

# Modest Fashion in UK Women's Working Life

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



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ISBN 978-1-906908-66-9

### **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.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction: Setting the Scene</b>	<b>14</b>
What is modest fashion and who wears it?	14
COVID-19 and the future of workwear	18
Modesty and shame: judging bodies	20
The terminology of “religious” and “secular”	20
Free choice	22
Workwear and judgement	24
What makes a garment modest?	24
Modest dress as lived religion	25
Religion and dress at work in Saudi Arabia and the UK	28
Accommodating religious dress at work: law and practice in the UK	32
The faith-based employment sector	33
<b>Research Methods in Brief</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Findings: The Contours of the New Modest Fashion Market</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>1. A growing market with established and new consumers</b>	<b>37</b>
1.1 Modest fashion does not only mean Muslim modest fashion, and Muslim fashion does not always mean modest fashion	38
1.2 Modest fashion can overlap with “ethnic” fashion but ethnic fashion is not always modest	39
1.3 Modest fashion is a temporary trend <i>and</i> a long-term category	41
<b>2. Who are the new modest fashion consumers?</b>	<b>43</b>
2.1 Modesty as the price of doing business	43
2.2 Not modest enough? Navigating wardrobe needs for Saudi Arabia	45
2.3 Abayas can be shared, unlike other garments	46
2.4 The pros and cons of working in an abaya	47
2.5 Muslim women are not necessarily familiar with abaya-wearing for work	50

<b>3. Framing the conversation about modest fashion</b>	<b>52</b>
3.1 The language of morality in wardrobe decisions; direct and indirect moral judgement	53
3.2 Fashion mediation: formal and informal style arbitration	58
3.3 How political changes in Saudi Arabia impact on fashion	62
3.4 The retail context	65
3.5 Travel collections: new opportunities for Saudi and global brands	70
<b>4. Industry skills and reputational risk</b>	<b>74</b>
4.1 Over-valuing transgression in the fashion industry and education	74
4.2 Learning to see religiously-related dress as part of fashion	75
4.3 Learning about your own and other people's religion	76
4.4 Developing and recruiting new types of fashion talent	76
4.5 The commodification or celebration of religious fashion cultures: risks and benefits	78
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>94</b>

# Acknowledgements

## Thank you!

This research would not have been possible without the help of a great many individuals, companies, and organisations who so generously supported our project from inception to completion. We wish first of all to thank our funders, the Arts and Humanities Research Council of UK Research and Innovation, and our two universities who supported our application: London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London (UAL) and Coventry University, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations.

At UAL we are especially grateful to Oriana Baddeley, Felicity Colman, and Clare Shelton for guiding the project development, and to Caroline Redahan, Prema Muniandy, Susan de la Rosa, and Janna Rais for research administration support. For research events, we thank Ruth Miller and Lynne Finn.

Our thanks at Coventry University go to Jane Arthur for research administration support and the Faith and Peaceful Relations research group for advice during the development and running of the project.

The success of our initial application was enhanced by our impressive list of Project Partners. We thank them for their willingness to invest in our vision for this project and their continued tangible support during the project's development and delivery.

British Council (Kendall Robbins)  
Islamic Fashion & Design Council (IFDC) (Alia Khan)  
Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion (ENEI) (Alan Beazley)  
Faith and Belief Forum (F&BF) (Phil Champain and Josh Cass)  
Edge of Arabia (Valeria Mariani)  
Haute Elan: London Modest Fashion week (Romanna Bint Abu-baker)  
Baroness Young of Hornsey, OBE

Across the span of this research we have learned from the thoughtful challenges posed by our Advisory Group, and benefited in so many ways from their ongoing generous support. We thank:

Clive Bane, HR consultant  
Harriet Crabtree, Executive Director, Inter Faith Network for the UK  
Nadia El-Sebai, Executive Director, The Arab British Centre  
Bana Gora, CEO, Muslim Women's Council

Jackie Goymour, External Relations Director, Women's Interfaith Network  
Rachel Guthartz, Jewish gender specialist, formerly of JOFA UK  
Harriet Harper, Education specialist  
Trish Lawrence, Diversity and Inclusion specialist  
Amélie Le Renard, Centre Maurice Halbwachs/CNRS, Paris, France  
Professor Lucy Vickers, School of Law, Oxford Brookes University  
Ritu Upadhyay, Middle East Bureau Chief, *Women's Wear Daily*.

We are indebted to the many women who participated in the research by providing confidential interviews about their experiences of modest fashion at work in the UK and in Saudi Arabia. We are also beholden to women in Saudi Arabia who shared their experiences of advising international visitors on modest workwear and abaya fashion. The necessity of maintaining confidentiality means we cannot thank anyone by name, but this in no way diminishes our gratitude or regard. In Saudi Arabia and in Dubai our research was made possible by local gatekeepers who generously brokered introductions to fashion professionals and potential interviewees as well as sharing insights from their own experiences of abaya consumption past and present. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean generously offered regional advice.

We are delighted to be able to thank publicly the fashion professionals and individuals who shared with us their insights about the Saudi and Gulf regional fashion industry:

Arwa Al Banawi, of Arwa Al Banawi  
Effa Al Dabbagh, of Effa  
Faiza Bouguessa, of Bourguessa  
Ghizlan Guenez, of The Modist  
Kerim Türe and Burcu Yilmaz, of Modanisa  
Loai Naseem and Mona Al Haddad, of Lomar  
Marriam Mossalli, of Niche Arabia and editor of *Under the Abaya*  
Mohammed Khoja, of Hindamme  
Nemanja Valjarevic and Nina Valjarevic, of CHI-KA  
Rabia Zargarpur, of Rabia Z.

Thanks also are extended to the many shopkeepers and shop assistants in Jeddah, Riyadh, Istanbul, and Dubai who responded to questions and permitted prolonged observation in their stores.

Our roundtable event at the House of Lords in March 2020 was generously hosted and even more generously chaired by Baroness Young. We are greatly indebted to our distinguished panel and to our audience members for their insights and expertise:

Lisa Armstrong (*The Telegraph*)  
Alan Beazley (Employers Network for Equality & Inclusion)  
Andrew Copson (Humanists UK)  
Bana Gora (Muslim Women's Council)  
Jenny Kartupelis MBE (World Congress of Faiths)  
Ravinder Kaur Nijjar (Religions for Peace, UK Women of Faith Network)  
David Perfect (Equality and Human Rights Commission).

We thank our partners at 2019 Saudi Design Week with whom we were able to collaborate on a Faith & Fashion event, facilitated also by the British Council. We most especially thank our speaker at the event, Dr Eiman Elgibreen of Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, Riyadh.

The project has benefited from several critical friends whose responses to dilemmas and to drafts of material have strengthened our approach to the material in these reports and other outputs. We thank especially Agnès Rocamora, Paul Yuille, Lucy Peacock, Áine Duffy, and David Perfect. Thank you to Caroline Starkey and Ina Merdjanova for sharing expertise on Buddhist and Orthodox Christian dress.

It was a pleasure to work with Simon Ford on the design of this report.

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The project's key public outputs consist of two stakeholder reports and executive summaries, one for fashion and the creative industries and creative arts education, and one for employers, HR professionals, religious organisations, and policymakers. Further analysis of our findings will appear in academic journal articles, along with more detailed discussion of the relevant research literature.

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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.

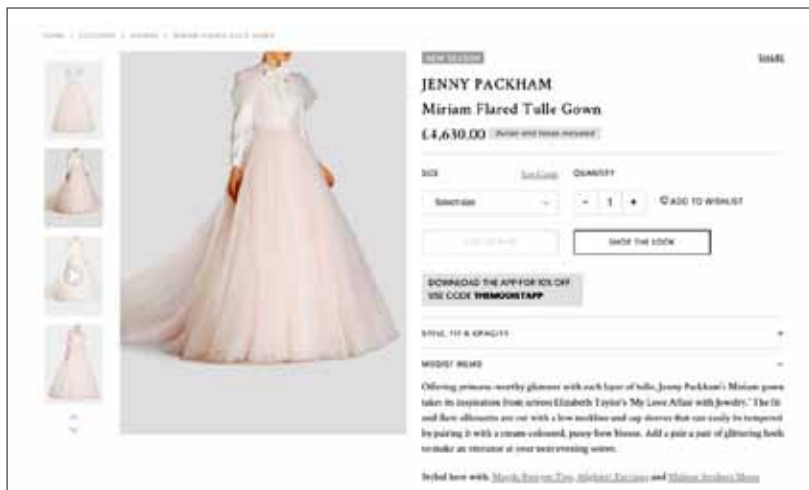
- In the Saudi context, organisations should proceed with caution whilst modesty codes change. The lack of precise guidance for visiting and Saudi women makes it harder, not easier, to get modesty right, with an attendant increase in personal and organisational risk.
- Saudi brands should develop or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

# Introduction: Setting the Scene

## **What is modest fashion and who wears it?**

We use the term “modest fashion” to refer to the many ways in which women from diverse religious and religio-ethnic communities cover their bodies in accordance with their interpretation and accommodation of religious teachings and prevailing religious cultural conventions. Women may dress modestly their whole adult lives; how they do this may change as their roles and style preferences alter. Women may dress modestly sometimes and not at other times. A woman might cover herself more when visiting older relatives and less when out with her children. A woman might adopt a visible sign of religious difference as a political act to challenge anti-Muslim or anti-Semitic prejudice or she might wear symbols of her faith such as a Christian crucifix to manifest her beliefs.

For centuries religiously related codes of modesty and shame have determined dress and behaviour for women, and men, across different religious traditions. Social norms of covering parts of the body in particular spaces or in front of particular people have also been habitual around the world in contexts not necessarily understood as religious. For example, women in Britain in the 1950s who wore a hat and gloves were generally being stylish and respectable, rather than dressing religiously. In the 1960s the mini-skirt was shocking because it transgressed social norms, not religious norms. By the 1990s women who might wear a hat for church or synagogue probably weren't wearing one to do the shopping. And today when Muslim women wear a veil over their hair or face, they are continuing a practice that is pre-Islamic in origin and which long served as a sign of social status for women from several religious communities across the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

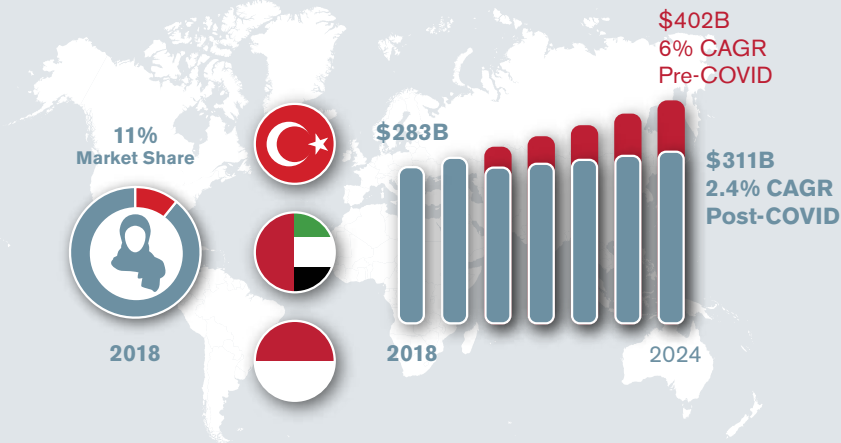


▲ *Styling modesty for consumers: online retailer the Modist (2017-2020) shows how a Jenny Packham dress can be combined with a long-sleeved blouse to provide additional cover for arms and cleavage.*

*Image: [www.themodist.com](http://www.themodist.com)*

In the last two decades, a niche commercial industry and related specialist print and social media in modest fashion has been pioneered largely by women from religious communities who could not find the clothes they wanted in the stores, and who did not find style inspiration in mainstream fashion magazines. In the UK, Muslim brands, magazines, and social media led the way. In North America, the number of Jewish brands reflected the larger Jewish demographic, along with brands and modest fashion media from Christian traditions. These entrepreneurs found it hard to make inroads into mainstream fashion retail or media, at a time when fashion was commonly perceived as antithetical to religious sensibilities. This picture changed as Muslim expenditure on modest fashion began to be quantified. In 2013 Thompson Reuters and Dinar Standard launched their annual report on the State of the Global Islamic Economy, including the global Muslim spend on fashion. For 2018-19, they estimated the

Muslim modest spend as 283 billion USD, equivalent to 11% of the total worldwide apparel market of 2.5 trillion USD, with key markets in Turkey, the UAE, and Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> With a youthful and growing Muslim population, often located in valuable emerging consumer markets, Muslim modest fashion is anticipated to increase at a compound annual growth rate of 6% to 402 billion USD in 2024. Whilst other religiously related modest fashion markets have not been quantified in this way, for niche brands this growing interest in modest fashion consumers creates opportunities and generates a threat to market share as mainstream providers enter the sector. Within the niche sector, brands originating from one religious tradition have known from the start they can serve consumers from numerous faith and secular backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> Like all sectors of the fashion industry, modest fashion has been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, with estimated value for 2020 showing a drop of 2.9% and a reduced predicted increase at a compound annual growth rate of 2.4% to 311 billion USD in 2024.<sup>4</sup>



▲ For 2018-19, the estimated Muslim modest spend is 283 billion USD, equivalent to 11% of the total worldwide apparel market of 2.5 trillion USD, with key markets in Turkey, the UAE, and Indonesia. Muslim modest fashion was anticipated to increase at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6% to 402 billion USD in 2024, but this has been revised down to 311 billion USD with an anticipated CAGR of 2.4% due to COVID.

**Source:** State of the Global Islamic Economy Report – 2019-20 / 2020-21  
Thompson Reuters and Dinar Standard



In media commentary and academic research, modest dressing is routinely seen as a concern only for women within religious communities; whether regarded positively as personal spiritual expression or negatively as an oppressive imposition by religious patriarchies. In contrast, we examine the increasing number of contexts in which women encounter religiously related codes of modest dress and behaviour as a workplace requirement – regardless of their own religious or secular background and beliefs.

We compare women working in the UK for faith-based employers with women with secular employers whose work requires them to visit Saudi Arabia where they have to wear a long outer robe called an abaya, and at times a headscarf. (Recent visa changes permit more versions of modest dress for women travelling to Saudi Arabia from other countries, but we predict that the lack of precision in the guidelines will actually make it harder not easier to judge how to get modesty right.)



▲ *Felicity wearing abaya and headscarf outside the further education college for girls in Northern Saudi Arabia, where she was principal.*  
*Image: Courtesy of research participant*

## COVID-19 and the future of workwear

COVID-19 has changed the work environment profoundly. There is more reliance on technology (revealing a newly pronounced global digital divide) and home working (re-entrenching gendered divisions of labour<sup>5</sup>) and less travel for health and environmental reasons.

This does not mean that workwear no longer matters. How we dress at work may help resolve the paradox reported in Deloitte's 2020 *Global Human Capital Trends*: "finding ways to remain distinctly human in a technology-driven world".<sup>6</sup>

With commentators concerned that COVID-19 could produce the biggest economic contraction since the First World War, McKinsey's Coronavirus update in April 2020 warns that "fashion, due to its discretionary nature, is particularly vulnerable".<sup>7</sup> Early indicators in April 2020 showed that the "average market capitalisation of apparel, fashion and luxury players dropped almost 40 percent between the start of January and March 24, 2020 – a much steeper decline than that of the overall stock market." COVID-19 hits the globalised fashion industry in terms of both supply and demand, making it likely that revenues for apparel and footwear "will contract by 27 to 30 percent in 2020 year-on-year, although the industry could regain positive growth of 2 to 4 percent in 2021." By the end of 2020, McKinsey was reporting that economic profit for fashion companies had declined by approximately 90 percent, with a best-case scenario showing continued decline in global sales of 0-5 percent in 2021 – based on a relatively rapid economic recovery prompted by globally widespread successful vaccination. Should this not be the case, fashion sales may decline 10-15 percent in 2020 with no return to 2019 levels until the end of 2023.<sup>8</sup>

Especially damaged are the department stores and high street brands on which many of our research participants rely for mid-price products. Also affected have been the independent multi-brand boutiques favoured by women in finance and professional services for help in curating capsule wardrobes: a selection of co-ordinating items to see them through the working week. Repeated lockdowns have impacted on local and tourist consumers, with an accelerated shift to online shopping and localised consumption dramatically altering many retail landscapes. As global brands in all sectors plan the future, consolidation may offer further opportunities for investors from Asia and the Middle East, both regions where offline shopping may continue strong.

As with other global crises, post-pandemic recovery will be gradual, possibly taking up to two years in some regions and impacting unevenly on different social groups and regions.<sup>9</sup> In fashion retail, reduced personal income may



◀ *Will the widespread use of face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic change attitudes to Muslim women wearing a face veil?*

**Image: Drazen Zigic/**

**Getty Images/iStockphoto**

mean that retailers discount more, extending pre-pandemic trends (likely to impact especially on mid-market brands and retailers). Consumer cost sensitivity may dovetail with reduction in consumption led by concerns for social and environmental sustainability – though price consciousness may trump commitment to sustainability.

With regional variations these factors will impact the buying habits of women who dress modestly, with small niche modest fashion brands, like other independents, likely to suffer significantly. The economic impact of COVID-19 on countries seen as emerging markets for fashion especially those in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with large Muslim populations may also disproportionately reduce the demand for modest fashion, affecting niche as well as global players.

For women who purchase modest fashion as a workwear requirement, alterations to the location of work may have a variety of impacts. Video-conferencing as an alternative to travelling for meetings to Saudi Arabia or other MENA countries alters the nature and location of modest workwear. Rather than needing to dress modestly only when “in-country”, modesty may feature in wardrobes for working from home (switching in and out of cover for selected calls). Women employed in the UK faith-based sector may similarly find that workplace modesty codes have entered their domestic environments. For both groups, modest workwear in the home may provide more flexibility if it only has to be worn occasionally rather than all day (as with the men’s lockdown favourite long-sleeved “zoom shirt” – suitably business casual to throw on over shorts for on-screen meetings). Or/and the incursion of work-imposed modesty into domestic space previously regarded as private may magnify the impact of occupational dress codes on individual autonomy. Outside the home, the accustomed formalities of the western handshake are being replaced by non-contact salutations, whilst the health requirement to wear face masks means everyone is trying to learn new forms of communicative facial expression (including in national or regional contexts, such as France, where the Muslim niqab remains banned).<sup>10</sup>

## **Modesty and shame: judging bodies**

Around the world women are judged more harshly than men about how they look.<sup>11</sup> This is true in societies that are overtly religious and those that people consider to be more secular.

## **The terminology of “religious” and “secular”**

Terms associated with religion and its place in the world are used in different ways. In this report we use the terms “religion” or “religious”, “faith-based” and “secular” in their broad senses. “Religious” connotes being connected to systems or traditions of faith, worship, and practice. Religion varies widely, and all religions are internally diverse, often differentiated by approaches that are conservative, or orthodox, or ultra-orthodox, and others that are progressive or reform. Sometimes terms like these refer to formal distinctions within a wider religious denomination, such as Reform Judaism. Sometimes descriptions such as conservative or orthodox are used to differentiate approaches within the same institutional religion. These appellations might be self-designated or/and might be applied by others; in either case, they are rarely straightforward, sometimes imprecise, and often controversial. When any of our participants describe their religious or spiritual affiliation and habits we use the language they choose; other than that, we use this type of classification in their general sense. The same applies to the category “faith-based”; a term that has become popular in the UK as a policy short-hand for “religious” which might also include inter-religious expressions (“interfaith”). “Secular” is used in contrast to “religious”, to refer to political and social structures premised on separation from religion or freedom from religious influence. When we contrast “religious” societies with “secular” societies, we appreciate that both kinds of societies have many variations.

In every country, the state's relationship with religion differs. Religion-state relations range, on a spectrum, from religious regimes to secular (which can encompass moderate, inclusive versions as well as more anti-religion versions), then atheistic regimes. These regimes also differ in practice. Some very “religious” regimes generously fund religious organisations; others simply safeguard religious freedom. Some “secular” regimes give one religion privileges such as tax exemption, but do not allow religion to be taught in schools; others impose restrictions on religious organisations. Some atheistic regimes restrict the freedoms of minority religions; others imprison dissenters.<sup>12</sup>

“Religious” societies include those with a state-endorsed religion – for example, Thailand (Buddhism), Morocco (Islam) and Greece (Eastern Orthodox Christianity). “Secular” societies include France, where the state can intervene in religion but religion cannot intervene in state affairs, the USA, where, officially, neither the state nor religion can intervene in each other’s domains, and India, where the state theoretically supports religious diversity while keeping a “principled distance” from religious institutions (although the rise in Hindu nationalism is changing this stance). The term “secular” is often applied also to countries, for example in Europe, which despite some formal alignment with Christianity are experienced as more secular than religious because the majority of the population do not engage in formal religious practice. Because many secular societies are marked by the heritage of the religion that preceded them,<sup>13</sup> people who share that heritage – even when they do not see themselves as “practising” – may not notice how other religious communities are excluded. For example, in France, the Roman Catholic heritage determines many public holidays whereas in Britain it is Protestant festivals. British Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, or Muslims may have to request annual leave to spend time with families on their feast days, whilst Christmas dinner does not require any such dispensation (and indeed is enjoyed as part of British culture by many of other faiths).

In secular societies women are judged more than men on their appearance – including in the workplace. This is one reason we did this research. Women are body-shamed for being fat, being old, or looking “slutty”, in other words for failing to meet unrealistic social beauty norms. Activism within and without the fashion industry has won improvements: brands are beginning to offer more styles in larger sizes; older women are more often used as fashion models; and visible racial and ethnic diversity is becoming more of a requirement in fashion media. But the shaming of women who do not meet the prevailing – and ever-changeable – social norms of beauty and heterosexual desirability continues.

Religious judgements about which forms of dress and behaviour are modest or shameful often focus on women – despite that most religious cultures with modesty codes have guidance for men too. In societies with codes of modesty and shame, a woman’s behaviour may be held to jeopardise the honour of the entire family. Her behaviour can be collectively surveilled, regulated, or punished. This is one of the reasons why some secular commentators worry that modest dress is a sign of religious oppression, even if women claim it is freely chosen.<sup>14</sup>

## Free choice

Against both secular and religious judgements of women's appearance, many modest dressers today argue that whether the reason is religious, spiritual, cultural or social, modesty is only authentic in contexts where women can choose if, how, and when to cover or not cover.<sup>15</sup> Seeking to protect women's rights to freedom of religious expression, modest fashion advocates argue that it is just as wrong to compel someone to cover (in Iran or Saudi Arabia, or ISIS-controlled territories) as it is to force her to uncover (in France, Germany, or Quebec).



▲ Woman in burkini being asked to uncover by police on beach in Nice, after several French resorts banned clothing that “overtly manifests adherence to a religion” in response to an Islamist attack on civilians in July 2016. Samia Hathroubi, Zineb El Rhazoui, and Zainab Salbi discuss these issues during the Eighth Annual Women In The World Summit, New York, 2017.

Image: Michael Loccisano / Getty Images



▲ *Religious and secular solidarity: French women's activist group Citizen Alliance of Grenoble defend Muslim women's right to wear a burkini in French swimming pools.*

*Image: Citizen Alliance of Grenoble*

This ideal is not the experience of all women, or people, in the world. Sometimes religious state law, as in Saudi Arabia, mandates certain types of modest dress and behaviour for women and men. Sometimes secular state or federal law prohibits visible forms of religious affiliation in public spaces, municipal employment, or education.<sup>16</sup> More often, including in secular societies, religious cultures and communities impact on women's ability to choose how they dress. Moralising judgement about dress being modest or shameful does not only come from the law. It comes from families, community members, strangers, other modest dressers; judgement may be a direct command from someone in a position of influence or power, and it can be experienced through a sideways glance, circulated by gossip, and amplified in social media. In the workplace, judgement about appropriate or inappropriate dress may be formally transmitted by management, often mediated through HR, or by a kind or unkind word from a colleague, service user, or client.

## Workwear and judgement

It is not only in relation to workplace modesty requirements that women's appearance is judged at work. Sociological research has established that appearance is more a factor in women's employment prospects than in men's.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes employer demands are explicitly gendered – as highlighted by recent activism against compulsory high heels in London and Tokyo.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes the gendered impact of appearance on women's recruitment or promotion is implicit and intersects with other structural factors that create inequality of opportunity, such as social class, race and ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, or religion. The way the body is dressed and styled for work may be a trigger for unconscious bias, compounding ethnic and class disadvantage in women's employment prospects.<sup>19</sup> Employers may not consider so-called “ethnic dress” such as a sari or *shalwar kameez* to be business attire, or may regard styled natural Afro hair as a lack of grooming. As we expand later, in both faith-based and secular environments women in our research were aware that their appearance affects their job prospects whereas men's mattered less.

Women reported wearing different clothes for work than for leisure. The majority of women also spend considerable time – and sometimes, proportionate to income, considerable money – sourcing their workwear. Depending on their own religious and secular beliefs and habits and on their employment sector, the need to dress modestly at work made new demands on women's wardrobes. We spoke with women about how they felt about adjusting their usual work appearance to different modesty requirements; this might be a different version of their own religion, or an adjustment to a different religious cultural dress code. Either way, working out which garments on their particular bodies would accommodate work modesty codes took time and care as women experimented with garments for dressing modestly.

## What makes a garment modest?

A garment itself is not inherently modest or immodest. Along with hair, accessories, and make-up, clothing on our bodies as part of our appearance can mean different things to the people who see us. Clothing operates as a form of non-verbal communication but we cannot control exactly how our appearance will be read. One person's cool outfit might be regarded as style disaster by others. Neither can we always read someone else's intent from the way they are dressed. An “older” woman wearing a party dress with long



sleeves might be doing so because she is adhering to religious modesty codes or because she has internalised secular body-shaming that the no-longer young body is ugly (phrases like “bingo wings”) or she might be a fashionista following transient red carpet trends for volume and cover.



▲ *Modest fashion on the red carpet in 2020: Janelle Monáe in Ralph Lauren at the Oscars; Zoey Deutch in Fendi at the Golden Globes; Sandra Oh in Elie Saab at the Oscars.*

*Images: Starstock/Dreamstime.com, Featureflash/Dreamstime.com*

The recent vogue for modest aesthetics in the globalised fashion industry simultaneously makes shopping easier for women who want to dress with more cover for religious and cultural reasons and demonstrates that modesty does not lie in the garment but in how it is worn on the body.

For women who do dress modestly for religiously-related reasons, daily religious practice is often a creative mix of non-religious fashion items and personal religious and cultural conviction.

### **Modest dress as lived religion**

Workplace modest fashion/dress is a form of what we and others call “everyday religion” or “lived religion”. Religion is not just about practising traditions and rituals, attending places of worship, individual spiritual practices such as prayer, or beliefs and doctrines. Religion is present throughout

everyday life, beyond conventional boundaries of sacred versus profane. As McGuire argues, people can experience the sacred through everyday bodily experiences such as walking, gardening or domestic work. Religion is lived as the material body experiences the spiritual.<sup>20</sup> Clothing, jewellery, household consumption, food, cultural practices such as music, visual and performing art, and religious objects are part of this.<sup>21</sup> Religion is also lived, expressed or performed through dress. Dress in general and the fashion industry in particular are significant as part of the fabric of how religion is lived. These are not part of the “profane” and to be ignored, but integral to how religion is performed in everyday life.

Women interviewed for this project include some who hold clerical office and/or fulfil roles as religious functionaries. Many of these roles historically were designed to be held by men, so as women took up these roles their clothing became an important and sometimes vexed issue. As with women entering the UK armed forces or the police, questions of uniform and professional dress were often a point of controversy.

Religious leaders and senior religious figures (ordained and not) often dress in ways that reflect their religious traditions – a turban for Sikhs (increasingly for women too), a tallit (prayer shawl) for rabbis during prayer or a white clerical collar for a Church of England priest, for example. Faith traditions that include women in clerical roles may require gendered dress. For example, in some Christian traditions, monks and nuns wear a different head covering. Within some Buddhist monastic lineages, monks’ robes are of three pieces, nuns’ of five, and sometimes the colours are different. A male rabbi might wear a *kippah* (skullcap), and in Reform and Liberal communities where female rabbis are more common, a female rabbi might also do so. In religious groups where senior spiritual roles are held only by men, the attendant forms of religious dress can only be worn by men – for example, in Orthodox Christianity, the white inner robe, long neck stole, cloth belt, wrist cuffs, long outer robe and large cross around the neck that constitute priestly dress. Religious leaders’ dress can change over time or, like Roman Catholic priests’ dress, it can be static: “a form of fossilised fashion”.<sup>22</sup>

For religious leaders, everyday wear may be different to what they wear for ceremonies. For example, some Anglican priests wear a clerical collar (nicknamed “dog collar”) in their daily work lives and don additional vestments for Sunday services and festivals.



◀ Zoe dressed for work as an assistant curate in the Church of England, wearing her clerical collar.  
Image: Courtesy of research participant

Beyond religious leadership, the dress of some people from minority communities provides clues to their religious affiliation and community membership, though this is not always as easy to read as some might think. Many observers would identify the religion of Hasidic ultra-orthodox Jewish men, when seen in their distinctive Shabbat finery of white hose and *shtreimel* fur hats. But not all Hasidic men dress this way, and other Jewish men, including the religiously orthodox, may not be distinguished by their dress at all; especially if they wear a baseball cap instead of a *kippah*. Similarly, whilst many in the UK associate *shalwar kameez* (suit of trousers and tunic plus scarf, or *dupatta*), with Muslims from South Asia, it has long been worn by Hindu men and women from the sub-continent. Women from all the region's faith groups have also worn the sari.<sup>23</sup> Yet a British-Indian Christian woman in a sari is highly likely to be misread by observers as Hindu or Muslim. Competing claims of cultural "ownership" can be driven by local, national, and diaspora politics, or triggered by younger generations rejecting as "cultural" the clothes their parents regard as signs of religious observance.<sup>24</sup>

In the UK, major shifts in minority cultural politics since the 1980s have changed how religiously related and ethnic dress is experienced, perceived, and understood. Today in the UK, distinctive clothing along with other aspects of daily life among minority communities is often conceptualised in

terms of religion rather than ethnicity or culture. Where previous concepts of multiculturalism were often inherently secularist in their presumptions,<sup>25</sup> in recent years a growth of public discussion of religion has been accompanied by a reconceptualisation of many minority community lives and practices as determined by religion rather than ethnicity or race.<sup>26</sup> Positively, this can more accurately recognise the complexity of minority religious and cultural identities. Negatively, this can dominate the framing of minority claims to rights and representation in ways that obscure other structural factors, such as poverty, or that favour one type of religious perspective over another.

## **Religion and dress at work in Saudi Arabia and the UK**

This project compared the UK and Saudi Arabia. The difference in women's working experience is less stark than might commonly be presumed. Saudi Arabia and the UK are both – in different ways – “religious” regimes, one Islamic and one Christian, and both favour those religions. The UK is *de jure* Christian but *de facto* a mostly secularised and religiously plural democracy. Saudi Arabia is an Islamic theocracy with an absolute monarchy. Saudi Arabia is authoritarian, while the UK state is relatively libertarian.

According to the Pew Research Centre's international report on religious freedom,<sup>27</sup> Saudi Arabia has very restrictive laws and policies towards religious freedom. The report ranks Saudi Arabia in the top 10 countries with restrictions on the religious activities of individuals and groups and finds it has “high” levels of social hostilities involving religion (this includes harassment and religion-related violence). The UK, with only “moderate” restrictions on religious activities of individuals and groups, also has high levels of social hostilities related to religious norms.

Globally, women are increasingly experiencing harassment for violating religious dress codes (the proportion of countries where this happened rose from 7% in 2007 to 28% in 2018).<sup>28</sup> This is not only a problem in “religious” regimes. Europe has seen an increase in government restrictions on religious dress, including bans on wearing particular religious clothes (such as a face veil) or symbols in the workplace; The Pew Research Centre records these bans as affecting five European countries in 2007, rising to 21 by 2018.<sup>29</sup> The European Commission's Equinet report records national or local legislation banning wearing of religious clothing or symbols in seven of the 28 EU member states in 2017, with a further three having proposed it and more than half the states seeing the issue publicly debated.<sup>30</sup>



▲ *Medina, Saudi Arabia. Women wearing black abayas and men wearing white thobes, in the courtyard of Masjid al-Nabawi.*  
*Image: numbeos/Getty Images/iStockphoto*

Women's work experiences reflect these contexts. In Saudi Arabia, religiously-coded forms of dress are state-mandated for nationals and, until late 2019, for visitors. Visiting women were expected to wear an abaya (floor length, long sleeved over garment, front fastening or over the head) and sometimes a scarf over their hair and neck. Covered clothing applies in areas designated as public where women might be co-present with or seen by non-familial men. In the Saudi state's Wahhabi Islam, gendered spatial segregation combines with gendered dress – women in black abayas, men in white thobes (long gowns) – to visualise a pious national identity.<sup>31</sup> Saudi cultural codes and norms vary internally, with Riyadh typically more conservative and Jeddah more permissive. In practice, modest dress has always varied: some regions or cities are more or less conservative; some families take different interpretations; individual women are more or less diligent in following regulations. In the last few years coloured and embellished abayas have been increasingly visible.

"My first experience, of course, was going to Riyadh for meetings and I was met at the airport with a very colourful abaya, which surprised me, because I thought it had to be black, but they said as a Westerner that was okay." (Jo)



▲ Jo, who is an international consultant/trainer for a non-profit, international education-based charity specialising in sports and social emancipation, wearing the abaya she was given on arrival. Subsequently she was delighted to purchase more abayas in her preferred shades of blue.

*Image: Courtesy of research participant*

Until recently the Saudi religious police or *mutawa* were a powerful regulatory presence on how women (to a lesser extent men) dressed and behaved in public. Face veils (*niqabs*) have not generally been required of international women, but those whose appearance makes them “look” Saudi have encountered demands to cover face, and sometimes eyes. Mostly, visiting women keep a scarf available though this is less often utilised in recent years. The advent of tourist visas in autumn 2019 brought new, imprecise, guidance that men and women should “dress modestly in public, avoiding tight-fitting clothing or clothes with profane language or images”.<sup>32</sup> Abayas may become optional, but the lack of detail on precisely how women “should cover shoulders and knees”, suggests that business travellers are entering a high-risk transition phase of trial and error.

In the UK work dress is less restrictive than in Saudi Arabia but most employers do have a dress code; ranging from uniforms in some customer service jobs to expectations of smart attire for business meetings. Although more relaxed than in the past, dress codes enable employers to establish workplace culture and set standards for appearance at work (prohibiting torn garments, offensive logos or messages, sometimes jeans or trainers). Those presenting “inappropriately” dressed for a job interview are less likely to be appointed. As legislation shields employees from discrimination on the grounds of religion and sex (and other protected characteristics), most employers are careful to ensure any dress codes do not discriminate. Dress codes are, however, more of a backstop to an organisation than openly discussed: when asked, staff often say that their employer has not discussed the dress code with them. Rather, employees are often expected to know how to dress at work without being told.<sup>33</sup> Dress codes can vary within an organisation, depending on the role and level of seniority within the organisation.

The “aesthetic labour” staff have to do in buying and styling their work outfits is rarely recognised as work or as a contribution to the company or organisation.<sup>34</sup> Success with this invisible preparation for the workplace is not equally available to everyone; knowing how to dress appropriately depends on one’s background and social network. Specific workplace norms may be more or less welcoming to different types of people: they can exclude those who look or seem different, because of social class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, gender, disability, or body shape. Some of these inequities in being able to look the part apply to UK women in Saudi Arabia; but the presumption that they will be unfamiliar with Saudi workwear requirements puts a different emphasis on how their work appearance is achieved and judged.

## Accommodating religious dress at work: law and practice in the UK



▲ After he was suspended in 1967, Tarsem Singh Sandhu fought for two years for the right to wear his turban to work in Wolverhampton, UK. The ban was eventually lifted on 9 April 1969.

Image: Alamy

2020 workwear guidance from the British Islamic Medical Association ►  
Image: BIMA



British, and EU, law requires employers to consider religious beliefs as the basis for requested adjustments to dress codes. For example, allowing Sikhs to wear a turban or a Muslim female medic to wear disposable sleeves during surgical procedures if she feels her arms should not be on view.<sup>35</sup> To date, UK legal cases about religion and workwear have been brought by religiously-observant employees in secular or non-religious workplaces where they felt unable to express their beliefs through dress and appearance. The rulings and appeals on some such cases, including those taken to the European Court of Human Rights, have garnered public and media attention. Cases such as those over the right to wear a niqab (face veil) or crucifix at work have implications for the expression of other faiths too. The European Court of Human Rights rulings



have generally favoured the employer. The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) finds most rulings – including in the Eweida case which found in her favour – to have been “consistent” and “appropriate”:

In relation to dress codes, the wearing of religious symbols and time off work, courts have balanced appropriately the right to manifest a religion or belief with other factors, including health and safety, and business requirements such as effectiveness of a service, or a duty of care for vulnerable service users.<sup>36</sup>

Eweida, an airline check-in officer who wished to wear a crucifix, won her case at the European Court of Human Rights; as EHRC explain, it was found that “her Article 9 right to manifest her belief was unjustifiably breached. The domestic courts gave too much weight to the employer’s legitimate need to project a corporate image and not enough weight to the employee’s right to wear a visible cross, which did not adversely affect that corporate image”.<sup>37</sup> European Court judgements have generally echoed, and respected, the different national contexts.<sup>38</sup> Guidance and example dress code policies have been produced by a range of bodies, including in the UK, the Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion (ENEI), Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) and Human Resources (HR) consultancies.<sup>39</sup> In their 2016 report for ACAS, Nath, Bach and Lockwood recommend employers be aware that dress restrictions may disadvantage religious people and be cautious about imposing “unreasonable and unnecessary restrictions”.<sup>40</sup>

If challenged on a dress code rule it will be important for the employer to be able to justify the restriction imposed and to demonstrate that it is not merely a matter of personal preference.

What is considered conventional in relation to dress and appearance may change with time, and employers may be expected to modify their dress and appearance codes to reflect those changes... helping to attract and retain employees who desire latitude in expressing facets of their personal identity at work.

The guidance that has been created as a result of these and other cases focuses on the religion of employees not that of the employer – something that this research seeks to address.

## The faith-based employment sector

The exact size of the UK faith-based sector and the number of employees is hard to ascertain. Some faith-based workplaces are places of worship, with around 40,000 recorded in England and Wales.<sup>41</sup> Often registered as charities, religious organisations can also receive state funding, for example to deliver education or welfare services. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations' UK Civil Society Almanac (2020) reported that, in 2017-18, "Faith-based organisations that have a charitable purpose but are not places of worship" totalled c.15,000 or c.9% of the voluntary sector.<sup>42</sup> There are over 35,000 registered charities in England and Wales that list "religious activities" in their self-classification in the Charity Commission register; 21% of all charities.<sup>43</sup> It is hard to get accurate data on different faith-based charities, but, when the 20,503 charities in England and Wales listed by Charity Choice in 2019 are broken down by religious denomination, 85% are Christian, 7% Islamic, 6% Jewish, 1% Buddhist and 1% Hindu.<sup>44</sup> It is unclear how Charity Choice accounts for interfaith organisations, which are a feature of the faith-based charity landscape (and feature in our research). 20,503 is significantly lower than the 35,122 figure reported above by the Charity Commission. This discrepancy (14,619 charities) might be due to a variety of factors, including different ways of counting faith-based charities and the possible exclusion of interfaith organisations.

Faith schools account for a third (34%, or 6,802), and rising, of English state schools.<sup>45</sup> This means that up to a third of the UK's half a million full-time teachers work in faith schools.<sup>46</sup> The majority are primary schools and the vast majority are Christian. Less than 1% of schools are linked to a minority faith (of these, the largest number are Jewish, then Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu). In addition to these examples and statistics, other religious organisations and employers exist: non-recorded or small faith-based businesses, schools, nurseries and places of worship run by religiously observant individuals or faith-based organisations, or further or higher education colleges and universities with a religious ethos.

As the faith-based sector is a significant employment sector in the UK, the experience of staff working within it is important. Religious organisations have historically often discriminated against women, so it is important to understand women's experience of employment in faith-based organisations. Focusing on one aspect of gendered experience – dress – provides a window into this.

The religious sector is subject to the Equality Act 2010 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of religion or other protected characteristics. There are two exceptions. First, if it can be shown that job delivery requires religious adherence (for example, attending a daily prayer meeting), or as part of the advertised and visible ethos of the organisation. "Proportionality" is important: "the requirement to employ a Christian for the role must be objectively justified and reasonably necessary, notwithstanding its discriminatory effect".<sup>47</sup> A dress requirement (for example, modest or "neutral" dress) could be legitimately required to demonstrate the advertised and visible ethos of the organisation. A second, much narrower exemption applies where the post is "for the purpose of an organised religion", which is not defined but understood to mean roles that carry out religious and spiritual functions (for example as imam, rabbi or priest).<sup>48</sup> For such roles, employers can discriminate against/not employ someone because of their sex, sexual orientation or marital status where necessary to comply with the doctrines of the religion.

# Research Methods in Brief

We focused on two distinct sets of employment experiences for women:

- Women working in the UK who worked in Saudi Arabia for a period of time or who travelled to Saudi Arabia on business.<sup>49</sup> They are employed in diverse sectors including professional services, fashion and lifestyle, arts, culture and leisure, international education, international healthcare, and politics and diplomacy. When their work took them to Saudi Arabia, these women were required to wear abayas or other modest clothing, and to adjust to religious codes of behaviour and gender segregation.
- Women in the UK whose work brings them into the orbit of modest dress requirements at UK faith-based organisations (FBOs),<sup>50</sup> whether directly employed, sub-contracted or engaged on a project-basis. These include schools, charities, and places of worship. These women encounter modest dress codes and navigate implicit and explicit requirements to accommodate the religious dress cultures of their employers.

We also spoke with HR professionals and managers and interviewed fashion designers and industry professionals:

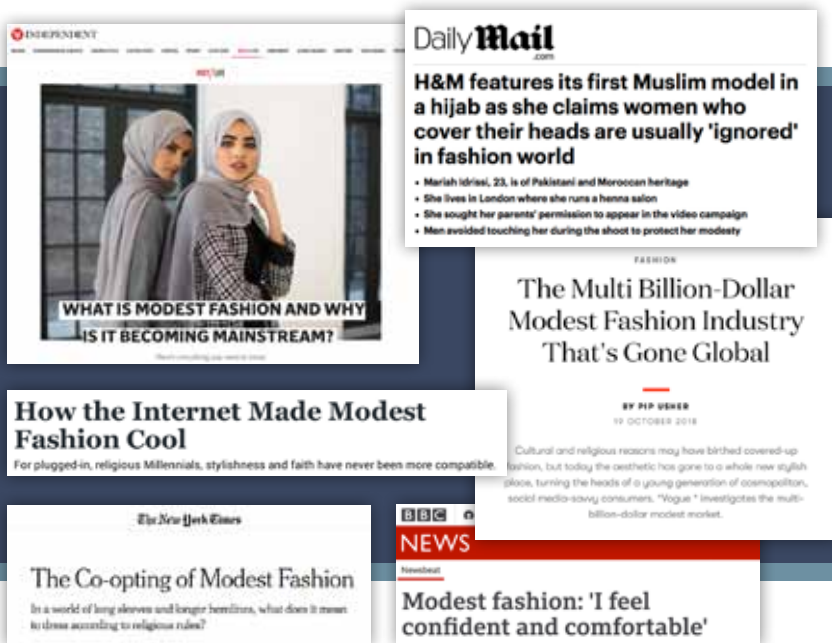
- UK-based HR professionals and managers tasked with regulating the UK workplace and Saudi placements and dealing with modest dress and behaviours as a factor in UK business.
- Professionals in the UK and in the Gulf fashion industries and media who offer attire and modest style guidance to help women find clothing or adjust their wardrobes for employers' modest fashion codes at work.
- Fashion professionals in the UK and in the Gulf fashion industries and media who offer attire and modest style guidance to help women understand how to find clothing or adjust their wardrobes to adapt to employers' modest fashion codes at work.
- Saudi women who act as informal fashion mediators and advisors to women visiting from other countries, providing abayas for visitors, taking women abaya shopping, and discussing appropriate dress and behaviour. Sometimes international women also fulfil this role.

65 interviews were conducted in total. The next section reports on findings from these interviews.

# Findings: The Contours of the New Modest Fashion Market

## 1. A growing market with established and new consumers

Far from being the opposite of fashion, modesty is currently having a “fashion moment”. Modest aesthetics are on trend. Modest fashion is big business, with an estimated (pre-pandemic) global spend of 238 billion USD in 2018-19,<sup>51</sup> larger than France’s national fashion market (170 billion USD in 2016)<sup>52</sup>, and around two thirds of the world’s largest market, the USA 368 billion USD.<sup>53</sup>



▲ Modesty is currently having a “fashion moment” and modest aesthetics are on trend.

Images(clockwise from top left): independent.co.uk (image courtesy Aab aabcollection.com), dailymail.co.uk, vogue.co.uk, bbc.com, nytimes.com, theatlantic.com

Cited in the fashion and business media as estimates for the modest fashion market, these figures derive in fact from reports about Muslim consumption patterns. This is not surprising as Muslims are the largest – and often most visible – modest fashion consumer group. Extrapolating from the data on Muslim modest consumption has advantages and pitfalls. The decision to construct Muslims as a consumer group is commercial and ideological.<sup>54</sup> Branding and marketing professionals have begun to develop their understanding of religious dress cultures, accessing knowledge and experiences previously overlooked or disparaged as a career asset.

The globalised fashion industry has seen huge attitudinal change in the turn to Muslim and modest consumers. Where once fashion brands were **aversive** to public association with Muslims (especially because of 9/11), today connecting with Muslim fashion influencers and consumers is seen as a business **asset**.

### **1.1 Modest fashion does not only mean Muslim modest fashion, and Muslim fashion does not always mean modest fashion**

It is not surprising that the term modest fashion is often used as a synonym for modest Muslim fashion. Globally, Muslim women are the largest distinct religious market segment for modest fashion and – especially if women cover their hair – the most visually identifiable. Other sizeable religious markets for modest fashion include orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jews and conservative Christians (including members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). Increasing numbers of Sikh women have taken to keeping their hair uncut and wearing a turban, which leads to some increase in Sikh modest dressing. As yet there is no market research to provide data on numbers of modest dressers in these faith groups or the value of the market.

But brands and media should be alert to the slippage between the terms modest and Muslim fashion: many Muslim women do **not** dress with modesty in mind; many designers of Muslim heritage do **not** create modest fashion; and many modest fashion consumers are **not** Muslim. Women who choose modest fashion can come from other religious traditions **and** from secular backgrounds. The modest fashion market also includes – as our research illustrates – women who are not motivated by personal belief or aesthetic preference but who are required to dress modestly for work some or all of the time.

The modest fashion industry has known from the start that consumption crosses religious divides and includes women from secular backgrounds.

Modest brands and digital influencers have welcomed this: influencers post on the social media accounts of fashionistas from other faith traditions; brands develop marketing campaigns for other people's festivals. Despite this evidence of cross-faith and faith-secular commerce and commentary, it can be contentious for religious-originating brands to have consumers from other faith groups, and for members of religious communities to be brought into contact with other religions through consumption. If for some, modest fashion provides a welcome route to interfaith dialogue, for others it is alarming to be consuming items "tainted" by other religious practices.<sup>55</sup>

As a marketing term, modest fashion was adopted by many pioneers in the niche industry because it was not specific to a single faith, so helped cross-faith marketing and dialogue. At the beginning of the 2010s, these designers and creative entrepreneurs were still finding that their products were blighted by anti-religious (and especially anti-Muslim) prejudice or ignorance in the mainstream fashion industry.

A decade later, and modest fashion is enjoying popularity as a mainstream fashion category; allowing brands within and without the modest sector to maximise the wider potential applicability of modest style clothing. The association of modesty with Muslim fashion may take some time to dissipate: within the modest fashion niche industry the growing calendar of modest fashion "weeks" continues to conflate modest with Muslim (despite sometimes including designers from other faith backgrounds and brands that do not originate from a religious perspective).

The correlation of modest fashion with Muslims may obscure crucial market insights for fashion brands and media. Equating modest fashion too much with Muslims means that fashion professionals might not grasp the range and nuance of other religious modest fashion cultures, or the similarities between them.

## **1.2 Modest fashion can overlap with "ethnic" fashion but ethnic fashion is not always modest**

Another way in which modest fashion does not map neatly onto either Muslim fashion or religious fashion, is the intersection with so called "ethnic" fashion. The clothing conventional to different ethnic and religious communities does often meet modesty requirements, but not always –; especially as different generations alter their definition of modesty.

*Salwar kameez* and saris have both been and are worn by South Asian women from many religious communities, though at times perceived, claimed, or avoided as distinctively Muslim or Hindu. Some Muslim women have come to regard the three piece *salwar kameez* (tunic, trousers, and *dupatta* shawl) as insufficient for modesty, adding an additional scarf tied closer to the face as a hijab (with the *dupatta* left over the shoulder, or incorporated into an elaborate head wrap). Comparable adaptations are made by some Muslim sari wearers who use a separate headscarf to cover their hair and neck; rebooting the inbuilt modesty of the sari's flexible design which allows Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim women to adjust where they drape the loose end (*pallu*) to cover hair or face depending on their location and company.



▲ This three-piece set of anarkali, churidar, and dupatta (dress, trousers, shawl) was tailor-made in the UK for arts freelancer Hala. She wears this to deliver interfaith and intercultural arts programmes, but may equally likely appear in contemporary “western” fashion too.  
*Image: Courtesy of research participant*



Most forms of ethnic fashion seen in the West are rarely regarded as fashion or as business wear. Moving forward, fashion professionals, fashion educators, businesses and HR professional could view ethnic fashions as part of the multiple fashion systems of a globalised industry, drawing on team members with existing experience or expertise.

### **1.3 Modest fashion is a temporary trend *and* a long-term category**

The incursion of modest aesthetics into fashion trends has proved a boon to modest dressing consumers, but this trend will inevitably pass out of style in an industry structured on transience, fashion journalist Lisa Armstrong argues. However, she adds, modesty as a concept and as a commitment transcends trends. So too does the prevailing concept of immodesty and the shaming that accompanies it.<sup>56</sup>

The current vogue for modest fashion can be seen as part of a pendulum swing, standing in strong contrast to early 2000s and skimpy “body con” styling that saw starlets parade in barely there “nude” gowns with figure-hugging cut and plunging necklines. For some modest dressers styling a more covered body is a way to signal opposition to an objectifying male gaze, and it is not a coincidence that the trend towards modest aesthetics accompanies a widespread assertion of women's bodily rights. Resistance to objectification underpinned the #MeToo fightback against the sexualisation of women and the Slutwalk resistance against shaming women for being too overtly sexual. Activists connect women's rights to dress as they please with the right to control their own bodies. It is also not a coincidence that campaigns and commentary have focused on how sexualisation and shaming impacts on women's employment prospects – whether sexual harassment at work in the entertainment industry or the inequities of being required to wear skirts in the airline industry.

Women who dress modestly are not protected from being shamed. Workplace modesty codes can create opportunities for women's appearance and behaviour to be policed.

When twenty-something Muslim Safya started work at a Muslim charity she was already a long-time hijab wearer and modest dresser so she was surprised when HR admonished her about “inappropriate” dress: “I never expected the way I dress would offend anybody [so] I was really, really upset.” Frustrated that the organisation’s code was “so ambiguous [that] we’re unsure what we should and shouldn’t wear”, Safya interceded at an operational level to rewrite the dress code with clear transparent advice on garment type and fit. She also made explicit that modest dress applied to men as well as women.



▲ Safya in workwear for her post at a UK Islamic charity.  
Image: Courtesy of research participant

For whatever reason women wear modest fashion, how others view it depends on the wider context of what is in fashion and available to buy. Brand offer impacts on how the body is presented and experienced, with “unflattering” trends drawing attention to less favoured body parts. When secular fashion trends favour modest aesthetics, women who elect to dress modestly fit in more and stand out less. Some women who dress modestly welcome this camouflage effect. Others want to be distinctive from other religious people or secular society.

All these factors suggest sustained demand for modest options from specialist and mainstream fashion brands. It is to be anticipated that brands will mainstream modest fashion within their ranges, as in now increasingly the case with “plus size” garments, or eco-fashion items.

## **2. Who are the new modest fashion consumers?**

Our investigation of modest dressing as a workplace requirement reveals two new types of modest fashion consumers:

- women not driven by personal or religious convictions who do not generally dress with modesty in mind
- women whose existing form of modest presentation has to be adjusted to meet workplace regulation.

For both groups, experiences of workplace modesty codes are framed by the dress code in their employment sectors. Women's individual experience of adjusting their workwear for modesty will vary according to demographic factors such as age, class, and location as well as personal morality and ethics. There is considerable overlap between the two groups, especially as changes in work environments (whether visiting Saudi Arabia, or attending a meeting at a UK faith school) reposition how women's chosen style is regarded.

### **2.1 Modesty as the price of doing business**

In the UK some women seek jobs with faith-based employers partly because they think such employers will support their own religious practices (such as time off for festivals, prayer rooms, dietary needs, etc.). Modest dressing may be a motivation for choosing a religious employer, but we did not hear

this argument from women we interviewed at UK faith-based organisations. Rather, women choose to work at faith-based employers partly because the organisations' aims chime with their own religious values. Most see religiously-related codes of modest dress and behaviour at work as a manageable occupational requirement. Women's willingness to accommodate modesty codes might vary depending on whether they have other job alternatives (such as teachers seeking work in areas where many local schools are faith schools) or/and because they are personally committed to supporting religious or interfaith initiatives.

Women who work for UK and global secular employers, our interviews showed, are more specific about regarding modesty codes as the "price of doing business" when their work took them to Saudi Arabia. This evaluation was expressed by women in the private, voluntary, and public sectors, possibly reflecting the significance of Saudi Arabia as Britain's biggest trading partner in the region. Attitudes to the personal impact of this "cost" varied significantly, but sector was not the determining factor.

Barbara is a senior partner at a global professional services firm who makes sure that her "conservative" workwear contains options suitable for her frequent trips to partner organisations "across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), [and in] Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon". Travelling to Saudi Arabia first in the early 2010s, she was initially "rebellious" about accommodating the imposed dress codes of Saudi Arabia because of the inference that her existing modest wear was insufficient, or immodest. After subsequent trips she became "more accepting of it, the price of doing business".

This sartorial surcharge only applied to women; men visiting Saudi Arabia for work had to make far fewer adjustments to their dress (mainly not wearing shorts) and the adjustments to their behaviour such as not shaking women's hands did not disadvantage them. In contrast, women visitors (as also those working there longer term) experience a range of situational disadvantages as we discuss below. This includes spending additional time and, sometimes, money acquiring appropriate clothing.

## 2.2 Not modest enough? Navigating wardrobe needs for Saudi Arabia

Many women already incorporated modest dressing considerations into their workwear wardrobes. Women in finance and professional services accustomed to international business travel ensured that their wardrobes contained outfits suitable for locations likely to be governed by Muslim or other religious cultures of modest presentation. Barbara works with a local UK independent boutique to build “travel capsules”.

“So, black and white with a splash of colour; dresses in the main with jackets; always something that you can wear in the Middle East.” (Barbara)

Despite being very interested in fashion, many women aim to reduce the daily effort of choosing an outfit. Lyn, another senior partner at Barbara's firm who like her dislikes spending time shopping, uses regular visits to Washington DC to see the personal shopper at Nordstrom who helps craft:

“...a kind of a uniform...black trousers, black top, various jackets of colour – I have a pink one and I have a cream one – and then funky shoes; and I can do that every day and I don't have to think about [it].” (Lyn)



▲ Lynne's “funky” shoe brand.  
Image: [www.chiemihara.com](http://www.chiemihara.com)

Women understand that clothing is a key investment in the impression management essential to career progression. Having begun in the male-dominated finance sector in the 1980s, Barbara is strategic:

"... in a world of very grey-suited male professionals, it's important that the few women – and there are still few women – stand out, so I will wear splashes of colour. So be it red or a bit of yellow or a bit of bright turquoise or purple, mixed into something that's conservative" (Barbara)

She was affronted when her carefully selected modest travel coordinates were repositioned as implicitly immodest for her first trip to Saudi Arabia:

"I said, I'm also not going to waste my time and money trying to search for one in the UK because I rebel against wearing the abaya... So if you want me there you'd better go and get me an abaya." (Barbara, on her first trip to Saudi)

### **2.3 Abayas can be shared, unlike other garments**

Nearly all participants in all sectors and in faith-based and secular workplaces gave considerable thought to what they wore for work. Women often had an entirely different attitude when it came to the abaya, regarding it as something that could be shared in a way that few would contemplate with their regular wardrobe.

"I had to rush out for a meeting, so I needed an abaya to go out, also to meet the people. So I borrowed one from work, but it was too long for me. It was actually, I think, the perfect length, it was exactly [to] the ground, but I couldn't manage, I tripped all the time. So for me it doesn't work for that length. I need it to be shorter to be able to manage, because I'm not used to it." (Lisa)

The emergence of the “borrowable” shared abaya and the pooling of abayas as a collective workplace asset indicates that women who carefully crafted their professional appearance as a way of maximising status were willing to sacrifice this when working in Saudi Arabia. In some cases, sharing abayas reflected an ideological aesthetic disdain for an unwelcome sartorial imposition. In others, the willingness to lend was driven by collegiality or desperation in a context where lack of appropriate clothing prohibits job delivery. The inability to project individual occupational identity through clothing is one factor in the mix of components that may compromise women’s ability to demonstrate professional status. Whilst it is not unheard of for a woman in the UK faith-based sector to loan a cardigan to someone deemed insufficiently covered, we did not find that pooling personal wardrobe items was common. The collectively accessible abaya is an anomaly.

## **2.4 The pros and cons of working in an abaya**

Women unaccustomed to long voluminous garments encountered physical challenges in the unfamiliar abaya. In some occupations this was acute: Mattie’s role in cultural interpretation required her to bend up and down to toddler height during family art workshops. Going forward, visitors will benefit from work-friendly design details, such as pockets, that abaya brands are introducing as Saudi women’s work and social opportunities (such as driving) increase.

Some women found the abaya simplified work wardrobe decisions, especially those making repeat and longer stays, like Anna, a senior consultant with a healthcare consulting company:

“When I was coming to Saudi a lot... I went from wearing a suit or something professional to work every day to wearing the abaya and I can wear whatever I want underneath, and I actually found it quite nice, because then I can just wear my leggings and a comfy t-shirt to work... you don’t have to think about putting your outfit together during your lunch or whatever, you just have to get up and put on the abaya.” (Anna)



▲ Anna, in her abaya delivering a presentation at work in Riyadh.

*Image: Courtesy of research participant*

However, some visiting women also found that wearing an abaya hampered their impression management, impeding the ways in which they used dress and personal presentation to project professionalism and sometimes authority at work. Some women did not feel “like themselves”:

“...clothes help with confidence, if you feel you're dressed well you feel good about yourself, and wearing something that's so shapeless, I felt that people didn't really know me, it created a barrier.” (Sue)

Producing an appropriate workplace appearance in the UK is known to bear more on women than men. In Saudi Arabia this investment in the aesthetic labour of self-management is interrupted by having to manage an unfamiliar sartorial self in an abaya and can impact on job delivery:



"It made me feel less confident. Because I was so aware of it. So instead of just being me and getting on with my business of the reason why I was there, I was constantly aware [of] wearing this uniform, in a way, this thing that didn't really represent me.

I was travelling with my boss at the time, so I felt in a way a bit sort of humiliated having to wear something and he didn't have to." (Sue)



▲ Sue has an executive role responsible for international relationships at a major British national cultural institution and felt she was rendered anonymous and lacking in individuality when wearing her abaya (second from right). Her male colleagues do not appear to have had to make adjustments to their clothing.

*Image: Courtesy of research participant*

Women whose experience included having to wear a headscarf, required everywhere in previous years and still recently in some conservative districts, found that this compounded the impact of the unfamiliar abaya. The sense of feeling “anonymised” and “less valued” went beyond the workplace. Prior to recent changes enabling women to dine more easily in restaurants and cafes, Saudi restrictions on movement and clothing contributed to an overwhelming “suppression of self” (Fiona) including for women with years of work in other Gulf locations.

Even with some lessening of Saudi gendered spatial norms, women may struggle to dress correctly for the different people viewing them over the day. The few women working in women-only environments such as schools or universities (rarely women-only offices) had to cover for the journey to work. Most women operated in mixed-gender work environments. Others might move between mixed and women-only spaces, so could not risk throwing on their abaya over a pair of shorts or a sleeveless sundress. Barbara was caught out sartorially by an unexpected dinner at the home of a Saudi host during a British trade mission and found herself unable to accept the invitation to remove her abaya because she was only wearing leggings and a t-shirt underneath; “well covered” but not formal enough for a business social with the men (the women of the household not attending).

Visiting men do not lose status in same way. Whilst some western men appeared alert to the spatial and wardrobe challenges faced by female colleagues and made efforts to help compensate (introducing women into the conversation with Saudi male colleagues, etc.), others appear to welcome the enhanced status accorded by local patriarchy’s “bro-culture”.<sup>57</sup>

## **2.5 Muslim women are not necessarily familiar with abaya-wearing for work**

Women who are Muslim but not from abaya-wearing cultures equally find it a challenge to wear an abaya at work. This is true even when women have visited Saudi Arabia for reasons of pilgrimage so own an abaya. Amal, a senior consultant with a consulting company serving healthcare organisations around the world, spent ten months working in Riyadh. Amal owned abayas from her several pilgrimages but did not consider them suitably “professional” for workwear. She borrowed a slightly better pilgrimage abaya from a cousin to change into on the plane and immediately went shopping. Wearing an abaya for work did not feel the same as wearing one for pilgrimage.

“Very, very, very different. I remember just feeling quite nervous before going into meetings, because I wasn’t sure if it was classy enough, I didn’t really know how to wear it. And I remember getting the buttons all mixed up as well. [laughs] There were lots of buttons on my abaya and they would go out of synch, so it was difficult. And I remember the [male, British] partners that were on my team, the more senior members of staff laughing at me, a lot of it because I was struggling with my abaya and there were other things to be worrying about.” (Amal)

Contemplating what to wear is normal for fashion-conscious Amal, who says, “I generally think about how I dress, like whenever I’m going out and I take a lot of pride in how I dress myself.” Dressing “classic, but with a twist”, Amal aims always to “have a statement” in her outfit. On client-facing days she pairs a knee-length dress or trouser suit in “a classic simple colour” with “a bright scarf [hijab] to brighten it all up”. In contrast to spending time every day choosing an outfit, working in an abaya means that “I must have got an extra 15, 20 minutes’ sleep every day.”

“...by the end of my time there I would always tell people, seriously, abaya over a suit any day. I could go into meetings just wearing leggings and a t-shirt underneath my abaya, and no one would know. I would wear my gym wear underneath my abaya so that when I’d come back to the [hotel] I could just go straight to the gym and I saved a lot of time. So it was very comfortable and very efficient in time from that aspect.” (Amal)

Amal’s experience of wearing abayas for spiritual practice during pilgrimage did not create transferable skills for managing one at work:

"I'll be carrying my laptop, carrying my bag and trying to be on a phone call at the same time, and doing all of that while going up the stairs with the abaya and not being able to hold the abaya so that I don't trip over it was a bit of a challenge" (Amal)

None of the Muslim women we spoke to were habitual abaya wearers, and they all reported a similarly "weird moment" when transposing the abaya from religious to business practice. They also felt judged differently by Saudis who regarded them as co-religionists with presumed similar religious cultural values about modesty. Differences of visible ethnicity and linguistic capability also play a role: British Asian women who were not Muslim were likely to be judged in public as if they were Muslim; Arabic speakers who are or are not Muslim might be supposed to comprehend and share regional cultural social conventions.

In the UK religious workplace personal affinity with religious cultural codes can sometimes be a career advantage, though rarely demarcated as a job requirement. Patricia, who works in a managerial office role for the Church of England, does not "have to be Christian" to do her job "though it does help a lot. I would find it quite hard to do it if I wasn't":

"I am conscious of the way that people dress. There is nothing that says to me, you must dress in this way, in a Christian way, but there is very much a kind of code that I adhere to, which is much more couched in the words of professional dress, about presenting yourself professionally, rather than in terms of a faith." (Patricia)

### **3. Framing the conversation about modest fashion**

Fashion professionals have to learn new terminology to understand language of modesty and the concepts within it. This is as true for those working in the UK as those in Saudi Arabia. The same garment can have different names around the world; moral judgements and concepts behind categories such as modesty, culture or religion also differ around the globe and within communities. Modest dressing can be discussed indirectly through a variety of terms and concepts; and ostensibly neutral personal style choices may be rooted in moral decision-making.

### 3.1 The language of morality in wardrobe decisions; direct and indirect moral judgement

Women we interviewed try to avoid overtly moral judgements about the modesty or inferred immodesty of their co-workers even if they were comfortable describing their own dress decisions in moral terms. Women already immersed in forms of modest dress utilise their moral code when selecting work apparel, though the judgements of others can override. Davina had made careful purchasing decisions in preparation for a new job at an evangelical Christian organisation:

"I went out to buy new work shoes and I bought this pair from River Island that I thought were completely appropriate for the new workplace, they are heels. They're leather, black, kind of not like strappy, but you could see a little bit of my flesh through them. But I thought, oh, these'll look great, because these will smarten up my leggings if I want to still wear leggings, or those trousers that taper in at the bottom. I would have thought you need a heel with them, to balance me out, because I'm quite small. I showed these to my husband [and] – so he's a vicar – he made a comment about how they might lead my Christian brothers astray. And then he went, or your Christian sisters, because he was trying to be, you know, woke, and think anybody might be attracted to me. But I haven't worn them now. So now I feel awkward wearing them in the workplace." (Davina)



▲ Davina's shoes.

*Image: Courtesy of research participant*

In the faith-based sector some women may take it upon themselves informally to share judgement about the appearance of others. Or women may be tasked with inducting or regulating colleagues in the observance of organisational modesty codes – regardless of their own religious or secular affiliation. HR professionals and managers are aware that to be corrected for dressing with insufficient modesty is not the same as being chastised for lateness or making a mess in the lunchroom. Danielle, in HR at a Muslim charity (not herself Muslim) knows how it feels and tries to be “tactful”, framing the interaction as an “informal chat”:

“Normally the person is quite embarrassed. I mean, I’ve been told in the past because of my arms, so when I didn’t have my shoulders and arms covered that time, and I remember feeling quite embarrassed, so you want it to be quite a quick conversation. And if it’s something like that, and the person that told me about my arms, had like a spare cardigan they could give me at the time, so I didn’t have to worry about it for the rest of the day.” (Danielle)

For secular and religious alike, corrections about modesty produce a shaming sense of embarrassment about the body and the gender imbalance is clear: it is more often men than women whose scrutiny initiates the correction for modesty failures (including by male clients and visitors). Yet responsibility for delivering the awkward communication is delegated to other women, as Danielle explains, “because they [men] wouldn’t feel necessarily as comfortable having that conversation”.

In UK secular sectors, women make judgements about how to show their body at work but do not describe this in overtly moral terms: Lyn never goes sleeveless at work because she considers it more “appropriate” to cover, and thinks she has “chubby arms”. Other women who were comfortable to wear sleeveless clothes always kept an additional layer to hand, because as Barbara explained, “I don’t think it’s appropriate to go to a business meeting without that small jacket or cardigan” although she would remove it after arrival if this “mirror[ed]” the dress codes of the clients.

As a morally neutral term, “appropriate” was common among women in faith-based and secular sectors (although for some religious women it could

have directly moral connotation). Other non-moralising terms included “professional”, linking clothes to career optimisation. In the UK faith-based sector, the equation of professional dressing with modest dressing can render it imperative even for women not personally attached to codes of modest dress. Melanie reflects on her Islamic charity workplace:



“I think the reality is that modest fashion helps women to establish a professional reputation, stops any backbiting or criticism about them behind their backs. And potentially helps them to advance their career, because they are seen to be kind of professional. I don't agree with it, but I feel that probably is the case and that I would probably advise my daughter to dress modestly, to consciously dress in a reasonably modest way at work because of that culture, because I feel that there is that kind of understanding or expectation or inherent criticism of people who don't dress modestly.” (Melanie)

▲ *Melanie combines this high necked patterned top with loose trousers for her job at a UK Islamic charity.*  
*Image: Kristin Aune 2019*

Women who are modest dressers use the language of autonomy especially in relation to being object of the external gaze:

"I want to ensure that I've got control over what they see. And for that I do cover up. I think modesty's more than covering hair and face, it's more about your attire." (Samirah)

Lisa, who dressed modestly for work, concurred that modesty "can be empowering in the sense that women get taken more seriously [at work] if they do not show a lot of skin or wear very tight dresses, short tight dresses", though, she cautions, "it can also be limiting if it's not what you prefer". Wearing unfamiliar modest attire when you do not choose it, can indeed reduce rather than enhance women's sense of control, impacting on job delivery. When Lou discovered that her conference paper in Riyadh in 2014 had to be relayed by mic from the back of the women's gallery, it was the inability to be seen by others that offended her feminist ethics.

"I did my best to compensate for the fact that I wasn't standing on the platform [with my male colleagues] wearing my own clothes... it was stressful [but] I felt I had something I wanted to share professionally and these are the hoops I have to go through I can do that... even though I had gone through the motions of trying to abide by their dress code... If you've invited me [how] can it be such an affront to you that you have to look at the person whose ideas you are listening to and possibly even going to carry out, how can it be so offensive to you that you can't also look at me." (Lou)

"Not causing offence" was common parlance for how to adapt to modesty coded work environments, with women describing relevant clothes as "conservative" and sometimes "refined". Similar phrasing is used in Gulf English-language discussions: Dubai-based Saudi designer Arwa Al Banawi, from a "conservative" and "modern" family, avoids the term "modest fashion", saying instead "I never like to make a woman look vulgar". With women's "empowerment" in mind, she emphasises that "in general, a woman in business cannot look vulgar, no one will take you seriously." Her line combines streetwear and athleisure with sharp suiting, "modernising the abaya" into on-trend oversize blazers for Saudi and regional millenials.<sup>58</sup>





▲ Modest workwear comes in all styles and aesthetics: Rachel dressed for work as a rabbi; Abigail's style for work at a UK Catholic organisation; two outfits worn by Yasmin for her job at a UK Islamic charity.  
Images: Courtesy of research participants

In terms of fit and aesthetic, “flowy” and “feminine” were popular in modest workwear, but so too were unstructured geometric garment types in fabrics stiff enough to obscure body shape. Both achieve the “loose” fit required in a number of contexts. Trousers were a frequent go-to for modest attire in the UK faith-based sector, especially in Christian and Muslim contexts. Modest styling is certainly not a move into hyper-femininity per se (though that may be an aesthetic preference for some).

### **3.2 Fashion mediation: formal and informal style arbitration**

Access to forms of fashion advice or mediation were essential to women's ability to “do” workplace modesty. This includes fashion magazines and social media, and the professional services of shop staff and personal shoppers. So too was the formal and informal “insider expert” advice provided by individuals with experiential knowledge of modest fashion cultures. This might be Saudi women advising visitors. Or, in the UK workplace, counsel from women with cultural heritage relevant to modesty conventions, plus non-affiliates (like Danielle above) who have acquired workplace modesty intel. This role is generally unacknowledged and unremunerated.

Unfamiliarity with the abaya on the part of women whose work took them to Saudi Arabia made it critical to access advice on acquiring and wearing abayas (especially when necessary to change into one before landing). In the UK faith-based workplace wardrobe adjustments were generally more moderate and often less urgent. In the UK the range of garments involved was usually within women's comfort zone; sufficiently familiar to be findable in favoured mainstream stores at all price points, from ASOS and H&M though Zara and M&S to Selfridges. Popular workwear sources for women going to Saudi Arabia, these brands were augmented with unstructured styles from Cos, John Lewis, and Hobbs (reflecting also the higher spend of older and more senior participants, since younger junior women were historically unlikely to gain a visa).<sup>59</sup> Across the spectrum from Net a Porter to ASOS, mainstream fashion brands increasingly curate a modest fashion edit, sometimes seasonally tied to (mainly Muslim) festivals as key purchasing points.

Women needed advice to navigate the nuanced and situational variations in Saudi Arabia's ostensibly clear dress requirements. Abaya “etiquette” depended on the relative strictness of modesty norms in different cities or regions, sometimes varying according to job sector, individual age or status.<sup>60</sup> Guidance came from several sources: women in the organisation who had

visited before (who might also lend their abaya); regional business partners who may or may not themselves have visited Saudi Arabia; women in Saudi Arabia (mostly Saudi nationals) who either worked in the same organisation or who were connected to visiting women by their own occupational networks or by those of men in their family (as also women married to businessmen, plus their daughters). Expat Western women individually and through networks (including social media), also provide assistance and FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions); though these are often focused on women's lives outside work given that many women travel to the Kingdom on non-working expat spousal visas.

The regional abaya fashion industry in Dubai and elsewhere in the GCC is an important source of garments, with women often doing business in regional hubs on their way. Saudi designer Effa al Dabbagh, whose accessible luxury brand is based in Dubai, points out how things have changed:<sup>61</sup>

“European executives that would be coming and they'd be working in the fashion industry, sometimes they would just, you know, quite honestly look terrible because it would be an afterthought and they would just wear an ill-fitting abaya that was the wrong length [and] they just wouldn't know even how to carry themselves in it. ...I think before it used to be more of an afterthought. [Now things are different,] maybe more women are travelling to Saudi for business than before, [and] generally designer abayas have become much more available, whereas maybe 15 years ago it was mostly just traditional abaya shops, so there's more options out there now”.

In her own stores, her staff are trained to help visitors select easy to manage styles, suitable for specific destinations.



▲ *Project researcher shopping for abayas, Jeddah and Riyadh November 2019.*  
**Images: Reina Lewis 2019**

Within the Kingdom, Saudi women sometimes welcome the task of guiding international visitors into abayas as an opportunity for cultural exchange:

“...she loved shopping for abaya. I took her to the places where Saudis go for abayas, she loved the collections there, the options that she had and the whole experience. And I loved shopping with her, you know, I felt so proud, introducing her to part of my culture and also getting the message to her, what does abaya mean to us as Saudis.” (Haifa)

Women who have grown up wearing abayas, or become accustomed to them over time, often explained that wearing one is simple, “so easy to put on” and

“elegant to wear”. But the abaya like all garments – whether high heels or a sari – requires learned body management techniques. Unsurprisingly, Saudis can tell at a glance when someone is a “newbie” abaya wearer:

“Identifying you by the way you wear an abaya doesn't mean anything negative to Saudis... So when a Westerner takes one step, you know, in a positive way and showing respect to our culture by putting a scarf on or wearing abaya, to us it's a plus... you would see people smiling to you because you are exerting effort to show respect to their culture. (Haifa)

The recurrent refrain has implications for visiting women's effectivity at work, given that international women may appear in outmoded abayas that have been circulating at work for years. Easily able to discern an abaya's cost and fashionability, Saudi women demonstrate kindness in overlooking shabby or poorly fitting garments:

“...you don't expect them to spend much money on something that they will not use later... So it's very reasonable that they buy something for the purpose that would look elegant, but not very costly.” (Noor)

“Actually, you don't expect them to wear something very elegant. No, if I see a foreign lady wear a very elegant abaya, it's wow. This has not usually happened.” (Myriam)

“Same here.” (Noor)

### 3.3 How political changes in Saudi Arabia impact on fashion

Until recently, visiting women's concerns about not being able to project professional or senior status might have been ameliorated by Saudi willingness to overlook their lack of style smarts. The Saudi tendency to classify the abaya as a cultural rather than religious garment also helps provide latitude for visitor mistakes.<sup>62</sup> Now, the rise in business visas granted to women plus the new tourist visas and accompanying relaxations to modest dress requirements will alter expectations for all women entering the Kingdom. The audience for international women's modest dressing will alter as more Saudi women enter the workforce and attain seniority, and more workplaces shift into partial or fully gender-mixed use of space. International women working in Saudi Arabia will no longer find that most of their Saudi business partners and collaborators are men. Instead, they will work – and socialise – in environments populated by Saudi women who can size up their wardrobes just as they themselves might instinctively evaluate someone's appearance at home in the UK.

The present and pending relaxation to Saudi modesty requirements for international women visitors will in fact increase the need for expertise in fashion mediation as visitors learn to craft Saudi-compliant ensembles from more familiar garment types. Visiting women already encountered inconsistency in how the previous, apparently straightforward, abaya regulations were observed. Now the vagueness about what constitutes modest dress will make it harder to get modesty right.

There have been similar indications of – similarly imprecise – relaxations in modesty requirements for Saudi nationals; making the fashion landscape even more complex. To date, the changes in what constitutes modest dress for Saudi women have not been codified in law. Instead, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman used a television interview on CBS TV channel during his first formal trip to the USA in March 2018 to indicate a change in interpretation and practice:

“The laws are very clear and stipulated in the laws of Sharia: that women wear decent, respectful clothing, like men,” he said. “This, however, does not particularly specify a black abaya or a black head-cover.”<sup>63</sup>

This proclamation fits with the Crown Prince's programme of social modernisation without political reform that has seen the country's youthful population offered opportunities for cross-sex socialising and entertainment

outside the home. Advances in some aspects of women's lives such as permission to drive and some amendments to the guardianship law have been granted whilst restrictions on civil liberty and political freedom of expression remain in place.

There has been no universal shift out of the abaya into other forms of modest dressing, as Saudi women respond in various ways to the Prince's statement. Women retaining the abaya include some who elect not to wear one when they travel abroad (sometimes adopting other forms of modest cover). The growing market for "travel" clothing (below) may go on to form the basis of new modest fashions for public dressing within Saudi Arabia, but so far these garment types are not widely transposed into new codes of dress at home. Many women have personal reasons for wanting to retain the abaya (and for some the face veil, or niqab) which may be spiritual/religious or/and to do with social and community convention and status. Another factor in retaining the abaya is the widespread perception that the Prince's proclamation is running in advance of popular opinion.

Within months of the Prince's interview, one early adopter was telling the UK *Daily Mail* that the lack of specific legal change left her with "no protection. I might be at risk, might be subjected to assault from religious fanatics because I am without an abaya".<sup>64</sup> Except for the few frontrunners willing to be conspicuous (or who are public campaigners) it is highly likely that Saudi women will continue wearing the abaya until the regime sends a clearer signal.

This signal may be a fashion statement as much as a legislative development. As luxury consultant and fashion editor Marriam Mossalli explains, behaviour is unlikely to change until a significant royal is pictured in the new modest fashion **within** the Kingdom, not just on tour abroad:

"That's why I always say the moment we see one of the top tier princesses going sans abaya, you're not going to see anyone wearing it. They are the leaders. The influencers, for real." (Marriam Mossalli)

Women's reluctance to pioneer the newly sanctioned modest dressing is understandable. Within living memory for much of the female population, fashion choices were subject to scrutiny by the real rather than imagined fashion police. The power of the Saudi *mutawa* has only recently diminished; until then they were a regular public feature, from parks to shopping malls.

The *mutawa* did not only police women's appearance, they also intervened in the very process of shopping; affecting what women could buy and how it was sold. Arriving in the early 1990s to a conservative town in North Central Saudi Arabia, American Sofia had already converted to Islam and adopted modest dress. Her Turkish trenchcoat-style long *jilbabs* were obviously insufficient for a town where women covered their faces and eyes with a black face veil, so she and her husband rushed to the stores:

"And as we were walking in the street to go into the store to buy an abaya, a mutawa actually came up to us and started yelling at us, that why is she dressed like that, cover her eyes, she shouldn't be dressed like that, her abaya is too form-fitting... my ex was trying to be very calm about it. [He] told him she arrived from America, she's American.... And he's like, okay, hurry up and go. And he literally waited outside the store to make sure that we actually were buying stuff." (Sofia)

What they purchased was a "head abaya"; a large oval shaped cape, placed over a headscarf at the crown of the head from where it cascades to the ground and is held closed with one hand.

"...it didn't have fastenings, which I didn't like at all, because when you're holding a baby and a bag and a diaper bag and a stroller, it just opens everywhere, so it's like really, what's the point? You know, you see everything that's underneath." (Sofia)

Having moved to Riyadh a couple of years later, and once again pregnant, Sofia became a front-runner in adopting the then innovative "shoulder abaya." Now commonly worn in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, the shoulder abaya



does not as effectively hide the entire shape of the body. Leaving the head to be covered only by the scarf, the new style abaya is seamed across the top of the arms to hang from the shoulders, in either front fastening or wrap across styles, with different types of sleeves. In Riyadh in the mid-1990s accessing this new design required subterfuge from retailers and their customers:

“And some of the shops, [when] they heard the mutawas coming around and they heard the trucks outside, they would literally close the shop, lock it, so that no one could go in the shop to see. They were hidden, the abayas were hidden. [So too subsequently] the colour abayas were also hidden in the beginning. [The] storekeepers would get punished, yes, yes.” (Sofia)

Today most women wear versions of the shoulder abaya. It is decisions about if and where and when to wear it open that today present the biggest challenge, along with the potential infractions to modesty posed by changing trends for colour, pattern, and embellishment. Despite the risk of punishment, women then and now have adapted modest dressing regulations, evaluating scope for the expression of personal aesthetic preference in particular situations as they navigate macro-national and micro-familial sumptuary regulation.

### **3.4 The retail context**

The commercial abaya market in Saudi Arabia today is vibrant, segmented, and provides rapid responses to an increasingly fast trend cycle that interprets global apparel trends for regional and local taste. Except for the super-rich, many middle-class Saudi women might buy 3 or 4 abayas a year, perhaps shopping every three or four months or as dictated by family weddings and associated events. Wedding events are major part of social life, and provide a push for garment acquisition at the higher end. Other key seasonal points are determined by the lunar calendar of Muslim festivals, with the holy month of Ramadan an important seasonal fixture. Many women will buy new clothes for Ramadan, and for the culminating festival of Eid al-Fitr (festival of breaking the fast after Ramadan); with high demand for shopping opportunities on Ramadan evenings.

Most women differentiate abayas in relation to purpose with corresponding variation in price. In general, Saudi women operate with three main categories.

Our price guide is for mid-range products in each category: prices could be double for more expensive locations (Jeddah often higher priced than Riyadh for example); for products from higher quality established brands; or/and from high profile celebrity designers and brands.<sup>65</sup> Style and price also overlaps at each end of classification boundaries.

- “Evening” abayas for weddings and major events are usually women’s least worn investment pieces, with prices ranging from 1,000-6,000 SAR (£210-£1,260) and above depending on the level of embellishment and customisation.<sup>66</sup>
- Mid-range frequently worn abayas for work and leisure cost between 300-1,000 SAR (£63- £210) This category can be subdivided into abayas for different purposes and locations (below), relating to women’s varied work opportunities and the increased opportunities to socialise beyond the family and outside the home. In contrast to socialising at home when the abaya is removed on arrival, women now retain their abaya in the cafes and restaurants that make-up a newly available social life. Malls and stand-alone hospitality locations provide opportunities to see and be seen in fashionable abaya ensembles.
  - Abayas for work could go up 300-400 SAR (£63-£84), for meetings and client-facing interactions. This sub-category could also include abayas purchased to wear for professional and client-facing engagements in other GCC and regional locations , including by women who do not wear an abaya outside the region but who do want to signal national and regional status locally.
  - Abayas for daytime and low-key evening leisure outings to cafes, up to 500 SAR (£105).
  - Abayas for leisure and dining activities in the fanciest malls and restaurants, up to 1,000 SAR (the lower end of the luxury evening abaya category).
- “Daily” or “everyday” abayas, the cheapest category at 100-250 SAR (£20-£53), thrown on over house-clothes for a dash to the store. These garments – the “black sad abayas” as one husband called them – may also be worn to bazaars in conservative areas to avoid social censure and/or bargain for better prices.



◀ Sofia in an everyday abaya that is suitable also to be worn to work.  
*Image: Courtesy of research participant*

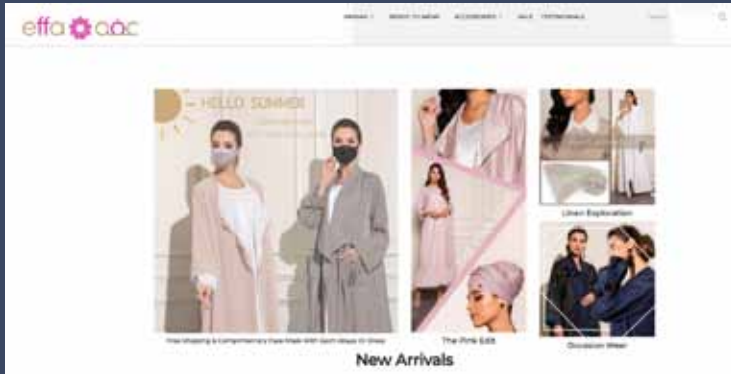
- The everyday abaya can upgrade to a better quality garment that mixes utility features and durability with sufficient quality to edge it up into workwear. This type of abaya fulfils a similar function to office casual, considered not suitable for client-facing work.

Retail spaces are differentiated by price and function. Abayas can be purchased cheaply at open-air markets. Specialist abaya malls may be “open” malls like the Taibah Souk in Riyadh where individual abaya stores line uncovered pedestrianised streets, or higher end enclosed malls with air conditioning, cafés, and restaurants, such as Royal Mall in Riyadh or the Ana Ghair Mall in Jeddah. Single brand designer abaya boutiques can be found in strip malls and in villa showrooms in Riyadh and Jeddah, though opening hours can be inconsistent. Multi-brand abaya boutiques or concept stores such as Jeddah’s Homegrown Market showcase local designers and provide hang out spaces for fashionable rich young clients. In non-specialist malls, less expensive abaya stores may be clustered together while higher end brands have their own stand-alone flagship stores and some mall presence, including pop-ups at cultural festivals.

As well as spaces for women to socialise, malls provide opportunities for female employment. The current push for women's economic participation sponsored by MBS' Vision 2030 builds on measures supporting women's work by the previous ruler, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud (reigned 2005-15). Today, in retail it is not uncommon to find women working front of house. Though many shop staff may be migrants, increasing numbers of Saudi nationals work in retail as may be deduced from the numbers wearing a niqab. Observers should not presume that these women are necessarily pious or conservative. Rather, the niqab is deployed as a form of disguise, so that women can remain unrecognisable (in reality or by convention) and so avoid the personal or family shaming that can still be associated with public service sector labour.

International observers may never see the clothes underneath a closed abaya and so may categorise abayas as akin to dresses; but it is more appropriate to consider abayas as similar in function to coats. Just as a woman working in the UK might rotate one or two jackets with other workwear separates, so too does the abaya sit above other clothing on the body and is regarded as outerwear. An outside observer should not imagine that the recent trend for open abayas means that they are worn only and always open; Saudi women are accomplished abaya wearers and will hold the garment closed across their body with the opposite arm, anchored underneath a clutch bag, or with the strap of a well-placed cross-body handbag. Like the moveable modesty of the sari pallu, the abaya can be temporarily more or less covering.

Nonetheless, the shift to open abayas and even more the change to non-abaya modest dressing puts an enormous burden on what Saudi women wear in public. Previously garments under the abaya would be seen only by other women or close family members. Now, with the open abaya women's entire ensemble is on show to passers-by and to colleagues, requiring a re-appraisal of clothing for work and leisure.



For clients who “want to leave it open, but not have to worry about matching their outfit or what they're wearing underneath”, Effa al Dabbagh has recently diversified into dresses to match her abayas (inventory and custom-made). During the COVID-19 pandemic, she also began to provide complimentary matching face masks.

▲ Image: [www.ffa.ae](http://www.ffa.ae)



Dubai-based abaya brand CHI-KA, who have a significant Saudi clientele for their kimono fusion fashion designs, also felt compelled “to listen to the market [and start] producing our own pieces for under abaya wear”. Founders Nemanja Valjarevic and (designer) Nina Valjarevic plan to augment their initial line of “fine silk dresses from Japanese silks” with “more practical, easy to wear items, loose, comfortable, long, flowy silhouettes”.

▲ Image: [www.chikacollection.com](http://www.chikacollection.com)

Within Saudi Arabia women are also seeking separates for open abaya outfits for work and leisure. All these new consumer needs may provide an entry point for global brands and opportunities for Saudi and regional brands (with Turkey as a non-GCC field pioneer) to expand the existing "travel" category.

### **3.5 Travel collections: new opportunities for Saudi and global brands**

Recently emerged as a new market segment in GCC countries, travel has become an important component for modest fashion and abaya brands. As a category, travel can include clothing to provide modesty outside Saudi Arabia for women who do not wish to wear an abaya, and it can include garments sold at home to be worn abroad or in private. Many Saudi and GCC designers and brands code an array of products as "travel", from cropped trousers to fitted jackets, leaving consumers to decide if they can wear them within the region. In the abaya sector, the mid-calf abaya (sometimes in a heavier fabric) as a stand-alone item or as coordinates with dress, trousers, and jacket is a key development that could take off as a transitional solution for the move into new forms of modest fashion within the Kingdom.

Anticipation that the abaya and traditional menswear would phase out was integral to the business plan of Saudi brand Lomar. Established by husband and wife team Loai Naseem and Mona Al Haddad in Jeddah in 2005 with affordable luxury in menswear thobes and other traditional garments, the company incorporated womenswear in 2014.



◀ *Lomar flagship store, Jeddah, November 2019, showing travel abaya pictured on wall.*  
**Image: Reina Lewis 2019**

"We decided that abaya, it will not remain for the coming ten years, it will dissolve, it will disappear, let's focus on the abaya in the first ten years and then we go to modest fashion. [The abaya] it's not a religious thing, it's a cultural thing. And we know that like we changed the thobe from classic thobe to design and fashion thobes, [womenswear] will be the same...we will establish the abaya and then it will be more into fashion, but conservative." (Loai)

Lomar's abayas cover all categories, giving special design consideration to "comfort" for women whose gender-mixed workplace means they have to keep their abaya on all day; "not too heavy, not too tight ...Practical. Easy, pockets, easy to move, breathable". As well as abayas designed with strategically placed zips to facilitate exercise and driving, the coat-style abaya for travel is a key part of their segue into lifestyle (along with shoes, bags, childrenswear). The travel abaya, as with the rest of their range, can be worn at home or abroad; a gradual switch into modest fashion delivered through an adaptive mix of global and Saudi garment types. Like others, Lomar predicts a slow pace for the shift out of abayas:

"It will take time, because how fast the [social] change is happening now, even we are, as Saudis, we didn't realise this. We couldn't believe what we're seeing now. So it takes, maybe it's from two to three years, yes. And then it will be normal, everybody will be educated and they will know where and how to wear." (Loai)



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◀ Shop assistant in Dior cosmetics/perfume wearing corporate abaya designed by Lomar.

**Image: Reina Lewis 2019**

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Global companies rarely commission executive abayas for female team members, but corporate workwear is required for front of house roles in fashion and lifestyle. Lomar have designed branded abayas for luxury cosmetics and perfume retail, and vehicle exhibitions and salesrooms. For individual women, the two founders and their shop staff advise on abayas for business, everyday and social wear, providing fine tuning on “the cultural” nuance:

“We know what not to wear and what to wear in each occasion. And when is it, day or night, or morning, is it a prince, are you going officially invited or not officially, you know.” (Loai)



As companies navigate the unpredictable transition into new modesty modes, communicating fashion-forward brand values without offending conservative gatekeepers will be delicate. It may prove fruitful to pivot to travel style clothing. This will require accessing fashion mediation expertise on variations in local modesty requirements within the Kingdom and the region.

Travel clothing may travel to consumers outside the region just as high concept abaya designers welcome the possibility of external markets. Some abaya styles, especially in lighter fabrics, suitable to be worn open, can be imagined as resort wear. This is a limited market for the northern hemisphere climate, though this type of product could transpose to continental Europe or North America with their longer drier summers, and Australia. Around the world, the growing – pre-pandemic – market for “festival fashion” also provides an opportunity. Travel collections generally consist of garment types more easily incorporated into everyday wear outside the region (especially when the abaya-type garment is mid-calf in length). In both categories, design that appeals to a globalised aesthetic will require fabrication suitable for diverse climates and non-air-conditioned contexts (creating also opportunities for smart fabrics with temperature control).

Existing strengths in fusion fashion in abaya design and travel collections may be key to international market penetration. This may also stimulate consumption from women visiting the region for whom abaya shopping has been a popular leisure activity (often one of the few available). Aesthetic immersion helps women recognise quality and innovation. So too, as fashion stylist Yvette remarks, does the opportunity to see and wear the abaya in a context where it functions as designed:

“The abaya to me was really just, it was a coat, it was just a beautiful garment and when I’m wandering round east London I don’t see abayas like that; I just see a woman with an abaya and then a parka on top and it looks ugly... and then you go to Saudi and they look beautiful. So again, that makes an aesthetic difference, it makes the social class different. So there’s a lot of layers in all of that.” (Yvette)

For women who travelled frequently, abaya consumption continued a pattern of acquiring – or being gifted – local fabrics and clothing when working abroad, especially in countries with rich textile traditions. However – as with touristic shopping – items could not always be utilised on return for practical

reasons or/and because of concerns about cultural appropriation: “I do like sparkle, I do like bling, and so I’d be, oh my goodness, and then think, ‘[Audrey], get a grip, you’ll never wear that at home, you know, don’t be ridiculous, don’t go out and buy an abaya with this beautiful diamanté stuff on it.”

Relaxation of Saudi modest dress requirements means that women may be able to wear adapted versions of their existing travel wardrobe, especially styles suitable for other Muslim majority locations. Brands and fashion advisers could incorporate into travel capsules items that would meet the additional considerations required for Saudi, mindful that these items will need to provide flexibility for a changing and unpredictable situation.

In the Saudi context, this could provide an opportunity for market stimulation. Even women like Anna who reported that the abaya made it easier to dress for work missed her fashion fix:

“I have my own style and way of expressing myself which I don’t do when I’m wearing my abaya. [If] I’m not coming to Saudi and I have to go to the office in Dubai, I get really excited to put on like a skirt or a suit and I do my make-up a little bit more.” (Anna)

#### **4. Industry skills and reputational risk**

Brands who enter the modest fashion market find they must be alert to variability within and between modest dressing constituencies and the sensitivities of their more secular customer base. In product design and communications the risks are high of receiving criticism from modest dressers that garments or ads are insufficiently modest while consumers not targeted as modest dressers may feel that treasured brands are now implicitly shaming them: “Modest implies horrible things about women who don’t dress that way.”<sup>67</sup>

##### **4.1 Over-valuing transgression in the fashion industry and education**

Avoiding offence is tricky for a fashion industry that venerates the shock of the new and regards causing offence as a marker of successful innovation. The embrace of iconoclasm as a sign of creativity reveals the extent to which

the fashion industry regards itself as secular; able to disregard religious sensibilities whilst plundering religious or spiritual traditions as sources of “inspiration”. As with criticisms of the cultural appropriation of ethnic and racial heritage, the perceived availability of diverse cultures for the fashion lookbook emphasise the relative lack of diversity among fashion personnel. A Muslim staffer could have alerted Karl Lagerfeld in 1994 to the pitfalls of printing verses of the Quran on a Chanel couture ball gown,<sup>68</sup> just as Sikhs might have warned Gucci about riffing on religious turbans on the catwalk in Fall 2018. That not all Sikhs were offended<sup>69</sup> demonstrates the urgency for fashion brands to have a diverse workforce and to skill up in religious and secular literacy in order to avoid reputational damage whilst retaining ingenuity.

Fashion brands are increasingly appointing diversity experts – sometimes, as with Prada, under court order. Global campaigns that Black Lives Matter are to some extent galvanising fashion brands, media, and educators to respond more effectively to longstanding internal demands for diversity and representation. Approaches to diversity and inclusion could include familiarisation with religious and secular sensitivities.

For religious diversity as for diversity of race, ethnicity, age, or disability, the fashion industry and fashion education are learning how to have difficult conversations. Yet paradoxically for a sector that thrives on transgression many find it difficult to get beyond the “cultural cringe” of fearing to cause offence to religious sensibilities. This hinders teaching, learning, and creativity and it hinders industry profit. There are number of areas where increased confidence in understanding diversity in religious and cultural life would be an advantage.

## **4.2 Learning to see religiously-related dress as part of fashion**

Outside the zone of religion, fashion professionals are routinely expected to be able rapidly to familiarise themselves with new styles and garment types. Journalists accustomed to rating fine distinctions in high-heeled shoes have upskilled in the nuance of sneakers without seeing it as “outside” fashion. For journalists to pivot their style dexterity to the field of religiously-related fashion means overcoming the presumption that fashion is nothing to do with religion **and** learning to detect the components of religiously-motivated clothing that are fashionable or innovative.

Developing capacity to make judgements about fashion and religion is especially important because the answers cannot be found in codes or religious rulings, despite that some religious authorities will claim otherwise.

In other sectors certification schemes are relatively uncontested (kosher and halal food, sharia-compliant finance); but “no agency can implement a globally accepted standard for the modest fashion sector”.<sup>70</sup> The fashion industry will continue to have to make nuanced judgements that can navigate diversity of opinion within religious communities and without.

### **4.3 Learning about your own and other people’s religion**

Motivation to cultivate expertise on the intersection of religious cultures and fashion cultures is not solely a property of those whose own background or beliefs give them a “vested interest”. Individuals prompted by social, intellectual, aesthetic, and political interests also want to learn about the modest fashion market. There is a business case for doing so; but this is not the whole story. In fashion education students not from modesty backgrounds gain familiarity with modest fashion design and media to enhance intercultural communication. Modest dressers likewise develop critical awareness that individual experience is not representative of an entire religion or community. Within the fashion industry, designers and creative entrepreneurs, branding professionals, and retailers may embrace religious diversity as core brand and company values for business reasons, motivated by personal experience, family connections, or social activism.

The picture is not all rosy; some religiously-motivated individuals do not want to engage with other faiths, or find their engagement is constrained by macro-political events (be it tension between Hindu nationalists and Muslims in India and its diasporas, or violence between Israelis and Palestinians). Some cross-faith and faith-secular dynamics are easier to broker than others and the industry may need dialogue skills pioneered in interfaith and intercultural trust building.

### **4.4 Developing and recruiting new types of fashion talent**

Recruiting more staff from diverse ethnic and religious belief backgrounds is key to building organisational competencies with religious fashion cultures. So too is developing teams who can be confidently responsive to religious and secular cultures that are not their own. Experiential modest fashion intel repositioned as a career asset can contribute to reducing structural inequality, though individuals cannot be presumed to have religious cultural knowledge simply because of their biography. As with other areas of diversity and inclusion, navigating divergence of community opinion is the hardest factor for all concerned whether or not they are “from” the religious culture under discussion.

Rather than shy away from religion, fashion brands, organisations, and employers could incorporate the intersection of religion and fashion into their existing risk categories of known unknowns for product success, reputation management, and staff (and, for educators, student) satisfaction. This may maximise market opportunity and help develop agility to respond to previously unattended components of religious or philosophical belief (as seen in recent UK extension of legal protection to ethical veganism).<sup>71</sup> Employers could cultivate an approach towards legal developments which recognises that:

“...the scope of judgements is a very fluid area, it's changing over time [and] they need to be really on top of how things are going to develop, rather than how things necessarily are right now.”  
(Alan Beazley, Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion)

An existing talent pool of individuals with skills in intercultural fashion dialogue can provide valuable exemplars. For example, western non-Muslim industry professionals like Fiona have years of experience navigating GCC and regional markets, managing a multi-national team of multiple religions. In a context where “we’re all economic migrants”, she now finds “when I go back to England I feel very constrained, it’s very mono in its conception of the world...a very western outlook”. Distinctive transnational perspectives underwrite the expertise of “third culture kids” like Saudi Marriam Mossalli, whose childhood and education across Asia, Europe, and the USA underwrites an approach to the luxury sector which incorporate and goes beyond established fashion capitals. Designers like Rabia Zargarpur, galvanised into modest fashion design by experiences of being a religious minority in the USA after 9/11, show how diaspora experiences bring fresh perspectives to marketing and thought leadership.

#### 4.5 The commodification or celebration of religious fashion cultures: risks and benefits



▲ Halima Aden on catwalk launching her designer hijab collaboration line at Modanisa Istanbul Modest Fashion Week, April 2019.

*Image: Reina Lewis 2019*

For religious cultures not usually wooed by the fashion industry, being “seen” can both positive and negative. Promotions for Ramadan or Hanukah may be welcome inclusion to some and/or worrying commodification of community life for others. There is nonetheless a huge appetite among under-represented groups to be included: early examples of Ramadan marketing went viral on Muslim modest social media as also the debuts and ongoing careers of hijabi models such as Maria Idrissi and Halima Aden. Just as women of colour hone in on the still few black fashion models, seeing a (real) hijabi on the catwalk or magazine cover is a “celebratory moment” for Muslim fashionistas. Others worry that the normalisation of hijab by fashion media inclusion may act as a pressure for women and girls who do not choose to cover.

While signs of religious diversity remain a rarity in fashion this tension will continue. Fashion professionals as well as policy makers may find it helpful to recognise the variations in how women respond to apparently prevailing religious codes. Creating an industry workplace culture in which people feel able to identify in terms of religious cultural heritage without being presumed to be conservative or orthodox in practice will assist.

Religion and belief as a protected characteristic under UK and EU equality law is generally under-represented within company diversity work, whether recruitment, HR, staff networks, or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) campaigns. Modest fashion intelligence provides opportunities to redress this; brand messaging that signals alertness to religious diversity as component of human experience might assist with recruitment; so too CSR initiatives that incorporate religious cultures. Retention and progression may improve if the institutional culture fosters expression of all components of religion and belief including dress, bringing the whole self to work.

With fashion exhibits increasingly popular with publics around the world, modest fashion displays provide museums with an income stream and attract new audience. The potential of modest fashion for nation branding and national economic development is utilised in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Australia, with Saudi Arabia keen to grow its own fashion industry. Those seeking to benefit from modest fashion diplomacy in the cultural sector and economy will require skills for careful stewardship at a time when debates about cultural and racial appropriation in fashion have never been more fraught.

With designers and brands called out for insensitivity and intellectual theft, awareness of instances where women wear modest attire as a workplace requirement rather than for reasons of personal religious adherence can shift the dial. Alertness to different attitudes to cultural ownership may help brands navigate sensitivities about appropriation.

Saudi women and men often express positive responses to international women wearing “their” garment, the abaya. Some international women take pleasure in developing an eye for innovative design and quality embellishment. Though, as above, women visiting Saudi Arabia as elsewhere on their professional travels are often alert that clothes which seem appropriate in situ, can look like touristic appropriation when worn back home in the UK.

If some Saudis code the abaya as cultural rather than religious, others want to claim the garment as part of their devotional practice. For Asma, who dresses modestly when she travels, cultural respect within Saudi Arabia shouldn't be compelled just as she wouldn't want to be compelled to remove her headscarf when visiting the UK:

"... as a veiled woman, I would hate someone to ask me to unveil or wear a certain thing just to adapt to that rule, I respect that, but I will never go to a country that will force me to wear a certain thing. Which is why I feel uncomfortable about the laws in the past. And now, I'm really happy that people don't have to wear things that they are not comfortable [with]. Although I'm a very conservative woman, but still, I believe in freedom of choice. [Regulation] defeats the purpose." (Asma)



# Recommendations

Fashion brands, media and educators should conceptualise in the widest possible way the potential interactions between fashion and religion and belief.

## **1. Brands should move beyond the current fixation on the Muslim modest market:**

- Market research is needed on the religiously related fashion needs of women (and to some extent men) from other religious cultures that have been so far under-researched (for example, Sikhism or Buddhism).

## **2. Managers and brands should not presume that religious women are always or ever involved in modest dressing:**

- Remember that many women who see themselves as immersed within religious communities do not necessarily dress with modesty in mind.

## **3. The fashion industry should understand religion and belief to include philosophical belief as well as institutional religious denominations to maximise market opportunity:**

- The development of legal cases indicates that workplace disputes may increasingly come to focus less on religious practice and more on religious, spiritual, and philosophical belief, such as the recent protection extended to ethical veganism as a belief.
- Brands should anticipate and be ready to cater to new market needs (such as demand for non-leather, non-animal uniforms for schools, airlines, the armed forces etc.).
- Belief impacts on what goes in as well as on the body, creating opportunities for skincare or make-up ingredients that meet religious and philosophical dietary requirements (from veganism to kosher or halal cosmetics).

#### **4. Marketing campaigns should expand to include multiple religious calendars:**

- Consumers from minority religions around the world appreciate being “hailed” whilst also feeling cautious about the commodification of community practices. Brands should build on seasonal festival communications campaigns by making diverse religious cultures visible (even in small ways) across the year. In the post-pandemic context, this could meld well with existing moves to seasonless catwalks and reduced collections.

#### **5. Religion and belief diversity should be included in advertising campaigns and brand visual communications:**

- Religion and belief should be included alongside race and ethnicity in brand, media, and education, efforts to respond to consumer and public demand for more visible diversity and inclusion in brand messaging.

#### **6. Fashion professionals should learn the “language” of modesty:**

- Women use a variety of terms to describe clothing which connects to their moral values – whether or not they are modest dressers. Retailers can expect the diffuse language associated with modesty to be part of women’s purchasing decisions and online search terms. Brand communication could attend to synonyms and antonyms for modesty to maximise search engine optimisation and to avoid offending consumers who do not want to be associated with the shaming inferences of immodesty.
- Brands, media, and educators should develop a lexicon of terms for describing the vast variety of religious cultures and how they interact with fashion cultures. This can help communication be more accurate and help avoid stereotyping and generalisations. Cultivate language that infers plurality of experience and interpretation; consider referring to “religious cultures” rather than singular religious institutions.

#### **7. Religiously-related fashion and “ethnic” fashion should be accepted as suitable business wear:**

- Fashion professionals, fashion educators, businesses, and HR

professionals should view ethnic and modest clothing as part of the multiple fashion systems of a globalised industry.

- HR and managers should develop recruitment protocols and staff training to ensure that candidates are not penalised for appearing in ways unconventional to accepted sector “norms” of business wear. This includes, hair, make-up, and clothing.

#### **8. Women should be compensated for the effort required in accommodating workplace modesty requirements:**

- Employers should recognise and recompense the additional time that women have to put in to achieve the modest appearance required at work. Companies and organisations could fund the associated costs (from buying an abaya or equivalent for work in Saudi Arabia to purchasing looser t-shirts or longer jackets for the UK workplace).
- For all genders, developing practicable and aesthetic familiarity with relevant forms of modest dress can help challenge stereotypes about different religions and cultures.
- Organisations should also recognise and validate as a form of professional service the modest fashion guidance (including guidance on behaviour) developed and shared by individuals. This type of intelligence should be regarded as a workplace asset, the cultivation and transmission of which should be taken into account for career progression. This will also help organisations uplift those whose religious or ethnic heritage is drawn on for organisational inclusion strategies (whether religious people offering modest fashion advice or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic / BAME staff serving on recruitment panels).

#### **9. The globalised fashion industry should proactively recruit talent with religious cultural knowledge.**

- This could be incorporated into widening participation Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI, D&I) strategies and will help brands, media, and educators adapt intelligently to demands for diversity and inclusion whilst reaching under-served markets.

- Staff recruited with a view to inclusion and diversity should not be restricted to a diversity brief lest this impede equal access to career progression. Do not presume that religiously-committed designers want to work on modest fashion collections, just as marketers who are from BAME backgrounds will not necessarily want to work on campaigns about ethnic diversity.
- Brands and organisations should recognise that non-adherents can skill up on modest aesthetics and sensibilities.
- Religion and belief literacy should be incorporated into business plans to increase and monitor diversity. Fashion industry and education should regard acquiring literacy in religiously related fashion trends as a valued component of the fashion professional's skillset.

## **10. Fashion brands should mainstream modesty as part of their offer:**

- There is a strong business case for fashion brands to mainstream modest wear as an apparel category; the market extends beyond religious affiliates to include “older” and secular women who also want more options of clothes that cover their bodies.
- Designers and brands should not regard modesty as restricted to any particular aesthetic or garment type: women who dress modestly for work, as also for personal preference, display the same range of style choice and body shape as the rest of the female population.
- Incorporating modes of cover into all sectors of brand offer – from swimwear to party wear – would allow brands to build loyalty from diverse groups of consumers.
- Workwear ranges should be enhanced to provide more modesty options.
- Brands should, however, be mindful in their marketing and messaging not to trigger imputation of shame to consumers who do not wish to dress modestly.

## **11. Global and Saudi fashion brands should cultivate new sectors as Saudi Arabia transitions into different forms of modest dress for women:**

- The transition period should be regarded as one of risk and opportunity since guidance and interpretation may change rapidly.
- Global and Saudi brands should cater for new garment needs generated by the established trend for open abayas (specifically garments which can be seen in mixed gender publics without transgressing state or personal boundaries of modesty). This existing trend among Saudi women will likely continue as a key proposition during the transition into new forms of modest presentation. Brands should be alert to the diverse interpretations of modesty among Saudi women (including attention to colours or forms of embellishment that might be seen as drawing too much attention, etc.).
- Brands should cater to all price points for work and leisure.
- Saudi brands could enhance and expand their existing travel ranges to offer more options for in-country use by Saudi and international women.
- Saudi brands should develop travel lines for export which will appeal in global markets to non-Saudis, developing garment ranges suitable for wearing in different climates and without air conditioning and allowing for public transport (perhaps utilising natural fibres, or/and on breathable fabric tech). Modest fashion wearers around the world will appreciate many of the aesthetics offered by Saudi brands, if the garment design and fabrication is suitable for their environment for work and leisure. Women not dressing with modesty in mind will too if the garment choices are compatible with their existing wardrobe aesthetic.

## **12. Fashion education at all levels and in all sectors should proactively recruit staff with religious cultural knowledge as and as part of a widening participation EDI, D&I strategy:**

- Fashion education will benefit from increasing the diversity of religious and secular backgrounds represented among their staffing. This applies equally to all employment families, including academic, technical, knowledge exchange, professional, support, and administrative staff.

- Increased experiential knowledge of diverse religious cultures will help institutions to move away from a default Christian (in the UK, Protestant) workplace culture, and so will help educational organisations develop meaningful attentiveness to the place of religion and belief in the lives of staff and students.
- Educational organisations should recognise the overlap and distinctions between experience and expertise; it may be that non-affiliates have developed expertise on religion and belief (as per race and ethnicity) that could prove essential to the crafting of effective communications messaging, for example.

### **13. Fashion educators should foster a learning and teaching environment that welcomes all forms of religion and belief:**

- Educators should develop religious and secular literacies so that they are confident in catering to all forms of religious culture rather than simply deferring to the most conservative or orthodox interpretations and practices. Programmes and facilities should accommodate the needs of students from conservative religious backgrounds and those of students who are committed to religious cultural heritage but not necessarily orthodox.
- Diversity of religion and belief should be incorporated into educational responses to decolonising the curriculum, and responses to the Black Lives Matter movement. Attending to modest and other forms of religiously related fashion can provide a powerful lens for discussions about class content and institutional behaviour.
- In the necessary move to include multiple fashion systems and media into fashion education and professional training, religiously related fashion and its impact on non-adherents (as in our study of workplace modesty codes) opens doors to decentering western or white or majoritarian presumptions about what counts as fashion.

# Methodology

This interdisciplinary project cuts across fashion studies, religious studies and sociology of gender and work. We combined qualitative methods from humanities and social sciences, and used a mixed-method approach including: 65 semi-structured interviews, eliciting images from interviewees of their outfits (sometimes with accompanying commentary), site observation and shopper ethnography, garment analysis, and secondary background research.

For each set of interviews we recruited our research participants using a mixture of snowball sampling based on referrals and the targeted circulation of “calls for research participants” to a broad range of groups and networks from the project investigators’ contacts in faith-based, interfaith, and secular women’s networks, HR and employment, and fashion sectors.

The generous help of the project’s Advisory Group and Impact Partners (see acknowledgements) were indispensable to data gathering, analysis, and dissemination.

We conducted interviews in the UK, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia. Most interviews were face-to-face, some via Skype and phone. The interviews were conducted according to the ethics guidelines and procedures at University of the Arts London and Coventry University, who granted ethical approval. Participants and their organisations were anonymised. The semi-structured interviews asked a similar set of questions of each category of participants. Recordings were transcribed and thematically coded and analysed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package.

To visually record how women were “doing” modest fashion we asked participants to create images of their outfits for work and for home/leisure, either displaying garments on hangers or laid on flat surfaces or taking a selfie (with identity obscured by shooting from below the chin or by image pixilation). This data was instrumental in our garment analysis of fabric, cut, design and fit. We used shopper ethnography in Saudi Arabia and Dubai, and site observation at modest fashion fairs in Istanbul to view commercial showcases and community- and network-building opportunities.

We exceeded our target number of 45 research participants, interviewing 65 people. For the UK case study, we sought to interview women working in faith-based organisations from a broader range of religious denominations – Sikh, Hindu, Baha’i, Buddhist, Pagan and others. Those who came forward work at or with Muslim, Christian and Jewish organisations or they freelance for local councils with interfaith projects. The findings are not intended to offer a fully representative picture of modest fashion codes of dress and behaviour in the working lives of UK women. Rather, they reveal key issues about women’s religious dress in the workplace, highlighting the challenges and opportunities it presents.



<b>COMPLETED INTERVIEWS</b>	Research participants
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<b>Abaya wearers</b>	
<b>Occupational sector:</b>	
Fashion and lifestyle	3
International education	6
International healthcare	2
Art, culture and leisure	5
Professional services	2
Politics/diplomacy	3
<b>Total:</b>	<b>21</b>

<b>FBO employees</b>	
<b>Religious affiliation of organisations:</b>	
Christian (1 faith school, 3 charities, 3 churches/church-affiliated organisations)	7
Muslim (1 faith school, 7 charities)	8
Jewish (4 synagogues/synagogue-affiliated organisations, 1 charity)	5
Secular (local councils working with FBOs)	2
<b>Total:</b>	<b>22</b>

<b>HR professionals and fashion professionals/mediators</b>	
<b>Professional capacity:</b>	
Fashion professional/designers	11
Fashion mediators	8
HR professionals (from sectors in international education and professional services)	3
<b>Total:</b>	<b>22</b>

<b>Total no. people interviewed:</b>	<b>65</b>
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## Interview participants who travelled for work to Saudi Arabia

The participants who spoke to us about their experiences when travelling for work in Saudi Arabia include the following women:

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnic background	Religious background and current practice/belief	Organisation/capacity	Location	Sector
Amal	34	Egyptian-British	Muslim. Now practising Muslim	Senior consultant – healthcare consulting	Wales	Intl. healthcare
Anna	28	Asian – Korean-American	Christian. Now not practising	Senior consultant – healthcare consulting company	Saudi Arabia	Intl. healthcare
Audrey	58	White British (Scottish)	Church of Scotland. Now Baptist	Senior lecturer – UK university	Scotland	Intl. education
Barbara	57	White British	Roman Catholic	Middle East relationship partner – international professional services firm	London	Prof. services
Blair	29	White – Other (US)	Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Now atheist	Cultural sector manager	London	Intl. educ./culture
Carol	39	White British	Christian/Baptist	Curator	London	Intl. arts
Caroline	77	White British	Christian/Anglican. Interest in spirituality	Freelance journalist	London	Media policy
Dina	28	Moroccan/French	Muslim. Practising Muslim now	Senior regional marketing executive – European global luxury fashion and lifestyle brand	Dubai	Fashion industry
Felicity	64	White British	Catholic. Now spiritual / Buddhist	Consultant – British-based international further education consortium	London	Intl. education
Fiona	56	White British	Agnostic. Non-religious	Senior leadership role – large multi-brand retail business, including fashion, across the Middle East	GCC	Multi-brand retail business

Helen	61	White British	Jewish	Schools inspector	London	Intl. education
Jo	65	White British	Christian Methodist. Christian ethos now	Consultant – sports for development education-based charity	Northwest England	Intl. sports education
Linda	61	White British	Catholic. Now not religious	Chair at learning governing body	London	Intl. education
Lisa	23	White – Other (European)	Catholic. Now not religious	Political advisor – European country embassy	Saudi Arabia	Politics/ diplomacy
Lorraine	44	White – Other (US)	US Catholic. Now atheist	Lecturer – Saudi women's university	Saudi Arabia	Intl. education
Lou	68	White British	Roman Catholic. Practising Catholic	Consultant – major education publisher	London	Intl. education
Lyn	49	White – Other (US)	Christian/southern Baptist. Now Christian Anglican	Crisis management group leader – international professional service firm	London	Prof. services
Mattie	24	White British	Agnostic – culturally Christian. Now atheist (celebrates Xmas & Easter)	Researcher and content developer – UK-based arts consultancy	London	Art. Mgmt./ cultural consultancy
Olivia	29	White British	Non-religious. Now not religious	Editor – English language international arts and culture publication	London	Intl. art. journalism
Sue	54	White British	Catholic. Now secular but alert to spirituality/moral values	Executive role – international relationships – major British cultural institution	London	Art. Mgmt./ cultural consultancy
Yvette	did not say	White – Other (Canadian)	Humanist multicultural	Fashion stylist	London	Fashion industry

## Interview respondents who work for faith-based organisations in the UK

The participants who spoke to us about their experiences working for faith-based organisations in the UK include the following women:

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnic background	Religious background and current practice/ belief	Organisation/capacity	Location
Abigail	27	White – Other (European)	Catholic. Catholic now	Research and policy – Christian organisation	London
Brenda	45	White British	Jewish (Orthodox). Jewish Orthodox now	Office manager – Jewish organisation	London
Charlotte	28	White British	Jewish (Reform) but one parent Christian	Special projects – Jewish organisation	London
Danielle	32	White British	Non-religious (one parent Catholic). Atheist now	HR – Muslim organisation	Northwest England
Davina	33	White British (Scottish)	Christian missionary background. Christian now (less conservative)	Research and development – two Christian organisations	Northwest England
Hala	45	Asian British (Indian)	Muslim – moderate	Artist and community worker (interfaith work)	London
Joanne	27	White British	Christian Anglican. Christian Anglican now	Development officer and manager – Christian organisation	Northwest England
Julia	36	White British	Christian Salvation Army. Christian Salvation Army now	Salvation army minister – Christian organisation	Scotland
Lamya	33	Asian British (Pakistani)	Muslim. Muslim now	Volunteer – Muslim organisation	Midlands
Melanie	40	White British	Christian. Atheist now	Programme officer – Muslim organisation	Midlands
Melissa	35	White British	Christian. Agnostic now (interest in Christianity & Buddhism)	Teacher – Christian school	Midlands

Nikki	50	White British (mixed European)	Catholic. Non- believer now	Senior manager – Muslim organisation	London
Patricia	56	White British (Scottish)	Christian. Christian now	Research manager – Christian organisation	Northwest England
Rachel	29	White British	Jewish (secular). Now more religious	Student rabbi – Jewish organisation	London
Rebecca	66	White British	Jewish (secular). Now more religious	University lecturer and rabbi – Jewish organisation	Northern England
Safya	27	Asian British (Pakistani)	Muslim. Muslim now	Programme officer – Muslim organisation	Northwest England
Salma	27	Asian British	Culturally Muslim. Still Muslim	Teacher – Muslim school	Northwest England
Samirah	24	Asian British (Pakistani)	Muslim. Muslim – very observant now	Recruitment officer – local council (interfaith work)	London
Sophia	41	White British	Jewish (not Orthodox). Now Jewish Orthodox	Community manager – Jewish organisation	London
Yasmin	36	Asian British (Pakistani)	Strict Muslim. Muslim now – less conservative	Support services manager – Muslim organisation	Midlands
Zainab	28	Asian British (Pakistani)	Muslim. Muslim now	Project manager – Muslim organisation	London
Zoe	45	White British	Nominally Anglican. Committed Christian now	Assistant curate – Anglican church	London

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