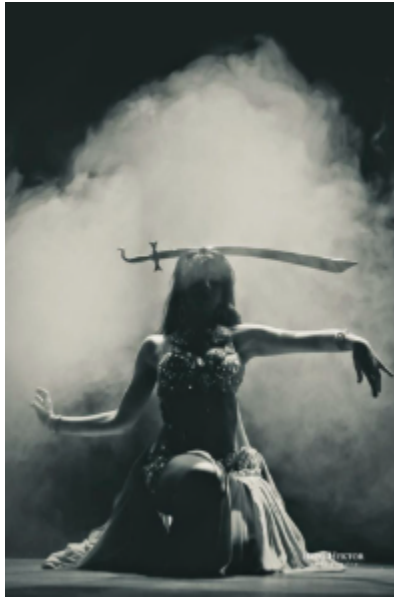


Hijabi & a Belly Dancer?

Let's Talk About the Elephant in the Room



The Hidden World of Belly Dance

- Belly dance in Middle Eastern culture

Because Middle Eastern culture has a big part about modesty, belly dance in the Middle East is deeply rooted in private spaces. Usually it is in women-only celebrations like in bachelorette parties, women-only gym classes, women-only parties. It's usually considered as a private talent which can only be shown in women-only spaces because of modesty purposes related to religion and culture. Belly dance in the Middle East is considered as a very feminine activity and the Middle Eastern culture is a very modest culture because people there mostly are very religious; for that reason women try to practice belly dance in women only spaces. Women in the Middle East like women only gathering as a big part of our culture is only shown in those women only gatherings.

- Women only gatherings

Women-only gatherings in the Middle East are always a form of celebration. Women usually plan on having a dj either a paid or a friend dj with a list full of belly dancing hyped music. Most of the time they plan on bringing lots of food that they cook especially for these types of events. Usually every woman cooks the best dish that she can make and some other women bring hot and cold drinks. All women who come to those gatherings are always dressed up and feeling themselves in the best way they can. Sometimes there is a dress code for those types of events like wearing a belly dance

dress or a two piece belly dance costume or wearing a short dress in a specific color or wearing something that would impress everyone there in the gathering. Usually women come wearing something that covers their bodies and go change their outfits in the event. The purpose of those types of events is to boost women's confidence and feeling supported by other women. In those events I always feel that every woman is feeling how pretty and awesome she is. Also, I feel like those events are made to be like a different form of therapy as it makes everyone feeling very happy. There are so many different types of women only gathering in the Middle East. For example, we have the bachelorette party which is the last day before the bride gets married. In that gathering women usually wear short dresses most of them put on makeup if they like it. There is usually a woman who comes to draw 'henna' (henna is a liquid they use to draw on the body and it stays on the body for a week, it's like tattoo but non permanent) to the bride and the invitee for whoever wants to. In this type of gathering we decorate the place as if it is a nightclub and we bring a belly dancer to entertain everyone. The bride in this event usually wears so many different costumes and each one of the costumes is related to the music that will be played. For example, if she is wearing an Indian costume then we play Indian music. The bride is usually the star of the show so the belly dancer usually tries to dance with the bride and do easy moves that the bride will be able to do so everyone is always focused on the bride.

A second type of women only gathering is women only belly dance classes. There are different types of belly dance classes, some of them are for fun and some are for learning. Dancing for fun is usually a class where the music is on and the instructor is on the stage doing her own thing and dancing and the students are either following her moves or doing their own thing. This type of class is usually just hyped music only for the purpose of having fun. There are also educational classes about belly dancing like lectures of the history of belly dance and very academic stuff. And there are technique classes which are for learning how to do each move step by step. Those technique classes mostly have different levels, exams and certificates. You always have to start from the beginner level or take an assessment test if you think your level is higher. There is also another form of women only gathering called belly dance festival or competition, in those gathering women are wearing a professional belly dance costume with a number hanging on the outfit and there is more than one judge seeing each competitor dance and after announcing the winner and getting the prize they start doing a belly dance workshops with more than at least 3 professional belly dancers. This type

of gathering usually the attendees are very enthusiastic about belly dance or they are belly dance instructors.

Another type is the events that women do to have fun together. It's usually in a rented studio or a friend's home depending on the number of women attending. Usually each woman will bring snacks and they all dress up. Sometimes they will have a woman who can play the drum 'tabla'. Each woman will start dancing and showing off her moves.

They are always loud in those events so they will make sure the place they are in allows loud noises, they will also make celebration noises called 'zaghrota'.

- Modesty in public, expression in private

Because of modesty women don't have a good way to promote those events because they can't really show themselves belly dancing on social media platforms so they tend to use posts that have just animations or any cartoon visuals and some words about the event they are doing. So for people who are coming from different backgrounds they might find it difficult to find those belly dance classes because of the lack of marketing as those static posts don't really get that much reach and also foreign dancers are very present on social media so people just go to there events without digging to find people who are from the Middle eastern culture.

- A celebration of femininity

Women really like feeling feminine and this type of dance really makes them feel their feminine energy. I really think it is the best practice for a woman who wants to love her body and feel confidence. It also tones the body and helps to shape it to look feminine.

- Limited public exposure

It's almost impossible to find a way of exposure while keeping the culture modesty rules. Some people just post videos showing women's feet while dancing in those events which is a very creepy way of advertising. Other people post videos showing women shadows while dancing or just videos of the wall while you can hear celebration noises. Some people show some simple moves to advertise the event. However, there is no good way to advertise those events while keeping the culture modesty rules.



The Power of Belly Dance: More than Just Movement

- Belly dance has so many benefits for women

Belly dance is one of the best cardios women can do to lose weight without feeling that you did hard work. It is one of the most fun and easy cardios that women are capable of doing for hours in the day if they are interested. Belly dance is also a good practice to feel your femininity and tone your body shape as it has so many feminine moves and good workout for the waist, belly, and the hips. Belly dance is also a good practice for the ability to control all your body movements and isolate them. It is also a good practice for your balance, and flexibility. Beside the physical benefits it is also a good exercise for your mental health because you can express yourself by the music and feel the music in your body.



Belly Dancing with Modesty: The Untold Story of a Hijabi Belly Dance Instructor

As an Egyptian woman, I used to dance since I was a kid, it was part of my culture in any celebration we dance. Me and my friends used to do belly dance competitions for ourselves and we vote who is the best belly dancer in the group. For me it was the way I express myself and my feelings. My friends at the time used to call me 'safinar' which is the most famous belly dancer at the time.

I was just belly dancing for fun in my friends gatherings until that one time when a classic old song was played on the TV when I was at my grandma's home, my grandma came to me and told me to dance with her. We started dancing together and I was impressed by the way she dances. She looked like a star to me and I just stopped and started looking at her. I was admiring every move she made. At that moment I was thinking how is she able to do all those dance moves and how is she so feminine as if she is in her 20s. She looked like a butterfly, she was very soft and feminine. I felt that I want to reach her age and have the same feminine energy that she has.

I started mimicking belly dancers moves and trying to learn how to dance like them. After a while I told my friend that I want to cancel my membership at the gym that I used to workout in. I told her that I'm not feeling comfortable working out in a mixed gym because of an incident that happened there.

We planned to make a membership in a women only gym. When we went there we were surprised that they are teaching belly dance classes, it was something we never heard of because of the limited advertising for these types of classes at the time. We attended the belly dance class and we were amazed by the vibes and how many women

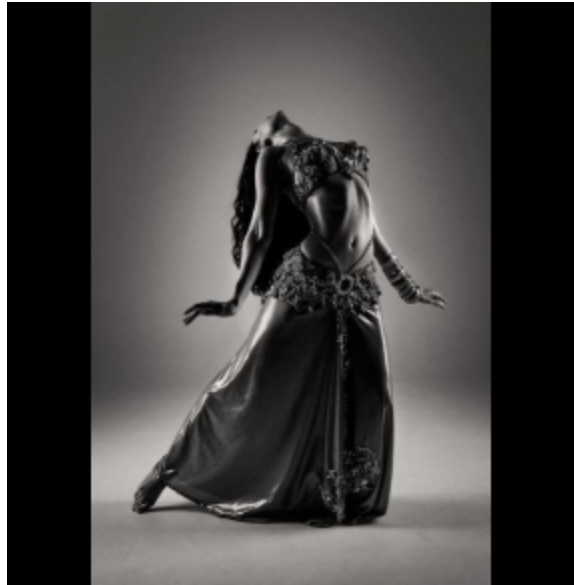
were there. I was looking at the instructor who looked exactly like a professional belly dancer and I felt inside myself that I wanted to be like her. I started to search for belly dance classes and I took so many classes and I even took certificates just because I liked learning belly dance. After a while my friends asked me to teach them, so I started teaching them and I realized that my happiest moments are when they learn any new moves. I really liked seeing my style in their moves.

At that time my friends started to ask me to give them belly dance classes. It was the most fun time in my life. I started giving lots of classes by myself. People started to know me through my friends and some places asked me to give classes at their studios or gyms or do performances. I was always refusing their offers as it was in mixed places or I didn't work with them for some other reasons, till I got the offer that I couldn't refuse; one of my friends/students asked me to be the belly dance instructor for the women only gym that she wants to start. Now I'm starting my new journey with belly dancing from HERS FITNESS.



Common Myths & Misconceptions About Belly Dance & Modesty

- ✗ Belly dance is only for performance ✓ It is also a fitness practice and self expression
- ✗ Only certain body types can belly dance ✓ Belly dance is for all shapes, sizes and ages
- ✗ Belly dance is only about moving the belly ✓ There are so many different moves in belly dance (arms, hips, legs, etc..)



The Unseen Talent: Why Middle Eastern Belly Dancers Struggle with Marketing

- Students hesitation

Students usually prefer to attend classes to instructors they saw their work before.

Because of that there are usually limited attendees for Egyptian instructors if compared with foreign instructors. That also makes it worse because people assume that Egyptian instructors have a limited number of students because of a limited experience or other reasons so they don't try to attend their classes. They don't want to risk coming and then find out that it is a bad class which wasted their money. Also, employers know that if they hired a well known belly dancer instead of an Egyptian instructor more people will attend the classes because of many reasons. First of all, there are so many fans of the belly dancer who are willing to pay even more than what a regular class costs to attend the belly dancer class or workshop and take some photos with the belly dancer and spend time with her. Secondly, people saw her dance on social media so they know what to expect from her class.

- Preference for foreign instructors

Foreign instructors don't receive as many hate comments when they post their work online as Middle Eastern people know that their cultures don't care about modesty as much as our culture does. But, whenever a woman from the Middle East posts her dancing videos online she receives so many hate comments because they are doing something against our culture. That leads to a visibility gap because foreigners post their work but Middle Eastern don't. So people know what to expect from a foreigner because they know her style.

- The visibility gap (aka foreigners vs Egyptians on social media)

This visibility gap made even people from the Middle East not aware of the presence of good Middle Eastern belly dance instructors or Middle Eastern belly dancers (dances in women only events).