

**Veiled and Sexy (From Vice Magazine)**  
**The Many Reason Middle Eastern Wear Hijabs**  
By Angelina Fanous



Photo by E.Hanazaki Photography/Getty Images

In December, the University of Michigan released the results of a survey that, among other things, asked Middle Easterners what style of dress was appropriate for women to wear in public. Participants were invited to choose between various styles of Muslim head coverings, like burqas, chadors, and niqabs. The results showed that people from conservative nations like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan generally favored the face-concealing niqab, while most Egyptians, Tunisians, Turks, and Iraqis preferred traditional hijabs, which cover the hair and leave the face exposed.

These results aren't particularly surprising, and neither is the fact that Middle Eastern women and men largely shared the same preferences. Though some Westerners associate Muslim religious head coverings with the oppression of women, many Muslim women view the hijab—a blanket term used to denote any form of traditional head covering—as a source of empowerment. During the Arab Spring–inspired protests against Hosni Mubarak, some Egyptian women wore hijabs to protest a ban against headscarves on state television.

According to Shereen El Feki, a researcher and the author of *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*, many young Muslim women cover themselves to gain more independence from their parents. “They feel that their parents think these girls are good Muslim girls, therefore they don't exercise

as much vigilance and the girls get more latitude in their lives,” she told me. “They may get to travel, they may get to move around, and they have more mobility.”

Another common misconception about head coverings is that it is always worn as a statement of extreme religious modesty. “The women wearing hijab who I spoke to for my book have just as much sexual desire,” said Shereen. “Women put on hijab for a variety of reasons, not just to desexualize themselves.”

In her book, Shereen describes young Egyptian women who regularly cover their hair, necks, and shoulders, yet walk down the streets of downtown Cairo in stiletto heels, makeup, and tight jeans. “They’re like fantastical birds-of-paradise arrangements,” she told me. “On one hand, they’re trying to conform to what was the increasingly conservative climate. On the other, they’re young women, so they want to be attractive to men.”

The hijab certainly doesn’t protect women from sexual harassment. A UN survey that made the rounds on the internet last summer said that 99 percent of Egyptian women experience some form of sexual harassment, though most of them cover their heads.

Thanks to longstanding cultural and religious traditions, sex is rarely discussed in many Middle Eastern countries, even between married couples. In spite of this, Arab women have found creative ways to signal their desires to their husbands. Lingerie shops throughout the region sell all kinds of lacey and racy items and Syria in particular is known for outrageous intimate apparel. The *Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie*, a 2008 book by Malu Halasa, describes *fur-lined panties and underwear* that come equipped with fake flowers and birds. According to Halassa, shops continue to sell lingerie in Damascus despite the turmoil and conflict there.

In more conservative Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, niqabs are popular in public forums, but in private it’s another story. Weddings are sometimes segregated by gender, which leaves the women free to wear extravagant gowns with plunging necklines. “Women from the Gulf are some of the best customers of haute couture,” said Shereen. Their wedding parties are showrooms of beautiful potential brides, clad in the latest fashions for their friends—among them the mothers of would-be suitors.

When dress codes are loosened in these situations, security is tightened. Shereen told me that photos are prohibited at such parties, and guests are required to check their phones at the door to protect the women’s privacy. “It’s a very complex dichotomy between the public and private,” she told me. “It’s night and day in many cases.”