

Perceptions, Reasons and Barriers in Observing Purdah (Hijab) among Female Undergraduate Medical Students

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Abstract: Hijab is practiced by global Muslim women as an obligation of their religion and protection. The objective of this study was to determine the frequency of Hijab with comparison of the awareness, perceptions, practices and identify barriers to hijab wearing among female medical undergraduate students. A descriptive study in four randomly selected Medical Colleges of Peshawar, Pakistan was conducted among 370 female undergraduates with 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error. All female students were included in the study with consent however sick, absent with no consent were excluded. The validated questionnaire had 18 questions of knowledge, attitude, practices and barriers. The collected data was analyzed through SPSS Version- 21 with descriptive statistics for categorical variables through frequency and percentages. A total of 327 females with response rate of 88.37% completed the questionnaires. The mean age was 20.81 + 2.48 years. Hijab wearing females were 58.8%, 16.5% were without Hijab however 83.5% females were unaware of Hijab timing. The 76.1% females had no problems in observing hijab. The 68.8% hijab wearing females were satisfied, 1.5% felt safe and 3.4% were comfortable with it. Reasons for observing purdah were 63% religious, 23.2% for protection, 2.8% as a part of uniform and 7.6% due to family pressures. Perceptions of hijab were 90.5% religious, 73.7% to society pressure, 5.8% as a part of the dress code and 3.7% as a piece of cloth only. Hijab awareness was 95.1%. This study concluded that hijab is considered a religious duty and obligation with comfort and protection among the female undergraduate students of Peshawar, Pakistan.

Keywords: Hijab; Niqab; Medical Undergraduate; Islam; Modesty.

1. Introduction

Hijab is the oldest phenomenon, practiced by global women as a social, cultural, moral and religious behavior. Jews and Christians considered it as a head cover and a commitment to their religious values. However, Islam takes it as sign of modesty that protects a woman, with social, moral and religious regulator as well. Hijab was thought to be part and parcel of Prophets wives' lifestyle [1, 2].

"Hijab" is an arabic word with its root as Hajaba (حَجَب) meaning to screen, veil, shelter and hide. Also known as حِجَاب: بُرْفُوع (veil, yashmak worn by women) and حِجَاب: بَيْتَر (Curtain, Screen, Covering, Mantle, Veil, drape). A Jilbab is a full-length outer garment, traditionally covering the head and hands, worn in public by some Muslim women. The trilateral arabic root word Ha Jeem Ba occurs eight times in The Holy Quran, seven times as a noun and once as a passive participle Mahjoboon. The word Hijab in Quran is

used for partition and curtain. Hijab can also be used to refer seclusion of women from men. Hijab according to Oxford dictionary is “a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women”. As per Islam and Muslim World Encyclopaedia Hijab is worn by females when Na-Mahram (non-relative male adults beyond the age of puberty) is around [3].

Several research scholars like [Afsar; 1985, Al Swaleim; 1995, Siddiqui; 1983 and Philips & Jones; 1985] have found that many Muslim clergy and Islamic elites prescribe veiling as a custom in which good women should engage their selves. However, Macleod in his case study of 1992 expressed that veiling served as a symbolic mediator for many women expressing women's concerns arising at intersection of work and family. Read and Bartkowski in 2000 examined the conflicting meaning of veiling among Muslim religious elites and Islamic feminists, and describe how discursive disputes between the religious elites and feminists affects the identity negotiation among veiled and unveiled women living in Texas.

Hijab is the most important concept of Islam, that guides for modesty. The verses of Holy Quran have commanded women wearing Hijab to protect their private and sensitive parts, and asked men to lower their gaze. Quran orders the women to draw their veils over their attractive parts before coming to their near relatives. Further Holy Quran exempts elderly women from veiling, provided they have crossed the marriage age, yet have explained that it would be a noble deed to observe veiling and must not have intentions of showing their attractive parts [4, 5]. Further on the topic of veiling and modesty, Allah forbids men to come directly in front of Prophets wives and must ask if mandatory from behind the curtain to maintain privacy. Allah asks the women to cover their attractive private parts, so that they are not recognized nor be a victim of any harmful act [6, 7].

Renowned Hades books i. e Bukhari and Muslim narrates this important hijab concept as a religious and social duty along with commands of with covering the body, face, neck and bosoms so that they are not recognized by other men, in its Hades numbers [4481; 146; 5149 and 36] and [2170; 1428 and 645].

Pakistani women veil themselves by covering their face except the eyes or covering full face using Burqas and cover their head with a scarf or a shawl/chadar and some don't cover their head, except on special occasions. Women of lower middle-class Pakistani families observed Pardah. Khalida Shah during 1960s found that women in the larger cities do not veil but survey of student's attitudes in Pakistan revealed that one-third of the college students favored burka and the majority opposed mixed social activities (as cited in White, 1977). Time has changed the concept of social status as veil is considered a symbol of backwardness in middle class and upper-class families. El Hamel [2002, p. 303] argued that in 20th century middle class women unveiled themselves due to gender equality and upon husband's wish considering it as a modern concept. The westernized middle-class women observed no veil, and remained a lower middle-class families sign of modesty and piety as their strong religious indoctrination and beliefs. Pastner, (1990, p. 257) explained Purdah in Pakistan as lower middle-class sign of status. The lower middle-class families, accept veiling as a traditional and religious concept for the safety of their daughters in a vulnerable male society [8].

Literature review revealed very few studies on this significant topic, that framed the basis for the conduction of the present study focused on Hijab. This study being a first one discussing this important issue. The objectives were to determine the frequency of students wearing Hijab with comparison of the awareness, perceptions, practices in relation to hijab/ Niqab among female medical undergraduate students of Peshawar and to identify the reasons with barriers in observing hijab/ niqab.

2. Materials and Methods

A descriptive study was carried out among undergraduate female medical students of district Peshawar, studying in four medical colleges. The included medical colleges were randomly selected and were Peshawar Medical, Peshawar Dental, Khyber Medical and Rahman Medical College. This study after being approved by Institutional Review Board of Prime Foundation Pakistan as IRB Approval Number; Prime/IRB/2018- 135, was completed in four months from 1st January 2019 to April 2019 through random sampling technique.

The sample size was calculated as 370 through online sample size calculator through Qualtrics website [9] with 95% confidence interval, 5% margin of error with 10, 000 population size but only 327 completed the questionnaire with response rate of 88.37%.

A structured validated questionnaire was used for data collection. All the female medical and dental undergraduate students with consent and available within the premises of the institute were included in the study whereas absent, sick and with no consent were excluded.

The open-ended questionnaire consisted of 18 questions regarding knowledge, attitude, practices and barriers of females in regard to veiling and purdah observance. The collected data was analyzed through SPSS Version- 21 with descriptive statistics for categorical variables with computation of frequencies and percentages.

3. Results

This section depicts the formulated results

3.1. Details of the study participants with their mean age and Standard Deviation.

A total of 327 females participated in this study with the age range of 17 to 34 years. The mean age of the students was 20.81 + 2.48 years. The female students in 3rd year were (n= 134/ 327: 40.9%), followed by 2nd year (n= 87/ 327: 26.6%). More than half of the participants wore Hijab (n= 191/ 327: 58.8%) and same number had no idea when they started taking or wearing Hijab (n= 273/ 327: 83.5%), followed by students who didn't take Hijab (n= 54/ 327: 16.5%) respectively. More than two fourth of the study population didn't face any problems while wearing hijab (n= 249/ 327: 76.1%).

3.2. Undergraduate students segregated into Hijab and Niqab wearing categories.

The 51.1% students were wearing Niqab (n= 167/ 327) followed by 21.1% who wore it sometimes at some places (n= 69/ 327) respectively. The Niqab wearing satisfied students were 68.8% (n= 225/ 327) followed by 24.8% not satisfied (n= 81/ 327) respectively. The unaware Niqab wearing students were 52.3% (n= 171/ 327) with 3.4% felt comfortable (n= 11/ 327) followed by 1.5% (n= 5/ 327) who felt safe in relation to the Islamic teachings to wear Niqab respectively.

3.3. Description details in relation to the tables shown.

The various reasons given by the Hijab wearing students are given in detail in the Table 1. The reasons which came out to be were mostly religious followed by protection from untowered effects in the society. Family pressure to wear hijab was a strong factor behind as well, although minimal percentage was attributed to peer pressure, pushtoon culture and as a uniform in their respective colleges.

Table 1. Reasons Behind Wearing Hijab.

S. No.	Reasons	N = 327
1	A Religious duty	206 (62.9%)
2	Friends/Pashtun culture	11 (3.4%)
3	Family Pressure	25 (7.6%)
4	Protection from unwanted behavior of people	76 (23.2%)
5	Mandatory uniform in working place/college	9 (2.8%)

In below Table 2, depicts the perceptions of the students towards Hijab, which concluded that maximum thoughts were related as part and parcel of Islam, followed by part of the mandatory dress code and simply a piece of cloth.

Table 2. Participant's Perceptions Towards Hijab.

S. No.	Variables	N = 327
1	Piece of cloth	12 (3.7%)
2	Second part of dress	19 (5.8%)
3	Part of Islam	296 (90.5%)

In below Table 3, shows the reasons behind Hijab wearing motivation. Fortunately, most of them listed religious behind wearing it, followed by society pressure and peer pressure as well. Some thought hijab is attractive and adds on the beauty of the female. When they were asked about the Hijab as being only an outer covering maximum denied it and only few students said yes to it.

Table 3. Reasons Behind Motivation to Wear Hijab.

S. No.	Variables	N = 327	
1	Friends	32(9.8%)	
2	Society	33 (10.1%)	
3	Physical attractiveness	15 (4.6%)	
4	Fashion trends	6 (1.8%)	
5	Religious teachings	241 (73.7%)	
6	Hijab an outer covering	Yes	60 (18.3%)
		No	267 (81.6%)

In below Table 4, explains the awareness regarding Hijab/ Niqab along with the frequency of the students compelled to observe Purdah.

Table 4. Awareness Towards Purdah/ Hijab and Compulsion to observe Hijab.

S. No.	Variables	N = 327	
1	Yes	311 (95.1%)	
2	No	16 (4.9%)	
3	Compulsion to wear hijab	Yes	261 (79.1%)
		No	36 (11%)
		I don't know	30 (9.2%)

In Figure- 1 shows the different kind of Hijabs used by the students, and burqa and abaya were on the top list whereas Figure- 2 depicts the frequency of the students who wish to continue Hijab for lifetime.

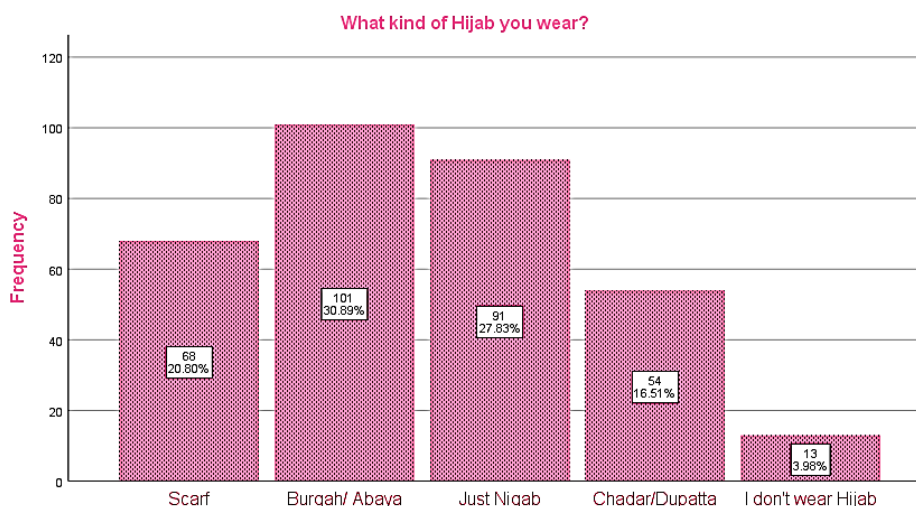


Figure 1. The Various kinds of Hijab Worn by the Students. (n= 327).

In Figure 2, which depicts the frequency of the students who wish to continue Hijab for life, 256 respondents marked yes and 70 opted no.

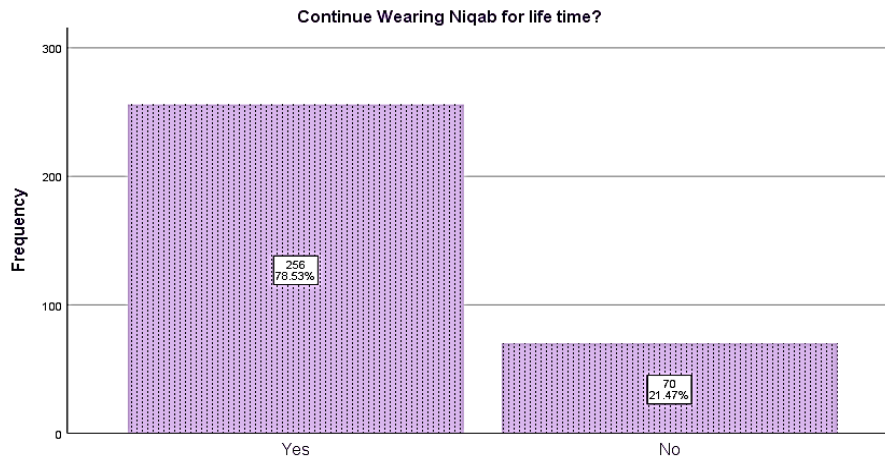


Figure 2. Number of the Students who will continue to wear Hijab for Life Time (n= 327)

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the level of awareness with their perceptions about hijab and barriers in observing it. The results concluded that mostly females are observing veiling in relation to the Islamic teachings, as a religious duty as well as compulsion from the family in being Muslims. The results proved excellent awareness of Hijab among the female undergraduates. The most common form of the attire came out to be Abaya/Burqah and only few of the students were wearing scarf and niqab however, maximum agreed to continue it in future. A Hijab is a traditional dress code of Muslim women worn as scarf to cover their hair and neck with face open 10, while Niqab is a light weight opaque fabric veil worn by Muslim women in public that cover face without eyes [10].

The concept and perception of hijab has gained popularity within last few decades. A Palestinian study was conducted upon student's attitudes towards hijab. The results showed that maximum number of students considered hijab as a symbol of modernism and fashion, very few were religiously acquainted to the concept, others were under the heavy influence of social and cultural constraints. Another group of students avoided hijab due to racism. Social media had a great influence upon girls to wear hijab. Some of the girl students were of the view that wearing hijab will protect them from deadly diseases and some thought of having good proposals if they act modestly and religiously by wearing hijabs [1]. A Study was carried out with open ended interview questions among hijab wearing women of Palestine. To make the participants comfortable the interviewers were without hijab. They were asked about the motivation behind observing veiling. The findings revealed political influence, personal identity factor, religious preference, pressure from the society, traditional and cultural values [2]. A Pakistani study upon student's attitudes towards hijab concluded family pressure, religious obligation, social and cultural values with personal liking as strong reasons behind veiling 9. All the results of these Palestinians and Pakistani studies are in accordance with the present one.

A quantitative Bangladeshi analysis upon hundred hijab wearing women identified the perceptions in relation to Hijab. According to this study hijab was worn by 80.6% females out of their own free will, 16.1% due to family traditions and 3.2% for social reasons. Perceptions of women regarding hijab were freedom and respect (100%), 90.3% respondents considered it significant for the society and 74.6% thought it to be essential for every woman. Hijab was considered as fashion by 74.19%, a new style by 19.1% and 25.8% considered it to be a protection for their hair from dust and dirt [10]. A questionnaire based Omani study determined the attitudes of women with Omani law for veiling among the females in the country. Among all the respondents 61.3% agreed for a law regarding veiling practices with 80% agreement to cover head while in public. It was strongly recommended by the women that hijab be worn but not with compulsion. Wearing Burqa and Niqab yielded very low percentage of 17 and 18% indicating it to be not very important. All the females were well aware of the fact that hijab should be part of the dress code and Islamic obligation as well. They believed to be Hijab as compulsory but not covering the face 11. An experimental study upon hijab practicing females was carried out to determine the perception of facial

attractiveness with women images with and without hijab. The results astonished everyone as women said that hijab reduces the facial attractiveness, but as well limit their facial beauty for the opposite sex that is good in a way. But it was a norm to wear within the society. However, it is associated with negative influence as far as facial beauty is concerned [12].

The University students wear hijab as an important divine duty however there are students who do not use head coverings. An interview-based study was conducted to gain understanding of the root causes behind the acceptance and rejection of hijab among the university students. The main findings revealed a number of factors like cultural, religious adherence, spiritual values, transformation in beliefs, selected and changed moral & ethical values in accepting or escaping away from hijab [13]. These findings are similar to the fact as far as objective is concerned but detailed axial coding was missing in the present study. A Qualitative study focused on the variety of hijabs wearing students, by asking about their perceptions through in-depth interviews. Conclusions from the study depicted Hijab as a self-defense mechanism for protection, high self-esteem, psychological adjustments and personal control. However, researcher's suggestions put forward were astonishing as they referred hijab as a mean of depression and stress with traumatizing effect. Mostly females explained that they were not allowed to remove the coverings in public places as per strict parental instructions [14]. This study provided a link between religion and compensatory mechanism. All these findings were contradictory to the results of the present study.

A Confirmatory Study explored the views regarding Hijab among Saudi and Irani women. Higher life satisfaction experience with strong positive support in relation to veiling was the outcome of the study similar to the present one [15]. A study focused on public opinion about veiling practices of Muslim women and identified the different Swiss groups supporting it. The astonishing yet interesting findings were political group which opposed the idea of veiling, religious acceptance of veiling appeared complex however, they agreed that this way of life is best for women, their identity and protection and no threat to others [16]. A Study evaluated social anxiety through a scale among the female students with prior hypothesis but the results did not establish any sort of significance and rejected the hypothesis [17]. These results do not go with the present study as it was conducted among western world and no scale for anxiety was incorporated as well.

A Qualitative study with Phenomenon research design was adopted to check the themes of religious discrepancy, low self-esteem, powerlessness, alienation and trauma. The findings gave hijab as a compensatory method to lessen discrepancy, restore self-esteem, gain more personal control, reduce alienation along with coping with psychological trauma [18]. A self-determination theory was applied on women wearing Hijab in Muslim areas of Iran and Saudi Arabia, to check out the motives behind hijab wearing. Confirmatory results revealed positive affective experiences with autonomous motivation for veiling. Its more likely to be dependent upon individual choices as well [19]. Both these studies were unique in respect as qualitative however, the present study was a quantitative one. Individual and societal preferences were determined on Hijab wearing women of Kuwait and Egypt with strong affinity and belief as outcome behind it. Cultural and religious factors were the other noteworthy highlights for wearing Hijab [20]. Similar results were noted in this study as well.

An Indonesian Survey was carried out to know the attitudes of veiling students while in class and interacting with people around. The key findings stated 58.2% were willing to form female associates, 17.7% were happy with their veiled friends and 67.1% were never bullied for this behavior. However, 19% were often bullied and asked to take out their Burqas and Hijabs while 78.5% enjoyed freedom of expression in class during learning. Mosques (57%) and social media (37%) were sole factors for motivation of wearing Hijab [21]. Similar results were noted in the present study as well. An Indonesian study used qualitative approach throughout and confirmed burqa correlation with body transformation at workplace for safety, protection and to penetrate into middle class Dawah programs. This study gave a new perspective that women from Muslim countries when move to non-Muslim areas gain recognition and win space through religious manifestations [22]. This study results do not comply with the present study as it was regarding barriers and attitudes of the female. An interview-based study from 28 veiled women of university determined the reasons for veiling and the findings revealed religious, cultural and social factors as significant contributors towards Hijab wearing at university. The positive effect that contributed towards their decision was also from their family, school, neighbors and friends [23]. All the findings are in correlation with this study.

An interesting study was conducted to investigate effects of Hijab wearing upon the facial beauty and attractiveness in relation to men's perspective. This was achieved by women head images displayed with fully, partial and uncovered Hijabs. The attractiveness of female face was lower as compared to fully covered. Partial and uncovered appeared more attractive to men as a general perspective [24]. This study is quite different and do not match with the present study but interesting perceptions were noted. France banned Hijabs for Muslim women and a lot of surges in the community developed. One such article provided a legal articulation in relation to the ban in France. It mostly encompasses law and critiques regarding this burning topic that is not in accordance with the present study.

Afghani women were discussed in detail by an analytical commentary and concluded that Taliban were always forcing women to veil themselves whenever in public and even cover faces. It in turn limited women working and masking their abilities. In Afghanistan 99% women are already following Islam and are covered. Taliban justification of imposing hijab in the name of Islam is contradictory to the spirit of Islam [25]. This article discusses young displaced Sunni Iraqi Muslim girls, that how a new place becomes their identity and veiling becomes compulsory to save themselves. Even the second generation Iraqi women also practiced Purdah/Hijab and it had no negative effects, they could move about freely and work as well [26].

5. Limitations

Limitations of the study included the following very important factors and ideas;

1. Primary data was collected only in number of medical colleges of Peshawar. However, District Peshawar and others of KPK were left out so the data cannot be generalized.
2. Lack of expression from the students with fear of elders.
3. Only Medical female undergraduates were included in the study, which create bias in the study. So, for the reliable and authentic data one should include all females working in every walk of life.
4. Available participants were included in the study, random sampling may have improved and enhanced the validity of this study.
5. Primarily, the responses from the students were forced as per questionnaires so it can add a bit of bias in it.

6. Conclusions

Hijab is considered a religious divine duty and obligation with comfort and protection among the female undergraduate students of Peshawar. The recommendations for future researchers would be;

1. Wearing Hijab should be related to one's intentions so this must be made clear with understanding of total submission to Allah, only then one can be at peace.
2. Primary as well as secondary data be collected to have in depth view of the actual situation.
3. Random sampling will ensure maximum participation with stronger study and their results.

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