

Emily: I'm Emily Kumler and this is Empowered Health. This week on Empowered Health, I'm very excited to welcome [Manal Rostom](#)<sup>1</sup> who is an athlete from Egypt who is working on running all [six of the major marathons](#)<sup>2</sup> around the world and she's doing it wearing a hijab, [which Nike has now created a job for her and for other women who want to run](#)<sup>3</sup> and not show their hair. She and I talk about running and being an athlete and how she grew up not wanting to cover up or not being told to cover up and decided that she wanted to do that for herself. This is a really interesting interview for anybody who's, you know, sort of thinking about what it's like to be a woman in sports or a female athlete. And it's also a really interesting conversation, which I've reflected on since we recorded this months ago, because it goes to the heart of this idea of like as a woman, how what we choose to wear in so many cases sort of defines us in ways that I don't know that men are necessarily confined to. While this is a health issue in terms of empowered health, covering women's health. It's also really sort of a social construct issue. For me, I learned a lot in this conversation just sort of hearing her talk about how people respond to her in really negative ways even in places like New York.

Manal Rostom: Hi everyone. My name is Manal. I'm Egyptian. I'm 39 years old. I'm based in Dubai. I was born and raised in Kuwait. I used to be a pharmacist until about three years ago when I had like a full time job and then currently I switched careers and I'm doing health and wellness and fitness full time. I'm also a [speaker](#)<sup>4</sup>, a [Nike ambassador](#)<sup>5</sup> and a social media influencer.

Emily: Yeah, I'm so excited to talk to you cause I feel like you're doing so many great things. And you know, it's really important, I think we talk a lot, especially on this podcast about women who are pushing boundaries and you're kind of doing that in such a visual way. Right.

Manal Rostom: Thank you.

Emily: And so I feel like one of the things that people really, I feel like one of the things that you're really well known for internationally and more, you know, starting to happen in the United States, is that Nike has made a special hijab almost just for you. I feel like...

Manal Rostom: I don't want to like get any credit for that to be honest. I think we sparked a conversation, you know, a few years before they went off, got inspired and you know, delivered and catered for all these women who were hungry, you know, to see themselves represented by a multinational company. So I think that's a better wording of honestly what happened because, you know, Nike's is a beautiful, you know, clever and intelligent company and they just truly believe in the athlete's journey. And in order for the athletes to perform, they need to have, you know, the proper gear. You know, female athletes did not have the proper

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/manirostom/?hl=en>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.marathontours.com/abbott-world-marathon-majors>

<sup>3</sup> <https://news.nike.com/news/nike-pro-hijab>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnCkETMymfw>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkG3v-8W4U0>

gear, fine. You know, perhaps they have the, you know, like the top, the bottoms and the shoes, but they never had a head gear which was missing. I thought, you know, as an item from our wardrobes, you know.

Emily: And so how has that changed for you now that you have this as an option?

Manal Rostom: Look, you will never really understand the struggle of the hijab woman because sadly up until now, like in 2019, I still look, I still get weird looks, you know, when I'm traveling the West, like last time I was in New York after everything that I've done, like, you know, the first, you know, hijabi athlete to appear in an Nike released campaign. I'm founder of the woman's largest empowerment, you know, platform, **Surviving Hijab** on social media, everything, everything. And then I bumped into this lady and you know, she got so angry at me and you know, she said, maybe if you take that thing off your head, you will see better. Why would she say that? You know, like, why would you say that? And it's just such an angry and hateful comment. It's still, you know, it's embarrassing. It's very discriminatory and it cuts deep, you know? And you know, like as a listener you might just like listen or hear them and be like, Oh, you know, that was not nice, but it goes beyond not nice. You know? It's hurtful. It's embarrassing. It's humiliating.

Emily: Yeah. And I mean, I think we should talk about it, right? Because I think I have spent time traveling in the Middle East and I used to work for a business that I cofounded and the cofounder was based in Kuwait.

Manal Rostom: I was born in Kuwait. Wow. Nice.

Emily: Yeah. And it's, I mean, I feel like it's one of these things where I learned, right, growing up, that you know, this idea that women are forced to cover their head is a sign of oppression. And then I was re-educated I would say where I realized like no this is like actually an extension of women. Right? Or that in some places women choose to do this completely voluntarily.

Manal Rostom: Exactly.

Emily: I mean I remember walking around like sort of malls and Dubai and Kuwait and like the women had the coolest shoes and purses and all of this stuff. I was like these women don't seem oppressed. Right. Like this is a different, like there's something different about it. But will you talk a little bit about that? Because it's one thing for me to say that I had this sort of observation...

Manal Rostom: So why we wear it, you mean, like why we wear the hijab?

Emily: Why you wear it and also why, for some, it is more comfortable or like more a sign of your individuality and identity to wear it rather than to be told not to wear it.

Manal Rostom: Thank you for the question because it will obviously shed the light on the why, the what and the how and very basic and you know, direct English basically hijab is a compulsory form of worship for all women, all Muslim women, as soon as they hit puberty, you know. So you get your period at age 10 to 13, 10 to 16, whatever, you know, your body starts to change, you start to become more curvy, you're more attractive. You need to cover that up. However, you know, in a very direct and open message in the Quran, in the Surah Al-Baqarah we also say "let there be no compulsion in religion." You know, this kind of rule, it sort of applies here because if you don't want to wear the hijab, you know, you don't have to until you understand it and, and understand the reason behind it. I mean like you also get like Muslims who don't fast or Muslims, we don't pray five times a day. There are Muslims around the world who don't fast, you know, during the amount of Ramadan. And there are Muslims who don't pray five times a day. And similarly there are women, muslim women who also don't cover. But then for a Western person to see a woman who covers and then a woman who doesn't cover, I get that. It's confusing, but it's confusing because you don't understand it and you've never asked that question. And that's why I'm thanking you earlier, you know, for raising that question. So for example, I got my period and I was 13. I grew up in a Western school. It's like international British school. I actually hated the hijab so much. I hated how it was portrayed. I hated how a woman who wore it on television used to come out or used to be perceived. I remember I would watch documentaries of, you know, muslim women always, you know, labeled as uneducated. They're probably hidden in a tent somewhere with an awful husband. What is this? What are these images of Muslim women that media used to expose to us? It's just all like, I don't want to use like bad words, but it's really old rubbish. You know.

Emily: You can use bad words on this podcast.

Manal Rostom: Oh, amazing. Okay. So I just to say it's bullshit. I'm glad I'm speaking to someone from the States, but it's like, it's really bullshit, you know. And it started to make sense to me. Like, you know, I grew up and like, you know, I hit my late teens and then I hit my, I entered my twenties and then I got into this accident, which really changed things for me. I had swapped seats with my cousin five minutes before the accident happened. Five minutes later the front tire blew up, the bus swerved into the desert. My dad got thrown out of the bus, broke six ribs, a shoulder bone. My cousin was paralyzed on this pod because he broke two bones in his spine and I had just swapped seats with my cousin and then he passed away three months later and then nothing happened to me.

Emily: I'm so sorry.

Manal Rostom: Yeah, that was 20 years ago. Thank you. And you know, these kind of like accidents, they really shake you up. You know, you question your existence basically.

Emily: And you were what, like 19 or something at the time?

Manal Rostom: I was 19. It was exactly August 1999. I was 19, you know, I wouldn't call myself, I wouldn't call myself an airhead back then, but I just hijab and the whole like immersion into religion was so far away from me. Like I had my own band, I loved swimming, I loved, you know, posing on the beach. I was just like a typical teenager, you know, teenage girl, who grew up hating the hijab, you know, with an identity crisis as a third culture kid. You know, like my parents are Egyptian, they put me in an international school, who am I like? And then I see all these images of women who are supposed to look like me, but, and I'm supposed to look like them, but I don't want to be them, you know? So how are you supposed to deal with that? And that's why social media now on all the brands right now that are giving opportunities to Muslim women like Halima Aden for example, the [first, you know, international model to be employed by IMG models](#)<sup>6</sup>. All these things really change the narrative for the little girls who growing up like me having no clue who they are or who they want to be. So when they see a woman like Halima or a woman like me being featured, you know, on a global platform, you know, for sports or education or academia or whatever, you know, they think that, okay fine, if I decide to wear the hijab it will be okay. I can still be cool. I can still be a model. I can still be an athlete.

Emily: Still be beautiful.

Manal Rostom: Exactly. So when the accident happened, I just, I sort of like, I went by myself and I started asking questions, like you, you know. Like, believe it or not, like even as an Arab girl who grew up in, you know, in the middle East, but I had obviously Western sort of background due to my education in high school. I also went in and research what does it actually mean? So this is what the book says, this is what the Holy book says. But then this is what we see in media. And I dived in deep in, secrecy by the way no one knew, and it made sense to me like I understood why women need to cover. I understood why, you know, like why it happens at puberty and how it will never take away from our identity if I end up covering. What I was worried about is how people will, you know, perceive me or think of me. And it's really sad because 20 years later with everything that I've done, you know, to fight all the stereotypes, you know, I get yelled at, you know, walking down the street in New York for just having bumped into, I'm sorry, but she was white. I know this sounds racist, but I mean, she was a blonde, white American woman and she was really nasty and rude to me and it was embarrassing to the point and so loud, you know, to the point that two men in the city, they're like, we are very sorry. She's probably one of these very lonely woman who has 16 cats in her home. And it made me laugh, and I was like, thank you.

Emily: Yeah, but it's still not, that doesn't make it go away. The pain is still present.

Manal Rostom: Exactly. You know, and it just gives me reason to continue doing what I'm doing. You know, even if some people say like, yeah, but what are you doing? Like, you know, I need to continue fighting, you know, for our rights. I wish we, are still like offered the same job

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6

<https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/news-bites/imgs-first-hijab-wearing-model-and-jil-sander-returns-to-her-roots>

opportunities as a woman who's not covered for example. I get complaints on a daily basis almost, you know, via my Surviving Hijab group or you know, our Instagram account and woman are still saying, Oh, you know what, they would not hire me because my hijab. Do I take off my hijab or do I just like say like jobless?

Manal Rostom: Oh, I was denied access or participation in this [?] championship. Do I take off my hijab or do I give up my sport? What is the correct answer to all these questions? What are you supposed to say to that? And what really cuts me deep is when a 20 year old, it used to happen until recently until the [FIBA lifted the ban on basketball hijabi athletes](#)<sup>7</sup>. I bet you weren't aware of that. Were you Emily?

Emily: No, no, no.

Manal Rostom: Okay. So let me give you the history and by chronological order. So up until 2012 the FIFA, we used to ban hijab, the Muslim athletes from participating in football championships. And then the ban got lifted in 2012 and then up until May 2017 the FIBA, the, you know, International Federation of Basketball, you still ban hijabi athletes to participate in basketball. And then that got lifted in May 2017 and it was very short after Nike came out with the Nike Pro hijab and they use one of the PR, the press releases, they used my photos, you know, to make the announcement, which was great. I was like, wow, amazing. Even though I'm not a basketball player. And then [most recently the boxing federation in 2019](#)<sup>8</sup>, believe it or not, has finally lifted the ban on hijabi boxing athletes. So look, the rules are being changed. I really hope that the world's perception of us Arab covered woman is also changing. I'm not going to say has changed because there's still that woman who will scream at me in the street and also it's not, it wasn't just in New York. Last month I was in Amsterdam. Obviously we go through extra screening. You have no idea how embarrassing that is. Especially that this whole security check area is super small and as you going in, they're always yelling and screaming at you for no reason. And of course everyone will turn around and be like, Oh my God, she could be the terrorist who's going to bomb a plane. You know what I mean?

Emily: Yeah.

Manal Rostom: It's really embarrassing because last month I was wearing a jacket and underneath I was wearing a sleeveless top and the lady was like, take off that jacket and then walk into, you know, the checkpoint. I was like, I can't take off my jacket cause I'm wearing a sleeveless top underneath. I'm happy to go to a private room. And I was really speaking with that tone of voice, you know...

Emily: Being polite.

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/fiba-hijab-turbans-professional-basketball-170504055404989.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aiba.org/blog/aiba-welcomes-positive-change-in-the-uniforms-rule/>

Manal Rostom: Like just trying to, being polite and being logical. Right? If I can't take it off in public, I'm happy to go into a private room. So she's like, don't you know that when you come to an airport you're supposed to take off your job? I was like, I understand this ma'am. I'm asking you to take me to a private room so that you can check me because I wear the hijab and I cannot, you know, take it off in public. So of course she was like ranting and mumbling stuff as she took me to the private room. Again, walking with me as if I'm a criminal.

Emily: Yeah.

Manal Rostom: It's really embarrassing, you know? And she was saying all these things in Dutch and I'm like, you know what, the world is a really sad place. Like don't talk to me like this.

Emily: Well, so scared. Like so, so fearful of things that are, you know, misallocated to people.

Manal Rostom: Unknown.

Emily: Right. Yeah. I mean I think it's important to just go a little bit deeper on this because I think people might listen and say like, oh, she had an accident and then she felt guilty that she survived and her cousin didn't. And that's what led to this decision.

Manal Rostom: It could be.

Emily: Right. And so, but you're not saying that this is a form of punishment and I want to be clear about that because I feel like there is an underscore, you know, whatever bias or discriminatory belief that like this is somehow punishing women. And that's not my understanding of how people who wear it.

Manal Rostom: How is it punishing women?

Emily: By covering up who you are.

Manal Rostom: Yeah. But like, I don't know, like I've never, I've never felt like it was a punishment. I honestly, I'll tell you something. The way I used to wear very revealing clothing when I was like, as a teenager, you know, and I swear to God, and I'm not just saying that because you asked that question, but the way that men would look at me like it would really make me sick and like, you know, like the way they would stare at my chest for example, I didn't have a cleavage per se, but I would wear like, you know, an open top and it would be, it would come very close to my cleavage let's say, and the way that men would, would stare at that, foreign strange men, like even men in the street cleaners in the street. And I know just make me, stop and think like who is this man? And who gave him the right to see that, you know, whether it's super attractive or not, this is my property. Like that, I'm just like leaving on display

for random humans to come and check out without my consent. That's exactly how I felt. You know, and I'm not making this up. Obviously we did not plan these questions, but like I just felt like my hair, my beauty, my body. Like you know, I'm obviously an athlete, you know, like I spend a lot of time working on my body. It would would turn heads back in the days, like even on the beach. It didn't make me feel comfortable. I did not like that I was turning heads.

Emily: You know, it's so funny you say that because I have this very early memory of like going through puberty earlier than friends of mine did and feeling like grown men looked like they wanted to eat me up.

Manal Rostom: Ew I know.

Emily: And that it was like this very weird, like why are people responding to me differently now? And obviously I knew my body was changing. It wasn't like I was naive to that, but it was such an interest, it's such an interesting way of putting it. And I think in the United States, especially certainly in Europe too, but I think the United States has such a hyper sexualized culture. And we even see this [with things like Halloween costumes for kids](#)<sup>9</sup>, right? Which are now we're about to have that holiday and it's, I have two young kids and I'm like, no, you can be like you know, the grim reaper or like a mummy. But like you're not going to be some sort of like sex pot superstar. It's so strange. And so I think what you're saying is that it kind of gives you the freedom to just present yourself as your mind. Right? And that and your personality and your strength. And I think, you know, we should talk a little bit about that because you are a superstar when it comes to sort of breaking the norms of what women can do both athletically as well as sort of culturally. And so I sort of, I was curious to ask you like in terms of, I mean, I know your parents sent you to an international high school, but like in terms of the way that your mom looked at even like workouts, right? Or sports in general versus how you do, where you've accomplished these incredible, I mean like incredible feats of strength. Those accomplishments have given you not just a platform, but I think they've also let people know, like women are powerful. Right? And like we can do a lot of things if we put our mind to it. And it doesn't matter what sort of, I don't know, restrictions are said to us, we can still overcome those things and do what it is that we feel, our bodies, our minds, whatever are capable of. So we've talked a little bit about sort of just in terms of generational stuff. I mean, I feel like when my mom was growing up, I don't know that she knew anybody who had, you know, run the marathons you've run or climbed Kilimanjaro. Like, I mean, these are crazy things you've been able to do.

Manal Rostom: Thank you. Look, my mom came from a like very ordinary, conservative Egyptian background. And she grew up in Egypt. She was born and raised in Egypt, married at 26, I think. Yeah. And you know, she went to university, she has pictures of herself in a proper, like mini skirts and stuff. So she lived the whole like sixties life. And you know, I keep making fun of her because you know, she has like long hair, her cleavage is out and you know, super short, mini skirt. There was no awareness or education about religion back in their days. Like I don't

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.today.com/parents/mom-takes-party-city-task-over-sexualized-costumes-little-girls-t46526>

think my mom was praying five times a day until maybe she hits her forties and this I like, I'm 100% sure of my dad on the other hand, you know, used to pray five times a day and obviously, you know, they both fast in Ramadan, but neither of them ever spoke to me about the hijab by the way. I remember when I took the decision, you know, because like I sorta came out when I was 21 I was like okay, I want to wear the hijab. And then they're like, where's this decision coming from? Like how are you gonna play sports?

Emily: Because you've been secretly researching all of this you said, right?

Manal Rostom: Right, exactly. So it was shocking for them. I remember when I had a phone conversation with my dad, he was in Kuwait at the time and I was in Egypt and he said, where's this, you know, decision coming from, who's playing with your mind? Like I put you in an international school, like what's happening? How are you going to play sports? How are your foreign friends going to accept you? I remember these particular questions, how are we going to travel? You know, these are the things, these were the exact obstacles that we're kind of facing the moment, you know, the sport bans, the extra screening and travel and the way foreigners look at us. Like 20 years down the road, these are things that still affect us, you know? And I said, God bless the 21 year old girl in me who said, look, I don't know like why I want to do it, but it makes sense to me and I feel like I'm up for it. And I remember my dad scared me and said, yeah, but it's a one way ticket. Don't wear it. And then come back and say you want to take it off. And that was such a powerful threat because it's actually not a one way ticket. I feel like in life in general, the only one way ticket is death. You know? It's like, you know you die, you never coming back.

Emily: Like why can't you change your mind if you want? Right.

Manal Rostom: Right, exactly. I took that as a motive, a motive to like push myself and be like, okay, you know what? No like I will stick by it. I'll fight for it and I'll fight for my right to prove who I am. And it took me years and years, you know, to break through until, you know, I came out with surviving hijab in 2014 and then it inspired me to contact Nike and it just changed things for me. But in answer to question, no, my mom was so like not hijabi like, I think she wear the hijab I think when she was like late forties or something.

Emily: And so did she, were you an influence on her in that way?

Manal Rostom: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. My dear. My mom had me when she was like a 30 I think.

Emily: Okay, so she was wearing one when you decided to

Manal Rostom: Yeah, exactly, exactly. But she was not like rooting for it or advocating it. Like when I told her that I wanted to wear it, she's like, why don't you wait until you get married? You know? And I'm like, what's that supposed to mean? Like, you know, why would a guy judge

me? Even though, even though if you speak to like between brackets, Arab men like I feel like they still judge a woman because they're scared of us. They're like, I know. Well I'm not that religious to marry a girl who covers. Why does that have to show extra level of, you know, religiousness. It's literally just the way that, okay, so I pray five times a day. I do pray five times a day. I fast in Ramadan. I wear the hijab. They go literally hand in hand, all three. So it's really a struggle and it's complicated and that's why it's important to keep like talking about it to normalize it.

Emily: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting to me too because I feel like there's obviously other symbols of other religions, right? Like whether it's the star of David or a cross that somebody wears, maybe it's less obvious, right? If somebody has like a necklace on or something like that. But you know, I feel like all of these things come with persecution at different times. Right? Or come with this idea of like you're marking yourself in some way that makes you different and therefore you're going to draw attention to yourself in a way that might, you know, put you in a more harmful situation. And you know, I mean in the, like in the Boston area, like Catholics were discriminated against for a long time. It's sort of...

Manal Rostom: I love Boston by the way.

Emily: Oh good. I'm so glad. I love it when people say they love Boston.

Manal Rostom: Yeah I ran Boston Marathon. I thought you found out about me from the Boston Marathon. I ran it this year.

Emily: Oh, you did.

Manal Rostom: 2019. Yeah I was in Boston in April I ran the Boston marathon. I'm trying to be the first Egyptian to finish all six world major marathons. And at the moment I'm in the lead, so I still have Tokyo left. Yeah.

Emily: And so then tell me what the future has for you.

Manal Rostom: I'm turning 40 in two weeks. So that's the first thing.

Emily: Yay happy birthday.

Manal Rostom: Thank you. So that's kind of scary for me because I don't know, like again, with the number 40 a lot of expectations come and societal pressures, et cetera. But that's like on a personal level and I'm single by the way, which is also crazy for some people because it's like, Oh my God, she's 40 and she's single, like, you know what I mean? It's harsh and hard for us and society because of the sort of like expectations that we grew up with. Okay. So you're 40 years plus to have kids. You're supposed to have bought your first house or whatnot. None of the above,

Emily: But excuse me, I'm sorry. Time out for a second. The other things that you've done instead of that? I would say yes.

Manal Rostom: I'd like to think that would at least replace them a little bit. Okay, good. Thank you Emily. Yeah. So I hope the mountains and the marathons that make up for the fact that I'm still single. Yeah. I'm like kind of like chilling for the rest of the year because I had a very busy year, like two back to back world major marathons, like [I did Boston and then London](#)<sup>10</sup> this year, shortly after [I had just led a team of a woman up to Everest base camp with Surviving Hijab](#)<sup>11</sup> to spread a message about tolerance, equality and inclusivity. Yeah. But next year I hope to finish the world's six major marathons, hopefully in March after I finish Tokyo [***Editor's Note: Manal could not complete her goal this year due to COVID-19 cancelling the mass Toyko Marathon***] and then just continue my journey with my mountains. I still have five world's highest mountains to chase basically, and look for a man of course. So if anyone is listening and is interested, yeah we'll leave my Instagram account, maybe after, I don't know.

Emily: The last question I wanted to make sure I asked you is, I feel like you have accomplished so much physically, spiritually, and intellectually and you've set a standard for people that is pretty incredible. And I wondered, when you reflect back, what do you consider to be thus far, I'm sure you're onto more important, bigger things, but what do you feel most proudest about?

Manal Rostom: Okay, so look like I feel like I'm going through a lot of reflections these days because I'm obviously leaving my thirties and going onto like a fourth decade. And I remember like 10 years ago I was so scared to like, you know, attempt these mountains or get on a plane, a 16 hour flight to run like a four or five hour marathon, you know, because the minute I would ask, it would always be like, oh, you're not a boy to do all these things and you know, who gets on a flight like 16 hour flight to run a four hour marathon, why would you do that? And I never used to fight back and say, yeah, but why not? Yeah, I want to go on, on these things. I want to go off and do these things. I feel like I'm very proud of, of having just made up my mind to literally just do it, you know? I remember when [I decided to do Kilimanjaro](#)<sup>12</sup>, I called my dad up and I said, okay, so I booked for Tanzania for this summer. I'm just letting you know so that I have your blessing. And I discovered that with Arab parents or maybe all of parents, I don't know, but like, it's much easier to tell them that you have decided to do something than to take their permission, you know? Because if you take the permission, the answer will always be, no, no, no, no, no. This is too dangerous. It's too risky. It's too far. But when you say that you've made up your mind, it will open up the conversation for oh really?

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<https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/people/news/manal-rostom-london-marathon-record-breaking-time>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/people/news/surviving-hijab-manal-rostom-mount-everest>

<sup>12</sup>

<https://www.cairoscene.com/Travel/Mountaineer-Manal-Rostom-to-Become-First-Egyptian-Woman-to-Climb-Mount-Everest>

Well, who's paying for it? Is it safe? It just completely, you know, changes the dynamic of the conversation.

Emily: Yeah. Well, there's that great expression, right? That's like, it's always better to beg for forgiveness than to ask for permission.

Manal Rostom: Right. I'm also very, very proud of the community that we founded by Surviving Hijab, even though we're not really monetizing it per se. Everyone's like, yeah, but why aren't you monetize? Again, I'm not really monetizing it yet because we're still building a community, you know? And it's really inspiring brands and I really feel like it's like a domino effect. So, you know, I approached Nike and then Nike went off and they did the pro hijab and now I'm an official Nike ambassador and then other brands are copying that whether in the sports field or outside. And I just feel like little by little ten years from now, I don't think this podcast will be interesting for anyone because it'd be like, what is she talking about? Yeah. So she wears hijab, big deal. You know, they're actually super cool women who wear the hijab. This is what I'm looking forward to. Like the little girls would decide to cover or not won't have that like, oh my God, taboo. Like how will people, what will people think of me?

Emily: Well, and I also think that it's opening up the world of athleticism in a new way too, I would imagine. Right. Because if there isn't a viable option, then you just don't participate. And that's incredible too.

Manal Rostom: Yeah, exactly. And like you said like Nike is going around and scouting amazing woman who otherwise wouldn't have been discovered. You know, they have the same talent as you and me maybe like obviously a little bit more because you know, some of them are Olympic athletes or whatnot, but imagine no one ever heard of them or wanted to include them just because of the way that they wish to exercise their faith, you know? But you know, like thankfully there are brands that are accommodating and inclusive and tolerant and really, really believe in equality, you know? And I just hope for all the brands to come on board and be like, okay. Like I remember [United Colors of Benetton](https://us.benetton.com/)<sup>13</sup>, remember back in the 80s when it used to feature like, like an African American model, a Chinese or an Asian model. And it used to be so attractive. We never used to see a hijabi though, alongside these campaigns. Now we do, obviously, via like Nike and stuff. You know, you see an African American, an Asian American and a hijabi American, which is beautiful. It's time that we had more of these brands come out and be like, okay, hey, you know, we want to support her as well.

Emily: And so what advice do you have for women out there who are listening, who are struggling with something that they want to do but that they feel sort of scared to take on because of whether it's the sort of cultural norms that they're challenging or some sort of physical boundary that they feel they couldn't do what it is that they're dreaming of doing.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://us.benetton.com/>

Manal Rostom: I'm going to ask the listeners to like, I know I don't know them and they don't know me personally, but you know, I will ask them to do me a favor to please stop wasting your life and stop wasting your time and emotions on people who will never be there for you to pay your bills, to give you that hug that you need if literally shit hits the fan for whatever reason. Like imagine I was turning 40 single, not married, no kids, and I haven't done everything that I've done because I was so scared of society judging me. I would go kill myself. Oh my God. Like, you know, because when I was, when I was 29 turning 30, I had just like ticked off and checked society's boxes. Like, okay, so I need to get the master's degree. I need to be working on multinational and all these things were there, you know? But I really felt trapped, Emily, like inside my heart, I was like, no, but like I want to go and explore the world. I want to travel. And I was told, I wasn't like not permitted per se, but I was always told, no, no, no, no, no. Like, what will people say about you if they find it out that you, you know, took off with a group of girls and you went on a trip? I'm like, yeah, but like, who are these people? And why do they, why do they matter so much. Like why are we even giving them like time, you know, to consider their opinions. Who are they? So if you're a woman and you're putting up something like whether it's a race or a job or even feeling trapped in a relationship, life is too short. You know, enjoy it live every day as if it's your last, I know this sounds like a cliché, but it's really true. Like none of us knows if like we're going to live till tomorrow as dark as it might sound, but like it's true. If you don't become the best version of yourself on a daily basis, you're gonna look back and be like, why did I waste that day? Why did I live in fear? Or why did I live live in insecurity? You know, this is your life. This is your world. This is your time. Live it to the max.

Emily: I'm Emily Kumler and that was Empowered Health. Thanks for joining us. Don't forget to check out our website at [empoweredhealthshow.com](http://empoweredhealthshow.com) for all the show notes, links to everything that was mentioned in the episode, as well as a chance to sign up for our newsletter and get some extra fun tidbits. See you next week.