Abstract:
This paper analyses data from 25 qualitative interviews to explore the relationship between religion, gender and sexuality for Turkish-Australian women aged 18-26. It argues that the hijab (headscarf) symbolises an idealised Muslim femininity because it signifies to the participants a high level of personal religious commitment and it also embodies the Islamic mores of modesty and self-respect regarding their sexuality. Participants in the study explained that ‘a woman is precious like diamonds, that’s why we have to keep her covered’. While they displayed a sense of agency in perceiving their ‘liberation’ from sexual objectification through the hijab, some ambiguity arose from their conceptualisation of an ideal Muslim femininity. This ambiguity is tied to Islamic and Australian narratives of female sexuality, which position women in a role responsible for regulating sexual expression and sexual attraction in both the private and public spheres.

Introduction
This paper explores the constructions of Islamic sexuality and femininity of 25 Turkish-Australian women aged 18 to 26. It employs data from in-depth qualitative interviews to analyse the meanings these participants attach to the hijab (headscarf) and how these meanings are used in the expression of their religious, gendered and sexual identities. First, this paper will briefly review the literature regarding the hijab and female sexuality, focusing on Islamist feminist perspectives and then linking this material to the work of Hird and Jackson (2001), who use the concept of ‘heteronormativity’ to explain the role of women as ‘gatekeepers’ of sexual desire in Western societies. Second, this paper will outline a methodological description of the study and the sample interviewed. Third, this paper will describe how the metaphor ‘a woman is precious like diamonds, that’s why we have to keep her covered’ is used by the participants to explain how the hijab facilitates the communication of two Islamic values. The first Islamic value embodied by the hijab regards modesty, which the participants link to gender liberation. The second
Islamic value embodied by the *hijab* regards self respect, and the participants link this to sexual morality. Together these two Islamic values represent an idealised Muslim femininity, although some ambiguity arose from such a construction of femininity related to the regulation of sexuality by women.

This paper will argue that the participants who wear the *hijab* take on a *multiple burden* in policing sexual desire in both the private and public spheres, because they perceive their gatekeeping role to be a *social* (not just a personal) responsibility. This paper further argues that this feminised role of sexual gatekeeper is not merely endemic to a system of patriarchy within Islam, instead it can also be seen as an extension of Australian narratives of female sexuality, in which women are made responsible for regulating sexual expression and sexual attraction.

The *Hijab* and sexuality

Debates about the practice of veiling are linked to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism or ‘Islamism’. Maumoon sees that the *hijab* is tied to the political activism of the Islamist movement because it acts as a powerful visual symbol. Islamists feel that Muslims should be immediately identifiable by their appearance. This identification of religious identity is felt to be most important for women since they are assumed to be the most vulnerable to “westoxication”. The issue of the *hijab* is intimately connected to questions of women’s sexuality and their roles in society (1999: 270-271).

The *hijab* is passionately criticised and defended around issues of sexuality. El Guindi argues that Islam views inter-gender interaction as potentially ‘sexually charged’ and so activity outside of marriage must be ‘desexualised’. She says, ‘Both body and interactive space need to be regulated and controlled and both men and women must abide by this temporary desexualisation to make public interaction between them possible’ (1999: 136). El Guindi emphasises the long-standing Islamic tradition that requires men to cover in a version of the *hijab* (1999: 117-128), and yet in non-Islamic states such as Australia, Muslim women are more likely than men to observe Islamic dress codes (see Bouma and Brace-Govan, 2000: 168-170).

Given this discrepancy between men and women’s dress codes, Read and Bartkowski argue that one major area of conflict over the *hijab* concerns the claim that it is used as a tool of social control of men’s sexuality:

> Many expositors of the pro-veiling discourse call attention to the uniquely masculine penchant for untamed sexual activity and construe the veil as a God-ordained solution to the apparent disparities in men’s and women’s sexual appetites. Women are therefore deemed responsible for the management of men’s sexuality (1999: 199).

Islamist theologians reject the notion that the *hijab* is oppressive to women and recent research on second-generation Muslim women living in Western societies supports this rejection (Deen, 1995: 164-171; Rassol, 2002: 33-46, 65-82; Read and Bartkowski, 2000: 403-407). Instead, Maumoon argues
that the *hijab* symbolises resistance to Western ideologies regarding sexuality and she argues that Islamists view *Western women* as sexual deviants:

   The *hijab* and its associated qualities of religious modesty are emphasized by Islamists partly as a rejection of the “immorality” of the West and the Western woman... Whilst Western attire encourages women to be seductive, sexy and sexual, the Islamic dress encourages them to be prudish, conservative and asexual (1999: 271).

The *hijab* has become an icon of ‘otherness’ of Muslim women in the West and, in the eyes of non-Muslims, acts to reinforce the view that Muslim women are passive and oppressed under Islam (Cooke, 2001: 131). While it might be easy enough – from a Western perspective – to see that Muslim women are given a tremendous responsibility in regulating both female and male sexuality through the *hijab*, women are also expected to be ‘gatekeepers’ of sexual expression within Western contexts (Hird and Jackson, 2001), although this gatekeeping role occurs within the private realm.

Hird and Jackson’s (2001) combined studies used the concept of ‘heteronormativity’ to describe the taken for granted assumptions regarding heterosexuality operating in Western discourse. Such a discourse presumes that while it is ‘natural’ that men possess high sexual drives, women harbour passive and restrained sexual drives. In their discussion of sexual coercion, Hird and Jackson found that the male and female participants in both their British and Australian studies placed women in

   a no-win situation. [Girls] can deny their sexuality in order to conform to expectations of “angelic purity”, or girls can be sexual and risk being labelled “slut”. Consistent with the “angel” identity, girls are the gatekeepers of male sexuality... as “angels” they are expected to apply the brakes to rampant male sexual desire (2001: 34).

The sexual ideology operating within such heteronormative narratives suggest that patriarchal depictions of female sexuality are not only found in Islamist discourses of sexuality regarding the *hijab*. Instead, they are endemic to constructions of sexuality operating in Australia (and elsewhere).

My own sample is interesting in light of the polarised views presented above regarding the *hijab* and the role of women in regulating sexuality. From the point of view of the participants in this study the *hijab* empowered them as Muslims and as women. For example, Pertev, who does not wear the *hijab*, gave a typical explanation for the symbolism of the *hijab*:

   With the religion, it tells us that women are ...precious like diamonds; that’s why we have to keep them covered. Now, the religion also says that women have to be treated like diamonds; they always have to be respected...

This paper argues that the metaphor ‘a woman is precious like diamonds’ functions as the rationalisation of two intersecting ideals. First, the *hijab* symbolises the struggle for liberation from ‘Western’ cultural ideals about female sexuality permeating within Australian society. Second, the *hijab* symbolises *sexual morality*, which is explained as having ‘self respect’. This paper draws these ideals together to highlight that the *hijab* is symbolic of
an ideal Muslim femininity, although this ideal contains some ambiguity as we can see from Islamic and Australian narratives of female sexuality.

Methodology
This paper is based upon in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 heterosexual Australian-Turkish women aged 18-26 years. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and the participants were given pseudonyms. Twenty-two of the women were Australian-born, and the other three participants migrated before the age of two. Of the women born overseas, two were born in Turkey and one in Cyprus. Five participants were married (one of these women had a child, and one was pregnant) and a further four women were engaged to be married at the time they were interviewed. This sample was largely derived through snowballing from members of Turkish and Islamic associations in three Melbourne universities and one Islamic school.

For the purposes of this paper, there are two categories of participants. First, there are those women who wore the hijab. All participants referred to this as being ‘closed’ or ‘covered’. For the purposes of consistency, the 14 women in this group are referred to as ‘closed Muslims’. Second, the remaining 11 participants are categorised as ‘open Muslims’; they also spoke of themselves in this way. Out of the eleven open women, one woman was ambivalent about the possibility of closing, and a further two participants were adamant that they would never close. All participants believed that the decision to close is their own choice, and the other eight open participants optimistically looked forward to covering in the future, because they believed that closing signified a deeper commitment of personal religiousness.

Women are precious like diamonds: constructing sexuality and femininity through the hijab
The hijab is an important symbol of identification for these participants. It facilitates the communication of two valued mores of the Islamic religion: modesty and respect. These values will now be looked at in turn. The participants’ discussion shows that their internalisation of these two mores has meant that they necessarily differentiate themselves from the wider Australian majority. This is in spite of the fact that the majority of the participants described that being Australian was important to their identities. Issues of sexuality highlighted the fact that the participants saw the hijab as a boundary marker (Barth, 1969) that distanced them from Western ideologies of sexuality operating within Australia.

Gender Liberation
The first Islamic value that is embodied by the hijab regards modesty and the participants link this to gender liberation. This study found that in the participants’ experiences, some non-Muslim Australians think that women are oppressed within Islam. Yet the participants argued against this. As Manolya said, ‘We don’t feel oppressed, we feel more liberated. We’re not
getting judged for our sexuality, we’re getting judged for our intellectual capabilities, our skills. Principally they outlined the ‘liberation’ of their gender identities in contrast to the femininity of ‘Western women’.

Sahiba: …I think that physically we’re just different from the Western women. We might seem oppressed because we’re dressed like this, but personally I think that they’re more oppressed than what we are. Exposing yourself doesn’t mean you’re free. …I don’t understand why we’re called oppressed or why we don’t have an identity because we’re covered like this. I’m free because I don’t have to show my body to anyone.

From this comment, it can be seen that the hijab informs a differentiation between themselves as Muslim women and other (Western) women in Australian society.

Further to the idea of liberation, the hijab was also understood as a way in which Islam ensures gender equality. Having a woman ‘cover her beauty’ guarantees that men engage with her as an individual, as their social equal. This stops her from being objectified by men. Leyla describes that wearing hijab signals to all men, “Respect me for who I am not what I look like”, so if they’re going to speak to me they can’t be distracted by anything except by what’s coming out of my mouth. Wearing the hijab is also a ‘rebellion against society’s expectations’ concerning beauty and sexuality and it liberates them from the images of femininity dictated by Western society.

Huriye: …I’d say it’s sort of like a rebellion against society and their beliefs. Clothes today are more about showing the female form and revealing the female form, I should say. And it’s based on a male society. It’s so a man can actually look at you and sit there and think about you in certain ways, maybe sexually or fantasising. To me covering up is about “listen to what I say rather than what I look like”.

The covert feminist overtones of this rationale for the hijab were striking, yet in spite of the parallel between feminism and the symbolism of the hijab, this link was made explicit only in four interviews. One woman who made this link was Rana. In her teens, Rana had identified herself as a feminist, but later felt that as a consequence of her own studies of Islam that feminism is not as effective in realising its ideals about gender equality:

…A lot of feminists say, “but you wouldn’t have to cover up to show that you’ve got a brain!” But men don’t think of it that way! They look at you and all they see is the one thing. So you’ve got to guard yourself and show that you’ve got a mind! [Laughs]

Sexual Morality

The second Islamic value that is embodied by the hijab is respect for oneself, as it relates to sexual morality. Most women felt that wearing the hijab fulfils not only religious duty in ‘submitting to the will of Allah’, but that it also fulfils a social duty. The hijab protects themselves and other people from ‘harm’ by ‘putting a limit’ on sexual attraction. In this way, the hijab symbolises sexual morality.

TASA 2003 Conference Proceedings
Güldeste: I feel that I’m creating a better environment. I can just imagine that if men were covered properly and if women were covered the way Allah told us to, that there would be less marital breakdowns, there would be less divorces because there would be less men having this dream woman.

The interviewees reflected the assumption that sexual restraint is a woman’s responsibility and they drew from a discourse of heterosexuality outlined in Hird and Jackson’s (2001) work. The participants seemed to believe that sexual drive is all about ‘nature’, despite the disputing sociological evidence that the gendered experience of sexuality is socially shaped (Laumann et al., 1994; McMahon, 1997). Specifically, the participants believed that men have a higher sexual drive, which in many cases they cannot control and so women, who are able to restrain their own sexual appetites, must assume responsibility to remain ‘protected’ from men through wearing the hijab. Effectively, this perpetuates a multiple sexual burden: women are the gatekeepers of sexual expression for both male desire and their own sexuality and in so doing they are responsible for policing desire at the greater societal level.

For these women covering is symbolic of their sexual morality and ‘purity’. The ‘self-respect’ they are protecting by wearing the hijab then is their virginity.

Güldeste: I know that a lot of brothers out there who are now practicing Islam respect covered women so much. …Most of them are all happy at the end because what’s covered is more exciting at the end. I know it sounds like a cliché but it is a fact. … There’s nothing to say that you don’t give credit to a lot of smart women that are open too. But if you take just one little step like this, you’ll be more respected and I think you feel more complete because that’s how I felt because I was open once ago, that’s why I can say this.

Read and Bartkowski, who interviewed 12 ‘veiled’ and 12 ‘unveiled’ women in Texas, also found that their veiled participants contrasted ‘the “precious” diamond-like feminine character to the ostensibly less refined, less distinctive masculine persona… Women’s inherent difference from men, then, is perceived to be a source of esteem rather than denigration’ (2000: 404). Yet their unveiled participants viewed the hijab as a man-made ‘mechanism of patriarchal control’ rather than being divinely mandated. They believed that the veil has been ‘imposed on Muslim women because of Middle Eastern men’s unwillingness to tame their sexual caprice and because of their desire to dominate women’ (2000: 408). The majority of the open participants in the present study did not hold such a view; they were not critical of the sexual ‘morality’ embedded within the hijab, because they saw it as the will of Allah that they should one day close. Therefore the overwhelming majority of my sample, both open and closed, accepted the dichotomised view of ‘normal’ heterosexual behaviour described by Hird and Jackson, which defines male sexuality as ‘active, initiating and constant, [while] female heterosexuality must paradoxically be defined by its absence’ and controlled passivity (2001: 28). The only participant who was critical of the hijab as it re-
lates to sexuality was Destan. Being a married woman, she was troubled by the rationale given for wearing the hijab and she spoke of the religious contradiction it presents:

Well the way I think about it is God wouldn’t have created hair and beauty if it wasn’t to be shown. It’s all in the way you handle yourself too. In this day and age, people look. There are some attractive females in a headscarf and men will still look. It’s not stopping anyone. Their husbands can enjoy them – it’s totally different your husband enjoying you, enjoying your beauty.

Other studies of second-generation migrant youth have found that sexuality is an ambiguous territory where parental and communal codes of ‘morality’ are both resisted and accepted (Baldassar, 1999; Pallotta-Chiarolli and Skrbis, 1994). Pallotta-Chiarolli and Skrbis argue that acceptance of parental and communal sexual moral codes can occur in two ways: ‘passive acceptance’ enforced through coercion, and ‘active acceptance’ adopted through choice (1994: 267-268). My participants fall into the latter category. They display agency in their adoption of the hijab given that they claim that wearing the hijab is their own choice. Therefore they exhibit an active acceptance of Islamic moral codes regarding sexuality. In effect however, covering continues to serve the Islamic/Turkish status quo, where women seem to navigate between the confines of a patriarchal system. And yet their discussions about the hijab reflect their confidence that they are achieving gender equality through observing an Islamic lifestyle. Their talk of agency is not undervalued by the fact that they are working within patriarchal constraints to achieve gender equality (cf. Baldassar, 1999: 13-18).

Conclusion

The participants’ emphasis on the agency achieved through the hijab is a central finding of this paper. Significantly, the participants emphasised that closing is their ‘personal choice’ and that it also ‘liberates’ them from gender inequality. The hijab embodies an ideal Muslim femininity because it helps the open participants to strive towards a ‘higher level of religiousness’ and it helps the closed participants to convey their adherence to Islamic mores of modesty and respect. And yet there is ambiguity within such an idealised Muslim femininity. This ambiguity is located in the hijab’s perpetuation of the gendered experience of sexuality – the double standard – that has been a long-standing norm for women in many Islamic-majority countries such as Turkey and even for Australian women today. That is, the hijab still ultimately places women in the role responsible for observing heteronormative conceptions of sexuality. These women assume a role which makes them responsible for regulating desire, a role that is not generally assumed by Muslim men.

The ambiguity regarding female sexuality embodied through the hijab is not inherent in gender inequalities within Islam, but rather, it points to wider incongruities in the conceptualisation of women’s role as the gatekeepers of heterosexual activity. Other studies have emphasised the ‘double burden’ women experience regarding paid and unpaid labour (Bittman and Lovejoy,
but this paper argues that the responsibility assumed by these women regarding their sexuality is a multiple burden. At the personal level, wearing the hijab is symbolic of regulating their own sexual expression; at the interpersonal level, it is symbolic of assuming responsibility of men’s sexual urges; and at a wider societal level, it is symbolic of their role in policing desire, which is perceived as a social duty. This was reflected in one participant’s comment that she sees herself ‘creating a better environment’ by wearing the hijab. While women are by no means victims of their own sexuality or of men’s desire (Lumby: 1997), the distinctly feminised role regarding the policing of sexuality continues to be internalised by some women within Australian society. In the case of these closed women, issues of sexuality and femininity seem more confronting because these issues become visible through the hijab and so their gatekeeping role becomes manifest in a more public way.

References


