

Veiling and Unveiling: Attitudes and Experiences of University Students in the Punjab

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By

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Abstract

This study intended to explore the attitude differences in university students wearing veil vs. those not wearing it and their cause of inspiration for veiling/not veiling in universities. Interviews were conducted in three universities of the Punjab, Pakistan, from sixty students, twenty from each university, ten wearing veil and ten not wearing veil. Data revealed very interesting patterns of attitude, of which most striking was strong attitude of veiled ones against the unveiled. Unveiled students were very careful in their comments but certainly were not in favor of adopting it. It was found out that personal preferences, religious obligation, family pressure and social value were the main causes of wearing veil. It was suggested that the phenomena of veiling needs to be understood more deeply in different educational contexts to know its implications for teaching and learning.

Keywords: Veil, attitude, universities, hijab, and Muslim women

Introduction

The issue of veiling and unveiling is the talk of the town these days and has been a buzz word in western media. Muslims consider it an expression of modesty and piety, and women who are wearing veil takes it as a religious symbol. Gressgård, (2006) argues that the idea of the Muslim veil as suppressive of women is well established in western societies. Many Muslims, including women reject the view of Islamic oppression of women and argue that an Islamic identity which includes the use of traditional clothing and veils de-emphasizes appearance and protects them from public scrutiny (Mussap, 2009). Todd (1999, pp. 441-442) notes that, “the *hijab* is no innocent “signifier” within such a volatile context. It has come to symbolize everything from Islamic fundamentalism, religious expression, women’s subordination to women’s empowerment and equality” (cited in Zine, 2006, p.). Much research has been conducted in Middle East, Turkey and in immigrant Muslim communities (Bhimji, 2008; Droogsma, 2007; El Hamel 2002; Zine,2006). Studies of the hijab by Ahmed (1992), Mernissi, (1994) and Hoodfar (2003) recognize different complexities of Islamic practice of veiling in Muslim women’s lives. This work is paralleled by the work of Bigger, (2006)

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Kirmani, (2009) and Zine, (2006), who have emphasised and explored problems faced by Muslim women who choose to cover themselves and the range of motivations behind veiling. The main objective of this paper is to explore the experiences and perceptions of university students who veil and their cause of inspiration for veiling/not veiling in universities. Moreover, the differing perspectives, attitudes and experiences illuminate the contrasting opinions and interpretations on veiling. An important point needs clarification here that in this study the women wearing veil are those women who cover their face and women not wearing veil are those how don't cover their heads and don't use head scarves so the use of word '*Hijab*' as synonym of 'Veil' is avoided and Veil refers to full face covering.

Veil: Meaning & Myth

Several authors have pointed to the variety of definitions and interpretations of veiling. El Guindi (1999) notes that the English word "veil" has no single Arabic linguistic referent" and that "the absence of a single, monolithic term in the language(s) of the people who at present most visibly practice 'veiling' suggests a significance to this diversity that cannot be captured in one term" (xi:7). Droogsma, (2007) has used the word *Hijab* as synonymous to veil. Badr (2004) takes veil' as a piece of fabric meant to conceal the face. The veil has many names -- *hijab, niqab, abaaya, burqa, chadar* but the term used for veil in South Asia, is *Purda*, which literally means curtain. Kirmani, (2009) has looked into the Dictionary meaning of *purdah* and explains that it is not only a curtain, screen, cover, veil, but also 'secrecy, privacy, modesty; seclusion, and concealment. She further states that "*Parda*' refers to a wide range of practices from full female seclusion and complete segregation of the sexes, when it is practiced in the strictest sense, to varying degrees of restrictions on women's dress, mobility and behavior vis-a-vis men in order to regulate and control sexual conduct" (p. 53).

Among the Muslim feminists the meaning of *hijab* and wearing the veil emerge as primary points of conflict. Hoodfar (2003) argues that dress codes, such as the Muslim veil, serve significant social, cultural, and political functions, acting as a medium of non-verbal ideological communication. Fatima Mernissi persuasively argues that "since the word 'hijab' literally means 'curtain,' it 'descended' not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men" (Mernissi, 1991: 85).

According to Badr (2004) and El Hamel (2002) Veiling has negative connotations so it is seen also as a sign of inferiority, oppression, passivity, and docility rather than focus on the exact specifications of women's dress. Veiling needs to be understood and observed in within specific religious and cultural frames of reference because associating veiling with oppression is not always true as Franks (2000) argues that "the headscarf is, of itself, neither liberating nor oppressive, and that the power relations with which it is associated are situated not only in the meaning with which it is invested but also in the circumstances under which it is worn" (p. 918). He also says that in effect, the *hijab* as a garment, offers a Muslim woman the means to move between the private (domestic) and public spheres and to be a spectator (or participant) in the public world of men. So clearly the *hijab* may be experienced as liberating or oppressive by different women in the same society depending on their religious belief, class,

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income and everyday practicalities. The hijab is a cloth and it oppresses, liberates, empowers, according to tradition, society and the woman who wear it (Mahabir, 2004).

Veiling in Pakistan:

In Pakistan we find three groups of women; one wearing veil in which they cover their face except the eyes or covering full face using *Burqas*, second group who cover their head with a scarf or a *shawl/chadar*, the third category they don't cover their head, except on special occasions. Generally, women belonging to lower middle class families observe *Pardha* in Pakistan.. Khalida Shah during 1960s tells us that some women in the larger cities have ceased to wear Veil but her survey of student attitudes in Pakistan reveal that one-third of the college students favor wearing the *burka* and the majority oppose mixed social activities (as cited in White, 1977). But things have changed with the passage of time and concept of social status and its demonstration has also changed. Now taking veil is considered as a symbol of backwardness in middle class and upper class families. El Hamel (2002, p. 303) argues that "in the twentieth century, middle class women unveiled themselves as a symbol of gender equality and most of the time under the insistence of their husbands who meant it as a symbol of modernity. What is ironic is that in this era the westernized middle class women of the cities started to come out with no veil". But in lower middle class families it's still a sign of modesty and piety because of their religious indoctrination and strong beliefs. According to Pastner, (1990, p. 257) "In Pakistani cities, *pardha* is often used to signify status achieved by the lower middle class". In lower middle class families, traditionally, veil is acceptable having its roots in religion as well as concept of safety of their daughters in a society where females are vulnerable to a lot of perceived dangers e.g. staring of males etc.

Methods:

This study was designed to provide depth of understanding through interviews using open ended questions, discussing: (a) the experience and perceptions of Muslim women who veil and the cause of inspiration for women wearing veil in universities and (b) the opinions of women wearing veil, about those women not wearing veil and vice versa. The major concern of the researchers was to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts. (Phenomenologist are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved.

As even type of participants were required so purposive sampling technique was used. To identify, locate and access the participants, researchers relied on the observations which were made keeping in view the purpose of the research, during the visit of different universities. The female students studying at masters' level in universities of Punjab were the target population of the study. As the consent and willingness of the participants is an important factor of interviews and an ethical responsibility of researcher, so only those students were interviewed who agreed to participate in the research.

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Because Boyd (2001) regards two to 10 participants or research subjects as sufficient to reach saturation and Creswell (1998, pp. 65 & 113) recommends “long interviews with up to 10 people” for a phenomenological study, but researcher intended to allow the data to emerge, as Bentz and Shapiro (1998) and Kensit (2000) purposed. So, Sixty (60) female students were chosen (30 veiled & 30 unveiled women) from three different universities (University of the Punjab, Lahore, Islamia University, Bahawalpur & University of Sargodha, Sargodha) which represent the distinctive culture of Punjab (a province in Pakistan). Moreover, as phenomenology” means capturing “rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings” (p. 104) researchers conducted unstructured in-depth interviews with both the veiled and unveiled women.

The remainder of this paragraph enlightens how these interviews were conducted. Our questions were directed to the major causes of veiling and participant’s experiences, feelings, beliefs and passion about the theme in question. The interviews were reciprocal: both researcher and research subject were engaged in the dialogue. Therefore, duration of interviews and the number of questions varied from one participant to the other. Interviews were audio-recorded, with the permission of interviewees,

Each interview was assigned a code, and notes were taken during the interviews. For the very purpose of phenomenological analysis (explicitation) researchers transcribed key words, phrases and statements to consolidate the emerging themes. The systematic procedure of transforming the data through interpretations was followed. Before extracting the final thought to reconstruct the inner world of experiences of the respondents, bracketing, phenomenological reduction, delineating and clustering of units of meaning, summarizing (Groenwald, 2004) of each interview was cautiously done. The researchers concluded the explicitation by writing a composite summary of themes emerged under four major sections 1; addressing why to veil, 2; why not to veil and 3; about the contrasting attitude of veiled and unveiled women towards each other and section4; experiences of veiled women.

Results and Discussion

This paper focuses on themes: veiling and unveiling among young Muslim women in different universities of the Punjab. Phenomena of veiling and unveiling were explored through in-depth interviews. The perceptions of the research participants are analyzed below.

Section 1: Why to Wear Veil?

A very large majority of Muslim women cover their head, and this number is increasing with the passage of time. Even in countries where the hijab is not required, today younger Muslim women are covering their heads although they do not wear a full face veil. Young female students who take veil and who do not take veil were asked about their perception about veiling. Young female students who take veil told the reasons why women wear veil range from personal religious devotion to the cultural and political factors. Similar findings were found by Wing and Smith who surveyed and summarized some reasons as follows: personal religious conviction, freedom of religion, acceptance as a good Muslim female, compliance

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with family values, neutralization of sexuality and protection from harassment from males, and individual choice and religious/ cultural identity (as cited in Clark, 2007). Women perceive that the veil is a way to get personal freedom in a world that objectifies women. Muslim women use arguments of freedom, control and liberation to explain and legitimize the concealment of those parts of the body that are assumed to arouse the lust of men (Gressgård, 2006).

Toncy (2008) tells in her artistic inquiry that participants had their own motive, meaning and perception of what the veil is and does. "Increasing self-control, being in a private space with God, identifying with the prophet's wives, feeling safe from male intrusion, preserving one's body until marriage, self-soothing, limiting one's freedom in public, making one invisible in the street, praying, enabling one to fly and be free, or establishing a stronger body boundary were some of the true voices behind the veil" (p. 279). There may be a wide range of intersecting reasons why Muslim females want to wear the headscarf and their reasons may change over time. Most often there are a combination of factors that determine whether and how a woman veils, some of which may be imposed upon her by her family or society in general and others which are based on her own choice (Kirmani, 2009). As Bigger (2006: 7) explains,

For Muslim women decisions about dress, modesty and protection of honour are multilayered. Theology, culture, identity and personal safety all have influences. The headscarf may feel repressive to some, but voluntarily adopted can be viewed as liberating the women from being and feeling sexualized—being regarded and regarding themselves as sexually attractive first and intelligent human beings only second.

Participants of the study believe that hijab protects women from the male gaze and allows them to become self-ruling subjects. The above discussion suggests that finding the reasons behind veiling is a bit complex phenomenon. Here these reasons are being discussed under the following sub headings.

Religious Reasons:

There are a lot of interpretations about taking veil in Islam and different sects promote different forms of veil starting from simple scarf taking to covering the face, hands and feet etc. So the veiling is considered as the prominent feature of Islam and same is mentioned by the veiled women. The women who are taking veil by their own choice defend veil very strongly. As one of the participant mentions;

I am proud of my decision of veil taking, nobody compel me to do so, that is the God almighty who blessed me and I decided to use veil.

Another woman gives the similar response;

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Recently I started to use the veil because I read some Islamic books and found that how important it is for women to cover herself. I think this is the blessing of Allah that He gave me a 'tofique' to use veil.

They believe it as their religious duty and veil out of their own choice, as one of them states that in Qur'an all the Muslim females have been instructed to be very particular about Islamic 'Hijab'. For example [And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their zeenah (charms, or beauty and ornaments) except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof] (An-Nur 24:31).

It is to maintain divinely protected female sanctity in the light of Islamic Shariah. She further states that as believers we dare not to disobey these orders. This is how the holy Qur'an has assigned a great sanctity to the female chastity a pivot of establishing a profound social system of good standing.

Social Reasons:

Haque (2007) while interviewing illiterate women finds the fact that the social norms play a vital role in determining the practice of veil taking and not taking. Similar facts are found in this study although the participants of this study are educated women who are striving for higher education in reputed higher education institutes.

One participant tells that:

In our locality there is a tradition of veil wearing. Nearly every girl and women take a veil so me too as I am the part of that society. It looks very odd if I refuse to take a veil.

Another woman describes very contrasting social reason than the mentioned above and she tells that the men in the street has made it very difficult for her to pass nearby they stare at her with a sense of vulgarity so she has decided to take a veil. So the customs, culture and behavior of men towards the women in any particular society is the reason behind the decision of veil taking. Another opinion is:

This is profound socio-psychic first line measure of self preservation of chastity. By self defense of a female against the so called sexual freedom all over the world as a whole. By using hijab women feel themselves more secure, safe and protected in the society where the men may swallow them merely with the eyes.

Social pressure is a strong factor which forces women to comply with the norms of that particular society.

Family Reasons:

Pakistan is a country in which the family bond is very strong and the male members are considered as the heads of family. They have a right to pressurize the females. The same fact is found when they are asked e.g. why veiling? During the interviews eighteen out of thirty

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respondents mention that they cover themselves because it is the requirement of their family especially the male members. One respondent quotes:

Taking veil is considered as a responsibility and a good habit by my family. In my family when a girl is grown up to the stage of puberty then she have to take veil and we the girls don't have any choice for that matter.

Another expresses her views and tells that her father ordered her to take a veil when she took admission in university. The same sort of finding regarding Pakistani university students have been mentioned by Bigger (1996, p) when he discusses the case of a girl and states that, 'families preferred formality in public when giving permission to go to university, but more casual dress was normal socially'. This is very true for many of the students in The Islamia University of Bahawalpur where many students wore veil first time when they joined the university.

Haque (2007) describes that the family exert pressure on the females to take veil, sometimes mother and women in the family, who wear veil are presented as role models and sometimes before marriage fathers and after marriage husbands compel them.

Personal Affiliations

Some women take veil for their very own personal reason or simply wear because they feel comfortable in and find facing the world easy, as one participant mention:

According to my knowledge there is no any instruction in Holy Qur'an about covering one's face but I think we have to cover ourselves because face reflects all the feelings and emotions and fears. My veil makes me courageous and increases my confidence directly and indirectly.

The students who are taking veil are inspired by their teachers, friends and families and a small fraction is also taking it with their own will although they don't had any pressure or even tradition of taking veil in their family. Almost every one describes herself as more secure and safe while being covered.

Some participants mention their affiliations with some movements e.g. *islami jamiat* , and *madni tehrick* etc (Students movements). They have themselves decided to join the *tehrick* and afterwards their affiliation forced them to adopt the identity of that *Tehrik*. One participant tells her story as follows;

I was very fashionable and I did not cover my head until my graduation then one day I got a chance to attend the gathering of Madni Tehrik. I got an inspiration and start to take veil it was not the pressure of the tehrick. Allah blessed me with awareness and I started to take veil.

The participants who wear veil by their own option and decision mention their affiliations with some religious political associations like many of the students wearing veil in Punjab University reveal their association with *Islami Jamiat Talibat*. While some of them take it by their own choice by making a conscious decision to dress like that as they believe they can

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acquire education and can join professional careers and wearing modest dress can protect them from sexual harassment.

Section 2: Why not to veil?

A vast majority of the women cover their head and don't find any point in covering their face as they believe it has nothing to do with Islam. Many of them don't even cover their head and believe that Islam only orders to cover the bosoms and to wear modest dress which is not suggestive and provocative. Muslim feminist Leila Ahmad affirms that "There is no explicit exhortation in the Qur'an that women should veil" (Ahmed 1992, p. 55). Bartkowski and Read, (2003) wrote that hijab (veil) is a traditional, not religious head cover that dates back to ancient civilizations, and is not supported or advocated by the Quran. Their argument is that modesty, piety and chastity are inner qualities that do not demand covering the face. They believe on the metaphorical concept of veil i.e. the veil of heart and eyes (Klein & Nestvogel, 1992). They further describe these two forms of veil: first; the visible that manifest in seclusion, particular dress, second; invisible, which prevails in underlying attitudes of society. One participant describes this notion as: 'Veil is not necessary in Islam. Islam did not focus on face and similarly veil does not mean to cover a face. What is necessary is actually spirituality'.

In Muslim world generally and in Pakistan particularly the transition of culture can be observed and the concept of taking veil is being considered as an out-dated practice by many families and they discourage the concept of veil taking.

One of the participant states that;

Although my mother and aunt take veil, but they never pressurize me. Once I asked about taking veil but my mother said 'no, it is not necessary for you to use it, I am using it because of my habit to have It'.

In this regards the comments of a girl are very surprising as she associates her practice of not wearing veil with her father, although the older generations are generally convinced of taking veil.

No! I never think to take a veil because my father did not like it.

The religious concern of women not taking veil is quite different from the women who use it as most of the participants mention the metaphorical concept of veil and tell:

Veil is not meant for face it is meant for heart if I am not committing any sin (staring men and having sexy desires) then there is no need to cover my face, and in case if I have the same then how my veil can stop me to commit a sin mentioned above and vice versa"

The responses of women reveal the fact that if women are not taking veil it does not mean that they are unaware about the teachings of Islam and did not have religious concern.

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As the paradigm is shifting and now world is a global village and most of the women are not using veil so in some societies veil is considered as an outdated, useless and conservative thing. Some of the participants of this study do not veil because their families perceive veil as symbol of backwardness. As one participant from the most developed area of Lahore, the Defense, responds in following words.

I never think of veil because in our community I have never seen the same and I think if I use it ever I would be most unfit person in my society and my parents had to do a hard effort to find out a husband for me because it is undesirable.

The awareness of women about the liberal scholar's views is one reason why they are not using veil. Moreover they have their own personal reasons as one of the participant mentions that she can't compromise on her liberty, because she perceives veil as a communication barrier. Many of them wants control on their lives and don't want anybody else to direct them.

It's my own choice. I never think of it. If you are free to take decisions about your own life you feel confident and can perform your role in a better way.

Another, more sensitive and aggressive girl says:

I will be aggressive because it's my life, I knew what is right and what is wrong. No way!

When the students are asked that do they think that unveiling mean woman's empowerment and freedom, many agree the idea and even a girl who is herself wearing veil accepts the notion and says:

Yes unveiling is empowering. In today's society, it is worldwide acceptable not to take a veil because a woman is no more a decorative and useless item of home. She is equally contributing in the progress of her country.

Another explains it giving her explanation of Islamic teaching:

Yes! because I think Islam does not allow you or force you to conceal your identity. I am not taking veil but I know how to behave in mix gatherings and what are my boundaries? So veiling only to cover a face is not the evidence of piety. In Islam covering of body and covering of 'Singhars (make up) lawful but not face.

Section 3: Contrasting Views

Researchers observe the attitude of respondents during the interviews and it is found that the attitude of unveiled women toward veil and veiled women is positive but as they bear no pressure so they never take initiative to wear veil and on the contrary women wearing veil are very aggressive and exhibit negative attitude towards unveiled women.

Those not wearing veil are Jahannami (destined to go hell). They are not aware about the fact how veil is important for them. They are committing sin and attracting men so compelling them to commit sin. Moreover, women

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without veil will bring four men in hell with herself- father, husband, brother and son.

Another woman states that the unveiled women are distorting the image of Muslim women. And other very aggressive in thoughts says:

Why are they so shameless? I feel naked while I am not in veil.

Generally, the attitude of women who don't wear veil towards the women wearing veil is positive. Several respondents imply that it will be wrong to criticize veiled women for wearing *hijab*. Unveiled women express tolerance and empathy for the veiled and are unwilling to look down on women who wear *hijab*. One unveiled comments on veiled one as:

Yes they are fine. But they must observe that their action should be consistent with their appearance not having a dual personality.

Another women quote:

Yes they may be justified because they are behaving according to their own conceptions and interpretations of Islam. They may have a lot of arguments in favor of veiling but I don't have any.

Majority of the women states that in the situations of veiling and not veiling, the character of woman is important which will describe the piety of the women. It all depends on the attitude of the women how she exhibits her sanctity. One respondent mentions the fact in following words:

Veil can't ensure the sanctity of women, it is not guarantee of piousness. It is only physical manifestation of the concepts and interpretation of Islamic teaching. So we can't decide the piousness of women on one criteria of taking or not taking veil.

Section 4: Experiences of Veiled Women:

Veiled women mention both the benefits and the problems associated with veil wearing. As one woman asserts that:

In veil women can be secure and safe while without veil the woman has to face the eyes of every one on her body which can spoil her soul and snatch innocence. Actually I mean without veil nothing is concealed so women become a hot-cake. Women without veil are considered being the public property and men consider it their foremost right to steer her.

Another mention the fact that:

Veil gives me a satisfaction that I am obeying the God and my parents at the same time and I am promoting the right image of the women in Islam. I feel proud and satisfied. I think I am not facing the problems which the unveiled could face e.g. staring, chasing and teasing by men.

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Another participant states that:

One feels ashamed of it, but we should inscribe in others minds that veiling is a positive merit and world routine is no recommendation or a standard to judgment.

So far as problems of veiled students are concerned some of them complain about teachers' biased attitudes towards students wearing veil and report people's strange attitude generally. Nearly all respondent mention the problems associated with the veil e.g. communication barrier, lack of confidence, sign of backwardness and low preference for jobs etc. One woman mention:

I realize that I become extremely shy, even with females and unable to maintain social relations with people, male or female both.

Others discuss the problem of looking through the veil at the beginning but alongside they provide the point that God has made human body quite flexible, it can accommodate itself to any habit or environment. Some are annoyed for labeling them as backward and outdated. There are some who are concerned about health issues especially the breathing and find it suffocating and distressing. This is very valid point which needs scientific investigation as Ahmad et al (2001) has already taken a leap in this regard and investigate the occurrence of respiratory tract problems in veil wearing by adult women and find out that respiratory infections and asthma are significantly more common in veil users, although such findings needs to be conformed in replication studies for their lasting implications. Communication barrier is another potential issue perceived by many as they are finding hard to understand the veiled ones without observing facial expressions.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Today we find that the Muslim community divided on the subject: the veil or *hijab*. But there is sweeping consensus among Islamic religious scholars around the world that Muslim women are required to, or at least should, cover their hair. So the head scarf, or some type of head covering, is widely viewed as mandatory in Islam. The present study tries to explore the experiences and perceptions of university students who veil and who do not veil. Findings of the study indicate that students' have multiple reasons for their decision to veil and not to veil. Majority of the students see family pressure and social obligations as the main reasons of covering themselves. Others see it as a profoundly religious personification of modesty and soberness in clothing. Those unveil don't have any specific reason and religious explanation of not covering themselves except taking it as their personal choice and dressing the way they like. The students who take veil have perception that they faced many problems due to veiling. They identified various issues like teachers' biased attitudes, peers strange attitude generally, communication barrier, lack of confidence, sign of backwardness and low preference for jobs. But in contrast to other behavior, they feel safer out of home in veil. This is the perception of almost all of the veiled women. The women who are taking veil by their own choice defend veil very strongly and they believe it as their religious duty. Veiled students reveal more stern attitudes towards those students who are not veiling. Unveiled are

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not in favor of adopting veil and it seems that they draw upon anti-veiling discourse of Muslim elites but they are not inconsiderate towards the veiled students. They are very casual in their attitude about veil but reluctant to pass any negative comment about veiling. Women who veil are not typically respectful toward the unveiled but the unveiled women are reluctant to impugn the veiled ones.

Many students take veil after getting admission in the university. According to them, they sacrifice their liberty for availing the chance of higher education. It is found out that parents are concerned about making their daughters covered while sending them to co-education institutions. Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, it is suggested that more researches be conducted for exploring the ratio of students covering themselves and vice versa and the factors behind this phenomena in qualitative and quantitative perspective. Secondly, observational research exploring the actual interactions between veiled and unveiled female students is warranted. Thirdly, it is suggested that the academicians and administration at higher education level must think about it and make some efforts to create a supportive and conducive academic atmosphere where parents can safely send their female children with confidence. Finally, the phenomena of veiling need to be understood more deeply in different educational contexts to know its implications for teaching and learning.

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