

Rights, Religion and Relativism

Kelly is discussing women's rights with a group of her friends before their International Law class starts. As an avid feminist, she prides herself in her belief that women and men are equal. She says to her friends, "I feel sorry for the women that feel like they have to submit themselves to men. I mean, look at Muslim women. Why should they have to cover their heads or faces? They are beautiful. It's a violation of their human rights to be treated as inferior to men. Why should they have to wear one if men don't have to?"

Several of Kelly's friends look uncomfortable and motion with their eyes to the right of Kelly. She glances over and realizes that Salma, who is originally from Kenya, is sitting next to them wearing her hijab. Thankfully for Kelly, their professor enters the room and begins the day's lecture.

After class, Salma approaches Kelly as she putting her things away in her backpack. Salma explains that she heard Kelly's conversation and that she wears a hijab because in her culture it is empowering. To her, a hijab is a sign of her submission to Allah. It also makes it so that men judge her by her personality rather than by her appearance. Surprised, Kelly apologizes. Yet, she is confused. She thought hijabs were degrading and a violation of women's fundamental rights. How could two people view women's right so differently?

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you agree with Kelly that hijabs violate women's rights?
2. If human rights are universal, how do we account for cultural differences?
3. Are human rights and cultural relativism fundamentally incompatible? Which one is more important?
4. Who has the power to decide how human rights are interpreted?