

COMMENTARY

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The Freedom to Go Topless

By AMIR TAHERI

"The girls are ecstatic and the teachers feel liberated," says Zohreh Samloo, headmistress in a south Tehran school. "It is as if the sun is shining again." Ms. Shamloo's school is one of 12 in the Iranian capital where girls, aged between six and 17, and the all-female staff, have been allowed to remove the officially imposed headgear (*hijab*) while inside the building.

The permission to cast off the hijab inside the schools is part of an experiment launched by the education ministry in September. To make sure that the girls and their teachers are not exposed to "stolen gazes" from men, six-foot high plastic extensions have been added to the walls of the buildings of the schools concerned.

Inside, the girls are also allowed to cast off the long black overcoats that all females aged six or above must wear in the Islamic Republic. "With the new walls the school looks like a prison," comments Ms. Shamloo. "But inside it we feel free!"

The experiment, to be reviewed in three months, was approved after a nationwide study showed that the imposition of hijab on young girls caused "serious depression and, in some cases, suicide." But it has drawn the wrath of Khomeinists.

The newspaper *Jumhuri Islami* (Islamic Republic), owned by Iran's "Supreme Guide" Ali Khamenehi, has lashed out against "this slippery slope towards scandal." "Casting off the hijab encourages the culture of nudity and weakens the sacred values of Islam," the paper warned on Nov. 20. Former President Hashemi Rafsanjani has gone even further.

"A strand of woman's hair emerging from under the hijab is a dagger drawn towards the heart of Islam," he told a recent Friday prayer gathering in Tehran.

Perhaps it is worth recalling at this point that radical Islam's obsession with women's hair is a new phenomenon. Mussa Sadr, an Iranian mullah who won the leadership of the Shiite community in Lebanon, invented this form of hijab in the early 1970s. The first neo-hijabs appeared in Iran in 1977 as a symbol of Islamist opposition to the Shah.

By 1979 when the mullahs seized power the number of women wearing it had multiplied by the thousands, recalling sequences from Hitchcock's thriller "The Birds."

In 1981, Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic, announced that scientific research had shown that women's hair emitted rays that drove men insane. To protect the public, the new regime passed special legislation in 1982 making the new

form of hijab mandatory for all females aged above six, regardless of religious faith. Violating the hijab code is punishable by 100 lashes of the cane and six months imprisonment.

So by the mid-1980s a form of hijab never seen in Islam before the 1970s had become standard headgear for millions of Muslim women all over the world, including Europe and North America. Many younger Muslims women, especially Western converts, were duped into believing that the neo-hijab was an essential part of the Islamic faith.

Muslim women, like women in all societies, had covered their head with a variety of gears over the centuries. These had such names as *rusari*, *ruband*, *chaqchur*, *maqne'a*, and *picheh* among others. All had tribal, ethnic and generally folkloric origins and were never specifically associated with religion. In Senegal, Muslim women wore a colorful headgear but went topless.

Muslim women anywhere in the world could easily check the fraudulent nature of the neo-Islamist hijab by leafing through their own family albums. They will not find the picture of a single female ancestor of theirs who wore the cursed headgear now imposed upon them as an absolute "must" of Islam.

This fake Islamic hijab is thus nothing but a political prop, a weapon of visual terrorism. It is the symbol of a totalitarian ideology inspired more by Nazism and Communism than by Islam.

The garb, moreover, is designed to promote gender Apartheid. It covers the woman's ears so that she does not hear things properly. Styled like a hood, it prevents the woman from having full vision of her surroundings.

But the harm that Islamism is doing to Muslim women is not limited to the evil headgear. In every Muslim country the number of women out of work is at least twice that of men. Women wages are less than a quarter of what men get. The Pakistani fundamentalist coalition that won almost a quarter of the seats in last month's parliamentary elections campaigned for "kicking women out of offices and giving the jobs they have stolen to men."

Barbarous traditions such as the so-called "honor-killing" are widespread. In the year 2000 alone, over 6,000 women were murdered in Pakistan by their fathers or brothers for having "dishonored" the family. In Jordan over 700 women fell victims to "honor killing" in the same year. In Egypt and the Sudan an estimated 150,000 girls, aged four or above, suffer genital mutilation in the name of Islam each year.

Almost everywhere in the Muslim world, rape, including the most horrible cases of incest, end up with the punishment of the victim. In most Muslim countries women cannot travel without the written permission of a male guardian. And in Saudi Arabia women are not allowed to drive cars.

Against such a background two recent highly publicized seminars on women in the Muslim world appear rather tame, if not actually insulting, exercises.

The first, funded by the World Bank and held in Amman, Jordan, gave a standing ovation to a Tunisian lady who, having managed to get a divorce from a cousin, persuaded an Englishman to convert to Islam so that they could marry. Not a bad story, except that the message was that if Muslim women could divorce husbands they did not love, they might attract new converts to the faith!

The second event, also held in Amman, attracted a number of Arab first ladies. It ended with a spineless appeal for "educational opportunities for girls."

The fact is that Muslim girls have already kept their end of the bargain as far as education is concerned. They have all the degrees they need but are still not allowed to leave home without a chaperon or wear the kind of clothes they like. They cannot get the jobs they merit or choose whom to marry.

The two Amman events were a far cry from the first congress of Muslim women held in Kazan, then part of the Russian Empire, in 1875, in which over 800 women delegates unanimously voted for "full equality of sexes, and the abolition of all discrimination." Sadly, the Western powers have done little to help Muslim women in their struggle for freedom and equality.

Leading Western ladies, including former Irish president Mary Robinson and the ubiquitous Danielle Mitterrand, wife of the late French President Francois Mitterrand, have frequently visited Tehran and other Islamic capitals wearing the evil neo-hijab. The list of topics that the European Union wants to raise in its "critical dialogue" with Iran has 22 items. Yet not one is concerned with the gender Apartheid imposed by the Islamists. Some French, German and British leftists have even praised the fascist neo-hijab in the name of "cultural diversity."

Many courageous women are fighting against the age of darkness that Islamism is trying to impose on the whole world. Democrats everywhere have a duty to support that fight so that the sun will shine for Ms. Shamlou's girls all the time and everywhere, not just for three months inside a school-cum-prison.

Mr. Taheri is a former executive editor of Kayhan, Iran's largest daily newspaper. His new book "L'Irak: Le Dessous des Cartes (Iraq: What is in the Cards)" has just been published by Editions Complexe in Paris.