

The hijab debate in the European countries: Perspective of women return migrants in Pakistan

Perdebatan hijab di negara-negara Eropa: Perspektif migran kembali perempuan di Pakistan

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Abstract

Choosing a dressing pattern is an individual decision shaped by multiple factors associated with one's identity and sense of belonging. Based on their lived experiences, this study documents the perspective of women return migrants on the hijab in European context. In-depth interviews were conducted with the women presently living in the country of origin i.e. Pakistan. The women wearing the hijab faced multiple restrictions in their everyday life affairs. In a few countries, there were formal rules restricting the covering of head and face in the public sphere. The women experienced discrimination in employment opportunities because of the hijab as a dominant feature of their Muslim identity. Non-acceptance of the hijab is towards increase among the natives in European countries, who perceive that wearing the hijab in public spaces is leading their society towards conservative outlook. The study concludes that the hijab is one of the predominant factors that shape the decision of Muslim women residing in the Europe to return back to their country of origin.

Keywords: belonging and identity; European countries; hijab and Islamophobia; return migration

Abstrak

Memilih pola berpakaian adalah keputusan individu yang dibentuk oleh banyak faktor yang terkait dengan identitas dan rasa memiliki seseorang. Berdasarkan pengalaman hidup mereka, studi ini mendokumentasikan perspektif migran pulang perempuan tentang hijab dalam konteks Eropa. Wawancara mendalam dilakukan dengan para perempuan yang saat ini tinggal di negara asal yaitu Pakistan. Perempuan yang mengenakan jilbab menghadapi banyak batasan dalam urusan kehidupan sehari-hari mereka. Di beberapa negara, ada aturan formal yang membatasi penutup kepala dan wajah di ruang publik. Perempuan mengalami diskriminasi dalam kesempatan kerja karena hijab sebagai ciri dominan identitas Muslim mereka. Penolakan jilbab semakin meningkat di kalangan penduduk asli di negara-negara Eropa, yang menganggap bahwa mengenakan jilbab di ruang publik mengarahkan masyarakat mereka ke arah pandangan konservatif. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa hijab merupakan salah satu faktor dominan yang membentuk keputusan perempuan muslimah yang berada di Eropa untuk kembali ke negara asalnya.

Kata kunci: kepemilikan dan identitas; negara-negara Eropa; hijab dan Islamofobia; migrasi kembali

Introduction

Clothing conveys significant meanings about one's personality including status, gender preferences and religious identity. Individual choices in dressing and the associated identity issues have started to receive academic attention. In this regard, there is considerable scholarly debate about how the increasing migration tends towards the European countries are resulting in diversity in dressing patterns among the residents (Fatima & Jabeen 2023). This has also caused concerns among the local European

communities about the fast changing outlook of their society. It becomes a news headline when a woman wearing the hijab achieves a significant position in West, such as Nadia Kahf, the first Muslim woman judge taking oath in New-Jersey (Pakistan Observer 2023).

In Islamic tradition, both the men and the women are expected to dress modestly. The Arabic term for Islamic modest wear for covering head is the hijab, translated as headscarf. Traditionally, the Muslim women wear a piece of cloth for covering head. There are two major viewpoints in this regard; on one side, there is an idea of covering head as an act of modesty, whereas the other perspective considers it as against the women's freedom. The later viewpoint stresses that the Muslim women do not choose this attire, they are rather forced by their men to wear the hijab. They argue that covering head makes women subjugated and restrained (Helbling 2014, Tadjini 2019). It furthermore emasculates feminists' assertions about sexual liberty (Pirmasari 2021). Conversely, the conformists consider it an element of respectability, humility and self-effacement for the women (Siraj 2011, Hopkins & Greenwood 2013).

Islamophobia has played a role in shaping the identity of Muslim migrants not only in the US but in Europe as well, since the beginning of 21st century. In the aftermath of September 11, the Muslim migrants in the West feel discriminated in various walks of life, especially the employment opportunities (Cesari 2009, Ghumman & Jackson 2010) that are the predominant reason for international migration towards developed countries. In this regard, the Muslim women have especially been facing intersectional challenges in the public sphere, including in the community and workplace settings. The Muslim hijab is particularly controversial and the attitude of Non-Muslims is more negative towards the women wearing the hijab than the Muslims in general (Helbling 2014). There are multiple reasons behind this non-acceptance of the hijab, such as the hijab being a symbol of Muslim fundamentalism (Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2005), a sign of unwillingness to integrate in the host society (Byng 2010) and an expression of women's oppression and rejection of gender equality (Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2005). Furthermore, the West identifies the Muslim women, especially the hijabis, as the supporters of Islamic terrorism, since they dress in accordance with their religion that is ultimately enforced by the Muslim men (Baboolal 2023).

With increasing restrictions on the religious attire, it is becoming difficult for the women migrants to live and work in Western countries (Seta 2016). Academics argue how signifying the Muslim clothing as antagonistic has resulted in their marginalization by fostering discrimination against them and encouraging hate speech (Bajaj et al. 2016). The hijab is described as a barrier for the Muslim women in gaining employment, doing everyday tasks or simply moving around freely. In addition to this, the taboos connected with the hijab provoke discrimination against the Muslim women i.e. 'hijabis' (Samuel 2016). The local Western communities find the hijab orthodox and controlling. As a result, a binary is created between the Western and the Muslim women that promotes the marginalization of the women following a specific religious dress code such as the hijab. On the other side, the Muslim men are viewed as sexist, who restrict women's freedom of expression as a basic human right, which the West claims to be the symbol of equality in their societies (Payton 2016).

Interestingly, the women in the West advocating human rights deprive the Muslims of their basic rights to choose a dress for themselves. The feminists, advocating the women rights, frequently make judgments about the dressing choices of the Muslim women (EFOMW 2019). They consider that the Muslim women are not free, since they are regulated by their religion to dress in a particular manner that limits their mobility and visibility. The feminists, politicians and media frequently advocate against the oppression of women by referring to the practice of observing the hijab (Bayrakli & Hafez 2016). As a result, the Muslim women are largely singled out through a narrative that stereotypes them and denies them a voice of their own (EFOMW 2019).

In this backdrop, there are numerous challenges that the Pakistanis face while residing in a developed country along with the privileges that they avail. Their identity formation, on the basis of their ethnicity and cultural values towards the women, makes them vulnerable against discrimination in the labour

market (Spencer 2014, Zschirnt & Ruedin 2016). The Muslim women face rejection in the employment, primarily for wearing the hijab. In the job market, the hijab has created a selection bias against the Muslim women. The acceptance rate of the women wearing the hijab is much lower than their counterparts without the hijab (Karakavak & Özbölük 2022). If the Muslim women are able to achieve a job, they face discriminatory rules in the office prohibiting them to wear the hijab as part of their dress (Nisar et al. 2023). In recent times, the hijab appears to have risen the religious and political campaigns in Europe, which their media has further exploited. Lately, this issue has started to receive academic attention as well, where it is primarily rooted in the debate over contradictory ideologies of the European societies in comparison with the non-native cultures (Ahler & Broockman 2018).

The above discussion shows how the migrants residing in the Western countries confront multiple challenges, including the non-acceptance of wearing the hijab. As a result, there are trends among them, especially the Muslim women, to return to their native countries, where they have the freedom to choose a religious attire and are willingly accepted. Having discussed this, the present study attempts to explore the women’s experiences of wearing the hijab while residing in various European countries. It will furthermore be examined that how the non-acceptance of the hijab in West shaped their decision for return migration to the country of origin i.e. Pakistan. It should also be interesting to explore that how the discrimination towards the Muslim women wearing the hijab in Western countries shaped their daily life affairs. For a deeper investigation, it should be crucial to consider that how the citizenship is being understood in the European countries and the terms within which the migrants are granted constitutional protection as citizens. It should also be explored that how the Western countries view diversity to assimilate immigrants. For this study, it will be essential to comprehend that how the laws governing the hijab and accommodation of religious differences help shaping the lives of women migrants in Europe.

Research Method

The qualitative research and interpretive paradigm

The researchers were interested to investigate the experiences of the Muslim women in Europe that shaped their decision to return back to the country of origin. Considering the nature of investigation, this study is positioned in interpretive paradigm and employs qualitative methods. Through in-depth interview, the researchers engaged the perspective of women return migrants to understand the hijab debate in Europe and its consequences for the Muslim diaspora.

Sampling and selection procedure

For conducting the present study, the women were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The inclusion criteria focused on the women return migrants who used to wear the hijab as residents in Europe. They resided in the country of settlement for at least fifteen years and had returned back to Pakistan at least one year ago. In total, fifteen women were selected for the interviews. Preference was given to the women who decided to return back to Pakistan because of the restrictions that they faced as Muslim. The selected women were presently living in Islamabad and Lahore city to avail better life opportunities for their family members, especially the children. A few of them originally belonged to Gujrat, Gujranwala, Jhelum and Rawalpindi, the cities with higher trends of international migration and return migration. The researchers approached a few of the targeted women using their personal contacts. Later, the interviewed women helped locating other potential participants residing in their city.

In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with the women return migrants to investigate their experiences of wearing the hijab as residents in Europe. Interview guide was prepared by listing down the open ended and probe questions to be asked in the interview. Literature review helped gathering the information that

was used to formulate questions for the interview guide (Rubin & Rubin 2011). Later, the researchers arranged meetings with a local academic working in the area of international migration and a woman return migrant to seek their expert opinion on the nature of questions in interview guide. Moreover, a peer consultation session was conducted with a few graduate students taking courses on international migration, sociology and gender studies. The consultative sessions with experts and peers helped improving the interview guide. After the interview guide was finalized, the researchers conducted a few pretesting interviews. The interviews were conducted in the Urdu and Punjabi language, as per the convenience of participants.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), University of the Punjab Lahore. Following the ethical guidelines (Steffen 2016), the women were interviewed after they had given their consent to participate. They were informed about the purpose of study and the ethics of using data. All the identifiers associated with the women were removed while quoting their views. The time for an interview was decided beforehand, to be conducted at a place convenient for the participants. Before an interview, a session of rapport building was carried out to make the women comfortable with the interview setting and procedure.

Data analysis

The interviews conducted in Punjabi and Urdu were transcribed and then translated to English. All the identifiers of the participants, such as their name, age, address in the country of settlement etc. were removed to anonymize data. The transcripts were read for initial ideas about the codes. Later, one third of the interviews were purposively selected for finding codes. All of the researchers independently read the selected interviews for code identification. A peer debriefing meeting was conducted to discuss the codes and prepare a code book with mutual consultation. After this, all the interviews were coded using the code book. The process of thick description helped understanding the data assigned to each code within its context. Codes with similar attributes were grouped to generate categories. A title was assigned to each category to finally reach to the themes for data analysis. In order to ensure rigor and trustworthiness in data analysis, the researchers used various techniques including parallel translation, constant comparison, reflexive journaling, member check and referential adequacy.

Result and Discussion

Wearing the hijab is not merely a dressing choice to portray one's identity; it has multifaceted effects on the lives of people in this globalized world. For the Muslim women, wearing the hijab has produced multiple shades of identity struggle. They face increasing discrimination, especially in the public sphere. The freedom of identity based on dressing choice, such as the hijab, has contesting connotations across its supporters and opponents.

Stigmatization based on Identity

The hijab, as a dress code, has received increasing criticism in the European countries, where there is a majority non-Muslim population. Conversely, the Muslim women residing in these countries consider it an issue of fundamental rights to choose a dress that describes one's identity. In the present study, the women participants opined that wearing the hijab was a way for them to feel connected to their parentage identity. They took pride in wearing the hijab and wanted to reaffirm their identity while living in an opposite cultural context. When they were discriminated for wearing the hijab, it became an identity struggle for them against the dominant culture. While talking about the stigmatization based on identity, NAD mentioned that,

"I take pride in wearing the hijab and covering my head. All women in my extended family, settled in the UK, wear the hijab. Prejudice and hatred based on wearing the hijab was not that frequent previously but it is towards increase with time. My daughters experienced this discrimination a lot in their school. Their class fellows bullied them for their attire and called them terrorists. As a result, one of my daughters started having mental health issues." (Informant NAD).

Another participant (TAQ), who lived in France for more than twenty years, opined that it is a serious human rights violation to deprive them of their freedom to choose a dress for themselves. She stressed that:

"For them, the headscarf is against one's freedom but I always used to ask my Western friends that have you ever thought about the violation of our fundamental rights that you do on everyday basis by commenting on our attire and discriminating us on wearing the hijab." (Informant TAQ).

The study showed how this stigmatization based on identity shaped the decision of these women to opt for return migration to Pakistan. They mentioned that they have the freedom to choose a religious attire in Pakistan and are willingly accepted. As a result, their identity as a Muslim is not challenged on everyday basis, that they used to experience as the residents in Western countries.

Hijab and religious belongingness

Sense of religious belongingness is the major reason for the Muslim women in West to wear the hijab. In the presence of multiethnic residents, the Muslims are found to be sensitive towards their religious identity. In order to claim their religious belongingness in West, the Muslim residents choose the dressing pattern that reaffirms their identity. While discussing their religious belongingness, the participants discussed various reasons for wearing the hijab that included family honor based on their religious affiliations, feelings of being attached with Almighty, getting a sense of assurance as a woman, not rebelling from family values, and gaining a deeper sense of self in a society where they are treated as non-natives.

The participants considered that the covering of head is a threat for the Muslim communities residing in Western countries. They opined that the non-acceptance of the hijab is rooted in associating the hijab with Islamic radicalism that may instigate the communities towards religious intolerance and terrorist activities. It was explained that the media in West is playing a role in building this narrative against Muslims. YUM returned from Netherlands and mentioned that:

"Islamophobia is the main reason behind perceived identity of the Muslim women in Europe. We were victimized in the public places because of the hatred that media generates towards the Muslims by labeling them the terrorists. The women wearing the hijab are considered as reaffirming the Muslim extremist ideological tendencies." (Informant YUM).

Furthermore, the assumption that the customers might object to employees associating themselves with specific religious attires is also a reason that the hijab is criticized in West. In this regard, the issue of workers' rights triggered the court justification that permitting the religious attires might hinder the functioning of organizations. Furthermore, the participants shared that other religious attires, such as wearing of the turban by Sikhs or the kippah by Jews, are not criticized in West as religious or ideological representations. RAN who is a return migrant from Germany shared that:

"It was surprising that people from other religions, such as Sikhs or Jews, are well settled in Western countries but they do not face such discriminations despite adopting religious attires that are sometimes conservative e.g. covering the head and sometimes they wear a modern dress. The Muslim community in West has shown serious concerns on this discrimination, targeted against them." (Informant RAN).

Non-acceptance of the hijab was indicated as one of the major factors behind Pakistani families in West taking decision for return migration. In this regard, one of the participants (SAM) shared that:

“We are not safe from discrimination; in airports, schools, parks or even by our neighbors. We are proud of our identity that for them is a form of terrorism. This is always associated with Islamophobia that is increasing in West. We are adults and can understand but we never wanted our children to suffer from this discrimination, leading them to identity crisis. Thus, we jointly took a decision to move back to Pakistan.” (Informant SAM).

This shows that the non-acceptance of the hijab is due to prevalence of Islamophobia, where individual choices are considered as the cause of spreading terrorism. While there are no legal cases reported where a woman wearing the hijab was found to be involved in any terrorist activities, there is still prejudice and hatred among the native Western communities towards the women wearing the hijab.

Hijab, school and work: Experiences of discrimination

The participants discussed the incidences of experiencing hatred, non-acceptance, prejudice, discrimination and even violence in public spaces due to their inclination towards wearing the hijab. A few of the women return migrants talked about the government policies banning the hijab at workplace. They opined that the sole purpose of such policies is to target the Muslim communities living in the European countries. ZAH mentioned that:

“I used to wear the hijab in Germany. During my interview for a school job, I was denied to be interviewed by the panel and their words were that ‘we are not aspiring to make our children extremists’. The panel egged me to remove the hijab, if I ever wanted to join an institution where the future generations are being trained.” (Informant ZAH).

A few of the participants returned from Germany shared that how they and other Muslim women had to quit a public sector job after the ban on religious attires. They opined that the situation was not different for the Muslim women wearing the hijab in other Western countries. While sharing her experiences, ZAR told that:

“I was doing a teaching job in France for the last five years, when a rule regarding prohibition of wearing the hijab was passed. The rule was shared in elementary and secondary schools with expectation of implementing it strictly. At the time of joining, there was no such rule. However, when this rule was passed, I was supposed to remove my hijab at the entrance of school every day. I felt embarrassed and discriminated as a Muslim woman. As a result, though it was a tough decision, I had no option but to quit job.” (Informant ZAR).

Similarly, the young Muslim women, as students, had experienced discrimination in their schools. In this regard, SAF, who returned from Spain along with her family expressed that:

“I was born and grew up in Spain. As a girl in Muslim family, my brought up was according to the teachings of Islam. I started wearing the hijab at a very young age. When I entered into the school, I was stereotyped due to my dress. Other Muslim girls wearing the hijab in school had the similar experiences. I decided to raise voice in this regard. Despite being an active member of the students’ union, I found it extremely difficult to question such discrimination. I did not get any support from the school, while the Muslim community members considered it a useless struggle that won’t bring any results.” (Informant SAF).

The study found that the incidents of targeting Muslim women wearing the hijab are towards increase in Europe because of the rising Islamophobia. The participants shared that the rules regarding wearing the hijab have been issued in different Western countries such as Sweden, Netherlands, France and Denmark. On the other side, the participants returned from Poland and Greek mentioned that no such rules were shared. However, all of them considered that they were treated differently on the basis of their attire associated with a particular religion.

The argument against the hijab is rooted in three major assumptions. First, the hijab is considered as a symbol of the Muslim fundamentalism (Emami & Amidi Mazaheri 2020, Lempen 2020) that is frequently associated with intolerance and terrorism. Second, the hijab has been interpreted as a sign of apparent unwillingness on the part of Muslim women to integrate in Western societies (Byng 2010). Third, the hijab is considered as an expression of women's oppression and rejection of gender equality (Shadid & Van Koningsveld 2005, Jirousek 2019). The presents study found that how these assumptions among the non-Muslims in Europe and their resulting behaviors tend to shape the experiences of Muslim women while residing in the European countries. They were found to be experiencing multiple forms of discrimination, hatred and prejudice.

There is no conclusive proof that the covering of head or face is linked with personality leanings towards terrorism or extremism (Shirazi & Mishra 2010). However, the opponents of the hijab frequently refer to the possibilities that allowing women to wear the hijab in the public places would encourage extremist tendencies among the other residents as well. In this study, the women return migrants highlighted that linking the hijab with religious extremism is the reason that West is imposing increasing restrictions on the hijab. The local Westerns view that wearing the hijab in public spaces is leading their society towards conservative outlook, which they consider against the Western culture and life style.

Predominantly, the opponents of the hijab consider it oppression of the women and negation of their basic rights to liberty and choice (Weichselbaumer 2017). They maintain that the women are forced by their men family members to cover their face and head. It is argued that the liberal states should not accommodate the cultural traditions of minority groups, if these infringe upon the women's rights, freedom and autonomy. Conversely, the present study found that the Muslim women residing in European countries wear the hijab by choice and consider it an integral part of their religious identity. They found it empowering for them to wear the hijab and stressed that banning the hijab has inhibited their autonomy as Muslim women.

The hijab debate is part of a larger discussion about diversity in Europe, where it is suggested that it should be easier to accommodate people of different ethnicities and religions. The developed nations, such as Europe and the UK, are known for equality of treatment without any distinction based on color, race, religion or ethnic belongingness. On the other side, the present study found that the Muslim diaspora in West face multiple forms of discrimination from the natives. The participants considered that banning the hijab is against the basic values of Western societies about tolerance, diversity and coexistence. The Muslim diaspora face challenges to assimilate, when their rights to choose are systematically and institutionally negated.

Sezgin (2019) and Ahmad (2020) described that how with increasing influx of Muslim immigrants, the wearing of religious dress has received public attention in different European countries. There are legal steps taken in this regard that prohibit public display of religious attires. This has resulted in various forms of institutionalized discrimination against the Muslim women wearing the hijab at public places. In this regard, the supreme court of the European Union gave verdict that the companies have the right to forbid employees from wearing the overtly religious insignia (El Aabedy 2017). Greble (2021) stressed that this decision of supreme court downgraded the guarantee of religious liberty for the Muslim women by allowing the companies to discriminate against the employees whose religion can be identified on the basis of their appearance. In two trials brought by the German women, where the bosses stopped them from working for wearing the hijab at jobs, the CJEU ruled that the companies can restrict employees' representation portraying religious, ideological or personal philosophies (Appleton 2005, Greble 2021). Similarly, Hasan (2022) reported that approximately 600 Muslim women were forced to stop wearing the hijab when the European Court of Human Rights enforced a ban. In 2004, a law prohibiting the hijab in institutions prevented many Muslim girls from completing their education in France. From face veil restrictions in Denmark and Switzerland to a near-ban on lawful divorce in Poland, the European nations are increasingly trying to regulate the thoughts and physical appearance of the Muslim women.

In the present study, the women return migrants considered that banning of the hijab in various European countries is a blatant assault of the women who wear the hijab at workplace. They shared how banning the hijab caused them to face discrimination in job opportunities, workplace and schools. A few of them were forced to quit their job or leave school because of the discrimination they experienced. The women return migrants opined that there is a need of laws in European countries that are supportive of religious diversity, where the Muslim women are not required to choose between their religion and career.

Conclusion

This research examined the perspective of women return migrants on the hijab in European context. The study relied on their experiences of wearing the hijab that shaped their decision to return back to Pakistan along with their families. The study found that the women were discriminated due to adopting an attire that portrayed their religious identity. They were restricted to wear the hijab in public places including schools and work. In a few countries, there are written rules prohibiting the covering of head and face in the public sphere. The women migrants faced discrimination in employment due to their religious attire. Similarly, many of them quitted their job because of the ban imposed on wearing the hijab. It is found that the non-acceptance of the hijab is primarily linked with rising Islamophobia, where the personality traits and individual choices are considered as the determinants of spreading terrorist tendencies. The hijab is found to be a crucial factor that shapes the decision of Pakistani women to return back to their native country. They found it challenging to reside in European countries due to experiencing indecent behaviors based on hatred, prejudice and biasness.

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