

Islamic Perspective on Students Wearing a Burqa at Universities in Indonesia: Results from a Survey at Three Universities

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Abstract

Burqa or in Arabic An-Niqab is used to cover the entire face of a woman, except the two eyes. The burqa is not obligatory according to *Syafi'i madzhab*, which is followed by the majority of Indonesian Muslims. In this study, researchers used a survey to develop an understanding of veiled female students' attitudes about themselves, their experience wearing a burqa, interactions with peers, and their perception of how other members of their academic community perceive them. The survey used Likert-type items. The sample in this study was 100 students from three general universities in South Kalimantan: Antasari State Islamic University, Rasyidiyah Khalidiyah Islamic College, and College of Quranic Sciences. The key findings include that 58.2% indicated a willingness to form associations with any women; 17.7% said they were happy associating only with the veiled community. A total of 13.9% said that sometimes they were told to take off their burqa when they were in the classroom. While most said

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they were never bullied on campus (67.1%), 19% said they were often bullied. Most (78.5%) said that they were given freedom even though there was a suggestion to open their faces when education and learning were taking place.

Keywords: burqa; Indonesia; university; veiled student; social interaction

The Decree of the Director-General for Islamic Education (DIRJENPENDIS) No. 102 of 2019 states that "the execution of the learning process takes place in the form of interactions between students and lecturers carried out in a humanistic and andragogic manner and dressed decently and with an open face." The Decree Laws No. 102 of 2019 apply to the rules of Islamic Religious Higher Education Standards to be consistent with Indonesia's National Higher Education Standards as a whole.

Previous research states that many factors cause the emergence of radical and splinter movements. The relationship between individuals in the digital and global era today is more formal and professional than family, so that it causes alienation (feeling alienated in the crowd) and triggers some to seek self-mooring (Koo & Han, 2018; Parashar, 2010).

Several studies have shown that sometimes students wearing the burqa are considered radical. The main factors promoting the use of the veil are the search for identity in religious life and the modeling of Islamic veiled female figures (Coulson, 2017; Mechoulan, 2018). The decision to hide (veil/niqab) is a form of religious conversion to further strengthen positive behavior as an extension of religious values that are considered to be moral and signs of good women (Strabac, Aalberg, Jenssen, & Valenta, 2016).

This paper claims that the veil is part of a religion. Veiled students often find it difficult in their community to change their lives for the better (Batum, 2016; Braun, 2017). The problem is the behavior of other female students who withdraw and sometimes feel that veiled students are "pretentious" because veiled students are considered radical (Braun, 2017; Brown & Saeed, 2015; Leibold & Grose, 2016).

On the other hand, students who use the burqa do not always close themselves off from the surrounding environment (Hussain, 2019; Leyerzapf, Rifi, Abma, &

Verdonk, 2016). Wearing a burqa can help create a comfortable environment for some women. Self-confidence and positive self-concept become the main things that must be possessed by veiled women in communicating with others (Łatuszyńska, Wawrzyniak, Wąsikowska, & Furaji, 2013).

The narration about the wearing of a burqa by students in several universities is that it is indeed part of Islamic Sharia, although there are still those who assume the burqa is a symbol of the Arab (Jahangir & Manzoor, 2017; Zimmerman, 2015). The Islamic view of the burqa as part of Islamic law has always been a controversial issue among Muslims (Dabbous-Sensenig, 2006).

The discussion of this research will show that if the community environment already understands the concept of veiling, then the use of the burqa is viewed as positive and has nothing to do with radicalism or terrorism based on understanding the environment. This research focuses more on the role of social background and student engagement in several South Kalimantan universities.

Research Methods

A survey was conducted to learn about the experiences and attitudes of burqa-wearing students in South Kalimantan, Indonesia from May to August 2019. The selection of higher education institutions was based on a previous survey conducted as preliminary research that indicated an increase in the use of the veil/face covering at higher education institutions.

The instrument used in this study was a closed questionnaire using a Likert-type scale. The questionnaire items were developed by considering specific indicators: the freedom to wear a burqa on campus, interaction between burqa-wearing students and other female students, the age when the women started wearing a burqa, and the place that inspired or motivated women to wear a burqa.

In this study, the population is all burqa-wearing students of three universities in South Kalimantan, Indonesia. Sampled in this study were three general universities,

namely, Antasari State Islamic University,² Rasyidiyah Khalidiyah Islamic College,³ and College of Al-Quran Sciences Amuntai,⁴ with a total of 100 burqa-wearing respondents who completed a paper-based questionnaire about their experiences and attitudes after being invited by a researcher. A purposive sampling technique was used.

Results

Universities in the state of South Kalimantan include Antasari State Islamic University, Rasyidiyah Khalidiyah Islamic College, and College of Al-Quran Sciences Amuntai, with an average sample of 30 people per campus. The number of respondents was 100. The focus of the study were women who were veiled/*niqab* in these universities in South Kalimantan, Indonesia. Most (75%) started using a burqa when they were in college, and 25% have used one since they were in high school.

Respondents were asked about the places or people who motivated them to start wearing a burqa. The most common response was a mosque (57%), followed by the social media 37%, and 6% followed their burqa-wearing friend in the classroom. The universities provide an understanding of the wearing of burqa in class and give freedom for students to wear a burqa.

The most common reasons respondents cited for wearing the burqa in their higher education environment were because they feel comfortable with the burqa and wanted to include the sunnah (teaching) of the Prophet on campus. The second reason is that most people assume that wearing veils can reduce the gaze of the opposite sex and diminish their lust. Finally, the most common reason for respondents to use the veil is to be able to control themselves better and be able to associate with a more intense community to seek goodness in the way of Allah. Only a small number say that they use a veil when on campus because it has become an attractive trend among female students on several campuses in South Kalimantan.

There are two questions asked to burqa-wearing students. First their social interaction with their veiled peers and the second one is their social interaction with

² For more information about this university, see <https://uin-antasari.ac.id/>

³ For more information about this university, see <http://stairakha-amuntai.ac.id/>

⁴ For more information about this university, see <https://www.stiq-amuntai.ac.id/>

their not-veiled peers. When asked about their social interaction with their veiled peers, 62.5% answered that they preferred to hang out and make friends with members of the veiled hijab communities because it is better. Twenty-two-and-a-half percent were open to relationships with any hijab-wearing women, not only burqa-wearing women. The remaining 14% were open to relationships with anyone whether male or female, including the teaching lecturer.

However, when asked about interactions with women who were not veiled, such as making friends and doing some work together, 58.2% answered they were very open to forming associations with any woman; 17.7% said they were happy associating only with the veiled community.

Some respondents (40.5%) said it was quite good to get along with those who were not veiled and sometimes invited them to begin to use a veil to become better. They stated their ultimate goal was to make it easier to protect themselves from negative responses.

When wearing the burqa on campus, almost 67.1% answered that they were never bullied in class or on campus, while 19% answered that they were often bullied in the college environment, and the rest were sometimes bullied and were the object of the ridicule of their peers.

The perceived views of respondents' colleagues were also interesting to study: 72.2% answered that they were seen as wise women and the environment was supportive; some (11.4%) said they assumed that some colleagues disagreed and differed in their views on the use of veils and made strange assumptions. The rest did not know how the colleagues view the female students who wear the veil.

Some (38.5%) strongly agreed that they must use the veil all the time. Many users of the burqa can improve their character in the future according to 34.6% of respondents. In addition, 24.4% of them argue that using the veil can protect them from their own mistakes or those of others in the community.

Lecturers and leaders at the universities did not enforce any dress codes, even for those who wearing burqa. Most (78.5%) said that they were given freedom even though there was a suggestion to open their faces when education and learning were taking place.

The basic assumption is that although there were no instructions or suggestions, using the veil is something that is sunnah for women who are post-pubescent. The rest of the respondents said that they had been told by faculty to remove the burqa in the classroom. However, none of them reported that the veil was prohibited anywhere in public or Islamic higher education institutions.

Discussion

Based on this research, female students who wear a burqa indicated that wearing a burqa make them feel content. Reconstruction of the environment based on social reality becomes part of the community interaction that is considered normal; they support it.

The understanding of the narrative of Islamism with the burqa pattern has a different understanding of life in the campus environment. Most can construct themselves as women who are Muslim, want to be better, maintain their self-desires and those who look can even motivate themselves to provide the best in their environment.

As far as social interaction is concerned, the respondents continue to interact with those in the academic community who have different beliefs, although some respondents chose to limit their social interactions to other women who wore hijabs.

Closer mosques are an important part of the use of the burqa, because they are filled with teachers from outside the campus. The social interaction of veiled female students did not seem to act as a barrier for those who carry out campus activities and actively communicate with anyone, although from the results of the study there are still some people who think that wearing burqa is strange. This research can be the initial evidence that the students are still able to carry out activities as usual and remain open to communicating with anyone, sometimes even members of the opposite sex.

Interaction on campus is also the focus of this research, that students can receive knowledge and are also able to have discussions with their college colleagues. Almost all of them stated that the lecturers provided opportunities and did not prohibit the use of veils in class, although there are sometimes that they still felt

awkward in communicating.

This research can suggest that the use of the burqa is not part of the map of a radical understanding of Islam, although there are still some who consider it strange. The issues brought up in this study are evidence that religious narratives depend on the place and system. Specifically, for the lecture environment, among those who use the veil, nearly 80% said that the veil was not compulsory and only sunnah to avoid slander and maintain self-respect as a woman. The main evidence is that campus colleagues still accept other colleagues in terms of interacting, communicating, discussing, or other activities. Sometimes when facing lecturers who are also female, they still want to open the face-covering to facilitate interaction.

Conclusion

Our survey results demonstrate that it is possible for veiled women to choose to pursue higher education and interact in an academic environment in South Kalimantan, Indonesia. A few limitations of our survey should be mentioned. First, since only university students were interviewed, any veiled young women who may feel limited in their ability to interact socially or educationally were not included in this study. In addition, some veiled students who do not feel freedom to express themselves may have been less likely to participate in this survey, and so their views may be underrepresented. Future research might consider how to reach other veiled women to better understand their attitudes and perceptions about their interactions with society. Also, other parts of burqa-wearing culture on university campuses in Indonesia may be worth considering. For example, future research should examine how certain students who wear a burqa are recruited to join burqa-veiled communities, which have been gaining popularity in Indonesia. In addition, surveys should be conducted in other parts of the country to see if our results can be replicated or if attitudes in other locations are different.

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