

Beyond the Veil: Deconstructing Gender Activism and Islamic Identity in Post-Secular Public Spaces Among Muslim Women in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Muslim women navigate their Islamic identity, engage in gender activism, and operate within post-secular public spaces. By applying semiotic principles, it examines how female activists challenge traditional religious norms and societal expectations to develop polysemic expressions of Islamic identity. By interviewing and analyzing four leading Indonesian Muslim women activists, highlight how these women redefine their roles within religious and societal contexts through activism. Reshaping public perceptions of non-hijabi Muslim women activists. The findings reveal that; [1], gender is not a static category but something negotiated and shaped through actions and reinterpretation of identity in socio-religious contexts. It underscores the dynamic nature of activism, where hijab is reinterpreted not as a rigid religious mandate but as a fluid cultural mandate. [2], activists employ traditional and innovative markers to articulate their identities, challenging the hegemonic narrative imposed by religious and political authorities. The fact that Islamic identity coexists with modernity and inclusivity. In conclusion, this paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of evolving roles of Muslim women activists.

[Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana perempuan Muslim menavigasi identitas keislaman mereka, aktif sebagai aktivis gender, dan di ruang publik pasca-sekuler. Dengan menerapkan prinsip semiotika, riset ini mempelajari bagaimana para aktivis perempuan menantang norma agama tradisional dan ekspektasi masyarakat guna mengeksplor ekspresi identitas Islam yang bersifat polisemik. Melalui wawancara dan analisis terhadap empat aktivis perempuan terkemuka Indonesia, penelitian menyoroti bagaimana para perempuan tersebut meredefinisikan peran mereka dalam konteks agama dan sosial melalui aktivisme, sekaligus mendekonstruksi persepsi publik terhadap aktivis muslimah yang tidak berhijab. Temuan menunjukkan: [1], gender bukan kategori statis, melainkan sesuatu yang bisa

dinegosiasikan dan dibentuk melalui tindakan dan reinterpretasi dalam konteks socio-religious. Menegaskan bahwa aktivisme bersifat dinamis, dimana hijab tidak lagi dimaknai sebagai kewajiban agama yang kaku tetapi mandat budaya yang fleksibel/luwes. [2], Para aktivis memanfaatkan simbol tradisional dan inovatif untuk mengartikulasi identitas mereka. Menantang narasi hegemoni otoritas agama dan politik. Karena sejatinya identitas Islam dapat berdampingan dengan modernitas dan inklusivitas. Pada akhirnya, paper ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai peran muslimah yang terus berkembang dalam aktivisme.]

KEYWORDS

Deconstructing, gender, Muslim women activists, veil

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Introduction

Indonesian Muslim women occupy a unique and complex socio-cultural landscape.¹ Traditional religious values intersect with contemporary demands for gender equality and social justice,² creating a dynamic environment where issues of faith and activism converge. One notable example of this intersection is the phenomenon of Muslim women activists who choose not to wear the hijab, challenging conventional expectations of Islamic femininity. This study explores the complex gender dynamics and the position of Muslim women activists who do not wear the hijab, focusing on individuals such as; Yuniyanti Chuzaifah, Nong Darol Mahmada, Anis Hidayah dan Rika Iffati Farihah.

These Muslim women activists navigate their identities within the pressures of social constructs and religious adherence, particularly in the post-secular public sphere, which increasingly accommodates diverse expressions of faith and activism. Through exploring their experiences and strategies, this research

¹ Diah Ariani Arimbi, *Memahami Penulis Perempuan Muslim Kontemporer Indonesia* (Airlangga University Press, 2018).

² Novia Puspa Ayu Larasati, "Gender Inequality in Indonesia: Facts and Legal Analysis," *Law Research Review Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (2021): 445–58.

examines how these activists engage with and adapt to traditional norms. It also interrogates their roles within religious and social frameworks and their contributions to the evolving discourse surrounding Islam and gender.

Much of the existing literature on gender and Islam tends to emphasize a dichotomous narrative, portraying Muslim women primarily as agents of change. Through her exploration, Maimunah³ underscores the significance of female activists' voices, positioning them as central to the discussion on gender equality and social justice. However, this study takes a different approach by examining how Muslim women activists who choose not to wear the hijab reinterpret Islamic teachings and feminism within a religious framework.

According to Harahap,⁴ the active role of female activists in Indonesia must be asserted in the public sphere. Notably, these female activists employ distinct strategies to challenge traditional norms. The Identity of female activists in Indonesia is often marginalized, and therefore, redefining the role of Muslim women in the public sphere highlights the fluidity of gender identity within the context of Islam. Women must navigate their roles to reinforce their Islamic identity.⁵ Becoming an activist should not prevent women from aspiring to their goals; however, the question remains: does a religious symbol, such as the hijab, serve as a standard by which women are judged in the activist sphere? Or, conversely, does the function of the Hijab as a symbol of resistance⁶ to gender injustice imposed by religious and state regulation?

In traditional cultural contexts, the hijab is often regarded as a symbol of modesty. Yet, in the context of activism, Muslim women must renegotiate their identities by actively engaging in social movements.⁷ Sari, an academic, emphasizes that Muslim women's involvement in the post-secular public sphere is far more complex. Increasingly, female activists are asserting their presence by challenging prevailing social norms. The transition from traditional to modern social, political, and cultural frameworks has created space for Muslim women to amplify their voices. The post-secular dynamics present unique challenges as Muslim women navigate societal expectations and traditional gender roles. Thus, the question is whether Indonesian Muslim women can effectively negotiate and deconstruct their identities within the public sphere, shaped by the evolving post-secular context.

This qualitative study relies on field research, interviews, and raw data processing. We can state that, *Deconstructing Gender Activism and Islamic Identity in Post-Secular Public Spaces Among Muslim Women in Indonesia* is essential for further exploring the ideological dichotomy surrounding this issue. This research

³ Maimunah, *Reconstructing Islamic Feminism: Indonesian Perspective* (Yogyakarta: LKiS Pelangi Aksara, 2023).

⁴ L. A. Harahap, *Perempuan Dan Ruang Publik: Menemukan Identitas Dalam Aktivisme* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2021).

⁵ Rina Rachma Novitasari, *Gender, Islam, Activism in Indonesia: The Role of Muslim Women in Contemporary Social Movement* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2022).

⁶ Dicky Sofjan, *Agama, Gender Dan Identitas: Agama, Kebijakan Publik & Transformasi Sosial Di Asia Tenggara*, ed. Dicky Sofjan (Yogyakarta: INSIST Press dan ICRS, 2017).

⁷ R.A. Sari, "Negotiating Identity and Activism: Muslim Women on Post-Secular Indonesian," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 28, no. 4 (2022).

analyzes the shifting gender roles in contemporary Indonesian society. Ultimately, the study aims to provide new insights into the dynamic interactions between activism, Muslim women's identity, and public spaces in a contemporary context.

The gender semiotic theory proposed by Subali⁸ enriches this research within both practical and ideological contexts. Semiotics serves to understand gender representation in the Islamic context. Women possess numerous symbols and unique behaviors, and this approach will assist in understanding the identity of Muslim activists and how it can be interpreted within Indonesia's complex society.

The theoretical framework of Umberto Eco's multidisciplinary philosophical semiotics⁹ interprets culture and the flexibility of meaning within the contexts of gender, Indonesian Muslim women activists, and social identity. For instance, Eco's concept of polysemy, which refers to the ability to signify to express multiple meanings¹⁰ will guide this study toward an in-depth analysis of how Muslim women reinterpret their identities and activism movements.

Applying a semiotic lens represents an effort to explore the activism of Muslim women in Indonesia. Therefore, this qualitative research approaches the subject through four informants; Anis Hidayah, Yuniyanti Chuzaifah. Nong Darol Mahmada dan Rika Iffati Farihah are Indonesian Muslim women activists with backgrounds in education and pesantren. Data were collected in Surabaya, Malang, Yogyakarta, Jakarta, Jepara, and Kuala Lumpur.

Navigating Islamic Identity in Post-Secular Public Spaces by Muslim Women in Indonesia

The Hijab is an identity for Muslim women, but that does not mean we lack the freedom to be activists simply because we wear it. It is essential to understand that the hijab is a fashion that has evolved within society, not a religious obligation. I want people to recognize and value me not for my religion or that particular identity, but for the meaningful things I do that genuinely benefit others. I want to help people and be appreciated for that. Whether they know I am Muslim or not, whether I wear a hijab or not, is irrelevant. Identity is neither the main focus nor something exceptional.¹¹

(Farihah, one of the four female activists featured as subjects in this paper, as she reflected on her experience as a Muslim woman activist.)

Re-interpreting and navigating gender and Islamic identity for Muslim women is a careful balancing act. They must reconcile religious teachings, societal

⁸ M. Subali, "Semiotics of Identity: Understanding Gender Representation on Islamic Contexts," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021): 85–102.

⁹ Umberto Eco and Inyik Ridwan Muzir, *Teori Semiotika: Signifikasi Komunikasi, Teori Kode, Serta Teori Produksi-Tanda* (Yogyakarta: Kreasi Wacana, 2016).

¹⁰ Jeffrey R Di Leo, *Umberto Eco and the World Literature of Semiotics, Theory as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2024).

¹¹ Interview with Rika Iffati Farihah, Founder Neswa.id, on 28 October 2024.

expectations, and secular norms.¹² The women in this study challenge the stereotype that religiosity is incompatible with modernity. At the same time, however, they face criticism from conservative groups.

Hidayah, Chuzaifah, Mahmada, and Farihah exemplify the interplay between global and local influences by embracing the freedom of expression in their social movement activism¹³ while maintaining their identities and distinctive ways of dressing. The question arises: is the “hijab” truly a traditional cultural artifact? Why does hijab seem to be a barrier to progressive activism, or is it rather our perception of being constrained and regulated by Islamic symbols? Addressing these questions requires a deeper understanding of the hijab’s definition. The term *hijab*, derived from the Arabic *al-hijab*¹⁴ or *hajaba*, symbolizes the Islamic identity of a Muslim woman. It refers to a separator or barrier between men and women.¹⁵

The Iranian Revolution significantly influenced the intellectual landscape of educated Indonesian society, marked by the emergence of various movements (*harakah*), sects (*firqoh*)¹⁶ and fatwas from Iranian scholars such as Murtadha Muthahhari, Thaba-Thaba’I, Ali Shariati, and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr on this topic.¹⁷

Indonesia has experienced profound transformations in its religious and gender landscapes, particularly since the fall of the Suharto regime¹⁸ in 1998. The post-Suharto era ushered in an era of expanded freedom, allowing greater expression in religious practices, social movements, and women’s activism. This period of liberalization catalyzed the proliferation of women’s organizations and the resurgence of public religiosity, with Muslim women activists emerging as key contributors to this societal shift. In contemporary Indonesia, the clothing choices of Muslim women activists have become emblematic of societal change in public spaces,¹⁹ including workplaces, universities, government institutions, and digital platforms.

Hidayah, Chuzaifah, Mahmada, and Farihah exemplify progressive Muslim women who advocate for gender equality and champion women’s rights within an

¹² Maimunah, *Reconstructing Islamic Feminism: Indonesian Perspective*.

¹³ Interview with Yuniyanti Hidayah, Presiden Pusat Studi Migrasi Migrant CARE, on 1 November 2024.

¹⁴ In terminological terms, it refers to a barrier that prevents women’s *aurat* (parts women’s body that must be covered) that cannot be seen by men. The hijab is not merely limited to clothing worn on a woman’s body. See Heba Omar Marzouk, “The Hijab in the Quran and Its Effects on Muslim Women in the Western Society” (2021).

¹⁵ Muhammad Husein, *Perempuan, Islam & Negara: Pergulatan Identitas Dan Entitas* (Yogyakarta: Qalam Nusantara, 2016).

¹⁶ Guity Nashat, *Women and Revolution in Iran* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁷ Rina Rachma Novitasari, *Gender, Islam, Activism in Indonesia: The Role of Muslim Women in Contemporary Social Movement*.

¹⁸ Azista Difanaya Khoirunisa Zaeni, “The Controversy of The Hijab for Students in State Schools During the New Order Era (1978-1991),” *Yupa: Historical Studies Journal* 8, no. 3 (2024): 406–14.

¹⁹ Sofjan, *Agama, Gender Dan Identitas: Agama, Kebijakan Publik & Transformasi Sosial Di Asia Tenggara*.

Islamic framework. Hidayah reflects on her challenges as a Muslim woman activist who chooses not to wear the hijab. She observes that the hijab is often regarded as a symbol of religious identity, yet it is also an expression of fashion.²⁰ Furthermore, the style of wearing the Hijab has evolved, reflecting broader fashion trends. Hidayah articulates that:

Sometimes, whether someone is considered Muslim or not is judged by whether they wear a hijab. Such inquiries are frequent and reflect broader societal perceptions. In Arab countries, for example, I've met women who wear loose, traditional clothing yet leave their hair uncovered, often dyed in vibrant colors. Similarly, Muslim women in other Arab regions adopt diverse forms of self-expression. Ultimately, these choices are deeply personal—individuals dress in ways that make them feel comfortable. The evolving styles of hijab further illustrate this dynamism. It is essential to recognize this fluidity rather than adopting a narrow wearing a hijab, which is neither an obstacle nor a facilitator; it is simply a matter of personal fashion choice.²¹

In public spaces, Muslim women must demonstrate intellectual agility and adaptability, asserting their voices²² while maintaining a commitment to their faith. The essence of being a Muslim activist is not defined by external markers, such as wearing a hijab, but by two fundamental elements: [1], the ability to express one's faith through creative and innovative methods that resonate across different contexts and audiences. [2], a focused commitment to the goals of activism, representing not only Muslim women but also individuals from diverse backgrounds, including non-Muslims, thereby fostering inclusivity and shared understanding.²³

Chuzafah asserts that women have the autonomy to choose their attire based on various needs and circumstances. However, they must also take responsibility for these choices in the social sphere and before God. Women have the right to participate in society while upholding modesty and dignity,²⁴ mandating religious dress codes for all women under any circumstances—as observed in certain Islamic countries—is neither practical nor aligned with the

²⁰ Interview with Anis Hidayah, president of Pusat Studi Migrasi Migrant CARE, on 10 November 2024.

²¹ Interview with Anis Hidayah.

²² Interview with Mahmada, Special staff at the Freedom Institute, founder of JIL (Liberal Islam Network), on 28 November 2024.

²³ In the mid-13th century, the Abbasid Caliphate extended the mandate for women to wear the hijab, a rule previously confined to the middle and elite classes, to all segments of society. Caliph Al-Mu'tasim Billah (1242-1258) further institutionalized gender segregation by decreeing that men and women should be separated at public events attended by the sexes. Similarly, Caliph Qadir Billah (991-1030) issued a decree that formalized the marginalization of women as an Islamic institutional norm. Read Neng Dara Affiah, *Islam, Kepemimpinan Perempuan, Dan Seksualitas* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2017).

²⁴ Interview with Yuniati Chuzafah, Executive Board AMAN / Asian Moslem Action Network Indonesia, on 14 November 2024.

teachings of the prophet²⁵ nor the flexibility inherent in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*).

Hidayah²⁶ demonstrates that a Muslim woman's commitment to activism in secular and public spaces does not necessitate conformity to traditional theological interpretations that prescribe the hijab as an obligation for all Muslim women.²⁷ The navigation of Islamic identity by Indonesian Muslim women in a post-secular context reflects a complex negotiation involving religious, cultural, Social, and political dimensions.

Gender Activism and Challenges to Traditional Religious Norms

The discourse on gender pertains to the processes of producing and reproducing widely accepted perceptions of truth regarding the roles of men and women, constructed to align with the cultural demands of Muslim societies.

Public perceptions arise from a strong influence on what Muslims consider to be right or wrong... acceptable or unacceptable... admirable or detestable... legitimate or illegitimate... as well as other norms derived from the Qur'an, hadith, sharia, and various interpretations by Muslim scholars of these sources.²⁸

A gender-biased system exists within the Muslim community, as this system is shaped and defined by the politics of differentiation between men and women. Surah Al-Ahzab (33:35) portrays women as *qânitât* (profoundly obedient). Scholars often interpret this "obedience" as compliance as one's husband. The Qur'an does not endorse any form of physical or non-physical coercion. The concept of *qânitât* for Muslim women belongs to the broader description of believers in surah Al-Ahzab, which explicitly refers to obedience to God. Muslim men and women are equal in all dimensions of Islamic life. Neither is deemed superior or inferior to the others.²⁹

In the social aspect, the absence of hijab as a tangible, individualized object signals specific social identities. Its symbolic significance emerges not merely as an abstract communicative class (e.g., an iconic signifier of "not covering one's *aurat*") but as a broader sign of "non-compliance," "irreverence," or even "resistance." Consequently, the act of not wearing hijab becomes a semiotic marker, functioning

²⁵ Interview with Anis Hidayah, president of Pusat Studi Migrasi Migrant CARE, on 7 November 2024.

²⁶ Hidayah, an accomplished Indonesian Muslim women's activist, is a prominent figure in advancing gender equity and human rights. Her extensive list of accolades includes the *Woman of Change Award* from the United Nations (2019-2020), recognition as one of Indonesian's *Five Most Influential Women Human Rights Activists* in 2019, and the *Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism* and *Human Rights Defender Award* from Human Rights Watch, New York, in 2011. Hidayah has also played a pivotal role in governance and policymaking.

²⁷ Interview with Anis Hidayah, president of Pusat Studi Migrasi Migrant CARE, on 10 November 2024.

²⁸ Interview with Nong Darol Mahmada, Special staff at the Freedom Institute, founder of JIL (Liberal Islam Network), on 28 November 2024.

²⁹ Kaukab Siddique, *Menggugat "Tuhan Yang Maskulin"* (Paramadina, 2002).

as a vehicle for both practical and cultural meanings.³⁰ In the political aspect, the decision not to wear the hijab by Muslim women activists assumes a pronounced political dimension. In contexts where authoritative institutions, whether religious or state-driven, mandate the hijab, the choice to forget it constitutes an act of opposition, defiance, or demonstration.³¹ In this sense, the absence of the hijab becomes a form of sublimated political existence, embodying an assertion of independence and authenticity. It reflects women's agency as autonomous individuals with intellectual, ideological, and social capabilities, enabling them to navigate public spaces on their terms.

Indonesian Muslim women activists encounter significant challenges in articulating their Islamic identity in public spaces. The concept of “post-secular”³² acknowledges that contemporary societies are not moving toward the erasure of religion but rather toward the reintegration and visibility of religious practices in public life. This framework requires a reevaluation of secularism³³

and invites critical inquiry into how Muslim women activists negotiate Islamic norms in public domains that are not exclusively religious.

From a broader cultural perspective, non-veiling among activists transcends mere personal preference, functioning instead as a semiotic vehicle that conveys complex messages about autonomy, identity, and resistance. When analyzed through the lens of abduction and semiotics, this phenomenon underscores the fluidity and dynamism of cultural meaning, challenging essentialist interpretations of religious identity and attire. It illustrates how cultural symbols such as non-veiling, operate within an intricate network of historical, social, and political³⁴ relations, continuously reshaped through the processes of signification and negotiation.

Interpretation of Cultural Symbols and Polysemy in Expressions of Islamic Identity

Women activists articulate their Islamic identity in ways that often challenge traditional religious norms and societal expectations, thereby constructing a paradoxical reimagining of conventional Islamic identity. The decision not to wear the hijab represents a deliberate semiotic act,³⁵ symbolizing resistance to the restrictions imposed by governmental regulations and cultural conventions. This choice signifies a form of independent thought, serving as a critical intervention to

³⁰ Interview with Mahmada, Special staff at the Freedom Institute, founder of JIL (Liberal Islam Network), on 20 November 2024.

³¹ Shashank Singh and Akanksha Singh, “Understanding the Legal and Political Aspect of Hijab Controversy,” *Issue 1 Indian JL & Legal Rsch.* 4 (2022): 1.

³² R.A. Sari, “Negotiating Identity and Activism: Muslim Women on Post-Secular Indonesian.”

³³ L. A. Harahap, *Perempuan Dan Ruang Publik: Menemukan Identitas Dalam Aktivisme*.

³⁴ Ugo Volli, “The Origins of Umberto Eco’s Semio-Philosophical Project,” *Rivista Di Estetica*, no. 76 (2021): 81–95.

³⁵ Nuril Hidayati, “Identitas Keislaman: Muslimah Aktivist Tanpa Hijab.” (Surabaya, 2024).

draw attention to contemporary social conditions and to foreground the future of human rights,³⁶ particularly the rights and roles of women within Muslim societies.

From a semiotic perspective, the act of not wearing the hijab functions as a signifier within a broader system of meaning. This semantic act gains significance when situated within axes of opposition and relational contexts alongside other units of meaning.³⁷ For example, within an oppositional axis, it may contrast with practices such as wearing *a hijab*, *a burqa*, *a niqab*, or *an abaya*. Conversely, a relational axis may align with choices such as *wearing a dress*, *a kebaya*, *a sarong*, or *a bikini*.³⁸ These semiotic structures underscore the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity construction. In this context, clothing choices transcend mere fashion and operate as ideological markers, enabling women activists to engage critically with the intersecting discourse of religion, culture, and politics. This approach challenges normative paradigms and invites a reexamination of the interplay between individual agency and societal expectations in shaping Islamic identity.

The semantic construct of not wearing the hijab can be interpreted through abductive reasoning from several critical perspectives: [1] *economic dimension*, the decision may be viewed as an effort to reduce fabric expenses or minimize the environmental impact of detergent usage during washing.³⁹ Conversely, it may signify elevated financial capacity, as maintaining uncovered hair often incurs additional costs for grooming, hairstyling, and accessories. [2] *social dimension*, it signifies a particular social status and is frequently subjected to societal judgment. For instance, it reflects perceptions of irreligiosity, social disconnection, lack of education, or non-conformity with prevailing fashion trends.⁴⁰ [3], *semantic dimension*, among Muslim women activists the absence of the hijab transcends mere behavior and represents a cultural unit embedded within a broader system of cultural symbols.⁴¹ These relationships remain consistent even when linguistic descriptors evolve, such as “not wearing a hijab,” “not adhering to Islamic dress codes,” or “not covering properly”.⁴²

The absence of the hijab as a semiotic vehicle facilitates deeper metalinguistic analysis whereby secondary hypotheses reinforce primary ones. Within cultural systems, any entity holds the potential to acquire semiotic significance. The process of signification, inherently linked to cultural dynamics,⁴³ ensures the

³⁶ Interview with Chuzaifah, Executive Board AMAN / Asian Moslem Action Network Indonesia, on 14 November 2024.

³⁷ Remo Gramigna and Mari-Liis Madisson, “Unravelling Semiotics in 2022: A Year in Review,” *Sign Systems Studies* 51, no. 3–4 (2023): 709–33.

³⁸ Interview with Farihah, Founder Neswa., on 25 November 2024.

³⁹ Eco and Muzir, *Teori Semiotika: Signifikasi Komunikasi, Teori Kode, Serta Teori Produksi-Tanda*.

⁴⁰ Interview with Chuzaifah, Executive Board AMAN / Asian Moslem Action Network Indonesia, on 23 November 2024.

⁴¹ Gramigna and Madisson, “Unravelling Semiotics in 2022: A Year in Review.”

⁴² Interview with Farihah, Founder Neswa., on 9 November 2024.

⁴³ Ewa Glapka, “Veiled or Veiling?—Turning Back the Gaze on the Western Feminist. Understanding Hijab from the Socio-Culturally Located Positions of Knowing,” in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 71 (Elsevier, 2018), 103–13.

perpetuation of communication as long as entities are integrated within broader symbolic frameworks. Even cultural phenomena that appear, at first glance, to lack communication reveal layered and multifaceted meanings under sustained interpretative scrutiny. These insights underscore the intricate interplay between identity, cultural norms, and the systems of meaning that shape societal perceptions⁴⁴ and interactions.

The initial findings concerning the non—veiling practices of Muslim women activists reveal an associated phenomenon: many of them deliberately wear traditional Indonesian textiles, known as *Wasta Nusantara*, such as *batik*. As a standalone entity, “batik” operates as a sign that can be interpreted within a semiotic framework. When placed in a relational axis alongside other cultural artifacts such as “woven textile,” *baju bodo* (traditional Bugis attire), “*batik sasirangan*,” or eco—print,”⁴⁵ batik emerges as a rich semiotic entity capable of being analyzed from various perspectives. This is akin to the semiotic treatment of non—veiling as a dynamic cultural expression.⁴⁶

The methodological lens of abduction provides a valuable approach to unraveling the complexities of non—veiling⁴⁷ among Muslim women activists. As a form of inferential reasoning, abduction involves the interpretation of seemingly minor or peripheral facts, which may serve as the foundation for broader theoretical conclusions and empirical verification. This process begins with observable facts, followed by the formulation of hypotheses, the evaluation of their plausibility, and eventual substantiation through evidence. In this context, semiotic analysis transcends traditional boundaries, permitting any cultural phenomenon to become a legitimate subject of investigation.⁴⁸ The focus shifts from the sign as an isolated concept to its functional role within a broader cultural and communication framework. At the level of signification, abduction enables meaning to be systematically constructed, thereby rendering the intricate structure of human culture comprehensible.

Changing Public Perceptions of Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesian Society

Hidayah, Chuzaifah, Mahmada, and Farihah view the hijab as a fashion trend emerging within society rather than a religious obligation. They argue that scholarly differences (*ikhtilaf*)⁴⁹ highlight clothing as a contextual cultural

⁴⁴ Maimunah, *Reconstructing Islamic Feminism: Indonesian Perspective*.

⁴⁵ Interview with Chuzaifah, Executive Board AMAN / Asian Moslem Action Network Indonesia on 23 November 2024.

⁴⁶ Nehaluddin Ahmad and Hjh Hanan Binti Dato Haji Aziz, “Religious Freedom and the Hijab Controversy: A Human Rights Perspective,” *J. Int’l L. Islamic L.* 18 (2022): 30.

⁴⁷ M. Subali, “Semiotics of Identity: Understanding Gender Representation on Islamic Contexts.”

⁴⁸ Qinglian Wang and Peera Phanlukthao, “Golden Sunbird: Semiotics and Cultural Identity in the Context of Modern China,” *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies* 19, no. 1 (2024): 81.

⁴⁹ Muhammad Ikhsan and Azwar Azwar, “Ikhtilaf Dalam Tafsir Al-Qur’an Dan Kedudukannya Dalam Hukum Islam: Ikhtilaf in the Tafsir of the Qur’an and Its Position in Islamic Law,” *DIRASAH: Jurnal Kajian Islam* 1, no. 1 (2024): 62–76; Muhammad Khalid Masud, “Ikhtilaf Al-

construct. Rejecting the compulsory nature of the hijab, they independently construct identities by creating new markers as a production of signs. *First*, they engage physically by utilizing the diversity of materials and traditional clothing styles from the Indonesian archipelago. *Second*, they adopt head coverings as daily attire, similar to practices in Christianity and Chatolism, where adherents also wear headscarves as a sign of devotion to God.

There is a new public perception and trend in contemporary Indonesia today. Did you know that... they are striving to return to a theocratic perspective in their lives?... This is evident not only in religious practices but also in social and political aspects. Similarly, contemporary Indonesian society generally believes that Muslim women are obliged to cover their bodies by wearing the hijab.⁵⁰

The subjects interpret Islamic identity as a humanistic activity to achieve justice and environmental preservation. In conclusion, public perception of the hijab, as widely understood as a theological symbol, is considered a fallacy. Market forces, political interests, and ideological power are disseminated through various channels to hegemonize society,⁵¹ particularly Muslim women. All the informants argue that the Qur'an and Hadith are open encyclopedic structures. For them, public perception of Muslim women activists and Islamic identity is rooted in practicing the pillars of Islam. Their unique fashion creations serve as a communication strategy to express *individual autonomy* and creativity, deconstructing the *supra—individual*⁵² principles prevailing in society.

Mass media and social media have become hegemonic instruments in this effort. According to Umberto Eco's terminology, this phenomenon can be described as "nostalgic"—an attempt to resurrect the past, idealized as a golden age by creating its replica.⁵³ Consequently, Indonesia is expected to reimplement political and governmental systems based on the Islamic framework, revive Islamic banking while opposing *riba* (usury), and reintroduce gender segregation in social life. However, this tendency has unfortunately led to the erasure of local cultural heritage, with an emphasis placed on Arab cultural practices⁵⁴ rather than on the intrinsic values of Islam itself. This shift risks overshadowing Indonesia's rich and diverse cultural traditions in favor of a homogenized and externally imposed cultural model, often conflated with religious authenticity.

This study presents evidence and posits a hypothesis that the decision by Muslim women activists—who serve as the subjects of this research—not to wear the hijab reflects a deliberate challenge to the prevailing assumption that donning

Fuqaha: Diversity in Fiqh as a Social Construction," *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family*, 2009, 65–93.

⁵⁰ Interview with Farihah, Founder Neswa., on 9 November 2024.

⁵¹ Interview with Anis Hidayah, president of Pusat Studi Migrasi Migrant CARE, on 7 November 2024.

⁵² Leonard C Sebastian and Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff, *Indonesia and Islam in Transition* (Springer, 2024).

⁵³ Eco and Muzir, *Teori Semiotika: Signifikasi Komunikasi, Teori Kode, Serta Teori Produksi-Tanda*.

⁵⁴ Camelia Ibrahim and Marwan Dwairy, "Identification of Arab Males and Females with Oppressive Patriarchal Practices," *The Arab Journal of Psychiatry* 27, no. 2 (2016): 105–16.

the hijab is a mandatory obligation⁵⁵ for Muslim women. Their stance further contests the notion that the hijab inherently signifies religious piety and obedience, a perspective often grounded in theological dogma. In the contemporary era, often referred to as “Islamic revival,”⁵⁶ the decision not to wear the hijab appears anachronistic. This is particularly striking when juxtaposed with the majority trend among Muslim women in Indonesia, who increasingly choose to don the hijab. It gains significance given that nearly every dimension of life in Indonesia today is intertwined with Islam, the predominant identity of the society.

Semiotic analysis distinguishes between two key dimensions of meaning: denotation and connotation. Denotation⁵⁷ refers to the direct, literal, or surface-level meaning “of a sign”, while connotation delves into the layered, implicit, or symbolic meanings that may emerge from deeper interpretation. In abduction, recognizing meaning’s inherent fluidity and contextual dependence reflects the impossibility of absolute truths. Instead, the most plausible interpretation is derived from the interplay of various possibilities within specific contexts.⁵⁸ These interpretations transition into conventions through intersubjective agreement and ultimately evolve into recognized symbols within a cultural framework.

The denotative meaning of non-veiling among Muslim women activists is the absence of attire traditionally categorized as adhering to Islamic principles of covering the *aurat*. However, the connotative⁵⁹ meanings are more nuanced and multifaced. Common societal interpretations often associate non-veiling with shallow religious knowledge, insufficient faith, or a lack of divine guidance (*hidayah*).⁶⁰ Yet, uncovering deeper connotations necessitates a contextual deconstruction of the historical, cultural, and personal dimensions unique to each individual. Each subject’s choice reflects a distinct set of experiences, identities, and social negotiations.

A Semiotic Interpretation of Non-Veiling Among Indonesian Muslim Women Activists

These Muslim women activists have chosen not to wear hijab as an expression of intellectual independence derived from their in-depth analysis or religious knowledge. However, they face intimidation⁶¹, discrimination,⁶² and objections

⁵⁵ Interview with Anis Hidayah, president of Pusat Studi Migrasi Migrant CARE, on 1 November 2024.

⁵⁶ Fahlesa Munabari, Nadia Utami Larasati, and Rizky Ihsan, “Islamic Revivalism in Indonesia: The Caliphate, Sharia, NKRI, Democracy, and the Nation-State,” *Jurnal Politik* 5, no. 2 (2020): 5.

⁵⁷ Bahrom Jabborov, “Reflection of Semiotics in Pictographic Signs,” *Open Herald: Periodical of Methodical Research* 1, no. 3 (2023): 1–4.

⁵⁸ Eco and Muzir, *Teori Semiotika: Signifikasi Komunikasi, Teori Kode, Serta Teori Produksi-Tanda*.

⁵⁹ Mahfoud B E N Mohammed ZEGHDANI, “A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE “REFLECT YOUR RESPECT” INFOGRAPHIC POSTER FOR THE WORLD CUP QATAR 2022” (University of Martyr Sheikh Arab Tbesi Tebessa, 2023).

⁶⁰ Interview with Chuzaifah, Executive Board AMAN / Asian Moslem Action Network Indonesia, on 14 November 2024.

⁶¹ Interview with Anis Hidayah, president of Pusat Studi Migrasi Migrant CARE, on 10 November 2024.

from their families⁶³ who cite sin and concerns about modesty as their reason. Religious norms play a central role in shaping those mindsets. As Mahmada articulates, it is exceedingly challenging to shift the conservative mindset entrenched within her family,⁶⁴ making the concept of gender deconstruction a complete and intricate endeavor.

1) Resistance to the Rise of Religious Revivalism

In recent decades, nations with substantial Muslim populations, including Indonesia have witnessed a marked inclination toward the reinstitution of theocratic ideals in social and political⁶⁵ spheres. The widespread resurgence of Islamic revivalism characterizes this phenomenon and has permeated virtually all facets of Indonesian society, reshaping its sociocultural and normative paradigms. Within this doctrinal milieu, Muslim women are frequently positioned as dependents under male guardianship, their agency subsumed within a patriarchal framework that limits their independence.⁶⁶ Such a system often conceptualizes Muslim women as symbolic of religious piety and moral rectitude, with veiling framed as an obligatory act symbolizing compliance and sanctity.

Against this context, the deliberate choice by Muslim women activists to forget the hijab constitutes a profound act of resistance. It challenges the pervasive institutionalization of religious symbols,⁶⁷ which often prioritize superficial markers of religiosity while neglecting the substantive ethical and spiritual dimensions of faith. The non—veiling of these activists thus operates as a semiotic counter-narrative, rejecting the imposition of religious symbolism as a monolithic standard of righteousness and identity. This manifests intellectual and ideological defiance⁶⁸ against the reductionist interpretation of religious identity. It represents a resistance to the commodification of faith and the imposition of rigid socioreligious codes, advocating instead for a pluralistic and inclusive approach to religiosity that respects individual freedom and celebrates the diversity of spiritual expression.⁶⁹

⁶² Interview with Farihah, Founder Neswa., on 25 November 2024.

⁶³ Robert W Hefner, "Whatever Happened to Civil Islam? Islam and Democratisation in Indonesia, 20 Years On," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (2019): 375–96.

⁶⁴ Interview with Mahmada, Special staff at the Freedom Institute, founder of JIL (Liberal Islam Network), on 20 November 2024.

⁶⁵ Robert W Hefner, "Introduction: Indonesia at the Crossroads: Imbrolios of Religion, State, and Society in an Asian Muslim Nation," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia* (Routledge, 2018), 3–30.

⁶⁶ Interview with Chuzaifah, Executive Board AMAN / Asian Moslem Action Network Indonesia, on 23 November 2024.

⁶⁷ Wiwik Setiyani, "Sharia Business: Halal Tourism-Based Community Empowerment," *International Journal of Halal Research* 5, no. 2 (2023): 89–99.

⁶⁸ Ghada Muhammad Mahmoud Muhammad Al-Imam, "Umberto Eco's Theory of Signs and Its Effect on Creativity and Reception," *Journal of the Faculty of Arts (JFA)* 81, no. 2 (2021): 17.

⁶⁹ Interview with Farihah, Founder Neswa., on 29 November 2024.

2) *Resistance to the Nostalgic State and Religious Institutions*

Indonesia has fostered a vision to revive the ideal conditions of a bygone era, often romanticized as the era of Prophet Muhammad. This period referred to as *madani society*,⁷⁰ is envisioned as a model of justice, prosperity, and welfare. To realize this imagined world the state has developed regulations across political, social, economic, educational, and cultural domains, with Islamic principles as the primary standard, reflecting the majority religion.

The ongoing Islamization of public life in Indonesia has catalyzed the proliferation of *halal* and *syar'i* labels across nearly all facets of daily existence, encompassing *syar'i* clothing, *syar'i* housing, *syar'i* hotels, halal tourism, and halal—certified household appliances.⁷¹ Within this milieu of religiously infused societal practices, the refusal of certain women activists to wear the hijab challenges entrenched understanding of religion, individual agency⁷², and gender social expectations. Hidayah, Chuzaifah, Mahmada, and Farihah remind society that not everything labeled as religious is inherently or exclusively about faith.

Despite their decision not to wear the hijab these activists remain devout Muslims and are active participants in religious networks, such as Indonesia's *Jaringan Ulama Perempuan* (Women Islamic Scholars Network). What distinguishes their approach is their willingness to engage in critical analysis of religious doctrine and societal judgments, which are often presented as immutable truths. Rather than uncritically accepting prescriptive interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*),⁷³ these women advocate for a contextual and reflective engagement with religious teachings.

According to Mahmada's statement, the notion of absolute religious truth, when treated as final and unassailable, presents significant challenges. Such rigidity precludes opportunities for reinterpretation of religious texts in light of contemporary social, cultural, and historical contexts. Furthermore, it creates fertile ground for authoritarian tendencies, empowering political, economic, and cultural elites to manipulate religious narratives to consolidate power.⁷⁴

These dynamics disproportionately harm marginalized groups,⁷⁵ particularly women, by perpetuating discriminatory practices under the guise of religious

⁷⁰ Anisa Fitriani and Siti Amilia, "Pandangan Islam Terhadap Kepemimpinan Wanita Dalam Mewujudkan Masyarakat Madani Di Indonesia," *Islamologi: Jurnal Ilmiah Keagamaan* 1, no. 2 (2024): 758–70.

⁷¹ Interview with Chuzaifah, Executive Board AMAN / Asian Moslem Action Network Indonesia, on 23 November 2024.

⁷² Wahidatul Hannan Nazari, and Razali Musa, "A View Of Hijab Wearing From Muslim Feminism Perspective." *UFUQ International journal of Arts and Social Science Research* 1(1), (2021), 19–26.

https://www.academia.edu/download/68583672/ufuq_2021_1102_wahidatul_hannan_1.pdf

⁷³ Nadiyah Mu'adzah, "Ushul Fiqh, Qaidah Fiqhiyyah, and Islamic Jurisprudence: A Review," *Journal of Islamic Economics Literatures* 3, no. 2 (2022).

⁷⁴ Interview with Mahmada, Special staff at the Freedom Institute, founder of JIL (Liberal Islam Network), on 28 November 2024.

⁷⁵ Bushra Sabri and Douglas A Granger, "Gender-Based Violence and Trauma in Marginalized Populations of Women: Role of Biological Embedding and Toxic Stress," *Health Care for Women International* 39, no. 9 (2018): 1038–55.

authority. By navigating and reinterpreting the intersection of faith, critical thought, and gender equality, these Muslim women activists embody a broader intellectual resistance to the conflation of religion with hegemonic sociopolitical practices.⁷⁶ Their advocacy highlights the urgent need to reexamine and deconstruct dogmatic interpretations of religious principles, ensuring that they remain responsive to evolving human values, individual freedoms, and the pursuit of justice. Their efforts illuminate the potential for religion to coexist with rational inquiry and progressive⁷⁷ social transformation.

Conclusion

Activists conceptualize Islamic identity as a humanitarian effort aimed at promoting justice and self-expression. They employ traditional symbols while also generating new ones to articulate a distinctive Islamic identity. The deconstruction of the hijab is perceived as a theological symbol. However, market dynamics, political agendas, and ideological forces are disseminated through various channels, creating a hegemony over society and targeting Muslim women.

The subject regards the hijab not as a religious obligation but as an evolving fashion trend. Scholarly differences (*ikhtilaf ulama*) underscore the view that clothing is culturally contextual. These individuals reject the notion of a mandatory hijab, choosing instead to construct their identities autonomously by producing new symbolic markers, including: [1], physical reinterpretations, incorporating the diversity of traditional Indonesian fabrics and clothing styles into their attire. [2], innovative use of head coverings; reinterpret conventional norms. This perspective underscores the notion that the Qur'an and hadith are inclusive, encyclopedic texts that allow for diverse interpretations.

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⁷⁶ Interview with Anis Hidayah, president of Pusat Studi Migrasi Migrant CARE, on 1 November 2024.

⁷⁷ Sitti Marwah, "GENDER PROGRESSIVE TEACHING IN PREMARITAL COURSE: Study on Islamic Marriage Guidance Books for Prospective Muslim Couples," *Al-Ahwal: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 15, no. 1 (n.d.): 101–24.

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