RESEARCH ARTICLE

“The new modern”: The subjective motivation for wearing a veil in a Muslim-majority city, Langsa, Aceh

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ABSTRACT

The veil-wearing is debated in various non-Muslim countries, yet it is indispensable to explore the veil-wearing in Muslim-majority country that upholds the ideology of religious moderation. Despite the fact that Langsa implements Sharia law, women who wear veils encounter discrimination. While wearing a veil, women are confronted with obstacles but still preserve the veil. Thus, analyzing the motive and the maintaining factor is crucial. This study investigates why people choose to wear and continue wearing veils. The current study is a qualitative study with an ethnographic approach. Data was collected using observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD) with ten informants selected purposely. The analysis results revealed that the use of the veil does not happen suddenly but through a complex process. The motivation for wearing a veil is a spiritual force. However, other multi-factor underlines the decision to wear one. The factors are dedication to religious principles, protecting oneself, following one spouse’s advice, and a desire to appear fashionable yet respectful and Islamic. This study implies a shift in perspectives regarding the veiling practice as a means of spirituality and a means of self-expression. Remarkably, Islamic veils transcend Islamic regulations because women wear them for diverse purposes.

INTRODUCTION

Hijab and veiling have always become a symbol of Muslim women. Even today, the veil continues to be an interesting topic for research. Despite the long history of veiling, women wearing veils still receive a negative stigma in public spaces. Women who wear the niqab are considered radical and destroy campus culture, so several universities prohibit their use (Sudirman et al., 2020). Even women wearing the veil are considered a symbol of men’s oppression of women (Zempi, 2020; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2014).

Furthermore, one definition of society’s intolerance for women wearing veils is the intolerant attitude of European society towards these women. Because of this intolerable mindset, women who wear veils face prejudice, verbal abuse, and social exclusion. The idea that wearing a veil constitutes...
religious radicalism started the controversy (Yeste et al., 2020). However, Abbas (2023) distinctly specified that the veil is a symbol of autonomy and empowerment, in which Islam is a religion that values women highly. Therefore, Research on the perspectives of women who wear the veil is crucial because there are divergent opinions on its practice.

Currently, 231 million Muslims reside in Indonesia, accounting for 86.7% of its total population, making Indonesia the most prominent Muslim nation globally (World Population Review, 2023). However, negative stigma toward women who wear the veil has also spread to Indonesia in a variety of ways, such as the belief that women who wear the veil are radical Islamists, terrorists, or even considered incompatible with Indonesian culture (Kistoro et al., 2020). Despite the negative feedback on the veil, statistically, there is a dramatic increase in the number of women wearing a veil (Niah & Ali, 2022; Permatasari & Putra, 2018), which means that despite the veil's detrimental effects, there is a hidden motive why people still want to wear it.

Utomo et al. (2018) claimed that the Islamic veil wearer is difficult to find, but it is often encountered today as people start to hijrah. The Prophet Muhammad originally considered hijrah a physical and territorial movement, but as times have changed, the concept of hijrah has also evolved. Nowadays, the common understanding of hijrah involves becoming a better, more devout person (Hasyim, 2022). People who desire to make the pilgrimage typically start by modifying how they look—becoming more subdued and moving while covered. According to reports from multiple Indonesian higher education institutions, the number of students wearing niqabs has increased (Danial, 2019; Nurmiati et al., 2020). As a result, more and more people are beginning their hijrah journey while covering their heads, and some continue to cover their faces with a veil or niqab.

Previous research mostly focuses on describing the experiences, motivations, and forms of stigma felt by women who wear the veil in their daily lives because they are considered fanatical women belonging to the terrorist group, so they are ostracised by society. Inversely, the motivation driving women to wear niqab has been widely studied. Studies revealed that women wear veils for various reasons, such as religious obligation (Grine & Saeed, 2017), fulfill the need for security, affection, actualization, and transcendence (Pohan & Syiva, 2022); self-expression (White & Hernandez, 2013). Differently, this article examines the rationale behind women continuing to wear a veil and their subjective experience wearing the veil in a microenvironment, such as the Acehnese Muslim community, which applies Islamic law and has not been given much attention by scholars. Therefore, the current study aims to describe the premise of wearing a veil based on subjective experience in Langsa, Aceh.

METHOD

The current study is qualitative research based on semi-structured interview data with women who wear the veil, which was studied based on a systematic, actual study and field facts (Creswell, 2011). This research was designed as qualitative research with an ethnographic approach. An ethnographic approach was used in this research because the aim was to explore in depth the culture that exists in a community (Spradley, 1997). This research is also reported based on the reality of natural settings in the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rakhmat, 1984).

Ten women wearing niqabs in Langsa City, Aceh, participated in this study. The data demographic can be seen in Table 1. The selection of women wearing niqabs in Langsa City was based on several arguments. First, Langsa City is a reflection of a modern, multicultural city. It is inhabited by various ethnic groups and religions, even though statistically, the majority of the population is Muslim and Acehnese. Second, Langsa City offers an ideal research location because it is a model city in the
practice of Islamic law in Aceh. Third, researchers' observations say women wearing the veil are often found in Langsa City. Based on the initial interview, women who wear the veil are discriminated against and negatively labeled. Through this ethnographic study, a clearer picture of the culture, beliefs, and even habits of the daily behavior of the community, and all the interrelationships of the social structure related to the lives of women wearing the veil in Langsa, Aceh, are becoming increasingly apparent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>The year started wearing a niqab</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marriage status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KF</td>
<td>57 years old</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Civil Servants</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DL</td>
<td>45 years old</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>35 years old</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>48 years old</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Therapist</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KN</td>
<td>42 years old</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>42 years old</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Contracts Worker</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR</td>
<td>40 years old</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR</td>
<td>26 years old</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MB</td>
<td>20 years old</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Kindergarten Teacher</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULT

Based on the findings of ten veiled women’s interviews in Langsa City, several themes supported their decision to wear the veil. Among these are the following: to demonstrate their adherence to religious teachings, to defend themselves, to accept their spouses' invitations to improve, and to desire a more stylish yet modest and Islamic appearance.

Commitment to religious teachings and Spiritual Realization

Two of the ten veiled women interviewed revealed that deciding to wear a veil was due to commitment to religious teachings. KN, one of the ten interviewees, said she chose to wear the veil to improve herself and her commitment to practicing religious teachings.

“I have been veiled since 2003. I wear the veil because I want to improve myself in obedience to Allah SWT. Initially, I learned about the ruling on veiling from the readings I received. But until then, I was not interested in wearing the veil. My heart’s desire to wear the veil became stronger after I followed and listened to the Islamic preachers’ lectures at the recitation center.” (KN)

KF, who is also one of the informants interviewed, expressed the reason for choosing to veil because she wanted to carry out the commands of Allah SWT. The interview results show that the desire for Hijrah by choosing to veil is a form of commitment to practicing religious teachings.

“I have been veiled since 2008. I wear the veil not only to protect myself, but I also want to be a person who obeys religious rules because Muslim women are told to cover their awrah. I learned about the law of wearing the veil from reading books and the ta’lim assemblies I regularly attend. I also wear the veil to be an example to my daughters.” (KF)

With a new attribute or identity as a veiled woman, the commitment to practice religious teachings can be seen in their daily activities. From observations made of veiled women, especially married ones, almost all their daily activities outside the home involve their husbands. For example, when shopping, visiting the tax office, and taking their children to school, their husbands always accompany them. Likewise, if a non-mahram male guest visits the house, they will not open the door or provide an opportunity to communicate with the guest if their husband is not at home. Veiled women do such things as a commitment to religious teachings.
Furthermore, although it is not the main reason for choosing to wear the veil, commitment to religious teachings is a factor that maintains the decision. To maintain this commitment, veiled women in Langsa City always care for themselves and their hearts by continuously learning religion from teachers or preachers they trust and attending recitations in various places. As expressed by MB and M in one of the interview excerpts,

“When I first started wearing the veil, I was still sometimes unveiled and veiled. After a while, I was ashamed of myself, and finally, I decided to wear the veil continuously. Choosing to hijrah by wearing the veil is actually hard. People mocked me ostracised me, and there were many challenges. But in order to be istiqamah, I try to learn a lot by listening to religious teachers, participating in recitations, and listening to other people’s experiences so that I can take lessons from their stories.”(MB)

“To keep myself consistent in wearing the veil, I just attend a lot of recitations so that we continue to get advice from the teachers. So it's like someone is reminding me. In my daily activities outside the home, I am accompanied mainly by my husband. Except when I'm selling, I get a lot of help from my employees, who are all women.“(M)

Additionally, spiritual realization is one of the important reasons for women in Langsa City to wear the veil. Spiritual experience arises from contemplation and upheaval of thought that occurs over a relatively long period, accompanied by considerations that are quite mature. DL, who, after hijrah using the veil, changed her name to a more Islamic name, is one of the veiled women who revealed spiritual experience as the reason for veiling.

“I decided to veil after I found peace in Makkah. I feel sinful if I still show my awrah to non-mahrams.” (DL)

Other informants expressed similar spiritual realization. S also revealed her experience of deciding to veil after often attending recitations and felt it was important to prepare herself to achieve more lasting happiness.

“I veiled myself because, in the Quranic classes I attended, the ustadz often explained that women should cover their awrah properly to enter heaven quickly. Since listening to recitations in mosques and dayah, I have realized that I have not been covering my awrah properly. I felt I had committed many sins because I had not covered my awrah properly. That motivated me to veil; I also thought life was short. I am a businesswoman, so I thought wealth is meaningless if not accompanied by worship and obedience to Allah.”(S)

Protecting Oneself

Based on the records of the interviews conducted, MR is one of the informants who expressed the reason for using the veil because she was uncomfortable with the opposite sex when carrying out daily activities. The discomfort of doing activities with the opposite sex prompted MR to decide to wear the veil. As expressed by MR in one of the interview results,

” I was a student activist. I am active in the Campus Da’wah Institute and the Department Student Association. At first, I was not veiled. Over time, while working in organizations, I began to notice discomfort when communicating with the opposite sex. Since then, I started accessing information related to the use of the veil through religious lectures on YouTube. That’s why, since 2018, I started strengthening my intention to wear a veil to avoid the gaze of men, and I feel more comfortable when I carry out organizational activities on campus.” (MR)

Following Spouse Suggestions
R is one of the informants who revealed her reasons for wearing the veil: she obeyed her husband's advice. Rea believes that obeying the husband's orders is an obligation, and making the husband happy is also the wife's obligation. As expressed in the interview results:

“I chose to wear the veil since 2011 after I got married. Before getting married, I had tried using the veil when I was at boarding school. At that time, I borrowed a friend's veil. At that time, there was a feeling of comfort when using it, but the intention was not yet strong because of many considerations—fear of disapproval from parents and ridicule by people. After getting married, I decided to wear the veil because my husband supported and always encouraged it. I chose to wear the veil because I want to make my husband happy.” (R)

Similar motivation was also obtained from interview notes with other informants. S said she chose to wear the veil because of her husband's recommendation.

“I use this veil because of my husband's recommendation and support. I have been wearing the veil since 2015, or only about seven years ago. Actually, since I studied in Palembang, I have started to hijrah, but the hijrah has not been total. At that time, I just wore a normal hijab because I felt there were so many obstacles. I'm not confident, worried about being isolated, etc. However, I started solidifying my confidence to wear the veil after getting married and returning to Langsa City. My husband is very supportive and always encourages me. For me, a wife must obey her husband; even when I want to leave the house, I have to get my husband's permission first.” (S)

The description of the two experiences of veiled women presented above shows that veiling is not only because they want to feel pious. The choice to wear the veil is because they feel comfortable and consider it an act of worship because they obey their husbands. For married veiled women, obeying their husband's orders is considered a form of piety and civility towards their husbands.

**Fashionable but still polite and Islamic.**

Based on the results of interviews with ten veiled women in Langsa City, two of them said the answer to the choice of deciding to hijrah by wearing the veil was not only because they obeyed their husbands, already knew the law, obeyed religious teachings, and wanted to be better but also based on the desire to look fashionable, more polite and remain Islamic. As expressed by M, a veil convection entrepreneur in Langsa City chose to wear a veil for the reason of wanting to look fashionable but Islamic.

“Initially, I did not wear a veil even though I was a maker and seller of veils and Muslim women’s clothing. I decided to wear the veil. After all, I had to look fashionable because my customers often asked me to demonstrate how to wear it. Because I often model the use of the veil that I sell, in the end, I was interested and chose to hijrah using a veil because it can also look fashionable and Islamic. Even now, I have my own veil brand called Sumaiyah.” (M)

Further information was obtained from an interview with SR, who said the veil is a beautiful and modest garment.

“I strongly disagree that people who wear the veil are called conservative. In fact, there are many models of veils nowadays, and they can be chosen according to each person's taste. Personally, I wear a veil that is up-to-date because, in addition to feeling religious, we can look fashionable. Moreover, I am active in the community. Of course, I have to choose a fashionable veil so that other people do not think we are left behind, and others also like us in socializing.” (SR)
The experience of veiled women in Langsa City who play an active role as an agency in responding to the development of modernity. They choose to wear the veil not because of oppression but as part of the appearance of a modernist Islamic identity that adheres to religious teachings but is adaptive to modernity. This information was obtained from an interview with M;

“Not everything modern should be measured by a glamorous lifestyle, showing off, and revealing the awrah so that a veiled woman is considered conservative just because of her veil. I disagree with that. A veiled woman is following the times, but she knows what is allowed and what is not because she has learned religion and practiced it. I personally am like that. I always follow developments and know which ones I should follow and which are not allowed. Of course, everything must be in accordance with religious rules. That’s the new modern. Keep up with developments, but don’t forget to practice the teachings of religion.” (M)

Moreover, two veiled ladies present their reason for wearing veils as stylish, courteous, and Islamic because they frequently go outside the city to attend recitations, such as those in Aceh Tamiang and Lhokseumawe. They frequently travel out of town with their husbands to places like Medan and Banda Aceh

**DISCUSSION**

The results revealed there are themes of motivation to wear the veil based on the subjective experiences of women who live in Langsa, a Muslim-majority city. The premises are commitment to religious teachings and spiritual realization, protecting oneself, following spouse suggestions, and the last is fashionable but still polite and Islamic.

The first premise is wearing a veil is a decision made based on the motivation to commit to religious teachings and spiritual realization. This finding confirms the view of Ancok and Suroso (2008) that this attitude is called religious commitment, and the indication is seen in the way individuals practice and live up to the beliefs they hold. Veiling has become a social and religious identity that is maintained by veiled women in Langsa City, even though the law is still under debate and veiled women are attacked by exclusive issues, radical issues, and so on. Accordingly, Rusuli (2001) and Ummah (2001) also reported that Muslim women and female students decided to wear the veil because of their desire and commitment to practicing religious teachings. Hochel (2013) also reports that veiling decision is made based on the Qur’an mandate.

Furthermore, to maintain this commitment, veiled women always protect themselves and their faith by continuously studying religion from teachers they trust and attending religious studies in various places. In addition to commitment to religious teaching, spiritual realization is one reason women wear the veil. The woman was enlightened when she attended Islamic study and decided to wear the veil. Correspondingly, Ammerman (2014) stated that spiritual awareness can be obtained from conversation rooms and religious studies conducted in religious organizations and other places.

The second premise is protecting oneself. This study revealed that women decided to wear a veil to defend themselves. The discomfort of doing activities with the opposite sex and men’s gaze on their bodies made them decide to veil themselves. They feel comfortable wearing a veil because they can protect themselves. As stated by Muthahhari (2012), women who wear the veil feel more comfortable, and their dignity is maintained when doing activities outside the home because they are protected from the gaze of men and safe from sin. Similarly, Siraj (2011) also specified that women considered the hijab as a source of empowerment rather than a sign of isolation. It’s a manner to avoid the male gaze.
The third premise is following spouse suggestions. The experiences of women who wear the veil presented above show that wearing the veil is not just because they want to feel religious. She chooses to wear the veil because it feels comfortable, and she considers it a form of worship because it is obedient to her husband. For married women who wear the veil, obeying their husband’s orders is considered a form of piety and civility towards their husbands. From the interview, it can be inferred that they understood the significance of the suggestion rather than feeling pressured to accept it. Chowdhury et al. (2017) stated that familial encouragement to adhere to tradition is one reason women wear niqabs.

The last premise found in this study is fashionable but still polite and Islamic. Wearing a veil makes one appear not only more religious but also Islamic in appearance. This research demonstrates that being fashionable today means more than just dressing stylishly and attractively. The awrah is covered with a veil and modified to fit the current style when fashionable. It is interpreted with an Islamic aspect. Participants described this as the new modern, keeping up with changing times but remaining under Islamic rules. Correspondingly, several studies also discovered a similar premise. For example, Mouser (2017) stated that Malay women describe headscarves as modern. As well as Sandikci and Ger (2010) studied how Turkish-covered women transformed veiling into an attractive option in fashion. Cahyaningrum and Desiningrum (2018) also reported that women are motivated to choose to hijrah using the veil because they are motivated by the current fashionable veils.

There are limitations to consider when interpreting the results of this study. First, this study does not compare the subjective experiences of the women wearing the veil to those of other women in various situations. It just reports their subjective experiences. Subsequent research suggested adopting an alternative strategy by contrasting veiled women according to their demographic attributes. Second, this study solely focuses on the premise of veiling. However, during data collection, variables such as culture are missing. Culture is an important variable, as Indonesia consists of different cultures, which might lead to a more in-depth analysis of the primary variable. Thus, future studies recommended considering culture as a fundamental theory in data analysis.

CONCLUSION

Prior research has provided evidence that women are expressing themselves in new ways when they wear fashionable niqabs, as demonstrated by the experiences of women wearing niqabs in Langsa and other places as stylish Muslim women who follow Islamic principles. It is also clear that a woman has two goals in mind when choosing to wear a veil based on the experiences of other women in Langsa who wear them. Initially, consider being able to uphold their beliefs and keeping awrah covered. This kind of situation nearly always befalls women who opt to wear veils in various settings. Subsequently, consider staying Muslim but maintaining a polished public persona. The study validates the notion that Muslim women are imaginatively bringing the veil into the present moment and counters liberal feminism, which disparages women who cover their heads.

DECLARATION

Acknowledgment

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Author contribution statement
Syiva Fitria wrote up the results and discussed and interpreted the results. Mawardi Siregar contributed to research design and concept formulation. Masdalifah Sembiring contributed to the preparation and the data collection process.

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**Data access statement**

The research data associated with a paper is available by request and can be requested through email.

**Declaration of interest’s statement**

Authors have no conflict of interest

**Additional information**

No additional information is available for this paper.

**REFERENCES**


