

Letter to the Organizers of the Women's March: Why Use The Headscarf (Veil) As A Symbol For Islam?

Thursday 2 February 2017, by [MANEA Elham](#) (Date first published: 22 January 2017).

Dear Organizers of the Women's March.

Dear Human Rights Watch!

I am a female Arab academic who considers Islam to be her religion. I have extensively researched the conditions of women in the Arab Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in addition to the United Kingdom and South Africa; and have been involved in various campaigns for gender justice, freedom of expression, religion and political association. In other words, I have an established record in the defense of universal human rights.

I supported the idea of the Women's March since its start. I thought and still think it was important to send a clear message to the new American president. Mr. Trump's acrimonious campaign made it clear that he needed a reminder that universal human rights are not subject to negotiation. We are not entering into a post-human rights era. They are here to stay and the Women's March was supposed to be a reminder that there are enough people in the United States and the world willing to fight peacefully for these rights.

And it was indeed a success.

Congratulations!

That said, I was alarmed by some posters used for your campaign, namely the posters showing a woman wearing the American flag as a headscarf (veil). It was meant as a symbol for the minority of Islamic faith and their rights to equal citizenship. While the idea behind it is to be praised and applauded. Your choice of the symbol was misguided, to say the least.

The headscarf (veil) is a controversial symbol. If you are working in the defense of women's rights, you should know that by now. Some consider it a religious symbol; others see it as a tool of patriarchal control and oppression; and yet others consider it a symbol of the march of political Islam.

When it comes to wearing the headscarf (veil), some women wear it because they truly believe it to be part of their faith. Others, on the other hand, are forced to wear it, and these are many.

Those, who insist on not wearing it face physical and physiological sanctions from their family and community. I dealt with such cases in my consulting work with educational authorities here in Switzerland. In certain parts of the UK, some women's rights activists have to wear the headscarf in order for them to get access to the women trapped in their closed communities. In Egypt, where a wave of young women taking off their veil is on the march, some young women face defamation and threats. And in some Islamic countries, women are forced to wear the headscarf whether they

wanted it or not. For example, in Iran, women are not privileged with the freedom of choice. Like it or not they have to wear the headscarf. The veil was the symbol by which the Islamic Revolution showed its face to the world – by decreeing that all women should cover themselves! Those who disobey this decree are faced with fines and arrest.

Given the complexity of the headscarf (veil) and what it represents, your choice of it as a symbol for the Islamic religion and the minority of Islamic faith was ill advised. Why choose a symbol — considered a tool of oppression for many women in different parts of the world — as a symbol of a rich and diverse religion like Islam? It is not only misguided, it is an insult to all of these women, who have to wear it and bear the psychological scars of that imposition.

I continue to support the demands of your march but I urge you to chose your posters carefully. It is the message you are sending that is my concern. If you are marching for equality, then I suggest that you stop patronizing those women of Islamic faith and heritage. Not all women of Islamic faith wear the headscarf, nor are all convinced that this is THE symbol of Islam. Choose a symbol that reflects that diversity.

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P.S.

* “01/22/2017 07:28 am ET | Updated Jan 24, 2017”:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/womens-march-why-use-the-headscarf-viel-as-a-symbol_us_5884a1ede4b0111ea60b971c