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**Islamic veil in the Gulf and Arabian modernity:  
a qualitative study on female managers**

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This paper presents parts of the findings of a long range 3 years mixed study conducted in the Gulf addressing the values carried by Arabian female managers after their sudden promotion in the professional world during the 10 past years. 20 women have been part of a qualitative study particularly composed of semi-structured recorded interviews regarding their values, notably the influence of religion in their daily behavior and thoughts.

A significant part of the questionnaire has therefore consisted in asking the interviewees about their religious feelings and particularly about a crucial and controversial subject in Europe: the Islamic veil. This part of the exploratory research thus aimed to identify the feelings and sense given to the Islamic veil to find out its in depth meaning for female managers.

Living in the Arabian Gulf or more broadly in a Muslim country while being a Westerner leads to be faced to the clothing issue and the women's one in particular. The traditional dressing in Saudi Arabia, which was mandatory for women until 2019 is easy to describe: women were required to wear a black *abaya* (large and long dress supposed to hide the attractive parts of the body) and a *hijab* of the same color (veil supposed to hide the hair). Often in Saudi, face is completely hidden with a *niqab* (that permits to see only the eyes), a *burqa*, with a string between the eyes to shorten the visible space for a stranger man (every men except the husband or a close relative). Sometimes but more rarely, the veil is strictly integral and even don't allow to see the eyes: the *sitar* is made with a thin fabric that permit to have a certain visibility for the woman wearing it.

In the other Gulf countries, *niqab* is more rare and majority of the locals of these countries are wearing black or colored *hijab* and sometimes an *abaya*, not compulsorily black. In countries such as Kuwait or Bahrain, significant part of Arabian women are non-covered and seem to live normally without any particular pressure from their families or peers, at least this latter is not noticeable by the external observer.

To be covered for a Muslim woman is explicitly a religious recommendation mentioned in the Quran, particularly in Sura 24, verse 31: *"And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not*

*expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed.*" Other interpretations exist, such as the one of historian searcher Jacqueline Chabbi (2016), that tends to see the term of veil in Islamic culture as a more complex and symbolic construction. However alternative interpretations concerning Islamic veil are not mentioned by the interviewees who prefer to refer directly to the Quran when they decide to give religious explanations during our conversations.

Mentions of the way Muslim women have to dress doesn't appear frequently in the religious texts. By consulting several hadiths (stories of prophet Muhamad's life reported by witnesses. The closer of the prophet the witness was, the worthier the hadith is) we can learn that some women around prophet Muhamad were covered (Ouardi 2016) but the details of the dressing of women remain very poor within ancient religious references. Furthermore, living in the Gulf region means being confronted to men's traditional dress, especially in Saudi. Indeed, men wear a long white dress (*thowb*) as well as a veil that could be white or in red and white checkered pattern. Therefore, whether it's frequent to never see women's hair, it's not rare to neither see men's hair.

Nevertheless, even though certain radical moves of Islam impose a certain kind of dress to the men (like *qami*, worn especially by the Salafi that ends above ankles and is easy to identify at the exit of mosques where men wearing some are distinguishable from the other worshippers) there is no clear mention of mandatory specific clothing for Muslim men in the Quran. Men's *thowb* seems thus more a traditional than a religious dress. However it has to be mentioned that wearing a *thowb* in certain places can be regulated, sometimes more strictly than *hijab*. In the United Arabian Emirates, Muslims are not allowed to purchase alcohol in specialized shops and don't have the right to wear a *thowb* while entering in some bars serving alcoholic beverages. In Bahrain, a Muslim can purchase alcohol but not wearing his *thowb* inside a specialized store. However, Muslim men are allowed to wear their *thowb* in bars and it is always surprising, even while being used to it, to see locals wearing traditional dresses drinking at the counter of some Bahraini bars.

During the observation period, I have had the opportunity to find out that among the students hosted in my department, the number of men wearing *thowb* was equivalent to the one of the women wearing abaya. Nevertheless, it has always been surprising, while traveling with them for the two yearly one week residencies in Singapore and Paris, to discover those men without *thowb* and women without *abaya* (those latter keep their veil which is often turned into a simple scarf).

## Research methodology

This research stems from my appointment in 2017 as Academic and Managing Director of the “*French Arabian Business School*”, Department of the “*Arabian Gulf University*”, regional university located in Bahrain co owned by the 6 member states of the GCC whom students and faculty members are almost 100% GCC nationals. I have started the research on some of the Executive MBA students and alumni.

The qualitative research consisted in finding out the values carried by the female managers from the Gulf. The questionnaire was inspired by past research work based on a population whose some characteristics were similar. Actually, Memoona Tariq and Jawad Syed had conducted a study on the same population of Muslim women having reached some managerial positions in Britain. Most of those women were coming from South Asia, which refers, according to the British point of view, to the Indian and Pakistani regions. The object of the study was to investigate on the difficulties faced by an intersectional public (females, immigrants, Muslims) in their career path (Tariq and Syed 2017).

Our exploratory study targeting Arabian females from the Gulf borrowed a subset of the questions asked by those two sociologists and added some more cultural and religious items on the second part of the interview. The first part of the semi conducted interview aimed to make women talk about themselves, their career paths, their achievements, their vision of companies and eventual difficulties they have encountered in workplace or into their family to progress in their career paths. The most important things were, to borrow to the “feminist” sociologists to make them speak of their “selves” by giving concrete examples in order to “start from the experience” through discussion on the perception of the self, expression of emotions presented as keys of understanding (De Vault 1999). Elements of sociologic evidences have to be enriched by “*elements of the daily experience*”, inspired by the methodology defined by Howard Becker to run a qualitative research (Becker 2014)

Thus, the most important part of the interviews was to make them start with elements linked to the professional life of those women, in order to make them describe some usual and familiar situations and define concepts they were supposed to master due to their professional position. This is why the first questions of the interviews are focusing on the way they have reached their current professional level, what they had to undertake to get there, obstacles they have faced, by focusing each time through the prism of gender that is pervasive during the recorded conversations.

Second part of the questionnaire changes sensitively from the study of Tariq and Syed: due to the environment, I chose to ask a set of questions regarding influence and perception of culture and religion. The one regarding veil, which is detailed below is part of this set of questions.

The study is composed of 20-recorded interviews of 45 to 90 minutes each with female managers from the GCC region. The average age of the interviewees is 33

years old (from 21 to 49 years old), 9 are Saudi, 9 are from Bahrain and 2 from Kuwait. 2 of them are entrepreneurs, 15 of them are managers or executives in the private sector with more than 5 years of work experience, 1 is a manager in the public sector, 2 of them are undergraduate students and were very useful to compare with their elders. The interviews were conducted in English language, most of times in my office at the University but some of them have been recorded in coffee shops. To check the reliability of the replies and avoid language and position bias (due to my position as a male westerner and head of a prestigious program), my assistant Samia was in charge to have informal conversations in Arabic with them on the most sensitive aspects of the questionnaire to check if the discrepancies in their answers were very important before or after the recorded interviews (it has never been the case.)

In addition to this, I have conducted anthropological observations during multiple professional visits and informal discussions with colleagues, students and various actors of the region. Another source of research has been the organization of focus groups in collaboration with my colleague Cedomir Nestorovic, professor in the MBA program and specialist of Islamic marketing. We have been gathering small groups of students (35 years old of average age) and questioned them on different aspects of the family, professional and private life in the Gulf to have the better possible keys of understanding of the context of the research.

#### **Litterature review**

It appears important to claim that this study is not made to find out a precise sense to the veil worn by some Muslim women or to arbitrate between multiple analysis that have already been done on that matter. What remains particularly pregnant in the western mindset and in the various public debates is the idea that veil is a tool of submission to men and/or God. Psychoanalyst Fehti Benslama insists on the fact that Muslim religious doctrine emphasizes on the notion of gaze : *“according to the Islamic theology that prescribes it, veil is not a sign. It’s an item through which the feminine body is hidden partly or completely because this body has a charming and fascinating power”* (Benslama 2002).

The veil would therefore be a tool aiming to protect woman from the man’s gaze, not especially because man would be perverted while seeing a woman but more because woman would be carrier of evil and sin. Woman would psychologically perceived her body as a source of evil, temptation and seduction, as *“territory of fault and sin, likely to divert the believer from the path of prayer and salvation. Through her charms and the anatomy of her body, she represents an abyss where the virtue of Allah’s sons can fall down into. However, her presence is a necessary evil as said Imam Ali, due to her matricial and reproductive function”* (Chamoun 2004).

This vision of woman stems from several hadiths reporting words of Imam Ali, son-in-law of the prophet and Shi’ism founder who would have said: *“woman is entirely made of evil and the worse evil in her is that she is indispensable”*. This idea according to which it would be necessary to hide woman’s body, isolate

them or even separate them and that all those latter would be symbolized by the Islamic veil is underpinned in the thoughts regarding this subject in France. Some feminists or philosophes regularly use this religious and psychoanalytic version of veil. Elisabeth Badinter seems shocked by the religious hold on women's body in terms that can be very close to the ones of the above-mentioned psychoanalysts, who are themselves often from Muslim origins: *"the fact to force women to hide their hair because men claim that they are responsible for the sexual desire they don't know themselves how to refrain is shocking to me"* (Badinter 2015).

Within the frame of the study about values carried by the manager women in the Gulf, it appeared interesting to investigate on the opinions of the interviewees regarding Islamic veil. Because while in the Western world, the Islamic veil carries more and more a way to claim an identity, it's difficult to assign it the same role in a Muslim country, especially in the birthplace of Islam such as Saudi Arabia. Among the 20 women forming the sample, 4 does not wear hijab (which is statistically not really relevant, the way to select the women was not based on this but on their professional positions).

The matter of the veil appears at the end of the questionnaire, after a series of questions about culture and religion in the Gulf and especially their influence on gender equality. The question is asked in a very oriented way and is supposed to reflect the projected personality of the searcher, who is Westerner and French. This questions aims thus to get personal reaction from the interviewees. I preferred therefore not to ask them about the veil in general, because in the Arabian world, hijab is a completely common accessory, but on the alleged vision westerners had regarding the veil worn by Muslim women. The question was asked as follows: "In some western countries the fact that Muslim women are sometimes covered is seen as a sign of submission to the Islamic law. What do you think of this statement?"

This question, that has been asked slightly differently depending on the way the interviews were turning, has systematically given rich and long answers from the interviewees. Though my intuition led me to think that those women could have felt offended because of the critics carried by the questions, it was surprisingly very easy to collect data on this subject that was not as sensitive as expected. It can be explained by the fact that the *"hijab affairs"* in the Western world and particularly in France are highly commented through the press and media in the Arabian world in general and in the Gulf in particular. This mediatic presentation gives a contrasted image of France because the way to explain this affairs is obviously distorted, such as the way western medias are presenting the situation in the Gulf...

Question of the veil gives the opportunity to point out the distinction between religion and culture. In Saudi particularly, the notion of choice did not exist at all before September 2019 because hijab was considered as legally mandatory for Muslim women (even though sources of law are not clear in Saudi regarding this subject and could be discussed). French anthropologist Amélie le Renard (2011, 2013, 2014), in her study conducted from 2008 to 2011 in Riyadh with women aged from 18 to 25 years does not point out a real clearly expressed religious

meaning to *hijab* or *niqab*. For her interviewees, hijab is mandatory and women have to deal with this, even while being at the border of the Saudi law and taking risks to be confronted to the religious police. Therefore, she mentions in her papers and books some visible fancy accessories, jewels, make up, lighter or colored hijabs that make hair visible, that permit a differentiation in this *"society of young women"* who were living mostly in reserved places and were allowed to meet men only if they were their relatives. While Saudi authorities were justifying the legal mandatory clothing imposed to women using religious and cultural reasons, the interviewees questioned by the anthropologist did not put a particular stress on such reasons.

### **A culturally appropriated religion**

Talking about religious issue with women from the Gulf has conducted us to discover, especially while evoking *hijab* and pushing interviewees to justify this practice, that it carries a form of identity lexical reflex. Therefore, alongside the interview, they used the word "I" to describe situations concerning themselves or use the word "they" or "them" to give examples picked up from outside, mentioning their friends, their colleagues, their hierarchy. When we switched to religious subject, they used willingly the words "we" or "us" whatever their sociological characteristics are (age, nationality, commitment to religion, job...) F1, 27, Saudi, explains that : *"but we find ourselves very convinced since in our religion we have to follow it and also for our culture we have to follow that"*. F5, 32, Bahraini says « *Maybe later on when they will used to live next with us and they know our mentality, our life, our religion they will start accepting* ». F7, 36, Saudi points out that « *in our religion it's not necessary to be dressed in black but we must cover our bodies, we must cover our hair*». F9, 49, Emirian, claims that « *I know that if I don't pray, in our religion, this is the result of it, this is what I will get* ».

It is noticeable that the words "Islam" or "Muslim" do not appear frequently. Most of times, it is "our religion. It's the same when Quran is mentioned. When it is cited, even though it's more rare (only 5 women are using the Quran to evoke the veil), it's described as something that belong to "us". Thus, F6, 34, Bahraini, tells that: *"it's mentioned in our Qur'an that from 9 years the women should be covered"*. However, when they aim to take distance with religion without directly criticizing it, interviewees take more easily distance with the word "Quran", showing less ownership of this term. Therefore, F15, 21, Bahraini, talks about her father who wants to force her to adopt a more religious attitude by mentioning references to the holy book using the following terms: *"So let's say for example my father, he doesn't agree with me going out like this, it's really hard for him to accept, and he keeps bringing up "oh the Qur'an. Oh God" they want all of that"*.

It is therefore very clear that the collective appropriation of religion often comes in the conversation when the question of veil is evoked. It can be interpreted as a sign of reflex of defense against this abrupt and rough question that expects a justification on the idea of "submission".

## A veil of modesty

The meaning of veil is itself not every time specified by the interviewees, as if it was that obvious that it implied no answer. Sometimes I have tried to insist on that question by reintroducing it in the conversation, but not systematically because just the fact not to try to justify or give a sense to the veil was by itself an interesting answer.

When I have collected data about the sense carried by the veil, these latter have been somehow classic and compliant to what we can hear in the Western world excepting several interesting things.

First, veil is considered by some interviewees as a synonym of decency and dignity because according to them, it helps woman not to reveal her beauty to the external world. When she elaborates on the argument that convinced her to cover herself, F12, 28, Bahraini, explains that *“the best part of a woman’s appearance is her hair, given that it’s the most beautiful part about a woman, so why would you like to show the most beautiful part of you to the entire world? Why not keep it something private to those who you really love, and who you really care about?”*

F17, 37, Bahraini, clearly talks about the men’s gaze whom religion aims to protect her from: *“in our religion it’s instructed to cover yourself but not to only cover, to hide the... you know? the body parts which the man cannot, like not be attracted”*.

This argument according to which woman has to preserve her beauty in order to show it to the men she loves the most is frequently repeated by the interviewees. We can find as well, expressed in different ways, the arguments that a woman is like a sweet or a piece of meat that, if they remain uncovered, will attract bugs or predators. This argument could sometimes be presented in an ironic way by those who would like to keep a certain distance with religious commandments. F15, 21, Bahraini, who doesn’t wear hijab, describes her father trying to convince her using this terms: *“he would say like it’s safer, so that the male eyes won’t be on you and you won’t be a target, you won’t be like a piece of meat walking down the street, the flies won’t come on you”*.

The ideas of modesty and decency are also often used by the same women who use them to explain the sense they give to the veil, but this time in order to highlight on its non-mandatory character for Muslims. This notion of choice, that will be addressed in depth below because it has been raised a lot during the conversations, is thus linked to the idea of modesty. The fact that veil is not very present in the religious texts allows women to consider that this latter is non-mandatory, considering that the only real religious prescription is to be dressed in a modest and decent way. Besides, this is the meaning of the recent Saudi regulation regarding clothing enacted in 2019, mentioning that men and women has to be dressed modestly, without further mention. The same kind of references could be found for example in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), at the entry of the private beaches along the red sea. On one of the billboards, I have taken a picture of the following statement regarding the dressing: *“men and women must dress in a conservative and appropriate manner while on the beach”*

(picture shot in Jeddah, 2020). As in the new Saudi law, there is no mention of a particular kind of clothe but just the fact that they have to be *“conservative and appropriate”*.

Therefore, by relying on those elements of language, many interviewees justify the fact that *hijab* is not mandatory anymore. Thus, F13, 21, Saudi, covered, relativizes the importance of hair: *“you can wear decent clothes that’s like we should look decent, it’s not about showing your hair, the hair is not everything”*. F4, 36, Bahraini, goes further by turning the concept of decency into a symbol and giving it a cultural dimension. While being herself covered, she specifies that : *“What is it about covering? Covering is about being decent women, so whether you are covered or not... that woman, whether she is covered or not she can be a decent woman. She doesn't have to be fully covered, and even she is fully exposed, if she is decent, she is a decent woman”*.

Be « *decent* » is then the rule for most of the interviewees whom all except one do not consider the hijab as an obligation (although 4 out of 20 of them are non-covered during the interview). This notion of decency can be very symbolic as it is the case for F4 but can be far more precise as it is the case with F2, 29, Bahraini, who is however not covered and describes with many details the parts of female body that have to remain covered in order to remain “decent”.

### **A religious decency ?**

This notion of decency carries obviously a religious background which is frequently used to evoke the veil. However, the degree of mobilization of the religious explanation varies a lot from one interviewee to another one. Therefore, the religious knowledge and the level of details brought to justify the use of veil differ a lot depending on the women interviewed. Most of the latter reply that the hijab is religious but without showing lots of conviction and lots of importance to it.

Some of them, mostly from Saudi (but as well the most religious ones of other nationalities), attempted to compare the three monotheist religions, turning this comparison in favor of Islam. Thus, for F7, 37, Saudi, the three monotheist religions order women to cover themselves. She therefore does not understand (at least pretend not to understand) why the rest of the world is focusing only on Islamic veil whereas this religion is supposed to be less tough regarding this subject. One find the same kind of argumentation while listening to F2, 29, Bahraini, uncovered. According to her, Islam does not mandate women to cover their hair, contrarily to Christianity or Judaism: *“the thing is this might be coming as a shock but Judaism, Christianity asked the women to cover their hair. Islam did not. I mean even if you look into it, if you look in a verse in the Qur'an. The Islam was very much focused on wearing, for the women to cover the ... I don't like to call them this way but... I don't like to call them sexual parts but you know what I mean[...]*”

F2 is obviously not the only unveiled woman to use religious argumentation to justify the use of Islamic veil. F3, 29, Kuwaiti, explains straightly that *hijab* is an instrument that permits to identify a woman as a Muslim, giving to the veil a very sharp identarian role, which is very surprising for F3 who looks and behaves

apparently like a Westerner. As a reaction, I have asked her the question of her own religious feelings and if she considered herself a Muslim. After a short hesitation, she rephrased her first answer, claiming that veil is after all a personal choice. Speaking of her own case, she estimates that according to the fact that she bothers no one, she can live her faith the way she wants: *"I'm doing all the things that represent me as a Muslim and not harming anyone so I guess it's kind of a personal thing yeah..."*

These words are slightly the same as the ones of F15, who also use the Christian comparison but in a completely different sense as F2 and F7: *"Because I told him like I have the religion in my heart, so let's say for example I'm a Christian, I won't put a cross on my forehead and walk around, so I told him this is my religion, I have it in my heart, I pray, I fast, so like it's me, it's me, it's my personality, this is how I'm building myself, so just let me be the woman I'm becoming".*

The religious argument is often used albeit it appears particularly difficult to find a common spiritual thought regarding *hijab*. Religion is, we have pointed it out, often depicted as "our" religion and seem therefore a common pretext to justify the use of veil by avoiding a too deep reflection on the subject, whether one wear it or not. Thus, F10, 32, uncovered Saudi, explains that obviously *hijab* is a religious prescription but not wearing it does not make her a bad Muslim. Once again, the comparison with Christians in churches is used. F10 says that some Christians cover their hair while entering a church whereas some do not, but these latter are not considered as bad Christians.

Islam appears thereby as something that exists, that cannot be criticized frontally (except timid and rare words of some interviewees) and that gives a large set of explanations and justifications going from complete obligation to adopt a specific behavior to the possibility to live freely life without particular constraints. The various answers collected make religion appears as a subject whom definition goes from a strict regulatory guide whom commandments are supposed to organize the believer's life to an internalized aspect composed of different boxes in which it is possible to pick up whatever one wants. For that latter description, the minimal requirement to be a good Muslim is to have faith far more than to adopt a particular behavior.

This aspect is present although expressed differently depending on the interviewees but the general idea remains clear. Therefore, F9, 49, Emirian, gives an original definition of Islam as a religion without real constraint but with a set of free options the believer can follow or not: *"I am a Muslim, I know that I have to do all of these things, I chose what to follow and I know the consequence of everything. I know that if I don't pray, in our religion, this is the result of it, this is what I will get. So it is up to me, I can to follow it or I can don't follow it if I don't want to."*

F13, 21, Saudi, specifies that according to her, Islam is first a matter of faith that has to be in the heart and that have not to be mandatorily showed to the others but to be sincerely worshipped. F18, 35, Bahraini, explains as well that there are in Islam things that she follows and things she doesn't because it is her vision and interpretation of religion. Besides, F18, has a particular vision of religious

obligations : she is covered at work and prays in her office but posts unveiled pictures of herself on social networks (her Instagram account is private but she lets me access it without reserve). Even with the most religious interviewees, Islam is internalized and remains an individual inner choice that doesn't have to interfere in private life. The only exemption that should be highlighted about hijab is F16, only woman to spontaneously defines herself as a Shia (half of the interviewees are members of this branch of Islam but only one of them has judged useful to mention it clearly). For F16, 38, Saudi, *hijab* is compulsory for Shia women and there is no discussion on this. But by scrutinizing the facts, Shia interviewees are far less categoric regarding that statement (two of them are unveiled). However, the most interesting part of the narrative of F16 is the description she gives of this religious obligation comparing to the civil law of her country.

Therefore, after a long explanation on the fact that Sunni women thinks that veil is not mandatory and that they are often not veiled, she then comment the new doctrine enacted by the Saudi Crown Prince specifying that hijab is not anymore required in the kingdom: *"Now Prince Muhammad Bin Salman says "you are free woman, free to wear what you like, whether it's abaya or without abaya, the most important thing is to wear respectful clothes" from this says we can understand that even for him for example it's not mandatory but for me, for all the Shia all over the world they will wear the hijab"*.

But paradoxically, F16, who wants to highlight the fact that her faith is stronger and that her religious branch is more submitted to constraining requirements, is adopting somehow a more secular approach. Thus, she distinguishes sharply law of humans and law of God and advocates for separation of temporal and spiritual. This secularization, at least according to the words used, is more visible on interviewees while they are asked on what extent hijab is a cultural or religious obligation.

### **A cultural veil ?**

During the interviews, conversations on veil have been the longest and the most documented. It leaded me to have at an early stage the feeling that religious explanation was not enough and that it appeared necessary to relaunch the discussion when the interviewees were not giving a well-structured religious set of arguments but mostly explanations linked to context, Arabian or Gulf culture .

The first non-religious argument about hijab is linked to the climate. F2, 29, Bahraini, summarizes it well by explaining that historically, the Gulf region requires head covering to avoid sun, sand and dust. This explanation is often similar as the one given by men wearing *thowb* and the traditional male's veil. Indeed, they often give some images of the past of Bedouins in the desert, mentioning even the pre-islamic past. Concerning women, F2 elaborates a precise explanation : *"So especially even the covering of the face is very cultural. It's because of people when they used to live in the desert. Because there is a lot of dust so that they were veiled to protect themselves. And even when they used to cover their hair, it was to protect them from the sun. So, and also from all the*

*dust and because in the living condition in a desert environment is kind of different from living in colder countries."*

This kind of rationale appears in many interviews but in less precise ways. Most of women interviewed understand this notion of "cultural veil" as a "forced veil". Thus, in the mind of the interviewees, religion cannot force a girl or woman to cover her hair or face but culture can. The reasoning is the same regarding the idea of submission.

Frequently, when question on submission is asked, it is understood as submission to family, to traditions, to patriarchy. Religious veil has to be freely chosen and the least constraint can be only cultural in the interviewees' minds. According to F4, 36, Bahraini, the reflection on "cultural" veil goes further because a woman cannot only be forced to wear *hijab* but moreover can wear it in an offensive way: *"I understand that there are women who are covered in an offensive way, and who are forced to cover"*.

According to her, "culture" is thus sometimes responsible of the "enslavement" of women because it can conduct families to force their daughters to cover themselves. F2 is scandalized to mention and describe unacceptable morals, according to her, concerning young girls: *"So you see a lot of families, they force their daughters to cover from the age of 7. Some of them 7, some of them when they get older and mature up, some of them when they get their first mensuration cycle. In some of them if they see their daughter not putting on her scarf outside, they consider she caused shame for the family"*.

We can find in the latter citation, the common argument of non-Saudi that prefer often finding compromising examples by evoking their powerful neighbor to criticize its politics that is, here, assimilated to culture. F17, 37, Bahraini, interpret the former Saudi law which required the wearing of the veil as a cultural obligation: *"I can say that most of it happening in Saudi. Why? Because the government forced them in the beginning, not now, now they are free. In the beginning they forced them to wear hijab either they like it or they don't like it. For us here no, it's our religion but in some of the countries it's because the culture."*

When someone is forced to be veiled, it is thus, according to the interviewees, automatically cultural or due to a misinterpretation of religion by very traditional people. F12, 28, Bahraini, summarizes it in the following way : *"Those who, like I mentioned earlier, are very traditional people, the ones connecting to religion in an old manner, not adapting to whatever changes happening in the world, might enforce this on the girls."*

It's highly noticeable that, according to F12, the "conservative religious people" are guilty not to adapt to the change of the world. It is consequently completely clear for her that cultural practices due to a bad interpretation of Islam, has to be able to evolve. Those "conservatives" are frequently mentioned by the interviewees.

F6, 34, Bahraini, denounces them after having mentioned that according to Quran, it was prescribed that girls could wear *hijab* from 9 years old but that

fortunately, 90% of the population was not following this recommendation. She talks about the remaining 10% in unkind terms, wishing that this proportion will soon dramatically shrink: *“But maybe 10% of the people here we have in the country still... I mentioned in the beginning still they are closed mentality and culture but they still feel that you are cover you have to be covered from now, you cannot work with a man, you cannot travel, you cannot do... This 10% I believe strongly by end of next year from 10% it will reach at least 4% and it will get better:”*

This notion of choice that has to be free is, by reading the answers of the interviewees, especially the covered ones, linked to the question of minimal age to wear hijab. Data collected shows unanimously a form of disgust for the custom to cover girls at a too early stage. F11, 28, Bahraini, synthesizes this general feeling : *“I do know women in Bahrain, and in Saudi, and in other countries, that are suppressed and are forced to wear an abaya. I’ve seen 6 year old’s, and 7 year old’s, and even 10 year old’s, it’s too young for them to wear a hijab and an abaya, I think this is suppression, because she wants to be a kid, and she shouldn’t wear a hijab from... and she should be able to choose to wear the hijab, I chose to wear it”*.

Systematically, Gulf female managers, that are micro-models for their relatives (Lacheret 2020), describe the fact to be covered as something personal that cannot and must not be imposed, qualifying traditional families that force their girls to wear *hijab* as backward and outdated.

The argument, raised notably by F17, according to which Saudi were going to answer differently is here perfectly justified. Indeed, the word « *force* » is found more than 20 times in the narratives of the Bahraini while talking about *hijab* whereas it appears only once in the Saudi ones (it’s only mentioned in one sentence explaining that Jews had the custom to cover their women).

Thus, F7, 36, Saudi, merely states that veil is a religious phenomenon common to the three monotheist religions. F8, 36, Saudi, explains that veil can be worn only if one believes in its usefulness: *“it really depends on how she is convinced with, whatever she is wearing”*.

Among all the questions asked, the one about *hijab* leads to the most important discrepancies depending on nationality. Saudi interviewees seem not to be sensitive to the notion of forced veiling because this question wasn't relevant in the Kingdom during decades. F1, 28, Saudi, detailed her answer explaining that it has never been a question for her because she grew up surrounded by *hijabs* and that it appeared obvious for her that it was mandatory: *“since you come to this life you found your mother doing this, your family is doing this, and you grow up seeing this so it’s already in our blood. So we usually don’t ask ourselves ‘why do we do it?’ but we find ourselves very convinced since in our religion we have to follow it and also for our culture we have to follow that”*.

Here, culture and religion are merged in the same sentence and strengthen themselves: not only *“our religion”* says so but *“our culture”* says the same. However, it’s noticeable to indicate that through her personal behavior, F1, who is a former student, is particularly open minded. During the residencies past in

Paris and Singapore, she wore classic western clothes while keeping her veil, sometimes worn like a turban. The meaning she gives to the veil, its cultural dimension and the lack of notion of choice are simply an illustration of the weight of her family in her life and of the habit taken to cover herself without having to think especially of the reason why.

F13, 21, Saudi, describes as well her familial environment while evoking the issue of veil except that in this case, she mentions one of her cousins that decided to remove hers without any opposition from a her father: *“Yes, I was raised in a family all of them wore hijab and when my cousin removed her hijab, her father went to talk to her, he told her, if you don’t accept it, don’t wear it because it’s all about your soul, your heart, it’s all about faith”*.

In that case, F13 describes a family where every women wear *hijab* (including her) but when someone has one day violated this unwritten rule. The way she talks about the reaction of the father, full of tolerance and who, ultimately, has accepted her uncovered daughter, shows one aspect that often raises in the words of Saudi interviewees: the progressive end of tribal or clan culture. Psychiatric Doctor Maurice Berger describes clan as an unit that does let only with extreme difficulty an autonomous and alternative thought being expressed. To develop independent way of thinking, the individual has to extract himself from the clan at an extremely painful cost. He describes it in his book published in 2020 about the extreme violence of certain teenagers. In this book, he gives the example of families, especially originated from Maghreb, functioning like this and whom each diverging opinion are finally annihilated by the clan (Berger 2020).

Tribalism and clannism are very frequently mentioned as cause of Saudi conservatism by Saudi women themselves. The examples encountered during the research tend to show their etiolation because some divergent voices can now occasionally express different opinions and behaviors. This softening of clan culture can also be found in the words of the only unveiled Saudi woman of the sample. She indicates that it’s because of the higher education of both her parents that she has made them accepted the removing of her hijab. F10, 32, is far more talkative concerning the reasons why Saudi women are covered. She claims, with a certain dose of respect, that some women wear hijab because they believe in it fundamentally, but meanwhile highlights that *“some of the girls would do it just for family”*, clearly demonstrating the issue of clan culture and family pressure. Furtherly in the interview, she evokes the symbolic ban and the fact that some women are not covered when their family cannot see them: *“some of them even look like me but they just do it because they have freedom now out of their house, they don’t see their family around so they can do it, they could take it off”*

This transgression is thus possible and seems quite common. In the above case, F10 talks about kind of semi-transgression because the women mentioned will not cover themselves in front of their families but will remove their hijab while being far away from them. It is kind of an interesting in-between because one can imagine that a woman taking such risk knows that if she is caught, the sanction won’t be too severe.

These narratives are far away from the careful precautions taken by young women interviewed by Amélie le Renard in Riyadh between 2007 and 2011 (Le Renard 2014). In the abovementioned cases, the risks are assumed and calculated because the reputation of the family would be harmed but at a degree that seems acceptable. F10 tells also about the pressure she has been under and insists on the key role of her father, who protected her against one of her cousins that was a little bit too insistent regarding the fact that she removed her hijab: *“I can say some of my family tried yeah, I remember one of my cousins asked me and they said things like I could not behave as a Muslim anymore since I didn’t cover myself. Then, my dad has stood behind me and said I’m young and even it’s my choice, I’m the one who’s going to hell or heaven. It was good but at the same time I believe God not just gonna look to my looking, there is something inside my heart and how I’m acting with him.”*

The fact here is that the clan leader, the father, can impose and make accepted by the other members his daughter’s choice, including by using religious arguments. F10, as many other interviewees, is completely interiorizing her religious faith and rejects in her narrative the fact to be obliged to wear constantly religious signs. Once again, we are finding out a framework where religious become a personal affair and does not have to impinge on the free choices done by women.

Freedom of choice is to be remarked as well in the words of the most religious of Saudi interviewed: F16, who is the only one considering *hijab* is mandatory for Shias. Her narrative is obviously very different, but when this latter answers the question about the cultural aspect of *hijab*, she mentions once again the laws that have forced Saudi women to cover themselves: *“So in Saudi Arabia you know the conservatives ... the strict people who impose women to wear the hijab just because they put this law in Saudi Arabia for the Sunni.”*

Once again, according to this interviewee, law of God differs from law of men and if F16 considers that as a Shia, she must be covered and that it is not a matter of discussion, she does it because she believes personally in it and refuses that something – the state in this case – forces her, underpinning clearly that conservatives have taken benefits from the rigorous Saudi legislation to impose a certain model.

### **A veil conducting to secularism ?**

The very detailed and numerous testimonies we have collected validate the assumption of a secularization or anyway of an interiorization of the religious faith of female managers in the Gulf. Whether they are covered or not, the notion of submission through *hijab* is highly fought against by the interviewees: *hijab* has to be a choice, and this notion comes to a true obsession for most of the interviewees. At the same time, *hijab* is mainly considered as a religious tool and sometimes as an identity accessory, used to prove that women are Muslim.

However, the fact that culture and religion are often merged and the fact that *hijab* is described first – and it is a crucial point – as something freely worn

appears more and more obvious. Except for one case, interviewees insist in the fact that religion does not impose veil but only a “decent” attitude and clothing. The notion of decency is therefore sometimes described as something symbolic, as a state of mind more than something linked to the clothing strictly speaking.

Those findings tend to show that female managers from the Gulf, far from rejecting Islam, does not consider it as a key point that have to rule their lives. Former researches, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, addressing the link between Islam and women, advocating the development of Islamic feminism to help empowering Arabian women, does consequently not make sense because they tend to overestimate the weight of Islam in female managers’ daily life.

By the contrary, main constraints described here by the interviewees are purely human and temporal. Family or tribal pressures to force women to be veiled or even society pressures (reputation of the family) or from the Government (former Saudi laws imposing a very strict dress code for women) are presented as far more important challenges than the religious pressure. The clan culture, traditional and patriarchal, is rejected by those women through their individual behaviors and the example showed to their relatives, friends and peers who are observing them.

Those women often mention themselves willingly personal examples of colleagues, family members who have been kind of rebels before them and have served as role models, contributing indirectly to make their own vision evolved. This non-social move (Bayat 2013) of female managers from the Gulf constitutes, after being studied in its familial, professional and religious dimensions, a heavy tendency toward secularization, symbolization, interiorization of religious issue as well as a path to the Arabian modernity in which women would have a privileged place.

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