Research Review

Men, Money, and Hijab: Financial Labor and Politics of Visibility in Islamic Banking in Turkey

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In June 2018, I entered the headquarters of an Islamic bank, nestled among Istanbul's skyscrapers, ready to discover the world of global Islamic finance. Besides chasing my own doubts (what could be *Islamic* about banking anyway?), I was motivated by what I considered a feminist agenda to conduct research on Muslim men and their invisible money rather than Muslim women and their hypervisible bodies. I was determined that I was *not* going to study hijab. Seven years later, conducting years of fieldwork among Islamic bank employees, I realized that studying men and money *was* studying hijab. Or rather that I could not possibly understand the world of Islamic banking and finance in Turkey without understanding the interplay of gender, religion, and the politics of visibility.

Currently, there is a stark divide in Turkey's banking sector. If you visit a conventional bank, you will not encounter employees wearing headscarves; conversely, at many Islamic banks, it is nearly impossible to find employees *without* headscarves. This distinction is not attributable to headscarves being part of the Islamic banks' professional dress code. Rather, it emerges from the Islamic banks' hiring practices, which tend to favor women who wear headscarves in public, irrespective of whether they are at work. Initially, I approached this segregation as a context externally imposed, predominantly resulting from the discriminatory policies of non-Islamic banks prohibiting headscarves. However, I soon realized that Islamic banks were also making choices that relied on and shaped this

dynamic.



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Secular-Washing Religious Finance

Islamic banking initially emerged as an anticolonial, anticapitalist, and anticommunist movement. In the mid-20th century, Muslim scholars attempted to generate an economic model that complied with the Islamic prohibition on riba—the charging or paying of interest—intending to eradicate it as a fundamental problem perpetuating social inequalities. Inspired by Islamic economic history and their contemporaries such as cooperative banks in Europe, various financial experiments were initiated within the framework of Muslim-owned institutions in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Indian subcontinent.

Avoiding interest was a substantial challenge and the necessary wealth accumulation for building such institutions occurred primarily after the Gulf oil boom of the 1970s.[1] Gulf-based Islamic banks established branches specifically targeting Muslim-majority countries and Islamic banking made its way to Turkey through this process in the early 1980s. The first three banks to enter the country were Bahrain-based, Kuwait-based and Saudi-based. In doing so, industry leaders aimed to provide financial services to religious Muslims who avoided interest in line with the Islamic moral economy[2] and to generate profit on petrodollars in non-Western countries, promoting wealth within a framework of southern solidarity.[3] This also meant incorporating communities that explicitly rejected financialization into the global financial system.

The history of Islamic banking is also deeply entwined with the history of the hijab ban and

military coups in Turkey. In 1980, alarmed by the growing number of hijabi women in universities and public institutions, the military, acting as custodians of Turkish secularism, implemented a ban on headscarves. This ban was part of a long and complex process that reached its peak following another coup in 1997, commonly referred to as the February 28 post-modern coup. This event led to hijabi women being forcibly expelled from universities or coerced into removing their scarves. The backlash that ensued as a result of this ban and the broader enabling context contributed to the rise of the pro-Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This political shift resulted in their election in 2002 and subsequent re-elections since then.



Jari Hytonen via Unsplash

Ironically, the same 1980 military bureaucracy that banned headscarves also facilitated the establishment of Islamic banking in the country. How is it that the same government that banned headscarves also facilitated the entrance of Islamic law into the national economy? Although the formation of the Turkish model of Islamic banking is commonly analyzed within the framework of the neoliberal economic restructuring, it is equally important to contextualize it within the broader politics of visibility that have been a cornerstone of Turkish laïcité since the establishment of the republic.

While the simultaneous introduction of the headscarf ban and Islamic banking is seemingly a paradox, it reflects the pragmatic nature of Turkish secularism shaped by nationalism, capitalism, and patriarchy. As anthropologists have repeatedly shown, what was and is considered a threat to secularism depends on arbitrary definitions.[4] At the time, the promise of financial inflows was enough for the secular government not to categorize Islamic banking as a threat and authorize their establishment.

Convincing a secular bureaucracy to allow Islamic banking came at the cost of what I call "secular washing" where the whole Islamic banking terminology was reinvented. State officials closely monitored Islamic banking language and subjected their lexicon to an arbitrary litmus test for secularity. From pamphlets to financial documents, from legal texts to TV commercials, a detailed process of Turkification of Islamic-sounding Arabic terms emerged. Within this context, the hijab became a distinctive symbol identifying Islamic banks.



Olga Subach via Unsplash

Hijab and Dignity Tax

In my interactions with women, the topic of headscarves is one I almost never broach directly. For many, this issue is fraught with trauma, whether it is a shared experience, lived through the experiences of others, or rooted in personal history. Nonetheless, headscarves are an integral aspect of daily life and significantly shape experiences, so the topic often comes up within a few minutes of conversation.

When I meet a banker, I usually start the conversation with a Turkish phrase, roughly translated as "What wind brought you to the sector?" A prominent pattern emerged when I asked my women interlocutors what led them to work at Islamic banks: they had limited options in the labor market due to wearing headscarves. Many of my interlocutors had never anticipated careers in banking, but they needed jobs. Some approached it as a stepping-stone. For many, the banking industry provided the financial independence necessary to lead a life on their own terms.

For instance, Feride,[5] a woman in her 40s, was raised in a secular-identifying family and began wearing a headscarf after moving to Istanbul for college in the 1990s. She intended to stay in academia, but she was expelled from grad school in the aftermath of the February 28th. After forcibly concluding her education, she was reluctant to return to her hometown, fearing that her family would not accept her new religious lifestyle. Reluctantly, she began working at an Islamic bank. She later found it to be "a refuge for creativity," gradually identifying more with it. "At work," she said, "a space was opened up to me where I could express myself. In a time when it was difficult even to walk on the street with a hijab, I was able to reach a lot of people through my work. I was able to create."

During my interviews with hijabi bankers, it became apparent that the number of job applications they submitted during their employment search was alarmingly low. A common sentiment I encountered among many, including those from top university programs, was a resigned, "They won't hire us anyway." Given that Islamic banks constitute a mere ~8% of the industry, this exclusion from the majority of the sector presents a significant disadvantage.

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An exception to this trend was Süreyya. Despite being fully aware of the discrimination she would likely face as a hijabi, she felt compelled to witness it firsthand. Initially, she began applying for jobs via a popular Turkish job search website but received no callbacks. To experiment, she removed her profile picture, which led to her receiving multiple interview invitations. One such invitation was from a conventional, non-Islamic bank.

She recalls the moment she walked into the bank, everyone appeared as though they had

seen a ghost. The HR representative, during the interview, made condescending remarks, such as, “Well, you’ve come here looking like this, what did you expect?” In response to HR’s brazen attitude, she told him that she wouldn’t work there even if they wanted her to, and she eventually left the interview. She also told me about job offers she could not stomach, where she was offered more than double her salary, but she would need to hide from their customers and work in the back office. But eventually, she received offers from Turkish branches of international consulting firms. Yet she still chose her work at an Islamic bank over others. When I asked why, she told me:

> ***“The first man who didn’t try to shake my hand [during a job interview] was Ahmet Bey. It was such a precious moment for me; I was about to cry from happiness. After encountering HR people who asked me why I was wearing a headscarf when I was ‘such a smart girl,’ this interview became invaluable to me. It wasn’t so much what he said, but how he treated me that mattered, and it created a bond between us.”***

For employees like Süreyya, Islamic banking transcends the question of whether a contract adheres to certain legal principles; it becomes a matter of dignity.

The space, dignity, and agency afforded to women in Islamic banking are expressed and experienced through both everyday interactions and structural frameworks. Firstly, in terms of everyday encounters, women often spoke about the discrimination they either faced or

anticipated had they not been in an Islamic bank. One example is Süreyya's appreciation of the implicit knowledge of Ahmet Bey that 'not shaking hands' is a sign of respect to her. Similarly, Sena, an internal auditor, shared: "When I forget to pray on time—let's say there are 5-10 minutes until the next call for prayer—I can rush to my coworker's desk, grab a prayer rug, and pray in the office, and nobody would find it weird," implying that this would not be the case elsewhere. Such examples are countless.

Secondly, inclusion is quite literally structural, as seen in the architecture of financial institutions where a sense of belonging is fostered through facilities like a prayer room or the integration of a place for ablution into employee bathrooms. The provision of a preschool for employees' children—facilities whose absence disproportionately affects women—also illustrates Islamic banks' efforts to create more accommodating working conditions. We should also note here that the inclusion of women in white-collar positions in Islamic banking has not always been the case. One Islamic bank CEO shared a memory from the early 1990s, for instance, when a female guest asked to use the women's bathroom, and all panicked—because they did not have one.

Returning to Feride's description of Islamic banking as a "refuge for creativity," one might find it surprising to hear banking characterized in such terms. Yet the recruitment policies of Islamic banks reflect a particular theory of financial labor—as a creative and interpretative process that not everyone is capable of performing. Can an Islamic loan be executed by someone who is not a Muslim? We might also consider this within the broader context of ethical banking: Can employees who lack environmental concerns facilitate sustainable finance? If we view financial labor as a purely technical job that could be carried out by anyone, or even by robotic automation, the answer would be "yes." However, within Islamic banks, there is an underlying assumption that the answer is "no." Their hiring

practices and employee surveillance mechanisms demonstrate a tendency to seek religiosity, and hiring hijabi women reflects the underlying assumption of homogeneity—that they would be religious.[6]

Thus, beyond everyday needs and encounters, I argue that the particular approach to Islamic financial labor itself provides women space and respect. Although a detailed exploration lies beyond the scope of this short essay, it is crucial to note that religious worldview is not merely tolerated as a token of celebrated diversity but is valued as an essential part of the work itself. An analysis of systemic features, such as the design of job roles and requirements, shows an acknowledgment of embodied and acquired religious knowledge as an indispensable aspect of financial labor.

Yet, many women employees whom I talked to also found themselves grappling with dissatisfaction due to wage disparities and the glass ceiling that limited women's upward mobility within the institution. It's common knowledge that Süreyya, Sena, and many others, are somewhat confined to Islamic banks due to a lack of alternatives. This reality is not lost on the banks themselves, which, aware of their relative monopoly, set salaries accordingly, often to the detriment of the employees. As a consequence, hijabi women often found themselves paying what I call a "dignity tax" whereby they settled for lower salaries and fewer benefits.[7]

The dignity tax is the amount individuals are willing to accept in reduced pay to avoid the mistreatment they would likely face in another workplace. While, on the one hand, Islamic banks provide employment opportunities for hijabi women, on the other hand, this disadvantage turns these workers into a source of cheap skilled labor for the banks. This dual dynamic simultaneously enables employment yet perpetuates an exploitative labor

market.

There is also strong criticism directed at some Islamic banks for almost exclusively hiring hijabi women. While some bank executives justify this policy as affirmative action, creating opportunities for marginalized women, the underlying stability assumption creates a precarious employment situation for hijabi employees. Should they decide to remove their headscarves, they would lose their jobs. I am personally aware of two such instances where my interlocutors either moved or found new jobs before they removed their headscarves.

Conclusion

The hijab has become highly politicized in Turkey, evolving into a commitment that shapes the trajectory of a woman's life. With the decision to wear a headscarf comes the acceptance of certain doors being closed, exclusion from specific social circles, and even the loss of certain sources of love, like rejection from family. Sometimes it is an explicit decision, and sometimes not so much. Hijabi women are not a homogenous group, nor do we have coherent and consistent lives. Choosing to wear the hijab is a life-altering decision, one that often exposes individuals to blatant discrimination and daily microaggressions. Similarly, deciding to remove the hijab is equally significant, as it can jeopardize social relationships, family dynamics, employment, and financial stability.

Mihai Surdu via Unsplash

Regrettably, the politics of the hijab in Turkey are deeply rooted in inequality, perpetuated by multiple male gazes that enforce their own vision of women's well-being. On one side is

the Turkish military, which implemented a hijab ban under the banner of empowering women of the republic, making them appear more “modern” for the nation. On the other side, religious Muslim men who capitalized on the backlash against the hijab ban, proclaimed to champion the wellbeing of hijabi women. Yet, they continue to preserve male authority, positioning themselves as the decision-makers over women’s bodies. Both of these approaches ultimately serve to limit women’s autonomy and reinforce systemic inequalities.

Pairing the histories of Islamic banking and hijab allows us to uncover insights obscured when each is considered separately, revealing how secularism as a modality of power is operationalized by state authorities to manage religion in public life. This essay argues that the political trajectories of Islamic banking and clothing are best understood through the interaction of gender and capital, with “secular washing” serving as a crucial framework for understanding their interplay.

When considered separately, the secular washing of Islamic finance appears as a subtle form of state violence—compared to the overt violence of the hijab ban—used to control religion in the economic sphere. However, when examined through its intersections with the hijab at the level of human experience and everyday labor, secular washing can also be understood as a form of resistance. Islamic bankers preemptively secular-wash Islamic banking to protect it from secular state scrutiny, creating space and dignity for religious practice.

Ifrah Akhter via Unsplash

Secular washing as a process of oppression and resistance provides a concrete example of how relations of gender and capital shape the boundaries of what constitutes “secular,” directly impacting what is and is not perceived as a religious threat. When infused with the

potential for national monetary gain, an unlikely alliance between secular and religious men emerged so that the fate of Islamic banks could diverge from that of the hijab, becoming acceptable to a secular palate. In contrast, hijab has become the ultimate "other" in relation to which secular identity has been constructed and remained a visible symbol that cannot be secular-washed. Ironically, because it was not secular-washed, it became an irreplaceable financial labor and a distinct identity marker for Islamic banks—who are not even allowed to call themselves "Islamic banks."[8]

Footnotes

[1] Maurer, Bill. 2005. *Mutual Life, Limited: Islamic Banking, Alternative Currencies, Lateral Reason*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

[2] Asutay, Mehmet. 2012. "Conceptualising and Locating the Social Failure of Islamic Finance: Aspirations of Islamic Moral Economy vs the Realities of Islamic Finance." *Asian and African Area Studies* 11 (2): 93–113.

[3] Warde, Ibrahim. 2010. "The Evolution of Modern Islamic Finance." In *Islamic Finance in the Global Economy*. Edinburgh University Press.

[4] Agrama, Hussein Ali. 2012. *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt*. Chicago Studies in Practices of Meaning. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.

[5] All names in the essay are pseudonyms to keep the anonymity of the individuals mentioned.

[6] Men are also expected to perform religiosity during the job interviews, which they often do so in reference to women's bodies, e.g. "my mom/sister/wife is wearing hijab."

[7] This term is inspired by what Melaku (2022) calls "inclusion tax," referring to uncompensated invisible labor Black women perform in white spaces of corporate US.

[8] Islamic banks in Turkey were initially called Özel Finans Kurumu (Special Finance House) and adopted the name Katılım Bankası (Participation Bank) after 2005.

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