The Islamic veil in the Gulf and Arabian modernity: A qualitative study on female managers

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Voile islamique dans le Golfe et modernité arabe :

Une étude qualitative sur des femmes managers

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Abstract

Purpose

The aim of this study is to identify the feelings of female managers in the Gulf region about the Islamic veil, and the meanings they attribute to this veil, a key element of Arabian modernity and of the evolving gender-inclusive business environment. This three-year study, conducted in the Gulf region focused on the values of Arabian female managers after their sudden admission into the professional world, especially since the early 2000s. Twenty women participated in the qualitative study, in which semi-structured interviews were used to question interviewees about their values, notably the influence of religion on their daily behavior and way of thinking. The discussion is supported by both anthropological data and religious sources. A significant proportion of the questionnaire focused on the interviewees' religious feelings, and in particular on a crucial and controversial subject in Europe: the Islamic veil. The main findings suggest that although the Islamic veil has religious significance for the interviewees, they consistently privileged the concept of free choice, showing that female managers in the Gulf region see the veil as a form of symbolization of religious obligation, and this view is one of the essential markers of Arabian modernity.

Keywords: Hijab; veil; Gulf countries; religious culture; Arabian modernity; female empowerment

Résumé:

L'objectif de cette étude est d'identifier les sentiments et la signification que les femmes cadres du Golfe attribuent au voile islamique en tant qu'élément clé de la modernité arabe et de l'évolution de l'environnement des affaires intégrant la dimension de genre. Cette étude de trois ans menée dans la région du Golfe porte sur les valeurs portées par les femmes cadres arabes après leur entrée soudaine dans le monde professionnel, en particulier depuis le début des années 2000. 20 femmes ont participé à une étude qualitative composée d'entretiens enregistrés semi-structurés concernant leurs valeurs, notamment l'influence de la religion dans leur comportement et leur pensée au quotidien. La discussion est renforcée par l'utilisation de données anthropologiques ainsi que de

sources religieuses. Une partie importante du questionnaire a donc consisté à questionner les personnes interrogées sur leurs sentiments religieux et notamment sur un sujet crucial et controversé en Europe : le voile islamique. La principale conclusion de cette étude est que, bien que le voile ait une signification religieuse pour les personnes interrogées, la notion de libre choix est toujours mise en avant et montre une forme de symbolisation de l'obligation religieuse pour les femmes cadres de la région du Golfe qui semble être un des marqueurs essentiels de la modernité arabe.

Mots clés: Voile islamique; *Hijab*; Pays du Golfe; Culture religieuse; Modernité arabe ; Autonomisation des femmes

I. Introduction

This paper presents the first part of the findings of a longitudinal, three-year mixed-methods study conducted in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.[1] The aim of the study was to analyze the values of Arabian female managers following their admission into the professional world over the past 10 years, bringing an update to the existing research by studying two less studied countries and particularly one, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where there has been a very recent batch of reforms allegedly aiming to empower women. Twenty women took part in a qualitative study, primarily composed of recorded semi-structured interviews, in order to understand their values, in particular the influence of religion on their daily behavior and way of thinking.

This study is of particular interest given the constant rise of the proportion of women in the workforce in the Gulf countries. According to the World Bank, the percentage of women in the total labor force in Saudi Arabia rose from 10.9% in 1990 to 16.8% in 2016. Bahrain has seen a similar rise, from 17.6% to 21.3%. In Kuwait, this percentage has risen from 24.2% to 26.6%. In the United Arab Emirates, the growth has been even more substantial, rising from 10.7% to 16.7%.

Living in the Arabian Gulf, or more broadly in a Muslim-majority country, means constantly encountering the issue of attire, in particular that of women. The traditional dress of women in Saudi Arabia, which was *de facto* mandatory for women until the 2019 public statements of the rulers, is easy to describe: women were required to wear a black *abaya* (a long, voluminous dress that is supposed to conceal the attractive and shapely parts of the body) and a *hijab* (a veil that is intended to hide the hair) of the same color.[2] Actually, no formal regulation stated this obligation and those

[1] LACHERET, 2020a
[2] AL RASHEED, 2013

garments were worn mostly to comply with the weight of traditions. However, public statements from the authorities and especially from the Crown Prince were interpreted as a softening of the cultural habits. In Saudi Arabia, a woman's face is often completely hidden behind either a *niqab*, which permits others to see only the eyes, or a *burqa*, which has a narrow fabric strip between the eyes to reduce the area seen by any man who is not the husband or a close relative (*mahram*, with whom marriage is impermissible). Sometimes, more rarely, the veil obscures even the eyes by integrating a *sitar*, which is made of a thin fabric that gives only limited vision to the woman wearing it.

In the other Gulf countries, the *niqab* is less common, and the majority of the national women of these countries wear a black or colored *hijab*, according to our field observations, and sometimes an *abaya* which may not be black. In countries such as Kuwait or Bahrain, a significant proportion of local women do not cover their heads (as confirmed by field observations, especially in the pictures of the batches of the various programs at the University at which the study was conducted). As far as the external observer can tell, these women appear to live without any particular pressure from their families or peers, or from the state and its religious establishment.

Religious texts have hardly addressed the issue of how Muslim women should dress. However, several hadiths state that women around the prophet Muhammad were generally covered.[3] Nevertheless, ancient religious references provide only a few details of women's dress code. Furthermore, in the contemporary context, living in the Gulf region means being brought face-to-face on a daily basis with men's traditional garment, especially in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, men wear a long white dress (*thowb*) and a veil headdress that may be white or have a checkered red and white pattern. Therefore, while women's hair is generally never seen, men's hair is also often hidden.[4]

II. Research methodology

This research stems from a collaboration with a regional university located in Bahrain co-owned by the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) at which students and faculty members are almost 100% GCC nationals. This research involved Executive MBA students and alumni corresponding to the defined criteria (women, managers, GCC nationals, undergraduate degree at least). This Executive program was shaped in order to let the participants continue their career in their countries of origin while coming two weekends a month to Bahrain to attend the classes. Despite the fact that most of the interviews were conducted in Bahrain, not all of these women live

[3] OUARDI, 2016
[4] LINDISFARNE-TAPPER and INGHAM, 1997

in this country. We just seized the opportunity of their travelling to study in this executive program to conduct those interviews.

The qualitative research focused on analyzing the values of female managers from the Gulf region and especially women from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, to enrich the existing literature from the Gulf mainly based on women from United Arab Emirates,[5] Qatar,[6] Kuwait.[7] There is some existing researche based on anthropological sources concerning Bahrain[8] or Oman[9] but it is not based on qualitative recorded interviews.

For our study, the questionnaire was inspired by past research carried out by Memoona Tariq and Jawad Syed on a population with relatively similar characteristics: Muslim women holding managerial positions. Only two characteristics differed: in this previous study, the interviewees were living and working in Britain and most were originally from South Asia, i.e., from parts of India and Pakistan. The objective of the study was to analyze the difficulties faced by an intersectional population (females, immigrants, Muslims) in their career path.[10] For the current study, the aim of the research method was to get these women to speak of their "selves". To this end, concrete examples were given in order to "start from the experience" through discussions on the perception of the self, with expressions of emotions presented as the keys to understanding.[11] Elements of sociological evidence were then enriched by "*elements of daily experiences*", inspired by Howard Becker's methodological approach to qualitative research.[12] The interviews were conducted in English and mainly took place in the head of department's office at the university. Other interviews, however, were conducted in coffee shops. In such qualitative research, the position of the researcher himself has obviously to be questioned. He was a male, westerner and head of the executive program at the University. Therefore, those elements implied a kind of hierarchical relation for some of the women who were mostly students in this program. This position has however to be relativized due to the status of the participants themselves who had reached managerial positions in their respective companies and to their age, which was not as young as ordinary students.

Nervertheless, to test the reliability of the replies and avoid language and position bias, an assistant (Arab woman) held informal conversations in Arabic with interviewees regarding the most sensitive

[5] GOBY and EROGUL, 2011
[6] JAMES-HAWKINS, 2017
[7] SALEEM and SPEECE, 2017
[8] NAGY, 2013
[9] DECHANT and LAMKY, 2005
[10] TARIQ and SYED, 2017
[11] DE VAULT, 1999
[12] BECKER, 2014

aspects of the questionnaire to check whether there were significant discrepancies in their responses after the recorded interviews (which transpired not to be the case.)

The second part of the questionnaire was radically different from that used by Tariq and Syed:[13] due to the environment, we chose to ask several questions regarding the influence and perception of culture and religion. Consequently, there was a section on the veil, which is detailed below.

We obtained 20 recorded interviews, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, with female managers from the GCC region. The average age of the interviewees was 33 years old (from 21 to 49 years old), with ten coming from Saudi Arabia, nine from Bahrain and one from Kuwait.

The interviews took part in the Kingdom of Bahrain for practical reasons: as mentioned in appendix 1, these women were currently working and living in their countries of origin, traveling to Bahrain only to attend training courses.

Regarding their positions, two women were entrepreneurs, 15 were managers or executives in the private sector with more than five years' experience, one was a manager in the public sector and two were undergraduate students who made it possible to make comparisons with their elders.

This study was therefore clearly oriented toward middle-class educated national women of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, aiming to fill a gap in the existing literature regarding this specific aspect of the significance of the veil for women of these two countries. The first and main difference between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and Gulf countries such as Kuwait, UAE or Qatar is the proportion of nationals among the total population, which is far greater in the first two. Qatari nationals are around 11% of the population, Emiratis are 12% and Kuwaitis 25% while 45% of the Bahraini population and 60% of the Saudi population are nationals. The second difference lies in the income per capita, which is significantly different too. According to the World Bank, the GDP per capita was 59,330 US dollars in Qatar, 45,189 in Kuwait, 43,420 in the UAE, but only 24,454 in Saudi Arabia and 27,926 in Bahrain as can be seen in appendix 2. Therefore, such a study on Saudi and Bahraini female managers seems useful to enrich the existing literature.

As staff members, the female managers interviewed are completely embedded in their companies, expressing no particular distance with their male counterparts, especially when they have to manage or supervise them. Culturally, the professional environment described by the interviewees appears to them as being protected from a number of local customs and habits of the region especially regarding patriarchal attitudes and gender segregation for instance. To a certain extent, it seems that

[13] TARIQ and SYED, 2017

the managerial codes are at least partially erasing the eventual difficulties faced by women in other places.

This is obviously one of the limitations of the study. The interviewees are English speakers and, therefore, non-English speakers have not been interviewed. Moreover, most of the women interviewed are members of the middle class and upper middle class. The sample could be compared to the one formed by Amélie Le Renard, who studied difficulties encountered by female bank employees in Riyadh in the early 2010s.[14] However, the main difference lies in national regulations which have been widely changed between 2012 (when Le Renard did her research) and the time we did our research (2019–2020). Actually, one of Le Renard's decisive arguments was that Saudi women were mostly stuck in those jobs because large sectors of economy were still not opened to them, which is no longer the case since the late 2010s. Thus, it is now far easier for them to resign and move to another company.

We have not been able to interview lower social categories. However, in Gulf countries, it is noticeable that the lowest positions are often occupied by foreigners (55% of the population in Bahrain, 75% in Kuwait and 40% in Saudi Arabia for instance), especially from South Asia. The proportion of low-income nationals is therefore far lower than in the Western world, despite the fact that even the lower-skilled jobs are also being nationalized, such as in supermarkets, front-desk positions in tourist facilities or in hotels and restaurants.

In addition, we conducted ethnographic observations during multiple professional visits and informal discussions with colleagues, students and various actors in the region. Focus groups were also organized in collaboration with a professor, a specialist in Islamic marketing. Small groups of participants were gathered together (with a mean age of 35 years old) and questioned on different aspects of their family, professional and private life in the Gulf to understand the research context better.

This mixed-methods exploratory study therefore relied on an inductive approach aligned with an interpretivist philosophy. The data analysis process involved coding the transcripts in order to identify the sense given to the *hijab*, the expressed level of religious commitment, personal definitions of decency and modesty and the level of interaction between religion and civil life. Coded data was then compared with the results from ethnographic observations in order to apply a final test of their relevance.

III. Review of the literature

[14] LE RENARD, 2013

It seems worth mentioning that the objective of this study is not to identify a precise and definitive meaning of the veil worn by some Muslim women or to arbitrate between the multiple studies that have already addressed this issue. What remains particularly significant in the western mindset and in the various public debates is the idea that the veil is a tool of submission to men and/or God. The psychoanalyst Fehti Benslama insists on the fact that Muslim religious doctrine emphasizes the notion of gaze.[15]

The veil, therefore, would be a tool aiming to protect a woman from the male gaze, not because a man would be perverted by seeing a woman, but because a woman is supposedly a carrier of evil and sin. A woman would thus psychologically perceive her body as a source of evil, temptation and seduction.[16]

This view of women stems from several narrations, such as the one attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib, son-in-law of the Prophet (p): "*Woman is entirely made of evil and the worst evil in her is that she is indispensable*" (Bihâr al-Anwâr, 100/252.) The notion of evil is not limited to any particular sect. In one of the leading hadith books, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, it is stated:

> *"Evil omen was mentioned before the Prophet: The Prophet (p) said, "If there is evil omen in anything, it is in the house, the woman and the horse." (Vol. 7, Book 62, Hadith 31)*

Naturally, there are serious questions about such hadiths, a thorough examination of which is well beyond the scope of this study.[17] The idea that it would be necessary to hide women's bodies, isolate them or even separate them, all symbolized by the Islamic veil, underlies the thoughts regarding this subject in France and many other western countries.

Within the framework of the study on values among female managers in the Gulf, it thus appeared relevant to analyze interviewees' opinions regarding the Islamic veil. In the Western world, the Islamic veil is increasingly perceived as an attempt to claim an identity. It is difficult to assign it the same role in a Muslim-majority country, especially a country in the heartland of Islam, now part of Saudi Arabia. Among the 20 women in our sample, four did not wear *hijab* (this is not statistically relevant because women were selected based on their professional positions rather on their attire).

Papers about Islamic veil in the Middle East tend to show that it creates the illusion of a coherent gender category, but it is essentially used as a political tool for western observers. As Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Ingham note, "veiling" may be held to indicate potentially anything the analysts want. However, as they mention in their book, the problem is that there is no single

[15] BENSLAMA, 2002
[16] CHAMOUN, 2004
[17] FAROOQ, 2011

garment, nor any single woman or man.[18] Therefore, our study must be read not only through a religious lens but also, and it appears obvious in the verbatim, with a strong cultural view. Questions around the veil appeared 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 questions were designed in a very oriented way and were supposed to reflect the projected personality of the lead researcher, specifically, a French Westerner. These questions thus sought to spark a personal reaction from the interviewees. We therefore preferred to avoid questioning them about the veil in general, because in the Arab world, the *hijab* is a common accessory. Rather, our questions revolved around the alleged westerner's vision of the veil worn by Muslim women. The question was framed as follows: "*In some western countries the fact that Muslim women are sometimes covered is seen as a sign of submission to Islamic law. What do you think of this statement?*"

This question, which was framed differently depending on how the interviews were unfolding, systematically led to rich and long answers from the interviewees. While we believed that the women may have been offended because of the criticism inherent in the questions, it was surprisingly quite easy to collect data on an issue that we had expected to be quite sensitive. This may be explained by the fact that the "*hijab* affairs" in the Western world, particularly in France, are highly commented on in the press and media in the Arab world in general and in the Gulf in particular.

The issue of the veil provides an opportunity to point out the distinction between religion and culture. In Saudi Arabia particularly, the concept of choice did not exist at all before September 2019 because the *hijab* was considered legally mandatory for Muslim women (even though the sources of law in Saudi Arabia are not clear regarding this subject). Amélie Le Renard,[19] in her study conducted between 2008 and 2011 in Riyadh with women between the ages of 18 and 25, did not observe a clearly expressed religious significance of the *hijab* or the *niqab*. For her interviewees, the *hijab* was mandatory and women had to deal with it, even while being at the boundary of the Saudi law and at risk of being confronted by the religious police. In her papers and books, Le Renard mentions some visible fancy accessories – jewels, make up, lighter or colored *hijab*s that reveal hair – that permitted a woman to differentiate herself in this "*society of young women*" which resided primarily in secluded places and were allowed to meet men only if they were their *mahram* relatives. While Saudi authorities justified the mandatory law on clothing imposed on women using religious and cultural reasons, the interviewees questioned by the anthropologist did not seem to pay any particular attention to such rationales.

[18] LINDISFARNE-TAPPER and INGHAM, 1997
[19] LE RENARD, 2011; LE RENARD, 2013; LE RENARD, 2014

The other role of the traditional dress is to maintain a certain distance with non-Nationals and therefore it is not strictly linked to religion. Sulayman Khalaf,[20] studying the wearing of national dress for both genders in the United Arab Emirates, found that this dress, including the *hijab* and abaya, were clearly a way to express national identity. Such an explanation is obviously possible in our cases but might be more relevant in countries where only around 10% of the population are nationals, which is not the case in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

IV. Findings

1. A veil of modesty

The data collected about the meaning attributed to the veil revealed that the responses were classic and quite similar to the studies mentioned above in the literature review, albeit with several interesting differences.

First, the veil is considered by some interviewees as a synonym of decency and dignity because, according to them, it helps a woman to hide her beauty from the external world. Elaborating 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 of a woman, why would you like to show your most beautiful part to the entire world? Why not keep it as something private to those who you really love, and who you really care about?*"

F17 (37, Bahraini) using a similar argument was clearly referring to men's gazes, from which religion aims to protect her.

The argument that a woman must preserve her beauty in order to show it to the men she loves most was frequently repeated by the interviewees.

The terms modesty and decency were also frequently mentioned by these women, who used them to explain the meaning they gave to the veil but here by highlighting its non-mandatory character for Muslims. This concept of choice, which was repeatedly raised during the conversations and which will be addressed in depth later, is linked to the idea of modesty. The fact that the veil is not very present in the religious texts allows women to consider that it is non-mandatory, and to deduce that the only real religious prescription is to be dressed in a modest and decent way. Indeed, this seems to be the direction taken by the 2019 Saudi regulation regarding clothing, which mentions that men

[20] KHALAF, 2005

and women must be dressed modestly, without providing further details.[21] In the new Saudi law, there is no mention of a specific kind of clothing but simply a request to be "*conservative and appropriate*".

Relying on these elements of language, many interviewees justified the fact that the *hijab* was no longer mandatory. Thus, F13 (21, Saudi) relativized the importance of hair: "*You can wear decent clothes. That's like we should look decent. It's not about showing your hair; hair is not everything*". F4 (36, Bahraini) went further by transforming the concept of decency into a symbol and giving it a cultural dimension. Being herself covered, she specified:

> "*What is it about covering? Covering is about being a decent woman, 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 if she is fully exposed, if she is decent, she is a decent woman*".

Being "*decent*" was thus the rule that guided most of the interviewees who, except for one woman, all considered that the *hijab* was not an obligation (although only 4 out of 20 of them were notcovered during the interview). This notion of decency can be very symbolic, as the case of F4 shows, but it can also be far more precise, as shown by the case of F2 (29, Bahraini) who, despite being unveiled, describes in detail those parts of the female body that have to remain covered in order to remain "decent".

2. A religious decency?

This concept of decency obviously has its roots in a religious background that is frequently referred to when evoking the veil. However, the degree to which these religious explanations were used varied widely from one interviewee to another. Therefore, religious knowledge and the amount of detail used to justify the wearing of the veil differed depending on the woman interviewed. While most of these women spoke of the *hijab* as religious, they showed neither strong conviction, and nor did they accord much importance to it.

Some of them, mostly those from Saudi Arabia, attempted to compare three monotheist religions and concluded in favor of Islam. According to F2 (29, Bahraini, uncovered), Islam does not mandate women to cover their hair, unlike Christianity or Judaism.

[21] See for instance https://agsiw.org/the-public-decency-law-and-the-shaping-of-the-saudi-identity/

Naturally, F2 was not the only unveiled woman to use religious argumentation to justify the use of the Islamic veil. F3 (29, Kuwaiti) explained that the *hijab* is an instrument that permits one to identify a woman as a Muslim, thus giving the veil a clear identity role. This was quite surprising for F3 who looked like and behaved like a Westerner. In response, we asked her about her own religious feelings and whether she considered herself a Muslim. After a brief hesitation, she rephrased her first response, stating that the veil was, after all, a personal choice. Speaking of her own case, she considered that she could live her faith as she pleased because she bothered no one: "*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*…"

Although the religious argument was often used, it was particularly difficult to find shared spiritual thoughts regarding the *hijab*. Religion is, as we have pointed out, often depicted as "our" religion and therefore appears as a common pretext to justify the use of the veil by avoiding overly deep reflection on the subject of whether one wears it or not. Thus, F10 (32, uncovered Saudi) explained that the *hijab* was obviously a religious prescription, but not wearing it did not make her a bad Muslim. Once again, a comparison was made with Christians in churches. F10 said that some Christians covered their hair when entering a church, but others did not, and the latter were not considered to be bad Christians.

Islam therefore appears as something that is, as something that cannot be criticized directly (except for some interviewees' occasional rare and timid words, such as some of the youngest interviewees explaining that they are no longer following the religious commandments, finding them backward). It also appears as something that provides numerous explanations and justifications that range from a complete obligation to adopt a specific behavior, to the possibility of living life freely without any particular constraints. The data collected show that the definition of religion varies widely. While some interviewees saw Islam as a strict regulatory guide whose commandments were supposed to structure the believer's life, others had internalized their religion. This suggests that some interviewees saw Islam as somehow comprised of a set of different boxes where it was possible to pick some values and obligations and ignore those that appeared too constraining. For those who had internalized their religion, the minimal requirement to be a good Muslim was to have faith; this was viewed as far more important than the adoption of a particular behavior.

3. A cultural veil?

During the interviews, conversations on the veil were the longest and the most documented. Quite early on, we thus felt that a religious explanation was not enough and that it would be necessary to

reopen the discussion when the interviewees privileged explanations around Arab or Gulf culture rather than giving a well-structured religious set of arguments.

The first non-religious argument about the *hijab* was linked to the climate. F2 (29, Bahraini) perfectly summarized this argument by explaining that historically, the Gulf region required a head covering to avoid sun, sand and dust. This explanation was similar to the one about men wearing a *thowb* and the traditional male veil which was often given. Indeed, they often referred to the past of Bedouins in the desert, mentioning even the pre-Qur'anic past.

Questions on submission were often understood as submission to family, to traditions and to patriarchy. The religious veil had to be freely chosen and in the interviewees' minds, constraints could only be cultural. According to F4 (36, Bahraini), the reflection on the "cultural" veil goes even further because a woman cannot only be forced to wear the *hijab*, but can also wear it in a "proselyte" way: "*I understand that there are women who are covered in an offensive way, and who are forced to cover up themselves*".

According to her, "culture" is thus sometimes responsible for the "enslavement" of women because it can lead families to force their daughters to cover themselves. Those testimonies can thus been linked to those collected by Madawi Al-Rasheed with women explaining that culture more than religion was responsible for the difficulties encountered by women.[22]

F17 (37, Bahraini) interpreted the former Saudi law which required the wearing of the veil as a cultural obligation: "*I can say that most of it is happening in Saudi. Why? Because the government forced them in the beginning, but not now; now they are free. In the beginning, they were forced to wear a hijab whether they like it or not. For us here, no, it's our religion but in some of the countries it's because of the culture.*"

According to F12 (28, Bahraini), "*conservative religious people*" were guilty of not adapting to the changing world. It was therefore clear to her that the cultural practices that had arisen from a bad interpretation of Islam had to evolve. Those "conservatives" were frequently mentioned by the interviewees.

This concept of free choice, as revealed by the responses of the interviewees, especially the covered ones, was linked to the issue of the age at which women began to be required to wear the *hijab*. The data collected showed a unanimous disapproval for the custom to cover girls who were too young. F11 (28, Bahraini) summarized this general feeling:

[22] AL RASHEED, 2013

"*I do know women in Bahrain, and in Saudi, and in other countries, who are suppressed and are forced to wear an abaya. I've seen 6-year-olds, 7-year-olds, and 10-year-olds. 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*".

Gulf female managers who are micro-models for their relatives[23] systematically described being covered as something personal that cannot and must not be imposed, qualifying traditional families that force their girls to wear the *hijab* as backward and outdated.

The argument, raised notably by F17, that Saudi women would answer differently is here perfectly justified. Indeed, the word "force" appeared more than 20 times in the narratives of the Bahraini women about the *hijab*, but only once in those of the Saudi women (it was only mentioned in one sentence explaining that Jews had the custom of covering their women).

Questions about the *hijab* led to the greatest discrepancies depending on nationality. Saudi Arabian interviewees appeared unconcerned with the notion of forced veiling because this had not been a relevant issue in the Kingdom for decades. F1 (28, Saudi) explained that it had never been an issue for her because she grew up surrounded by *hijabs*, and that to her it was obvious that it was mandatory.

Here, culture and religion are merged in the same sentence and reinforced: not only "our religion" says so but "our culture" says the same.

F13 (21, Saudi) also described her family environment while evoking the issue of the veil. She mentioned one of her cousins who had decided to remove hers without any opposition from her father. F13 therefore described a family where every woman wore the *hijab* (including her), but also the violation of this unwritten rule. She spoke about the reaction of the father, who was full of tolerance and who ultimately accepted his uncovered daughter, in a way that shows an aspect commonly raised by Saudi interviewees, i.e., the progressive end of tribal or clan culture.

Tribalism and clannism were very frequently mentioned as the cause of Saudi conservatism by Saudi women themselves. This softening of clan culture can also be found in the words of the only unveiled Saudi woman of the sample. She mentioned that it was because of the higher education of both her parents that she was able to make them accept her removal of the *hijab*. F10, 32, was far more expressive concerning the reasons why Saudi women are covered. She claimed, quite respectfully, that some women wore it because they believed in it fundamentally, but also pointed out that "*some of the girls would do it just for family*", clearly demonstrating the issue of clan culture and family

[23] LACHERET, 2020b

pressure. She further evoked the symbolic ban and the fact that some women did not cover themselves when their family could not 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 can take it off*".

These narratives are quite distant from the careful precautions taken by the young women interviewed by Amélie le Renard in Riyadh between 2007 and 2011.[24] Obviously, those precautions shows the extent of the change in legislation between the two studies despite the fact that the profiles of the interviewees were close (middle-class educated Saudi women). In our study, the risks were assumed and calculated because the reputation of the family could have been harmed, but to an acceptable degree. F10 also talked about the pressure she had been under and emphasized the key role of her father, who had defended her removal of the *hijab* against one of her cousins who was a little too insistent that it should be worn.

It is evident here that the clan leader, the father, can impose and make accepted his daughter's choice by the other family members, using religious arguments. F10, like many other interviewees, completely internalized her religious faith and rejected being obliged to constantly wear religious signs. Once again, we observe reference to religion as a personal affair which does not have to impinge on the free choice of women.

The concept of freedom of choice was also frequently present in the discourse of the most religious Saudi Arabian woman interviewed, F16, who was the only one who considered the *hijab* as mandatory for Shias like her. Her narrative was obviously quite different from that of the other women, but when responding to questions about the cultural aspects of *hijab*, she talked about the laws that had forced Saudi women to cover themselves.

Once again, this interviewee revealed the perception that the law of God differs from the law of men; if F16 considered that, as a Shia, she must be covered and that it was not a matter of discussion, she did it because this was also her personal belief and she thus rejected the idea that something – the state in this case – forced her to do so, underpinning clearly that conservatives have taken advantage of the rigorous Saudi legislation to impose a certain model.

V. Conclusion: a new awareness among Muslim women in the Gulf region?

[24] LE RENARD, 2014

The detailed and numerous testimonies collected validate the assumption of a secularization or an internalization of the religious faith of the female managers that were interviewed in the Gulf. Whether they are covered or not, the notion of submission through the *hijab* was highly contested by the interviewees: the *hijab* had to be a choice, and most of the interviewees genuinely supported this notion. At the same time, the *hijab* is primarily perceived as a religious tool, and occasionally as an identity accessory used to symbolize that women are Muslim, although it has been highlighted in the literature that traditional dresses were also features of shaping national identity.[25] However, the fact that culture and religion were often merged, and that the *hijab* was described first – and this is a crucial point – as something freely worn appeared increasingly obvious. Except for one case, the interviewees insisted on the fact that religion did not impose the veil but only "decent" attitudes and attire. The concept of decency was therefore sometimes described as something symbolic, as a state of mind rather than something linked to one's attire, strictly speaking.

Our findings show that far from rejecting Islam, many female managers from the Gulf region increasingly do not consider it as something which should rule their lives. Past studies on the relationship between Islam and women, which we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, advocate the development of Islamic feminism to help empower Arabian women. In our view, this may seem unnecessary for the women we interviewed because these studies tend to overestimate the weight of Islam in their daily lives and its capacity to serve as a conduit for collective and political mobilization.[26] Most recent studies, aiming to understand the political commitment of Saudi women after the first municipal elections in 2015 tended to show that indeed, the collective mobilization of Saudi women had not especially developed and that according to them, most of the changes have to be obtained without using collective engagement.[27] The main constraints described by the interviewees were purely human and temporal. Family or tribal pressure forcing women to be veiled, societal pressure (reputation of the family), or government pressure (former Saudi laws imposing a very strict dress code for women) were presented as far more important challenges than religious pressure. The traditional and patriarchal clan culture was rejected by these women through their individual behaviors and through the example given to their relatives, friends and peers who were observing them.

These women often willingly mentioned personal examples of colleagues and family members who had been somewhat rebellious before them and had therefore served as role models, indirectly contributing to the evolution of their own vision. This social non-movement (Bayat, 2013) of female

[25] KHALAF, 2005; AKINCI, 2019
[26] AL RASHEED, 2013
[27] KAROLAK and GUTA, 2020

managers from the Gulf, which has been analyzed in its familial, professional and religious dimensions, reveals a strong tendency toward the secularization, symbolization and interiorization of religious issues.

It is also consistent with the growing awareness among Muslim women that their choice matters, from an Islamic viewpoint, and that their choice to go outside the home and choose to work or even pursue leadership positions is not necessarily un-Islamic. Naturally, this has encouraged many women to seek their place in modern times, while keeping their faith in what they hold dear.

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Appendices

Table 1: interviewee participant profiles

	Nationality	Age	Status	Children	Dress code: Veil (V) Abaya (A) Neither (N)	Family: Brothers (B) Sisters (S), Unknown (U)	Position
F1	Saudi	27	Single	0	V	3S/2B	IT knowledge manager
F2	Bahraini	29	Single	0	N	1B	CEO
F3	Saudi	29	Single	0	N	2S/2B	Senior relationship officer
F4	Bahraini	36	Married	1	V	1S/2B	Financial controller
F5	Bahraini	32	Single	1	V A	4B	Financial Auditor
F6	Bahraini	34	Married	0	V	U	Financial controller
F7	Saudi	36	Married	3	V A	4B	Planning manager
F8	Saudi	36	Single	0	V A	3S/1B	Senior accounting analyst
F9	Saudi	49	Married	6	V	U	HR Manager
F10	Saudi	32	Single	0	N	7S/5B	Public relation manager
F11	Bahraini	29	Single	0	V	4B	General Manager
F12	Bahraini	28	Single	0	V	U	Sale administrator
F13	Saudi	21	Single	0	V	U	Bachelor
F14	Saudi	38	Single	0	V	2B/1S	Civil service commission manager
F15	Bahraini	21	Single	0	N	1B	Trainee
F16	Saudi	38	Single	0	V A	U	HR Manager
F17	Bahraini	37	Married	3	V A	1S	Head of sales
F18	Bahraini	35	Married	3	V	3B	Program coordinator
F19	Saudi	35	Single	0	V A	U	HRM

Table 2: focus group participant profiles

	Nationality	Age	Status	Position	Company	Education level
Rasheed	Saudi	39	Married	Improvement specialist	Chemical Industry / + 10000 employees	MBA
Muhamad	Bahraini	21	Single	Trainee	Hotel	MBA
Karim	Bahraini	28	Marrie	Sales manager	Metal industry / 500-3000	MBA

			d		employees	
Rayan	Bahraini	25	Single	Supervisor	Ministry	Bachelor
Mehdi	Saudi	32	Married	Customer care coordinator	Chemical Industry / + 10000 employees	MBA
Ali	Saudi	31	Single	HR coordinator	Oil and Gas / + 10000 employees	MBA
Ahmine	Saudi	54	Married	Training supervisor	Oil and Gas / + 10000 employees	MBA
Louna	Saudi	30	Single	Consultant	Audit company	MBA

Table 3: statistics of GCC countries (2019)

	Population	**GDP/Cap**	**GDP/PPP**	**National/Population**
Koweït	4.2 million	45189	70785	25%
Saudi Arabia	31 million	24454	52183	60%
UAE	9.2 million	41420	67119	11%
Oman	4.1 million	21456	43304	68%
Bahrain	1.7 million	27926	49633	45%
Qatar	2.5 million	59330	145894	12%

Source : World Bank