

Episode 6 — Osama 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 we are joined by Osama Iqbal Ahmed. He's a graduate of the university of Toronto's Rotman Commerce Program and now works in Ontario wealth management corporation. His story of covering in the workplace is about his religion. Osama thank you for joining us.

Osama: My story starts a bit earlier than most. I grew up in the Middle East and I've always been embodied in myself through my parents' religious values et cetera. So, after coming to Canada especially a country that you know Celebrates diversity and, in all forms, it's been very easy to uncover in all aspects whether it be in university or in the workplace. I've never felt the need to cover up myself even from the very first day as far as work is concerned. I remember if I could just share a small anecdote, so I come into work and I'm working and it's time for prayer. And I look at my mobile which informs me it's time for prayer. So, I'm a bit ambivalent. I don't know what to do. I mean like you know this the entire office is just teeming with noise et cetera and you know I have lots of work to get done in this first day and I'm sort of like you know generally battling with myself do I just get up close the door and start praying? Or like you know what if my boss walks in it's going to be awkward et cetera. so, I just said forget it let me just let obey whatever I've grown up with. So, what I did was I took a sticky note, and I wrote 'praying please do not disturb.' And I put it on my translucent door, not even opaque just translucent. And then I put it outside and funny enough my cabin is actually right in front of the main printer of the office. So, it's a busy spot for the office. After having closed the door, I start praying and you know people start observing I can hear the rustling noise you know people's whispering et cetera. And then I think I came in the next day in the morning, and I see one of my colleagues actually printing out a paper saying, 'praying please do not disturb.' And she sticks it on top of my door and that really touched me because I found that that that workplace especially is a place of welcoming diversity. And they really don't have the need for people to cover in that workplace. So, you know from the very first day after that moment of revelation that the office environment is so welcoming, I never had to need to uncover I was always open to talk about my background my values and it's always been appreciated and celebrated especially in a country like this where you know diversity's our strength. So, it's always been a welcoming environment both in the workplace and everywhere else I've been.

Narjis: That's a very nice story and it's very nice of her to have done that. So, have you faced any professional challenges? I know you mentioned that the prayer wasn't really your problem but is there anything else? Maybe it's part of your religious identity that you have to do at work? Are there any other challenges you faced?

Osama: Sure. So one of the things in my in my workplace is I have to do a lot of client meetings so go out and meet with clients have dinner or discuss over lunch. And there of course comes a time whereby you have to you know the drinks are served et cetera, so the clients observe that I don't drink and when they ask me "oh aren't you ordering a beer" or et cetera I say listen "I'm okay for now perhaps later" in other words in other words you just you know brush it off. But it seems awkward to say oh "I don't drink" or et cetera. Like sometimes when they do insist you just come out and say listen "I don't drink" and they ask me why I say, "oh because like you know I've never had alcohol and

my religious values tell me to stay away from any sort of alcoholic drink." And they're very understanding. So, what I like to do and one of my friends advised me is that instead of ordering water every single time when they have beer just order a Coke. So that's what I do. Like I usually a soft drink and I usually enjoy that and whenever I go out with my colleagues et cetera like after work and they usually order heavy alcoholic drinks to satisfy them after long day of work I order a soft drink just like you know to have a chat with them. So, I'm not trying to invite their values but I'm also trying to stick to my own principles and morals, and they appreciate that. And they see that if a person you know continues to stick by what he thinks or what he finds to be true or what he believes in like you know they have this subtle respect for you, it's underlying but they communicate that. You know I've never had a problem professionally as well but there have been instances whereby the very first times these things have happened. The very first time I went out for drinks or when I had to pray there have been challenges for me but at the end of the day I found out that it's in my hands to see how I set the tone and how I control the situation and that's been very important to me.

Narjis: About explaining things about yourself and you know your religious beliefs do you find it a bit challenging to always say that "no this is my restriction" or you know "this is something I do differently." Like is it is it hard to bring that up in conversations? And is it hard that people keep asking you the stuff.

Osama: It's very very difficult. In fact, it's very difficult to keep on like repeating your principles and your beliefs. In fact, it was a just a few days ago I had a big networking event it was a Christmas party one of our colleagues had invited us to his company's party and I'd gone there, and my boss said "Osama listen like you know, you need to have a drink today. Because you've been working hard. It's been a long day. Let's both have drinks." I said, "sure sir I'm down for a drink." So, when we go to the bar I tell the guy so my boss pushes me on first right just in case I don't order a drink. I said "no sir. I just have to go to the bathroom. I'll come back." So, by the time I come back from the bathroom, and he already had a drink and said, "Osama your time to order." I said "sure. Could I be to have a regular Coke?" So, I mean I'm not lying but it kind of gets annoying after a while right after you keep on explaining to the fact that listen like I can't do this I can't do that. but at the end of the day, it's what it is. As long as like I feel as if you know my beliefs are respected as long as I feel the environment is accommodating. I Don't mind but I have faced lots of circumstances whereby people have insisted let's do this let's do that after having consistently told them that I cannot do it. I haven't found yet at least in my workplace like silent judging or you know undertones of negativity et cetera towards myself and that's reflected of I guess working hard and you know working towards making the company better et cetera. They see that like if the person is hardworking if the person is focused et cetera then they sort of go easy on you. But I don't think one should compensate the other. I think every workplace should be accommodating. Every workplace should be welcoming to diversity because I firmly believe that diversity is a source of strength for organizations and not only adds to it but doesn't subtract from it.

Narjis: So generally speaking, what role do you think an organization plays in either keeping people covered or maybe encouraging uncovering?

Osama: I think the role that an organization plays in helping people cover or you know maintaining an uncovered sort of environment, I think it's a huge role because an organization is what values and tones it sets for its employees. They decide ultimately the success of an organization. This is my first job I can say I'm relatively inexperienced because I haven't really hopped around jobs. My organization in in my view is very successful because it welcomes diversity, and it also welcomes people to uncover. When employees feel like they're comfortable in their own skin and they're allowed to express their own true identity that means that they uncover themselves, you know that's great. I think that ultimately that drives the organization forward. However, if an organization has this policy whereby it wants everyone to be one shade one color and is unwelcoming to new ideas new traits new policies, if it forces people who usually cover IE woman let's say of this type of faith who usually cover and if they force them like you know no headscarves allowed and all like that policy I think that's just a toxic environment and it makes the employee feel uncomfortable with her own self when she never felt that before joining the organization and it limits the performance of the employee. That's what I think and in order for the organization to truly develop itself to fully like you know express itself

in all areas I think the employee should be empowered which is very important. Employee empowerment comes as a result of being true to oneself and operating in that environment.

Narjis: What would you say is you you've grown up in the Middle East and I'm not sure if you had the chance to go to a workplace there but what do you think is how is it different to be Muslim in a Canadian workplace versus you know Muslim in a middle Eastern workplace?

Osama: Sure. So, like you mentioned I did an internship in the Middle East in that company I did a four month internship as a risk and trade analyst. In that company it was much easier to express your identity everyone over there was of a certain faith. And even if they weren't I mean I saw a lot of people that weren't of a certain faith they were of different backgrounds different shades different colors. As far as the Islamic faith is concerned a lot of like the majority of them were Muslims. So when it came time for prayer everyone just left their work and went and prayed together. It's not something you see here in the Canadian workforce, but it was certainly done there because it was just of that background like people of that background. I found that in the company for example overseas in that sort of environment I didn't really feel different because everyone was of certain shade of color. You don't really see the effects of that diversity of that welcoming front because everyone is of one tone however when you come here to Canada you see people have different values different backgrounds and that's great. Because you know that's important because it's nice to learn about you know the different backgrounds different values different cultures. And you certainly don't force your culture you don't force your values you don't force your background on anyone, but you sort of incorporated it into the larger mesh of things and so certainly once you do enter into such an environment where there are a lot more cultures like the pictures bigger than yourself. you sort of understand where you fit in that picture. You sort of understand more about yourself and your uniqueness something that you wouldn't have realized if you know stayed in an environment where everyone was the same. So, I found out more about myself. I understood more about who I am what I believe in and how I can incorporate into the larger picture of things. And honestly it was a revelation. It was an amazing experience because I had a great time understanding more about other people as well as myself. And I found that you know diversity is celebrated and welcomed here. And I felt really empowered in this country especially in the workplace here. Honestly, I'm very grateful that like you know when you come to an environment where you have a different background but it's celebrated, I think that's very very empowering.

Narjis: Yeah. And if I may ask, what do you would you say that you learned about yourself?

Osama: That's a good question. What did I learn about myself? I learned that while I was somewhat different based on my background or where I've come from, I learned that I've had similar experiences growing up with other people. I've learned that my colleagues, my friends, the people who have befriended here people who have had contacts with, I found that they didn't have like you know a different childhood than mine. I watched the same cartoons as them I had the same experiences you know played the same sports as them. So, I wasn't really like you know too different from them. But then again, the experiences you've had where you've lived where you've worked all these sort of diverse sort of thoughts that you've you can bring to the table this is what differentiates you. I think at a certain base I feel like a lot of people like almost everyone is the same as you. As you sort of envelope yourself with experiences with these thoughts and ideas you can really like you know enhance a conversation and improve a conversation and a discussion and I've certainly found that to be true in the university setting I've also learned that you know I've learned about respect about respecting other people I've learned more about diversity and how that empowers people and how that's it's a reason to move forward and not backward. I've learned to appreciate and be grateful for things that I've found out that other people might not necessarily possess. I found that education is very important because having come here I've noted how little I know. And how there's so much there is still to know. So, I've found that you know especially in the university environment where you are just you know among people of various thoughts, various backgrounds, and various interests, I found that there's so many interests out there. And honestly when growing up like I had. Let's say like you know two or three interests, but I found that like you know people have you know these important topics for example social justice racism empowerment, female empowerment, feminism, all these ideas where you know foreign to me. So, I found out like you know how in. Important. It is in this

environment and in the world, we're living in today. and I've just come to appreciate that and learn more about it and voice it as well. So, I found a voice within myself and I'm able to communicate that with the experiences that I've you know gathered so far having lived here for five or six years.

Narjis: Excellent, you mentioned education and educating you know yourself about all of these topics. How have you gone about educating yourself? What's that process been like?

Osama: The process I've taken to educate myself is by just being out there in university. University was a huge revelatory experience for me because I was always part of student clubs. I was always part of you know group discussions on campus and debate clubs. The way that I've found that I've educated myself the most over these years is to listen. Because if I just speak, I will only be regurgitating. What I know by listening I hear new ideas and I sort of try to process them and understand and reflect on them and then sort of you know give my take on what I think I feel is like what my opinion is. So primarily I've listened, and I've listened well over these four years. I've made sure to you know not to limit myself to maybe one thought, but you know go out there and listen to every perspective whether it be in religion on gender on any politics on any sort of topic. I've made sure to incorporate all perspectives and reflect on them and understand them and process them and read more about them. So, I have read various literatures in university as part of my courses as part of the independent reading I have You know gone to student lectures I've gone to university lectures guest professors have come and talked about certain topics student clubs being involved in important discussions around campus how to improve student life. You know how to incorporate a more diverse sort of perspective into the way student clubs operate. All these experiences have allowed me to fine tune myself in the discussions of today of what's the current discussion of what's happening today and invite all these perspectives. You know that people have to bring and it's honestly like very awe inspiring to see like you know how you know three people can come to a room and all three of them have different perspective on it. So, it's amazing to see you know the various perspectives that are out there so you know for now I can at least say like you know I'm still like a student learning about all these topics and you know the world is always moving it's always rotating and there's always new topics out there so it's always exciting. It's a journey of learning, I think.

Narjis: I'm very glad that you're taking this upon yourself to educate yourself because like I agree that it is our responsibility as you know as immigrants here to educate ourselves on the different diverse populations because we are part of them at this group. And you know if we expect them to know about us, we should do the same. is there anything I haven't asked that you'd like to share about covering in the workplace?

Osama: I think you've asked some important questions with regards to covering the workplace. The one thing that I want to say was as far as covering and concern is so two perspectives one is from the perspective of you know you being in a position as an immigrant like you mentioned for new immigrants who have come into the country and who are still coming into the country to encourage them and to communicate to them that it's okay to be able to you know reflect who you are and to communicate who you are in a way that makes you comfortable and not necessarily you know force yourself upon anyone else force your beliefs upon anyone else but to just you know be respectful of others. I think when I came into this country, I didn't know that, or no one had informed me. And I sort of learned that the hard way. when I came in, I was very staunch on what I believed in et cetera. And I wasn't really open to many or many perspectives. And I learned that the hard way. I lost some good friends over that problem. But as I went through the years, I found out that like you know your life is bigger than what you think it is. There is just so much out there right now and so many perspectives and it's important to respect them even if you disagree with them. I think it's important that we must maintain a respectful environment so that everyone's voice is heard which is very important. That's what I firmly believe in and that includes your voice as well. so, it's important not to hold back but it's also important to make sure others have a chance to speak and voice their opinion. so as far as like new immigrants are concerned in the workplace there is just so much out there. People are very welcoming, and you have your rights to be able to practice what you believe in. And it is important for an organization to be able to accommodate and host an environment that you feel comfortable in uncovering yourself. I think only if you do so and if you are in an environment where you are constricted and you're unable to communicate yourself I think it's important to you know have that

open safe space where you can communicate this to your organization. That like listen I would like to contribute more but I'm unable to because these are the restrictions that are placed upon me. So going from that sort of process from covering to uncovering I think a safe space should be hosted by every organization and every employee should be empowered such that they are able to you know operate in a way that makes them comfortable in their own skin. Not in a way that constricts them.

Narjis: Thank you so much for sharing your story with us Osama. I really really appreciate you coming in on a Saturday morning.

Osama: It's always my pleasure.

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