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The Australian designer behind the burkini

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Sales of the burkini have skyrocketed following attempts to ban the garment. Australian designer Aheda Zanetti discusses how she created the burkini and why she believes her designs give freedom and confidence to Muslim and non-Muslim women alike.

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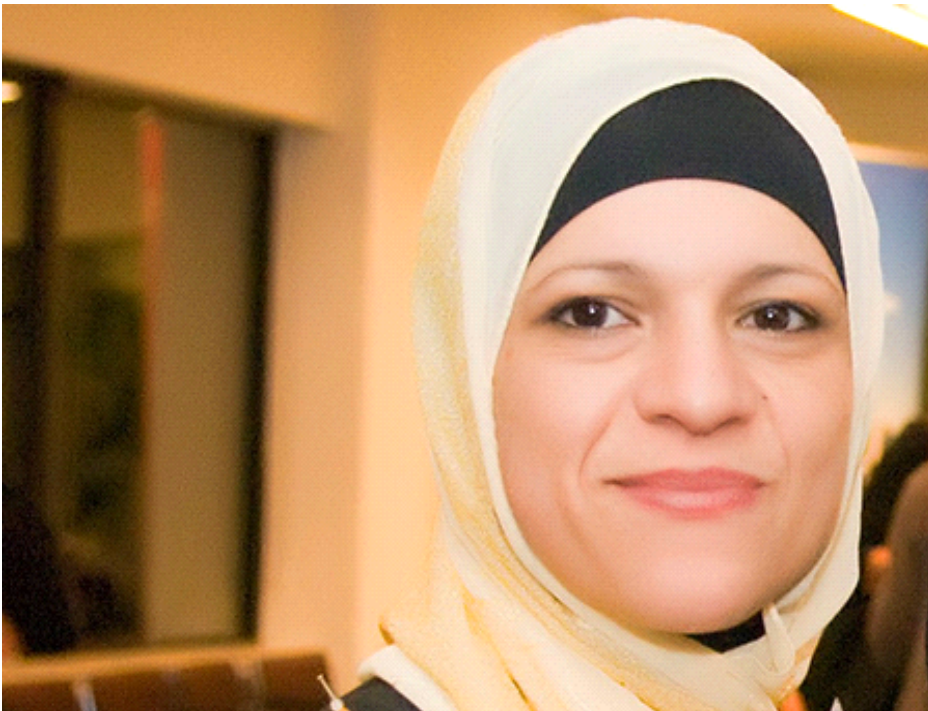
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It was while watching her niece play netball in Sydney that Aheda Zanetti was first inspired to create sportswear for Muslim women. A passionate sportswoman, her young niece is also a practising Muslim.

“My niece chose to wear a veil at an early age, which meant she wore her team sports uniform over her hijab¹, long sleeves and long pants,” Zanetti says. “She looked really hot and uncomfortable. It got me thinking ‘why wasn’t there anything culturally suitable for Muslim girls to wear when playing sport?’”

These thoughts led Zanetti to design the hijood – a combination of a hijab and a hood aimed at making it easier for modestly dressed Muslim women to play sport and exercise.

“I wanted to create something that was breathable and flexible that made Muslim women feel confident and empowered to pursue sporting activities,” Zanetti says.

The birth of the burkini

The philosophy behind the company is to allow women to “compete with confidence” Zanetti says, listing world-class athletes as her clients including the Afghanistan women's football team and Bahraini sprinter Roqaya Al-Gassra who competed at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

Born in Lebanon, Zanetti designed the hijood in Bankstown in Sydney's south-west, where she lived after moving to Australia from Tripoli at the age of two.

In June 2004, Zanetti was inspired to expand Ahiida's range beyond sportswear to include swimwear. The result was the burkini – a hybrid of a burka² and bikini.

“I wanted to give Muslim women the freedom to embrace the Australian beach lifestyle,” Zanetti says.

Zanetti first tested the burkini at home in her bathtub, then took it for a joyous and triumphant test drive at her local public pool.

“I put the swimsuit on, drove to Roseland pool, stood on the diving block and dove into the water,” she says. “I wanted to make sure the head cap didn't slip off and the pants didn't float up – that the wearer could swim and not be distracted by anything coming loose or impeding her actions.”

When she emerged from the pool that day, Zanetti knew she had another potential success story on her hands.

Zanetti took both the hijood and the burkini to a local Islamic festival, and after a positive reaction she decided to start her own business –Ahiida – selling both products.

Zanetti wasn't surprised by the burkini's popularity – “I could see there was a need for such a garment” – but she was surprised when Surf Life Saving Australia asked her to produce swimwear.

The approach came after riots in the seaside suburb of Cronulla in southern Sydney in December 2005. Surf Life Saving Australia sought to bridge the divide between the Muslim and non-Muslim community and look at ways to encourage more men and women from the Muslim community to engage in beach activities.

The resulting yellow and red burkini received overwhelming positive publicity when it was worn by Mecca Laalaa, who became the first Muslim-Australian surf lifeguard in 2006.

“It was nothing to do with hate and terror and everything to do with positivity and empowerment,” Zanetti says.

A garment for women of every background

More recently Zanetti has seen positive publicity turn sour after the burkini was banned by 31 seaside towns in south-eastern France in August 2016. “On a business level it's disappointing the burkini has been referenced, because it is a name that I've trademarked,” Zanetti says.

In the years since its invention, the burkini has partly slipped away from its creator: the term's use has become generic, describing any full-body swimsuit worn by Muslim women to dress modestly.

On the upside, the burkini bans have been good for business, with online sales rising by up to 200 per cent in the days following the announcement.

“We have had to increase our production to cater for a large market of non-Muslim women.” she adds. “Our sales used to be about 60 per cent Muslim women and 40 per cent other women but now I could easily say that 60 per cent of our sales are to non-Muslim women – and it's growing.”

Non-Muslim customers include skin-cancer patients who want to shield their skin from the sun, breast cancer

survivors, women who are allergic to sunscreen and others who have body image issues.

Swimming to international success

“It’s a product with worldwide appeal,” Zanetti says.

Since 2004, Ahiida has sold over 700,000 burkinis. Today the company’s biggest markets are the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Ahiida sports and swimwear are also sold throughout Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia as part of Zanetti’s strategy for continuing international expansion.

While controversy about the garment may continue, Zanetti argues it liberates women, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, by allowing them to take part in a greater range of sporting and water-based activities.

“The burkini is not a symbol of Islam or of Muslim women,” Zanetti says. “It is a symbol of freedom and empowerment. I have created a product women around the world can wear with pride.”

[Visit Ahiida Hijood Sportswear & Ahiida Burqini Swimwear.](#)

1. Hijab: A head covering worn in public by some Muslim women.
2. Burka: A long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet, worn in public by women in many Muslim countries.

