

In Germany, Debate Over Muslim Headscarf Rages On



Rhea Wessel | 29 Nov 2006

Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of articles by Rhea Wessel on the rights of Muslim women in Europe, particularly Turkish women in Germany. The stories will appear occasionally on World Politics Review. Read the first article in the series [here](#).

FRANKFURT, Germany -- Fed up with the status quo, a Turkish-born German politician in the Green Party has done just what many German politicians are afraid to do: She has called on Muslim women to take off their headscarves and "arrive in the modern world, arrive in Germany."

"Show that you have the same civil and human rights as men have," Ekin Deligöz told fellow Muslim women in the mass-circulation Bild newspaper in mid-October.

Deligöz's comments heated up the long-raging headscarf debate in Germany, home to more than three million Muslims, most of Turkish origin. She was celebrated by women's rights activists, while Islamic organizations and individuals expressed their displeasure with her appeal. Deligöz even received death threats, after which she was put under police protection.

The parliamentarian considers the head scarf a form of oppression against women, and her message is loud and clear: The headscarf is decidedly un-German, and immigrants who want to live here harmoniously must accept certain Western values and play by German rules.

These are precisely the kind of comments that many German politicians shy away from despite the fact that a large number of Germans equate the headscarf with behavior that Germany doesn't condone, such as the sexual repression of women, domestic violence and emotional intimidation.

Some German politicians have taken a stand against the headscarf for teachers in public schools, but few go so far as to call for women to change the way they're dressed when they shop, ride trains or conduct business, as Deligöz did.

In private circles, it is still considered impolite for Germans from the West to complain about Germans from the East and the billions of freebies that have been pumped their way. It is just as unfashionable to demand that immigrants adopt German customs and learn the language if they are going to make their homes here. Rather, it is more popular to sing the praises of multiculturalism than to risk being called intolerant.

Expect the head scarf debate to go on in Germany long after the matter is settled in other European countries with large Muslim populations. In France, protests continue but the government has taken a clear stance against head scarves for teachers and pupils in public schools. In England, headscarves are widely accepted, and the Metropolitan police even offer four different styles for female officers to wear with their uniforms. But in Germany, the high court has said that each state should make its own laws about headscarves in schools, leading to a patchwork of regulations. Baden-Wuerttemberg was the first to ban the scarf, and Bavaria, Bremen, Hesse, Lower Saxony, North Rhine Westphalia and Saarland followed. Other states are considering bills to ban the scarf and still others, such as Rhineland Palatinate, have no bills under consideration or laws on the books.

Much More Than a Piece of Cloth

It is more than just the unclear legal status in Germany (and the country's knack for never-ending discussions) that gives the debate its eternal character. Historical guilt holds Germany back from taking tough anti-immigrant stances, and the debate has as many facets as a scarf has folds.

For many people, discussions about the headscarf are shrouded in mutual accusations of immoral conduct and based on starkly different ideas about modesty. Others see the headscarf as a question of separation of church and state -- or the neutrality of the state; still others have made the piece of cloth stand for the role of women in society. Making matters even trickier, Muslims in Germany disagree among themselves about where, when and if the scarf is appropriate, and no single organization represents the Muslim or Turkish community.

Altogether, the debate is symptomatic of an ongoing identity crisis in Germany. The country is asking who it is now and who it will be in the future.

"The discussion is dangerous here. . . . It's a question of how far Islam will be allowed to make inroads in Germany," said Naime Çakir, a Muslim activist who supports the right of each woman to choose how she dresses, even if that woman holds a job as a civil servant, such as a teacher. Naime was born in Turkey and grew up in Germany never wearing a scarf. When she married at 15, her in-laws forced the scarf on her. About eight years later, she divorced and left the scarf behind as well.

Naime wrote her first master's thesis on stereotypes and stigmatization of Islam, and she says the scarf evokes two preconceived images when Germans see it on the streets: They immediately associate the scarf with fundamentalist Islam (i.e. terrorists) or they think that the woman wearing the scarf is oppressed.

"The behavior of a person can't be determined by the way she looks. I have to know what the head under the headscarf thinks," she said.

Naime is at the university again -- this time for Islamic studies -- and she advises women on a volunteer basis for an Islamic association based near Frankfurt called Islamische Religionsgemeinschaft Hessen e.V. She wants to help them solve the problems they face -- domestic violence or a lack of education, for example -- without forcing Muslim women to reject their religion or culture. She believes Germany should allow teachers to wear headscarves in schools because the government's stance affects all others, and anti-headscarf laws essentially condone discrimination and make it even harder for veiled women to find jobs. For Naime, a woman's education and job prospects are more important than her choice in clothing for helping a woman become independent and self-reliant.

Religious Identity and Fashion

It is precisely because she worries about her job chances that a woman from Rhineland Palatinate who is of Turkish descent agreed to be interviewed for this article only if her name was withheld. The 23-year-old education student hasn't had any problems so far with the scarf she put on at age 10 for religious reasons. But she's prepared for some as soon as her student teaching begins and she enters the classroom.

The petite, confident woman, who can hold her own in English, came to our meeting with a bright turquoise scarf wrapped snugly around her chin and covering her neck. It was pinned to a type of headband, and two corners of the scarf were spread out elegantly over her chest. When she first began to wear the scarf, she wasn't interested in fashion, she says. Now, each morning she stands in front of her collection of 50 scarves that are pinned to a soft-sided board and contemplates which scarf will look best with her outfit for the day. She owns silk scarves that cost 30 to 40 euros a piece (38 to 51 dollars) and

more casual ones that were bought for 5 to 10 euros.

Although she was uncomfortable describing the hair beneath her wrap, she said most women wear a pony tail below the headband, and long hair is much easier to manage than short hair. She would enjoy going to the hairdresser, but she has not found one that caters only to women. Many Muslim women must resort to hiring a private hairdresser who can come to their homes or getting their hair cut at all-women salons while visiting Muslim countries, as my interview partner does once a year in Turkey while on vacation.

In the urban areas of Turkey, she might be considered conservative since laws against the headscarf are much stricter in Turkey than they are in Germany. When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk created the secular Turkish republic in 1923, the head scarf was immediately banned in all public buildings, men traded in their fez hats for berets and mustaches became taboo for members of the military (since they are seen as too macho).

The education student decided for herself that she wanted to wear the scarf after discussing it with a favorite teacher at a mosque. It has become such an ingrained part of her identity that asking her to take it off would be equivalent to making a long-haired woman cut off her mane or forcing someone to parade naked. A younger sister has reached puberty, the age at which most girls don the scarf, and she has not yet put it on. The family is not forcing her since they feel wearing the scarf should be a matter of deep religious conviction.

"I'm convinced that I am doing the right thing," she said, as she pointed to an article she brought with her citing the verses of the Quran which say that women should cover themselves so they can be recognized as believers and so they won't be harassed. Some people who reject the head scarf say the Quran does not specifically require such covering; instead, they say, the tradition is based on the post-Mohammed teachings of male scholars -- the so-called *hadiths*. We shared a laugh about the odd coincidence that the article my interviewee brought with her was printed out on paper that was being reused, and the story on the back was Gottfried Keller's *Kleider Machen Leute*, translated roughly as Clothes Define People. The story was written in 1866 and is read widely in German schools.

A Starkly Different Sense of Modesty

My interview partner was born and raised in Germany and carries a German passport, but before she is a German, she's a Muslim and a Muslim of Turkish descent. She remembers feeling awkward when she confronted different habits in Germany as far back as kindergarten. She and the other children used co-ed restrooms and stalls without doors, and she soon realized that the others had a different sense of modesty than her own. When the education student goes swimming, she's still surprised that women shower together or change in a group locker room. She has never been into one of Germany's many co-ed nude saunas, a shocking experience for the uninitiated. Women and men lounge together in the nude in saunas and whirlpools. Couples snuggle up in corners to smooch, and women have no problem swimming breast stroke in the pools, opening up even more to those who are brave enough to stare.

A female friend of my interview partner converted to Islam as an adult and has told my interview partner about visits to the sauna with her adult brother and father. Apparently, this was difficult for the young German to handle and was one reason she sought Islam, with its strictly enforced rules about modesty.

"We are raised in a conservative way, and the religious dimension plays a role," said my interview partner, adding, "We have a totally different sense of shame."

Though we did not discuss how Germans were portrayed in my interviewee's family, some young

Muslims are taught that the German population as a whole is impure because a few dress immodestly and the topic of sex is not taboo. Turkish-German sociologist and activist Necla Kelek says many of the Turks she has interviewed for her books pass along this message to their children. In her most recent book called *Die fremde Braut*, roughly, "The Stranger Bride," she calls for a ban on head scarves in schools for pupils and teachers. She repeated the call at Germany's recent Islam summit (a meeting of high-level government officials and representatives of the Muslim community); Necla says that schools are often the only place that Muslim girls experience respect and equal treatment and that wearing a scarf is not a religious requirement.

That the scarf is not prescribed in the Quran is the same conclusion Emel Abidin-Algan reached after wearing the scarf for more than 30 years. As the daughter of the late founder of Milli Görüs e.V. -- a Turkish-Islamic association that is on the watch list of the German government -- and the former head of the Islamic Women's Association, Emel created quite a sensation when she traded the cloth in for a bob hairdo at the end of 2005. A year before her physical transformation she began to question the religious grounds for the headscarf. As she was reconsidering what she had been taught, Emel began to work with a milliner to design hat-like head coverings that would bridge Muslim tradition with Western fashion.

"For two months, I was able to experiment by taking off my head cover while I was waiting in the doctor's office or at a closed-door event since my hat looked like a fashionable accessory," she said. In March of this year, Emel presented some of her head coverings to a museum dedicated to German history.

One of Emel's daughters, 25, wears the headscarf. "She still can't tell me exactly why she does it even though I have questioned all the reasons she has. But we get along very well and try to be cautious about the headscarf. Many women are overwhelmed because they're not prepared. You have to give them time," she said.

Emel rejoined the debate in a recent article in the *Tageszeitung* or TAZ. The article was written in response to the stir set off by Deligöz and included a call for men to speak out against the headscarf since it was men (i.e. the creators of the *hadiths*) who had initiated the tradition.

Collin Schubert, an activist and psychologist who volunteers frequently for Terre des Femmes, a women's rights organization, also turns the tables on men and says men should be forced to cover their eyes before women should be forced to cover their heads.

Terre des Femmes published its stance on the head scarf in September. It called the scarf a symbol of a patriarchal-based hierarchy of the sexes that has no place in schools -- for teachers or students.

"Terre des Femmes has observed that there is social pressure to wear the scarf in order to, among other things, distinguish the honorable from the dishonorable. It does not offer any protection -- as some proponents say -- against sexual assault," the group said.

Schubert believes a shift is underway in German attitudes since the 9/11 terror attacks, the murder of Theo van Gogh in Holland by a fanatical Muslim and the death of Kurdish German Hatun Aynur Sürücü at the hands of her brother in 2005.

"We will find a different position on the headscarf. What it will be, I don't know. This is a process, says Schubert.

She adds: "We're starting to think that tolerance only makes sense when it's mutual."

Rhea Wessel is a freelance correspondent based in Frankfurt. She is at work on a book called "Honor Killings in Our Midst: The Fates of Three Women Who Broke with Tradition."

Photo: Emel Abidin-Algan, with and without the headscarf. Photo courtesy of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) television.