

Modest Fashion in UK Women's Working Life

A report for fashion and the creative industries
and creative arts education



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Executive Summary

This report discusses the findings of a study on how religiously-related modest fashion and associated behaviours impact on women's working lives – regardless of their own religious or secular background or beliefs. The investigation compares the experience and implementation of workplace modesty codes at UK faith-based organisations (FBOs) with the experience of women employed by UK and global secular employers whose work took them to Saudi Arabia (the UK's biggest trading partner in the region) where they had to abide by Saudi regulations about women's dress and behaviour.

Methods

65 women were interviewed. This included:

- 21 UK-based women who worked in Saudi Arabia for a period of time or who travelled to Saudi Arabia on business, from sectors including professional services, fashion and lifestyle, arts, culture and leisure, international education, international healthcare, and politics and diplomacy.
- 22 women working at or with UK faith-based organisations (FBOs), including schools, charities, and places of worship, whose work brings them into the orbit of modest dress requirements.
- 22 fashion designers and professionals, informal fashion mediators and HR professionals and managers, working in the UK and Gulf.

Findings

Modest fashion is not only a property of the religious

Our data reveal the breadth and diversity of participation in forms of modest fashion. This brings to attention the experiences of women who encounter modest codes as a workplace requirement, rather than (or in addition to) practising modest dressing out of personal piety or community convention. We analyse how this impacts their occupational delivery and sense of self, including how women deal with the potential of being shamed that can accompany perceived failure to enact required modes of modesty.

Religious codes of modesty and shame generally impact more women than men. So too do secular societies focus judgement on women's appearance and behaviour, with fat-shaming or age-shaming emblematised by women's perceived failures rather than men's.

Interpretations of modesty differ within as well as between religions

Workplace modesty codes are organisational management tools; they are an inevitably partial set of religious interpretations that will not match the personal practices of all religious affiliates working for or visiting the organisation. Workplace modesty codes may demand adjustments to dress from co-religionists in the organisation as much as from women whose religious or secular backgrounds do not match that of their employers.

In both faith-based and secular sectors, women generally wear different clothes for work than for leisure. The additional time and expense of developing a modest workwear wardrobe is nowhere recognised or recompensed as a contribution to the organisation.

A growing market for modest fashion

The size and projected growth of the global Muslim modest fashion market has been demonstrated by existing research, though of course not all Muslim women are modest dressers and not all modest dressers are Muslim. Women from other religious backgrounds dress modestly (sometimes using and adapting conventional "ethnic" clothing), and women who see themselves as secular often want similar degrees of body cover in their clothing choices. The recent fashion trend for modest aesthetics demonstrates an appetite for enhanced degrees of body cover transcending age, religion, and ethnicity, and traversing the style gamut (from frilly florals to architectural and plain).

This report identifies a significant new consumer segment for modest attire – women not driven by personal religious conviction who need modest attire for work in their field. These women require garments suitable for location-appropriate modest dressing, whether in the faith-based sector in the UK (or elsewhere) or for secular placements in countries and regions with prevailing religious modesty codes (including but not limited to Saudi Arabia). Women want modest clothing that allows them to function fully in role and to express and project their usual workplace impression.

New modest fashion consumers

Some women at secular employers who have to visit Saudi Arabia and wear an abaya are already seasoned world business travellers with capsule wardrobes suitable for most Muslim majority and Middle-Eastern destinations. Because only Saudi Arabia mandates the abaya, some resent the inference that their other workwear is insufficiently modest. Despite this, everyone agrees that wearing an abaya is the “price of doing business”.

For all women interviewed for this project the abaya is beyond the range of their usual work garments. Muslim women who had worn abayas on personal pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia had not previously worn them in an occupational capacity. Regardless of religious or secular background, some women like how the “uniform” aspect of the abaya saved time planning outfits; others feel anonymous with reduced ability to make an impact in their role. Unlike other work garments, abayas are frequently shared between colleagues.

In contrast to the challenges of finding an appropriate abaya for work in Saudi Arabia, women in the UK faith-based sector can generally craft a modest wardrobe from the mainstream store offering. Judicious choice of brand or garment allows for looser trousers or longer skirts, layering of upper garments. Women who prefer a faith-based workplace do not cite dress codes as a pull factor, but also may find adapting to organisational modesty a challenge.

Framing the conversation about modest fashion

Women use a variety of words to describe modest clothing, often avoiding terms of direct moral judgement and relying on synonyms and antonyms to skirt the issue.

In the faith-based sector, HR professionals and managers tasked with implementing modesty codes understand that being disciplined for failures of modesty (sometimes as judged by male visitors to the organisation) is unlike being chastised for other behavioural infractions. Frequently men delegate this task to women in HR or management. Sometimes women voluntarily “guide” female colleagues in modesty observance.

In Saudi Arabia, male colleagues accompanying international women often fail to grasp that gendered modesty codes and spatial segregation may cut

women out of formal discussion and informal networking. Strikingly, Saudi women and men try hard to avoid judging visiting women for poorly fitting or unfashionable abayas; giving credit for efforts to “respect” Saudi culture. Saudi women act as fashion mediators, providing guidance on the nuance of abaya protocols, taking women shopping. This can be a pleasurable form of cultural exchange.

The 2019 introduction of travel visas and – imprecise – relaxation in visitor modesty codes is coterminous with a potential relaxation on modest dress regulations for Saudi women. As more Saudi women enter the workplace and advance to seniority international women will encounter a more fashion-literate audience for their modest workwear. Guidance on changing local modest fashion etiquette will be ever more crucial during a doubtless changeable transition phase.

The Saudi abaya market shows signs of early movement into new garment types suitable for a revised modesty regime in which clothes previously worn under abayas or in women-only spaces may be on public display. Saudi brands which have already diversified into travel collections can expand non-abaya ensembles for the domestic market and explore potential penetration into global markets. Global brands likewise have opportunity to develop their Saudi offer with flexible forms of cover in diverse aesthetics, as pioneered by the existing cross-faith international niche modest fashion market. Women travelling for work may find that Saudi Arabia now requires only minor adaptations to their exiting modesty-context travel wardrobe collections.

Industry skills and reputational risk

Despite evidence of modest fashion market viability, the fashion industry, media, and education continue to regard fashion as a primarily secular domain. Transgression is revered as innovation; religious cultures are relegated to aesthetic “inspiration”.

As per recent challenges to racial and cultural appropriation in fashion, including in response to the Black Lives Matters movement, this report emphasises both the longstanding participation of people of faith in the fashion industry and the value of fashion professionals upskilling in religious fashion literacy. Our data demonstrate that modest fashion expertise can be a workplace asset, and can contribute to understandings of the multiple fashion systems in a globalised industry. Fashion students welcome the

opportunity to study religiously-related modest fashion and media as part of intercultural communication.

Because fashion in the religious sector will remain resistant to codification and regulation, developing capacity to produce industry-appropriate intelligence will remain crucial and is at present a skills deficit in fashion capacity. Minority religious communities appreciate being recognised by fashion brands and media at the same time as being concerned about the commodification of community practices. Recruiting more religiously and secular diverse talent into the fashion industry will assist brands to develop the operational agility needed to navigate consumer need and concern at a time of heightened cultural sensitivity.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations are made based on the study's findings. These include:

- The fashion industry should build upon the fixation with the Muslim modest market and explore consumer needs related to other forms of religious and philosophical belief (such as ethical veganism).
- Marketers and branding professionals should learn the “language of modesty” and conceptualise religious cultures as multiple and internally diverse to avoid perpetuating stereotypes.
- The fashion industry and fashion education at all levels and in all sectors should proactively recruit talent with knowledge of religious fashion cultures, whether gained experientially or through education.
- Literacy in religion and belief should be incorporated into business plans to increase and monitor diversity, and religiously related and ethnic fashion should be regarded as suitable business wear.
- Women should be compensated for the effort required to accommodate workplace modesty requirements. The contribution of those who provide modest fashion guidance within an organisation should be recognised as professional service.

- In the Saudi context, organisations should proceed with caution whilst modesty codes change. The lack of precise guidance for visiting and Saudi women makes it harder, not easier, to get modesty right, with an attendant increase in personal and organisational risk.
- Saudi brands should develop or expand travel style collections for domestic and foreign markets, and global brands should consider developing modest fashion lines for Saudi and visitor consumption.

Our thanks to all those who contributed to and advised this project. The full version of this report, and the report for employers, HR professionals, religious organisations, and policy makers, are available on our web page <https://www.arts.ac.uk/research/current-research-and-projects/curation-and-culture/modest-fashion>

To be notified of future events and publications related to this research, please join the mailing list at modestfashionworkwear@arts.ac.uk

To cite this report:

Reina Lewis, Kristin Aune and Lina Molokotos-Liederman (2021) *Modest Fashion in UK Women's Working Life: A report for fashion and the creative industries and creative arts education*, London: University of the Arts London and Coventry: Coventry University.

