

Episode 8 — Aamer on covering his Islamic faith

Sarah Kaplan: This limited series podcast is from GATE Audio. GATE stands for the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, and I'm GATE's director. Our goal is to engage current and future leaders in rich conversations around inequities in our society and how we might address them. In this podcast series one of GATE's MBA Fellows, Narjis Premjee, explores the different ways that people cover and uncover their identities at work. Through interviews, first-hand accounts, and rich storytelling, Narjis ventures into the world of covering, why it happens, and what employers can do to make workplaces more inclusive. You'll be moved and inspired by her deeply personal takes on these issues, as was I. So up next, listen to what Narjis has to say.

Narjis: Welcome to covering in the workplace, a podcast from the Institute for Gender and the Economy or GATE. I'm Narjis Premjee. In each episode I will be interviewing one individual on how they have covered in the workplace, or perhaps never felt the need to do so. Today I will be speaking with Aamer Syed. He is currently an MBA candidate at the Rotman School of Management. Aamer was born and raised in the middle east. And he spent the summer working at CIBC's enterprise procurement division. His story of covering in the workplace is about his religion. Aamer thank you for joining us today. Let's start by learning a bit about how you cover in the workplace.

Aamer: Yeah. So, when I got that call from you, I felt this even before, the whole aspect of covering it started off way before. So, I did my undergrad in the US. I was in Chicago for some time. I worked there for a couple of years. And moved back to Middle East where I was born and raised. And this goes back to covering in the sense of religious practices. For some reason when I moved to the US, I was a very active member of the religious organization at the school, it was an open atmosphere. I used to pray, and I never felt the need to cover as such. And this practice continued on even in the workplace. So, I did an internship once in Chicago. It's a very you know hip kind of a place where industry designers were working, and they hired me for a four-month term. And then I had to go for prayers, Muslims generally pray in the afternoon twice, so I told them that this is something which I need to do "If there's a space you can point me to" and then they were really nice about it. So that was my first professional setting where I requested something that I needed. And I think that that response itself had a lot to do with how I carried myself forward. I said "okay, this is really easy. Just talk to the people you are, you know, working with and tell them this is a need. And, and it'll be a, you know, a good five- or 10-minute break". I think more often than not it (prayers) fell within the lunch break. So, it wasn't even an extra time request on my part except Fridays for which I need a longer break. And so, yeah, going back there was never a feeling as such that I'm covering. I was always very clear and explicit in what I wanted. And then the second thing which added on to this supposed confidence was I went back to Saudi Arabia, and I worked there for seven years and the, the society over there is predominantly Muslim and it was never uncovering. it was just business as usual but then I came back to Canada, which is again you know, a different society. And, and then that practice continued I remember my second day at Rotman. In fact, I went to the (inaudible). I told them "This is my name, I'm a Muslim. I need a place to pray. And I, I can't go to the medical center building or to Hart House where they have these prayers, is there a facility here?" And there was this very kind gentleman over there who told me that there's a room, 3084, It's dedicated for everyone to pray. And incidentally, the next day we had an orientation session where there was a big talk about how there was this one student who came up and requested "we need a place to pray". So, I was very happy that even Rotman adjusted, so well, and then more recently at CIBC here, I would say that I, I felt a little hesitant because it was a very formal setting. And my previous experiences were mostly in construction, real estate facilities, and people were like, you know, not very formal and client facing. Here everyone was super formal and dressed up and there was this atmosphere of being, you know, presentable. Which usually doesn't affect with my prayers. I just have to use a washroom and do a small ritual where we clean ourselves up and then pray. so, the first couple of days I was finding places on my own. And, and then I found out that CIBC actually has a rejuvenation space. Which is just excellent. it was meant for things like that. So yeah, this was a confirmation of my own understanding that "okay, workplaces are more accommodating. It's just a matter of asking them." But since we last spoke there was a few instances where I became cognizant of the fact that am I covering or uncovering - and that's where it became a little "okay. I'm not exactly always not covering" there are some instances where I am. For instance, as a Muslim, we don't consume alcohol or eat

pork, we eat food which has to be halal. So, it's sometimes difficult to explain to people in a setting where there's alcohol and, and you're being given out stub and then you "oh, that's fine. I don't actually..." so that becomes more than information. It becomes a session where you actually educate people about your belief system and in my experience by and large, everyone has been really receptive of that. It is still nonetheless something you have to go above and beyond because it's not it's not common knowledge right now.

Narjis: So, yeah, so it seems like you've had to educate a lot of people here. So, I like that you spoke about transitions and how you went from Chicago to the Middle East, to Canada. Can you talk a little bit more about what it means to be Muslim in north America, in the workplace? Versus compared to Muslim in the Middle East and how the workplaces are different?

Aamer: Yeah. So, Muslims in north America versus middle east and the differences within?

Narjis: Yeah. So in the workplace, specifically in the workplace for you? How has it been the different?

Aamer: Sure. So, first of all, workplace or not being a Muslim in the Middle East is that is ground zero. So, it's just like being a Catholic at the Vatican. there's not much explaining to do. Within north America, you have the US, and you have Canada, and I would say by and large they're very similar in their cultures with of course there are some differences, but I think it's really accommodating. Because it's a predominantly immigrant population. Everyone is an immigrant, regardless of if you go back 20 years, 30 years, 100, 300 years. Everyone has a story. They, they have an understanding and acceptance. I've never been to Europe, but I have friends over there. Where it is sometimes difficult to explain the rationale behind the need for these things or specific customs or rituals. But then that's an assumption on my part I'm not sure. Maybe they are more liberal in some sense. But yeah, north America is, has been, and you have second, third generation Muslims who are creating more awareness in the society, at least in the bigger metropolitan cities if not in second or third tier cities. So, I've never been to rural Illinois. In fact, so interesting you brought it up I was recently in Bellville in Ontario it's a two-hour drive east of Toronto I was there with my venture partner- not a partner. I'm just helping him as a senior student. I'm helping this venture and he had a conference in Bellville. he was invited to speak about his idea. This was a firefighting society, so all of the Ontario firefighting organization members were there. They were really kind people, you know, typical Canadian niceness and all of that. It was time for lunch, and I was really hungry because there was nothing around it's not like GTA where you have a lot of places to eat. There was pulled pork and a little bit of fries and coleslaw, and I was hungry. So. It's difficult to explain in that setting, right because pork or bacon or some of these things are considered delicacies over here and you know those are off limit to me as a person of certain religious belief. So other than that, I think the metropolitan cities have been very, very accommodating, a lot restaurants everywhere and mosques which are really close by if you want to attend the Friday prayers

Narjis: So, can you talk about a few say professional or personal challenges that you have faced as a result of being vocal about your religious identity?

Aamer: I wouldn't call it challenge. It's more so the minority thing. You are automatically put up on a pedestal if you are different and it's not religion it's any kind of a minority which is trying to explain their belief system. So, when you are someone who's explaining their belief system or specific rituals or customs yeah there's this thing going on in your circuitry within, and I don't know if it's psychological or, this is the things you observe naturally that your audience may be apprehensive or - in some instances also hostile, which is almost always never the case. But you're still prepared for that worst case "oh, but why don't you do this? Why don't you eat this? Or why don't you drink that, or you know, you can delay your prayers at some certain times," and as someone who's explaining something you have to be prepared for that eventuality. So that's a challenge which I have inherently within me. I don't know how to address that and I'm sure you know, working in other places and dealing with more people there is a possibility that someone may come up and ask you and even worse someone who's of influence - someone who's higher up there's a power distance where that

explanation even becomes more of a confrontation rather than an education version. So, there's a challenge I feel internally like how do I actually tow that line?

Narjis: Yeah. No, I think it's, it's a very relevant challenge and I don't think it's just internal for you only. Leaning towards the next question what role does an organization play in keeping people covered or you know, encourage uncovering?

Aamer: Wo we were talking about HR before this session I think there's just so many things you can do so many small things which can have enormous amounts of benefit for everyone. Whether it's religion, or sexual orientation, whether it's in political beliefs but I think Politics should be off the table anyway, it's a workplace you don't want to do (inaudible) but all of the other things HR can facilitate a discussion. So, I think when I spoke to you before I told you that where I work, there's this person - and it's still an anonymous person who has an allergy to seafood and there are two floors, which have cafeteria areas you can have lunch or whatever snacks and they have posted over there 'seafood, strictly prohibited.' And we don't know who that is so that's something which HR took ownership of and said that "we are going to put it over here Don't worry. Whoever that person is we'll enforce it." - so those kinds of things also give hope to people who have something similar to ask of HR. I'm not saying that you, you put a blanket restriction on, for example alcohol or pork or, or meat even for that matter that's not viable. Where HR can come in however is just make that process easy, right? The process of putting your request or putting your belief system out there. If it's known within HR that three people need to have 30 minutes off on Friday at a certain time then as a person who's going in there the expectation is that you don't want to be the first one who are telling them this, right? Especially in a country, in an organization where you have quite a few minorities who have that belief system.

Narjis: So, beyond HR, like what about you know, your teammates or your managers? What role do you think they play in encouraging uncovering or keeping people covered?

Aamer: An easy example would be "Aamer going to work and he has colleagues who have different belief systems who have different preferences and telling them, oh, hi, my name is this I'm from here and I'm Muslim. And I observe these practices." (inaudible) confrontation into more of a conversation, right? So eventually, "oh, Aamer this is happening. Are you, are you sure you can make it on, on Friday at this time?" So, it's not like, why can't you, they already know beforehand. Oh, "Aamer usually goes for prayers on Fridays, and he can't make it." or eating halal or things like that. So, when the team is going out for lunch, they make sure, even for vegetarians, that they don't order one pizza which has pepperoni in it or else the poor guy ends up eating the crust. So yeah, those are the small things which can make you feel included within that team.

Narjis: Is there anything I did not ask that you think is important to know about covering in the workplace in general?

Aamer: So, I think one of the aspects of this I've been working for eight years and the temporal aspect of it is important. Like where is it going directionally? Is it becoming easier for people to cover or uncover or vice versa? In my experience and I've come back to north America after seven years So I'm not particularly sure what happened in the middle, but from 2009-10 within Chicago, which has a lot of similarities with Toronto it has gotten much better for people of the Islamic faith. And I'm sure, it's easier for people who are Hindus who prefer vegetarian meals or for others who are, who have different belief systems it's becoming more and more accommodating for their belief system. So that's good news. But going back to the whole HR and productivity the whole covering thing it just puts so much undo pressure on someone which they don't need. I mean imagine if someone has to go, so you're sitting in the meeting which has been going on for some time and everyone is like, 'oh, that's okay, that's fine' but then you have to go for prayer or you have to go for anything for which you have your own belief system and that's something which is unique to that person. So, if you haven't experienced that, it's hard to explain to anyone else. So that's a loss of productivity as well. You're completely stressed out and you won't be focused in that meeting. Your output would be affected. And imagine that happening over and over again. And a simple fix to that is just, you know, let them know.

Narjis: All right well, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate you sharing your story and, you know, being open about your experiences. So, thank you.

Aamer: Yeah. Happy to help and good luck with this I hope it makes things better for others.

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