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It's a Simple Scarf, but Its Meaning Is Much More Than Faith

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR Published: September 8, 2006

Everything seemed to be going well, recalled Dena al-Atassi, a young college student planning a career as a diet consultant, until her prospective boss caught sight of the head scarf she wears as a devout Muslim.

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CHICAGO Muslim women like Dena al-Atassi who wear head scarves say they have faced widespread discrimination in their careers and in their daily lives.

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"She said something like, What the heck is that on your head?" Ms. Atassi said in an interview at a recent Muslim conference in Chicago. "I don't remember the exact words, but I will always remember the derogatory tone."

Ms. Atassi, 21, said she argued that her head scarf would not interfere with her work, that the fleshy women who flocked to the Maryland office of the Jenny Craig diet chain where she had been a trainee seemed to appreciate the fact that she dressed modestly and avoided flaunting her own slim figure.

But the supervisor in the Jenny Craig office in Florida where Ms. Atassi hoped to relocate last summer was not moved, she said, and the job never materialized.

"She wanted her office to look all-American," recalled Ms. Atassi, who reported the incident to a prominent Muslim advocacy group at the time.

Norma Hubble, Jenny Craig's vice president of operations, said the supervisor in the Florida office no longer worked for Jenny Craig but "to the company's knowledge, neither Ms. Atassi's religion nor her religious dress was a factor in any employment decisions affecting her."

Jenny Craig "has a policy of nondiscrimination on the basis of religion," Ms. Hubble said in a statement, "and it complies with all federal and state laws regarding employee requests for religious dress accommodations."

Cozette Phifer, the spokeswoman for Jenny Craig, confirmed that some staff members wore head scarves.

Before Sept. 11, Muslim women who wore head scarves in the United States were often viewed as vaguely exotic. The

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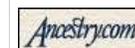
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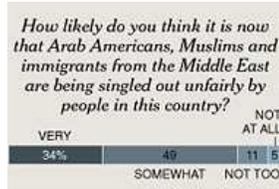


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terrorist attacks abruptly changed that, transforming the head scarf, for many people, into a symbol of something dangerous, and marking the women who wear them as among the most obvious targets for those who deem the faith threatening.

Muslim leaders call discrimination a problem for many of the faithful, particularly for women like Ms. Atassi who wear head scarves and who say they face widespread discrimination in their careers and in their daily lives.

Born to a Syrian father from a prominent political clan and an American mother who converted from Christianity, Ms. Atassi said she was the only Muslim at Flagler-Palm Coast High School in Bunnell, Fla., a wealthy area in the northeastern part of the state. During a three-year stay in Syria as a teenager, she began taking private religion classes and, she said, noticed that veiled women showed a self-confidence lacking among American women, who seemed to her to be trying to transform themselves into a Barbie-doll ideal.

"I would meet women who were not attractive by Western standards," Ms. Atassi said, "and when I told them, 'You look beautiful,' they would say, 'I know, thank God.' They really believe it. The veil facilitates inner strength, a greater feeling of self-esteem."

Ms. Atassi began wearing a head scarf, or hejab in Arabic, at age 16, along with a floor-length trench coat.

About a year later, in July 2002, she said, she was passing through the airport in Amsterdam on her first trip outside the Arab world after the Sept. 11 attacks, when the security screeners singled her out, questioned her and made her remove her coat. Feeling violated, she said, she tore off her scarf in a bathroom and wept.

"I had gained such a strong relationship with God that I didn't want to do anything to distance myself from him, and I felt like I was doing just that," she said.

The head scarf stayed off for eight months. But she said she felt like a hypocrite as, bareheaded, she waged a campaign against anti-Muslim stereotypes at the University of Central Florida, where she is chairwoman of the Florida chapter of the Muslim Students Association. After she began wearing a head scarf again, she said, death threats and other offensive telephone calls salted with expletives started the very next weekend.

Discriminating against people because of their religion is illegal in the United States. But it is difficult to prove, and many victims avoid even speaking about it publicly out of fear it may affect job prospects or bring other unwanted attention. Ms. Atassi said that her stepmother had removed her own head scarf after Sept. 11 and kept it off, afraid of her co-workers' reaction. Ms. Atassi said she did not want to live that way.

"I made the decision when I put it back on that I will never take it off again," she said.

NEIL MacFARQUHAR

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