Summer is just around the corner. That means it’s time for the fun, parties, beaches - and the comments. Every year, as summer nears, I get into gear to respond to the "Aren’t you hot?", "How can you be dressed like that when it’s 90 degrees outside? I would never do it if I didn’t have to!", and "Man, you should take all those clothes off in this heat…you’re in America now, you don’t have to dress like that anymore!" comments.

Ever since I made the decision - yes, I chose this by my own will - to wear hijab (the Muslim women’s veil and long dress), I’ve gotten a lot of looks, remarks and well-meant advice.

The thing is, I was born in Little Rock, AK, and I moved to Indiana when I was about two-years-old. The way I dress has nothing to do with where I’m from and everything to do with what God has commanded Muslim women to do. When I was getting ready to enter fifth grade, I begged and pleaded with my parents to wear the hijab. They said I was too young. I said I was ready to do it. In the end, they relented. I’ve been wearing hijab for a decade now, and I haven’t looked back once.

In fact, rather than limiting me, hijab has given me freedom. It has allowed me to build myself as a woman and to focus on my inner self, rather than my outer appearance. Don’t get me wrong -outer appearance matters too, but it doesn’t matter one bit if there is nothing substantial inside. I haven’t been prevented from going to school and getting an education or working because I am wearing hijab or because I’m a Muslim woman. While it may be a widely believed, it is not true that Muslim women are prevented from learning or being educated. In fact, the direct opposite is true. Muslim men and women are equal in the eyes of God when it comes to their responsibilities in learning and understanding the world around them. It is an obligation, in Islam, for both genders to seek both religious and secular knowledge. Indeed, the Prophet told Muslim women in particular to seek knowledge, saying to them, "The best among you is the one who seeks education for what she does not know."

Women were not created by God to be looked down upon or stepped on by men. They were not created to be slaves to what their society imposes on them. They were created by God to better society and to nurture future generations. Furthermore, God gave women the right to vote, the right to own property, the right to contribute to society meaningfully - long before men gave these rights to them through man-made systems.

Before Islam, the women who lived in the Arabian Peninsula had no rights - they were the property of their husbands as were goats and cattle. Then, Islam came, and God restored to women their rights and made them honored and esteemed members of society. In fact, as the Prophet Muhammad delivered his Last Sermon to the people, he gave them a reminder, "Treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers."

It is true that many women are oppressed, but Islam is not responsible for this oppression. In the Qur’an, Allah says: "There is no compulsion in religion: truth stands out clear from error." Therefore, in Islam, one cannot be forced to follow the religious guidelines. If someone is being forced, it is culture that is causing this, not Islam.

Oppression is not taken lightly in Islam; it is a gravely punishable offense, no matter if the oppressed be Muslim or not, female or male, strong or weak. The Prophet Muhammad stated that Allah said: "My most extreme anger is with those who oppressed the ones who have no help except Allah." One of the core principles, then, of Islam is justice to all people-not just men.

One time, a woman came to the Prophet Muhammad complaining about her husband’s treatment towards her, and Allah revealed a whole chapter of the Quran, entitled the Woman Who Pleads, acknowledging her complaint and giving her reassurance.

Incidences such as this were not uncommon during the early Islamic period. Women had suffered at the hands of men for a long period of time, and early Islamic leaders worked hard to make sure the oppression stopped. For example, the sec-