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The Meaning of *Hijab*: Voices of Muslim Women in Egypt and Yemen

By Kenneth E. Jackson¹ and Elizabeth Monk-Turner²

Abstract

This work explores how Muslim women in Egypt and Yemen understand the *hijab*, or head scarf. Based on data (N = 100) from a self-administered questionnaire written in Arabic, differences about the meaning of *hijab* are examined from the perspective of women who wear or are expected to wear the head scarf. When asked what the *hijab* means, Egyptian women focus on religious reasons and Yemeni women emphasize a cultural (or modesty) understanding. When probed further about their understanding of *hijab*, Egyptian women split between religious and gendered explanations. Significant numbers of women in our Egyptian sample report the *hijab* to be a symbol of oppression. On the other hand, Yemeni women rarely offer a gendered understanding of the *hijab*; instead, they focus on religious, domestic, and psychological reasons for wearing the head scarf.

Key Words: Hijab, Qualitative Methods, Islamic Dress

Introduction

This work examines perceptions associated with Islamic dress among a sample of Muslim women in Sana'a, Yemen and Cairo, Egypt. The majority of women in Sana'a wear the *niqab* in combination with a one-piece *balto* or *abaya*, or two-piece *sharshaf*. The *niqab* itself is the part that covers the face, with holes or a slit to see through, and is secured by tying or pinning the fabric (which is usually black) in the back of the head (Vogelsang-Eastwood and Vogelsang 2008). The one-piece *balto* and two-piece *sharshaf* are loose-falling, full-length garments that serve as overcoats. The *abaya* is also full-length, but is more form-fitting and is made of a slightly thinner material. These garments are typically black in Yemen (Moors 2007). There are many variations of Islamic dress, from the way the garments are tied, pinned, wrapped or draped to their color arrangements, patterns and sizes. The specific nature of the dress involved can vary considerably among different schools of legal interpretation, sects, and cultural backgrounds (Young 2008). Some interpret the religious texts to mean the entire body is to be concealed with one or more pieces of cloth from head to toe; however, others interpret the Qur'an and Hadith to mean that a woman is only required to dress modestly (Young 2008).

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Varieties of Islamic Dress

There are a variety of different clothes Muslim women wear that can be classified as Islamic dress. The two most focused pieces of clothing under the Islamic dress umbrella with which this study is concerned are the *hijab* and the *niqab*. The majority of Muslim women in Cairo wear the *hijab* and most women in Sana'a almost exclusively wear the *niqab*. For this study the *niqab* refers to not only the piece covering the face, but the entire ensemble worn along with the face covering. It is also important to keep in mind that the concept of *hijab* involves more than covering just the head and hair. Some of the women in this study assert that the *hijab* means more than simply the attire worn; it is the act of modesty in terms of behavior that goes along with wearing the *hijab*. Some also consider the *hijab* to represent all forms of dress. Therefore, one is constantly wearing more or less *hijab* or displaying more or less modesty (Ruby 2004). Thus, Wher (1994) defines the Arabic word for *hijab* with the following in English: cover, wrap, drape; curtain; woman's veil; screen, partition, folding screen; barrier. Despite the *hijab* being tied to Islam, there are few references to it in the Qur'an. Stillman (2007:141) explains how the use or lack thereof of *hijab* or veiling of any specific type is unclear in both the Qur'an and the Hadith, writing that it was not clear "how important a social and moral issue was veiling in the early Islamic centuries."

There are two Qur'anic verses typically used to describe the women's dress code for Muslims (Fernea and Fernea 1979; Hoffman-Ladd 1987; Zenie-Ziegler 1988; Zuhur 1992; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Parshall and Parshall 2003; Ruby 2004; Stillman 2007; Heath 2008). The following quotes are from AL-QUR'AN (Ali 2001):

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, or 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 or their ornaments, O believers, turn to God, every one of you, so that you may be successful (24:31)

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 (33:59)

The English word here for 'wraps' in the Qur'an is the Arabic word *jilbab* which Vogelsang-Eastwood and Vogelsang (2008:230) define as a "large outer wrap, worn in the early centuries of Islam." Likewise, Winter (2008) states that the modern day *jilbab* is a loose-fitting garment that covers the entire body except for face and hands. What the 'wraps' actually wrap is a contested topic because there is debate on what the *jilbab* was at the time the Qur'an was written (Winter 2008).

Besides interpretations of veiling based on religious readings, it is important to note that the *hijab* did not start with Islam. Early Muslims adopted veiling as a result of their exposure to the cultures they encountered, traded with, and conquered (Fernea and Fernea 1979; Zuhur 1992; Nashat 2003; Stillman 2007; Heath 2008). Vogelsang-Eastwood and Vogelsang (2008) suggest that religion may not even be relevant in understanding Islamic dress because dress may be

primarily shaped by following local customs. The “*hijab* can be worn, but is certainly not limited as a religious obligation. It is also worn as a marker of her position in life and protection against unfamiliar men” (Vogelsang-Eastwood & Vogelsang 2008:7).

Some in the Muslim community see these verses from the Qur’an as having no reference whatsoever to females covering their head, neck or face (Zahedi 2007). Other scholars hold that the Qur’an is a historical document and edicts, particularly about dress, may not apply in today’s times. Still other scholars hold that the Qur’an is timeless and that it is important to cover in contemporary times. At the extreme, certain Islamic scholars hold an understanding of these verses that the woman’s entire body should be covered except for one eye (Ruby 2005).

Past Research on Veiling

Several studies have explored the *hijab* and its meaning (Haddad 1984; Zuhur 1992; Zenie-Ziegler 1988; Ruby 2004; Fakhraie 2008). The central purpose of Haddad’s (1984) study was to better understand why women in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman and the United States wore the veil. Haddad (1984) outlined several factors that shaped Islamic dress including: **religious** (a sign of obedience to the will of God as a consequence of profound religious experience); **psychological** (an affirmation of authenticity, a return to the roots and a rejection of Western norms); **political** (a sign of dissatisfaction with the existing political regime); **revolutionary** (an identification with the Islamic revolutionary forces); **economic** (a sign of affluence, of being a lady of leisure); **cultural** (a public affirmation of allegiance to chastity and modesty, of not being a sex object); **demographic** (a sign of being urbanized); **practical** (a means of reducing the amount to be spent on clothing); and **domestic** (a way to keep peace in the household when males in the family insist on it).

In her work, Zuhur (1992) found similar responses to why women adopted traditional dress. Likewise, Zenie-Ziegler (1988) interviewed students at Cairo University and argued that a combination of an anti-Western mentality and adoption of a strict religious frame of reference shaped female Islamic dress. She writes that for some, the “Western model is both enviable and unattainable,” thus women may adopt the *hijab* and become more religious to emphasis their piety for all to see (82). Fakhraie (2008) explored how fashion serves as a vehicle to convey the socioeconomic status of its wearer. Like the current study, Fakhraie (2008) utilized a Web-based survey instrument and collected data from a snowball sample (N = 23). Ruby (2004) examined the ways that immigrant Muslim women living in Saskatoon, Canada constructed identities and argued that the concept of *hijab* varies from culture to culture and person to person.

Similar to Haddad’s work, Zuhur (1992) researched the reveiling phenomena of the late 1980s with specific focus on Egypt. Using a survey questionnaire of 50 women in a variety of locations (mosques, stores, universities) throughout Cairo, Zuhur’s (1992) found that 62% were veiled. A significant portion of women (38%) did not wear any form of Islamic dress. Zuhur (1992) noted that some of these women were seriously contemplating starting to wear the *hijab*, but not until after marriage. Zuhur (1992) argued that some, especially veiled women, felt that unveiled women in the eyes of Egyptian men were immediately labeled as “...attractive, available, and sexually accessible” (76). Zuhur (1992) found that many of the younger women in her study, ages 19 to 24, had been wearing the *hijab* on average for seven years and that those who wore the *niqab* had been doing so an average of four years.

Historical Background of Hijab

Zenie-Zeigler (1988) argues that *hijab* use has historically represented high social standing in Egypt. During the early 1920s, not wearing the *hijab* or veil was seen as progressive in Cairo (Meneley 2007). The actual law obliging women to “veil,” was officially abolished in 1932 (Zenie-Zeigler 1988). These progressive unveiled Egyptian women gave a picture of legitimacy to the rest of the world and to Egypt’s claims of secularism and modernity (Zuhur 1992). While women were seen as advancing throughout the country, there was a strong pull for traditional values and cultural norms (Zuhur 1992). However, in 1967, after Egypt was defeated by Israeli forces in the six-day war over the Sinai Peninsula, Zuhur (1992) contends that many sought spiritual relief in Islamic radical fundamentalism (Kocs 1995). Years later, inflation and difficult economic circumstances left Egyptians, especially women, returning to traditional roles at home (Zuhur 1992; Ruby 2004, 2005; Zahedi 2007; Pandya 2009).

The Status of Women in Yemen and Egypt

In comparison to Egypt, Zabarah (1984) argues that Yemen is more geographically and politically isolated. The country is bordered on the north by desert, to the west and south, by the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and to the east by Oman. Further, the capital city is itself isolated within Yemen. Sana‘a is surrounded by mountains, strategically located for its military advantages.

In addition to broader political and economic differences, women in both Egypt and Yemen face difficulties in acquiring an education and finding paid employment. Most (59.4%) females (aged 15 and older) are literate in Egypt compared to an 83 percent literacy rate among males (Central Intelligence Agency 2009). The reasons for the low literacy rate of female Egyptians is similar to reasons for lower female literacy rate the world over, namely, poverty, distance to the nearest school (especially in rural areas), and a focus on traditional female roles, which gives priority to boys in education (Integrated Regional Information Networks, IRIN 2006). According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 53% of females (aged 15 and older) in Yemen are literate; the lower percentage is due, in part, to the lack of separate classes and/or schools for female students, lack of trusted female teachers, and financial burdens on poor families. The importance of educating male children before female children is shaped, in part, by the lack of employment opportunities for female workers (UNICEF 2009). Notably, only 12% of the Yemeni workforce is made up of women (Women National Committee 2009). Further, the prevalence of early marriage among Yemeni females leads to early dropouts in the educational system. Similar to Egypt, rural areas of Yemen have higher rates of illiteracy than do cities (Women National Committee 2009).

Methodology

All surveys were completed via the Internet through the use of respondents’ email addresses. The sample was limited to Muslim Egyptian or Yemeni women within the selected target population, ages 18 and above. Initially, the survey was sent to a select number of contacts in each country. The initial contacts were centered on women at the university. From these targeted contacts, the survey was sent to others; therefore, ours is a snowball sample. Since many women who completed the survey were at the university, our sample is skewed toward

economically advantaged individuals. The survey instrument was administered in Arabic and translated into English.

Respondents were asked several questions that aimed to probe feelings about the *hijab*. First, respondents were asked, “What is the meaning of *hijab* in your words?” This question was followed by, “List or explain in detail all of your reasons for wearing or not wearing the head covering” (this included the prompt, “this is a central question in the research, the more information you provide here the more useful the information will be to the study, thank you”). Next, respondents were asked to explain: “Is there one thing or individual you can name as the most influential reason that you are or are not wearing the head covering today?” In an effort to understand how context might influence dress, we asked: “on what occasions do you or do you not wear the head covering?” Respondents were asked “at what age(s) did you begin and or stop wearing the *hijab* and or the *niqab*?” and to “please explain the specific type and style of your head covering.” Finally, respondents were asked “what do you typically wear while outside the home?”

We use the categories identified by Haddad (1984) to see how well emergent themes in this work match earlier research. The domestic theme was expanded to include wearing a head covering because of expectation or tradition. The dominant theme that emerged in response to these questions was coded for analysis. All questionnaires were kept in a secure location (password protected laptop). Human subject protection was approved by the university prior to the start of the study.

Results

In total, 100 women responded to the questionnaire (61 in Yemen and 39 in Egypt). In Egypt, few respondents wore the *hijab* most of the time (N = 13 or 33%) compared to 31% who never wore it (See Table 1). A significant number of women (N = 13 or 33%) only wore the *hijab* on occasion or while praying, reading the Qur’an, or in a mosque. In our sample, no Egyptian women wore the *niqab*.

In Yemen, the majority (52%) of women wore the *hijab* most of the time (N = 32). Almost a fourth of our Yemen sample (N = 12) wore the *niqab* and others (N = 9) wore the *niqab* on occasion. One Yemeni woman wore the *hijab* only when praying and three others wore the *hijab* in their respective country only (see Table 1).

Table 1: Type of Head Covering Worn

Type of Head Covering Hijab Use	Egypt		Yemen		Combined Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
None	12	31	0	0	12	12
Only while praying, reading Qur'an, or in mosque	10	26	1	2	11	11
On occasion	3	8	0	0	3	3
In respective country only	0	0	6	10	6	6
Most of the time	13	33	32	52	45	45
Generally wear hijab and occasionally niqab	0	0	9	15	9	9
Niqab	0	0	12	20	12	12
Missing response	1	2	1	2	1	1
Total	39	100	61	100	100	100

The mean age of respondents was 28 (with a range between 19-62) (See Table 2). The majority of women in our sample (71%) were employed or looking for employment. Almost a fourth of the women in Egypt were in school compared to 13% of our Yemeni sample. Two women were housewives in our Egyptian sample (compared to 1 in Yemen). On average, women in our sample had four siblings; however, Yemeni women had, on average, five siblings while Egyptian woman had only two siblings (significant at .05 level). The mean age at which women started wearing a head covering was sixteen, with a range between seven to 37 years of age. In Yemen, women started wearing a head covering earlier ($X = 14.74$ years) compared to the age when women started wearing a head covering in Egypt (19.34 years old) (significant at .05

level). Next, we explore differences in how Egyptian and Yemeni women feel about wearing the *hijab* (see Table 2).

Table 2: Characteristics of Sample

	Egypt	Yemen
Age	28.60	27.83
Number of Brothers	.88	2.30
Number of Sisters	1.34	2.61
Siblings	2.00	4.79
Age R Started Wearing Head Covering	19.34	14.74
Single	29 (74%)	43 (71%)
Married	9 (23%)	11 (18%)
Divorced	1 (3%)	7 (11%)
Current Student	9 (23%)	8 (13%)
Employed or Looking for Work	28 (72%)	43 (71%)
Housewife	2 (5%)	1 (2%)
Total	39	61

The Meaning of *Hijab* for Egyptian Women

When asked, “What is the meaning of *hijab* in your words?” Most (41%) women in Egypt identified a religious reason as shaping their understanding of *hijab* (see Table 3). In addition to thematic categories identified in prior work, we include a new category identified as **gendered**. Many Egyptian women (21% of our sample) understood the *hijab* in terms of gender. Essentially, these women saw the veil as a symbol of the oppression of women. In addition to these categories, women identified cultural, psychological, and domestic reasons for wearing the *hijab*.

Religious reasons for wearing the veil included: “because God commanded us to wear it,” “obligation by God,” “religious duty,” “a personal decision and a religious one. Something between me and God,” “religious obedience and modesty,” “the *hijab* is a religious duty every Muslim woman should follow, it’s not necessary for praying at home, but is still a religious duty,” “something God asks us to do,” “obedience to God almighty,” “to fulfill a religious requirement, but you have to be ready for it,” and “religious duty.” One woman who wore the *hijab* for religious reasons, citing, “commitment to the teachings of the religion”; however, she also reported it was for “my own personal comfort.” Another respondent recognized that the *hijab* was a reminder of appropriate behavior as well:

It is to abide to Allah...by wearing garments that are not transparent or descriptive that covers properly the whole body except the face and hands. Also, *hijab* entails abiding to proper and decent behavior because *hijab* is a reminder of God’s orders so the one putting it on should have proper words and actions (as much as one can).

A significant number of women in the Egyptian sample (21%) saw wearing the *hijab* in very gendered terms. These women saw wearing the *hijab* as “suppression of freedom,” “mental and psychological retardation,” or “the *hijab* is a desert nomad custom and doesn’t have any connection with Islam. Men use it to subjugate and impose control over women.” Two respondents put it this way:

In my opinion, the *hijab* doesn’t represent anything except the imposition of a prison on women imposed on them from a society that sees her hair as an *awrah* [denoted an intimate part of the body by Islam]...It is...necessary to keep covered so as not to provoke men; or

The covering doesn’t have a meaning...nor does it refer to religion or modesty, but on the contrary...it symbolizes ignorance in her viewpoint in seeing it for women as an *awrah*.

Many (13% of sample) women perceived wearing the *hijab* as merely following expectation or custom (our domestic theme). One respondent put it this way:

For me the head scarf represents a cultural belief more than a religious one. I believe that people are now “accustomed” to wearing it, it is not about religion it’s about “if you don’t wear it, it means that people will judge you and start referring to you as *sefoor*.”

Another put it this way:

The *hijab* is a way to avoid attention. The *hijab* has sometimes been connected with culture and the popular majority in substitution for choosing it through one’s own self-motivation. In other words, it becomes what is expected of the girl to do irrespective of her religious conviction or extent of her interest in it.

Other domestic (and expectation) reasons for wearing a head covering included women who said: “I only wear the *hijab* out of fear of the street, not out of religious conviction”; or “The *hijab* is more of a tradition than it is a part of religion. It doesn’t state in the Qur’an to cover the head.” Likewise, some women wore the *hijab* because of perceived concern of family and friends. One wrote: “I wear clothes without a *hijab* except when I am forced to wear it (a condition of leaving the house with my family).”

Psychological reasoning for wearing a head covering was associated with Muslim identification. For example, some respondents put it this way: “it’s the way that people know that I’m Muslim,” “it is my announcement to everyone that I am Muslim,” “Islamic religious practices,” “it is a duty for Muslim women,” “religious duty and preservation of the (sacred) Muslim woman,” and “purity and Islam.” Sometimes, women identified with a psychological reason for wearing a head covering while at the same time being conflicted. Thus, one respondent wrote that the *hijab* was “an Islamic symbol and obligation, which requires some discipline...that I’ve grown to respect and highly value even if at times I feel that I want to break free from it and walk down the streets with my hair down in a sleeveless shirt.”

Among those women who did not wear the *hijab*, one wrote that they were “not convinced by the idea of it.” However, many reported the following sentiment: “I feel that it conflicts with my personality, it would restrict me and I’m not religious enough *yet*, there are more important building blocks in religious first, like praying (emphasis added).”

Finally, a few respondents gave a textbook response to this question. For example, one woman wrote: “linguistically speaking, the *hijab* means to prevent something, the word is currently used in Egypt to identify a piece of fabric covering the head of religious Muslim women along with acting a certain way when wearing it.” Or, “the *hijab* is merely a piece of attire spread through social and cultural conditions.” One woman framed her response in a broader historical/political way:

It (the *hijab* or the so-called head covering) to put precisely is a head covering and part of the attire for women and men worn in certain cultures and communities. *Hijab* is an appellation of a specific type of head covering which gives it a religious characteristic. It is the result of the modern cultural defeat in Egypt, where Egyptians emigrated to the Gulf for work, returned with petro-dollars, radical religious ideas, became violent towards women and attempted to take away all of the freedom women had achieved since the beginning of the twentieth century.

When probed to explain in detail their understanding of the *hijab*, Egyptian women (74% of the sample) focused on gendered and religious reasons (see Table 3). Those who wore the *hijab* for religious reasons wrote that “it is part of my obligation towards God like praying and fasting,” “I wear the *hijab* because I’ve come to believe in it through religious teachings,” or “respect—religious duty for every serious Muslim woman.” Another saw that by following perceived religious teaching that this would pave the way to paradise writing:

...if your creator orders you to abide to a certain outfit then to please Allah one should abide...Islam means to surrender...and by trying to abide to Allah’s commands this is paving a way to paradise.

Another woman outlined what she understood as the “good reasons” for wearing *hijab*:

I believe it should be about understanding the core value of *hijab* (and not just blindly following orders) which are basically modesty and a submission to God. Letting go of very simple yet very tempting worldly desires such as simply looking glamorous in a way that would attract too much attention. In a way, it trains the soul to be modest and to overlook superficial and outer appearances as opposed to the “real deal.”

Likewise, another wrote “the reason behind wearing the *hijab* is because it’s a religious duty for Muslim women like the rest of the obligations called for by Islam, and also to please God and avoid making him angry or unhappy with me.” The idea of needing to cover the female figure, especially for younger girls, emerged as well (cultural reasoning). One put it this way: “...I saw that it is necessary for every Muslim girl because it’s written in our book Qur’an, plus girls should wear it in a right way, without tidy and transparent clothes.” Likewise, another explained:

According to religion, you should wear the *hijab* after becoming a woman (getting your period). You need to cover not only your hair but your whole body, which doesn't include your face. One needs to cover all curves of a woman's body; or I've worn the *hijab* since I was seventeen years old. The decision to wear it was through my own choice and contentment. My main reason for wearing it at the time is that I thought it was necessary to take this step as a type of religious obedience and submissiveness; and now this thought is in doubt. As for my reason for still wearing it now, it's because I consider it a moral deterrent.

Other women (13% of the sample) wore the *hijab* for domestic/expectation reasons stating it was for "my own peace of mind" or because "it is an obligation for all Muslim women and to avoid obstacles in following that obligation...I feel that it is a part of me and my identity."

Women who did not wear the *hijab* tended to provide long answers and focused on reasons of comfort, feeling free, believing that covering had nothing to do with religious understanding, and strong feelings against what wearing the veil meant about gender relations. They wrote:

I don't believe it's a requirement to wear one and sometimes even suspect that covering the head excessively leads to some diseases. I consider myself one of the cognizant, considered free and therefore I do not adhere to a religion that imposes on me any form of clothing despite me being a Muslim by (family) inheritance.

Other responses were more pointed: "I don't wear it because it's become a racist symbol, a symbol for backwardness and narrow-mindedness and reactionary ideas, it has become a symbol for a certain class, I don't belong to that class." Another wrote:

I'm not a *muhajiba* (a woman who wears a *hijab*) and I chose that because I don't believe in the reasons that push me to hide my identity or the power of my body or my presence as a woman. And because I am able to accept the idea of not devaluing the body and its place in society...The *hijab* is a different way of life, it's not just a "style" or what society wants.

Another very pointed response read:

the *hijab* is backwards and ignorant and everyone who wears it is ignorant and mentally retarded. The *hijab* came from the filthy country called Saudi Arabia that forced the *hijab* on us in the name of religion. Wearing the *hijab* is an affront to women.

Another echoed this feeling:

The *hijab* has no value, it's merely a repugnant Bedouin custom...the *hijab* is not obligatory. I'm not convinced in any way that any part of the woman is *awrah* nor why the hair of a woman is *awrah*. And her face isn't *awrah*??? At the very least, the face of men causes a lot more temptation than the hair.

Similar frustration was found in other responses including:

if I have to wear a head scarf then men should wear one too, women do get aroused by men as well and the belly button to the knee is not the only place that can arouse a woman, so cover up men before you cover up women.

One woman who did not wear the *hijab* perceived her decision in demographic (and gendered) terms writing:

I don't wear a head covering because it isn't a part of the regular dress seen in Cairo. None of the women in our house have worn a head covering except with the onslaught of radical ideas in the seventies, which was a time worn by some of them and not by others...I like my hair style appearing as a part of my personality and I don't think that the hair of women is an *awrah* nor that unveiled women are a cause for temptation.

Finally, some women inferred or stated that they might/would wear the *hijab* at some later point in time. For example, they wrote:

I don't believe in it. I don't think one needs to put a scarf to prove she is a better Muslim. True religion is by actions; or I feel it conflicts with my personality, it would restrict me and I'm not religious enough *yet* (emphasis added).

Likewise, another woman said:

I am not willing to give up my lifestyle...also when I look around me I see that the veil is becoming more like our traditional dress. Girls would wear tight jeans and short/tight t-shirts and simply put a scarf on their head and call themselves veiled. To me this is a misrepresentation of its true meaning or reason for wearing it.

Another respondent stated that "I do not wear the *hijab*, but this is not due to lack of conviction, but because of postponement" or "I still do not have the ability to wear the *hijab*, but certainly someday I will wear it because it is a religious obligation for me to" and it is a symbol that "I am no longer interested in life pleasures."

When Egyptian respondents were asked to explain if there was a significant person or event that shaped their decision to wear or not wear the *hijab*, women reported that family and friends, religious leaders, and books were what made a difference. Among those whose decision was shaped by family and friends, they wrote: "Most of my family are wearing the veil thus it is easy for me to take such decision"; or "parents always encouraged it as they come from a religious background"; "my upbringing both in school and in a religious environment." One woman had a relative who wore the *niqab* and convinced her that "if I were to die and was not wearing it that I would go to Hell—so I began wearing it out of fear of retribution." Finally, one put the *hijab* on "because I became friends with a veiled girl for the first time in my life...when I went to college...I was in the same place with more than 100 veiled girls...that's why I felt it's

not as impossible as I thought before.” This woman eventually took off the veil because she moved to a new workplace; however, she “stopped believing in it long before I took it off.”

Some respondents were influenced by religious leaders. One woman said that “when I was fourteen years old, I listened to...a prominent Islamic preacher and also most of my classmates and friends wore it, so I was under peer pressure too.” Others had “read several books about *hijab*” or wore the veil because of “my studies and the books I read.”

When respondents were asked about the occasions they did or did not wear a head covering, women focused on religious (needing to wear) or family (not feeling need to wear) occasions as well as going into public spaces that shaped their decision. Some women always wore the *hijab* and wrote “I do not take it off”; “I always wear it”; or “I wear the head covering for all occasions—observing the standards of modesty.” More women, in our Egyptian sample, never wore the veil (“I am not covered”; “I don’t wear a head covering”; or “I never wear it”). Many women who usually did not wear a head covering did so if they were involved in a religious occasion. These women wrote that they wore the veil if “reading Qur’an, praying”; “praying”; “I only wear it when I pray. I do not cover my face or hands or feet”; “When I am in a mosque I cover my hair out of respect for the place I’m in”; or “When on a pilgrimage to Mecca or when in a mosque.” Other women wore the veil if they were in a public space, writing: “I am not veiled. But I wear the veil when I go to the souk, or overly crowded/local areas”; “When in public places”; “When outdoors, or when in the company of men who are not close family relatives.” Some women said they wore the veil “for practical reasons.” It is unclear from these statements if it is to maintain expectations in public or for practical (reducing the amount spent on clothes) reasons. Many women reported that they did not wear the veil at home or with close family relatives. Thus, the distinction was made between those who wore the veil all of the time and those who took it off at home.

Next, respondents were asked what they typically wore while outside the home. Women typically wore jeans outside of the home or pants (or skirt) and a simple blouse. Still there was some concern that while they wore “normal clothes” these should be worn “without detailing the body, like skirts, blouses, trousers, blouses and dresses.” Many of these women stated that they simply chose practical clothes or clothes that were suitable for the occasion. Among women who donned the *hijab*, there appeared to be more concern about how to cover their bodies. Many of these women still wore jeans with the veil as long as “it is not tight.” Others wore the *hijab* “with a skirt and blouse.” Several women who did not wear *hijab* still donned “shawls as accessories without any religious intent.” Another would wear a “tricot bonnet with a scarf” on very cold days and “take them off as soon as I get inside.”

When asked to describe the specific type and style of the head covering that they wore, several women simply said “normal”; “normal *hijab* style”; or “the more simple the better.” Some reported that they tied the covering in the “Spanish” style (in the back with the neck uncovered). Many women said that they wore “all colors of head coverings”; “really bright, magnificent colors, but not too explosive”; and “any color, non-transparent, normal style.” Several said they wore the *hijab* “without glitter” in any color they liked but preferred simple and plain so that it does not attract “more attention rather than make you look proper.” This refrain was echoed by another respondent who said “the whole point is to maintain modesty and not to draw attention to oneself.”

Only one person in the sample had traveled to Sana’a and brought a scarf “but at the end I just wore jeans and long sleeves and non-tight shirts.” When asked how they might dress if they went to Sana’a, most respondents said they would wear “the same clothing as I wear in Egypt”;

however, some did volunteer that they “wouldn’t want to completely stand out so I might wear what locals tend to wear.” Therefore, among these women most presumed that they would feel comfortable wearing their normal gear even without the *hijab*.

The Meaning of *Hijab* for Women in Yemen

In Yemen, the most common response (38% of sample) to the question, “what does the *hijab* means in your own words,” was a cultural explanation (see Table 3). Simply put the *hijab* conveyed “modesty.” Other respondents said that the *hijab* “is used to modestly conceal the head and body and to not be extravagant”; “to cover and conceal the charming qualities of the woman”; or “protection, covering, dignity and chastity.” The next most likely reason given regarding the meaning of *hijab* was religious. Women related that “it is an order from God almighty”; “the *hijab* is a religious obligation and necessary for all Muslim women”; or simply “it is a religious requirement.”

In addition to the themes of cultural and religious understanding of *hijab*, women psychologically identified with the head covering and saw it as a part of their identity. One stated: “it is the way people know I’m Muslim”; “it is a message for the whole world that I am a Muslim woman”; “I am a Muslim woman”; “commitment to Islam”; “represents who I am”; or “It makes me Yemeni.” Even for women who no longer appreciated the religious significance of *hijab*, the importance of the head covering remained. One woman put it this way: “...I am no longer convinced of the *hijab*’s religious significance, but it remains part of my identity.”

Only one woman identified a domestic/expectation theme as an understanding for *hijab* stating “it’s nothing more than custom and tradition.” Finally, few women (3 or 5% of the sample) in Yemen saw the *hijab* in gendered terms. Further, the language expressed that denoted a gendered theme was not as direct or angry as that in the Egypt sample. Thus, these women said: “it means nothing”; “a head scarf is no longer us”; or “oppression.”

When probed and asked about the meaning of *hijab*, Yemeni women focused on a religious understanding of the head scarf. Over half of the sample (52% of respondents) stated that the *hijab* was a religious requirement for Muslim (and in particular Yemeni) women. Fewer women emphasized a cultural (or modesty) theme (3% of the sample) when probed about the meaning of the *hijab*. Nevertheless, many of the respondents who focused on the *hijab* being a religious requirement also noted that the veil offered modesty for the wearer and that it kept temptation in check. For example, one Yemeni woman wrote:

I wear the *hijab* to follow the commandment from God almighty. I adhere to the commandment especially since I live in a country that applies the requirement of wearing the *hijab* “They will thus be recognized and no harm will come to them.”

Likewise, another woman in Yemen echoed this sentiment:

...wearing the *hijab* is a religious obligation incumbent on women. God does not order women to wear the *hijab* lightly, but commands her to wear the *hijab* because he wants to protect her and the people around her. I am one who believes that the rate of rape and harassment in these countries that don’t abide by wearing the *hijab* is increasing day after day...the many temptations that the men face in

those countries. How beautiful the women who wear the *hijab* are! For they protect themselves and those around her from sin.

Yet another respondent put it this way:

It is a religious reason first and foremost because it is a religious obligation and necessary for all Muslim women to cover her temptations from men. Plus the commitment to modesty. Society's customs are also committed to covering and modesty for all women which is why you see that some women consider wearing it as a tradition and not as a religious obligation!!!

Only one respondent focused on a domestic theme (or expectation) when initially conveying the meaning of *hijab*; however, when probed almost a fourth (22%) of the sample said this was their understanding of *hijab*. They said:

I only wear the *hijab* because of social and cultural reasons and for nothing else. The *hijab* doesn't have any connection with Islam... If I were in an environment where people would not bother me if I didn't wear the *hijab* then I would not wear it at all.

Others felt the same way writing: "The *hijab* is more of a tradition than it is a part of religion"; "We were raised with the *hijab*. The *hijab* became a natural part of our lives"; or "I've worn the *hijab* since the third year of middle school at the time I came of age." Thus, fewer Yemeni women focused on psychological (or self-identification) reasons as their primary understanding of *hijab* and instead viewed veiling as a part of tradition or expectation. Again, "it was a tradition (all young women in the area wore the *hijab* after reaching puberty)." Still, some (15% of sample) women saw the *hijab* in terms of their identity (psychological theme). One woman put it this way seeing the *hijab* as an "obligation for being a Muslim woman." One woman put it directly stating "I wear the *hijab* in adherence to my Muslim identity."

Two women noted that the *hijab* was a *practical* piece of clothing. One said:

I am not wearing the scarf because I feel...that (it) brings more attention to you than take it away, you can wear non-revealing non-sexy clothes, if the *hijab* was needed to keep men from having bad thoughts, you can do that without having to wear the *hijab*.

Few (5%) of the respondents in Yemen saw the *hijab* in gendered terms. Even when framed in this way, the sentiment was simply revealed as "I don't believe in covering the head."

When asked if there was a significant person or event that shaped their decision to wear *hijab*, many stated that "this was always my opinion (to wear *hijab*)"; "the vast majority of women wear the *hijab* in my country"; "for the sake of keeping accordance with the community"; or "because I live in a conservative society...its necessary to wear it." The majority of women in the Yemen sample related this idea. Simply put it was tradition or something one did thus "customs and traditions are the only reasons I started wearing the *hijab*" or "I've worn the *hijab* since I was little." Finally, one woman saw that "society obligates me to wear the *hijab*. It's necessary even if I didn't have my own conviction on the matter." Other women had done

“research and from there, religious conviction” lead to the *hijab*. One respondent felt forced to wear the veil, writing:

My religiously fanatical brother and uncles forced me to wear it on the account that it is forbidden in Islam not to. But I rebelled against them...I’m against it because in my opinion wearing the *hijab* does not hide *fitna* [temptations or “one’s charms” as seen in some translations].

Finally, a few Yemeni women related problems of “verbal and other forms of harassment that I saw in the street” which shaped their decision to wear *hijab*.

When Yemeni women were asked what occasions they wore the head covering, most reported that they did so when they left the house or while praying. Women appeared to be most careful in wearing *hijab* when “in the street and in celebrations where several people I don’t know get together” or “at work and places with men.” Essentially, the *hijab* was perceived as necessary whenever non-relative men were present because they had “the ability to see and recognize the beauty of a woman.” Among close family relatives some Yemeni women did not wear the head covering or while “in women’s groups.” One woman noted that she did not wear a head covering when she was only with women assuming “there are no cameras there.” Still, a distinct minority wore it “all the time.” On the other hand, several women volunteered that they did not wear the *hijab* when they left Yemen or when they traveled to foreign countries.

When Yemeni women left the home, they typically wore an *abaya* (a long black cloak, similar to a dress, worn over other clothes) and *hijab*. One woman noted that she wore the *abaya* in the street; however, at work she wore a uniform that “consists of a skirt, jacket and head covering.” A few women wore a short-sleeved shirt and trousers with a shawl to cover the hair or jeans and a shirt; however, these women were in a distinct minority. The vast majority of women in Yemen wore the *abaya* and *hijab* outside of the house.

In Yemen, when women were asked the specifics about the type and style of the head covering, they varied with most women preferring different colors, a few wanting simply black, and one who did not prefer anything rather “the most important thing is to be laundered and pressed.” One woman who liked to wear color nevertheless refrained from any “color that is very bright or turning heads.” Likewise, another woman wrote:

I don’t care about the color, if there is a color I like, I can wear it. I like moderation, meaning I don’t like wearing a *hijab* like a marker or umbrella for my head or one that draws a lot of attention.

There seemed to be some debate about the color black. Many reported liking this color; however, a few said “I’m trying to avoid black color”; or “They say that the black color resembles a flock of crows.”

Most women wore the *hijab* so that it “covers the neck and all of the hair without introducing any breakages to it.” Many other women wanted to “make sure it’s completely covering.” The intricacies of wearing various coverings, was summed up this way:

When I wear the *niqab* (in the street): *abaya*—wrapped around twice—a *niqab* that has a knot covering in the back—lined with some colors on the inside—when I don’t wear the *niqab* (in the street): black *abaya* with a black or colored head

covering—in the house (a *hijab* of the family among those who are *mahram*): maxi skirt and long tube shirts covering up with veil for the head or pants with tube shirt going to the knees and veil for the head.

Finally, when Yemeni women were asked if they would dress differently if they visited Egypt, most said that they would go “without *hijab*” or “*hijab* with jeans.” Several said they would wear *hijab* and *normal* clothes (like trousers, skirts and dresses) (emphasis added). A few would continue to wear the *abaya*; however, these women were in the distinct minority (see Table 3 for a summary of reasons why women wear *hijab*).

Table 3: What Wearing/Not Wearing a Head Covering Means to Muslim Women and Meaning Offered When Probed for All Reasons.

	Initial Question		Probe	
	Egypt	Yemen	Egypt	Yemen
Religious	16	13	14	31
Gendered	8	3	15	3
Demographic	0	0	1	0
Domestic/Expectation	5	1	5	13
Psychological	2	15	0	9
Cultural	6	23	2	2
Political	0	0	0	0
Revolutionary	0	0	0	0
Economic	0	0	0	0
Practical	0	0	0	2
Other	1	0	1	0
Missing	1	0	1	0
N	39	60	39	60

Discussion and Conclusion

Looking at differences between what the *hijab* meant to women in Egypt and Yemen, the reader can see that Egyptian women were most likely to understand the *hijab* in terms of religion, modesty (cultural theme), expectation, and identity. Further, a significant number (21% of sample) of women viewed the *hijab* in gendered terms as a symbol of oppression. On the other hand, Yemeni women tended to understand the *hijab* in regard to modesty (cultural theme), religion, and identity. Few (5% of sample) respondents in the Yemen sample saw the *hijab* in a gendered way and even when they did the tone of the statement never approached that expressed by Egyptian women.

Religious reasons are prominent in the understanding of both Egyptian and Yemeni women about the *hijab* (along with cultural (or modesty) issues). In Yemen, tradition (or expectation) is also a very important way women understand *hijab*. Notably, when probed and asked to share more about the *hijab* and what it means to them, women in our Egyptian sample reported more gendered responses and fewer cultural (or modesty) ones. Initially, only 21% of Egyptian women focused on a gendered understanding of *hijab*. However, when probed for detailed meanings, 39% of Egyptian women, in our sample, saw the *hijab* in gendered terms.

Further, Egyptian women were direct in relating this feeling writing that the *hijab* was a symbol of “suppression of freedom” and that men used it “to subjugate and impose control over women.” When Yemeni women were probed about the meaning of *hijab*, domestic (or expectation) reasons increased. Initially, only one Yemeni woman said they understood the *hijab* in domestic terms. When probed, 22% of Yemeni women identified a domestic (or expectation) theme as their understanding of *hijab*. To summarize, in Egypt, women initially identified religious, gendered, domestic and cultural themes as how they understood the *hijab*. When probed religious and domestic reasons held constant; however, cultural understandings declined and gendered reasons increased. In Yemen, women initially identified religious, gendered, domestic, and psychological meanings about wearing the *hijab*. When probed, Yemeni women continued to identify psychological meanings in about the same numbers; however, religious and domestic ones increased.

Egyptian women were most likely when probed to identify a gendered theme with regard to their understanding of *hijab*. Many report that the *hijab* is a symbol of the oppression of women. There is a sense that these women believe that men want to control their lives and use the *hijab* as a tool to accomplish this goal. On the other hand, in Yemen, women strongly identify with religious dictums to wear the *hijab*. They appear to believe that it is their fate in life to do so as commanded by their religious beliefs. This is an expectation that has been with them since they were young girls, and the inevitability of wearing the *hijab* bears little critical questioning. We argue that the current work, in probing respondents further about what the *hijab* means instead of asking only one question about this phenomenon, contributes an understanding of *hijab* that is lacking in prior work. Further, women were asked to report these understandings in their native voice which has been transcribed.

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