

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Experiences of Hijabi Women: Finding a Way Through the Looking Glass for Muslim Americans**

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**The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of Muslim women who wear the hijab, their perceptions of the how wearing the hijab impacted their relationships, identity formation and cultural adaptation in the American workplace. Through the analysis of qualitative data, this exploratory phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of Muslim women to gain an understanding of how the wearing of the hijab impacted cross-cultural interactions, how they maintained their personal and social identities, coped with stress, and perceived discrimination and feelings of isolation. Qualitative interviews with seven participants were conducted in the U.S. and the results varied.**

**Keywords:** Hijab, hijabi, Muslim women, American workplace, U.S., scarf, headscarf

### **Introduction**

This article describes the experiences of Muslim women who wear hijab, a headscarf or other body covering, and their perceptions of how wearing hijab affected their relationships, identity formation and cultural adaptation in America. Through an analysis of qualitative survey data, this phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of Muslim women to gain an understanding of how the wearing of the hijab impacted cross-cultural interactions, how the hijabi women maintained their personal and social identities, coped with stress, and perceived discrimination and feelings of isolation. Qualitative interviews with seven Muslim hijabi women were conducted in the U.S.

### **Literature Review**

Very few studies have used qualitative interviews on the topic of the hijabi woman, and the wearing of the headscarf regarding their work experiences in the U.S. There are however, a few studies regarding the wearing of the hijab, on various topics.

The first study investigated the influence of the hijab (the Islamic headscarf) on perceptions of attractiveness, intelligence, and employability among Muslim women in the United States (US) by Pasha-Zaidi (2012). The author found that religiosity was highly correlated with personal hijab status, and the effects of religiosity and perceived discrimination were also examined. He concluded that perceived discrimination had a negative effect

on ratings of employability among hijabi's in the US (Pasha-Zaidi, 2012).

The second example was a study by Kelley-Hollwell (2008) on perceptions and behaviors that encourage or impede advancement or attainment of leadership positions in higher education by Muslim women wearing hijab. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that encouraged or impeded Muslim women wearing hijab from attaining or advancing in positions of leadership in higher education institutions in the United States. The study findings articulated the importance of the role institutions of higher education played in creating environments that endorse inclusion for recruiting, employing, supporting and promoting aspiring Muslim female leaders; and the importance of relationships or connecting with breaking down barriers and stereotypes of Muslim women to support recruit, employ, and promote aspiring Muslim female leaders (Kelley-Hollwell, 2008).

A third study focused on the nature and range of stereotypes that job recruiters hold about Muslim women wearing the hijab, with five main themes identified: (a) fear of Muslims, (b) hijab appearance vs. hijab functionality, (c) impact of cultural and religious differences, (d) stereotypes, and (e) discrimination in the United States. (Hana-Meksem, 2012) The findings offered opportunities to investigate, illustrate and document stereotypes on Muslim women wearing the hijab that could intervene during a hiring process. (Hana-Meksem, 2012)

## Hijab

The hijab (headscarf), worn by Muslim women, is currently defined as the covering of the hair and neck (headscarf), according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, (2014). Traditionally and in the Qur'an, hijab means a covering or veil that not only covers parts of the body, but also metaphorically is a covering for the eyes and heart for both men and women. Hijab of the eyes and heart means that men and women cannot look at each other (other than their own spouse) in a lustful way. Traditionally, hijab is meant to harbor respect among and between men and women. Hijab (headscarf) is not required in front of all people. There are also those who are *mahram* to women, or male family members that women are not required to wear hijab in front of, such as the husband, father, father-in-law, sons, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers, etc. (The Qur'an and Hijab, 2014)

This parallels the literature and the relevance of religiosity, identity and of Muslim culture in the lives of people and the communities they form. Specifically, among Muslim women, religious affiliation and beliefs in the Qur'an or Koran, and Islamic traditions played a vital role in their lives. The *hijab* (headscarf) is a particularly powerful symbol of Muslim identity that holds different meanings for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The veil and the situation of women in Islamic societies are irrevocably linked. According to Smith (2010) and Rasheed-Ali, et al. (2004), the Qur'an does not specify exactly how the body is to be covered, but does order men and women to dress modestly. It is clear that when the topic arises of hijab and women's dress, Islamic authors and researchers and those who study Islam address and write about the topic quite differently, suggesting multiple interpretations and possible conflicting viewpoint articles (Severson, 2011).

## Identity

Theories concerning the relationship between social identification and behavior are increasingly attentive to how group members emphasize or de-emphasize identity-related attributes before particular audiences. The continued and growing presence of Islam and Muslims in the West has produced a plethora of conflicting literature and debates around interpretations and representation of minority Muslim identity constructions (Seddon, 2013). These women must navigate two different cultures: their native culture and their hosting culture. They have to acquire financial and social stability, and they face discrimination and rejection while undergoing identity development, which is an essential process to healthy adaptation (Khatib, 2013).

Today, Muslim women do not view their hijab as a restriction to their potential but more as a symbol of empowerment. They attend colleges and universities, work in various professions, have families and friends and enjoy life, all the while wearing hijab. Their hijab can be a regular headscarf covering their hair, neck and chest area or something more traditional like an abaya (long, loose robe) or even niqab (face covering). But they don't

let their form of hijab come in the way of a successful and meaningful life (Tariq-Munir, 2014). By wearing the hijab, women signal to others what code of life, values and morals, to which they subscribe. Muslim women wearing hijab in Muslim countries may do so to "fit in" with the dominant culture, whether forced or not to wear the attire.

When Muslim women move to western countries such as the United States, hijab symbolizes something else entirely. It actually holds a multitude of meanings depending on their interactions and experiences. It becomes a way to express their Muslim identity to others, to symbolize their differences (Tariq-Munir, 2014). Among Muslims living in the United States, Islamic religious practices are negotiated and adapted to a new culture. A visible and controversial symbol of Muslims' differences from dominant American Christianity is the hijab worn by many Muslim women. The decision to wear hijab occurs within a two-fold cultural context: (1) the assumption by many non-Muslims that hijab encapsulates Islam's inherent violation of women's "equal rights"; and (2) a widespread Muslim critique of American culture for its individualism, materialism, and lax sexual morals (Beall, 2008). Ba-Yunus and Kone (2006) wrote about Muslims in the United States and the way the U.S. culture influences their lives. They wrote about the freedom to choose whether or not to attend a mosque, the ability to vote elected officials in and out of office, and the freedom of women in choosing to wear the hijab or not. They wrote, "This [America] is a society in which Muslim women observe modesty (hijab) out of their own free will" (p. 25).

## Discrimination

Muslim women living in the U.S. today, continue to face explicit and subtle acts of discrimination and prejudice. Over the past decade, and particularly since the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, the Muslim community in the United States has experienced an increased level of social and religious scrutiny. This has fundamentally changed the way the American society views Muslims, especially Muslim women who wear the veil or *hijab* in public. Tariq-Munir (2014) in his study says that it is imperative that Muslim women become active in the Muslim society as well as in the mainstream American society, to improve the public impression of Muslim women as meek, uneducated and confined to their homes.

In examining the effects of discrimination on the behavior of Muslim Americans, Livengood and Stodolska (2004) found that the majority of their participants experienced some form of discriminatory behavior in the year following 9/11. The various acts ranged from racist epithets, menacing looks, exposure to obscene gestures, and intentional avoidance, to more serious acts of prejudice such as direct threats, vandalism, and physical attacks. The perpetrators were both strangers and individuals with personal connections to the victims. Women experienced discrimination at a much greater frequency than men. This phenomenon can be attributed to the visibility of Muslim women who wear hijab, as was true of the majority of the women in their sample. Hijab "gave women away" (Livengood &

Stodolska, 2004, p. 193) and made them easily identifiable as belonging to a target group.

### **Method**

This research was conducted as a qualitative study using individual interviews. The findings generated from the research are the result of data collected from a sample of employed Muslim women who wear the hijab in their workplace.

Data was collected from subjects who could sufficiently provide written data through a qualitative interview survey. The current study included a sample of seven participants. This sample aligns with phenomenology's emphasis on rich, in-depth analysis, and is within the established standard for phenomenological investigations within the social sciences. Data analysis was completed for each interview. Interview transcripts were read several times by the researchers to gain an overall sense of the data. Data analysis using thematic clusters, categories, and subcategories that reflect the experienced phenomenon was accomplished by two authors responsible for conducting all data analysis procedures.

### **Selection of Subjects**

The selection of the subjects is a vital component to this study. Subjects have to be actively wearing hijab and working part time or full time to be included in the research. Theory based sampling occurs when subjects are selected because they are able to provide data towards the research in developing a theory (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007).

### **Instrumentation**

The selection of the subjects was conducted by electronic request. Participants are members of a mosque and were emailed general information about the study and requested to reply if they qualify and are interested in participating. The email addresses were obtained from the mailing list of selected mosques in the Chicago and St. Louis areas. To qualify for participation, female subjects must be employed full-time or part-time, and wear hijab. Participants responded by email. Participants were given confidentiality by using pseudonyms. The interview protocol contained questions about challenges hijabi women face at the workplace, viewpoints and positive/negative experiences with wearing hijab at the workplace. The interviews did not last more than an hour.

### **Assumptions**

Certain assumptions were made in the methodology. The purpose of some studies is to add insight to a group. The qualitative data provides descriptive data and did not require a large sample (Creswell, 2008). The researchers collected, transcribed and analyzed the data, according to Patton (2002). Here, an assumption is made that the researchers who collect and analyze the data will provide unbiased research (Creswell, 2009). Assumptions are also made that the subjects voluntarily participated in this study; and also, that the participants provided honest responses in the electronic interview.

### **Limitations**

Limitations include the study used only qualitative data only with selected samples from various demographic areas of the U.S. Participant selection was confined to mosques in the United States. Since the study was qualitative, it could not be determined how many participant interviews there would be. Also, researcher bias could have occurred through collection and analysis.

### **Results and Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine the following research questions on the experiences of Muslim women who wear the hijab, and their perceptions of how wearing the hijab impacted their relationships, identity formation and cultural adaptation in the U.S.:

- 1: What factors influence how working hijabi women make decisions to wear a headscarf?
- 2: How is identity relevant to hijabi women's professional life? How do hijabi women present themselves in the workplace?
- 3: What factors in the workplace influence how hijabi women present themselves, shape their professional identity, and conduct their work?
- 4: What challenges do hijabi women face?

This chapter aligns with the responses of participants to the research questions. The responses include the meaning participants ascribe to being Muslim, as this provides a context within which to situate the interpretations. The participant responses are followed by cross-participant thematic analysis of the seven interviews.

The themes that emerged from the findings as to why Muslim women chose to wear hijab varied. Women felt empowered and spiritually directed by wearing a headscarf, while others desired to improve the poor image of Islam. The participant, Rita states "...I wanted to be a positive advocate for my religion, which had come under much scrutiny post 9/11. I sensed a widespread dislike for my faith..." Many felt a calling from within, some because peers were wearing it. All of the women expressed a sense of pride, but also a feeling of security. Yolanda, another participant in the study, states that "Wearing hijab gives me authority, dignity and respect versus being treated like a material. I want to attract people to my intellect not my figure." Wearing the hijab would attract attention, but in a positive way, and many stated that it protected them from unwanted invitations or remarks. For some, it is a requirement of Islam to wear the hijab and these women want to follow the path of and emulate female saints such as Fatima Zahra and Zainab Binte Ali, the respective daughter and granddaughter of Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam. Barbara says "It would burn me up from inside that despite my practice, adherence to, and understanding of Islamic law, I was not doing hijab. I was not following the pure examples of Fatima Zahra (SA) and Bibi Zainab (SA). It made me feel so depressed inside and continuously incomplete and fake."

It was interesting to note that none of the participants felt pressured by their families to wear the hijab. In fact, one of the participants, Molly, received opposition from her family in her decision to wear hijab. Molly states that wearing hijab "...was just something that came from within me. It was my decision entirely even though I was met with a lot of opposition at home and in the workplace." Another participant started wearing hijab after she had been working for a while without hijab as a teacher. Barbara states "I worried about response at work. My husband did not want me to wear it and was adamantly against the idea." Although these women met with opposition both at home and work, they decided to start wearing the headscarf.

Conflict often exists between two social and cultural structures as in the case of the American Muslim women. Many women in the survey mentioned how they would not shake hands with male colleagues. Anna feels this may be a limitation for them. "Hijab means I have to set some limits for myself so before shaking their (men) hands, people think twice." Beth, another participant in the survey, states "My male co-workers know that I cover my head and that I do not shake hands with men. They make it a point not to shake my hand or hug me...even at company parties/events."

It was evident that a conflicted identity within them, often making them feel invisible. Molly states, "There is an invisible barrier that separates me from my colleagues. I feel it when they're socializing at lunch or going out after work, etc." Many of the participants did not socialize with their colleagues after work because their colleagues would choose to meet at places like bars for drinks.

Contrary to the women who felt conflicted, some women felt that this limitation created positive effects as Yolanda states "Wearing hijab keeps me focused and empowers me to deliver an excellent lesson without creating any distractions for my students and me." Not having the social distractions and following social formalities helps Yolanda focus on her work and gives her clarity in her work.

But, as was evident in the participants, when positive psychological adaptation occurs, the acculturating individual develops a clear identity, strong sense of self-esteem, and a positive mental health image. Yolanda feels "I do not consider hijab to be my weakness...My struggle and fight has doubled that of a non hijabi...Every day is a liberating day and no one can take away my respect, dignity, knowledge and equality with men."

All the hijabi women related that it was important to be professional, dress appropriately, and modestly; and for all of the Muslim women the hijab professed not only their faith, but their professionalism. Mostly, they match their hijabs to their outfits and try not to dress themselves the way hijabi's are portrayed in the media. Some even chose to avoid wearing black colored hijabs so as not to seem too radical or orthodox. Barbara states "I try my best to coordinate my outfit and accessories to make it look fashionable, yet Islamically correct. I do not believe hijab

means that you have to make yourself look ugly and unpresentable. I do try to avoid wearing black too much all though it is one of my favorite colors."

Many of the participants found that the working climate was supportive and colleagues embraced them. Beth states "They (colleagues) respect my choice to wear the hijab and understand that it does not affect my role in any way." After initial reluctance and intimidations, most of the colleagues ultimately respected their choice to wear the hijab and accepted that it did not affect their jobs. One of the women said that she completely felt a part of the mainstream as a professional. Upper management gave her the responsibility and trust to run her department with minimal supervision, while some others related that hijab meant having to set limits to feel a part of the mainstream.

However, the other women did not meet with such luck and encountered some adversity at their respective workplace. Beth had a colleague who did not want her to accompany them to conventions because she wore "...that thing on her head. He claimed he didn't want me to be uncomfortable wearing it." Another woman, Roberta, worked at a French culinary institute, and her supervisor asked her to remove her hijab for an evening gala event. "She reduced my hours eventually and I ended up quitting but it also happened around the time when the veil debate was hot in France - I'm sure she did not want to rub her French guests (the wrong way)." Other women, like Molly and Yolanda had questions asked of them such as, "Are you related to Saddam?" or "Does wearing hijab clog your brain due to heat?" and even "Does your husband mind if you talk to a guy?" Many of them were avoided or stared at.

However, for some the hijab made people ask questions and the hijabi women were happy to answer them. Beth relates, "One co-worker even said once that before he met us..., he thought all Muslims were terrorists. I'm glad I'm able to answer questions about my faith and beliefs if it'll help remove any stereotypes." For them, the adversity was something that did not hinder their work or success at the company, as Molly states "I am very lucky...not to be persecuted for it (wearing headscarf) as in many countries around the world. So why would I stop wearing hijab because of some discomfort at the workplace...? In the end, it makes me a better worker/professional." Others, such as Barbara, were actually able to change people opinions about hijabi's. Barbara, a school teachers relates a parent's conversation with her. "From you, I learned never to judge a book by the cover. I used to look at you and think...'She probably has trouble with English...she has an accent.' And then I heard you speak. I am so sorry for thinking that about you."

Many of the women felt that the more diversified the workplace, the more hijabi's would be accepted as legitimate workers, as Roberta states, "Diversity is a big one. I feel that the more diversity and hijabi's (that) are around, the easier it will be to find a niche in the workplace." They wanted to think that it does not affect relationships and most do not want to worry about

unwanted attention. Their identity as a hijabi affected their practice with colleagues because it restricted some of the things they could say or do that may not have been the case if they weren't wearing hijab. Barbara states "If you work with people who are bigoted and have no tolerance or acceptance of differences, it will be very hard for a woman to wear hijab there." These women did not feel part of the mainstream as a professional as much as they hoped. Roberta says that there were "individuals who immediately stereotyped me and did not want to talk to me... Otherwise I don't think there were any barriers." And Rita says "...there were times where I felt my hijab was causing a hindrance in getting me past certain doors."

All of the hijabi women who choose to dress modestly faced more discrimination because hijab openly declares that the women are Muslim. They related that they had to work extra hard to prove themselves. Molly states "I have to be more assertive and aggressive... strive to do my best and better than others... If I make a mistake or I am not as productive as others, my hijab could be blamed for that... People might believe that hijabi's in general are a certain way or inadequate at their work."

Almost all of the women expressed difficulty in obtaining interviews and subsequently jobs. Some of them had phone interviews in the past that guaranteed jobs based on experience and education, but were turned down within 5 minutes of a personal interview. Molly states, "And when I rarely have an interview, I am not considered for the position... because of my hijab. I can see the interviewer's eyes rove to my head when I walk in for the first time."

Some had made good friends but not close friends that they could easily relate. Yolanda states, "There is always that assumption that being a hijabi means being rigid in my religious beliefs, a boring person who always preaches... even a non hijabi Muslim girl avoids hijabi girl friendship..." since they subsume their identity. Molly states "It was difficult to foster relations with colleagues... Many of them think that hijabi women do not understand the American culture especially at the workplace. (They) probably thought that I came from some desert location, where camels roam and women hide from people."

They indicated it was difficult to help people realize that being a hijabi woman also gives them the right to achieve the goals that non hijabi or non-Muslims do. They felt that they were always characterized as different. Some were at a point where they had accepted being different is alright. Beth states "As a woman in general, I try to act as professional as possible to ensure that I'm taken as seriously as the men in the organization... I have to hold my own... I worked hard to work my way up in the company. My work and knowledge spoke for itself and it didn't matter that I wore because they knew I was the best person for the job." But, many women give up their hijab to be accepted by western cultures to avoid the discrimination and stress. Mainstream America is all about freedom of religion, right to speech and religion and so on. But in reality a hijabi Muslim as a minority does not have those rights. To paraphrase Yolanda, "Orthodox Jewish women wear a head covering, and so does a nun. But,

these women are accepted because that connects them with their religion; while a Muslim woman wearing hijab at work is a new phenomenon."

### **Discussion**

Our findings of why Muslim women chose to wear hijab varied: Political reasons as a positive advocate for religion due to the poor image of Islam, a requirement as part of Islam, as a calling from within, peers were wearing it, and discovering being pregnant with a baby girl so that she can show her daughter the right path. It is interesting to note that there are many assumptions behind why Muslim women begin to wear hijab yet all the reasons provided were different but supported very well.

Some employers were supportive (for e.g. allowing the participant to read daily prayers in a meeting room) and accepted that Muslim women will not attend after work functions if there is drinking or dancing and will not shake hands with men. Forming relationships with co-workers felt real and not superficial for many of the participants which indicate genuineness. Co-workers have asked to clarify what is presented in the media regarding Islam and this was appreciated by the participant which also indicates learning positively about the role of Islam. A positive workplace feeling is that wearing hijab provides clarity to the role she plays at work and hijab keeps her focused without the distractions.

Some negative perceptions of Hijabi Muslim women were observed within the study. The co-workers of one of the participants did assume all Muslims are terrorists. One participant mentioned gender stereotypes along with religious stereotypes. Another negative was feeling like being watched more than others in their place of employment and also mentioned being extra cautious with her actions because she represents her religion openly by wearing hijab. It also presented a hindrance where you could not get past certain doors. Sometimes, it takes longer to understand the potential within hijabi women due to the negative perceptions associated with hijabi Muslim women which resulted in not feeling a part of the mainstream professional culture.

### **Implications for Practice**

The perspectives examined based on the interview questionnaire completed by Muslim women will enable employers to evaluate their work relations to Muslim hijabi women in general and develop a model for professional development and subsequent training in the workplace. The information from this study may benefit other Muslim women to improving the relationship with their workplace as well as satisfaction at the workplace. The information from this study may aid institutions of higher education in discussing the perspectives of Muslim Women.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, Muslim hijabi women do face specific challenges but as a participant, Molly, stated: "I will say, based upon my many travels and residing abroad experiences that this country is the best as far as freedom of speech and religion goes. I am very

lucky to be able to do what I want essentially and not be persecuted for it as in many countries around the world. So why would I stop wearing hijab because of some discomfort at the workplace or because I have to strive harder and do better to get ahead? In the end, it makes me a better worker/professional.”

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