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CHALLENGING PATRIARCHAL TRADITIONS: A FIELD STUDY OF MARRIED WOMEN'S FREEDOM OF ATTIRE IN HARYANA

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ABSTRACT

Marriage in rural Haryana not only signifies a change in women's social roles, it also indicates a sharp decrease in their autonomy over clothing choices and bodily expression. This research investigates how widespread use of patriarchal family structures control the ability of married women to choose what to wear and how to cover their heads through various forms of veiling in nine districts throughout Haryana, India. Through a narrative-based qualitative analysis of data collected from married women representing different age/cultural groups as well as differing levels of education and socio-economic status, the study determined that many women experienced limitations on what they could wear following marriage, with these restrictions being expressed within the context of family honour and respect, as well as the increased surveillance being placed upon them by their communities. In addition, significant differences were observed based on generations and levels of education, with younger women and women with more education exhibiting more resistance to mandatory veiling and more willingness to discuss and negotiate clothing choices with their families. External support from husbands and fathers improved married women's chances of successfully fighting against normative rule restrictions. The findings of this study are advisory in determining that women's clothing choices in rural Haryana are not uniformly limited; rather, the education level of married women, their family structures, and supportive family members create varied degrees of control over their autonomy concerning clothing and body image. Although patriarchal control continues to dominate in rural Haryana; as women continue to make greater strides toward controlling their clothing option choices, more opportunities for greater freedom of choice will continue to occur for married women living in Haryana.

KEYWORDS: Women's clothing autonomy, Patriarchy, Veiling practices, Marriage, Education, Rural Haryana.

1. INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal norms that dictate what women wear are a problematic situation that limits women's autonomy and self-expression. In many cultures and communities, the dress code for women is deeply rooted in patriarchal systems to control the physicality of women's bodies and the way they live (Bourdieu, 2001; Connell, 2013). When imposed legally or when these become socio-cultural norms, women often find it difficult to exercise personal authority in their lives, perpetuating power structures and positional authority that favour men (Nussbaum, 2000; Rudman & Glick, 2001). The negative impact of prescribed dress codes for women is not limited to their choice of clothing; it also affects women's participation in social, economic, and political realms (Afshar, 2007; Flood, 2015). If women cannot dress in a way that they want, it worsens their role and status in society and reinforces gendered prejudice, thereby shaping the direction of social progress (Butler, 1990; Mahdavi, 2020).

As a framework to address this issue, this study identifies how patriarchal traditions constrain women's choices around clothes and describes proposals that promote their freedom. In situating the cultural dimensions uncovered, this study contributes to the broader dialogue around gender equality and women's empowerment (Shetty & Kotian, 2023; Lekha & Kumar, 2024). Conversations around women's fashions are heavily influenced by cultural, social, and legal practices, frequently woven with larger patriarchal issues (Garcia-Ramos et al., 2024; Amed et al., 2018). The construction of the literature is interdisciplinary, drawing on feminist theory, cultural studies, legal theory, and empirical evidence as it examines the consequences of dress codes in upholding gendered expectations and restricting women's agency (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

Historical studies illustrate how etiquette and social obligations restrict women in their style of dress, framing dress as a social construction dependent upon cultural movement (Wolffe, 2022). Anti-feminist constructions of dress norms have been critiqued by feminist theorists such as de Beauvoir and Butler, and empirical documentation of how codes restrict women's agency has also been demonstrated by sociologists and feminist scholars (Lune & Berg, 2017; Denzin, 2017). Legally, CEDAW represents a universal framework of rights; however, it often encounters limitations when addressing local cultural practices due to cultural relativism. There are numerous implications of cultural relativism in human rights discussions, particularly when examining gender-based traditions (Mayer, 2018; Okin et al., 1999).

Although there is a substantial body of knowledge around dress codes, significant gaps remain in understanding intersectionality at the intersections of race, class, and religion, as well as the specific influence of media and technology on contemporary dressing standards (Adams, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). Examining these gaps will improve our understanding of the situation and provide practical paths forward. Using cross-cultural interpretations and evidence-based interdisciplinary discussions, the research undertaken for this study seeks to broaden understanding of women's clothing preferences while also engaging with broader discussions of gender, identity, and power (Bazeley, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

In rural northern India, marriage significantly influences women's clothing choices within their daily lives. However, there has been limited focused research in this area, and only minimal empirical data have been available so far. This study aims to fill that gap.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design to explore women's perspectives regarding how married women dress and observe practices related to the veil in Haryana. The study investigated how brides interpret and negotiate restrictions placed on their clothing after marriage within their cultural and social context.

Research Paradigm

Through an interpretivist research paradigm, this study aimed to gain an understanding of women's lived experiences and social meanings associated with dress. The interpretive approach allows for in-depth exploration of how patriarchal norms impact women's clothing choices and how women construct meaning around these patriarchal clothing norms.

Study Area

Fieldwork was completed in several towns throughout nine different districts of Haryana: Yamunanagar; Kurukshetra; Panipat; Gurugram; Faridabad; Jind; Rohtak; Charkhi Dadri; and Bhiwani. These districts serve as representations of northern, southern, eastern, western, and central Haryana, with both urban and rural communities included to illustrate the cultural and lifestyle differences within the region.

Sampling and Participants

A multi-staged sampling strategy that does not use probability was employed. Zoning the state into

five geographical areas allowed for the inclusion of all cultures. Each zone of the state contained districts and corresponding villages surrounding those districts that were used for selection in this study. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The target group was married females who were between the ages of 20-60, and who came from varying levels of education and socio-economic backgrounds, including those who were both literate and illiterate. Participation from males, who were related to the female participants, and leaders of local communities provided different perspectives on clothing practices as well.

Data Collection Methods

A combination of online and paper-based questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to identify respondents during the study. Online surveys were distributed using Google Forms; printed questionnaires were used in rural communities where there was limited access to the digital world. Pseudonyms and audio recordings were taken of the interviews with participants' consent. Field notes were also maintained throughout the data collection process.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical policy throughout all phases of the study. Participants selected for this study had a choice regarding their participation, and could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were asked to provide written informed consent prior to the data collection. All participants received fair treatment and were free from discrimination. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by not revealing anything that could be linked to an individual participant's identity.

4. FINDINGS

The survey was conducted in different zones, half of which used physical questionnaires and half used online Google Forms. Urban participants overwhelmingly chose online surveys, whereas rural participants choose physical surveys owing both to technology and lack of access to internet. The primary issues faced included technical issues related to online access, literacy issues requiring the help from an enumerator (also made for awkward interviews), and cultural sensitivity in interview settings. The analysis noted some statistically significant differences between urban and rural participants in attitudes towards clothing attire and veiling and this is environmental based.

A Change After Marriage:

A 19-year-old female from Bhinhol who was married recently, said there has been a change in the way she is choosing her attire. She had been dressing on her own, before marriage. But she must wear a veil in front of her in-laws, especially her father-in-law, which is not allowed to be seen in her daughter's body.

She expressed her desire for change, stating,

"I want that every woman in a new generation should have the freedom to choose their clothing."

She studied till 10th standard, has an education in a joint family, where she now feels somewhat cloistered and wants to do what she wants in her life after marriage.

Contrasting Perspectives: Voices of the Elders

A progressive viewpoint was given by a 65-year-old woman from the same village:

"Every woman has the right to choose their clothes. Why should it bother anyone if someone wears clothes according to their preference?"

This statement highlights the ability of women to make their own decisions regarding clothing choice, even the older generations.

On the contrary, a 45-year-old Sarpanch woman living here for more than 10 decades and who had put a veil on her face immediately after adulthood, believes that keeping a veil is necessary.

She claims,

"Veil is necessary, but there is no compulsion. There is a right to wear and freedom to wear with the change of time."

These two differing opinions reflect that both change and tradition exist in the same generation.

Support for Change: Male Perspectives

Men too speak out on the tradition of veils. A 58-year-old man remarked,

"The veil is an ancient thing. Nowadays, women are more educated and settled. If our daughter-in-law is educated and we force her to cover her face with a ghoomhat, how will she be successful?"

This statement sounded like an encouragement to allow women to educate and provide for themselves with respect through deeds rather than costume.

The Influence of Village Norms

A 33 years old lady lived with her family of five that included her husband, kid, and brother-in-law. She said that her life has seen a 'little bit of change' post marriage. She covers her face with a veil outdoors, but does not wear it at home.

She explained,

"Everyone does it, so we are doing it when we go outside."

This adherence to communal norms showcases how deeply ingrained traditions influence individual choices.

She added,

"If a woman is doing it by her choice, it's good, but no one should be pressured to put on a veil."

A Comfort in a New Environment

A newly married woman from a village near Ambala, now lives in Kuk City. She shared that her marital home is more comfortable than her parental home and the home environment truly reflects on how we dress up.

"Marriage was not a reason for restriction on clothing, but her surroundings impacted her clothing,"

She explained that supportive in-laws can foster a sense of freedom and comfort.

Advocating for Choice: Young Voices

Two unmarried girls from the village were vocal about their views on attire. They stated,

"We don't have particular hate against the change in clothes, but we are completely against the force or compulsion by the in-laws for the clothing."

Seeing it like that can lead us to echo that popular saying, "Jese Desh Vese Bheshe" - knowing when to wear what for which occasion without being spoon fed by people.

The participant, another young woman, echoed this sentiment, advocating for a balanced approach,

"There should be 50:50 from both sides. There should be a compromise from both ends."

She emphasized respecting elders' advice in specific contexts, such as visiting relatives or holy places, while maintaining personal freedom.

Respect Beyond the Veil

A 32-year-old woman married for love, shared that she faced no restrictions after marriage. She conveyed a profound message stating,

"Respect doesn't lie in someone's veil."

Her experience provided an example of mutual respect and understanding between partners that could go beyond archaic practices.

Dayalpur Village: Divergent Views

Dayalpur has multiple generations displaying different views on the meaning of the Burka (i.e., Worn by women for modesty and custom). For example, an older woman believed that a woman wearing the Burka demonstrates her respect, whereas another woman who earned a post-graduate

degree developed independence from the traditions of her family. The daughter of the older woman also opposed restrictions on dress and felt she should be free to express herself through her clothing.

Anta Village: Norms and Necessities

In Anta Village, a 30-year-old woman viewed the veil as a voluntary norm rather than a forced practice.

She stated,

"Veil is a necessity and a symbol of respect. No one forces me to do that."

While other women in the village faced stricter limitations regarding their clothing, such as limitations regarding the wearing of white clothing (widow's clothing), there were differences in perspective between the community leaders, where the younger community leadership favored more varied clothing options and the older leaders placed their emphasis on veiling traditions and individual choice.

5. RESULT

Interactions related to social welfare and empowerment themes were observed during the fieldwork. During discussions and conversations women participated collectively rather than individually, usually arriving in small groups. They reflected a shared interest in community involvement and mutual support. Exchange of ideas on issues they could address together and highlighting the importance of collective participation in social development. All of these interactions contributed to raising awareness about issues facing the community and creating a feeling of being together and having a common goal.

Field Notes and Observations

Generation Gap: The older would be more inclined to support traditional veiling and dress as opposed to the younger women, who were all much more focused on having personal freedom, self-determined choices, and control of their clothes.

Men Are Now Allies: Many of the participating men expressed changing views about veiling and modesty in general by stating that women's dignity should not be defined based on whether or not they cover their heads.

Impact of Education: Women with higher levels of educational attainment show greater resistance to oppressive cultural norms and a greater assertion/autocephalus or autonomous decision-making regarding their clothing.

Environmental & Family Factors: The clothing practices of women are heavily shaped by the

sociocultural context of each woman's marital residence as a result of the attitudes of her in-laws and expectations of the community.

Voluntary vs Compulsory Veils: There is a clear distinction between those women whose practice of veiling is a result of their personal choices vs women who practice veiling because of societal expectations and obligation.

General Pattern: Through the observations in the field, we can see that the fabric of tradition, education, gender, and individual agency is a continually weaving pattern that is creating a more complex environment for women to navigate. For some women the veiling continues to represent a sign of respect, while for other women it is increasingly being identified as a choice and as such, represents a gradual trend towards more autonomy.

6. ANALYSIS

The results section discusses findings with the following perspectives:

- (a) Historical and cultural origins of dress codes for women.
- (b) Effects of limiting clothing on women's personal and professional experiences.
- (c) Ways in which women have resisted and liberated themselves from gender-based clothing.

The key themes that emerged from participants' responses and observations are:

1. Impact of Marriage on Clothing Choices
2. Generational Perspectives on Veiling
3. Educational Influence on Attire Autonomy
4. Male Support for Change
5. Environmental Influence on Attire
6. Voluntary vs. Compulsory Practices

Impact of Marriage on Clothing Choices

A major theme that this study brings to light is the influence of marriage on what women wear. Before marriage, it was common for women to dictate the way they dressed as a form of personal taste and expression. Immediately following marriage, however, there is a clear shift to compliance with the cohesion cultural and family pressures, especially regarding the practice of veiling. This is a reminder of just how deep-seated patriarchal norms are, and how much they permeate the family life and community at-large.

As illustrated in above story, the choice of women's clothes is largely dictated by marriage. The pre-marriage, would dress as per her wish but after marriage, she would dress as per her husband and wear a veil in front of her father-in-law. This change shows that one moves from individual autonomy to

family norms and obligations after marriage. This was consistent with previous research to suggest that marriage can function to perpetuate patriarchal norms that limit women's autonomy (Bourdieu, 2001).

Generational Perspectives on Veiling

Generationally, people's attitudes towards veiling also differ. Older women, like the 65-year-old lady, advocate for individual choice while others, like the Sarpanch who is 45, believe it's tradition and means honour. This dichotomy reflects the internal battle of old vs. new mindset that exists within the same generation. A more generational aspect added nuance to the dialogue, as older women fought for the personal freedom of individual choice and their younger sisters attempted to move back and forth between tradition and modernisation. Education also surfaced as an important variable associated with women's agency, as women with higher educational attainment were able to question the status quo and demand their rights. The stories told by educational women pointed to the transformative possibilities of education in breaking up long established sexist structures.

Educational Influence on Attire Autonomy

Women with more years of schooling are more independent and less likely to conform to conservative dress codes. The narrative of the double MA graduate from Dayalpur village exemplifies how education empowers women to challenge and negotiate traditional practices. This theme reinforces existing literature that posits the role of education as a vehicle for women's empowerment and gender equality (Nussbaum, 2000).

Male Support for Change

A significant finding included support from males for change, reflecting changes in the roles of gender dynamics within these communities. A few men stood by their side and supported women as they fought women's rights, as well as the victimisation of women, which tied into the root norm of underrepresentation and invisibility of women in the workplace. This support reflects a more progressive view of gender roles, as well as the central role that male allies play in driving the women's rights movement forward. The community has some men who also support women dressing freely, and realise that customs are subject to gradual transformations. Challenging and changing the status quo when it comes to long-held patriarchal norms requires critical support to be successful. This aligns with research

indicating that male allies are essential for advancing women's rights and promoting gender equality (Flood, 2015).

Environmental Influence on Attire

Women's dress codes were also heavily influenced by contextual factors, including the dynamics of the marital home and community expectations. Some women gained more comfort and freedom with their husbandry and some protested against the traditional norms given by society. The separation of voluntary and coerced behaviours in this sense also carved the space for the exercise of personal agency and processes of differentiation between cultural traditions and coercive norms. The use of clothes that is up to the woman in her clothing selection is related to her social and cultural environment. Experiences of more comfort and freedom in her marital home vis-a-vis her parental home reiterate that sufficient support provides women the adequate security and impetus to dress the way they want to dress.

Voluntary vs. Compulsory Practices

The difference between veiling by compulsory or voluntary modes is clear. While some women wear the veil by choice in public, others say they are under pressure to wear it for societal reasons. This is where the theme of agency and the difference between voluntary cultural practices and coercive traditions comes into play.

The findings of this study align with Theory of Gender and Power by Connell (1987), in which she exposes the structural, the symbolic, and the individual dimensions of gender relations. We are talking about the level of structure here, with women deciding what to wear because of the resulting patriarchal family structures. But the extent to which the symbolic weighs in can be seen in the way veiling is used to signify cultural norms and values. The individual dimension is evident in the parallel and personal agency of women such as the MA-educated and those as young as the pre-teen girls claiming autonomy.

This echoes Bourdieu (2001) and his idea of 'symbolic violence' where norms of a society produce

'voluntary servitude' to maintain gender structures while women in fact come to internalise and reproduce these roles (ibid). The study suggests that conventional norms, personal freedom, educational input and environmental influences operate in a complex manner determining the attire choices of women. The results highlight the importance of ongoing advocacy for women's rights, and indicate that educational access, autonomy and enabling environments aimed at overcoming oppressions, are drivers of challenging harmful traditions. Our results are based on a convenience sample and may not be generalizable, and future research could include a more varied and larger sample, covering a wider geographical area.

7. CONCLUSION

The study has examined how patriarchal control continues to shape women's clothing practices in rural Haryana. The fieldwork carried out across different regions clearly shows that marriage often becomes the point at which restrictions on women's dress begin or become stronger. These restrictions are not limited to clothing alone but are connected with household control, community pressure, and economic dependence. In many cases, this also affects women's movement and their opportunities related to work.

The study offers a zone-specific understanding of dress autonomy and shows how everyday clothing becomes a site where control and resistance both operate. The findings can be useful for organisations working with women, especially in designing awareness programmes for young brides and sensitisation efforts for families and in-laws. The observations from the field also point toward areas where policy support is needed to strengthen women's ability to make independent choices.

At the same time, this research is limited to a specific region and a convenience sample. Future studies can follow women over a longer period of time to understand how clothing autonomy changes across generations. There is also scope to expand this work by comparing rural and urban settings and by bringing in caste and religion to better understand the multiple layers that shape women's everyday lives.

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