

# Women and Islam

## *A Muslim Feminist Perspective*

HODA AL-MUTAWAH  
University of Bahrain

*[Editors' Note]:* Readers have asked us to present the perspective of Muslim women. We respond with the following e-mail interview. Students from an intercultural communication class at Santa Clara University submitted questions to Dr. Hoda Al-Mutawah, a Sunni Muslim woman working for peace from the island of Bahrain.

***Editors: Can you please tell us a little about yourself?***

I consider myself a multicultural entity. I believe we possess an identity beyond the fragmented geographical territories that we inherited from our parents. I was born in Bahrain in August 1958 to parents with religious and cultural education. I was the second daughter in a family of eight children (five girls and three boys). I worked after high school and continued my education in the evenings at Gulf Technical College, where I focused on studying Office Management. I worked between 1974 and 1981 as a secretary. I attended Arabic University of Beirut in 1976 and earned a bachelor's degree in philosophical, social, and psychological studies in September 1981. I immediately joined a daily newspaper, *Akhbar Al-Khaleej*, as a reporter, and in December 1981, I joined Bahrain Television as a TV producer. I produced several cultural and educational TV programs for children and adults. I applied for a scholarship from the Ministry of Information and attended the University of Florida

in August 1984. I earned a master's degree in mass communication in December 1988. I continued my work at Bahrain TV until 1995 as a TV producer and director. I established foundational TV programs and trained some employers during that time.

During the Gulf War (1992), I felt troubled by the fact that Arab people blamed colonization for their current problems, and most of the time they felt hurt by the confusion that is caused by the establishment of an Israeli Jewish state on Arab territory in 1948, which left millions of people homeless and in a state of war until today. However, the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq was a conflict between two Arab Muslim neighbors. I was preparing to go to the United States for my PhD when that happened, but my grandfather begged me to stay and support the family during the Gulf War. The American army had permission to use Bahrain to host its Fifth Fleet to liberate Kuwait, and later to invade Iraq. In January 1994, I visited Israel in an individual journalistic effort to promote peace during the Arab-Israeli peace talks. I felt a personal responsibility to educate people everywhere about peace, and contribute to an international dialogue about building new understanding about "the other." In the end, Israel is another name for Jacob, the son of Abraham, the grandfather of the Muslim race. Muslims respect Judaism and consider all the Jewish prophets such as King David, King Solomon, Moses, and Jesus as holy as Prophet Mohammad, and they

believe that Islam consists of all the messengers known to Jews and Christian people started from the time of Adam and Eve ending with Prophet Mohammad.

In January 1994, I decided to start my mission toward peace from Egypt. I was able to fly to Tel Aviv, where I spent 3 days talking to people from the two sides, Palestinians and Israelis. I spoke with regular people and experts. I spoke with children. Most people were sick of the war and wanted peace, but they did not know how to communicate with each other. I thought that it is the responsibility of educated people to bring a new dialogue about peace to the surface. Dealing with the issue politically will never solve the problems. Both Arabs and Jews are emotional about the issue of "homeland." I am bringing a new concept to the dialogue about the meaning of homeland, but I did not get anyone to listen to me. I was fired from my job at the Ministry of Information upon my arrival to Bahrain by the end of January 1994. Some Bahraini and some Arab newspapers wrote against me, and I was not given the chance to explain my stand. I even received warnings to not talk about the subject. I felt alienated and depressed because no one could understand my stand. Most people took it negatively for a long time. I worked as a freelance journalist after that. I got married, but my marriage did not succeed, because some close friends of my ex-husband interfered because of my visit to Israel.

I became an Assistant Professor at the University of Bahrain in December 2005, and wrote a weekly column for *Alwatan* newspaper until January 2007. Between 1981 and 2009, I directed my efforts to bringing more understanding to the human condition and worked to improve communication among different religions and different cultures both locally and internationally.

**Brian asks: Westerners argue that women in the Middle East are suppressed by Islamic rule. However some Easterners argue that women in the West are restrained in the same way by material possessions, physical obsessions, and makeup. What do you think about these two views?**

I believe that patriarchal systems control important aspects of our lives. Our political, economic, and

social systems are established, run, and maintained by masculine power. Sex is economized by masculine authorities and is a commodity regulated by religions and social laws.

The institution of marriage is established by patriarchy to ensure legal inheritance rights for men and to restrict sexual activities in most known cultures both in the West and in the East.

Our terminologies are controlled politically and made natural by masculine power. In Arabic, the verbs and the nouns are gendered. When there is one man among a group of women, the verb that is used is changed to masculine. Masculine language has privilege over feminine language. Those who own the power dictate their own terminologies. When we call a certain place a center and the rest of the world is the periphery, and when we start to label a place as West or East of us, and we publicize it through literature and through media, then we normalize and naturalize what is not natural at all. We construct the world in our mind politically, without awareness that our "knowledge" serves the purposes of those in power.

Brian mentioned in his question the suppression of women in the Middle East by the Islamic rules. Women in Islam are required to cover their bodies. The covering of the head is still contested among different religious group. Although Arab men do cover their heads as well (as well as Jewish religious males), men's dress code is never a matter of dispute or concern, and it is accepted by the international community as a national dress code. So I believe that the international community should accept and respect the Islamic female dress code and not impose the Western dress code on Muslim women. However, I do believe that the face cover is conceals the identity, and I am personally against it. I have a problem teaching female students who cover their faces at our university. Concealing the face of the human being for any reason is an obstruction to the process of communication, and it does make me feel insecure and violated. Concealing the face does not allow equal rights in the acknowledgment of the person's identity. Today, we learn some female benefiting from such attitude to counter the ethics of Islam, as to commit adultery. Some women (Muslims and

non-Muslims) abuse the face cover further to hide their identity while performing prostitution or other illegal acts.

Traditionally, in Christianity the sexual relationship was directed by one partner, the man. Divorce became available in later stages of Christianity. However, liberation movements gave both men and women free choice to sex and to marriage. While the Western spirit of equality gave both men and women freer access to sexual activities, I find that the sexual economy is still controlled by masculine powers. Both Islamic and Western males benefit from this sexual economy to secure their sexual privilege.

***Alyssa asks: How do the Muslim women conceive of their own beauty?***

Both Islamic women and Western women are trapped in their obsession with physical beauty and makeup. The difference is that Islamic women are taught that their beauty is restricted to their husbands. However, while Muslim women cover their beauty outside their houses, some of them abuse this restriction when they get together in a women-only environment. Sometimes those women copy the most liberated versions of Western women as represented by Hollywood movies. Most of the material possessions and beauty products of the Western cultures find their way to Middle Eastern markets, and it easily transfers to the hands of the most restricted zone of Islamic females.

Muslim women are not a monolithic entity. They are diverse. Those Muslim women of Prophet Mohammad's times followed the Prophet's instructions. For example, he ordered women to cover their bodies, and to not show their beauty or accessories to other men who are not siblings or close in kinship such as father, grandfathers, uncles, nephews, and the young males below the teenage (those men whom they cannot get married to, excluding the first cousins).

Traditional Muslim women could wear perfumes and use natural herbal products to make up the eyes, lips, and hair. Henna is used to color hair and decorate hands and feet even today. Modern Muslim women are different in their tastes and attitudes toward their beauty. Some of them imitate Western

women, and others continue to follow the Islamic traditions. Each Muslim country has its own way of reflecting the uniqueness of their culture in their appearance. Each culture has its unique accumulative experience that reflects the influence of the environment, history, and the taste of the hybrid cultures that interact over time. There are shared lines that unify those who apply the Islamic rules in their dress codes, such as covering the heads and the body with scarf, long dress, and long sleeves. Makeup is guided by a sense of modest taste and by what is not considered sexy or clearly enticing. The clean face that mirrors the innocent beauty and the purity of the person is recognized as the natural beauty of a Muslim woman.

***Gustavo asks: Where do you draw the line (in the U.S.) between personal and professional life for Muslim women wearing a veil? Should they be required to uncover their head in the workforce or should their culture be respected? Is it possible that a Muslim woman who wears a hijab does not foster strong community relationships because her veil acts as separation? How can this mentality among U.S. natives be overcome?***

When we talk about veil, we need to distinguish between *hijab* and *Niqab* or *Burqa*. *Hijab* is a dress code that covers a woman's body including the arms, leaving only face, hands, and feet exposed. *Burqa* or *Niqab* is another form of veil that some Muslim women wear, especially in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and some parts of East Asia. *Niqab* and *Burqa* is a dress code that requires covering the whole body, including face, hands, and feet. Some women leave an opening for the eyes only, while others could wear a thin black cloth over their faces. There is a continuing dispute about the covering of the face, and the fact that it is not required in Islam, and there is no mentioning of it in the holy book of *Qur'an*. However, both the Wahabites in Saudi Arabia and the Taliban in Afghanistan force women to wear face cover.

When we talk about drawing a line between personal and professional spheres in the West, I do believe that the West already introduced the dress code of Islamic *hijab* through the image of the Virgin Mary. The veil also was worn by high-class women during the Middle Ages in Europe. Also, we can easily notice that the

dress code of the Victorian era is similar to the dress code of Muslim women. We can see remnants of this code in the old movies as *Gone with the Wind*. This approach to dress is applied to fit the profession of the woman at work. In the West, it is not acceptable for women at the office to wear very short skirts or very deep cuts that show details about women's body. So women's clothing should not become an issue if it is communicating modesty. The Western culture is an open culture, and it does have diversity. For example, some Christian groups such as the Mormons and the Amish still wear modest, conservative clothing similar to Muslims, and Western people learn to respect that. In the same way, Western media should educate people to accept other people's dress code as part of mutual human respect. Western men in the early to mid- 1900s used to cover their heads with hats. Many non-Muslim and non-Arab men and women still wear head covers as in India and Africa.

To conclude about the dress code, I need to stress the fact that I do not approve the concealing of the face. If you cannot see the face of the person you talk to, a very important aspect of communication gets lost. I do think that both Muslim and Western culture should put a limit to this extreme way of presenting the female body. It is very humiliating in my opinion to be forced to cover my face. It is a metaphor that tells me "You don't exist," or that you are not an equal member of the society, or that you are a subhuman, and that your body will only be used for reproduction, and therefore you are not allowed to participate in other human activities because you will make other people think of that one thing when they see you. So all the behaviors in this dress code are centered over the fact that a woman is a sex object, and that is why she should be concealed. To complicate the meaning of this practice further, I should use the example of underwear. People use underwear to cover their sexual origin, and believe that it is very rude to expose their sexuality to others. The face cover is dealing with the whole woman body as a "sexual origin," and woman's body becomes "The Taboo" that should be concealed in all situations. The answer is we do have to bring a dialogue to that kind of behavior among Muslim and Western scholars and put an end to the suffering of women by making

them ashamed of their bodies. The discrimination against humanity and against women's rights to participate equally in life should be stopped. However, media is a strong instrument to bring insight in people's lives. I do not recommend invading people and using missiles and wars to force people to change as it is happening in Afghanistan. Cultures are a product of centuries of experiences, and should be respected by others. Any change should be brought up peacefully and with the consent of the parties involved.

There is the other segment of the question that I should address: Is it possible that a Muslim woman who wears a *hijab* does not foster strong community relationships because her veil acts as separation? How can this mentality among U.S. natives be overcome?

As I mentioned earlier, the head cover, the *hijab* could not possibly affect community relationships. We could easily trace that from the history of Europe and the United States, where women used the head cover, but few would argue that that dress interfered with their roles in the society. However, the separation that happens in some Islamic countries is because of conservative traditions that do affect community relationships. For example, I went to a conference in Saudi Arabia in 2006 and attendees were placed in two different conference halls. We were allowed to see men and hear them through big TV screens, but men were only allowed to hear our voices. Western women scholars and I got together and tried to object to that. We could not benefit from the interaction with other scholars because of our gender. I don't know what happened in the end. The Western scholars, both males and females, were hosted by the Minister of Education and got special gifts. So they did not complain. I was not invited to join them. When I discussed the issue of the separation with some Saudi female scholars, I faced strong opposition. One female educator told me that I should respect their tradition and that I didn't have the right to impose my views on them. She said that they prefer to socialize only with women because they could talk comfortably without having to use the *neqab* or even the *hijab*. At the final ceremony, the Minister of Education handed the certificates to men while women were gathered in a different place and

one woman, a Palestinian Sauid, was appointed to give the certificates to women.

The last part of this question is: How can this mentality among U.S. natives be overcome? First, I need to point out to the difference between the Islamic culture and the Western cultures in accepting nudity and pornography. Nudity is on the other side of the coin. To expose the female body and commodify it for the joy of the male is also unethical, and it should not be considered a respectful way of gaining living. However, many Hollywood movies are making a lot of profit using the female body. Covering or uncovering the female body is continued to be a space of struggle for most men and women.

I lived in the U.S. for 11 years between 1984 and 2005. I found out that the Muslim community in the U.S. is more flexible. Men and women prayed in the same Mosques together (but in different lines). The women line up either beside or behind the men's line. In the break, women and men sit together with their families. During official meetings, men and women sit together in the same board meetings. They are neighboring each other in the offices. They receive guests in their houses as families. I did not notice a separation that threatens the strength of the community. However, the separation between men and women in Muslim countries does affect the strength of the community. Bahrain is a moderate society where many social and political events are attended by both men and women. We have most of our cultural activities together; however, most public leisure activities are separated. The community activities are mostly separated, especially for the last 25 years that followed the Iranian revolution. Bahrain is in the territory of Iran, and we are influenced by the political and social activities in Iran and in Saudi Arabia. Bahrain is considered an "open" society for the Gulf people and most of our hotels have bars and disco places available for both men and women. But this openness increased to such a level that Bahraini people started to fear that Bahrain might become an attractive place for prostitution and other vices. As an open cultural, social, and commercial center, surrounded by very conservative countries, whose people nevertheless use King Fahad Highway from Saudi Arabia to come

to Bahrain especially on the weekends and on the national and religious holidays, Bahraini people became more conservative during the last 25 years. There are many reasons for such conservative movements. One of the causes was the Iranian Revolution in the beginning of the 1980s. Muslims of the Arabian Gulf became more conservative in the last 25 years to protect themselves from the global marketing policies that made the Gulf area a global capital where everything is commercialized, including sex.

An example of the conservative attitudes among people can be seen in the following personal experience. I organized a lecture at my house in 2008. I invited around 50 people, both males and females. When they attended the lecture, some males and some females left because they did not want to be mixed. I continued with a very small number of people, but in the end, they told me they did not feel comfortable sitting together with the opposite sex. While my family used to have all the cousins, relatives, and neighbors who visited us at the *Eid* festival [that celebrates the end of Ramadan] in one place mostly, now the young males of the family will not sit with us in the presence of foreign women. My mother would have to move between two places, one solely for her male relatives, and the other for her female relatives. Also some women in the family would use the *neqab*, and some of males would be ashamed to sit together. So, the *neqab* acts as a distancing force, while the *hijab* does not. Men used to greet women with a handshake. Today, some men and some women will not agree to shake hands with the opposite sex. I noticed that although I am not veiled, and not wearing *hijab*, still my relatives, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and colleagues still greet me with respect. My choice to not wear the *hijab* is respected by all. I invited an American friend few months ago, and she was well accepted within the family. Bahrain grants other people their freedom to not wear the traditional clothing or the *hijab*. They deal with everyone with high respect without demanding that others should follow their dress codes. However, I don't think that they welcome women with shorts or very short skirts, even in the summer. Western women who live in Bahrain respect that, and never complain about it. They still can wear a Western bikini and sexy



swimsuits on some private beaches and some swimming pools at the public hotels without being harassed.

*Laura asks: Do women in the Middle East feel influenced by popular media (especially Western media), particularly the images that contradict their personal values and beliefs? If so, how do they cope and balance these contradictory ideas and identities?*

Yes, women in the Middle East feel that they are influenced by Western media, even the images that contradict their personal values and beliefs. They balance the contradictory ideas and identities by creating two separate spheres. One is a public sphere where they present the conservative identity that is required by the Muslim community. The other is a private sphere that is practiced behind the scenes. However, some private activities become public. For example, at the weddings, the bride wears a Western white gown, which follows the latest Western fashions. The makeup of the bride, and the clothing of the females who attend the wedding mostly follow the

Western fashion, if not combining the two, and create a new way that harmonizes both Arab and Western practices. In the private sphere, women would choose nightgowns that follow the Western lines. Women as well as men might easily be influenced by the TV soap operas. Some young men will go to discotheques and have foreign girlfriends, smoke, and drink alcohol like Western males. However, young girls are very careful and secretive about their movements, because the likelihood of not getting married if they are found having premarital activities with men still will haunt them.

The identity of men and women is fragmented because of the global culture. There is no one fixed Muslim culture, or one fixed identity for a Muslim man or a Muslim woman. Every single family has its own rules, habits, and traditions, and every person has his or her own choices to come up with a balance to live his or her own life peacefully, without being an outcast. We all need to be accepted by others and the reality for many Muslims in the Middle East is deciding how much sacrifice one is willing to make to not be an outcast.