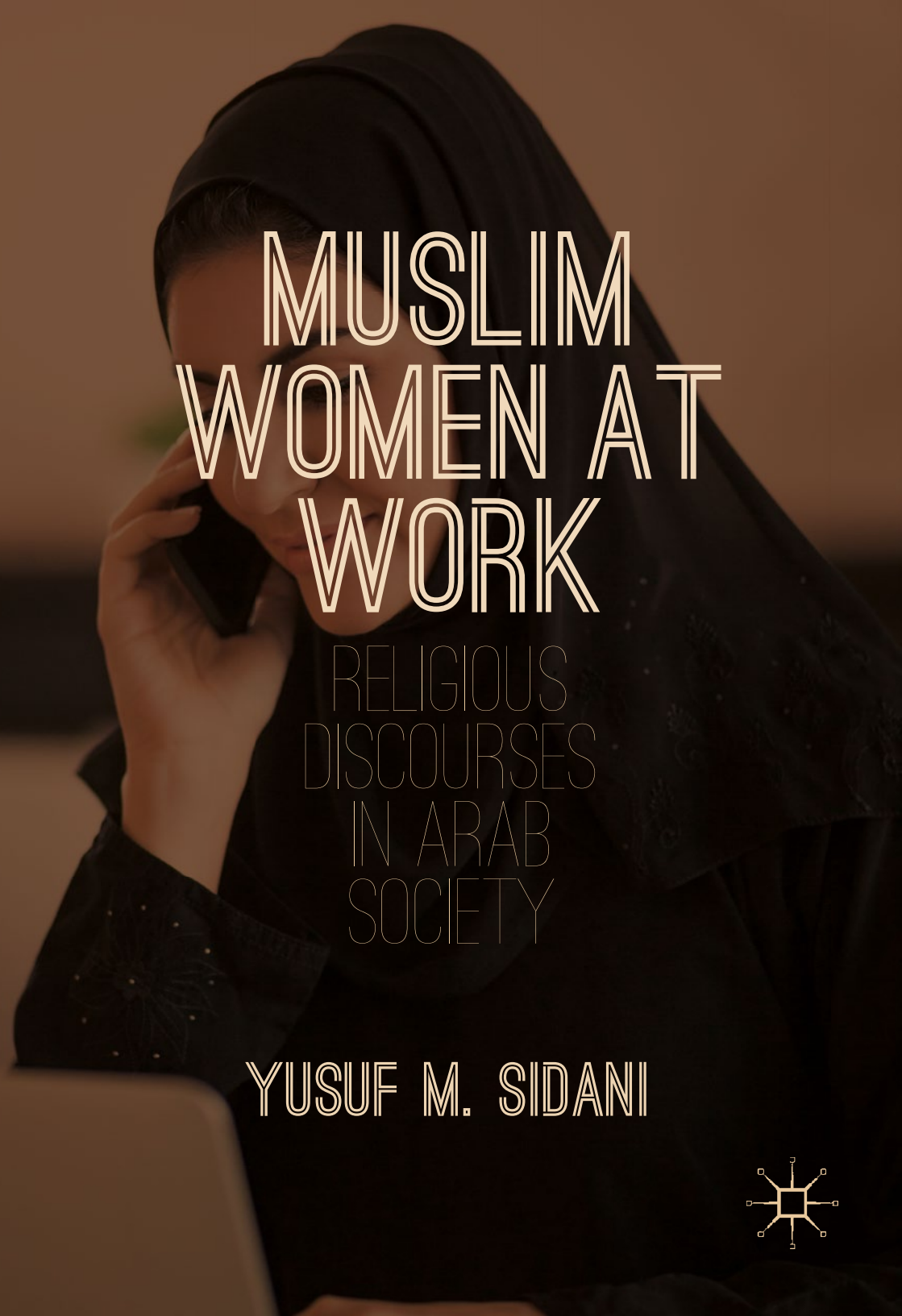

MUSLIM WOMEN AT WORK

RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES IN ARAB SOCIETY

YUSUF M. SIDANI

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Religious Discourses in Arab Society

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To my mother
A Muslim woman at work

Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Rarely a day goes by without a piece of news about Muslims and Arabs in the mainstream media. Mostly, it is not positive. The status of Arab women particularly has long captured the interest of scholars, intellectuals, and activists from all four corners of the world. Issues of discrimination, harassment, dress codes, seclusion, lack of participation and inclusion, absence of meaningful political representation, deficiencies in education, and lack of equal access to resources are repeatedly discussed and highlighted. Those discussions often lead to the conclusion that there is either something wrong in the Arab culture, in Islam, or in both.

People who write about the region, including some Arabs, often reach the same conclusion that there is an overpowering "hatred of women" in the Arab world. Male-dominated institutions have accumulated a sum of animosity towards women, and the only path that most men take, according to such perspectives, is that they continue their domination over their female counterparts. The only way to do that is to continue to marginalize women, imprison them, treat them without courtesy or consideration, and squash any ambitions they might have.

This is not an exaggeration. In an article written in 2012, just as the Arab Spring revolutions were taking form, an Egyptian American journalist wrote a provocative piece in *Foreign Policy* under the title "Why Do They Hate Us? The real war on women is in the Middle East."[1] The word "hate" and "hatred", excluding its synonyms, appeared 16 times in the article. Blanket condemnations of Arab societies were issued such as "Arab societies hate women," "Saudi Arabia hates women," and "the hatred of women goes

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deep in Egyptian society." The author described a world where abuses are conducted, husbands beat up their wives, women are denied the right to drive cars, girls are forced into child marriages, sexual harassment is endemic, and women are forced to marry their rapists.

The author was seemingly afraid of Islamism which seemed to be on the rise in the wake of the Arab Spring mobilization in 2012. Egypt had just elected a parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and *Salafis*, and Tunisia's *Ennahda* party won the largest bloc in the Constituent Assembly.[2] She did not seem to have discerned the distinction between those two countries or the major forces operating within. Failing to understand the difference between *Ennahda* party in Tunisia and their progressive agenda, and the *Salafism* movement in Egypt with their ultra-conservative vision, is problematic to any Middle Eastern specialist.

The above depiction of the Arab world also invariably leads to erroneous conclusions. Let's take harassment, which was described as being endemic. Sexual harassment is indeed a problem in many regions of the Arab world. But this is hardly an "Arab" problem; harassment is a global problem. Specifically, workplace harassment—worldwide—is an impediment to female empowerment and integration in many professions, especially in those fields dominated by males. The top five worst cities for verbal harassment according to one study[3] were Mexico City, Delhi, Bogota, Lima, and Jakarta; only Jakarta is in a Muslim country. The worst cities for physical harassment were Mexico City, Bogota, Lima, Tokyo, and Delhi; none is a Muslim or Arab city. While harassment is indeed a problem in many Arab contexts, this does not make it an Arab cultural phenomenon. The Catholics of Mexico City, Bogota, and Lima do not have an innate hatred of women, nor do the Shintos of Japan, or the Hindus of India. Similarly the argument that the real problems facing women in the Arab world are based on an innate "hatred of women" is a proposition that is unwarranted. It serves no real purpose except to augment another "clash of civilizations" thesis. One more example brought forward, as evidence for the "hatred of women" in the Arab world, relates to denying women the right to drive in Saudi Arabia, which is home to less than 2% of all Muslims. This is a severe problem which has repercussions on women's integration in the public life of the Saudi society. Yet, this is still a problem that needs to be seriously tackled within Saudi Arabia, rather than being an "Arab issue."

This book about women's participation in the workplace acknowledges the significant problems found in Arab societies that still need to be resolved. Yet, missing the real culprits would only lead to prescribing the

wrong solutions. The main argument that I make in this book is that the sorry state of Arab women is the result of major problems created by a complicated web of socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. Authoritarian regimes, that have been very ineffectively governing this part of the world, have made the situation worse for Arab men and Arab women. The impact on women has indeed been more severe. But this is how dictatorships work. They create structures that marginalize historically disadvantaged communities. Some groups, in this case women, feel the brunt of those structures more than others.

This topic—understandably—has captured the interest of scholars from various disciplines, backgrounds, and ideological starting points. I acknowledge that it is not easy for a male researcher, especially in the Arab world, to write about this subject. I have learned, over the years, to ignore the perceived lack of legitimacy that I face from the presumption that I can only imagine, but never live, the struggles that women in this part of the world face. This is true; empathy has its limits and I am very cognizant of that. Yet, I feel that, as a male researcher, I actually complement, though not replace, the insights of my female colleagues. My background, as a student of Islamic studies, also helps in reaching communities that would otherwise ignore yet another book about Arab or Muslim women.

Another assumption of this book is that religion continues to play a fundamental role in Arab societies and—accordingly—it plays a role in shaping managerial and organizational behavior. Yet, I do not claim that it is the only factor, not even the primary one. I did choose to zoom in on this factor, repetitively asserting that understanding the functioning of organizations—including women's participation within those organizations—has to be explained by an array of factors—transcending religion to include other social, economic, and political factors.

This book thus addresses the special link between Islam and women's participation in the public sphere. Various discourses are described and analyzed. I also, of course, give my personal insights and opinions throughout this work. The second chapter addresses the persistent gender gap in Arab societies. Particular emphasis is put on female participation gap in the public sphere. Examples of such gaps are given in education, labor participation, income, and ascension to leadership positions. Gaps within Arab countries are also discussed and arguments against treating the Arab world as a single monolithic culture are presented. Potential explanations for these gaps are given that go beyond the oft-repeated "Arab culture" argument. The chapter also explains some of the characteristics of women's careers in

the Arab world which reflect many inter-related factors that contribute to their current status.

Through presenting various readings of key verses from the Qur'an, the third chapter describes the religious injunctions brought forward that impact women's participation in the public sphere. The few verses in the Qur'an dedicated to male–female interactions and Muslim women's dress are discussed. The various understandings of those verses are presented and the implications on female participation are described. The chapter reflects on the controversies revolving around the *hijab* verse and what this means for women's presence in the public sphere. The chapter explains how arguments that effectively seclude women are indeed based on the sacred text. Yet, it also explores how alternative explanations and interpretations of the same texts are brought forward that call for understandings that include, rather than exclude, women.

The fourth chapter depicts the main arguments put forward by opponents of veiling. Drawing from the works of several Arab feminists, activists, and academics, I describe a discourse that attributes much of the lack of female participation to the boundaries imposed on women by certain readings of the Qur'anic texts. Those restrictions, it is argued by critics, draw their legitimacy from misguided religious interpretations made by societal forces that have no intention to move in any direction that empowers women.

The fifth chapter addresses the issue of the veil within its historical context. It describes various discourses, from within Islam, that argue for, or against, female participation in the public sphere. It explains the various, sometimes divergent, understandings of the veil, and the implications thereof on Muslim women. The varieties of explanations within Islamic feminism are discussed. In addition, the chapter tackles the implications of a woman's dress on her sense of agency and autonomy. The concept of "false consciousness" is analyzed, and conflicting feminisms, within and outside Islamic discourse, are discussed.

The sixth and final chapter explains how various attempts over the last century have not been able to significantly close the gender gap. The role of education, regulatory changes, and the quota system are analyzed. Why education has not resulted in increased economic and political participation is revisited and explained. The limits of regulatory changes and the quota system are also addressed. It is argued that without proper implementation and a parallel change in attitudes and norms, regulations are not likely to be effective. The chapter also touches upon the successes and failures of

feminist action over the last century. Whether transnational feminism would help is debated including the risks of this being perceived as a form of colonial feminism. The chapter closes by asserting that the blame game engulfing Arab societies has not helped the cause of women. The need of various groups, even when coming from disparate starting points, to come together and work on a common agenda would contribute to the advancement of women all across the region.

Notes

1. Eltahawy, M. (2012). Why do they hate us? *Foreign Policy*, 193, 1–9.
2. This has since changed with the military coup in Egypt and *Ennahda* Party softly exiting from power in Tunisia.
3. Stop Street harassment. *Statistics – The Prevalence of Street Harassment*. Reston, VA, USA. Harassment. http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/resources/statistics/statistics-academic-studies/

CHAPTER 2

A Persistent Participation Gap

Men are the wool of the tribe,
But women are the ones who weave the pattern
(Arab Proverb)

Introduction

There is a recurring image, very much dominant in the West, of subjugated powerless Arab and Muslim women. Those women are seen as being marginalized by powerful forces of patriarchy and rigid societal institutions that include the family, political structures, and religious bodies. Reports and statistics by international organization, some of which will be presented in this chapter, tell of a dismal situation for those women. Issues of discrimination, education gaps, harassment, and prejudice are brought forward attesting to a situation that is extremely problematic.

While still acknowledging that something is indeed wrong, another perspective asserts that this issue cannot be separated from a larger development problem that sweeps many parts of the Arab world. This predicament is worsened by ineffective public administration structures, autocratic regimes, corruption, and deficient educational systems. Talking about a "woman problem" that is separate from a larger crisis would not lead to proper diagnosis of the challenges faced. Women do suffer from a power differential vis-à-vis strong societal and political structures. Yet, such structures also impact other marginalized groups including lower-status men,

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deprived ethnic groups, and historically disadvantaged social classes. Fixing one side of the equation needs to be complemented by fixing the other side as well.

Irrespective of which position one adopts, most would agree that the current status of women in Arab societies is not alright. Scholars, activists, and women's rights advocates, whether Arabs or non-Arabs, overwhelmingly acknowledge the existence of significant gender gaps at many levels. Some Arab countries have gone a long way in addressing those gaps; others seem to be running in circles. All in all, however, narrowing gender disparities in education, workforce participation, and political representation has proven to be an arduous task.

There is little agreement as to the reasons behind this gap. Determining who, or what, is responsible for the gender disparity, and how best to address it, are questions with various, often divergent, explanations. Some blame deeply rooted customs, traditions, and religious understandings. Others blame patriarchal forces entrenched in the whole region, which transcend countries, ethnicities, and religions. Yet, a third group offers explanations associated with the discovery of oil, labor migration, population growth, and changes in fertility rates.[1] Those and other factors, through a complicated web of cause and effect, have particularly impacted women in a negative way.

Some Arab feminists see parallels between what has been happening in Arab countries and what happened in Western countries a couple of centuries ago in terms of the role of culture, religion, and patriarchy. Others look suspiciously at what they consider to be Western-inspired feminism and tell a story that is, in many respects, different. Some, more interested in sustaining the status quo, imply that the "women issue" is blown way out of proportion. Another group may link raising this issue to a host of neocolonial attempts that aim to disintegrate Arab societies.

Regardless of the various standpoints, serious analysts concur that there is something clearly wrong. Reports by international organizations note that the gender gap in the Arab World is greater than almost any other region of the world. Gaps have been highlighted in education, health, labor participation, pay equity, ascension to leadership positions, and harassment on the job. While women suffer from such problems in multiple contexts including the Western world, the gravity of the problem in the Arab World looks overwhelming. I am going to describe below some aspects of the problem indicating where successes, in relative terms, have been made and where problems still persist.

Gender Gap in Education

In a book[2] dated 1873 written by an American missionary in Mount Lebanon, the author described the educational situation in one Arab country, Lebanon, which was then part of a greater Syria.[3] He explained the situation of girls whose parents were not welcoming to the idea of sending their children to school. Particularly, girls were not expected to pursue formal education. Protestant Missionaries were among the first to establish a school system that took into great consideration the importance of education for girls, whether Muslim or Christian. Such initiatives were not very welcome, not only by Muslim families, but also by other opposing Christian churches in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. Irrespective of the resistance, the drive to educate girls prompted many like-minded organizations to be established to educate children, both male and female.

At that time, rarely did a girl reach a high school level, let alone pursue university education. This changed toward the end of the nineteenth century as more Muslim and Christian schools started to open doors. The pace of progress, however, especially for Muslim families, was slow. It was only in the 1950s and the 1960s that an influx of women began to pursue higher levels of education. This was also the case in neighboring Arab countries in the Levant area, in North Africa, and more recently in the Arab Gulf region. Nowadays, as far as education is concerned, the situation is much better. Significant improvements concerning women's education have been realized.

There is still much to be done for Arab women as they lag behind their male counterparts in many respects. Females still account for the majority of the illiterates in the Arab world.[4] Their literacy rates have increased from 41% in 1990 to 69% in 2010, while male literacy increased from 67% to 85% during the same period. So, effectively, women's literacy rates (across age levels) lag by about 20 years. The gap has decreased from 26% in 1990 to 16% in 2010. Youth literacy rates for males remain higher than those of females, but the gap is narrowing.[5]

Gender parity still does not exist in pre-primary education in most Arab countries. According to one study,[6] males are favored above females in seven Arab countries, females are favored in one country (Sudan), and there is gender parity in seven other Arab countries. Primary enrollment growth for females (slightly above 20%) has, however, been higher than males (slightly less than 15%). There is also a rise in the primary completion rates, though still less than the male rates.[7] Females have made impressive

gains in secondary education,[8] where the growth rates in enrollment are increasing.

Female enrollment growth rates in tertiary education have almost been double to that of males.[9] Females accounted for a majority of graduates in some disciplines such as life sciences (73%) but they were lower in other disciplines such as computing (33%). In 1990, males were enrolled at higher rates in post-secondary education. Currently females are enrolling at higher rates compared to males. However, there is a problem for both males and females as enrollment rates are lower than most other world regions, except for South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Compared to other world regions, post-secondary education in Arab countries is still below average for both males and females.

The gap in education has a direct impact on women's employment. Uneducated women are not as employable as men, and thus women tend to occupy more low-paying jobs.

Female Labor Force Participation

Since 1990, labor participation rates in the Arab world have tended to stabilize for both men and for women. Female labor force participation rate was 21% in the Arab world in 1990, compared to 76% for males. The rates were 23% for females in 2016 and 75% for males (see Table 2.1).

Compared to other regions, the Arab world suffers from the lowest female-to-male participation rates (computed by dividing female labor force participation rate by male labor force participation rate).

Not only are the female labor force participation rates lower compared to those of males, the participation rates have plateaued for the past 20 years. Female labor force participation increased by a mere nine percentage points within the 1980–2008 period (from 18% to 27%).[10] This indicates that the gender gap in labor force participation is not likely to be significantly narrowed anytime soon.

Looking at male versus female labor force participation rates in individual Arab countries, one can notice the extent of the problem. There is not a single Arab country where the female rate comes even close to the male rate. It is true that the gender participation gap represents a global phenomenon, yet nowhere does the difference appear as strong. In all but three cases, the differences between the two rates exceed 40 percentage points. In nine countries, the differences even exceed 50 percentage points.

Table 2.1 Labor force participation rates for males and females

	Labor force participation rate		
	(% ages 15 and older)		
	Female	*Male*	*Female to male ratio*
Country			
Kuwait	48.4	84.5	0.57
Qatar	53.6	94.2	0.57
Djibouti	36.5	68.1	0.54
Bahrain	39.2	85.4	0.46
United Arab Emirates	41.9	91.6	0.46
Mauritania	29.1	65.3	0.45
Comoros	35.3	79.4	0.44
Somalia	33.2	75.9	0.44
Libya	27.8	78.7	0.35
Yemen	25.8	73.1	0.35
Tunisia	25.1	71.3	0.35
Oman	30.0	85.6	0.35
Morocco	25.3	74.3	0.34
Sudan	24.3	72.2	0.34
Lebanon	23.5	70.3	0.33
Egypt	22.8	76.1	0.30
Palestine, State of	17.8	69.1	0.26
Saudi Arabia	20.1	79.1	0.25
Algeria	16.8	70.4	0.24
Jordan	14.2	64.4	0.22
Iraq	15.1	69.7	0.22
Syrian Arab Republic	12.2	70.8	0.17
Regions			
Arab States	22.3	75.1	0.30
East Asia and the Pacific	62.3	79.1	0.79
Europe and Central Asia	45.4	70.5	0.64
Latin America and the Caribbean	52.8	78.6	0.67
South Asia	28.3	79.4	0.36
Sub-Saharan Africa	64.9	76.1	0.85
Least developed countries	61.5	80.9	0.76
World	49.6	76.2	0.65

Source: Human Development Report. (2016). *United Nations Development Programme*, New York, USA

There are many propositions that attempt to explain the dismal rates of labor participation for women in the Arab world. One such factor refers to the role of Muslim values that define a restrictive role of women in society.[11] Yet, such a view could be challenged if one compares female labor force participation in Arab countries versus other Muslim countries. Many Muslim countries enjoy significantly higher participation rates compared to Arab countries. Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, two non-Arab Muslim countries, enjoy much higher female participation rates.

This in turn leads some scholars to note that there is an "Arab factor" rather than an "Islamic factor" thus invoking an "Arab culture" argument. Whether it is an "Islamic" or "Arab" factor, either position runs the risk of inviting a host of orientalist reductionist perspectives that have been challenged elsewhere.[12] Without totally discounting the role of certain cultural understandings, one needs to understand the role of distinct economic and development factors when explaining the diversity of experiences within this vast region.

Irrespective of the reasons behind labor force indicators, the story is clear. Females lag significantly in terms of their labor force participation, and this has been the case for a long time. While Arab societies and economies have changed considerably over the past three decades, little change has occurred in the levels of female labor force participation. Some of the potential reasons behind this gap relate to economic changes over the past century. As societies transitioned from agriculture to industry, women missed many of the opportunities that were previously available to them.[13] What women lost in some sectors weakened by development and automation, was not immediately compensated for by their involvement in the new emerging sectors. Less educated women who left their jobs in light industries because of production-related factors (such as factories becoming less labor-intensive) were not able to immediately join newly created jobs (such as those in the IT sector) due to their deprived skillsets. A gender gap in education, coupled with increased automation, impacted women the most.

Another potential reason relates to the negative repercussions of the discovery of oil. Oil production has impacted Arab economies in a way that challenges conventional beliefs regarding the positive link between growth and gender equality.[14] The economic impact of this discovery led many women out of the labor force in traditional sectors; those women were also not able to integrate in the booming oil-related businesses[15] which anyway employ a low percentage of citizens,[16] mostly males. The social and labor-related impact of oil has also transferred even to non-oil-producing Arab

economies, as a wave of migrant labor (mostly males) became an integral part of the labor equation. The economics of oil have thus operated in a way that led to a disempowerment of women, both in terms of the meager numbers present in the workforce or in terms of their societal and political influence.[17]

This mixed-blessings of oil—that helped in the economic development of many countries, in building the infrastructures, and in advancing education—negatively impacted women's participation. This led one Middle Eastern specialist to note that:

> Women have made less progress toward gender equality in the Middle East than in any other region. Many observers claim this is due to the region's Islamic traditions. I suggest that oil, not Islam, is at fault, and that oil production also explains why women lag behind in many other countries.[18]

Education Participation Paradox

It would be interesting to understand the "education participation" paradox that has been impacting Arab societies. Over the past three decades, female literacy and enrollment in secondary and post-secondary levels have significantly increased. Yet, their participation rates have remained stable. It would be intuitively expected that with more education, more women would be employable and more job opportunities would become available to them. This, however, has not been the case which creates an interesting paradox. Some argue that the educational system has been concentrating more on the quantity of educational variables at the expense of quality. In addition, the supply side of the equation (educational outputs) has not been able to match the demand side (market needs).[19] This has led to an educational system that is not attuned to employment needs. Slow economic growth complicates the story as many educated people do not find the jobs that match their skills and educational backgrounds, and thus they end up occupying jobs below their skill levels.

Income Gap

Disparity in income between males and females is a worldwide problem. While women have been able to partially close the gap in many countries, this is still a persistent challenge. In the United States, studies show that women earn less than men in almost every occupation.[20] Currently, they earn about 80 cents for each dollar that men make, and it will take till 2059

for women to reach equal pay. For women of color it will take longer, till the year 2248 for Black women and the year 2124 for Hispanic women.[21] The pay gap has also been reported in many parts of the world including Canada (women make 74.2 cents for every dollar men make[22]), the United Kingdom (pay gap of 18.1%[23]), Sweden (13%[24]), and Australia (16%[25]). Reasons for this gap have included higher concentration in low-paying jobs, interrupted careers, different negotiation strategies of women versus men, variations in work experience and age, and discrimination, both direct and indirect.[26]

The story is not very much different in the Arab world, but the gap is significantly larger (see Table 2.2 for the 2015 data for all Arab countries). The data show that, compared to global indicators, the pay gap is staggering. The table shows the estimated gross national income per capita (for males and females) which is derived from the ratio of female to male wage.

Studies addressing pay gap in the region have uncovered some interesting trends including[27]:

1. The gender pay gap in Arab countries is not only wide; closing the gap is not happening soon. According to the *2016 Global Gender Gap Report*, it will take 356 years to close the economic gender gap between men and women,[28] and an important contributor to this imparity is the disparity in pay.
2. Similar to many other regions of the world, women tend to be present in low-paying jobs. Nursing and primary school teaching (female-dominated jobs) are paid less than jobs in the medical and engineering field (male-dominated jobs). While females have made significant improvements in terms of accessing jobs in the medical field, their presence in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) is still limited.[29] Restricted access to high paying jobs, either due to interrupted careers or due to glass-ceiling effects, leads—on average-—to lower incomes for working females. Women's integration into higher paying jobs has increased, yet men still dominate executive level positions, and are more likely to be present in corporate boards.
3. Both males and females, particularly—though not exclusively—in non-oil-producing countries, express dissatisfaction with their salaries. This could be attributed to many reasons including deteriorating economic situations which often result in salaries below expectations.[30] The gender divide in pay satisfaction in the oil-producing countries seems to be secondary to the divide between expatriates and locals, as studies have shown significantly low pay satisfaction among expatriates compared to locals.[31]

Table 2.2 Estimated gross national income per capita

	Estimated gross national income per capita (2015)		
	Female	*Male*	*Female to male ratio*
Country			
Bahrain	25,717	44,303	58%
Djibouti	1981	4441	45%
Somalia	170	418	41%
Comoros	715	1945	37%
Oman	15,703	43,894	36%
United Arab Emirates	27,257	80,420	34%
Libya	7163	21,364	34%
Sudan	1902	5775	33%
Kuwait	35,164	107,991	33%
Qatar	50,324	159,897	31%
Egypt	4750	15,267	31%
Morocco	3388	11,091	31%
Mauritania	1608	5422	30%
Yemen	1045	3530	30%
Tunisia	4662	15,967	29%
Lebanon	5844	20,712	28%
Saudi Arabia	19,300	75,923	25%
Syrian Arab Republic	835	4007	21%
Palestine, State of	1766	8651	20%
Jordan	3203	16,694	19%
Iraq	3552	19,467	18%
Algeria	4022	22,926	18%
Regions			
Arab States	5455	23,810	23%
East Asia and the Pacific	9569	14,582	66%
Europe and Central Asia	8453	17,547	48%
Latin America and the Caribbean	10,053	18,091	56%
South Asia	2278	9114	25%
Sub-Saharan Africa	2637	4165	63%
World	10,306	18,555	56%

Source: Human Development Report. (2016). United Nations Development Programme, New York, USA

4. In some sectors, there is higher dissatisfaction in pay gaps compared to other sectors. For example, female nurses—more than female bank employees—perceive that their salaries do not match their efforts and backgrounds.[32] This could be attributed to the possibility that some sectors are more agile in responding to the gender gap, and thus are

more responsive in narrowing it. In the higher education field, senior professorial ranks have been dominated by males. As females are late entrants, it will take time before the situation is balanced. Since older males still populate such senior academic levels, they tend to be paid more. The cycle for promotion in other sectors, such as those in financial services and the accounting profession, is shorter and more controllable.

5. There seems to be different pay expectations for male versus female employees. Women are still overwhelmingly expected to provide the secondary, not the primary, income to the family. Under such societal expectations, pay disparities are usually tolerated. This does not only pertain to employer expectations, but also extends to job seekers themselves. In Saudi Arabia, for example, when asked about their salary expectations, graduating male business students expected to make close to USD 35,000 compared to lower expectations by graduating female business students of about USD 27,000.[33]
6. In some cases, there is no explanation for pay disparities other than direct or indirect discrimination. For example, it is widely acknowledged that women's contributions and skills are valued less, and thus they are paid less. This is usually coupled with a context where women are not expected to negotiate their salaries, and if they do, they risk losing their jobs.[34]
7. Some Arab countries are closing the gap very fast; in other countries the pace is very slow. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for example, the gap is narrowing,[35] and some even claim that there is a reverse pay gap where women in the same position, function, and company earn 2% more than their male peers.[36] In a study about women's versus men's compensation in the UAE, it was found that younger females (20–29 years) actually earned more than their male counterparts (107%). In the older age categories, they earned significantly less (81% for the 30–39 age category and 39% in the 40–49 age category[37]).

Women in Leadership

Another gap that is worth discussing is the leadership gap. While women's labor participation has increased, they have tended to be concentrated in the lower levels of organizations. Where data is available (see Table 2.3- *The 2016 Global Gender Gap Report* - World Economic Forum), the female to male ratios in senior leadership positions in the public and private sectors

Table 2.3 Female representation in senior leadership

	Female	*Male*	*Female to male ratio*	*Rank (of 123 countries)*
Bahrain	22	78	0.28	94
Tunisia	15	85	0.18	106
Kuwait	14	86	0.16	108
Morocco	13	87	0.15	111
Qatar	12	88	0.14	112
UAE	10	90	0.11	115
Algeria	10	90	0.11	116
Syria	9	91	0.10	117
Lebanon	8	92	0.09	118
Egypt	6	94	0.06	119
Saudi Arabia	6	94	0.06	120
Yemen	2	98	0.02	123

range between 0.02 and 0.28, which is way below the world average. Only Bahrain (at 94) is ranked among the top 100 countries (out of 123 countries), while all the remaining countries show the lowest female to male ratios, mostly ranked near the bottom. These figures clearly indicate that there are roadblocks in terms of women's advancement into senior positions in government and in the private sector. Forbes' *Top Arab Business Leaders* lists include one female business leader in Kuwait (at #55) from about 121 individuals listed. None of the top ten executive management positions in the *Forbes' Middle East* list in the retail, telecommunications, food, or financial services sectors, featured a woman.[38]

Gaps Within Arab Countries

One common myth that is frequently propagated, sometimes in scholarly circles but often in popular media, is the notion of a single monolithic Arab culture. Arabs are seen to represent one ethnic group with one religion and one history. This is an overgeneralization of the diversity that comprises the Arab world. Arabs do not represent one ethnic group, there are sizable Christian minorities, and most Muslims are not Arabs. Actually, the "true" Arabs in terms of ethnicity now comprise a minority within most Arab countries. The Arab world covers a vast geographic area with various groups, disparate historic experiences,[39] and diverse traditions and social norms. There are indeed some common features among those societies, but

there are also many areas of difference. Those differences often represent better explanations of group behavior than the commonalities. As far as women's role in society is concerned, it would be important to uncover the unique features that characterize each Arab community and sub-community. A few examples will illustrate this point.

The experiences of working women in the oil-producing countries are unique. Historically, women were active in agriculture, trade, and light industries. While their social role was still subject to prevalent communal traditions, their participation was impactful. As oil was discovered and economic development increased, women felt less urge to stay in the workforce. The new affluent economic status acted as a disincentive for their economic involvement. A growing religious discourse also discouraged women from work unless there was a need. As a "real need" for women to work became less crucial, women were encouraged to stay at home. This led to dismal participation rates in the 1960s and 1970s. However, in many such countries, a counter-argument has been causing a gradual reverse in this trend. Women have been faring better in many Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE.[40] Bahrain is also good illustrator of this trend. Women in 1970 comprised a mere 4.9% of the Bahraini workforce. In 2013, they comprised 31.8% of this workforce.

Saudi Arabia, which is the principal country among the Arab Gulf countries, is an anomaly in this regard. Women are employed in the public sector mainly in the education and health sectors, but their presence in the private sector is limited. The Saudi Arabian cultural context emphasizes strict segregation between males and females in the public sphere. This rather unique case does not extend—at least not to the same degree—to other neighboring countries, let alone other Arab countries. The participation rate of females in Saudi Arabia is still limited. Although it gradually improved over the last few decades, it seems to be plateauing at about 20%.

Jordan also represents a case worthy of exploration. While the Jordanian culture does not impose the same social restrictions on women as Saudi Arabia, female participation rates are even lower than those of Saudi Arabia. The tribal Jordanian society is conservative,[41] and despite a less conservative social agenda by the state, the economic role of women is limited. Both male and female labor force participation rates in Jordan are among the lowest in the whole region. This suggests that there are economic factors, rather than mere cultural factors, that impact labor participation rates of both genders in those two countries.

Egypt represents another distinctive case. Its huge population and struggling economy have prompted millions of Egyptian men to seek employment outside the country. This—in theory—should have put more pressures toward employment of more women inside the country. Coupled with increased levels of education for Egyptian women, one would expect increased levels of female labor force participation. Yet statistics show a depressing trend where the intuitive link between education and participation does not hold. In fact, this link has been weakening, and many educated women remain outside the labor force.[42] Working women also have to balance between economic needs and conservative values that do not look favorably at their work outside their homes.[43] The impact of labor migration resulted in an increase of working women in rural areas coupled with a reduction of their participation in urban areas.[44] Some scholars argue that the problem of the stagnant participation trend, in spite of rising educational attainment, is due to the "economic and policy environment and is therefore amenable to policy action."[45]

Finally, Lebanon is a diverse Arab country where Christians represent a sizable minority with significant economic and political powers. It is the only Arab country with a Christian president, and its social customs are considered to be liberal compared to most of its Arab counterparts. Women enjoy lots of freedoms at the social, economic, and political levels. This façade of liberalism is not, however, translated into higher levels of participation. Lebanon has one of the worst gender gaps in the world ranking 135 out of 144 in the global index of gender equity.[46] It ranks 133 on economic participation and opportunity, 108 on educational attainment, 102 on health and survival, and a dismal next to last ranking of 143 on political empowerment. Lebanon also ranks 136 on female to male ratio of labor participation, and 135 on female to male estimated earned income. It ranks 118 out of 123 ranked countries in terms of female presence as legislators, senior officials, and managers.[47] These figures are striking for a country that has long been seen as the "Switzerland of the East" in terms of its freedom and openness to the West. The Lebanese case suggests that, beyond economic factors, there are forces that, independent of religious affiliation, operate in a way that is not conducive to women empowerment and participation. Perhaps unique to the Lebanese case, Yessayan and colleagues note that "contrary to what many believe, the main obstacle to women's political participation may not be the patriarchal or family-based culture itself, but rather the political culture, the state structure, and the sectarian divides inherent in it."[48]

The above suggest that while there are shared attributes among Arab countries, falling into the trap of overgeneralization would not be helpful in explaining the situation of Arab women and their participation levels within each Arab country. Many Arab countries seem to be doing relatively better on education and health equity for women, but not as well on economic and political participation. Some countries have strict explicit societal controls on the work of women; others have more implicit and subtle constraints. Social freedoms vary, but even in those contexts where women enjoy such liberties, those are not translated into real and significant empowerment.

Conclusion

Some scholars note that cultural values explain most of the gender gap in the Arab world. While it would be imprudent to discount the role of those values in impacting women's participation and workforce integration, it would be equally unwise to reduce the causes of existing disparities to the impact of "culture" or "values." There are a host of political, historical, economic, social, and demographic factors that explain the status of women as they try to negotiate their evolving societal roles. Without a proper understanding of how these forces work together within various subcultures, one would not be able to properly diagnose the problems, let alone suggest potential remedies. Minding the above differences, I present below some of the characteristics of women's careers in the Arab world that would possibly explain their current status.

In general, women in the Arab world suffer from interrupted careers. When a female engineer in Jordan put a seven-word ad in a newspaper asking for "female engineers required to work from home," she received 700 resumes within a week.[49] She discovered that most female engineers (estimated at over 60%) leave their jobs after their first child is born. Childcare services are extremely expensive, and engineering work typically requires long hours of work. Leaving her job has lots of implications on the engineer and her career progress. While she would be able to allocate more valuable time to her family and child, she will lose contact with the developments occurring in the profession. She loses training and development opportunities, loses touch with the field, and becomes less able to build a network of contacts, both within and outside the firm, all of which are necessary for long-term upward mobility.

Women also face challenges in accessing resources that are commonly available to men. This applies whether they are working as employees

(e.g. training and development opportunities) or as entrepreneurs (access to capital and networks).[50] When a woman decides to temporarily exit the job market to raise her children, her long-term employability usually suffers. Her career path becomes interrupted, and she loses the cumulative experience that many employers value for career progression.

Conflicts between work and family obligations also pose significant problems for working women. In a survey of hundreds of Lebanese women, both single and married, it was found that increased workforce integration for women did not mean that they were relieved from family responsibilities. Similar to women elsewhere, working women face a double burden, having to dedicate efforts to their jobs, while still paying close attention to the family affairs. A higher female participation in the labor force did not result in significant increases in male contribution to work at home. What seems to be peculiar to women in this region, however, is that even single women face many of those conflicts. Women are still expected to contribute to their family work, even if not married. Family norms in the Arab world expect more home chores to be done by daughters and sisters than what is expected to be done by sons and brothers. Single women "generally face a host of strains that, to a certain extent, make the interconnection between conflicts at home and at work similar to those faced by married individuals."[51]

Norms in many parts of the Arab world consider that males have the responsibility to be the breadwinners of their families. When a woman works, her salary is considered to be the second (secondary) income to the family. This means that some employers may discount her value and contributions. Basing their salary decisions partially on her economic need, they would consider—implicitly most of the time—that her family does not need this secondary income compared to the primary male-generated income. Many female workers thus end up being considered cheap labor.[52] This leads to lower earned incomes for females compared to their male counterparts, and women end up having limited overall participation in paid employment[53] and lower levels of economic activity.[54] Such a perspective on the secondary nature of women's work has also impacted legal frameworks in many Arab countries. In many cases what the law gives to the male worker—in terms of benefits and amenities—are not available to the same degree for working women (e.g. social security benefits).

Another feature of female work is their undocumented work in the informal economy. Women's share of home-based businesses is significant, but there are no reliable data that capture this phenomenon. The textile industry is an example where many women work, in an informal way, to

meet their basic survival needs.[55] Those are usually micro-businesses led by women who suffer a lot in terms of getting access to capital, growing their businesses, marketing their products, and scaling their operations. Limited mobility for women sometimes forces them to rely on such home-based and informal arrangements.[56] Many funding organizations, such as the *Cherie Blair Foundation for Women*, target women working in the informal economy as entrepreneurs and help them streamline and formalize their operations.[57] As doors to jobs in the traditional labor force get tighter, entrepreneurship has steadily become an option for aspiring working women in many countries in the Arab world including the UAE,[58] Tunisia,[59] Oman,[60] Bahrain,[61] Lebanon,[62] and Saudi Arabia.[63] This has been coupled with gradually changing positive attitudes toward the work of women. For example, the *Financial Times* reports that in Saudi Arabia there has been a major transformation despite persistent traditional structures. More women are participating in the labor force, and entrepreneurial activities are increasingly getting more popular.[64]

As discussed earlier, there are many differences among women in affluent oil-producing Arab countries compared to less prosperous countries. In the former, women work out of a desire for self-fulfillment and self-actualization.[65] They are increasingly getting interested in work and entrepreneurial activities. They see an intrinsic value in their work irrespective of the economic need. These are not the major drivers for women's work in less affluent Arab countries; there is no option for those women but to work because of economic necessities.[66] Thus, as women face distinct institutional arrangements in different Arab countries, their responses to such arrangements vary. In many of the oil-producing Arab countries, a discourse that emphasizes the positive role of women in early Islam is usually invoked. In other countries, while the religious discourse remains important, there is a significant emphasis on the economic role of women and the missed opportunities if women stay at home.

Changing societal dynamics have necessitated a growing discourse about the role of women at work in Arab society. This discourse often reflects intense debates, objections, arguments, and counter-arguments. Some propose a religious starting point for the issue; others prefer to invoke a model based on Western experiences. A third group cites a negative role for religious understandings and cultural norms. Almost invariably, religion and religious understandings are part of the debate. Some consider that Islam discourages female work participation; others have a completely

opposite perspective arguing that a sensible religious understanding would actually support more female participation.

The above suggest that there are various explanations of the primary problems facing women at work in Arab society. There is still a need, however, to analyze the prevalent religious and cultural norms. Such norms extend to how women should dress and how men and women should behave in mixed work settings.[67] This produces dilemmas, perhaps unique to the Arab region, in work contexts that are gender-mixed.[68] How religion interfaces with cultural values has thus become an area of increased interest. In the following chapters, I focus on the religious arguments and understandings that encourage or discourage women's participation. I explain various propositions, how they are presented, how they are understood, and how they are practiced. Special attention is given to an issue that has proven to be extremely contentious in the Arab context and beyond, the Muslim woman's dress. I reflect opposing points of view on this topic, and what this means for women's participation and career progress. In the next chapter, I explain where this all started by revisiting the most important religious text for Muslims, the Qur'an.

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CHAPTER 3

What the Qur'an Says

Tell the believing men to lower [from] their gaze and be modest. . . .
And tell the believing women to lower [from] their gaze and be modest. . . .
(The Qur'an; Annur; 24:31)

Introduction

Whether the Muslim women's veil is a reason for women's lack of participation is a question of continuous interest as this arguably influences labor market indicators. If some employers become concerned about the impact of a dress code on their operations, this could lead to an unavoidable lack of participation. Yet, a dress code cannot be separated from the host of institutional factors that could lead to women's exclusion from the public sphere. Beyond what is sometimes argued about the impact of the veil on participation rates, there are no comprehensive studies that show that participation rates are linked to the degree to which women take on the veil.

Lebanon is a case in point. Veiling rates among Muslim women are less than those found in most Arab countries, such as Egypt, Bahrain, or Kuwait. Yet the female labor force participation in 2016 was a mere 24%.[1] Compare this to the rates found in more conservative Arab countries, where the veil is overwhelmingly present. The female labor force participation rate is 48% in Kuwait, 39% in Bahrain, 30% in Oman, 26% in Yemen, and 20% in the

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ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia. This suggests that participation rates are dependent on a host of factors that go beyond how a woman is dressed.

Despite the above, understanding the extent to which women become involved in the public sphere would benefit from engaging the religious texts that seemingly put men and women in two different realms, roles, and expectations. This is linked to the fact that, to some, a certain explanatory variable for women's lack of participation is the influence of religion on male–female dynamics and on women's roles in the public sphere. This argument suggests that the lack of participation of Muslim women in economic and political affairs is related —at least partially— to basic assumptions within the Muslim faith that limit female participation. Those assumptions include the following:

1. Within conventional Islamic understandings, there should be specific gender roles within any society. A good society is one where men participate more in the public sphere, and women participate more in the private sphere. A woman's biology is evidence that she bears the children, nurses them, and is most influential during the early years of their lives. Although it is acknowledged that both parents are needed to raise a healthy family, the domestic role of the father is limited especially in those early years. Those differences in role expectations have immediate impact on participation as women are not encouraged to enter domains that are not in line with their true "natures."
2. The strong mutual attraction between women and men has to be organized through certain rules, including how people should dress in public. The female dress, particularly, has to adhere to specific requirements that are more restrictive than males. The reason for this additional restriction is that males and females respond differently to visual images. While both men and women have to dress modestly, avoiding tight and transparent clothes, the restrictions on women are different. According to mainstream understandings of the women's dress, a female has to cover her hair and body, exposing just her face and hands in public. There are other more extreme understandings of the limits of female dress yet those do not represent the majority of what Muslim women practice.

The implications of the above constraints are immense as argued by critics. A free secular work environment is one where both males and females are able to participate freely. Productivity would suffer when there are religious constraints on either or both genders. A free work environment is one where

workers can participate, move, relocate, supervise, and be supervised closely or at a distance by a member of the same or different sex. Work conditions would permit and even require that a male employee work on the same assignment or project with a work colleague who is of the opposite sex. This interaction may be incidental or short, or may be integral to the job and more permanent. The latter condition may occur, for example, when a manager forms a group of two individuals, one male and the other female, to work on the design of a new product or service. Design work requires lots of interactions, long meetings, thorough discussions, and essentially a great deal of connection and socialization in the workplace. Sometimes the issue is not restricted to two individuals but a group of individuals, both males and females. A project team assembled to address a product defect may have to meet for long hours extending beyond the office hours. This may require interactions outside the office premises among various members of this group. Sometimes work may also require team members to travel or to relocate for short or more extended periods of time. Arguably all such work relations could be severely hampered by religious prohibitions. In those contemporary times, some would argue, Islamic restrictions on interactions between males and females significantly limit such interactions. But what are those prohibitions, and where do they come from?

The Qur'an

To Muslims, the Qur'an is the eternal word of God. It is not only referred to for spiritual fulfillment, but it contains guidance for their daily lives. It descended on Prophet Muhammad through the archangel Gabriel, and then it was transmitted through groups after groups of early companions and those who followed them. The word of God was memorized, word for word, by many of the companions, and it was then communicated, generation after generation, by oral transmission. This was corroborated by a special group of early literate Muslims, who recorded the word of God as it descended on the Prophet. Those highly respected scribes are called *kuttab alwahy* (writers of the revelation). According to those multiple chains of transmissions, Muslims take the Qur'an as the intact word of God. The sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad (called *hadeeth*) are also considered to be part of the religious "text." While *hadeeth* does not have the same sacredness as the Qur'an, the implications thereof are almost the same. The challenge is that while all Muslims accept the Qur'an as is, there is much controversy over the *hadeeth* corpus. Islamic sects differ as to which body of

hadeeth is rightfully attributed to the Prophet or not. Muslims do not dispute the authenticity of the Qur'an, though they tend to differ in the interpretation of some of its verses, including the verses that pertain to male–female dynamics and the Muslim woman's dress.

Most of the Qur'an is dedicated to discussions about matters of belief such as belief in the existence of one God and resurrection, in addition to stories and narratives about earlier prophets and nations. The Qur'an has more than 6000 verses. About 150–200 of those are related to what is called *ahkam,* which cover issues related to Muslim behavior and rituals. Among those, there are only a few verses that tackle male–female relations. The various old and contemporary discourses on females and their roles in society had been mostly based on how different Muslim scholars interpret those verses. Muslims don't disagree on what God said, but they sometimes disagree on what God meant. They don't disagree on the text; they sometimes disagree on the implications of such a text.

Specifically, in assessing any text in relation to how women are positioned, few questions have to be settled:

1. Is the text related to a specific reason (*sababi*) or has it descended as a general text or guidance not related to an incident (*ibtida'i*)?[2] Most of the Qur'an is *ibtida'i* yet some relevant verses, especially in relation to male–female dynamics, were descended for a reason. The reason could be an incident that happened to the early members of the Muslim community or an answer to a specific question raised by the companions of the Prophet. The significance of this distinction is that understanding whether the text is *sababi* or *ibtida'i* helps in understanding its "intended" meaning.
2. Are the implications of certain verses within the text specific to a designated group of people when these were revealed, or do they have a universal application transcending time and place? This is an issue in Qur'anic exegesis, *tafseer*, which is related to two concepts: the universality of the meaning (*umumul-lafz*) versus the specificity of the reason of revelation (*khususu-sabab*). Some scholars of Qur'an exegesis note that sometimes the text is revealed for a specific reason, but its implications apply to all. When other scholars disagree about the general application of a verse, this will be the start of a long debate. This has exactly been happening for centuries around the interpretation of some Qur'anic verses. Controversies emerged about whether those verses implicate only the people involved at the

time, or do they involve all Muslims "till the Last Hour"? This applies, as will be discussed later, to some verses where disputes emerged about their specific applicability to the wives of the Prophet versus their universal application to all Muslim women.

3. Do the initial implications of the text still hold or have those been abrogated? Because of the gradual nature of some of the Islamic instructions, the Qur'an contains certain orders that replace earlier injunctions. For example, intoxicants—forbidden in Islam—were only made unlawful in a gradual manner. At an earlier stage, Muslims were instructed through a verse in the Qur'an not to pray while drunk. This was abrogated later by another rule that completely prohibited drinking intoxicants. Knowing about the timings of each verse, and whether one ruling abrogates another one, is a delicate science within Islamic law. It requires deep knowledge, not only of the text, but also of the context within which it was revealed to the Prophet. This has significance to the issue of women's dress. The requirement for believing women to put on the veil occurred on the fifth year of the Islamic calendar. Any text that has a different requirement before that time would have been abrogated.[3] Putting a date on a certain incident to have happened (such as a male–female social interaction), or a certain ruling to have been issued, before the fifth year, would lead to a different conclusion compared to the case if the incident or ruling is dated after the fifth year.

As scholars assess the few verses dedicated to male and female interactions in light of the above questions, disagreements emerge. Some understandings of certain Qur'anic verses would make all of the work scenarios—mentioned earlier in this chapter—inconceivable from an Islamic perspective. But what are those verses exactly? I am going to go over those verses here, not to offer a personal comprehension but rather to present examples of the thorny issues revolving around the text. This aims at facilitating the comprehension of the implications of each verse on male–female interactions and eventually whether and how this impacts female participation.

Chapter Annur: The Light (Verse 30 and Part of Verse 31)

The first verse in the Qur'an (Annur—30) discussed here is actually an instruction to the believing men that they lower their gaze when they see members of the other sex:

> Tell the believing men to lower [from[4]] their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! God is aware of what they do. (The Qur'an; Annur; 24:30)[5]

It is interesting that this comes *before* an identical instruction is given to the believing women to lower [from] their gaze. The first part of the second verse that immediately follows asks the same of the believing women:

> And tell the believing women to lower [from] their gaze and be modest. . .. (The Qur'an: Annur, 24:31)[6]

The remainder of the second verse asks the believing women to do other things required exclusively of them as will be discussed later. I will initially restrict my discussion to the first requirement which applies equally to both men and women.

Understanding 1

This verse (The Light—verse 30) and the first part of the second verse (verse 31) have been the subject of debate for centuries. Under one understanding, believing men are ordered to totally lower their gaze not looking at the face of the female even for a second. The same is expected of the believing women. Ibn Katheer[7] (1300–1373), a well-respected scholar who authored a popular and extensive interpretation of the Qur'an, notes:

> This is a commandment of God to His faithful servants to turn away their eyes from what they have been forbidden to look at, so they only look at what is permitted for them to look at, and to turn their eyes away from those individuals they are not allowed to see. If it happens that one's sight inadvertently falls on such a thing, let his eyes be turned away quickly.[8]

This understanding would arguably limit, or even totally curtail, the participation of females in the public space. If males cannot look at females *at all*, and if females cannot look at males *at all*, then how could any female participate in the public sphere—which is controlled by males-? This would include any workplace unless this workplace is restricted to females. Given that economic and political organizations are dominated by men, one solution would be either for women not to enter in the public sphere at all, or they would have to have their own female-only institutions. This is

exactly the case in some countries, like in Saudi Arabia, where women often have their own businesses or service units (female-only bank branches or dedicated places in restaurants, etc.). Yet this is rather an exception as such practices are not representative of what happens in other Muslim and Arab countries. In addition, one would make the argument that such arrangements are not economically feasible in most situations.

In the political sphere, parallel gender-segregated public units or institutions would not be possible. It is impossible to envisage two parallel political structures, one for men and the other for women. Thus, while women can operate within their own female-only business institutions, they cannot have their own separate political ones. As a result, under this understanding, women have to be mostly secluded from political participation.

Understanding 2

The first understanding is just one extreme interpretation of these verses. Another approach in interpreting these two verses is based on a fine linguistic nuance. The Qur'an indicates that the believing men are required to lower "from" their gaze, and the believing women are also required to lower "from" their gaze. This is understood to mean that, even for pious Muslims, a degree of gaze is inevitable. Muslims are required to avoid long stares at members of the other sex, in addition to those gazes that are deemed as being "lustful." Beyond that, there is a degree of gaze that is practically required for any social interaction. Al-Qaradawi[9] (1926–) explains this as follows:

> What Islam forbids is prolonging the gaze from a man to a woman and from a woman to a man.... It is noted that the two verses require lowering "from" the gaze ... which does not mean closing the eyes, nor does it mean directing the head [and eyes] to the ground as this is not what is meant nor is it possible to do that.... Yes, the hungry looks from one of the sexes to the other are adulterous to the eye, but looking is permissible unless accompanied with lust, or if it is feared that such looks would lead to *fitna* (sedition or temptation).[10]

Al-Qaradawi's understanding was also reported, though not adopted, by Ibn-Katheer who noted that some scholars have understood from this verse, and from the practice of the Prophet, that the believing women could look at other men if there is no lust (*shahwah*). The evidence is drawn from a

story where the Prophet allowed his wife to look at some men practicing playfully with their spears in the mosque during a feast.

This controversy is very pertinent to the issue of female participation in the male-dominated workplace. If one were to adopt the former view that all looking is forbidden, then this would invariably lead to significant hurdles in terms of the ability of females to integrate in the workplace or in other economic or political environments. Under the second understanding, the door to more male–female interactions becomes more feasible.

Chapter Annur: The Light (Second Part of Verse 31)

> And tell the believing women to lower [from] their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigor, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto God together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed. (The Qur'an: Annur, 24:31)[11]

The continuation of this second verse is specifically directed at the believing women. This verse requires that the believing women observe a certain dress code that is not required from men. What is interesting is that the word *hijab*, which is commonly translated to mean "veil," is not mentioned here. Instead the word that is used is *khimar*, which is understood to mean a headscarf. Women in *jahiliya* (pre-Islamic "ignorance" era) used to put a loose *khimar* over their heads that would extend behind their backs. The *khimar* thus used to expose their necks, braids, ears, and upper part of their bosoms. The new dress code had an instruction to the believing women to draw their *khimars* over their bosoms or the exposed front part of their dresses. Effectively, the believing women were supposed to cover those areas that were open to male gaze during the times of *jahiliya*.

Thus in this verse believing women are instructed to cover more areas of their bodies than what they were used to. The verse also specifies the exception, that is, the males who are excluded from this prohibition. These include husbands, fathers (and grandfathers by extension), father-

in-law, sons (and grandsons by extension), stepsons, brothers, nephews, and children.

There is another verse that lifts some of the restrictions on older women:

> And women of post-menstrual age who have no desire for marriage – there is no blame upon them for putting aside their outer garments [but] not displaying adornment. But to modestly refrain [from that] is better for them. And God is Hearing and Knowing. (The Qur'an: Annur, 24:60)[12]

Another verse in a different chapter also has some instructions as to how the believing women should dress:

> O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is God Forgiving and Merciful. (The Qur'an: Al-Ahzab, 33:59)[13]

This verse explains in further detail how the believing women need to bring down their outer garments. It is the earlier verse (24:31), however, that has been contentious among Muslim scholars. I present below two different understandings of this verse that have implications on male–female dynamics and women's participation and involvement in the public sphere.

Understanding 1

On the one hand, there are those scholars who assert that the above verse instructed believing women to extend the veil over their faces. To those scholars, there is no way for a woman to draw her *khimar* over her bosom if she does not cover her face. Accordingly, covering the face and hands becomes part of what the believing Muslim women are ordered to do. The famous Saudi scholar Muhammad Ibn-Uthaimeen[14] (1925–2001), in support of this opinion, noted:

> God ordered His Prophet to tell his wives, daughters, and the believing women, that they draw down their gowns and cover their faces and bosoms... A Muslim woman has to cover her face... If she reveals her face, that would be a temptation to men, especially if she is young or beautiful, or if she puts on makeup. (pp. 10–12)[15]

This is the mainstream understanding that is found in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and some parts of the Arab Gulf countries. In addition, this view is embraced by disperse communities, though relatively minor in terms of numbers, in the Levant area and parts of the Indian subcontinent. This religious discourse, dominant in Saudi Arabia, has also impacted other Muslim contexts. A case in point is Egypt.

In Egypt, the dress of Muslim women passed through various, often contradictory, stages. In the nineteenth century, the face veil was very common, and one of the first symbolic moves done by the famous feminist Huda Sha'arawi[16] (1879–1947) was to lift her face veil in the early twenties. That was the start of a gradual removal of the face veil and then the headscarf altogether for most Egyptian women, especially after the 1952 revolution which brought Nasser (1918–1970) to power. Nasser, a charismatic leader and captivating orator who ruled Egypt from 1954 to 1970, brought in a socialist revolution that contributed to a transformation of the Egyptian society. During the 1950s and 1960s, the veil—whether the face veil or the headscarf—almost disappeared from the public scene in Egypt.

This trend changed starting in the mid- to late seventies[17] to the extent where the veil became the adopted dress code by the overwhelming majority of Muslim women.[18] The face cover also witnessed a limited comeback due to the impact of the religious discourse in Saudi Arabia. A phenomenon called "Saudi-oriented *Salafism*" became very vibrant in Egypt, influencing individuals across the social continuum.[19] Some scholars argue that this group enjoyed the commitment of many Egyptian expatriates who returned from Saudi Arabia, many of whom were uneducated. Part of their discourse has been centered on an incessant affirmation as to the importance of the face veil for women who want to enter into the public space.

Understanding 2

The other understanding which is more mainstream—at least in terms of numbers—is the one which contends that the *khimar* is supposed to cover the chest, the neck, and the ears while keeping the face and hands exposed. According to some scholars, this is reported in a *hadeeth* when the Prophet conversed with one of his female companions, Asma' the daughter of Abu Bakr, who was also one of the companions of the Prophet:

> Asma', daughter of AbuBakr, entered upon the Messenger of God wearing thin clothes. The Messenger of God turned his attention from her. He said:

> O Asma', when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to his face and hands.[20]

Proponents of the face veil do not accept that this was a saying of the Prophet. The controversy over the face veil has thus remained a hotly debated issue between various Islamic scholars for centuries, and the debate is still ongoing. In the modern times, the renowned Egyptian scholar Muhammad al-Ghazali[21] (1917–1996) was one of the staunch critics of the face veil:

> The Qur'an is categorical in indicating that humanity flies with two wings, one is male and the other is female. If one wing is broken, this means that it cannot fly anymore and has to stop and crash down. . .hiding hands in gloves and covering the faces behind the face veils and making a woman like a ghost who walks on the street isolated from this world: this is not an instruction of any religion[22] (pp. 6–7)

This contentious issue has had obvious implications on the participation of Muslim women in the public sphere. Under the first perspective, women would inevitably be secluded not only from men, but also from most economic and political activities by virtue of their dress. A counter argument would be that there are examples of women, completely veiled, who have been participating, or attempting to participate, in public life. Indeed, the controversies over the face veil in Europe have mostly been about such women trying to negotiate their place within the larger public space, and not them negotiating to stay at home. Yet, covering the face would entail significant obstacles towards any significant participation.

Chapter Ahzab—The Combined Forces (Verse 53)

> O you who have believed, do not enter the houses of the Prophet except when you are permitted for a meal, without awaiting its readiness. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without seeking to remain for conversation. Indeed, that [behavior] was troubling the Prophet, and he is shy of [dismissing] you. But God is not shy of the truth. And when you ask them [i.e. his wives] for something, ask them from behind a *[hijab]* partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. And it is not [conceivable or lawful] for you to harm the Messenger of God or to marry his wives

> after him, ever. Indeed, that would be in the sight of God an enormity. (The Qur'an: Al-Ahzab, 33:53)[23]

This is the famous *hijab* verse. The word *hijab* appears in the context of organizing the physical boundaries between the wives of the Prophet and his male companions. The verse asks that male Muslims only interact with the wives of the Prophet from behind a *hijab*, meaning partition, curtain, or screen.[24] Again here, two conflicting perspectives have emerged as to the generalized implications of this verse. Is this verse specifically directed at the wives of the Prophet and the male companions? Or, alternatively, does this ruling apply to all interactions between men and women?

Interestingly the word *hijab* mentioned in this verse (partition, curtain, or screen) has ended up being the preferred term to mean the veil (headscarf). What was supposed to mean a physical barrier between two individuals came to be used to mean a form of dress. Currently, when Muslims—including scholars—use the term *hijab*, they usually mean the veil or headscarf. This has led to confusions as sometimes when somebody would be really referring to the *hijab* as a partition, curtain, or screen as mentioned in this verse, many people would understand that he or she is referring to a dress code applicable to all Muslim women.

Understanding 1

Some scholars argue that the above verse (33:53) has a general application that includes all Muslim men and women. One scholar, for example, noted in interpreting this part of the verse; "And when you ask them for something, ask them from behind a [hijab] partition":

> Although "them" refers to the wives of the Prophet, yet this is general to all Muslim women because God then says "That is purer for your hearts and their hearts." Purity of the heart is required from everybody.[25]

Thus the argument goes that if a screen is needed between the most pious of people, the wives of the Prophet and the male companions, then it would naturally and logically apply to all Muslims.

Understanding 2

Some contend that this verse refers to a specific ruling that is bound by time and space. In this verse, the word *hijab* means a screen or a curtain, a physical barrier that separates the wives of the Prophet from other men. According to scholars who adopt this view, the word *hijab* in this context does not refer to a dress code nor does it apply to a screen that needs to be established in every male–female interaction. Referring to the incident on which this verse was revealed would shed some light on its real implication.

The story behind this verse refers to a group of people who came to the Prophet's house after being invited for a wedding meal. They then stayed in his house (which was actually one room), started to talk, and they did not leave. The Prophet's wife was in that room, but those guests were unmindful as to what they needed to do. The verse effectively teaches the Muslims of that time the proper code of conduct after having a meal at the Prophet's house. The second part of the verse talks specifically as to how to address his wives from behind a curtain. This was particular to the wives of the Prophet and was not a universal ruling that applies to all Muslim women and men.

Again, under the first understanding, male–female interactions would only be possible under strict conditions. The second understanding provides a flexible way of dealing with the issue by emphasizing the specificity of that incident and the implications thereof.

After the Veil

When the veil was first prescribed, the young community in Medina, the first capital of Islam, changed as women became expected to adhere to a form of clothing that was different. Yet some argue that the change was not as dramatic as originally thought. As explained earlier, a woman, at the time of *jahiliya*, in line with her customs already used to put a form of head cover that would extend behind her back. The Qur'anic injunction directed the believing women to extend the loose ends to the front concealing the head, the neck, and the upper part of the bosom. Another Qur'anic verse directed women to lower their (*jalabib*) which is a form of loose garment. Those types of dress were not new. What was new was a new way of putting them on.

Those few verses in the Qur'an have been the center of debate for centuries, still counting. The veil, and its various forms and symbolisms, have taken different routes. Some, though markedly few, understand the

verses and the behaviors of the early Muslim society to direct women to be fully covered, almost totally secluded from the presence of men. Others acknowledge that Muslim women have to adhere to a dress code that is different from men. Yet, this is not necessarily linked to impediments to participation in the public and economic lives.

Abu-Shuqqah,[26] in a major contemporary encyclopedic effort to trace the behaviors of the early Muslim society after the veil was prescribed, narrates dozens of examples of economic and social interactions between men and women. He concludes that the veil was not an impediment to their public involvement in social and economic affairs of their communities. It is sometimes the case that the veil meets institutional arrangements that impede women's growth and involvement. This is when the combination of those forces, put together, would lead to lack of women participation.

So there is nothing—in theory—that prohibits a woman with a veil (*khimar* or head cover) from participating in the public sphere. Yet, the issue became complicated when the Qur'an came with special arrangements for the wives of the Prophet as discussed above. If the verse is thought to be generally applicable to all Muslim men and women, women's involvement in public affairs becomes extremely curtailed. This controversy is referred to as the controversy of *ikhtilat* (social mingling between the sexes). Some scholars assert that *ikhtilat* is strictly forbidden while others argue that *ikhtilat* is inevitable and would be allowed under certain conditions. Al-Qaradawi,[27] for example, notes that the concept of *ikhtilat* has most probably crept into the Islamic contemporary lexicon, not based on earlier jurist rulings, but in later periods.

What is the significance of this controversy? The implications of either position are myriad. In those communities where *ikhtilat* is considered forbidden, women are mostly shut out from public life except within women circles. This explains the situation of women in some countries where the over-riding religious understanding is that *ikhtilat* is totally forbidden. In those contexts, women are allowed to work with other women, only within their own networks. They are not allowed to work with men or among men. They are not allowed to seek most positions of public office as those almost always require interaction with the other sex. In some extreme—though rare—cases, women even shop separately from men, go to separate channels of entertainment away from the other sex, or are not allowed to drive.

For those communities which adopt the second perspective, the interaction of women with men is allowed under a set of principles.[28] For example,

a woman cannot be in the same location with a man alone. In addition, the type and tone of discussions have to reflect the type of needed interaction. In a business meeting, a certain level of expected professionalism has to govern the communication. Thus the free mingling of sexes without any limitations is not condoned under either position. Yet, under the second perspective, women's participation in public life becomes easier. Women can buy, sell, respond to a superior's request, issue order to work subordinates, discuss issues with peers, participate in meetings, work within the same vicinity of other women and men, and do most of the things that are usually expected in a work environment. This leaves some things that cannot be done by men or women in such interactions. This includes engaging in the sort of free, playful, or extremely informal interactions that sometimes occur in office environments. This would sometimes exclude Muslim workers, both male and female, from engaging in events such as after-work parties or drinks. Other than that, the proponents of the second position argue, there are no reasons that would restrict women's participation in the economic, public, and other aspects of social life.

Some schools of thought within Islam have thus drawn legitimacy from the above verses to offer a strict perspective towards women's involvement in the public sphere. But what led to the position among some scholars that women need to stay separate from public life? How did some schools of thought develop a closed perspective about women and their role in society?

One of the main reasons that could explain why narrow understandings of the role of women overpowered what would be considered a better reflection of Islamic principles, relates to the fact that patriarchal forces were able to reorganize after they were relatively weakened by Islam. One famous story illustrates how this might have happened just a few years after the Prophet died.

> Abdullah b. Umar [a companion of the Prophet] reported: I heard God's Messenger (may peace be upon him) say: Don't prevent your women from going to the mosque. Bilal b. 'Abdullah [his son] said: By God, we shall certainly prevent them. On this Abdullah b. Umar turned towards him and reprimanded him harshly as I had never heard him do before. He (Abdullah b. Umar) said: I am narrating to you that which comes from the Messenger of God (may peace be upon him) and you (have the audacity) to say: By God, we shall certainly prevent them.[29]

This story tells of a person who objected to the participation of women in the public space of worship even after he was told by his father—who was a

close companion of the Prophet—that his religion forbade him to do so. This is not a lone case of one person. It shows that some elements within the Muslim society were against the integration of women, even within the boundaries set by Islam. Unfortunately we do not know much about the context of this story. We don't know whether this was said in a small-circle discussion between the father and his son and perhaps a few others, or whether it was in some sort of a public forum. Yet, because this short discussion existed and was transmitted year after year, it is open to any student of history to deduce what would have been a context for this dialogue.

A historic event that resonates well with Muslims till this day is how a woman publicly objected to a decision made by the second Caliph, Umar Ibn al-Khattab (586?–644).[30] He eventually yielded to her objection and said: "The woman is right, and Omar is wrong." Aisha Bint Abi Bakr[31] (604–678), the wife of the Prophet, was politically active during the major rift that occurred shortly after the Prophet's death. These examples, among many others, are often brought forward to illustrate that women in the early Islamic period were not shy to take action and make their voices heard.

Fatima Mernissi[32] (1940–2015) gives several examples of active women in Islamic history whom she calls "the forgotten queens of Islam."[33] She explains how those women were able to have power in a context that continued to be dominated by males. Beyond what Mernissi describes, the examples of female ultimate decision-makers are rare. Yet there is evidence to suggest that they were impactful decision-makers at various instances of Islamic history. As time passed, however, women's participation declined, and their societal and political voices dwindled. By the early nineteenth century, the situation of women paralleled the decay of Muslim societies. In many corners of the Arab and Muslim world, women became secluded within closely guarded private spaces. They were offered limited education and had little say in public affairs.[34]

Conclusion

While some Islamic societies have developed institutional arrangements that secluded women and silenced them, most Muslim investigators would assert that this is not related to an aspect of Islam itself. Muslim societies have passed through various historical experiences that shaped, in some cases, extreme interpretations of what Islam tells. The examples of the various interpretations of Qur'anic verses outlined above illustrate this point. Those

interpretations, as extreme or odd as they may seem to many, are still part of Muslim history and still reflect what happens in parts of the Arab and Islamic world. Yet, it becomes increasingly clear that some Muslim and Arab localities only provide an extreme version of what Islam is. Unfortunately, this version is the one that gets the most attention. There are various geopolitical reasons, in addition to the fact that such regions are rich with oil resources, which put those countries under the constant gaze of the curious outsider. The social functioning of those societies is a mesh between deeply rooted cultural practices and understandings of Islam. They do represent one way to speak for Islam. Yet this neither is the only way, nor it is the most representative.

This acute way of representing what Islam requires has implications on the participation of women. When arguments to seclude women are based on the sacred text, the opposing views lose legitimacy. Yet, it is clear that there are other voices, as will be explained in a later chapter, which offer alternative explanations and interpretations. Basing their arguments on the very same texts that the other side uses, those voices call for understandings that include, rather than exclude, women. Voices for women empowerment and emancipation in Arab societies are not only coming from feminist discourse based on an areligious standpoint. Many such initiatives are increasingly coming from totally unexpected places. Change often requires indigenous efforts rooted in genuine local discourse rather than foreign-imposed standards that do not resonate well with local populations, male or female.

In the next chapter, I tackle the main arguments put forward by opponents of veiling. Drawing from the works of several Arab feminists, activists, and academics, I reflect a discourse that attributes much of the lack of female participation to the boundaries imposed on women. Those restrictions, such a perspective asserts, draw their legitimacy from misguided religious interpretations made by societal forces that have no intention to move in any direction that empowers women.

NOTES

1. *The World Bank*, Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+), 1990–2014; (modeled ILO estimate). http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS
2. Ibn Utahimeen, M., (2002), *Principles of Qur'anic exegesis,* Dar Ibn Jawzi – (1423), Saudi Arabia.

3. AlQudat, S. (2002), *Hijab in Sunnah*. College of Sharia, University of Jordan, eacademic.ju.edu.jo
4. Translations differ in terms of adding "some" or not. In the Pickthall translation, "some" is not found. In "Sahih International," "some" is added. I find that adding "some" is more in line with the Arabic word *"min"* so it is inserted here.
5. Chapter (24) sūrat l-nūr (The Light), verse 30. *Translation of the meaning of the Qur'an*. Pickthall. http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=24&verse=30
6. Chapter (24) sūrat l-nūr (The Light), verse 31. *Translation of the meaning of the Qur'an*. Pickthall. http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=24&verse=31
7. Ismail Ibn Katheer (1300–1373), born near Damascus, Syria, is a well-respected early Muslim scholar and theologian. He is mostly known for his popular exegesis of the Qur'an which is referred to widely in the Muslim world.
8. Ibn Katheer, Tafseer Al-Qur'an; http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura24-aya30.html
9. Yusuf al-Qaradawi is an Egyptian scholar, prolific author, with a long history of activism in Egypt and the Arab world. While he is considered to be a controversial figure due to his political viewpoints, his perspectives regarding the role of women are considered to be liberal. He is often criticized within the extreme *salafi* movements -among other things—because of his perspectives regarding social interactions in the Muslim society. He has been living in Qatar after being expelled from Egypt due to his affiliations with the Muslim Brotherhood.
10. Al-Qaradawi, Y. (May 26, 2013). *Lowering the gaze*. http://www.qaradawi.net/new/Articles-5188
11. Chapter (24) sūrat l-nūr (The Light), verse 31. *Translation of the meaning of the Qur'an*. Pickthall. http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=24&verse=31
12. Chapter (24) sūrat l-nūr (The Light), verse 60. *Translation of the meaning of the Qur'an*. Pickthall. http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=24&verse=60
13. Chapter (33) sūrat l-aḥzāb (The Combined Forces), verse 59. *Translation of the meaning of the Qur'an*. Pickthall. http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=33&verse=59
14. Muhammad Ibn-Uthaimeen (1925–2001) was a Saudi scholar considered one of the pillars of the *salafi* school. He was a member of the *Council of Senior Scholars* in Saudi Arabia, which is a highly respected religious body appointed by the King. His influence has extended well beyond Saudi Arabia.

15. Uthaimeen, Muhammad bin Saleh. (1998). *Instructions to believers on adornments and unveiling*. Ibn Khuzaima publishing House, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
16. Huda Sha'arawi (1879–1947), born in Egypt, is perhaps the most renowned Arab feminist of the twentieth century. She was very active in advancing women's issues. She is most famous for lifting the face cover (most probably in the year 1921) that was dominant at the time among Egyptian women. She authored an autobiography reflecting on her experiences and struggles.
17. Williams, J. A. (1979). Return to the veil in Egypt. *Middle East Review*, 11 (3), 49–54.
18. Radwan, A. (July 6, 2006). The return of the veil. *Time Magazine*. http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1210781,00.html
19. Gauvain, R. (2010). Salafism in modern Egypt: panacea or pest?. *Political Theology*, 11(6), 802–825.
20. Sunan Abi Dawood. *Clothing (Kitab Al-Libas)*. https://sunnah.com/abudawud/34/85. In-book reference: Book 34, Hadith 85; English translation: Book 33, Hadith 4092.
21. Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917–1996) is a famous Egyptian theologian and writer whose impact extended beyond Egypt into vast areas of the Arab and Muslim world. His writings regarding Islamic jurisprudence and the implications of the *hadeeth* corpus are considered revolutionary. In addition, his ideas were considered to be very progressive concerning issues of family dynamics and women's status in the Arab and Muslim world.
22. Al-Ghazali, M. (1990), *Kadaya al-Mar'ah – Women's issues*, Shurook Publishing, Cairo, Egypt.
23. Chapter (33) sūrat l-aḥzāb (The Combined Forces), verse 53. *Translation of the meaning of the Qur'an*. Pickthall. http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=33&verse=53
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26. Abdel Halim Abu Shuqqah (1924–1995) was an Egyptian scholar and educator. He is best known for his encyclopedic work on the *Emancipation of women in the era of the Prophet* where he collected hundreds of *hadeeth* from various *hadeeth* books explaining the role of women during the era of Prophet Muhammad.
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28. Al-Qaradawi, Y. (April 20, 2008). *Al-ikhtilat between the sexes*.
29. Sahih Muslim 442; *Sahih Muslim English translation*: Book 4, Hadith 885.
30. Umar Ibn al-Khattab (586?–644), the second of the four "Guided Caliphs" who succeeded Prophet Muhammad. He was a very influential figure in the

history of Islam. His reign witnessed an expansion of the Muslim state and the introduction of many political and administrative structures.

31. Aisha Bint Abi Bakr (604–678) was the wife of Prophet Muhammad and the daughter of one of his closest companions. She was a politically active woman after the third Caliph was assassinated.
32. Fatima Mernissi (1940–2015) was a Moroccan sociologist and feminist writer. She is most famous for her writing about male–female relations in Muslim society and the veil in historic context. She offered what she considers to be a "feminist interpretation of Islam" where she analyzed the lives of the wives of the Prophet and their roles within Muslim society.
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CHAPTER 4

The Critics

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I am against the veil because it is against morality.
(Nawal el-Saadawi)

Introduction

Many years ago, during a leadership seminar that I was delivering in an Arab country, I had a group of passionate participants, both men and women. There were two completely veiled ladies, with light sheets of black fabric over their faces. They were extremely active in class discussions. Although I am used to veiled women in my classes and seminars, this was the first instance where I had two women with *niqab* (a full face veil), and it was quite a challenging experience. I felt I did not know how to interact with them in class. They sat all the time next to each other, and it was hard for me to establish the usual rapport that a teacher would need to have with his students. I kept questioning myself: what things were allowed while interacting with them, and what things were not? I made a point that I would look at them when they talked. Although I could not see their faces, I realized that it would be courteous that I acknowledge them even more by looking into the veils that cover their faces.

Once during the long days of the seminar, one of them was talking at length and I was looking at her. Then I saw the person I was looking at, shaking her head sideways directing me to the person next to her. It took

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me a while to understand her body language, but I soon realized that I was looking at the wrong person. I was acknowledging the person who was not talking, while failing to recognize the person who was. I felt embarrassed. I'm not sure whether the two female participants or others in the classroom felt my awkwardness.

I have to admit that it was a bit of a challenge to let them feel welcome through the long hours of the seminar. My belief was that they were very much committed to the subject matter, but there was no way for me to tell. The reciprocal feedback that usually occurs between a teacher and students was interrupted. Moreover, in those situations when group work is needed, how would I plan which groups to assign them to? Would it matter if they are mingled in groups where there are males? Or should I just restrict them to female-only groups? Would it be rude if I require them to be involved in some leadership activities that require lots of movements in class? Or would they feel offended if I don't? How can I have proper class interaction while being confident that I am taking them into proper consideration? What is acceptable? What is not? If I knew this beforehand, what different approach would I have taken?

I cannot but extend the implications of this incident to a workplace situation. How would I deal with those two women if they were under my supervision? Are there any work or development opportunities that they would miss given their dress code? What sort of expectations would they have of me? Would they expect me to deal with them like I deal with any other employee, including other veiled women who do not cover their faces? Or, would they expect some additional accommodation? If this is the case, what sort of accommodation would they expect? Would I be able to comprehensively appraise their performance at the end of the year like I would do for any other employee? Would I get their performance confused? Would I inadvertently—or even consciously—pass them over when certain opportunities arise when I think they would not fit? If I do that, would that be fair?

I realize now that it was my inexperience in dealing with such situations that prompted me to feel anxious. Other colleagues, or managers in such a work situation, who have a better understanding of various cultures, have developed ways to deal with such issues. For me, the seminar was over in less than a week. But, for a company, this could be an issue that they have to struggle with day in and day out. They have to do what is right for the company, for the operations, for the customers, and for the bottom-line. At the same time, they have to do what is fair to the individual worker who has

the right to work—just like any other employee—given her skills, experience, and background, without anybody prejudging her. The problem that I faced could be related to the fact that many such interactions are regulated by unwritten norms. Employee handbooks and supervisor manuals are usually devoid on how to deal with such intricate circumstances. People have to deduce what would be the right thing to do in coping with such instances, either in an academic environment, or in the work context. Such an encounter may be particularly burdensome to the male manager. Not only does he have to deal with a cultural divide (national/foreigner), or with a basic gender divide (male/female), he also has to deal with an employee at a more detailed level of diversity (religious/veiled/covering her face). This could complicate things for him unless he is able to develop the cultural and social intelligence to deal with such situations.

Thankfully, companies are increasingly becoming conscious of the need to have diverse environments that guarantee equal opportunity, fairness, and reasonable accommodation. Levels of diversity in Western countries have primarily revolved around race and gender, immigration status, and ethnicity. Those are also salient in Arab workplaces. Yet it may get even more complicated as aspects of religiosity, religious behavior, and religious observance enter into the picture.

How Muslim women dress has become an issue in the Western public space as evidenced by the headscarf and *burqa* debate in France and other European countries. Strangely enough to some, this has also been—for a long time—an issue in Muslim countries. Such controversies do not only occur as women negotiate their participation in the larger public space in terms of political participation, but also in the "smaller" public space such as in businesses, schools, and other societal institutions.

The female participants in my class may have been among the best performers among their cohort. In many cases in my experience, they actually turn out to be like that. Some would argue that they have more to prove. I have found that in many of the seminars with both male and female participants, females—irrespective of whether they were veiled or not—have mostly been outgoing and dynamic. Although such anecdotal evidence should not lead to an overgeneralization, it would be sufficient to conclude that the dress code does not pose a problem to them. In a work setting, a manager would find them to be motivated and engaged in what they do, even if just to prove a point that they can produce and be positive contributors to their companies. Those women face many doubts about whether they can really be industrious and useful to their organizations.

They face suspicions whether they can be serious, whether they have long-term commitment to their work, or whether their lifestyles would impede their functioning at work. More often than not, they prove their doubters to be wrong.

What's in a Dress?

Historically, how females dress has been different from how males dress.[1] There has never been in history a truly androgynous dress.[2] Through dress, women and men's gender roles are specified. This hasn't changed much in our contemporary times. Despite the fact that there has been a movement in the fashion industry for unisex lines of clothing, the most prevalent manifestations of dress are still unique to each gender. This has not changed with the increasing presence of women in the workplace, including in Western contexts. While designers have developed business suits for white-collar women, those are markedly different than men's. In a career guide for how to dress professionally at Emory University,[3] for example, the recommended clothing for "business professional attire" is different in many respects for men compared to women. When it gets to the "business casual attire," the differences become more salient.

Dress continues to be a factor by which cultures define what is appropriate for men and women, not only in terms of how they look, but also in terms of how they behave. In Eastern and Western work contexts, dress codes are different for men versus women. In the aviation industry, for example, female flight attendants have different attires than male flight attendants. Yet, such dress codes do not entail different work expectations. Some studies addressing the historic relationship between dress and gender roles[4] indicate that gender roles closely follow the divergence between male and female dress. When fashion styles of females significantly diverge from those of males, gender roles also tend to diverge. As female dress converges more with male dress, so would be the expected convergence in gender roles.

Surprising to many who are not familiar with Arab culture, how Muslim women dress is as thorny a topic as it is in many Western societies. How a woman dresses has been argued to be of significant relevance to her expected roles and her potential participation in public life. A dress is not only a fashion statement by the wearer. It sometimes reflects an inherent ideology, a reflection of deep religious convictions, a response to parental or societal demands or pressures, a political declaration, a social message, an

identity statement, all of the above, or none of the above. The decisions she makes thus have implications, not only for her, but also for others. Those implications have magnified over the last few years, as women's bodies and clothes have "become battlegrounds" for conflicting ideas. Below I explore some of the arguments, standpoints, and positions that see the female Muslim dress, particularly the veil[5] (headscarf), as a major contributor to the decline in Arab women's participation and empowerment.

The Veil

Criticisms against the headscarf in Arab societies stem from a standpoint that links this type of clothing to various institutional arrangements that strip a woman from her agency and power. In addition, the headscarf presents a case where certain assumptions are made about women, all of which put those women at an unequal footing with men.

One reservation raised by the headscarf critics[6] is that the message sent by the veil, as a symbol, reaffirms the notion that the public space is owned by men.[7] It is an acknowledgement on the part of women that they are entering into a sphere that is not theirs. If they happen to be in the public space, they become like guests who enter their host's home and have to be respectful of their host's domain. This is a reaffirmation on the part of women that their presence in the public domain is exceptional and temporary, though sometimes necessary. A woman who puts on the veil and enters the male domain would be sending a message that she is doing that because of a necessity. A woman who puts her veil and joins the workforce is acknowledging that she is entering into space that is not owned by her:

> A woman is always trespassing in a male space because she is, by definition, foe. A woman has no right to use male spaces. If she enters them, she is upsetting the males order and his peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him merely by being present where she should not be.[8] (Mernissi, 2011, p. 158)

In her interesting analysis of the public and private space in early Islam, Mernissi argues that the Prophet actually made attempts to mesh the public and private spheres.[9] The way he situated his dwellings (private space) adjacent to the mosque (public space) indicates that he was sending a message of blurring the distinctions to the nascent Muslim community. Yet, according to Mernissi, the forces of patriarchy did not just go away.

They insisted on a strict dichotomy based on male-dominated readings of the religious texts and of Islamic history. The implications of this have been detrimental to female participation.

According to those critics, when a religious understanding asserts that not only women should be veiled, but they also should be separated from men, this would effectively shut women out from public life. That's why some Muslims scholars insist that the free intermingling of men and women—*ikhtilat*—(whether social or professional) is against Islamic doctrines and has to be avoided at all costs. A woman's presence, if tolerated, should be a rare exception to the rule. Sometimes women's presence in certain space within the bigger space is tolerated. This is the case in female-only parts of the public sphere, such as female schools and female-only businesses. In other cases, her presence is tolerated out of necessity. Female doctors and nurses in hospitals would be tolerated out of economic necessity, or out of the need to have female medical practitioners attending to the needs of female patients. Beyond those cases, a female entering the public sphere is going into a place that is not hers. According to such critics, some Muslim historic practices have reinforced this dichotomy.

It is in the public sphere where the decisions are made, and it is in the public sphere where the economy is developed. This sphere is one of influence, control, prestige, and decision-making.[10] By excluding women from this space, they were stripped from all power, and accordingly lost control over their respective societies. Societies became a reflection of men's aspirations, needs, and desires. This was exacerbated by the emergence of legal understandings, based on oblique readings of the holy texts, which further led to the marginalization of women. Those interpretations, mostly conducted by male religious authorities, have led to extreme readings of the holy texts which became embedded in the Muslim legal traditions.[11] Those male jurists monopolized the understanding of the religious text, which is the Qur'an in the case of Muslims. Accordingly, there is a male-bias in such understandings. Attempts to have a feminist interpretation of religious texts are still very weak and ineffective.[12]

An example of such readings of the holy texts is the interpretation regarding the famous verse of *hijab*. Many interpretations of the scriptures assert that this verse ordered the community of believers to address the wives of the prophet from behind a *hijab* which means a physical screen. According to such perspective, this verse is specific to a group of individuals within a specific historical setting. An alternative reading of this verse asserts, however, that this verse has a universal message in regards to the necessity of

secluding women from men. If the verse was directed at the purest individuals who lived at that time, the argument goes, then it also applicable to all Muslims in those contemporary "corrupt times."

Qasim Amin[13] (1865–1908), the famous Egyptian author and defender of women's rights in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, was among the first to write about the problems associated with this thinking that led to deterioration of female education and participation. The societal impacts of seclusion are detrimental, not only to women, but also to the overall development of societies within which they live. Amin comments on the impact of this dichotomy, which led to the seclusion of women:

> Despising the woman, a man imprisoned her in the house and boasted about her permanent restriction . . . Despising the woman, a man secluded her from public life and kept her from involvement in anything except female or personal issues. A woman had no opinions on business, political movements, the arts, public affairs, or doctrinal issues. (p. 10)[14]

Linked to this perspective, Mernissi notes that the forces of patriarchy were actually troubled with women's power. From that end, extreme understandings were put in place to control female power, embodied in the threat of her sexuality, and thus there was a need to control her. Social mechanisms including secluding her in the private space was one mechanism by which women could be controlled. This is contrary to other readings which assume that men in Arab societies perceived a woman to be weak and thus needs protection by keeping her at home. Not so, Mernissi would argue. It was actually the woman's strengths that needed to be hidden, not her weaknesses.

Irrespective of whether seclusion and restricting women to the private sphere was out of concern for women to be protected or as means to control their innate strengths, the results were the same. By keeping them at home, they had little access to education and could not develop. Thus their chances of penetrating the public world of men became even more unlikely. Even when societal conditions change, women are not equipped to function properly in a men's world. They are less educated, less skilled, and less sure of their powers. When they enter the public world of men, they are more likely to fail as they have been historically disadvantaged. Women's failures thus further strengthen the argument that they do not belong to the public sphere. This argument is in line with recent studies which show that women's

organizational performance is usually closely scrutinized. It is evaluated more strictly and failures are ascribed to their gender, them being women in men's domains. Other contributing factors are usually discounted.[15]

The Veil Feeding Gender Inequality

Linked to male ownership of public space is the notion that the veil propagates a culture of gender inequality leading to gender segregation. This changes the organization from a being merit-based unit into becoming a neo-traditional entity based on non-professional values.[16] Instead of values of perfect equality in terms of what is expected of males and females, the organization now is liable to alternative sets of values. The veiled woman is telling her employer, her supervisor, her organization, and everybody else that she is different. This view even extends this assertion to note that the veiled woman is expressing her agreement that she is inferior to men.[17] She hides what they do not hide. She covers her hair while they don't. Through her dress, the veiled woman is effectively apologizing for entering the "male space." She ends up re-inserting herself in the domestic private space.[18]

Because of this preoccupation in gender segregation and women's clothing, critics note that the Islamist discourse has distracted reform initiatives in more than one Arab locality. Tracing the discussions and controversies around *ikhtilat* in Saudi Arabia, Roel Meijer notes that[19]:

> The liberals accuse the conservatives of derailing the debate over the future of the country by referring to nonissues such as *ikhtilat*, the prohibition against women driving cars and the introduction of cinemas. Compared to "real problems" like poverty, drug abuse, unemployment and the nuclear threat, these are nonissues. The conservatives, they believe, are damaging the image of Saudi Arabia and isolating it from the rest of the world. (p. 84)

As an example of this contempt for the strict understanding that prohibits all types of mixing, Mona Elhaidari, a female Saudi journalist noted that there seems to be confusion between two different concepts in Islamic jurisprudence as applied by many in Saudi Arabia.[20] First is the concept of *khilwa* which refers to the event when two unmarried individuals, a man and a woman, meet alone in a closed place, which is strictly prohibited in Islam, versus *ikhtilat* which is a normal event necessitated by social and professional demands:

> With the surge of extremist views in the last three decades, people confused between *khilwa* and *ikhtilat*. Any meeting between the two opposite sexes in a public space is a form of [religiously] permissible *ikhtilat*. . . which represents a normal coexistence between people in the streets, in the markets, and in the workplace (p. 21).

Another argument that is presented by critics of the veil relates to the observation that the veiled woman becomes less visible. This would result in her missing out on work and promotion opportunities.[21] In addition, the veiled woman becomes more prone to be discriminated against. Compared to the above reasons, which are more values-based, this argument is more utilitarian. As a woman adopts the veil, she is less likely to become noticeable, and thus would not be taken seriously for career development. Lazreg uses this argument in reference to a female inspector in a public entity in Algeria, who was a dynamic unveiled professional performing her job duties effectively and efficiently. Then at one point in time she decided to put on the veil. By doing that, Lazreg reports, this veiled Muslim woman has "knowingly removed herself from the world of competition for advancement" (p. 110). Lazreg does not dwell on why this was the case for this employee, or why this would be the case for other women. Would it be based on discrimination against veiled women? Or would it be founded on an emerging perception that this woman became less qualified the moment she decided to don a veil? The only explanation that Lazreg provides is that this woman decided to stay indoors more and thus became less visible as "she was seen less frequently in the waiting area."

The Veil: Two-Way Discrimination

Missing out on employment and advancement opportunities is evidenced by discrimination that has been documented against veiled Muslim women in various countries including Arab countries. In some cases, women's careers have suffered due to bias which goes beyond the inequities that other women usually face.[22] Such discrimination is done irrespective of the perpetrator's religion. Sometimes the person involved in discrimination is—surprisingly to some—a Muslim. Bias is not a phenomenon enacted by Christians or secular forces against Muslim women. In many, though not all cases, discrimination is initiated by Muslims themselves against each other.

How some Muslim employers and legislators may be culprits in discrimination could be bewildering. One explanation is that some Muslim employers may be secular in perspective and have ideological reservations against the veil. That was the case, for example, in Tunisia where the legislator between the years 1955 to 2013 imposed restrictions on veiled females in schools and in the workplace. In a series of testimonies, collected by the *International Center for Transitional Justice*,[23] about 140 Tunisian women talked about their experiences with religious discrimination triggered by the restrictions imposed on the veil. One woman, Khadija, reported how the police used to summon her, during the era of the late president Bourguiba[24] (1903–2000), pressuring her to lift her veil:

> I went to the police summons without telling my family. I did not want to put more pressure on them to remove the hijab. I was already under great pressure, because they needed my job. They wanted to be proud of me as an engineer. I was stubborn, clinging to my opinion; I did not try to remove [the *hijab*]. I thought it was my right. My sisters took it off when they entered the university. . . . One of my sisters told me: You were not smart enough to be able to adapt. Maybe. Maybe I was not smart. Maybe she was right. I'm not sorry. I was telling myself it was a test from God.[25]

There are tens of such testimonies which include reports from women who were physically harassed by school administrators trying to force them to lift the veil. This led to career blocks as such women could not get educated in their chosen field of study. One woman, Enas, reports that "I wanted to get my higher education and become a media specialist; one day [the administrator] dragged me forcefully and she forbade me from entering the higher institute." Enas ended up not completing her education.[26]

Such cases are also found in many other Arab countries. In Lebanon, a report about opportunities for veiled women exposed what seems to be a systematic discrimination against them in some sectors. In some media organizations, veiled women are not allowed to work.[27] "I applied to a job and I got an appointment to a job interview," reported one job applicant, "after they met me and found that I wear the veil, they refused my application indicating that it is against company policy to hire veiled women." Veiled women also appear not to be accepted in the Lebanese judicial system. Although female judges comprise 45% of all judges, which is an impressive record compared to other sectors, there is a total absence of

veiled female judges. The arguments raised in that regard pertain to the notion that a judge should avoid showing any affiliation with an aspect of religion or religiosity as this would be perceived negatively by some litigants.[28] The judge arguably has to be perceived even in appearance as an impartial party without any religious tendencies or affiliations. A veiled woman, the argument goes, would be problematic as a judge, as her dress questions her impartiality especially when there are cases involving litigants from multiple faiths.

What adds to the problem in Lebanon is the lack of effective legal mechanisms that mitigate religious discrimination in employment opportunities. The legal apparatus is slow, is in need for modernization, and there are weaknesses in "people's trust."[29] Similar issues were raised in other Arab countries such as Algeria where veiled women were barred from some industries including aviation, tourism, and security forces.[30] The bottom line in this line of thinking is that if the veil poses a roadblock towards women's advancement, then it should be shunned. This would be the case even if this is related to discrimination against veiled women.

While the veil sometimes acts as a barrier to employment, in other cases it actually facilitates it. Sometimes employers, who are religious or who are not comfortable with unveiled women, discriminate against the latter. According to critics, this is also another instance where the veil creates inequality and unfairness among women. According to this argument, the veil divides women into two camps: the veiled and the unveiled. It would not be beneficial to the cause of women for them to be perceived as two groups. An inequality between groups of women could be used as an alibi towards creating inequality between women and men. Critics of the veil indicate that it is problematic that some religious men do not like to work alongside women who do not put on the veil. This opens the door for lots of discrimination against those who don't adhere to "acceptable" standards.

If there is evidence that veiled women are discriminated against, there are also indications that unveiled women can also be prone to discrimination. In 2005, a member of the Kuwaiti parliament raised the issue of discrimination against unveiled women. He indicated that such discrimination comes against the Kuwaiti constitution which asserts that all Kuwaitis are equal irrespective of whether they are male or female.[31] The banking syndicate supported this assertion noting that such practices isolate certain members of the Kuwaiti society and produces unjustifiable discrimination in employment policies.[32]

In Gaza (Palestinian territories), similar issues were raised by some women who do not wear the veil. Asma, a blogger, wrote[33]: "In most countries, discrimination takes place against veiled women. Only in Gaza there is discrimination against those who do not wear the headscarf. You find unjust laws, ugly comments, and ridiculous words against a woman who is not veiled." In what appears to be a response to such charges, the minister of education indicated that the ministry does not forbid unveiled students from entering schools, but they have to wear acceptable clothing.[34] In Saudi Arabia, problems occur at a more structural level. For example, the daily newspaper "*Mecca*" reported in 2014 that unveiled females, including students, were barred from entering the all-girl schools.[35] In 2015, the Saudi minister of labor issued a ministerial decree requiring female workers to pay a fine of about 1000 Saudi riyals (around USD 300) if they don't adhere to the required veiling requirements.[36]

In February 2017, news reports indicated that the governing board of Karbala in Iraq (which is a sacred city in Iraq for Shi'a Muslims) made a decision to forbid unveiled women from entering the city. This raised concerns on limits that such decisions would pose on women's mobility and participation in public affairs.[37] This met other complaints that unveiled women were subjected to harassment in the headquarters of the Prime Minister.[38] "In our Iraqi society, an unveiled woman is looked down at even if she is wearing modest clothes," complains Aliah, a 37-year-old school teacher, "the veil is now enforced under the gun in Iraq."[39] All of this has prompted some to use the phrase "the *shi'a* ISIS" to refer to practices that oppress women in today's Iraq: "the behavior of the *shi'a* Islamic parties in Iraq coincides with behaviors of the *sunni* ISIS."[40] This was in reference to practices that have been increasingly present in Iraq including forbidding women to work in cafes or enforcing, under the gun, a strict dress code on Iraqi women. Apparently, extreme parties, irrespective of sectarian affiliations, are culprits in discrimination against unveiled women.

Similar incidents are also reported in other Arab countries. In Egypt, for example, some ultraconservative Muslims reportedly barred unveiled women from casting their votes during elections.[41] Selwa, a 27-year-old woman from Cairo reported that she initially wore the veil due to social pressures: "I suffered as an unveiled woman from lots of harassment on the streets and at work."[42] Some note that the societal perception of a woman who does not put on the veil is one of despising which leads to all types of suffering for those women.[43] In Lebanon, unveiled women are free to dress as they wish except in some religiously affiliated organizations. The religious

Al-Manar TV does not employ or host (except under severe exceptions) women who are unveiled.[44] Similar measures are found in other religiously affiliated organizations.

Those experiences indicate that women sometimes have used, or were forced to use, veiling as a negotiating chip with potential employers. Contrary to experiences of women who lose opportunities because of their veil, there are other women who are able to gain work because of their veil. Kamal, in a study about Syrian women accountants, found that women "have been able to use the practice of veiling in order to negotiate greater opportunities for access to work in a patriarchal context"[45](p. 188). The veil has thus been used as a means, not only to protect women as they go to school and work, but also to help them gain access to those spheres.[46] The veil, according to such perspective, provides access to social and economic networks that are not available to other women.[47]

In an interesting analysis of *ikhtilat* discourse and behavior by two competing Islamist groups in Egypt, Aaron Rock-Singer explains the differences between *Salafism* and the Muslim Brotherhood. The former group initially embraced views that effectively wanted women to return to their homes. They actively adopted views that women's presence in the public space is incidental and exceptional. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, adopted a perspective that was more pragmatic. They actively worked on involving women in the public space, albeit a segregated or controlled public space. The *Salafi* discourse developed over the years from effectively arguing for seclusion (women need to be at home) to one of segregation in public spaces: "Women were in public to stay and, if *Salafi* elites were to successfully compete with the Muslim Brotherhood for a popular audience, they had to adapt to this reality" (p. 304).[48]

According to this argument, this all leads to one conclusion, that women are not equal, not only to men, but also to each other. Two classes of women emerge. The first represents those who refuse to don the veil. Those will suffer from societal humiliation in addition to obstructions to their economic empowerment. The second group is represented by those who decide to veil, who would accordingly be given the qualified "permission" to enter into the public area without much harassment, and would thus benefit from relatively more extensive networks of economic opportunities. This creates an environment of inequality and injustice. Women, according to this view, do not have to go through all of this. The veil creates disequilibrium whether it acts for women's pragmatic interests or not. Accordingly, proponents of this perspective, call for its lifting.

The Veil and Harassment

One additional issue that critics of the veil raise is that if putting on the veil is done out of fear of male harassment, sexual harassment may actually increase with hijab. Many studies affirm that street harassment is a problem in many parts of the Arab world.[49] While there are fewer studies about workplace harassment, various investigations indicate that this is also prevalent especially if housework by foreign female workers is included in those studies. A 2013 report by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women showed that 99.3%, of Egyptian women—virtually all women—have faced some type of sexual harassment.[50] In another study it was found that more than 60% of Egyptian women have been harassed in the workplace.[51]What is interesting in another study is that about 62% of Egyptian men surveyed admitted that they have been involved in perpetrating some form of sexual harassment.[52] The veil did not appear to reduce the incidents of harassment. In Morocco, about 63% of women indicated that they faced a form of harassment in public spaces. The percentage was about 54% in Tunisia. Another study conducted by Reuters that included Saudi Arabia noted that the country occupied the third place out of 24 countries in terms of sexual harassment in the workplace.[53] In Libya, it is reported that harassment has been used as a strategy to intimidate and terrorize women who wanted to be politically active.[54] A similar strategy was used in Egypt where some interpreted the rape crimes committed against revolutionary women, many of them veiled, during the *Tahrir* square protests as a political mechanism to bar them from participation in the revolution.[55]

In a 2008 survey of harassment in Egypt, it was found that women are harassed, whether veiled or not.[56] The veil may reduce harassment in contexts where not wearing a veil is considered unacceptable, but it does not necessarily stop it.[57] Actually studies show that most women who have been harassed were veiled,[58] yet this does not relate to the fact that veiled women are targeted more. It just relates to the fact that most Egyptian Muslim women (who are the majority) wear a headscarf. One young veiled female in a *YouTube* video complained about the phenomenon:

> If you are a woman who is skinny or over-weight, tall or short, veiled (with face veil or no face veil), or if you are not veiled, or even if coming from the outer space, a woman [in our context] will be subject to harassment. As long there is something related to "women", you will be harassed.[59]

Critics of the veil argue that if harassment extends to veiled women, there would no point in veiling. Lazreg agrees with the notion that sexual harassment may actually increase with the veil. The argument goes as follows. A woman is usually harassed because she is imposing a barrier between her and other males. She is indicating that "my body is off-limits, and not your property." Actions by harassers aim to violate this restriction by getting into the forbidden territory, that is, female personal space. A veiled woman presents more of a challenge. She is extending the limits of what other males can or cannot see. That's why she becomes more desirable, and men become more motivated to violate the moral shield a woman is building around herself. In support of this argument, a veiled Muslim lady noted: "I think a woman who wears hijab can be more provocative to them. . ..The more covered up you are, the more interesting you are to them."[60]

Lazreg does not provide empirical evidence to this argument, and coming up with such generalized evidence is not easy. While there is some evidence to suggest that both veiled and unveiled women are subject to harassment in various Arab localities, there are no studies that support the notion that veiled women are harassed even more in those contexts. In Western contexts of course the story is different. Harassment of a veiled woman in an Arab street would still reflect a male trying to invade a forbidden female body. It still represents acts with sexual overtones, an act of sexism. In the West, such harassment would mostly relate to discomfort in who she is and what she represents. It is an act of racism.

Veil and Identity

Another argument against the veil is the purported undesirable implication of the dress on the Muslim woman herself. Would the fact that she is dressed differently have negative self-implications in terms of the way she chooses her career, work assignment, work conditions, type and location of job, and the whole nature of the employment contract? Some critics affirm that this is indeed the case. Lazreg, for example, notes the following:

> The psychological effect of the veil on its wearer in the workplace is real but seldom acknowledged. The veil . . . instills in a woman an inchoate sense of her insignificance as a social being. (p. 109)

Lazreg's observation is based on her analysis as a sociologist although, throughout her work, she refers to anecdotal evidence to support this

standpoint. El-Saadawi[61] has similar, even stronger, sentiments. She affirms that the type of education that women are subjected to reaffirms patriarchal structures:

> ... education both at home and in schools – especially religious education- leads women to not realize where their real interests are. They subject themselves to the prevalent way of thinking even when they attain high academic or political positions like becoming university professors, ministers or members of parliament. (p. 65)

According to her, there is no value to what a woman would say if she has been subjected since birth to a brainwashing process. The veil, under this understanding, is a symbol that only suggests that women have no minds: "veiling and nakedness are two sides of the same coin. Both mean women are bodies without mind ... " (El-Saadawi, 1997, p. 140).[62] The veil, according to el-Saadawi, is slavery and it represents an immoral act. A veiled woman herself is a victim of a class society that is capitalistic, patriarchal, and masculine.[63]

Qiwamah

A related point raised by critics pertains to the concept of *qiwamah* or *wilaya* (custodianship) which strips women from all agency. According to one verse in the Qur'an, men act as (*qawamoon*) over women; this could be understood to mean protection and maintenance of men over women.[64] According to the way this verse has been applied in many Arab contexts, men assume the roles of custodians over women. This understanding of the male–female relationship (especially husband–wife) has led some authors to note that "authoritarianism and dictatorship are the common norms in marriages. The husband assumes the role of ruler, superior, controller, oppressor, and master"[65] (p.81). For el-Saadawi, family laws assume that a woman lacks the legal ability to take her own decisions as her husband is her custodian. This is based on old historical practices where the husband actually "owned" his wife. She asserts that "women in our countries have not elevated to the level of humans yet, not only from the perspective of men, but also from the perspective of women themselves"[66] (p. 41).

Critics assert that custodianship, and the way it is put in practice, puts many hurdles in front of women participation. In many cases she has to refer to the consent of her father or husband before initiating a transaction.

El-Saadawi mentions, as an example, restrictions on women's travel, noting that this is tantamount to imprisonment. This system has advanced laws that give power to a man over his wife. He owns, by virtue of those laws, her body and her mind. He can effectively imprison her in her house as she cannot travel except with his permission. She cannot go out of her house to work without his permission. She laments the current situation asking: "Why did women (in the early days of Islam) fight alongside men in the battles of Prophet Muhammad?... Why do millions of female agricultural workers in our countries go out from their houses from dawn to sunset? Why do thousands of female factory workers and female employees in the public and private sectors go out to work?"[67] (p. 36).

Other authors contest the jurist understanding of the verse pertaining to *qiwamah* as this was not done on a gender-conscious basis.[68] A gender-conscious method re-reads the text and looks for alternative meanings that have been lost by early and contemporary jurists and interpreters who are predominantly male. One such gender-conscious understanding of *qiwamah* understands it to mean "to take care of, to serve, to protect," rather than "to lead, to preside over, to manage."[69] The drive towards an alternative gender-conscious understanding of the text has led some organizations, such as *The Women of Morocco's Justice and Spirituality Organization* to hold intellectual meetings that aim at reviewing religious texts and historical applications from a woman's perspective.[70]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I tackled the main arguments put forward by opponents of veiling. One key assertion made by the critics is that the veil, beyond being a fashion statement, poses a significant hurdle in front of women's societal, political, and economic participation. In putting the veil on her head, the argument goes, the Muslim woman is making statements that position her in a situation that is incompatible with political and economic empowerment. Even if she participates in one or more of those spheres, there are often significant doubts about her expected effectiveness, whether real or perceived.

For critics, the veil also creates a threatening position to others, males or females, as it creates two classes of females, the veiled and unveiled. The artificial production of those two classes is likely to produce a situation of inequity for both of these groups. On the one hand, a veiled woman puts herself in a position where she will give others the opportunity to judge her, harass her, and discriminate against her. On the other hand, in other

situations a veiled woman may enjoy a preferential advantage due to mechanisms that reward her conformity with societal expectations. In this case, the rewards that she attains are unwarranted thus creating an unfair advantage compared to a woman who decides not to put on the veil. The veil also leads to situations, both in the workplace and the larger society, which are conducive to gender segregation, seclusion, and inequality.

Finally, critics assert, a Muslim women does not wear the veil out of her own will. She is either forced to put it on by a male guardian or by social expectations, or she gets accustomed to wearing it by social conditioning. In cases when she declares that she is putting on the veil out of her own will, she is—in reality—under a false sense of awareness (this will be discussed further in the next chapter). She thinks she has agency while, as a matter of fact, she has none.

In the next chapter, I introduce a different type of discourse. I discuss propositions that advance positive perceptions of the veil, those who look at the possibility of the veil being a redemptive vehicle that liberates from an obsession about women's bodies and sexualities. I also elaborate on the charge of "false consciousness" and what it means for female agency and autonomy. I finally discuss the phenomenon of Islamic feminism and analyze what conflicting feminisms mean for Arab women and their societal roles.

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CHAPTER 5

Islamic Discourses

I believe that women are more likely than men to read the Qur'ān for liberation.
(Asma Barlas)

Introduction

At a conference held in Beirut at my university a few years ago, the Muslim keynote speaker who happened to be a CEO of a large Lebanese corporation was asked a simple question: "Do you hire veiled women?" He had a simple answer: "Yes we do. We hire them in the back office, but we do not allow them to occupy positions where they have to face customers." He then went on explaining and defending the company's position in regards to that unwritten policy. Nobody in the audience made a rebuttal to his answer and the discussion went another way.

This answer summarizes many of the issues that surround veiled women in the workplace. First, the company operated in Lebanon where Muslims are the majority (about 60–65%). This proves the point that the "veil issue" is not restricted to Western societies where Muslims are the minority. Second, the CEO was a Muslim. So the stance taken by the CEO did not emanate from religious differences. In other words, it was not the case here that a non-Muslim manager was making a conscious decision to discriminate against

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veiled Muslim women. The decision was actually based on pragmatic reasoning that a veiled woman is not fit to occupy certain positions, irrespective of her education, qualifications, or experience.

Thus the veil issue, much debated in Western contexts, has also been an area of controversy, arguments, and counter-arguments across many contexts, including countries where Muslims are the majority and others where they are the minority. The disputes over the headscarf ban in France and other European countries do not represent the only cases where the veil proved to be a divisive issue. In this chapter, I will provide a brief description of the veil within its historic context. I will then continue to explore the various discourses about its role and significance specifically among academic scholars, *ulema'* (religious scholars), and intellectuals—including the growing discourse within Islamic feminism—concerned about this matter and what the veil means for women's status and participation in various Arab and Muslim contexts.

Historical Context

Examining the status of women just before the advent of Islam, one observes a paradox. On the one hand, there are historical indications that suggest that women in the *jahiliya* society were extremely disadvantaged. For example, it is known that infanticide, the burying of female daughters while they were alive, was a common practice. A dim picture also appears in areas concerning marriage customs, divorce rights, inheritance, and other aspects of social and economic lives. On the other hand, there are indications that portray a different picture. The story of Khadija, the wife of Prophet Muhammad, reflects an image of a wealthy woman who was—before Islam—an entrepreneur of sorts. She had a business, employed other men, traded beyond the borders of Mecca, and represented the epitome of economic participation. It is indeed the case that there was an interplay of gender/class/ethnicity factors that were operational during that era which allowed a woman like Khadija to thrive, while at the same time disadvantaged other members of society including poor and slave women.

The example of Khadija in her later interactions with her husband after Islam tells a story of a strong woman whose husband leaned on her for support. Muslim traditions indicate that when the Prophet received the message from God through the archangel Gabriel, he came back to her frightened and shivering. She comforted and consoled him; throughout their lives together, he drew courage out of her. When she later died well before him, he seemed to have buried a piece of his heart with her. Even as he remarried later on, he used to refer to her with affection: "She believed in

me when no one else did; she accepted what I was saying as truth when people rejected me; and she helped me with her money when there was no one else to lend me a helping hand."[1] The Prophet was not hesitant to indicate that, at various points in his life, he was dependent on her emotionally and economically. Khadija's story has been recurrently used in contemporary discourses on the role of women in Muslim societies. Her example is often advanced by Muslim feminists as a role model of a courageous, intelligent, and dependable woman who was instrumental in the life of her husband.

Khadija died a few years after the Prophet declared the message of Islam. That was a tough period for him to the extent that the year in which she died is dubbed the "year of grief." In that year he lost his compassionate wife in addition to his supportive uncle. When he was later driven out of Mecca to another city, Medina, things gradually became better. The deprived and oppressed Muhammad in Mecca became a head of a small, but growing, state. The men and women of Medina welcomed him as he established the first seeds of an Islamic society and government. It was in Medina that the first laws were written down, and it was there where the first signs of a new social order were established. This social order included the prescription of the veil (whatever that has meant for later-day Muslims). The veil was not only a dress code for the believing Muslim women. The veil marked a new social arrangement in which women became differentiated in new ways within the embryonic Medina Muslim society. While Muslims have historically debated the exact implications of the prescription of the veil, this era has been immensely important even for contemporary times. Various perspectives as to what the veil really means have had strong implications on defining women's roles in Muslim society, the degree of their participation in economic and political affairs, and their expected functions in the public versus private spheres.

Many historians argue that the veil was not a new phenomenon created by the new message of Islam at the time.[2] Actually, there were forms of veiling among Jewish, Christian, and pagan societies. Even after the Islamic prescription of the veil, and up to recent times, many European women conformed to a form of veiling during religious services in many churches. Nowadays, a form of veil is found among many disparate communities across the world. Those include the Amish, orthodox Jewish women, Hindu women, and other non-Muslim women in various communities. It even exists among men, though to a lesser extent, such as the *Tuareq* of North Africa and within Sikh communities mainly in India but also within immigrant groups in the West.

Since the time the few verses in *Sura Annur* (chapter of The Light) of the Qur'an were revealed, the veil, and its various forms and symbolisms, have taken different routes. Some, though markedly few, understand the verses and the behaviors of the early Muslim society to direct women to be fully covered, almost totally secluded from the presence of men. Others assert that the dress is not supposed to limit women's participation in the public and economic lives of their societies. Some assert that the headscarf is the invention of patriarchal structures which overpowered the genuine Islamic rulings at the time. Those differences of opinion have had significant impact on female participation in various Arab and Muslim societies. Religious teachings met cultural traditions, and thus various understandings emerged about how believing women should dress. This obviously had an impact on women's levels of economic and political participation across time and place.

Veil as a Face Cover

Some Muslim religious scholars assert that the veil has always meant, not only a headscarf, but also a face veil, and thus a screen distancing men and women. Before delving into what this group confirms regarding male–female relations, it would be important to define one of the schools that advocate such positions in the Arab world, loosely labeled as *Salafism*. Many—though not all—sub-branches within *Salafism* embrace this view, and those have been very vocal with significant outreach within the Arab world.

Salafism represents a philosophy in Islamic thought that emphasizes going back to the early roots. While various forms of *Salafism* are represented in many parts of the Arab world, its strongest presence is—without doubt—in Saudi Arabia. One of the strongest icons within this school was the late grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz BinBaz[3] (1912–1999). A mufti is the principal religious authority who has excellent command of religious principles. He is certified by virtue of his official position granted by the state to issue *fatwas*, or religious announcements, instructions, and interpretations. His ideas are considered by many to be ultra-conservative, especially in terms of the societal role of females. Although his impact was mostly felt in Saudi Arabia, he was, and still is, widely admired by millions of like-minded *Salafis* (people who adhere to *Salafism*). His role and also the role of his successor have been very influential in impacting social and legal discourses in the Kingdom.

Salafism generally asserts that female participation in the "domains of men" is in contradiction with their true nature. Such an encroachment will inevitably have severe negative societal implications. A woman's house is her kingdom. This is where she can be most productive as she takes care of the affairs of her house and her family. According to this school, the West has devalued the importance of taking care of the home and the family. This has eventually led to significant societal problems and disintegration within the family. Uncontrolled participation of women in the public space is considered a crime against the young as they lose the opportunity to be properly raised by dedicated mothers. Eventually children fail to get the right values from their mothers.[4]

This school of thought recognizes that women indeed participated in various roles in the early Muslim community as nurses or even as warriors. Yet they note that it would be false to draw generalized conclusions from those historical incidents about the permissibility of women participating in the public sphere alongside men. Their reading about Islamic history, especially the last few years before the Prophet's death, reflects an understanding that such occurrences happened within a strict separation between males and females. During such interactions, they assert, women observed the full veil including the face cover.

Advocates of such positions do not resist, and actually encourage, women to seek out better education and even get involved in the world of work. They do believe, however, that such initiatives have to be done within the two above-mentioned conditions: separation from men and observing the full cover including the face veil in case there is any presence of adult men. That's why women are encouraged to seek more education in girls-only schools and universities. They are also encouraged to take on work roles that do not compromise the above conditions through working in all-female education, health, and similar gender-segregated institutions.

Within the Kingdom, however, there are various dissenting voices that often challenge, softly in most cases, the official position of the religious establishment. Actions by the political arms of the Kingdom, represented by the various kings and crown-princes, reflect how the rulers have been trying to negotiate a positive transition into a relatively less conservative thinking and practice. This is evidenced, for example, by efforts made by the late King Abdullah to further facilitate female university education, and even create a prototype of a coed college in 2009, the *King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST)*, near Jeddah by the Red Sea.[5]

Strict traditions within Saudi Arabia still bar women from access to many job opportunities, and their political participation, despite recent improvements, is still very modest. While female labor force participation rate has improved, it still remains at 20% which is less than half of the neighboring Kuwait or UAE.[6] This is still up from the 10% rate of 2002.[7] All in all, the situation has improved, but changes have been slow, definitely slower than the pace desired by many Saudi and Arab feminists.

To explain further some of the discourses that have been going on among conservative circles, I am going to illustrate by drawing from a little-known text by a Saudi Arabian author named Ahmad Abdul Ghafoor Attar. In his 172-page book titled *the veil and the uncovering*, he dedicates long sections to defend a certain understanding of the veil that reflects the above-mentioned dominant discourse in Saudi Arabia which is markedly less dominant in other parts of the Islamic world. The book is a good representation of the positions of many Saudi religious scholars impacting daily practices and shaping male–female interactions.

In his introduction to the book, Attar notes that improvements in schooling in Saudi Arabia prove that the veil does not obstruct women from earning their education. He describes the positive role of the monarchy in advancing education for girls back in the 1960s. He does not, however, elaborate on the stern resistance that the late King Faisal[8] (1906–1975) faced when he introduced female education. He, instead, notes that Saudi women have been able to make significant educational accomplishments without compromising their veils.

As the veil is an important term to define, Attar asserts that the veil cannot be complete unless it includes the face. Although the term *niqab* is the term usually used to mean face-cover, Attar prefers to use the word *hijab*. He dedicates a long section explaining how both the male and female were created from one soul, quoting from the Qur'an: "O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women." (The Qur'an—chapter 4—verse 1). There are, however, natural urges and instincts among males and females which need to be properly regulated. Among the regulations are the restrictions put on Muslim women. A Muslim woman should have no relationship with an *ajnabi* (a person whom she is not allowed to interact with as he is not a father, brother, husband, or son). The divine law, continues Attar, has put levels of protection for Muslim women. The first of those protections is a *hijab* that "covers all her body and her limbs where

nothing becomes visible" (p. 38). Except under an extreme need, such as the need to be treated by a male doctor, no part of her body should be exposed to the eyes of an *ajnabi.*

In a later section titled "the uncovering of the face is not permissible," Attar notes the reasoning behind covering the face:

> In our Islamic law, it is not allowed [for women] to show their face and hands. . .the face summarizes all the beauty of a woman. . .evidence is clear that the *fitnah* [sedition or temptation] of the face is overpowering. Instincts and lusts when put on fire cannot be resisted or overcome, especially if there are a young man and a young woman. (p. 50)

Attar then brings forward further rationalization to this position. The face needs to be covered to protect women, because in guarding women lies the well-being of the whole society. The face veil, he asserts, was the practice in early Islam, and this is the practice that needs to be kept. Attar further criticizes other contemporary scholars who argue that the veil only represents a head cover that reveals the face and hands. He indicates that those scholars have been mistakenly impacted by the contexts in which they live where women do not cover their faces. Those scholars had to adapt to their environments and thus had to accommodate an understanding of the veil that is simply not correct. He makes a distinction between the *almuhajjabah* (the completely veiled woman) and the *alsaferah* (the woman who exposes her face). The *alsaferah* is more likely to get harassed and fall into unwanted approaches of men:

> The general moral decline would not have come if women kept their faces covered. What we see and what we hear about such erosion of values and sexual chaos in Muslim societies is only because it all started by uncovering of the face which eventually led to women exposing other parts of their bodies wearing seductive and provocative clothes (p. 141–142).

Based on this, Attar considers that the only real Muslim society in contemporary times is the Saudi society where the divine laws are applied. Because of this, Attar contends, only two rape cases have been reported in 50 years in Saudi Arabia. This is because of the face veil that has built a fortified barrier between men and women: "our society gives severe punishment to anybody who harasses a woman."

The work of Attar is representative of a school of thought echoed by many popular scholars in the Kingdom. The main issue here is that despite the

fact that more than 98% of Muslims live outside Saudi Arabia with a variety of understandings about the veil, this context takes special significance. First, Saudi Arabia represents the home of Islam where Mecca and Medina are situated. It was in those two cities that the mission of the Prophet first started, and it is to those places where Muslim pilgrims, from all over the world, visit and give special reverence. In addition, Saudi Arabia has what are probably the largest reserves of natural resources (oil). Thus it takes special geopolitical importance. There are various practices of face-covering in other parts of the Muslim world, and those only get attention when there is a political or economic reason for doing that. For example, very few people knew about the *burqa* in Afghanistan before 2001. It was only after the terrorist events of September 2001 that the Afghan female *burqa* got any serious media attention.

The face veil has led to a great controversy in Western countries where, out of millions of minority Muslims living there, very few Muslim women adopt it. It is evident that the face veil is not the preferred choice of dress even among religious Muslim women. According to a survey[9] by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research Center in seven Muslim-majority countries, the full face veil was the preferred style of dress for a minority of respondents except for Saudi Arabia where a face veil which kept the eyes exposed was favored by 63% of respondents. Despite the geopolitical and religious importance of Saudi Arabia, female dress practices in the Kingdom only have a marginal impact on women's dress in other contexts. While the face veil exists in many countries, the percentage of Muslim women who cover their faces is very low. In Tunisia, for example, according to some reports,[10] veiled women who cover their faces represent only about 3% of women. In Egypt, percentages possibly range between 5% to 7%.[11] The percentages in other Arab contexts are not expected to be much higher (except for some countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council).

The impact of the face veil on female participation in the Arab world did not get much scholarly attention. Over the last decade, most discussions about face veils have centered on the practice within countries where Muslims are the minority including the much publicized *burqa* ban in France. This got lots of media attention although reportedly only a small fraction of French Muslim women wore it. According to the interior ministry just 2000 women wore the face veil out of a 7.5 million Muslims in France (0.027%).[12] Interestingly, the stern resistance against the *burqa* has actually led to an increase in its incidence.[13] In addition, in a

country like Egypt, proposals to ban the face veil cast some doubts about the potential harms on the same women who were supposed to be helped by such a ban. "Because of the decision (to ban the face veil), now I will have to stay at home," reported a fully veiled practicing nurse.[14]

Without doubt, wearing the face veil puts limitations on women's participation in some sectors due to the unwillingness of some employers to hire those women. Some employers, such as those in the hospitality industry in Egypt, consider that the face veil is not fit for their type of work.[15] This prompts some activists to mobilize against such establishments through social media claiming discrimination, insensitivity, and lack of tolerance to alternative understandings of the religion.

Veil as a Headscarf

At the other side of the debate, there are Muslim scholars who do not embrace the view that Muslim women are required to cover their faces. Those include renowned—and sometimes controversial—figures such as Muhammad al-Ghazali and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. I am going to represent this view, however, through a less-known, though more controversial, figure, Gamal el-Banna.[16]

In a book simply called *Al-hijab*,[17] el-Banna notes that the past few decades have witnessed a surge of veiled women in Egypt. Very early on in his analysis, he makes a distinction between the *hijab* and the *niqab*. A *hijab* has commonly been used to mean the headscarf that keeps a woman's face and hands exposed, while a *niqab* is the full body cover that hides the face except occasionally for a small hole in front of one of the eyes.

El-Banna notes that the rights of the females in Muslim societies have been oscillating between two contrasting and harmful positions. On the one hand, there are those who approach women and their roles in society only from the perspective that she is a female, a sexual being, not from the perspective that she is after all a human being (p. 12). From that standpoint, her sexuality is what determines her:

> The idea of the female as a "human being" is very blurry to some... Just by giving her right as a human being gives her a right concerning her dress ... The opposing party has to value her "will" and respect it and not try to weaken it or overpower it...A woman has on her end to draw the proper balance between her existence as a human being and her nature as a female. (p. 21)

The other perspective is the one that looks at women only as human beings negating their feminine sides. This is the perspective that adopts the notion that—as el-Banna quotes—"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"[18]:

> The path that the modern European woman has pursued proves that both perspectives are wrong. One is an old [Muslim] jurist understanding which forced a face veil and prohibited *ikhtilat* [intermingling between males and females] because they only saw the "female" in a woman, and the other [European] perspective which only saw the "human" in a woman thus ignoring the categorical biological differences which make a woman "biologically speaking" a female. (p. 23)

El-Banna then moves on to describe how the head cover was the most practical solution between those two perspectives. In covering her hair, a Muslim woman is acknowledging her femininity; she is different from a male. At the same time, as she is free to expose her face and hands, her personality and individuality are not eroded. The Muslim woman, by putting on a headscarf, is able to strike a delicate balance between her "femininity" and her "humanity."

El-Banna acknowledges that for the most part of Islamic history, Muslim women have been subjected to a very strict form of seclusion. At one point in time, women were prohibited from going out of their homes, and they were not given the opportunity to learn how to read and write. Moreover, women were required to cover their faces which he considers to be "an unforgivable crime against society and against women which should never be allowed" (p. 34). This understanding—in practice—did not allow women to participate in any sort of meaningful work outside their homes. Thus they became more dependent on men. This gave the latter extreme power over women which was often misused. In addition, the inability of women to get proper education had detrimental impact on the whole family. Mothers could not educate their children beyond what they already know. Such practices "kept half of the society in the darkness of ignorance and illiteracy." The society became a masculine society where women were totally separated, not only from men but also from public life. Those baseless prohibitions, he contends, were among the prime causes of "the decline in Muslim society."

El-Banna goes even further in putting his standpoint about *hijab* in a broader perspective indicating that Islam as practiced nowadays is different from the real Islam:

> The "Islam" that Muslims practice nowadays is not the "Islam" of God and his messenger, but it is the one that has been molded by interpretations of *fuqaha* (jurists) over more than one thousand years ago... This revealed an understanding that was impacted by the closed-minded nature of the era in which they lived... Such an understanding reflected the opinions of men who, irrespective of their good intentions, were fallible as their opinions were impacted by fallible sources. (p. 133)

El-Banna then moves on to describe the Qur'anic meaning of *hijab*. He asserts that the word *hijab* has been mentioned several times in the Qur'an and does not refer to a dress code. Actually the word *hijab* comes to mean various things, including a physical barrier or a screen. He explains that the famous verse of the *hijab* refers in fact to written manners (not a dress code) that could be included in a book of etiquette, not a stipulation governing how women should dress.

El-Banna asserts that the basic message of Islam is one that is based on justice and gender equity with rights and duties, while respecting decency and disciplining sexual relations through the institution of marriage. The holy texts in Islam forbid indecency and enjoin things that are right and forbid things that are wrong. A review of the practices in early Islam, el-Banna notes, provides strong evidence that women played an active role in their societies, including participation in group prayers and performing pilgrimage. He notes that—as a consequence—there were lots of women who had very active public roles. This comes in contrast to the stereotypes portraying them as subjugated females who kept to their homes with no voice regarding what goes on around them. Women acted as soldiers, teachers, entrepreneurs, and nurses, and there is no evidence that they used to do all of this while their faces were covered.

El-Banna contends that the Prophet had a very strong relationship with the other sex, first with her as a mother, then as a babysitter, then as a wife, and as a faithful companion:

> He was touched by what a woman holds in terms of love, compassion and sacrifice which left deep impressions on his behaviors and life direction. He stood as a supporter of her rights against any injustice or oppression. (p. 193)

El-Banna provides his own theory as to why a basic rule to cover the hair and the bosom was transformed in later thinking to a requirement to cover the whole body including the face. Islam came with a new message, and its

rulings—particularly those relating to women—were revolutionary. Those new rulings were not met with proper understanding, and were not unconditionally welcomed. Women were closely linked before Islam to the concept of *'ird*, or honor, and thus they were closely guarded. The saying of one of the closest companions to the prophet provides evidence to this: "By God we did not see anything (of real value) in women till God revealed his rulings about them." They hated—against the message of Islam—to consult with their daughters as to whom the latter would marry. They hated—against the message of Islam—that a person looks at his future wife before he marries her. They also hated that women join them in prayers, or that they would be given anything in inheritance.

In sum, the liberating ideas of Islam barely lasted for 50 years. After the Prophet died, his compassionate message in regards to women was lost. The Muslim society changed in a fundamental manner back into understandings that reiterated earlier practices. The early equitable message of Islam was lost as new masses of people started embracing the new religion in the Levant area and in Persia, and they brought their heritage and ancient customs. Among those practices were those which kept women at home and deprived them from their civil rights. Those practices included the institution of *harem* which was, and always is, an alien intrusion into the world of Islam. A wave of political events, changes in dynasties, and a series of cultural influences—including Byzantine, Persian, Ottoman, and Mamluk—gave a severe blow to the cause of women.

El-Banna then advances an understanding about the veil that would differentiate him from other scholars who also criticize the face veil, such as Muhammad al-Ghazali and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. He notes that while he accepts the veil that only keeps the face and hands uncovered, his analysis of the religious text does not lead him to conclude that this specific dress code is a clear injunction of Islam. The Qur'an offers general guidelines and it does not dwell on the details. Those general guidelines would prohibit any dress that reflects vulgarity and exaltation, the dress being too short, or too tight, or it being transparent showing the skin. These are all forbidden by Islam and are far from the decency sought by the faith. Beyond that, a modest dress code is acceptable even if it shows part of a woman's hair or part of the legs. When understood from this perspective, el-Banna asserts, the veil would not be an impediment to women's public involvement in social and economic affairs of their communities.

Islamic Feminism

El-Banna represents a school of thought that argues for women's right from within Islam itself. This growing type of discourse, labeled Islamic feminism, revolves around the need to address women's issues through rereading of the Muslim holy texts. Contrary to what some secular Arab feminists assert in terms of the responsibility of religion—even beyond Islam itself[19]—in producing the problems targeting women, this approach argues that Islam has been misused and misinterpreted. While this might be understood as an apologetic response to criticisms involving Islam,[20] the proponents emphasize that this approach is not only valid in theory, but is also effective in practical terms. Islamic feminism becomes a movement where intellectual and academic efforts meet activist initiatives seeking to empower women, taking Islam as a reference point. This type of feminism uses concepts, methodologies, and approaches that include both those that have traditionally been advanced by Islamic understandings, and those that exist outside of Islam.[21] What this means is that an Islamic feminist would use, for example, the tools of exegesis usually used by Muslim jurists, but would not mind the use of the philosophical underpinnings of mainstream feminism.

Islamic feminists acknowledge the existence of deep problems impacting women in Arab and Islamic societies. Women have long been excluded from participation in the public sphere in Muslim societies, and much of the rationale that has misguidedly been used relates to arguments that such exclusion is sanctioned by Islam itself. Part of the problem lies in the fact that some people who consider themselves "guardians of the truth," almost exclusively male, have often monopolized a monolithic understanding about the recommended position of women in the public sphere including how they should behave in the presence of males. Islamic feminists do not take everything interpreted on behalf of Muslim women at face value, as "Muslim women are demanding equal access to scriptural truth."[22] Women have been mostly deprived, as many Islamic feminists argue, from such access, and this has had devastating effects on their well-being including their ability to be present in the public space that is mostly occupied by males. Male interpretations have led in many cases to practices that had left women behind.

Many Islamic feminists acknowledge that the situation of Arab and Muslim women is a multi-faceted problem, but part of the puzzle can be explained by how the holy texts have been understood. Interestingly, more women are getting involved in the reinterpretation of the Qur'an including

cases in Saudi Arabia itself.[23] Such attempts would move the interpretation into becoming a more gender-balanced one or a "gender-sensitive reading of Qur'anic Exegesis."[24]

In tackling the issue of monopolizing interpretations, Nazira Zainuldin (1908–1976), a Lebanese author and activist, emerges as a key figure who challenged monolithic interpretations of the religious texts. She criticizes the historical framing done by men: "women are more worthy of interpreting verses that have to do with women's duties and rights than men, for they are the ones that are directly addressed."[25] Other Islamic feminists refer to readings of the Qur'an that engender female repression,[26] ones that have been erroneously used to propagate perspectives not cognizant of the plights and rights of women. In sum, Islamic feminists assert that there is a need "to offer a reading that confirms that Muslim women can struggle for equality from within the framework of the Qur'ān's teachings… To identify Islam inseparably with oppression is to ignore the reality of misreadings of the sacred text."[27]

From the above discussions, one finds a lively and dynamic analysis that argues for women's rights, but does so from within the holy text itself. The over-riding common factor among most such discourses is that the text is believed to offer no implications that should lead to discrimination against women.

Qiwamah

As an example of the problems facing women that are based on textual understandings or misunderstandings, is the one related to *qiwamah* which was discussed earlier. This is an issue that has been raised multitudes of times by secular feminists as an example of how a religious ruling has been putting obstacles in front of women's participation. When a religious understanding puts a man above the woman, at a higher degree, then this would inevitably lead to lack of equitable participation.

Islamic feminists argue that the concept of *qiwamah* has been grossly misinterpreted and falsely applied. The concept of *qiwamah* is not related to a higher regard for males over females.[28] This is more related to the varying roles assumed by each gender. As males in most cases are the economic custodians of the family, this responsibility rests on their shoulders. This is definitely not related, Islamic feminists argue, to an inherent preference for men over women. *Qiwamah* is not patriarchal from this perspective.[29] It is rather an acknowledgement that from an economic perspective, the man is

the person who takes care of, serves, and protects the woman, and not the one who controls, leads, or manages.[30]

Saleh[31] criticizes how the *qiwamah* has been interpreted by one of the key interpreters of the Qur'an, Ibn Katheer. This early interpreter indicated that men are "better" than women and thus it is only appropriate that men become women's guardians. Such understandings have overwhelmed many of the interpretations of the Qur'an including some contemporary ones, and thus the religious text (the text of the Qur'an) has to be "saved" from such prejudgments.[32] If the text is approached from a new perspective, Saleh asserts, totally different interpretations would be reached.

Aziza El-Hibri, in analyzing the verse (*aya*) related to *qiwamah*, which she calls the "complex verse," notes the following:

> The Complex Phrase was revealed in an authoritarian/patriarchal society that the Prophet was attempting to civilize and democratize. Consequently, it should be viewed for what it really is. It is a *limitation* on men which prevents them from assuming automatically (as many did then) oppressive authoritarian roles with respect to women. At most, the Complex Phrase tells them, that they can guide and advise only these women they support financially and then only when certain conditions obtain. The rest of the *ayah* does not change this analysis if one takes a fresh non-patriarchal look at it.[33] (p. 32)

On a related note, Heba Raouf Ezzat[34] (1965–) asserts that the concept of *shura* should apply within family relations in the same manner that it is applied in the political arena.[35] The concept of *shura*, or consultation, means that decisions are made through a process of mutual discussions and exchange of ideas. The institution of the family, she asserts, should not be different from other societal institutions. Accordingly, husband–wife relations should be based on a system of consultation and participation, and not on the principle of putting an authoritarian leader who behaves the way he wants within his family. Many Islamic feminists contend that there is still a distinction between men and women that pertains to the roles that they assume during certain periods of their lives.

Any differences between men and women, Ezzat affirms, should not be used as grounds for discrimination against women who should be granted the same opportunities and other rights guaranteed by the Qur'an. Those differences related to the nature of women would require them to assume different responsibilities and functions during their lives both in the private and in the public spheres. Each woman should be given the

choice between different roles that she wants to play at different stages of her life. A woman, during the time when she is giving birth, nursing her children, and raising them, needs to have the choice to assume a role different than her husband during that period. Later in life, she can assume a different role where she can participate more in the public sphere. Society should be responsive in both cases. Society should accept the fact that she has chosen to immerse herself more into her private space with her family and children in the first instance. Moreover, when she decides that it is time for her to assume larger roles within the public space, society should not discriminate against her in that regard.

Like their secular feminist counterparts, the issue of the veil has understandably been of keen interest to Islamic feminists. There does not seem to be a unified discourse even within Islamic feminism regarding the veil. Some intellectuals who would be categorized under Islamic feminism consider the veil a making of male readings of the holy texts which engulfs a misreading not only of the text but also of Islamic history. Mernissi is one of those voices. She takes a critical approach as to how the early traditions were read. Others, on the other hand, argue that the veil is indeed a matter of religious injunction, and women have the right to heed what they believe in terms of how they should dress.

Women's Agency and False Consciousness

A question that is often addressed to feminists on either side (secular and Islamic) is where would we draw the line between a woman's agency (which assumes that she has the right, as an autonomous human being, to make her decision and indeed decide to put on the veil or not), and her false consciousness (which assumes that such sense of agency is in fact a reflection of deceitful awareness). Under the later situation, forces of patriarchy, socialization, and powerful institutional arrangements strip women from genuine autonomy. Under a false consciousness context, women are argued to make decisions that are against their own self-interest.

Commenting on such arguments, Charusheela discusses a tension between two values, one of autonomy and the other of equality.[36] Equality between men and women is a desired outcome. Yet what would happen when women choose to make decisions or display behaviors that make them unequal to men?

> What do we do when women, in asserting their right to autonomy of cultural identity and national self-determination, do not attack a social construction of gender we deem patriarchal, nor seek to replace it with notions of human autonomy or choice that we consider marks of female emancipation?[37] (p. 199)

According to certain strands in Western feminism, including some aligned with Arab secular feminism, women are sorted into two groups: those who suffer from "internalized oppression," "false consciousness," or "deceitful awareness," and those who have "genuine autonomy." Under this categorization, there is no real world where women can genuinely make choices that lead to unequal outcomes with men. When women make such choices, they are not being authentically agentic or autonomous. They would be suffering from the effect of outside forces that alter their consciousness about what they need to do as autonomous human beings. Such women end up suffering from "internalized oppression."

Under this perspective, all third-world feminisms (including Islamic feminism for that matter) would have a problem of legitimacy if they do not challenge the status quo of their societies in a manner that aligns with Western conceptions of female emancipation. Under such an understanding "non-Western feminism is an oxymoron. . . One cannot be both a feminist and a critic of Western ethnocentrism and orientalism."[38]

In invoking the false consciousness argument, as far as Muslim women are concerned, critics may end up enslaving the same women they aim to emancipate. Real freedom becomes the one configured for oriental women by Western feminists. "Those veiled oriental women have no agency of their own, and when they declare they are choosing, they are not in fact choosing," so goes the argument. Women are perceived to be reflecting external imposed powers of patriarchy and male domination.

Many Islamic feminists counter the false consciousness standpoint by arguing that female agency is actually compromised when her decision to put on a specific dress is not respected. A woman's decision to dress in a certain manner—that is not in harmony with external standards—should not be interpreted as her being subjugated and oppressed. By choosing a form of dress, she is in fact sending a message that she wants to be treated as a human being rather than just being a female.

The false consciousness argument has been recently brought to life in the wake of the veil controversy in some European countries. Much of the discourse that occurred over the dress revolved around whether Muslim school girls were brain-washed by their families into wearing the veil.

Accordingly, critics argue, they develop a preference for the headscarf that is based on a false awareness. Analyzing how the French media covered the issue, Michela Ardizzoni reported how various critics of the veil declared how it "positions the young Muslim women as completely subjected to their male family members"[39] and the headscarf thus becomes to those critics a symbol of subjugation irrespective of whether the person wearing it has done it out of her free will or not.

This argument that has been brought forward by several Western feminists, has also been embraced by many Arab feminists. El-Saadawi is the most notable example of an advocate of the position that Arab women have fallen into the false consciousness trap. Either by putting on the veil or by succumbing to Western models of how a woman should look like, the Arab woman has fallen victim to her own thinking:

> . . . that's why we see a female university professor.. who is revolting against [male] despotism and harassment, yet she carries within her, the [male] despotism and harassment virus without realizing it. She carries the blind belief in the absolute power of the state, religion, and family. . . she then gives birth again to this seed or virus through her children, male and female.[40] (p. 245)

This theme is repeated within el-Saadawi's rhetoric, effectively ascribing lack of real consciousness to some women as to what are their priorities, how they need to live their lives, and how best to tackle their problems.

In specifically addressing the issue of "choice" in wearing the veil, Ghadeer Ahmad, an Egyptian activist, notes that wearing the veil does not spring from real choice by women due to two reasons. First, the veil is engulfed in an aura of sacredness. Although it is not one of the pillars of the Muslim faith, she affirms, it has always been surrounded with significant societal interest due to an obsession with women's bodies. The second reason, according to Ahmad, is that the society provides reinforcement mechanisms and reward structures associated with wearing the veil. All of this leads the woman to "deceive herself" into thinking that she is making a free choice in putting on the hijab while she is in reality making this choice "consciously and sub-consciously at the same time."[41]

One problem with the above arguments is that they fail to note that a degree of socialization involves all types of dress. People "choose" what to dress to attend a wedding, a funeral, or a church or mosque, or to go the beach. Their decisions reflect a combination of free choice and responsiveness

to societal expectations. Stripping veiled women of all agency because of their choices, becomes the other side of stripping other women, with different socially sanctioned dress choices, of all agency.

The false consciousness argument also disseminates the notion that Muslim women make choices on what they wear based on conditioning by powerful, often male, family members and religious institutions.[42] In such instances, the perspectives, ideologies, and opinions of those women become irrelevant:

> the perspectives of those who wear the burqa are delegitimized in favour of those who are (self) represented as emancipated. .... false consciousness has effectively reintroduced through the back door a way in which Western women can reclaim legitimacy in speaking for women of other cultures and races. Thus, just as under colonialism, Western women claim the ability to speak for those who are so victimized and hapless that they have no voice which is their own.[43] (p. 389)

The false consciousness charge again divides the world of Muslim women into two camps, those with legitimate views who embrace "our" Western modes of liberation, and the other misguided ones who are under an illusion of agency and autonomy.

Reasons for the Veil

For Islamic feminists, the power of the veil in neutralizing women's sexuality is an interesting theme to explore. The veil is one way by which Muslim women are able to free themselves from the "obsession with sexualising women."[44] Some veiled Muslim women look at the veil as the means by which they have control over their bodies, thus not subjugating themselves to the demands of an increasingly consumerist society which uses and abuses their bodies in advertisement and economic profiteering.[45] Accordingly, the veil becomes a symbol by which women are treated as "persons, rather than as sex objects."[46] Practically speaking, as some women assert, veiling gives them better control of their own selves, rather than being a form of externally imposed control over their bodies and behaviors. In such a situation, the argument goes, veiled women can work more freely than their unveiled counterparts, without attracting the gaze of men.[47]

As discussed in an earlier chapter, some secular feminists assert that there is a negative impact of this symbol on a woman's identity.

Yet this reasoning would necessarily entail that women, more or less, put on the veil for a limited number of reasons. The assumption is that a woman puts on the veil because she is forced to do that, either directly through the power of the state or a father or husband figure, or indirectly through the power of institutions which offer sanctions for such behavior. Another assumed reason relates to the false consciousness argument as described above. In both those two general explanations, women's identity will suffer as she is behaving to please others, either towards dominating male figures or towards powerful societal institutions. Such decisions, it is argued, are not taken by a woman's own will, and thus her identity is tarnished. This leads her to make decisions that are not truly hers.

The above line of argumentation fails to note the multitudes of reasons why women put on the veil, a thing that has been extensively explored in prior studies.[48] There are women who put the veil yielding to the power of the law and/or power of strong cultural norms. This explains some veiling cases in countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan under the Taliban (the latter two are not Arab countries). This does not exclude the fact that there are many women in those countries who freely choose to put on the veil for other personal reasons. In all cases, however, those three contexts which are greatly and disproportionately covered in the media, do not explain the mosaic of the female veil in Arab and Muslim countries, and even in countries where Muslims are the minority. Women put on the veil for various reasons, many of which are not captured by observers. Sometimes the same Muslim woman may offer various explanations as to why she wears the veil.

It would be inappropriate to shame the "return to the veil" movement by reducing it to powers of brainwashing or patriarchy. Some women put on the veil because they simply believe that this is a religious requirement. While those women may not necessarily agree with all what religious scholars (ulema') have to say in terms of the exact specifications of the Muslim dress, they embrace a dress style which they believe makes them good Muslims before God. Linked to this reason is the perspective that the veil serves as an expression of Muslim women's modesty and morality.[49] The veil is just a statement, often directed inwards, that they find more personal meaning in this dress code. While the religiosity argument seems intuitively plausible as to why some women put on the veil, it is surprising how this reason is often immediately discounted.

Of course, some who put on the veil are impacted by the dress codes within their own cultures. After all, cultural conditions are part of how

people live their lives and make their choices. This applies to all people, Muslim or non-Muslim, male or female, veiled or unveiled. In the case of veiled women in Arab and Muslim countries, this explains the multitudes of veil fashions that are found.[50]

Other reasons for putting on the veil could be more politically oriented. The veil to some is a symbol of protest against a ruling government or a perceived unjust system. The growth of the veil movement in Egypt in the late seventies and early eighties is often put forward within that context. The headscarf thus becomes to some women a means and a symbol of protest and revolution. The veil could also be used as a means to affirm one's identity and an expression of an "anti-colonial solidarity and resistance."[51] Veiling could also stand to reflect Muslim woman's independence. It could be a vehicle to get better access to the public space, or it may represent a solution to the quandary of choosing to get into paid employment while undergoing a feeling of guilt about such a decision.[52]

In sum, the much celebrated false consciousness argument fails to capture the myriad experiences and motivations of veiled Muslim women. The reasons differ depending on many factors including whether a woman lives in a Muslim majority country versus countries where Muslims are a minority, whether she is politically active, whether she is affiliated with activist groups, the environment in which she lives, her social or economic conditions, or even whether she is religious or not. In sum, there is no one exclusive reason that can be brought forward to explain why women choose to put on the veil.

Who Owns the Public Space?

Another question that has been recurrently addressed by Islamic feminists is related to the public sphere and "who owns it?" There is a traditional discourse, as discussed earlier, that restricts women's access to public spaces, or only permits it under strict conditions. This is based on a premise of male ownership of this realm. Islamic feminists are unanimous at challenging male-purported ownership of this common space. Some Islamic feminists assert that it is a pillar in Islamic feminism to refuse the division of spaces into two, a "public" owned by men and a "private" owned by women.[53] A female, first and foremost, as a human being enjoys the same value of equality, as advocated by the Qur'an: "[Islamic feminism] rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic

jurisprudence or *fiqh*) conceptualising a holistic *umma* in which Qur'anic ideals are operative in all space."[54]

Badran laments the situation of Muslim women in many contexts where their access to the public sphere is greatly constrained. This has even extended to the common religious public space, as limitations are sometimes put on women's access to some mosques.[55] Shutting women out of the public space has been responsible for a culture of gender inequality and gender segregation. Eventually women have become isolated and their access to educational, economic, political, and even religious participation has been greatly constrained.

Islamic feminists also refuse the notion advanced by some Muslim religious scholars as to the priority that women should give to the private sphere all the time. There are connections between the two domains and women's impact should extend to both: "Breaking the dichotomy would give housewives more social esteem and would encourage working women to fulfil their psychological need to be good mothers and wives."[56]

Conflicting Feminisms

In the Arab world, there are many initiatives aiming to improve the situation of women, eradicate injustices imposed on them, and cultivate environments conducive to their empowerment and participation. The work of feminists for over a century in this region has met some successes, but those achievements pale compared to what needs to be done. Feminists have different starting points, and they adopt various approaches to sort out women's issues. This often puts them at odds with each other. As they sometimes differ as to the real reasons behind women's disempowerment and lack of participation, they disagree on how best to approach those roadblocks and problems.

Among many Islamic feminists, there is a sense of disenchantment with Western-style feminism and its counterparts in the Arab world. Western-style feminism tries to impose a specific form of universal feminism that transcends cultures and countries. There is an over-emphasis on the "external" role of women that marginalizes the "internal" role of women.[57] The external role of women, her role in the public space is given primary, often sole, attention at the expense of the internal role within her family and the domestic sphere. It has become almost shameful to talk about a role for women in the private sphere, and the discourse about their role in the public sphere has dominated all feminist talk.

It could be argued back that such feminist discourse is just a reflection of where scarcity exists. Women do not exist at par with men in the public space, not even close. This necessitates an emphasis on the societal loss from such absence in economic and political participation. Yet, the over-dominance of the external role of women undermines the whole private sphere as if such a role does not contribute to societal progress. Feminism becomes overly concerned with the role of women in economic production.[58] This zealous emphasis on women's economic contribution at the expense of her contribution within the domestic sphere (which is not usually assessed in a quantifiable manner) raises a concern over what all of this means to common values, including social and family values.[59]

Moreover, working along a Western agenda, there is fear that Western-inspired feminism reflects the neo-colonial priorities rather than genuine indigenous areas of concern. Some scholars argue that feminism, nationalism, and colonialism are interconnected in the Arab world although an indigenous feminist movement has existed in this context for a long time.[60] Some view the unveiling campaigns that have been conducted in some Arab countries as a conspiracy perpetrated by colonizers to erode Muslim society.[61] In a balanced analysis of the role of Western-inspired feminism, Abu-Lughod notes that "condemning 'feminism' as an inauthentic Western import is just as inaccurate as celebrating it as a local or indigenous project. The first position assumes such a thing as cultural purity; the second underestimates the formative power of colonialism in the development of the region."[62]

Western-inspired feminism is perceived as driving for the total independence of women, not in terms of them being autonomous beings, but in terms of putting forward an agenda that is centered around the female. Abdel Wahab el-Messiri[63] (1938–2008) provides a sharp criticism of such female-centered feminism.[64] This brand of feminism centered around the female, el-Messiri contends, actually argues that a woman, as a self-sufficient being, needs to "discover" herself, and thus she should self-actualize outside any social framework. The underlying assumption is that she is in a state of timeless conflict with the self-centered male. There is a fear that a movement that sought to liberate the women, has turned into a movement that is concerned about the identity of the woman, which is separate of the man. Under this understanding, according to el-Messiri, Western-inspired feminism offers an alien understanding of the history of civilization, framing it as a history of male–female conflict. This flawed perspective assumes that because males became dominant over females at a certain point in history, the time has come for the latter to fight back and liberate themselves from this domination.

Both Ezzat and al-Messiri criticize such perspectives of Western-inspired feminism or "radical feminism." This reflects a disappointment in Arab feminist organizations as they have departed from their nationalistic concerns and have continuously embraced "fundamental feminism" in terms of conceptualization and agendas. Western-inspired agendas have replaced other indigenous issues of prime importance.[65] It becomes worrying that by adopting such extreme feminist agendas, some Arab feminists may be hurting the same women they are trying to help.

Notes

1. Musnad Ahmad. Reported from Aisha, Hadith #24302, http://library.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?bk_no=121&hid=24302&pid=62379
2. Kahf, Mohja. (2008), "From her royal body the robe was removed." *The veil: Women writers on its history, lore, and politics*, 27. edited by Jennifer Heath, Univ of California Press.
3. Abdel Aziz Bin Baz (1910–1999) was a Saudi jurist and scholar. He was the Grand Mufti from 1992 to 1999. He was a very influential figure in Saudi Arabia having occupied many official positions in the Kingdom. He is considered one of the major figures in the *salafi* understanding of Islam. He is also considered to be a prolific writer although he lost his eyesight at an early age.
4. BinBaz, A. (1985), "Judgement about women's work", available at: http://www.binbaz.org.sa/fatawa/91; BinBaz, A. (1988), *Islamic Fatwas*, Darul-Qalam, Beirut.
5. Drury, S. (July 30, 2015). Education: The Key to Women's Empowerment in Saudi Arabia? *Middle East Institute*, http://www.mei.edu/content/article/education-key-women%E2%80%99s-empowerment-saudi-arabia
6. Ibid.
7. Arab Human Development Report (2002), *Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*, UNDP, New York, NY.
8. King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud was King of Saudi Arabia from 1964 to 1975. He implemented lots of reforms in the kingdom including increased education for girls despite the strenuous resistance from ultra-conservative circles.
9. Moaddel, M. (2013). *The birthplace of the Arab spring: values and perceptions of Tunisians and a comparative assessment of Egyptian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Pakistani, Saudi, Tunisian, and Turkish publics*. Department of Sociology, and Research, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism, University of Maryland, http://mevs.org/files/tmp/Tunisia_FinalReport.pdf

10. *Middle East Online*, (March 26, 2016). Banning *niqab* in public spaces protects Tunisians. http://middle-east-online.com/?id=221126
11. *FRANCE 24 Arabic*, The face veil that hides the Egyptian women, YouTube Video, uploaded on Jun 27, 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgAfV8TRHpY
12. *The Independent*. (25 August 2016). 7 facts about France's burkini ban that make outsiders very uncomfortable http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/burkini-ban-ruling-france-sarkozy-nice-beach-pictures-muslim-islam-a7208476.html
13. Ibid.
14. *FRANCE 24 Arabic*, The face veil that hides the Egyptian women, YouTube Video, (uploaded on Jun 27, 2008). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgAfV8TRHpY
15. *The Economist*, (Aug 27, 2015). Muslim dress in Egypt Haughty about the hijab. http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21662561-women-campaign-against-places-ban-veil-haughty-about-hijab
16. Gamal el-Banna (1920–2013) was an Egyptian scholar and writer. He is best known as being the youngest brother of Hasan el-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. He is also known to have had extremely progressive propositions regarding issues of secularism, justice, and family issues. Noha El-Hennawy writing for the Egypt Independent notes that he was "a feminist at heart," as he advocated for a greater role for women in Muslim societies.
17. El-Banna, J. (2010). *Hijab*, Dar Shurook, Cairo, Egypt.
18. de Beauvoir, S. (1973). *The second sex*, New York; Vintage Books.
19. For example, this is the view adopted by Nawal el-Saadawi where in many of her writings she indicates that religion, including all monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have been responsible for the disempowerment of women and they were major contributors in strengthening patriarchal structures.
20. On the issue of apologetic responses, see Barlas, A. (2002). *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. University of Texas Press.
21. Saleh, A. (2013). Epistemological dimension of Islamic feminism. In Omamima Abu Bakr. *Feminism and the Islamic perspective*. Women and Memory Foundation, Egypt.
22. Cooke, M. (2004). *Women claim Islam: Creating Islamic feminism through literature*. Routledge. p. xiv.
23. Ibid.
24. Abou-Bakr, O. M. (2011). A Gender-sensitive Reading of Qur'anic Exegesis'. in Qudsia Mirza (ed.) *Islamic Feminism and the Law. London: Routledge/Cavendish*.

25. Zayn al-Din 1998 as quoted by Cooke (p. xiv). Nazira Zainuldin (1908–1976) was a Druze Lebanese writer and activist who argued against the seclusion of Muslim women. She is known for her revolutionary ideas outlined in two books "Unveiling and veiling" and "The young woman and the sheikhs".
26. Barlas (2002).
27. Barlas (2002), p. xi.
28. Ezzat, H. In El-Saadawy, N. & Ezzat, Heba Raouf (2000). *Women, religion, and morals.* Darul-Fikr Al-Mu'aser. Damascus, Syria.
29. Ibid.
30. Banani, F. (1993). *Taqseem al-'amal baina al-Rajul wa al-Mar'ah (Division of labor between men and women)*. Marrakesh: Manshurat Kulliyat al-'Ulum al-Qanuniyya. As quoted by Bahlul, R. (2000). On the idea of Islamic feminism. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 20, 34–63.
31. Saleh (2013).
32. Ibid.
33. Al-Hibri, A. (1997). Islam, law and custom: Redefining Muslim women's rights. *American University Journal of International Law and Policy*, 12: 1–44.
34. Heba Raouf Ezzat (1965–) is a Professor of Political Theory at Cairo University. She is the Co-founder, and consultant (1999–2005) on strategic planning and editorial policy evaluation, for the popular online service www.islamonline.net. Her research interests include globalization, women, empowerment, and social change.
35. Ezzat (2000).
36. Charusheela, S. (2001). Women's choices and the ethnocentrism/relativism dilemma. *Postmodernism, economics and knowledge*, 15, 197.
37. Charusheela (2001), p. 199.
38. Charusheela (2001), p. 206.
39. Ardizzoni, M. (2004). Unveiling the veil: Gendered discourses and the (in) visibility of the female body in France. *Women's Studies*, *33*(5), 629–649.
40. El-Saadawy, N. & Ezzat, Heba Raouf (2000).
41. Ahmad, Ghadeer. (October 22, 2016). Veil or no-veil: an endless duality. *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=617520
42. Amina Haleem (2015) Covernance: Feminist Theory, the Islamic Veil, and the Strasbourg Court's Jurisprudence on Religious Dress-Appearance Restrictions, 5 *DePaul J. Women, Gender & L.,* Available at: http://via.library.depaul.edu/jwgl/vol5/iss1/1
43. Down, S. (2011). Debating the Burqa: How the Burqa Debate Can Reveal More than It Hides. *Canterbury L. Rev.*, *17*, 375.
44. Down (2011), p. 390.
45. Bullock, K. (2002). *Rethinking Muslim women and the veil: Challenging historical & modern stereotypes.* IIIT, Henndon, Virginia.
46. Bullock (2002), p. 24.

47. Ikran, Eum. (2000) Discourses on (Un)Veiling in Egypt, *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 6:4, 102–124
48. See Bullock (2002); Haddad, Y. Y., & Esposito, J. L. (Eds.). (1997). *Islam, gender, and social change*. Oxford University Press; Haddad, Y. Y. (2007). The post-9/11 hijab as icon. *Sociology of Religion*, *68*(3), 253–267.
49. Of course, this is not to say that such women claim that unveiled women lack modesty or morality.
50. Ikran (2000).
51. Haddad (2007).
52. Ikran (2000).
53. Badran, M. (2006). Islamic feminism revisited. *Al-Ahram Weekly On-Line*, 781, 9–15.
54. Ibid.
55. In Islamic jurisprudence there should be separation between men and women during prayers—within the same space—preferably with different access points. Many mosques in the Arab world are architecturally built in a way where such separation is not easy. This ends up denying women from any access. In the past few decades, however, women have increasingly been able to access newly built mosques which accommodate all Muslims, male or female.
56. El-Gawhary, K. (1994), "It is time to launch a new women's liberation movement – an Islamic one (an interview with Heba Ra'uf)", *Middle East Report*, November–December, pp. 26–7.
57. Ezzat (2000).
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid
60. Golley, N. A. H. (2004). Is feminism relevant to Arab women?. *Third World Quarterly*, *25*(3), 521–536.
61. Ikran (2000).
62. Abu-Lughod, L. (2001). "Orientalism" and Middle East. *Feminist Studies.* 27(1): 101–113.
63. Abdel Wahab el-Messiri (1938–2008) was an Egyptian scholar, historian, and author who wrote a lot about Western culture, secularism, Arab-Israeli conflicts, and comparative literature.
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CHAPTER 6

The Way Forward

Oppression as a habit of life blocks the oppressor's own advancement and freedom (M.S. Fish)

Introduction

The 1913 Suffrage Parade was a milestone in the efforts of Western women to gain their emancipation. Organized by activist Alice Paul, the parade welcomed scores of white women who demonstrated asking for the right to vote. Behind those women towards the back was a group of black women who were asking for the same right, equality for women. The participation of black women in such an event in 1913 was not a normal occurrence, and it did not take place without much controversy. In the end, the 22 founders of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority participated[1]: one big parade, many common issues, but two separate groups. Women participating in the parade were asking for legitimate rights, the right to participate, the right to voice their opinions, and the right to make a difference. Yet some were perhaps oblivious to the rights of other minorities to live equally. Some within the white women's movement perhaps were not forgetful of this, but thought that for change to happen it had to be gradual. Others were frustrated that voting rights were given to former slaves but not to women.[2] Women's rights, it would have been contended, when given, would open the door for other rights. Recent American history is evidence that this could happen. A few decades after

Y.M. Sidani, *Muslim Women at Work*,
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women were given their rights, the civil rights movement realized its primary objectives.

But there is another way to look at those events in history. Perhaps if the organizing women looked at the rights of black women from the start, the rights of the blacks, together with those of women, would have come along much sooner. Perhaps a lot of suffering could have been avoided, or perhaps not.

A twenty-first-century suffrage parade for Arab women would look similar. Arab women would demonstrate asking for their rights. Yet one would immediately sense the rifts and divisions that engulf this group tearing it into splintering factions. On one side, you would find secular feminists, who would chant for women's rise and empowerment. They would call for abolishment of patriarchal structures and other institutional mechanisms that stand in the way of their freedoms. You would find those who would take a pick at Islam or at patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Some of them would be bitter at male-dominated institutions that have—for so long—monopolized a certain understanding of how women should behave, thus determining the extent to which they can participate in public affairs. On the other side, you would find a different group of feminists. Like their secular sisters, they would chant against patriarchy, though they have different explanations for its persistence. They would blame colonialism, imperialism, and Western attempts at domination. Instead of looking at their religion as a source of their problems, they lament faulty interpretations of the religious texts. Irrespective of the extent to which the two sides agree or disagree, they have a common understanding of the urgent need to change the status of Arab women. Both sides feel that women are marginalized, and both look forward for ways to alleviate their problems. Both sides strive to assert their individuality, autonomy, spirituality, and identity.

This twenty-first-century Arab parade has already happened in various forms. Those women did participate and they weren't demonstrating at the back. They were there in *Tahrir* Square in Cairo on the 25th of January 2011. They were in the first few months of the Syrian Spring roaming the streets of Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. They were there in Yemen when everybody thought their voices would never be heard. Veiled, unveiled, Muslim, Christian, and secular, women and men aspired to live as autonomous human beings with independent minds free from dictatorships. Although women were an integral part of the protest movements, their demands were not particular to women's issues. Perhaps if everybody had the right to voice their opinions,

elect their representatives, and govern themselves in a free manner, the door would open to all women, all faiths, and all expressions.

But this was not to be. The promising Arab Spring has mostly been aborted. Hopes of freedom have all but vanished in many quarters of the Arab world. Egypt has been regressed to a Mubarak-like regime. Yemen has essentially become a battle-ground between two regional powers. Syria has been suffering at the interplay of regional and global powers. Similar to how the demands for women's rights have been continuously sidelined, demands for political freedoms for Arab masses met the same fate.

To many, what was a promising and innocent Arab Spring at its start, has turned into a nightmare. With the demise of the Arab Spring, hopes for women's real emancipation have also dwindled. The link between patriarchy and dictatorship is peculiar, though—to many—not surprising. What happens in the private sphere is just a reflection of what happens in the public sphere. Deeply held institutional control over women is just one example of structural mechanisms that subjugate silent majorities in the Arab world:

> The patriarchal family [is] a central tool of political oppression in a variety of social situations. . . Circumcision, rape, terror, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse are the hallmarks of woman's condition and are at the same time emblematic of Barre's [late Somali dictator] political regime.[3] (p. 205; 218)

While the Arab women Spring has never seen the day of light, there have been—over the years—some gains for women on many fronts: impressive accomplishments in education, in social freedoms, and in the right to be part of the social scene (although the story is not uniform across all Arab countries). Their accomplishments have, however, been meager in terms of political or economic participation. Some would argue that more participation should have resulted based on better education, increased social freedoms, dynamic feminist activism, and increased integration in an interconnected and increasingly egalitarian world. Yet those factors of change were not impactful in producing gender parity. Why haven't those factors been able to significantly contribute to a narrowing of the gender participation gap? Who is responsible, and what is the way forward?

Social Modernization Did Not Close the Gender Gap

It could be thought that countries that are socially liberal are more likely to include women in decision-making circles in political institutions (through representation in legislative and executive bodies), or in economic spheres of activity (through increased recruitment, appointment, and development of more qualified female elements). Yet evidence in the Arab world does not suggest that this is happening. As explained earlier, Lebanon is a case in point. It is one of the most socially liberal countries. Compared to some of its Arab counterparts, there are no restrictions (at least explicit ones) on women's social functioning, education, or access to work opportunities. Women are free to drive, enroll in coed schools and universities, and work in all types of institutions (including the military). There is an acceptable level of freedom of the press—compared to many other countries in the region.[4] The country is home to many religions including diverse sects within Islam and Christianity. It is open to the West given the fact that it was colonized by France till 1943, and many of its citizens make it a point to adhere to a Western lifestyle. The Lebanese people travel extensively especially to Western Europe, North America, and Australia, and they are accustomed to various styles of living.

Despite all of the above, Lebanon fares miserably in relation to female participation.[5] Only about 3% of parliamentary seats are occupied by women. There are also a low number of women representatives in municipalities and other public service positions. Lebanese women occupy few seats in the upper echelon in Lebanese businesses, and they comprise a low percentage of corporate boards. The social liberalism of the country has not translated in any way into better participation. Participation rates are actually higher in some countries commonly perceived to be less socially liberal than Lebanon.[6]

The above example clearly shows the fallacy of linking social freedoms to higher participation, whether political or economic. There are other factors that better resolve the quandary of participation. In some cases, as far as low participation is concerned, more can be explained by socio-economic class affiliations than by social attitudes. In other cases, it is the combination of socio-economic class *and* social attitudes. If a family does not need a second income, the first to leave the workplace is the wife/mother. This leads to scarcity of women who belong to the upper middle-class and rich social classes. Economic need thus emerges as a major determinant of women's participation.[7] In the Arab Gulf countries, female labor force participation before the discovery of oil was higher compared to later

periods. Many industries that traditionally employed women, such as those in agriculture or light manufacturing, were negatively impacted by oil production.[8] The rapid prosperity that materialized after the discovery of oil deterred the entry of women back into the labor force. In other Arab countries that have little or no oil, women, more than men, lost their work in the fields and were not able to move into the emerging industries.[9] This confirms earlier studies showing how women's labor participation goes down as agriculture is replaced with industry.[10]

Education Is Not Significantly Closing the Gender Gap

The Arab world has developed significantly in terms of education. Schools now exist in many urban and rural communities, but such penetration is not enough. It is estimated that there are still about 80 million illiterate Arabs. Yet, in comparison to the first half of the twentieth century, female education has significantly improved. In some Arab countries, such as the UAE, females are faring even better compared to their male counterparts. In Saudi Arabia, where societal constraints—at one point in time—put obstacles in front of women's education, schools and universities are now dedicated to help women earn their education in a variety of fields. Moreover, women are increasingly becoming able to pursue education in what were traditionally male occupations. In some Arab countries, female enrollment in business education slightly exceeds male enrollment at a number of universities. The gap in education between males and females is narrowing, and females are even outperforming males in terms of quality measures.[11]

Two observations can be made regarding educational accomplishments so far. Despite all the improvements, the level of education in the Arab world does not compare well to other regions. Rates of illiteracy are still worrisome, and penetration into different classes and regions is not even. A second problem is that the relationship between education and gender parity is not straightforward. Any purported advantages of education on gender equity are still below expectations. In some countries, such as the UAE, where women have accomplished remarkable achievements in education, there are no corresponding increases in participation rates in the political and economic spheres. In Saudi Arabia, institutional contingencies make participation less dependent on education and more dependent on cultural frameworks that significantly limit such participation. Yet, the fact remains that "in the Arab world, girls' education is one of the best investments Arab states can make in their social and economic well-being."[12]

Regulatory Changes Are Not Closing the Gender Gap

It could be argued that the Arab world is in need of more regulation as far as women's rights are concerned. It needs modern laws in regards to discrimination, sexual harassment both on the streets and in the workplace, domestic violence, educational access, and all other areas where equitable rights need to be implemented. Laws and regulations have the potential to change behavior. Based on a rational choice perspective, when there are sanctions on what people can do and what they cannot do, behaviors would change in line with what is required. It would subsequently be expected that behaviors subject to state punishment would go down. When there are systems that criminalize discriminatory behaviors against women and that outlaw intimidating workplaces for women, company decision-makers will respond by doing their best to avoid penalties and punishment.

Yet there are two main shortcomings with an over-reliance on the regulatory arm of the state to regulate behavior. First is the issue of implementation. In some countries, such as in Lebanon, amid political strife and opaque environments, the state often has limited powers in terms of enforcing laws. In other parts of the Arab world such as in Yemen, parties rely on elders and communal leaders to sort out disputes and decide on any deviations from expected behaviors. The problem thus becomes not that of regulation but that of implementation. Coming up with newer rational laws is always healthy, but the real benefit of such laws is only realized when governments come up with reasonable workable enforcement mechanisms.

Another shortcoming of an increased reliance on the power of laws is that the beneficiaries from such laws, marginalized women in this case, are the ones who are less likely to make use of them. One example relates to sexual harassment laws in the workplace. A study by the *Arab Trade Union* exploring various Arab labor laws indicated that irrespective of the presence of laws or lack thereof, women tend not to report cases of harassment or violence in the workplace.[13] There could be many reasons for such attitudes including fear of being blamed for what happens to them, or fear of retaliation. Irrespective of the reasons for lack of reporting, no laws would really protect women who are not willing to report wrongdoing. In those cases, women may just decide to continue working, often under the same boss, where they have to tolerate what happens to them till they find another work opportunity. In other cases, they may decide to leave their jobs, or exit the job market altogether.

In sum, regulatory changes are very much needed, yet the positive outcomes of such changes are slow and take many years to materialize. Without proper implementation and without a parallel change in attitudes and norms, regulations are not likely to be effective.

A Quota System Does Not Ensure Participation

Linked to the earlier point is the issue of the quota system. Although this system is a regulatory change, it is discussed separately due to its significant relevance for participation in the public sphere. The quota system is not particular to political representation. In many countries there are regulatory requirements that require a certain percentage of women to be represented on corporate boards of private companies.[14] In some Arab countries there has been increased campaigning for a voluntary business commitment to better female representation on corporate boards (e.g. 30% by the year 2025 in Lebanon as advocated by the *Lebanese league of Women in Business*).[15]

The issue of a quota system has been the subject of intense debates all over the Arab world. There are voices that support such a system and others that oppose it. Enforcing the quota system would ensure a guaranteed number of females to be present in the political and economic spheres. While this would not be the best way to ensure female participation, it is the best way—according to supporters—where a resisting society is pushed to accept the presence of women in decision-making roles. On the other hand, those who oppose the quota system assert that while it guarantees that women will be represented, it does not guarantee that they would be the best ones to serve in those positions. In the political arena, women chosen for representation have traditionally been relatives of connected males.[16] This has implications on how the public perceives the appointment of those women, and how it evaluates their performance.

Women are often subjected to tougher standards when evaluating their performance. When it is perceived that a wrong woman is chosen for an executive position, the drawbacks of her experience are detrimental to the whole cause of women participation. In political representation the issue becomes even more visible. If a woman is elected just because she is a woman, her failures would not be attributed to her lack of leadership or executive skills, but because of her gender.[17] Men are not subjected to those standards. Because women suffer from an a priori lack of proper preparation for participation in executive or leadership roles, they often

kick off their leadership positions from a disadvantaged position. When wives, sisters, or daughters of exceptional male politicians are elected to office, they would be compared to their male kin. While their successes are judged positively in relation to their own personalities and groundings, their failures are often attributed to who they are as women. Accordingly, while the quota system is needed in many situations, the problems associated with it need to be carefully tackled. In an ideal world, any process of participation and representation in the political and economic spheres would yield a gender-balanced group of decision-makers who are chosen or appointed because of their expertise and potential, not because of their genders.

Feminist Action Is Not Closing the Gap

Ever since Qasim Amin and Huda Sha'arawi raised their voices in support of women's emancipation, Arab activists have been struggling, each in their own way, to advance women's rights. Those feminists included secular feminists, Marxist feminists, Islamic feminists, or just feminists without any qualifier.[18] Feminist action involved both men and women, both intellectuals and laypersons, and both educated and non-educated, from various religious, areligious, and anti-religious perspectives. Their collective efforts have led to some successes and some disappointments at several fronts. It is important to gauge the efforts that have started more than one hundred years ago. How far have the accomplishments contributed to the elevation of Arab societies and the cause of women in the Arab world? What are the successes? Where are the shortcomings?

Attempting to evaluate more than a century of activism by diverse forces and stakeholders is a grandiose task, and I am not attempting an evaluation here. Yet, compared to the successes of women in other parts of the world, Arab women's progress has been partial and slow. Questions that need to be addressed in any evaluation: who is responsible for the lack of significant progress in terms of participation of women in many Arab localities? Have the internal rifts within the feminist movements led to problems in realizing the desired outcomes? What explains the resilience of patriarchy, if patriarchy is indeed the culprit? To what extent has the discourse of some feminist movements been considerate of the cultures in which they operate? What was the role of Western-inspired agendas in that regard?

As discussed earlier, the problems facing the early feminist movements included forces of resilient patriarchy and a strict religious reading that, while not embraced by many Muslims, was not welcoming of the

changes. Some feminists have argued against certain prevalent practices, legitimized by a certain religious interpretation, that disadvantage women. The religious establishment, dominated by men, has not been helpful in advancing the cause of women. In many ways, according to this perspective, the current institutional structures have fed from a regressive understanding that led to female disempowerment and lack of participation. As noted in an earlier chapter, there are indeed extreme readings of the religious texts that reinforce strict gender segregation and women detachment from public and economic affairs.

On the other hand, however, are positions—stemming from a religious starting point—that argue for a departure of current practices. Practices hindering women's access to the public life have become increasingly challenged, not only from secular feminists, but also from religious circles.[19] New discourses within Arab feminism started to look for answers within the faith itself for how best to approach women's issues. Islamic feminists have embarked on uncovering arguments within the Muslim tradition, texts, and history, for evidence why women's emancipation is not contrary to religious teachings. Through looking inside, they hope to fix the situation outside. While some[20] fear that an undue attention given to reinterpretation of religious texts and history may distract from the real problems associated with female underdevelopment and lack of participation, the benefits from such an exercise are myriad.

Within the discourse of Islamic groups, as discussed in an earlier chapter, there are lots of arguments regarding the importance of inclusion of women based on a rereading of Islamic texts and history. Such reexaminations have been translated into real action on the ground. There are indeed cases, for example, of women who ran for elections and won parliamentary seats on the election lists of Islamic groups. *Annahda* Islamic party in Tunisia is a good example where, in 2014, 28 out of 69 seats were won by female members of this party.[21] Yet even in Tunisia, which fares extremely well compared to other countries, there are concerns that female participation does not translate into real involvement in decision-making.[22] All in all, participation remains low, and even when the numbers tell stories about improvement, the question remains whether such improvements are really substantive.

One of the problems associated with feminist movements in the Arab world is the apparent discord between Islamic feminists and secular feminists. Both aim at improving the status of women, but there are often sharp differences in their assumptions and approaches. An extreme version of secular feminism would discount Islamic feminists as individuals who "don't know what they're doing," pointing fingers at them

for hiding political agendas. An extreme version of Islamic feminism labels secular feminists as being aligned with colonial powers based on Western agendas that do not take the real priorities of Middle Eastern women into consideration.

While the efforts of all feminist groups have materialized into notable changes for women, the process is still far from over. The rift within Arab feminism is clear. Some feminist movements are aligned with Western feminism, others are aligned with Islamic feminism, and many are in between.

Does Global Feminism Help?

Globalization has enabled a rise of "transnational feminist networks" that work together to achieve common transnational goals: "As such . . .'globalization-from-above' has engendered 'globalization-from-below,' producing a dynamic and transnational women's movement that has been confronting neoliberal capitalism and patriarchal fundamentalism."[23] Some look favorably at those transnational initiatives. They look positively at the outside for inspiration, which is to global norms, treaties, and experiences. The benefit of such an approach is that one could look at what worked elsewhere, and establish mimetic practices that are likely to work, avoiding the pitfalls and benefiting from the successes.

One example of such initiatives is the *1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)* adopted by the UN General Assembly. After the fall of the Soviet Union together with the phenomenal advancement of communication technologies, the world supposedly became smaller and thus treaties, just like the CEDAW, could be diffused easier within various world communities. Although many Arab states made reservations against some articles within CEDAW, and despite the slow progress in the application of CEDAW,[24] the global movement towards women's rights has had significant implications in those countries. Women have become more aware as to emerging worldwide initiatives and more cognizant of the potential that they have in the political and economic arenas. This has contributed to a growing discourse at various levels where stakeholders address women's issues and their relationships to patriarchy, religion, and political will.[25]

There are questions, however, in respect to how such global initiatives are being implemented. There is a concern that such reservations against

CEDAW by many Arab countries are just a form of "New World Hypocrisy"[26] which aims to effectively prevent advancement of women's rights. All in all, however, some assert that there is a silver lining to all of this:

> To look on the brighter side, one can at least say that all this signifies the degree to which the principle of equality for women has gained normative force around the globe – so that even the enemies of women's rights are forced to pay lip service to it. The days of arguing for the general propositions that discrimination against women is wrong will soon be behind us. That battle has essentially been won. (Mayer, 1998, p. 21)

Colonial Feminism

One problem with global initiatives is the possibility that they eventually become a form of "colonial feminism" as coined by Leila Ahmad.[27] This refers to the colonial fascination with Muslim symbols, such as the veil, as a representation of women oppression and subjugation to male-dominated structures. The Arab woman is depicted as one who is deprived of all agency. Less educated, disempowered, and marginalized, she—according to colonial imagination—becomes unfit to govern herself: "Colonial campaigns against veiling, sati, and other 'uncivilised' practices used a form of feminism to depict colonised societies as backward and oppressive, and colonised women as victims in need of Western salvation."[28]

Thus according to colonial imagination, Arab (or Muslim or "oriental") women need saving. The sorry state of Arab and Muslim societies, particularly as it impacts women, is brought forward as evidence[29]: "the empirical data demonstrates that, whether because of social status or their status under Islam, women in the Arab World face many barriers that marginalise and exclude them, leaving them vulnerable to oppression and abuse."[30] Arab women are seen to be living under oppressive institutional structures from which they are not equipped to escape. Those structures are often reinforced by tribal entities or extended family institutions where a woman's voice is lost to the benefit of a larger collective interest.

The above argument fails to note that such institutional arrangements, when marginalizing individual voice, cut across demographic settings. Larger tribes dominate smaller tribes, older men dominate younger ones, and some ethnic groups dominate others. Attempting to save women, irrespective of other discrimination structures, may inadvertently lead to deformed equity. A better route is to work on parallel streams of tackling inequity, both for women and for other marginalized societal

entities. In addition, an attempt at forcing a change from outside is likely to be perceived as Western intrusion which is easily delegitimized. Voice needs to be given to indigenous emancipation efforts that recognize that the Arab woman is not a powerless person void of all agency or as one who is in constant need for her Western sister for guidance. This is acutely important as Arab women have become more educated and open to various world experiences. They are better able to discern whether, when, and how to benefit from practices that exist beyond their borders. They are also better able to understand their own cultures and decide on the best way to cope with cultural practices that stand in their way.

Obsessively looking to the outside for inspiration runs the risk of importing Western-motivated agendas into Arab societies that fail to acknowledge the need for homegrown feminist action. This could prevent proper reflection on what is inside to properly understand what would work within a certain context and what would not. This makes people less sensitive to issues of cultural relativism and less able to understand the real priorities and needs of Arab women. Such insensitivity ends up failing Arab women, causing disappointments in enforcing meaningful change, and eventually obstructing women's development and gender parity.

Who Is Responsible?

Many Arab feminist movements and intellectuals have been obsessed in identifying the parties and institutions that continue to obstruct women's rise in the Arab world. Questions that emerge include: Who is responsible for the problems engulfing women in Arab societies and who is responsible for lack of female participation in the public sphere? It is argued by those activists and academics that failing to answer those questions, or ignoring to name the real culprits, runs the risk of extending women's problems much further into the future.

While answering such questions is always important, there is a risk with an over-indulgence in naming a culprit. Some blame the "religious right" while others blame the essential fabric of Arab society. Such a blame game often leads to no tangible changes for Arab women. What would it serve to attribute underdevelopment problems to the premise that women are hated in this part of the world?[31] Behind being grossly erroneous, there is no use of such distorted conclusions other than reaffirming the false image of the enslaved Arab woman who needs to be saved. It is true, as explained in detail in earlier chapters, that there are severe problems that need to be

addressed. Yet blaming the Arab culture or religious ideals for perpetrating misogynistic attitudes is not only inaccurate, but it also fails to recognize the complexity of factors that work together to the detriment of women in the Arab world. This was noted by Max Fisher who responded to misogynistic charges against Arab culture when he asserted that it is not Islam,[32] or racism, or "hate" that is responsible for sexism in the Arab world:

> If that misogyny is so innately Arab, why is there such wide variance between Arab societies? Why did Egypt's hateful "they" elect only 2 percent women to its post-revolutionary legislature, while Tunisia's hateful "they" elected 27 percent, far short of half but still significantly more than America's 17 percent? Why are so many misogynist Arab practices as or more common in the non-Arab societies of sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia? After all, nearly every society in history has struggled with sexism, and maybe still is.[33]

Blaming the culture of the Arabs, or the religious right[34] for misogynistic attitudes often starts a cycle of blames and counter-blames that accomplish no real objective. This would feed the rifts that engulf Arab communities in terms of conflicting understandings in explaining the reasons behind women's problems, their lack of participation in the public space, and the ways to best address those issues.

Final Words

With the transformations taking place in many corners of the Arab world, there is hope for an increased and equitable participation for women. As Arab citizens push for more political freedoms, it is expected that such freedoms would naturally include women's rights. The Arab liberation movements, including the struggling Arab Spring, represent an ongoing experiment that could materialize in significant gains for women and men alike. Equal or equitable rights for women cannot be separated from other wider societal rights:

> Several leading writers have argued that the repressiveness and unquestioned dominance of the father in the family and of the male in relations between men and women replicate themselves in broader society, creating a culture of domination, intolerance, and dependency in social and political life... The notion of isomorphism between primary social relations and those that obtain in broader society has a long history in social science.... Oppression as a habit of life blocks the oppressor's own advancement and freedom. (p. 30)[35]

The subjugation of women is representative of failing power structures within widespread sections of the Arab society. As the Arab world moves towards asserting the rights of its citizens to express themselves freely within the political realm, the impact will transpire into other societal circles. It is unfortunate that we see unwavering attempts to sustain authoritarianism in many Arab countries. Failure to give Arabs, men and women, their political freedoms and autonomy is likely to regress women's causes for many more generations to come. What is hoped is that attempts at aborting Arab aspirations for freedom and equal participation would be overpowered by increased citizen awareness and dynamism. Positive changes are likely to meet stern resistance from forces benefitting from the status quo. Good-intentioned activists, intellectuals, and women's rights advocates from all sides, Islamist and secular, women and men, need to work together on a common agenda to further improve the lives of Arab women. By doing that they would be advancing societal prosperity and well-being for all. The blame game about who is responsible for what that has been going on for the last two centuries is leading nowhere. The only way forward for Arab liberation movements is to acknowledge their differences, stop the blame game, and work together towards the advancement of women and other marginalized groups all across the region.

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32. Golley notes that "Islam has always been the pot within which the subject of Arab women has been cooked. The West has a generalized view that Arab women are Muslims and that Islam, viewed as monolithic religion, oppresses women" (p. 17). While one is inclined to agree with such a statement regarding the prevalence of such a perspective, it needs to be noted again that such a generalized view is not restricted to some Western scholars. This view is shared by some Arab authors, activists, and feminists; Golley, N. A. H. (2010). *Reading Arab women's autobiographies: Shahrazad tells her story*. University of Texas Press.
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34. As an example of blaming the "religious right," the famous *Al-Hilal* Egyptian cultural periodical published in March 2017 a special issue under the title; *"The Arab Woman…Before the Spring and after the storm"*. The interesting thing from the title is that it relabels the Arab Spring as storm as the spring is yet to come, thus discrediting the—now failing—Arab Spring. In one of the articles, Farida Nakkash talks about the "religious right" which aims to besiege the female body through the usage of two types of discourse that lead to the same outcome. The first discourse views the female body as a sex symbol, which is a source of seduction and sin. That's why it needs to be hidden and secluded. The second discourse looks at the body as a valuable jewel, a symbol of motherhood and fertility, which needs to be protected. She concludes by noting that the religious right takes texts out of context leading in both cases to one outcome: the marginalization and seclusion of women. In the same issue Hussam Haddad, an expert on Islamic movements, throws a blanket condemnation of schools of Islamic jurisprudence including those affiliated with the official Azhar institution.
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