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Modern Middle Eastern Women and their Rising Impact on Society

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## Abstract

Middle Eastern women are viewed in the West as women who do or are not allowed to have their own will and who are suppressed within their society. By studying passages from the Koran and comparing them with the writings of Esposito, Amer, Bhutto, and other pieces of prominent academic literature, compiled with assorted new media and mass media sources, this paper attempts to understand the stigma that has been placed on women in the Middle East, but it moreover challenges the idea that women throughout the region are both powerless and uninterested in changing their fortunes. Looking into the developing political, social, and economic roles of females in the Middle East, the paper attempts to determine what factors have created the current/past representation of these women and how these roles are changing through international efforts, but more importantly through grassroots engagements. The research which is embedded in a tri-level analysis of how women impact the societies that they live in, have been examined to determine whether or not these women impact the societies that they live in, have been examined to determine whether or not these women are truly suppressed victims of their society. More directly, this paper evaluates the efforts of women and the current events that are developing a new face for Middle Eastern women in the twenty-first century.

## Modern Middle Eastern Women and Their Rising Impact on Society

*Hayrunisa Gul, the first lady of Turkey, stated "My scarf covers my head, not my brain."*

*Benizer Butto*

This quotation by Gul poetically highlights the escalating debate concerning the idea of Middle Eastern women wearing the veil and exactly what this means socially, politically and religiously. In the West, the idea of the veil has come to represent repression and violations of human rights, while in the East, it is not as much about the veil as people assume. It has become more a fight for rights and equality.

When envisioning an Islamic woman, many people immediately think of a woman covered in some form of head garb or covered head-to-toe in conservative robes and the ideas held are usually negative. The key problem with these perceptions is that one would never be able to know exactly what each headdress means to each individual woman and the reasons why she chooses to wear it, due to the individuality associated with Islamic beliefs and values. Most important to any such understanding, however, is that stereotypical views of the headdress should not be drawn, i.e. that all Islamic women would fall into one category, as they are an extremely diverse group of women with differing views.

For many westerners, it is assumed that all Islamic women are suppressed and held down because of their faith, which is symbolized in the Islamic garb. One of the main reasons people view them in this light, comes directly from the Islamic headdress and not much more. For some, the issue is that this type of covering seemingly conceals their individuality, if not their entire identity. Others respond even more negatively to isolated, but moving media reports of some of

the atrocities enacted on women in the Middle East for not adhering to the conservative norms of that society. While it cannot be ignored that these repressive measures are reality for some women, such conclusions oversimplify the truth and conceal the diverse positive reasons about why many other Muslim women would choose to wear a veil.

Consider, for example, the fact that not every Islamic woman is suppressed, as found in the differences in the headdress observed in the many countries of the world. Islamic headdress takes many different meanings and forms depending on the individual women under consideration and the country of origin. The most common form imagined by westerners is the burqa, which is the full black covering from head to toe with the eyes or entire face cut out. There is, however, also the hijab, which is a black or colorful piece of fabric used to cover most of the hair and neck and sometimes shoulders. In more secular countries, this can even be as unobtrusive as conservative scarves, as long as they cover all of the woman's hair. This paper moves beyond the reasons why a particular type of headdress would be worn and instead addresses and focuses on the motivations behind the choice to wear it in the first-place.

Is Islamic veiling the terrible plight that it is described to be to a Middle Eastern woman? To address this question and to understand Islamic veiling there are three key things that must be addressed: the social progression of the veil, the political progression, and finally the economic progression. The word progression is important here, since it highlights that the veil is used as a tool of progression towards more actual and/or symbolic freedoms in all three realms. This paper is thus designed to show where Islamic veiling originated, and shows how the headdress is changing and finally discussing what all of this means for the future of the Islamic headdress and the women in the Middle East. The intention is enlighten misinformed people about what the veil means to women and essentially show how a woman can use her veil to her advantage.

To accomplish this, the first section of the paper will address the basics of where the veil came from, specifically the scriptural basis to wearing the headdress. Counterintuitively for many westerners, this discussion highlights that while the actual wearing of a veil is based in the Koran, the repressive use thereof is based on interpretations of the Koran, since this text does not even mention or mandate its use. The focus will then shift to more contemporary debates and look at the veil in the three different arenas that affect everyone's life on a daily basis: the social, political and economic realms. These arenas will be explored both in the west and the east. Clarity to the different tactics used in everyday life will be explored through seven brief case studies Asma Mahfour, Gigi Ibrahim, Benazir Bhutto, Hayrūnnisa Gül, Emine Erdogan, Lolwan Al-Faisal, and Zahar Rahnauard, as well as examples of different programs enacted in Middle Eastern society that are not hindered by the veil, such as The AccoLade, Miss. Arab World, The Green Movement in Iran, and The Egyptian Women's Union. The overall objective of this project is to display how Middle Eastern women are on the path to liberation with the veil despite the different reasons they choose to wear it.

### **Spiritual Realm**

When looking at the history of the headdress one discovers where it gained its roots, why women wear it and why there are so many interpretations of it. One of the most fundamental things to understand when looking at Middle Eastern head garb is where everything originated. When doing this it is hard to ignore the religious roots of the head garb and understand how they have been misinterpreted to form the stereotypical view many people have.

### **In the Quran**

The veil is often times seen merely as a religious symbol. This even historically is just about the farthest from the truth, as "The Quran does not stipulate veiling or seclusion."

(Esposito, J. 2005 98) The roots of the veil are far from the Quran. The word *hijab* is an Islamic word that means “barrier or protection.” (British Broadcasting Network. 2009) When looking at it from a religious stance, it means a lot more, it is the principal of modesty, for both women and men. The idea has paradoxically been attached to the many different forms of head coverings that an Islamic woman might wear. People believe that the idea specifically starts in the Quran because women state that they wear them for religious purposes; this is simply not the case. The idea of veiling was first introduced by customs of the conquered Persian and Byzantine societies. (Esposito 2005: 98) It was a cultural norm for the elite in society to wear the veil to signify their status. This began to quickly be imitated by the commoners as many trends in society do. “In fact the veil or the burqa, the all-enveloping chador, have more to do with tribal traditions.” (Bhutto 2008 :42) Historically women who were the elite within society very rarely left home and when they did leave home they were fully covered, not because of the Quran though. Bhutto indicates that at the time of the Prophet there is nothing to indicate that women should wear a veil. She says that everything we know of the “Prophets’ family suggest a social system directly contrary to the traditionalists’ view of women.” (Bhutto 2008:42) She further states that practices like wearing the burqa come from various tribal traditions that have no basis in Islam. (Bhutto 2008: 40) Since the idea of veiling did not originate within the Quran, it is easy to see that it is also not dictated by the Quran.

Next the verses in the Quran that mention the word “hijab” will be looked at. When looking through the Quran, the hijab is only present on five occasions: Sura 7:46, Sura 19:16-17, Sura 41:5, Sura 42:51, Sura 33:53. Each verse has to be analyzed to uncover the true meaning of the verse. They will be grouped by common meaning to better understand them.

The first verses are grouped together because they are both using the word to convey to meaning of separation. Sura 7:46 for example when translated states, “There will be a veil between them.” (Amer 2000:2) A few verses before this the Quran discusses the inmates of Paradise and the residence of Hell. It becomes clear that this has nothing to do with dress of women at all. It is talking about the separation of the people of heaven and hell. How a veil, a literal barrier, will be separating them. Sura 41:5 says “And [those who do not listen] say: ‘Our hearts are immured against what you call us to. There is a deafness in our ears, and a veil lies between lies between us and you. So act (your way), we are acting (ours).’” (Amer 2000: 3) This verse is dealing with people not understanding one another, and thereby creating a separation, or veil, between themselves. You can see that both of these verses deal with the word hijab in the context of a separation between people.

The next verses take the word and give it a meaning that would not be traditionally grouped with the word hijab. The first verse Sura 19:16-17 states “Commemorate Mary in the Book. When she withdrew from her family to a place in the East/ and took cover from them.” (Amer 2000:3) The word that is being translated to mean hijab is the word cover. This verse once again talks nothing about dress, it is simply talking about Mary taking refuge. It is using refuge and covering almost interchangeably. Mary is taking cover and hiding from her family, not by dress but by literally hiding. The next verse, Sura 42:51 says “It is not given to man that God should speak to him except by suggestion or indirectly, or send a messenger to convey by His command whatsoever He please. He is all-high and all-wise.” (Amer, S. 2000: 3) Indirectly is the word that was translated from hijab in the verse. This verse is saying is that God does not speak directly to a person, he only communicates in an indirect manner with humans. Clearly none of the above verses deal with dress or modesty at all, espically not in the context of women.

There is one verse that mentions both females and hijab in the Quran . Sura 33:53 states “ O you who believe, do not enter the houses of the Prophet for a meal without awaiting the proper time, unless asked, and enter when you are invited, and depart when you have eaten, and do not stay on talking, This puts the Prophet to inconvenience, and he feels embarrassed in (saying) the truth. And when you ask his wife from something of utility, ask for it from behind the screen. This is for the purity of your hearts and theirs.” (Amer 2000:4). This verse is discussing talking to the prophet’s wife. It is stating that you should not look at her when you are talking to her. Something to point out is that this is referring to the Prophet’s wife, not the general population, and also that it is still does not a command for a woman to wear a covering. It tells the reader to talk to the prophet’s wife in a certain manner, nothing about her dress or clothing in general. It becomes clear that this verse is not talking about dress of a female at all.

There are three other passages in the Quran that mention the Idea of a women dressing modestly: Sura 24:30-31, Sura 33: 32-33, Sura 33:59. According to Amer, Sura 24:30-31 is translated to say

"Tell the believing men to lower their eyes and guard their private parts. There is for them goodness in this. God is aware of what they do./ Tell the believing women to lower their eyes, guard their private parts, and not display their charms except what is apparent outwardly, and cover their bosoms with their veils and not to show their finery except to their husbands or their fathers or fathers-in- law, their sons or step-sons, brothers, or their brothers' and sisters' sons, of their women attendants or captives, or male attendants who do not have any need (for women), or boys not yet aware of sex. They should not walk stamping their feet lest they make known what they hide of the ornaments. O



believers, turn to God, every one of you, so that you may be successful."

(Amer 2000: 6)

It is clear that the idea of a veil to cover private parts of the body is presented as a good idea, but once again it is not mandated. Also this verse is putting men and women on an equal playing field. It also instructs men to guard their private parts as well. Bhutto stated "this verse is clearly gender equal, not discriminating between men and women. The passage does call for modest dress, but for both sexes." (Bhutto 2008:43) They are both supposed to observe modesty.

In Sura 33: 32-33 the Quran states "O wives of the Prophet, you are not like other women. .../ Stay at home, and **do not deck yourselves with ostentation** as in the days of paganism; fulfill your devotional obligations, pay the zakat, and obey God and His Apostle." (Amer 2000: 7; original emphasis) This verse is targeted at the wives of the Prophet again not all women. Bhutto backs up the claim that this is geared only towards the prophets wife, she states that when the Quran is referring to women as a whole it will specifically all women, and that there are times that the prophets family is set apart within the scripture. (Bhutto 2008: 42) Also it is not telling them to veil themselves but to not dress in a way that is adorned with a lot of jewelry and to set themselves apart from other women by their dress. This verse is only instructing the prophet's wife to be aware how she presents herself and to not dress in a manner that draws attention to herself, nothing about wearing a veil at all.

Finally, Sura 33:59 of the Quran states "O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters, and the women of the faithful, **to draw their wraps a little over them**. They will thus be recognized and no harm will come to them. God is forgiving and kind." (Amer 2000:7, original emphasis) This again is not telling women to wear a veiling; it is almost advising them not to put their bodies on full display and to cover themselves. Wraps when you look at Middle Eastern dress is

most likely referring to clothing in general, when it is a common practice to wrap large pieces of fabric around yourself as a form of dress. It does not mandate this at all it is just stressing the idea that women should not dress in a provocative manner.

To summarize these verses, the importance is having a modest appearance in public, not of being veiled. The Quran does not specifically instruct women to wear the veil, it simply instructs them to maintain a modest appearance in public places. What seems to have happened here is very similar to the Christian faith and how they interpret the Bible in regard to dress. There are different denominations that all believe different things when it comes to what a woman should do to dress modestly. Often women in Assembly of God and Pentecostal churches are only allowed to wear long sleeved shirts and long skirts. This goes back to how these two denominations view modesty and how a woman should dress to remain modest. The Baptist and Methodist faith have no dress code for women, they just discuss the importance of modesty with their congregations. The parallels between the two cultures are evident. Women and religious institution in general determine what it means to be modest. Trends begin to develop within that community and that begins to be seen as the correct observation of modesty. It is the same as all of the differences when it comes to which headscarf is modest, from a sheer scarf over the hair to a full burka. It all comes down to interpretation, of what it truly means to be a modest woman. (Martino 2008)

Benazir Bhutto and M. Steven Fish indicates that women are in fact made equal several times within the Quran. Bhutto discusses how women were given the right to divorce, property rights, and the right to earn money, ect. within the Quran. She also states how women and men have a common origin and which indicates that they must in fact be equal if they have a common origin. She also indicates that women and men are put on the same level in terms of religion as

well. She finally goes on to talk about the grammar in the Quran and how the Prophet went out of his way to indicate and highlight women instead of just saying all, she claims that this proves that the Prophet went out of his way to insure that women were treated as equals. (Bhutto, 2008 p. 44) Fish claims that male and female separation within Islamic cultures “does not have a strong scriptural basis.” (Fish 2006: 225) He also discusses that often the Quran is more liberal than sharia or religious law. He even goes so far to say that it is “dubious” to try to locate justifications for gender inequality within the Quran. (Fish 2006:226) Looking at all of the instances that the Quran calls for equality between men and women, it is very clear that it does not unfairly target women in terms of dress. The Quran calls for nothing more than women and men to be treated equally through its treatment of both men and women.

### **Interpretations**

Hijab is an Arabic word that means covering. In the Islamic culture it has taken on a broader meaning. In Islam it has come to represent modesty in both men and women. The most visible sign of Hijab is the head garb. The idea of modesty is open for a lot of interpretations. This is why there are so many different forms of veiling for women. Veiling can be everything from a beautifully colored and beaded scarf covering a woman’s hair to a full brqua covering her entire body. This being left open for interpretation allows women to almost determine, unless the law of their country says otherwise, what it means to be modest. (British Broadcasting Network. 2010, September 3).

It is evident when looking at the veil, that it is not all about religion. These women really determine what the veil means to them as individuals. They have the opportunity to really pave what that means to them; because of this these women have progressively been changing the face of the veil and essentially what it means to be a woman in the Muslim culture. They have had

effect in three very important areas of their lives: the social realm, the political realm and finally the economic realm. All of these together are showing women to be the force that they are in the Middle East and they are really beginning to assert themselves as political actors.

The veil is no longer just a religious tool that many people believe it to be. The veil has transitioned in many ways to being a symbol, to see this we need to look at the veil in society. Society is constructed largely by three different arenas: the social arena, the political arena, and the economic arena. For women to be liberated in society they have to become actors in all of these arenas. This paper will take these three arenas and show how the veil is being used as a symbol within them. It will do this by looking at the veil in both the western and eastern hemispheres.

### **Social Arenas**

For a symbol to be effective and well used it needs to first be introduced in the social arena, after this happens the transition can be applied to the other two arenas. This is because the symbol has to be known and accepted, because of this the introduction needs to happen here so that it can become more saturated within society.

### **Western Countries**

What is almost ironic is that in the Western hemisphere of the world women are said to be given full rights when it comes to expression. They have the right to vote and to pave their own way, women have been doing all of the things that the women in the Middle East are fighting for now, and have had that ability to define their own social world. Currently it seems that the west is starting to take steps back from these rights because of the veil.

Girls in the West have been able to participate in sports for some time. They are almost considered to be equals in this area, that is unless you are a Muslim girl. Maheen Haq, a member of the Lady Leopards basketball team of Hagerstown, MD, was forced to sit out of a game by a

referee for wearing a hijab, due to safety concerns. She was not allowed to play again until her parents signed a release for liability. Her safety was not a risk due to the hijab according to Dr. Syed Haque. This is taking away the right of this 12 year old girl to just play basketball without extra consent form her parents. She is at no more risk of being chocked than someone playing basketball wearing their favorite necklace tucked under their jersey for good luck. They were not concerned about her glasses that she was wearing that could easily be broken by and elbow or the ball to the face which could pose an actual safety concern. They were only concerned about the veil. Part of this is simply because the veil, while you do see some women wearing it, is an abnormality in western society. Since a referee does not understand the hajab, and it is something he is not used to dealing with, it is seen as something that does not be on the court. This shows that the west is not ready to deal with something like this, and because of that it ends up limiting female's rights. (Bingham 2011)

In France people have been brought out on all sides of the debate about Islamic head scarves. This has come about because of law makers amending the French Law of Education to exclude the wearing of any conspicuous religious symbol at school. Many believe this to be a specific attack on the wearing of hijab in public schools. Jerome Riviere, a member of the UMP party, the main party in support of the law says "France's secular nature was being challenged by a small minority of hardline Islamists, and he insists the law is not about suppressing religious freedom." It is evident that this is precicely what the law is doing. People and young Muslim girls, as well as Jewish and Christian children are not able to express their religion at school. When laws like this are put into place people are forced to choose between education, if they cannot afford a private education, or their religion. The choice they are forced to make becomes a suppression of their religious freedom. There was not legitimate reason for the veil or any

religious garb for that matter to be banned from school; they were not limiting the children's education. Once again it is showing that the west is not granting but suppressing the rights of Muslim women. (Wyatt 2004)

The West has not entirely dealt with the idea of headscarves. The West at times is still suppressing people of Islamic decent just for their choice in clothing. At the point that all citizens are not treated equally, a young girl has to sit on the sidelines at a basketball game because of her hijab or laws are made that disallow people to express their religion however they so choose with clothing, society is really taking steps backwards it dealing with individual expression or free will. The issue is no more solved than the Middle East.

### **Middle Eastern countries**

#### **AccoLade**

An all female rock band, *The AccoLade* is challenging the norms of Saudi Arabia just by being in existence. There is nothing politically charged about their band. It is very similar to a female rock band within the United States, the main difference is they play in full abayas (full body coverings with cut outs for the eyes). What makes them special is they are reaching for the freedom of expression even if they do not realize that. These girls live in a country that is oppressive to women doing anything, even driving. They have little to no rights in their country but are not allowing that to stop them. They formed the band three years ago and have begun to rise in popularity; they have been featured by many western media sources. The women say "being female means playing by the rules in Saudi Arabia." (McEvers 2008:1) This playing by the rules allows the girls a certain freedom in Saudi. It allows them to not attract unwanted attention. Often in the past rock bands have been arrested for public performances in Saudi, these women can escape that persecution all because of the abayas that they wear. It allows them to

remain undercover both figuratively and literally. These girls are challenging convention and norm in a society that is nothing but that. They hope because of the emerging band scene in Saudi Arabia that in ten years it will be acceptable to play music in public. These girls are having a major impact on the culture of Saudi Arabia, and are showing women that it is okay to express yourself, and you do not have to take off your covering to do so. (McElroy 2005:1)

### **Clothing**

Women in Pakistan are given the choice of what they would like to wear as their head garb and a lot of them are choosing just to cover their head. Women in Pakistan are taking that reasonability heavily too. They are choosing to only cover their head and not wear a full buqra, to show that Pakistan is not a backwards conservative country. These women are also not doing it out of norm of society anymore. They are doing it out a religious observance. The beauty in this is that the woman feels she has the right to define what that means to her. She gets the power then to define her own religious walk and discover fully what that walk means to her. These women in Pakistan not only have the power to define how others see their country, but they also have the power to determine their own religious observances. (Times of India: 2010)

### **Miss. Arab World**

Women from all over the Middle East are coming together to show the world they are not suppressed in a pageant. It is set up much like the Miss. Universe Pageant. These women have full right and reasonability to represent themselves as individuals in this pageant. This was translated into several different styles of dress in the pageant; more then would ever be seen in a western pageant. Some women were willing to dress in a way that displayed their body and showed more skin, for example Miss. Lebanon and Miss. Syria. There were also women who wore full head garb in the pageant, including Miss Saudi Arabia and Miss. Egypt. As this

pageant was opened to veiled and unveiled women from around the Arab world, unlike Miss Universe, it does not push women to compromise their values. Another interesting thing to point out about this competition they do not have the women compete in a swimsuit competition, instead they offer the girls the chance to dress up in their national dress to represent their country. This pageant allows girls the chance to move away from the western idea, that the media displays, of what it means to be beautiful. An interesting trend that has developed for the past two years is that the winner has had on traditional head garb. They have won because of their head garb, and their representation of modest Muslim beauty. These women have chosen not to compromise who they are and have shown many young girls in the Middle East that it is acceptable for them to be who they want to be, and that they can still be beautiful in traditional Islamic head veils. These women are paving the way to what it means to be a beautiful Muslim Woman. (Hashim 2009:2)

What makes these three case studies so interesting and important is that you begin to get a different face of women in the Middle East. *The Accolade* is showing that women are and can be very expressive within the Middle East. The Pakistani women are redefining Islamic head covering in their country. Finally, the pageant shows them as a population of females that is uniquely beautiful and able to define what beauty means in the Middle East. These women are becoming progressive in different manners, but because of that progressive attitude and mindset they feel they have the right to become new political actors, thereby injecting themselves into the political arena.

### **Political arena**

Women being socially motivated leads to the idea that these women will want to become serious political actors. At this point in the paper it becomes clear that it is not all about the veil



for these women, the veil has become a symbol of the fight rather than the fight. It is about their rights, and the women's desire for those rights, this is displayed in the aforementioned protest in France on veiling in schools. Here it becomes important to state how important it is that women do become the serious political actors that they so desire, Fish indicates that by removing women from this realm you run the danger of "[removing] distinctive voices and influences from politics." (Fish 2006 :222) He also breaches the idea that by holding down a portion of your society you run the risk of holding back that society, he says that it has the potential to hold back advancement and freedom of the persecutor. (Fish 2006:222) This arena is very important for women to become active in as it will gain them their own rights, but it will as Fish indicates help to advance that country as a whole.

This section of the paper is going to look at how women are becoming that political actor. Often to become a political actor people have to first fight or protest for their rights which will lead to unions and collations, and finally become active as a political figure. We are going to look at that progression within the Western and Middle Eastern Worlds.

### **Western World**

The women of world began to protest over France's decision to ban the headscarves from schools in 2004. Women from around the world got together and formed a day called "Hijab protest day", January the 17. They organized protest in several Western countries France, London, the UK, these women were protesting for their right to wear their headscarf, and also deem it an attack on religious freedom. The protest became important when young girls began to be denied entry to school because they were wearing headscarves. The principal who started banning the young ladies became a politician and proposed the legislation that young girls could not wear these veils to school. These women have banded together for a common cause and

tried to get the law tabled before it even crosses congresses table. With this it becomes clear that it is not only the Middle East who is having problem with the idea of wearing headscarves. France caused waves to be felt around the world over the idea of banning the headscarf. (Hijab Protest 17 January 2004)

While Islamic Women have began to make their voices heard within the countries it is expected that the next natural progression would be for them to form opposition group and then to become political figure. This has yet to happen within the western world. These women have halted, and are not really expressing anymore need to equality. There are very few Islamic women who have stepped up to show themselves as a figure to other western Muslim women. There are a few women who are in congress within the United States but that is all, and most of them try to hide their religion so they will be reelected in a society that after September 11<sup>th</sup> is wholly not open to their culture. For the Muslim women to become a respected political actor within a western society they need to step up and form groups to centralize support and then work their way into the political arena.

## **Middle East**

### **Protesting**

#### **Asma Mahfouz**

Asma Mahfouz was one of the bloggers who was largely responsible for inspiring many of thousands of young women and men to join the movement. She is a 26 year old graduate of American University in Cairo with a degree in business management. She is a very unassuming looking young lady. She has a small frame, and wholly a not intimidating figure. She is more than that though, she urged people to join her in the streets of Tahrir Square and was the founding member of the April 6 youth movement. In her video that quickly rang around Egypt

and then the world, she directly challenges men to get on the streets and to be a man, and to treat her as an equal and to not let gender bar anyone from standing up for the country. (Kligman A: 2011)

Asma is seen in a gray patterned headscarf. By protesting in a scarf, she is trying to demonstrate that she is just like anyone else within the county, she is a typical person. She is also showing that nothing can be done to hold her down or to suppress her ideas. In her video she challenges people to come out and join her in Tahrir square. She states “If you think yourself a man, come with me on January 25<sup>th</sup>.” (Mahfouz 2011) You can see with this statement that she is directly challenging men, she is also speaking out for women and their right to protest in this video. “Whoever says women shouldn’t go to protest because they will be beaten, let him have some honor, and manhood and come with me on January 25<sup>th</sup>.” (Mahfouz 2011) She is directly calling for men to come out and fight for their country, she is also speaking to the equality of women and men alike. Amr Ezz one of Asmaa’s close friend and fellow protester stated that she was successful in her efforts and stated “The fact that a woman was able to do this made the men feel challenged, and they wanted to do the same.” (El-Nagger 2011:2) Amr Hamzawy, a research director at Carnegie Middle East Center “Female participation is at an equal standing – just like male participation- and female demonstrators are not shying away from marching despite the tear gas. It’s not about male and female, it’s about everyone.” (El-Nagger 2011:2) This woman inspired with just her words, many of thousands to come out and join in these protest which lead to Mubarak’s step down.

### **Gigi Ibrahim**

There was another notable women involved within in the movement Gigi Ibrahim, who has worked through Twitter and Facebook to organize protestors. She is a self acclaimed “civic

journalist” of the riots. She has been a political activist within the Middle East since she moved back in 2008. She attended high school at a small all girls school in California. She came back to Egypt to study at the America University in Cairo. She studied political science at the university, and has a connection to Marx’s idea of revolution.

Gigi wears a black and white scarf, in almost every picture you see of her from the Egyptian riots. She is a beautiful young girl who is very western looking; she wears make-up, western clothing, and does not cover her head with a scarf, but instead wraps it around her neck. Black and white scarves are identified largely with Yasser Arafat, and have come to be a symbol of the Palestine struggle. Gigi has also participated in protest for the Palestinian people, so it becomes clear she wears this scarf as a political symbol. Connections can also be made between her and Leila Khaled, who was the female terrorist in the TWA flight 840 high jacking. Many have stated that she wore this scarf as a symbol of her equality to men. Gigi also strongly believes that women are equal to men and talks about this being part of the struggle in Egypt. Her scarf is nothing but a symbol for the fight in Egypt for equality. Miss. Ibrahim speaks of how something happened between the men and the women inside the protest. She said that men acted as if they were equals once they saw women were willing to fight alongside them. She felt that the men’s views of women changed and they were seen as equals now. She points to the fact that there was no sexual harassment instances that occurred during the protest, which she said is a huge change for Egypt. Something else that Miss. Ibrahim talks about is the idea of feeling like she has a voice now. She stated “Before January 25 I didn't have faith that my voice could be heard. I didn't feel like I was in control of my future. The metaphor used by Mubarak that he was our father and we were his children made us feel as though we lacked any motivation. The revolution woke us up - a collective consciousness has been awoken.” (Mackey 2011) This is

showing that her and other women in Egypt now feel as if they have a right to be heard. They have solidified themselves as new political actors and it is going to become very hard to stop them now.(Mackey 2011) (England 2011)

### **Iran Protest**

Recently, many women stepped out onto the streets in Iran in 2009 for the green movement, shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts. These women adorned themselves with bright green head scarves. These women are fighting for their freedom and have protested for a very long time. Iranian women have a history with protesting; in 1990 they went into the streets and protested when Iraq invaded Kuwait. They also came out in large numbers in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. These women have tried time and time again to come to power. While they still do not currently have their own vote that does not mean their political voice is not heard. They have made a point to ensure that the people running for office in Iran are pro women's issues.

The government has loosed up when it come to showing hair under the veil. The women of Iran have made their voices heard and have helped to make changes in their country.

It is important to note that a lot of time Protest will spar opposition groups. These groups work towards achieving the goals that there people desired during the protest. One country that is interesting to look at is Iran.

This movement began to rise after the constitution was adopted in 1906. The Women's Rights Association was founded. This association helped to gain a lot of rights for Iranian Women. They were able to vote in 1963, they were also able to hold political office, and in 1975 they gained the right to divorce and custody rights. They then lost all of these rights after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. After this revolution rights were taken away and females were then

forced to wear a veil again. While this might seem repressive it did not silence the females. They had a taste of liberty and they wanted it back. They are still fighting today as noted in the protest section. Besides protesting they have also started the “One Million Signatures for the Repeal of Discriminatory Laws” campaign. This campaign has been met with strong dislike from the government. The government has tried to block the website for the campaign at least 50 times since it has started. This campaign has enlisted several more women and men in the fight for women’s rights in Iran. The idea of an opposition group tends to be met with more respect than that of a protest. People see a legitimate group fighting for the cause. They set out goals that they want to accomplish, like One Million Signatures for the Repeal of Discriminatory Laws campaign, and they achieve their goals through legal means, once they do this and are attacked by police forces for doing so people begin to identify with them more. It is clear that these opposition groups are helping to progress and change society. (Mansouri, 2010)

### **Formation of Groups and Unions**

Women in the Middle East have been protesting for years. Iranian and Egyptian women, for example, have been trying to make changes for a very long time. In Egypt during the 1920’s, women marched alongside men in Tahrir Square to drive the British colonizers out of Egypt. At this time, a group of 300 women took to the streets under the leadership of Hoda Sha’arawi and were consequently very influential in forcing out British occupation. What was brilliant about this protest for women is four years after the protest Sha’arawi called for and formed the Egyptian Women’s Union. This was a union of women whose main aim was to get voting rights for women in Egypt. This Union also fully and openly rejected the veil to move towards their emancipation. While the Union was short lived, it made a lot of strides for women rights in Egypt. They got a minimum marriage age implemented and also the first secondary school for

the girls opened. They held an Arab's Women's conference in 1938 and another in 1944 which helped to create the Arab Feminist Union. (Keddie & Baron 1991)

The victories of the Egyptian Women's Union were short lived after the death of their founder in 1972. Other feminist groups began to overshadow this group since they were more appealing to young girls. After the 1952 revolution the Unions efforts were taken over by the government and soon faded away.

### **Active political figures**

After being introduced into the political arena it is important that women become full political actors and become active within the political sector of their country. There are women all over the Middle East that are stepping up as full political actors and are helping to change laws within their country.

### **Benazir Bhutto**

One of the most influential and true ground breakers for women in the Middle East is Benazir Bhutto. She was elected to be the 11th Prime Minister of Pakistan, making her the first woman to lead a Muslim state. She served for two terms as Prime Minister 1988-1990 and 1993-1996. She faced corruption charges both times she was in office and the second time placed herself in a 'self-imposed' exile to London. What is so important to note about her is that she, while leading her country, wore a hijab. When addressing France press she stated, perhaps women who wear a hijab "want to make an identity of their own and to observe what they consider to be their traditions," and declared "luckily my father did not ask me to wear a veil, otherwise I might not be here before you today." (Taylor 1994) That is just what Benazir did, in her youth and during her excel she would often wear short skirts, pants and go unveiled, which was a conflicting image of what she displayed while at home in her country.(Bubb 2010) It is so

important that this is not conflicting with the image she held in her country. This is because she was for women making the choice of how to define themselves, and that is what she was doing at these different times. She did not let herself be defined by her scarf, nor did she let her scarf define her. She served as an example to all women in the Middle East in regards to the veil. There were many young girls who saw her as a light of inspiration in the region. She actually inspired many young girls to wear a veil in observance of the tenant of hijab.

One key political arena the veil is becoming known in is Turkey. Turkey is a democratic county that in the 1980's outlawed the wearing of headscarves in public institutions and universities. This has caused strife in the country for years. Many of the women in Turkey would like to have the privilege of wearing the headscarf, but this law prohibits them from doing so. There have been two women who have stood up for the right of Turkish woman to wear their headscarves, Hayrünnisa Gül, the first lady of turkey, and Emine Erdoğan, the wife of Turkey's Prime-Minister.

### **Hayrünnisa Gül**

Hayrünnisa Gül has done a lot to try and enact change with in Turkey. She has been said to be "the heart of the political storm in Turkey." (Turkish-Press Scan 2010) This woman has a history going back to 1988 with the headscarf. She applied to the Arabic Language and Literature Department at Ankara University; she was denied entrance because she refused to remove her headscarf. She put in an application to the European Court of Human Rights. She withdrew her application in 1994 when her husband became Foreign Minister. Gül did not abandon her stance on the issue when she became the first lady of Turkey. She if anything has become more outspoken about the issue. In recent interviews she has stated that the only place she sees fit for the wearing of headscarves to be banned is in primary school, since these young



ladies are unable at this age to make an educated decision by themselves. (Today's Zaman 2007)  
(Turkey- Press Scan 2010)

### **Emine Erdoğan**

Emine Erdoğan, while she has not made quite as big of political impact as Gül, she has certainly helped to push the issue. She, like Gül, wears the headscarf on a daily basis. In 2007 she also influenced the political spectrum. She wore her headscarf and was denied entry to Gülhane Military Academy of Medicine, to visit an ailing person. In a survey conducted at the time over 60% of the people were displeased with the decision to not allow her to enter based on her headscarf. The overall disdain felt by the people shows proof that the general population is against the idea of being forced not to wear their veils. (Today's Zaman, 2010)

Both of these women have helped to influence major political change in Turkey, while acting as human rights advocates for women. These women's efforts have worked to cause an amendment to the Turkish constitution which disallowed women to wear head scarves in universities. The turning over of this law indicates the impact that women really have in the Middle East. They are at a unique time in history, which has not happened before in Turkey, as this debate has been going on since the controversial law has been implemented. These women's foot prints are now left on the Turkish constitution because of the change they inspired to happen in Turkey. Their names may never be attributed to that change directly, but every young lady that is able to veil herself out of her own choice will be forever grateful to the stance that these two women took. (Reuters 2010)

### **Lolwah Al-Faisal**

Princess Lolwah Al-Faisal is standing up for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. She is one of the most known and respected princesses in Saudi. First of all this is a woman that has been an

advocate for the education of women. She heads a prominent women's college in Saudi. She understands the value in woman gaining an education, and stands up from the rights of women to do so. She also stands up for a woman's right to drive; she did so publically at the World Economic Fair. She said that if she was Queen for a day that would be the one thing that she would change. This is a woman that has gone unveiled and veiled. Often time's princesses have the right to make that choice for themselves. She said that she went unveiled in the past but "saw the light" in her later years, this allows women who are very suppressed in their country to see the power in the veil and that it is not a means of oppression. She stands behind her veil and holds a lot of power within her country. Her veil has been her choice, it is not a choice that she neither regrets nor a choice she would change, the veil has done nothing to hinder her in her high power positions. (Buzbee, S. 2007) (Jardine, C. 2005).

### **Zahra Rahnavaard**

There has also been a women in Iran who has made her own political waves, Zahra Rahnavaard. She is the wife of Mir- Hossein Rahnavaard, the most favorable candidate to beat Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This was largely due to Zahra. She according to Freeman gave him the "Zahra factor." She came on to a political stage where a women had not been in the past 30 years. Women do not have a Michelle Obama to look up to in Iran, Moveni discusses how women within Iran need and want a women to look to as an example of how they should handle issues as a women. Zahra is very in favor of women being politically active. In one of the numerous speeches she gave during her husband's campaign she asked why there were no women on the ticket for president or for cabinet members. She wants women to come out and be active and believes that they have to be to ever get any of the repressive laws changed. Her husband lost the election, but that did not stop Zahra. She is still just as politically active she is

just now leading in protest for the green movement. She can often be seen comforting the widows and family members of the people that have been killed in the protest. Something that is interesting about Zahra is her clothing she wears a full black head to toe covering, but she pushes the boundaries by incorporating color, and showing her clothing under her covering. She has stated that her clothes will not limit her. In 2007 she led a campaign for women to wear colored garments in their outdoor wardrobe. She is not allowing her clothes to be able to define the women that she is. She still actively expresses herself with a veil on with her words and clothing. This is a woman that is sure to inspire many other females within the region to step up and make a name for women within Iran. (Moaveni 2006) (McElroy 2009). (Freeman 2009)

These women worked hard to push the ideas of females and equality, especially when it comes to wearing the veil. They saw wonderful reward for their actions because they went through the process by legitimate means. They went to the government and got legislation passed that helped to promote and uphold their ideas.

### **Economic Arena**

For women to be able to reap the full benefits of change within the region they have to be able to become full economic actors. For the change to occur people have to feel the need for a change, this is the social arena begin changed. Women have to be able to think for themselves they have to feel a need for their role in society to change. Once that change has occurred women see themselves as political actors. Once they become political actors they begin to impact change within legislation and politics in their country. Once women feel like they are good enough to have a role in society and then they fight for that role within society and become political actors, they now feel they have the right to have any job and to do what they want.

**Police force**

Iran has some women that are able to be economic actors by working for the police force. There has been a morality police created in Iran. This police force's main aim is to make women's dress not "skimpy". They will fine women 1,000 dollars and even arrest them at times for not wearing their head garb in a way that does not fully cover their head. The officers are often women themselves in full black burqas. These women because have been given a place of power, are allowed to interpret what a long enough coat is on a woman, what it means to have a good hijab. They have been given that power due to their preservation of the idea of veiling. These women remain fully covered but have full authority to enforce law within their country. The veil has offered these women the right to have a power over society. (Penketh 2008: 1)

Looking at it from the stance of the person wearing the veil you almost have a scene of power if you obey the rules. You are not going to get in trouble with the law if you simply follow the rules. That does not mean that you have to remain totally modest under your veil. These women in Iran have had the since of liberation since the law had not been enforced for a few years. They started to wear makeup and streak their hair. In 2008, after a more conservative leader came to power; the morality police came back to power and were instructed to crack down on immoral people. The veil now that all of those things are seen as immodest, allows them the chance to push the boundaries all they want as long as the veil is still covering it. Once you allow people to have a right it is hard to take that right away again. Once someone feels empowered they are going to continue to act that way. The women who are arrested on a daily basis because of these police stand as wonderful evidence of this. Even though they are fully aware they are

breaking the law, stand up against it every day with their streaked hair they allow to peak from underneath the veil. (Siamdoust, 2010)

### **Workforce**

A survey was conducted by bayt.com, the leading employment web-site for the Middle East, dealing with women in the work force. This survey concluded that 30% of the women surveyed stated that they perceived that as many as 51-75% of women in their country to be actually working at present. Also 75% indicated that women were in senior ranks of companies. This shows that women are injecting themselves into the workforce all over the Middle East. Women are making themselves known as political actors within the region. This same survey indicated that 43% of women think they have a lower chance of becoming promoted in their job. and 32% indicated that they will have poor chance of growth in their current jobs. This shows that it is not all positive within the region, while women are in the work force they still have a long way to go to be considered equal to their male counter parts. (Ataya 2010)

Dunbi is more specifically experiencing a surge of women workers. According to the UAE yearbook over half 65% of the UAE university students are females. While only 15% of the workforce is female. While it might not seem like a lot this is a gain in the UAE. Women have stepped into the job force as firefighters, police officers, and business leaders. Amna Mazam, a student counsellor at Dubai Women's College, stated 50-60% of their 2,300 students are likely to continue into employment. Women are making their presence known within the UAE, because of this women are gaining confidence and have come to enjoy making decisions. This new sense of empowerment will lead these women into becoming better political actors. (Sharp 2005).

Since the women are starting to be given certain rights and power in being able to help influence law enforcement within their country this is helping them to feel that they have the power and that they can work outside of the home. This will just help to empower the social change within the region and help to also make them feel that they are a valid political actor.

Women are not always able to become economic actors so easy, a lot to times within the Middle Eastern countries women are held down from being serious economic actors, as they are not able to hold certain jobs if they wear a veil, or they are not able to get an education because of their choice to wear a headscarf. Once women fully establish themselves as political actors within their country they will be able to fight against the idea that women are not able to fulfill certain roles within society and hold certain jobs. They will also be able to fight against laws that hold them out of having certain jobs. Since a lot of the Middle Eastern women are impacting their country socially and then becoming political actors the next step is for them to become serious economic actors.

Engels argues that women can achieve social and political emancipation by becoming economic actors and having jobs. When women begin to work outside the home it helps to raise the education of younger generation of girls. Families begin to see the benefits that come from having women as workers; they are then able to contribute to house-hold incomes and are also able to take care of themselves, because of this they begin to invest more in their education since they feel they will get a return on their investment. Ross argues that it would seem easier for women to get jobs after becoming political actors because once they are political actors the government is forced to deal with them and their demands, which would allow them to effect legislation dealing with women in the work force. He also points out this is not as easy as it

seems, he states that if women are not active participants within the workforces they are often not political actors, as the government is not forced to deal with them. (Ross 2008:107-108)

It is also important to note that giving women rights, can lead to mass economic opportunities in their country. Wolfe argues that countries who are poor and oppress their women, accept the lack of economic growth that their country has the potential to harness. Once women are allowed into the business world they will start creating jobs within their country. The country will benefit from this growth and their economy will grow. This comes from the importance that now becomes placed on education for the young girls so they can work. It is obvious that women within the Middle East need to be able to become full economic actors within their county to help benefit future generations, themselves, and lastly the economy. (Wolfe 2011).

### **Conclusions**

Looking at all of the influential women currently active in the Middle East, it is clear to see that the idea of the veil is starting to change. Women are becoming increasingly comfortable with showing their femininity, while at the same time asserting their power. They are also showing that they do not have to come from behind their veil to do so. It is thus clear that the future of the Middle East will be exposed to larger numbers of women noticing that they have the right to a freedom of expression and movement in what they choose to wear and what it means to their identity. This is a direct result of the activities of the courageous women discussed in this paper; they are literally paving the way for the future.

When taken to its logical conclusion, women are predicted to feel increasingly liberated and empowered, and contrary to what has been presented by the west, they do not have to shed their veil and become “harlots” to do so. They are also going to see the power and respect that is given to them, not only from men, but also from women for remaining modest. They will come

to understand that they can choose how they want to express their modesty and that whatever their choice, people will begin to listen to them. Also these women have the power of remaining seen as Middle Eastern and as such, they will not feel that they have allowed themselves to fall into the category of someone who is seen as simply losing their identity to another culture and selling out. This is important, if the trend is to continue, as grassroots activities are key to consolidating such changes in society.

Women within the Middle East have full potential to become a serious and powerful force within their society if they will fully attach on to the idea of becoming serious actors within any of these arenas. In many ways, this process can be seen as a cycle whereby some women begin to feel empowered, i.e. that they can go outside and get a job, which in turn puts them in situations where they can ban together and share ideas with other women that in turn really start to push them to become political actors. More importantly, once they do this and they impact their role within the family, they will then gradually impact social change within their country. It does not matter where the process starts. Women can become political actors, social actors, or economic actors first and then move into other realms. What is important within this process is the idea that they continue on the path of fighting for their liberation and change, because all three of these spears are interconnected and for women to become fully liberated within a society they have to be able to be fully liberated within all of these spears.

The veil is uniquely powerful. It has become a notable symbol in all three of these arenas and as such, it is allowing women to become a serious force within their country and subsequently within the region. It allows women to be seen as more than mere women, as they come to be associated with the issue that they are standing up for and not their femininity alone. They avoid the media attacks for not wearing the veil, and rather capture their attention with the



power of their stance. These women have moreover found a way to remain Middle Eastern, which allows people to identify with them rather than feel like Paris Hilton is standing in front of them speaking on women's rights in a language that they do not understand. Veils admittedly sometimes offer them a safe haven to hide behind, but it does not matter because they are still pushing for change. If anything, it allows for the issue to be pressed without having a single person to tie to that idea, meaning that it cannot be dismissed because of a single person's personality. When that happens people see it as an idea and it becomes more easily saturated into their minds than if it were attached to one specific person. Either way the veil is allowing for women to come to power in places that they would not have been able to come to power in the past. The veil could easily be seen as a new source of power and beauty in the Middle East.

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