

# The Politics of PANTS

As my family and I prepared to enter the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria, my mother and sisters were promptly stopped and told that they could not enter the holy sanctuary wearing pants, that they must rent a hooded robe in order to tour what has become a historical landmark in addition to a place of worship. By Faisal Al-Juburi

The cynical part of me paused for a moment, thinking that this was most definitely a sneaky way to receive extra funds. Then, the contemplative part of me paused a moment further, and I wondered how pants on a woman – when freely and expectedly worn by men both inside and outside of the mosque – could be so subversive as to be considered impure on holy ground, especially in the 21st century.

Having been raised in the United States, I had never heard anyone say that a Muslim woman should not wear pants when simply touring a mosque in hopes of catching a glimpse of the architectural details and artistic creations that are no longer seen in today's mass-produced, cookie-cutter buildings. Every time I have entered a mosque in the States and in Europe, I have seen all women follow the religious rule of modesty, which, for them, has – in addition to the obligatory head covering – included pants, so long as they covered the entire leg.

It would be potentially too narrow-minded to say that this issue is simply one of progress, or lack thereof. To classify Syria, as a whole, as stunted in its development or growth because of this singular point of discussion would be doing a great disservice to a political, religious, and social area that has, until recently in world history, been considered a beacon in both intellectual and cultural fields. Damascus is, after all, the oldest continuously inhabited city known to mankind, dating back 250 years before the Common Era and having served as the capital of the famed Umayyad and Mamluk Empires.

In addition, it would be too foolhardy ever to dismiss Islam – and the code of manners with which it comes – as being suffocating toward women. At the time of its creation more than 1400 years ago, Islam raised the status of women in society by putting an end to the then widespread female infanticide and glorified the mother as the core of goodness in both the family and, ultimately, the world. The female population was also given many rights, including, but not limited to, those of family inheritance and property ownership. Moreover, it is said that a woman – namely Khadija, the Prophet Muhammad's first wife – was the earliest convert to Islam.

To return to the issue at hand, it is not as if pants on women are not allowed in everyday Arab life, but the issue itself reawakens a debate that has been had not only on Muslim territory but across the globe as well, within the last 100 years. In fact, it has only become commonplace for women to wear pants both in the household and in public within the last half century in the Western world, an area self-characterized by progress and modernity but where the main issue of contention was – and, in some circles, still is – power rather than piety.

Before the masses of women began to trade-in their below-the-knee length skirts for trendy and form-fitting pants, they were represented by glamorous fictional housewives in widespread advertisements, films, and now-classic 1950s and 1960s television situation comedies. The ideal American homemaker could baste a turkey and vacuum at the same time, while having exquisitely coiffed hair and a set of pearls around her neck and wearing a dress, silk stockings, and high heels. Wives were meant to be perpetual beauties and the ultimate illustration of femininity for their husbands, who were seen as deserving of so-called perfection after a long day of being the proverbial breadwinners and, thereby, heads of household.

According to television trivia, it was not until Mary Tyler Moore – the once and perhaps eternal and undeniable American sweetheart – decided to represent the American woman as Laura Petry on the hit 1960s *The Dick Van Dyke Show* that actresses on the screen were seen regularly outfitted in pants. She had it included in her contract that she must wear pants in one scene of every episode of the sitcom, arguing that the women she knew would not be dressed to the nines while completing household duties and running errands. Because of this and her chic sense of style, Moore is said to have single-handedly begun the initial trend of capri pants.

There was, however, still inevitable anger expressed within some sectors of the American public, for the clearly defined standards of masculinity and femininity were being distorted in front of the masses. Thus, a seemingly frivolous contractual inclusion by today's Hollywood standards was more than just a costuming preference during the particular time period in question; it was instead a rather large step toward the social empowerment of women.

Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, pants increasingly



## The good wife's guide

- Have dinner ready. Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal ready, on time for his return. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospect of a good meal (especially his favourite dish) is part of the warm welcome needed.
- Prepare yourself. Take 15 minutes to rest so you'll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people.
- Be a little gay and a little more interesting for him. His boring day may need a lift and one of your duties is to provide it.
- Clear away the clutter. Make one last trip through the main part of the house just before your husband arrives.
- Gather up schoolbooks, toys, paper etc and then run a dustcloth over the tables.
- Over the cooler months of the year you should prepare and light a fire for him to unwind by. Your husband will feel he has reached a haven of rest and order, and it will give you a lift too. After all, catering for his comfort will provide you with immense personal satisfaction.
- Prepare the children. Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces (if they are small), comb their hair and, if necessary, change their clothes. They are little treasures and he would like to see them playing the part. Minimise all noise. At the time of his arrival, eliminate all noise of the washer, dryer or vacuum. Try to encourage the children to be quiet.
- Be happy to see him.
- Greet him with a warm smile and show sincerity in your desire to please him.
- Listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first – remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours.
- Make the evening his. Never complain if he comes home late or goes out to dinner, or other places of entertainment without you. Instead, try to understand his world of strain and pressure and his very real need to be at home and relax.
- Your goal: Try to make sure your home is a place of peace, order and tranquillity where your husband can renew himself in body and spirit.
- Don't greet him with complaints and problems.
- Don't complain if he's late home for dinner or even if he stays out all night. Count this as minor compared to what he might have gone through that day.
- Make him comfortable. Have him lean back in a comfortable chair or have him lie down in the bedroom. Have a cool or warm drink ready for him.
- Arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a low, soothing and pleasant voice.
- Don't ask him questions about his actions or question his judgment or integrity. Remember, he is the master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him.
- A good wife always knows her place.

became a symbol of the professional, social, and family power that was once solely in the hands of men in the Western world and beyond. As women began to sport the latest fashions in slacks, they also began to assume more duties outside of the household and, in recent years, have secured themselves in the mainstream workforce and become breadwinners in their own right.

It is progressively more apparent that clothing itself is a crucial tool in the way any portion of world society functions, for some life-altering situations and the connections we, as individuals, make are oftentimes based upon first impressions, of which our fashionable ensembles play a large part. In addition, whether in the home, workplace, restaurant, or, yes, place of worship, we are ruled by sets of differing dress codes, dictating what we can and cannot wear at certain times and places. Clothing, in general, reveals a great deal about one's own personality, and, evidently even in our day and age when anything apparently goes, pants are still symbolic of confidence and the pursuit of the stereotypical male's social standing and strength.

In regard to the subject of pants as worn by women in the mosque, purists from all backgrounds are known to be champions of the clear dividing line between men and women in everyday life, and that line may indeed have been blurred across the Middle East in recent decades, as well, due to Western influence. In addition, there is most likely the perhaps unnecessary fear amongst some that with pants comes the increased potential of seduction and the power it entails, since it cannot go unno-

ticed that pants are more revealing of the woman's figure than a loose robe. With that said, the issue of pants in the Umayyad Mosque is, in my opinion, undoubtedly one of tradition and the preservation of a certain code of ethics and values, regardless of whether or not any of us think the rules being imposed in order to preserve that moral integrity are indeed too rigid.

I doubt that those two men who told my mother and sisters

– along with countless other women – to rent the hooded robes before entering the Umayyad Mosque would have ever thought that their seemingly harmless and self-explanatory rule would have led to musings on the history of pants and the social politics that they entail. But, when

the issue of male and female equality comes into play, further scrutiny is always required of the situation at hand, illustrating that the power struggle between the sexes – and the desire on some of our parts to have a constant, unchanging definition of our roles as men and women in the world – will perhaps always be present, showing that pants are in all probability never just pants. ■

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