

The truth behind the veil

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LIV & LUST. Ideals and standards, advertising and religion; In what degree women decide over their own bodies? Hamideh Moeinfar from Iran studies Gender at Lund University. Now she has made a short film that asks the question, a question that she has struggled with throughout her life.

She remembers the feeling. When the shawl went down into the bag and hair flowed freely, in the center of population. It was in Copenhagen three years ago. Hamideh Moeinfar was going to Lund and her new life as a student at the University in gender course.

- I thought I had arrived in the country where women are really free, says Hamideh Moeinfar, 29.

That was then. Before she had lived in Sweden. On the apricot-colored walls at home in student lair in Lund hanging large handwritten notes: "Show more of yourself," "Tell your story," says in English.

- These are some of the comments I got when I showed my movie. But of course, I do not agree.

A little later she'll explain why. But first, how come she ended up on a course in gender studies far from the family home in Tehran.

- I grew up in a religious and traditional family. Islam was dominant, but I was lucky to have parents who are open-minded.

Hamideh was a believer; she both thought about and talked with God several times a day. He was omniscient and equally obvious as the norms and rules in force in the family and the Iranian society. This was also for the friends and the man she married. Until she turned twenty-three Hamideh had early began studying sociology



Hamideh Moeinfar
HD/NST SONNY THORESEN



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at a university in Tehran. When she came up on the master's level everything, bit by bit, was coming to an end.

- The more I read and the more new friends from other contexts I met, the more I began to think about.

She describes how a new world opened up. How everything she previously learned was reconsidered. Why would she believe? Why would she cover her hair? Why at all to be in a certain predetermined way?

- It was a turbulent process. My marriage was chaos; my husband had married a person who was in a different way than the one I had now become.

25 years old was Hamideh Moeinfar divorced. She wore tighter clothes than before, and let the hair come out the shawl.



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- These things about how I looked may seem small, but for me they were big.

For the family, it was not easy to keep up with and understand. But they respected Hamideh's inner journey.

- Once I started to question, I saw other things and it got new doors to open. It is precisely reappraisal that makes life so valuable that makes you free.

Hamideh searched Masters in Gender at Lund University. She wanted to travel, stand on her own in a foreign country. And maybe, just maybe succeed in her dream: to make films.

She did. But it took hard work, fighting spirit and patience. On gender course, she realized quickly that she was almost obsessed with the female body, the ideals and standards that she, like all women, is dealing with.

- So why not make a film about it? A film that is an artistic expression of my theoretical studies.

It took two years. Now "Mariposa" is finished and Hamideh has sent it to a number of film festivals. It's about Hamideh Moeinfar herself, in the form of a cartoon little girl who meets two adult Swedish women who have chosen very different strategies to feel good in, and with, their bodies.



One woman has been the model. She tells how she had difficulties with her appearance, an object for others' glances. But also how important it is for her to get dressed in the short skirt she would like to, that whatever others will think she decides how she wants to look like. The other has chosen the opposite path: she wears clothes that do not show any skin and veil. Not at all because someone said it to her, on the contrary, many people think she's weird, but because she wants to avoid being looked at. She is tired of feeling judged. Behind the fabrics she feels freer.

- When I started the film I did not know how it would end. It was a part of my own process.

From having believed that Swedish women are generally freer than Iran, has Hamideh - as well as her film - come to the conclusion that women in both countries are really struggling with the same thing. They take the only different expressions since the conditions are not the same.

It's here somewhere Hamideh coming back to the criticism she got from the film, that it should be more about herself; as she says pointedly little sarcastically: "The Iranian girl who oppressed under the veil and now breaks free in the West."

- But the whole thing with my film is that I was actually telling my own story. And I do it by two Swedish women.

Three sisters form a circle, which reflect each other.

- The Swedish women represent different sides of me. When you see them, you will see me.

In Iran, women are forced to wear headscarves in public places. They must also not walk around in a short skirt or linen. Many makeup hard, that's the face they will show and have to play with, says Hamideh Moeinfar. Sweden has no law governing how we dress. But once superiors norms and ideals.

But the fact that there is a law that regulates how women should dress, is not there a significant difference?

- I'm not so sure. In all societies, there are things that you, regardless of law or not, must comply and which it is incorporated in. The veil can be seen as a symbol of male power over women. But can all this advertising with half naked women do also.



In Iran, it is clear that it is the man's gaze woman to please. In Sweden, says Hamideh, the same structures, they are just more hidden.

- When I came here I thought that woman's choices, lives and identities were more and more open. But they are equally gridded as in Iran, just the other way. Those who are unable or unwilling to adapt to the standards and ideals of how a woman should be are struggling. And most Swedes looking to secure often unconsciously, to really fit in with this frame model, just like Iranians do.

She mentions women who have not had children facing feel-sorry-for-gazing; or who are ashamed because they are not thin or problems for their outspoken manner.

- It's nice that women here do not allow men to be the big deal like in Iran, where it's all about men, men and men again. But even here many acts indirectly relate to men.

The shame of their own female body is also the same, she says.

- In Iran, it's about the fear of showing too much, here is about being wrong, having too small or too large breasts.

Her point is that we are neither here nor there to make it easy for us. That we should not for complacency believe that we are automatically better. Rather, says Hamideh, it is important to recognize that women and their bodies are under scrutiny everywhere. Scrutinized and constantly exposed to the gaze of others, norms and ideals. As well as their own.

- What I would say is that we women have to see this. We need to take a step aside, get perspective by daring to ask ourselves outside our box. By gaining distance from the dominant culture may also view it on. Only then can we make our own choices.

Hamideh says that she now has a better relationship with the mirror. Work on the film is "almost healed" her. Not that she always loves what she sees, but she does not care as much.

- It is my awareness that makes all the difference.

Any opportunity to show Mariposa home in Iran does not exist. Too much bare skin is shown, Hamideh says gloomily. But the plan is still to travel back to Tehran and work as a filmmaker, both there and in Sweden.

- I want to continue to build my life by my own choice. Not by society's expectations of how I should be.

Hanna Wehlin