Is Purdah barrier to get Education and Employment of Muslim Women in Rural India

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Abstract

This research was designed to explore the relationship between the use of purdah, access to education and employment of rural women. The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods. In most past literature, it has been argued that in India, the use of purdah has had effect on women’s access to education and employment because the former is seen to impede on women’s freedom and mobility. Some authors have argued that purdah is not merely a religious symbol tied to a belief system, but it is also a symbol of purity and honor particularly among richer families who are more conscious of their high social status. With regard to this religious custom, most rich families simply do not permit their women to go outside their home. Due to the practice of purdah, women are generally prohibited from going into the public and they are mostly restricted to the home. Contrary to the above religious observation of women, this study went to show that the use of purdah do not in any influence on women’s access to education as well as employment outside their homes. The study’s findings also showed that although majority of rural women chose to wear purdah, they nevertheless follow non-traditional (a more liberal) view concerning the practice of using purdah.

Keywords: Purdah (Veil), Women Employment, Women Education, Rural Women

Introduction

The main aim of this study is to examine the influence/role of the use of purdah (viel) on women’s education as well as employment. In India although the use of purdah is often taken to be a display of Islamic practice and institution, the actual origin of this practice continues to be quite vague and discussion on the matter persists. It has been argued that the use of purdah is not only an Islamic institution, but it also commonly associated with the seclusion of women. The use of purdah has directly been related to women’s socio-economic status because Hindu women also practice it. In India, the use of purdah has been viewed as female seclusion that is normally followed by a strict division of spaces for men and women (Rahman, 1994; Zaman, 1995; Rozario, 1992). The use of purdah is devoutly followed by a minority of mainly wealthy women in India. In his study, Dube (1998) noted that in India the ideas of seclusion, segregation, protection and control over women were reflected in restriction for women and these usually came in the form of dress, manner, norms regarding interaction and movement that would come under close security from society. The practice of purdah or veiling in Islam has been discussed by Rozario (1992). The allocation of space between the sexes and men’s unequal power over women is strongly associated with Islamic views about the potentially destructive power of (particularly women’s) sexuality.

However, in few studies such as of Rozario (1992), Gruenbaum (1991), Hoodfar (1991) and Papanek (1982), the concept and practice of purdah also involves female seclusion. By extension, this was also taken to mean the separation of men’s and women’s tasks in society as well as restrictions on women’s participation in extra-domestic sphere. For Engels (1989), for example, he defined purdah as a set of social practices most commonly associated with the seclusion of women that were often criticized by western observers of Indian social conditions as the cause of poor health and thwarting intellectual development amongst women. He saw female seclusion that was rigidly practiced by a minority of women, as the dominant social custom regulating the relations between men and women because it
fitted in with the late-Victorian sex roles that restricted women into the private sphere of the household.

In India, Muslim women who practiced purdah also follow a system of arranged marriages very closely and these are usually carried out among cousins. Similarly in Pakistan, purdah is used a mismatch of the established way of service delivery with the tradition of female seclusion, purdah, with its restrictions on women’s appearance and movement in public, was repeatedly identified as an important reason in Pakistan. purdah consists of a set of rules ensuring the segregation of sexes outside well defined categories like extended family and next kinship Papanek (1982).

**Influence of Purdah on Women’s Education and Employment**

The paper focuses on the influence of purdah -related norms on women’s education and employment. For scholars such as Rozario (1998), Hoodfar (1991) and Papanek (1982), the poor educational and employment achievements of women were attributed to the prevalent of purdah use found in many countries. Rozario (1998) linked the use of purdah to the ability of families to keep their women at home because their socio-economic status was not directly dependent on the women to bring in the extra incomes. Therefore the status of a family is linked to its ability to protect its women (wives as well as daughters) through the strict use of the purdah . According to Rozario (1998), the practice of purdah among their women also has an important impact on them since that would inevitably meant that they were to be the sole bread winner for their families.

In Pakistan, women generally are less educated than their men (Khan, 1993; Shah, 1986; Chaudhary & Chaudhary, 1989; and Behrman & Schnieder (1993). There are several possible explanations for this distinct gender gap in education. The use of purdah may well constitute one among many possible reasons. Due to the custom of women seclusion through the use of purdah , parents might have a strongly negative impact on women’s education. Durrant and Sathar (2000) who had examined women’s status and demographic behavior in Pakistan had argued that the use of purdah has had an influence on the lower status of women. Their study further elaborated that women from conservative households were generally expected to have lower status than those from more modern households. In India, Muslim women tend to be less empowered than their Hindu counterparts, even though both groups of women may often live in the same geographic clusters of villages. In some aspects of empowerment, the Muslim-Hindu differences were particularly pronounced in Tamil Nadu where Hindu women do not, as a rule, practice purdah while Muslim women do (Mason et al., 1997; and Mason & smith, 2003).

Similarly, Noland (1983) who studied the problems of female secondary education in rural Iran had found out that some cultural and economic factors were responsible for the women’s lack of access and success in education in comparison to the men. The author noted that the use of purdah was the main reason for the low enrollment of female students in secondary education in rural areas. In Malaysia, Chinese women have strikingly greater empowerment than most of their Malay or Indian counterparts, especially when it comes to mobility. In the Philippines, women in the two Muslim communities have far lower mobility than women of other communities. Thus, religion and ethnicity are often important factors affecting women’s mobility (Jejeebhoy & Zeba, 2001). This is consistent with the idea that gender norms play an important role in determining women’s empowerment (Mason & Smith, 2003).

In a study by Bakr (1994), found that the practice of purdah had been used deliberately as an instrument to enable men to dominate the family structure and divide labor by gender, leaving women extremely dependent upon their husbands. Furthermore, Bakr argued that the subordination of the majority of women is propagated by attitudes derived from men. He also noted that in India, the practice of purdah is socially and culturally determined. However, in India, the institution that governs
the behavior pattern and roles of women is related to the use purdah that defines the principle of segregation of sexes. After attaining puberty, women are put in seclusion and their movement is consequently limited within the confines of their homes. Any contact with the outside world is to be avoided and contact with males, especially non-kin in particular, is considered to a disgrace and immoral (Papanek, 1973; Begum, 1989).

**Research Objectives**

The general objective of the study is to identify the role of the practice of purdah and its related norms had on rural women’s education as well as their employment. Some specific objectives of this study are as follows: (1) to examine rural women’s general understanding of purdah and its related practices; (2) to identify the role of the practice of purdah and its related norms upon rural women’s education as well as their employment.

**Methodology**

The study is based on two main types of data. Firstly, previous literatures were reviewed to provide a general picture and the state of literature on the issue of the use of purdah in India and other Muslim states. Secondly, the primary data collected in selected study areas in India. Besides collected responses from 75 rural women, a set of questionnaires were constructed based on the research objectives of the study.

**Findings and Discussions**

**Respondent’s general understanding regarding the use of Purdah:**

To determine respondent’s general understanding regarding the use of purdah, respondents were asked to define purdah. The majority (91.2 percent) of women defined purdah as ‘religious belief’. The peoples are rather religious and cultural aloft. purdah is commonly viewed as a standard practice among Muslim women. This lends supports to previous findings by Keddie (1992) who had reported that that early Muslims had adopted veiling from conquered peoples and that both non-Muslims in Muslim societies and Mediterranean women in Christian societies were subjected to the same forms of control and isolation from men. Mediterranean societies, whether Muslim or Christian, also had the same idea of the centrality of a man’s honor that lay chiefly in the purity of their women. However, although the majority of respondents defined purdah as a religious belief, this practice is also widely observed among non Muslim women too.

Furthermore, some women (53.8%) defined purdah as a social cultural norm. As mentioned earlier, the people of India are not only spiritually but also culturally dominated. The findings suggest that in India, the central components defining appropriate female purdah and behavior in India society are as purity, honor, religious and social cultural practice, although the precise way in which they operated traditionally varied in relation to the women’s class background. Hindu women in predominantly Muslim India practice purdah although to a lesser extent than Muslim women.

About 9.4 percent of the respondents associated the use or wearing of purdah with ‘female seclusion’. This is consistent with the findings of previous scholars observed that that in India, Muslim women who use purdah follow also a system of arranged marriages that usually occur among cousins. The same can also be seen for women who used purdah in Pakistan. The use of purdah consists of observing a set of rules relating to segregation of the sexes outside well defined categories like the extended family and next kinship. This is achieved either by seclusion of women at home or by the use of the purdah.
In India, noted that the use of purdah is not only the ideology of Islam but the institutionalized manifestation of women’s seclusion. This observation is despite the fact that only a small number of women (respondents) themselves had closely defined purdah with female seclusion. On the other hand, only a few (4.4 percent) of the respondents viewed the use of purdah as indication of some socio-economic status of the family. The author further argued that as a socioeconomic status, purdah was therefore practiced by a minority of mainly wealthy women in India. Overall it can be said that in India purdah is viewed not only religious belief but also as “social cultural norms” and “female seclusion”. There were also a few respondents who defined or associated purdah with “socio-economic status”.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked on their preference of purdah i.e. on type. The results show that majority of the respondents said that they prefer to wear the purdah in comparison to about 5.6 percent who would choose not to wear it. To further understand their choices, they were asked as to the type of purdah that they would choose to wear. About 76.8 percent of the respondents said that they would choose to use purdah that would cover their hair only’. This was followed by about 13.2 percent who would chose to cover their face only. Only about 4.4 percent said that they preferred to cover the whole boy. The results clearly indicate that a large number of respondents chose to wear purdah. The majority considered it as a mean to cover their hair only.

**Determinants Respondent’s Purdah Ideology**

The main focus of the study was to examine the effect of purdah practice on their educational opportunities as well as their empowerment. In order to arrive at this understanding, the role of purdah was measured in two ways; as restrictive on the one hand and non-restrictive on the other. “Restrictive” was defined to be confirming to the “traditional norm and values”, whereas “non restrictive” was defined as reflecting “non-traditional norm and values”. The measurement was distributed over a four-point scale based on the Likert format: e.g. ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, disagree and ‘strongly disagree’. Traditional norm and values would be measured by values closer to 1 and 2, while non-traditional norm and values was measured by values closer to 3 and 4.

In this respect, respondents who had responded ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ were classified as ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’ while those who had indicated ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagreed’ were identified as nonconservative (liberal) or ‘non-traditional’. There were eight statements used to measure their perception, five statements relating to their education and three relating to employment. The results reveals that the majority of the respondents can be seen as holding to the ‘non-traditional’ as well as ‘non-conservative’ attitude towards the practice of purdah. They believed that purdah use should not impede one’s going to school, college and universities. With respect to the statement “women should not go to school, college and universities because they have to open their hair in the presence of men. The results of this statement reveal that a few respondents believed that women should not continue their studies because they have to uncover hair in the presence of men, the majority opposed with this statement and these responses were perceived as ‘non-conservative’ as well as ‘non-traditional’. Similarly, with the statement, “women should not go to school, colleges and universities because they have to talk directly to the men”, a large number of respondents do not think that women should not study because they need to talk directly to men. Only a few (16.2 percent) respondents had the positive opinion about the above statement. In addition, to the statement, ‘women should not go to schools, colleges and universities due to co-educational system’ a large number of women were perceived as non-conservative as well as non-traditional ideology’.

From the above five statements relating to the influence of purdah on women education it was found that the majority of the respondents ‘disagreed’ with the statements that women should not go to schools, colleges and universities if they are allowed purdah, followed by ‘to uncover their face’, ‘have to uncover their hair’, ‘have to talk directly to the men’ and ‘co-educational system’. The article
also focused on the role of Purdah in relation to views on respondent’s employment. Three statements were employed to measure the role of Purdah regarding employment.

The results shows that a large number of respondents tended to be ‘non-conservative’ and have a ‘nontraditional ideology’ regarding employment. They do not believe that women should not do the job if she is allowed to wear purdah. The majority of respondents do not agree to the statement that women should not talk directly to the men if she is allowed to wear purdah. The results also indicate that the majority of respondents (53.2) did not support to the statement that women should not continue job as she has to uncover her face and hair in the presence of men. They argued that women can continue their join by wearing (covering face and hair) purdah. From the three statements, it is observed that most of women performed ‘non-conservative’ as well as ‘non-traditional’ ideology.

**Respondent's overall Assessment on Purdah Awareness**

In order to give a clearer idea of the awareness of purdah and its effect on women’s education as well as employment, a total of eight variables were constructed in which five variables related were to education while three were employment related. Scores of 1 and 2 were assigned if the respondent made responded ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ while 3 and 4 were assigned if the responses were ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ respectively. The overall awareness of the purdah was created summing all the values of the eight variables for each respondent. The minimum total score was counted into the 8, if the respondent showed ‘agree’ for all variables.

The results presented in Table 2 shows that only 13.5 percent of the respondents were in the ‘low awareness’ category whereas 25.6 percent of the respondents are in the ‘medium awareness’ category. On the other hand, 60.9 percent of the respondents were in the ‘high awareness’ category. These results indicate that the majority of the respondents fell under the ‘high awareness’ category.

In the previous section, it was also observed that most respondents tended to follow the ‘nonconservatives’ as well as the ‘non-traditional’ ideology regarding education and employment. This indicates that most of the respondents have a high awareness of purdah. Similarly, in the overall assessment on the of purdah awareness, it was found that a high number of respondents have the awareness of purdah norms whereas only a few respondents are under the ‘low’ category. Overall, it can be said that although women in India are more religious and cultural-dominated, they have a high awareness of the practice of the purdah.

**Conclusion**

The focus of this article is to determine the influence of the role purdah in women’s education as well as their employment. Overall the results show that there were little affect but no significant affect of purdah norms on women’s education as well their employment, since a small number of respondents believed that women should not continue to study and job if they were allowed to wear the purdah. On other hand, the majority of the respondents believed that they could continue the study and job although they liked to wear purdah. Overall, it can be concluded that a large number of respondents liked to wear purdah but they tended to follow a non-traditional ideology in its practice since the majority liked to cover only their hair. The findings also reveal that in the present situation women are changing their attitudes and are entering in the labor market. Therefore, these findings suggest that the purdah norms have no significant affects on the women’s education as well as their employment in the current perspective in India.
References