WOMEN IN ISLAM – Module

Hannah N. Geffert  
Shepherd College

**LESSON PLANS:**

Introduction: This unit will discuss what symbolic policy is and use as an example the wearing of the veil in various countries to illustrate how the wearing of the veil (hijab) has different meanings in different countries, at different times.

Topic: Symbolic Policy and the Use of the Veil: Turkey, Egypt, and Afghanistan.

Goals: To define symbolic policy and to illustrate this through the example of the wearing of the veil in three different countries—Turkey, Egypt, and Afghanistan.

**Objectives:**

1. Students will be able to differentiate between material and symbolic policy.

2. Students will be able to define symbolic policy.

3. Student will understand that woman can make a symbolic political statement by either wearing or not wearing the veil.

4. Students will have a beginning understanding of the position of women in Sha’ria.

5. Students will be introduced to what the Qur’an says regarding the wearing of the veil.

6. Students will be aware that there are a variety of hijab (veils)—burka, chador, nikab, etc. —that are worn by Muslim women in different countries.

7. Students will be able to discuss the practical reasons for and against women wearing a veil.

8. Students will be able to discuss the political reasons for and against women wearing a veil.

9. Students will be able to discuss the difference between a secular state and a state with an established religion.

10. Students will have a beginning understanding of why Turkish government officials have made the decisions they have regarding hijab.

11. Students will have a beginning understanding of why Egyptian government officials have made the decisions they have regarding hijab.

12. Students will have a beginning understanding of why Afghani government officials have made the decisions they have regarding hijab.

13. Students will understand the complexity of decision making that women in Afghanistan, Turkey and Egypt faced when deciding to wear or not to wear a veil.

14. Students will understand that Islamic some women take active roles in the political life of their nations.

**Activities and Learning Strategies:**

Lecture – See narrative.

Film – Show Veiled Revolution (Icarus Film, 1982) about 30 minutes.

Show slides of different types of veils.

Role Play – Let people in the class try on head scarves, gloves, long outer garments.

Participation in relevant out-of class event – Have students wear headscarves in the community while going about their daily business and ask them to record people’s reaction.

Class discussion – Have students discuss their experiences wearing a veil.

In-class Debate – Have students debate if they would wear a veil or not in the United States. Why?

Closure: The lesson will end with a statement that emphasizes that Muslim women chose to wear or not to wear the veil for a variety of reasons, and that getting women out of the veil should not be an end in itself for people trying to improve the situation of Muslim women, although it could be a strong symbolic statement.

**REVISED SYLLABUS**

See Attached: “Introduction to Women’s Studies”   
“Politics and Government”

[Please Note: These are not attached in the electronic copy.]

The attachments are the old syllabi from two courses—“Introduction to Women’s Studies and “Politics and Government”—where this lesson will be utilized. The “Introduction to Women’s Studies” course is being revised, and will include a section on Women in Politics. In the Politics and Government course the syllabus itself will not be altered because the topics of material and symbolic policy are already in the course. However, the example used for symbolic policy will be the wearing or not wearing of the veil.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION: The following is a summary of the lecture part of the module and the topics to be covered:

Public policy can be either material policy or symbolic policy. Material policy deals with authoritative governmental decisions that require expenditure of public funds; where symbolic policy usually does not require an outlay of money but can be more important or controversial than material policy. In many Muslim nations the wearing of the veil has had enormous symbolic importance.

The veil symbolized many things to different people. Though typically associated with religion and ethnic customs, the veil also has great political, religious and cultural significance. For many Western, non-Muslims, it represents the repression of women in the Islamic faith. But if when we understand the complexity of the veil and of women’s place in Islam a more sophisticated, and accurate understanding emerges.

Under Qur’anic law women have a number of protection and rights. Shi’ria (Islamic Law):

* prohibits the practice of female infanticide,
* prohibits men from expelling women from their homes or from eating from the same pot as men during menstruation, and
* prohibits men from inheriting their wives from their dead fathers.

Women’s rights are protected with regard to whom they marry, to marriage contracts stipulations, to use of their maiden names, to divorce, to an education. And the killing of a woman is equal to the killing of a man. (Handout from “Women in Islam” course.)

The wearing of the veil can be traced to Qur’ranic verses regarding hijab. Hijab literally means a “descended” curtain (sitr). It is used to mean veil, partition, separation, or a screen. The term hijab occurs seven times in the Qur’an – 19:17, 38:32, 17:45; 41:5, 42:51; 7:46 and 33:53. The verse that is pointed to most often with regard to hijad is Verse 53 of Sura 33:

Oh believers, do not enter the Prophet’s houses except that permission is given you for a meal, without waiting for its time. But when you are invited (or, called) enter, and when you have eaten, disperse, without seeking familiarity for talk. This used to cause the Prophet annoyance, and he is ashamed (or, bashful) of you. But G-d is not ashamed of what is right. And if you ask them (the women) for a thing, then ask them from behind a hijab. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. And it is not for you to cause annoyance to G-d’s Messenger, nor that you should marry his wives after him. Truly this with G-d would be enormous. (Qur’an 33:53)

The descent of the hijab was the curtain that the Prophet drew between himself and the man who was at the entrance of his nuptial chamber. Hijab rule in its original meaning was a “screen of separation” from strangers in the home. Anything that separates and protects is hijab.

There are three dimensions to the concept of hijab all of which relate to each other:

* a visual dimension – to hide something from sight;
* a spatial dimension – to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold; and
* an ethical dimension – something that dwells in the realm of the forbidden. (Mernissi, 93)

Muslim women cover themselves in their mantles or cloaks (jalabib, singular jilbab) when abroad “so that they be known as free women not, slaves and not molested in the streets by the hypocrites, and those in whose hearts is disease, and those who stir up sedition in the City (al-Madina).” (See: Qur’an 33:59-60)

The veil existed before Islam existed. Veiling and seclusion were marks of prestige and symbols of status in the Assyrian, Greco-Roman and Byzantine empires as well as in pre-Islamic Iran. Veiling, however, has been embraced and spread by the religion. Even during the early interpretation of hijab and the wearing of the veil became part of Islamic life for religious reasons, there were political/social implications in its implementation. It legitimized the medieval institution of women’s segregation that became a distinctive feature of life for at least the upper-class urban dwellers among them. (Stowasser, 98) The veil did not appear as a common rule to be followed until around the tenth century.

Hijab refers to the variety of styles in which women use scarves and large pieces of cloth to cover their hair, neck and sometimes shoulders. Not all Muslim women wear a veil. Among those who do wear a veil, styles vary wildly, from simple kerchiefs to elaborate head-scarves to full face-and-body coverings. The veil takes on different forms in different countries:

Burka refers to a cloak like pleated garment that covers the body from head to foot, fitting closely over the head and face with a mesh area in from of their eyes. The burka comes in many variations, but in its most conservative form of hijab, it thoroughly covers the face, with only a mesh-like screen to see through. This is what the Taliban regime required women in Afghanistan to wear. The burka is thought to have originated in the Arabian peninsula and is still worn there by some women. Some burkas allow part of a woman’s face to be seen.

Chador is the full-body cloak Muslim women in Iran wear. The chador may or may not cover the face. The chador was forbidden in Iran under the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, but after the shah was exiled during the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the chador became required wear for Iranian women

Nikab is the form veil that comes closest to what is meant by the English word “veil.” The nika, is a veil that covers everything below the bridge of the nose and the upper cheeks, and sometimes also covers the forehead.

Headscarves are worn by some Muslin women in the United States and other western countries who wish to observe hijab.

For many from the West, the veil in is a symbol of female repression; however, this piece of clothing has much more meaning attached to it. Variations in color and fashion can reflect a woman’s political and religious belief. Even with women within the same family, opinions on the veil may vary widely. One woman may wear the veil to reflect her religious belief and feels naked without it. Another woman might wear a veil because of government requirements, fearing that breaking the law of hijab that could result in imprisonment, harassment or physical punishment. Another woman might wear a veil to reflect her political beliefs. Even Islamic feminist are divided on the wearing of the veil.

The veil has been used to as a symbolic political statement throughout history. It can be used as political protest or to show political support. In Algeria, women protested French colonial rule by wearing black veils instead of the traditional white veil. In Iran, as the political rulers of the country changed, women either put on the veil or took them off. Women were forced to unveil to under the Shah and then forced to veil under the Ayatollah Khomeini for religious as well as political reasons. By telling women they must veil the Ayatollah was protesting Western culture hegemony, using it to symbolize the theocratic nature of the government in Iran. It was even suggested that failure to wear a veil would cause the downfall of the Iranian Islamic Republic. Even in non-Muslim countries the veil has political implications. In France, for example a 1994 French governmental decree barred pupils from wearing or carrying any signs of a religious or political nature, including the veil.

Formal compliance with veiling does not necessarily mean commitment to all the ideology associated with it. The veil is worn for various reasons, not all connected with religion. Some women wear it as part of ethical and social customs. The veil can be a social symbol or used as protection from male harassment. The veil has been the cause for personal dilemmas to some women who wear it yet seek to maintain a non-segregated life-style. (Haddad, Islam, Gender, etc., pp 182) It has been used as a symbol of nationalist and gender resistance in national liberation struggle. It can be viewed as a political statement announcing an Islamic sympathy. (Haddad, Islam, Gender, etc., pp 203) The hijab has come to signify the sum total of traditional institutions governing women’s role in Islamic Society. In the ideological struggles surrounding the definition of Islam’s nature and role in the modern world, the hijab has acquired the status of “cultural symbol” (Stowasser, 127) And in contemporary society where religion and politics are so directly linked, the veil can be as much a political symbol as a religious statement.

Three examples of different political situations giving rise to enforcing or restricting hijab as a symbolic policy of the state can be seen in the experience of women in Turkey, Egypt, and Afghanistan.

Turkey became a sovereign state after World War I and established a republic under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. During this early republican period there were dramatic transformations of Turkish society. Ataturk, began to build a secular nation-state in 1923. He denounced the veil, calling it demeaning and a hindrance to civilized nation. But he did not outlaw it. Women were enfranchised beginning with municipal elections in 1930 and gained the vote on the national level by 1935. Islamic “dress” and veiling was actively discouraged by the government; and women were encouraged to enter the workforce and public life. (Meriwether, 16) This was part of a conscious effort to create a secular state in Turkey.

Since the “soft coup” by the army in 1997, the secular nature of the Turkish state has been underscored by restrictions on state employees. Prohibition of Islamic “dress” and other forms of public identification with Islam apply to both men and women. Men are forbidden from wearing a beard, and women from veiling including wearing a headscarf. In addition, employees are not allowed to pray at work, and risk loosing their jobs if they are seen praying in public. Even the army has purged several generals who were discovered to be praying at home.

Restrictions also apply to schools. Since the beginning of the 1998 academic year, students have been prohibited from wearing headscarves at universities. Some schools have chosen not to implement the ban, but the majority of schools have barred students wearing a veil from entering school grounds. Police have been called to campuses on a daily basis to remove veiled women students. On October 11, 1998, there was a demonstration across Turkey where four million people formed a human chain in various cities to protest the restriction on public identification with Islamic.

In Egypt the veil took on a different symbolic meaning.

In earlier times, for example under the Mamluks, repeated decrees were issued requiring veiling and restricting the right of women to take part in activities outside their home. This was done in the name of protecting women and protecting society from immoral women.

In the nineteenth century, when Qasim Amin, a French-educated, pro-Western Egyptian spoke of “bringing Egyptian society from its state of ‘backwardness’ into a state of civilization and ‘modernity,’ he lashing out against the hijab…. [h]e understood the hijab as an amalgam of institutionalized restrictions on women that consisted of sexual segregation, domestic seclusion and the face veil.” (Stowasser, 127) Another argument was made in 1910 by al-Zahawi (a teacher at Baghdad law school). He published an article in a Cairo journal that called for women to discard the veil. His argument was that the anonymity of the veil provided women with the opportunity to betray their men; that the veiling of women made it easier for them to go anywhere they wanted without being recognized; that the isolation that the veil led women to form relationships with servants, and that it did not preserve honor. (Sonbol, 179.)

For many nationalist there was close link between the emancipation of women and rejection of veiling to national movements for independence. They called for the liberation of women as an important way to convince the colonial powers that colonial subjects were ready and able to govern themselves. Women were encouraged to be symbols of the new state. In the early twentieth century some educated women started to abandon the veil. In 1923, Huda Shaarawi undertook the most dramatic, public unveiling. By mid-century it was not unusual to see unveiled women on the streets of Cairo.

Egyptian law does not prohibit or enforce the hijab. Unlike Turkey where veiling is restricted or in ultra-conservative states like Saudi Arabia and Iran that require women to wear a veil, in Egypt there are subtle pressures exerted by state authorities on women to avoid the veil. For example, state universities authorities cite security reasons for prohibiting women from wearing the niqab. Women in the state-run television rarely are seen wearing the veil.

In the mid-1960’s and 1970’s, some women started to make different choices encouraged by an Islamic revival and the rise of political Islam. This is true especially among young women from wealthier families. While the veil has been common and part of the culture in rural and poorer communities, it is now becoming popular in urban areas. Since September 11, 2001, the trend toward veiling has been on the rise as many Muslims reject Western dress and culture as a response to perceived prejudice of the West towards Islam.

Another example of the relation between symbolic public policy and the veil can be seen in Afghanistan under the Taliban. World attention was drawn to the plight of Afghani women after the Taliban ceased control of Kabul in September 1996. The Taliban was initially supported partly because it was reputed to provide protection for women who had become targets of sexual abuse under the previous government. The Taliban issued rules for women during a radio broadcast. The new restrictions on women were draconian Women and girls were:

* a. banned from schools and universities,
* b. prohibited from working outside the home,
* c. required to have male relatives escort then in public,
* d. required to be veiled from head to foot.

There were also rules applicable to men. Men were:

* a. not permitted to shave or trim their beards
* b. not permitted to wear Western clothes
* c. required to pray five times a day (Mertus, 53)

These rules were strictly enforced through public executions and amputations.

Afghan women, divided by class, education, ethnicity, and tribal linkages, perceived the Taliban issued rule in vastly different ways. Rural women follow traditional, more conservative practices basically in line with the Taliban edicts. However, even some of these women did not like the compulsory nature of the edicts. Urban women were typically better educated and used to Western practices – suffer a great loss of freedom that they had practiced before the Taliban take over. (Mertus, 53)

When the United States occupied Afghanistan the requirements for women to wear burkas were lifted; however, many women chose to continue the practice.

Making the decision regarding hijad is a complex one for women in Afghanistan, Turkey, Egypt, and throughout Islam and it has become a central issue in the debate on women’s rights.

Some say veiling is a step backwards for women’s emancipation, comes from pre-Islamic culture, and perpetuate male dominance. Supporters of wearing the veil say it is a personal religious choice that does not keep women from a full role in society.

Some Muslims are calling for ijtihad (development in religious thought) on the way hijab has been interpreted, saying that it is not a true Muslim religious obligation for women. Others argue that it is a Qur’anic imperative. Certain Islamic groups are seeking to encourage the hijab in an effort to create a more conservative society. Some governments view hijab as a threat and a reflection of a political challenge. Either way, the choice is not always an easy choice, even in predominantly Muslim countries. And it is not always a religious choice. It may be religious, political, social, cultural, practical, or a combination.

**INTERNET TEACHING RESOURCES:**

Sites on the hijab and political protest:

<http://www.inminds.co.uk/hijab-ban/ihrc-report.html>   
<http://www.soundvision.com/Info/news/hijab/hjb.choice.asp>   
<http://www.themodernreligion.com/women/hijab-fear.html>   
<http://www.isisforum.com/women/hijab.htm>   
<http://www.counterpunch.org/behzad1123.html>

Sites on veiling:

<http://www.islamicgarden.com/page1004.html>

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Mertus, Julie A. War’s Offensive on Women: The Humanitarian Challenge in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. ( Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 2000) pp. 52-60.

Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp. 127-131.

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Fernea, Elizabeth Warnock, ed. Women and the Family in the Middle East. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) Hoffman, Valerie J. “An Islamic Activist: Zaynab al-Ghazali,” pp. 231-254.

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Tucker, Judith E., ed. Arab Women: Old Boundries, New Frontiers. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993) Badran, Margot “Independent Women: More than a Century of Feminism in Egypt,” pp.129-148.

**FILMOGRAPHY:**

Veiled Revolution (Icarus Film, 1982) – Discusses the modern Egyptian Muslim women’s decision of whether or not to wear the veil.