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**WHAT ARE WE
AFRAID OF?
THE BATTLE OF THE BURQA**



HOLLYWOOD'S GREATEST KNOW-ALL **STILL PAYING FOR FINE COTTON** ESCAPE TO A FRENCH REUNION

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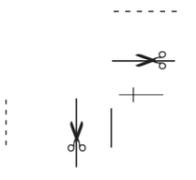
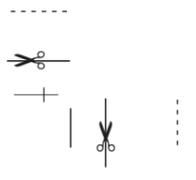
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PUB: ADV WKNDMAG



Dina Assaker

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VEIL OF FEARS

CRITICS CALL IT A SECURITY THREAT, 'UN-AUSTRALIAN' AND OPPRESSIVE. BUT IS THERE MORE TO THE PUSH TO BAN THE BURQA?

WORDS ANDREW FENTON PICTURE TAIT SCHMAAL

LIKE many suburban Adelaide mums Dina Assaker is devoted to her family, spending much of the day ferrying her three children to playdates and kindergarten. Come school holidays she'll volunteer at her local community centre, entertaining the kids with cupcake decorating and colouring-in competitions. Assaker doesn't sound like a threat to national identity and security. But according to some, she is.

The 30-year-old who emigrated from Egypt 18 months ago chooses to wear a veil called a niqab – commonly referred to as a burqa. It's only a small piece of cloth that's favoured by just a few women across the country, but it's a threatening sight for many. "We are not for every man to look at," the new Australian says. "A lot of crimes happen from the relationships between men and women. In our religion the woman is considered to be something precious. It's like when you have candy and you want to cover it. A woman needs to be covered to be protected."

Assaker isn't some poor, uneducated woman forced into donning the veil by the backward patriarchy in her family. The Park Holme resident is a highly educated, wealthy doctor who chose to wear the niqab at the age of 20, long before she got married. And rather than force her into it, her appalled father argued it would ruin her chances of a successful medical career.

The polite, quietly-spoken young woman wears carefully chosen and fashionable colours for her outfit, with white sneakers poking incongruously from beneath her low hem. She explains it was her devotion to Allah that inspired her to take the radical step of hiding her face and keeping her distance from all but a select few men. "I

chose to wear the burqa myself," she says. "For us as Muslims we're trying to please God more." After 10 years it has become like a second skin. "Sometimes, I totally forget that I'm wearing it and I don't feel any different," she says. "But then I feel people looking at me in a strange way and I wonder what I'm doing wrong."

It's a timely question. Women like Assaker are at the centre of a furious debate that has enveloped Europe and much of the western world. In Australia, the anti-burqa sentiment bubbled over in May when SA Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi denounced the veil as "un-Australian" and called for it to be outlawed. The burqa even became an issue in the federal election when the leaders of the major parties were called on to comment on a WA woman who wants to give evidence in court wearing her niqab.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard said the face veil was "confronting" and argued there were occasions when they should be removed, such as in banks and in court. Opposition Leader Tony Abbott said the burqa was a "particularly confronting form of attire and I would very much wish that fewer Australians would choose it". They are very much in tune with popular opinion. Popular surveys suggest 59 per cent of people support a ban on burqas.

But how does outlawing the burqa fit with cherished political ideals like freedom of religion and tolerance for difference? And is a ban even possible given the Australian constitution prevents laws that prohibit the free exercise of religion? It's a complex debate and one that throws traditional political allegiances into disarray. The natural inclination for many on the Left is to view

calls for a ban as racism and xenophobia. But many are also torn, as their desire to respect multicultural difference conflicts with their feminist ideals that view the veil as a form of gender apartheid.

Jacqueline Pascarl studied Islam for four years in the 1980s with the Malaysian royal household's imam. In Malaysia, only the hijab, or headscarf, is mandatory. "As he [the imam] interpreted the Koran, women by their very nature are natural seductresses," Pascarl says. "The tresses of her hair, her attractiveness, could send a man into a sexual frenzy, so women had to be covered. As an ideology I find it enormously distressing." Pascarl believes covering the face prevents communication and isolates women. "The veil marks the man as having control of his household," she says. "It smacks of a man with a beautiful car with a dust cover over it, only for his use."

Culture warriors from the Right have used feminism to trumpet women's rights – while denying these same women the freedom to worship as they wish. There is considerable irony in a group of predominantly Western men telling Muslim women what they can and can't wear in order to prevent a group of Muslim men from doing likewise.

This is an election in which "stopping the boats" and curbing population growth are significant issues. It seems both these debates are tapping into a broader unease about the influence of Muslim immigrants on Australian culture and society. After all, the boats contain a large proportion of Muslims, while there is little disquiet over the much larger group of visa overstayers from the UK and the US who arrive by plane.

"I accept that not all people who are uncomfortable about face veiling are outright xenophobes who also want to turn back the boats," says Shakira Hussein, a post-doctoral fellow at the National Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies. But, she adds, criticising the veil can also be a form of dog whistle politics – a coded way of winning favour with those groups.

Former Dutch parliamentarian and atheist-feminist author Ayaan Hirsi Ali has seen these coded debates in Europe, where France and Belgium are on the verge of banning burqas. "People want to talk about the threat that Islam might pose to Australian society," she says. "Instead they're talking about a 'big Australia' and a 'small Australia' and population and the burqa and all sorts of euphemisms for that same debate. That's what we did too." Ali says there is good reason why people are reluctant to express their fears openly. "You run the risk of being accused of being a racist or Islamaphobe."

Burqas predate Islam, initially being used by nomads in the Arabian desert as protection from dust and sand – niqab literally means "mask" in Arabic. Most Islamic scholars do not believe that women are obliged by the Koran to cover their faces. The main reason advanced by those in favour of a ban on the veil is that it oppresses women. The veil makes communication more difficult and it impedes the integration of immigrant Muslim women into their new societies. This is true to some extent considering Australia is crying out for doctors, yet Assaker can't work here in her face veil.

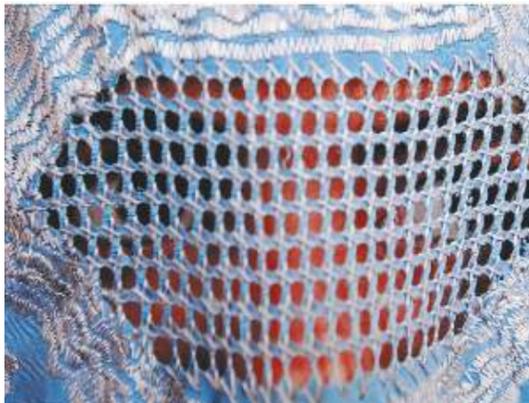
The burqa is also said to be a security risk. Last week controversy erupted after footage emerged of two veiled women being allowed to board a flight from Montreal to London without being asked to show their faces or prove their identities.

But according to Ali these are all side issues. The real reason western societies want to ban the burqa is because it's a potent symbol of a fascist political and religious ideology that seeks to take over the world. "The official reasons given are always that women



From top, a hijab,
a burqa, a niqab
and a chador.

THERE IS COMMUNITY PRESSURE BUILDING UP IT'S OPPRESSIVE TO WOMEN IT'S INCOMPATIBLE WITH AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY



are forced into it, it's for security and people need to identify themselves etc," says Ali. "But what does the burqa represent? For most Europeans it is a symbol for an ideology of Islamist supremacy and ultimately an ideal to introduce Sharia law into the world a suburb at a time, a city at a time and a country at a time. This is what European populations are rejecting." Ali is a former Muslim from Somalia who endured genital mutilation as a child and has lived under a fatwa for the past six years. She wrote a screenplay for a film called *Submission* that criticised the treatment of women in Islam. The death threat was contained in a letter pinned with a knife to the body of her murdered filmmaking colleague Theo van Gogh.

Ali's perspective may explain why the debate over the burqa in Australia rouses such passion when so few women actually wear it. There are no official figures, but the best estimates on the number of niqab- and burqa-wearing women in Adelaide range from two to a couple of dozen. Across Australia, they probably number in the low hundreds. (The two

terms are technically different – the former is a veil, and the latter is a full body covering sometimes with mesh to see through. But critics are focused on both of them, since they hide the face.)

But the few burqas there are cause a visceral reaction from some who fear the Australian way of life is under threat. "Is it a big enough deal?" asks Bernardi. "It was very easy to make that argument 20 years ago in Europe, but they now realise it is a very big deal. There is community pressure building up." Even Bernardi was surprised by the reaction he got to a blog posting in May calling for the burqa to be banned, following a news report about a burqa-clad armed robber. His blog was reported in the media and an online poll shortly afterward found 85 per cent of more than 11,000 respondents agreed with his call.

Other politicians were quick to jump on the band wagon, including the Reverend Fred Nile in NSW and SAM P Bob Such, who introduced a private member's bill calling for a ban in security-sensitive public buildings and government offices – even though they already have the legal right to refuse entry to burqa wearers or ask them to prove their identity by showing their faces.

Bernardi says he's giving voice to something usually left in the "whisper zone". "I'm one of those defenders of religious freedoms even if I fundamentally disagree with the premise of the faith," he says, arguing the burqa is cultural rather than religious garb, and that it's part of Sharia law. "We are not talking about a progressive system here," he says. "I think it's incompatible with Australian society, it's a security risk, it's oppressive to women and reflects a way of life and a system of life that is completely at odds with what we enjoy in this country." Bernardi lived in Libya for a short time and believes women are forced to cover their faces. "In my limited experience the majority of people wearing the veil have not chosen to wear it," he says. "There are exceptions."

The notion of choice is a key point in the debate. Hussein, who specialises in the study of Muslim women, says in Australia at least it's "extremely unusual" for men to force women to veil. In fact she's heard many more stories of husbands wanting their wives to take it off because it attracts so much unwelcome attention. "I'm not saying all women are doing it through personal choice, but there are enough women wearing it who are extremely assertive about wearing it," she says.

She says many veiled women in Australia are exchange students from the Arabian Gulf, or their

partners. As the veil is mandatory in places like Saudi Arabia, it's difficult to know whether they choose to wear it here. And sometimes the women wearing the veil are Australians who choose to follow the religion and don the garb. Kathryn Jones, 41, is a seventh generation South Australian. She grew up in the Adelaide Hills and converted to Islam after reading the Koran in the mid-1990s. At the height of her devotion to Allah, she wore a niqab for two years, but now wears a hijab and a full body covering. She's forbidden from being alone with a man who isn't her husband or a close relative, so we meet in a pizza shop in Ascot Park, watched by her Algerian husband Ali Vachor, 46. He has an impressive black beard, but turns out to be a lot friendlier than his stern demeanour suggests. I cut to the chase: "Are you an oppressed woman living under the yoke of a dastardly man?"

"Yes!" she says, laughing. "Save me!"

"[It's] really important to explain that most women are wearing it of their own free choice," she says. "To remove it is removing their right to choose and the right to feel comfortable. People who say they're (fighting it) to help us don't know what they're talking about because most Muslim women will find it quite the opposite."

Complicating the idea of choice though, is that some believe (or have been led to believe) that Islam demands the veil. "Some women I know believe it is obligatory so if it was banned here in Australia they would be basically locking these people up in their homes," she says. Jones understands why people feel uncomfortable as the veil impedes communication. But she points out that no one made a big fuss about the masks many people wore at the height of the swine flu panic. Vachor



Kathryn Jones, SA
Multicultural Affairs
Minister Grace Portolesi,
Dina Assaker and
Sumeja Shaha.

says the debate has inflamed tensions. A few weeks before a Saudi exchange student and his burqa-clad wife were walking outside his takeaway store. "This guy actually threw a rock at them," he says. "I saw that and went outside and said: 'you have no right to do that'. He said: It's my country!" There are tensions even for those who don't wear the full veil. Laila El-Assaad from the Islamic College of SA says already rife discrimination would be made worse by a ban. "I wear a headscarf and I get stares and poor service delivery and it'll be 10 times worse for people who wear the full veil," she says. "They'll be extremely isolated. We don't want them to feel restricted by the fear of going out their front door."

But while many Muslim women strongly support a woman's right to choose, that doesn't mean they support the choice of a burqa/niqab itself, says Hussein. She says that some of the women who express the strongest opposition to the full veil wear the hijab. "They're kind

of echoing Cory Bernardi," she says. "But they don't see it as oppressive – they tend to see it as a silly choice."

For most people, the debate is a proxy that opens discussion on issues that are often avoided – fear of an alien religion, the fairness of "special treatment" for minorities, and whether the need for tolerance should trump our own view of gender equality. As more women from the Muslim faith adopt this potent political and religious symbol in Australia, another question demands an answer: isn't it ridiculously hot under the burqa in the middle of summer? Egyptian-born Assaker says she's caught the pitying looks on scorching Adelaide days, but giggles as she insists it's the blokes in suits and ties they should feel sorry for. "The men in Australia are more covered than the women!"

Is the burqa 'unAustralian'? Email our letters page at saweekend@adv.newstld.com.au

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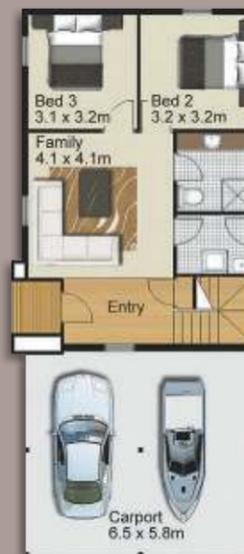
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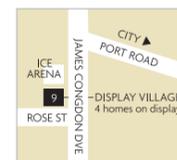
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