



Perceptions of Social Empowerment among Hijab-Wearing Women in Pakistani Universities: An Intersectional Perspective

Syeda Maryam Batool¹, Jannat ul Mawa²

Lecturer, Department of Gender and Development Studies, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Pakistan

Supervisor and corresponding author

maryam.batool@lcwu.edu.pk

Department of Gender and Development Studies, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Pakistan

Researcher

mawaahmed29@gmail.com

Abstract

In Pakistan, the hijab is a well-known symbol of religious and cultural identity; however, its effects on women's empowerment are still not yet widely acknowledged. This study analyzes the social empowerment experiences of professionals and students wearing headscarf or veil in Pakistani academic settings. Seventeen hijab-wearing women from coeducational and women-only universities participated in semi-structured interviews utilizing a qualitative methodology. The data was interpreted through the perspectives of gender performativity and intersectionality theory using thematic analysis. The findings showed that women's social empowerment emerged as closely linked to economic independence, mobility, self-reliance, and confidence. While women-only institutions offered safety and participation, co-educational settings were valued for building confidence and professional skills. Together, these outcomes highlight the dual nature of empowerment experienced by hijab-wearing women, where individual agency is fostered through education and exposure, yet constrained by institutional biases and societal expectations. These insights underscore the significance of inclusive policies and cultural sensitivity in order to promote social empowerment in educational and professional settings.

Keywords: Hijab, Social Empowerment, Pakistan, Intersectionality Theory, Gender Performativity, Discrimination, Inclusive Policies

Introduction

Enhancing the status of women and promoting their empowerment has become a prominent topic on both national and global agendas throughout the twentieth century. Women's empowerment is widely recognized as a critical driver for sustainable social and economic development, as it directly influences a country's capacity to fully utilize the talents and potential of its population. According to Chompa (2022), women's empowerment involves the ability and power of women to access resources, participate in decision-making, and improve their socio-economic standing. Within social sciences, empowerment is often understood both as a dynamic process and an outcome that enables women to overcome barriers and gain control over their lives (Dandona, 2015). Gangrade (2001) described empowerment as providing

women with opportunities and the freedom to make choices concerning their own lives. Sunkad (2023) similarly views social empowerment as the process through which individuals and groups acquire autonomy, confidence, and resources necessary to make independent decisions, positively impacting their social environments. Antony (2006) emphasized education as a fundamental means to uplift women's status by recognizing their agency across various spheres of life.

Since the United Nations designated the Decade for Women in 1975, the focus on women's conditions has intensified globally. However, recent research highlights persistent obstacles to achieving empowerment, partly due to the lack of standardized tools and comprehensive understanding of what empowerment entails in contemporary contexts (Saarathi, 2024; Silva, 2022). Sharaunga et al. (2018) argue that empowerment is multidimensional and cannot be adequately measured by a single indicator, noting that progress in one area does not imply full participation in all societal domains.

Muslim women, particularly those who visibly express their religious identity through hijab, face distinct challenges on a global scale, especially in the post-9/11 context, where their access to social institutions and public spaces is often constrained (Nagra, 2018). Women continue to strive for recognition and autonomy worldwide despite these barriers (Koo & Han, 2018). The hijab, worn predominantly by young women, symbolizes religious commitment, cultural heritage, and personal comfort (Haroon et al., 2022). Religion profoundly shapes individuals' attitudes and interactions, influencing their social and professional experiences (Smith et al., 2012). With women's participation in the workforce increasing over recent decades, those who practice modest attire often encounter prejudice impacting their career trajectories (Saher et al., 2022).

Education plays a crucial role in shaping social perceptions and promoting inclusivity, equal opportunity, and critical awareness within communities (Sultana, 2024; Budhia & Mahakur, 2025). Universities serve as transformative spaces for skill enhancement and personal growth. Savani (2025) contends that higher education institutions foster gender equality by providing leadership opportunities, implementing inclusive policies, and encouraging women's engagement in academics and extracurricular activities. Despite these advances, institutional policies often challenge prevailing gender stereotypes while striving to create inclusive environments. Youssef (2020) further asserts that positive institutional cultures can bolster women's development regardless of visible identity markers.

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework is particularly relevant in understanding the unique challenges faced by hijab-wearing women, as it highlights how overlapping social identities, i.e., gender, religion, and culture create complex forms of disadvantage (Hossain et al., 2024). A comprehensive examination of empowerment for these women necessitates an intersectional approach to capture the nuances of their lived experiences.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore how hijab-wearing professionals and university students perceive their social empowerment.
- To investigate differences in perceptions of social empowerment between hijab-wearing students in women-only versus co-educational universities.
- To examine the experiences of hijab-wearing women regarding social empowerment in both academic and workplace settings.

Review of Literature

Empowerment has been defined in multiple ways, but central to many definitions is the increasing capacity of individuals to make meaningful decisions about their lives. Kabeer (2001) describes empowerment as the expanding ability to make life choices. Ahmed (2024) views empowerment as a process of personal development that fosters social change through building connections and collective strength. Dandona (2015) adds that empowerment involves awareness of social and cultural factors shaping one's identity and treatment, emphasizing the importance of both internal mindset and external conditions.

Nussbaum (2000) argues that true empowerment should be measured not merely by resources but by the real freedoms individuals have to act and make decisions. Social empowerment, particularly for women, involves gaining access to resources, achieving social justice, and enhancing capacities (Sultana, 2024). Sustainable development requires equal participation of men and women, underscoring the necessity for a holistic approach to empowerment (Chompa, 2022). Scholars such as Sharaunga et al. (2018) caution against single-dimensional measures, emphasizing that empowerment is multifaceted and context-dependent.

In many developing countries, structural barriers such as educational disparities, financial dependence, gender discrimination, and weak enforcement of laws impede women's empowerment (Adil & Yasin, 2022; Mandal, 2013). Some men perceive women's empowerment as a threat to traditional power dynamics (Schuler et al., 2010). Effective empowerment must occur both individually and collectively, supported by organizations and institutions that facilitate women's social advancement (Sunkad, 2023).

The hijab holds layered meanings, functioning as a symbol of religious identity, moral standing, and cultural expression (Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Kadir, 2024). In Western contexts marked by Islamophobia, hijab-wearing women are frequently stereotyped as oppressed or dangerous (Afshar, 2008). However, Beckmann (2014) challenges this narrative, arguing that wearing the hijab can be a deliberate and empowering choice. Despite this, hijab-wearing women often face discrimination and social exclusion in Western societies, including public harassment that undermines self-confidence (Marzouk, 2021; Nagra, 2018; Zakir & Zabrodska, 2023). In countries like Iran and Turkey, state policies have instrumentalized the hijab to control women's autonomy (Koo & Han, 2018).

In Pakistan, women's identities are shaped by intersecting factors such as religion, culture, socioeconomic status, and institutional barriers, all of which influence their empowerment (Mian, 2023). Education remains a critical driver of empowerment, enhancing agency, voice, and decision-making abilities (Sultana, 2024). However, challenges persist, especially for women from tribal or rural backgrounds, where limited female staff, poor education quality, cultural restrictions, and logistical issues restrict access to higher education (Aftab et al., 2023; Mehmood et al., 2018; Rana et al., 2024). Urban girls generally enjoy greater benefits from education and social opportunities (Budhia & Mahakur, 2025), while higher cultural capital correlates with increased educational attainment and social mobility (Hassan et al., 2019).

Educational institutions can act as catalysts for women's empowerment by providing inclusive policies and leadership opportunities (Savani, 2025). Motivations for wearing the hijab include religious obligations, cultural norms, personal comfort, and family influence (Fayyaz et al., 2023; Haroon et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023; Mizel, 2020). Sectarian affiliations further shape hijab practices (Fayyaz & Kamal, 2016). Nonetheless, hijab-wearing students often face discrimination and social exclusion within educational settings (Arshad et al., 2012). Contrary to assumptions linking hijab to psychological distress, some studies show low social anxiety levels among these students (Hussain, 2019). Family concerns about modesty sometimes compel students to wear the hijab in co-educational settings (Khan et al., 2023).

Financial empowerment of women improves with greater access to opportunities (Khursheed et al., 2021). Although the number of hijab-wearing women entering male-dominated fields has increased, they still encounter cultural clashes and discrimination in professional environments (Saher et al., 2021; Saher et al., 2022). Discriminatory hiring practices and slower career advancement are prevalent among hijab-wearing employees (Ahmed & Gorey, 2021; Lalani et al., 2023). Urban workplaces pose particular challenges as women navigate the tension between modern work cultures and religious principles (Matloob & Saher, 2025). Women prefer recognition based on performance rather than appearance (Caksen & Caksen, 2024). For many, hijab symbolizes religious commitment, social adaptation, and mental well-being (Fayyaz & Kamal, 2017). Supporting hijab in the workplace promotes gender justice and inclusivity (Jovari, 2024).

Critical empowerment emphasizes the importance of social recognition, voice, and inclusion in professional contexts (Casey et al., 2010). However, workplace harassment remains widespread, with many cases going unreported (NCSW, 2023). Wearing the hijab can also provide a sense of safety and confidence in mixed-gender environments (Hussain, 2019). Patriarchal norms restrict women's ability to balance personal and professional responsibilities (Walby, 1989), while cultural expectations sustain gender imbalances and limit women's visibility in public spaces (Adisa et al., 2023). Traditional norms discourage women's workplace participation, reinforcing male dominance (Adisa et al., 2019; Friedan, 1963). Structural barriers continue to hinder women's engagement in economic sectors (Gulzar et al., 2024; Kumar, 2005). Freedom of mobility and decision-making are key to effective empowerment (Das, 2022). Partial empowerment occurs when women progress in some areas but remain restricted in others (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Weak enforcement of pro-women laws and patriarchal systems slow social progress (Wahid & Kabir, 2024). Gender discrimination is perpetuated through multiple institutions, including family, education, workplaces, religion, media, and interpersonal relationships (Johri, 2023). Social institutions play a vital role in promoting gender equality and empowerment (Youssef, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, hijab-wearing women often used face masks to mitigate discrimination in public (Tubangsa & Syarif, 2024). Muslim female influencers also contribute to normalizing the hijab as a fashionable and modest choice among young women (Manzoor et al., 2024).

Rationale

Although the number of educated and professionally active women who wear the hijab is increasing, there remains a scarcity of research focusing on their own perceptions of social empowerment within academic and workplace environments. In global discourse following the events of 9/11, the hijab has often been framed in a binary manner either as a symbol of terrorism or oppression. This oversimplification fails to acknowledge the diverse lived experiences of hijab-wearing women across different cultural and social contexts. Within Pakistan's socio-cultural setting, the hijab functions as both a religious emblem and a visible marker of identity, influencing how women are perceived and how they navigate public spaces. This study seeks to provide evidence-based insights that can inform inclusive workplace practices and university policies, thereby fostering a more supportive atmosphere for women who wear the hijab.

Significance of the Study

This study addresses a significant gap by exploring social empowerment perceptions among hijab-wearing students and professionals in academic institutions a topic often overlooked in research and policy discussions. The findings aim to inform policymakers in designing inclusive, non-discriminatory frameworks and assist educators, employers, NGOs, and media practitioners in cultivating respectful and empowering environments. Ultimately, the research contributes to advancing gender-sensitive practices and challenging prevailing stereotypes within the Pakistani context.

Research Question

How do hijab-wearing university students and professionals perceive their social empowerment within their academic institutions and workplaces?

Conceptual Framework

This research is grounded in two theoretical perspectives, i.e., Gender Performativity Theory and Intersectionality Theory. Gender Performativity Theory helps to understand hijab-wearing as a performative expression of gender identity and religious belief. Meanwhile, Intersectionality Theory offers a framework to analyze how intersecting social identities such as gender, religion, and cultural background combine to influence experiences of empowerment and discrimination in both educational and professional settings.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was employed to explore participants' perspectives in depth. Purposive sampling was used to select 17 hijab-wearing participants, comprising 10 students and 7 professionals

from both women-only and co-educational universities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify key patterns and themes within the data.

Inclusion/ Exclusion Criteria

Female participants who wear the hijab, i.e., including both veil and headscarf styles were included in the study. Students enrolled in women-only or co-educational universities, female professionals working in universities, including both academic and non-academic staff. Females not wearing the hijab and male students or professionals are also excluded from the present study.

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Students

Participants	Age	Institute Types	Hijab Duration	Hijab Types
S1	18	Women-only	6 years	Abbaya/scarf
S2	20	Women-only	5 years	Abbaya/veil
S3	21	Women-only	5 Years	Abbaya/veil
S4	19	Women-only	6 years	Abbaya/veil or mask
S5	20	Women-only	10 years	Abbaya/scarf
S6	22	Women-only	6 years	Abbaya/scarf
S7	23	Co-educational	13 years	Abbaya/scarf
S8	21	Co-educational	9 years	Abbaya/scarf
S9	24	Co-educational	6 years	Abbaya/scarf
S10	18	Co-educational	3 years	Abbaya/scarf

Table 2 Demographic Profile of Professionals

Participants	Age	Education	Designation	Institute Types	Work experience	Hijab Duration	Hijab Types
P1	46	Post-Doc (Continue)	Associate Professor	Women-only	22	30	Abbaya/veil
P2	55	Post-Doc	Associate Professor	Women-only	15	40	Abbaya/veil
P3	43	Mphil	Admin Officer	Women-only	19	23	Abbaya/veil
P4	33	Mphil	Assistant Lecturer	Co-Edu	7	21	Abbaya/scarf
P5	24	PhD (Continue)	Visiting Staff	Co-Edu	2	11	Abbaya/veil
P6	48	PhD (Continue)	Associate Professor	Co-Edu	15	13	Abbaya/scarf
P7	26	Mphil	Assistant Lecturer	Co-Edu	1.5	8	Abbaya/veil or

Table 3 Thematic Overview of Participants' Experiences

Main Themes	Connecting Themes
Perception of Social Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions and understandings of empowerment
Hijab as Aspirations and Challenges to Social Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation behind wearing hijab • Hijab as identity • Public dealing and social barriers • Social mobility • Societal perceptions • Inner conflicts while wearing hijab • Access to academic opportunities • Career aspirations • Professional experience and challenges •
Academic and Professional Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation behind wearing hijab • Hijab as professional identity • Workplace experiences and challenges • Opportunities & inclusion • Career aspirations, barrier & opportunities • Institutional environment • Hijab as a professional identity • Workplace experiences and challenges
Agency and Empowerment Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy and voice • Suggestions and aspirations for change • Resilience and coping strategies

Table 3 presents the overarching themes and subthemes derived from the narratives of all participants. Three major themes emerged: Perceptions of Social Empowerment, Hijab as Aspirations and Challenges to Social Empowerment, and Agency and Empowerment Strategies. Each theme captures interconnected dimensions of participants' lived experiences across academic and professional settings.

Analysis

The first major theme emerged from thematic analysis is **Perceptions of Social Empowerment**. Participants described social empowerment as a multidimensional concept encompassing personal autonomy, freedom of movement, decision-making authority, and social respect. Several respondents' emphasized independence and safety as central to feeling empowered. As a student said: *"In my opinion, it means that if I am anywhere outside, I have freedom, that I am empowered, that I can come out on my own. I can take decisions, decide what I want to do in my career, what I want to wear. No one can force me, no one can hit or hurt me, and no one try to control me."*

Similarly, another student highlighted encouragement and freedom from fear as essential elements of empowerment, stating: *"For me, social empowerment is when I can do anything in my social circle or life and I am not discouraged for it. I am encouraged instead. I can work without fear – that's what social*

empowerment means to me.” Decision-making authority within social life was also stressed, as a student added: *“To me, social empowerment means how empowered you are in your social life, how much decision-making you can do.”*

Other student linked empowerment with self-reliance and confidence in public interactions. A student explained empowerment through independent social functioning: *“Social empowerment is about what we are doing socially in our lives, when we step into society, how we perform socially. For example, I travel alone, and I face challenges myself, I deal with them on my own without anyone’s help.”*

Confidence in communication and self-presentation was another recurring aspect. Student 4 shared: *“Social empowerment means being confident enough that if someone asks you anything when you go out, you have enough confidence to answer them comfortably, according to your own values, and feel that you are absolutely fine, that you can handle everything your way.”*

Safety and secure mobility were also central to empowerment narratives. Student added: *“For me, it means I feel very secure. I can go out alone. It’s not that I feel weak and stay inside because I am a girl!”* However, some participants pointed to the persistent insecurity women experience despite education or independence. Student observed: *“To me, social empowerment means that even if a girl is independent, she may still feel insecure. No matter how educated or bold she is, our society makes her feel fear.”*

Echoing this view, a professional participant stated: *“A woman should be at least confident enough to move independently in society.”* Financial independence was also identified as a vital component of empowerment. Student 1 defined empowerment as freedom from dependence: *“For me, social empowerment means that a woman should be independent and not dependent on others.”* Similarly, Student linked empowerment to employment and supportive work environments: *“For me, social empowerment means being socially independent — having a job and working in a good environment.”*

The second major themes followed by connecting was, ***Hijab as Aspirations and Challenges to Social Empowerment***. Participants reported diverse motivations behind adopting the hijab. Family influence emerged as a significant factor, with several respondents indicating that they were instructed by family members to wear it. The participant expresses thoughts that she starts wearing hijab on her personal choice after influence from mother, however, her mother enforce her to do this practice through expressing sentiments such as, *“If you start wearing it then you must wear it daily.”* Others described hijab as a personal choice rooted in religious belief and influence of Islamic schooling. The participant acknowledged that her friends expresses sentiments on her appearance like, *“why are you wearing it? Are not your dress pressed? Moreover, participant shares her another memory where her university teacher point out on her veil during an event though expressing sentiments like, “take off the mask, what is this?”* Furthermore, the respondent shares a moment when she hosted an event in university with her class fellows but she was send back to the stage at the time to present token of thanks to guest due to her appearance, highlighting the role of institutional culture in shaping religious practices.

In contrast, one participant described being compelled to wear the hijab by a teacher, recalling feelings of humiliation when being singled out in class. Exposure to religious content on social media and spiritual experiences such as performing Umrah were also mentioned as influential. Some participants linked their decision to wear hijab to experiences of harassment, viewing it as a means of protection in public spaces. One respondent shared that she began wearing the hijab due to family expectations and later adopted a face mask during the COVID-19 pandemic as it became socially required. Collectively, these accounts illustrate that the decision to wear hijab is shaped by a complex interaction of personal faith, family influence, religious exposure, institutional norms, and lived experiences. The participant shows rigid believe on that she will get reward in hereafter while fighting with her inner conflicts though expressing sentiments such as, *“Sometimes I feel poor about my look in social gathering and want to look stylish as others with open hair but I stopped myself because of fear to Allah.”*

Many participants associated the hijab with a strong sense of religious and cultural identity. Professional women, in particular, described it as integral to their self-concept, noting that it enhanced confidence in

professional roles. For them, hijab symbolized dignity, strength, and independence, enabling them to assert themselves across social and professional domains. The respondent advocates for the positive attitude with others though expressing sentiments like, "If you cannot support someone, then do not criticize also. Everyone has his own struggle, respect it", reflects to behave in moderate way with each other.

Several respondents also viewed the hijab as a form of protection that fostered a sense of safety and comfort in public settings. Wearing it helped them feel more secure and confident while navigating daily life. Thus, the hijab was not only a religious or cultural practice but also a source of psychological reassurance and empowerment.

However, participants also highlighted constraints on women's mobility shaped by traditional gender norms. Many reported that women often require male accompaniment to move freely, reflecting entrenched patriarchal expectations. Restricted mobility was linked to reduced confidence and limited social participation, reinforcing inequality in public life. Participants described a state of "critical empowerment," where concerns about safety and harassment shape everyday decisions. One participant preferred university transport or ride-hailing services but still expressed anxiety about potential harassment when traveling alone. Transportation challenges were repeatedly identified as a barrier to equal participation, demonstrating how structural and cultural factors jointly influence women's freedom of movement.

Stereotyping was another prominent concern. Participants noted that hijab-wearing women are frequently perceived as conservative or intellectually less capable, based solely on appearance. Some mentioned peer pressure to adopt more fashionable clothing, leading to internal tension. One respondent pointed out that repeatedly wearing the same abaya could lead others to associate hijab-wearing women with lower social status, underscoring how dress becomes a marker for social judgment. Similarly, the respondent expressed helplessness about telling how her female relatives criticize on her in gathering though expressing sentiments like, "*You must be an aunty, "have you lost your hair" "you are so weak, what are you trying to hide from such big dupatta."*

Media representations were also criticized. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with portrayals that equate confidence and success with unveiled women, while depicting hijab-wearing women negatively. Such representations were seen as reinforcing stigma and exclusion. Inner conflicts were acknowledged by some participants, particularly feelings of reduced attractiveness or a desire to dress more fashionably. Despite these tensions, participants described managing these struggles through self-discipline, religious commitment, fear of Allah, and the belief that modesty yields spiritual reward. The respondent also adds that her mother also wear hijab and emphasize me though expressing sentiments such as, "*it doesn't seem good if a Syed girl goes out uncovered."*

Academic and Professional Experiences was the third major theme emerged from thematic analysis. Participants generally reported that universities promote equal participation regardless of dress, and hijab was not perceived as a major barrier to academic access. However, subtle biases persisted, especially in extracurricular activities and representative roles. One participant noted that hijab-wearing students were often assigned roles such as recitation or naat competitions. Others avoided extracurricular involvement due to dress code requirements. A participant recalled being removed from the stage during an event and sent back only to present a token of thanks, attributing the decision to her appearance. For instance, a student recalls a university function where she refused to participate though expressing sentiments such as, "*I didn't participate because I would have to wear a dress, and I don't want to wear."* The participant shows her firm practice though expressing sentiments such as, "*If I participate, I will do so in veil."*

Despite institutional inclusivity, participants anticipated or experienced discrimination in employment contexts. Accounts included biased hiring practices, exclusion from key tasks, limited professional visibility, and slower career progression. One respondent described being sidelined during an internship, noting a preference for appearance over competence. Another recounted how her cousin was asked to

remove her hijab and wear makeup during a school interview to appear more “representative.” Concerns were also raised about working in media industries, where appearance was perceived to outweigh qualifications. These narratives illustrate how persistent societal biases shape employment opportunities for hijab-wearing women. The participant shares her memorable event of receiving gold medal when her class fellow and photographer suggest unveiling, expressing the sentiment such as, *“This is your special picture, so take it without the niqab”*, while she refused to unveil in front of all, reflects her firm commitment to hijab.

Professional participants further detailed experiences of discrimination during interviews, including being criticized or asked to remove the veil. The participant reports a lot of biasness in our school system. Moreover, the respondent shares her experience of an organization, where her promotion was delayed for a long time, expressing their sentiments such as, *“What’s the issue if you don’t carry hijab?”* Some reported exclusion from representative roles despite qualifications, though a few noted fair treatment after being hired. Social events and workplace gatherings posed additional challenges, particularly during meals. One professional avoided eating in mixed-gender settings due to discomfort in adjusting her veil, leading to feelings of exclusion. Another opted to wear a face mask instead of a veil during meetings for convenience. According to the respondent, she observes that girls, who carrying veil, faced more difficulty during lunch time in mixed gathering though expressing sentiments such as, *“Eating ice-cream is difficult with niqab.”*

Despite these challenges, many participants stated that the hijab enhanced their confidence when interacting with male colleagues and formed a core part of their professional identity. While most described respectful workplace interactions, some observed reduced engagement from male colleagues. Participants acknowledged growing societal acceptance of hijab, although entrenched stereotypes continue to influence workplace dynamics. According to the professional participant, hijab support her during traveling outside though expressing sentiments such as, *“I go wherever I want to go without hesitation.”*

Participants emphasized that education and confidence alone do not eliminate insecurity in a society characterized by unequal power structures. Fourth major theme drawn from thematic analysis was ***Agency and Empowerment Strategies***. Many stressed the need to transform cultural attitudes and male perspectives that normalize harassment. Family norms were identified as influential in shaping ideas of gender and modesty, while Islamic education and online religious content were seen as strengthening faith among younger women. The participant expresses thoughts on her hijab that she consider it as an essential part of her daily life that brings pride and satisfaction, expressing sentiments such as, *“If I remove hijab, I feel something is missing.”* The respondent emphasizes her firm commitment with hijab, though expressing sentiments such as, *“I’ve been wearing the hijab from the start... I feel incomplete without it.”*

Participants also described exercising agency through personal style choices that balanced modesty with professionalism. One respondent shared that she selected elegant abayas and printed scarves for formal occasions, while choosing simpler attire in public spaces to remain anonymous and safe. Additionally, the respondent advocates for consider hijab as positive tool to bring change in our society through expressing sentiments such as, *“hijab is positivity, not associate it with negativity due to few individual’s action.”*

Moreover, the respondent shared the experience in which she take off her abbaya in an event due to comfortable environment setting but people criticize it expressing sentiments such as, *“ she is showing off now, otherwise she always say she does hijab from everyone.”* Others discussed adapting their hijab styles using scarves, face masks, or accessories to align with workplace expectations while maintaining religious principles. These strategies reflect how hijab-wearing women actively negotiate empowerment by navigating social expectations without compromising their values. The respondent highlights the importance of hijab in her life, through expressing sentiments such as, *“it is not just a garment, and it is a source of comfort and personal security for me in public.”* . Furthermore, the respondent helps to understand harassment and advocate for zero tolerance towards such behavior through expressing the

sentiment such as, “Even if someone just stares at you that is also harassment. If someone does it once, they will do it again, so you should react immediately and not give them any support.”

Table 4 Comparative Dimensions of Social Empowerment among Hijab-Wearing Students in Women-Only and Co-Educational Universities

Major	Connecting themes	
	Women-only institute	Co-education institute
Perceived empowerment & Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel socially empowered because of comfortable setting and have lack of mixed-gender interactions • Supportive and inclusive environment • Limited exposure • Teachers and classmates are generally supportive • Freedom of movement • Lack of biasness in grade due to hijab • Peer pressure exist to dress in a fashionable way • Reported exclusion from certain representative roles • No discrimination to get scholarship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High level of confidence while group discussions and giving presentations • Confidently participating in expert growth • Broad exposure • Supportive faculty • Respectful male peers interaction • Restricted mobility • Acceptance of appearance • Reported no restrictions or discrimination as a participant tells herself part of conducting international conference • Interactions between men and women are not seen in positive way • Lack of personal vehicle usually cause hurdle in mobility inside campus
Discipline: Islamic studies vs. others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visible difference observed • More acceptance of appearance • Normalized culture of hijab • Comfortable classroom settings • Respectful interactions with teachers and peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant difference seen • Curtain separation between male and female students • Strict enforcement of hijab • Limited interaction between males and females students • High acceptance of appearance • Extra-curricular activities are conducted in segregation; strict adherence to hijab

Comparative Analysis

The perception of social empowerment among hijab-wearing students varies notably between women-only and co-educational universities. Within women-only institutions, the hijab was frequently described as a source of identity and self-assurance, enabling students to engage freely in academic and social spaces while remaining aligned with their personal and religious values. Participants emphasized the supportive and inclusive nature of these campuses, where the absence of mixed-gender interaction reduced anxiety related to judgment and harassment. Importantly, students reported equitable treatment

in academic assessment and access to scholarships, reinforcing their trust in institutional fairness. However, this environment also limited exposure to broader professional networks and, in some cases, restricted participation in leadership or representative roles. The presence of peer-driven fashion norms further illustrated that social pressures persist even in women-only contexts. Additionally, the respondent addresses that peer influence exist as well as peer pressure referring that girls are also force by peer to change your look in modern style.

Students generally reported a strong sense of social empowerment due to a comfortable, gender-segregated environment. The absence of mixed-gender interaction was often described as reassuring, contributing to freedom of movement and active participation. The participant shares her inner conflicts that she face difficulty at some point in social gathering like party or celebration, through expressing her sentiments such as, *"You start feeling awkward yourself in this situation, when everyone around you is looking different during event."* Additionally, the respondent reports that criticism mostly comes more from women than men. The respondent expresses that people are quick to judge even when you are doing proper hijab, expressing sentiments as, *"She wears hijab but talks to boys."* Faculty and peers were largely supportive, and participants did not report grading bias or barriers to scholarships linked to wearing the hijab. However, limited exposure, subtle peer pressure to dress fashionably, and occasional exclusion from representative or leadership roles were noted.

Few participants reported higher confidence in public speaking, group discussions, and professional development activities. Supportive faculty and respectful interactions with male peers contributed positively to their experiences. Exposure to diverse academic and professional opportunities was greater, and some participants reported representing their institutions in international forums without discrimination. Nonetheless, restricted mobility particularly due to lack of personal transport and societal disapproval of mixed-gender interaction emerged as key challenges.

In contrast, students in co-educational universities often associated social empowerment with increased confidence, particularly in communicative and professional settings. Opportunities to engage in discussions, presentations, and career-oriented activities were seen as instrumental in building interpersonal competence. Additionally, the respondent share precautions while dealing with men, attend meetings or event while expressing the sentiment as, *"Do not meet male colleagues alone; meet in groups and public places, not in personal spaces."* The respondent gives advice to all through expressing the sentiment as, *"Your tone of voice should be enough to give a shut-up call to the next person."* The participant advocates wearing different styles of abayas to look presentable while stay in the modesty.

Respectful conduct from male peers and encouragement from faculty members contributed to a relatively positive academic climate. Participation in high-profile academic events, such as international conferences, strengthened perceptions of merit-based inclusion. At the same time, participants highlighted persistent constraints, including limited mobility within and beyond campus especially for those without private transportation and societal scrutiny surrounding male-female interaction, which shaped both practical experiences and social self-perception.

Overall, the findings suggest that co-educational universities offer broader exposure and professional skill development, but these benefits are often accompanied by social judgment and mobility-related challenges. Women-only universities, conversely, provide a safer and more affirming environment with fewer gender-based concerns, yet at the cost of reduced engagement with diverse social and professional spheres. Both institutional contexts therefore shape distinct, yet equally complex, pathways through which hijab-wearing students experience and negotiate social empowerment.

Disciplinary Context and Institutional Culture

Within Islamic Studies departments, institutional setting further mediated experiences of empowerment. In women-only universities, the hijab was deeply embedded within departmental culture, fostering a sense of normalcy and acceptance. Students described classroom interactions as respectful and non-

threatening, which strengthened their confidence and reinforced empowerment through cultural and religious alignment.

By contrast, co-educational Islamic Studies departments were characterized by stricter regulatory frameworks. Physical segregation, limited cross-gender engagement, and rigid enforcement of dress codes structured everyday academic life. While these measures restricted autonomy and interaction, participants nonetheless reported feeling accepted and protected in relation to their appearance. Empowerment in these spaces was thus experienced through safety and institutional endorsement, albeit within highly controlled and segregated environments.

A clear distinction was observed, particularly in Islamic Studies departments where the hijab was normalized and widely accepted. Classroom environments were described as comfortable, with respectful engagement from both instructors and peers. The visibility of the hijab within departmental culture reinforced students' sense of belonging and ease. The participant recalls a memory when her friend shares an opportunity, expressing her sentiment such as, "*Please don't wear hijab, because they have already said they want a fashionable teacher.*" In addition, the respondent shares her experience that she faced unfairness during her interview in school, expressing their sentiment as, "*If we appoint you, will you wear our dress code (pant, shirt and coat)?*"

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that institutional type and disciplinary culture play a critical role in shaping how the hijab is practiced, interpreted, and linked to social empowerment. Women-only settings tend to promote empowerment through comfort, familiarity, and ease of interaction, whereas co-educational contexts emphasize exposure, confidence-building, and professional preparedness, often negotiated alongside structural and cultural constraints.

Discussion

The study's thematic findings demonstrate that social empowerment among professionals and students, who wear the hijab, are multifaceted, contextual, and determined by intersecting identities. This finding is in accordance with recent studies that demonstrate Muslim women's experiences cannot be reduced to basic categories of oppression or liberation (EL Idrissi et al., 2025; Abuzar & Mansoor, 2024). Participants described empowerment as autonomy, confidence, and a sense of safety dimensions that recent research identifies as crucial to how women in Muslim contexts negotiate identity and social belonging across themes *Perception of Social Empowerment* and *Hijab as Aspirations and Challenges* (Abuzar & Mansoor, 2024).

These results show how gender, religion, institutional norms, and society attitudes all simultaneously affect empowerment when Intersectionality Theory is taken into consideration. According to the theory of intersectionality, social factors like gender and religion produce multidimensional experiences of advantage and limitation rather than functioning independently (Crenshaw, 1989). Participants' accounts of stereotyping and restricted mobility, for instance, are consistent with research showing that women who wear headscarves frequently face nuanced prejudices related to their apparent religious identification, which can interact with institutional expectations to result in unequal opportunities. Similarly with intersectional examinations of how Muslim women navigate organizational environments, these patterns were evident in Academic and Professional Experiences, where women felt strong academically but suspected or encountered minor bias in their professional development.

The results are also consistent with Gender Performativity Theory, which contends that repeated performances of gendered behaviors, as opposed to inherent characteristics, are what determine identity and agency (Butler, 1990). Participants' constant hijab use and social space navigation might be interpreted in this setting as performative gestures that both reflect and replicate empowered subjectivities. According to recent research, wearing a headscarf can be a purposeful way to express oneself and go against prevailing preconceptions which connect empowerment to secular or Western standards (EL Idrissi et al., 2025). Participants in this study also reported how the hijab promoted self-

assurance and a feeling of belonging, especially in encouraging settings, highlighting the continuous process of creating empowered identities through practice.

Participants' experiences also highlight how institutional culture and disciplinary context influence empowerment. Women-only environments were perceived as safer and more inclusive, reducing gendered scrutiny and fostering participation echoing studies that emphasize the role of supportive institutional norms in enabling women's agency. In co-educational settings, increased exposure to diverse interactions supported confidence but also surfaced subtle cultural expectations that moderated engagement. This dynamic illustrates how empowerment is not linear but negotiated within specific cultural and structural frameworks.

Finally, the narratives around *Agency and Empowerment Strategies* underscore active resistance to reductive stereotypes. Recent research notes that Muslim women often contest external narratives about the hijab by asserting their own meanings and resisting being spoken for by dominant discourses. Participants' adaptive strategies such as styling hijab in professional contexts or managing visibility reflect this agency, aligning with scholarly calls to recognize Muslim women's voices in empowerment discourse.

Participants' *Perceived Empowerment and Attitudes* toward modesty and respect reflect broader discussions in feminist and sociocultural research where hijab is linked to positive body image, comfort, and protection, challenging Western assumptions that associate empowerment solely with Western norms of visibility. These findings suggest that empowerment for hijab-wearing women are rooted in their own interpretive frameworks and lived realities.

Finally, variations in empowerment across *Disciplines (Islamic Studies vs. others)* underscore the role of academic culture in shaping experiences. In Islamic Studies environments, where the hijab is normalized and shared, students reported a stronger sense of belonging, aligning with literature that emphasizes how shared cultural markers can enhance social inclusion and identity affirmation. In contrast, stricter gender separations and formal requirements in these settings may reinforce structural boundaries that shape how empowerment is enacted. Overall, these results corroborate literature emphasizing that empowerment for hijab-wearing women is relational, shaped by intersecting social positions, and performed through everyday practices of identity and agency.

Conclusion

This study examined how hijab-wearing students and professionals in university settings understand social empowerment through the frameworks of Intersectionality Theory and Gender Performativity. The findings show that empowerment is shaped by the interaction of gender, religious identity, and social norms, producing varied experiences across academic and professional spaces. The hijab emerged as a complex marker of empowerment, reflecting both individual agency and ongoing social negotiation. Among students, particularly in women-only institutions, the hijab was commonly associated with confidence, dignity, and a sense of security, reinforcing feelings of inclusion and belonging. In co-educational environments, it functioned as a means of asserting moral identity and personal boundaries while remaining engaged in academic life.

In contrast, professional participants reported more constrained experiences of empowerment due to structural and institutional barriers. Practices such as biased recruitment, limited access to leadership roles, and judgments based on appearance rather than competence revealed how intersecting identities gender, religion, and occupational status continue to shape unequal outcomes. From a gender performativity perspective, the hijab operates as a conscious, repeated practice through which women actively construct empowered identities, challenging assumptions that equate liberation solely with visibility. Overall, the study demonstrates that empowerment for hijab-wearing women is context-dependent and negotiated, rather than uniform, highlighting the need for institutional cultures that value merit, autonomy, and inclusion over appearance.

Recommendations

- Educational institutions and workplaces should implement inclusive, gender-sensitive policies that emphasize competence, merit, and equal access to academic and professional opportunities, regardless of dress.
- Government and organizational bodies should consider developing women-friendly and secure work environments, including gender-segregated options where appropriate, to enhance comfort, participation, and workforce retention among hijab-wearing women.
- Fashion and apparel industries should mainstream modest clothing by incorporating diverse hijab styles into regular collections, helping normalize modest fashion as part of everyday wear and social acceptance.

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Annexure

Demographic Information Form (For University Students)

Participant Code (For Confidentiality): _____

Basic Information

1. Age: _____

2. City of Residence: _____

3. Current Academic Program: (e.g., BS/MS/Mphil etc.) _____

4. Name of University: _____

5. Caste: _____

6. How long have you been wearing the hijab? _____ Years

7. What motivated you to wear the hijab?

(Religious; cultural; personal choice; family influence; others) _____

8. Source of transportation _____

Interview Questions from Students

1. What does social empowerment mean to you?

2. Do you feel socially empowered in your university? Why and why not?
3. Have you encountered situations where you felt that wearing hijab influenced your participation in academic, social, or extracurricular activities?
4. How do peers, faculty, and staff interact with you, and do you think wearing a hijab influences these interactions?
5. Have you faced any challenges or barriers while commuting or traveling outside the university, such as in markets, public offices, or other public spaces?
6. Do you feel your choice to wear a hijab affects your career aspirations or professional opportunities?
7. How do you think societal or cultural norms influence the perception of hijab-wearing women in universities?
8. Do you believe your experiences would be different in a co-educational university versus a women-only university?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences with hijab and social empowerment?

Demographic Information Form (For Professionals)

Participant Code: _____ Email: _____

Basic Information

1. Age: _____
2. City of Residence: _____
3. Education: _____
4. Marital Status: _____
5. Caste: _____
6. Designation: _____
7. Department: _____
8. Name of Institution: _____
9. Work Experience: _____
10. Source of transportation: _____
11. How long have you been wearing the hijab? _____ Years
12. What motivated you to wear the hijab?
(Religious; cultural; personal choice; family influence; others) _____

Interview Questions from Hijab-Wearing Professionals

1. Can you introduce yourself and your professional role at the University?
2. How long have you been wearing the hijab and what does it personally mean to you?
3. What does social empowerment mean to you in the context of your professional life?
4. Can you share any experiences where wearing the hijab has impacted your professional life?
5. How do colleagues, students, and other staff members interact with you, and do you believe the hijab influences these interactions?
6. Have you faced any challenges while engaging with the public outside the university, such as in markets or public offices, due to wearing the hijab?

7. How do you think societal and cultural norms influence the perception of hijab wearing professionals in university?
8. Do you believe your experience would be different in a co educational university versus a women only university?
9. What advice would you give to young hijab-wearing women entering professional spaces?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences, challenges, or aspirations related to social empowerment and hijab?