



Islamic dress for women: the essential guide.

Muslim attitudes towards the appearance of women are rooted not in repression and subservience, but in a strong sense of public versus private – of what is due to [whoops!] and what is due to one's husband and family. This is based on religion in the sense that the Qur'an includes a blueprint for social behaviour. In particular, it admonishes women to "guard their modesty ... and not display their beauty" except to their husbands, fathers and some other relatives and family.

But there is a good deal of debate within Islam about what preserving modesty should entail, especially in terms of interpretations of the Hadith (the Prophet's sayings). In one of these the Prophet Muhammad is quoted as declaring that "if the woman reaches the age of puberty, no part of her body should be seen but this – and he pointed to his face and hands".

From this and other references, most Moslems would agree that women's dress must cover the entire body, with the exception of the face and the hands; and it should not be so form-fitting as to reveal the shape of the body, or so eye-catching as to attract undue attention from men. But it's still open to debate and interpretation – some abayas can be pretty eye-catching, for instance, with expensive and genuinely impressive adornments or a style that allows the wearer's stylish trousers, jeans and footwear to appear regularly. And people with different traditions and different interpretations come to the UAE, which is why so many alternative styles can be seen in Abu Dhabi.



What's more, fashion designers have been pushing the envelope with the abaya. The argument is that some decorative elements are acceptable since the meaning of the Islamic dress is unaffected.

Basic garments

Hijab normally means the headscarf, sometimes the veil (and by extension is sometimes used for women's Islamic dress in general). In the Qur'an it actually refers to a curtain that provided privacy for the wives of Muhammad enabling them to talk to male believers, which indicates the principle involved.

Shayla or **sheila** a headscarf, very characteristic of the Gulf area and rarely found elsewhere

Abaya the traditional black overgarment worn by some Islamic women – and in the UAE it is actually national dress, which is why it is so common here. The abaya covers the whole body except the face, feet, and hands; there's no particular prohibition on the material used (it's

usually a light, flowing fabric like crepe or chiffon) and the amount of decoration (which can vary from none to quite extensive printing or embroidery).

Niqab a face veil covering all but the eyes.

Burqa an all-enveloping garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions to cover the entire body, including the head and face. Common in Afghanistan and surrounding areas but rarely seen in the UAE, the burqa is usually an indication of a particular traditional religious or social bent

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