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Job or hijab? Singapore debates ban on Islamic veil at work

Every day before she starts her shift at a government hospital in Singapore, Farah removes her hijab - the Islamic veil she has worn since a teenager. Although minority Muslim women can freely wear the hijab in most settings in Singapore, some professions bar the headscarf - and a recent case has triggered fresh debate on diversity and discrimination in the workplace. Now Farah has joined a growing number of Muslims - who account for about 15% of Singapore's 4 million resident population - calling for the ban to end, with an online petition gathering more than 50,000 signatures. "They told me I can't work here if I wear the tudung," said Farah, using the local Malay term for hijab, as she recounts her job interview two years ago for a physiotherapist position. "I felt a sense of helplessness, it's unfair. Why has the tudung become a barrier for us to look for jobs?" asked the 27-year-old, who used a pseudonym for fear of reprisals at work. She accepted the job eventually but has to remove her headscarf whenever she is at work. Farah's case is not an oddity.

There was outcry last month when a woman was asked to remove her hijab to work as a promoter at a local department store. Halimah Yacob, the country's first female president who herself



Although minority Muslim women can freely wear the hijab in most settings in Singapore, some professions bar the headscarf - and a recent case has triggered fresh debate on diversity and discrimination in the workplace. — Shutterstock

wears the hijab, said there is "no place" for discrimination when asked her view of the case. The store reversed its policy, but many took to social media pointing out restrictions remain on wearing the hijab for some civil servants, including policewomen and nurses.

Livelihood

The debate surrounding the hijab is not new in Singapore, a modern city-state which takes pride in its multicultural and multiracial background. The country is predominantly ethnic Chinese, many

of whom follow Buddhism or Christianity. In 2013, then Muslim affairs minister Yaacob Ibrahim said wearing a hijab at the workplace would be "very problematic" for some professions that require a uniform. The following year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the hijab issue was about "what sort of society do we want to build in Singapore", according to local media reports. Singapore's police force and the health ministry did not respond to repeated requests seeking comment. Referring to the department store case, Singapore's president said discrimination in the workplace was "disturbing" as it deprives a person from earning a living.

"People should be assessed solely on their merits and their ability to do a job and nothing else," Halimah wrote on her Facebook, which attracted more than 500 comments. "During this COVID-19 period when concerns over jobs and livelihoods are greater, incidents of discrimination exacerbate anxieties and people feel threatened," she added.

Divided

The hijab has been a divisive issue for Muslims worldwide. Many Muslim women cover their heads in public as a sign of modesty, although others see it as a sign of female oppression and in

the Middle East women face jail for eschewing it. In Indonesia's conservative Aceh province, women without a headscarf have been censured. In Malaysia, Islamic authorities have probed a book about Muslim women who refuse to wear the hijab. But women's rights campaigners in Singapore say they want Muslim women to have freedom of choice. Such restrictions have hindered women's job prospects, especially when the coronavirus pandemic has pushed Singapore into recession and companies are laying off, they say.

"Women should be able to practise their religion freely without having to choose between having a job or to practice their religion," said Filzah Sumartono, a writer who helps run Beyond the Hijab, a website focused on Singapore Muslim women. "This issue in Singapore is only being faced by Muslim women, it's a strong discriminatory policy against Muslim women," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Identity

Others urge consistency, noting that the turban - headgear worn by Sikh men - is allowed at work in Singapore. "Why the double standard," asked Nur, a Muslim law student who signed the peti-

tion posted online in June. She requested not to use her full name to protect her privacy. The 22-year-old said her mother and sister, who work as a nurse and in a private security company respectively, are both banned from wearing a headscarf at work. She called on officials to explain the restrictions, saying countries such as Britain or Australia have changed tack, with disposable hijabs for nurses to address any hygiene concerns.

"I accept that racial harmony is very fragile, but it's not just acknowledging these differences exist and live with them. It's much more than that," said Nur, a co-founder of Lepak Conversations, an online group. "It's about knowing these differences exist, accepting them and embracing these differences." Filzah of the Beyond the Hijab group said the restrictions can make it more difficult for women to enter the workforce. "Some women don't feel comfortable removing a part of their identity just to be able to earn money," she said. "Having to put this very difficult choice on Muslim women is unfair and unjust." — Reuters

Talk show host Ellen DeGeneres apologizes over toxic workplace allegations

Ellen DeGeneres on Monday opened the 18th season of her talk show that's been mired in controversy for months with a broad apology that addressed allegations of a toxic workplace culture under her watch. It was the first time the staple of daytime US television publicly addressed the controversy surrounding her, after BuzzFeed News published a report over the summer detailing a culture of fear among her employees that included accusations of sexual misconduct, racism and intimidat-



In this file photo US comedian Ellen DeGeneres introduces Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus during the 62nd Annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. — AFP

tion from the show's management. The scathing reports followed rumors and anecdotal posts on social media that DeGeneres was difficult to work with and not nearly as nice as her feel-good show portrayed her to be. "I want to say I am so sorry to the people who were affected. I know that I'm in a position of privilege and power and I realized that with that comes responsibility, and I take responsibility for what happens at my show," DeGeneres said in her opening monologue, released online ahead of its broadcast later Monday.

DeGeneres said her program was kicking off a "new chapter" after "necessary changes" following an internal investigation from parent company Warner

Media, though she did not go into detail on any of the restructuring. In August three high-level producers were let go: an executive producer Ed Glavin, a co-executive producer Jonathan Norman, and head writer Kevin Leman. The longtime comedian, actor and host also joked that she was in a tough position given her reputation as the "be kind" lady, a nickname she said she earned after she urged kindness following the 2010 suicide of a young man who was bullied for being gay. "Being known as the 'be kind' lady is a tricky position to be in," DeGeneres said. "So let me give you some advice out there if anybody's thinking of changing their title or giving yourself a nickname, do not go with the 'be kind' lady. Don't do it." "The truth is I am that person that you see on TV," she continued, denying allegations that offstage her personality was a far cry from the sunny persona she has crafted onstage.

'A platitude'

DeGeneres, 62, made waves in 1997 after becoming one of the first television stars to publicly come out as gay, which she did while starring in the sitcom "Ellen." Last year, prior to the scandal surrounding her eponymous show, she renewed her hosting contract through 2022, also inking a deal to create three shows for the streaming platform HBO Max. DeGeneres had returned to her California studio for Monday's premiere, with a virtual audience on rows of screens due to the coronavirus pandemic. DeGeneres circulated her monologue online, though many social media users mocked her — the line "I am a work in progress" was particularly skewered-saying her words rang hollow.

"It's hard not to feel as though an opportunity was missed here," wrote Daniel D'Addario, chief television critic for entertainment outlet Variety. "DeGeneres' attempt to clear the air fell painfully flat in part because of her unwillingness to engage with her critics in anything more meaningful than a platitude," he said. — AFP

'Watchmen' Emmy winners explore 'missing' history and possible sequel

The creators of big Emmy winner "Watchmen," a timely blend of superheroes and political satire that confronts US racism, say they are proud to have spotlighted the nation's historic traumas and modern-day injustices-as fans hope for a possible follow-up. The HBO hit series, based on a seminal 1980s graphic novel, scooped up 11 Emmys at this year's television equivalent of the Oscars, making it Sunday's top honoree. The show opens with the 1921 Tulsa race massacre, in which up to 300 people were killed when white mobs torched a black neighborhood, but which many Americans have never heard of.

The convulsion of violence nearly a century ago received renewed attention this summer when President Donald Trump held a controversial rally just down the road. "When the show premiered back in October, that night the word 'Watchmen' was not trending on Twitter, but 'Black Wall Street' and 'Tulsa massacre' were," creator Damon Lindelof told journalists after his Emmy wins. "And it just showed you that people actually have a real hunger to find these missing pieces of history. You just have to find ways that are a little bit off the beaten path to tell them." The show is set in an alternate timeline created by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons in their "Watchmen" comics. In this universe, superheroes are real, but many have turned out to be sociopathic far-right outlaws.

Featuring on Time magazine's list of the 100 best modern English-language novels, the original book is widely hailed for bringing mainstream popularity and artistic credibility to the graphic novel form. Race plays a central role throughout, not just in the pilot episode's portrayal of the deadly destruction of "Black Wall Street" in Oklahoma. One remarkable episode sees a young black New York cop struggle with blatant racism, surviving a near-lynching and confronting a secret Ku Klux Klan-style



In this file photo US actress Regina King arrives for the Los Angeles premiere of the new HBO series "Watchmen" at the Cinerama Dome in Hollywood. — AFP

society operating within the metropolis's police ranks. The noirish 1930s flashback episode shot in black-and-white won cinematography, writing, sound editing and sound mixing prizes at this year's Emmys.

"Watchmen" depicts white supremacists, police brutality and rows over mask-wearing-all subjects of intensely polarized national debate as the United States gears up for November's presidential election. In the show's present-day scenes, reparations paid to the families of Tulsa massacre victims have galvanized a white supremacist group, who are furious at the government's support for minorities and bent on triggering a race war. For best actress winner Regina King, who wore a tee-shirt bearing the image of Breonna Taylor-an African-American woman killed in a police shooting in her own home-those struggles resonate with the reality of being black in 21st century America.—AFP

HOLLYWOOD UNIONS SIGN DEAL WITH STUDIOS BOOSTING RETURN TO WORK

Hollywood's top unions announced a deal with major film studios Monday on coronavirus safety measures needed for the entertainment industry to ramp up its return to production. The months-long talks over Covid-related testing, equipment and sick pay were seen as a significant bottleneck in getting Tinseltown back to work, with unions currently needing to approve individual film and television projects on a case-by-case basis. The deal is seen as a shot in the arm for a struggling industry that has seen silver-screen productions grind to a halt-along with obstacles such as lack of coronavirus insurance, local restrictions and high infection rates in shooting locations will remain. "At long last, I'm confident that these protocols, as rigid and thoughtful as those of any industry in America, will keep crew and cast safe as well as the communities they live and work in," said Thomas O'Donnell, director of Hollywood's teamsters union, in a statement to AFP.

The agreement was jointly negotiated by five of Hollywood's biggest unions, including the actors, directors and craft guilds, totaling over 350,000 members. Talks were held with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, the trade organization representing major studios including Disney, Universal, Paramount and Warner Brothers as well as top TV networks. "This agreement establishes sensible, science-based protocols that allow members to return to doing the work they love," said Gabrielle Carteris, president of Hollywood's acting guild. Filming in Los Angeles ceased in mid-March due to the coronavirus pandemic, and resumed at low-levels in late June. Activity currently remains at below half usual levels, according to FilmLA. Other regions in the US and abroad have benefited from the difficulty of filming around Hollywood itself. The talks concluded Monday were national in scale and are expected to impact on union members living and working abroad.

A reported sticking point in the talks had been the issue of sick pay. The deal announced Monday includes 10 days of COVID-19 paid sick leave, per producer, and quarantine pay for employees required to isolate, with limited exceptions. It also mandates regular "gold standard" virus testing-more frequent for actors unable to wear protective equipment while filming and those in close contact with them-as well as the presence of on-set coronavirus officers. AMPTP, which did not immediately respond to AFP request for comment, has yet to confirm the details. Covid-19 has triggered massive disruption in Hollywood, with productions suspended and theatrical releases delayed-prompting further postponements to industry staples including the Oscars.—AFP

EMMYS HIT NEW RATINGS LOW DESPITE PRAISE FOR 'REMOTE' CEREMONY



This handout picture shows host Jimmy Kimmel in front of a wall of nominees watching remotely at the Staples Center during the 72nd Primetime Emmy Awards ceremony held virtually.—AFP

Television's Emmys plummeted to yet another all-time ratings low, despite producers overcoming technical challenges to pull off an innovative and well-received "remote" ceremony, ABC confirmed Monday. The 72nd Emmys, broadcast from an empty Los Angeles theater with dozens of nominees and winners beaming in via video call due to the coronavirus pandemic, was watched by an average 6.1 million viewers. Continuing a trend seen across nearly all major award shows, that figure declined from last year's 6.9 million-itself down from a previous record low, 10.2 million, the year before.

The ceremony was dominated by three shows-limited series "Watchmen" ended with 11 awards, "Succession" claimed the top drama prize, and "Schitt's Creek" achieved a remarkable sweep of the comedy trophies. Attempting to put a positive spin on the stats, ABC noted the Emmys were up against a packed sports sched-

ule, with most major professional leagues now back in action after months of lockdown. "Airing opposite both NBC's 'Sunday Night Football' and the NBA Playoffs on TNT for the first time ever," the Emmys drew the network's "largest audience to the 3-hour time period since April," ABC said in a statement to AFP. Social media engagement with the show was up on last year, it added.

The ceremony-anchored by in-venue host Jimmy Kimmel, and featuring awards handed to winners by presenters dressed in hazmat suits styled as tuxedos-drew glowing reviews from the Hollywood press. Variety praised the "surprising triumph of producing" and Deadline called it "an awards show for the ages." Viewers watching the Emmys-television's answer to the Oscars-have halved since 2014, as fragmented audiences increasingly shun awards shows. The ceremony rotates between the four major US networks. — AFP