

*Hadja Bangoura*  
**We Are All One**

*I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.  
~Maya Angelou*



I am a Muslim girl who doesn't wear a hijab -- it was never a requirement in my household. Nevertheless, I am a Muslim. Since 9/11, Islamophobia has spread widely around the world. I was too young to know what life was like for Muslims before then, but I grew up seeing the taunts and prejudice against my religion. Stereotype after stereotype have been stamped on Islam.

Once when I told my friend I was Muslim, she looked at me with piercing appalling eyes and said, "You don't act like one!" It's like no matter what, or who I am, society always finds a way to mold me into a character. Being a woman alone in our heavily patronized environment is difficult because society views us as incapable of fending for ourselves. Women have been carved as weak and docile in the eyes of society. We have to look a certain way -- the "acceptable" way. Watching my friend's reaction, I wondered, Is there suppose to be a specific way that a Muslim should act? One acts and behaves based on the person they are, and not their labels.

The labels used to negatively strip me of my identity has given me the voice to identify myself. My religion has been the subject of many accusations in the past decades. When some people think of the word "terrorist," they often connect it to Islam. Celebrities feel they can openly ask for all Muslims to be branded as a way to alert others. Muslim women are considered to be helpless, brainwashed, and are often chastised for wearing a hijab, a niqab, or a baraka. Muslims women are misunderstood for their choices like wearing hijab. Meanwhile, Christian nuns cover their hair with a garment similar to a hijab and they are never asked about their decisions or choices. They never get the finger pointed at them like the Muslim women do. The same critics of Muslim women haven't actually educated themselves about Islam and its true culture. The religion itself promotes peace and prosperity. We practice tolerance and kindness.

Today, I stand tall, and use my voice and my newly discovered strength as a woman to empower my people and every human being around the world who are being discriminated -- may it be Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions groups.

I speak up for every Muslim, every woman in the world, and every person who feels like they've become shadows to society's cruel bigotry. We must all speak up. We must break the cycle that has long been repeated. We are people capable of roaring and making our mark on this world. We are brave birds waiting to take our first flight towards the luminescent rainbow, but need a little push and each other's encouragement on our path to empowerment.