

## Hijab' s Hijab: A Call for Inclusion, Peace, and Resistance Shia Muslims Women's Standpoints

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is based on a study that considers appreciating diverse ethnic groups within multiculturalist communities. This conceptualization enables postulating Shia Muslim hijabi women as an ethnic group with varying views and understanding about hijab where they find it a tool for resistance and peacekeeping at the same time. As a result, hijab which is considered as a religious phenomenon appears with an additional alternative meaning where it becomes a call for inclusion, peace, and resistance. Thus, the paper concludes that 'the hijabis' situatedness in their contexts plays a significant role to ensure goal 5 'gender equality' and goal 10 'the reduced inequalities' by constructing a collective standpoint to participate for country's development with their hijab on.*

**Keywords:** *Hijabi, Inclusion, Peace, Resistance, Shia Standpoint*

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to the Shia school, the hijab has great significance that lies at two levels. At first, it is significant because Quran calls women and the wives of the prophet to wear "*khimar*" and "*jalabib*". Secondly, the symbolic and practical representation of hijab by the women who are considered as the "*beacon of light*" and a "*source of guidance*" with Shi'ism particularly, and among all Muslims (Tabarsi, ed. 2001). These women are Lady Zahra<sup>1</sup> and the Lady Zaynab<sup>2</sup> who have iconic status among Shia Muslims, men, and women. The life events of these two women are commemorated during Moharram to Safarul Muzaffar<sup>3</sup> around the world by Shia Muslims where they recall the events happened to these women and mourn at the calamities which were befallen on them.

Majlisi (Vol 43) mentions the life of Lady Zahra as a symbol of empowerment and agency because during all her life from early days of his father's prophethood, and even during the difficult times after the death of her father when she faced issues regarding her inheritance, and successorship of her husband, she faced all difficulties with grace and remained wearing hijab that covers her whole body from head to toe<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> daughter of Prophet of Islam

<sup>2</sup> the granddaughter of the prophet of Islam

<sup>3</sup> the first two months of Islamic Calendar

<sup>4</sup> ibne Qutaybah vol: 1 pp. 19-24; Tabari vol: 9, pp. 186-187; Bukhari, vol, 8, tradition 817; Biharul Anwar Vol 43; Sahih Bukhari, Vol:4, Book 53, tradition 325; Sahih Muslim, vol 3 p.72, Hukm al Fay.

Whereas Lady Zaynab is being mentioned as firm and feminist for her qualities of being remained firm to expose the brutality of the Yazid and his forces when after the event of Karbala his forces looted his hijab (Haque, 2005, pp. 97-122). It was done so that these women would feel dishonored and would lose hope to speak against Yazid and his brutal act of killing the grandson of the Prophet and his progeny. However, Lady Zaynab gave voice to what why and how happened at the place of Karbala and gave sermons in the city of Kufa and then in the court of Yazid as well. Haque mentions that by the remembrance of her bravery and firmness the Shia Islam by creating a discourse of the “majlis<sup>5</sup>” becomes feminist Islam (ibid. 2005). She also points out that her eloquent words in a state of captivity, used to channelize bravery, firmness, and steadfastness among Shia women (Haque, 2005; Balagatun Nisa, Abul Fazl Ahmad bin Tahir, 208-280). Thus, the hijab has a symbolic significance among Shia Muslims. In “*majlis*” the mourning gatherings Shia women and men both cries aloud used to cry “wa hijaba” “wa hijaba,” relating it to that how the hijab of Lady Zaynab was snatched by the Yazid’s army (Haque, 2005). With such a background of hijab among Shia hijabi Muslim women, the study underpins contemporary hijab as a tool for inclusion peace and resistance. It highlights how hijab becomes an empowering tool when it provides opportunity to women to study and work in highly reputed institutions where they distinctly contribute and utilize their energies. Hijab also becomes a call for inclusivity and accepting diversity, by focusing on the capabilities not on the dressing or headgears.

## THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The contemporary literature on social media blogs and online newspaper blogs evidence that since 1960s hijab has been portrayed as a symbol of subordination and oppression. For instance, Badran (1996), Leila Ahmed (1992), and Md. Mehmoodul Hassan (2016) mentioned hijab as a “sign of oppression”. Jim AC Everett et al (2014) mentions as a “stigma”, and Mernissi (1987) as “a patriarchal tool”. As a result of this conceptualization and dissemination of anti-hijab content and discourse many issues have been faced by hijabi Muslim women within and outside Muslim communities (Al-Mahadin, 2013). Especially, the transnational Muslim women faced violence, mockery and even hatred. Hijabi women have faced harassment by Islamophobic people. Even these people snatched their headgears at roadside and in public (Sumarlia, Khan & Khan, 2021; Sabah, Khan, & Amin, 2021).

Interestingly, this stigmatization has not been impacting the lives of hijabi Muslim women abroad but hijabi women belonging to Muslim majority countries like Pakistan. Pakistani women also facing multiple issues due to the anti-hijab discourse. This discourse even caused issues pertaining to women’s selection for a job (Saher et.al., 2021). This hatred for hijab embedded in Islamophobia led United Nations to realize to redress this negative portrayal of the Muslim women by focusing on partnership within multiple institutions, researchers, and scholars because it is limiting hijabi women’s fullest participation in the economic arena. As a result of this move, UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution proclaiming 15<sup>th</sup> March as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> A religious gathering to commemorate Imam Hussain Martyrdom and held on the death of Shia men and women for sending blessings to them

<sup>6</sup> General Assembly Unanimously Adopts Texts on Combating Islamophobia, Protecting Rangelands, Tackling Difficulties for Widows, Bicycles as Public Transportation | UN Press. Retrieved from <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12408.doc.htm>

Later, Muslim women at their own also taken up a step in New York and in other western countries and that was to start celebrating The World's Hijab Day, where they ask non hijabis to wear hijab as a sign of accepting diversity, while promoting inclusivity. From the first Hijab Day of 2013 to date, hijabis are trying to explain different meanings of hijab to the world<sup>7</sup>. The Muslim hijabi women belonging to all schools of Muslim thought collectively started this initiative in various parts of the world.

Yet, the qualitative studies from Pakistani<sup>8</sup> researchers on hijab highlights hijab as an institution, and how Muslim women aspire to be hijabi. Some of these studies also present data on hijabi girls belonging to different schools of Muslim thought other than Shia Muslims. A few qualitative studies like of Haque (2010) from a feminist and gender perspective and Abid's (2010) from anthropological or ethnographical perspective gives enough clarity about the general issues that Pakistani women face concerning hijab. Haque (2003) discusses how hijab is practiced by Pakistani women in a covert and overt way and how overt ways and covert ways of practicing hijab differ and why both forms of practicing hijab create various challenges for women. It is noted that many of the factors influencing observance of purdah were identified including female family members as role models, generational influence, the influence of father, husband, in-laws, other extended family members' influence, upholding of family honor and shame, social norms, situational factors, religious factors, etc. She calls purdah a "portable space" for women to come out due to changing socio-economic conditions. On the other hand, in her research Abid (2010) notes from Daly (2005, p.392) that for understanding the real meaning of 'hijab' or the 'veil' which is worn by Muslim women dependence on their personal, social, and cultural perspectives is particularly important. Hoodfar (2001, p.421) considers it as a "marker of identity" and a "symbol" because it signifies woman as a Muslim woman, and a symbol because it stands for Islam.

So, the reviewed literature evidenced that on hijab there has been varying perspective. Haque (2010) explains that Pakistani young generation working women wear hijab to pose that hijab could be a way to look modern, fashionable, or even a way refuses material culture race. Moreover, for some other Pakistani working women, it is also a way to get "escape" from strict attitudes within the family and challenge the notions of oppression, submissiveness, and backwardness. Whereas in tribal and feudalistic societies of Sothern Punjab and KPK women wear *Topi Burqas*<sup>9</sup> or long *abayas*<sup>10</sup> to represent that they are from elite rich or religious families.

Although, the feminist scholarly writings (Mernissi 1969; Afshar 2008, Hosseini 1999, Abid 2010, Haque 2010) highlights this phenomenon 'hijab' and 'hijabi', yet it still not captures the standpoints of Shia Muslims women on hijab. This paper fills this existing gap and focuses on Shia women's

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<sup>7</sup> [World Hijab Day | Better Awareness Greater Understanding Peaceful World](http://worldhijabday.com/). Retrieved from <https://worldhijabday.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Citizens who belong to Pakistan

<sup>9</sup> A large cloak which covers women's body and has a round cap stitched with it having small holes so that women can see through

<sup>10</sup> Long loose gowns that cover the whole body

standpoints to seek out how they see their hijab as a tool that calls for inclusivity peace and resistance because inclusivity and peace can actualize the country prosperous and developed.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed the case study method. The participants include women who 1) belong to Shia Imami school of Muslim thought 2) are *Syed*<sup>11</sup> (from the lineage of Prophet of Islam Mohammed (PBUH) 3) observe hijab as an all-time lifestyle. We contacted participants using snowball sampling. However, we also employed purposeful sampling to ensure that each participant would fulfill the required criteria mentioned above. Out of ten, seven hijab wearing participants are professional while three are nonprofessional. To conceal their identity, we use their various roles for stating their responses.

**Table 1: Profiles of the Participants/Respondents**

Participants	Age	City	Type of Hijab
Student	20	Lahore	Irani abaya with stole
Anchor	40	Rawalpindi	Headscarf (leaving front hair prominent)
Marketing manager	29	Islamabad	Irani Chador
Journalist	40	Islamabad	Abaya (gown) with stole/scarf
Religious scholar	32	Lahore	Irani Chador
Housewife	40	Jhang	Headscarf /covers body with dupatta
Community speaker	40	Jhang	Irani chador
Principal	50	Karachi	Abaya Gown with scarf
Sales manager	30	Lahore	Embroidered abaya with headgear/stole
School teacher	25	Karachi	Abaya with headgear/headscarf

We have structured an interview guide that is used as the data collection instrument consists of six simple questions 1) what is hijab for you? 2) What caused you to wear hijab? 3) Do you think that our culture plays a role to make women hijabi? 4) What are your experiences as a hijab wearer? Give an account of your challenges if faced.5) Do you ever think of putting it off? No/yes please give reasons for why? 6) Why did you decide it as an all-time lifestyle? This paper is based on some of the responses of women for the question no. 4-6.

As the questions were broad enough that is why each interview period was not fixed. The interviews with professional women lasted from 45-50 minutes whereas, with the non-professionals from 55-60 minutes. Four interviews allowed being audiotaped and the other was not who have given interview through skype call. So, their interviews were recorded in the interview diary. The in-depth interviewing was done electronically and in person too. The two women from Karachi and Jhang were interviewed through Skype video call, while the others were interviewed in person.

For data analysis, a 6-step thematic analysis of Braun & Clarke (2006) was employed. This thematic analysis helped better identify that hijabi women’s perspectives collectively create a standpoint on hijab: a tool for inclusion, peace, and resistance.

<sup>11</sup> People are those who are from Prophet Mohammed (PBUH)’s lineage

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data reveals that hijabi women participants understand that the Shia Muslims in Pakistan are not in majority. They face different issues; Shia genocide, hatred, stereotyping etc., by some radical groups who disseminate misinformation about the sect. Yet, they are committed to the country's development. That is why they are participating wholly for the development of the country Pakistan.

### Hijab as An Empowering Tool Urging Inclusivity

The responses highlight that hijab is empowering and encourages inclusion. Women found hijab a tool that helped them realizing the importance of their inner selves, their capabilities, abilities. Participants have used a vocabulary of words to denote this. The anchor called it her "strength for dealing with men, helps affirming that professions are not personality bound." The Marketing Manager stated that at the workplace she proved that "I cover my head, not my brain." So, its "a nutshell that makes me empowered." So, many women consider their headcover to be a source of empowerment and part of their claim to an identity that resists the power as for the participants of this study consider hijab comes as an empowering tool to resist stereotypes. The participants' responses confirm what Katherine Bullock's (2007) elucidates about hijab "a tool to dismantle the stereotype of material and cultural hegemony by giving importance to "choice". Such construction was echoed by Afshar (1998) who noted that many feminists do not consider hijab oppressive and realize that "the fundamental reason", for why women should wear veiling is "to represent freedom of choice". Thus, participants' agency is reflected in separate ways: by showing people who they are? By convincing that all professions are for everyone and demonstrating that the elite class has no restriction to be a non-hijabi always. Thus, they depict their agency not only through their voice but also by carrying hijab on.

Thus, it became evident that all the cases have developed their narratives, identities, and attitudes based on their selective positionality as Mills explains (2004) that external forces of political, economic, and social pressure affect discourses and people internally ordered them by discursive narratives and structures. Thus, an individual can come across various positions at the same time, we find that although women used to cover themselves with different type of headgears i.e., Burqa, chador, coat, gown earlier yet the final decision was theirs "to wear it as all-time lifestyle" or to wear it occasionally in religious gatherings alone.

### Hijab – A tool for Peacekeeping

The hijabis in their discussions many times discussed how they wear hijab to relate themselves with Lady Zaynab to whom they find a symbol of peace, and resistance. They shared that the headgear is simply not a headgear instead it provides them the feel that they are in front of God "*huzoor*." this feeling helps them to act and behave peacefully with all other fellow beings. The schoolteacher asserts, "it is in the traditions that the prayer is the sign of religion, I believe hijab is also a sign of religion. Since its with you so you need to behave in a fashion that people would understand what Islam really means *aman*-the peace. The marketing manager since enjoy a great deal of mobility, and travels across the world, therefore she views that her hijab removes the existing biases against hijabis as less capable and as contributors to the economic and social development, and "most importantly our role being Shia hijabi women comes into limelight." The housewife explains how her hijab helps her develop inner peace by rejecting the materialistic race of looking the best. Another participant of a research conducted in U.S.A 'I speak for Myself.' echoed the same voice. The participant Nousheen Yousuf Sadiq of this research study has mentioned in her article 'Half & Half,' how hijab helped her

coming out of the obsessed-size-world in which women are expected to be calorie counting etc. to fulfill the demands laid out by that culture. The analysis of these words highlights that hijabi women and particularly the Shia hijabi women consider that their hijab is calling the world towards peace by accepting others as they are. Thus, inclusion of hijabis in the socio economic and development field brings peace as Dr. Teresa Dumasy<sup>12</sup> highlights that “inclusion creates opportunities for people with a stake in lasting peace to shape it.”

### **Opting Hijab as a Tool to Resist Stereotypes about Shia Women**

The data analysis explains that all the participants opted to wear hijab as an all-time lifestyle to tackle stereotypical behaviors about Shia Muslim women. The sales manager mentioned it “a protective cover,” the housewife called it “*hathiyar*” (a tool) for resisting stereotypical imagery for hijab wearers,” the principal called it “a tool that represents you, the schoolteacher said, “it tells people to keep a distance. So, their responses concur with that of Katherine Bullock's (2007) who mentions it as “an empowering tool of resistance”. Thus, hijab means for a few women around the world as a tool of resistance for empowerment which negates the concepts of oppression.

In addition, the marketing manager considers Irani Chador a symbol of her faith as “Shia woman.” She says that many Shia women wear chador but at public places especially at offices, she did not come across many women wearing Irani Chador. For her, “the other Shia Muslim women might not wear it because if they will show their identity, they must face more challenges which I have faced and still facing. However, this marker highlights our presence in all fields of life.” Student also wears Iranian-style abaya to redress negative stereotypes about Shia women during processions. Similarly, the community speaker asserts, “During Muharram, the black Irani chador and the black dress becomes a prominent marker of our identity. During these days, people from conservative religious mindset show more stereotypical behaviors and asks strange questions. These people do not know “alif bay” (anything) of Islam and questions Shia Muslim women’s dignity and self-respect.”

Thus, the responses showed that the stereotypical behaviors have made one of the participants to wear Irani Chador and the other to wear an Irani style abaya to be identified as different from other during jaloos e Aza in the start and later they started wearing it as an all-time lifestyle. Kenneth E. Jackson ‘s research (2015, p.37) also confirms this opinion that hijab shows the association with religion or sect within religion. Kenneth also calls it psychological identification. In addition to this, Hoodfar (2003) calls it “an adaptive strategy” which Muslim women use for claiming their rights.

### **CONCLUSION**

Considering all the responses of the hijabi participants, the paper concludes that these hijabi Shia women calls for their inclusion in all fields of life irrespective of their ethnicity, appearance, and headgear. United Nations’ vision to redress inequalities also stresses on the importance of inclusivity because inclusivity brings ultimate peace when everyone is the given the chance to participate and utilize their capabilities at the maximum level.

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<sup>12</sup> Dumasy, T. (2018). Why does inclusion matter for peace? Retrieved from <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/why-does-inclusion-matter-peace#:~:text=It%20does%20mean%20creating%20opportunities%20for%20people%20with,represented%2C%20heard%20and%20integrated%20into%20a%20peace%20process.%E2%80%9D>

The results of the analysis show that the hijabis women are sure that they are playing their role for country's progress. Yet, they find positive acknowledgement of this role by different power structures.

In addition, they view that by being hijabi they could enjoy much mobility and accessibility to different opportunities. Yet, they do desire that the stereotyping about hijabis must be shattered, so that they could enjoy being highest on the professional ladder. The responses from the Shia Hijabi women also concludes them as a group that share a standpoint "we are peacekeepers" and "we are resisting the negative stereotypes." All the participants uttered these words by using their own vocabulary.

Analysis highlights that none of the participants have discussed any instance when they reacted with harsh tone or language or use any such method to voice their rights as hijabis. For instance, religious scholar response that she never confronts people directly instead gives different sessions and voice her feelings in conjunction with the traditions and rulings of Quran and Hadith on her YouTube Channel. Similarly, the marketing manager considers her Irani chador a symbol of her agency while explaining her positive role. So, these women have employed their own ways without direct confrontation and conflict. In the past literature, such a response has been equalized with submissiveness. Yet, these women were showing calmness but putting up their argument. For instance, when the anchor person was barred to host a TV Show on a private channel due to being hijabi, she did not fight with the administration. But her success story itself highlighted to those stakeholders that professions are not personality bound. After her success story, those very channels hired many hijabi anchor persons and journalists too and offered her to join the channel as well.

The minimum sample also shows that homogenizing framework cannot be applied to even a small group of women because their stories, narrations, and accounts differ yet their standpoint on resisting stereotypical images and behavior, and their stance on their role as peacekeepers comes something influential as a source to prove their agency and resistance too. In addition, these participants note that they experienced a few stereotypical behaviors when opted to be hijabi. Yet they are breaking those dominant discourse of hijab "as load, backwardness, and or submissiveness."

It has been also illustrious that through knowledge structural systems; socialization processes, cultural settings, and familial traditions, they got convinced wearing hijab is good. This was done first from an ascribed positionality when hegemonic supremacy of religious ideas makes them behave in a certain way. However, later it was internalized so much that hijab became "comfort" instead of "load." These ten women also represent a positive demonstration of hijab wearers as they were educated, empowered, confident, well-informed, and moderately religious. They present themselves as "peacemakers," humanitarian, ones who cry on human rights violation and stand for minority and vulnerable groups. Thus, their active role gives a positive and contrasted image which colonial gaze and postcolonial writers have developed about the veiled brown women. Jiwani and Rail's study (2010: 251-267) of Shiite Canadian women involved in physical activities also illuminates how the participant women use hijab "despite the difficulty that it poses for physical activity" and feel confident by resisting the colonial and oriental view of hijabi women as submissive, unconfident and oppressed. (Ibid: 264). Thus, the paper concludes that Shia Muslim hijabi women as a group want to play an active role in society for which they need society's positive role and negation of negative imagery. They assert that this can only be done if the hegemonic knowledge and channels for

dissemination of knowledge work to present the positive underlying aspects considering Shia hijabi women free human beings having their own choice and way to live life.

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