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## RU-N Students Reclaim Their Narrative With “Hijabi World” Documentary

By Lawrence Lerner

Sep 20, 2016

*Back in January 2015, Rutgers University–Newark seniors Dina Sayedahmed and Hamna Saleem happened upon a newly released video by BuzzFeed, which featured four non-Muslim women wearing hijab for a day and discussing their experiences. The video went viral, racking up more than 7 million views.*

*Understanding BuzzFeed’s good intentions, Sayedahmed and Saleem nevertheless wondered why the news outlet did an “experiment,” rather than speak with hijabis, or Muslim women who wear hijab daily. While in a journalism class that ran in conjunction with RU-N’s Newest Americans Project that spring, they decided to take matters into their own hands, shooting and stitching together video interviews with fellow hijabi students from different academic, social and cultural backgrounds about their experiences wearing hijab.*

*Their class video eventually led to the making of "Hijabi World," a powerful, candid six-minute documentary film they created with the help of Tim Raphael, associate professor of arts, culture, media and director of RU-N's Newest Americans Project, and producers Julie Winokur and Ed Kashi of Talking Eyes Media, a non-profit production company whose work stimulates public dialogue and advocates for positive social change.*

*Woman wearing hijab*

*Through Winokur and Kashi's connections, "Hijabi World" has gotten wide exposure on both **The New York Times Lens Blog** and on The Atlantic's website. It also was an official selection at the 2016 Montclair Film Festival and received honorable mention for best documentary short at The People's Film Festival in New York City.*

*Sayedahmed is double-majoring in journalism and political science. Her family migrated to the U.S. from Cairo, Egypt, in stages during the 1980s and '90s. She was born in Jersey City, N.J., and raised in Bayonne.*

*Saleem is journalism major, minoring in video production, who resides in Passaic, NJ. She was born in Lahore, Pakistan, migrated to the U.S. with her family in 1998 and grew up in Plainsboro, N.J.*

*We sat down with Sayedahmed and Saleem to talk about the making of "Hijabi World."*

***Hijabi World* emerged out of a video you did in class, correct?**

**Dina Sayedahmed:** Yes. When Hamna and I were in the Newest Americans journalism class, we drafted a storyboard and recruited women to be interviewed. We all got together and chatted for several hours, sharing similar experiences, challenges and struggles, such as the absurd questions people asked and the drive-by comments and other forms of harassment and discrimination we face. There was so much similarity, yet it was rare that we ever sat down and validated our emotions together.

**You shot your class video in spring 2015 as a series of talking-head interviews. How did that video morph into the short documentary film *Hijabi World*?**

**DS:** Professor Raphael, along with very talented filmmakers Julie Winokur and Ed Kashi, saw our video at a New Americans retreat in May [2015]. We all toyed with the idea of recreating the film, and Julie and Ed suggested a new format—having the women walk and talk directly into the camera—which gave the film a new, dynamic appeal.

**And you shot *Hijabi World* in fall 2016. Can you tell us about that?**

**Woman in hijabi**

**Hamna Saleem:** It took about three months to film on location in Newark, Jersey City and Montclair. For our class video, Dina and I did everything from filming to editing. With Ed and Julie, we gathered the subjects [from our previous video], and were onsite during filming to make sure that they captured our message.

**DS:** Yes. While Ed and Julie filmed, Hamna and I walked alongside and guided the women through the questions we had asked them in our class video.

**HS:** And in post-production, we watched rough-cuts to see that our message was still there. So it was interesting because we were learning to be on a different side of production.

**What are some of the biggest lessons you came away with from this film-production process?**

**HS:** This film taught me patience. No matter what obstacle you face, always stand your ground and push through to see the end product. And only speak on behalf of the constituents you represent. This is how our film came about in the first place.

**DS:** Yes, no one is entitled to someone else's narrative. And all of the women who were part of *Hijabi Worldare* Rutgers or NJIT students, and some are my childhood friends, but this was the first time that I was hearing their "hijab story." I realized then how precious personal narratives are and that they are truly gifts to be appreciated.

**In spring 2015, when you embarked on your class video, did you imagine in your wildest dreams that a year and a half later you'd have associate producer credits on a short-documentary screened at film festivals and appearing on the websites of *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*?**

**HS:** I think when doing a documentary, you always have hope that it will be screened at festivals and be featured by big-name news agencies. But I didn't expect it to reach to such far horizons in such a short timespan. I would have been equally happy if only professors used the film to educate their students. If one person walks away learning something, that's the biggest accomplishment.

**DS:** In all honesty, I did expect that *Hijabi World* would go viral—it is the only film of its quality and kind—but I didn't expect it to make it to *The New York Times*.

**Any final thoughts?**

**HS:** We wanted people to understand what it means to live as hijabi day-to-day. You can't get that from a social experiment where non-Muslims wear hijab for 24 hours.

**DS:** Right. And though Muslims make up only a small percentage of the U.S. population, we can make waves and play important roles. We're here, and despite what Donald Trump says, we're not going anywhere. But we need to stand up, take back the mic and reclaim our narratives. We can't afford to be silent and have others speak on our behalf, now more than ever.

See the documentary on *The New York Times* site [here](#).



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