Invisible in the Digital Shift: Hijabophobia, Newsroom Management, and Profit-Driven Exclusion of Hijabi Journalists in Morocco

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Abstract

This article explores the structural invisibility of hijabi journalists in Morocco, analyzing how newsroom management practices, market-driven imperatives, and cultural norms shape their professional exclusion. Grounded in qualitative research, including in-depth interviews, the study critically examines the intersection of gender and religious identity within Moroccan media institutions. It reveals that hijabi journalists are systematically marginalized through informal gatekeeping, aesthetic branding, and editorial biases that position the hijab as incompatible with modern, secular media ideals. Exclusion from on-screen roles, limited access to leadership, and thematic pigeonholing are found to be sustained by both colonial legacies and contemporary performance metrics. The findings expose how symbolic and material barriers converge to undermine the visibility and advancement of hijabi women in the newsroom. By situating these dynamics within broader debates on intersectionality and decolonial feminism, this article underscores the urgent need for inclusive editorial practices that challenge gendered and religious hierarchies in Moroccan journalism.

Introduction

The Moroccan media landscape plays a pivotal role in shaping national discourse, yet it remains governed by secular, colonial, and patriarchal norms that systematically marginalize certain social identities. While female journalists have increasingly entered the profession, those who wear the hijab encounter specific and compounding forms of exclusion, particularly in visual and leadership roles. Despite the absence of formal policies barring veiled women from appearing on screen, prevailing newsroom practices and aesthetic standards effectively render them invisible. These informal exclusions are perpetuated through organizational

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cultures that align professional credibility and modernity with a secular, Western-oriented visual identity.

Research on veiled journalists has expanded across Western, Muslim-majority, and postcolonial environments, yet much of the existing work has centered on formal regulations, ideological discussions, or macro-level political transformations. There has been significantly less focus on how hijab regulations function within journalism organizations through daily managerial practices, unspoken aesthetic standards, and professional assessments, especially in environments where exclusion is not legally formalized or overtly stated. In the Moroccan context, this raises important questions regarding how hijabi journalists navigate visibility governance in their everyday roles, how management choices influence career paths, and how concepts of professionalism are interpreted in the absence of official prohibitions. To fill this void, the current study investigates the hijab not as a fixed symbol, but rather as a focal point of organizational authority embedded in the culture of Moroccan newsrooms.

Although scholarship on gender and media in the MENA region has addressed issues of sexism, censorship, and representation, limited attention has been paid to the intersection of religious expression and professional marginalization within media institutions. This article draws on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to explore how the interplay of gender, religious identity, and professional hierarchies produces unique barriers for hijabi journalists. In addition, it adopts a decolonial feminist framework, as articulated by María Lugones, to interrogate how colonial epistemologies continue to inform contemporary newsroom aesthetics and the exclusion of visibly Muslim women. Through a qualitative analysis of fifteen in-depth interviews with hijabi journalists working in Moroccan broadcast, print media, and digital newsrooms, this study examines the mechanisms through which exclusion is normalized. It focuses on three key areas: market-driven visibility, managerial priorities privileging efficiency over equity, and algorithmic gatekeeping. These dimensions reveal how economic imperatives, institutional practices, and symbolic representations converge to reinforce the invisibility of veiled women within Moroccan journalism. By situating empirical findings within broader theoretical debates on intersectionality and coloniality, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how newsroom structures produce and sustain epistemic and material exclusions. It further argues for the necessity of inclusive media practices that challenge the hegemonic alignment of journalistic professionalism with secular aesthetics and that recognize diverse embodiments of Muslim womanhood as legitimate, authoritative, and visible within the Moroccan public sphere.

Overview of the Moroccan News landscape.

Before print, information in Morocco moved through oral and communal networks, with Raqqas[1] publicly announcing decrees and later delivering private letters across regions (Al Kattani 1962, 17). As European postal systems expanded in the early 20th century, Sultan Hassan I regulated the Raqqas in 1911 to curb foreign influence and preserve Morocco's sovereign communications (El Hajji 2021). Mosques, zawiyas, and Quranic schools acted as key information hubs, Friday khutbahs conveyed royal directives (Abdelhak 2021, 3), zawiyas[2] hosted debates on governance (Akmir 2022, 70-72), and Barrāhs[3] relayed notices through oral storytelling (Alaoui Mdaghri 2001, 34-35; Baida 1996, 31). Popular traditions such as El-Halkah[4] also blended entertainment with public commentary (Amine 2001, 56). Although printing arrived in 1756, early newspapers mainly served European communities in Ceuta, Tangier, and Tetouán. Examples include *El Liberal Africano* (1820) (Zayn; Armenteros), *El Eco de Tetuán* (1860) (Babas), and *L'Œil de Tanger* (1834) (Radi; González). From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the proliferation of foreign-language newspaper titles in Morocco reflected the growing influence of European – particularly French – diplomatic, commercial, and cultural interests. Publications such as *La Gazette de Tanger* (1870) (El Hajji, 2021) and *Le Maroc du Réveil* (Al-Maghari 2010, Stillman 2010) signal the symbolic and linguistic imprint of France within the Moroccan public sphere, even prior to the establishment of the French Protectorate. Other titles, including *Journal de l'Obédience Allemande* (Looney 2010), point to broader European geopolitical competition, while Jewish publications such as *Mebasser Tob* (1893) and *Le Moghrabi* (1903-1904) (Cohen 2007) further illustrate how Morocco's press landscape became a multilingual arena shaped by colonial entanglements, transnational networks, and imperial power relations.

The Algeciras Conference (1906) and the Treaty of Fez (1912) formalized French and Spanish protectorates and imposed strict press controls that marginalized Arabic and Hebrew journals. Nationalist papers like *L'Indépendance Marocaine* (1907) were shut down, while the Makhzen launched *Lissan ul Maghreb* (1907). Clandestine Arabic resistance persisted through outlets such as *Al Ta'un* (1906). The 1939 censorship decrees

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[1] Town-crier who orally announces public notices, events, and news in markets and public spaces; historically an oral channel of information in Moroccan towns.

[2] Sufi religious institution in Morocco serving as a space for spiritual practice, religious instruction, and communal organization

[3] Traditional public town crier responsible for orally announcing news and official information in public spaces.

[4] A traditional Moroccan form of public performance organized in a circular gathering, where a storyteller, performer, or entertainer (*ḥlayqi*) addresses an audience in open public spaces such as markets or squares; it functions as a popular space for oral narration, social commentary, and communal knowledge transmission.

further restricted reporting, though clandestine papers like *Hayat Ashabab* and *Al Istiqlal* continued to circulate (Baida 1996, 313-315). After independence in 1956, political parties established major newspapers such as *Al Alam* and *At-Tahrir*, while Francophone dailies affiliated with the Mas group largely maintained a pro-French orientation. The period between 1955 and 1970 thus represents a critical formative phase in which the Moroccan press transitioned from a tool of anti-colonial resistance to a state-regulated and politically polarized media landscape. Following Mohammed V's return in 1955 and independence in 1956, the landscape split between nationalist party newspapers, such as Al-Alam and A-Tahrir, and Francophone dailies operated by the Mas Group, which continued to defend French interests (Baida 1996; Al Kharazi 2022). The absence of formal journalism training until the establishment of the first center in 1969, supported by the Friedrich Neumann Foundation, introduced Eurocentric professional models that still shape newsroom norms and values (Alhaihy 2020; Hanusch & Mellado 2014). For this reason, 1956 constitutes as a key analytical turning point, marking the transition of the Moroccan press from a clandestine tool of anti-colonial resistance to an institutionalized media field shaped by party competition, state influence, and colonially inherited, Eurocentric journalistic norms and pedagogical standards.

During the 1970s-1980s, Moroccanization laws reduced foreign press presence and strengthened national outlets, with Maghreb Arabe Presse (MAP)[5] consolidating state control (Hiri 2021). Under King Hassan II, the 1990s brought cautious liberalization through the 1996 constitution, human rights reforms, and technological advances that lowered publishing barriers, which reduced the cost and logistical constraints of producing news, enabling the emergence of a new generation of semi-independent outlets, such as *Maroc Hebdo* (1991), *Assahifa* (1997), and *Al Ahdath Al Maghribia* (1998). Despite this diversification, prosecutions continued to enforce "red lines," such as the Monarchy, Islam, and the Western Sahara (Campagna & Labidi 2007). The year 1999 is selected as the second analytical period, because the accession of King Mohammed VI marked a significant shift toward cautious political openness and accelerated media modernization. The dismissal of Interior Minister Driss Basri, who had long overseen restrictive press policies, signaled a reorientation toward greater transparency and reform (Ibahrine, 2002). These changes encouraged the rise of independent print outlets in the early 2000s and paved the way for rapid digital expansion, even as legal and political "red lines" remained actively enforced (Campagna and Labidi 2007; Tayebi 2013). This combination of technological innovation and enduring constraints makes

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[5] MAP is Morocco's official state-owned news agency, responsible for producing and distributing government-aligned news across the country and internationally.

1999 a pivotal boundary for analyzing contemporary newsroom practices in Morocco.

Under King Mohammed VI, media modernization expanded coverage of social and economic topics but preserved state influence through key appointments (Looney 2010: 20). New titles like *Nichane*, *Al Massae*, and *Akhbar Al Yawm* appeared, even as print readership dropped below 1% by 2017 due to literacy limits, economic constraints, and the rise of free digital news (Perreault and Ferrucci 2020, 3). In broadcast news, state-aligned institutions, especially MAP, continue to shape editorial priorities, reinforcing an authoritarian communication model where official narratives dominate prime-time coverage. These structures intersect with a persistent male predominance in leadership and on-air political reporting, limiting the diversity of voices that can challenge institutional frames. At the same time, the sector faces declining print revenues, digital competition, and shrinking investigative budgets, even as online platforms open new spaces for grassroots and accountability journalism. Moroccan media, therefore, sits in a hybrid position: caught between authority and autonomy, and between gendered tradition and digital innovation (Ibahrine 2002, 633).

A literature review of veiled Female Journalists and the media globally

In Morocco, journalism is organized around concentrated urban media hubs, namely Casablanca, Rabat, and Tangier, where television organizations operate through vertically layered editorial hierarchies dominated by senior male managers (Mahlouly 2025). Because editorial authority is concentrated in a small set of decision makers, appearance becomes a managerial variable tied to brand identity: managers routinely assess whether a presenter's visible religiosity will affect advertiser relations, audience segmentation, or platform performance metrics, and these assessments inform hiring, assignment, and promotion decisions. In practice, such evaluations translate into informal gatekeeping, reassignments to off-screen roles, radio, or digital desks, and discretionary career barriers rather than formal legal prohibitions. Professionalism in these newsrooms is defined visually. While women, especially veiled journalists, are evaluated through a Mediterranean/Westernized aesthetic of unveiled hair, polished styling, and cosmopolitan presentation, men are rarely subjected to equivalent bodily scrutiny; their credibility is assumed through professional status rather than appearance, reinforcing a gendered double standard in newsroom norms (Steiner 2017). This configuration makes Morocco a distinct analytical case: rather than exclusion through law, visibility is produced through everyday managerial and market logics that remain underexplored. To analyze this, I draw on global studies to identify mechanisms, conditional visibility, market-driven neutrality, and state aesthetic control, and show how each manifests in the Moroccan newsroom.

Global research on hijabi journalists provides a scaffold for understanding these dynamics by revealing the mechanism of conditional professional legitimacy. In Western contexts, studies show that visibility is often mediated by broader ideological frameworks of secularism and multiculturalism. In Canada, Maqsood (2025) demonstrates that while hijabi journalists assert professional agency, their inclusion remains conditional, requiring them to navigate tokenization and the assumptions of a predominantly white audience. In contrast, the French context (Reuters 2024) illustrates a more rigid exclusion driven by institutional *laïcité*, where the hijab acts as a disqualifying marker of "neutrality." These studies suggest a mechanism where visibility is used as a tool for ideological gatekeeping.

Comparative scholarship highlights that the principle of "neutrality" in journalism, often emphasized in Western contexts as an ostensibly objective standard, can operate as a subtle mechanism of exclusion when applied selectively. In Muslim-majority societies, such as Pakistan and Indonesia, research shows that market-driven and state-led aesthetic regulations intersect with gender and religious norms: veiled women, despite respect for piety, are frequently confined to off-screen roles to preserve a "neutral" commercial appeal, limiting their career advancement (Ahmed and Sultan 2025; Rabathy et al. 2021). This suggests that ostensibly neutral standards can reinforce structural inequalities in contexts where cultural and commercial expectations intersect. Historically, this has been compounded by state-driven modernization projects in Turkey, Egypt, and Algeria, where unveiling was used as a tool of nationalist elites to signal a rupture with "backwardness" (Posetti 2006; Awny 2024; Maa'zouzi 2022). These cases suggest a mechanism where the female body is a site of political and commercial branding.

In Morocco, the regulation of journalistic visibility operates through an institutional logic that can be described as "professional aestheticism." At the same time, the country lacks formal legal prohibitions like those seen in France; a comparable notion of visual neutrality shapes who is deemed appropriate for on-screen appearances. The hijab, in this framing, is often constructed as a potential distraction from the modern, secular, and market-oriented brand identity that news organizations aim to project. Neutrality here is not simply a stylistic preference; it functions as a tool to manage visibility, determining which journalists and which forms of personal expression are deemed acceptable in public-facing roles. Unlike the stable, state-mandated bans observed in post-colonial Algeria or Mubarak-era Egypt, Moroccan newsrooms rely on shifting institutional norms and managerial discretion to enforce these aesthetic standards. The ambiguity of these "unspoken rules" allows professionalism to be weaponized through everyday editorial and managerial decisions, regulating the visibility of

female journalists, particularly those who wear the hijab, both in front of the camera and in broader organizational hierarchies. This study examines how these norms of neutrality and visibility intersect with market logic and gendered expectations, shaping the professional experiences and opportunities of women in Moroccan newsrooms. To understand how these contemporary dynamics have emerged, it is necessary to situate them within a historical trajectory. Thus, the next section traces the evolution of the hijab across colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary contexts, highlighting how historical formations continue to inform current newsroom regulations and professional expectations.

The Hijab in Morocco

Pre-Islamic veiling in Morocco is poorly documented and remains debated, yet veiling was widespread across ancient North African and Mediterranean societies, such as Mesopotamia, Greece, and the Byzantine Empire, where it signified status and modesty (Ricks & Ricks 2011). These practices may have reached the Maghreb through trade and cultural exchange (Stillman 2000). Within Berber communities, veiling customs varied; the Tuareg are especially notable for their pre-Islamic male veiling (tagelmust), which is used for protection and identity marking, in contrast to the predominantly female-focused veiling that developed in later Islamic societies (Stillman 2000). Moreover, veiling customs across Morocco's communities reflect a long and complex cultural history, illustrated clearly in the dress of Moroccan Jews. Although pre-Islamic records are limited, Jewish women are generally understood to have practiced modest dress and hair covering as markers of respect and communal identity. A key garment was the *hayk*, a full-body draped cloth serving both protective and modesty functions (Besancenot 2008). By the medieval period, Jewish clothing had incorporated strong Islamic and Andalusian influences, men adopting long robes and turbans, and women wearing embroidered garments with veils, showing how Jewish communities blended regional styles while maintaining a distinct cultural identity within Moroccan society (Chloe 2023).

The arrival of Islam in the seventh century introduced major cultural and religious shifts in Morocco, including Islamic modesty norms that gradually shaped local dress practices. Over time, the hijab became increasingly common among Moroccan women through Islamic teachings and exchanges with other Muslim societies. However, the transition from pre-Islamic to Islamic veiling remains insufficiently documented, leaving gaps in the historical tracing of the hijab's early development in the region. The term *hijab*, meaning "covering" in Arabic, encompasses diverse forms of modest dress across Muslim societies (Halrynjo and Jonker 2016), including headscarves and long garments that obscure the body (Ruby 2006). In Western discourse, however, it is often reduced to the women's

headscarf. Modern shifts in Moroccan veiling practices also reflect broader socio-political change. In 1947, Princess Lalla Aicha appeared publicly without a hijab, endorsed by King Mohammed V, signaling a new state discourse on women's emancipation (Beitler and Martinez 2010). During the colonial era, the hijab became a site where Moroccan women balanced tradition with modernity. It preserved religious continuity while adapting to new social roles and, importantly, symbolized anti-colonial resistance. Like women elsewhere in North Africa, Moroccan women used the hijab to assert cultural and religious identity against European assimilationist pressures (El Mouadden, 2021). The veil held significant anti-colonial meaning, as French and Spanish powers portrayed the act of unveiling as a civilizing act to justify assimilation (Bolorinos Allard, 2021). In contrast, Moroccan women reasserted veiling as a form of political resistance, sometimes using their haïk to carry weapons during the liberation struggle (Bijdiguen, 2015). For them, the hijab symbolized defiance against colonial impacts on gender and identity. These narratives persist, with postcolonial Moroccan institutions still reflecting secular ideals tied to colonial aesthetic standards.

Colonial authorities, however, interpreted it through orientalist lenses, framing it as backwardness and female oppression. Such depictions, common in colonial literature and art, exoticized the "other," legitimizing the civilizing mission while obscuring the hijab's role as a marker of agency and resilience (Eid, 2011). In post-colonial Morocco, veiling practices evolved significantly. While the early independence era favored a modernized female appearance, the 1980s Islamic revival introduced new hijab styles that contrasted with traditional garments. In contemporary Morocco, the hijab is neither mandated nor banned, giving women autonomy in its use. Its prevalence is greater in northern regions, smaller cities, and rural areas, reflecting local norms and personal belief (Beitler and Martinez 2010).

Public debate over the hijab continues to surface in Morocco, exemplified by the 2005 revision of religious textbooks following criticism of images depicting girls in headscarves. Implicit restrictions also persist within the professional sphere, where sectors such as the military, police, and high-profile media institutions often expect women to remove the hijab, exposing profound tensions between individual religious expression and institutional claims to "neutrality." These practices are symptomatic of broader patterns of hijabophobia, a phenomenon that must be understood through the lens of intersectional discrimination. As Makkonen (2002) elucidates, discrimination is rarely a singular event but manifests in direct, indirect, structural, and institutional forms. Within Morocco's news economy, this discrimination is uniquely gendered; women who wear visible

identity markers like the hijab encounter a far more complex array of intersectional challenges in the labor market than their male counterparts (Gilliat-Ray 2010). This disparity suggests that the hijab is not merely a piece of clothing but a hyper-visible site upon which institutional anxieties regarding modernity and "colonial secularism" are projected.

The exclusion of hijabi journalists is further sustained by a "lifecycle of discrimination" that spans from entry to advancement. Research by Šeta (2016) indicates that hijabi women are more frequently rejected during recruitment, face heightened workplace harassment, and are systematically overlooked for high-prestige promotions. In the context of Moroccan broadcasting, this results in symbolic invisibility, where hijabi women may occupy behind-the-scenes roles but are barred from the "anchor chair", the ultimate symbolic position of institutional authority. When situated within overlapping historical trajectories, a media system rooted in secular norms and a religious symbol increasingly politicized in public life, hijabophobia becomes a structural mechanism. This analytical framework, which can be expanded to include factors such as age, nationality, and class (Turner 2011), allows us to ask: How do management strategies, market-driven logics, and culturally embedded newsroom norms converge to produce the exclusion of hijabi journalists? Ultimately, this study posits that the "professional" ideal in Moroccan news is not a neutral standard but a managerial construct that systematically filters out religious markers to align with specific global and editorial brands.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality

In this paper, I delve into the multifaceted experiences of hijabi women working within Moroccan newsrooms, employing the lens of intersectionality theory as pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality serves as a critical framework for understanding how various dimensions of identity, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, overlap and interact, creating complex layers of discrimination or disadvantage, and in this case, Muslim women, who are recurrently subjugated by multi-level and multi-layered forms of discrimination in the employment sector (Syed and Özbilgin 2015). This theoretical approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of identity facets, asserting that they cannot be fully understood in isolation. In the same vein, Crenshaw (1989) contends that oppression and its consequences are multidimensional and interwoven, reflecting the complex interplay of intersecting identities. In the contemporary landscape, where social constructions of gender and race are constantly evolving alongside the rising waves of Islamic radicalism and growing Islamophobia in Western societies, hijabi women frequently

encounter intricate challenges. These challenges stem not only from their gender and religious identity but also from additional personal aspects, such as family responsibilities and professional qualifications (Brah 1994; Koopmans 2015).

Addressing just one category of identity fails to capture the full scope of barriers that can obstruct the career aspirations of hijabi women. An intersectional lens is crucial for illuminating how different socially constructed categories interact within overlapping systems of oppression (Turner 2011). The interplay of gender, race, and socioeconomic class offers a profound lens through which to analyze the varied experiences of women, particularly those from diverse racial and economic backgrounds. Research has demonstrated, as noted by scholars such as Chow et al. (2011) and Shields (2008), that this intersectionality leads to distinctive challenges and experiences for women. In particular, numerous studies have candidly revealed that Muslim women encounter both structural and intersectional barriers as they navigate various sectors of society. According to Makkonen (2002), Ghanem (2017), and Tariq and Syed (2018), these barriers manifest in numerous ways. For instance, Muslim women often face discrimination in the workplace, particularly due to their religious attire, such as the hijab. This specific form of dress can adversely impact their hiring prospects and opportunities for career advancement, as discussed by Ghumman and Ryan (2013). The intricate relationship between religion and gender significantly contributes to labor market disadvantages faced by Muslim women, underscoring the crucial necessity for intersectional approaches to address these challenges (Cannon 2023).

In this paper, the concept of intersectionality is employed to analyze overlapping axes of identity and structural power: gender, religious visibility (specifically the hijab), class, urban professional status, and the visibility norms dictated by platforms and advertisers. This framework enables an examination of how these axes operate across various career stages, from entry into the newsroom to on-screen assignment and promotion, highlighting both the individuals who are excluded and the organizational processes that sustain these exclusions. At the same time, these intersectional patterns are situated within broader historical and cultural legacies, including colonial and Eurocentric norms that continue to shape notions of professionalism, visibility, and authority in Moroccan media. While a full discussion of decolonial theory is reserved for the following section, acknowledging these inherited structures here underscores how historical hierarchies intersect with contemporary gendered and religious inequalities, creating a multi-layered matrix of exclusion that shapes the experiences of hijabi journalists.

Decolonial Feminism

In examining the experiences of hijabi women in Moroccan newsrooms, I turn to decolonial feminism as a crucial theory that allows for a deeper understanding of the intersections between gender and coloniality. As María Lugones (2010) argues, colonial modernity established a hierarchical dichotomy between the human and the non-human, situating the European, bourgeois, Christian man as the normative ideal of humanity, while racialized and colonized people were dehumanized, relegated to the realm of the primitive, the irrational, and the subjugated. This racial-gendered classification did not merely serve as an ideological construct; it was actively institutionalized through structures of labor, governance, and knowledge production that persist today in various socio-political contexts, including media industries worldwide and within the Moroccan context.

Applying this lens to the case of hijabi female journalists in Moroccan newsrooms enables me interrogate the ways in which coloniality continues to shape the news landscape and reinforce exclusionary practices. The newsroom, as a site of discourse production, operates within a framework of modernity that often aligns with Eurocentric ideals of gendered professionalism and secular visibility. The presence of hijabi women in these spaces disrupts these hegemonic norms, positioning them as both hyper-visible and marginal, visible as a racialized and religious "other" yet marginalized within newsroom hierarchies.

Drawing on Lugones's (2010) concept of the modern/colonial gender system, I argue that the exclusion of hijabi women from prominent roles in Moroccan news media is not merely a question of individual discrimination but is embedded in a broader system of coloniality that constructs certain bodies as incompatible with modernity. As Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) has shown in the context of nineteenth-century Iran, gendered and sexualized norms were restructured under colonial influence to align with European modernity, marking certain forms of embodiment and expression as backward or regressive. Similarly, in Moroccan newsrooms, the hijab is frequently framed as an anachronistic signifier, incompatible with the liberal-secular ideals that dominate media spaces. This colonial construction of modernity, which aligns professionalism with Westernized, de-ethnicized, and secularized femininity, systematically delegitimizes hijabi women's presence in newsrooms, rendering their professional aspirations precarious.

Decolonial feminism offers not only an analytical lens but also a praxis-oriented approach to disrupting these exclusions. As Lugones (2010) emphasizes, decolonial feminist praxis involves reimagining sociality beyond the rigid binaries imposed by coloniality: gendered vs. non-gendered,

civilized vs. primitive, secular vs. religious. This framework allows me to move beyond merely identifying the structural barriers that hijabi journalists face; it enables a critical engagement with alternative ways of being and knowing in newsroom spaces. Rather than positioning hijabi women as subjects who must assimilate into secular media norms, a decolonial feminist perspective invites us to reconsider the epistemologies and values that underpin journalistic professionalism itself.

By centering decolonial feminism in my analysis, I seek to challenge the dominant narratives that equate neutrality with secular visibility, and professionalism with Westernized gender performance. I advocate for a newsroom culture that recognizes and accommodates plural ways of being, one that does not view the hijab as an obstacle to credibility but as a legitimate expression of professional identity. This reimagining aligns with Lugones's (2010) call for a decolonial transformation of social relations, one that resists the hierarchical fragmentation imposed by coloniality and instead fosters a more inclusive, relational, and non-hierarchical approach to gender and identity in professional spaces. Thus, decolonial feminism is not merely a theoretical tool in my work; it is a necessary framework for understanding and contesting the ongoing legacies of coloniality in Moroccan news. It allows me to not only critique the structural mechanisms that marginalize hijabi journalists but also to envision alternative futures where media spaces are not sites of exclusion but of multiplicity and epistemic justice.

Building on the insights from intersectionality and decolonial feminism, this study brings the two together within a single, cohesive analytical framework, treating them not as separate approaches but as mutually reinforcing lenses for examining how historical, cultural, and structural inequalities converge to shape the professional experiences of hijabi journalists in Morocco. In practice, this means that each instance of exclusion is interpreted both in terms of overlapping social identities and the colonial logic that shapes professional norms. Intersectionality serves to map and empirically trace overlapping axes of disadvantage, specifically the intersections of gender, religious visibility (such as wearing a hijab), class or urban professional status, and the visibility norms driven by platforms and advertisers. This framework helps to identify where exclusion occurs within organizational processes such as hiring, assignment, and promotion. Subsequently, decolonial feminism is employed to interpret these mapped patterns by historicizing the aesthetic and institutional logics that render certain embodied presentations professionally illegible. This approach enables not only highlighting who faces disadvantage and the mechanisms behind it but also explaining why ostensibly neutral managerial logics perpetuate exclusionary and colonialized aesthetics, thus linking micro-practices of newsroom management to broader historical and epistemic contexts.

The Digital Paradox: Algorithmic Gatekeeping and the Visual Economy

To fully contextualize the contemporary experience of hijabi journalists, this framework accounts for the digital transformation of media, moving beyond the shift from analog to online toward a visually-driven, metric-oriented digital economy. Within this landscape, where social platforms and algorithmic logics mediate news consumption, this study examines how such pressures impact the inclusion, credibility, and career paths of hijabi journalists. The advent of digital media initially promised to democratize these spaces. As noted in regional studies of the Arab Spring, digital platforms offered female journalists new agency, allowing them to bypass traditional gatekeepers, build direct audiences, and challenge patriarchal narratives (Shaher 2025). Nevertheless, scholarship shows that editorial gatekeeping and image selection marginalize the veil as a marker of otherness, while interview and workplace studies document managerial pressures and informal hiring practices that exclude veiled women from on-air roles (Macdonald 2006; Rasheed and García 2020; Maqsood 2025; Ghumman and Ryan 2013).

Historically, hijabi journalists in Morocco faced both formal and informal exclusions in the media, stemming not only from gendered inequalities but specifically from biases against visible religious expression. By 2011, qualified women who wore the headscarf were often barred from television and remained underrepresented in radio, reflecting hijab-specific restrictions on professional visibility. This exclusion stemmed from unwritten norms influenced by secularist ideals, leading to tokenistic inclusion and highlighting the tension between religious visibility and secular modernity in Moroccan media (Ouchtou 2011). Furthermore, the early 2000s-2010s' digital expansion initially paved the way alternative distribution channels and audience-building opportunities, but after roughly the 2010s, the rise of metric-driven platform economies recalibrated visibility thresholds rather than eliminating structural barriers (Zaid and Ibahrine 2013).

Theoretically, the digital shift should have created an opening for diverse representations of Muslim womanhood that were previously marginalized by the secular elite of traditional Moroccan media. However, this study specifically examines how discrimination is being reshaped in digital environments. Instead of removing obstacles, the transition to digital has frequently created a double bind. Although the entry barrier has decreased, the thresholds for visibility and credibility have evolved. In the digital newsroom, the pressure to compete with legacy outlets for clicks and engagement has intensified the commodification of the female image (Centre for Media Transition 2019).

This competition is intensified by the continued dominance of legacy outlets, whose resource advantage and editorial norms shape digital news values; digital teams frequently adopt legacy-driven priorities such as sensationalism, visual branding, and engagement-maximizing aesthetics, which reproduce existing biases rather than challenge them (Zaid and Ibahrine 2013). As a result, the professional pressures inherited from legacy media intersect with the platform-specific demands of the digital environment, shifting the burden from editorial competition to embodied visibility. This pressure is not only about producing more content but also about presenting bodies that can capture attention within algorithmically driven platforms. In fact, the digital economy is structured by a visibility mandate that privileges bodies conforming to globalized Western aesthetic standards (Hussain et al. 2025), reinforcing unequal expectations for how women, especially those outside these norms, must perform visibility to remain competitive.

In this context, the hijab may trigger a form of what participants interpret as algorithmic bias, which refers to flaws at the system level, such as in data, design, or model processes, that cause algorithms to generate unfair or skewed outputs (Kordzadeh and Ghasemaghaei 2021). This means that hijabi journalists may be disproportionately disadvantaged, as the visibility penalties produced by biased algorithms further marginalize their presence and credibility in digital news spaces. Therefore, participants in this study describe their interpretations of algorithmic marginalization as experiences in which platform visibility and engagement metrics seem to penalize content featuring visibly hijabi presenters. These experiences manifest as downstream effects, including reduced reach, increased exposure to harassment, and lower engagement–conditions that participants interpret as a form of de-prioritization at the platform level. Importantly, my findings do not include direct insights into the platform algorithms. Instead, I focus on how journalists perceive and experience the penalties associated with metric-driven visibility, alongside the influence of organizational branding decisions. This digital dimension complements the intersectional and decolonial frameworks by highlighting that modernity in the digital age is still coded with colonial aesthetics; the modern digital journalist is expected to look a certain way to maximize algorithmic engagement, often to the exclusion of the hijabi woman.

Methodology

This study employs semi-structured interviews, a qualitative method involving a set of open-ended questions that guide the conversation (Kallio et al. 2016), while allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes during interviews with fifteen female journalists working in Moroccan media. Such an approach facilitates in-depth insight into the lived experiences of the

interviewees. By adopting this method, I aim to capture the complex and multifaceted experiences of hijabi journalists, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face in their professional environments. The study involved 15 female journalists who wear hijab, working in various print, broadcast, and digital media organizations across Casablanca, Rabat, and Tangier. All participants were directly engaged in news production, representing a range of roles from field reporting to editorial management. This selection ensures a focus on the experiences of hijabi journalists while capturing diverse perspectives within the Moroccan media landscape.

To recruit participants, I employed a multi-tiered recruitment strategy. Initially, I leveraged personal professional networks and snowball sampling to establish trust with key informants. Subsequently, I utilized LinkedIn to identify and approach specific profiles to ensure institutional diversity. Given the sensitive nature of the research, a rigorous informed consent process was conducted. All participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's scope and assured of strict anonymity to protect their professional standing. Explicit verbal or written consent was obtained regarding their willingness to be interviewed and audio recorded. The sample comprised 15 female journalists aged between 21 and 54, employed in various print and electronic news organizations. Participants worked across a range of media organizations, which are anonymized as follows: National Print Media, Regional Print Media, National TV, Regional TV Network, Online TV Platform, and National Online Media. This ensured representation from both print and electronic outlets in different cities. All participants wear the hijab, and although the interview questions were posed in Arabic, most respondents often answered in French, reflecting their linguistic preferences. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 68 minutes, with an average length of approximately 42 minutes and 33 seconds.

As a non-veiled Moroccan female with prior experience in media research, I occupied a position of partial insiderhood. My nationality, gender, and fluency in Darija facilitated access, rapport, and sensitivity to participants' linguistic code-switching, while my non-veiled appearance aligned me with the often-privileged secular aesthetic dominant in Moroccan newsrooms. This positionality required reflexive awareness of potential power asymmetries. To address this, I adopted empathetic listening practices and emphasized the creation of a safe interview space in which participants could critically reflect on organizational structures and exclusionary practices without fear of judgment. I employed convenience and purposive sampling to select participants for in-depth interviews (Henry 1990, 21). This non-probability sampling method involves choosing

individuals who are readily accessible and willing to participate, making it a practical choice when time and resources are limited.

  This sample aims to provide qualitative and in-depth valuable insights due to the diversity of roles, media types, and cities represented. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this study prioritizes qualitative depth. The sample of 15 participants offers a rich cross-section of the industry, providing valuable, localized insights through a diverse representation of professional roles, media types, and geographic locations. Each participant occupies a distinct professional position, from field reporting and investigative journalism to editorial leadership and audiovisual roles, allowing the study to capture a broad range of experiences within Moroccan media organizations. Given the participants' direct engagement in news production and their relevance to the research focus, the interviews provided sufficient information power (Malterud et al. 2016) to reach thematic saturation and to capture the core organizational mechanisms at play (Guest et al. 2006). Two participants had direct on-camera experience: one as a Camera Operator and another as an Audiovisual Specialist who occasionally appeared on screen. This ensured a range of perspectives, including both behind-the-scenes and on-camera experiences.

Table 1. Summary of Participants

ID	Age	Experience	Job Position	City	Media Type	On-Camera	Hijab
P1	24	1 year	Field Reporter	Casablanca	Print	No	Yes
P2	22	<1 year	News Trainee	Rabat	Print	No	Yes
P3	45	15 years	Senior News Editor	Casablanca	Print	No	Yes
P4	51	23 years	Editor-in-Chief	Casablanca	Print	No	Yes
P5	25	3 years	Camera Operator	Casablanca	TV	Yes	Yes
P6	30	5 years	Production Assistant	Tangier	TV	No	Yes
P7	28	5 years	Investigative Journalist	Rabat	Print	No	Yes
P8	21	<1 year	Audiovisual Specialist	Rabat	TV	Yes	Yes
P9	42	15 years	Editorial Assistant	Casablanca	Digital	No	Yes
P10	33	9 years	Freelance Journalist	Casablanca	Digital	No	Yes
P11	24	3 years	Field Reporter	Rabat	Print	No	Yes
P12	44	16 years	Chief Editor	Tangier	TV	No	Yes
P13	35	13 years	Editorial Assistant	Tangier	Print	No	Yes
P14	27	4 years	Investigative Journalist	Rabat	Print	No	Yes
P15	29	3 years	Content Writer	Casablanca	Digital	No	Yes

Table 1 summarizes participants' characteristics, including demographics, role, media type, city, years of experience, on-camera involvement, and hijab status. It highlights the diversity across media organizations (print, digital, TV) and confirms that all participants wear the hijab, in line with the study's focus on hijabi journalists. Data processing and analysis followed a rigorous, systematic workflow where findings were interpreted in terms of patterns, experiences, and organizational mechanisms rather than prevalence or frequency. Manual coding was selected to allow close engagement with the nuanced language and semantic subtleties in participants' Darija/French responses, which automated software might not accurately capture.

The translation process accounted for frequent code-switching between Arabic and French, ensuring that both linguistic and cultural nuances were preserved during analysis. Given the linguistic complexity of the responses, which frequently wavered between Moroccan Arabic (Darija) and French, the recordings were transcribed verbatim and simultaneously translated into English to ensure the preservation of semantic nuance. For the analysis, I employed an inductive thematic analysis framework as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding was conducted manually using color-coded categorization to ensure close engagement with the text. I utilized an 'open coding' strategy, identifying semantic units (sentences or paragraphs) that captured distinct professional experiences and assigning them descriptive labels. This inductive approach allowed findings to emerge directly from the participants' lived experiences rather than imposing a pre-existing theoretical framework.

This approach was appropriate for an exploratory study, as it enabled access to hijabi journalists occupying diverse professional roles across different media sectors and cities. The analysis unfolds in two interconnected steps: (1) conducting intersectional mapping to identify those who are excluded and how this exclusion is distributed across various roles and career stages; and (2) applying decolonial interpretation to elucidate why managers and market actors perceive certain embodied presentations as incompatible with professional credibility, tracing these perceptions back to colonial and Eurocentric aesthetic legacies.

Findings and discussion

The findings are structured around four interconnected media management mechanisms: (1) Market-Driven Visibility – how commercial imperatives frame the hijab as a visibility risk; (2) Management Priorities – how efficiency is prioritized over equity in assignments and promotions; (3) Editorial Gatekeeping – how editors and newsroom hierarchies shape who and what is visible; (4) Cultural Norms – how newsroom branding and visual style reinforce secular-modern ideals, limiting hijabi visibility. As

noted earlier, hijabophobia in Moroccan newsrooms operates as an organizational phenomenon rather than solely individual prejudice. It manifests through routine and often unwritten managerial practices that shape religious visibility by influencing role assignments, aesthetic expectations, and access to leadership positions. These practices are justified and reinforced through market imperatives, claims of professional neutrality, and audience-driven risk management, and they thread through all four of the findings presented in this study. Although analytically distinct, these mechanisms function concurrently and are deeply embedded in the daily practices of newsroom management.

Market-Driven Visibility: The Hijab as a Commercial Risk

The interview questions for this theme were directly informed by intersectionality and decolonial feminist theory, guiding participants to reflect on how gender, religious visibility, and market-driven newsroom standards shape access to on-camera roles. Importantly, this pattern does not imply a homogeneous "secular" media field; Moroccan news organizations vary significantly in ownership structures, political affiliations, audience orientation, and editorial cultures, producing uneven and sometimes contradictory practices of inclusion and exclusion. The systemic exclusion of hijabi journalists from front-facing, on-camera roles in Moroccan national and digital news indicates how participants interpret newsroom gatekeeping as framing the hijab as incompatible with a marketable commercial image. Despite holding equivalent professional qualifications, these women are routinely sidelined due to aesthetic biases driven by media economics and engagement metrics that favor secular or "modern" representations. Participant testimonies indicate a direct correlation between wearing the veil and the denial of visual opportunities, even when qualifications are high. P6 (30) notes "there is a complete absence of responses for on-camera roles in both national and digital sectors," a professional standstill echoed by P11(24): "I faced restrictions in Morocco only to be offered an anchor role immediately upon seeking employment in Gulf countries." These excerpts highlight context-specific barriers: hijabi journalists face structural exclusions in Morocco that limit on-screen roles, whereas opportunities in other regions reveal that restrictions are shaped by local managerial and market norms rather than individual competence.

The issue moves beyond simple job denial into a structured limitation of professional scope, functioning as a form of structural discrimination. As P4 (51) argues, the recruitment of female presenters prioritizes physical attractiveness, where the hijab is viewed as attracting "less attention," extending this exclusion beyond newsrooms to the broader commercial landscape. This market-driven logic aligns with P8's (21) observation that

the hijab leads to immediate classification as "backward" or "Islamist," illustrating how intersectional discrimination subordinates professional competence to secular aesthetic codes. Consequently, journalists like P2 (22) experience limitations in reporting stories across internships, while P13 (35) describes the frustration of seeing less experienced, unveiled colleagues promoted to presenting roles while she remains confined to editorial work behind the scenes.

Furthermore, the few instances of on-camera inclusion demonstrate the regulatory nature of this exclusion. P1 (24) describes being permitted to report on camera only during "Ramadan or with well-known religious figures," effectively containing the veiled image within a specific religious narrative rather than integrating it into normative journalism. Similarly, P7 (28) noted a colleague had to modify her hijab to a turban to gain visibility, highlighting the forced assimilation required to meet acceptable aesthetic standards. These examples reflect Lugones's articulation of the colonial/modern gender system, where the newsroom functions as a colonial matrix of power that regulates non-Western embodiment. Within this framework, the hijab is treated not simply as a commercial liability but as a politically charged symbol that unsettles dominant visual regimes. Thus, the systemic sidelining of hijabi journalists is a manifestation of intersecting global hierarchies that simultaneously racialize, gender, and commodify visibility in the Arab media landscape.

While the dominant pattern highlights exclusion, a subset of responses introduces a complex narrative that resists totalizing interpretations. Some participants acknowledged the structural limitations associated with the hijab in national television, yet emphasized personal agency and the growing visibility of veiled women in digital journalism. P14 (27) and P10 (33) reframe the hijab not as an obstacle, but as a source of distinction and "visual identity" that commands respect. This perspective challenges the assumption that visibility is exclusively governed by secular norms and complicates the intersectional analysis; for these women, the intersection of gender and religion does not universally result in marginalization. P9 (41) highlights public figures such as Nadia Lyoubi as proof that on-screen presence is possible, while P3 (45) notes that digital platforms are gradually normalizing hijabi reporters. These observations suggest that, although structural and organizational barriers remain, digital spaces offer alternative avenues for visibility. From the perspective of the Digital Paradox framework, these examples illustrate how increased digital exposure can simultaneously challenge exclusionary norms, while leaving traditional newsroom hierarchies largely intact.

Through the lens of Decolonial Feminism, these assertions function as forms of epistemic resistance. By affirming the hijab as a legitimate

professional marker, journalists like P12 (44), who insists her work is judged on skill rather than appearance, resist assimilation into secular-modern ideals and reclaim the authority to define their visibility. This diversity of responses does not negate the broader exclusionary trends, but instead highlights the plurality of hijabi journalists' experiences. While market-driven logics often marginalize veiled women in Moroccan newsrooms, some participants illustrate how individual and structural agency can coexist, particularly in contexts where professionalism and credibility are prioritized over appearance. These tensions reinforce the importance of viewing hijabi journalists not as a monolithic group, but as situated actors navigating and negotiating intersecting systems of power in dynamic ways. The participants perceive that exclusion in Moroccan newsrooms impacts not only hijabi women but also signals a wider gender hierarchy, in which men are positioned as the 'default' authorities in political and economic reporting. Consequently, women are frequently relegated to 'soft,' less influential beats, even when they possess qualifications equal to or exceeding those of their male colleagues, a pattern that reflects gatekeeping and topic segregation, which is explored in greater depth in the following section.

Management Priorities: Prioritizing Productivity over Fair Access

The majority of participants indicated that wearing the hijab did not impede their career advancement, with nine respondents answering "no" to whether the hijab affected their promotion chances. However, a significant minority (six participants) reported facing distinct challenges in professional growth, revealing that while entry-level access may be available, the path to leadership remains obstructed. This divergence suggests that while the hijab is not a universal barrier, it functions as a specific filter for high-level mobility. For the journalists who identified barriers, exclusion in newsrooms is rarely codified in explicit rules; instead, it emerges through soft-power dynamics and informal networking practices that quietly shape who is seen, supported, and given access to opportunity. These everyday mechanisms, often invisible to those who benefit from them, produce patterned inequalities even in organizations that publicly endorse diversity.

The accounts shared by these journalists expose how management decisions in Moroccan newsrooms are shaped by intersecting structures of exclusion. P7 (28) articulates this complexity explicitly, noting that while the hijab affects how she is treated, "being a woman in this domain has a bigger effect." This distinction aligns with Crenshaw's framework, illustrating that hijabi journalists negotiate their place not only as women in male-dominated institutions but also as visibly religious subjects within secular environments. This compounded marginalization is evident in the observation of P1 (24), who noted she had "never seen a chief editor who was a woman, let alone a hijabi one." This absence illustrates how gendered hierarchies intersect with

religious appearance to systematically render hijabi women invisible in leadership, confirming that single-axis frameworks are insufficient to capture the reality of the newsroom glass ceiling.

Furthermore, the data reveal that barriers to leadership are often coded as issues of "culture" or "networking" rather than overt discrimination. P15 (29) argues that management biases favor male journalists for promotions because "it's hard to build a network in that circle," highlighting how the newsroom operates on a logic of institutional familiarity and masculine trust. This exclusion is intensified for veiled women, who are often stereotyped as culturally incompatible with the social dynamics of leadership. P2 (22) observed that many male colleagues view veiled journalists as "conservative and unable to make connections or network properly," while P14 (27) noted that veiled women are treated with "extreme caution," making professional relationship-building difficult. P5 (25) further points out that the hijab triggers "preconceptions about neutrality or competence." Participants suggest that the visual marker of religion is implicitly read as a lack of professional objectivity.

These perceptions reflect a form of epistemic exclusion where non-Western, Islamic expressions of womanhood are devalued within professional contexts modeled on colonial legacies. As Lugones argues, this exclusion reproduces a colonial logic that ranks bodies under racialized and secularized ideals of public life. Participants emphasize that "efficiency" and "leadership potential" reflect proximity to secular, masculine norms. In practice, efficiency means performing in ways aligned with dominant newsroom expectations: constant availability, assertive communication, and a clear detachment from religious or gender-coded markers. Consequently, hijabi women face persistent barriers to leadership not due to a lack of skill, but because their embodied identities are viewed as incompatible with the organization's unspoken ideals of influence. These findings suggest that the exclusion of hijabi women from senior roles is underpinned by structural preferences that prioritize conformity over transformation. Organizational norms valorize alignment with established patriarchal and secular Eurocentric ideals, ultimately determining who is permitted to occupy positions of authority within the Moroccan media landscape.

Editorial Gatekeeping and the Social Logics of Visibility

Newsroom practices operate as a social algorithm – a systematic set of human-driven filters, rather than relying solely on a technical platform ranking. It differentiates between the automated governance of digital platforms and the specific editorial directives that determine who is granted access to high-value reporting assignments. Notably, when participants refer to "algorithmic" sorting, they are not alluding to access to platform source

code or ranking systems. Instead, they are highlighting how journalists interpret the patterned and predictable decisions that influence assignment allocation, visual selection, and editorial trust, all of which function as a social algorithm within the newsroom.

To avoid conflating distinct mechanisms, this analysis separates three interrelated layers of visibility governance: (1) platform governance, the opaque ranking, recommendation, and engagement systems that shape reach on social platforms (visibility and metric-driven amplification); (2) organizational decision-making, human editorial choices about who appears on camera, which thumbnails are used, assignment allocation, and branding strategies; and (3) audience dynamics, user responses, harassment, and reputational effects that shape sharing and consumption. Participants' accounts indicate that exclusion in Moroccan newsrooms predominantly operates at the organizational level, through mechanisms such as assignment allocation and aesthetic gatekeeping. At the platform level, the effects of exclusion are less directly observable; journalists tend to interpret them through their downstream impacts, including declines in reach, exposure to harassment, or shifts in audience engagement, rather than through the direct technical actions of the platforms themselves.

The findings reveal that while there are no official policies against hijabi journalists, there is a tendency for topic segregation. Participants are often directed toward 'safe' topics like religion and women's issues, while being discouraged from 'hard news' areas such as politics and economics. This reflects societal perceptions and gendered assumptions about expertise, reinforcing a divide similar to the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences, where male-dominated spheres are favored, perpetuating systemic hierarchies in news production. When asked if they face limitations in assignments due to expectations of secular professionalism, the majority of participants answered "yes." However, their responses reveal that they interpret this not just as religious discrimination, but as a function of male domination within the newsroom. P4 (51) explicitly notes that political and economic news is rarely assigned to hijabi journalists, who are instead expected to cover "social issues, education, or religious topics." She critiques this division by questioning why male colleagues, regardless of their appearance, are automatically deemed capable of handling complex economic analysis, while women are assumed to lack that intellectual range. This pigeonholing reflects a form of essentialism, where the visible marker of the hijab is assumed to define a journalist's professional scope. Intersectionally, hijabi women face exclusion both as women and as religiously marked individuals, highlighting how gender and religion intersect to shape access to high-status beats.

P2 (22) corroborates this, explaining that internship opportunities for field reporting were given to other colleagues, typically male journalists or female journalists without a hijab, while she was relegated to office-based tasks focused on family or religious topics. The newsroom's social algorithms reveal a patriarchal logic where men dominate 'hard news,' such as politics and economics, while women are directed toward 'soft news,' such as family and lifestyle. These roles are socially constructed, reflecting Eurocentric values that elevate the masculine and public while diminishing the feminine and private, thus reinforcing hierarchies in news production.

The rationale often provided for this segregation relies on a constructed notion of "neutrality" that is deeply entangled with secular, Eurocentric standards. P1 (24) was told by a senior editor that assigning hijabi journalists to politically sensitive stories might create "a wrong impression" about the newsroom's neutrality, "I was told once that my hijab might make guests uncomfortable, so I was not considered for this role." This illustrates that newsroom notions of neutrality are gendered, religiously coded, and shaped by colonial-Eurocentric standards that privilege secular, Western norms of professionalism: a male journalist is seen as the neutral default, whereas a woman, especially a visible Muslim woman, is seen as biased. Similarly, P13 (35) was excluded from interviewing political guests under the assumption that her hijab would make them "uncomfortable." These instances illustrate how assumed 'neutrality' is weaponized as a gatekeeping tool, systematically limiting the opportunities of hijabi journalists and reinforcing gendered and colonial-Eurocentric norms. Similarly, professionalism is also a constructed and biased mechanism, serving to regulate who is deemed fit to occupy positions of authority in the newsroom.

The participants actively questioned this power dynamic, noting that definitions of professionalism were created by and for male-dominated management. In this context, notions of neutrality and professionalism function together as gatekeeping mechanisms, shaping who is deemed fit for high-status roles and reinforcing gendered and colonial-Eurocentric hierarchies within the newsroom. In the Moroccan newsroom context, secularism is coded as neutral and professional, while religious visibility is coded as biased. This aligns with Lugones's (2010) critique of the colonial/modern gender system, where the "modern" public sphere is constructed to exclude non-Western embodiments. The hijab is interpreted not merely as a personal choice but as a sign of non-conformity that threatens the secular "vibe" of the institution, as noted by P11 (24), who was asked to wear specific outfits to match the environment.

Confronted with these systemic barriers, many female journalists feel pressured to perform specific forms of aesthetic labor to gain professional legitimacy. This pressure is communicated through both subtle academic socialization, where professors suggest non-hijabi students have better chances (P8, 21), and direct managerial coercion. Consequently, journalists engage in negotiation strategies to survive professionally. P7 (28) describes replacing her traditional jellaba with "trendier outfits" to appear "less conservative" and fit the "image of modernity" required for better assignments. Most tellingly, P12 (44) provides a stark example of how this social algorithmic sorting responds to aesthetic changes: "After loosening [my hijab] and showing some hair, I noticed not only a shift in how I was treated, but also in the kinds of topics I was suddenly considered suitable for."

Participants inferred these mechanisms from repeated, patterned outcomes: shifts in assignment type following aesthetic changes, altered editorial trust, and changes in professional treatment rather than from explicit policy statements. Conversely, P15 (29) admitted to considering removing the hijab entirely to overcome indirect discrimination. Participants explained their inference logic explicitly: repeated, time-linked drops in reach after on-air appearances in hijab; shifts in assignment type following editorial comments about "image"; and observed changes in thumbnail choices or sharing patterns linked to specific visuals. These patterned indicators, rather than internal access to platform code, are the basis for their interpretation of platform or visibility effects. These narratives highlight that professional advancement in Moroccan media is often contingent upon erasing or restyling indigenous religious markers to satisfy the visual and ideological codes of a "modernity" that remains colonial in nature.

Cultural Norms Reinforced Through Editorial Branding

Most interviewees reported that their visible faith earned them greater esteem from colleagues, aligning with the newsroom's moral branding; nevertheless, this perceived respect proved fragile when probed further. Nearly all participants reported verbal or physical harassment, reflecting broader gendered violence in the newsroom, including harassment tied to both gender and religious identity, "inclusive editorial branding," and underlying gendered power dynamics. P10 (33) articulates this paradox clearly, noting that while wearing the hijab commands "a certain level of respect," it does not exempt her from "inappropriate comments or being undermined professionally." The participant data suggest that the "respect" afforded to hijabi journalists is conditional. Participants described being framed around assumptions of conservatism and morality, which positioned

them as 'safe' figures for certain topics, while simultaneously marking them as outsiders to the secular, liberal, and professional core of the newsroom, a dynamic that echoes orientalist and gendered stereotypes of Muslim women.

Despite the assumption that modest dress serves as a deterrent to unwanted attention, the findings reveal that sexual harassment remains pervasive, merely shifting in form. P3 (45) offers a critical insight that challenges the protective utility of the veil, stating, "Regardless of what you wear, when I was non-hijabi, I got harassed, and when I wore hijabi, I still got harassed, but it just became more secretive." This testimony underscores that sexual harassment in Moroccan media is a systemic issue rooted in (patriarchal) power rather than appearance. P4 (51) confirms this, describing harassment as "normalized in our industry," a structural reality that persists across generations. Furthermore, the intersection of digital media and professional networking has created new vectors for this abuse. P7 (28) and P1 (24) both report that professional platforms like LinkedIn are frequently co-opted by male colleagues as "hook-up sites," reducing them to "simple bodies" rather than professionals. This digital harassment functions as a barrier to career advancement, as the necessary work of networking becomes fraught with the risk of sexualization, effectively excluding hijabi women from the informal power structures essential for mobility.

While earlier forms of harassment highlight gendered and colonial power dynamics, these dynamics also extend to the visual and aesthetic norms of the newsroom. The harassment described often takes on a specific tone related to the 'modern' image of the newsroom, revealing how gendered violence intersects with colonial-Eurocentric standards of appearance. P2 (22) notes that male colleagues frame inappropriate comments as jokes, acting as if she were 'challenging the newsroom's modern image' and using that as an excuse to test boundaries. In this context, the hijab functions as a disruptive symbol within a space modeled on secular Eurocentric norms, prompting male colleagues to discipline the non-conforming body through humor or commentary. This aesthetic policing is further evidenced by P11 (24), whose boss asked her to "wear certain clothes for on-field reporting," to match a specific guest, and P9 (42), who received suggestions that she would "look better" in different attire. These instances reflect a colonial hangover in media aesthetics where professional competence is equated with a "de-Islamized," westernized visual norm.

These dual realities expose the symbolic burden placed on hijabi women: they are caught between the cultural codes of postcolonial patriarchy, which assigns them symbolic respect as carriers of moral identity, and the professional codes of colonial modernity, which demand conformity

to secular visibility. The pressure to modify appearance or endure "secretive" harassment reflects a form of epistemic violence, the disqualification of certain subjects as credible knowers. Hijabi women are celebrated as symbols of national integrity yet treated as professionally illegible when they seek public authority, producing what José Medina (2013) calls epistemic friction: hyper-visibility as cultural icons paired with invisibility as legitimate journalists. Ultimately, the widespread nature of these experiences demonstrates that "respectability" does not shield hijabi journalists from gendered violence; rather, it complicates their ability to navigate a professional landscape that views their bodies as sites of both moral projection and secular regulation.

Conclusion

Hijabophobia in Moroccan newsrooms is not simply a matter of isolated instances of bias but rather a complex, multidimensional form of discrimination deeply intertwined with broader societal and cultural forces. Drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory and Lugones' (2010) insights from decolonial feminism, the findings reveal that hijabi journalists face unique challenges, as their marginalization stems not only from gender or religious bias but from the interaction of these factors with entrenched institutional practices shaped by secularist and Eurocentric norms. Through an intersectional and colonial-feminist lens, the findings demonstrate that hijabi journalists encounter multifaceted barriers, exacerbated by the prevailing expectation of a secular and Westernized newsroom aesthetic. These constraints not only limit their visibility and career trajectories but also compel them to adopt adaptive strategies, such as modernizing the traditional hijab, to navigate and negotiate professional spaces shaped by patriarchal and Eurocentric norms.

Even though there is no Moroccan law that prohibits the employment of veiled women in the role of news presenters, the matter has become almost a custom, and it has become known that there is no place for veiled women on the visual news, especially since no veiled Moroccan presenter has ever appeared on national television, with the exception of religious programs. Although this ban is not public, the interviewees faced refusal when applying for news presenter roles on television just because they wore the veil. According to Al-Ramid, a leader in the opposition Islamic Justice and Development Party, the reason behind preventing veiled women from working on Moroccan television, "is simply that those in charge of television in Morocco belong to the French secular school, which rejects the appearance of some religious manifestations and symbols in the media" (Ashto 2011). Al-Ramid notes that even when female journalists are highly qualified, the hijab can serve as sufficient justification to prevent them from appearing on screen, a dynamic that extends to digital media,

where visibility and public presence remain closely regulated according to secular and Eurocentric norms.

According to Lugones (2010), colonial legacies continue to shape not only structural power dynamics but also how marginalized groups construct their identities. Professionalism in Moroccan newsrooms is not only constructed around gendered and secular-Eurocentric norms but is also linguistically coded. The use of French, for instance, functions as a marker of professional legitimacy and authority, reinforcing gatekeeping practices that privilege certain forms of knowledge and expression while marginalizing those who do not conform. This preference reflects the deep imprint of francophone colonial culture on contemporary Moroccan society, where French is often associated with modernity, professionalism, and legitimacy. According to Alalou (2006), the image of French has shifted from that of a colonial oppressor to the language of the elite, symbolizing opposition to traditional Moroccan society. As Samah Bouamama (2018) notes, code-switching to the colonial language intersects with political and identity struggles. In this context, the use of French among hijabi journalists can be understood as a strategic adaptation to newsroom norms, reflecting both professional expectations and internalized coloniality. This linguistic shift not only shapes how they are perceived but also interacts with visual markers, such as the hijab, influencing their representation and opportunities within the newsroom. This reinforces a decolonial feminist analysis by showing how colonial standards persist in determining what is acceptable or desirable in professional settings, further marginalizing those who do not conform.

The impact of French colonial and secular norms on hijabophobia in Morocco extends beyond the media, shaping discrimination in sectors such as policing, aviation, and the military, where hijabi women face systemic barriers to employment. In newsrooms, the hijab is often misinterpreted as a symbol of resistance to modernity, justifying its marginalization and erasure. However, surveys show that 65% of Moroccans support making the hijab mandatory, with higher support among women (L'Economiste). This duality, in which social norms encourage veiling while institutions restrict its visibility, reflects what Benjamin Rivlin (1956) described as a form of 'cultural schizophrenia' in North Africa, a tension between adherence to Islamic identity and the aspiration toward Western modernity. In the context of media, this dynamic informs both institutional gatekeeping and the adaptive strategies employed by hijabi journalists to navigate visibility, professionalism, and representation.

Building on the broader context of hijabophobia in Morocco, which reflects the tension between societal expectations to veil and institutional pressures rooted in secular-Eurocentric norms, this study reveals that hijabi

journalists in Moroccan newsrooms are caught in a dual bind. On the one hand, they are expected by society to uphold traditional norms through the hijab; on the other, media institutions marginalize them, perceiving visible religiosity as incompatible with modern professionalism. This contradiction limits their career opportunities and contributes to both psychological stress and professional stagnation. Hijabi journalists often modify their appearance or adopt modern hijab styles as active strategies to navigate the pressures of societal expectations and institutional norms. These adaptations reflect their agency and desire for visibility in the face of systemic marginalization; they still face barriers to full inclusion, particularly in on-camera roles. These adaptive strategies, though rooted in resistance, highlight the extent to which the burden of negotiating acceptance falls on the individuals themselves rather than on the institutions. A similar scenario occurs in digital news, challenging the assumption of inclusive opportunities. While digital platforms offer expanded content space, they also compel some hijabi journalists to adapt by modifying their appearance or adopting modernized hijab styles. These strategies serve to navigate market-oriented, Eurocentric, and secular aesthetic standards and engagement metrics that disproportionately disadvantage visibly Muslim women, often even more than in legacy media. Ultimately, the analysis identifies a critical research gap: the lack of longitudinal and comparative studies exploring how hijabi journalists navigate these exclusions over time and across national media systems in the country. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how digital transformation may either challenge or reinforce existing power asymmetries rooted in coloniality and for envisioning a media landscape where diversity, religious, gendered, and cultural, is not merely tolerated but valued.

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