

The Rise and Rise of the Hijood

Two years ago, an Australian mother of four, Aheda Zanetti, took notice of an important gap in the global sportswear market, that on the surface some of us would think of as 'niche'.

However, the comfortable swimwear for Muslim women which Aheda, through her company Ahiida, has begun producing has been attracting a flurry of global reaction exactly because it has the potential to be anything but niche.

There are around 1.5 billion people in the world who follow the Koranic code, and probably more than half of these individuals are women.

Finding appropriate exercise wear is something Muslim women have struggled with for years, reported Laila Al-Marayati, a spokesperson for the California-based Muslim Women's League, recently to National Geographic News.

Ms Al-Marayati reported that some women and girls choose to work out in long-sleeved shirts and sweatpants, and a hijab, but that it is only a partial solution. "Muslim women sometimes will prefer to go to all-female gyms or work out at home, so they can exercise comfortably and not be overwhelmed with heat exhaustion."

Aheda began producing her 'hijoods' (a hijab shaped like a hood), a year and a half ago, as a practical, sensible alternative to the only appropriate swimwear in the global marketplace - garments from a Turkish and an Egyptian company which were essentially "an outfit with a veil."

"You can't comfortably wear a veil when swimming!" says Aheda. "It is probably easier to swim in a jumper and a pair of denim jeans, so I came up with an innovative alternative, which uses a high grade, light fabric that was also water repellent – an important factor, so that the garment doesn't cling to the body. It is suitable for women who swim to relax, and for athletes."

The Ahiida hijood is by no means dull looking, but come in a range of vibrant, bold colours. The master design took some months to perfect, but has now been approved by the Mufti in Australia, and is going about grabbing the world's interest.

Ahiida's creations have attracted stories across the BBC network, the National Geographic Society, in the New York Times, the French press, and on German national radio, to name a few.

"There has been great buyer interest, particularly in America, where I have made some sales already, and in Europe."

In early July, Aheda will travel to London to present her garments to buyers at the Islam Expo, a market which features not just clothing and other consumer goods, but is also a forum to exchange of ideas about modern education and harmony. She has approached some attending buyers, with the consistent help and encouragement of Denise Eaton, Regional Export Adviser Wollongong, who Aheda describes as "absolutely fantastic".

"The Asian Games are happening in Qatar in December, which could be a boom area for Ahiida. The Federation of Islamic Sports in Iran have asked me to visit to speak on behalf of

Islamic sports, and I will be attending a large market in the US in September, then travelling to Dubai in February 2007.”

Despite the attention and clear signs of export impact, Aheda has found certain difficulties in being a new designer in the relatively small Australian clothing industry, which is why offshore opportunities are so attractive to her.

The high cost per unit is also a challenge. “My garments are completely Australian made, which is great, but the materials I use are expensive. I can’t afford a large container of fabric, and many Muslim women, in Malaysia and Indonesia for example, wouldn’t be able to afford my current product because of the high costs involved, whereas middle class Muslim women in the US , the UK and France can.”

Aheda is searching for high quality manufacturers who can offer competitive prices, but is confident of meeting large orders, which she expects particularly from the US.