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Muslim men must dress modestly, too

By [DR MD MAHMUDUL HASAN](#) - August 21, 2023 @ 6:16pm

One evening just over a month ago, I went shopping at a hypermarket in Wangsa Maju, Kuala Lumpur, with my children. After grabbing what we wanted to buy, we waited our turn in the checkout queue.

Ahead of us was a large family comprising a man, a few children and four women. All the women wore 'niqab' that covered their entire faces except for an area around the eyes. They also wore gloves and socks to cover their hands and feet.

Although I couldn't see their faces, I presumed they were of proximate age.

The man was most probably the husband of the four women and the father of the children. He paid the cashier and the women transferred the groceries from the counter to a shopping cart.

I was puzzled about the sharp contrast between the 'dress code' of the four women (wives) and that of the man (husband): the women were fully covered and the man was in shorts.

I believe they are a Muslim family. The practice of polygyny (having multiple wives) is validated (excused) by Quranic statements that permit a man to marry more than one woman (not exceeding four at a time), provided certain conditions are met.

But the Quran also contains rulings on modesty of dress and behaviour. Even though women are required to cover more — but, in my opinion, not to the extent that those four women did — men also have to abide by decency and modesty in dress and behaviour. Islamically speaking, what the man with four wives wore was by no means decent or modest.

It should not be forgotten that the Quran (24:30-31) mentions the sartorial decency and modesty of men first, and then discusses that of women. But,

while the 'hijab' of (Muslim) women is highlighted, that of (Muslim) men is often forgotten or overlooked.

The hypermarket was not the first place where I saw Muslim men in shorts next to fully covered Muslim women of the same family. I have seen many a time Muslim couples (presumably tourists) of similar sartorial oddities — the wife was fully covered while the husband was wearing shorts — on public transport such as light rapid transit (LRT) trains in Kuala Lumpur.

Years ago, this issue caused some embarrassment to me as a Muslim. In January 2014, I flew from Kuala Lumpur to Chicago in the US to present a paper at the Modern Language Association convention.

The research that I presented was titled "Fetishised hijab and resilient Muslim women: Representations of the veil in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and in Shelina Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*".

I was part of a panel discussion with other academics from different countries. Our session was on "Between Vulnerability and Resilience: Representations of the Veil in Art, Film, and Literature".

I was the only man among the five panellists (both Muslim and non-Muslim). During the Q&A session, one non-Muslim presenter from Australia raised the issue of discrepancy between the dress code practices of Muslim men and Muslim women.

She told us about what she saw on Australian beaches. What she saw was comparable to what I encountered at the hypermarket and the LRT — among Muslim family members, women fully covered and men in shorts.

I agreed with the Australian scholar and validated her observation. It is hard to deny that there are Muslim families whose women wear the 'hijab' (and even the 'niqab') when they go out, but their adult male family members do not hesitate to appear in shorts in public.

Unfortunately, this gendered dress code discrepancy does not give a favourable representation of Muslims as a global community. Practising polygyny and wearing shorts in public by Muslim men also points to their tendency to abide by Islamic teachings selectively and partially, depending on their whims, desires and caprices.

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