Hijab on/Webcam Off - Episode 1 TRANSCRIPT   Dec 2021

Sahra-Isha Mohammad-Jones: Welcome to the first episode of Hijab On/Webcam Off, a Geographies of Embodiment research collective series. Hijab On / Webcam Off is a project reclaiming conversations around hijab from the mainstream where it is often the prerogative of non-Muslim, white supremacist, patriarchal and secular-imperialist narratives; or a topic of discussion amongst Muslim men where it becomes a symbolic reference to Muslim women.

The following conversation was recorded between Suhaiymah, Sahra-Isha and Azeezat in discussion about what we want to explore and untangle in this series. We invite you to contribute to the conversation, too, by sending in a voice-message reply through the Anchor.fm website or app.

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan: I feel like the conversation started between you two, right? In terms of this idea of hijab on, webcam off, like the thoughts that led to that being like a project we might start?

Azeezat Johnson: One of the reasons why I started thinking a lot about hijab and webcam was during lockdown, having like meetings with like Sahra-Isha and I was, I just started noticing how like you were, you were very particular about like when and where you put your webcam on and off. And it made me think a lot more about like actually, especially when we're dealing with like, you know, like all-white academic rooms, right? And so it made me think a lot more about like, actually, what does it mean for this like boundary around the body now to be like represented through the webcam?

Sahra-Isha: It started during COVID and erm, realising I think it was both in academia and then also in like the sports world, realising that the spaces I was in needed me to be visible. But then I still felt like I was invisible because I wasn't really heard or really appreciated in those spaces. And that became quite damaging and also kind of changed my relationship with hijab, and I had to really kind of reclaim that. And that's when I started to think about, you know, the spaces I'm in, like, do I need to have my camera on you? Do I need to be as visible as I am right now because it's not actually erm strengthening my relationship with hijab. If anything, it's kind of steering me away from it.

I guess it's just like reclaiming that and setting those boundaries that hijab has already created and establishing that for myself.

Suhaiymah MK: That's so interesting. I feel like Azeezat, though, something that you said that kind of stuck with me that's similar to that theme where I think you were sort of saying, what does it mean for like, who is it for? I guess, like, who are we having to make ourselves visible for and what does it mean when that is institutions that actually rely on making us invisible?

I thought it was a really striking way of also thinking because I think when I initially was thinking about hijab on webcam off. I was just I was already really compelled by the idea of just, I haven't

enjoyed, you know, my private space also being entered by like random people, you know, people I would just have meetings with, who I don't know in any, you know, even just in a limited professional capacity even and suddenly were all in my bedroom because, you know, that's the only space I have to do professional meetings. And it's that was also like a thing around boundaries that I was thinking through because to me, it's so weird to wear my hijab in my bedroom where I was like, why on earth would I be doing that? Just like the one place where I can just be fully, just being myself? But then I think also that when these layers that you just talked about Sahra-Isha, who are these people I'm talking to and why they need me to be visible? And actually, you know how much of their work is premised on my invisibility in the first place?

Azeezat J There's that question of like, Well, what does it mean when Muslim women are like being disappeared in so many different ways, you know, and you feel it, you feel it intimately.

We are talking about what it means to like, make yourself visible, but also what it means to actually feel seen, like, there's so many different ways where Muslim women feel their bodies being surveilled, right? Feel their bodies being looked at by different people. But what does it mean to actually feel seen? You know.

How do we build conditions where people actually feel seen with one another? And I think, you know, like Suhaiymah, that was one of the things that you mentioned really early on in terms of like, well, actually what happens when we think of hijab as a boundary that can also allow us to see in a different way as well, you know? And I'm really excited by that. And I think that's also like one of the reasons why I think it's interesting to put the conversation around hijab beside the conversation around webcam because like there have been other conversations around webcams being on all of the time and that being really, like, overwhelming for a lot of people, you know, so there's already this conversation that people are kind of having around visibility in relation to, like the digital world. And I think that there's something, yeah, we're just trying to expand that even further to really like. Pay attention to well, who feel seen where and why.

Suhaiymah MK: I feel like this distinction that we're talking about between being seen them being visible is also like when we take when we kind of think about Islamically, the different context that hijab is like mentioned in and used in. They vary so widely, but what I find really exciting is that oftentimes it's also about this this barrier that's actually invisible to the human eye, right? And like the idea that Allah has hijab that is light actually to protect us from the kind of majesty and the, you know, whatever Allah is that is so kind of unfathomable to us that we can't really understand if we were to see it with the naked eye or to understand as humans we couldn't.

I feel like that is also linked to this kind of distinction we're making because I think that that to me, is also such kind of beautiful proof of the idea that actually seeing is like, I think I've mentioned this before, Azeezat like the idea that we could see with our hearts one another rather than seeing with our eyes. I feel like, you know what you're saying, Sahra-Isha as well about like choosing kind of making selective choices about when we are visible and invisible or kind of less visible. But actually that that's also a choice about... almost trusting, maybe? I think

this one of the words that I feel comes to mind like it's about trusting that actually you see me so you don't need me to be visible because,we actually believe in other dimensions, we don't we don't just have this naked eye dimension.

So because of that, there's there's a possibility of we actually believe there are many things, you know, feelings and experiences that the yeah, there aren't like intelligible and aren't kind of explained in this like European secular way, but that are true. And I think the ways that I desire to be seen really echo with these kind of, you know, unarticulatable ways of kind of wanting to be seen as opposed to just, yeah, like, I want you to look at me, that's that's not what I mean.

Azeezat J: I love that. Yeah. I don't just want you to look at me. I like want you to see, I want you to actually see me and also think thinking about like our relationship to different institutions that want us to be there to be looked at like as the voice of anti-racism or the one black person or the one, you know, like in all of these different dimensions.

What I'm excited by in relation to the like, the way you're also talking about like different dimensions of hijab as well, those that we can see and can't and those that relate to, you know, us as humans interacting with each other, potentially, but also that relate to like all like belief that relates to faith in like another world that is another world that is not even another world, really, but like multiple worlds

I mean, I know that we've spoken about this in different ways, but it feels like that's another really important way of us, like as a as a group in this conversation, signalling a really different relationship to like how we're meant to think about the secularism of the world we're in right in the sense that when we're talking about like anything related to belief it always needs to be rationalised and explained within like a context that secularism can still understand when actually here we're saying no, there are boundaries here and ways of being here that go beyond that, which we're actually told is possible. And that feels really important to hold on to, you know?

Sahra-Isha: It's like trust you have in Allah that the protection hijab, you know, has means that you can set those boundaries for yourself and again, have that trust that whatever Allahis like, whatever spaces you're meant to be

Suhaiymah MK: I was just actually thinking about the words that we that we use because like just just even what you were saying, Azeezat, they're about like belief, like even, you know, even the word belief is not it's not our word, right? Like a belief already feels so loaded with like, well, "it's your belief", you know, it strikes me as so unfair, I guess at a really basic level, that actually all the ways in which, you know, because it's like these everyday practises right?

All throughout the day, like whether you're making dua, if you're praying, if you're like, even if you're just to yourself having a thought, but your thought process is like, Oh, I don't know, like, let me not post this thing on Twitter because I don't want people to... I don't know just all these things that are informed by actually this firm knowledge, I would like to say, of another world of a creator of being created. But then also, you know, I'm just thinking about the fact that even

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when we speak about it, we can only translate it through these words that already are like filled with secularism and build on secular assumptions so that even when we're talking about trying to reclaim a conversation and reclaim our boundaries, like we're still having to translate it through just these terms that are not our own

And I think for me, it's also like, what? What conversation might I be having around? Which is why I think excited me about this. What conversations might we have about hijab or about, you know, anything that we think, I guess anything that we do and what informs what we do? Yeah, if we could, you know, if we could use our own terms, if we could have our own?

Azeezat J: that's so beautiful. I love that.

Actually just in relation to what you were saying and also actually then flipping back to some of the things Sahra-Isha that you were saying about, you know, when you decide to, like, no longer show your face online or to step back from like the kind of hyper visibility of digital spaces, like also feeling feeling disappeared through that process as well and how difficult that is to navigate. But also then here, I guess one of the things that I'm excited by in this conversation is that we're looking for ways to like, actually say no by turning the webcam off, we're looking to actually re-engage with like Allah with our with with the practise of being so that we don't get caught up in the specifics of being visible.

Suhaiymah MK: There's something about hijab that I feel the potential of, at least, that allows you to be who you are without having to just perform who you are. And I'm just, you know, just thinking about what you said about, you know, even if you just disappear offline for a bit, right? Like even if it's not the pictures that you post, but it's just like, I need a break. I think I immediately feel so yeah. Like I'm no longer kind of in the world or I'm no longer kind of useful. It's almost like this utilitarian thing where it's like I'm no longer of use my because my ideas are only in my head. And, you know, unless they're visible and shared with others, they're not useful, which is it just feels like, you know, another way that, like capitalism has kind of really been internalised, but is also linked to this idea of boundaries and visibility. And that has nothing to do with whether I feel seen and whether I am seeing others actually in fact.

Sahra-Isha: Lockdown has kind of allowed us to do step back from social media as a step back from having our cameras on and really think about what hijab means for us, what our relationship means for us before it's kind of filtered by other thoughts and views, which is always the case when it comes to, like as Muslim women, like before we can even state our views, it's already been in other people's thoughts and opinions have been included in it. So by the time we get to us, it's like, OK, well, now you're trying to like, you know, battle this point or, you know, say no to this opinion and so on and so forth.

Azeezat J: I think the big like the question there is really like, how do you want to be in the world, you know? Like instead of us getting caught up in all of the different ways that we're told to be in the world? Like, what does it mean for us to actually like re-imagine boundaries? Yeah, re-imagine boundaries in ways that work for us. And I think maybe that's the thing that also lockdown showed - well lockdown and like, you know, the pandemic - showed in terms of, oh,

the way that we're working, the way that we're moving isn't sustainable. Right? We know that now. So actually, like, what does it mean for us to then try and take care of ourselves and take care of each other umm in ways that haven't actually been like? Tried yet.

Suhaiymah MK: I was just thinking about I just this memory just came to my mind, I remember when I was doing work experience at school, I think we were probably like 15/16. And I remember in the lead up to doing work experience, I in my head, I was like preparing like a almost like a almost like a speech that would be the answer if somebody asked me why I wore hijab, right, like I was. And obviously, the so much that was must have been informing that. And it's like, really sad to think that I was doing that. But what I think's interesting is that at no point throughout the entire thing, I knew that at no point it would. I knew it was not reasonable for me to just say, "Oh, for God", you know, that couldn't be the answer. I couldn't say that I wear this for God or for myself and just thought, be the end of the conversation. I think that's what I'm excited about with this idea of like webcam off, you know, like this actually is just something that I don't need to explain.

And as you've just said Azeezat, when I'm not having to explain it in any, like any way that's intelligible to all the gazes that are upon us, then then becomes a really exciting question of like, OK, so how do we want, how do we want to move and what do we want to move for? And what what's motivating us?

Another quote is just coming to mind, which was Yassir Morsi. I think he said something along the lines of, you know, at some point realising that the way that I speak is more informed by the war on terror than the Quran. And I thought that was such a kind of profound way of putting into words that feeling So what would it mean if we didn't speak the language of the war on terror and we could actually speak about ourselves and our relationships to Allah and our relationships to each other and the ways we move in the world with a language that that defies?

I think that also relates to what you the point you made as well about how the term "hijabi", because yeah, I think that's a good example of that's not. But but yeah, that word would not exist if we weren't. I don't know. I just feel like that's such a contextual thing. Like, you know, one hundred years ago, I mean, no one would have identified as a hijabi, right? Like, it's so context dependent and [true. Yeah] it wouldn't be defining so much of, you know, it was when you think about the cloth, right, like it becomes, it just brings it back down to this piece of cloth, which I think is also very dehumanising of those of us who wear it like, I feel like, yeah, it kind of strips of us of that agency. I don't know, it strips of so much, I feel.

Azeezat J: just, you know, talking a little bit more about the kind of the like deeply gendered application of like hijab, right? And like where and how it becomes so knotted to like the like Muslim women's bodies, right? Right. In different ways, whether you're wearing it or not. And all of that. And it's always I remember during my Ph.D., it was just a curious thing for me that I was talking about, like, OK, thinking about like the multidimensional hijab and all of these ways. And at the same time, in like in our popular language, it becomes so knotted to like Muslim women's bodies. And I think about all of the ways that, like women's bodies have been like policed and

surveilled or yeah, "wear this don't wear that" and all of the kind of, the replication of gender norms in relation to that as well, right?

And actually, like here, it's just exciting to think about like all of the different ways the boundary of hijab might be understood beyond this kind of like knottedness to like the cloth as like Sahra-Isha was talking about.

Suhaiymah MK: I just feel like so amongst most Muslim women, I feel like, you know, there's. I think there's so much like embodied knowledge and like I guess the experiences that we have, wearing a hijab or not wearing it like of being, you know, in our bodies being read as Muslim women or not being read as Muslim women and being Muslim women and all the kind of different layers that are there. And I'm just the thought I'm having is just sort of like in contrast with, the really gendered conversation - I just feel like there's actually part of the reason I think this conversation is is so necessary as well is that I feel that we have so much knowledge that is produced from being in this vantage point of wearing hijab or not wearing it, but being in this position where like we. I don't know so much, so much is kind of exposed to of the world

Azeezat J: I think that's also part of the point of, you know, us coming together in this conversation and coming together in GEM more generally, it's actually saying, no, our lived experiences are are real and they deserve like they deserve to actually be the grounds upon which we like imagine new worlds, you know, not just like, OK, you make small, small change there. And now, like, you know, no one's spitting at us directly like, no, no, like, we want a new world. And that's what we want and like. And I think that it's exciting to think about all of the different ways that we might like move towards that even just in ourselves, in the ways that we like sit with hijabs sit with with Islam, like it was really profound when you were saying that, my kind of spoken patterns are more informed by like, you know, the war on terror than on the Quran and thinking about how true that is. But how that means that we're leading with fear. You know, and leading with like constraints or imaginations of these like constraints on our bodies instead of actually trying to like, lead with ourselves, lead with what we know to be true, what we how we actually want to be in this world, you know?

Sahra-Isha: Even going back to academia and thinking of how it has really limited our growth when it comes to that space of writing, like anecdotes, how we're not really allowed to do that, for example. But then realising that is valid piece of knowledge that can and needs to be shared and will help so many other Muslim women. So then it's like finding that space to have these conversations have discourses, have knowledge like shared in a way where it empowers or, you know, like normalises things for us or, you know, allows us to see ourselves.

Suhaiymah MK: I'm just thinking about this quote from this, the book that's Sahar Ghumkhor wrote, I think it's called The Psychology of the Veil. She talks about lots of things, but one of the things that really stuck out to me is that she says that the she kind of characterises like Muslim women who wear hijab in Europe, are unbearable to the European like imagination of itself. Because what we're saying is we believe in another world like, sorry, we just don't like our motives are not your enlightenment values of freedom and like, sorry, that's it.

Wearing a hijab doesn't make you inherently like, oh, radical decolonial. But I do think that is inherently like deemed an attack on like the this like the secular imagination because of because of the idea that we're motivated by a world that is unseen and by things that we're supposed to just have left behind right in the in the "uncivil past".

I was thinking about the way that, you know, I think one of the ways that liberal populations kind of. Like demarcate themself as being liberal as opposed to being, you know, those "bad conservatives" is that they are like, you know, we accept and tolerate, you know, Muslim women who wear hijab. And it was horrible what Boris Johnson said about those women who wear niqab. That was so wrong." But at the same time, the actual policies that enforce the things that Boris Johnson says, e.g. niqab bans, e.g. Prevent policies that surveil women who do cover, you know, in health care the fact that you won't get the same quality of of that you won't get call quality care, that you won't get quality of education, that you won't will these things because simply because of these pieces of cloth that surround your body and the fact that liberal populations don't have an issue with that, that's like, you know, that's just part and parcel of society. But. And so I don't know. I'm just thinking also about how there's like a performance around the accepting of Muslim women that is sort of tied to I don't know that has nothing to do with our well-being in our care that has no reflection on like actually making it safe for us to be in the world. And I just, yeah, nothing more frustrating than than the way that everybody is like "oh my gosh that's so horrible". But nobody cares about actual well-being of Muslim women. Just just like, wow.

Azeezat J: And how can we like tend to? Yeah, I guess I've I've been thinking about tenderness a lot because if yeah, just that's where I'm at right now in my life, I'm just like, now we need to be thinking about like tending to each so that it's not just a matter of like pointing out like, "Oh, wow, this is a horrible thing that happened." But actually, like the work of tending to each other, of actually trying to imagine care with and for each other and for ourselves, obviously as a starting point. And that is so completely different, you know, and also thinking about how like Islam provides us with the framework for that. I mean, I know talking about this with, like you Suhaiymah and I think a couple of other people as well around what it means to actually say "Asalaam alaikum" to someone and be wishing peace upon them. Right? So like, what does it mean for us to actually like, create the conditions upon which peace might be something that they experience? Ease is something that they can experience, and that's not just pointing to the conditions of like brutality that's actually trying to, like change the way that we relate to each other within that. That feels really important to hold on to.

You know, I felt it Sahra-Isha when you were talking about like, yeah, I'm tired and frustrated, you know, like, it's done. But also then because I think that that's also part of the kind of like feeling the constraints so intimately, like feeling just all of these different ways where like, you're being disappeared in front of yourself. But actually like there's there's space for us to be. There's space for us to be in the ways that we want to. You know, and there's space for us to move towards the person that we want to be and the world that we want to see.

That's why I keep on coming back to like tending and tenderness because it's like it feels a lot slower. It feels a lot more like, no, we're we're hoping for something else, you know, and we're

we're going to put all of our well, I'm I'm willing to to choose to put all of my energy or most of my energy into actually like tending to myself into the communities that I love, you know? How does that transform even just our own relationships with the people that are closest to us?

Because I think part of the kind of violence of, yeah, just feeling, yeah, just all of the different ways that the conversation around hijab doesn't become about Muslim women, right? And like, It's not like, OK, just stop listening to like blatant Islamophobia, that's everywhere or all of the ways in which you don't feel seen. But actually, for me, it's been like a really important part of like, no I see the reality of the world that we're trying, that we're having to navigate in. And I'm holding and I'm not, we cannot excuse the need for like greater accountability, greater like just everything to change. But also like placing my bet on them to change is like, yeah, those days have. It's so gone. Like is done. So like, what else do we do? How else do we? Yeah. What else do we want then? You know?

Sahra-Isha: You know, like tenderness is the most important thing now because even just in regards to like surveillance, which is, you know, within society for some within their homes. And then it's kind of, yeah, finding those spaces and giving that love back to each other and healing. And yeah, I would say it's like blocking out all of that in acknowledging it, but blocking it out to kind of find peace within yourself and the spaces that you're in and strengthening that boundary that found you, that you have yourself and others as well.

Suhaiymah MK: Yeah. I think even just acknowledging like how? How much work we already are doing you know, like in the sense that I think just to just to survive all of that just to. You know, get through it all, and I think I feel like, you know, yeah, Muslim women are doing doing so much and like, you know, so, you know, more than overlooked, it's just like not even it is as if it doesn't exist, I feel like I feel like that's why it's also just is really radical. And it seems it can sound so small to the like, you know, the eye that doesn't kind of measure correctly, but I feel like just being in spaces where we validate one another's experiences and just kind of say, like, I can see that you're exhausted, like, you know, this is heavy, like that. Sometimes just hearing that it's like because I think it's when you said Azeezat helps you see yourself and you suddenly are like, Oh, wow, like, oh yeah, like, this is actually like this is a tough space like this this is this is like a I feel like we're just so expected to survive all the time and to still be the best mom, the best daughter, the best sister, the best. All of the, you know, like still be the perfect Muslimah still be, you know, the representation of the religion; all those things. And in a way, maybe we also internalise all of that so that we kind of just think that actually, you know, being tired and being a bit scared is just normal. That's fine. That's just part and parcel. And actually for someone for us to just say to each other. No it's that's heavy and you're not alone in carrying that. And I see you that that to me, is also just so that feels so radical. And it's it's not just it's not just words that's like, really, that's like because I believe that you do see because you are also, you know, in that world with me. And I think there's something, really. You know, just kind of incomparable actually about that.

Thank you for listening to this podcast. The conversation you just listened to was recorded between Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Sahra-Isha Mohammad-Jones and Azeezat Johson about the Hijab On/Webcam Off project and what we would like it to become. An important part of the

project for us is that these conversations are collective, so we'd like to invite you to contribute to this conversation, too, by sending in a voice-message reply through the Anchor.fm website or app. Thanks. We look forward to the next conversation in the series!