

Perception of Female Media Workers on Wearing Hijab/Abaya at Workplace in Pakistan

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Abstract

Hijab or *abaya*, a symbolic dress code that the Muslim women wear across the globe and reflect it as their identity has been subject to great sociocultural and scholarly debate across the globe. Many studies have been conducted in the West about the discrimination faced by the Muslim women due to wearing hijab or *abaya*, as a result of Islamophobia that prevails in those societies. Following the trend, many studies have also been conducted in the Muslim countries including Pakistan about wearing hijab or *abaya* at workplace that predominantly reflect inclination towards discrimination faced by the working women. Adding to the global academic debate on the topic, the current study attempts to explore the perception of female media workers about wearing hijab or *abaya* at workplace in Pakistan through in-depth interviews. A conclusive understanding of the research states that contrary to many research studies across the globe as well as in Pakistan, environment in Pakistani media organizations regarding wearing hijab or *abaya* at workplace is quite conducive, but usually off-screen.

Key Words: Hijab, Abaya, Female Media Workers, Pakistan

Background

A large number of the Muslim women wear hijab or *abaya*, considering it as an enforcement of the Islamic values. Hassim claims that veiling (wearing hijab) trends proliferated even in media portrayals in the Middle East during 1970s during the global Islamic resurgence until 9/11 that intensified Islamophobia¹. Many of the researchers focused to conduct studies on socio-religious dimensions of hijab-wearing trends and discrimination factors but another group of scholars concentrated to explore consumption culture resulting from the recursive imageries of hijab or *abaya* on traditional and the digital media that stimulated the public to take interest in Islamic modesty, heightening the awareness of its purpose. Göle argues that this was actually a resistance to the religious conservatism where the Muslim women were more inclined towards “cosmopolitanism” offered in contemporary hijab styles². A Pew Research Center survey suggests that 59% of the Muslim women in the United States of America have been used to wearing hijab at certain times³. Droogsma’s explains the role that hijab plays in the routine life of the Muslim women saying that where hijab is taken as a religious obligation and a sense of protection, it also carries difficulties like getting treated in a stereotypical way, a negative and erroneous attribute of the Western world identified as Islamophobic trend⁴.

Understanding the Context of Pakistan, A Patriarchal Society

Pakistan, the Islamic Republic as per the Constitution of 1973, hosts 23.58 billion masses as of 2022 estimates (World Population Review, 2022)⁵. The same constitution has established Islam as the state religion with all provisions necessary to be consistent with the Islamic philosophy (International Religious Freedom Report, 2021)⁶. According to estimates, 96% of the population in the country is Muslim. Keeping in view the religious beliefs of the nation, and tendency of young women to attain professional academic excellence and subsequently join various professions (Saher; Awan; Aziz; Matloob & Malik), the trend of wearing Hijab has increased over a period of time, particularly among the working women⁷.

Tisdell states that because of being a patriarchal society, a general perception of disparity and discrimination often prevails for male and female segments in notable walks of life ranging from healthcare and education to employment and political participation⁸. Pervez et al. point out that the problems that the women face in patriarchal developing nations cannot be particularly associated with any specific religion, region or nation and that the share of women in government jobs is discouragingly low as the avenues of socio-economic development and prosperity have been male-centric⁹. Furthermore, Hong claims that in patriarchal societies, women face discrimination and are placed in inferior job roles with lesser opportunities available to them due to male dominant occupations¹⁰.

Female Media Workers in Pakistan

Uks Research Center on Women and Media estimates document that women media workers comprise less than five percent (5%) of the total employees in Pakistani media industries¹¹. Furthermore, they are seldom found being on decision making positions in different media setups. Similarly, Maqsood, Chaudhary, Zia & Cheema note that female media workers in Pakistan are rare to be at the top positions, hence they cannot contribute to decision-making processes¹². Similarly, women are the discriminated objects, denied of opportunities of presenting their ideas and often criticized by male colleagues. International Women's Media Foundation Report claims that lack of basic facilities at workplace causes gender inequality¹³.

Hijab and Abaya in Context of Pakistani Working Women

As the higher education in Pakistan has opened new avenues for women to explore their talents in various professions from education and healthcare to business and media, the newer trends of women getting more and more employments and changing economic dynamics have influenced their life styles but with lesser effect to sociocultural aspects. Subohi opines that due to inclination to towards consumerism, people in Pakistan seem to be adapting to modernism but their social morals negate the context as sociocultural dynamics, deeply influenced by religion have not really been transformed¹⁴. One of such depiction is hijab or *abaya* that the women working in different

public and private sector organizations commonly practice, not only to uphold the sociocultural and religious norm but also as solution to the challenge of dignified survival at workplace. In view of the above discussion, this study aims to understand the perception of female media workers about their experiences on wearing hijab or *abaya* at workplace in context of their choice of wearing it that should be respected by the colleagues and management at workplace, their acceptance at the workplace with this attire, treatment by colleagues, and facilitation as well as denial of opportunities due to their dress code.

Objective of the Study:

- To understand the perception of female media workers about wearing hijab/*abaya* at workplace in Pakistan

Basic Research Question

- What is the perception of female media workers about wearing hijab/*abaya* at workplace in Pakistan?

Literature Review

Wearing hijab or *abaya* has been one of the longest upheld traditions of the Muslim societies across the globe. Since the rise of Islamophobia in the West after 9/11, many of the Muslim women have faced discrimination due to their attire. Many studies have been conducted about attitudes and behaviors at the workplace that the Muslim women face on day to day basis, not only in the West but also in Muslim countries. Göle and Sa'ar explored that a lot of studies have attempted to find out the implicit connotations of wearing hijab and its insinuation for female Muslims professional working in different setups¹⁵. A study Doing gender, modestly: Conceptualizing workplace experiences of Pakistani women doctors by Masood claimed wearing hijab as a governing tool for women both at household and workplace¹⁶. Williams and Vashi conducted a research on tradition of wearing hijab among the American Muslim Women in 2007 and found that the Muslim women preferred wearing this attire to get an identification and a cultural space, and to understand the contradictory aspects between the Islamic and the liberal values of the American society¹⁷. Koura carried out a study in the United

States of America to explore Islamic psycho-therapeutic approaches to discrimination with respect to hijab in the Western workplaces. The study found out that the Muslim women were not impassive receivers of discrimination as they reflected psycho-spiritual resistance to any such instances. This research further explored that faith-based handling of the situations at workplace gave the Muslim women positive definitions of self-valuation¹⁸. Sehar et al. conducted a research to trace out the mechanism of gender discrimination at workplace in Pakistan with respect to hijab at workplace and explored that conflict between the sociocultural values and outlooks of private sector commercial setups had demanded from the working women, a confusing and double-faced role as individualism-based organizational values contradicted society's cultural prospects at certain times. The study also attempted to sensitize organizations in Pakistan to accept diversity and facilitate women professionals to be active members regardless of their dress codes, particularly wearing hijab¹⁹. In view of the above-discussed literature, the current study attempts to explore the perception of female media workers through a mixed-method research about wearing hijab at workplace in media organizations. The study was conducted, using in-depth interview technique.

Theoretical Framework

Islamic Feminism

The study bases its framework in the concept of Islamic feminism. Although the most of the debate on the relatively emerging ideology of Islamic feminism is vested with the Iranian left, many scholars argue that the most of the problems that the women face generally result from the misguided interpretations of the basic principles of Islam by the men, and demand for re-reading of basic precepts of the holy sources of Islam to find solace in powerful Islamic justice system in the modern times. Ahmad says that it is undeniable fact that the concept of Islamic feminism has affected the Muslim societies across globe in many ways²⁰. All questions and debate centering on the liberal feminist ideologies have been brushed aside with knowledgeable interrogations by Muslim scholars of the modern times. The modern Islamic

feminist philosophies pose a great challenge to patriarchal social structures and the change can be witnessed by many in the shape of formal and informal dialogues between the modern researchers, religious scholars and state bodies leading to more and more women engagements in various domains of Muslim societies as well as legal reformation about the minimum age for marriage, divorce laws, right to education and basic healthcare, rights of protection, right to getting due part in heirship, almost all aspects for which clear directions from the holy sources of Islam have already been available since centuries.

Research Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted from 24 female media workers working with different print and electronic media organizations in twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad through semi-structured questionnaire. Towards the end of every interview, the participants of the study were also asked to share their personal experience on wearing hijab/*abaya* at workplace in Pakistani media organizations. Brounéus in a book, *Understanding Peace Research: Methods and Challenges*, edited by Hoglund and Oberg states that this method is utilized by the researchers to understand individual perspectives of the research participants about a few well-defined themes and the questions used to proceed with the interview are semi-structured. Sampling technique used for the in-depth interviews was convenience sampling. The respondents were approached for the consent and recording of their answers to the interview questions via personal contacts or acquaintances. Convenience Sampling method was used to select the sample as Etikan describes convenience sampling as a technique that allows the researchers to select a sample comprising of respondents who have experienced the phenomenon and stand worthy to be studied in view of their experiences. The study involved 15 hijab or *abaya* wearing participants and nine others who didn't use it as their dress code. The study participants were between 21-40 years of age, serving in different print and electronic media organizations. Although, the questions asked were in English, the respondents used both Urdu and English languages simultaneously to answer

the questions. The interviews lasted as less as for 30 minutes to as maximum as 68 minutes, an average to which counts at 42 minutes and 33 seconds.

Results and Discussion

The objective of the study was to understand the perception of female media workers about wearing hijab or *abaya* at workplace in Pakistani media organizations. The in-depth interview questionnaire comprised semi-structured items including personal choices of wearing hijab or *abaya* or supporting it as an individual's choice of dress code. The study revealed that majority of the respondents made independent choices of choosing a career in media industries with 17 participants against seven who accidentally made up to careers in media setups. Here are seven subthemes of the study, derived out of the questions asked to the respondents.

i. Hijab or *abaya*, a personal choice of a woman, that should be respected at workplace:

The participants of the study were asked about their response on hijab as an individual's personal choice, either to be respected or discouraged at workplace in Pakistani media organizations. Out of 24 respondents, majority (80%) were of the view that it must be left to a woman to make a choice about the dress code and male members, either at home or at workplace should not decide for their female counterparts or interfere into any such matters at all. Rest of the study participants mentioned sociocultural infrastructure and environment and some religious obligations that entrust on a man, a right to look after his family and an upper hand as decision maker. These respondents didn't object to men making decision of dress code for their female counterparts.

ii. Encouragement or discouragement at workplace for wearing hijab or *abaya*:

Another subtheme of in-depth interviews was the encouragement or discouragement by colleagues and management at workplace for wearing hijab or *abaya*. The study revealed that women colleagues of the females wearing hijab or *abaya* were more supportive than men

coworkers. The responses showed that men workmates usually were more comfortable in the company of those females who were open to debate and discussions and were mostly without hijab or *abaya*.

iii. Hijab or *abaya* wearing women are conservative, old-fashioned and less attractive:

Interestingly, the study also revealed that majority of the respondents agreed to the statement asking about their level of agreement/disagreement on media workers considering women wearing hijab or *abaya* as conservative, old fashioned and less attractive. About eight of the study participants opted to remain neutral in response to the given context and didn't prefer to give any clear answer.

iv. Respect for wearing hijab or *abaya* at workplace in media organizations:

While answering questions and sub-questions related to receiving respect at workplace for wearing hijab or *abaya* while being in the office in a media organization, majority of the respondents also responded that they received more respect from male and female colleagues for wearing hijab or *abaya* as compared to the ones who didn't do so. When asked a subsequent question about disrespect for wearing hijab or *abaya*, there was strong denial to the context as almost all of the respondents stated they didn't face any such instance or would not expect to face it in the future. Another secondary question was about any demand by the management or senior members of media organizations for removal of hijab or *abaya*. There was also a refutation to the given statement by majority for facing any such circumstances. However, three of the respondents reported such instances where they were demanded of doing so and were denied opportunities of growth for not fulfilling the demands of the managers. Interestingly, one of the respondent was quoted as saying that she could not get a job at Such TV just because she didn't wear

abaya or headscarf that was demanded by the management but she was not willing to practice the required attire.

v. **Opportunities for growth to female media workers wearing hijab or *abaya*:**

Opinion of the respondents was divided to almost a half when they were asked about career growth opportunities equally available to those who wear hijab or *abaya* and those who opt not to wear it. Reasons revealed by the respondents were linked a previously-discussed context that revealed that majority of the people in media setups consider women with hijab attire as conservative and old-fashioned and because of this reason most of the people do not feel easy-going for any official tasks and assignments because of their general perception. Respondents also told that it may also be due to the factor that media is generally considered as a liberal profession and women with hijab or *abaya* are contradictory to the given phenomenon. Hence, the female workers usually find lesser opportunities of growth in media organizations as compared to those who do not use this attire.

vi. **Suitability for a media job for women wearing hijab or *abaya*:**

Another interesting point to note was the opinion of respondents about the consideration of media workers about wearing hijab or *abaya* as being not suitable for a media job. Almost all except three of the respondents agreed on a point that majority of the media workers, particularly men consider such kind of dressing as not suitable for a job in the media industry. Most of the respondents were quoted as saying that a lot of opportunities can be availed by the female media workers as part of off screen assignments but for going on screen, the glamour and advertising demands of the industry deny females with hijab or *abaya* to avail any such job opportunities on screen even when they are talented and competent for the said tasks.

vii. **Availing opportunities in media jobs for females wearing hijab or *abaya*:**

An important point to note is that majority of the female media workers agreed that they could not avail opportunities on screen just because they wore hijab or *abaya* and refused to compromise on it for appearing on screen. However, when asked a supplementary question to further understand the matter about preference of female media workers about working in print media or taking off-screen assignments just because they felt of somewhat compromising their preferred dress code, half of the respondents did not come up with either a clear response or opted not to answer the question. On the other hand, five of the respondents accepted that keeping in view the situation in the organizations, they were convinced that it would be difficult to work on screen with *abaya* and opted to work off screen in production departments of different TV channels.

Positive and Negative Responses from the Participants:

There have been some positive and negative comments from the participants of the study that could be separately discussed other than the subthemes of the study. Contrary to various claims of gender biasness and discrimination in professional setups in Pakistani society like many other countries, the most of the responses from female media workers of the Pakistani electronic and print media setups were encouraging and positive. However, when it comes to grabbing opportunities, environment is not that conducive for the women who wear hijab and the reasons behind it may be the commercialism and advertising/marketing demands related to glamour. While sharing the experience of working in Pakistani media organizations, one of the respondent stated that:

“There is no doubt that Pakistan is moving towards modernism but still the hijab is respected. My personal experience is that everywhere a veiled woman is respected more than a modern woman. But on the other hand, when it comes to opportunities, it is sad to say that the proportion of veiled women is lesser, and of course there are many reasons for that.”²¹

As discussed earlier, majority of the female media workers opine that the general perception among the media people is that the females may not be able to explore many opportunities and advance their careers as desired by them because of wearing hijab. While talking about any challenges or discouraging remarks or demand from the organizational management to remove hijab, one of the respondents was of the opinion that:

“My experience of wearing hijab is the best in media. Nobody asked me to remove hijab but yes some of my colleagues said that you can’t pursue your career with hijab because different channels have their own policies and that you can’t grow with an orthodox mindset.”²²

Many of the respondents stressed about being rational and not criticize media organizations for the policies. There are some organizations which allow and encourage hijab whereas others do not allow women with hijab to appear on screen as anchor. For such organizations, there might be commercial interest that matter more than anything. Among the participants of the study, one respondent has been working as an anchor with one of the mainstream news TV channels. She commented:

“I have worked as a news reporter and an anchor person in Such TV. As many people know that the television has its own policy of wearing hijab, I was comfortable for that thing but when I switched to the other channels, the management there did not accept me with my hijab. So, you cannot criticize people in the industry and policies vary from organization to organization. We should understand the commercialism in media.”²³

Linked to the same organization, another female media person faced a varied experience where she was denied a job in Such TV just because she didn’t wear hijab or *abaya* and was clearly told the reason behind not hiring her. She explained:

*"It was very weird to come to know that they won't hire me at Such TV just because I went for the interview without abaya or the headscarf that was a dress code requirement there. They asked me about wearing it in the interview and I told them, it is my personal choice not to use it. Later on when I contacted a colleague for the updates about my job, he told me that you're not inducted because of not preferring headscarf. I was discouraged because it was my personal choice that they should have respected."*²⁴

A few of the respondents, however, were very critical about the workplace environment in Pakistani media sets, perhaps because of their bitter experiences. One of respondents was of the view that:

*"I have experienced that many of the Pakistani media organizations do not provide equally conducive working environment for female workers who prefer to wear hijab or abaya. There are instances when people like me are bullied. I have borne negative comments like being conservative who should have explored career in some other field like government school teaching. Some of my colleagues and friends who wear abaya were offered to get opportunity on screen, saying that their face appears to be attractive without abaya and was suitable for presentation on TV."*²⁵

Another female media worker who didn't wear hijab or abaya explained the situation in a different way, saying that:

"I don't wear Hijab at my workplace but my colleagues do practice it and they all are treated in same way like I am. I accept that sometimes females having scarf or hijab face some difficult situations in television media, but as far as print media is concerned, there are no such issues. For some media platforms, it's true that people

reject those girls who wear hijab or abaya and wish to appear on screen, but mostly, people respect the girls wearing it at their workplace and even these girls get more respect, at times, than other girls who do not wear hijab or scarf.”²⁶

Conclusion:

This qualitative study attempted to explore the perception of female media workers about wearing hijab or *abaya* at workplace. Through in-depth interviews, seven subthemes were studied and responses recorded. An overall understanding of the study concludes that as generally portrayed by many studies that women with hijab or *abaya* face discrimination and harassment due to their dress code, environment in Pakistani media organizations is quite better to work while wearing it, but usually off-screen.

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