



*Manual of Good Practices for Development in the Most Disadvantaged Countries of the Euro-Mediterranean Area.  
Education, Gender Equality and Rule of Law*

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### ***The Headscarf and Arab Women at the Dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

A young friend of mine left her country so that she could “*feel the sun and air on her skin*”. She’s worn a headscarf for as long as she can remember. Not out of personal conviction, but because everyone in her family, in her neighbourhood, at work... wore it. So imagine her surprise when she discovered, while rummaging through some old suitcases at home one day, a miniskirt that her mother used to wear when she was her age.

Unfortunately, these two anecdotes symbolise all too clearly the situation of women today in the Arab world. They could just as easily occur in any of the so-called moderate Arab countries such as Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, etc. It is no longer a question of culture or traditions. In recent decades, women in Arab countries have had increasing access to education, employment and public life.

In fact, the image of the veiled, uneducated woman confined to the home is an outdated stereotype. In Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, the disparity between boys’ and girls’ access to schooling has practically disappeared over the last generation. As for the higher education that gives young adults access to the job market, the proportion of men and women in many Middle Eastern countries has already shifted in favour of the latter; in other words, female students outnumber their male counterparts in the universities of Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine.

In contrast, the figures corresponding to the political sphere indicate that Middle Eastern women are still poorly represented in parliaments and government cabinets, but then this is also the case in Europe, and if it were not for government decisions to impose gender parity in political parties and cabinets, the situation would be much worse. In fact, in a country such as France, women are still notably underrepresented in both the National Assembly and the Senate...

The huge inequality gap in terms of personal status between men and women in the Middle East -including Israel, in my opinion- still stems from the set of laws that lay down case law in relation to personal matter. These statuses are based on religion, with each individual following the jurisdiction of their own religion. This system spread during the Ottoman period to guarantee the Empire’s non-Muslim minorities a certain degree of autonomy for managing personal affairs (inheritance, divorce, marriage, polygamy or monogamy, etc.).

Another reason for inequality can be found in certain -and sometimes unfortunate- traditions such as honour killing, marriage at an early age, etc.

Any attempt to change or amend these laws is proving extremely complicated both politically and socially, provoking diverse reactions which in some cases, as strange as it may seem, are firmly opposed to change. This takes me back to my example of the headscarf, the use of which has always existed, and which even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was nearly as widespread in southern European countries as in the Arab world. Later, and thanks to the first women's emancipation movements, which emerged on both sides of the Mediterranean, the use of the headscarf gradually disappeared in Europe, while a mixture of veiled and unveiled heads prevailed in the south.

This is where the totally outdated idea of associating the headscarf with educational and social backwardness comes from. Nevertheless, this was certainly true in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Arab women's emancipation movements associated with the movements seeking Arab independence from the Ottoman Empire, which first appeared in Egypt, demanded education for girls and European clothing to help the Arab world emerge from the backwardness that, according to the leading thinkers at the time, was due to (Muslim) religion and, obviously, to the Ottoman government.

The post-independence Arab nationalist movements were also committed to emancipating women and allowed them to wear Western style clothing, which in Syria was even compulsory: if a woman wanted to follow a career she had to dress in the European style. Both 20<sup>th</sup> century versions -with or without headscarf- were accepted on equal terms by Muslim "*priests*" and the religious laws until recently. Although it is clear from the Koran - the holy book of Islam- that women do not enjoy the same rights as men, this does not mean that Muslim peoples throughout history have not interpreted the texts relating to women's status in different ways.

Yet whereas in the West the promotion of women's rights continues to focus on achieving parity with men and more besides -such as in Spain, where laws are being adapted to the concept of gender equality in order to remove all barriers between the sexes, even to the extent of allowing same-sex marriages-, in the Arab world we can see a resurgence of exacerbated political-religious nationalism and, consequently, a far more inflexible attitude to the use of the headscarf.

The new generation is adapting to this situation almost without protest and seems willing to follow the orders of certain fundamentalist (or perhaps I should just say religious) sectors that believe that the use of the headscarf is not just a cultural or religious matter, but also, and above all, a sign of submission to a set of religious and social rules laid down by Islam. This imposition goes hand in hand with their rejection of Western values as represented also by women's behaviour, both in the way they dress and the way they behave with men, as was very clearly stated by the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood Abdul Monem Abdul Fattouh. Meanwhile, the current spread in Europe of gender legislation and the new concept of same-sex marriage is giving this politico-religious sector in the Middle East every excuse to reject Western modernisation.

It must be said that the majority of women in the Arab world are also convinced of this approach. While feminist movements in the Western world have focused on imposing the concept of gender since the now famous Beijing Summit of 1995, Arab feminist movements focus on two aspects: demanding a place for women in the public arena of their respective countries, and sharing in a reformist interpretation of the Koran.

We have to be very careful here; no woman in the Arab world and practically no political or feminist movement wants or is proposing a social change. Indeed, it would be far too risky and even complicated in these countries, given that all of them have strong non-Muslim minorities.

The demands of most of the self-proclaimed secular political movements are limited to civil marriage, women's right to divorce, consensual marriage, the abolition of marriage of minors, the fight against honour killings, a change of attitude to polygamy, the transmission of nationality from mother to child, etc..., and they are making slow but steady progress thanks to the support of their governments and in spite of the opposition of the religious parties.

These parties loudly proclaim that "*Islam is the solution*", meaning Islam in all its facets: political, personal and social. In other words, they demand the enforcement of the Sharia and Islamic Tradition.

The women belonging to these parties (of whom there are many and who play a very active role in attracting new supporters) accept all the consequences of the Sharia: polygamy, the marriage of minors, etc., but they also demand more visibility in public life and, above all, the right to interpret the Koran. In fact, they believe that during the early years of Islam women had many prerogatives which have gradually been lost over the centuries, which accounts for the recent appearance of Islamic feminist movements throughout the Arab world, all of whom want to remain faithful to their religion while at the same time contributing to its modernisation.

Returning once again to the headscarf, the traditional ways of wearing it differ from one country to another. Thus in Palestine we can still see women wearing the dresses they have hand-embroidered themselves. Each village has its own distinct style of embroidery, as well as a discreet headscarf, which is sometimes also embroidered. Women in Egypt wear the well-known headscarf whose edges are decorated with eye-catching and brightly-coloured fake coins that complement the classic *abayeh*. It is also very common to see Druze women in Israel, Lebanon or Syria wearing the same typical white headscarf, although two variants of a more uniform type are increasingly popular: the black version with its cloak of the same colour, favoured by the most fanatical women, or the more modern version worn by the rest together with decent but more contemporary clothing of a matching colour. In the latter case, there are many varieties that make up a new Islamic fashion with its own designers, factories and specialised shops.

This headscarf dichotomy gives us an idea of the current situation of Arab women, both modern and traditional, and both with a mutual respect for their respective religious beliefs. I should also add that it is no longer a question of wearing the headscarf or not, as its use is practically obligatory. Women are increasingly subject to restrictions when it comes to exercising their freedom of choice. The few who try to resist belong to social classes that allow them to defy the norms, have contact with the outside world, or are not Muslims.

Anyhow, it is still too early to be able to assess whether the headscarf will lead to an improvement or a deterioration of the situation of Arab women. This logic can legitimize forced marriage, polyandry, confining women in their homes and depriving them of education, but it can also mean the acceptance of women in political circles and other walks of public life, access to education... One thing is for sure, though: the headscarf is increasingly used more as a symbolic political instrument or as a means to demand fundamental freedoms.

