

New Zealand women face praise and protests for donning the hijab

Tuesday 26 March 2019, by [KANSO Heba](#), [TAYLOR Michael](#) (Date first published: 26 March 2019).

KUALA LUMPUR/BEIRUT (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - A campaign by New Zealand women including Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to don headscarves as a sign of solidarity with Muslim women after the nation's mosque shootings has divided opinion over whether the gesture was a help or a hindrance.

Ardern won widespread praise this month for putting on a black headscarf when meeting members of the Muslim community after 50 people were killed by a suspected white supremacist at two mosques in the city of Christchurch.

But the move sparked an online backlash as critics pointed out that women in conservative Muslim countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia were forced to cover up for the sake of modesty or risk public rebuke, fines or arrest.

Women's rights advocates said it was a sensitive issue for many women campaigning globally against the obligatory wearing of headscarves and other clothing in a fight against oppression.

"When we see non-Muslim women wear the hijab in solidarity of Muslim women it is very ironic and contradictory because our experience with the hijab is not empowering or uplifting in the political sense," said Maryam Lee, a Muslim women's rights advocate and author in Malaysia who chooses to not wear a hijab.

"I wish she (Ardern) hadn't (wore it) but I understand where she is coming from because she is not a Muslim and not from a Muslim majority country."

Women across New Zealand donned headscarves last Friday as part of a Head Scarf for Harmony campaign started by a doctor who heard about a woman too scared to go out as she felt her headscarf would make her a target for terrorism.

"Why is hijab a 'show of solidarity' symbol for New Zealand terror attack victims," wrote Twitter user @RamaNewDelhi. "A key part of my feminism is to question shackles that religion imposes selectively on women."

Lee, who has written a book called "Unveiling Choice" about the hijab, said women in Malaysia opting not to wear headscarves would now receive more harassment and pressure to wear the hijab by Muslims citing Ardern's actions.

Pressure on other women

Women in Muslim-majority Malaysia, which has a large population of ethnic and religious minorities, have been barred from government offices in the past for attire that officials deemed as indecent, such as skirts or shorts.

Masih Alinejad, an Iranian activist and journalist who hosts the website My Stealthy Freedom where women in Iran post photos without headscarves, had mixed feelings about the campaign.

Alinejad has lived in self-imposed exile since 2009 and received death threats for her campaigning against the obligatory wearing of headscarves.

"I felt admiration that a prominent leader and women in New Zealand showed compassion to the Muslim community, but I also felt that you are using one of the most visible symbols of oppression for Muslim women in many countries for solidarity, and it also broke my heart," said Alinejad.

"That is why I call on them to show their sisterhood and solidarity with us, who are being beaten up, imprisoned and punished for fighting against compulsory hijab as well."

But Mutiara Ika Pratiwi, national secretary of Indonesian women's rights group Perempuan Mahardhika backed Ardern.

"Giving sympathy to a victim's family is part of a feminist position, and the veil is a symbol for a community that is currently a victim," said Jakarta-based Pratiwi.

"Although there are those who criticize her, the majority respect the move. What is important is that Jacinda is able to build a movement of New Zealanders who sympathize with the victims."

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