

The Veil: A Women's Equality Issue

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Introduction

While women around the world have made incredible advancements over the past several decades, some women remain marginalized. These women include those with disabilities, those who are obese, are veiled, and others. Their experiences are frequently overlooked; it is only more recently that issues related to women's intersectional identities have come to the attention of women's rights actors and organizations around the world.

In Lebanon, marginalized groups of women face different types of discrimination, including at the workplace, and in public institutions and private institutions such as schools or universities (Keuchkerian, 2022). In particular, women who wear the hijab have faced specific types of discrimination by various organizations, solely on the basis of their religious dress. For example, anti-veil discrimination frequently occurs in the workplace. Although veiled women do possess the talent, potential, and required qualifications for high-level and high-quality jobs, they are given less value compared to non-veiled women and are sometimes disqualified from applying to certain job positions because they are veiled (Syed, 2022).

Anti-veil discrimination has existed in the public sphere globally for years, and has been exacerbated by the rise of religious fundamentalism around the world. For example, hijabi women were at one point prohibited from working in governmental institutions in Lebanon (Naharnet Newsdesk, n.d.). Today, discrimination continues to push hijabi women out of the public sphere (Shizleen, 2018). "[It] won't look good for business" is commonly the answer of many job employers when asked why they prefer not to hire veiled women. In one news report, employees at an organization with more than 1,000 workers reported never seeing a single woman wearing a headscarf, even though the area where the factory was located was reportedly mixed (i.e., both Christians and Muslims resided in the area). Another young woman reported being repeatedly asked about her clothes and dress habits in different interviews due to the fact that she was wearing the hijab (Sandels, 2010).

Wearing the hijab should be a personal religious decision. However, many veiled women are facing unfair professional consequences for choosing to wear the veil. Interestingly, while anti-veil discrimination and Islamophobia have been more an issue of study and analysis outside of the Middle East, it has not been in the region itself even though the same issues are prevalent. Today, women wearing the hijab in the Middle East are subject to personal attacks on social media, and hate speech against the hijab is on the rise. This discrimination continues to make hijabi women feel unsafe and insecure (Wallace, 2013).

The Lebanese workplace continues to perpetuate the misconception that veiled women are unsuitable for some professional situations, resulting in substantial barriers to their careers. Lebanese institutions should pay more attention to this demographic because hiring veiled women as part of a diversified workforce is ethical. However, although evidence on discrimination against veiled women in the Arab world is on the rise, it is still largely limited. This is especially true when it comes to academic references. Therefore, this paper will discuss anti-veil discrimination using several short stories taken from newspapers and other online sources. These miniature case studies have occurred over a long stretch of time (since 2010), but still offer important points of reflection. After discussing these four cases, the paper presents a set of recommendations that can strengthen protection for hijabi women and can prevent anti-veil discrimination from happening with impunity.

Examples of Anti-Veil Discrimination

In 2013, a diverse group of students at the American University of Beirut (AUB), including both Arabs and Americans, veiled and unveiled, visited a shop in Dora, a suburb of Beirut largely known for being an enclave for different non-Arab immigrant communities. Ironically, however, the owner of the retail shop visited by the group of women did not respond positively to the diversity of the group. Namely, the owner took issue with the fact that one of the women was wearing a hijab (Anti-Racism Movement, 2013). "What do you want?" he asked the veiled woman directly. The veiled woman was checking for a Pepsi; he responded, "We don't have [that]." She went inside the shop to check for other items for sale, and he followed her, informing her that they only sell to Sri Lankans and that she had to leave. He refused to back down and demanded that she and her non-Sri Lankan colleagues depart. In this example, bias and pre-formed opinions about Islam influenced the shop owner's treatment of the young woman wearing the hijab (Anti-Racism Movement, 2013). This biased attitude might be influenced by incorrect information from the media, including from social media. As well, the highly politicized sectarian environment of Lebanon, which frequently pits different religions against each other, contributes to a context of impunity where such acts of discrimination frequently go unpunished because this behavior is seen as "normal" by some communities.

The second story takes place at a restaurant, where a group of three people with dinner reservations were turned away from the location because one of the people in the group was wearing a hijab (Fares, 2016). Meanwhile, the group reported that as they were being denied entry, women who were unveiled were being allowed into the restaurant even though they did not have a reservation. According to a newspaper article on the incident, the restaurant claimed in an audio note sent to

the reporter that they “weren’t allowing anyone [in] with hijab tonight because it’s a special night” (Fares, 2016). The special night was an evening targeting international football players. Seemingly, the restaurant did not want these players to see any veiled women in their establishment, as veiled women are frequently linked to notions of “backwardness” and other Islamophobic assumptions (Sharaf Eddine, 2022; Fares, 2016). Although it is legally permissible for a private business to deny entry to certain people, this practice is largely used in a discriminatory manner. In this case, under the guise of it being a “special night,” the restaurant was legally able to prevent hijabi women from entering the restaurant. This kind of behavior from this restaurant and other private businesses only serves to further widen the divide and the non-equal opportunities in Lebanese society for women wearing hijab.

In another instance of anti-veil discrimination, a pop-up shop at Beirut’s ABC Mall claimed that the mall’s management urged it to fire an employee for wearing a hijab. While there is limited information on the incident in the news, an article from Daraj Media (Sharaf Eddine, 2022) notes that the pop-up shop preferred to close rather than fire its employee. As the author of the article notes, it is ironic and hypocritical for ABC Mall to forcibly fire an employee donning a religious symbol in a country where sectarian discourse and practice dominates social life. What this sheds light on, then, is that certain religious practices—like wearing the hijab—are only acceptable in certain places. As Sharaf Eddine (2022) notes, “the pretext that the shopping complex is wary of religious symbols,” which is the reason ABC Mall in Beirut gave for forcing the veiled employee to be fired, “sounds like a rather unsound argument in a country devastated by religious and sectarian strife.”

Lastly, in response to its choice not to hire veiled women, a company at the Rafik Hariri International Airport in Beirut claimed that “the company does not employ veiled women” because of its foreign owners. These owners, the company claims, are the ones who stipulated that veiled woman should not be hired there. In response, one applicant responded that, “even in Western countries, America and Europe, veiled women do get employed; why in Lebanon do you refuse to hire us? Hijab covers my head; it does not cover my brain or abilities” (Khzam, 2022). In response to the story, Halimeh Kaakour, a Lebanese Member of Parliament recently elected at the time, challenged such discrimination, noting that they “contradict our right as women to choose our clothes and our religious symbols” (Khzam, 2022).

Policy Review

These stories give important insights into the experiences of discrimination that veiled women might face in Lebanon. Although Lebanon has made considerable progress in recent years, it still lags behind several of its regional counterparts relative to women’s rights. Women in Lebanon continue to face significant barriers, and face increased prevalence of abuse, violence, and discrimination. These issues have particular consequences for hijabi women.

The legal framework in Lebanon contains certain laws and policies that defend women’s rights and gender equality, at least nominally. The Lebanese Constitution contains certain articles that defend women’s equality; the Lebanese Labor Law also includes some articles that target equal working conditions for women and men in

both the public and private sectors. Specifically, Article 26 of the Lebanese Labor Law was introduced to protect women from any act of discrimination regarding “the type of work, the amount of remuneration, employment, promotion, vocational training, and clothing.” It is illegal for employers to differentiate between men and women relative to workplace benefits and services offered to the employees and their families. In addition, women are allowed to have night shifts at work and cannot be discriminated against based on employers’ perceptions of what are considered to be “appropriate” jobs for women based on negative gender stereotypes. The law was also recently amended to extend fully paid maternity leave from 40 to 60 days for public sector employees and to seven weeks for private sector employees. Employers were also prohibited from dismissing pregnant employees from work beginning in their fifth month of pregnancy or during their maternity leave (Keuchkerian, 2022).

Importantly, these benefits apply to all women in Lebanon irrespective of their religious practices and dress. While this means that the law should be equally applied to all women workers, it unfortunately hides the realities facing women with intersectional identities. In other words, the use of the universal identity of “women” ignores that there are marginalized groups of women that might need special protections to ensure that they can also enjoy the benefits of equality. For example, women with disabilities need specific sets of legal protections, just as women donning religious symbols like the hijab might need certain legal protections to ensure that they are not discriminated against.

Policy Recommendations

Based on this analysis, it is therefore key to promote legislative reforms to address anti-veil discrimination against women in Lebanon. These legislative changes should identify the specific types of discrimination facing these women and outlaw them. For example, discrimination barring hijabi women from entering the labor force directly violates the Lebanese Constitution’s protection of religious freedom for all citizens. Therefore, recognizing this specific type of discrimination as punishable by law can help to strengthen the laws that are already in place to ensure equality among citizens.

The Lebanese Government should therefore enact laws that provide legal protections for veiled women in the workplace. These laws should explicitly prohibit discrimination based on attire and provide clear remedies for those who experience discrimination. Legal protections may include the right to file complaints with relevant authorities, access to legal representation, and the ability to seek compensatory measures (ECRI, 2022). By establishing robust legal frameworks, the Government of Lebanon can reinforce the principle of equality and hold those who engage in discriminatory practices accountable for their actions.

In addition, employers should develop comprehensive anti-discrimination internal frameworks that address and prevent anti-veil and other forms of discrimination from occurring in the workplace. An essential component of any framework to protect veiled women should include anti-discrimination policies that explicitly prohibit bias, harassment, or differential treatment of hijabi women, following best practices and guidelines established by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance

(ECRI, 2022). These policies should be clearly communicated to all employees, outlining the consequences for violating them and emphasizing the commitment to equal opportunity in the workplace. The consequences can include verbal or written warnings, suspension, or termination of employment.

Alongside anti-discrimination policies, employers should prioritize the development of diversity and inclusion initiatives targeting all women, including veiled women. These initiatives can create a workplace culture that actively supports diversity (ECRI, 2022), irrespective of religious beliefs or attire. By fostering an inclusive environment, employers can encourage collaboration, creativity, and productivity among their employees. Moreover, such initiatives can help raise awareness about the importance of racial and gender understanding and openness among employees in the workplace more broadly.

Recognizing the unique needs of veiled women could also include the development of accommodation policies that recognize or account for the specific forms of discrimination that might face veiled women in the workplace. For example, in workplaces where uniforms are mandatory, accommodation policies can ensure that women wearing the hijab can both wear their hijab as well as the proper uniform attire. Other examples of reasonable accommodations include flexible scheduling to allow for religious holiday observance, or designated prayer spaces. These policies have been adapted by countries around the world, and can help foster an inclusive workplace. By implementing these policies, employers demonstrate their commitment to ensuring that veiled women can fully participate and thrive in the workplace.

To address and mitigate various forms of bias that contribute to discrimination in the workplace, employers should prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training for all staff, including those with higher positions in the company, such as the administration and even the owner. Such training programs raise awareness about biases and provide tools and strategies to recognize and overcome them (Ali, 2022). By fostering an understanding of the impact of biases on decision-making processes, employees can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive workplace environment.

Anti-workplace harassment policies also play a key role in supporting marginalized women workers. These policies should clearly define what constitutes harassment, provide examples, outline reporting procedures, and highlight the negative outcomes that will face companies that do not implement strict anti-harassment policies (Lebanese League for Women in Business [LLWB], 2019). These negative consequences might include reputational damage, negative publicity, loss of customers or clients, or damage to their brand (Impactly, n.d.). These policies are important to ensure that employees feel safe and supported when reporting incidents of harassment. As well, strong anti-harassment policies in the workplace can ensure that thorough investigations are promptly conducted following a report of harassment (LLWB, 2019).

Ultimately, by implementing these comprehensive policies and laws, employers, the Lebanese government, and other key stakeholders can create an inclusive and

respectful work environment that embraces and supports veiled women (Sidani, 2018). It is through the collective efforts of employers, employees, and policymakers that we can combat discrimination, foster inclusivity, and promote equal opportunities for all individuals in the workplace.

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