Hijab at Workplace: Tracing Mechanism of Discrimination in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Interestingly, the recent debate on the hijab has made it more popular among Muslim women across the world; similarly, a trend of wearing hijab has been increasing in Pakistan among working women of all ages (Anwar, 2015). As a good number of young women are attaining professional degrees and joining professions previously known as male-oriented professions (Saher, 2010; Saher, Matloob, Ali and Batool, 2014) while wearing Hijab (Awan, 2016); consistently the phenomenon of hijab in the work place is a relevant topic. Despite the prevailing practices of women joining careers and making their way ahead in their careers with hijab/scarf, there is no significant published research available depicting the experiences of women wearing hijab at workplace. This study is an effort to address this lacuna between practice and literature and contribute to body of literature.

KEYWORDS: Hijab, working women, diversity management, discrimination, Pakistan.

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INTRODUCTION

The incursion of modern organizations in the private sector of contemporary Pakistan has opened up new job opportunities for educated women. This change in the economic trends directly influenced the life style of urban women and extended their role beyond the private sphere whereas the general life standards and the sociocultural values remained the same. According to Subohi, "Pakistanis … appear to be modern if measured on the basis of their inclination to consumerism but their social mores have not necessarily transformed. The more things change the more they remain same" (Subohi, 2009). In this context hijab/headscarf with normal dress has been taken as a solution for working women (especially from middle and lower middle class) serving in private sector organizations. It facilitates these women to manage the double-edged pressure of society to work outside the home but without compromising on the honour of the family through explicit signs of limited interaction with males (honour of the family). But this solution give way to new challenges for these women wearing hijab in the organizational life of private sector in Pakistan as it becomes a challenge for these women to meet the demands of liberal attire, flexible social behavior and mobility of private sector firms. As a result, women working in theseorganizations experience complex situation to handle a continuous continuum of maintaining honor of the family(seclusion) through wearing scarf and joining profession in private sector firms (demanding inclusion).

This research aims to explore the lived experiences of Pakistani working women wearing hijab (socialized on the values of gender segregation, collectivism and asymmetrical relations) in private sector organizations following modern trends (HRM policies based on principles of gender egalitarianism, equality and individualism). To effectively meet the requirement of the research at hand, our main focus will be on exploring the intrigues,i.e. how does wearing hijab influence the life of a women at workplace (in a private sector organization) and how does she narrate it?This paper starts with review of relevant literature to develop an intellectual base for the research topic and then presentthe research methodologyand methods (data gathering and analysis). The later sections willpresent results and discussion. The last section will comprise of conclusion, research limitation, research implication and future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hijab is an essential part of women's attire in Muslim societies (Tariq-Munir, 2014). Hijab governs and controls every aspect of women's social life including norms of sexuality, kinship, the physical structure of spaces, organization of work, and gender-based ethics of interaction in Muslim societies (Masood, 2016). Wearing Hijab is considered an explicit symbol of modesty that serves as a means to protect women's privacy, chastity, and virtue (Read &Bartkowski, 2000). Therefore, Hijab makes it necessary for Muslim women to cover their heads and bodies as the observance of their religiosity that also communicates a specific message of behavioral, social, and religious expectations for women's conduct.

Hijab has various connotations and one of the most common is a veil or a headscarf in the contemporary world. The hijab (presently adhered by educated women in Pakistan) is the same as is practiced by Muslim women in the west. This is, in fact, a square or rectangular piece of cloth that is used to covers the head, neck, and chest area

but leaves the face clear/open (Tariq-Munir, 2014). This form of hijab is becoming famous in the contemporary economically liberalized Pakistan. It has been witnessed that this trend of the hijab (veil) is increasing in Pakistan among working women of all ages (Anwar, 2015).A positive view of veiling within Islam is associated with protecting female sexuality and of respecting modesty whereas a critical/feminist stance takes veil/hijab as a sign of oppression and hindrance for women to become part of mainstream activities; due to this intellectual divide, debate and research could not flourish on this issue. A recent survey has shown that the trend of wearing the hijab has been increasing especially in Islamabad and Karachi (Anwar, 2015).

The use of headscarves as an expression of Muslim women's identity and its association with their experiences at western public and workplaces has been studied by several researchers (Gole, 2003; Sa'ar, 2006). Most of these studies have explored the implicit meanings of wearing the headscarf and its implication for Muslim women at the workplace. For example, Williams and Vashi (2007) view Muslim women wear the hijab primarily to create a cultural space for themselves, and to negotiate the conflicting values between their Islamic values and the liberal values of the western world. Simirlarly, Omair (2009) consider Hijab as a safe" mode of communication and interaction with the male colleague at the workplace and reduces the chances of gossip against women. Besides this, the hijab indicates to other men that a veiled Muslim woman is not available for dating (Alvi et al., 2003; Bullock, 2002; Droogsma, 2007). Further, women with headscarf want to liberate themselves from the pressure of set standards of beauty set by the society (Tariq-Munir, 2014; Gurbuz and Gurbuz-Kucuksari, 2009) and save them from male

gaze that accompanies it (Bartkowski and Read, 2003:Zine, 2008). Scholarship in this way highlights that the hijab sets a moral boundary around these women, defines the type and expectation of the interaction they are going to make with males in the surrounding (Furset, 2011; Omair, 2009).

The scholarship also reveals the multi-layered issues faced by these women (who wear the headscarf) to work in western workplace contexts. Muslim diaspora with religious attire (Hijab/headscarf) in western countries experiences particular challenges and discrimination at the workplace (Syed et al., 2005; Ali et al., 2017). In the western context, women with a hijab/headscarf encounter both contexts (cultural/religious norms and organizational cultural norms) which have a significant impact on their self- identities and career success. Tariq and Syed (2107) study indicate that Muslim female leaders face numerous challenges in the United Kingdom, specifically; women with religious attire (Hijab) at the workplace face more challenges as compared to the women with western or mainstream appearance. Kumra and Manfredi (2012) have highlighted that wearing Hijab makes it easy to distinguish Muslim women but it also increases the possibility of experiences of discrimination at the workplace. Likewise, Ghunman and Jackson indicate relatively lower job prospects for Muslim Hijabi (headscarf) women in the USA as compared to non-hijabi Muslim women (2008).

Terrie, Reeves Arlise, and Azam (2012) in their study focused on Muslim women physicians and healthcare professionals' decisions to wear Hijab (headscarves), associated discrimination, and effects on professional outcomes for Muslim women in the USA workplace context. Results indicate a strong adherence to Islamic precepts for

women's decision to wear the Hijab (headscarf) at workplace. Researches also reveal the experiences of discrimination and in-toleration for women who wear headscarves. Accordingly, Syed and Pio's (2010) study highlighted wearing of the headscarf as a hindrance for women to gain employment in the Australian context. Using Hebl et al.'s (2002) conceptualization of discrimination,

Recent changes in women's educational advancement and the influx of international organizations in Pakistan have increased the number of women in all types of organizations and wearing hijab is getting popular among working women (Anwar, 2015) because it enables them to carry modern working style while managing the issue of honour. Though, the modern organizations show discrimination in taking women wearing hijab despite their relevant qualifications and skills for a particular job on the plea of liberal policies/image demands (Shareef, 2015).

Additionally, working women in Pakistan, especially women with Hijab/headscarf experience contradictory behavioral demands at the workplace due to social and organizational expectations (Saher, 2010: Syed, 2010:Saher, Matloob, Ali and Batool, 2014: Syed &Ozbilgin, 2015: Syed et al., 2005). This creates a clash of values and conflicting situations for working women with headscarf/Hijab who are expected to follow the workplace rules and at the same time try to maintain a balance with their traditional cultural, religious, and gender roles (Omar & Davidson, 2001).

In line with the recent trends, Pakistani entrepreneurs and managers are following the western HRM practices to gain organizational success in the competitive environment of the contemporary political economy of the world (Saher, 2010;

Saher&Mayrhofer, 2014). In this way by adhering western human resource management practices (individualism, equality, and gender egalitarianism) organizations have created a conflicting situation for its Pakistani employees. This situation has placed special pressures on female workers as they have to carry the symbolic meanings associated with the hijab and honor of the family in the gender-segregated society of Pakistan. With this back ground, the aim of this paper is to elucidate the challenges women face at the work place.

Research Methodology and Methods

Qualitative research methodology was adopted to get an insight of the issue at hand. The empirical data was collected through an in-depth qualitative investigation using semi-structured interview guideline from private sector firms in Islamabad. Purposive sampling technique was used as recommended by Walter to gather data when researchers are clear about purpose of the study and aware of their target population (Walter, 2010). The interviewees (all females) were from different organizations such as universities, telecommunication firms, hospitals and banks.

Rapport was developed with these working women through reference-based visits and then in- depth interviews were conducted in Urdu language from the twenty selected female workers wearing head scarf. On average each interview lasted for 35-50 minutes, anyhow it lasts for 70-90 minutes in some cases when the interviewee was willing to share her personal insight (only three cases). The field data was analyzed through deductive qualitative content analysis as suggested by Leedy and Ormrod (2001).

Result and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore women's experiences and unique challenges they encountered for wearing hijab while working in modern private sector organizations. The results of the study highlighted that working women with Hijab encounter multiple challenges and discrimination in these organizations. Our respondents reported negative experiences of wearing Hijab at workplaces. These experiences, though not obvious in most cases, have a significant creating social pressure and workplace stress. Variations are found in discriminatory practices within the different organizations though its intensity is high in telecommunication/marketing and health sectors. In the next section, we categorize and discuss/report the fundamental themes and sub-themes and some supporting responses that emerged from our respondents' experiences.

The results indicate that women wearing hijab perceived experiences of isolation in these organizations. For example, a respondent from the health sector reported that she experienced isolation and feel less assimilated with the organizational environment when she preferred to maintain the norms of gender segregation, Purdah, and limited interaction with her male colleagues.

> "in gender egalitarian gatherings like meeting or combine lunch/tea, I feel completely isolated as my colleagues (not wearing headscarf) interact and move freely with all colleagues. This put me in a very odd position and total mismatch with the existing situation".

Results also indicated that women feel discomfort to share their offices with male colleagues and several instances of avoidance from their respective authorities for not adopting the norms of the organizations.

> "it is not easy to sit in room with male colleagues for eight to ten hours every day. Despite the requests, I have not been accommodated with female colleagues. So, I feel stressed the whole day and only get relieved when I am with the room of my female colleagues."

Similarly, women from the telecommunication sector reported that women with Hijab are not considered appropriate/suitable for marketing purposes specifically to represent organizations at various promotion activities. This discriminatory treatment based on particular attire has negative implications for these women and they feel stressed, depressed and less assimilated with the organizational environment. One respondent from the telecommunication organization expressed her feeling in the following words:

> "I am very good in research and developing new projects. But when there is a time of presentation of these projectsto our clients/ seniors, my co-worker is selected for presentation of that project as she maintains the right attire (not wearing scarf). This irritates me a lot and I remain up set for many days and feel less motivated to work."

The above response has explicitly revealed the priority of the management in the researched organizations to show case their liberal and modern image through presenting female employees with modern attire though in this effort they discriminate and neglect talented women who actually work to conceive and develop the project.

The field data has also highlighted that women with Hijab/head scarves were alienated from main stream official information and project as they did not participate in various informal on job activities. One respondent, a senior doctor from the private service sector hospital expressed her experience of formal discrimination and feeling of otherness while stating:

> "I wear a headscarf to cover my head and body and prefer to sit in a separate office or cabin. I do not sit with male colleagues during the duty hours and do not join them on different social events like parties or gossip sessions. My male colleagues are closer to my senior female professors and inform them about my disengagement (isolation) with them in different social activities though not related to my official duty. It is quite disturbing when I do not get information regarding official and administrative matters".

In a similar vein, an assistant professor from the education sector also shared her views regarding how did women with hijab are perceived different during the official meetings, and often authorities avoided direct interaction with them. She highlighted that

> "I think discriminatory attitudes exist against women wearing headscarf/hijab. I have observed in meetings that management is less likely to appreciate the hard work and commitment of a woman wearing hijab than those who are not wearing it. Unfortunately, these issues are imbedded deep down in our practices that is the reason not taken seriously. So, it will be very difficult to tackle these subtle forms of discrimination prevailing in organizations. There is still a long way to sensitize people at various levels of decision making about diversity and its management at workplace".

It has also been shared by the respondents of this research that women wearing hijab are considered less for the opportunities related to on-off job training and development activities. One of the respondents in the telecommunication sector figured out it in the following words:

> "In my organization going on an off- job trainings activities are considered a perk for the employees. Generally, more male members are selected for the trainings as compare to the female employees. And interestingly, it is rare to see a woman with scarf in this selected group. I myself is working in this organization for the last four and a half year and never get an opportunity to go for such training".

It had been witnessed during the research that almost all the women wearing hijab were placed at the rear end of the organization. Only in a rare case, a lady wearing a scarf had been observed sitting on the front desk. It unleashed the fact that women wearing hijab are less placed on the forefront of the organization. According to a respondent;

> "the selling point of a private firm is its modern and dynamic look; and for that they hire staff with modern look and keep the traditional one on the rear side to perform at the back end."

Further, our results show that women with Hijab/scarf are discriminated against on occasions where direct public dealing is required. Results reveal that though, organizations hire women with Hijab/scarf but do not assign them the tasks and responsibilities where Hijab can convey a conservative or backward impression to the public at different levels. Respondents consider this subtle form of discrimination from their respective departments and authorities as a way to exclude women to apply for higher managerial positions. One respondent from the health sector reported that she was not allowed to perform the task as a stage secretary in a medical symposium for observing religious attire. She explained that despite organizing all the major activities for the symposium, she was asked by the principal to represent a liberal and modern outlook of the college as a stage secretary. According to her,

> "These opportunities are very vital for us to come forward and prove ourselves as a good performer. But we

cannot handle such issues based on organizational interests and particular attire. In such situation, we just have to accept it"

Many respondents shared that they had been genuinely and sincerely working in their organization; remained focus and waste less time in office as they did not involve in informal social activities. But when there is a time of job evaluation and promotion, our number is at the last. In the same van, one respondent from banking sector explained how women with Hijab/headscarf were not selected on certain events. Her views reflected that females with modern attire were preferred at the events of launching different products at organizational and other levels. According to her

> "I think physical appearance with modern outlook influences authorities' decision to provide access to certain people in the organizations. Consequently, this enhances the profile of women with mainstream attire and increases the chances of their promotion".

There was a similar experience reported by one respondent from the Banking sector. She shared that during her job interview; one of the committee members asked her views if the organization demands a change in her attire to get this job. According to her, the committee asked her,

> "It's wonderful to talk to you. What if we ask you to change the style of wearing headscarf and abaya?"

These experiences reflect that manger are often reluctant to hire a woman with

headscarf. Women wearing a headscarf these obvious and subtle forms of discrimination during the selection processes specifically in telecommunication, banking, and health sectors.

CONCLUSION

This section discusses implicit and explicit discrimination against women wearing hijab. The result pointed out that contrasting socio- cultural values and expectations of modern organizations pose conflicting role demands on the women and put a negative impact on their professional life in private sector firms in Pakistan. The findings of current study have also concluded that these organizations expect their employees to behave and perform according to organizational culture but these are not always consistent with the local social norms. This is because the management system of the modern organization is based on individualism, equality and gender egalitarianism whereas collectivism, asymmetrical relations and gender segregation are the basic principle of Pakistani social structure. Therefore, our results have supported that the inconsistency between the organizational culture of modern organization and general social culture creates conflicting situation for women wearing hijab (head scarf) at workplace. The findings of current study have additionally revealed that these women experience biases in all aspect of organization i.e. active participation in organizational life, acceptance, incorporation in main stream activities, ownership of their work and presentation, nomination for training activities, better job placement, job growth and promotion and the top of it positive attitude of the senior management. An interesting point to ponder here is that when the mainstream scholarship

in management is considering diversity as a source of creativity and innovation; thus, focusing on aligning diversity. The organization in Pakistan are doing with it.The results of this study can be highly useful for both academic as well as practical domains. From academic perspective, this study focuses on the factors that influences Pakistani professional women's situation in the private sector firms. While from a practical perspective, this study sensitizes organizations to accept diversity andto facilitate workers with diverse back grounds especially women wearing hijab into the mainstream activities by developing more comfortable, suitable and context specific working environments and policies in their organizations. This study is also very significant in an era where organizations are interested to expand their business across the domestic borders, so these companies must get knowledge about contextual factors specifically related to women workers.

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