

# Dress Practices in the Workplace

## Power Relations, Gender Norms and Professional Saudi Women's Tactics

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“Would you accept to work in a mixed-gender place (*makan mukhtalat*)?” “Would you uncover your face in the presence of men?” This is a sample of the questions included in a 2008 survey questionnaire distributed to Saudi women in a job fair organized by the private sector.<sup>1</sup> The wording of the questions – that have no equivalent in questionnaires for men – suggests that the choice is exclusively theirs. But the fact is that professional women's dress codes are subject to many restrictions in Saudi Arabia as well as in other parts of the world with, however, some variants specific to the Saudi context.

Research findings on gendered organizations reveal how power relations within the organizations do shape specific gendered expectations and practices (see Acker, 1990, and Britton, 2000, among others). The dilemmas faced by female employees with respect to the choice of clothes in male-dominated organizations are an indication of the way gender as a “difference” and as a hierarchy is “done” in everyday work interactions (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Linda Mc Dowell (1997) draws on Judith Butler's (1990) conceptual framework to show how the employees in the City of London embody and perform specific models of masculinity. She also examines the impact such norms have on women's everyday working practices. Mc Dowell writes that employees always comment on their female colleagues' clothes because it is impossible for women to dress in a “neutral” fashion like men whose suits are unmarked. Female employees face a dilemma: if they opt for a style that is considered to be too feminine, they face sexually-loaded comments. In case they choose to adopt a “neutral” style similar to that of their male colleagues, they are considered to be too “masculine.” In other words, either they perform dominant “masculine” norms that are valued only for men, or they perform femininity, that is devalued.

The expectations regarding the attire to adopt at the work place, as well as the gender norms and power relations that shape them vary with each social context. In Cairo, for instance, Arlene MacLeod (1991) considers the veil that middle-class working women wear as a way to reconcile their family lives with their work lives, as well as a means for being considered good wives and good mothers in spite of their professional activity.

This article is about the tactics used by Saudi professional women in order to adapt to gender-mixed workplaces in Riyadh, a city where gender segregation is rigorously observed. In these “gender-mixed” workplaces, particularly in hospitals and banks,

**1.** It is a job application form distributed by Abdul Latif Jameel's program. This program was supposed to put jobless persons in contact with private firms. I picked up this form from Abdul Latif Jameel's stand, during the “modern woman” fair that took place in Riyadh (Kingdom Tower), from December 28 till December 30, 2008.

female Saudi employees interact with Saudi and foreign male colleagues (South Asian, Middle Eastern, European, or U.S. nationals). What are the dress dilemmas Saudi professional women face and how do they differ from those analyzed in the previously quoted works? What are the gendered expectations affecting Saudi women's conduct as well as their self-presentation in the "cosmopolitan" worlds of work? What models of femininity do they embody and perform in these workplaces?

In Riyadh as well as in London, professional women's justification concerning their dress practices is characterized by their attempt to be "neutral". It is important to underline, however, that they are not just considered as "women" by their male colleagues. They are treated more specifically as "Saudi women", in a context where the labor market is not only segmented into males and females but also into nationals and expatriates. In other words, gender and nationality cannot be dissociated when examining the status assigned to Saudi female employees.<sup>2</sup> My aim is to show how, due to this particular status, Saudi female employees are subject to conflicting expectations. I will analyze how they respond to these expectations by enacting dress tactics that are nevertheless constraining.

## Methodology

This article is based on ethnographic observations and on interviews conducted in Arabic, between 2005 and 2010, mainly in Riyadh. Initially, I spent ten months in the Saudi capital between 2005 and 2009 for the purpose of writing a Ph.D. dissertation focusing on young Saudi women's access to public spaces. Then, in February and March 2010, as a post-doctoral research fellow, I conducted an exploratory fieldwork focusing on young Saudi women's employment. I have collected material (ethnographic observations and a hundred of interviews) on the activities and the mobility of young Saudi women students, professional employees, or job seekers (aged 20 to 30). For the purpose of this article, I have selected the material pertaining to the Saudi women working in gender-mixed spaces, mainly in hospitals and in banks. I conducted 22 interviews with Saudi women working in gender-mixed spaces. Some of them worked as nurses, therapists, MDs, receptionists, or auxiliary nurses in public hospitals or in private clinics. Others were managers, accountants, computer scientists, secretaries, portfolio managers, HR personnel, as well as employees in charge of other clerical tasks in the banking sector. All of them worked in organizations controlled by (Saudi and/or foreign) men and where female employees do not have top-management jobs. These interviewees come from families with different levels of income (for more details on class and Saudi women's employment see Le Renard, 2013). For many of them, things did not stop at this point, as we kept seeing one another after the interview on a more or less regular basis. I also joined some of the informants for a tour of their work sites, where I met their female colleagues. In addition to formal interviews, I was able to have group discussions with women working in three banks and three hospitals. In 2012, I pursued my research in a more systematic way, by conducting interviews focusing on just one bank. The results confirmed the assumptions made in this article, although the article is based on previously collected material.

2. See Holvino (2010) for an overview of intersectionality in organizations' sociology.

The interviews followed the "life story" methodology and focused on three main topics: waged labor, family life, and urban practices. The interviews did not focus on the dress issue, but the majority of the interviewees spontaneously brought up this

matter when they mentioned their professional career and experience, as well as their relationships with colleagues at work. They were predominantly direct interviews conducted at work sites, which allowed me to observe the interviewees' conveyed self-presentations, as well as the way they interacted with their colleagues. I will hereby analyze their behavior and the justifications they gave for such dress practices, in order to understand their reaction vis-à-vis the conflicting expectations they face in these "gender-mixed" workplaces.

### **Saudi Women's Professional Activity in "Gender-Mixed" Workplaces**

The number of Saudi women's working in mixed workplaces is low. This is not the result of a segregationist "tradition" as the widespread stereotype would like us to believe. The modern history of Saudi female labor has known two major fluctuations. In the 1950s, the increase in oil revenues along with nation-building according to a developmental strategy has reshaped the definitions of labor (Altorki & Cole, 1989). Activities that women used to perform side by side with men in order to make ends meet became invisible according to this new definition. The handicrafts that enabled some women to earn a living became obsolete with the increase in imports of consumerist goods (Almana, 1981). The strict implementation of gender-segregation in the big cities has restricted women's professional activity to the field of education in the primary, secondary, and university levels (Doumato, 1999).

In the 1990s, and with the increase in unemployment rates, the national development plans started to promote women's participation in the national labor force. In the 2000s, the government took measures that were in favor of a larger participation of Saudi women in the professional world, even though these measures were only partially implemented. Promoting the work of Saudi women was part of a global measure advocating "the nationalization of jobs", i.e. replacing expatriate workers by a Saudi labor force. Similar strategies were adopted everywhere else in the countries of the Gulf. Unlike the previous labor code that has been effective since the 1960s, the new labor code of 2006 did not explicitly ban gender-mixing. In practice, there are authorized gender-mixed workplaces, like hospitals, whereas in other workplaces, gender-mixing is not clearly authorized and is hidden and invisible from the outside. Nowadays, Saudi women working in gender-mixed workplaces are a small minority. Generally speaking, Saudi women constitute 15 to 20 percent of the national labor force (without counting the immigrants), and most of them work in all-female educational institutions (from which men are excluded). I have chosen to focus my study on the experience of Saudi women working in gender-mixed workplaces for several reasons: on the one hand, Saudi women joining workplaces such as hospitals and banks are currently being supported by the Ministry of Labor, and the number of these working women is bound to increase over the coming years. On the other hand, the dilemmas the Saudi female employees are facing play a significant role in transforming power relations and gender norms in the professional world in Saudi Arabia.

### **Conflicting Expectations**

Saudi women working in gender-mixed places are bound to face conflicting expectations. These expectations might be explicit or more subtle. They come from different persons belonging to the women's professional milieu or to their family entourage.

To start with, there are explicit rules concerning the dress practices in the work place. These rules classify people according to their sex and to their nationality. In the banking sector Saudi men have to put on *thûb*, and Saudi women have to put on *'abâya* when they are in a gender-mixed milieu. Whenever they are in a women-only milieu they can remove the *'abâya*. Usually, expatriate men are dressed in suits, otherwise they wear shirts and trousers, according to their ranking in the professional hierarchy. In banks, there are almost no non-Saudi female employees. All foreigners are men, and all women are Saudi. This is different in hospitals, where many of the female employees are expatriates. All staff members wear the white gown, but in general, Saudi women are veiled, whereas expatriate non-Muslim women are not necessarily so.<sup>3</sup>

These strict rules are coupled with expectations coming from male colleagues or seniors in rank. In some professional milieus, such as in the financial services sector, they might make remarks in a more or less insisting way to Saudi female employees so that they conform to a certain image of the “modern” professional woman. By using the word “modern” I don’t intend to express any value judgment about tradition or modernity. I only use it to designate a way of seeing things widely shared in the banks and hospitals where I conducted my research, and that implies specific models of femininity and masculinity. For instance, based on interviews I have conducted with male employees in multinational banks, many (Saudi or foreign) managers imagine professional women as unveiled (or wearing only a light scarf uncovering a part of their hair), discreet, comfortable, and friendly with male colleagues (rather than shy and distant), hard-working, dedicated to their career, and not having any family constraints. It competes with another discourse on femininity, widespread in the public sphere, according to which women should respect gender segregation (be veiled and have limited interactions with men) and be dedicated first and foremost to their families. The female employees dress practices and self-presentation are a site where this competition takes place. Fatma, a Saudi bank employee working in Riyadh, told me that her boss, a Saudi man, suggested that she discard the heavily covering *'abâya*, (also known as the “head *'abâya*”, from the top of the head to toe) and opt instead for a more trendy and attractive *'abâya* called “shoulder *'abâya*” (cast over the shoulders like a coat, is narrower, and often decorated). The justifications she was given for that suggestion was as follows: “Just dress the same way your colleagues do, it is more comfortable for you”.

Of course, worries about the working women’s comfort are far from being the only reason underlying such expectations. The women’s attire in the workplace is central to the image of the whole sector. The most covering *'abâya* as advocated by the majority of the members of the committee of senior *ulemas* (Al-Jiraysî, 2002), which is a state institution, is only adopted by a minority of young Saudi women of the new generation. It is depicted as a plain garment, literally conforming to the Islamic precepts. Whereas the shoulder *'abâya* represents “modernity à la saoudienne”, especially when it is adorned with crystals and other decorative items. Contrary to the head *'abâya*, the shoulder *'abâya* can be worn without a *niqab* (i.e. face covering). Many male managers give an overwhelming importance to these dress nuances that concern specifically Saudi women. In fact, some expatriate executives, particularly those coming from Europe or from the United States, notify the HR personnel about

3. There are no clear-cut rules concerning this issue. See Somayya Jabarti, Dress Code for Female Hospital Staff – No Official Word Yet, Arab News, 2 November 2004. <http://archive.arabnews.com/?page=1&section=0&article=53816&d=2&m=11&y=2004>

their refusal to collaborate with Saudi women who wear the *niqab*. That's what an HR female employee explained to me. The dress issue is not discussed during job interviews, but it could determine the appointing of the candidate in such or such department. In general, women who accept to uncover their face have more opportunities since they are not excluded from some departments. Fatma maintained that she declined a job offer as secretary of the board of administrators because she would have had to uncover her face: "there were many meetings with expatriates who refused to deal with a face-covered girl". Though there is less pressure on female employees to uncover their face in hospitals, the issue does exist however. A Dammam clinic has put the removal of *niqab* as a pre-condition for hiring, and this created a minor controversy in 2005.

Female employees are subject to another type of constraint resulting from the contacts they have in their professional milieus. Many interviewees have described how the patients' (in hospitals) or the clients' (in banks) comments tended to deviate from the professional domain to the personal domain, in spite of the women's firm intention to be looked at in a "neutral" manner like any other employee. Nâhid, a 31-year-old nutritionist, said that her patients were very surprised to see "a woman whose face is not covered". According to her, they start asking personal questions pertaining to her marital status, her origins, and her age. Most of the non-Saudi nurses, particularly the Filipinas, are not veiled, so it is the combination of being both a "Saudi woman" and "unveiled" that looks unusual, even shocking, to some patients.

For Saudi women, the mere fact of accepting to work in a gender-mixed environment could be interpreted as a sign of being open to relationships. Interactions can shift from professional relationships to reach the stage of "harassment" as some interviewees recounted. A 30-year-old woman accountant relates the problems she faced when she used to work in a private clinic: "I did not like this job because too many men came to the reception, sometimes they were nasty. There were no security measures, no security guard. I was the only woman among men (...) Men are all alike, I used to cover my face, wear the *'abâya* instead of the hospital's white gown. Still, whenever they see your eyes, men think time has come to make a pass, it is O.K..." Her testimony is not exceptional/isolated. Mâjida, a 25-year-old receptionist in a hospital, starts the interview by praising work at the hospital, as well as the gender-mixed environment, which she describes as being "more serious, and more demanding than women-only environments". Later, she reveals that she has encountered problems with her male colleagues: "Any girl who works in a gender-mixed environment is going to face problems. There are always respectable and professional men, and others who are not. They try to take advantage of a girl, harass her. If she refuses their advances, they may create problems for her, such as starting to gossip about her".

This gossiping entails portraying the female employee as an accessible woman rather than a professional colleague. Also, gossip and rumors are of utmost importance because the interviewees are very keen to preserve their respectability vis-à-vis their families in particular. For some of them, working in gender-mixed places had to be negotiated with their relatives who perceived it as an activity damaging/undermining their respectability as Saudi women. But these definitions of respectability are fluctuating: they vary with families and with social groups. A middle-class respondent

working for a small clinic explained to me during the interview that her parents refused to let her apply for a job in the banking sector, because they consider this milieu to be too “liberal”. Another respondent working in the same clinic said that for a long time, her husband refused to let her work in a gender-mixed environment until she convinced him of the necessity for her to earn an additional salary in order to meet the children’s needs. Due to these negotiations, working in gender-mixed places constitutes in some cases a precarious situation that might come to an end anytime. The legal guardian’s authorization (father, husband, brother, or uncle) is necessary for a woman to engage in any professional activity, and might be subject to withdrawal at any moment. Some pressure is felt on the interviewees whose families are not supportive of their professional activity. The expectations to adopt fashionable ‘*abaya* and uncover one’s face in the workplace put these women in dilemmas that are not easy to deal with, especially that when it comes to family affairs women are expected to keep a very low profile.

### Constraining Practices

In this context, what will be the interviewees’ reaction vis-à-vis conflicting expectations such as being “modern” and “open-minded”, and at the same time being “respectable”? Most of the interviewees adopt dress codes that vary according to the situation, to their family’s attitude, and to their own convictions. In some cases, the interviewees might adopt tactics, what De Certeau calls “*manières de faire*” (De Certeau, 1980) vis-à-vis the expectations they receive. It is to be noted here that for many of them, veiling and unveiling depend on the urban space (Secor, 2002; Le Renard, 2011), so, for instance, they do not necessarily dress in the same manner in their work place or in a shopping mall.

In professional milieus, wearing the *niqab* can be considered as a tactic, as many informants who work in a hospital explained. When she started working, Nâhid uncovered her face. Her Saudi female colleagues gave her what she calls a “trick” in order for her to gain respect: wearing the *niqab*. She describes it as a “barrier”. This is not an issue for the majority of young Saudi women who wear the *niqab* anyway in all gender-mixed spaces in Riyadh. But the cases of Nâhid and another interviewee, a hospital receptionist who has made the same choice, show how negotiating a professional status implies, as women, being distant and inaccessible to their male colleagues. They accept the constraint of covering their face, but at the same time they impose on their interlocutors another constraint; that of preventing them from seeing while being seen. In this situation and for these interviewees, it is not a matter of claiming a religious belonging, it is simply a means of being considered “respectable” women. But this was not the choice that all female nurses, MDs, speech therapists, and other paramedical staff have made. Some of them claimed that they felt relatively secure and felt free to uncover their faces at the hospital which they described as being a world of its own. Others wore the *niqab* for religious reasons.

Another option would be not to wear the veil. Najlâ’ and Maryam, 23 and 26-year-old respectively, and with whom I have conducted interviews, work in a gender-mixed environment in the banking sector. Both of them perform a “modern”, “professional” femininity: they are unmarried (and unwilling to marry in the next coming years), hard-working, intent on making a career for themselves, and discreet when it comes

to discussing their family lives at work. Najlâ' does not wear the veil, while Maryam wears a loose veil, one that is constantly falling back, revealing some of her hair. They did not deliberately choose to dress in such a way as a strategy, nevertheless both of them gained some benefits from this look. Both Najlâ' and Maryam got quickly promoted at the banks where they work, although they do not have the same degree or level of qualifications (a Masters degree from the United Kingdom for one of them, and a vocational diploma for the other one). The swift progression in their career is due to the confidence they gained from their expatriate male seniors in rank, in addition to their being serious and hard-working. This implies that they did not implement gender segregation in their daily lives at work: they have relatively friendly relations with some expatriate male colleagues, which is unusual. The sweeping majority of Saudi women in Riyadh strictly respect the gender segregation even when there are no dividing walls in order to safeguard their reputation (Le Renard, 2011).

But there are some constraints to performing a "modern" image of femininity at work, as some expatriates would expect from their Saudi colleagues. Najlâ' and Maryam behaved as if they came from very open-minded families, and as if they were totally independent in the decisions they take, even if this was not always true. In an informal discussion, Najlâ' revealed that she had to decline a dinner invitation organized by some married colleagues. This type of heterosociality is not a common thing in Riyadh. It is only found in some cosmopolitan milieus of the upper class society. Usually, receptions are men-only, or women-only. Najlâ' opted out of the dinner by citing a family obligation as an excuse on that evening, but the real reason for her declining the invitation is that her parents refused to allow her to attend a gender-mixed gathering outside the workplace, something she is ashamed to reveal to her expatriate colleagues. Therefore, she lied in order to maintain the image she conveyed both about herself and about her family. She also lied in order to avoid her colleagues' embarrassing questions. This case shows how difficult and constraining it is for these working women to "reconcile" their colleagues' and families' expectations.

## Conclusion

Saudi professional women face specific dilemmas in "gender-mixed" workplaces: their dilemmas are more complex than the alternative between performing masculinity or femininity that has been analyzed in other contexts, as explained in the introduction (Mc Dowell, 1997). The norms and expectations that shape Saudi women's dress practices are related to a certain prevailing image of, on the one hand, what is considered "modern", "professional" femininity, and what constitutes "respectability".

I have shown that conflicting expectations weigh on Saudi female employees' conduct at work. On the one hand, especially in banks, some male managers refuse to work with face-covered colleagues. It means that women who do not agree to remove their face cover (or whose relatives do not agree that they do so) are excluded from some jobs and responsibilities. On the other hand, many female employees face the problem of being considered "accessible" rather than "respectable", just because they accept to work in gender-mixed places.

Faced with these conflicting expectations, some employees choose to be fully covered at work as a tactic to show their distance and inaccessibility, especially those who

interact with many different people daily, while they would not necessarily choose this attire in other places. Others, especially those who work in small, closed teams in banks, choose to work without a face cover and to conform to their colleagues' expectations of "open-mindedness" and "modernity". Even for those who feel comfortable without a face cover, the model of professional, "modern" femininity they perform is constraining. For instance, they hide from their colleagues the restrictions imposed on them by their relatives in order to preserve the "liberal" image they have built of themselves and to avoid intrusive and embarrassing questions.

This article has focused on a particular issue related to the constraints Saudi professional women are facing. Dilemmas concerning dress at the work place remind us that for women, to be able to have a profession does not necessarily mean being able to emancipate oneself from power relations, but rather can contribute to transforming them.

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