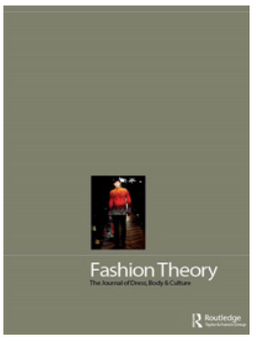

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Aesthetic Labor in Religious Contexts: Women Encountering Modest Dress in the Workplace in the UK and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This article explores how UK women encounter religious dress and behavior codes in religious work contexts. It compares two very different case studies: women working at faith-based organizations in the UK and women working for secular organizations who travel for work to Saudi Arabia. Using 65 semi-structured interviews, participant wardrobe photographs, and observation in regional modest fashion retail, the article analyzes women workers' experience in religious contexts as a form of aesthetic labor. It investigates the gendered and religious components which structure women's different responses to workplace modesty codes. Detailing the additional aesthetic and emotional labor demanded

of women in crafting modest professional appearances in religious contexts, the research reveals continuities in how workplace modesty requirements impact on women's occupational performance and sense of self. The conclusion argues that religion-related workplace modesty codes constitute a religiously-inflected form of organizational aesthetics that may operate simultaneously with, but be experienced differently from, secular-driven organizational aesthetics. We find that religious dress codes are arbitrated by the avoidance of shame, an affect accompanying the government of modesty for all involved. We find that organizations benefit from, but do not recognize or recompense, the additional aesthetic labor that modesty demands of women.

KEYWORDS: aesthetic labor, women and religion, Saudi Arabia, women and employment, fashion and religion

Introduction

Academic and media commentary largely regards modest dress as a concern for religious women; whether viewed positively as a personal choice to express religious identity or negatively as religious patriarchal oppression. In the UK and EU, modest or religious dress is considered primarily in relation to the right, under equality legislation, to individual expression of religion and belief at work. This article, by contrast, focuses on how women encounter religious codes of modest dress and behavior as a workplace requirement when working in religious contexts, regardless of their own diverse religious and secular beliefs and practices. We compare occupational dress experiences in two apparently very different situations: the *de jure* Christian but *de facto* secularized and religiously plural UK democracy, and the Islamic theocracy of Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy.

The UK focus is on women employed by faith-based organizations (FBOs), including schools, charities, and places of worship. The Saudi study concerns women in secular employment with UK and global organizations who traveled for work to Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia they were obliged to defer to state mandated religious codes of gendered dress and abide by rules about gender-segregated space and behavior.

Our focus on the workplace—rather than on individual employees—as the generator of modesty codes situates occupational modesty regimes as forms of organizational aesthetics and analyses the embodied aesthetic labor required of women employees. Viewing the operation and impact of religious organizational aesthetics in the round, we examine employee experience alongside investigating how employers, managers, HR professionals, and diversity practitioners maintain and regulate compliance with modesty codes. We found continuities in secular and faith-based employment sectors in both locations which reveal how

and Western Women's Writings: A Critical Reader (ed. 2006 with Nancy Micklewright); *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (2004): *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (ed. 2003 with Sara Mills); *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (1996); and *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Visual Cultures* (ed.1996 with Peter Horne). Reina was consulting curator for the exhibition *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*, at the Fine Art Museums of San Francisco in 2018 (touring Frankfurt 2019, Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum 2020) and is coeditor of the accompanying book with Jill D'Allesandro. Reina Lewis edits the book series *Dress Cultures* with Elizabeth Wilson (Bloomsbury Academic). Recent media commentary includes the New York Times, le Monde, BBC World, The Guardian, The Times, The Economist, Marie-Claire magazine, Businessoffashion.com, Fortune.com, Huffington Post, Vogue Arabia.
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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

workplace modesty requirements impact on women's occupational performance and sense of self. Our analysis of the gender and religious components that structure women's different responses to workplace modesty codes thereby incorporates religious and belief dispositions into the frame of aesthetic labor.

The first section reviews relevant literature and summarizes the religious and employment contexts in the UK and Saudi Arabia, followed by an explanation of our methods. Our findings reveal instances where women feel diminished by modesty codes and/or find benefits through enterprising self-actualization. We find that employers lack skills to manage effectively this gendered component of workplace experience. In conclusion, we argue that organizations should recognize and recompense the additional aesthetic and emotional labor demanded of women in crafting modest professional appearances.

Context

Religion and modest dress

We use the term "modest dress" to refer to the different ways in which women from diverse religious and religio-ethnic communities cover their bodies in accordance with their interpretation of religious teachings and, variably, their accommodations of prevailing religious cultural community conventions, or/and to make a political statement. Modest embodiment may distinguish the wearer from other religions, from secular society, or/and from coreligionists (Arthur 1999; Tarlo 2010; Bucar 2017), and can include details of hair (Tarlo 2017), garment type and color (Lewis 2013). In the last three decades, modest fashion has emerged as a niche market and media (Lewis 2013) and been mainstreamed within the globalized fashion industry, galvanized by the construction of Muslims as a global consumer segment (Jafari and Sandikci 2016), with dividends for other consumers seeking less revealing clothing.

Religions with codes of modesty and shame often include guidance for men, but women's dress and behavior are most stringently regulated. So too, secular societies focus judgment on women with fat-shaming or age-shaming emblematized by women's perceived failures (Hoggard 2013). Modest embodiment—as personal choice or workplace requirement—is a spatialized practice, often determined by whom else might view the modestly dressed body (Werbner 2007). Our analysis of religious workplace modesty codes and their regulation attends to how women—and those who manage them—deal with the potential of being shamed that can accompany perceived failure to enact required modes of modesty in a context where women's appearance at work is more stringently judged than men's. The risk of being shamed or having to

shame others (Sedgewick 1993) pervades individual and organizational responses to workplace modesty codes.

Religious work contexts: UK FBOs and Saudi Arabia

In the UK, organizational approaches to religious modesty codes are governed by the 2010 Equality Act that incorporated religion and belief among a set of six protected characteristics in relation to employment and public services (with some exceptions for religion and belief organizations). The Act requires that employees be permitted to express religion and belief at work and that employers should make "reasonable adjustments" subject to considerations such as health and safety. Employers find that most religion-related requests concern time off for festivals or dietary needs, rather than dress. Dress issues in UK legal and policy contexts have concerned individuals wanting to wear religious dress or symbols in the secular workplace rather than religious employers regulating employee's appearance. High profile cases in the UK and European Court of Human Rights have shown the difficulty for employers and public service providers in defining legitimate expression of religion and belief and in arbitrating its impact on corporate image and function (Vickers 2017; Howard 2020). Courts have often found in favor of the employer.

In UK organizational settings, dress code is often implicit rather than explicit—reliant on employee habitus to provide the appropriate soft skills for preferred forms of grooming (Nath, Bach, and Lockwood 2016)—with an "unspoken uniform" applying equally to freelancers and entrepreneurs (Armstrong and McDowell 2018). For UK organizations that do have a declared dress code, experience navigating religiously related dress at work also appears limited.

In Saudi Arabia, particular versions of modest dress were state mandated for nationals and for visitors. Women visitors were expected to wear an abaya (floor-length over garment, front fastening or over the head) and sometimes a scarf over their hair[1] in areas designated as public where women might be seen by non-familial men. This changed in late 2019 when Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman indicated a relaxation in the dress code for Saudi women and altered the abaya requirement for visitors to unspecified forms of "modest dress."[2] Most of our Saudi fieldwork took place before this announcement—or in the weeks immediately after—so our participants are reflecting on workplace experiences in which the abaya and sometimes a headscarf was required.

Like the most consecrated national dress, the reification of the abaya as Saudi dress is an invented tradition. As Madawi Al-Rasheed details, the ruling al-Saud family operationalized dress to homogenize tribal and regional variations into a new national culture based in Wahhabi Islam. Thus, "boundary markers that visibly and structurally distinguish the

pious nation … " materialize in the national image of women in black abayas and men in white thobes (long gowns):

> The colors black and white in the public sphere have become national symbols, similar to the country's flag; both imply religious inscriptions, signs of the piety of the state and nation. (Al-Rasheed 2013, 116)

In practice, modest dressing varies according to location, family status, and personal preference as across the region, but is uniquely policed in Saudi Arabia (Al-Qasimi 2010). It is within living memory of all but the youngest Saudi women that their public presence, appearance, and behavior was regulated to varying extents by the *Muttawa*, or religious police (the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice). For visitors, uncertainty about getting modesty right is likely to prevail in the current transition period.

Employers responsible for women traveling to work in Saudi Arabia manage staff who are subject to multiple local gendered business norms and diversity cultures. Saudi Arabia's workplaces have moved from, for example, gender segregated office floors to partial desegregation (Le Renard 2014) as the proportion of Saudi women employed outside the home has increased to support the transition to a post-oil economy (from 14.1 per cent in 2001 to 32.3 in 2021).[3] Women visiting Saudi Arabia encounter a finely demarcated changeable modest workwear environment. To help staff avoid individual problems and mitigate against reputational risk, companies often produce country guides; yet these do not sufficiently attend to the embodied gendered spatialized experience. Guides lack detail on clothing and women rely on others sharing in situ knowledge.

In both Saudi Arabia and UK FBOs, women's aesthetic labor in crafting the appropriately modestly dressed body is further complicated because the modestly-presented body is surveilled in the workplace by colleagues and visitors with varied views about "appropriate" dress for job delivery. As Priola and Chaudhry explain in their study of women bank workers in Lahore, "modesty and gender practices are affected by the complex and multidimensional meanings of Islamic/social values, by personal values and the culture of the work organization" (2021, 309); yet management and organizational studies rarely include religion in "sociological" contextual norms.

Aesthetic labor

For women, appearance is more often a factor in recruitment and career success than for men (French 2002). Forms of appearance that include visible markers of non-majoritarian religiosity further decrease employment opportunity in the UK, entrenching structural and intersecting social inequalities. Some of this applies to men and women: turbans and

beards or *bindis* and headscarves bring a religious employment penalty that can compound racial prejudice based on skin color (Weller et al. 2001; Bradley et al. 2007; Ghumman and Ryan 2013). The employment penalties of ethnicity and religion are melded for men or women who dress in ways conventional to minority communities: so-called "ethnic clothing" is rarely regarded as normative business-wear, just as prejudice remains against afro-textured hair.

This study of religious modest dressing as a workplace requirement locates the process of cultivating the appropriately dressed and comported modest body as a form of embodied aesthetic labor. The women we interviewed were required to develop skills in unfamiliar garment acquisition and grooming for modesty as part of "the management of their bodies by their employers for those employers' benefit" (Warhurst and Nickson 2020, 39).

Theories of aesthetic labor focused initially on interactive service sector work in the early 1990s "style labour market" (Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson 2003) where success in hospitality and retail required service delivery by a body able to enact brand values (Wrigley and Lowe 1996). This augmented research on workers' attitudes as an organizational asset developed in theories of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) in the 1980s' shift to service economies. The last quarter of the twentieth century was also when the first generation of women were entering the male-dominated boardroom with many—including some of our participants—following impression management guidance from the "dress for success" self-improvement genre. As Entwistle discusses, the workwear mode popularized by these manuals had by the 1980s become a widespread practice of power-dressing in which masculine-style tailored skirt suits were combined with feminine touches (a frill or scarf at the neck) to help professional women negotiate the "veritable tightrope [of] balancing the need to diminish sexuality with the need to maintain femininity in a man's world of work" (Entwistle 2015, 189).

By the 2000s, embodied aesthetic labor encompassed much consumer culture and the public sector. The ability to deliver the performances required by organizational aesthetics relies on embodied capacities that are in part present pre-employment (Pettinger 2005) and not equally available to all. Cautioning that that "not all aestheticised labour is aesthetic labour" Warhurst and Nickson (2020, 44) emphasize the structural divide between individual aesthetic adaptation and employer-driven requirements. Yet this is also mutable: research on freelancers or fashion models (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006) shows that they adjust embodied presentation to anticipate of the needs of multiple potential employers.

As more occupations become freelance in the gig economy, Elias, Gill, and Scharff argue that "[n]eoliberalism makes us all 'aesthetic entrepreneurs'" (2017, 5). The pervasive psychological impact of "aestheticised cultural work" brings forth the idealized neoliberal subject who will "embrace qualities such as confidence, happiness and

authenticity" and take individual responsibility for success or failure (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017, 38). The impact (negative and positive) of modesty codes on women's confidence at work situates religion as a component of today's panoptic visuality in which "some form of aesthetic labor is increasingly demanded of all women (and increasing numbers of men), as we live in societies that become ever more dominated by new forms of visibility, appearance and looking" (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017, 38).

Adkins (2001) cautions against viewing the "aestheticization or culturalization of labour" as "a feminization of work." Reading across McDowell's empirical research, Adkins notes that whilst "[p]erformances of feminine aesthetics for men workers are achievable, recognized, and, moreover, constitute [rewardable] workplace resources," women do not reap the same benefit. Performed by women, competencies in affective labor are regarded as innate "'natural advantages' (McDowell 1997, 154) that should not receive work-place recognition [or] be rewarded by promotion." We explore similar gender inequities in the organizational refusal to recognize as labor the work of creating modest presentation for work—even when, as with the abaya, it is manifestly not "natural" or innate to cohorts of women employees raised outside of abaya-wearing cultures.

We find permeability in the boundaries of aesthetic labor and individual impression management and fluidity between different forms of aesthetic labor. Women working in religious contexts move along a continuum between individually-driven efforts of personal grooming for career enhancement and workplace-mandated modesty codes. We examine women's experience of organizational aesthetics in two contexts led by religion: the UK faith-based sector and the experience of accommodating multiple organizational aesthetics when UK secular organizational esthetics merge with state-mandated religious aesthetics in Saudi Arabia. We evaluate how religious and secular dispositions factor into the pre-employment capacities that employers "mobilise, develop, deploy and commodify [through] processes of recruitment, selection, training and management" (Warhurst and Nickson 2020, 6).

As spatialized practices, aesthetic labor goes beyond co-present interactions: the affective impact of fashion models' aesthetic labor is experienced indirectly through images (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). The audience for aesthetic labor goes beyond consumers or clients: store fashion buyers perform aesthetic labor to achieve status with other professionals in the fashion field (Entwistle 2009); journalists project fashion capital to gatekeepers at fashion shows (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006).

The myriad of fashion micro-distinctions with which fashion field participants must acquire familiarity is mirrored in the micro-distinctions governing religious aesthetic regimes in religious organizational contexts: obvious to insiders, invisible and initially impenetrable to outsiders. Clothes do not only garb the body, they also shape

it—requiring learned techniques of body management whether for high heels or a sari (Entwistle 2015; Banerjee and Miller 2003). Clothes affect the external management of the body and interior dispositions (Mahmood 2005), with distinctive religious dress cultures producing "different types of people" (Andrewes 2004, 11). We investigate the extent to which skills in secular aesthetic labor are transferable to the religious organizational aesthetic context.

The burden of aesthetic labor can be mitigated by employees self-selecting to work at organizations with which they have a good "fit," sometimes as brand consumers. Aesthetic affinity is a strong recruitment factor in fashion retail (Leslie 2002), including for observant Muslim women (Lewis 2015; Sandıkçı and Ger 2005). Warhurst and Nickson find individuals generally accept the business case for adapting to organizational corporeal and behavioral demands. Detecting "only few or minor points of employee resistance or resentment" they call for more research on "resistance to aesthetic labour":

> It might be that there are two counter prevailing processes that explain the lack of empirical evidence: first, that it is counter-productive for the employee [likely to face penalty or be managed out], or, second, that instead of resisting employees simply exit. (Warhurst and Nickson 2020, 156)

We provide some of the empirical evidence needed to meet this call, with data on the mix of resistance and acquiescence that characterize responses to religious modesty aesthetic regimes.

Methods

Given the interdisciplinary nature of this project, cutting across fashion studies, religious studies and sociology of gender and work, we combined qualitative methods from humanities and social sciences. In addition to secondary research, we conducted semi-structured interviews and asked respondents in each case study a similar set of questions. We elicited photographs from those willing to provide them of ensembles women wore for work and for home/leisure (a method used in wardrobe studies). To ensure confidentiality women were encouraged to frame selfies cropped at the chin, or arrange clothes in a "flat lay" on a surface, or if they provided photos of themselves in the clothes we pixelated out faces or other identifying details. For the wider project (data not reported here), we used shopper ethnography and retail site observation in Saudi Arabia and Dubai and attended international modest fashion week events in Istanbul. We mostly met women in the UK and Saudi Arabia away from their place of work; on occasion, site observation at the workplace was possible. We also carried out textual and

visual analysis (of policy documents, specialist media, modesty codes, and commercial fashion imagery).

We conducted a total of 65 semi-structured interviews, most of which were face-to-face, some via Skype and phone. We focused on two types of employment experiences for women. We spoke with 21 UK-based women who worked in Saudi Arabia for a period of time or who traveled there on business. These women are employed in a range of sectors including international education, arts, culture and leisure, fashion and lifestyle, professional services, and healthcare. We also interviewed 22 women who work in UK FBOs, including faith schools, charities, and places of worship, whether directly employed, sub-contracted or engaged on a project-basis. Our final group of 22 interviewees consisted of fashion industry professionals and designers, HR professionals and managers, specialist diversity practitioners, and Saudi women "civilians" (i.e., not fashion industry professionals) who had acted as fashion mediators in helping visiting women acquire and wear abayas. Participants' employment contexts ran from large organizations with a full HR function to small voluntary sector organizations with no dedicated HR provision and all stages in between.

Participants were recruited from "calls for research participants" distributed via a range of groups and networks including the social media of some of our project partners. We also used snowball sampling deriving from the project investigators' existing networks in faith-based, interfaith, and secular women's networks, HR and employment, and "mainstream" and modest fashion media and industry. All participants are assigned a pseudonym, and care was taken to remove details that might identify individuals. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically coded (Braun and Clarke 2006) using Nvivo software.

Results

In religious contexts, workplace dress codes are inevitably partial religious interpretations unable to match the personal practices of religious employees or visitors, even if employees share the organizational religious tradition. Other mismatches between personal belief (religious and non-religious) and faith-based workplace modesty codes operate for people who come from different religious backgrounds or/and are secular and/or have no religious affiliation. In UK FBOs, women could choose garment types and styles to craft the required modest appearance. Women visiting Saudi Arabia for work found garment choice dictated by the state. Yet there were shared patterns in the enactment of workplace modesty codes that have implications for employees and those managing them.

All the women we interviewed wore different clothes for work than for leisure. All wore garments that they sourced, paid for, and owned. In the UK, sector normative variations in dress and appearance were

mirrored in faith-based and secular workplaces: restrained corporate styling for professional services and healthcare; flamboyant gestures of individuality in heritage and the arts; dressing down in most voluntary sector organizations.

Our participants considered it normal to be conscious of their appearance at work. The requirement to abide by workplace modesty codes was an interruption to everyone's habitual processes of dressed presentation for work, including women with their own forms of modest fashion pre-employment. Workwear adjustments for UK FBOs could be achieved through garment selection from the UK high street offer. Finding an abaya suitable for work was an alien garment acquisition experience for everyone we interviewed, including Muslim women who had previously worn an abaya for pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia.

With varying degrees of comfort or discomfort when working in an abaya, all participants were willing to accommodate Saudi dress cultures. The time and challenge involved in finding and learning to wear the unfamiliar occupational dress of an abaya highlights the less visible gendered aesthetic labor already incorporated into women's working lives. Because the abaya requires learning new techniques of body management, failure can be mission critical.

The Saudi religious work environment jeopardizes previous aesthetic labor skills

Some older participants entered their field when women were few and were long-practiced in the gendered aesthetic labor required to mitigate their workplace incursion. Now senior in global professional services, Barbara, white, 57, describes her work wardrobe as "relatively conservative." Starting in male-dominated finance in the 1980s, Barbara's wardrobe development became an act of career-essential impression management.

> … in a world of very grey-suited male professionals, it's important that the few women—and there are still few women—stand out, so I will wear splashes of color [red or a bit of yellow] mixed into something that's conservative.

Barbara dislikes shopping; to minimize time and maximize results she visits an independent multi-brand boutique several times a year to refresh her "travel capsules." These small collections see her through frequent business trips: "dresses in the main with jackets; always something that you can wear in the Middle East." In Western contexts, the exclusivity of the boutique's range is important: it is worth Barbara devoting some of her "precious time away from my family" to render herself distinctive as a woman and distinctive from other women: "When there's only two women in the room you don't want to be dressed the same."

Barbara's American colleague Lyn, from a white Southern Baptist culture, works extensively in the Middle East and uses a personal shopper for capsule wardrobes that save time in daily aesthetic labor:

> [It's] kind of a uniform … black trousers, black top, various jackets of color [and] then funky shoes; and I can do that every day and I don't have to think about [it].

Barbara's pop of color and Lyn's expensive funky shoes allow them to stand out from personal competitors within and without their firm in a male-dominated sector. This personal investment in career progression also advantages their organization in a competitive market. Demonstrating individuation through embodied delivery is a gendered tariff additional to the organizational aesthetics required of all company employees.

Barbara took a different attitude to the gender-specific consumption burden of acquiring an abaya. Her travel wardrobes meet modesty requirements for other Muslim majority countries and she was initially "rebellious" that the Saudi code reframed her travel workwear as immodest. Later, she became "more accepting of it, the price of doing business." She pushed back when kitting up for her first trip:

> I said, I'm also not going to waste my time and money trying to search for [an abaya] in the UK … So if you want me there you'd better go and get me an abaya.
>
> I said don't spend lots of money [on] something I almost didn't want to fit in …

In common with her female colleagues, Barbara's usual workwear is expensive and intended to be individuating. Selecting from luxury and affordable luxury brands, Barbara's clothes are tailored to the body in ways conventional to "western" globalized fashion and her boutique advisers will have ascertained which brands best suit her body and taste. Her garments are not bespoke, but offer sufficiently good fit and aesthetic choice to facilitate the sensation of crafting a unique personal style through the selection of pre-made mass market product (Woodward 2007). The abaya differs in construction and affect:

> … you don't need measurements because, you know, it's [gestures to looseness] … I call it my black sack …
>
> This abaya gets lent out all over the firm, you know …

At Barbara's firm, women share a non-individuating attitude to abaya wearing, regarding them as collective property. We found the loaning of abayas to be common amongst our participants, emphasizing

lack of investment in the garment as an expression of self. Although the abaya's looseness facilitated multiple wearers, women also reported discomfort wearing abayas borrowed from women taller or shorter than themselves.

Saudi modesty codes have positive and negative impact on occupational delivery

Managing an unfamiliar voluminous long garment sometimes impeded occupational delivery: Mattie, running family art workshops, struggled with crouching up and down to toddler height. The materiality of the abaya could affect the flow of the working day, including for British Muslim of Egyptian heritage Amal whose experience of wearing an abaya on pilgrimage had not produced body management skills transferable to the Saudi work environment:

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

Some women found that their inability to project their usual work impression undercut their confidence. Sue, white, age 54 and a senior international relations leader for a national British cultural institution, dresses "relatively classical" in trousers and jackets; "not too formal," as typical in her sector. Like Barbara and Lyn, she isn't fond of shopping but gives workwear "a certain amount" of attention because "I think clothes help with confidence." Now "fairly secular," Sue's "very Catholic" upbringing endowed her with "sensitivity" to religion. A frequent traveler, Sue found the small modesty adjustments she had previously encountered in Malaysia and Indonesia to be congruent with her usual workwear. In contrast, the Saudi modesty habitus and abaya requirement produced "aesthetic dissonance" (Warhurst and Nickson 2020, 85): "if you feel you're dressed well you feel good about yourself, and wearing something that's so shapeless, I sort of felt that people didn't really know me, it created a barrier." Physically and psychologically disorienting, the abaya:

> made me feel less confident. [So] instead of just being me and getting on with my business [I] was constantly aware [of] wearing this uniform, in a way, this thing that didn't really represent me.
>
> I was travelling with my boss [so] I felt in a way a bit sort of humiliated having to wear something and he didn't have to.

Relatively unusual when Sue visited in 2014–2015, her Saudi partners included men and women: the women's faces were covered which

Sue found "quite difficult, [because] obviously I couldn't really recognize them the following day." Although her Saudi colleagues didn't seem offended, Sue "found it created a sort of distance in being able to make a relationship with them." Her inability to distinguish her Saudi colleagues manifested the lack of individuation she feared for her abaya-clad self—although she was able to lead meetings and her Saudi hosts were welcoming. Where Barbara's sartorial distinctiveness in western boardrooms could parlay into individuating career advantage, wearing the abaya "cloak of invisibility" (Jo) could reduce professional profile.

Others appreciated how abaya uniformity reduced aesthetic labor. Amal, 34, healthcare consultant, likes outfits to "have a statement." On client-facing days, a knee-length dress or trouser suit in "a classic simple color" is paired with "a bright scarf [hijab] to brighten it all up." Accustomed to "spend time choosing" her outfit, she found that wearing an abaya gave her "an extra 15, 20 minutes' sleep every day."

> … by the end of [ten months in Riyadh in 2018/19] I would always tell people, seriously, abaya over a suit any day. I could go into meetings just wearing leggings and a t-shirt underneath my abaya, and no one would know. I would wear my gym wear underneath [and that] saved a lot of time.

Anna, a Christian Korean-American healthcare consultant, also valued the segue from work to gym and spending less time choosing outfits: "I went from wearing a suit or something professional to work every day to wearing the abaya and I can wear whatever I want underneath …." Nonetheless, she missed her fashion fix:

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

Aesthetic labor in UK FBOs: gender discrimination within and between faiths

Women working at UK FBOs frequently shared the organizational religion and did not find the workplace modesty code as alien as those working in Saudi Arabia. However, we found considerable intra-religious variation among women who shared the workplace religious affiliation, as well as from those who were of other faith or belief and secular backgrounds. Organizational religious aesthetics ranged from implied to specified. Even written codes were usually ambiguous and, as with secular organizational aesthetics, sector norms changed over time. The situation was particularly acute for women religious leaders.

Like the early women executives struggling to dress for the secular boardroom, the first generation of female religious leaders worked hard to gain professional respect. Rebecca, 66 and white, received negative comments about appearance from men in her synagogue when ordained as a Reform Jewish rabbi in the early 1980s. With women rabbis a rarity (the first UK ordination was in 1975), Rebecca "thought long and hard about what to wear in the pulpit, because [my] big bust often drew attention to me." Gender-specific religious conventions and personal body issues underwrote her occupational wardrobe choices:

> I [spent] 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's workwear had to include skirts because then it was not (then) acceptable for women of her denomination to wear trousers to synagogue (as still in some Jewish traditions). But she was not alone in needing to avoid trousers. The "female business suit" emblematic of 1980s power-dressing was available to her (including at price points to suit her limited budget, below) because managing female sexuality at work was also a concern for women in or aspiring to leadership roles in secular organizations. The suit "divided in two" the woman's body: "her torso is covered by a fitted jacket which de-emphasized her breasts, but her femininity is signaled by the wearing of a skirt" (Entwistle 2015, 190). The gendered burden of Rebecca's aesthetic labor was increased by monetary concerns and she was class-shamed in comparison to the sartorial proxy power of the wife of the synagogue board's chair:

> My very first student pulpit, the chair's wife was quite elegant and they had money and I didn't… I had two [suits]. And he made a comment about it to the college that I was wearing, just this kind of, you know, a bit shabby, suits.

Rebecca's confidence grew over 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 evolved in my style… "

Rabbinical women's clothing was still an issue three decades later when Rachel, white, 29, began her Reform synagogue training. As someone who has "always loved clothes" and known for her "experimental" street fashion, it was an externally generated shock that fashion might clash with her vocation:

> …the year before I started at rabbinical school I was at a party when this girl came up to me, and she said, are there any rules… are you going to be allowed to dress like that once

> you're a rabbi? … I was wearing a black wrap round playsuit, it had quite a low neck and it was short … And I just remember it so acutely because it was, I think, for me a moment of realizing that actually there might be some sort of perceived incongruence between [how] I want to spend my time and the way that I enjoy dressing.

Rachel had run a fashion business and her periodization of rabbinical workwear is immersed in the lexicon of globalized fashion trends:

> It's probably fair to say that the previous generation of female rabbis dressed in quite a dowdy way … there was a sense that you kind of hid your femininity, so they wear quite drapey [and] boring, drab clothing. And then the generation of rabbis that's ten years older than me [are] much more okay with dressing in a feminine manner … shorter skirts and heels. [Then] my generation where it's like, well, can I wear a pair of high-waisted 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 …

Dressing for her clerical function transgressed the distinctive personal style in which Rachel and her friends were invested. Fashion mediation from an older woman rabbi proved both practical and troubling:

> … in my first year of rabbinical school I wore some heels to the services and the rabbi said to me, she said you're not going to be able to wear heels that high.
>
> *Because it's just not appropriate?*
>
> No, it's just really uncomfortable.
>
> She said to me, like go to Clarks, and I was like, I will go to Clarks over my dead body. And then like three weeks later I bought a pair of heels in Clarks. [I] texted one of my friends and I sent her a picture of the heels, and she said, if you buy clear tights I'll never talk to you again. And like I'd also obviously bought clear tights. [It's] just totally not how I would choose to dress in million years. [laughs]

Modesty codes are positive and negative experience in UK FBOs

Modest dressing is rarely a pull factor in FBO recruitment but is sometimes welcomed (especially for headscarf-wearing Muslim women) as part of a general "fit" with religious cultural norms. A shared religious worldview could make the workplace feel

comfortable, although distinctions in religious interpretations could produce intense discomfort.

Finely tuned modest fashion knowledge is essential for occupational success in FBOs and in intra- and inter-faith and community contexts. In Rachel's (Reform Jewish) opinion, "definitely in the Orthodox community people feel coerced to dress in the same way." It is not simply that "in the Orthodox world they're very smart"; looking smart is a litmus test of authenticity. When meeting Orthodox men:

> … I would dress in a particular way because I wouldn't want to be disrespected. [There] is still a sense that there are a lot of kind of entitled Orthodox men out there [and] I am conscious about not conforming to stereotypes of what a non-Orthodox woman is like. And that definitely means that I sometimes performatively dress modestly. [T]here's a kind of cultural coding of when you happen to be accidentally dressed modestly, versus when you're dressing Jewishly and modestly.

Twenty-eight year-old British Pakistani Zainab was attracted to her post at a progressive Muslim organization because it melded with her own progressive practices and beliefs. There is no dress code, but she dresses adaptively for meetings with conservative Muslims, aware that her appearance was:

> … not just a reflection on my personal style, but also a reflection of how well the organization understood religion and how authentic the organization was. So, I felt like that was the burden [of] working for a faith organization.

Her knowledge of the UK Muslim landscape is essential to her religiously-sensitive aesthetic labor—"there's a lot of, you know, trying to figure out what would be appropriate"—so that she can protect the organization: "I'd be more comfortable wearing [different clothes sometimes, but] I don't want to offend anybody or give a negative perception of [the organization]."

Zainab's ability to defend organizational religious integrity is compromised because she does not cover her hair. She is painfully familiar with the "assumption that because you cover your hair you must be a good Muslim, [and] someone who doesn't is not a good Muslim or doesn't really know what she's talking about." This assault on personal and organizational religious capital peaks when required to visit conservative mosques. Zainab feels "mosque spaces require a level of modesty" and dresses accordingly at her progressive mosque. But when attending different mosque spaces for work, other women challenged her hijab style as insufficient.

UK FBOs' inconsistency in regulating modesty and shame

UK FBO modesty codes vary in level of detail. Some participants preferred vague codes, seen to facilitate individual interpretation, others felt unjustly penalized because codes lacked clarity. Safya is a Muslim modest dresser who was disciplined by HR for insufficient modesty at her Muslim organization:

> 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 started asking my colleagues, do you think I dress inappropriately? Do you think I wear too much make-up? … 'no, if anything, you're the most smartly dressed person in the organization' … 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'.

HR professionals routinely pronounce organizational positions regardless of their personal feelings and implement modesty codes to which they do not personally subscribe. Safya's modest dressing is driven by personal religious conviction, so chastisement for immodesty by an HR operative who disavows personal investment adds insult and further undermines her workplace self-actualization. An opposite perspective is presented by Danielle, a non-Muslim HR professional also at a Muslim charity. Tasked with implementing the modesty code, she alerts women to anticipate surveillance from visiting men such as donors and mosque leaders:

> [Any] key stakeholders here tend to be Muslim. [When I] 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. [To] represent ourselves properly as a faith-based organization, we need to be following the cultural norms of our faith, and as an organization we do have a faith and the cultural norms of that mean that we dress conservatively.

Danielle considered it her role to discipline staff in response to external complaints. She has sufficiently internalized brand architecture to articulate brand values—"the cultural norms of our faith"—as if they are her own. A white atheist is thus enabled to castigate perceived modesty infractions on the part of (in an instance she relayed) a South Asian Muslim woman colleague. Drawing on her own experience of modesty

reprimand, Danielle frames the disciplinary interaction as "tactful," an "informal chat":

> Normally the person is quite embarrassed. I mean, I've been told in the past because [I] didn't have my shoulders and arms covered, and I remember feeling quite embarrassed, so you want it to be quite a quick conversation. And [the] person that told me about my arms, had like a spare cardigan they could give me [so] I didn't have to worry about it for the rest of the day.

Gender trumps religion when regulating modesty at work. Criticism about modesty mostly comes from men (including visitors), but enforcing modesty is mostly delegated to women regardless of their religion. In faith-based and secular organizations the shaming risk of embarrassment redirects the supervision of embodied religious expression to women because, as Danielle explained, "they [men] wouldn't feel necessarily as comfortable having that conversation."

Safya sees men operationalizing HR to their advantage: "the women don't really mind who's wearing what [but] it's quite evident that [it] does bother the men." She is offended as a woman and as a believer, considering HR's endorsement of male judgment a breach of the organization's purported religious ethos: "as we have these morals and values [it would be] more appropriate" to require men reflect on their behavior than to accommodate their demand that "it's easier for me, [if women] dress appropriately than for me to divert my gaze."

The authority accorded to external stakeholders—generally men—is amplified by intense community connectivity, and for some by clerical pastoral obligation. Rachel explains:

> Everybody knows everybody … supports everybody. [But] the personal/professional boundary isn't necessarily there. [I] think every part of the Jewish world is a bit like that … [So], when a donor or a board member makes an inappropriate comment, it's probably harder to get any kind of discipline, [because] everybody assumes the best of each other, you don't know who's related to who.

As a small national population, Jews will likely encounter extreme workplace permeability. For the larger UK Muslim population, with patterns of religious residential clustering, neighborhood and kinship *biraderi* networks can have a regulatory impact on women and young people's behavior outside the home including in their place of work (Mohammad 2005). The same "community claim" extended in Saudi Arabia to women whose appearance led others to presume they were Muslim.

Communication and behavior support modesty regulation and fuel resistance

Discomfort with the shaming inferences of regulating modesty showed in organizational and individual language choice. Even women, who used moral terms for their own dress ethos, avoided overtly moral language when describing colleagues: in both sectors, euphemisms recurred, such as "appropriate" or "professional." Zainab conjoins corporate and religious fashion: "My idea of modesty is if I was to walk into a normal corporate office wearing something and I'm not going to get raised eyebrows, then I just think okay, that must be modest." When professional maps onto modest, competency becomes a cultivatable asset. Melanie, an atheist, observes her Islamic workplace:

> … modest fashion helps women to establish a professional reputation, [and] potentially helps them to advance their career … I don't agree with it, but I [would] probably advise my daughter [to] dress in a reasonably modest way at work because [of] inherent criticism of people who don't dress modestly.

Melanie's workplace code became more "gender neutral" after "pushback from women" but she still has "real problems with people acting as moral police." Language obfuscates power in directives to follow "cultural norms": "This is a question for me, about whose culture?"

Unlike smaller FBOs, Nikki (a non-believer of Catholic heritage) works for a national Muslim charity with a written conduct code. When an email quoting the code adjured staff that their behavior and conduct, both internally and externally, should reflect the fact that the organization is "faith-inspired" and "values-driven," office gossip galvanized resistance:

> I've been told that somebody in [another office], who's quite obese and not Muslim, was wearing a vest top and [a director emailed] her that it was inappropriate. [She] was self-conscious about her body anyway and she felt very humiliated. Her line manager also felt upset on her behalf … So, a woman, who is a hijabi, [set] up an anonymous number that people could call to express their concerns [and] she would present them to head office.

The affective impact of gendered fat-shaming (body size rendering modesty harder to achieve, Lewis 2019) drove the opposition. Nikki dissects the organization's dress code language which rules against low cut, sleeveless or above the knee garments.

> Well look … No man wears low cut stuff. [And] to start by saying we are faith-inspired does not include those of us who are not of faith. So, I found it quite an offensive message, both in terms of being a woman and being a non-Muslim …

Unlike atheist Danielle who internalizes her organization's Islamic tenets to enunciate brand values in her HR delivery, Nikki expects non-affiliates and nonbelievers to be respected in her values-driven workplace. Silent sartorial insurrection ensued: "I came in the next day in something that was probably more revealing than I would have done [and] I heard on the grapevine [that] I'm not the only one who came in the next day going sod you … "

The structural gender inequality prevalent in religious organizational aesthetics in Saudi Arabia was compounded by the behavior of male colleagues who didn't have to alter significantly their dress or behavior. Women were shamed by men from the moment their plane entered Saudi air space. Sue explained:

> I got changed into [my abaya] in the airplane because people had said it's best to walk into the airport fully covered. I was travelling with my boss at the time, so I felt in a way a bit humiliated having to wear something and he didn't have to …

Non-Saudi men colleagues diminished women by mocking their struggle with the unfamiliar workwear. For Amal, wearing an abaya for professional purposes rather than her previous pilgrimage experience felt:

> very, very, very different … [I was] quite nervous before going into meetings, because I wasn't sure if it was classy enough, In didn't really know how to wear it. [I was] getting the buttons all mixed up. [laughs] And I remember the [more senior] partners [on] my team … laughing at me, a lot of it because I was struggling with my abaya and there were other things to be worrying about.
>
> *And these senior partners, were they men or women?*
>
> They were men. That's why they found it funny.

Conclusion

When women at UK FBOs were disciplined for insufficient modesty because they were observed negatively by men visitors, we see organizational aesthetics in operation: managers and HR enact corrections to increase employee "aesthetic affectivity" as an "embodied resource" for the organization (Warhurst and Nickson 2020, 52). Corrections triggered by male visitors with whom women have not directly interacted demonstrate the extension of organizational aesthetics into indirect interaction contexts. Secular organizations capitalize on the aesthetic affectivity of women when their labor is transposed to the religious organizational aesthetics of the Saudi workplace.

Rather than finding that employees either adapt or quit (qua Warhurst and Nickson 2020), our data show women engaging to modify organizational aesthetic codes in relation to religious ethics, commitment to community cohesion, or/and feminist understandings of workplace equity. This expression of cultural "entrepreneurship" therefore "captures not only the labor involved but also the agency and creativity with which people go about styling, adorning and transforming themselves" (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017, 39). Women have the capacity to repurpose the exploitation of their gendered modest aesthetic and emotional labor "not only in terms of opportunities for career progression, but also to enhance their confidence and improve their cultural capital" (Priola and Chaudhry 2021, 316).

The shaming potential in defining modesty—and immodesty—inhibits organizational ability to maximally exploit employee aesthetic affectivity. Lack of detail in definitions of modesty is symptomatic: Safya pushed back against an organizational code "so ambiguous [that] we're unsure what we should and shouldn't wear" by negotiating for granular detail as protection against future penalization. Women pooled modest fashion intelligence: women who had visited Saudi Arabia quickly became expert advisors; a latter generation of trainee rabbis learned from the struggles of those preceding them.

Women understand shopping for workwear as time served in pursuit of career progression and occupational delivery. This is why Lyn and Barbara "work with" personal shoppers, building relationships with fashion professionals who have acquired sufficient competency in modest workwear to select travel wardrobes for Muslim majority contexts. Even when regarded as a business necessity—including by women who are Muslim modest dressers—the abaya is seldom stocked in western fashion stores and requires extraordinary means of garment acquisition. The lack of cultural competency with the abaya as workwear fashion constitutes another gendered tariff of difficulty in the delivery of workplace modesty. The materiality of the abaya is agentive in the development of a unique employee-driven workwear culture. Women who cultivate individuating workplace appearance and would not dream of sharing their jackets regard abayas as "borrowable." This can reflect ideological disdain for an unwelcome organizational religious aesthetic or, simultaneously, demonstrate collegiality when occupational delivery would be impossible without appropriate clothing. In UK FBOs, a woman might be lent a cardigan or cover-up, but this was rare. The collectively accessible shared abaya is an anomaly afforded by a lack of individual investment in particular pieces and a design tradition that does not cut to the shape of individual female bodies. (This contrasts to the normative sharing by Anglican priests of "communal" worship vestments, whose masculinist cut can exclude women priests from embodying sacrality, Page 2014). Despite the development of the borrowable abaya as a workplace asset, employers paid for it in only two

cases; one woman receiving instructions to purchase the "cheapest possible."

If some women appreciated how uniform abaya design released them from aesthetic labor, others found the loss of individuation shaming when witnessed by male colleagues. Sue's enterprising aesthetic self-management is disrupted as she becomes over gendered and under-actualized.

The gendered impact of modesty codes for individual performance and mission delivery emphasizes the socializing nature of spatial relations. In Saudi Arabia, women until recently could not participate in impromptu mixed gender networking unless pre-arranged for the "family section" of restaurants or hotels. Exclusion from women-only spaces brought little occupational penalty for international men whereas the bonding opportunities of Saudi "bro-culture" (Al Lily 2016) enhanced their status. In UK FBOs, workspace permeability meant that clothing passing as modest when viewed by colleagues was reclassified immodest by the gaze of visiting men.

Employers with organizational religious aesthetics that do not value fashion capital fail to benefit from employee-subjective assets. Trainee rabbi Rachel augmented her fashion business acumen with theological research into modest dress. Her situational dressing is a high-level aesthetic labor underwritten by multiple competencies; some acquired pre-employment, others cultivated it as occupational learning.

Employer inability to recognize as labor the aesthetic work of crafting modest embodiment is typical of the gender discrimination discussed in aesthetic labor literature. Women's performances of femininity are regarded as "immanent" and not "recognized as styles that are made up, deployed, and exchangeable as workplace assets" (Adkins 2001, 686–690). Workplace modesty codes produce a career risk for women by over-associating them with the trivialized domain of fashion. The manager laughing when Amal struggled with her abaya buttons, fails to recognize the burden secular employers place on women mandated to work in Saudi Arabia, where intersectionality renders some bodies subject to the higher surveillance accorded to women presumed to be Muslim. In UK FBOs, women accrue additional penalty when investment in appearance is judged as vanity within moralizing religious codes.

Religious dress codes are arbitrated by the avoidance of shame, an affect accompanying the governing of modesty for all involved. The variety of religious ethics inhering in our UK FBOs encounter disputation from different interpretations within the organizational religion as also from external religion and belief (including non-belief) perspectives, all potentially underscored by feminist attitudes. The experiences of women visiting Saudi Arabia for their non-Saudi employers similarly highlight the non-universality of ethics, and the need for organizations to be alert to the differential impact of religious organizational aesthetics on their

workforce. As it is now normative for organizations to promote corporate values and ethics as part of internal and external messaging, Thomas's apposite questions about "futuring ethics" for the fashion industry have wide applicability. Her proposed inventory frontloads religion and belief to ask whether corporate process privileges (often western) ethical frameworks or/and seeks input from the (often global) workforce when constructing ethics codes; in which case, "what are their faiths, their ethics, and what is the hierarchy within those ethics?" (Thomas 2017, 148). Religious organizational aesthetics require women to embody modesty values that may or not accord with their own, requiring specific forms of aesthetic labor to which women have differential access and in relation to which they encounter differential challenges or benefits. As we have argued, participation in embodied and material daily lived religious practices—such as abiding by a religious dress code—is not always, but in some instances may be, evidence of a shared spiritual or belief framework (Aune, Lewis, and Molokotos-Liederman 2022). However, whether or not women share the organization's religious framework, the aesthetic labor of modesty remains a gendered tariff.

Religion-related workplace modesty codes constitute a religiously-inflected form of organizational aesthetics that may operate simultaneously with but also be experienced differently from secular driven organizational aesthetics. In some instances, women's skills in secular aesthetic labor can be repurposed for the religious workplace; as in some of the UK FBOs we studied. However, the relative ease of crafting modest workwear from the familiar garments of mainstream retail can bring an unwelcome destabilization of "boundaries between work and home, religious and secular" (Aune, Lewis, and Molokotos-Liederman 2022). In contrast skills in secular aesthetic labor cannot be transferred to the Saudi religious workplace: here the materiality of the abaya can diminish self-actualization. The abaya does, however, afford the emergence of an employee-driven workwear proposition: the workplace asset of the "borrowable" shared abaya. In both our locations, organizations benefit from but do not recognize or recompense the additional aesthetic labor that modesty demands of women.

Notes

1. Veiling the hair, sometimes the face, though often regarded as a Muslim tradition is pre-Islamic in origin and was practiced by women from different Middle Eastern communities, often marking social status rather than personal piety.
2. https://www.visitsaudi.com/en/understand/laws-and-etiquette. Accessed 7 July 2020.
3. https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/814. Accessed 5 July 2021.

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