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### Investigating the Self-Perceptions and Experiences of Veiled Women in Pakistan

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#### ABSTRACT

The present phenomenological study aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of veil-taking women. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 purposefully selected Pakistani veil-taking women. Construct validity of the tool was checked through expert opinion from 5 experts from social sciences and qualitative research fields. Respondents reported three main reasons for taking the veil: Islam and Quranic values, family norms, and fashion. All the participants looked at their veil approvingly and considered it a sign of respect, freedom, and empowerment. However, some women reported that they had faced prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypical attitude due to their veil. The study suggests that wearing a veil or not should be the right of a woman. Neither should a person be ridiculed, harassed, or discriminated for taking; nor for not taking it.

**Keywords:** Veil, Women, Gender parity, Harassment, Islam, Pakistan.

#### INTRODUCTION

Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in the world (Davary, 2009). The veil is one of its most prominent yet debatable symbols. In recent times, it has compelled researchers more than ever before to investigate it (Yaghoobi, 2020; Rumaney, & Sriram, 2021). Many take veil as a sign of oppression, which is a sign of male domination and gender disparity (Hamel, 2002; Badr, 2004; Hasan, 2018); others think that it gives respect, power, and dignity to women (Hoodfar, 2003; Rumaney & Sriram, 2021). As a result, the veil has remained at the center of debates and arguments in both non-Muslim and Muslim societies (Rumaney & Sriram, 2021). Usually, Muslim societies and countries view it respectfully, while Western societies consider it a threat to not only gender parity but also their own culture and liberal values.

Pakistan is an Islamic country, and veiling was not a contentious issue in it; but in the recent decades, opinions are divided on it even within it, with many liberal advocates, women groups, and civil society members speaking openly against it. Veiling practices vary from society to society. In Pakistan, it mostly means

covering the full body with “abbaya” or “burqa” or the entire face (other than eyes) with the scarf.

Earlier studies (Arthur, 1999; Nasser, 1999) pointed out that most women take the veil because they take it as a sign of respect and dignity. Such females mostly believe that veil creates a very respectable link between society and their self-perceptions. The veil is also a sign of religion and self-discipline for most Muslim women (Rumaney & Sriram, 2021).

Many people think that veil gives women a respectable social and cultural image without creating any hindrance for them (Hoodfar, 2003). It is also believed by some that the veil gives more grace and dignity to females (Lane, 1984). Muslim women reported not only contentment with their veiling practice, but also a sense of loyalty to it (Rumaney & Sriram, 2021).

Previous studies highlight that veil protects women both physically and psychologically (Mernissi, 1987; Roald, 2001; Bartkowski & Read, 2003). The veil gives women a respectable place in male dominant and hierarchy-based society. The study of Secor (2002) indicates that the veil is not just a way of dressing for Muslim women, but it also gives them a sense of respect and empowerment. As

a result, the veil is not taken as a hindrance to their freedom and power. Muslim women have strongly believed that the veil is a symbol of *Muslim Ummah* identity. For many Muslim women, it also allows them to move with freedom, security, respect, comfort, and dignity (Hoodfar, 1993; Khan, 1995; Tolayamat & Moradi, 2011).

Islamic values and beliefs are amongst the most cited reasons for Muslim women to veil (Arshad et al., 2012), yet they are not the only ones. Roald (2001) pointed out that many Muslims believed women should veil due to cultural and societal reasons. They think that females are more sensitive and should cover their bodies to protect themselves from dirty eyes. Researchers pointed out that many women took the veil as a protective shield (Tolayamat & Moradi, 2011).

Many people, on the other hand, do not believe in putting women under the veil. They think that veiling is a sign of oppression, demoralization, and ignorance (Hamel, 2002; Badr, 2004; Sharlach, 2008). It is a way of controlling women and proving that they are not equal to men. Many Western countries have banned the veil as they consider it against gender parity and their cultural values (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2013). Sometimes veil taking women are tagged stereotypically and looked suspiciously. Ahmed (1992) highlighted the views of those people, including both males and females, who considered the veil as oppression for females. It is commonly assumed that countries where the veil is dominant, are basically patriarchal societies. Previous studies also indicate that in such countries as Pakistan, social norms, textbooks and media is often male dominated (Malik, Rind, & Qayyum, 2021).

The self-perceptions of veiled women are sometimes affected by the stereotypical attitude of society (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). In recent decades, not only the culture of veiling has increased, but also the debates and discussions about it. These debates revolve around two types of views: the veil is oppressive for women; and it is a sign of pride, respect, and empowerment for them. In recent decades, the world has become more polarized on this topic, with people opting for more extreme stances. The opinion of the veil observing women and their perceptions are often lost in these heated discussions. The purpose of the present study is to explore, explain and discuss the self-perceptions and experiences of veil observing women to

find out what they think about it. Specifically, the study has the following research questions.

1. What are the reasons that influence females to start taking the veil?
2. What are the self-perceptions of veiled women regarding their veiling practices?
3. What types of experiences do veil-taking women have in Pakistani society?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Method

As the purpose of the study is to explore the feelings and experiences of veiled women deeply, a qualitative research method was selected for it. Qualitative research allows for deeper investigation and probe (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) further suggested a phenomenological approach to explore lived experiences of the participants. The same was used in this study.

### Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of veil observing women in Pakistan. The purposive sampling technique was used to identify and select the sample. 15 veil-taking women were selected for the study. Those women belonged to different areas of the country. They had been observing veil for a period of one year to 22 years. Their age ranged from 23 to 40 years.

### Data Collection Tool and Technique

Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were carried out to collect the data. The interview guide consisted of eight main questions. Supplementary questions were asked when needed.

Interviews were mostly conducted at the participants' places. One of the researchers went to conduct them. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees.

### Data Analysis Technique

First, all the interviews were transcribed and translated so that they were ready for data analysis. Data were coded, put into themes, and then categorized. Verbatim quotations were also used as they help in portraying the original thoughts and ideas of the participants.

### Findings of the Study

As per the research objectives, the findings of the study are divided into three main parts: influential factors, self-perceptions about the veil, and the reaction of the society. The summary of the findings is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Interview Data Findings.

Themes	Respondents	Frequency
<b>Influential Factors</b>		
Religion/Quranic	R1, R2, R3, R9, R12, R14	6
Family Norms	R4, R5, R8, R10 R11, R13	6
Fashion Industry	R6, R7, R15	3
<b>Self-perceptions about Veil</b>		
Safety and confidence	R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, R8, R10, R12, R14	9
Power and freedom	R5, R7, R9, R11, R13, R15	6
<b>The Reaction of the Society</b>		
Respected	R1, R2, R3, R7, R9, R12	6
Stereotyping and prejudice	R4, R5, R6, R8, R15	5
Mixed (based on differences in mentality)	R10, R11, R13, R14	4

### Influential Factors

The participants reported three main influences for taking the veil: religious factor, family norm, and fashion. Religious factors and family norms were reported by six participants each, while three reported fashions.

Many participants reported that they started taking the veil because of religious influences. Six participants said that they had been taking the veil due to religious influences and Quranic orders. For them, Islam was the main aspiration for taking the veil. R3, who had recently started to take the veil, said,

“I was one of the most modern ladies in my family, and I could not even imagine covering my head in my whole life. One day, I studied in detail the veil in *Surah Ihzab* of the Holy Quran. On that day, I realized for the first time why Allah has made it obligatory for female to hide their beauty because it would be beneficial for females in their protection. It is also an honor for females to fulfill the order of Allah. So, from that day, I decided to take the veil and promised to Allah that I would not take it off till the end of my life.”

Another participant R9, who was taking veil for the last ten years, reported it in these words,

“According to my understanding, it is not strictly mentioned in Quran for females to cover their faces, but Allah knows best the mentality of people, so it is safer for females to hide their beauty, and it is also a sign of identity for a female that they are not public property to be used freely.”

All the women who took the veil because of Islamic

influence were happy and satisfied with their veil.

The second biggest theme that emerged under this research objective was the influence of their family. Most of those women stated that they started taking veils from the age of puberty (12 or 13 years of age). They said that it was the culture and environment of their family that they took the veil. As all the women in the house were covering themselves up, they started to follow them. R10 explained how her family norms influenced her to take the veil in these words,

“I started veil at a very early age when I was only 12 years old. At that time, I did not know about the veil in the real sense that why females do veils and why I should cover myself. My mother and father do not force me to do veil. I just saw everyone around me was doing veil, and it was like my family norm to do veil, so I was also expected to do when I grow up, so I started to take veil without getting explanations about it.”

Another participant (R13) also said that she started taking veil because of the environment in her house. She reported that in these words,

“When I was in class 7, I started to take veil. No one in the house forced me. When I was even younger, I would take *dupatta* (a kind of scarf often used in Pakistan) for fun. No one asked me to take it, but I liked it. I felt I must cover my body as I was growing up. I feel safe in it; I feel happy.”

Another interesting reason reported by a reasonably large number of participants was fashion. Respondents explained that increasing numbers of women (especially

the young ones) were taking the veil as it was becoming part of fashion. They reported that there were increasingly new trends in carrying veil or veil styles for females. R7 said,

“I think now the veil has diverse stylish forms and many females do veil for fashion, or to look more beautiful, different and smart from other females. I know most of my friends who just started veiling because of fashion but not to fulfill the command of Allah to cover their bodies. They are just following fashion.”

### **Self-perceptions about Veil**

The second research objective was about the self-perceptions of veil-taking women about their veil and themselves (as veil-taking persons). All the respondents took their veil approvingly. They said that they considered themselves more dignified Muslims because of the veil. Nine of them said that they felt more safe and confident because of the veil, while six reported a sense of empowerment and freedom. Talking about safety and confidence that veil gave her, R4 said,

“Veil gives me a sense of honor, and I feel more comfortable with my physical appearance. I do not have too many words to explain the benefits of my veil for me. It gives me a sense of security and safety to my soul and body from bad intentions and being gazed at by males in public. I feel more confident when I go outside my home in veil to work. I cannot, not even imagine of living without a veil”.

Six respondents said that veil gave them a sense of power and freedom to come forward with their abilities and skills in any field of life. As R5 explained,

“I have been taking veil since my school times as it was co-education institution and now, I am a university-level student. During this whole time, I feel more empowered and freer to achieve my goals in my life. I never ever feel about the veil as a hindrance in achieving my goal of getting anything in my life”.

R13 further explained the concept of freedom in these words,

“In veil, I can move freely anywhere. Nobody ever stopped me, asked me any questions. When I move in the veil, people treat me with more respect, and I feel empowered.”

The participants strongly refuted the concept that the veil hindered their social or professional mobility or

women in the veil were at a disadvantage due to their veil. Responding to this, R9 said,

“Veil has never created an obstacle for me in achieving my goals and in my studies. I studied in co-education institutions with a veil, and there was no issue. I am now working in the veil, and there is no issue. It (veil) does not stop me from doing anything. It helps. I feel proud of myself.”

### **The Reaction of the Society**

Veiled women shared mixed views regarding the reaction of the society about their veil. Six of the respondents shared their experience as respected, and five as stereotypical and with prejudice. Four reported mixed reactions from the society.

When questioned if she ever faced any issue or challenge from the society due to her veil, R12 said,

“I think it would be wrong to say that I ever face any difficulty because of my veil. If I talk about my teachers, friends, and family, they always give me respect because of my veil. I never find my veil demoralizing me in society in any place. I always feel proud, more confident, and getting more respect while wearing it”.

Some respondents (5 to exact), on the contrary, pointed out multiple issues and challenges that they faced due to their veiling practice. They reported stereotyping and prejudice from the society. R8 explained how she would often be discriminated against due to her veil. She said,

“During my visit to the market, I used to notice people around me look at me as if I am a thief or involved in prostitution and have suspicious character. I think people around me have a very bad image of the veil that sometimes hurt me so much. Most of the time, my husband forces me to take off my veil as people consider veiled female having bad character.”

R15 said that at times those negative attitudes become unbearable as

“Sometimes people look at me like a call girl.”

Four respondents said that the reaction of the society was mixed. They said that perception of Society depended on the mentality and social background of the viewers. R10 further explained that in these words,

“Our society is full of class differences, and I think these class differences are producing differences in mentality of people. According to my understanding, people think and behave

towards a veil-taking female according to their mentality and their experiences in their surroundings.”

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the study reveal that most of the women take veil due to religious reasons. Numerous pieces of literature also point out that most Muslim women would take the veil as a sign of their faith and loyalty to their religion (Arshad *et al.*, 2012; Rumaney & Sriram, 2021). An equal number of respondents cited family norms as the main reason. This is also supported by the literature. Many studies found out the influence of family members and friends on veiling (Patel, 2012; Young *et al.*, 2014). The third reason reported by the respondents was fashion. It is an interesting revelation as the veil is generally considered a sign of a conservative and traditional mindset. However, the respondents reported that the trend was changing. Wagner *et al.* (2012) also explained in their study that veiling was now following the fashion industry to combine cultural and religious requirements so that females could fulfill religious obligations, and at the same time, look more attractive and beautiful.

The study also found that veil is viewed differently in Pakistani society. This is related to the findings of Wagner *et al.* (2012) that veil was a diverse socio-political scenario that indicated the complex relationship between the self-perception of women regarding their veil and stereotyping from society. As indicated by the responses of the participants, some people consider women in the veil as outdated, illiterate, and having suspicious characters, while others view them as respectful and dignified persons. Mernissi (1987) also spoke about the same conflicting opinions about the veil. In Muslim societies, women usually do not have to face a lot of difficulties due to their veiling practices. However, with the changing times and increasingly extreme narratives, even within the Muslim societies, this situation is changing. The same has been indicated by the participants as some of them faced prejudice even in an Islamic country like Pakistan. The study of Bullock and Jafri (2000) also indicated that the veil is viewed differently as the society is formed by different people with different cultural backgrounds and social standings. In Pakistan, usually, people belonging to liberal and elitist classes view it disapprovingly, while those from

the lower and middle-class value and respect it.

The study of Bartkowski and Read (2003) found that some women used the veil because they thought they would get respectable social status, honor, and dignity in a male-dominant society. However, as it can be found through the interviews, some of them were treated negatively due to their veil. It could be due to multiple reasons, including media which shapes the mindsets of the people. Jafri (1998) found that some parts of media presented veil taking women as spreading antinational values that violate social values. Even in many Islamic countries, most of the media presents non-veil taking women in prominent roles.

Although many reported that society viewed them in a respectful way, some said they were mistreated due to their veil. This indicates that even in a Muslim society, there are two types of groups who have different views about the veil. The women who take the veil, overwhelmingly consider it as a strong source of their dignity, respect, and freedom, but when it comes to the ones viewing them, opinions are more divided. It may also be since some veiled women have been reportedly involved in theft and prostitution (Khawaja, 2015). In the eyes of some, it makes all the veil-taking women suspicious. Media or their bad personal experiences can also share such opinions. Veil-taking women mostly face stereotyping from such groups in society. The same was reported by some of the respondents.

This study shows that despite some negative experiences, women in the veil value it. Not only do they look at their veil with respect, dignity, and loyalty; they also believe that it gives them more power, respect, and freedom. These findings are paralleled with the earlier studies (Gressgard, 2006; Killian, 2007; Shield, 2008; Rumaney & Sriram, 2021) that veiled women consider the veil as a sign of safety, respect, and empowerment; and it does not represent females as being oppressed or subordinated.

The study suggests that women should have the right to decide if they want to take the veil or not. If someone wants to take the veil, she should not be forced to take it off, ridiculed, harassed, or discriminated against because of it. Similarly, if someone does not want to take the veil, it should not be forced upon her; neither should she be discriminated against or harassed for it. We, as a society, should accept and respect women's right to veil or not.

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