

AN INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH INTO THE EMPLOYABILITY OF HIJAB WEARING WOMEN IN KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the employability of the hijab wearing women in Kazakhstan. The aim of this investigation is to analyze how hijab wearing and religious identity influence on women's work prospects and the negotiation around her appearance as a symbol of culture and religion. Despite the plethora of research exploring the meanings and functions of hijab in society, very little research on discrimination towards hijabis in the workplace could be found. The importance of this topic is revealed by the fact that many Kazakh hijabis encounter difficulties finding a job in Kazakhstan owing to their appearance, despite the general understanding that work discrimination based on religion is unfair. The first section of the study is dedicated to the theoretical framework discussing the hijab and its relation to employment from relational demography theory of Ghumman and the concept of Hebl in identifying what kind of discrimination hijabis encounter. This will be complemented by a survey that examines the case of four Kazakh hijab-wearing women. The final section will interpret the findings, concluding that religious attire puts hijab wearing women into a dilemma between work and faith in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Employment, Hijab, Kazakhstan, Discrimination

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Қазақстандағы хиджаб киетін әйелдердің жұмысқа орналасуы туралы зерттеу

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақала Қазақстандағы хиджаб киетін әйелдерінің жұмысқа тұру және қабылдану мәселесін қарастырады. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты - хиджаб кию әйелдердің жұмысқа орналасуын және оның мәдениет пен діннің символы ретінде сыртқы келбеті туралы келіссөздерге қалай әсер ететінін талдау болып табылады. Қоғамдағы хиджабтың мәні мен қызметі туралы көптеген зерттеулердің бар болуына қарамастан, жұмыс орнында хиджаб киетін әйелдерді кемсіту туралы өте аз зерттеулерді табуға болады. Жұмыс орнында дінге байланысты кемсітудің әділетсіздік деген жалпы түсінікке қарамастан, көптеген хиджаб киген әйелдер сыртқы келбетіне байланысты Қазақстанда жұмыс табуда қиындықтарға тап болуы бұл тақырыптың маңыздылығын көрсетеді. Мақаланың бірінші бөлімі Гумманның жұмыспен қамтуға қатысты теориясын және Хеблдің тұжырымдамасын талқылайтын теориялық негізге арналады. Хиджаб киетін әйелдердің жұмыста және жұмысқа орналасу кезінде қандай кемсітушілікке тап болатыны талқыланады. Бұл теория хиджаб киген төрт қазақ әйелінің жағдайын қарастыратын сауалнамамен толықтырылады. Қорытынды бөлімінде Қазақстандағы хиджаб киетін әйелдердің жұмыс пен сенім арасындағы дилеммаға әкелетіні туралы қорытындыға байланысты тұжырымдама ұсынылады.

Түйін сөздер: хиджаб киетін әйелдер, жұмыспен қамту, хиджаб, Қазақстан, кемсіту.

Исследование трудоустройства женщин носящих хиджаб в Казахстане

Аннотация. В данной статье исследуется возможность трудоустройства женщин носящих хиджаб в Казахстане. Цель этого исследования — проанализировать, как ношение хиджаба и религиозная идентичность влияют на перспективы работы женщин и на обсуждение ее внешности как символа культуры и религии. Несмотря на множество исследований, посвященных значению и функциям хиджаба в обществе, можно найти очень мало исследований о дискриминации в отношении хиджаба на рабочем месте. О важности данной темы свидетельствует тот факт, что многие женщины носящих хиджаб сталкиваются с трудностями при поиске работы в Казахстане из-за внешности, несмотря на общее понимание того, что дискриминация в сфере труда по религиозному признаку несправедлива. Первый раздел статьи посвящен теоретической основе, обсуждающей хиджаб и его связь с занятостью, исходя из теории реляционной демографии Гумана и концепции Хебла в определении того, с какой дискриминацией сталкиваются женщины носящие хиджаб. Это будет дополнено опросом, в котором будет рассмотрен случай четырех казахстанских женщин носящих хиджаб. В заключительном разделе будут интерпретированы результаты, сделан вывод о том, что религиозная одежда ставит женщин носящих хиджаб перед дилеммой между работой и верой в Казахстане.

Ключевые слова: женщины носящих хиджаб, занятость, хиджаб, Казахстан, дискриминация.

1. Introduction

The hijab and other Islamic head coverings are inextricably linked with the notion of gender inequality and oppression towards hijabis by non-Muslims [1, p. 13]. The religiosity of women due to the resurgence of Islam in Kazakhstan after gaining independence in 1991 resulted in some women following practices of Islam such as wearing hijabs, which is a symbol of piety, decency, loyalty and righteousness [2, p. 210]. The term 'hijab', derived from the Arabic word *hajaba*, which means 'to cover', has polarised religious scholars and theologians alike on the requirement of the hijab for Muslim women. The word hijab that are being talked about here is not a complete cover for women. While some scholars believe that the hijab is not necessarily an integral part of Islam but just a cultural phenomenon, others claim that the hijab is a sign of oppression and violence that outlines the gender discrepancies and detriments of Muslim women in a Western setting [3, p. 400]. Yet, according to Ghumman and Ryan [4, p. 675], the hijab constitutes an essential part of the Islamic dress code for women as suggested by the Quran. Although there are no reliable statistics with regards to how many women wear the headscarf in Kazakhstan, it is estimated that there has been a sig-

nificant rise in the hijab being worn on the streets, especially among young women. Women who wear a hijab often tend to be stigmatised owing to its association with Muslims – a community frequently aligned with negative assumptions, beliefs and opinions [5, p. 201]. Thus, understanding the impact of the hijab on employability in Kazakhstan is a complex phenomenon which requires comprehensive exploration, as there is a conspicuous rise of Islamisation among the Kazakh people. This study explores how hijab wearing and religious identity impact women's work prospects and the negotiation around her appearance as a symbol of culture and religion.

2. Theoretical Framework

Relational demography theory, according to Tsui and O'Reilly [6, p. 426], offers a valuable framework for comprehending the reasons for the existence of discrimination against hijabis in the workplace. The fundamental principle of relational demography is that the social or demographic overlap of a work group leads to favourable work results. Ibarra [7, p. 685] argues that individuals are drawn to people who are demographically similar to them, and this leads to closer relationships. On the other hand, others are frequently removed from social networks, gaining less support from

their workgroups and encountering higher rates of tension with their colleagues [8, p. 743]. For example, relational demography research has provided substantial evidence for the idea that dissimilarity between persons and their workgroups result in less favourable working conditions, revulsion, decreased interpersonal interaction and affinity, and perceived prejudice [9, p. 241]. Several researchers have revealed that recruiter-applicant demographic connections are favourably linked to selection decisions during the hiring process. Goldberg [10, p. 603] suggests that having similarities between the interviewer and the applicant such as appearance, commonalities, religious or ethnic identity seem to result in a job applicant being accepted more often. Candidates who have common backgrounds with their recruiter or interviewer earn more satisfactory interview evaluations and consequently receive more job offers than others who are demographically different [11, p. 855]. It could therefore be assumed that relational factors play a key role in why Kazakh Muslims may be discriminated against in the workplace. While the theory of relational demography forecasts prejudice against certain groups and the degree to which it could exist based on their ethnic or religious representation at work, it does not explicitly differentiate between the various types of discrimination that exist in the workplace. Therefore, to comprehend what types of discrimination are experienced by hijabis during the hiring process, this article aims to utilise Hebl et al.'s [12, p. 820] conceptualisation of discrimination. There are two forms: 1) formal discrimination and 2) interpersonal discrimination. Adopting Hebl et al.'s theory with regards to the discrimination of Muslim women at workplace is helpful in order to understand the job discrimination experienced by hijabis within the recruitment process. There are two forms of discrimination: formal and interpersonal. Formal discrimination is a kind of discrimination that entails overt expression of negative attitude toward the marginalised group; in other words, wom-

en who wear hijab are explicitly refused by the employer. Interpersonal discrimination is a subtle form of discrimination through non-verbal and in some circumstances verbal activity in social relationships. Taking into account these types of discrimination within the context of Kazakhstan, the interpersonal type of discrimination is tangible or salient. Many employers dodge or evade questions pertaining to their refusal to recruit candidates who wear a hijab. The complex relationship between religion and gender discrimination in women's job prospects occurring in Kazakhstan is complicated and seems furtive, which suggests that the secular policy of Kazakhstan *per se* has negative influence toward the hijab and the veil by impacting on the mindset of the people. Experimental research carried out on the employment of hijabis and non-hijabis in Germany revealed prejudice or bias in the selection process of recruiting women in hijab [13, p. 192], revealing women wearing hijab were rejected more often than those who did not wear hijabs, again indicating job-related gender discrimination due to religious appearance, which raises the dilemma of bread or faith. Implicit types of discrimination have become more common despite the passage of anti-discrimination legislation and conventions [12, p. 822].

Explicit forms of discrimination could also be found in contemporary workplaces where personal and social or corporate racism occur [14, p. 58]. In other words, individuals consciously nurture deliberate, overt prejudice against a specific stigmatised community (Muslims) and their associations or affiliations, and even instigate or trigger individuals to get involved in discriminatory actions towards the members of the stigmatised group. This argument implies that some Kazakh people harbour not only latent prejudice against hijabis, but may also maintain overt stereotypes toward women who wear hijab. Arab-looking Kazakh women have been considered as deviant from traditional Islam and have been looked at suspiciously, as a threat. For example, a growing num-

ber of Kazakhstani mass media frequently raise public alarm about hijabs as a cultural-religious symbol that is inconsistent with the standards and values of a democratic nation like Kazakhstan.

Some people claim that the hijab is a choice, saying that it is not stipulated in the Quran or Sunnah. Thus, they say it is not a requirement of Islam but rather a choice opted by certain women. Taking this interpretation as the justification for an anti-hijab argument, some Muslims believe that it is permissible for governments, school authorities, and so forth to forbid it from public places. Therefore, the first President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, asked the female residents of Kazakhstan not to wear hijabs, explaining that it is not a reflection of faith, but rather the cultural attire of Arabic people and the Bedouin community, implying that wearing a hijab is correlated with some sort of backwardness [15]. This was reinforced by the call of the Chief Imam (religious leader) or Mufti for Kazakhstani women to refrain from wearing hijab [15], suggesting that the code of conduct of Kazakh women and their decision about clothing should be dictated by the national politics of Kazakhstan. This means that although it is claimed that wearing hijab is a choice, the policy applied by the Kazakhstani government implies coercion of Muslim women not to wear hijab, which is considered an obligatory Islamic religious practice [2, p. 220]. Women who wear hijab have been reported to encounter discrimination during the hiring process. For example, Kazakh hijabis were demanded to abandon wearing a headscarf and don their uniform so as to receive a job offer [16, p. 15]. Given the substantial amount of research and supportive evidence demonstrating that many Kazakh employers have clear personal prejudice against Kazakh women who wear hijab, categorising them as a marginalised group of people, and implying that they are obliged to act in that way firstly because of the law forbidding the hijab in public places and the hijabophobia related to its daunting appearance. It is hypothesised that Kazakh women who wear hijab are more likely to experience

formal discrimination during the recruitment process because of the law banning the hijab in any governmental workplace, such as universities, schools, and hospitals. This policy exempts private companies. Hijabis are considered to be a minority group within Kazakhstan, referring especially to the Salafi Brotherhood Islamic sect. Kazakh women who wear hijab are considered to be members of this Islamic sect, and thus people are frightened and feel uncomfortable working with them. With the increase of people associated with this Islamic sect, wearing a hijab has become more prevalent in Kazakhstan. With regards to interpersonal discrimination, Ghumman and Ryan [4, p. 685], borrowing the theory of Hebl et al., state that employers are not required by law to make eye contact, bow or make encouraging motions, or to stand at a reasonable distance from the job candidate. Since such behaviours entail leeway, it might lead employers to indulge in interpersonal discrimination by being less amiable, less interested, and more constrained in their interactions with stigmatised people, suggesting that indirect forms of discrimination (interpersonal prejudice) are more likely to occur than formal discrimination [14, p. 57]. For example, qualitative research carried out in Turkestan revealed that women wearing hijab are more likely to experience interpersonal discrimination during the hiring process. For example, interviewee Gulzat mentioned that the attitude of the employer towards her changed when she saw her wearing hijab, implying that this kind of hurtful behaviour is damaging to self-esteem.

The hijab is a stereotype that could impact women's employability and work performance [17, p. 15]. For example, research conducted among Bahraini women who wear hijab found that they are considered to be less intelligent and more reserved than those who do not [18, p. 43], implying that hijabis often tend to be refused prestigious jobs despite their high quality knowledge and skills, due to their religious attire and appearance. However, McIntosh and Islam [19, p. 105] claim that by taking a positivist approach, women who wear

hijab seem to open plenty of job opportunities for women. This argument proposes that job-searching difficulties encourage hijabis to start their own businesses. For example, one woman who was interviewed in this study told of three consecutive years of failure to find a job in Turkestan, so she started her own home bakery business.

3. Methodology

A qualitative case study will be utilised in order to examine the relation of religiosity and employability among women who wear hijab. This article will identify what type of discrimination Kazakh hijabis encounter during the hiring process and in the workplace by exploring their experiences through the application of case study. The content analysis method, a research method for analysing textual, verbal and visual interactions [20, p. 55], will be applied in order to analyse the topic. The primary source of data will be interviews with four hijab-wearing Kazakh women who have been searching for a job for four years. These women, who still wear hijab, were called and the purpose of the interview was explained to them. For ethical reasons their real names were changed. As my wife also wears hijab and has a close relationship with hijabis, she asked them to take part in my research. They were asked questions about what kind of problems they had encountered during the hiring and interview process. These four women told their stories, which were recorded as data collection. The women were from different age groups and different levels of education. Two are now housewives and two are self-employed. Their ages are 23-30, and they graduated from Ahmed Yasawi University in Turkestan, Kazakhstan. All these women live in Turkestan, and due to the outbreak of coronavirus, all were interviewed online by Skype. The interview took place on the 10th April, 2020.

4. Sample

Sholpan began covering her head when she was 14 years old. She says that wearing

hijab in public places was a predicament at first, as everybody gazed at her suspiciously or strangely and she felt uncomfortable and alienated. After graduating university with the major of pedagogical education, she started searching for a job with her qualification. However, she has not succeeded yet:

Certainly, I was aware that the hijab would affect my career but I cannot abandon my religious obligation as it is a requirement of the Quran. When I applied for a job through online services everything was fine, but when the Director of the school saw me the tone and attitude towards me changed instantly. She was shocked and proposed I take off my hijab as there is a law banning hijab in public spaces, and she told me that she could not offer me the job as hijab-wearing women cannot teach school pupils as it is against the law. Now I am baking cakes at home and sell them through Instagram on the internet.

Gulzat, after graduating from university with a distinction in accountancy, she applied for many vacancies that were available:

When I applied for an accountant vacancy in a restaurant, after talking with the manager, she told me that she liked my qualifications and competency but she told me that there is one requirement for accepting me to the job: take off my religious attire and put on their uniform. When I replied that taking it off is impossible, she told me that she would consider and call me back. I instantly realised that I would get rejected again because of my religious clothing. I felt at that time worthless. I desperately needed a job to make ends meet.

Aigerim has been wearing hijab for five years, since the first year of her study at university. She states that she started due to the influence of her classmate who had been wearing hijab and started practicing Islamic obligations.

I completed the tourism and management major with distinction. Now I am a hairdresser and cannot find a job within my field, despite the myriad of hotels in my city. The reason that I am rejected is my religious attire. The managers of the hotels where I applied for a job overtly told me that they would hire me

only on the condition that I take off my hijab. But I refused their offer because I cannot abandon practising my religious duty, and although I do not work within my field, I am spiritually pleased and happy.

Aliya is 27 years old. She is married and has two children. She started practicing the religious duty after marriage. She completed the University with the major of Finance. While working as a sales assistant at a store, she points out that she felt sexually harassed as no one wanted to talk with her.

While working in the store, I did not wear hijab and everything was fine. The interpersonal discrimination and sexual harassment started to happen to me when I started wearing the hijab. When I experienced discrimination I complained to my Manager but she did not take any measures. Some of my co-workers recommended that I take off the hijab, but I refused to exchange my religious obligation for the sake of the job. So, after 11 months of unbearable pressure and interpersonal discrimination, I had to leave my job. Every time I apply for a vacancy that has been advertised, when they see me during the interview I am told that they will call me back. I know they will not call me, and I feel worthless. I knew that wearing hijab would be barrier to my career. I tried three times to apply for a job as a sales assistant but I was rejected due to my religious attire. Yet, I am now working as a sales assistant, selling phones and phone accessories in a chain retail store whose owner is a religious person who prefers hiring hijabis to non hijabis.

5. Findings

The findings of this research revealed that for these covered women, along with the struggle of sexual harassment, they find themselves marginalised with regards to job placement despite their high quality knowledge and competency. They remain worried about public harassment and the fear that hijab-wearing women are misunderstood as a religiously dangerous group of people who deviate from traditional Islam. In other words, hijab-wearing women appear to be

stigmatised, meaning that they tend to find themselves as 'other' due to their distinct religious appearance that make them seem 'other' although they are Kazakh people. Relational demography theory, with regards to the acceptance of a job in Aliya's story, revealed that when there are similarities in ethnicity or religious outlook, the probability of a favourable interview between the recruiter and applicant is more likely to yield favourable outcomes, confirming the validity of relational demography theory in terms of accepting a job applicant through kinship. When the employer and the applicant have a common background, the interview yields a favourable result for the applicant. For example, Aliya could find a stable job as a sales assistant in a phone store whose owner is a religious person. The similarities between them enabled her to find a job, which again buttresses the theory of relational demography as valid within the context of Kazakhstan. The findings of this preliminary and small research project found that all four women mentioned that they were overtly rejected, indicating that within the context of Kazakhstan, formal discrimination seems to occur more often than interpersonal discrimination, which is in line with the theory of Hebl et al. [12, p. 819]. The case of Aliya demonstrates that she had encountered formal prejudice not only by the employer, but also by her co-workers, instigated by the employer – again confirming the theory of Hebl et al. [12, p. 820]. It can be assumed that the ban on wearing hijab in public spaces encourages formal discrimination to occur between employers and hijabi applicants during job interviews, as the employer can openly express that he/she will not accept an applicant, saying that hiring hijabis is against the law. Conversely, interpersonal discrimination seems to happen within the private sector, as hiring hijabis for a job depends only on the decision of the employer. If the employer is a religious person who understands and has a close relationship with the religious community, it is more likely that the hijabi will be successful. Otherwise, most of the time they are rejected.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate the impact of the hijab on the employability of Kazakh Muslim women, and identify what kind of discrimination they encounter in the workplace. Although research relevant to hijab and its meaning in Kazakhstan has been conducted previously, there is relatively very little research on the hijab and its impact on employability. The current research, although a small preliminary study, prepared the foundations for further research on hijab-wearing Kazakh women and their success in building their own business. This study contributed by adding new knowledge revealing the experience of hijabis in the workplace in Kazakhstan. The implications of the current research echo the need to combat the stereotypes of hijab in Kazakhstan. Stereotypes of docile, marginalised Muslim women go along with images of women and religious Islamic dress [21, p. 61]. Subsequently, women who are genuine Muslims can be expected to struggle with these assumptions should they want to pursue a career path. Muslim women wearing hijab can be pressured into choosing between job opportunities and religion. Such a decision might cause unnecessary psychological stress that can further impede their capacity to acquire a job and, consequently, reinforces the negative perceptions that still exist about women in Islam. Since the hijab continues to be a controversial topic, with several countries banning its usage in public places, there is a necessity for further research to investigate its effect in the social, political and economic realms. Research on hijab wearing can also be utilised to commence discourse between Western and Islamic cultures, and within Muslim societies as well, so that different viewpoints on the topic of hijab can be discussed and debated objectively and openly.

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