

Muslim model Halima Aden

- 1 When Halima Aden was six, a western woman visited Kakuma, the United Nations refugee camp in Kenya in which she had been born. “Just by being there, she made my people light up,” says Aden. “She was asking them questions, finding out what they needed, making them feel like they hadn’t been forgotten. Seeing the effect that she had changed something in me; it made me want to make some sort of a difference with my life. To have that sort of effect.” Today, the 20-year-old model – a naturalised American since the family made the move to Minnesota when she was seven years old – is making history.
- 2 November 2016 she entered the Miss Minnesota USA beauty pageant. Although she did not win, she went on to become the first hijab-wearing model to be signed to the model agency IMG. She has shot covers for several magazines (*Vogue Arabia*, *Grazia* and *Allure* among them), fronted campaigns for brands such as Nike and American Eagle and walked catwalks. “I have an opportunity, through my modelling, to change the way that Muslim women are viewed, to give them a platform to have their voices heard,” she says. Still, Aden insists that when she decided to enter the Miss Minnesota USA pageant it was not for political reasons. The appeal was twofold: girls placed in pageants can get scholarships for their college education and the winner usually goes on to forge relationships with charitable organisations.
- 3 Aden’s presence at the shows has already had a subtle influence on the culture and attitudes that attend the job of modelling itself. Her faith dictates unique requirements including a cordoned-off dressing room, a chaperone accompaniment at all times and female-only hair and make-up stylists. In a business where models are expected to change in full view of scores of strangers, she’s hopeful that her needs might indirectly bring about a shift in attitude, helping brands to see all models as individuals.
- 4 Her faith, and the way that she chooses to dress to express her beliefs, have always been secondary to who she is. “I’ve never let my life be ruled by segregation,” she says. “Jocks, Muslims, swimmers, dancers, they’re all the same to me,” says the girl who had never experienced discrimination before she came to America. “In the camp, there were no cliques. Race didn’t matter, gender didn’t matter, religion didn’t matter. When life is stripped back to its barest essentials, everyone is one and the same.”



- 5 A hard worker from the age of 16 (she worked as a hospital aide to support her studies), Aden is ambitious to make her mark on the world. Working as a Muslim model in the industry has given her a fascinating perspective on the physical scrutiny most other models are put under. “I am a hijab-wearing model so I don’t have to worry about ‘You’re too skinny’, ‘You’re too fat’, ‘Look at her hips’, ‘Look at her thigh gap’. And everyone I work with falls over themselves to accommodate my specific needs. I mean, what other young model gets to have someone with them at all times, looking after their interests?”

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