



Over time I have developed a thicker skin. I treat people just as I want to be treated. I try not to be disrespectful of anyone. My religion teaches me these things – as ironic as it seems, because I am attacked for my belief system.

Maryam

My name is Maryam. I study biology at Cal State San Bernardino. I was born in Iraq, but I was raised in the United States. I usually identify myself as an American Muslim.

Wherever I go, I don't quite fit in – in the United States I am that Muslim-Arab-Middle-Eastern girl. Post 9/11, Muslims are often seen as un-American and made to feel like we do not belong here. When I go back to the Middle East, I am that Americanized Muslim girl. And because I am Shiite, which is only 15 percent of the Muslim population, I am a minority also in my own religious community.

I do wear a head scarf. It is a personal choice of religious attire. For me, covering my head is a constant reminder to be humble and to be modest. Some people look at my head scarf and tell me, "Take it off! You don't need it. You're in America now." And I'm like, "I've been here almost my whole life, so I know what my rights are, thank you." I am proud to wear it.

Not all Muslim girls cover their heads. Others are reinventing how it is done – through hats, through

capets, through anything that looks "normal" in the United States. I don't think anything is wrong with that, but it is sad they feel they have to do that to fit in.

I get more positive than negative vibes from the general public about observing hijab, though some people do ask really weird questions, like if I shower with a scarf on. Other times there are social misconceptions– like that I am not allowed to attend school or to drive. Granted, some Middle Eastern women cannot do these things, but that does not mean these are core, fundamental beliefs of Islam.

When I was younger, although I observed hijab, I never felt any different from the other children in my classes. They would ask me why it was that I wore it, and I would explain it to them, and that would be the end of it. They simply asked out of curiosity and that never bothered me.

Unfortunately, these days my younger siblings are not treated the same by their peers as I was by mine. There have been too many occasions at school where they were bullied, mistreated, and harassed. My younger

sister was told that she is a terrorist, and that she is ugly with the headscarf. My brothers have also been called terrorists and “towel heads.” It broke my heart to see them crying at these cruel things people say. It got to a point where my parents placed them in a private Islamic school.

More often than name-calling, the animosity that I perceive toward Muslims is so subtle that you might overlook it. For example, I went out to dinner with a group of American-Muslim women and one of my friends requested water without ice. The waitress looked at her and said, “Well, in America we drink water with ice.” I was taken aback because I didn’t know how to react. I didn’t want to go down to that level and say something disrespectful, but I also wanted her to acknowledge that what she said was not okay. I told her, “You know, we are American.”

Another instance that I recall was at the retail optical dispensary where I work. A customer walked in, so I smiled and asked if she needed help. She said, “I need somebody else to help me.” Everybody else was busy, so I told her, “I am available.” She said, “I don’t want you helping me.” I was really hurt, and I did shed a few tears.

A situation that happened more recently is that my family’s cars were vandalized. For a month straight



“I think it’s very important to share narratives like these, so that we can break down the misconceptions, and so our neighbors know that, look, I am a human being, too.”



Maryam wears a scarf as a sign of modesty and her devotion to God.

there was dog waste on all of our windshields each morning. While there was no note to indicate that this was done because of our religion, we were the only family in the neighborhood that this was happening to.

I’m told that I should be apologetic, that I have to bear the responsibility of the actions of so-called Radical Muslims. But, I have nothing to do with them! I do feel bad because, as a human being, I believe that no life should be taken away unjustly. But, I’m not responsible for the actions of radical Muslims. Neither are a billion other Muslims in the world.

Everyone from all religions and cultures deserves to be treated with respect. But, because of my religion, it seems that there is always some kind of label glued onto me. Those labels keep people from seeing that I am a human being. I am loving. I am a capable woman. And I will not be oppressed.