Wardrobes of Turkish-Dutch women: The multiple meanings and aesthetics of Muslim dress

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CHAPTER FOUR: SKIRTS AND TROUSERS

Women’s sartorial preferences in tesettür clothing are not limited to outdoor garments—the choice of which garments to wear indoors or in combinations under fully covering outdoor garments is equally important. Most women wear skirts and trousers in combination with various top garments (jackets, blouses, tunics or dresses). Skirts and trousers are not only part of the wardrobes of tesettürlü women—women with diverse sartorial styles also wear skirts and trousers. In the world of tesettür clothing, skirts and trousers are different from other garments that are specifically worn as outdoor garments, such as the overcoat or the çarşaf. Therefore, they mediate different ideas about aesthetics, fashions and understandings of tesettür. As commonly worn garments, they circulate in a wider fashion scene; therefore they highlight commonalities and differences between tesettürlü and non-tesettürlü women. Moreover, women’s accounts of their skirts and trousers not only illustrate practices of covering but also ideas about gender difference, which other garments do not necessarily reveal to the same extent.

In the first section of this chapter, I give a brief historical account of skirts as modern garments and of the changing figure of the female body in Ottoman fashion during both the 19th Century and at the beginning of the Republican Era (1923). This sartorial history is especially important because the first generation of migrant women in the Netherlands were already confronted with a modern, secular dress code, what I have referred to earlier as “wardrobe modernization” in Turkey. Their sartorial practices were influenced by the urban-rural divide, which structured Turkey’s modernization project more generally. Skirts replaced more gender-neutral garments such as the şalvar and the entari (a kind of long robe) that were worn by both Ottoman men and women. Long, loose black skirts (with an elasticated band around the waist), became common as the lower piece of a çarşaf ensemble, and were therefore the earliest form of skirt in Ottoman women’s outdoor clothing. They usually functioned as overskirts covering women’s indoor clothing. At around this time, the garments characteristic of Istanbul fashion became influential all over the empire. They produced a feminine appearance in the modern sense, as they were visibly different from more gender-neutral garments and the image of personhood these garments created.
This chapter analyzes women’s accounts of their skirts and trousers in relation to changing perceptions of the female body and piety. It portrays the significance of wearing skirts and trousers in order to illustrate different, changing modalities of femininity as found in women’s migration stories from 1970s up to today. It depicts the multiple meanings of wearing a skirt as markers of a new status and urbanity. Basic sewing skills were no longer sufficient to make outfits representative of women’s new social status and sense of femininity in new locations. Some women who adopted and adapted new sartorial practices have been more successful in the Netherlands, while others failed in fashioning a new appearance, and were described as typical Turkish migrant women.

The section of the chapter on the shift from the “büzgülü etek” (a loose, long skirt with an elastic waistband) to the “kumaş etek” (a long, close-fitting skirt with a zipper) describes how most of women became unable to sew for themselves because they no longer possessed the skills necessary to do so. Like other modern garments, new skirts required new sewing skills. In the early years of migration, wearing ready-made (hazır giyim) garments signified the transformations in women’s lifestyles, as migrant women previously wore home-tailored garments for the most part. The discussion of “Dutch” skirts and trousers illustrates how ready-made garments became status markers, and how women developed different notions of femininity to fashion their visibility in the context of migration.

The following sections, “New Veiling: Trousers vs. Skirts?” and “Skirts and Piety,” portray the multiple, complex views women hold about the religious dimensions of wearing skirts or trousers. Women refer to various hadiths, interpretations of Islamic texts, and sermons of hoca in order to explain the formation of sartorial styles. They fashion styles differently. Some women do not consider wearing trousers suitable to their understanding of tesettür, while others consider trousers (combined with long tops) to be a modest, protecting form of tesettür. This part of the chapter elaborates how women see skirts as a means of disciplining their bodies and as a pious style that indicates a higher level of devotion and respect in religious contexts, especially mosques and religious meetings. Wearing a long, loose skirt highlights a modest understanding of tesettür in religious gatherings.

The last section of the chapter explores recent trends in skirt and trouser fashions. By focusing on creativity and styling, it portrays the ways in which women transform the aesthetics of Turkish long skirts to undermine the dominant image of the immigrant woman in a long skirt and tesettür. Women often shift their preferences from skirts to trousers in order to cope with the difficulties of tesettür clothing. These accounts illuminate how wearing
particular styles of skirts, as a mode of bodily discipline, fashions a particular posture and a
set of movements that in turn display, for instance, values related to the family, such as
respect for the elderly. In contrast, trousers and tunic-and-jacket combinations produce a more
formal, professional look for young, working women. With a focus on changing styles, the
final section of the chapter explains how young women negotiate and integrate different
notions of femininity and understandings of tesettür clothing in both Turkey and the
Netherlands. They employ diverse, sometimes contradictory notions of femininity, taste and
style in fashioning new types of visibility as young Muslim women.

1. The Appearance of the Modern Skirt

Skirts in Ottoman Fashions and the New Figure of the Muslim Woman

The history of skirts is similar to that of other western and new national garments in the 19th
Century Ottoman dress scene. Elites first introduced outdoor skirts that were similar to the
European long skirt-and-jacket combinations, which were worn beginning in the period of
Sultan Abdülhamit II. Adopting western notions of beauty and the body were popular; the
slim look, in particular, became fashionable (Sevin 1973: 140). The shape and movement of
the body gained significance with the new presence of women in modern public spaces.
Fashion trends emerging in Paris and London were very influential in the formation of
modern Ottoman dress. Magazines and tailoring guides played a major role in shaping bodily
ideals and clothing styles. A slim figure and suitable sartorial preferences were seen as means
to becoming modern.

Together with the corset, skirts played a major role in shaping the appearance of the
new Muslim woman. The transformation of the çarşaft from a one-piece outer garment to a
two-piece cloak-and-skirt combination not only raised the number of women wearing skirts, it
also diversified skirt models themselves. During the transition period, women continued to
wear two layers of skirts. The first layer was called the “iç etek” (inner skirt); it was often
made of wool or silk fabrics. The second layer was part of the çarşaft, a form of outdoor
tesettür. Both layers were ornamented fashionably. İç etek was often worn as a part of both
indoor and outdoor dress. The effect of the iç etek when walking was particularly striking:
different layers of fabric overlapped and blended to create an elegant look (Taşçıoğlu 1958: 28). Elite Ottoman women adopted proper styles of skirt as well as the entari for their new bodies and figures.

On the whole, these new fashions created a thin, tall ideal of feminine beauty. Wide belts worn around women’s waists, which were already restrained by corsets, helped to construct this ideal. By 1909, both çarşaf skirts and inner skirts had become very tight, so that women could no longer combine both together. During the years of the occupation (1918-1923), the combination of a long-sleeved blouse and a long circle skirt with a wide belt around the waist, which highlighted the wearer’s slim figure, was quite prominent in the Ottoman fashion scene (Taşçıoğlu 1958). In this period, the highest possible compliment that a woman could receive emphasized the foreignness of these garments, as is evident in phrases such as “You look like an ecnebi (foreign) woman,” and “She is so beautiful that she looks like an ecnebi woman” (75).

Indoor clothing, too, went through a significant set of changes at this time. The most common indoor clothing, a combination of şalvar (wide baggy pants) and gömlek (a blouse with long sleeves) was replaced by a combination of entari (a long dress) and hırka (vest). Şeni (1991) describes the role of entari as a sort of Trojan Horse, a practice that revolutionized Turkish women’s clothing. She analyzes a dialogue between two female characters (one dressed in a European manner the other dressed in an Eastern fashion) in a book written by Fatma Aliye, the prominent female Ottoman activist and novelist. In her work Contemporary Muslims (Nisvan-ı İslam, first published in 1892), Aliye contends that the entari is only pleasing to the eye if the person wearing it is girdled by a corset. The entari stimulated the adaptation of the corset to Ottoman sartorial practices. Consequently, it radically changed the figure of the urban Muslim woman (Ibid.: 29). The corset not only introduced western fashions, it also enforced and created a certain shape and posture of the female body.

Until the 1920s, the corset was a crucial item in the wardrobes of both European and elite Ottoman women. In the following years, the length of skirts grew shorter, extending only to the knee, and women’s legs became more visible. Women began to prefer straight-cut dresses, which disguised their breasts and hips. Hairstyles also got shorter; a style called “a la garçon” (boy-like) became popular. Adopting a less feminine appearance helped women to

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41 See Nisvan-ı İslam by Fatma Aliye Hanım (2012: 120-121).
take on active roles in public spaces. Educated, elite women became the trendsetters for the Republican fashions (75 Yılda Değişen İnsan ve Cumhuriyet Modaları 1998). However, the concealed female figure, combined with short hair, gradually disappeared during the years of the financial crises (1929 and later), and by the 1930s the most common hairstyle was longer again. The most remarkable invention of 1940s was the nylon stocking. Women who could not afford to buy silk stockings and therefore could not adopt particular styles of skirt enjoyed this cheaper substitute (Ibid.: 57). With the advent of the nylon industry, skirts and nylon stockings had become available to a larger number of women in Turkey by the 1960s. Nylon democratized women’s access to western fashions, and ready-made skirts became especially popular at this time.

When women began to migrate to the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s, they had already experienced or witnessed some of these sartorial changes. The move from the provinces to the cities in Turkey or directly to the Netherlands was often followed by, and entailed, a major shift in clothing. Çarşaf was replaced by manto and şalvar or pajamas,

42 and büzgülü skirts were replaced by readymade trousers and skirts. These shifts took some time and produced alternative styles, which women created by combining new and old items of clothing alike. Creative combinations, such as skirts worn over trousers, revealed clearly how women were able to accommodate different practices of bodily comfort and fashion in the early years of migration.

Wearing “Dutch Skirts” in the Netherlands

As I mentioned earlier, both Dutch and Turkish people still remember the saying “Zo al een Turk die een jurk over haar broek draagt.” Migrant women gradually adopted new styles of Dutch ready-made garments in the 1970s, including short skirts, often at knee length. A new status and appearance meant different things for different segments of Turkish society in the Netherlands. Adopting skirts, especially what women called “Dutch skirts,” was challenging for most Anatolian women due to former practices and understandings of body covering. The ways in which women fashioned their appearance in more modern, urban garments varied.

42 I use the term “pajamas” to refer to a cotton pant-like garment, often decorated with a flower pattern, that has an elasticated waist and elastic cuffs at the bottom of the legs.
Most of them still do not feel comfortable when talking about the length and tightness of the skirts and trousers of the period.

Nylon stockings were one of the most significant markers of this change. The difference between pajamas and stockings was a matter of particular importance for the first generation. Nylon stockings worn with slim-fitting skirts and blouses signaled the process of becoming modern, emancipation from a rural background, and adaptation to a new life. Women coped with new types of sartorial discomfort: even a pair of very thick stockings (*kalın çorap*), were not as comfortable or practical to wear underneath one’s skirt as cotton pajamas. Therefore, in most of cases, pajamas worn under *büzgüllü* skirts were replaced by trousers worn with short skirts or dresses.

![Figure 18 Photos by Bertien van Manen in her book *Vrouwen te gast* (1979), courtesy of Bertien van Manen.](image)

The combination of thick knee-length stockings and knee-length pajamas (*paçali don*) worn underneath skirts also became very popular, especially as the first generation grew older. This combination allowed women to complete a modern appearance with fashionable leather shoes while also enjoying the comfort of cotton pajamas underneath. This combination was not only protective and comfortable, it was also more practical than full-length stockings...
when performing ablutions for prayer (*abi*best*). Although it is more common among elderly women, a few young *tesettür* wearers who only wear long skirts also prefer a similar combination (knee-length stockings and pajamas) due to its ease in the practice of ablution.

After thirty years, Mükerrem finally began to feel comfortable when wearing thick stockings. When she first came to the Netherlands, she wore pajamas under her *büzgülü* skirt. For her, these were already more modern garments than the baggy trousers that she used to wear in the village. Her mother, who stayed behind in the village, did not wear readymade skirts like those her daughter began to wear in the Netherlands. She still wears a pair of cotton pajamas in combination with a *büzgülü* skirt or dress. Unlike many other migrant women who stayed at home all the time, Mükerrem spent much of her time in the hospital, as her daughter needed medical care. Being outside with others was the main reason to make changes in her style of clothing. She no longer felt comfortable in her pajamas and skirt.

Mükerrem’s depiction of her first Dutch skirt-and-trouser combination illustrates her feelings about changing sartorial styles. Her new style was not only about wearing more modern, urban clothes, but also about adopting a different practice of body covering. Wearing trousers with a short top such as a blouse or jumper was not an option for the first generation, which preferred more covered styles of clothing in the villages. It was already very difficult for Mükerrem to trade in her loose cotton pajamas for a pair of trousers worn under a tighter, shorter skirt. Mükerrem bought her first Dutch skirt-and-trouser combination from a market with her husband. She wore them until she met another Turkish migrant woman who sewed a long dress for her.

Wearing such a dress was a transitory style for her, as it covered the body better than a skirt and blouse combination. Fashioning a new appearance with skirts was also a significant step. This introduced a different style of covering and posture that made Mükerrem feel good in her new environment. In her story, this change of style was necessary because her earlier appearance had caused problems and misunderstandings during encounters in her new location.

I came here in pajamas, aaah, at that time, who would dare to wear trousers in Turkey? (She became silent, indicating that nobody in her village would dare to do so, at least no one she knew.) I happened to be in the hospital, tending to my daughter. I wore pajamas when I went to the hospital at first. One of the nurses asked my husband ‘Why does your wife wear clothing like this?’ and another cleaning lady asked him ‘Why do you make your wife wear those clothes?’ Then we went to the market. We bought two pairs of trousers; I would not have worn them even if I knew I was going die. Then I got a long
dressed tailored. [Who sewed it?] We had a relative in Rotterdam; she made it. I had to wear it when we were in the hospital. [Did you always wear pajamas underneath a long dress or skirt?] Of course, of course, what else could I have worn? In summer, they always said to me, ‘You wear a skirt, why don’t you wear stockings, too?’

When elderly women today reflect on and describe the new sartorial styles they adopted, they discuss each preference as a marker of shifting understandings of femininity and modesty in their new location. Some women combined long, tailored dresses with pajamas, trousers or stockings, while others tried to adopt the short Dutch skirts of the period, and combined them with trousers or nylon stockings. They tried to fashion a new, modern appearance that would erase the marks of poverty and a rural background. The more they succeeded in performing a modern, urban presence, the more successful they were as immigrants in general.

The importance of the rural-urban divide is quite evident when comparing the life stories of Mükerrerem and Sibel. They both came to the Netherlands in the 1970s, but they wore different styles and came from very different backgrounds: Mükerrerem wore a büzgülü maxi skirt and pajamas, and later adopted a skirt-and-trouser combination, while Sibel wore close-fitting skirts, nylon stockings or trousers. Their narratives about trousers and skirts reflect different notions and shifting practices of modesty. They had different lives in Turkey. Sibel used to go to the cinema twice a week with her friends; she frequently hosted social gatherings in her house. She always wore fashionable, modern clothes. Therefore, she did not have much difficulty adapting her style of dress in the Netherlands; she already had an urban style. In her opinion, this was the reason why Dutch people did not think she was from Turkey. Sibel only worked in part-time jobs in the Netherlands. She thinks that she was always treated differently from other migrant Turkish women because she wore more modern outfits.

On the other hand, Mükerrerem never wore modern clothes before moving to the Netherlands. Her new life did not disappoint her in the way that it did Sibel as a woman. Mükerrerem was exposed to other women’s lives; she bought new garments, which were more modern and feminine. When she remembers her early days in the Netherlands, she laughs at her own amazement and naivety. There were so many things that were completely new for her in the Netherlands. For instance, she told me how she was amazed when she first saw her neighbor with a vacuum cleaner. She kept watching her for a while; she had no clue what this machine that made so much noise was. She waited until evening to ask her husband about the
strange machine, and then she asked her husband to buy one. She started to vacuum her carpets, which she used to clean by shaking or washing them in front of her apartment.

Trousers, which Mükerrem found embarrassing to wear, enabled Sibel to find a cleaner, more comfortable job in the Netherlands. Changing styles allowed women to feel less stigmatized and more equal in their relationships with the others.

It happened all the time. It was 1977; I was working at a flower farm. There were five or six other women from Turkey. I was the only one who wore trousers and a blouse. My boss asked my help in communicating with Spanish and Italian workers. I said that I couldn’t help, I didn’t know their language. Then, my boss asked ‘Where are you from?’ I said I was Turkish. He said that Turks wear long skirts and cover their heads…Turks work in the fields with animal muck. They covered their mouths with their yazmas (rural cotton scarves) and worked there all day. Because I told them that I was Turk, they sent me there to work, but I wouldn’t go. The boss got angry when I told him that I was Turk. ‘How is that possible? You wear trousers, you are modern!’ he exclaimed. I talked to the director, and he called my boss and told him that I had come to complain. I told him that I knew why he did this to me: I didn’t help tourists (Spanish and Italian women) and I was a Turk.

Nevin’s story also provides another sharp example of the change in sartorial practices in the context of migration. It frequently took some time for women to be able to refashion the comfort of previous habits of clothing in combination with new aesthetic values. Nevin left her children behind with her parents in Turkey and joined her husband in the Netherlands in 1978. She only brought two skirts and two blouses in her suitcase. She remembers very well that when her two skirts were worn out, she had to buy her first Dutch skirt. At that time, it was almost impossible to find even a knee-length skirt in the Netherlands.

It was very difficult to find a skirt or dress that would extend to the knee. We had to wear the short skirts of the Dutch women. We could only wear them with trousers. When the skirts got longer, we threw the trousers away. At that time, we dressed this way, but now I never wear trousers under my skirt. [Why?] These skirts are long enough. Even my kids (she means her son-in-laws) haven’t seen me in trousers yet—I’m that sort of person. Trousers show your figure, for instance I do not take off this vest when men are present, it hides your breasts and hips. Look, now I am sitting alone, but even so I have my tülbent (a thin fine cotton scarf), I tie it at the back (a style that leaves her neck and chest uncovered). Otherwise, I feel naked; it feels like I am entirely naked.

As Nevin’s account of her feelings of nakedness and discomfort shows, covering the body does not merely depend upon the presence of others; it is also embodied and habitual. One maintains a certain awareness of the body even in intimate spaces, regardless of the presence of others. This awareness is formed by a certain understanding of femininity and a
specific notion of modesty. It has less to do with a religious understanding of the private and the public (this divide is more socially-oriented, informed by the presence of others). Furthermore, even in the context of mahrerm,43 women may not feel comfortable putting on garments other than long skirts. As we see in Nevin’s case, she does not like her sons-in-law to see her in the trousers that she sometimes wears at home. She is concerned about covering her body as an elderly woman, even in front of her family.

The wearers of “Dutch skirts” in the 1970s are elderly women today. Nowadays, they can find more suitable skirts for their practice of body covering and tesettür understandings. The first generation is still the largest group among tesettürlü women who prefer not to wear trousers. Their concerns in choosing which style of skirts to wear have changed, and their age plays a major role in their selections. As grandmothers or mothers-in-law, most of them do not consider trousers suitable for their age. An increasing variety of skirts in different models offer elderly women ways to display both their aesthetic preferences and their new status as elderly woman whose attractiveness is no longer an issue. Even though Nevin chooses subtle, dark colors, as she finds these more suitable to her age, her wardrobe also includes skirts of different colors and different materials, which match nicely with her blouses and headscarves.

From Büzgülü Long Skirts to Ready-Made Maxi Skirts

Tailoring a büzgülü skirt only requires very basic sewing skills. The name büzgülü comes from the skirt’s shape, which results from an elasticated band that gathers the fabric around the waist. This pattern is very similar to that of the şalvar, which women are easily able to sew themselves. Büzgülü skirts were loose and long; women often wore pajamas underneath them, as they had not yet adopted nylon stockings. Although this hybrid style hid the figure, it also fashioned a more feminine posture and appearance than the former şalvar. Furthermore, women who at first did not want to give up the comfort of baggy trousers gradually accepted new ideas of femininity and the more feminine, slim shape of the female body that büzgülü skirts encouraged. Büzgülü skirts can still be found in the wardrobes of elderly women today, as a less modern, less expensive and more practical style of skirt. They have also become an object of nostalgia, as migrant women long for the home country and the past.

43Mahrem indicates those men for whom women do not need to cover (e.g. fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands).
Pelda’s description of fabrics and her explanation of why sewing is no longer relevant for migrant women together express women’s changing relationship with garments. As one of the few elderly women among my interlocutors, Pelda remembers sewing her own büzgülü skirts and entari. This was before her migration to the Netherlands. She had to sew her own garments because of her family’s poverty at the time; this was the only way to dress herself and her children. Her garments were often made from two types of cotton fabric called basma and pazen. Her preference for basma or pazen shifted according to the seasons, as the former is made of thinner fabrics whereas the latter is made of cotton flannel and designed for winter clothing. Different kinds of material were principally important to provide comfort to the body, rather than to create and impart an aesthetic posture.

Figure 19 Sewing kumaş skirts (below) requires sophisticated tailoring skills.

The materiality of clothing has always been significant to Turkish-Dutch women interlocutors, not only in the context of migration, but also in their prior lives in the village. The difference between rich and poor women was sharp, yet only evident on the basis the kind of fabrics used in their garments; the rich could afford to wear garments made of velvet, especially red velvet. As Pelda says, “only the rich could wear a red velvet dress,” while the poor only wore garments made of basma or pazen fabric, usually patterned with flowers and made of cotton. Büzgülü skirts evoke the poverty that Pelda experienced as a young woman.
In the past, we used to sew our own clothes. At that time, it was easy to sew. Now, there are circle skirts, tight skirts, pieced skirts; it is very difficult...I was very poor in the past. Now every month you have something new to wear; in the past, we had one or two outfits a year, no more than that.

Self-tailored büzgülü skirts gradually became indoor garments, just as şalvar and pajamas did at an earlier moment. Pelda nowadays prefers tailor-made skirts, especially because she has put on some extra weight. She has had a tailor in Istanbul for long time; he can tailor garments for her without seeing her in person. Pelda can now afford to buy or tailor her garments, and is able to wear more expressive clothing. Her wardrobe is very colorful. Furthermore, like other elderly women, she feels freer in choosing what to wear, as long as the garment covers her figure properly. In addition to the fabric, decorations and designs matter quite a lot for her. Each detail reveals a different aesthetics and an idea of femininity.

Figure 20 Pelda’s şalvar and a scene from her wardrobe: her favorite red velvet skirt and colorful blouse.

In one interview, a young tesettürlü woman described a key distinction among elderly women and their clothing preferences, based on the differentiation between ready-made or stylishly-tailored “kumaş etek” and self-tailored “büzgülü basma etek.” These two types of skirts articulate a strict distinction between elderly women who enjoy clothing, and therefore catch up with new trends, and those who cannot keep up with the times, and therefore live in
the sartorial past. The difference between women who are able to wear kumaş etek (ready-made skirts, made of jersey or wool) and those who still wear büzgülü basma skirts (made of cotton fabric) has become more and more visible in recent years.

Figure 21 Shopping for skirts in a market in The Hague.

Büzgülü skirts are still popular among elderly Turkish women in the Netherlands, even if these women rarely wear them outside the home or in social gatherings. This type of skirt has become inappropriate, even embarrassing, as it indicates that its wearer has still not adjusted to modern urban clothing. Wearing a büzgülü skirt was described as “resisting change” or “living in the past, living in the village.” This same style would not be interpreted this way in Anatolia today because it still maintains a certain functionality in village life (although this is not the case in Turkey’s large cities). In the Netherlands, however, this style does not adequately reflect urban ideas of femininity and understandings of the body in urban life. The büzgülü skirt today functions as a prayer skirt (namaz eteği); younger women only wear them on top of everyday clothes, for instance over their trousers, when they pray. The büzgülü skirt is loose and easy to put on over other layers of garments because of its elastic
waist. It hides more modern, urban styles of clothing during prayer, and therefore fashions a modest presence in the presence of God. In other words, the significance of religiosity in clothing changes according to the intimacy and intensity of religious experience throughout the day.


Are Skirts More “Islamic”?

By the 1980s, there were enough alternative styles of tesettür to suit different understandings of body covering and fashion concerns among Turkish-Dutch women. However, as an item of clothing for “conscious” Muslim women, skirts also gained new meanings. They became a new marker of ideal tesettür, at least for particular segments of the Turkish-Dutch community. Some pious women refused to include trousers in their wardrobes—in doing so, they often referred to a hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad curses a man dressed like a woman and a woman dressed like a man. The “new veiling” gave skirts a new meaning and turned them into markers of religiosity. This fact is even more remarkable because gender-neutral garments, such as long dresses and şalvar, were worn by Muslim men and women in Anatolia for such a long time. They had not been considered as a matter of religiosity.

The controversy over skirts corresponded to the shift from the “habitual” to the “conscious” headscarf. In practice, however, the choice between trousers and skirts does not fit easily into these exclusive categories, as the following account reveals. Zehra is one of the few young women who rarely wear trousers. In general, she does not consider trousers suitable for outdoor tesettür practice. Unlike young women her age who wear fashionable outdoor tesettür garments, Zehra wears long, loose-fitting overcoats. On the other hand, she generally prefers to wear trousers at home. She enjoys the comfort of trousers, yet she would never wear them in front of others in public. At the time of our interview, she only had two pairs of black trousers, which she sometimes combines with long dresses. However, these trousers always remain under her long overcoat if she is outside. When she puts on trousers, she pays great attention to ensure that her long pardöösü conceals them. She enjoys the comfortable feel of trousers, but they do not fit her conception of proper tesettür. Her sartorial
preferences reflect her commitment to following the interpretation of the hadith mentioned above. Indeed, this hadith remains significant when women discuss trousers and skirts. For Zehra, her mother’s tesettür is more devout because she never puts on trousers:

My mother pays greater attention to her tesettür. She never wears trousers. This is rare. [What does she think about trousers, did you talk about it?] Of course we did, there is a hadith behind it. Our Prophet told women that they should not dress like men. Well, there are certain skirts…if you wear trousers you look more well-mannered (edepli) than you would look wearing these skirts. My mother does not wear trousers, nor does she wear those types of skirts.

Nonetheless, it is quite difficult to draw strict boundaries between men’s and women’s clothing in contemporary fashions, especially in relation to the religious differences between skirts and trousers. Moreover, the proliferation of new fashions and styles makes it difficult to comprehend one’s preference for trousers or skirts merely in religious terms. On the one hand, some skirts risk highlighting the figure of body in a sexy way, which is not proper to tesettür, while on the other hand, modest combinations of long tunics or dresses with trousers display a rather devout understanding of tesettür. Moreover, this controversy also raises the question of why şalvar (baggy trousers) has not been challenged. Even if baggy trousers vary in terms of material and color, both men and women used to wear baggy trousers, as well as long robes. At least in terms of form, these garments were almost exactly the same.

In our conversations, women consistently articulated the difference between wearing a skirt and a pair of trousers in relation to the presence of others and the occasion (in terms of time and place). Women choose to put on different forms of skirts when they go to religious meetings. These skirts are often loose-fitting and long. In these mosque gatherings, some participants consider performing a more modest appearance as pious act; however, they also like to be visible and seen as attractive at other times. The choice of this particular style of skirt also demonstrates an individual’s commitment to the above-mentioned hadith. This style should be modern and fashionable, while simultaneously fitting within certain limits of modesty and piety. It should also correspond to the community’s general taste, which is shaped by both the spirituality of the meeting and the backgrounds of the participants. A different posture and mode of femininity are thus displayed in a modest way, which is only possible when wearing skirt.
Long, covering outdoor modes of tesettür (çarşaf and pardöösü) allow women to blur and thereby overcome the distinction between wearing trousers and skirts. Underneath the çarşaf or pardöösü, women wear whatever garment they find comfortable and aesthetically pleasing, and can hide or reveal their sartorial preferences as they like. Wearing çarşaf or a long overcoat gives women the advantage of shifting among styles occasionally. They can enjoy the comfort of trousers under their outer garments when there is a mixed crowd. When they prefer a more chic feminine style, they can remove their outer garments and display their skirts. However, there are many contrasting opinions about and practices of wearing skirts and trousers. For instance, while some çarşaf wearers are strongly against wearing trousers, others adapt trousers to their understanding of tesettür in terms of comfort and protection. It is important to note that even though the çarşaf (whether a combination of overcoat and cloak or
skirt and cloak) mostly hides what women wear indoors, the question of whether one wears trousers or a skirt still matters. Hanne, for instance, is a çarşaf wearer who enjoys the comfort of trousers underneath her çarşaf. She often wears long dresses (ferace) and trousers. In her understanding of tesettür, trousers are significant because they are more practical and comfortable than long, loose skirts.

Figure 23 Trousers under long overcoats and tunics or blouses (with different preferences of length).

In Hanne’s account, wearing trousers under a long dress is a sign of modesty that underlines a devout understanding of tesettür. A pair of trousers fashions a modest appearance; furthermore, they allow her to move freely due to their protective quality. They widen the range of different bodily movements and allow women to display different notions of femininity. This, in turn, relates to an active lifestyle that is modern and urban, even as it is also reminiscent of the comfort of baggy trousers and pajamas, two rural garments that do not fit well in modern, secular public spaces.
Niyet (intention) plays a major role in women’s narratives of tesettür, especially in relation to women’s sartorial preferences and interpretations of religious texts and sayings about clothing. As a hoca, Hanne is hesitant to label anything haram (forbidden) in absolute terms, including trousers:

In Islam, it is difficult to categorize something as forbidden directly. Why should trousers be haram in Islam? What would be the guilt of a pair of trousers? I don’t think it is right to call trousers haram for women. First of all, when they are under my dress, they are not trousers but pajamas. If you seek an answer in Islamic sources, you see that our Prophet tells women that they should wear a layer that protects them against falling and the wind.

Different individuals interpret wearing trousers in different ways. Hanne refers to another hadith to strengthen her argument that trousers are practical and protective. The reason and intention behind wearing a garment is crucial. If the aim of a garment is protection, this garment does not become haram simply because it is called “pantolon” (trousers). In this hadith, the Prophet Muhammad prays for a woman from his caravan. When she unfortunately falls from a camel, the Prophet immediately turns his back. The woman responds by saying “rahat ol” (do not worry) and tells him that she is covered because she is wearing a layer under her outer garments.44

Hanne is critical of the fact that some teachers show no tolerance for trousers. For some hocas, wearing trousers under a dress or an overcoat is a sin, but wearing full-length pajamas (which could be as tight as modern trousers) is not. To them, pajamas express provincial, local tastes and women’s relationship with the past: they show an individual’s attitude of disinterestedness in the present and, thus, their disregard for life in this world. Trousers are urban and modern attire, and for these hocas modern trousers do not produce adequate modes of modesty and femininity. Hanne, however, expresses a contrasting view of trousers:

Trousers are part of my tesettür [What about stockings?] I do not wear stockings, because when you step on elevated things the wind might blow and disturb your garments. Your legs might show. Conservatives (banaz) say that when you put on flower-patterned underwear ‘don’ (the name of a type of underwear that covers the legs just below the knee), this is an aspect of worship. Well, I ask them, when I wear black trousers for the same purpose, when the function is the same, is that a sin?

As a hoca herself, Hanne argues that religious teachers are responsible for explaining the boundaries of Islamic clothing, but at the same time they must take care to be reasonable

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44 This hadith is recorded in Munavi, Fayz-al Kadir, 1: 109-110.
about what they say to their students. In religious classes, one can find girls and women who favor various different styles, including some who are not tesettürlü yet at all. It is important for Hanne that her lessons suit the current times, as well as being within the boundaries of Islamic teachings and practices. From her perspective, the notion of haram must be understood in a balanced way in order to make sense in the everyday lives of Turkish-Dutch tesettür wearers.

If you say that a pair of trousers is haram, you need to explain this. You have to say why this is so. For instance, nobody understands what you are saying because in this society (Dutch society), a woman does not wear men’s clothing (trousers in particular) in order to look like a man. It is normal for women to wear trousers. The hadith in question referred to a man who tries to look like a woman in order to display his sexual inclinations (meyil).45

According to Hanne’s understanding of clothing, why you wear a garment is as important as what you wear. There is a strong mutual relation between what we wear and how we feel about ourselves. Hanne refers to the hadith at the level of inclinations and intentions because she thinks that the act of wearing trousers does not inherently constitute a gender transformation or manifest such a transformation to others in our times.

Skirts in the Presentation of Piety

The majority of women prefer to wear a skirt when they participate in religious meetings. Mosque meetings and religious gatherings at homes are unique because they bring acquaintances from diverse backgrounds together. On these occasions, family members, relatives, friends, neighbors and other members of the migrant community come together. They constitute a more homogenous audience with a more refined taste and critical understanding of tesettür clothing than that of passersby on the Dutch streets. Furthermore, these occasions produce a spiritual atmosphere in which women become more aware of their words and deeds. They contemplate their own understandings of piety and reflect on how they practice and attempt to nourish this piety every day. In doing so, they bring the representational aspect of clothing to the fore.

45 “The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) cursed the man who dressed like a woman and the woman who dressed like a man.” This hadith is recorded in the authoritative collection of Sunan Abu Dawud, Book 32, Kitab El-Libas, Number 4087, narrated by the Companion of the Prophet, Abu Hurayrah.
Women draw a distinction between the functional and representational aspects of wearing trousers and skirts. They occasionally change their preferences with regard to wearing skirts or trousers. Sevde is a young woman who wears both skirts and trousers. However, for her, there are places and occasions in which the difference between wearing a skirt and trousers becomes more of an issue. Like many other women, Sevde considers skirts more elegant and feminine than trousers, but there are still some contexts in which the comfort of trousers is more important to her. On the other hand, religious meetings are contexts in which she considers wearing a skirt appropriate. Sevde is an active member in the *Gülen* movement, but she also follows the programs of other Turkish religious communities in the Netherlands. As an active community member, she thinks that her style and appearance also plays an important representational role in the movement. Through her clothing and appearance, she tries to present her values and way of life as a practicing Muslim woman.

I always wear skirts to religious meetings; I would never go to such a context wearing trousers. I think that this context has a *tensil keyfiyeti* (representative quality). [How?] When I say *tensil keyfiyeti* I mean that if there is a religious meeting, if the Quran will be read, if the words of God will be recited, you should pay a greater attention to what you say and do. For instance, you should not wear close fitting trousers…I never criticize anyone by asking ‘Why did you wear this?’ but I never wear such garments myself. I believe that there is such a strong spirituality in this context that angels fill the room. [How about the combination of tunic and trousers?] No, I do not wear that either.

The sense of spirituality attached to these contexts plays an essential role in clothing preferences. In these meetings, women share and nourish spirituality as a common experience, but they also learn and share certain community tastes and understandings of *tesettür*.

In his writings and sermons, the contemporary Turkish theologian Fethullah Gülen often employs the notion of *keyfiyet* and its representational role in Muslims’ life. *Keyfiyet* literally means “quality” or “nature”. In his writings, Gülen discusses notion of *keyfiyet* along with the idea of *kemmiyet*, which literally means “quantity.” He describes *keyfiyet* as “the manifestation of Muslim values in a person’s attitude, behavior, saying and thinking, in other words, it is the internalization of the Muslim way of life, its embodiment, to achieve deeper knowledge of the self.”46 With the notion of *keyfiyet*, Sevde refers to the representational aspect of her Muslim identity and her visible presence.

Clothing is a significant means for fashioning a proper feminine posture, which becomes even more important when women attend religious meetings. Even though there are no men present in these contexts, Sevde pays greater attention to her words and deeds, and her clothing preferences are particularly crucial, as they are visually communicative. Especially when she is with the members of the community, she is not only an individual, but also a representative of a certain understanding of a Muslim way of life. In her long, stylish skirt, she can perform a proper femininity, which she feels represents her Muslim identity as a member of the community.

Furthermore, sartorial preferences demonstrate an individual’s respect for and commitment to the gathering. This is different from displaying respect for the elderly or family members, which I mentioned previously. This display of respect reveals one’s affiliation with and concern for the understanding of femininity in tesettür and according to community values. As a member of a particular community, Sevde wants to show that she acknowledges and affirms a certain understanding of tesettür when she attends a religious gathering. Showing respect requires not only fashioning a particular style of tesettür, it also demands the display of a certain body language. This display is not always harmonious with one’s personality. It often requires hard work and internal struggle.

For Sevde, the image of the “ağır abla” represents the ideal woman in her community. Ağır literally means heavy in Turkish, but in this context it denotes a wise and mature person in the community. The image of ağır abla embodies and represents the model Muslim woman for Sevde. Besides being a practicing Muslim, the ağır abla is a hardworking, mature, patient, mothering, calm, and worthy individual. As an ideal persona, she is a moral figure whom other women refer to when they talk about being a good Muslim. The ağır abla is more aware of her body movements and their effects on the others. Her body movements indicate a certain awareness and reflect a disciplined will. A slowness and rhythm in the motion of her body also signifies a modest understanding of femininity. In sum, the ağır abla is an ideal that women refer to when they criticize their own choices, words and deeds:

I am a rather relaxed (rahat) person. Here we are at home, but when you go outside and interact with strangers, you represent others (i.e. Muslims in general). I was never a calm (ağır), serious person. I admire ağır abla(s) yet I could never be one. For instance, when I wear trousers, I sometimes sit with my legs apart at the bus stop, or I sit with my legs crossed, but you cannot do this if you are wearing a long overcoat. You cannot sit with your legs apart.

As Sevde explains, her sartorial preferences allow her to create a more modest, pious posture. When she mentions sitting with her legs apart, Sevde refers to a less feminine, less
modest posture, which she does not think embodies Muslim values. Each posture causes one’s body to feel differently and produces different effects on others. Even if Sevde could never become an ağır abla herself, she strives to better represent her way of life as a Muslim by wearing skirts for special occasions such as religious gatherings.

In other contexts, comfort and practicality are more important than a pious understanding of femininity. One such context is travel; Sevde does not wear skirts when she is travelling. She is the mother of small twins and a seven-year-old boy. When she is travelling, she does not care much about whether her appearance fits with a devout understanding of femininity. Her priority is to be able to act efficiently with her three children. Therefore, in these contexts she only wears trousers with long tops and cardigans. Wearing a skirt would disable certain movements of the body. Sevde does not want to look like a mother who cares more about her appearance than the comfort of her children. Performing proper motherhood and dressing according to the needs and expectations of the particular moment are more important to her. Not fulfilling her role as a mother would be more stigmatizing than not performing a particular understanding of tesettür.

3. Styling the Personal

A Passion for Tailoring

Even if new trends and urban lifestyles have promoted wearing trousers together with long tops (tunics, blouses, cardigans, dresses, etc.) in tesettür clothing since 1990, skirts maintain a unique place in the wardrobes of tesettür wearers. As I mentioned above, there are certain occasions during which women prefer to wear a skirt because it explicitly merges a particular aesthetic and a notion of pious modesty. Not doing so in such contexts could be seen as inappropriate or disrespectful. Some young women do consider kumaş maxi skirts old-fashioned—because such skirts are produced in standard models, they are not taken to reflect personal tastes and understandings of femininity. As a solution, sewing one’s own skirt has become more popular among young women. Sewing helps women create their own styles, which synthesize different notions of aesthetics and interpretations of tesettür. This section
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explores how women fashion personal styles with long skirts, and thereby articulate their understanding of *tesettür* and sense of femininity in various settings as young professionals.

In their accounts, young women often made statements such as “I do not like the Turkish style or classic skirts.” Young women try both to adopt the aesthetics of Turkish *tesettür* clothing and to personalize their *tesettür*. Creative, personalized adaptations succeed in distinguishing their long skirts from the “classic” Turkish skirt and outdated notions of femininity and religiosity. Young women do not like to wear old-fashioned, undecorated, long, straight-cut skirts in dark colors; on the other hand, they also do not consider the contemporary models of long skirts prevalent in the Dutch market compatible with their personal preferences and understandings of piety. The story of two fashionable Turkish-Dutch women, Azize and Latife, who are also young entrepreneurs in the Dutch *tesettür* market, illustrates the general desire to fashion a personal aesthetics in *tesettür* clothing.

We sewed seventy skirts, we used to make three or four skirts in one week…we did not know how to sew, but we had a passion for clothing…a tenacity. We always imagined colorful skirts and thought about combining them with other fashions. We always came up with something unique and different. Then, you must ask yourself how to make it. You sit at your sewing machine; you have to make them yourself. Or you have to give your design to a tailor to make it for you; we did that too. We love clothing, and we love colors. We could not find what we wanted in the market…we thought it would be better if we made it ourselves.

The growing interest in sewing is not a result of poverty or necessity, in contrast to what we hear in the accounts of first generation women. Rather, sewing is a means to fashion a unique, personal taste within the norms of *tesettür*. Sewing allows women to fashion their own style while also enabling them to bring together disparate fashions with a particular understanding of *tesettür*. An increasing number of young women have become interested in sewing, and they participate in tailoring courses in order to learn how to produce their own clothing. With the ability to sew for themselves, young women are able to determine the length and looseness of their garments as they wish; simultaneously, they incorporate

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47 A skirt is not “Turkish” or “classic” simply because the label reads “made in Turkey”—skirts in chain stores such as Zara, H&M and Mango also bear this label—but because a set of unique ornaments and a distinctive shape give skirts a Turkish character. The main difficulty with long skirts in mainstream fashions is that they are not always available. *Tesettür* companies in Turkey produce long skirts in a wide range of designs and materials. This is why most of the long skirts in the wardrobes of my interlocutors are often originally from Turkey.

48 These young women are *tesettür* coiffeurs; they make and sell fashionable head-coverings that match young women’s party dresses. For more detail about *tesettür* coiffeurs, see Chapter Six on festive dress.
aesthetics from different styles and trends that are not always available in ready-made covered styles of clothing.

Denim Skirts

Denim was absent in the tesettür scene up until the 1990s, as I mentioned in the overcoat chapter. Although tesettür producers introduced denim to the tesettür clothing market “from head to toe” (e.g. denim-patterned headscarves, blouses, bags, boots, etc.), from that time forward, not all young women preferred the styles and quality of these companies. In the absence of desired styles of long denim skirts—especially if wearing jeans is compatible with one’s tesettür understanding—converting jeans to long skirts is an option. This creative refashioning also illustrates the desire to distance one’s personal style from the old-fashioned, classic kumaş skirts.

Denim skirts quickly replaced the “classic” plain-colored maxi skirts, which had previously been used to produce “safe” combinations. Like any other garment made of denim, long denim skirts create a certain sense of comfort and a safe feeling, both because of their easy adaptability in various combinations and because the fabric itself induces a feeling of anonymity by highlighting a shared taste with a large number of people, as I discussed in the denim overcoat section.

Long, close-fitting denim skirts have become one of the most commonly worn styles in the Turkish-Dutch tesettür scene. Denim skirts are often embellished with big pockets or shiny zippers, or occasionally with rivets or beads. Unlike mainstream mini or knee-length denim skirts, these skirts are long. Both the growing tesettür market in Turkey and the mainstream clothing industry offer various models with colors and designs that change from one season to another. As we see in the following accounts, women still like to fashion their own apparel.
Asira is young, fashionable woman from Amsterdam. She prefers Replay jeans, which she converts into skirts, because this is a well-known, expensive jean brand; it is familiar to her colleagues and friends, and different from that of any other long denim “Turkish” skirt. Brand names also play a significant role in rescuing the long skirt from its former connotations of old-fashioned rurality. I searched for a long denim skirt for quite a while…I wanted to wear denim skirts but there weren’t any (she means long denim skirts). Then, I bought a pair of denim trousers. I went to the tailor and had the trousers tailored as a skirt. I bought some fabric [Can you show me?], and the tailor undid the trouser legs. I told her to put this fabric in between the legs. [You bought the black fabric?] Yes, I bought it from the marketplace for three euros. (She touches the fabric.) You can recognize from the texture that it is from a pair of jeans. This is Replay (a very popular brand in the Netherlands). I bought a pair of Replay jeans and had this skirt made from them.
Jeans that would not fit within an individual’s understanding of tesettür are transformed into attire that is compatible with tesettür. Making a skirt from a pair of jeans also adds a different feel to the garment. Such a skirt has a thicker texture and conceals one’s figure more effectively. Furthermore, this sort of skirt has the unique cut of fashionable jeans and a visible brand label. Other young women converted fashionable jeans into denim tesettür skirts, too. Tailoring a long skirt from a pair of jeans entails the transformation of a garment that displays the shape of the body into a garment that conceals the body. The long denim skirt brings together different elements that some tesettürlü women desire. It is a mix of high quality, comfort, a certain taste and a particular understanding of body covering.

It is difficult to link this phenomenon to a particular understanding of tesettür, because women who follow diverse practices of tesettür fancy denim skirts converted from jeans.
Ceylin is a twenty-five-year-old university student. At the time of our interview, she was very confused about her *tesettür*. She no longer sees wearing a headscarf as central to her understanding of modesty and piety. Her story is at the margins of *tesettür*, as she situates herself in between *tesettür* and non-*tesettür* practices. She first put on a headscarf when she was seventeen. Although she still follows a certain style of *tesettür*, she is highly critical about her initial adoption of *tesettür* because it was not the result of a conscious decision.

On several occasions throughout our conversation, Ceylin repeated that she would come out of *tesettür*, if only she could be sure that she would not have any regrets after doing so. A year later, I received an email from her updating me about the many things that had changed in her life. She is now married and no longer wears a headscarf. She wears both skirts and trousers, yet her favorite is the denim skirt:

I wanted to buy a long denim skirt but I couldn’t find one. You might find one, but it has a deep slit...then I said to myself, ’It doesn’t matter how much it costs, when I find a denim skirt I will buy it.’ However, I still couldn’t find one, so I said, ’Let’s make a skirt from a pair of jeans.’ I had not seen this before, but I had heard about it. I talked to a tailor and asked whether she could make a skirt in this way. She said she had never heard of such thing…she said ‘I have never done this, but let’s give it a try.’ And she did very well.

Denim skirts may become an alternative for women later in life, especially for those who would like to fashion a style that differs from that of classic *kumaş* skirts. Wearing denim skirts highlights individual differences among middle-aged women. As I briefly mentioned when relating her migration story in the chapter on *pardösü*, Fatma Nur is a forty-three-year-old *tesettürli* woman; during her time at university, she was the only young migrant woman there. Currently, she runs social care and aid projects for elderly members of the Dutch-Turkish community. She also has a very active life in the *Diyanet* mosque as a volunteer. Her story is distinctive because she adopted *tesettür* at a very late age. For long time, she was an active member in the Holland Turkish Women’s Union, an organization dedicated to labor rights. She spent a lot of time with the leading leftist artists and politicians of the period from Turkey in Amsterdam. She typically wore jeans, a turtleneck jumper (with short sleeves in the summer) and a brown leather jacket in photographs from the time.

Fatma Nur often prefers to wear long skirts. On summer days, she prefers loose cotton trousers, as she does not find stockings comfortable. But denim skirts are her favorite. To some extent, she likes standardized clothing, and feels protected by the limits that such garments set for her. From just a glance at her wardrobe, it is possible to see that functionality and simplicity are important for her. Functionality shapes her understanding of modesty to a
large extent. It also endows her style with a plain appearance. Fatma Nur cares about the quality of the fabrics she wears in terms of both comfort and health. She does not hesitate to invest in quality materials. Denim skirts fashion a more gender-neutral look than other long skirts. She enjoys a more causal urban style. Her sartorial preferences are different from those of her friends the same age.

I have friends who wear flashy garments, with many ornaments. I tell them that they look nice, but I cannot wear such things. Such shiny garments, they look good on some people. If I wear the same garment, however, it feels as if everybody is looking at me. If something makes me feel this way, I cannot wear it. I feel strange...you know the kind of fabric. There is more nylon stuff in Turkey; I never wear nylon. Jersey fabric, I would never wear that either.

At work, Fatma Nur pays greater attention to her clothing, especially because she thinks that her outfit and posture also represent her employer. Her account reveals that she revises and adjusts her understanding of modesty and sartorial practice according to this particular context.

If I am going to work, and I know that I have meetings all day long, then I pay attention to what I wear, because I represent my employer. My appearance is important, it should be pleasing to the eye. [How so?] For instance, last Thursday I went to work. I put on a denim skirt and a black jacket. I wore a short-sleeved blue shirt, and a black-and-blue colored scarf...I dislike things that attract too much attention.

For Fatma Nur, denim skirts and jacket combinations feel appropriate in the workplace. Fatma Nur’s wardrobe expresses a particular understanding of modesty. She buys clothes that are easy to wash and do not need ironing. The most important thing for her is to be able to easily combine any particular garment with the rest of her clothing. Time is very precious for Fatma Nur, and she considers spending time on her clothing wasteful. Denim skirts fit with her active lifestyle. They look smart and energetic on her as a professional.

Although Fatma Nur thinks that women her age in general should adopt more decorated, feminine fashions, she continues to wear simple, somewhat gender-neutral garments. For her, denim skirts solve the everyday dilemma of clothing. They are easy to put on, and combine well with different accessories for different occasions. They fashion a “safe mode” for their wearers. The principles of comfort and simplicity that denim skirts display constitute a different sense of femininity and modesty. Fatma Nur dislikes skirts made of Jersey (a kind of fabric that is typically stretchy and thin), which displays the body’s figure. Long denim skirts are alternatives to the “classic” Turkish style. They produce a more
professional look, and allow middle-aged women to fashion a personal style different from the typical image of the migrant woman.

Young Professionals in Skirts and Trousers

Young women attribute different meanings to particular styles of skirt, each of which highlights different notions of femininity and modesty. The life cycle has a significant effect on how these meanings evolve. Professional life requires young women to fashion skirts and trousers in more formal and sophisticated ways. Trousers and skirts signify different things in the workplace than they do in religious meetings, for example. Moreover, a woman in tesettür who wears skirts or trousers communicates different messages to Dutch viewers than she does to members of the Turkish religious communities. This section will focus on the place of skirts and trousers in changing personal styles when young women become professionals.

Ebrar is a young woman who sought to change her wardrobe and sartorial sensibility after beginning her professional life. She works as an account manager in a Dutch firm, where she prepares yearly income and tax reports for companies and entrepreneurs. After a few negative experiences with her customers, she began to suspect that her clothing choices caused her to be less trusted and treated in an inferior manner to her male colleagues. Ebrar decided to pay more attention to her outfits at work. In her opinion, both her gender and her tesettür make her customers think that she is not sufficiently skilled and professional. She believes that her tesettür makes it more difficult to deal with the already gendered perceptions of her customers.

Ebrar distances herself from the stereotype of a Turkish woman with a long, old-fashioned skirt, which evokes the image of an elderly migrant woman walking through the bazaar with heavy grocery bags; she seeks a style that strengthens her position as a professional. Her favorite combination is that of knee-length dresses with modern trousers. Such a combination looks more fashionable, as it shows the body’s shape more closely than tunics. Completing this outfit with a jacket on top, she creates a professional, formal look.

I am gradually changing my style from skirts to trousers. Trousers keep you warm. They are more comfortable. In fact, I could wear trousers with skirts, but I feel less formal in a skirt…when I put on trousers and a jacket, my outfit is more formal. When Turkish costumers come, if you have a skirt on, they see you as housewife. [Do Dutch costumers think the same thing?] I don’t think so,
because our Turks look and think differently. Their wives wear skirts and are always at home. This is the Turkish prejudice about women in skirts. For the Dutch, wearing a skirt is more about religiosity. They think you live for your religion. Our women often go shopping in marketplaces, they carry grocery bags, and they often wear long skirts. I think that is why the skirt has this image.

Stylish skirts with more cosmopolitan aesthetics have also become popular in the wardrobes of professional tesettürlü women. The “Istanbul style” (İstanbul tarzi) increasingly dominates the tesettür scene both within Turkey and in the Turkish diaspora, women still recognize crucial differences among garments both in terms of quality and aesthetics. In the Netherlands, they find skirts sold in Turkish stores old-fashioned and in bad taste. Such skirts generally lack the desired cosmopolitan or “Istanbul” aesthetic, and they are low in quality for their relatively high prices. On the other hand, skirts sold in mainstream clothing stores are often very tight and made of thinner fabrics, and therefore display the figure of the body.  

Evrem is a twenty-one-year-old tesettürlü woman from Amsterdam. She works as an optician. Her style has changed visibly since she started her profession as an optician. She had a difficult time finding a proper job. In fact, one of her attempts to procure a position ended with a court case at the discrimination bureau in Amsterdam. Her prospective employer told her directly that her appearance was not suitable because of her headscarf. She eventually won the case. The everyday dilemma of clothing has become more challenging and complicated for tesettürlü women in professional life. Evrem faced similar prejudices and distrust from her customers. Young professional tesettürlü women face a more difficult task because they have to deal with the negative effects of their tesettür. In order to cope with these negative effects, they need to fashion a personal style within the boundaries of certain understandings of modesty and piety.

Even if young tesettürlü professionals are not interested in fashioning such a style, others, especially employers, often ask them to do so. If they do not, they may lose their jobs. They need to pay more attention to their clothing in order to highlight their professional skills. By displaying a certain understanding of beauty and fashion, young tesettürlü women highlight commonalities with their customers. At their workplaces, style and aesthetics become more important than gendered perceptions of wearing trousers and skirts. A

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49 Although the gap between what is called the Anatolian market and the more urban regions of Turkey is increasingly disappearing, the same company might produce the same garment with different qualities of textile for rural and urban regions, and designers know that certain models sell well in Anatolia, but not in the big cities. For instance, while flower-pattern satin headscarves sell better in rural regions, more geometrical, abstract patterned silk scarves are primarily produced for urban areas.
sophisticated style can erase the effect of tesettür as a clothing preference that otherwise devalues one’s professional knowledge and skills. Evrem’s change in style is different from the change that Ebrar made. Rather than wearing trousers, she continues to wear skirts, but in a highly fashionable manner. She favors the more cosmopolitan “İstanbul tarzi.” She has adopted new trends and items from the Istanbul fashion scene with the help of cousins who live in Turkey. Evrem employs the “İstanbul style” to protect her clothing from the prejudices of others.

They didn’t let me wear Converse All-Stars and so forth. I wore them in the beginning. I was very casual; I wore jeans and a colorful headscarf. Then the costumers began to ask, ‘Do you work here?’ They were surprised to see someone in a headscarf. ‘Ah! Are you going to conduct my vision test? Can you do such a thing?’ They did not trust me. Whenever I put on skirts, boots, or a jacket and blouse with a chic headscarf, watch or jewelry, then there was sense of trust. I walk around in high-heeled shoes; when I dress up, I feel good. It seems that they want me to dress chic.

Evrem’s choice went the opposite way, from jeans to skirts, as jeans are often not considered proper professional clothing. Fashioning a proper appearance relies not only the choice between skirts or trousers, but also on the kinds of skirts or trousers one chooses. The skirts that Evrem finds suitable for her style are not the long, loose skirts characteristic of migrant women. They are short enough to display her boots, and she wears them combined with short, tight-fitting jackets. Like Evrem, many young professionals (covered or not) feel the need to change their style in the context of the workplace. Sometimes, they are directly asked to make changes to their appearance in order to look presentable. Through certain accessories, women are able to add a personal touch to their outfits and thus feel empowered. Fashioning an individual style challenges the image of the tesettürlü woman as less professional but more religious.

Medeni Türk Kızı: Wearing Long Skirts in Family Settings

The decision to wear a skirt rather than trousers cannot be explained exclusively on the basis of religious references and interpretations. Motivations and inspirations for this sartorial choice are also associated with certain family values, which in turn highlight particular meanings of womanhood and the role of women as family members. For some tesettürlü women, wearing a skirt is a strict, unchanging, habitual practice, but more importantly it is
also a marker of a certain understanding of femininity. These women only wore trousers when they were small children. Because skirts fashion a more feminine appearance than trousers, they continue to be more attractive to teenage girls. To wear skirts with a proper posture requires a high level of awareness of the body’s movements. In general, kumaş skirts are no longer attractive for most young tesettürlü women, because they consider these skirts too old-fashioned or “classic” for their taste. Nevertheless, they all remember well the period during their childhood when they patiently waited their turn to wear kumaş skirts of their own.

Habibe is a Turkish-Dutch woman who only wears skirts. In her professional life, she has received a lot of attention as a successful, young, recognizably Muslim woman in the Netherlands.

I do not wear trousers; I wear skirts. [You don’t have any trousers?] No, I don’t have any trousers, I do not think they suit me, and I’m not used to wearing them. I am short—I don’t think they look good on me. I was raised in trousers, I wore them until I was eight or nine, then I stopped, or rather I was asked to stop…I always wore a skirt from then on. Now skirts are trendy, there are very beautiful suits.

For Habibe, wearing a skirt communicates a certain message about her values and her way of life as a woman. Through this particular style, she affirms her role as a woman in the eyes of her family and relatives. For instance, the way she sits with her long skirts when in the presence of elderly people or her parents shows that she acknowledges them in a respectful manner.

Habibe describes her style as classic; she considers this to be a safe style. She does not need to bother catching up on recent trends or taking the risk of creating fashionable outfit combinations. In her opinion, this safe style saves her both time and money. As she would emphasize, she has skirts and jackets in her wardrobe that she can wear for ten years without any modification. She prefers skirts in plain colors, loose and long. For her, skirts guide their wearers by forming a particular bodily posture, which is appropriate in certain contexts.

For instance, let me put it this way, when I wear a skirt I have to sit properly; I sit like this (she shows how she makes sure that her skirt covers her legs properly). You place your legs on top of one another. You do this when elderly people are around, or in an official context. You can sit comfortably (laid-back) too, but when you cross your legs, you must place this layer under your leg. You squeeze the skirt, so it does not show anything…

Through these explicit practices, Habibe preserves notions of femininity and modesty that are accepted in her close network, particularly in her family. She feels embarrassed when she even thinks of herself in trousers. Her feelings about a possible shift from skirts to
trousers recall her mother Pelda’s feelings of discomfort and embarrassment when she first came out of çarşaf and adopted a close fitting overcoat, a story which I discussed in the overcoat chapter. As Habibe emphasizes, wearing skirts properly is a long-term discipline through which the body learns how to sit and move in skirts. Older female relatives often tell younger women to “put on your skirt” when guests are coming for a visit. Another frequently heard imperative is “sit properly!” (düzgün otur!), which aims to correct the body movements of young skirt wearers.

Habibe’s style has remained almost exactly the same for many years. This is her style; it simultaneously represents her idea of womanhood both professionally and as a member of her family. By combining two different understandings of femininity, she produces a unique style with her skirts. On one hand, she is an ambitious professional, even “aggressive” in her work, as she says. On the other hand, as a single woman and oldest daughter, her style affirms her respect for the values of her family. In a way, Habibe transforms the classic style of her wardrobe into a new personal style.

The motivations and inspirations involved in fashioning one’s style depend quite a lot on context. For instance, some young women would not feel very comfortable in trousers in the presence of their elderly parents, although they find trousers suitable for the workplace or university. Serap explains how wearing a skirt produces different meanings for the Dutch and Turkish communities. She thinks that from the Dutch perspective wearing a long skirt is more about piety; it is about Islamic orthodoxy rather than gender difference. Serap considers herself a tesettürülü Muslim woman, but not an orthodox one. She strictly avoids wearing skirts when she socializes with Dutch people. She thinks that the stereotypical image of the Turkish girl in long skirts is excessively rigid. Even if the skirt is orange—the symbolic color of the Dutch Royal family and the Netherlands more generally—it remains stigmatizing. It still produces feelings of otherness for her.

It doesn’t matter how good your Dutch is, how good your education is, when you wear a skirt, they think you are excessively orthodox. Even if you have a skirt that is orange in color, even if you say that you are Dutch, it does not matter—in the end a skirt is a skirt. They look at your skirt, not its color or its combination with other garments. If I am going to a place where there will be Dutch people, I wear a dress with skinny jeans underneath or a chic pair of trousers. Well…I try to dress up in this way.
At the same time, as mentioned before, kumaş skirts might be the safest, most appropriate attire to wear to family gatherings or the meetings of religious communities. Serap refers the word “medeni” (civilized/urbane), which highlights the young, urban, chic aspects of her style. The definitive outfit of the “medeni Türk kızı” (urbane Turkish girl) is basically a combination of a blouse and a normal black or perhaps dark blue skirt; it has become prominently present in various Turkish religious communities.

I cannot wear these trousers everywhere. People (from the Turkish community) view them differently. Well, you cannot call them trousers but you can’t call them a skirt either. (On the day of interview she was wearing a skirt-trouser combination.) There is always something to say, there is always an excuse. I would never put this on when I go to visit my family. For instance, if I were to visit my mother’s friends with my mom while wearing such an outfit, I am sure that I would provoke negative reactions. They would say, ‘Is it a skirt or what?’ ‘It’s too tight,’ and so on. But when I bought this outfit, I paid attention
to all that. For the events and gatherings that are organized by the Turkish community, I prefer to dress like a *medeni* Turkish girl.

Wearing a skirt at home or at one’s workplace also produces different feelings and modalities of femininity for Evrem.

If I wear a skirt at home, when guests arrive, I have such a different feeling...I feel mature. It feels lady-like (*hanım hanımcık*). If I put on a skirt and wear high-heeled shoes or boots outside, I feel myself present, confident. You walk in this manner: ‘*tıkır tıkır*’ (with a sharp rhythm and sound). The skirt should not be too long, well, about this long (she points out a length that is a hand span higher than her ankles). You wear high-heeled shoes or boots, a bit modern. Then I feel strong as a woman. On days when I want to feel like a strong woman I wear an outfit like this.

Even if the headscarf is an unchanging item in young *tesettürlü* women’s clothing, all of the other items in their wardrobes are equally important to the ways in which women conceal and reveal different modalities of femininity and modesty. As we see in the quote above, it is possible to add different effects to a skirt with other accessories, and thereby to rescue it from its former meanings. By manipulating the appearance and effect of her skirt by adjusting its length and using other accessories, Evrem feels empowered as a woman. On the other hand, the style of skirt that she wears in domestic contexts helps her feel more like an adult. She achieves a more mature, feminine appearance at home, in the presence of family, friends, neighbors, and relatives.

### Running the Risk of Transgression: Slitted, Fishtail, and Three-quarter Skirts

Slits complicate the potential meanings of skirts. It is not always easy to move properly and fashion a modest posture in skirts with slits. Indeed, slits may challenge the idea of modest *tesettür* clothing entirely. Skirts with slits are considered sexy, not only in mainstream fashion, but also in *tesettür* fashion. However, long, close-fitting skirts require slits so that their wearers can walk. Furthermore, there are different kinds of slits: open (*açık yırtmaç*) and closed (*kapalı yırtmaç*). As the names indicate, the first type of slit displays more of the leg more than the second.

Wearing a particular style of slitted skirt relates to both questions of modesty and piety and to the process of becoming an adult woman. In the accounts of young women, fashioning a suitable outfit with a skirt and disciplining the body in order to move properly in this style highlight the successful closure and completion of a liminal period, the passing from childhood to womanhood.
Long fish-tail and three-quarter-length skirts, which are produced by mainstream clothing companies, allow women to fashion a different style of tesettür, thereby introducing a new aesthetic to the Turkish-Dutch tesettür scene. They distance their preferences and tastes from what is typically sold in old-fashioned Turkish stores. New and fashionable three-quarter skirts, often combined with trendy knee-length boots, are found in the new generation of Turkish clothing stores, such as the successful Turkish chain Manzaram. While these new stores offer more fashionable skirts, self-styled skirts, in particular, guarantee a more distinctive appearance.

Figure 27 The image at the top right is the popular Mango skirt, seen at a community event; at the bottom right we see a green fishtail skirt from Zehra’s wardrobe; the image on the left shows a picture of a skirt that was recently on Facebook and got many “likes” from other young women.

The problem with skirts from mainstream fashion lines is that they are often very tight and made of thin fabric that displays the contours of the body. Even if they are long skirts, similar in length to maxi kumaş skirts, they produce a sexy appearance. For instance, a
leopard print fishtail skirt from the mainstream chain store Mango was especially trendy at the
time of my fieldwork. It was an expensive garment; often, a few good friends shared one skirt
among themselves to wear on special occasions. Women have different ideas about wearing
such appealing skirts. These ideas are related to various concerns and anxieties over when,
where, and in the presence of whom to wear such sexy garments. Some women would wear
this type of skirt as part of their everyday clothing, while others only wear it on special
occasions, when only other women are present. Others still find such skirts completely
incompatible with their understanding of tesettür, so they do not wear them at all, even at
women-only gatherings.

Fatma’s wardrobe is unique, since it combines garments that express a strong Turkish
taste with cosmopolitan garments right next to one another. She likes wearing trousers with
tunics, but she also has a large collection of skirts in her wardrobe. She wears both
fashionable long Turkish skirts and mainstream skirts. Fatma does not like old fashioned,
classic skirts; she prefers decorations and details on her skirts. In her view, these small details,
which could well be invisible to some people, express her taste and personality. Even the
denim skirt in her wardrobe, which is as plain as possible and therefore appropriate for the
safest combinations, is decorated with embroidery and lace.

Below, Fatma describes her favorite skirt in detail. Clearly, she enjoys uniqueness and
creativity in her style.

It has lacework, embroidery, it is a bit creative, there are pockets on the sides,
they are bit lower (than ordinary pockets). I do not actually use the pockets. It
is long but it has a slit. The front is triangular, it looks cool with boots...

Figure 28 Detail from Fatma’s skirt.
Super Star and Didi are Fatma’s favorite stores; they often offer fashionable skirts that appeal to her taste. Buying garments from Turkish stores makes it difficult to fashion a unique personal style, because these stores play a major role in propagating certain styles and trends among young women. Women know that if they wear the most fashionable skirt sold in Manzaram that season, they will probably encounter several other women in exactly the same skirt or in the same model in slightly different colors. Therefore, they often avoid wearing garments from Turkish stores, especially when attending Turkish wedding parties or events of the Turkish community.

The significance of long skirts in non-tesettür fashions is, of course, different. Like many other garments in mainstream fashion, long skirts need to be attractive and, therefore, to highlight the shape of the body. The full-length leopard print skirt from Mango that I mentioned above, which is made of shiny, thin fabric, exemplifies this. Fatma describes feeling of the garment and its effect on others in the following way:

You can’t wear skirts like mine when you are thirty-five, after you’ve had a kid and your body’s shape has changed. From time to time, I think about this. This skirt is very tight on the top and it gets looser to the bottom. This is why many people prefer it. It’s very tight on top around the hips, and you often wear something that’s not so long on top, usually a short jacket. When somebody says something, then I think maybe I should cover it up. [Has anybody said anything?] With these skirts, it happens all the time. Because my hips are low, it does not matter whether I wear high-heeled shoes or not, my hips always move when I walk (kıvırırım). In my old neighborhood, the kids used to ask ‘Are you a model? Why do you walk like that (kıvırák)?’ After seeing you, we mimic the way you walk.’ I said that this is simply the way I walk, this is the shape of my body and hips (kalçamin yapısı böyle).

The style of skirt that Fatma describes in this quotation is called a “balık etek” (fishtail skirt) by young tesettür wearers. For some tesettür wearers, this design is only appropriate in women-only meetings, especially wedding parties or henna parties. While Fatma wears fishtail skirts in many different contexts, from the workplace to wedding parties, another young woman named Yusra has gradually become uncomfortable wearing fishtail skirts, even when she attends women-only meetings. She always maintains her outdoor tesettür when she is in the presence of men; if she is at home, she wears a very long dress that conceals her body like an outdoor garment. Her sartorial preferences in terms of length and looseness are directly informed by the notion of mahrem-namahrem.  

50 In Yusra’s practice of tesettür, see footnote 3 above. “Namahrem” refers to those men in whose presence women must cover.
women-only gatherings are significant because they allow her to dress up and highlight different aspects of her femininity. Even so, however, Yusra feels shy when explaining the effects that her fishtail skirt has on other women. For this reason, she does not like this particular skirt anymore.

I don’t like fishtail skirts anymore. [You don’t like them?] Not anymore, they are extremely eye-catching (dikkat çekici), which is not nice. Even if you wear them among women…my hips are big (bayağı var) they become more visible, and that’s not good. All eyes are on you, don’t make me explain it explicitly (açık konuşurma) [They look at your butt?] (We laugh.) Yes, they are not embarrassed to look, they say things about my figure; the fishtail skirt wraps around your body. I bought a black one from Mango recently, it is very long and black. I wore high-heeled shoes with it when I went to a henna party. [Women-only?] Yes women-only.

Tesettürli women’s ideas and opinions about tight-fitting balık skirts and three-quarter-length skirts vary. In most accounts, women encounter many criticisms, but in spite of these criticisms they continue to wear such relatively short, tight skirts. Wearing fishtail and three quarter-length skirts with leggings or tight jeans is often taken as a sign of reluctance and discontent with the practice of tesettür. It denotes a mode of femininity that is difficult to reconcile with mainstream understandings of modesty and piety in both secular and religious imaginaries. Even in the exclusive presence of other women, fashioning an attractive appearance as a tesettürli woman risks being seen as being hypocritical in relation to one’s own beliefs and commitment. Such an attractive mode of tesettür is even more difficult for hocalar, both because there are relatively few of them and because, as pious figures and role models, they must negotiate the high expectations of others.

People only see me as a hoca. I like three-quarter skirts (with nylon stockings), but you cannot attend (women-only religious meetings) dressed like this. Well, I could wear this outfit in Turkey, [Not here?] because here people think that we (tesettürli women) are covered even in bed. [Even those in your immediate circle?] I am talking about the Turks in the Netherlands…in Turkey that is no longer the case (aşılmış). When you take off your carşaf you can wear a t-shirt or a jogging suit. However, here people find it odd (yadırganır), they think that you are a hypocrite, that you compromise your Islam, as if you do not truly live Islam. But in Turkey people are used to this, covered women are more comfortable there.

By focusing both on particular styles of skirts and women’s preferences for trousers and skirts, this chapter has discussed the multiple modalities of femininity and shifting understandings of tesettür in the Netherlands, as they have developed from the early days of migration. Above all, my discussion in this chapter emphasizes that the motivations and inspirations that shape sartorial choices in tesettür clothing can never be reduced to a
particular interpretation of religious clothing, contrary to the claims of the so-called “new veiling.” The choice to wear a skirt or trousers has always been shaped by different understandings of femininity and religiosity as they exist in different contexts. This choice of wearing skirts or trousers exposes and highlights a set of dynamics in the formation of *tesettür* practice, including kinship, age/generation, occupation, piety, and the effects of different social settings. Furthermore, through their creative, personal styling of *tesettür* outfits, women succeed in preserving their individual tastes and understandings of *tesettür*. 