COVERED OR UNCOVERED? FEMALE LEADERSHIP TO LIFT BARRIERS KEEPING GIRLS OUT OF SCHOOLS IN TURKEY

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This paper is an accumulation of opinions and personal experiences in the quest for finding an answer to the question of women wearing head cover at educational institutions in Turkey. Turkey is a secular country where 97 per cent of the population is of Islamic faith. The issue, prevalent for nearly two decades, has recently turned into a tug of war between the administration and the women who want to attend classes with their head covers at universities. This paper is also a non-partisan attempt to explore and uncover – no pun intended – the religious veil cast upon a problematic issue by two distinct Islamic approaches, which are the covered and uncovered dress codes for Muslim women.

My interest in the issue lies primarily from an educationist’s perspective as well as that of a feminist rather than a sociologist’s. As stated in the Quarterly Newsletter of UNICEF, Turkey, “The gender gap in girls’ education in Turkey is a very big issue for all concerned—the Government, UNICEF, NGOs, the school system itself and of course for Turkish girls themselves. The Government and UNICEF’s Advocacy Campaign for Girls’ Education is an important initiative in this respect.”1 I agree with UNICEF’s Executive Director Carol Bellamy’s, vision that “[E]ducation is the right of all children—and the obligation of all governments, its primacy proclaimed by agreements ranging from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Fulfiling the right of every girl to a quality basic education is the key to promoting true equality between boys and girls, and men and women.”2

I started my research on the topic after I found myself in the heat of a debate regarding the question of girls’ head cover as a barrier to education. The Flying Broom, a Women’s NGO in Ankara, Turkey, organized the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) Civil Society Forum with the support of British Council in Ankara on April 18-20, 2003. There were 450 participants from over 250 different NGOs present, coming from all eighty-one provinces of Turkey. The objective of the meeting was to create an information pool for the preparation of the alternative report for CEDAW due in January 2004. Therefore, it was very important to consult with women NGOs during the preparation of the alternative, or ‘shadow’ report before it was presented to CEDAW in all six areas of discrimination as defined in the convention: education, media, law, domestic life, employment, and political representation.

On April 19th, 2003, I was invited to moderate the education session, which was one of the six workshops of the forum. Sixty-six women represented forty different women’s NGOs nationwide -- predominantly leaders of the NGO they represent. All the participants experienced

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1 Say Yes, Summer 2003, UNICEF.
2 Ibid, p.3
discrimination against women either first hand and/or vicariously in various forms and practices in education and held a multitude of views on the gender gap in education.

Among the participants there were women wearing head covers, practicing a strict Islamic dress code for women, and also women without head covers, who identified themselves as being of secular Islamic faith. (Out of the sixty-six participants, eighteen of them covered their heads, and the remaining forty-eight did not.) From my experience at the workshop, as I was able to interact with women of opposing views, I came to the conclusion that the debate was nearly impossible to resolve, for the conflict was being dealt primarily dogmatically. Those who have taken a stance on the matter, despite understanding the conflicting position, adamantly argue their own. Both sides argued passionately; though by the end of the day the discussion room emptied without either side substantially influencing the other. This dilemma appears to have no solution, and very little room for compromise under the circumstances. That is, the civil authority has a very strong say over the religious authority at the universities, and those students with head covers are not admitted to classrooms.

The division amongst women Turkish society faces today is a projection of similar conflicts that the world has witnessed in many other countries in recent history. Be it the clash between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, or Sikhs and Tamils in India, or black and white in the United States, or tribal clashes in some African countries, the nature of the conflict is the same: ‘my truth is better or greater than your truth.’ As long as further polarization is encouraged by the oppressive measures, the problem remains to be unsolved and the social peace is disturbed. I am a strong supporter of human rights and I believe that a controversial social issue of this magnitude should be dealt with multilaterally rather than dogmatically. In the Turkish case, religious authority clashes with the civil authority. My purpose here is to question the arguments voiced by both sides and open up a further debate on the women’s rights from both the Islamic perspective and from a western point of view.

It may be useful to give a brief history of religious wear in the modern Republic of Turkey, and also how the head cover became a symbol of identity among Turkish Muslim women in the last couple of decades, and especially in the last five years. Before the foundation of Republic, the Ottoman Empire was a monarchy ruled by a Sultan who also held the highest position as the religious leader in the Muslim world, the Caliph. Although not fully practiced, the Sultan-Caliph ruled his people by the Islamic law, known as Sharia. Accordingly, the Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire were expected to be dressed in compliance with the Islamic dress code, i.e. head covered, in fact, the face too covered with a veil, and to observe strict gender segregation in mosques, public places and schools.

Lord Kinross describes the women’s status in Turkey in the pre-Republican era in his book *Ataturk: The Rebirth of a Nation* as follows:

The woman’s position in Turkey had changed relatively little since the days of the Prophet. Despite growing discussion of her predicament, both before and after the reign of Abdul Hamid [end of the 19th Century and beginning of the 20th] she still lived subject to the letter of the laws of Islam, in a seclusion which amounted at its worst to personal slavery and at its best to conventual segregation from a predatory world.³

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Republic and the first President of Turkey looked to West to modernize society. He believed that the citizens of Turkey should feel themselves free as

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³ Lord Kinross, *The Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 418
individuals of a modern country rather than a member of a congregation with restricted liberties. Ataturk’s observations on a tour to one of the provinces are cited in Kinross’s book as follows:

In some places I have seen women who put a piece of cloth or a towel or something like it over their heads to hide their faces, and who turn their backs or huddle themselves on the ground when a man passes by. What is the meaning and sense of this behavior? Gentlemen, can the mothers and daughters of a civilized nation adopt this strange manner, this barbarous posture? It is a spectacle that makes the nation an object of ridicule. It must be remedied at once.¹

Thus came the ‘attire reform.’ Two years after the declaration of the Republic in 1923, what has come to be referred to as ‘the Revolution of Attire,’ transpired in November 1925. In other words, the veil and religious attire in public places were banned, and women were allowed to wear western style clothes. In Ataturk’s words as recorded in Kinross’ book, “There is no question—the steps of progress must be taken…by the two sexes together, as friends, and together they must accomplish the various stages of the journey into the land of progress and renovation. If this is done, our revolution will be successful.”²

How far has Turkey come in eighty years as for the status of women since the foundation of Republic in 1923? The eventual progress in improving women’s status in Turkish society in the post-Republican era was made possible with a secular government and a constitution, which protects the rights, and the national unity and security of its citizens under the same secular principles. The first and second articles of the constitution read as follows: “Article 1, The State of Turkey is a Republic; Article 2, The Republic of Turkey is a democratic, secular and a social state of law protecting Ataturk’s national principles, respecting human rights for the welfare of the society with an understanding of national unity and justice.”³ Those two articles of the constitution are irreversible by law.

In addition to the constitutional rights and democratic liberties that still hold room for improvement, not only for women but for the entire society, the Turkish women’s movement made a considerable progress regarding the social and legal equality with men since the 80s.⁴

After the Declaration of Turkish Republic in 1923 legal and structural adjustments were accelerated. In the following years, the law on the unity of education and teaching was enacted; religious schools were closed down and banned. Monogamous marriage became compulsory with the adoption of the Turkish Civil Code; women obtained the right to divorce; child custody as well as property rights in marriage were gained. In the 1930s, women obtained the right to vote and be elected for local governments; vocational night schools for women were opened. Women obtained the right to vote and be elected for village administrations; women obtained the right to vote and be elected in parliamentary elections. First elections were held with women’s suffrage rights. Labor Act was enacted. (Regulations for working women were made.)

In the 40s, the schools providing advanced study for women graduates of vocational schools opened. Women gained same legal rights for old age pension and insurances. In the 50s, first female mayor was elected. The Ministry of Health initiated mother-child health services. The 60s introduced a law on family planning with free contraceptives for women; abortion became legal

¹ ibid p.420
² ibid
³ "Turkiye Cumhuriyet Anayasasi (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey) [1982 Constitution] (2001)."
⁴ Revised from the list of rights in http://www.ucansupurge.org/newhtml
as medical emergency. In the 70s, the first female Minister appointed to the Cabinet. Bill for equal pay for equal work accepted. Prohibition against women working in heavy and hazardous conditions became a mandate for work places.

In the 80s, amendments were made to the family planning law: right to abortion within the first 10 weeks of pregnancy. Turkey became signatory to CEDAW in 1985. Committee for Policies for Women established within the State Planning Organization. Women’s Units established at the Ministry of Labor. The first Research and Implementation Center on Problems of Women was established in Istanbul University.

The 90s introduced more equal rights for women such as the Supreme Court annulling the law on spousal permission for women to work. Legal justification for reduction of punishment for rape of prostitutes was annulled. Women’s Library and Information Center Foundation was founded. The foundation of Purple Roof Women’s Shelter was established. The Directorate General on the Status and Problems of Women (DGSPW) was established. Local governments started to serve women subjected to violence. First female governor was appointed. Advanced degree program for Women’s Studies established at Istanbul University. The first female Prime Minister (Tansu Çiller) formed a Cabinet. Turkey participated in the UN International Conference for Development and Population (ICDP) in Cairo. Turkey participated in the 4th World Conference on Women and became a signatory to this conference with no reservations. Turkey became signatory to the Beijing Declaration.

Also in the 90s, the Southeastern Anatolia Project (SAP) has been implemented in nine provinces in the region--one of the underdeveloped regions of Turkey. SAP is a multi-sectoral development project aiming at abolishing socio-economic inequalities in the region where women represent the most underprivileged group as far as their schooling is concerned. Multi-Purpose Community Centers (ÇATOM) for Empowerment of Women was opened in Urfa. First graduate degree in Women’s Studies granted at Istanbul University (in 1996). Adultery annulled as criminal act for men. Women gained the right to keep their maiden names along with the last name of their spouses. Eight-year compulsory education Bill enacted. Department for Women in Rural Development was established with 12 provincial administrations to enhance efficiency of services for women. Law on the Protection of the Family enacted, regulating measures for non-abidance with such measures. As per this law, the Court of the Peace issues such measures upon the application of women and children suffering from domestic violence or upon the decision of the General Attorney in this regard. The crime of adultery for women was annulled. Parliamentary Commission established to assess the status of women within the framework of CEDAW. Relevant measures were regulated for protection against domestic violence through the adoption of law on the Protection of the Family. Family head declaration of income tax was abolished; women and men can declare individual incomes. Women’s representation in Parliament since 1935 elections made insignificant progress from 18 to 23 at the elections in 2002.

In addition to the betterment of domestic status of women, there were a series of positive initiative to join international treaties and conventions that pave the way for better status for women internationally. The Turkish Council of Ministers signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, on July 25, 1985. The convention is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. The Convention defines discrimination against women as “...any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or
nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. Countries that have ratified or acceded to the Convention are legally bound to put its provisions into practice. They are also committed to submit national reports, at least every four years, on measures they have taken to comply with their treaty obligations. The Convention, which entered into force on 3 September 1981, has, as of 3 June 2003, 174 States parties.”

What are some of the discriminatory problems that the Turkish society is still struggling with and trying to resolve in compliance with CEDAW treaty? To develop groundwork on the issue, let us take a look at the combined second and third periodic country report Turkey submitted to the UN for CEDAW for the 16th period in 1997.

“Turkey is a country with a young female population. It is thought that when adequate education opportunities are provided and when sexist barriers that obstruct the right for a better life are lifted, women will have greater control over their own lives and will demonstrate their creative potential towards an equally shared life.”

What are those areas where sexist barriers existed and women experienced discrimination in education in Turkey? That was the main question asked during the NGOs Education Workshop for the preparation of NGO(s) reports for CEDAW on 19 April 2003, in Ankara.

Before the discussions started at the education workshop in the morning session, the covered and uncovered women had a tendency to sit in a segregated fashion more cohesive to their kind. As the moderator of the workshop, I would like to stress it here that I did not have any prior notion as to which NGO represented what kind of approach to the head cover issue. Just to give an idea of the diversity of the women NGOs represented, I present here a partial list of the organizations that participated in the workshop:

- Aegean Women Research Association
- Anti-militarist-Feminist Initiative
- Association to Support Modern Life
- Association for Women of the Republic
- Education from Women to Community Group
- Educators’ Initiative Group
- Flying Broom
- Foundation for Mother and Child Education
- Local Agenda 21
- Mothers’ Association
- Soroptimists Federation
- Turkish University Women Association
- Turkish Women’s Union
- Ankara (Capital) Women’s Platform
- Women’s Solidarity Foundation

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8 www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/
9 CEDAW Report, 1997, p 9
As it is clear in the above list, the names of the organizations the women represented are not descriptive of their stances on the issue. Due to the large size of the group and time limitations, the workshop attendants were asked to write down three personal statements on the areas that they experienced female discrimination and share it with the rest of the group. Prior to the individual session, the reporters of the workshop cited CEDAW Article 10, dealing with the areas of discrimination in education so that the participants could more succinctly articulate their phrases. The discussions of the participants were all tape-recorded from the beginning to the end of the meeting; and the tapes were transliterated by professional service staff and delivered to the organizers of the Forum, The Flying Broom. The transcripts of the session reports were later revised and edited by the two reporters and the moderator and handed back to the organizers to be sent out to each participant for a final revision and approval.

Article 10

States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education and in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women;

a) The same conditions for career and vocational guidance, for access to studies and for the achievement of diplomas in educational establishments of all categories in rural as well as in urban areas; this equality shall be ensured in pre-school, general, technical, professional and higher technical education, as well as in all types of vocational training;

b) Access to the same curricula, the same examinations, teaching staff with qualifications of the same standard and school premises and equipment of the same quality;

c) The elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programs and the adaptation of teaching methods;

d) The same opportunities to benefit from scholarships and other study grants;

e) The same opportunities for access to programs of continuing education, including adult and functional literacy programs, particularly those aimed at reducing, at the earliest possible time, any gap in education existing between men and women;

f) The reduction of female student drop-out rates and the organization of programs for girls and women who have left schools prematurely;

g) The same opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education;

h) Access to specific educational information to help to ensure the health and well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning

The individual statements were read by the workshop attendants one by one, and all the attendants had a chance to voice the issue that they found to be worth discussing and including in the final CEDAW report as a case of discrimination that needs to be eliminated. The following is

10 see Convention of Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
the complete list of areas of discrimination as phrased by the participants’ individual contributions.

Areas of Discrimination Against Women in Turkey Defined by the CEDAW Education Workshop Participants

1. Education opportunities for girls
2. Decision-making rights for girls (for education)
3. Restriction and inequality in gender roles for girls (in textbooks)
4. Financial opportunities in girls’ education
5. Support for educational pilot projects for girls
6. Education of mothers
7. Problem of girls’ head cover in education
8. Negative consequences of regional migration on girls’ education
9. Discrimination against girls in vocational schools
10. Adult education for women
11. Sufficient number of Community Training Centers for women
12. Elimination of schooling gap against girls
13. Parent education on discrimination against girls’ schooling
14. Gender discrimination against girls in the families
15. Discrimination in pre-schools (in toy selection)
16. Rural literacy rate gap
17. Relationship between women literacy rate and citizenship rights
18. Girls’ timely schooling
19. Gender discrimination in instructional materials
20. Issue of religion education
21. Harassment of girls by school administrations
22. Skill training, entrepreneurship and employment opportunities for women
23. Education of civil and legal rights
24. Female administrators in education
25. Issue of education in the first language (vs. Turkish)
26. Gender discrimination in pre-school curriculum
27. Interregional differences in educational opportunities for girls
28. Gender gap in girls’ compulsory education
29. Modernization of girls’ education
30. Gender gap in female adult education
31. Gender gap in educational opportunities for girls both in rural and urban settlements
32. Financial and social constraints on girls’ education
33. Education of female convicts
34. Women Empowerment in non-formal education
35. Education/training to minimize female suffering after natural disasters
36. Gender discrimination in attire regulations in public offices
37. Senior women education
38. Turkish language education for women
39. Peace education for women
40. Gender gap in girls education created by regional discrimination
41. Gender discrimination against girls in disciplinary regulations at schools
42. Traffic training for females
43. Emotional IQ development education for girls
44. Educational opportunities for handicapped females
45. Continuous non-formal education for specific purposes
The workshop convened for the afternoon session to discuss those 50 discrimination points in relation to the CEDAW Article 10 and its clauses. The next step was to match the items in the above list with that of the items of Article 10 of CEDAW to group them under a relevant clause of the article. At this point, both the covered and uncovered participants mingled together to discuss the grouping procedure. It was interesting to see that both the covered and uncovered participants were of the same opinion on all areas of female discrimination in education but one: the head cover issue. In the previous country report to CEDAW, the major discrimination against women was stated to be the disparity of literacy rates between men and women in all regions of Turkey, that is, the gender gap in girls’ education (starting from compulsory primary education).

As each CEDAW article was discussed at the workshop the participants voiced their opinions by sharing how they experience and/or where they see discrimination in education. Accordingly, the clauses ‘e’ and ‘f’ of Article 10 were relevant to the existing gender gap, and thus the reasons why girls were not being sent to schools. At this point, the polarization between the covered and uncovered groups of women at the workshop became even more conspicuous than their attire differences. The covered group argued that girls are kept away from school mainly because they were going to be forced to uncover their head covers eventually, and that poses a major threat to the faith of the traditional families in the rural areas, especially when the girls reach puberty.

Although eight-year compulsory education law which was in effect in 1998 academic year was a serious attempt to raise the national average of schooling as well as to prevent child labor, eight years of compulsory schooling turned into an intimidating factor to send girls to schools for quite a few families at rural regions. The eight years of compulsory education enforced the girls who already reached puberty, the age that the girls are required to cover their heads, stay in school rather be seen as potential candidates for marriage or domestic work force.

When it comes to the background of the scarf ban, as part of the dress code of the Ministry of National Education, both for the students and their employees, i.e. teachers and staff, the regulation stated that no individual could cover her head at the premises. However, universities were excluded from that ban. There was no dress code regulation for the universities until 1988. In 1985, the Higher Education Council enforced a new Student Disciplinary Regulation. In 1987, clause (h) was added to the dress code stating that any kind of ‘un-modern’, i.e. traditional clothing is a violation of the dress code and banned at the classrooms, labs, clinics, and hallways.

\[11\] see Forth and fifth (joined) first draft country report for Turkey to be submitted to the UN for CEDAW in 2004, p 25.

46. Technology education for women
47. Philosophy education for women
48. Equal opportunity in using vocational, art and sports facilities
49. Positive discrimination for girls for the betterment of schooling opportunities
50. Education of educators on discrimination against females in education
of the university buildings. In 1988, the Higher Education Council added an exception to the 7/h clause: “The neck and hair can be covered with scarves for religious beliefs.” In 1990, however, there was a new practice that attire at universities is free as long as it is in compliance with the law in force, that is no clothing symbolizing any religious belief, such as fez, and or veil.\footnote{With Pleasure, p. 212-213}

In 1997-98 academic year, at Istanbul University, however, female students were required to submit a photo for their student ID and the photos were required to show the head without a head cover. Those who did not comply were not allowed to attend the classes. The new regulation later included facial hair and earrings for male students. The female students who resisted the new regulation were banned from the university; the same rules applied to the faculty and students of all universities nationwide.

Here are some of the testimonies to the problem at the workshop from both points of view; the first one is a representative of why some girls are not sent to school, and the second one is a typical example of how/why the teachers wearing head cover are banned from schools:

\textbf{(A Covered woman from Women’s Union-Ankara):} “Our topic is the discrimination in education; the impediments and the obstructions before us. I insist that dress-code regulation causes a major injustice. As long as the girls are banned from entering schools with their head covers, the problem of girls education gap will grow even bigger. This problem is beyond our political views. We need to reassess the cover of our heads from a cultural perspective. Last year I was in Harran [a south-eastern town]. I know a family where the father sends his son to school but not his daughter. He claims that the school wants his daughter to ‘undress’ to attend. Yes, that is the term he uses. He does not even get a birth certificate for his newly born daughter, because if his daughter is registered, he says, the gendarme will take the girl to school when she reaches the school age even if the father is not willing to do so. He claims that it is not proper for her daughter to go to school without a head cover especially when she reaches puberty.”

\textbf{(A Covered woman from Women’s Platform-Ankara):} “I believe that religion is a personal and spiritual need, and therefore the head cover is not a symbol for piety or for sharia but for identity. I support the idea that religion should be supported by reason, and I feel that I better express who I am by covering my head. I am a math teacher, and up until the head cover ban I worked as a teacher for 19 years, but because I refused to uncover my head in the classroom [with the 1998 decree banning women with head covers from educational institutions], I was expelled from a career that I was passionately in love. I asked for my early retirement not to deal with the obstruction and oppression. I have never failed to fulfill my duties as a teacher, and those who ban me from the classroom are not unbelievers either. Ladies, how can I be of any use to anybody if I lose my self-esteem when I uncover my head?”

Several other women voiced the same claim that the head cover is their identity, i.e. who they are as practicing Muslim women. It is not a symbol of religiosity but a matter of choice.

\textbf{(A Covered woman from Hazar Group\footnote{Hazar means ‘ever present, existing now; peace-time’ in Arabic used in Turkish as well.}-Istanbul):} Now that everybody is complaining about discrimination against women I started liking this meeting. I have my complaints too. The head cover ban keeps quite a few girls out of schools. Even if they graduate somehow by some mutual compromises, the head cover issue hinders their careers as teachers or government workers later in their lives. They are restricted at home, and they are restricted in public. What I find indeed very disturbing is that some NGOs here at this forum cannot even stand to hear our point of view.
Nearly 600 women lost their positions, and they were all laid off just because they resisted removing their head covers. Why don’t the NGOs support the women’s rights in this issue? Can’t we question the law? Can’t we question an unjust practice? Unless this mentality changes, the discrimination will continue. We cannot resolve the issue among ourselves as women NGOs to begin with.”

The implication in the above statement is that the NGOs led by uncovered women have double standards when it comes to fighting for a public cause. Since NGOs define themselves as the ardent defenders of Human Rights the expectation is that they held a stance in the head cover ban.

(An Uncovered woman from People’s Republican Party-Ankara): I strongly support that we have to protect the national educational unity to stop division in education; we should not compromise the principle of unity in education. We tend to compromise I am afraid.

With the above statement, the concern of the member of the opposition party in the Grand National Assembly is that wearing head covers divides the society. The Law of Unity of Education banned the religious schools, and introduced a secular and a national curriculum to the pre-collegial education. If the dress code, i.e. girls and boys wearing standardized uniforms without any head covers, at schools is violated then the Law of Unity in Education will be violated in a similar fashion.

(An Uncovered woman from Mother-Child Education Foundation-Ankara): We cannot overlook the fact that 25 per cent of women in Turkey are illiterate. As women we have to be sensitive to this fact and do something about it. How capable of raising children is an illiterate mother?

The members and the leaders of the NGOs whose mission focused more on public service and adult education similar to the one above concentrated more on the problem itself, rather than the roots of the problem. They are more flexible when it comes to resolving the conflicts, for their mission is to close the gender gap in literacy and schooling.

(An Uncovered woman from Community Education Center-Ankara): Dear Friends, I don’t think the head cover issue is that significant. We are the people of the same country. I went to college. My roommate was a Theology student and she was my best friend. She would not cover her head and she would wear lipstick. I grew up in Konya [a conservative town]. I remember wearing shorts in that town. I am a Muslim woman too, and there was no such issue fifteen years ago. I don’t remember any family in Anatolia not sending their daughters to school because they have to uncover their heads. How come the head cover became an issue in the last fifteen years? Were Anatolian people unbelievers then, and they became believers today? The head cover is not the reason for the gender gap. The dress code is regulated by law and should be complied. I cannot accept the resistance to it.

The above statement is a typical example to ‘secular’ discourse among those women who identify themselves as ‘secular Muslims,’ and who believe that the head cover issue is not an identity problem but a problem of interpretation created by the patriarchal politicians. The rigid interpretation that the head cover is a prescript rather than a more tolerant suggestion of ‘modest clothing’ is a predicament enforced by the patriarchal mentality who tries to keep the women under control. The implication in the above statement is that the head cover became a hot topic in the last couple of decades; and that claim is basically a reference to the ‘Religious Revolution’ in Iran. The secular group believes that it is the malicious campaign of the mollahs in Iran to spread
the head cover among the Muslim women in Turkey, which is the only secular country with Muslim population in the region.

What I found to be interesting in the debate between the covered and the uncovered women was that those who came from the remote parts of Turkey shared concrete cases as evidence to the problem of girls’ schooling whereas the women from NGOs in Ankara [the Capital] and Istanbul [the largest city in Turkey] held advocacy and leadership positions of their stance in the head cover issue. Having listened to all the women from both sides, I checked the source of knowledge for the head cover. The reference point on which the uncovered women based their arguments was the law and secular nature of the government established with the Republic and acceptance of the Reforms, i.e. Attire Reform, introduced by Ataturk, and therefore, there was no room for ‘religious display’ in government offices and public educational institutions.

The covered women, on the other hand, based their arguments on a higher order, that is order of God delivered in the Qur-an, and the Article 24, the freedom of faith, in Turkish Constitution; and hence, International Bill of Human Rights, Article 13:

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They further agree that education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

2. (c) Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.

The next question here is “how is the head cover interpreted as a religious prescript by some women and not by others although both sides claim to be believers in the same religion and of the same faith?” There was not even a difference of religious sect among the debaters. To explain it briefly we need to refer to the Qur-an where the issue is raised for the women of the faith. In the Quran there are one hundred and fourteen surats (=sections) and only two of them touch the women’s clothing and the expected behavior of Muslim women as far as their modesty and attire are concerned: Surat Al-Ahzab, and Surat An-Nur. In Surat Al-Ahzab, 33\footnote{Surat Al-Ahzab (meaning ‘groups and tribes’), 33, Section 8 (Ayeth 59-60)} it says,

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women (1), that they should cast their outer garments over (2) their persons (when out of doors): this is most convenient that they should be known (as such) (3) and not molested. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, most merciful.” (4)\footnote{The Holy Qur-an, revised and edited by The Presidency of Islamic Researchers, IFTA, Call and Guidance; King Fahd Holy Qur-an Printing Complex. (1) This is for all Muslim women, those of the Prophet’s household, as well as the others. They were asked to cover themselves with outer garments when walking out of doors. (2) Jilbab, plural Jalabib: an outer garment; a long gown covering the whole body, or a cloak covering the neck and bosom.}
The key word in the above statement is “their outer garments.” It is translated as a “long gown covering the whole body, or a cloak covering the neck and bosom.”

In *Surat An-Nur*, on the other hand, the male kin with whom a woman can comfortably socialize has been listed along with the accepted behavior not to raise the sexual appetite of the men in their circles:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard (1) their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard (2) their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments (3) except what (ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers or their brothers’ sons, or their sisters’ sons, or their women, or the slaves who their right hands possess, or male attendants free of sexual desires. Or small children who have no carnal knowledge of women.17

Two prominent professors of Islam, Ozturk, (2001) and Beyaz, (1999) interpret the above given sections of the Qur-an with a ‘modern’ perspective, and they both state clearly that the head cover is not a prescript for Muslim women. They both agree that Islam does not enforce anything impossible on its followers, and therefore, rigidity and strict rules are beyond the framework of Islam. Modesty in clothing is what is meant by the *surats* above and therefore, removing head covers is nothing against the word of Allah in Qur-an.

However, the women wearing head covers that I interviewed individually after the forum disagree with Ozturk and Beyaz. The women all join in the claim that those two professors are not found to be credible in their discourse by other theologians in Islam. For them, head cover is a unifying element among the Muslim women and hence, their identity.

Although I have made an effort to arrive at a solution to the issue based on the discussions, I have unfortunately failed to find one. Nevertheless, I believe that it has been a worthwhile and rewarding experience. I do not categorize myself as an ardent supporter of one viewpoint or the other, but rather as a researcher dealing with a local problem in a global arena with international implications. However, I truly believe that the rule of the upper hand should not be the criterion

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(3) The object was not to restrict the liberty of women, but to protect them from harm and molestation. In the East and in the West a distinctive public dress of some sort or another has always been a badge of honour or distinction, booth among men and women. This can be traced back on the earliest civilizations. Assyrian Law in its palmist days (say, 7th century B.C.), enjoined the veiling of married women and forbade the veiling of slaves and women of ill fame. (p. 1265, The Holy Qur-an: English translation of the meanings and commentary)

(4) That is, if a Muslim woman sincerely tries to observe this rule, but owing to human weakness falls short of the ideal, then “Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful”.

16 Ibid. *Surat An-Nur*, (meaning ‘light’) 24 (Ayeth 30-31)
17 (1) The rule of modesty applies to men as well as women. A brazen stare by a man at a woman (or even at a man) is a breach of refined manners. Where sex is concerned, modesty is not only “good form”: it is not only to guard the weaker sex, but also to guard the spiritual good of the stronger sex.
(2) A greater amount of privacy is required for women than for men, especially in the matter of dress and the uncovering of the bosom.
(3) Ornament (= Zinat) means both natural beauty and artificial ornaments.
when the choice of the individual is at stake. “The assurance of human rights and the construction of peace are tasks that go hand in hand … A peace based on inequality, domination, and exploitation, even if it could be maintained by compulsion, would be peace in name only.”

The four women—ages 37, 52, 56, and 65—that I interviewed were college graduates, and work for an NGO on voluntary basis. They do not see themselves as leaders for ‘head cover movement’ although they all display strong leadership traits, such as articulation, awareness, tenacity, open to debate without resenting the obstacles, and self-discipline in ensuring voluntary work for future leadership. They all agree that women need more and better education to make their own choices. They see western style attire is the result of power politics of western civilization, and the ‘women’s rights’ cannot be the ‘wrights’ of the women of the western countries only.

Although the four interviewees had different backgrounds in upbringing, they had similar attitude in covering their heads: the decision was their individual choice as a result of a quest for ‘belonging.’ None of them had families with head covers, none of them had boy friends enforcing a head cover, or none of them see uncovered women as unchaste. The youngest interviewee blatantly admitted that she was an atheist till she started her college education in the mid-80s. The 52-year-old interviewee is agricultural engineer; she says that she belonged to the ‘68 generation’. She was a strong sympathizer of the socialist ideology. As she read more she felt the need to understand Islam within the same context. Thus, she found herself making a choice. The third one is professor of Theology. All she wants is to be able to go to the university libraries; with her head cover, but she is not allowed to. She says she does not discriminate the uncovered women; in fact, her mother-in-law does not cover her head. The oldest interviewee’s father was a military officer. She grew up with Ataturk’s principles; however, she chose to cover her head as a prescript of her faith, not in opposition to Republican state discourse.

The ‘Attire Reform’ was an effort to transform a theocratic society into a national one by adopting western style clothing and abolishing what was seen oppressive and out of date at the time, i.e. veil and chador, a long garment that covers the whole body leaving only the eyes uncovered. It was also a visual transformation from a religious society into an enlightened people believing in positive science rather than religious dogmas of the dark ages.

As the story goes in the Little Prince, as a widely read book in almost all languages in the world,

[Asteroid B-612] has only once been seen through the telescope. That was by a Turkish astronomer, in 1909. On making his discovery, the astronomer had presented it to the International Astronomical Congress, in a great demonstration. But he was in Turkish costume, and nobody would believe what he said. Grown-ups are like that… Fortunately however, for the reputation of Asteroid B-612, a Turkish dictator made a law that his subjects, under pain of death, should change to European costume. So in 1920 the astronomer gave his demonstration all over again, dressed with impressive style and elegance. And this time everybody accepted his report.

However, we reached the millennium with such catchwords as multiculturalism and multiple loyalties in an ever-globalizing world. The choice of an individual is as important as any

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18 UNESCO Medium Term Plan, 1977-1982, para. 107
19 Max DePree states “Leaders are also responsible for future leadership. They need to identify, develop, and nurture future leaders.”
20 The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupery,
authoritarian discourse. In the relational context of my research where I had individual interviews with women wearing head covers, they were all very cordial and they allowed me to share their story for my research publicly. They insistently told me that many women in fact did know what they wanted to do and also what they thought would be the best thing to do in what often were painful and difficult situations. Therefore, it would be underestimating the will and power of women to look for political and international conspiracy theories behind an issue of faith.

With this debate, I find myself in the midst of an active and lively and often contentious discussion about women’s choices, about differences, about foundations of knowledge or what is currently called “the canon,” about relationships between women and faith, and law, and education and culture and society, and finally religious authority confronting with civil authority. From people whose lives are very different from mine, or who work in very different fields, I have learned to hear my own voice in new ways. I find myself asking such questions: How can we create and maintain connections through education that cross the lines of religious division, and division of all kinds and in this way move toward breaking rather than perpetuating the cycle of domination of official and of mainstream discourse?

I hope this work will offer a representation of a spectrum of opinions on the issue of head cover to understand some of the apparent puzzles it presents, especially those that pertain to woman’s identity formation and their moral development as well as the gender gap in education created as a result of it. I also hope to delve into a further research seeking for peaceful resolution methods used in similar conflicts in history. From the perspective of morality, the essence of moral decision is the exercise of choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice.

No society can exist without order. Violence is a result of the breakdown of social order. Social order is maintained, and violence is prevented, by the effective functioning of legal, political, and public educational institutions—especially the agencies of law enforcement and public education. Individuals can form communities, but only through social institutions can they form nations. As a nation, communities solve their joint problems collectively and thereby become civilized. Though we are civilized in terms of institutions, it appears that we are not yet civilized in our interpersonal relations. As a nation we are afflicted by a kind of institutional paralysis, and we seem incapable of peacefully solving our rapidly growing national and international problems.  

The schools and the universities are places where people seek for knowledge to improve the quality of their lives. Therefore, they are expected to be exemplary places where differences can co-habit in harmony and understanding, not be the battlegrounds for the differences. Inalienable rights of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness cannot be granted only to those who hold the authority. Peace is one of the fundamental teachings of education to be learned through communication, and without peace all other learnings count very little in pursuit of happiness.

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21 George Henderson (1973), in *Education for Peace*, 178
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