

Questions and discussion starters for “*Just a Piece of Cloth*”

Documentary directed by Rosemary Henze

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These questions and discussion starters are organized by various themes so that an instructor or facilitator can decide what is right for his or her age group and context. I am working on developing a more complete teacher’s and facilitator’s guide. Check the website (www.justapieceofcloth.com) for updates!

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1. General

Before viewing: What did you know or believe about Muslim women and hijab before seeing this film?

After viewing: Was there anything that surprised you? How does the film relate to knowledge you already had? What additional knowledge or awareness did you gain?

Which of the women’s stories did you resonate with most, and why?

Do you think these women's stories are mainly related to Muslim women? Do you see connections with your own or other people’s experiences? Non-Muslim? Men? Children? Are their experiences similar to those of other minority groups in the US? How are they similar or not similar?

Do the women in the film see themselves as “other” or marginalized in US society? If so, what kinds of “othering” experiences do they talk about? How do they deal with these experiences and feelings?

How do these women use language to challenge and appropriate the discourses that “other” them?

2. Reasons for wearing hijab

Before seeing the film, what do (did) you know about the reasons why some Muslim women wear the headscarf?

After seeing the film, did your ideas and understanding of this change? If so, how did they change?

What are the reasons given by the three women who choose to wear hijab? (Dian, Noor, and Arwa)? What reasons does Mahsa give for choosing not to wear hijab?

3. Women’s choice

What do you think is the significance of choice in wearing the hijab?

Young Muslim women in the Bay area and other places in the US are increasingly choosing to wear the hijab, even if their parents prefer them not to. What do you make of this?

One could say that the women who wear hijab in the US are choosing to adopt a visible cultural symbol that makes them appear to be Other in US society. How do you make sense of this choice? Can you think of other symbols that people use to mark themselves as a particular religion or identity?

4. Islam and local cultures, women’s roles

Before seeing the film, what opinions or information did you have about the way women are treated in Islam? What about differences across various countries?

What do you know about Black Muslims in the US?

After seeing the film, has your perspective shifted regarding women in Islam? If so, how has it shifted?

5. Different ways of covering

Do a google search to find what “hijab” means in Arabic. What did you discover? What other terms are related to hijab? (Niqab, burka, abiyah, chador...). How do these items differ?

What do the women in the film think about fashion and style in relation to wearing hijab?

6. Legal status of Muslim coverings

What is the legal status of Muslim coverings in the US? Is it illegal to wear a headscarf in any states in the US? Have there been any legal cases in which women in the US were told they couldn't wear a headscarf? What were the results?

Do you think the wearing of a headscarf, as these women practice it, is contentious in our society? In your community?

What if the face were covered?

What laws have been passed about the wearing of hijab in France? What have been the effects of these laws?

7. The cultural construction of meaning

One of the key tenets of cultural anthropology is that humans create culture; that is, they create various types of products and then invest those products with meanings that are also culturally shaped. Often the meanings that we assign to material objects are not given by nature –they are developed through human cultural interaction. (e.g. a gold band on the fourth finger has no intrinsic meaning; it is through culture that we invest it with the symbolic meaning of marriage). In the case of the headscarf, think about the various contexts in which people wear a piece of cloth over their head. Are there other reasons besides religious practice, when someone might wear a cloth over the head?

What cultural meanings do the women in the film associate with hijab? Which of these are more widely accepted? Which are more individualistic? What other meanings do head coverings carry in our culture? In other places in the world?

8. Gender issues

Nur says that women who wear hijab are the “face of Islam” and that men are generally not visible as Muslims. What do you think about this difference in religious visibility? How do the women in the film feel about it?

After seeing the film, how do you think Arwa's "tomboy" identity as a girl has shaped her relationship to hijab? How does her perspective on wearing hijab differ from Dian's?

9. Challenges between Muslim and mainstream US

What are some of the challenges and tensions the four women experience from mainstream society? How do they address these challenges?

10. Challenges within Muslim communities

Both Arwa and Nur talk about challenges they face in wearing hijab within Muslim communities. What are these challenges, and how do they resolve them?

11. The relationship of documentary film and research

In what ways is a documentary film such as this one like (and unlike) various forms of social science research, such as ethnography, qualitative research, and participatory action research?

12. Resources

CAIR (Council on Islamic American Relations) SF Bay Area

<http://ca.cair.com/sfba/>

Islamic Society of North America

<http://www.isna.net/>

Islamic Networks Group

www.ing.org

The Interfaith Alliance

www.interfaithalliance.org

The Evolution of the Nation of Islam

<http://mizanstudios.com/projects.html>