

# Modest Fashion in UK Women's Working Life

A report for employers, HR professionals,  
religious organisations, and policymakers



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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.

### **Work contexts organised along religious lines are unique**

Workplaces organised along religious lines are unique work environments. This is true – in different and overlapping ways – both in Saudi Arabia where all workplaces are governed by state-mandated religious regulation and in the UK where a minority of workplaces are FBOs.

In the UK, FBOs' values and ethics have a religious basis, which drives their work, and enables employees to practice their religion in the workplace. This appeals to many who work for them, especially those who share the organisations' religious tradition. At FBOs employees have a strong sense of vocation and being cared for.

Gender and sexual norms often differ between religious and secular workplaces. Compared to secular workplaces, women appreciate the lack of pressure to dress in sexualised ways at FBOs. For others, especially women who are less religiously conservative than the organisation employing them, gender and sexual conservatism can cause problems. Not melding with organisational norms can hinder their full social or religious participation or require them to conceal parts of their identity (such as their intimate relationships).

In Saudi Arabia (until the 2019 announcement signalled a likely change towards modest dress rather than an abaya *per se*), religious gender regulations and norms required women visiting for work to wear an abaya and sometimes a headscarf. UK women visiting for work have mixed feelings about wearing an abaya. Positively, women sometimes consider the abaya comfortable, practical, elegant, and facilitating confidence and successful work performance. Negatively, they sometimes consider it uncomfortable or physically restrictive, undermining women's self-confidence and individuality.

Saudi Arabia's broader gender norms sometimes advantage visiting women: they may benefit from women-only spaces or/and from being treated as "honorary men" who can participate in discussion spaces closed to Saudi women. But patriarchal gender norms also disadvantage women, with Saudi partners sometimes disregarding their seniority. Norms of gender interaction can be hard to navigate (whether to shake hands with Saudi men) and impede networking.

At work in Saudi Arabia or at FBOs in the UK, dress can help and hinder interfaith and intercultural encounters. Adjusting one's workwear for these encounters and locations involves a mixture of "dressing for one's self" and "dressing for the other".

In the UK, women who as part of their job visit religious places of worship that are not their own generally dress to respect the religion of the host, including adaptations to their own modesty norms (covering their heads, exchanging skirts for trousers or vice versa). However, some women feel discomforted by conservative gender norms in the religious community they visit and observe that women are expected to change their behaviour more than men are. Differences or conflicts regarding gender norms can impede full and honest interfaith dialogue.

In Saudi Arabia, where the abaya is often coded as a cultural rather than religious garment, 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.

Learning about the dress and textile cultures of other religious traditions can help break down barriers between people from different backgrounds. Appreciation for the artistry of unfamiliar aesthetic systems can foster interfaith and intercultural dialogue, whilst women are also alert to the dangers of cultural appropriation.

Women's work experience is shaped by other factors including ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and age. In Saudi Arabia Muslim women of colour might encounter more stringent standards of modest dress and behaviour than their white colleagues (who might also be Muslim). In UK FBOs, LGBTQ women whose gender presentation is non-heteronormative face additional psychological burdens when deciding how to dress for interfaith work in conservative religious contexts.

### **Dressing for work in religious work contexts means embodying a religion you may or may not hold**

In Saudi Arabia, the research found a mismatch between the religion of the context (Islam), and the women travelling there for work, the majority of whom had Christian backgrounds. Some felt unease or resentment at needing to wear an abaya, seeing it as symbolising religious patriarchal oppression. Others had no such concerns. Not all women saw wearing an abaya or headscarf as wearing another person's religion – some saw the clothing as cultural rather than religious.

In UK FBOs, by contrast, female employees' religious affiliation was generally the same as the FBO's. Women already wearing modest clothing in line with their religious employers' preference/requirement didn't need to make many changes. Women accommodated small differences in interpretations of modesty alongside concerns over whether colleagues regarded being fashionable at work as acceptable or as sinful, or worldly. Some women had to dress more conservatively at work than they did for home or leisure. Conversely, women-only religious workplaces provided some women with more freedom of dress. Women with a formal religious role, including priests and rabbis, had to decide how to dress in contexts where dress norms were historically masculine as religious leaders were mostly men. Non-religious women experienced the biggest gap between their religious views and the organisations', and some had had to adapt their clothing significantly for work (buying loose-fitting clothing or trousers instead of fitted dresses).

## **Dress codes in religious work contexts sometimes cause contention**

There is variation in whether and how dress codes are formulated and how clearly and by whom they are communicated.

Saudi Arabia's code is specific and applies to all women, although interpretations vary across the country and over time. Women experience confusion, and sometimes anxiety, navigating the code because of insufficient guidance before they travel. They turn to a variety of sources of help, including social media and government guidance. Some employers produce country guidance, which is found useful but sometimes limited. Women would like more help with purchasing and wearing an abaya and more guidance on Saudi norms for social interactions between men and women.

Some UK FBOs have clear dress codes that are enforced, either implicitly through behavioural norms, or explicitly through HR training or responses to complaints from colleagues or visitors. Others do not. A small number of UK women we spoke to experienced censure and conflict relating to their organisation's dress code and considered the codes and their application gender unequal or discriminatory. Different people in the organisation, and visitors to it, hold conflicting views of what constitutes appropriate or modest work dress. What one person sees as modest and appropriate, another may object to as immodest.

HR, managers and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI and D&I) specialists sometimes advise on religion and belief in the workplace, but their knowledge and practice in relation to other protected characteristics such as gender and ethnicity is much more advanced than in religion and belief. Moreover, expertise in religion and belief at work is normally confined to accommodating religious observance (for example, prayer space at work) and requests for flexibility (for example, time off for religious festivals), rather than religion and dress. Where HR, managers, and EDI and D&I specialists consider religion and dress, they mostly focus on the issue of employees in secular workplaces wearing religious symbols, rather than on dress-related issues affecting employees in religious work contexts (for example how to deal with a religious employer's expectation that a non-religious or differently religious employee adheres to a religious dress code).

## Recommendations

- Employers, HR and EDI and D&I professionals should enhance their knowledge about issues relating to religion and belief in the workplace in order to give fuller guidance and training
- In particular, employers should improve their knowledge of religion and dress, to ensure that their policies and practices are fair and non-discriminatory to all employees
- More guidance on dress and behaviour should be provided by employers to those travelling overseas to work
- Faith-based and interfaith organisations should ensure that any dress code they use is not discriminatory against particular groups of employees
- Faith-based organisations and organisations based in religious contexts should provide support in recognition of the additional burden non-religious (or differently religious) staff may face in negotiating organisational norms
- Dress and related gender differences and inequalities should be discussed more within interfaith work

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

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