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Women the world over find veil limits job choice

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By Deena Hussein

DUBAI (Reuters) - Aysha Obeid couldn't get a job as a shop assistant in Dubai because of the veil that covered her face, exposing only her eyes to the outside world. So to improve her employment prospects, Obeid stopped wearing the veil.

"No one takes women with niqab in the retail sector," said Obeid, 22.

While women who cover up for their faith may expect problems getting some kinds of work outside the Muslim world, those in the region also say they have trouble getting jobs -- particularly ones requiring them to interact with the public.

It is common to see Emirati women in the workplace, most wearing elegant robes and head coverings, but those wearing the niqab which leaves only the eyes uncovered are rarely seen in front offices.

"Women in niqabs do not sit at the counter. They take administrative jobs," said Abdullah Naser, a manager at a Dubai post office. "Clients need to know who they are talking to."

Face veils have been a hot political issue in many countries over the rights of wearers to attend schools in secular societies or become policewomen, teachers or other jobs that involve interacting with the public.

They are particularly common in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia where many women cover their faces in public, driven by conservative traditions and powerful clerics who advise that Muslim women must wear the niqab.

In Dubai, the most modern emirate where multinationals keep their regional hubs and expatriate non-Muslims make up a large proportion of the population, women who wear the niqab find it hard to get jobs.

"Some companies have a policy preventing women from wearing their niqab during work hours, such as banks for example," said Nora al-Bidour, public relations manager at Tanmia.

The niqab has also caused controversy in Egypt, the most populous Arab country, where an increasing number of women are wearing the veil. In June, a court ruled that a U.S.-accredited university was wrong to bar a female scholar who wears a face veil.

NOT ON SCREEN

In the United States, Saima Azfar, an immigrant from Pakistan, plans to wear her niqab when she interviews for jobs once she passes her medical board exams in Chicago.

"There are Muslim women doctors I know who went through the licensing process here," explains Azfar, 34. "They told me that if you have the talent, then nobody will deny you a job for wearing a veil."

Zerqa Abid says her niqab has not curtailed her career. Now a communications and marketing consultant, Abid worked as a news editor for U.S. broadcaster NBC and ran a TV station in Pakistan.

"I have proven to people that a covered woman can do whatever she wants, can be successful, can be a career woman," she says.

While she does meet curiosity and confusion among her colleagues, Abid, 38, says that American laws allow her the freedom to work and wear niqab, with an important drawback.

"I am still not welcome on the screen because of my face cover," she adds.

In the world's most populous Muslim nation, Indonesia, the niqab is a rarity. Even in the staunchly Muslim province of Aceh, where women are required to wear headscarves in public as part of sharia, or Islamic law, the niqab can hardly be seen.

Siti Nurlaila, a Muslim activist who abandoned her niqab a few years ago, said in Indonesia the niqab was worn mostly by a tiny group of Muslims who follow Wahhabism, an austere form of Sunni Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia.

"In Indonesia, the general public see people who wear the niqab as strange and people often tell their children to avoid us, or even say that we are criminals," she said.

"Even my teacher who inspired me to wear the niqab has stopped wearing it," she said.

NO SCARVES IN TURKISH COURTS

In Turkey, wearing a simple headscarf is a struggle for women who are banned from covering their heads at work in public sector jobs under the country's secular laws and are discouraged from doing so in the private sector as well.

In many offices, the only covered women are the cleaners.

There are no statistics on how many women drop out of university or the labor market because of headscarf regulations, but 60 percent of women cover their heads, according to a study by leading thinktank TESEV.

Turkey has the lowest women's labor force participation rate in the OECD, at 27 percent, which activists attribute at least in part to headscarf restrictions. Often girls wear wigs to university as a compromise solution.

Fatma Benli is a lawyer who covers her head and so cannot appear in court. She quit her masters degree studies because of the ban and campaigns for the right to wear the headscarf.

"You can't work in the public sector and even in the private sector they think you will hurt their image ... Salaries are lower because they know there's no competition as your chances of finding a job are low," she said.

There is some hope the re-elected Islamist-rooted AK Party could look at lifting the ban -- as it tried to in its first term -- but many suspect it will take years to overcome fierce secular opposition and fears that lifting the ban would wipe out Turkey's secular character.

"I'm hopeful," said Benli. "But Turkey is a complicated country, time will tell."

(Reporting by Rachel Breitman in New York; Ahmad Pathoni in Jakarta; Emma Ross-Thomas in Istanbul and Andrew Hammond in Riyadh)

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