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NY Muslim Women Taking Precautions

By Halimah Abdullah
STAFF WRITER

They are a sisterhood of women cloaked in the symbols of their faith — head scarves and modest clothes that drape from neck to ankle known as hijab.

They are Muslimas. They are targets.

In the tumult following attacks on the World Trade Center, some individuals, guided by a twisted sense of patriotism and armed with unfocused rage, have turned on their Muslim neighbors and those of Middle Eastern heritage. Scarf-clad Muslim women and girls are especially visible and therefore vulnerable.

They have been assailed with curses, spit, eggs, rocks and in one case in Huntington, a car driven by a drunken, screaming man.

"It's terrible to cause this harm to Muslim women who have nothing to do with this tragic bombing," said Al-Haaj Ghazi Khankan, president of the National Council on Islamic Relations. "It is ignorant people who are doing this."

Many Muslim women across the area are staying off trains and streets and keeping behind locked doors. Their absence was felt during Friday's Jumah services at places like the Imam Al-Khoei Islamic Center in Jamaica, where only a handful of women and girls worshiped on rugs compared to the roughly 100 men gathered just beyond a partition that separated the sexes.

Humaira Malik, a recent college graduate, has spent her days closeted in her parents home in Flushing. She doesn't dare ride the subway to her job as Web master at the Council on American Islamic Relations of New York in the city's Upper West Side.

"You can be spotted out and what happens is that because of your dress you become a target for someone looking to hurt Muslims," Malik said.

Others have taken off the icons of devotion to their faith, heading to work and school for the first time with bare heads.

"I told my students, if you think you are in imminent danger, take off your hijab," said Sanaa Nadim, a chaplain at SUNY Stony Brook, adding that campus officials have been supportive of the Muslim students' plight. Nadim also said, "We've had young ladies who've had their scarves pulled down. One young lady said while she was driving someone tried to smash into her car."

But despite the suspicious glares and taunts, a number of Muslim women said they draw enough strength from Islamic teachings to face down any threats. Fighting bias is nothing new for many of these women who have labored for years to alter perceptions of them both in their communities and among Westerners.

"We are strong women, and our faith is strong," said Jacqueline Lateef of Deer Park. "I cannot imagine anyone making us turn from our way of life."

Above all, many Muslim women said they just want to be respected as a vital part of the New York City community.

"I am who I am," said Lateef, a retired social worker. "I am a Muslim woman living in the United States. I am a Muslim woman who worked in New York City. I refuse to cower."

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