

# Reham

**Reham Kassem, 44, Special Education Teacher, Egyptian**

“I wore the hijab when I first moved to the United States 21 years ago with my husband. I wanted to wear it since it is *fard*, or mandatory. I wanted to wear it as a way to show appreciation to God that I have a family. I wanted to wear it as the last major step. After having a family, I had the hijab on for a while, and after a few years, I decided to take it off for a year. I put it on again, but the second time was for a different reason than the first.

Hair is a great part of beauty, and [as a hijabi] you can start to question yourself, ‘Why do I have to keep this piece of cloth on?’ I considered it a piece of cloth, without giving it much thought because I inherited Islam. I came here, to the United States, with Islam. I came with my name inevitably inheriting it. I didn't look up Islam like I did after I took off my hijab in 2011. So initially, I put it on my head because I was mandated to. I [eventually] decided to take it off and just blend in.

Once I took it off, I thought I could fit in. But I didn't. I wasn't comfortable. It wasn't me. I felt like I was missing something. I had to go back and eventually investigate all of the resources. I know some people [in the West] may think that the hijab hides your beauty and that it is mandatory, but I found it to be the opposite. It's not just a piece of cloth that you hide your hair with, or an operation of men degrading women and taking away their rights. If anything, it grants rights. It gives me the right to decide if I want to show you a special part of my body – it's a decision. It's my own decision.

When I chose to wear the hijab again, I wore it because I loved it. I felt like this was not going to be a limitation [physically or mentally]. I defend it now. When somebody just gives me [a dirty] look and judges me, I insist on taking the challenge to make them regret the first thought of judgment.

After this specific experience, the hijab now is a part of me. Every woman would love to feel that she is beautiful, but I feel beautiful by following what my religion obligated me to do. I feel beautiful with the hijab on: This is my crown. My religion wanted to protect me, and by following this rule, it is now a part of my dignity, my honor. Maybe some people don't understand [the meaning behind the hijab] or are just following social media narratives and associate hijab with oppression, or terrorism, or anti feminism, or all of these issues. These people think that I'm oppressed if they see me in public, or that my husband asked me to put this on, or my dad, or that if I'm here, I should follow American culture. I do this out of my own volition, nobody actually asked me to do this. They may also think that we want to enforce it onto others here, and it's not that way either. We don't want to enforce it onto anybody. We just want to be ourselves. I want others to respect it.

I approach everybody and anybody even if they show an aggressive attitude in the beginning towards me. I'm nice, and I don't get offended. In the beginning, I try to show them that I can tolerate it, that I can show them the opposite of what's going on in their minds. I pursued a career in education just to show that there is no contradiction between being covered and pursuing any career.”