Activity 2 – Feminism and Multiculturalism: The debate on hijab

To put it simply, feminism stands for gender equality. As the discussion on the various waves of feminism shows, this claim for gender equality may be made in various areas of life – sexuality and reproduction; right to vote and participate in public life; workplaces; etc. – and may take different forms. Feminism is, therefore, not without debates and controversy. This is why it is important to remember that, although it is often presented as such (particularly in the media), there is no single feminist movement. One of such major debates, which we will discuss in this activity, has been between feminism and multiculturalism.

In a famous 1997 essay, Susan Moller Okin asked ‘Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?’ and argued that, although both feminism and multiculturalism emerge from liberal politics and values, they share a tense, and at times even oppositional, relationship. Okin asked this question in the context of Western liberal countries which house minority immigrant populations and cultures. She defined ‘multiculturalism’ as the claim for and accommodation of group rights for minority cultures. Okin suggested that minority cultures within Western liberal countries are often more patriarchal and harmful to women than majority cultures, therefore; multiculturalism and feminism cannot be assumed or expected to be in tandem. She gave examples of various practices in minority cultures which are detrimental for women such as polygamy, clitoridectomy (also known as female circumcision or female genital mutilation: FGM) and forced marriages, to illustrate her point.

Many scholars responded to this controversial essay, following its publication in 1997. It was criticised for its problematic positioning of Western cultures as less patriarchal and, despite its best intentions, of minority cultures as rigid. It was also suggested that Okin’s argument was similar to the ‘civilising mission’ of the colonialists, in that it envisaged Western liberalism to be the measure and solution for ‘Third World’ cultures¹.

Task

- Read Okin’s article and one of the responses in the Boston Review here: https://bostonreview.net/forum/susan-moller-okin-multiculturalism-bad-women

In 2010, France became the first country in Europe to ban face coverings, including the niqab² worn by some Muslim women, in public places. Alongside security risks and communication issues, the need to promote gender equality among all communities was cited as a major reason for this ban³. The wearing of headscarves by schoolgirls had already been banned in France in 2004. Both these moves were controversial and divided feminists.

Those who oppose the hijab argue that it is a sign of women’s oppression and thus is anti-feminist.

Others contend that the hijab is only as patriarchal and oppressive as high heels and lipstick

Although the UK has not enforced any such ban yet, it has been under discussion in recent years⁴.

In this context, consider the following:

1. How is the hijab similar to or different from other modes of women’s clothing? Is there something about the practice of hijab (as compared to other ways of dressing) that makes it detrimental for women?

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² ‘Niqab’ refers to the face covering, usually worn with a ‘burqa’, a long loose dark coloured garment, practiced by Muslim women. ‘Hijab’ refers to the Islamic practice of modest dressing and may be used to refer to the headscarf.
2. The issue of 'choice' becomes central in this debate – is the hijab only oppressive when enforced by women’s families? What if women claim to choose to wear the hijab themselves? Do women ever freely choose how to dress or are they conforming to societal expectations?

3. Can there be a universal framework for gender equality? Who would decide on such a framework? What problems can you see with reaching consensus on a universal notion of gender equality?