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REVOLUTION

LONDON & SINGAPORE MODEST FASHION WEEK

a Modest fashion REVOLUTION

*There was an unmistakable air of excitement amongst spectators snapping up seats alongside the runway. The pure diversity of **London Modest Fashion Week** was about to take the global media by storm.*

*Written by **Anu Shukla***



The first UK event of its kind - LMFW took place in February at the Saatchi Gallery. And by coinciding with the occidental London Fashion Week - its very presence made a powerful statement in itself.

A tall glamorous woman with long flowing locks was busy managing the commotion as people flocked into the gallery for the runway show on a Saturday afternoon. Women in hijabs gave clear-cut instructions to teams buzzing from the adrenalin of organising the event.

The place whirled with lights, cameras, music, action and a healthy dose of organised chaos just before each show.

This was the making of a modest fashion revolution. With photographers positioned at the far end of the runway and the audience seated with anticipation, the first models stepped out to a resounding applause.

The vibe was electric, the message, profound. This was no ordinary fashion show. It dared to be different with its platform for empowered women of all faiths and quest to inspire new female design talents to step up to the plate.

Its message seemed clear: modest fashion is not just Muslim fashion when multi-faith women adorn the veil too. It was a defining theme to inspire tolerance and acceptance, unity through diversity, and to choose love over fear.

Strong, bold, sassy designs crossed continents and unearthed new tribes. It was a trip into a multiverse of cultural parallels and a glimpse into a whole new world of modest fashion in all its glorious colours.

Modest fashion is the road less traveled. And on this journey of discovery, every designer had a story to tell.

So the response was phenomenal. But no one had expected it. Two days and 300 punters later, LMFW had raised over £10,000 for a number of charities. It had racked up support from over 250 startups. Its 60 designers from Egypt, Malaysia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Cyprus, Gibraltar, the UAE and the UK were splashed across the world's press. Everyone from Al Jazeera to Press TV to RT and the BBC were there. Even the Daily Mail published a decent report.

Globally valued at \$484 billion, modest fashion has plenty of clout. It is reportedly the fastest growing consumer market in the world and at events like this, investors have clocked the potential of tapping in.

LMFW was conceived by Haute Elan - hailed the Net-a-Porter of the modest fashion world. At its helm is former lawyer and investment banker Romanna Bint-Abubaker.



*Syomir Izwa
Gupta.*

*Photo by
Nimz Channa*



Iila Boutique.

*Photo by
Nimz Channa*

Toufah.

*Photo by
Burco Demirbag*





Fizzy Woo.

*Photo by
Nimz Channa*

The 34-year old spotted a gap in the market four years ago when she noticed an influx of business fashion startups. “There’s a very real need for modest fashion,” she said, “women have to trawl for hours across sites like ASOS to find something suitable, so I wanted to make it easier for them to find the brands they wanted.”

At the same time, Romanna says the best way to support designers and fashion startups within a maturing market is to provide them with an opportunity to reach it - “so what better place to do so than in London - the fashion capital of the world?”

Romanna says Haute Elan chose to focus on women in fashion because they are the ones who are designing the clothes they can’t find in the stores they seek out. As a result, the event has anchored itself as a platform where female fashion designers can meet potential investors. And thanks to a collective pot, it’s also supporting emerging talent with everything from free office space to a spot on the catwalk.

Born and bred in London, Romanna’s family originated from Northern India five generations ago before they moved to Kenya. “Our culture is Islamic, and we are also very much part of British culture too, so it forms who we are,” she says.



Mimaya.

*Photo by
Nimz Channa*

Modapp.

*Photo by
Nimz Channa*



Romanna confirmed it was hardly a coincidence that LMFW had been timed to take place during London Fashion Week. “It was very deliberately planned,” she says, “and in doing so, we made a massive statement. It was to say - we’re as big as. Some said it was even like a punch in the face to LFW, which said: ‘Hey, we don’t need you, we’ve got our own.’ “So you see, it’s because mainstream fashion still does not quite understand the sheer size and power of the Muslim market, let alone of the wider modest fashion market.

But for Romanna, LMFW is more about doing the math and bridging a very real market gap than it is about trying too hard about making a political statement. But maybe this is because it doesn't even have to try; because simply being out there, as media coverage has vouched, is enough of a statement in itself.

However, she agrees events like LMFW have the power to diffuse stereotypes - distinctively in a climate of rising Islamophobia where women have been targeted for donning the hijab or burkha.

“There is nowhere in London you can walk down the street and not see a woman wearing a hijab. It’s just not possible. Modest fashion is a normality for millions of women so the more women in hijabs on the catwalks, the greater tolerance and acceptance there will be.”

~

Romanna Bint-Abubaker

“For instance, the British Fashion Council have still not acknowledged LMFW, despite the fact there were over a thousand pieces of published press about us in four or five days; despite the fact there was more people attending than any LFW show.

It was fully packed, everybody around the world was talking about it, from India to France to the UAE.”

At the same time, she is very clear about ‘normalising’ but not ‘glamourising’ modest fashion on catwalks to generate tolerance.

“Our goal is not to glamourise the hijab per se as this may assert we are re-objectifying women, but in a different way - which we are not - so it’s not a word I would use. Rather, our goal is to demonstrate how women can dress modestly and still be elegant.”

Ummiriaz.

*Photo by
Nimz Channa*



She added: “There is nowhere in London you can walk down the street and not see a woman wearing a hijab. It’s just not possible. Modest fashion is a normality for millions of women so the more women in hijabs on the catwalks, the greater tolerance and acceptance there will be.”

Evident at the show were the multi-faith teams who worked behind the scenes. “There were Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Sikh women who volunteered with us because they wanted to be part of it. So the idea is to empower women of all faiths by uniting them through the realm of modest fashion - which is effectively the facilitating tool for that.”

It was this powerful surge of unified female energy which seemed to have made the event such a success - and the media response to it has been testament to that.

However LMFW has also been at the brunt of criticism from opposing sides of the spectrum says event project manager Narjice Basran: on the one hand, from conservative Muslims for not being modest enough - and on the other, from right wing media labeling it a ‘hijab show’ for Muslim women. Romanna added: “We didn’t do a fashion week for just Muslim women. It was for women of all faiths, so why should I accept criticism of it not being for everyone?”



“Secondly, we are not complying with sharia rules. This is because we provide options for women who make their own decisions on what suits their faith of choice - whatever that may be.”

“The reality is we are providing different choices for women: just like there are options for bikinis, there are options for modest fashion.”

Weathering the storm, Romanna says the biggest challenge was losing a big chunk of her team in the run up to the event.

“There were a lot of naysayers waiting for us to fall, but we made it happen. So considering the size of my team, many people were very shocked that we did it. But now we’ve also rebuilt our human resources by acquiring the brand Sakura Malaysia, who have been amazing.”

She added: “We’re always talking about Muslims fighting each other, so for once, we can say that here in London, we have managed for both Shi’a and Sunni Muslims to come together, alongside women of all other faiths, in a really positive way.

“So ultimately, the message is for all women to support each other, forget their differences and celebrate the fact we have more in common than we do in difference. This is the unity LMFW represents - and this is the real purpose of the event.”

*Romanna
Bint-Abubaker,
Founder of
Haute-Elan*



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Anu Shukla is a multi-media news reporter, freelance journalist and documentary film researcher. From music, art and culture, to refugees, homelessness and workers’ rights: she navigates the dynamics of different realities. Creative and curious, she enjoys bringing art to the world and is available for collaborations and future projects.

