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Arab Feminism and the Hijab:

Exploring the Intersection of Feminism and Islam in Jordan

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Collage by Melanie Kallah

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Content Warning:

This research paper includes mentions of gender based violence, domestic violence, and killing.

Abstract

The goal of this qualitative research is to procure a definition of Arab Feminism from the religious and cultural beliefs of Jordanian Muslim women while also highlighting the feminist roots of Islam. The hijab is the perfect symbol to analyze Arab feminism under and discuss the difference between religion and culture.

This paper first dives into the history of the Jordanian women's movement and the origins of today's activism. This hinges on the work of Rana Husseini, who has the only in-depth account of the Jordanian women's movement. This history allows the reader to better understand the current conditions of women in Jordan and the role Muslim women have played in the political history of the movement. Then, the definition of Arab feminism based on the opinions of Muslim women in Jordan is provided. Under this definition, the Qur'an is described as a feminist text. Furthermore, this definition exposes the weakness and Orientalist foundations of mainstream Western feminism.

The opinions of Jordanian, Muslim women are further unfurled to uncover the religious or cultural reasons why women wear the hijab. This dichotomy of culture and religion is further discussed to highlight the dangers of conflating religion and culture/Bid3a (misrepresenting Islam). Bid3a is the root of oppressive cultural practices that are falsely justified as being religious.

Key Words: Theology, Islam, Feminism (Arab Feminism), Women and Gender Studies

Abbreviations

- SWANA: South West Asia and North Africa
- MB: Muslim Brotherhood
- IAF: Islamic Action Front
- ICS: Islamic Center Society
- PLO: Palestinian Liberation Front
- PFLP: Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine
- GUPW: General Union of Palestinian Women
- JCP: Jordanian Communist Party
- GBV: Gender based violence
- DV: Domestic violence
- CSO: Civil society organization
- PSL: Personal Status Law

Jordanian Women's Organizations (In order of when they were founded)

- WSSS: Women's Social Solidarity Society, 1944
- JWU: Jordanian Women's Union, 1945
- AWF: Arab Women's Federation, 1954
- AWO: Arab Women's Organization, 1970
- GFJW: General Federation of Jordanian Women, 1981
- RAND: League of Jordanian Democratic Women, 1983
- RAMA: League of Jordanian Women, 1983
- JNCW: Jordanian National Commission for Women, 1992
- JNFW: Jordanian National Forum for Women, 1995
- JFBPW: Jordan Forum for Business and Professional Women, 1996
- FPD: Family Protection Department, 1998
- AWMC: Arab Women Media Center, 1999
- NCFA: National Council for Family Affairs, 2001
- AWLN: Arab Women's Legal Network, 2005

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Introduction

A Brief History of the Women's Movement in the SWANA Region

Many historians point to the immense participation of women in the 1919 Egyptian revolution against the British occupation as the start of the women's movement in the South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region.¹ As a part of this revolution, Egyptian feminists like Huda Sha'rawi would host several women's demonstrations. These feminists also used the impetus of political advocacy that arose because of this revolution to demand rights for women, such as raising the minimum age for women to marry from 15 to 18.² Their efforts were successful and also led to the establishment of various women's organizations and unions, such as the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923.³

Even before this revolution, there were many important cases of women organizing and advocating. Examples include Egyptian women protesting in the Urabi Revolution against the despotism of Muhammad Ali's regime in 1882, Palestinian women organizing a protest against the first settlements in Palestine in 1893, the establishment of the first women's association in Haifa, Palestine in 1910, and the women's association established in Syria in 1915.⁴

The bottom line for the women's movement in the SWANA region is that its roots have always laid in anti-colonial and independence movements. Women's activism in these movements often went hand-in-hand with socio-political and educational wins for women.⁵

¹ United Nations Development Programme, *The Arab women's movement: Struggles and experiences*. (2007). In *Arab Human Development Report 2005* (pp. 123–139). United Nations.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18356/9789210058971c011>

² Ibid

³ El Ayache, Dima. (2022, January 18). Women's movements. *The MENA Chronicle* | Fanack.

<https://fanack.com/society/gender-equality-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/womens-movements-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

Global Perceptions of the Hijab

Many people outside of Islam, particularly in the West, hold the opinion that the hijab is a symbol of the religious and socio-cultural oppression of Muslim women.⁶ This is especially true post-9/11 in which the War on Terror demonized Islam to the West.⁷ Furthermore, many people view the hijab as purely a religious symbol and do not consider that many women wear the hijab for cultural reasons instead of religious ones. This paper will explain how Muslim women feel empowered by the hijab and are not the “victims of the veil” Western feminist discourse would have them be. Furthermore, this paper will show how Muslim women have been strong participants in the women’s movement in Jordan.

Research and Methodology

This research identified and used sources from Jordanian, feminist writers and women’s organizations to set a foundation of knowledge of the women’s movement and the current state of women in Jordan. Using this knowledge, questions were created for interviews discussing the interviewee’s perceptions of feminism, Islam, and the hijab. This research also relied on previous interviews of prominent Jordanian feminists recorded in popular media or academic writing. This was essential considering the well-known and critical feminists in Jordan were often only available for short interviews or only had time for emails and WhatsApp messages.

The interviews conducted by the researcher ranged from half an hour to two or more hours. Eight women were interviewed, most of whom had close, personal relationships with the researcher to ensure comfortability in discussing sensitive topics. The rest of the interviewees

⁶ Abu-Lughod, L. (2015). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press.

⁷ Ibid

were experts either on feminism in Jordan or women and the Qur'an. Different questions were asked of each woman based on their background and the purpose of the interview.

The researcher explicitly chose not to conduct a survey about motivations behind wearing the hijab because this research is not meant to show whether women wear it more for cultural or religious reasons. Instead, the goal of the research is to discuss the difference between religious and cultural motivations and use these motivations to inform a definition on Arab feminism.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

Though I am an Arab woman, this project highlights the intersection of being Arab and being Muslim, which I am not. Therefore, I approached this topic, my research, and interviews with an open mind. I was able to do so because I have spent the past couple of years trying to undo the negative implicit biases against Islam passed down to me by Western media, Western academia, and my family.⁸ This included reading key texts like *Orientalism* by Edward Said, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* by Lila Abu-Lughod, and the Qur'an itself. Even still, I tried to the best of my ability to not inflict my own opinions or perspectives in any of my interviews. It was my strongest intention to highlight the voices of the Muslim women whom I interviewed and use solely their thoughts to inform a definition of Arab feminism. When asked about my religious background, I was upfront in having been raised in both the Catholic and Syrian Orthodox churches while explaining my academic endeavors to better understand Islam and the harmful rhetoric against it.

Being an Arab woman also gave me an interest in different forms of feminism starting in high school, as I saw how rampant misperceptions of the Middle East were in my schooling and among my peers. This has helped me be more aware of Orientalist stereotypes in literature

⁸ My father's side of the family are all Syrian Orthodox immigrants from Beirut, Lebanon. My family left during the Lebanese Civil War, and carried with them to America many negative perceptions of Muslims as a result of the war.

because of the personal connection I have with Arabs and the Middle East, which came in hand with this research.

The History of the Jordanian Women's Movement

The Beginning of the Women's Movement

Before the 1940s, women in Jordan were completely excluded from the political and legislative spheres. Despite this systemic, patriarchal exclusion, women in Jordan found ways to organize and be active.⁹ Though they were not yet organizing around women's rights, in the early 1900s they were actively involved in anti-colonialism efforts and gaining independence from British rule.¹⁰ In 1944, the activism of these women led to the creation of the first women's organization in Jordan named the Women's Social Solidarity Society (WSSS). At this time, it was only the privileged elite women who were able to organize, with the WSSS's foundation being supported by the most influential women of the royal family.¹¹ Because of their extensive financial resources, the focus of the WSSS was primarily philanthropic, and they turned their attention to children and other vulnerable groups in Jordan. WSSS would also play a key role in supporting the influx of Palestinian refugees in 1948.

A year after WSSS was founded, the Jordanian Women's Union (JWU) was founded because of the diplomatic work of Egyptian feminists Shar-arawi and Amna Al-Saeed.¹² These women visited Jordan and asked that the union be formed so that Jordan would have representation in regional meetings on women's rights. The first regional meeting that inspired

⁹ Husseini, Rana. (2021). Years of Struggle: The Women's Movement in Jordan. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/18192-20211124.pdf>

¹⁰ Dababneh, Abeer. 2005. The Jordanian Women's Movement: A Historical Analysis Focusing on Legislative Change. University of Leicester.

¹¹ Husseini, Years of Struggle

¹² About Us page. Jordanian Women's Union, from <https://jwu.org.jo/en/about-us>

the formation of the JWU was held in 1944 by Egypt's General Arab Women Federation and had representatives from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.¹³ Many historians point to Huda Sha'arawi's friendship with Emily Bisharat, Jordan's first female lawyer, as inspiring the two Egyptian women to travel to Jordan and request that the JWU be founded. While the JWU participated in advocacy across the SWANA region, their focus within Jordan was supporting the poor, refugees, and orphans, and promoting children's health. They also aimed to empower women by increasing access to education.¹⁴

The activity and engagement of women in organizations such as the JWU and the WSSS grew significantly in 1948 because of the Palestinian Nakba. This historic event catapulted political life in Jordan as people responded to the catastrophe and sought solutions from the Jordanian state. Motivated by the increase in popularity of various ideological parties and political life at this time, many urban, middle-class women began to organize around women's rights.¹⁵ These women's welfare and social work also supported other causes in the Jordanian National Movement beyond feminism such as Arab nationalism, anti-British colonialism, and Jordan's modernization.

The Palestinian Nakba of 1948 also inspired the creation of The Jordanian Communist Party (JCP), which established the League to Defend the Rights of Jordanian Women. This League "was invited to join a major international women's organization therefore allowing Jordanian women to take part in international events and conferences."^{16,17} However, the party's

¹³ Hussein, *Years of Struggle*

¹⁴ Al-Atiyat, Ibtisam. *The Women's Movement in Jordan: Activism, Discourses, and Strategies*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2003.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Naffa, Emily, "Women and Political Work." Open Dialogue Lecture. Solidarity is Global Institute.

¹⁷ Bourini and al Hindi, *Jordanian Women, pioneers in the work field 1994*, 86

freedom to organize was short-lived because the Jordanian government passed a law in 1953 that “condemned all JCP cadres to forced labor”, greatly diminishing the capabilities of the JCP.

The Significance of the Arab Women’s Federation (AWF)

The activism of Jordanian middle-class women coupled with the organization of upper-class women in previous years led to the creation of the Arab Women’s Federation (AWF) in 1954. Emily Bisharat was elected as leader by the 800 women who served as the inaugural members of the AWF.¹⁸ The AWF was the first women’s organization in Jordan whose focus wasn’t mainly philanthropic. This is likely because it didn’t merely consist of upper-class women and affluent women of the royal family. Instead, it was largely composed of women who became politically active with the Palestinian Nakba of 1948. Because of these foundations, the AWF advocated for a liberated Palestine and Pan-Arab unity. Their main focus, however, was women’s rights. The women’s issues they were most active around were equal citizenship rights, the right to vote and be elected, and equal access to education to eliminate illiteracy.¹⁹ They also advocated for these causes globally by organizing with feminist leaders across the SWANA region and internationally.²⁰

The efforts of the AWF led to the government pledging to review the election law to allow women to vote and run in elections. The AWF also focused on the Personal Status Law (PSL) and demanded that the government abolish polygamy. They also worked to expand labor laws ensuring better working conditions, equal pay, and paid maternity leave.

Due to its high level of political activity, the AWF grew significantly in Jordan and opened multiple branches throughout the country. Wanting to benefit from this rise in

¹⁸ Al-Atiyat 2003, 57

¹⁹ Husseini, Years of Struggle

²⁰ Al-Atiyat 2003, 57

membership and activity, the AWF strove to become more politically active and wrote its first memo to the government. The memo demanded that women have the right to vote and be included in parliamentary and municipal elections, but their demands were ignored by the late King Hussein's regime.²¹ Only a small concession was made allowing women with primary education to vote. However, this concession only further highlighted the gap in rights between men and women given that illiterate men were allowed to vote. In response, the women of the AWF wrote a petition reading:

"We, Jordanian female citizens, have been deprived, as a result of difficult economic conditions and age-old tradition, from gaining education. We call on the government to recognize our complete and equal electoral right similarly to our illiterate brothers and our educated sisters, because this is a fundamental right that cannot be divided."²²

In a strong symbol of resistance, the thousands of AWF women didn't sign their names, but stamped their thumbs, calling out the "inequality in allowing illiterate men full political and voting rights while women are denied those same rights."²³ The fight didn't stop with this petition. Not only did they continue to petition the government, the AWF also created weekly, strategic meetings to pave the path for amending the law.²⁴

While they inspired more political activity from women, their work was not supported by all Jordanians. They were often slandered in the press, an example being Al Jazeera publishing "several articles that attacked the women's movement accusing them of 'drifting away from religion and adopting Western values'"²⁵

²¹ Al-Atiyat 2003, 57

²² Abu Jaber, Raouf. 2008. The Bisharat Family, history of five generations. Ward Books.

²³ Husseini, Years of Struggle

²⁴ Al-Atiyat 2003, 57

²⁵ Husseini, Years of Struggle

Beyond Jordan, the women's movement served as a key ally to other movements, such as the women's movement for liberation in Algeria and the movements against the Israeli occupation of Palestine.²⁶

Political Restrictions of the 50s and 60s

In 1957, only 3 years after its founding, the AWF was forced to end its organization because of direct orders from King Hussein (which also ended the JWU and the JCP). This was because the government was incredibly skeptical and paranoid after an attempted coup against the late King Hussein. Though this coup was led by members of the National Guard coming mainly from the West Bank, the King took drastic measures to protect his regime, including banning political parties (to which the women's movement was ideologically linked).²⁷ With the main, male political leaders being rounded up and arrested, women rose in their absence. This significantly boosted the women's movement as they organized protests and sit-ins demanding that political prisoners be released and that the movement's demands be answered.²⁸ The JCP was active alongside the AWF at this time and continued to hold protests in downtown Amman despite curfew orders.²⁹ However, a lot of the AWF's and JCP's activity had to exist underground at this time. These restrictions would only be furthered in 1958 with the military coup of the Hashemite family in Iraq, which saw the bloody assassination of all the Royal Hashemite family members in the palace except for one.³⁰ This forced women to either continue working underground, or convert their organizations to be purely philanthropic like the 1940s.³¹

²⁶ Hussein, Years of Struggle

²⁷ Hussein, Years of Struggle

²⁸ Al Jam'ani, Dafii. 2007. From the Party to the Prison (1948-1994) Memoirs. Riad Al Rayyes Books.

²⁹ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p30

³⁰ Marr, P. (2003). The Modern History of Iraq. Westview Press. <https://archive.org/details/modernhistoryofi00marr>

³¹ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p32

Even after martial law was lessened from the mid 1960s-1970, historians and activists argue that the political fear from this time continued “to haunt Jordanians until the late 1980s.”³²

The Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Jordan

The only party exempt from being disbanded because of martial law was the Muslim Brotherhood. This is because it was not a political party at the time (it would only be considered a political organization with the later establishment of the Islamic Action Front).³³ Furthermore they had firmly aligned themselves with the King and were strongly against the coup.

Subsequently, the Muslim Brotherhood was not subject to the curfew and other intense martial law restrictions. This exclusive freedom to organize without restriction extended until the mid-1980s when political parties were able to organize again.³⁴

The monopoly the Muslim Brotherhood had on the socio-political sphere in Jordan helped them to quickly gain influence among the general population. With the absence of activity from opposing parties, the Muslim Brotherhood freely grew their influence in various cornerstone institutions in Jordan such as colleges, universities, and mosques. Because of their unique freedom to exert influence on these institutions, historians argue that this allowed them to alter curricula.³⁵ This was furthered in 1963 with the Muslim Brotherhood's formation of the Islamic Center Society (ICS). The ICS gave the Muslim Brotherhood oversight of “a network of schools, colleges, and health centers, as well as becoming involved in charitable, political, social, economic, and service-oriented work.”^{36,37} The influence they gained would help them

³² Ibid

³³ Al Tabini, Raed. (2023, December). [Interview by M. Kallah]

³⁴ Abu Rumman, Mohammad and Hassan Abu Hanieh. 2013. The "Islamic Solution" in Jordan: Islamists, the State, and the Ventures of Democracy and Security. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <https://bit.ly/3bQSq6F>

³⁵ Abu Rumman and Abu Hanieh 2013, 44

³⁶ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p32

³⁷ Abu Rumman and Bondokji, From Caliphate to Civil States, the Young Face of Political Islam in Jordan after the Arab Spring 2018, p23

significantly grow in political power when they later registered a branch of their organization as a political party.

The establishment of the Muslim Women's Association in 1933 by Egyptian Zaynab al-Ghazzali eventually inspired a branch to be registered in Jordan during the late 1950s despite the political restrictions. This was the only political women's organization allowed to be publically active at the time, while other leaders of the women's movement worked underground as part of the unofficial society called "Defending Women's Rights League" (which was associated with the Communist Party in Palestine).^{38,39} Unfortunately, there is not much information recorded about the Muslim Women's Association in Jordan, and it seems that their existence was short-lived.

Because no political organizations or parties were allowed to exist, leaders of the women's movement created the Society for Illiteracy Elimination. Because the Society had no political agenda and purely educational aspirations, it faced none of the martial law restrictions. Furthermore, the government showed support for the Society by providing classrooms and teachers to help bolster their work.⁴⁰

The Rise of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Jordan

The growth of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Jordan around the mid 1960s-1970 invigorated the repressed political parties and women's movement. In particular, it was the foundation of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) in 1965, under the PLO, that inspired the revival of the women's movement in Jordan.⁴¹ Similar to the beginning of

³⁸ Dababneh 2005, 102

³⁹ Husseini, Years of Struggle, p31

⁴⁰ Dababneh 2005, 102

⁴¹ Husseini, Years of Struggle, p33

the movement, the calls for Palestinian liberation and Arab nationalism inspired Jordanian women to join the women's movement.⁴² Jordanian women worked closely with the GUPW, even traveling with them internationally to raise awareness about the occupation of Palestine. Therefore, the GUPW and the Palestinian resistance at large gave Jordanian women a chance to spread their wings and flex their political capabilities in a restrictive and dark time in Jordan's political history.



Women protesting in downtown Amman, 1968 from 7iber.com. The poster reads “ الإجراءات التعسفية ضد أخواتنا نستكره ” or “العربيات” or “We denounce the arbitrary measures against our Arab sisters”

When Jordan went to war with Israel in 1968 over the occupation forces' attempts at land grabs, women became more politically active. Their actions, such as national awareness

⁴² Khader, Asma, interview by Rana Husseini. 2020. Amman, former Minister and Solidarity is Global Institute executive director. 7 September 2020.

campaigns and rescue operations for refugees, aided Jordan's government and were therefore not repressed.

However, while Jordan was able to defend its territories in the Jordan Valley in the Al Karameh Battle of 1968, Israel managed to steal the West Bank in the six-day war of 1967. Therefore, the political movements that were revived with the Palestinian cause began to lose traction as many Jordanians became disillusioned with the strength of the Arab Nationalist movement.⁴³ Despite this, the women's movement worked to remain steadfast, with several new women's organizations being formed in Jordan such as the Arab Women's Society in Mafraq and the Working Women's Society in Russeifef. These organizations worked on increasing the autonomy of women in Jordan and continued to stay true to the roots of the women's movement by supporting Palestine. The movement as a whole continued to advocate for Palestine, with women protesting in large numbers throughout the end of the 1960s. One of the most significant protests led by the women's movement was in response to the "Rogers Plan", which undermined Palestinians' claim to their homeland. Female activists of all ages helped plan the protest and ensure its effectiveness despite tight government restrictions.

Black September and its Effects

From 1965-1970, the political might and resilience of Jordanian women and the women's movement was brought to the spotlight as they advocated for Palestine and the rights of Arab women. This, however, came to a halt with the events of Black September in 1970. Black September was a result of growing tensions between King Hussein and the PLO in East Jordan. In September, when the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked 4 planes and exploded three of them at a deserted airstrip in Jordan's desert, Hussein declared martial law and

⁴³ Husseini, Years of Struggle, p34

civil war erupted.⁴⁴ This marked a dark time in Jordan's history, hence "Black September".⁴⁵ The intense and paranoid restrictions that arose from this martial law forced many female leaders to remain working underground.

Despite this, some women's organizations were allowed to form as long as their actions were not political. This was only because the government needed help supporting a large influx of Palestinian refugees. Key examples of such organizations were the Arab Women's Organization (AWO) (est. 1970) and The White Beds Society (est. 1971). Another notable step in the women's movement was the increased involvement in and leadership of women in the public sector, such as the appointment of Laurice Hlas in 1970 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (though the first ambassadorial assignment with an international post given to a woman, Dinar Kavar, only occurred 30 years later).⁴⁶

The Impact of the UN

There were two UN conferences that were crucial in giving momentum to the Jordanian women's movement in the face of intense restrictive martial law from the 1960s through the 70s:

The first was the UN's First Women's Conference in Mexico City, Mexico in 1975. "The National Woman's Group in Jordan" was formed by various women organizations to formulate Jordan's agenda for this conference. They were particularly pushing hard for the right to vote and run for government because the parliamentary elections were coming up that year.⁴⁷ The government separately prepared for the conference by creating the Women's Affairs Department

⁴⁴ Jordan. (1998, July 20). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Jordan/>

⁴⁵ As a result of the PFLP's actions, the PLO was kicked out of Jordan by the army. Some Jordanians saw this as positive for the country, and therefore refer to the event as "White September".

⁴⁶ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p37

⁴⁷ Salti al-Tal, Suhair . 2014. The History of the Women's Movement in Jordan (1944-2008). Azminah Publishing House.

as a branch of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, or the Ministry of Social Development (as it would later be named).⁴⁸

The 1975 UN Conference was especially important in that a global index on the status of the women's right to vote would be issued. This looming index exerted a lot of pressure on Jordan's government to respond to the demands of the women's movement in order to better present themselves on the global stage.⁴⁹ Therefore, King Husein issued a Royal Decree in 1974 changing the Elections Laws to allow women to run in elections.^{50,51} This huge win for the women's movement meant that they "started to gain ground at a quicker pace".⁵²

Furthermore, an exciting result of the international pressure the UN conference exerted on Jordan was the re-establishment of the JWU (which dissolved with the Martial Law in 1957).⁵³ The JWU quickly grew in numbers as the women they taught to read and write consequently opted to join the union as members.⁵⁴ The JWU also established its ties regionally by attending the Eighth Conference for the Arab Women's Associations in Baghdad in May 1975.⁵⁵

In 1978, before the next influential conference held by the UN, Jordan held a regional conference for Arab women titled "Partners in Development". In his opening speech, Prince Hassan made it clear that it is in Jordan's best interest to better integrate women into the labor

⁴⁸ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p40

⁴⁹ Al-Atiyat, Ibtisam, and Hassan Barari. 2010. "Liberating Women with Islam? The Islamists and Women's Issues in Jordan." Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, St Olaf College, Minnesota, USA, The University of Jordan. <https://bit.ly/3oTXdcL>

⁵⁰ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p40

⁵¹ L. Naffa 2020

⁵² Hussein, Years of Struggle, p40

⁵³ Alliances page. Jordanian Women's Union, from <https://jwu.org.jo/en/alliances>

⁵⁴ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p40

⁵⁵ Ibid

market. A year later, following the conference, King Hussein appointed Jordan's first female minister, Ina'am Mufti, as the Minister of Social Development.

The second significant UN conference was held in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1980. According to Jordanian scholar Rana Husseini, "The main themes the Jordanian delegation carried with them to Denmark were: Equality, Development and Peace." While women's organizations were preparing for the conference, Minister Mufti was working on consolidating existing women's charities in Jordan to ensure higher productivity and resource-sharing. This led to the creation of the General Federation of Jordanian Women (GFJW) in 1981, which combined all women groups "under one main organizational umbrella".⁵⁶ The GFJW stated at its first meeting that it would be in charge of representing Jordanian women at national, regional and international events.⁵⁷

In 1983, the League of Jordanian Democratic Women (RAND) was created to advocate for equality between men and women. Thanks to their work, RAND got many women to enroll in unions and political parties, and encouraged them to become active in the labor market.⁵⁸ The League of Jordanian Women (RAMA) was also formed that same year as a part of the PFLP and worked along the same lines as RAND.

A year later, in 1984, women were able to exercise their right to vote for the first time. This same year "Leila Sharaf was appointed as the first female minister in the Middle East to hold an information ministry portfolio."⁵⁹ She would mark the history books a second time when

⁵⁶ Husseini, Years of Struggle, p45

⁵⁷ HRH Princess Basma Bint Talal: Official website, from <http://www.princessbasma.jo/index.php>

⁵⁸ Husseini, Years of Struggle, p47

⁵⁹ Husseini, Years of Struggle, p48

she was the first female cabinet minister to resign in protest in January 1985 over the limits on free speech and political life.⁶⁰

Despite making advances with voting rights and seeing the first women appointed as ministers, it was still extremely difficult to make advances in the labor market. This was because women were rarely promoted to leadership roles. If they were, they faced backlash if they reported acts of discrimination against them in their leadership roles. A key example of this is in 1985 when the foreign minister decided, without alerting anyone prior, that the female diplomats would be removed from their foreign posts and demoted to administrative roles within the ministry. Dr. Amal Sabbagh, former Secretary General of the Jordan National Commission for Women (JNCW), immediately resigned because of the demotion. When a new Minister of Social Development stepped into the role, he brought Dr. Sabbagh back into the office to inquire about her resignation. Having learned the reason, he gave her her old position back.⁶¹

The bravery of women like Dr. Sabbagh was essential in gradually and intentionally opening up a space for women in Jordanian politics and encouraging women at large to break past socio-cultural barriers. This is what led female academics to push past taboos and discuss domestic, gender-based violence (GBV) with their students.⁶² This impetus for discussing GBV led to a survey being conducted by Professor Arwa Aamiry on domestic violence, revealing that 86% of students' families experienced violence in the home and that 22% of students' mothers faced physical abuse from their husbands. The women's movement in Jordan already faced many systemic difficulties, but because its focus throughout the late 1970s-1980s had been

⁶⁰ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p49

⁶¹ Sabbagh, Amal, interview by Rana Hussein. 2020. Amman, researcher-practitioner in social policy. 7 September

⁶² Aamiry, Arwa, interview by Rana Hussein. 2020. Amman, clinical psychologist and former Professor at the University of Jordan. 13 January.

development and the labor market, this unprecedented and pivotal academic discourse on GBV faced even more backlash.

In this period, the women's movement had not focused on development and the labor market by choice. It was the "NGOization" of the women's movement that had caused this shift from political causes and Arab liberation to development. With martial law having clamped down on political parties and activity, women's organizations had to shift to the world of NGOs. However, because donors controlled which NGO projects were implemented, projects focused on empowering women in Jordan received little financial support.⁶³

In the face of this "NGOization", women still strove to assert themselves in the political sphere, even if their political organizations and aspirations had been severely restricted. That is why, in 1989, women were able to both vote and run in elections for the first time in Jordan's history. This election saw 12 women running and half of the registered voters being women.⁶⁴ As a result of this increase in political activity for women, more organizations were founded by Jordanian women to advocate for their rights.⁶⁵

Muslim Women in the Islamic Action Front (IAF)

The Islamic Action Front was formed as an independent political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1989 with the slogan "Islam is the Solution".⁶⁶ The IAF held a lot of political influence as legislators in the Jordanian parliament, with 4 deputies and a senior member serving as the speaker of the Lower House of Parliament. In their first election, no female members of the party were put forward as candidates. This, however, did not mean that the women in the IAF

⁶³ Ababneh, Sara, interview by Rana Husseini. 2020. Amman, academic and labor activist. 16 August.

⁶⁴ Husseini, *Years of Struggle*, p50

⁶⁵ Amawi, Abla. 2001. *Against all odds - Jordanian women, elections and political empowerment*. Al Kutba Institute for Human Development, Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

⁶⁶ Husseini, *Years of Struggle*, p53

weren't taking advantage of the party's influence to "strengthen their presence in the Jordanian society."^{67,68} Because they were extremely politically active and highly educated, the women of the IAF quickly rose through the ranks of the political party and were promoted to candidacy in the following elections.⁶⁹ As their power increased, the women of the IAF were also able to expand and flex their influence in Jordan's socio-cultural sphere through the party's connections with the media, unions, religious institutions, and universities.⁷⁰ At the same time, these Muslim, female leaders were spreading the word of Islam, with many studying and memorizing the Qur'an. These women were also using their connections and education to encourage women to wear the hijab.

Women continued to become more involved in the IAF. A key example is Dima Tahboub who was a former spokesperson for the party and advocated for the increased participation of women in Jordanian politics.⁷¹

The Women's Movement in the 90s

The 90s started off strong with the King's foundation of a Royal Commission to further democratic reforms, which greatly benefitted Jordanian women.⁷² This is because the Royal Commission National Charter- which spelt out Jordan's vision for political, economic and social life- included multiple sections on women's rights.^{73,74} The sections were as following:

⁶⁷ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p54

⁶⁸ Abu Rumman and Bondjki 2018, 29, 79

⁶⁹ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p54

⁷⁰ Abu Rumman and Bondjki 2018, 29, 79

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Hussein, Years of Struggle, p55

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ The Jordanian National Charter n.d.

Chapter One, Article 8: Jordanian men and women are equal under the law. There shall be no distinction between them in rights and obligations regardless of difference in race, language or religion. They shall exercise their constitutional rights and uphold the higher interest of the state and the national ethic in such a manner as to ensure that the material and spiritual resources of Jordanian society are freed and directed towards achieving the national objective of unity, progress and building a better future.

Chapter Two, Article 3, Section 4: Attaining equality, justice and equal opportunities for all citizens, male and female, without discrimination.

Chapter Five, Article 6: Women are men's partners and equals in contributing to the growth and development of Jordanian society. This requires an affirmation of women's constitutional and legal right to equality, guidance, training and employment as a means of enabling them to play their proper role in the growth and development of society.

While these reforms were a great step for the movement, politics became segregated as senior members of the IAF discriminated against women (despite having women in their upper ranks).⁷⁵

This discrimination was inspired and led by Prime Minister Mudar Badran.⁷⁶

In 1992 however, Badran's government departed and was replaced with a more liberal government headed by Sharif Zeid Ben Shaker (the King's distant cousin). This government established The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) led by Princess Basma Bint Talal, who is a strong advocate for women's rights. The establishment of the JNCW was not only important in furthering women's rights in Jordan, it also signaled "the country's seriousness in its efforts to promote women's rights as part of the Kingdom's renewed commitment to a

⁷⁵ Al-Atiyat 2003, 201

⁷⁶ Husseini, Years of Struggle, p56

democratization process”.^{77,78} Nationally, the JNCW is in charge of eliminating discrimination against women and promoting the work of civil society organizations empowering women.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the JNCW is in charge of updating the National Strategy for Women every four years.⁸⁰ Internationally and regionally, the JNCW is in charge of events, conferences, and forums related to women's rights.

When the elections rolled around in 1993, Toujan Faisal won the Circassian-Chechen quota seat in the Third District of Amman and officially became the first woman to be elected to the Jordanian Parliament.⁸¹

For the following two years after Faisal's win, women activists (led and supported by Princess Basma) were dedicated to preparing for the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace in Beijing, China. These activists determined Jordan's priorities of discussion for the conference by carrying out a consultation process consisting of various events and meetings throughout the Kingdom. Simultaneously, the JNCW was preparing a National Document for the conference with information on the status of women's rights in Jordan and recommendations for improving the socio-cultural conditions and political participation of women.⁸² According to Rana Hussein, the result of the “flurry of activity” surrounding the conference “led to the establishment of new civil society organizations (CSOs) and charities that started implementing projects related to women in Jordan”.⁸³

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Sabbagh, A Critical Assessment of NWMs: The Case of Jordan 2006, 7

⁷⁹ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p58

⁸⁰ Official Website of HRH Princess Basma

⁸¹ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p60

⁸² Princess Basma announces final document for World Conference on Women in 1995 1994

⁸³ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p61

Despite upset from some male leaders of the IAF about Jordan's participation in the Beijing Conference, the Conference greatly energized the women's movement.⁸⁴ In 1993, Dr. Rima Khalaf-Huneidi was appointed by King Hussein as the Minister of Trade and Industry.⁸⁵ The women who worked alongside Dr. Khalaf-Huneidi held her in the highest regard, describing her as having "a very clear philosophy on how things should be run and had a deep knowledge of all issues at hand" which changed the lives of countless Jordanian women.⁸⁶

To encourage women to take a more active role as community leaders, Princess Basma instituted The Jordanian National Forum for Women (JNFW) in 1995. The JNFW was successful in achieving its goal, and built a network of 25,000 women from all around Jordan.⁸⁷ As a result of their work, female community leaders were appointed to municipal councils in the 1995 and 1999 elections, which was a breakthrough for this time.⁸⁸ Another historic event to occur during these elections was that the first woman, Iman Futeimat, won a mayoral seat and beat out four other men running for the role.⁸⁹

June 1996 saw another historic win for the women's rights movement with the appointment of the first female judge to the Judicial Council, Taghreed Hikmat, who was selected out of 350 male candidates.⁹⁰

As the movement grew, more organizations were founded, such as Princess Basma's Women's Resource Center and the Jordan Forum for Business and Professional Women (JFBPW). In the wake of increased discourse on GBV and efforts to address GBV, the JFBPW

⁸⁴ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p62

⁸⁵ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p63

⁸⁶ Badran, Reem, interview by Rana Hussein. 2020. Amman, former deputy and economist. 23 February.

⁸⁷ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p63

⁸⁸ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p64

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p66

created a pro-bono hotline to help women seeking legal advice and a second hotline supporting women and children who were victims of domestic abuse.⁹¹ At the same time, the JWU was also aiming to support women by addressing discriminatory laws, criminalizing honor crimes, and raising the legal age of marriage to 18.⁹²

Princess Basma worked to keep the discourse on GBV and domestic violence alive by creating a Women's Studies Program at the University of Jordan in 1998.⁹³ In 2006, this program would be expanded into a department, and then into an independent center within the graduate university.

There was also an increase in advocacy on preventing and addressing domestic violence in the late 1990s. This was bolstered by the efforts of UN Women in 1998, who launched a regional campaign in the Middle East to combat domestic violence and study the prevalence of GBV in Jordan.⁹⁴ As a part of this campaign, an unprecedented street protest against GBV was held and attended by 300 female activists and Princess Basma.⁹⁵ As a result of the march, King Hussein began answering the demands of the women's rights movement, particularly when it came to addressing GBV.⁹⁶

In 1998, the work of the women's rights movement to raise awareness about GBV led to the establishment of the Family Protection Department (FPD), which attempted to help rehouse women and children who faced domestic violence. Unfortunately the FPD became overwhelmed with cases within two months because there were no other shelters in Jordan to help the FPD

⁹¹ Husseini, Years of Struggle, p64

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Husseini, Years of Struggle, p70

⁹⁴ King spearheading efforts to end domestic violence 1998

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Ibid

with their large number of cases.⁹⁷ To lessen the FPD's load, the JWU opened its first shelter in 1999 for women who have been abused. However, this shelter was not enough, and the women's movement began to strongly pressure the government for more support. In the 12 years it would take for the government to adequately respond, female victims of domestic violence and attempted honor killings would continue to "serve indefinite periods at correctional and rehabilitation facilities".⁹⁸

In 1999, King Hussein passed away. As a result, his eldest son, King Abdullah, took over the throne and immediately declared his support for the women's rights movement. To further cement his support, King Abdullah had a meeting with the leaders of the movement to pledge his full backing of their efforts to eradicate discriminatory laws.⁹⁹ Following this change in leadership for the kingdom, multiple new and significant programs, organizations, and policy plans for the women's rights movement would be implemented:

1: The JNCW introduced a socio-economic plan for 1999-2003 with the government which implemented programs and advocated for policy that would empower Jordanian women.¹⁰⁰

2: Journalist and women's rights activist Mahassen Emam founded the Arab Women Media Center (AWMC) to support current Arab female journalists and inspire future ones while highlighting the importance of women in media.¹⁰¹

The 2000s

Significant strides towards combating GBV and domestic violence continued to be made in Jordan for multiple reasons. The first was a five-year program funded by the UK that trained

⁹⁷ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p67

⁹⁸ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p68

⁹⁹ King to support women's drive to amend discriminatory legislation 1999

¹⁰⁰ Al-Atiyat 2003, p174

¹⁰¹ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p70

law enforcement and medical professionals working with victims of GBV and domestic violence.¹⁰² In providing them training, this program aimed to change their perceptions of GBV, domestic violence, and honor killings. Rana Husseini also reported that this program exposed “several incidents of abuse or murder that were originally reported as accidents or suicide cases by close family members”.¹⁰³ The second reason was the work of Queen Rania in getting the National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA) established in 2001. This council included members from various professional backgrounds ranging from sociologists and physicians to deputies and secretary generals. Queen Rania made the NCFA responsible for implementing a national socio-political strategy to combat and prevent GBV and domestic violence against women and children in the home.

The work of the FPD, NCFA, and the women’s movement at large led to three temporary laws being passed in 2001.¹⁰⁴ Two of the laws altered the PSL, allowing a woman to divorce her husband without his permission (aka the Khuloe Law) and raising the legal age of marriage from 15 to 18.¹⁰⁵ The third law altered Article 240 of the Jordanian Penal Code so that no exemptions or reduced sentences would be given to people who committed murder because of “family honor”.¹⁰⁶

Two years later, in 2003, women made multiple serious advances on the ministerial, Parliamentary, and judicial levels:

1: Three female ministers were appointed, a record high at that time.

¹⁰² Husseini, *Murder in the Name of Honour: The True Story of One Woman's Heroic Fight against an Unbelievable Crime* 2009, p82

¹⁰³ Husseini, *Years of Struggle*, p73

¹⁰⁴ All laws were temporary in this period because the Parliament was absent from 2001-2003.

¹⁰⁵ Husseini, *Years of Struggle*, p75

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*

- 2: A royal decree was issued creating six quota seats for women in the Lower House of Parliament.¹⁰⁷
- 3: King Abdulalh appointed seven women to the Upper House of Parliament.
- 4: JNCW's National Action Plan was introduced in cooperation with the GFJW, the JWU, and the JNFW. The action plan targeted discriminatory laws and set up scheduled meetings with community leaders ranging from deputies to religious figures in order to spread awareness of their plan's demands.¹⁰⁸ This face-to-face dialogue was positively received and became a popular form of activism that significantly helped the women's movement.
- 5: An amendment was passed to the Passport Law thanks to the lobbying of the women's movement. This amendment allowed women to get or renew a passport without permission from a male guardian.¹⁰⁹
- 6: Female judge Judge Hikmat was appointed to the Criminal Court's tribunal by the Judicial Council. The Criminal Court handles grand felony cases, including homicides and sexual assaults, which is why it was essential that a female judge be appointed to this court. According to Rana Hussein, this was also "seen as a sign of increased trust in women's abilities and leadership".¹¹⁰ Female judges would continue to be appointed after Judge Hikmat thanks to the Judicial Institute's requirement in 2010 that women make up at least 15% of the incoming class.¹¹¹
- 7: The first female member of law enforcement was appointed as a forensic specialist at the National Institute of Forensic Medicine.

¹⁰⁷ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p77

¹⁰⁸ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p78

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p79

¹¹¹ Ibid

These wins were proof of how the work of the women's movement for the previous 60+ years had led to a gradual- but significant- opening for women in politics. They also showed the government's increasing commitment to empowering women and removing gendered barriers.

The mid-2000s also saw a continual increase of infrastructure to combat and prevent GBV because of Queen Rania's work. In 2004, she attended the launching of the 6-year Amnesty International MENA campaign to "Stop Violence Against Women " to further Jordan's involvement in international campaigns against GBV. In 2005, her activism led her to be named the World Health Organization Patron for Violence Prevention in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Queen Rania was also the patron of a conference specifically for Jordan on GBV and family protection.¹¹² At this conference, a crucial study on domestic violence in Jordan was shared which proved the magnitude of cases. In 2005, Queen Rania also formed the Arab Women's Legal Network (AWLN) to inspire women to pursue legal professions.¹¹³

After many years, the government finally established the Family Reconciliation Center (FRC) in 2007 to house and protect women who were victims of domestic violence or in potential danger because of family honor.¹¹⁴ The government was hesitant from using the word "shelter" because of its social connotations implying that they were supporting prostitutes or runaways.¹¹⁵

Despite continual social taboos, the lobbying of the women's movement was successful in passing the Family Protection Law in 2008 to combat GBV. According to Rana Husseini, "The passing of the law was an acknowledgement by the government that Jordan has a domestic

¹¹² Husseini, *Years of Struggle*, p81

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Husseini, *Years of Struggle*, p83

¹¹⁵ Ibid

violence problem and, more importantly, that victims of domestic violence needed better state protection”.¹¹⁶

At the same time activists and lobbyists in Jordan were working to address violence against Jordanian women, they were beginning to adopt steps to combat human trafficking.¹¹⁷ In 2009, a national law was instituted that imposed fines and imprisonment terms on sex and labor trafficking violations. The government then ratified the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.¹¹⁸

On a separate note, the movement spread further and further as women took up more space in Jordanian popular media with the popularization of social media.

Jordanian Women and The Arab Spring

The 2010s began with protests breaking out across the SWANA region in what would soon be known as the Arab Spring. The difficulty of the Arab Spring for Jordanian women was that the pushes for democratization didn't include pushes for increased rights for women.¹¹⁹ According to a study conducted by the Wilson Center in 2016, the status of women didn't improve during/after the Arab Spring in most countries, and the demands made by women's groups in these countries weren't met.¹²⁰ Not only were the demands of Arab feminists not met, JWU President Amneh Zu'bi argued that the women's movement suffered a setback in the first years of the 2010s because of the intense focus on national security and stability.¹²¹ Because of

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p84

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p86

¹²⁰ The Wilson Centre, Five years after the Arab Spring: What's next for women in the MENA region? 2016, 1

¹²¹ Hussein, Years of Struggle, p87

the eruption of political protests and the state's explicit focus on regime stability in 2010 and 2011, the women's movement chose to shift its focus to economic empowerment.¹²² Despite the setbacks from the Arab Spring, the women's movement succeeded in amending the PSL in 2010 to raise the legal age of marriage and introduce penalties for those involved in children marriages.

Furthermore, while the Arab Spring caused setbacks in the Jordanian women's movement, it's important to mention that countless women were active in the Arab Spring. Their actions and bravery are important because they show that women were able to exert power even on issues not directly related to women's rights or the women's movement. In particular, Bedouin women in Jordan used the Arab Spring to demand better access to education.¹²³

In the years following the Arab Spring, the women's movement would continue to push past obstacles in Jordan and land historic wins. For example, in 2012, the first cabinet post for women's affairs was created and filled by Jordanian feminist Nadia Hashem-Aloul.¹²⁴ Another example is the USAID program for gender equality and female empowerment in 2014 which bolstered the efforts of large CSOs in Jordan and the JNCW.

From this point onwards, the women's movement would continue to make consistent strides towards integrating women into the labor market, combating domestic violence and GBV, and shifting socio-cultural practices that oppress women.

Defining Arab Feminism

“I'm asking for my rights, but I'm not asking to be a man, I don't want to be a man”

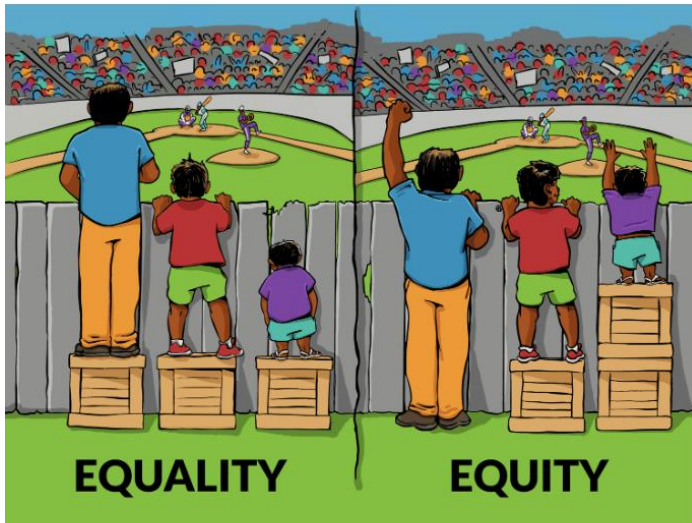
¹²² Husseini, Years of Struggle, p88

¹²³ Sarhan, J. (2012, May 6). The Feminist Arab Spring: Jordanian bedouin women call for better access to education. Ammon News. <https://en.ammonnews.net/article/16778>

¹²⁴ Aloul, Nadia Hashem. Interview by Rana Husseini, September 3, 2020.

- Riham Naimat

This quote reflects the mindset many women in Jordan hold about feminism. It is also the reason why many Jordanian women are hesitant to call themselves feminists. While they are advocates for women’s rights in Jordan, they see mainstream (Western) feminism as equating



Interaction Institute for Social Change | Artist: Angus Maguire.

women and men. In fact, the common definition of feminism, as written by Oxford Languages, is “the advocacy of women’s rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes”.¹²⁵ However, Muslim women in Jordan do not believe in the full equality of women and men. Instead, they believe in the equitable

treatment of women and men. This is because equality is understood as giving everyone the same resources despite their differences, whereas equity is understood as giving people the necessary resources having accounted for their differences.¹²⁶

Unlike many Western feminists, Muslim Jordanian women don’t see the differences between women and men as meaning that men are better than women. Instead, Muslim Jordanian women highlight, celebrate, and respect these differences as outlined by Islam.

The equitable treatment of women and men in Islam (while holding both in equal esteem) stems from the Qur’an. While both women and men are asked to follow the five pillars of Islam,

¹²⁵ Oxford definition as provided by Google

¹²⁶ Juda, E. (2020, November 5). Equity vs. equality: What’s the difference? GW-UMT. <https://onlinepublichealth.gwu.edu/resources/equity-vs-equality/>

the Qur'an outlines different roles for women and men.¹²⁷ The following paragraphs will discuss some of the key differences in the roles that women and men hold as written in the Qur'an:

Polygamy is often treated as one of the most controversial aspects of Islam. Many people would point to polygamy to prove that women and men are not valued equally in the religion. While the verse about polygamy in the Qur'an shows how women and men are treated differently, understanding the conditions of polygamy shows how it is not intended to diminish the rights and voices of women. The six conditions for marrying an additional wife are as follows (keeping in mind that there is a limit of four wives):

1. A man must have the physical and economic ability to have an additional wife.
2. In a time of war when the number of men has decreased due to battle fatalities, men are able to have an additional wife to support those who have lost their husband.
3. A man may have an additional wife if his current wife is unable to have children. This will ensure that a baby will not be made out of wedlock and the additional wife is properly supported.
4. A man can only marry an additional wife if his current wife has allowed him to do so in their marriage contract.
5. Beyond the marriage contract, the man must also obtain explicit permission from his current wife.
6. The man must be able to financially support their current wife/wives and new wife equally.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ The five pillars are as follows: Shahada (Faith), Salah (Prayer), Zakat (Almsgiving), Sawm (Fasting), and Hajj (Pilgrimage).

¹²⁸ The Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa Verses 3, 20, 25, 29

All of these conditions hinge on the husband's ability to provide for his wife. This is because the Qur'an places the responsibility on the husband for fully financially providing for his wife and their kids, which is another one of the key examples of equity.¹²⁹ As written in Surah An-Nisa (Surah about women), the men are "tasked with supporting them (women) financially".¹³⁰ Even if the woman has a job (which is her personal decision to make) the man cannot tell her what her money should be used for.

This leads to the third example of equity in the Qur'an, which is that women have full autonomy over their finances.¹³¹ Therefore, under Islam, it is up to the woman to earn, own, and spend her finances and property as she wishes, and it is forbidden by Allah for any man to interfere without her consent.¹³²

The man's responsibility to provide for the women in his life extends beyond finances. The Qur'an also tasks men with protecting the women in his life. Muslim, Jordanian women do not take this as demeaning or a lessening of their power. Instead they view it as the opposite, as exemplified by Riham Naimat's story:

Having just graduated from university, Riham secured a job at the Ministry of Education. However, this job was near the Jordanian-Iraqi border, which was a whopping 95 kilos from her house. There was only one bus that could take her to work, and it left at 5 o'clock in the morning. Her dad would walk with her every morning in the dark to the bus station, until one day he told her to go on her own. To calm her nerves, her father told her to pray as she walked and promised she'd be safe. Though she was afraid, she listened to her father and took off on her

¹²⁹ The Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa Verse 34

¹³⁰ Ibid

¹³¹ The Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa Verse 19

¹³² Ibid

own. She would find out months later that her dad had been walking behind her the entire time.¹³³ Reminiscing about her father had left Riham smiling with tears in her eyes as she told me the moral of this story: “protect, but give power to the one you protect”.¹³⁴ These powerful words go to show how Islam doesn’t ask men to protect women because they are somehow better than them. They are asked to protect women in a way that empowers them and uplifts the sacred value of women.

The final, key example of equity in Islam comes from a Hadith and not the Qur’an. This Hadith tells the story of a man who came to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to ask who is most deserving of his good treatment.¹³⁵ Muhammad (PBUH) responded by saying “Your mother”. “Who next?” the man asked, he said “you mother”. “Who next?” he asked, and for the third time Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) responded by saying “Your mother”.¹³⁶ This is to show that after Allah, it is the mother who should be shown the utmost respect.¹³⁷ It is not just the mother who should be shown this high level of respect, but all women. This is shown in the Surah An-Nur, which protects women’s virtue by ensuring that any man who accuses of wrongdoing has the proper proof and swears before Allah to be telling the truth.¹³⁸ This comes from the story of Aisha (RA), whose reputation was slandered by hearsayers.^{139,140} To protect women like Aisha

¹³³ Naimat, Riham. (2023, November). [Interview by M. Kallah].

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ PBUH is an abbreviated Islamic honorific and stands for “peace be upon him”. This and other abbreviated honorifics are used in this paper out of respect to Islam, though the researcher themselves is not a Muslim.

¹³⁶ The Hadith of Abu Hurairah

¹³⁷ Tora, T. (2016). Yusuf islam - Your mother (animation) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch>

¹³⁸ The Qur’an, Surah An-Nur, Verses 11-20

¹³⁹ IslamicFinder. Aisha bint Abi Bakr (R.A.). IslamicFinder. <https://www.islamicfinder.org/knowledge/>

¹⁴⁰ RA is an abbreviated Islamic honorific like PBUH, and stands for “رضي الله عنه” or “May Allah praise/protect him/her”.

(RA), verses 11-20 were written in Surah An-Nur warning men from disrespecting or falsely accusing women.¹⁴¹

Some would believe that the hijab should also be listed in these key differences, expecting that it is only women who asked to cover themselves. This, however, is a misconception that is the result of people conflating religion with cultural practices. (This misrepresentation of Islam, known as Bid3a, will be further discussed in the following two sections.) In reality, the Qur'an asks both men and women to cover their adornments.¹⁴² People also point to verse 31 in Surah An-Nisa in which the Qur'an asks women specifically to cover their adornments.¹⁴³ However, this verse explicitly goes hand-in-hand with verse 30 asking men to lower their gaze out of respect to women. Therefore, whatever Allah asks of women when it comes to covering is also asked of men. This begs the question of why women wear the hijab and men do not, which will be discussed in the following section titled "Religion vs Culture; Why Wear the Hijab?".

The two key takeaways from this section are as follows: Arab feminism is defined as the equitable treatment of men and women. Muslim, Jordanian women are clear in that they don't want to be men. Instead, they cherish the differences between women and men outlined in the Qur'an, which treats women with the highest level of respect after Allah. Secondly, under this definition of feminism, the Qur'an can be rightly understood as a feminist text.

The Feminist Roots of Islam

The Qur'an was brought to the people who needed it most, and the text addresses harams that were committed before the writing of the Qur'an. Therefore, the Qur'an addresses practices

¹⁴¹ IslamicFinder. Aisha (RA)

¹⁴² The Qur'an, Surah Al-A'raf, verse 26

¹⁴³ The Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa, verse 31

like worshipping idols and disregarding the poor.¹⁴⁴ The Qur'an also was brought to those who were disrespecting and harming women, providing the religious guidance that protected and empowered women.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, the Qur'an can be cited as the original source of Arab feminism as defined in this paper.¹⁴⁶ This is clear in the stories of three prominent, powerful women in the beginning of Islam's history: Khadija (RA), Sumaya (RA), and Aisha (RA).

Khadija (RA) is known as the "Mother of the Faithful" or the "Mother of Islam".¹⁴⁷ She has even been described by some Muslim women as Islam's first feminist.¹⁴⁸ Khadija (RA) was also the first person to believe Muhammad's (PBUH) revelations and become a believer in Islam, and would become his first wife.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, when her father died, she took over his business and traded goods from Mecca to Syria to Yemen, becoming a renowned merchant.¹⁵⁰

Sumaya (RA) is known as the first martyr of Islam, as she was the first Muslim to be killed for their faith.¹⁵¹ Originally from modern day Ethiopia, she was an enslaved woman who found power in Islam to stand against those who oppressed her. Despite her low rank, Sumaya (RA) was brave and stood up to the powerful Abu Jahl for his actions against Islam. In response, he tortured her family in front of her, and then killed her.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁴ The Origin of the Qur'an: The holy book of Islam. (2017, October 9). WhyIslam. <https://www.whyislam.org/originofquran/>

¹⁴⁵ Said, Kufu. (2023, November). [Interview by M. Kallah].

¹⁴⁶ Said Interview (2023)

¹⁴⁷ Zaki Yamani, A. (2020, March 16). The Mother of the Faithful Khadijah bint Khuwaylid (رضي الله عنها). Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation. <https://al-furqan.com/the-mother-of-the-faithful-khadijah-bint-khuwaylid/>

¹⁴⁸ Blackburn, Y. (2023, August 22). 7 remarkable things about Khadija, wife of Prophet Muhammad. Fair Observer. <https://www.fairobserver.com/region>

¹⁴⁹ Yamani (2020)

¹⁵⁰ Blackburn (2023)

¹⁵¹ Azizah, C. (2019, January 6). Story of Sumayyah: Finding empowerment & dignity in Islam. About Islam. <https://aboutislam.net/spirituality/story-of-sumayyah-finding-empowerment-and-dignity-in-islam/>

¹⁵² Ibid

Finally, there is the story of Aisha (RA). Like Sumaya (RA), Aisha (RA) was unafraid to speak her mind and spread Islam. She was also known for her profound knowledge and wisdom, and was one of the few people who memorized the Qur'an at that time. Furthermore, because she was the closest to the Prophet in his final years, she is responsible for writing the majority of the Hadith. After the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), her knowledge played a key role in ensuring that the writing of the Qur'an was preserved.¹⁵³

Arab vs Western Feminism

Beyond emphasizing equity instead of equality, Arab feminism is important in how it contrasts the Orientalist, sexist views that Western feminism perpetuates onto Arab, Muslim women. In fact, the hijab is often used in Western academia and mainstream feminist rhetoric as a distinction between the East and the West, the supposed modern versus the backwards, and the free versus the oppressed. That is why it is necessary that Arab feminism is popularized in general feminist discourse to combat the monopoly the Western lens currently holds. This monopoly isn't merely a theoretical problem, it's weaponized in foreign policy against the Middle East:

“The United States and other colonizing powers in Muslim countries claimed a moral high ground as justification for violent colonization” -Maheen Haq

A key example of this is the supposed “defending of rights for Muslim women” used as an excuse for American intervention in Afghanistan.¹⁵⁴ Before that, Lord Cromer who was a leader

¹⁵³ Mundir Dirampaten , F. (2023, May 10). Aisha Bint Abu Bakr: A Trailblazer for Women's Rights. World Hijab Day. <https://worldhijabday.com/aisha-bint-abu-bakr-a-trailblazer-for-womens-rights-part-i/>

¹⁵⁴ Abu-Lughod. (2002).

of the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 “used women’s rights as a tool to further colonial agendas while actively fighting against the feminist movement in Britain ”.¹⁵⁵

Not only does Western academia and feminism portray the Arab world and Muslim women as weak, backwards, and oppressed, it places Arab bodies as beneath Western bodies. This is because the current feminist discourse is led by the West and will continue to exclude those who the colonial state has made the "other": the "dangerously premodern" Arab woman who is unable to transgress the inherent sexist nature of her national identity and religion.¹⁵⁶ Let there be no mistake that the movement for women’s rights is not a movement for all, but instead “marks the entrance of some bodies as worthy of protection by nation states”.¹⁵⁷ This is exemplified in an Al Jazeera article calling out feminists in the West who refuse to condemn the genocide in Gaza:

“If your feminism does not make you stand up for a people who experienced little other than ethnic cleansing, oppression and occupation since 1948, who have been trying to survive under a crippling blockade for 17 years, who are being defined as “human animals”, and who are now facing what can only be described as a genocide, then what it is for? If these realities do not encourage you to take a stance, it’s hard to imagine what will. Are Palestinian women somehow not women enough to be deserving of your feminist advocacy?”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Haq, Maheen. “The War on Muslim Women’s Bodies: A Critique of Western Feminism.” Georgetown Law, January 7, 2022. <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/immigration-law-journal/>

¹⁵⁶ Puar, Jasbir. “Rethinking Homonationalism. 45th ed. Vol. 2. International Journal of Middle East Studie, 2013. p336-339 <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002074381300007x>.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

¹⁵⁸ Aldossari, M. (2023, October 23). Western feminism and its blind spots in the Middle East. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/10/23/western-feminism-and-its-blind-spots-in-the-middle-east>

Religion vs Culture; Why Wear the Hijab?

The hijab is widely known as a symbol of Islam. As such, before this research I believed that the majority of women in Jordan wore the hijab as a duty to Allah. While some women do, it is not the only reason women wear the hijab. In fact, many Jordanian wear the hijab for traditional, cultural reasons.

In her interview, Riham Naimat recalls wearing the hijab for the first time. When she was 7 years old, she had gone to the bazaar with her mom where she saw a hijab and fell in love with the color. After her family wrapped her up in it she refused to take it off for two months.¹⁵⁹ Then, in the 11th grade when she got her first period, her religion teacher told her that she should begin practicing Islam in all ways, which meant wearing the hijab. However, after a year of wearing the hijab during prayer, Riham decided to take it off because it didn't feel good for her.¹⁶⁰ Years later, after wearing it on and off in secondary school, she made a decision to never take it off again. She shared that she made this decision because the hijab feels like a part of her identity, but not because of religion. This is not due to any lack of devotion on Riham's part; on the contrary, she deeply loves her religion. However, she feels that the hijab isn't a religious item as much as it is a cultural, traditional one. She believes that women are more inclined to wear the hijab if the women in their family wear it, just as the women in her family did. On the flip side, the women in her husband's family never wore the hijab. That is why, when they got married, her husband asked her not to wear the hijab, though he respected her decision to keep wearing it.¹⁶¹ While Riham believes the hijab has traditional, cultural symbolism, she is firm in her

¹⁵⁹ Naimat Interview (2023)

¹⁶⁰ Ibid

¹⁶¹ Ibid

decision to not force her daughter to wear the hijab. Interviewee Sakhaa Bataineh agrees with this as well. Sakhaa, however, wears the hijab for religious reasons.¹⁶²

Sakhaa shared in her interview that Allah requested her to wear the hijab, referencing verse 31 of Surah An-Nisa which asks women to cover their adornments.¹⁶³ While she respects women who wear the hijab for cultural reasons, she doesn't think women should wear the hijab because someone besides Allah has asked them to. That is why, like Riham, she and her husband will not ask their daughters to wear the hijab. Sakhaa believes that her daughters should make the choice on their own as a part of their personal relationship with Allah.¹⁶⁴

Sakhaa first wore the hijab because her husband asked her to once they were engaged. This is because, unlike Riham's husband, all of the women in Sakhaa's husband's family wore the hijab. If she were to go back, she would have told her husband no when he asked her to wear the hijab.¹⁶⁵ This thought is what has led her to firmly believe that women should decide on their own whether they'll wear the hijab, and has informed her relationship with her daughters. Though it was her husband who had her first wear the hijab, she doesn't think about taking it off now. However, she doesn't particularly love the hijab, but she feels that it strengthens her relationship with Allah, making the hijab powerful to her.¹⁶⁶ Eman Farah, who wears the hijab for religious reasons, also feels that it empowers her. In her words "my hijab is my crown".¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Bataineh, Sakhaa. (2023, November). [Interview by M. Kallah].

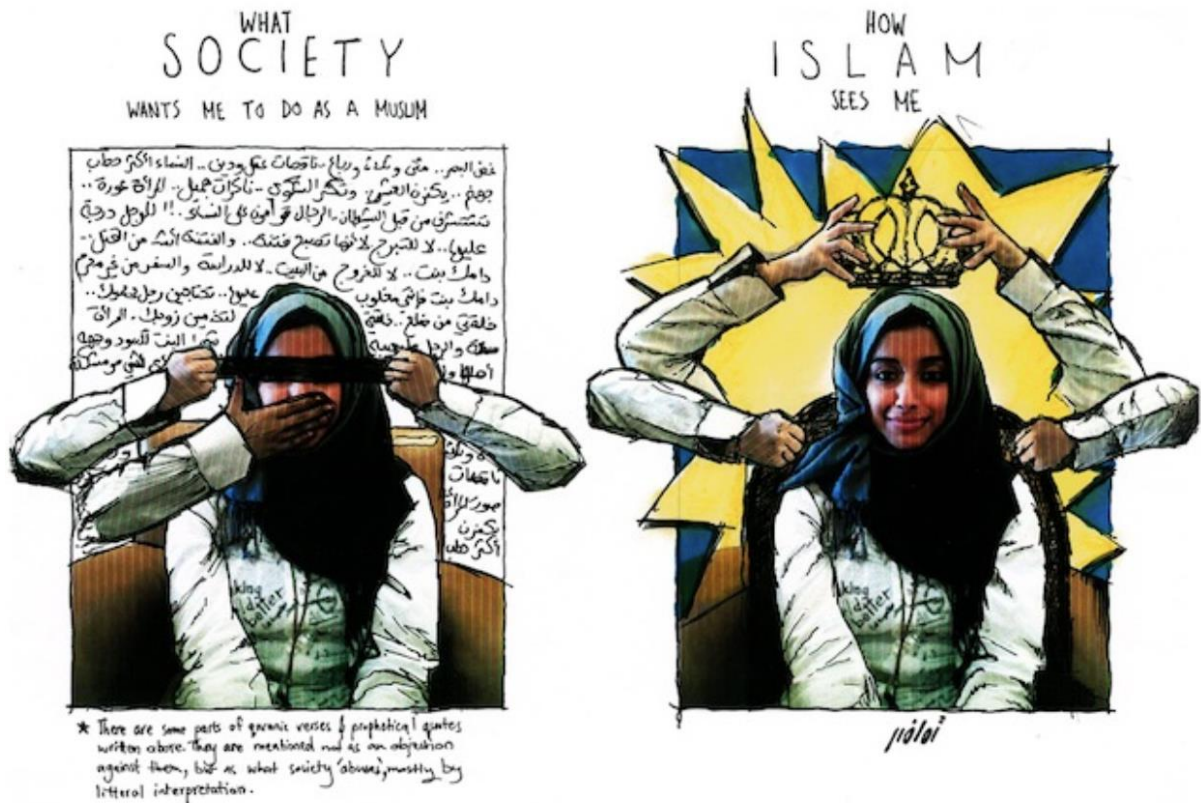
¹⁶³ Ibid

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ Ibid

¹⁶⁷ Farah, Eman. (2023, November). [Interview by M. Kallah].



An excerpt from Tamadher al Fahim's 'zine, "Diary of a Mad Arabian Woman," featured in IMOW's latest online exhibition at muslima.imow.org / Courtesy of Tamadher al Fahim

There are also women, many from the young generation, who believe in the religious significance of the hijab, but choose not to wear it. This is because they do not believe that they are committed enough to the religion to wear the hijab. While some are uncertain on whether they'll choose to wear it in the future, they know that if they do, they'll be completely committed to the religion.^{168,169}

Then, of course, there are Jordanian women who choose to not wear the hijab for personal reasons or because they do not believe in its religious or cultural significance, such as

¹⁶⁸ Hasan, Feryal. (2023, November). [Interview by M. Kallah].

¹⁶⁹ Al-Khalili, Myyas. (2023, November). [Interview by M. Kallah].

Zulaikha Abu Risha.¹⁷⁰ Zulaikha is a Jordanian feminist and writer, who does not believe in the hijab. She argues that its religious significance is no longer relevant considering it was originally used to differentiate prostitutes from other women.¹⁷¹ Therefore, she argues that the hijab acts as a cultural phenomenon used to oppress women. While it is true that some people force women to wear the hijab- which goes against the Qur'an telling Muslims that it is haram to force people into Islam or any aspect of it- her argument misses a key point: many women *do* wear the hijab for cultural reasons, like Riham, but made the choice themselves because they feel empowered by and/or more comfortable in the hijab.

Some may argue that the cultural reasons for wearing the hijab are “modern”, as they move away from religion. This exact argument was made in 2010 by a previous SIT student who studied why women wear the hijab. She concluded that the hijab was “losing its religious significance in practice because of modernization” as people now use the hijab as a fashion statement.¹⁷² However, there are three prominent problems with this argument. The first is that it pits women who wear the hijab for cultural reasons against women who wear it for religious reasons as the modern vs the backwards woman. Secondly, it names the process of modernization as responsible for why women wear the hijab culturally, when it has been a traditional decision made throughout generations of people’s families. Lastly, it assumes that the core reason women wear the hijab, if not for religious reasons, is for fashion. However, the hijab is only fashionable because Muslim women have made it so.¹⁷³ The core reason for wearing the

¹⁷⁰ MEMRI, & Aburisha, Z. (2016, September 1). Jordanian author Zulaikha Aburisha: The veil effaces the woman and her mind [Interview]. In Middle East Media Research Institute. <https://www.memri.org/tv/>

¹⁷¹ Ibid

¹⁷² McDermott, Nicole, "Modernization of the Hijab in Amman, Jordan: A Symbol of Islam and Modernity" (2010). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 832. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/832

¹⁷³ Said Interview (2023)

hijab remains either religious or cultural. Making it fashionable is merely an added bonus to wearing the hijab.¹⁷⁴

The important bottom line to draw from these interviews, which might surprise Western readers, is that many hijabi women in Amman believe that wearing the hijab is a personal decision. The autonomy Muslim women in Jordan exercise by wearing (or not wearing) the hijab is key to Arab feminism. Furthermore, they ensure that their daughters will also be able to exercise this autonomy by not forcing them to wear the hijab. This makes the hijab a symbol of female autonomy and proof of the prominence of Arab feminism in Jordan.

Bid3a and the Problem of Conflating Religion and Culture

People often blur the lines between religion and culture, leading them to believe that Islam oppresses women (which, as this paper has established, is false). Instead, it is the cultural practices which manipulate and misrepresent Islam that oppress women. As Sakhaa stated in her interview:

“Many Muslims now don’t represent Islam, they represent themselves” - Sakhaa Bataineh

This manipulation and misrepresentation of Islam is known as Bid3a (or bid’ah), and is a strong haram.^{175,176} As discussed previously, Bid3a is the reason why people believe only women are asked to cover themselves, as that is the typical cultural practice in Jordan.

In Jordan, there are many examples of Bid3a in the socio-cultural fabric of the country. One example discussed with Sakhaa and Riham was the misperception that the husband is responsible for the actions of his wife, even in front of God. This means that the husband is

¹⁷⁴ Farah Interview (2023)

¹⁷⁵ Said Interview (2023)

¹⁷⁶ Understanding Bid’ah. (2016, April 28). Islam Questions & Answers. <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/237360/is-every-innovation-bidah-worse-and-more-serious-than-every-major-sin>

allowed to control the actions of his wife as if they were his own. Sakhaa and Riham were clear that neither they nor their husbands believed this, but stated that this is a common way of thinking in Jordan.¹⁷⁷ The Qur'an directly contrasts this way of thought, stating that each believer is responsible for their own actions when they face Allah after death.¹⁷⁸

A more disturbing, extreme example of Bid'ah in Jordanian culture is honor killings. Though it is now illegal in Jordan, unfortunately girls and women are still killed by their families in the name of honor.¹⁷⁹ According to the JNCW, domestic abuse worsened with the pandemic with the FPD handling 1,685 cases of DV. In terms of killings, the Jordanian Women's Solidarity Institute recorded 21 in 2019, and 17 in 2020.^{180,181} These killings occurred because the woman had supposedly harmed her family's honor. Therefore, the family believes that in killing her, they restore the family's honor and they punish the woman so that she is not punished by Allah in death. However, this strongly goes against the writing of the Qur'an which puts violence and murder as one of the worst harams.¹⁸²

Conclusion

This paper produced a definition of Arab feminism as treating women and men equitably as outlined in the Qur'an. This definition was informed by the religious and cultural beliefs of the Jordanian Muslim women that were interviewed and the feminist roots of Islam. The

¹⁷⁷ Naimat and Bataineh Interview (2023)

¹⁷⁸ The Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, Verse 286

¹⁷⁹ Rautureau, Louise. Honor crimes in Jordan: between legislation and women's experience. https://achrs.org/english/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Honor-crimes-in-Jordan-between-legislation-and-womens-experience_final.pdf

¹⁸⁰ Qasim, N. (2020, August 18). Honor Killings: "Murder under the eyes of the law." محمد تيسير ظبيان. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/features-53752998>

¹⁸¹ عربي, B. N. (2020a, August 18). جرائم الشرف: "قتل تحت نظر القانون." BBC News عربي. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/features-53752998>

¹⁸² The Qur'an, Surah Al-Ma'idah, Verse 32

importance of distinguishing Western feminism from Arab feminism was proven when discussing how mainstream Western feminism demeans Muslim women as supposed victims of the veil. Furthermore, it was shown how the supposed “saving” of Muslim, Arab women has been used by colonial powers to justify violent intervention in the Middle East.

This definition of Arab feminism also allowed the researcher to address the Qur’an as a feminist text. The hijab was used to further exemplify this definition and highlight the religious or cultural reasons behind wearing the hijab. Because many women in Jordan believe in the autonomous decision to wear the hijab, the hijab can be seen as a strong symbol of Arab feminism.

Using the history of the women’s movement, this paper also showed how feminist activism has been strong throughout Jordan’s history and continues to endure today. The dichotomy of culture and religion is further discussed to highlight the dangers of conflating religion and culture/ Bid3a (misrepresenting Islam), creating the oppression that the movement and Jordanian women face.

Recommendations for Further Study

The first recommendation would be to further study how cultural practices in Jordan that claim to be religious are actually examples of Bid3a. This could be a paper in itself, and would be impactful in dismantling the manipulations of Islam that lead to misperceptions of what is a peaceful and empowering religion. Secondly, with more time it would be interesting to expand the definition of Arab feminism in Jordan beyond the perceptions of Muslim women. While this intersectional identity is important, it doesn’t represent the diversity in Jordan. Further studies

could explore the opinions of women either from different religious backgrounds in Jordan, or different locations in Jordan.

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