

The Critics

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

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 roles⁴ 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 veil⁵ (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 critics⁶ 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—*ikhhtilat*—(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 Amin¹³ (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 that¹⁹:

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 Bourguiba²⁴ (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, wrote³³: “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 *Tabrir* 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 be 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-Saadawi⁶¹ 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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