

Modest Fashion in UK Women's Working Life

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



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ISBN 978-1-906908-65-2

To cite this report:

Kristin Aune, Reina Lewis and Lina Molokotos-Liederman (2021)
*Modest Fashion in UK Women's Working Life: A report for employers,
HR professionals, religious organisations, and policymakers,*
London: University of the Arts London and Coventry: Coventry University.

Cover image: [Zoran Zeremski/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/author/zoran-zeremski)

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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 Zargapur, 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.

To receive notifications about related publications and events please subscribe at modestfashionworkwear@arts.ac.uk or visit our web page <https://www.arts.ac.uk/research/current-research-and-projects/curation-and-culture/modest-fashion>

Executive Summary

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

Methods

65 women were interviewed. This included:

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

Findings

Modest fashion is not only a property of the religious

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

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

Interpretations of modesty differ within as well as between religions

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

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

Work contexts organised along religious lines are unique

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Saudi Arabia, where the abaya is often coded as a cultural rather than religious garment, Saudi women act as fashion mediators, providing guidance on the nuance of abaya protocols, taking women shopping. This can be a pleasurable form of cultural exchange.

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

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

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

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

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

Dress codes in religious work contexts sometimes cause contention

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

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

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

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

Recommendations

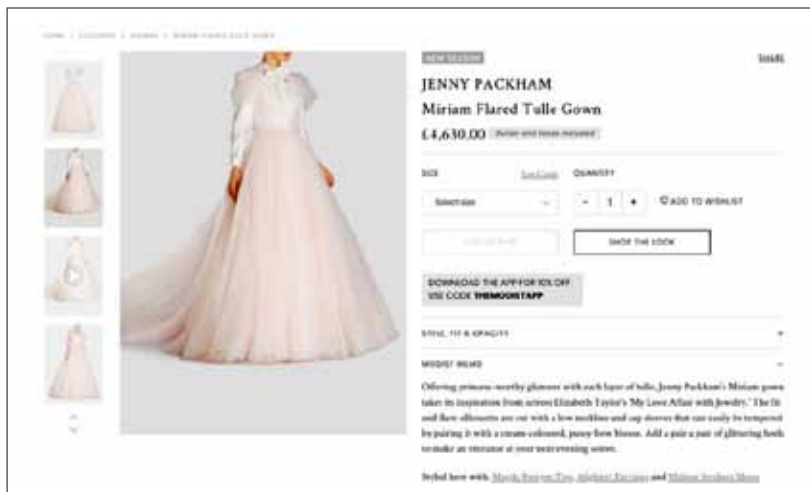
- Employers, HR and EDI and D&I professionals should enhance their knowledge about issues relating to religion and belief in the workplace in order to give fuller guidance and training
- In particular, employers should improve their knowledge of religion and dress, to ensure that their policies and practices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

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.¹

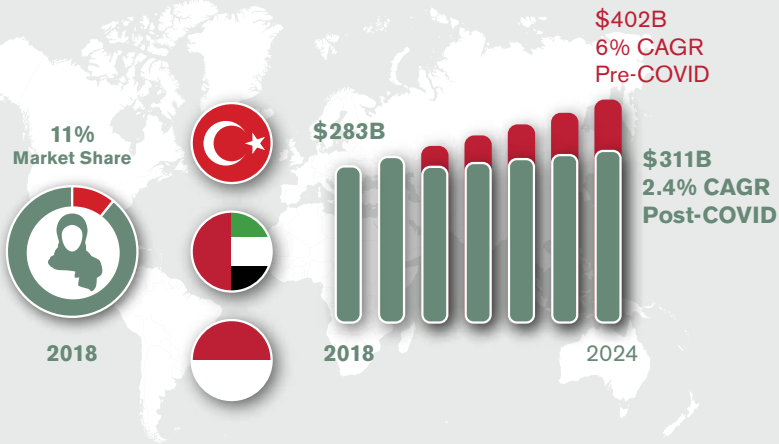


▲ *Styling modesty for consumers: online retailer the Modist (2017-2020) shows how a Jenny Packham dress can be combined with a long-sleeved blouse to provide additional cover for arms and cleavage.*

Image: www.themodist.com

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.² 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.³ 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 2024.⁴



▲ 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 labour⁵) 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".⁶

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".⁷ 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 2023.⁸

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.⁹ 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).¹⁰

Modesty and shame: judging bodies

Around the world women are judged more harshly than men about how they look.¹¹ 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.¹²

“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,¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Sometimes employer demands are explicitly gendered – as highlighted by recent activism against compulsory high heels in London and Tokyo.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Clothing, jewellery, household consumption, food, cultural practices such as music, visual and performing art, and religious objects are part of this.²¹ 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”.²²

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.²³ 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.²⁴

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,²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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,²⁷ 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).²⁸ 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 2018.²⁹ 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.³⁰



▲ *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.³¹ 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”.³² 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 backdrop 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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

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”.³⁷ European Court judgements have generally echoed, and respected, the different national contexts.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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”.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ This means that up to a third of the UK's half a million full-time teachers work in faith schools.⁴⁶ 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".⁴⁷ 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).⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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),⁵⁰ 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:

1. Work contexts organised along religious lines are unique

Workplaces organised along religious lines are unique work environments. This is true – in different and overlapping ways – both in Saudi Arabia where all workplaces are governed by state-mandated religious regulation and in the UK where only some workplaces are faith-based organisations (FBOs), though in some sectors (such as education or charity and voluntary organisations) FBOs constitute a significant employment component.

1.1 UK faith-based organisations

Shared values and ethics

FBOs are explicit about the religious basis of their values and ethics; this appeals to many who work for them, especially those who share the organisations' religious tradition. Religious values are drivers for the organisation's work. Their social and religious stances may range from conservative to progressive.

The holistic mission of FBOs tends to be embraced by employees – work is not simply a 9-5 job, but a vocation. This is most obvious for ordained religious leaders or ministers, such as Julia:

“I think probably for me, the difference between working as a minister and working in my previous professional role is I don't have the division any more between church and work... So my work is my lifestyle, a lifestyle of ministry, potentially I'm 24/7, seven days a week. ... The danger is that your faith becomes your work, because that's what you're doing.” (Julia)

FBO employees talk about being respected, enabled to make an impact that accords with personal values whilst practising their religion:

“By working there...your Christian journey has taken over from your work, because you probably could go and make more money working somewhere else, so you're probably there vocationally. I'm aware that it's treated as more than a job. And that your whole life is, they care about me as a person in a way that I didn't feel cared about in a secular, in my secular organisation experience. I feel like it's very holistic.” (Davina)



▲ *Davina's holistic experience of work as a researcher in a Christian organisation means that there are few – though perhaps still significant – distinctions between her workwear and what she wears for leisure. Note that she wears her hair tied back/up for work, and branches into a brighter, colourful T-shirt for home.*

Images: Courtesy of research participant

However, employees are also alert to the drawbacks of working at FBOs: expectations of over-work (without extra pay); professionalism and fairness being sacrificed in favour of religious interests; "private life" no longer being private; and requirements to abide by modest dress and behaviour codes. "The sense of being part of a community, the sense of vocation", said Patricia, "can be quite abused...you will give and give and give above, but actually, you're still an employee."

"My previous companies that I have worked for are more professional because they're not basing their work on religion, it's based on just purely what is fair." (Safya)

Space for religious practice and observance

The flexibility of FBO employers towards staff members who are religiously practising is very appealing and a key factor for people of faith to come and work there. Religiously-observant employees found maintaining their faith easier at an FBO than at a secular workplace where they faced obstacles such as not being allowed flexibility in their work hours or a place to pray. Despite laws requiring secular employers to consider accommodations for religious staff when reasonable, interviewees had experienced secular employers not doing this.

Religiously observant interviewees welcomed workplace religious practices and accommodations such as meetings starting with prayer, extended lunchbreaks for Friday prayer (in Muslim organisations), prayer rooms in the building and a work schedule that fits round religious holidays. This is less needed at Christian organisations, as UK working life is built around the Christian calendar, but is especially important for minority faiths.

"I automatically get Jewish festivals off work, so that's very helpful to me. When I was a teacher...it was often very difficult for me to get that time off work, and I know for other people that it can use up all of their annual leave to take the Jewish festivals off and that can be really difficult." (Charlotte)

“We have a prayer room, you can go to prayers. We have two days off for each of the Eids. There is flexible working around Ramadan, so when they’re fasting they change the timetable. So there’s certain flexibility that is granted to them for being Muslim that I think is appealing to Muslims, because if you’re working in the mainstream, you’re unlikely to be allowed to go off and pray x number of times a day.” (Nikki)

Gendered behavioural norms and expectations

FBOs’ gender and sexual norms are different from those of secular employers. This creates freedom from pressures to dress in a heterosexually sexualised way or to go out drinking alcohol with colleagues. A couple of women also reported freedom from workplace sexual harassment: Charlotte, Jewish and working at a Jewish organisation, remarked, “I’m glad that I don’t work in a context where I’m expected to look sexy”. For Danielle, an atheist at a Muslim organisation:

“One of the first differences I noticed on working here was obviously most of our colleagues don’t drink and previously I’d worked in more of a sales environment..., which is very much a culture of on Friday you finish at four and you go straight to the pub. So that’s definitely been a change for me in terms of getting to know and socialising with my colleagues. Because previously I’d done that from being drunk with them.” (Danielle)

FBOs are also distinctive workplaces when they demand different behaviour from men and women. This is sometimes welcomed by women, as in Muslim teacher Salma’s example of male school staff knocking before entering a classroom so that female staff and students who prefer not to be seen uncovered in front of men can put their head covering back on (she works in an Islamic school).

But some FBOs' gender and sexual conservatism causes problems for some women. The benefits of a workplace that facilitates religious observance is not experienced as such by women who resent being expected to adhere to an institutionally conservative stance that excludes women from effective participation. Jewish organisation employee Charlotte talked about the gendered aspects of the office's afternoon prayer:

"That's a weird thing that you don't do at non-religious organisations. It's quite funny, they have a tannoy that goes off across the whole building that says "Minchah" [afternoon prayer] and during my interview actually for the job it went off and it was very disconcerting. So it's held in one of the meeting rooms of the office and, as I said, it's pretty much exclusively men that go to this, and in theory it's meant to be that they'll put up a mechitzar [partition], like a separation for when women come, or that they'll have it up all the time. But I've found the couple of times that I've been that it's been quite awkward, them putting it up for me, that it's like been, like I've felt like a burden and inconvenience." (Charlotte)

Some non-Muslim women working in Muslim organisations disagreed with the organisations' disapproval of alcohol or of cross-gender socialising.

Employees sometimes worried about how the organisation would view their personal life choices. Melanie, an atheist working at a Muslim charity, hid the fact that she was not married for fear of colleagues' disapproval:

"The relationship of my partner I keep quite vague, because we're not married. So, when I travel overseas I always refer to [him] as my husband because I just think it would be a challenge too far for people. I'm trying to build a good relationship to get a job done and I don't want them to start off thinking, what's this crazy woman who's living in sin with her husband." (Melanie)

The clash between an employee's lifestyle and their religious employer's value system raises a key question. How far can a faith-based employer legally impose its belief system and values on its employees: as raised in the UK legal case *De Groen v Gan Menaschem Hendon Nursery* in 2017.⁵¹ A teacher at an ultra-orthodox Jewish nursery was dismissed for contravening the school's culture, ethos, and religious beliefs by cohabiting with her boyfriend. She claimed that she had been subjected to discrimination on the grounds of both sex and belief, and initially won, until the claim on the grounds of religion and belief was overturned as it was not the teacher's religious beliefs, but rather the school's, that led to the dismissal (the claim for sex discrimination was upheld). This suggests that unless employees can claim that they suffered discrimination because the employer did not allow them to express *their own* religion or belief, cases against FBOs will be unsuccessful.

1.2 Saudi Arabia

Women interviewed for this project worked for several sectors including professional services, fashion, education, healthcare, arts, culture and leisure. They travelled to Saudi Arabia briefly on business or were posted there (or in the United Arab Emirates / UAE but travelled frequently to Saudi) for a couple of months or years. For these women, the first clear difference when visiting and working in Saudi was the requirement to wear an abaya: going forward, the new relaxations into less specified modest dress will likely increase rather than resolve dilemmas about appropriate cover to wear with particular people or in particular places.

Mixed feelings about wearing an abaya

Women whose work took them to Saudi Arabia had mixed feelings about having to wear an abaya, including those who were Muslim.

Several women felt positive, reporting that the abaya was a comfortable and practical loose piece of clothing (like a coat or dressing gown). It saved time since they did not have to make too many decisions about dress and styling. Some liked the novelty and the opportunity to experiment with a new garment. Others appreciated its beautiful aesthetic, especially when the abaya was elegantly draped, styled (for example Japanese kimono style), or decorated.

Anna, who works for a multinational healthcare corporation in Dubai, found wearing an abaya for work comfortable and efficient; easy to wear over her after-work gym outfit.



▲ *Senior healthcare consultant, Anna, in her abaya delivering a presentation at work in Riyadh.*

Images: Courtesy of research participant

Jo felt more respected in Saudi Arabia when wearing an abaya and Linda appreciated being evaluated on professionalism rather than appearance:

“It made me actually feel safer, interestingly, because I was respecting their culture. And because you can’t go to Saudi Arabia as a tourist, there are very few Westerners that go there and so you’re absolutely in a goldfish bowl all the time. So the fact that I was wearing an abaya and showing respect actually made me feel much more confident.” (Jo)

“I feel less judged about my clothes when I wear an abaya than I do when I’m [in the UK]. I’m not sure Saudi women would say the same.” (Linda)

As Linda suggests, as more western women enter Saudi Arabian workplaces, this may alter Saudi women's workplace experiences, just as likely increases in Saudi women joining the workplace alongside men will alter western women's experiences of working in Saudi Arabia.

Other women found the physical and psychological impact of the abaya more negative. For some the looseness of the abaya's sleeves and long length was both comfortable and restrictive. They felt "awkward" or "claustrophobic":

"I feel like I'm more clumsy. I feel less professional, I suppose, because I feel like I'm maybe not totally accustomed to the person I'm speaking to, I'm not totally on the same level – not sure how to describe it. It feels a bit awkward." (Lisa)

"The abaya wasn't so much the problem, it's the headscarf, and that's been in every country and I've worked in a lot of Middle Eastern countries. So the sort of abaya to me felt like, oh, you're putting your jacket on before you leave the house, sort of thing. It became that sort of habit, like wearing a coat. Except we had to button it up and we couldn't wear it open. So it was somewhat restrictive... it's weird psychologically." (Lorraine)

Some women viewed the abaya as symbolic of Saudi patriarchy; undermining women, perpetuating gender segregation, and policing women's activities. Caroline, a journalist who travelled to Saudi Arabia, opposes the abaya and veiling because it undermines women, reduces individuality, and "gives men a hold over them".

Wearing an abaya made Lou felt relegated to the background and undervalued:

"I felt anonymous and unimportant ... I felt that I was less valued, although – and I'd like to think I felt solidarity with the other women, but I don't know that I did." (Lou)

Several women found their self-confidence affected because the abaya neutralised their individuality.

"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 this, of wearing this uniform ... this thing that didn't really represent me. I think clothes help with confidence ... and wearing something that's so shapeless, I felt that people didn't really know me, it sort of created a barrier." (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

"I found it neutralising in Saudi. And you become anonymised. It just was really inconvenient and I remember getting off the aeroplane in Kuwait and feeling free. You know, I could rip off my abaya, rip off my hijab and feel liberated." (Fiona)

For several, working in Saudi Arabia had a stifling cumulative psychological impact:

"By the end of my trips I'm generally angry. Because there's a kind of suppression of stuff, a suppression of self. I get on the plane to come back to a country that also has its constraints, you know, but it feels like freedom, I feel like I'm coming back to somewhere and I can be me again." (Fiona)

Others had mixed feelings about wearing an abaya. Asma, a practising Muslim working for an international healthcare multinational, felt initially uncomfortable wearing an abaya but got more used to it.

"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 ... I remember the 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. I got really used to it and I actually, by the end of my time there I would always tell people, seriously, abaya over a suit any day." (Asma)

The impact of wearing the abaya on work interactions

Although several women felt wearing an abaya had little or no impact on their professional interactions, most felt it had some impact on the ways they carried out their role. Felicity remarked:

“There’s something about covering oneself up that, I don’t know, has this kind of automatic response of, I’m not me.” (Felicity)

Felicity felt less assertive than she would normally be in professional contexts, and was conscious of not wanting to be a British person acting as if she knew best:

“I was also very aware of the political aspect and so with our guardian I would not have wanted to – I know it’s not colonial – but I wouldn’t have wanted to come across as being a kind of, you know, I’m white, British, I’m bringing further education to your country, aren’t you lucky. Politically I would have wanted to not be as bold as I would have been in the UK.” (Felicity)

Dina felt initially uncomfortable meeting a Saudi colleague who she had met before outside Saudi Arabia, as they had seen her in western clothes, but soon adjusted:

“There is this five minutes weird moment where they look at you like, oh, okay, you did the effort and so on, but it doesn’t look like you. But then you completely forget about the abaya. You just focus on the business and the outfit goes away.” (Dina)

Gendered behavioural codes and body management

Women struggled to adjust stereotypical presumptions about Saudi Arabia and to deal with new gendered behaviour norms. Mattie, needing to interact with a Saudi family, addressed the husband directly before realising her “social error” when he avoided eye contact:

“It was hard to categorise interactions with Saudi men and women...because...there was such a spectrum... maybe [with] more traditional Saudis I did feel like there was a slight sort of... I felt less comfortable, and perhaps that’s because I almost had built up a western stereotype [of] what they’re going to be like. And so the people who shattered my stereotype, great, I was really comfortable, it was fine. But the people who fulfilled my stereotype a little bit, I was maybe a bit more uncertain of how to approach.” (Mattie)

Lou had to navigate spatial segregation at her conference venue. Women were required to deliver their presentations from the balcony, seen only by other women, while men spoke to everyone from the podium. She found it “very difficult to project sufficiently”:



“I did my best to compensate for the fact that I wasn’t standing on the platform wearing my own clothes. I thought, I’ve come all this way, I have got something to say, I mustn’t let these circumstances inhibit the message... I think I worked very hard to compensate for the fact that I was invisible.” (Lou)

◀ *Lou in the abaya and headscarf she wore in Rlyadh.*

Image: Reina Lewis 2019

Her western male colleagues did not face such restrictions, and Lou said that one who was well known in her field “definitely tried to make us women feel respected, as if it was not in Riyadh and we weren’t wearing these particular clothes”.

Patriarchal gender norms in Saudi Arabia meant professional relationships with Saudi men were often less open. Some women did not interact with Saudi men in a work context at all. Journalist Olivia who went to Riyadh for an exhibition, commented that her relations with male colleagues were “more distanced”. Unlike in professional contexts in the UK, women and men did not shake hands, which, to her (and before COVID-19 rendered touching risky), made introductions feel “awkward”:

“Saudi Arabia is next level. Like if I went to Lebanon I would be able to shake hands, sometimes do triple kisses with someone you don’t know. But Saudi is, you know, there is a level of kind of, a much bigger level of distance between you and men.” (Olivia)

But Olivia did feel she was taken seriously at work in Saudi Arabia, and said that male Saudi colleagues seemed proud to be hosting her and her colleagues.

Carol, a museum curator responsible for an exhibition touring the Gulf countries, said she “didn’t feel as empowered when I was in meetings”. The Saudi museum’s all-male team “wouldn’t listen to me when I was telling them how to install the exhibition because I had installed it many times in many different countries and I knew exactly how the components went together, but I was sort of told not to interfere.”

Other women reported feeling well-treated, better than Saudi women, and seemed to be granted a kind of “honorary man” status – a long-established form of “imperial” privilege. Barbara described “business socials” where “there were no females there on the Saudi side and the ladies of the house were not present, but there was absolutely no problem with us being present and being dealt with as proper business-people.”

Occasionally, western male work colleagues embraced Saudi Arabia’s patriarchal gender norms. Felicity described a junior male colleague who started to behave as if he held the senior role:

“He treated me as though I was lesser than him and the Saudi men assumed that he was much, much, much more important than any of the women sat round the table. And so when he entered the room, I said, ‘Oh, hi [using his first name], really good to see you’. And he said, ‘Ah, [using formality of her full name]’, and shook my hand, and I thought, weird.” (Felicity)

Asked how she handled his implicit snub (of rejecting the familiarity of her greeting), Felicity said, my “political astuteness would have taken over and I would have wondered if he was acting a role, as I was expected to act a role, and therefore I ought to get back in my role, and so I would have humbled myself.” She raised the incident with him, but to no avail:

“He’d married a Saudi woman and risen in the ranks meteorically, so he was definitely a very important person by then so he didn’t have any truck with me kind of saying ‘why were you acting like that?’” (Felicity)

Other women reported positive, respectful interactions with Saudi men they encountered. Blair knew her main male colleague (who worked for a partner organisation) from meetings in London, where he wore western-style dress. She described their interactions in Saudi Arabia positively:

“The kind of main difference is that in Saudi he wears a thobe, in London he doesn’t. And I would say that there was nothing particularly different about our interaction and relationship locally, which was great.” (Blair)

Saudi Arabia’s religious context led women to reconsider their body management and how they present and hold themselves. They had to navigate nuanced, sometimes unspoken, behaviour codes, including greeting, hand-shaking, socialising, and speaking.

“Women won’t speak first, the men will speak first, wait to be invited to speak.

This was the first time he’d [junior level colleague] ever been on this, what we would call scoping level visits, but I knew I had to have a male partner there. So they would direct a question at him, I would give him the answer and he would respond, that’s how bizarre it was.” (Jo)

“I think I was given the instruction that unless they offered their hand, you know, if they offered their hand to me I could shake it, but I shouldn’t go in with a handshake.” (Mattie)

Sometimes Saudi gendered spatial segregation gave women a career advantage. Barbara maximised the opportunities of relating on a woman-to-woman basis with female colleagues:

“I talk to the women privately and I ask them various views. I have conversations with the women that probably men wouldn’t have, but I’d probably do the same in the UK, you know, where you’re encouraging people to be open and you’re non-threatening and you’re non-hierarchical.” (Barbara)

1.3 Dress helps and hinders interfaith encounters

Interfaith engagement in a work context is itself a particular religious context described by women in the UK and Saudi Arabia case studies. A form of “intentional engagement”⁵² between those of different faiths, interfaith work often centres on dialogue and sometimes on shared activities (such as sharing food). Dress also plays a role. Dress acts as a form of interfaith communication (or, including those with non-religious beliefs, “inter-worldview” communication). Dress can itself be the content and the conduit for interfaith interaction, as seen at the Glasgow event “Exploring Religious Clothing through Interfaith Encounter”.⁵³



◀ *“Religious Dress in the Flesh: Exploring Religious Clothing through Interfaith Encounter”, a partnership event between Interfaith Glasgow, the University of Glasgow, and St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art.*

“On the Kimono”: Dr Saeko Yazaki, University of Glasgow

“On the Hijab”: Safa Yousaf, Amina – the Muslim Women’s Resource Centre

“On the Five Ks of Sikhism”: Sukhcharan Kaur, Sikhs in Scotland

Images: Stuart Platt

Dressing for interfaith engagement in the UK

Women were careful about how they dress for interfaith events, to avoid offending. But they balance that with, as Joanne said, “keeping my own sense of self”. For arts sector freelancer Hala, who is Muslim, work sometimes takes her to interfaith spaces and so involves adapting her dress – she made sure she dressed modestly when she visited a church. But modesty was something she believed in practising anyway, so was a practice that she adapted to wherever she was going.



▲ *This three-piece set of anarkalli, churidar, and dupatta (dress, trousers, shawl) was tailor-made in the UK for arts freelancer Hala. For interfaith events she might wear this, or the “western” outfit to the right.*

Images: Courtesy of research participant

External visits can throw internal organisational modest dress norms into sharp relief. The women acknowledged variations between their workplaces and the religious and wider communities they operated in, and tried to accommodate these, often deferring to the dress norms of organisations they visited. Sometimes women received pre-visit wardrobe instructions. Charlotte, now working for a Jewish organisation, recalled:

“When I was a teacher I took a load of my students to visit a mosque, and for that I wore a longer skirt and covered my hair, took my shoes off and things, based on what the mosque had suggested would be appropriate.” (Charlotte)

Before visiting a gurdwara Yasmin, who is Muslim and does not cover her head, was told to cover her head:

“In some way I think gurdwaras uphold that more so than Muslims because you can, say if you were to come [to our Muslim workplace] and you didn’t want to [cover], it’s fine. Whereas in Sikhism you have to cover.” (Yasmin)

Yasmin also adapted her wardrobe for external visits to non-religious locations: for an event in Parliament she bought a new smart dress and blazer to conform to secular formal dress norms.

Mostly, women worked out themselves how to dress for external sites. Julia, a Salvation Army minister, wore her usual work clothes to interfaith events. Lanya, who sometimes wears an abaya in everyday life, avoids this for work church visits in case the Christians find it an impediment to communication:

“I would like them to be comfortable to me as well, I just don’t want any barrier. Say for example, I’m going in church, I wouldn’t wear abaya, but I know some of the colleagues, they would. But I wouldn’t, because I don’t want any barrier. Scarf is enough of a barrier.” (Julia)

Zainab adapted to fit the religious version of modesty she considered required when she visited a church or synagogue, different to that of a mosque. Her story shows the considerable work, debate and emotion involved in navigating these different religious spaces.

“When I used to go to church services I would still dress in what I considered modest, but it would be less modest than what I’d wear to a mosque. So I think if I was to go into a church, I would think it’s fine for me to show my legs, whereas in a mosque that would be unacceptable.” (Zainab)

In the Orthodox synagogue she visited:

“They didn’t allow women to wear trousers and so I was really stuck because a lot of my modest stuff is flowy trousers and that’s what I would wear to a mosque... And so I was kind of like, okay, so it was either between – I genuinely don’t know what to wear – I ended up wearing a dress, but it was below the knee, but it showed my legs.

...I felt very uncomfortable, because the women there were in long skirts and they all had a very particular way of dressing. And personally I would have felt so much more comfortable in my flowy trousers, because I would have felt like I was completely covered. But I felt like...what I was wearing..., I felt it wasn’t fine, I felt like I should be covering my legs, all the other women were covering their legs, even though they were skirts. So it’s interesting where even when you think what’s trousers versus skirts, what someone would think is modest and what someone else would think is... it’s a minefield really [laughs].” (Zainab)

Interfaith meetings offer an opportunity to represent one’s faith through dress, as Samirah describes below. This opportunity to build a bridge to dialogue with those of other faiths involves a mixture of “being oneself” and “dressing for the other”:

"If I knew that I was going to such an actual meeting that's all about interfaith, I would definitely go and represent myself to the fullest. Meaning no blazer, wear what I want to, maybe even go and turn up today with a jilbab on. But... I've always been into meetings where that subject's there, but everyone sort of comes and you've got different faith group backgrounds and different faith groups, but it's not really the main subject matter." (Samirah)

Patricia, who works for the Church of England, wears her cross in interfaith environments, except with Jewish groups who might find it upsetting:

"The only occasion in which I would take it off is if I were in a situation in which I know that a Christian symbol would cause somebody distress. So if I were with a Jewish group for whom a cross meant threats and persecution, I would not... There's nothing in the Christian faith that says you must wear a cross. It's not like a Sikh who's required to wear a turban or a devout Muslim who believes that she should cover her head. There's nothing in my faith that teaches that, so I wear it with freedom, but I would take it off if it was oppressing somebody else's freedom." (Patricia)

Women might encounter uncomfortable judgement by male interfaith practitioners. At one event, Patricia was complimented on dressing modestly by a younger Muslim man:

"He was commenting, you know, his perspective on dress and women's dress, and he pointed at me... I was wearing straight-cut trousers and a sort of boxy boiled wool jacket, and he pointed at me and he said, of course, not like you, you're very modestly dressed. And I remember finding that really difficult, because he was a lovely guy and I knew that in his world view he was paying me a compliment. ►

...I didn't like the fact he was commenting on what I was dressed in and if I had made a different choice, how would he have thought of me. And that's the sort of thing I'm very conscious of if I go into an interfaith context. But I dress in a way that doesn't prevent dialogue, even though there are certain things about it that I really struggle with. And this is not so much about dress, but when I have a much more conservative Muslim who won't shake my hand, I find that really, really hard. And I have a big thing about a lot of interfaith dialogue, is it being driven at the expense of women... [does] interfaith dialogue... kind of buy into these narratives of modest, immodest, and it's the conservative side of it that wins, you all expect to compromise. And because I'm in role I don't feel I can challenge it." (Patricia)

Rebecca, a rabbi, when giving a talk at a mosque, was irked that other women speakers voluntarily covered their heads with a scarf, even though they had not been asked. Rebecca subverted this by wearing a yarmulke:

"Three of us were invited to talk about our religious journey. And I came in and all the women had a gauze around their head. [laughs] I decided to put my yarmulke on. Nobody else made them put the gauze on, nobody was going around telling... The western non-Muslim women had put something round their head. If somebody had come up and asked me, I guess out of respect I could have done. I mean is it different than asking a man to put a head covering on in a synagogue? But yes, I do think it's different." (Rebecca)

The UK examples show that women's modest dress can be a tool for interfaith dialogue, but it is a tool that they use sometimes at their own expense, or to protect themselves from conflict or rejection. It is inevitably the most conservative interpretations and practices to which behaviour and dress is adapted. And, as Patricia noted, it is women, not men, of whom these accommodations are demanded. This ignores that adapting one's dress may also be an impediment to full, honest, relational interfaith dialogue.

This raises questions for interfaith dialogue itself – what is it about? Deferring to the most conservative view or sharing the parts of oneself that risk being rejected by others? There is an apparent tension between interfaith as a meeting of equals (different religious backgrounds meeting in what Jenny Kartupelis of the World Congress of Faiths calls “equality of spirit”) and interfaith practice that pays respect to others’ different religious traditions via adapting one’s dress.

Interfaith engagement through fashion in Saudi Arabia

In the Saudi Arabian context, it was fashion mediators who raised the issues of interfaith engagement. Some of them saw fashion as a form or context for interfaith engagement. Yvette, a fashion stylist, said that fashion ‘can break down a lot of barriers’:

“I don’t think the Middle East should be so foreign and I don’t think we should be so foreign to them either. And I think fashion can break down a lot of barriers. I think fashion and the arts, we express ourselves and to me clothing has always been a language. And even within those cultures there are so many differences within the abaya, the way somebody does something, and it’s really being able to understand and read those things.” (Yvette)

Fashion professionals saw their work as uniting people of different faiths. Abaya brand CHI-KA sells strongly to Saudi clients from their base in Dubai, where co-founder Nemanja Valjarevic, himself of Serbian Orthodox Christian background, says:



"I live in a world where all religions as paths meet. So in my world I see different expressions of the same thing. So my understanding of life and universe is this unifying thing that just manifests in different ways." (Nemanja Valjarevic)

◀ *CHI-KA, gold painted flower abaya, Fall/Winter 2019*
Image: www.chikacollection.com

For Alia Khan of the Islamic Fashion & Design Council, spirituality enables her to bring "positive energy" to her work, whether with religious or non-religious consumers:

"The spirit of Islam is so beautiful and I think this is really where people kind of miss out on what Islam really means. It really is an all-inclusive religion, it really is. And that's why we cherish our Jewish and Catholic and Christian following. We have a mainstream modest following which may not necessarily be faith-based. And we really cherish them." (Alia Khan)

Sharing Islam with others might be an aspiration of hers, through her work in fashion, but she offers it to the world rather than seeking to persuade:

"If you want to show and share something beautiful with someone, you let everyone in and you let them see for themselves. Our Qur'an says there's no compulsion in religion, and I think that's one of the most important lines that we can all embrace because you don't do it because you have to do it or you think other people have to do it, you know, you do it because it works and then when it works, you don't have anything to prove to anyone." (Alia Khan)

1.4 Differences beyond gender affect women's work in religious contexts

Other social factors shape women's work experience in Saudi Arabia and UK FBOs, including ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation and age. Muslim women who travelled to Saudi Arabia from Europe (or other Gulf locations) have to navigate assumptions about ethnicity and religion, as Dina illustrates:

"They assume [that I am Muslim], because first, the colour of my skin, because some pronunciation of some words when I speak, as I speak Moroccan, obviously when I'm going to say some words, I'm going to say it with an Arabic accent. And I think it's just that they kind of notice that I have origins and if I have an origin, by my name ... they will say oh, she has to be from North Africa.... So easily they're going to say, she has to be Muslim...

I've noticed a couple of looks, when I was in Jeddah, walking, even though...it's more open now. With the make-up that I had at the moment, the hair, I kind of looked like maybe a Saudi woman... The only thing that happened to me is that when I went on the street, I got honked by cars. So, then I put back the veil." (Dina)

For Muslim women, the question of ethnicity extends beyond dress and appearance into issues of professional rapport and the unique sensibilities or internal hierarchies related to being Muslim or Arab. Asma reported on her experience of Saudi Arabians making assumptions based on her appearance or speech:

"Some people would be surprised when they would realise that I was Arab, but that was mainly because I was coming from the UK team... And that's also with the preconception... that I feel that Westerners are viewed as being better than Arabs. ►

I had the impression, maybe it's just my thought, that [British-heritage colleagues] would probably be able to get away with more than someone like me for being Arab... Saudi men might be okay with a British woman calling them out or joking in a certain way with them in a meeting, but if I said that same joke or if I called them out about something, then they might respond negatively to me. It doesn't mean that I didn't call someone out if I felt that they needed to be called out on it, but I had to do it in a very different way and make sure that it was very respectful." (Asma)

In the UK, sexual orientation and gender presentation were considerations when attending interfaith gatherings. Anglican churchgoer Joanne who has a female partner, prefers to dress in way "you would call typically masculine". This affects how she dresses for her job at a Christian organisation and for interfaith gathering, negotiating her own sensibilities and those of multiple others:

"I'm very conscious of trying to keep my own sense of self whilst also not contravening any sort of major religious faux pas. And I've got a colleague who's Muslim so we go into mosques and do talks and things like that, and I'm always like, 'should I wear a headscarf?', and she's like, 'no'. And I'm like, 'well, I don't want to annoy anyone'. Because she's just like, 'don't be so ridiculous'. But you do have that element of, okay, so how should I present myself. And I know that there will certainly be, in the same way that there is in the Christian circles, there will certainly be people of other faiths who don't necessarily agree with the way I present myself in terms of clothing... very few people ever say anything to your face, but it's how do I balance that with my work life as well and how do I try to avoid that having an impact. So would someone not want to work with me because of it and therefore how do we deal with that." (Joanne)

2. Dressing for work in religious work contexts means embodying a religion you may or may not hold

Dressing for work in religious work contexts involves taking on clothes that signify a religion that employees may not themselves support. In Saudi Arabia, there was a mismatch between the religion of the context (Islam), and the UK women travelling there for work, the majority of whom had Christian backgrounds. In UK FBOs, by contrast, female employees' religious affiliation was generally the same as the FBO's, with some notable exceptions.

2.1 Working in the Saudi context: a mismatch between religious work context and women's religious views

The majority of UK women travelling to Saudi Arabia for work – 19 of the 21 – were not Muslim. Religion had played an active or nominal role in most of the women's background or upbringing. For two women this was Islam, for one it was Judaism, for 13 it was Christianity. Most of those from secular, agnostic or atheist families mentioned friends and neighbours who were religious. Many of the women had kept their childhood religion (generally Christianity, and more were raised Catholic than Protestant). Quite a few had become "de-churched"⁵⁴, or saw themselves more as spiritual or moral than religiously observant. Six of the 21 described themselves as atheist, secular or non-religious. Some women's prior religious experience provided points of connection to the Muslim religious context of their work in Saudi Arabia. Women raised Catholic found parallels between the *shayla* and abaya and the clothing of nuns; a comforting familiarity in a new environment.

In Saudi Arabia, the dress women took on was very different from what they wore in the UK, even for Muslim women. Dina, who was Muslim and travelled in Iran where she was expected to cover, discussed how she felt as she adjusted her head covering in Saudi Arabia:

"That was weird, because I'm used to cover myself when I pray, but I'm not used to wear[ing] a veil. And it's the same thing happens to me when I go to Iran, because when I go to Iran I have to wear also the shayla. I wanted to wear it properly, because otherwise I didn't know how to wear it... To wear it completely on my head, because in Iran you can just wear it half of your head..." (Dina)

Yvette, a humanist, had been apprehensive about the abaya's cultural and religious connotations, but when she put it on, and she saw her abaya as beautiful:

"I was so excited about going to wear an abaya, I think I built it up in my head, like how will I feel when I wear this sort of cultural/religious item, even though it's not really religious, it's cultural. [Will] I suddenly put on this cloak and really feel heavy and weighty and the oppression of centuries? And I didn't feel any of those things. I put it on, I was like, 'oh my god, it's a beautiful coat'. Because mine was sort of kimono style and Japanese and they'd given us each different ones and I think they thought it would suit our personalities, I was just like, 'oh my god, it's so beautiful!'" (Yvette)



◀ Lorraine who had worked in a number of middle east locations was in Riyadh as an English language teacher at a women's university. She enjoyed going abaya shopping – at the time one of the few leisure activities available to women – and developed aesthetic sensibilities about the varieties of design and detail. This is one of her favourites with a deep gold trim on the cuff and on the matching headscarf. The abaya's wide sleeves, however, could fall back revealing her arms as she moved, so she had to wear either a long sleeve top underneath or make use of what she and her friends called their "sleeves": a shrug/bolero piece that could be put on over short sleeved tops/dresses.

Image: Courtesy of research participant

While women were probably aware of the abaya's religious and cultural meanings, many of the women did not discuss this. For many women, the degree of fit with their religious backgrounds was not uppermost, and they seemed to see wearing the abaya more as cultural difference than as wearing another person's religion.

Anna, who was Christian, had reflected on whether she was wearing someone else's religion. Concluding that the abaya could be regarded as cultural not religious, eases the potential discomfort of wearing a garment from another different religion:

"I don't view the abaya or covering my head or something as a religious thing, I personally view it as a cultural thing. So for my mum, she sometimes views it as a religious thing for me to come to Saudi and put on an abaya, I'm conforming to like a Muslim rule. But I'm not, I'm still Christian, I confidently tell people that I'm Christian without feeling uncomfortable or unsafe... And people respect it, they think as we all believe in God, but maybe a different way of doing it, something like that. But when I put on the abaya I never link it as a religious thing, ever." (Anna)

Many women experienced mixed feelings about wearing an abaya in Saudi Arabia. Others were unfazed. Blair, in the fashion and arts sector, felt neutral about wearing the abaya as "just something you have to do", "part of the culture":

"One of the other ladies I travelled with is a fashion stylist and we had a chat about it because she said a lot of her friends said, 'tell us exactly how you feel when you put it on'. And I kind of hadn't even thought about it in any way like that, I just kind of, you know, it's part of the job, it's part of the culture, it's whatever, it's just something you have to do." (Blair)

Some women felt uncomfortable with the connotations behind abaya-wearing; the idea of purdah or of women needing cover themselves so that men are not sexually tempted. Barbara felt this way, but saw wearing the abaya as "the price of doing business" in Saudi Arabia:

“At times when I first went I thought ‘why should I go there because I don’t agree with it’. I suppose my thought process is, I always dress respectfully and I deal with the cultural norms of every country. The whole – and I’m not a scholar of the Qur’an or anything – but my understanding is, is actually women cover themselves so they’re not tempting the men and I’m 57, I’m not necessarily Mona Lisa, I can’t imagine that I’m tempting of men, and actually if you are tempted, that is your problem, not my problem. So if you can’t deal with temptation you should avert your eyes rather than me have to cover myself, because that is social norm. So if people ask me, how do I feel about wearing abaya, I often give that type of statement, saying I will do it because I want to do business here, I respect the culture.” (Barbara)

Barbara seemed to resent the implication that not wearing an abaya would be read as immodest. Her chosen clothes would be differently modest, she said: “Surely I should be allowed to be very respectful in my own attire, which would be fully covered and I would cover, as I am now, I am covered, this is no different.”

2.2 Working at UK FBOs: a close match between the women’s religious views and the organisation’s

Shared views of modesty

For women at the 20 Jewish, Muslim, and Christian UK FBOs where interviews took place, there was a close match between female employees’ religious views and the organisation’s religion. Interview participants’ background was the same in 17 cases (the exceptions being three women working at Muslim organisations: one of non-religious background, and two whose upbringing was Christian). The two women working on interfaith projects for a local council (so not FBOs) had a Muslim upbringing and were still Muslim. Similarly, the women’s current religion almost always matched: 16 of the 20 at single-faith organisations were adherents of the organisational religion. Exceptions were one agnostic working at a Christian organisation and three non-religious women (two atheist) at Muslim organisations. There were some variations, but the general pattern was for women to remain adherents to their childhood religion. Three of the five Jewish organisation

interviewees were brought up as relatively secular Jews and had become more observant. One of the seven interviewees at Christian organisations had become agnostic, and one more religiously committed. Among the eight participants working at Muslim organisations, several of the five Muslims referred to their family's religion as being entwined with expectations that the participants came to see as more cultural than religious. They, and the two Muslim women working for a council on interfaith projects, described their journey to discover their faith for themselves, sometimes rejecting the more patriarchal interpretations they had encountered during childhood.

The fit between employees' religion and employer's means that women often implicitly understand the workplace's religious dress norms. They have chosen to take a job at an organisation with religious values, and they already have a religious-cultural competency in the form of some understanding of expectations about dress and behaviour. There were advantages for women navigating dress at work who arrived with a pre-existing understanding of what would be considered "appropriate" (to use a word they repeated).

Zainab, who works for a Muslim organisation, adapts her dress to the work occasion:

"Whilst [my organisation] is very progressive, it's working within quite a conservative sector,... it's about what other people would think of the organisation and I have to be respectful of that... if I'm going to a meeting where I'm meeting someone who – and I know I'm representing [the organisation] – then I'd have to think quite carefully about making sure that I am dressed in a way that nobody's going to take offence to." (Zainab)

Like others, Zainab generally adapts her dress to fit the context's most Orthodox interpretations. This is easier for her than for a non-Muslim, because she has Muslim religio-cultural competency in Muslim dress. It is also harder, because conservative religious people at work may expect additional adaptations from her (covering her head) that they would not demand from a non-Muslim. She balances adapting to conservative religious people's expectations with "combatting" incorrect assumptions; in this case, challenging their idea that uncovered women are not practising Muslims.

Most women supported the idea of dressing modestly. “It makes you comfortable”, said Lamyā, who worked as a volunteer at a Muslim organisation, and saw modest dressing as something that happened in every religion and in secular contexts such as schools:

“When you have your PGCE ... the first thing they tell you, about your dressing, about modest dressing. So what they say is, in front of the mirror, lean a bit. There shouldn't be, children should not see anything on the front and should not see anything from your skirt from the back.” (Lamyā)

Melissa, a teacher in a Christian school, equated modesty also with self-respect:

“I agree with modest fashion at work, because it's just relevant to lots of different things, not just religious people's beliefs and things, I think it's just important, it's like a way of showing respect for yourself and your body.” (Melissa)

Women were aware that their interpretation of modesty was not always the same as others around them. Thinking about how to dress is part of women's whole lives, not just their work. Women negotiate dress in conversation with family and friends, and in educational settings, religious communities, and different cultural contexts. Zainab explains:

“For me this is a fairly modest way to dress, but for my mum, she'd be horrified that I'm showing my arms. And so if I'm going to see my mum, I'll make sure I cover my arms at least up to [gestures to her elbows], to satisfy her because that's what she considers modest. But for me, I feel I'm modest right now, just dressed the way I am. And then of course if I was to go into a mosque ..., if I know that there's going to be even more orthodox Muslims there, I will try to cater towards the audience, basically. ▶

But then at the same time, when me and my husband go on holiday, if I was on a beach, I don't have a problem being in a bikini, because I feel like it's appropriate for the setting... but I never post pictures of myself like that... Because I think for me the religious aspect of it is to not draw attention to yourself and I feel like I'm just blending in in that situation, on a beach." (Zainab)

Women often added that modest should not mean unstylish: interest in fashion was compatible with wanting to dress modestly. Abigail, who works for a Christian organisation, tries not to judge other women's dress, but seems irritated by women who eschew stylishness at work:

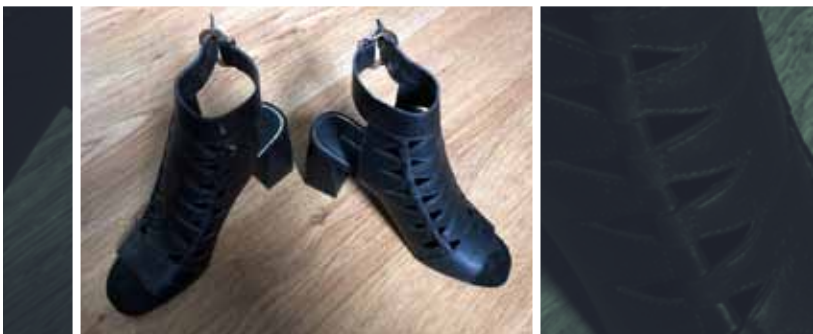


▲ *Abigail's style for work at a UK Catholic organisation.*

Images: Courtesy of research participant

“It’s about normalising things as well and saying I’m not going to be disrespectful but I’m also not going to be kind of like – I hate this word – but like frumpy. I’m not going to not dress in an attractive way just because I think it might attract the wrong look or something. I think there’s a difference between dressing modestly with respect and then kind of having to do it because of feeling like people shouldn’t be looking at you... if I say to myself, okay, I’m not going to have a short skirt, I’m not going to have a low-cut with my shoulders out or whatever, but actually how can I make that then as interesting as possible... There are some women who work here who tend to wear very similar things every day, kind of trousers, a shirt and a jumper or something and I think that’s one interpretation of it... it’s like a safe way to play things and like I by no means am judging anyone, what they’re wearing, but personally I like to think oh, you know, what can I wear that’s nice and that’s interesting.” (Abigail)

Davina described buying a pair of heels for her new job at a Christian organisation, which she thought fashionable and smart, but her husband “made a comment about how they might lead my Christian brothers astray”. Davina was no longer confident to wear them, and discussed the tricky balance she was negotiating between enjoying fashion without being read by Christian colleagues as sinfully fashionable:



▲ *Davina's shoes.*
Image: Courtesy of research participant

"I do feel like they'd be a confident statement, but I'm nervous about making that statement now at [work], that people will think oh, Davina dresses in that way. And it's not even Davina dresses in a sexy way, I think they're going to think I just... I think they'll think it's a bit intimidating because they're either just men in suits who don't seem to have thought much about ... And then the women are fairly dull dressed, I would stand out as caring about fashion. And I don't know, because in some Christian circles that's seen as a little bit of a sin, like if you care too much about your appearance..." (Davina)

Balancing her desire to break out of the "standard" dress style of her colleagues with dealing with other Christians' judgements, both specific (shoes too "sexy" or "intimidating") and general (attention to appearance "a little bit of a sin") involves considerable work.

A couple of women raised in conservative religious contexts experienced it as liberating to join religious organisations with more liberal mores. Yasmin was "so apprehensive" when she came for her job interview at an all-female Muslim organisation. Presuming the organisation was "conservative", she feared compulsory headscarves: "I'm not going to allow anyone to tell me to wear a scarf because I'm working for a Muslim organisation, or you can't do this or you can't do that". But things turned out differently when Yasmin met the senior manager on her first day:

"She wears a hijab, and she said do you have any questions after everything. I was like, no. She said most people ask whether you have to wear a hijab and what your dress code is. So the answer's no, you know, Muslim identity is individual and there's lots of Muslims around the world who appear in lots of different attire, it's fine, and there's no dress code. As long as it's smart for meetings, you wear what you want to wear. So that kind of broke the ice for me and I was so relieved." (Yasmin)



▲ *Two outfits worn by Yasmin for her job at a UK Islamic charity.*
Images: Courtesy of research participant

Women argued that modesty was broader and more holistic than dress. They saw dressing modestly while behaving immodestly as hypocritical. For Yasmin, modest behaviour was more important than modest dress. For Salma, both mattered:

“I feel my modesty is the fact that I don't eye up people, I don't sit there and bitch about other women and that kind of stuff, because it comes under a bigger umbrella than just appearance.” (Yasmin)

“For me as a Muslim, modest isn't just a dress code, it's more of a behaviour. So how your character, your moral character as well, that's part of your modesty,... your speech and communication, your delivery of things, that has to be modest as well. So that's the most important part...The clothing is just the outside, the surface, whereas the actual modesty should come from within.” (Salma)

Overall, women shared a view that dressing modestly, while requiring negotiation, was appropriate for their work in and with FBOs, and this view chimed with their own religious backgrounds and current views.

When the dress fits but the religion might not

Understanding the dress norms of the organisation does not make it any easier for women who disagree, or feel uncomfortable, with those norms. Women who were religious leaders had to decide how to dress in contexts where dress norms were historically masculine, as religious leadership was only or mostly done by men. The women were generally not the first generation of female leaders. For example, Church of England curate Zoe said that the only dress requirement presented to her when she was ordained was that she had to wear a clerical collar. (For funerals, weddings and events such as ordinations she wears a robe and stole). Otherwise, Zoe dresses mostly as she chooses, informally:

“My overall view is I want to be me and be normal and just wear my normal clothes. I was not going to go out and buy a new wardrobe when I got ordained, apart from having to wear a collar, obviously. [My] ordinary clothes, range from ... sort of ripped jeans and kind of summer dresses and slightly smarter stuff ... So I don't wear my collar every day, but when I am wearing it I would wear it with ordinary clothes, so what I'm wearing today is basically like a long-sleeved t-shirt which the collar fits into, I haven't got a clerical shirt.” (Zoe)

Zoe's workwear is mostly received positively:

“What I get a lot of the time is, oh, ...'you look really cool for a vicar', or, you know, 'I really like the way you're dressed', which is quite refreshing. [Well] I do hear it from some of our congregation, but I quite often find that if it's an event where people are not used to coming to church, a wedding for example, people often say to me, 'oh I love your dress', or 'I didn't know you could dress like that as a vicar'.” (Zoe)

Rebecca became a Reform Jewish rabbi in the 1980s, when this was still an unusual role for women. “I thought long and hard about what to wear in the pulpit, because I am big busted and I was much thinner and the big bust often drew attention to me”, she explained. Rebecca encountered objectifying comments from a male congregant that meant she had to spend longer thinking about her dress:

“When I was leaving, one of my congregants, a man, I let him have a lot of latitude because he wasn’t in any way... – he was funny, but he did say we’re hoping to get a new rabbi with a mini skirt and boobs out to here. And I knew this man and he never in any way shape or form in any way other than respectful of me, except one time when he was drunk and he was trying to photograph me in a dress that I wish I hadn’t worn, for Purim [when fancy dress may be worn].” (Rebecca)

At that time, women of Rebecca's denomination did not wear trousers to synagogue (some Jewish traditions still do not), so she settled on a skirt suit:

“I spent a lot of time, a lot of time wondering what to wear, in ways that I don’t think the men ever had to. ... So I lit on a skirted suit because the jacket covers up the boobs and it was a skirt...” (Rebecca)

On her wage, Rebecca could not afford expensive clothing, and this provoked criticism, increasing her burden of aesthetic labour:

“My very first student pulpit, the chair’s wife was quite elegant and they had money and I didn’t, I had two outfits: a brown corduroy suit and a blue something else type suit. And he made a comment about it to the college that I was wearing, you know, just this kind of, you know, a bit shabby, suits.” (Rebecca)

Her confidence grew with time:

"I became a little bit more relaxed about booby things. I guess I feel kind of older now anyway, who's going to look? [laughs] ... I think as well my very first pulpits were quite casual, but then I was working in maybe more middle-class synagogues where people did have maybe nicer clothes, and so I wore nicer clothes. And I liked it, but as I evolved in my style, that wasn't really what I was ultimately going to wear." (Rebecca)

Her dress became more casual as rabbis' dress did generally, illustrating that modest dress, like any dress, is situated in different historical and cultural contexts, religious and secular, and changes over time.

Speaking about a more recent experience of rabbi training, Rachel, a generation younger, relayed that some things had changed and others had not. She had more freedom, but still had to dress modestly. She differentiates work from leisure wear. Like Christian organisation employee Abigail who wanted to avoid "frumpy" clothes, Rachel dislikes the "dowdy" image of older rabbis. When Rachel began training:



▲ *Rachel dressed for work as a rabbi.*

Image: Courtesy of research participant

“I felt like I needed to dress like a rabbi. I didn't really know what that meant, because I think it's probably fair to say that the previous generation of female rabbis dressed in quite a dowdy way – and I've been thinking about this and talking about this a lot with people – that there was a sense that you kind of hid your femininity, so they wear quite drapery clothes and quite kind of boring, drab clothing. And then the generation of rabbis that's ten years older than me, the women are much more kind of okay with dressing in a feminine manner, there's a lot more shorter skirts and heels and stuff. And then my generation where it's like, well, can I wear a pair of high-waisted [on-trend] mum jeans and a shirt and trainers to synagogue, which will be perfectly smart in the outside world, but does it visually translate into here, was a really complicated question for me. And also this sense of do I want to have a uniform that's like a work uniform, so people know that I'm working, versus kind of who am I when I'm not working. Like is there a difference any more ...”
(Rachel)

3. Dress codes in religious work contexts sometimes cause contention

There is variation in whether and how dress codes are formulated and how clearly and by whom they are communicated. Saudi Arabia's code is specific and applies to all women, but women experience confusion navigating the code because of insufficient guidance before they travel. Some UK FBOs have clear dress codes that are enforced, either implicitly through behavioural norms, or explicitly through HR training or responses to complaints from colleagues or visitors. Others do not. A small number of UK women we spoke to experienced censure and conflict relating to their organisation's dress code and considered the codes gender unequal or discriminatory.

3.1 Dress codes in UK faith-based organisations

Working for a UK faith-based employer presents challenges for women who have to cope with a set of explicit dress codes and implicit behaviour codes. The ways in which dress is regulated may or may not bear direct relation to the degree of clarity of any written code. The degree of clarity in dress codes may have a positive or negative impact on women's experiences: sometimes women have more flexibility if things are not clearly codified; sometimes the lack of clarity leaves them open to the vagaries of other people's interpretations. At one Jewish organisation, there was no explicit written dress code, yet there were implicit expectations of what is appropriate workwear for women. Sophia, a Jewish employee, indicated that, for her, leaving things unsaid was preferable to a written code. Sophia also made clear that she would not directly challenge the dress norms she encountered because "I value my job too much – it doesn't bother me too much. I don't need to challenge it because it's not something that has been said."

Many women reported that dress codes and forms of wardrobe regulation apply far more to women than to men. Men, for example, can get away with being, as Safya described, "really scruffy and some of them are quite fat so their clothes are tight-fitting". At her Muslim FBO, Safya, who is Muslim, asked for the dress code to be made more specific to reduce room for ambiguities and misinterpretation; it should also apply to men's workwear.

In her Muslim workplace, atheist Melanie said that while others, especially men, wear "casual clothing [like] jeans and jumpers and trainers", she feels "my role is quite a professional role and I should dress more professionally." She anticipates visual evaluation for her seniority, her gender, and her non-Muslim identity:



"I also feel that because I'm a woman I have to be held to higher standards than the men and because I'm not Muslim I also need to show that I respect the culture of the organisation that I'm in."
(Melanie)

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

After "pushback from women" her organisation's dress code "doesn't specifically say men have to wear this and women have to wear that. It's now gender neutral." But it remains "a bit more extensive than I've seen in other organisations", and she objects to this, saying: "I have real problems with people acting as moral police." The dress code described employees' dress as representing the organisation, and recommended "common sense", "modesty", cultivating "a professional image" that recognised religious diversity and did not offend others, and avoiding scruffy, tight or transparent clothing, and avoiding jeans and trainers. With a code that emphasises the importance of following cultural norms, Melanie counters: "This is a question for me, about whose culture?"

Monitoring and enforcing dress codes: managers, HR and visitors

At her Muslim organisation, Safya had been taken aside by an HR colleague and told she was dressing inappropriately, after complaints from a visitor to the office. This affected her confidence and provoked anxiety:



▲ A workwear ensemble from Safya.

Image: Courtesy of research participant

“HR have spoken to me about the way I dress and I was like, I never expected the way I dress would offend anybody...”

I was really, really upset ... I couldn't understand why or how and what it was, I just couldn't put it all together. So I started asking my colleagues, do you think I dress inappropriately? Do you think I wear too much make-up? Do you think my heels are too high?... 'no, if anything, you're the most smartly dressed person in the organisation.'... I was just really thinking about it and then I went back to this HR and I said to her, 'do you think that – forget what you've been asked to tell me – but do you think I dress ...?' And she said, 'no'. So I said, 'why did you not, whoever asked you to say this, why didn't you say to this person, or director, whoever this person was, why did you not as HR, you have a say?' She was like, 'I'm just the messenger'.” (Safya)

The organisation's original policy, Safya explained, “was quite ambiguous.” It stipulated words to the effect of “dress modestly, business attire, professional work”. She thought the policy “biased” as “it was quite focused on female attire”. She worked on a project to review policies and “raised the concern

that because it is so ambiguous, we're unsure what we should and shouldn't wear." She added a definition of modesty to the policy, and specific details on what was or was not acceptable. She had male colleagues who "like to wear the male Muslim dress, the *jubah*". Her view is that "I personally don't feel like that's quite professional I just don't feel like in the office, when you have visitors and stuff like that, I don't believe that is smart attire." But since "in some cultures, that is their smart attire, so it's not for me to say, I just said maybe they could limit it to just Fridays when they do go to the mosque to pray and maybe wear a blazer on top".

Safya's draft policy included more detail: "instead of saying no tights at all, maybe it is that you don't want them too see-through." She continued: "If you want to make sure that they don't wear no sleeves, you need to put it in." The director approved her draft and agreed that it would be reviewed by the charity's trustees.

Two other women at FBOs described external clothing surveillance from male visitors to their organisations, with complaints to managers that women's dress was insufficiently modest (allegedly tight-fitting or showing too much skin). When these visitors held power, such as donors at charities, managers or HR staff might regard women adhering to their interpretations of modesty as a pre-requisite for securing future donations. Danielle, who works for a Muslim organisation but is not herself Muslim, explained:

"If we have a corporate donor or a high worth donor here or a partner, like a leader of a mosque and we've got an important partnership with that mosque, any key stakeholders here tend to be Muslim, so any external visitors, not all of them, but the majority of them, will be Muslim. And our senior leadership is Muslim, so our board of trustees is Muslim, for example. And so that's one of the ways, when I kind of train on our dress code, I talk about it in the sense of we need to ensure that we are dressing conservatively in line with the Muslim faith, because we need to be respectful to any external stakeholders that we are actively inviting in and asking for their support. In order to do that and to represent ourselves properly as a faith-based organisation, we need to be following the cultural norms of our faith, and as an organisation we do have a faith and the cultural norms of that mean that we dress conservatively." (Danielle)

Danielle was very willing to reprimand staff when there were external complaints, and had done so. (This dynamic, of a white atheist HR officer at a Muslim organisation telling off female South Asian Muslim colleagues for inappropriate dress, is one we did not expect to hear about.)

But modesty is in the eye of the beholder and women who were told off were not, as the male visitor might imagine, careless dressers. Rather, they were navigating a complex set of expectations, from their families, husbands and partners, wanting to dress professionally, keep up with fashion, while also adhering to religious expectations.

The experience of Safya, losing confidence after being told off and then assertively bringing about organisational change, demonstrates that ideas of modesty are many and that compromises can be reached:



▲ Another workwear outfit of Safya's.

Image: Courtesy of research participant

"It should be your decision whether you want to dress modestly wherever you work, but it shouldn't be something that you're, not forced, but feel compelled to do that just because the organisation is like that. Because it does demotivate people because they feel like... 'are you judging me on my work ethic just by the way I'm dressing?', and it causes those internal conversation and doubts about the way you look and the way you dress and the way you speak and all that sort of stuff... If you're going to have a dress set-up or dress code as such, then it needs to be just strictly professional and give people the flexibility if you want to dress modestly we accept your own religious interpretation of modesty." (Safya)

3.2 Dress codes for work in Saudi Arabia

Dress and body management choices are key tools enabling women to make a good impression at work in Saudi Arabia. Dressing for work while travelling in Saudi is more important, complicated, and nuanced than a simple wardrobe choice – it is part of the overall impression of management work and a personal safety and security issue.

As at UK FBOs, dress codes are complex and contentious, with additional expectations placed on women compared to men to adapt their work wardrobe to Saudi norms. Although there is explicit Saudi government guidance dictating modest dress for men and women, in practice the dress codes apply predominantly to women. They have to adapt their travel work wardrobe not only to Saudi dress codes but also to norms within their sector and professional function/role:

“There was a directive came round two or three years ago in our organisation reminding people... about professional dress and that professional dress was required in the office at all times. And that meant no short skirts way above the knee and no low-cut blouses. But it didn't mention any attire that any of the men might be wearing, and I questioned it [with HR].” (Jo)

Women had to adapt their work wardrobe in various degrees, even if they were Muslim. Whilst the vast majority of women wore an abaya, others were able to craft other sorts of modest workwear.

Jo, who works in international sports education, had to make a more drastic wardrobe adjustment and wear long sleeves and a loose skirt over her tracksuit bottoms while mentoring Saudi students and training Saudi teachers (all female).

Even if women have prior experience travelling in predominantly Muslim countries, they still often need advice on dressing for business travel in Saudi Arabia. Those who have relevant experience can, and sometimes do, offer cultural guidance to colleagues within their organisations on navigating dress and behaviour codes. Women reported wanting more guidance on working in Saudi Arabia.

Women dressing for business travel to Saudi Arabia experience anxiety and feelings of awkwardness about getting it wrong. They turn to a variety of sources, including social media, government web sites (for example, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, State Department), and other online guidance available (for example, expat guides, travel blogs). They look for practical cultural guidance, advice not only on what to wear but also how to be culturally sensitive in social interactions with other people, such as how to greet people, especially men, and how to act in public areas and shops.

Some employers provide written guidance, such as country reports or visitor notes, which cover briefly Saudi etiquette and cultural norms, including dress codes (for example, general advice to wear long sleeved and loose clothing). Other employers offer informal types of guidance such as connecting employees to local staff in Saudi Arabia or to people within the organisation who have worked or travelled in the region. This type of local expert cultural intelligence, by women who work or live there, seems to provide a much-needed culturally nuanced guidance, as Anna and Lorraine reported:

“They do it like informally by connecting you to people who have worked in Saudi and they can become your buddy and they can tell you about their personal experience. But that’s kind of done not in a structured way, but just conversations. ... I actually found that really helpful because my first ever trip to Saudi, I had a female colleague who like called me and made sure I got to Riyadh and when I got to the hotel came and met with me to make sure everything was okay, and it was just like, nice.” (Anna)

“They [Foreign Office] would give you guidance. But by that time I knew, and also I prefer to learn from the locals, because I find sometimes the guidance is very biased towards the western view of the country, so they make it much more strict. And when you’re with the locals they’re like, we know you’re a foreigner, we know you’re not Muslim, you know, relax.” (Lorraine)

In terms of specific dress guidance on abayas, few women are equipped with an abaya beforehand, let alone guidance on how to wear it. In a few cases, women are given an abaya in the UK, or buy or borrow one before their departure. Other women are only given an abaya just after landing. For more details on this point

please refer to the fashion report *Modest Fashion in UK Women's Working Life: A report for fashion and the creative industries and creative arts education*.

The lack of guidance causes women confusion and hampers their ability to function professionally in Saudi Arabia. Where to obtain an abaya and how and where to wear is not a straightforward matter as Lorraine's experience suggests:



“ [The company] sent us a letter of what we need to pack and blah blah blah, and sort of highlighted, it's very important that you buy an abaya before you arrive because there is nowhere to buy an abaya at the airport. . . I had assumed when I get to the airport, I'll go to a duty free shop, get something to cover up with and go out. No, you have to arrive wearing it, and that sort of put up a bit of a red flag, I was like, wow, this is serious, like I have to wear it on the plane. Like they said we have to change into it on the plane, basically, before we land. . . . So I did research [at home and found a] a kind of Pakistani area and they had shops with the Pakistani sort of shalwar kameez versions, which are quite colourful. So I told the shop owner I'm going to Saudi Arabia, and he was a bit horrified. He said, oh god. So he found this sort of heavy, black, multi-layered polyester pull over the head thing that he said, you know, this is going to be appropriate.” (Lorraine)

▲ *Lorraine (far left) and her colleagues in first week of arrival for their teaching posts in Riyadh.*

Image: Courtesy of research participant

3.3 Work dress codes: HR perspectives

From an HR perspective, especially in terms of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI, D&I), issues of religion in the workplace are usually confined to managing religion or belief requests, such as prayer facilities and time off for religious festivals (anticipating or evaluating requests in relation to reasonable operational considerations and prevailing legal definitions). While EDI has become a recognisable specialist career path in HR, mostly people have developed specialisms in gender equality, ethnicity, and disability, with fewer so far specialising in religion or belief.

When it comes to religious dress in the workplace, most of the issues that emerge concern the demonstration of employee religious identity through appearance. Cases often emerge when adherence to workplace dress codes clashes with an employee's religious beliefs (for example, when female Muslims working for NHS hospitals face challenges with wearing the headscarf and the bare below the elbows policy). If after balancing health and safety – or corporate visual identity – with respect for employees' religious expression, religious dress emerges as a point of contention in the workplace and no agreement can be reached, employees may end up concealing markers that indicate their religious identity or they look for employment in more inclusive workplaces.⁵⁵ Such places of employment may include FBOs.

The two HR EDI specialists in large universities in England interviewed for the project could not recall giving guidance on travelling to Saudi Arabia or working for UK-based religious organisations; this is interesting, given that students and staff do sometimes work in those contexts.

The HR staff member interviewed at a Muslim organisation (discussed above), Danielle, gave guidance to colleagues on dress in their induction. She also dealt with complaints from visitors and other staff about the appropriateness of staff members' dress, taking the employee aside "discreetly" and "quickly" and asking them to modify what they wore. Having experienced this herself when she was first in the organisation, and having been happy to put on a cardigan when asked to, she did not see this a big issue:

“It’s normally been fine when that’s happened. Normally try and make it just kind of informal sort of 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 just kind of 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)

Danielle’s use of the word “embarrassed” raises the issue of shame experienced by those on the receiving end of these instructions. Women are more commonly surveilled and shamed for their physical appearance than men, and likewise these instances appeared to have been mostly about male complaints about female staff members, suggesting possible gender discrimination.

Danielle acknowledged that appropriateness is “open to interpretation”:

“I don’t necessarily feel particularly well placed to advise on it because I still feel that I’m interpreting it all the time. [When] I’m training people on it about how specific to be, because I’m not always actually a hundred per cent sure because I think it is open to interpretation of different people working within the organisation. We had, a particular example I’m thinking of, a senior member of staff spoke to a male member of the HR team and said I’m not happy about this person’s outfit, and that male member of the HR team spoke to a female member of the HR team to say can you communicate to her that that’s not appropriate. But the issue or question with this particular person wasn’t their dress was too short or too low-cut, they felt it was too tight-fitting. But, the person in question is a larger dress size and I think that impacted how tight-fitting the outfit was.” (Danielle)

As Danielle noticed (and as Rabbi Rebecca experienced), body shape can render dressing modestly harder, with onlookers interpreting bodies that are not slim as insufficiently modest. HR professionals may find themselves implementing a form of fat-shaming that is experienced as particularly cruel, when “the failure to fit into the clothes or to be the beauty ideal is overlaid with the taint of failing at modesty; a judgement that can operate variously or simultaneously as a moral, aesthetic, spiritual, and community indictment”.⁵⁶

Recommendations

For HR, EDI (D&I), managers and employers

1. As not all HR, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI and D&I) professionals are specialists in religion and belief, they should seek to enhance their knowledge about issues relating to religion and belief in the workplace. This might include developing relationships with external bodies/consultants who can provide specialist advice, support, and training.
2. Organisations should seek to ensure buy-in to religion and belief as part of equality, diversity and inclusion at a senior level within the organisation.
3. Organisations should make clear to their staff where advice can be found about religion at work (for example guidance by ACAS, ENEI and EHRC). Organisations should note that advice may be provided by people other than HR or managers (for example religion and belief organisations and individual employees with specific expertise), and so should cultivate an ability to identify religion expertise differently and specifically. (However, they should also recognise that one individual or organisation cannot speak for all people of that religion).
4. HR and managers at secular employers should learn from good practice in managing religion and belief requests from employees (for example, flexibility in work schedules to enable employees to pray during the day, wearing of religious jewellery or clothing where they do not contravene health and safety regulations, or supporting requests for leave to attend religious festivals).
5. Religiously-related fashion and “ethnic” fashion should be accepted as suitable business wear. To ensure this, 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.
6. Employers should recognise that modesty codes of dress and behaviour in faith-based work contexts (including interactions with external partners) may give rise to conflicts over specific equality issues (for example, staff members feeling inhibited to talk about personal relationships that may contravene the conservative religious approach of the organisation or external partner).

7. Organisations and HR and managers should ensure that any reprimands for inappropriate dress do not unfairly target one gender (or a group displaying another protected characteristic) over another. They should also resist reprimanding staff unless there is a clear and repeated failure to adhere to the dress code; this is important because reprimanding staff can have a negative impact on their confidence at work. This caution applies equally to faith-based and secular work environments.
8. HR, Employers and EDI professionals should provide more dress guidance for staff travelling overseas. This should cover gendered norms of behaviour, and how best to respond to gendered behavioural codes.
9. They should also give guidance to men travelling with women about how to support them if local patriarchal norms exclude women's full participation; this applies to formal business or occupational interactions and to social activities and networking opportunities.
10. Staff travelling to Saudi Arabia should be comprehensively briefed on the practical details of abaya-sourcing and abaya-wearing (or/and the prevailing requirements for modest dress) and of local cultural codes.
11. Employers should provide an appropriate wardrobe allowance to employees who have to buy new clothes to work overseas in a different cultural context.

For faith-based and interfaith organisations

12. Faith-based organisations should ensure that any dress code they use is not discriminatory against particular groups of employees (for example, the non-religious or women).
13. Faith-based organisations who require staff to dress modestly should consider whether to allow for a range of interpretations of modest dress by staff, or whether to be more specific about what they require staff to wear.
14. Faith-based organisations/ religious contexts should provide support in recognition of the additional burden non-religious (or differently religious) staff may face in negotiating organisational norms. Such support could begin during recruitment and induction, and might include compensation in terms of time and expense (including clothing allowances), as well as training and appropriately focused CPD.

15. Faith-based organisations should balance their preference for employees to represent the organisation's religion with a recognition that employees should be free to behave, dress and live according to their own, perhaps different, values. Organisations should be mindful about the extent to which corporate modesty requirements are expanded into non-organisational spaces or extra-curricular activities (for example, strictures about cross-gender socialising at lunchtime).
16. Those working in interfaith work should try to balance being true to one's own religion or belief identity and dress choices with respect for the dress and identity of others. This may or may not require adapting one's own clothes, and it should not be a burden placed more on women than on men.
17. Dress should be discussed more within interfaith work, in order to increase understanding between people of intersectional differences and inequalities related to gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, nationality, sexual orientation and other aspects of identity, not only religion.

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 pixelation). 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.

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

FBO employees	
Religious affiliation of organisations:	
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
Total:	22

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

Total no. people interviewed:	65
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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
Lama	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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