

## PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION OF GENDER MICROAGGRESSION EXPERIENCES IN STUDENTS WITH VEILED : IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Abstrak

*This article focuses on the experience of gender microaggression in students with veiled in Indonesia. Qualitative methods with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis are used to determine how Students with veiled interpret the understanding of gender microaggression. The findings revealed that they often experienced subtle and inconspicuous discrimination. This fact is known as gender microaggression. The narrative suggests that participants experienced gender microaggression due to their appearance. The perpetrator considered that the participants were religious fanatical and incompetent. Participants also had to face social isolation and were marginalized within their groups. In addition, participants can feel the positive impact of avoiding sexual objectification. In light of these findings, it is recommended that counseling services in higher education institutions take proactive steps to prevent and address gender microaggressions. Additionally, counselors need to have competence in providing inclusive services.*

**Keywords :** Gender, Microaggression, Veiled, Preliminary Investigation, Students.

### Abstrak

*Artikel ini berfokus pada pengalaman mikroagresi gender pada pelajar berkerudung di Indonesia. Metode kualitatif dengan Analisis Fenomenologi Interpretatif digunakan untuk mengetahui bagaimana Siswa berjilbab memaknai pengertian mikroagresi gender. Temuannya mengungkapkan bahwa mereka sering mengalami diskriminasi yang tidak kentara dan tidak mencolok. Fakta ini dikenal sebagai agresi mikro gender. Narasinya menunjukkan bahwa peserta mengalami mikroagresi gender karena penampilan mereka. Pelaku menilai pesertanya fanatik terhadap agama dan tidak kompeten. Peserta juga harus menghadapi isolasi sosial dan terpinggirkan dalam kelompoknya. Selain itu, peserta juga bisa merasakan dampak positif dari menghindari objektifikasi seksual. Berdasarkan temuan ini, direkomendasikan agar layanan konseling di institusi pendidikan tinggi mengambil langkah proaktif untuk mencegah dan mengatasi agresi mikro gender. Selain itu, konselor juga perlu memiliki kompetensi dalam memberikan layanan inklusif.*

**Kata Kunci :** Gender, Mikroagresi, Bercadar, Investigasi Pendahuluan, Siswa.

### Introduction

The veil as a face covering is something new in Indonesia. Women with disabilities are often stereotyped as symbols of radicalism-terrorism and the Arabization culture of Indonesian Muslim women (Nisa,

2022). Various cases of radicalism-terrorism in Indonesia have been carried out by women with guns, for example, the case of women with guns at the Presidential Security Forces at the Indonesian Presidential Palace (Sutrisna, 2022). Or a case of terror

committed by a woman with a mask by crashing her motorcycle into a police station (Sitohang, 2022). A suicide bombing at a Surabaya church involved a woman with a mask and her two children (Fauzan, 2018). Would rather quit the civil service than remove the veil (Tim BBC, 2019). Prohibition of wearing a veil on students of Yogyakarta State Islamic University because it is considered radical (Tim BBC, 2018a). Ban on IAIN Jember students from wearing veils (Alhafiz, 2017). The march of early childhood carrying sharp weapons and wearing veils became a symbol of deep-rooted radicalism (Tim BBC, 2018b).

The anti-veil movement in the Muslim world, beginning in Egypt with the publication of *Tahrir Al-Mar'a* (Women's Liberation) in 1899, with the rule of change in the rules of polygamy and divorce and cultural changes, caused heated debate in Egyptian intellectual circles with the claim that removing the veil was the key to transformation (Behiery, 2013). In the new order, the Indonesian government once banned women from wearing hijabs in schools. With this policy, the government easily controls religious issues in public. The hijab is considered a political symbol imported from Iran and Egypt, so it is not in accordance with Indonesian culture and can threaten the stability of the Country (Qibtiyah, 2019).

Women with veils in Indonesia have been researched by many experts (Izharuddin, 2015; Nisa, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2022; Rohmaniyah et al., 2022; Wahib, 2017). The veil is seen as an expression of religious identity that includes the process of redefining complex body concepts so that it needs to be understood from multiple perspectives

(Rohmaniyah et al., 2022). Women are associated as a group that commits oppression and intolerance. This depiction is the cause of various rules in Indonesia governing the use of veils.

In 2015, the Alvara Research Center research institute conducted a study on women's liking for wearing Muslim clothing, and its findings showed that 79.4% like to wear a regular headscarf, 13.5% like to use a sharia headscarf, and only 2% choose to wear a veil (Hawley, 2017). This data shows that the use of veils is still in demand in Indonesia, albeit with insignificant figures.

The study of women with veiled was dominated by the selection of study participants who experienced experiences of open discrimination and aggression. At the same time, there is subtle discrimination and microaggression whose danger is not inferior to it. In Indonesia, there are still few studies that look at the veil from the side of social psychology, not just in terms of religion. According to Rohmaniyah et al. (2022), The development of the study of the veil is limited to three aspects, namely, the veil as a religious identity, the veil as an expression of radicalism, and the veil as a women's fashion. However, this research gap is not filled from a psychological view of how the experience of students with veiled experiences subtle forms of discrimination.

Subtle discrimination is also referred to as microaggression (Yamada & Yusa, 2014). If microaggression occurs from the point of view of gender relations, then microaggression is referred to as gender microaggression (Gartner, 2021). Gender Microaggression has been studied on the topic of a single identity related to gender (Abreu et al., 2023; Resnick & Galupo, 2019; Vaccaro

& Koob, 2019; Ylioja et al., 2018) or in the context of work (Algner & Lorenz, 2022; Basford et al., 2014; Holder, 2018), and students (Davis & Mirick, 2022; Gartner & Sterzing, 2016; Kumnick et al., 2022), without specifically discussing the population such as exploring the microaggression experiences of the veiled college student. This research has the potential to be the first to explore the experience of gender microaggression in students veiled in the context of eastern culture, especially in Indonesia, which is known as a country that is able to manage diversity (Raihani, 2011)

This study is important because people often assume that with good diversity management, Indonesia avoids intolerance. In fact, as previously stated, various acts of intolerance are directed at minority groups, one of which is students with the veil. The existence of a minority group oppressed by the majority group is the basis of the argument in this article. These power relations strengthened in line with the inferiority attitude of the students with the veil. Thus, interpreting the experience of gender microaggression of students with veiled is not just about reducing each of these experiences to research findings but equipping them with a collective consciousness to be equal.

## Method

The researchers sought to answer the research question, what is the experience of gender microaggression in students with veiled ?. As explained earlier, we chose students with veils because of the lack of research on microaggression with the research subjects of the students with veils and the series of religious experiences they experienced.

It is important to note that Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest population of Muslims in the world. For Muslims, closing the nakedness is an obligation. Long before Islam came, women in the middle east were already wearing the veil as a cultural identity (Behiery, 2013). Unlike in Indonesia, wearing a veil is something taboo, not even a little bit of opposition. Because of these conflicting conditions, it is important to understand the experience of gender microaggression in students with the veil.

We are trying to understand gender microaggression by using qualitative Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research. This design rests on the philosophy of phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). In the phenomenological perspective, science focuses on how individuals interpret their experiences, while in the hermeneutics perspective, IPA allows participants and researchers to be involved together in interpreting the meaning-making in which participants are involved, and finally, idiography allows to understand specifically to provide insight into the individual's unique experience of phenomena so that from that understanding, it can be used as a basis in hypothetical direction as well as alternative theories about a phenomenon (Cook & O'Hara, 2020). We chose this design so that we could comprehensively interpret the attendee experience. We use phenomenological analysis developed by Smith et al. (2009), that is, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Menurut Reid, Flowers, & Larkin (2005), when using IPA, it is recommended for 3-15 study participants (six preferred).

The study qualitatively explored five students based on their life experiences of microaggression at university and how they interpreted those experiences. In the tradition of microaggression research, qualitative research design using IPA analysis has been carried out since the beginning of the development of microaggression (Cook & O'Hara, 2020; Dimberg et al., 2021; Lino & Hashim, 2019; O'Hara & Cook, 2018; Schultz, 2018; Williams et al., 2020).

**Participants**

Participants (N=5) are students who are located on different campuses, namely Mulawarman University and Sultan Aji Samarinda University. We take samples homogeneously, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009). The criteria are; (a) is enrolled as a student, (b) wears a veil, (c) has experienced situations of being discriminated against, belittled, and ignored because of his identity.

We recruit students by sending research permits to the faculty. We got 10 participants according to the criteria through recommendations from lecturers who knew the students closely, then we sent a form and informed consent to the students to ask whether to approve the interview process that we would conduct. Five students are willing to participate in the research process by being given pseudonyms, namely W1, W2, W3, W4, and W5.

Table 1. Participants

Participant Initials	From	Current Activities
W1	Samarinda	Completing a thesis and working in an Islamic educational institution
W2	Kutai Kartanegara	Actively organized proselytizing
W3	Samarinda	Actively organized proselytizing and student organizations
W4	Penajam Paser Utara	Complete the thesis and follow regular studies.
W5	Samarinda	Participating in studies in one religious organization

**Data Collection**

Data collection is carried out through interviews. Before the interview, participants were asked to complete a democrat questionnaire using a pseudonym. We will use this data to match the suitability to interview data. The pseudonyms filled out on the democratic questionnaire were determined by the participants, while the pseudonyms for the interview data were determined by the researcher. The pseudonym consists of W1, W2, W3, W4, and W5.

Interviews were conducted in semi-structured manners that were two weeks apart each. All interviews are conducted in a private café to provide a sense of comfort to each participant. Interviews were conducted by researchers and research assistants, and participants because participants did not want to be alone during the interview. To maintain confidentiality, researchers and research assistants have committed to safeguarding the participants' scholarships. The first interview is conducted for 60-120 minutes, and the second interview for 15-30 minutes. The first interview was conducted to explore and understand the participants' microaggression experience, while the second interview was a complement to the first interview, whose purpose was a reflection of the microaggression experience as well as the interview experience.

The interview was developed from the taxonomy of gender microaggression of Gartner (2021), which consists of seven themes, namely invisibility, intersectionality, caretaker and nurturer, women-dominated occupations, presumed incompetence, sexual objectification, and environmental invalidations. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to discover the experiences of gender microaggression from participants.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis is done by creating code and finding the theme on each data. We adopt eight steps from Smith et al. (2009), i.e., (a) analyze participant responses closely, (b) identify themes across participants, (c) interpret themes, (d) develop the structure of themes, (e) organize themes into the final structure, (f) audit themes, (g) create a table with labels, definitions, and examples, and (h) reflect on researchers' processes. The first step is done by looking at the audio recording and transcript. In the second step, each researcher identifies the theme of the research findings as well as important points that are agreed upon and those that are not agreed upon. Furthermore, the interpretation of the theme is carried out by the way each researcher meets to discuss what they have found in the data. Then in the fourth stage, labeling, names, and definitions are carried out on each approved theme. In the fifth stage, a reduction is carried out on each theme that was originally six themes to four themes that have been modified. In the sixth stage, an internal audit is carried out by other researchers who are not involved in the theme reduction process by reviewing the code, theme, and definition of the research findings. After the process is complete, the final stage is carried out by

integrating each finding to refine the definition of each theme.

### Findings

We identified four themes of gender microaggression targeting students on campus, namely (a) facing the stigma of bigotry against religion, (b) being marginalized in social groups, (c) perceived incompetence, and (d) feeling more protected from sexual objectification. We present the themes and findings of the study below.

#### a. Facing the stigma of fanaticism against religion

This theme identifies the experiences of participants who are considered bigots of religion by their peers. At least all participants have had bad experiences because they are considered religious fanatics. W1 participants are among those who have a dramatic life experience background. He is an orphan and lives with limitations. Since 2020, W1 decided to make a joke because of family problems, being left by a girlfriend, and financial problems. W1 then became acquainted with a student who invited him to participate in religious studies. From then on, W1 began to be determined to use the veil. But not a few of his friends thought he was too fanatical about religion to be considered hijra to join in, as stated by W1 ;

"The problems in this life became a trial for me until I was finally met by a friend who led me to the hijra process as it is today. I want to study religion more deeply, but my friends think I am too fanatical about religion." Unlike W1, W3 is a student figure who is active in campus proselytizing. W3 had a dream together with his friends to establish an Islamic state, but the organization he had admired for a long time was frozen by the



Indonesian government. Although actively organized proselytizing, W3 has received subtle insults several times, as W3 points out; "I have heard the lecturer's statement addressed to me that, basically, religious observance must be accompanied by a depth of knowledge. If we are religiously observant but lack knowledge, then we may be fanatical and close ourselves to other views."

If both participants experienced a negative stigma from their peers, then a different experience was experienced by W4 when taking the exam. When taking the exam, according to his friends, the examining lecturer asked questions about the science he was studying. However, when it was W4's turn, the examining lecturer submitted questions outside of the material being tested. The lecturer conveyed ;

"Why are you veiled? Is there a strong argument about the obligation to be liberated?"

This question made W4 surprised because it was out of the context of the exam. W4 then replied accordingly and assumed he was viewed as fanatical by his examining lecturer.

b. Marginalized in social groups,

Since W2 decided to make a fuss, he has been increasingly shunned by his friends. Her friend became reluctant to be friends with W2, let alone a male friend. On campus, W2's close friends are only two people. They are actively organized proselytizing. However, his friend did not wear a veil, only a dress of *gamis*. As stated by W2.

c. "Since I decided to use the veil, I've been shunned more often by my friends, and it's not even rarely referred to as a walking ghost. My lecturer usually satirizes me by saying "don't you go into this class."

Participants described feelings of not being perceived in social groups on campus. They describe the situation of peers who will ignore their contributions because of identity. W5 recounted that his friend, who used to be close to him, did not want to sit next to each other in the classroom. W5 explains, " a friend who used to be familiar with me now no longer wants to be friends with me. In fact, I sat at the very back of the class because I didn't want to be ostracized by friends. I feel confused why people who want to hijra like me are actually shunned".

W5 talks about his confusion that after using the veil, many of his friends stayed away. Social groups on campus are formed from identities of similarity, such as ethnic identity, gender, and hobby interests. But W5 finds it difficult to form his own social group because it is far different from his friends.

Participants described experiences in which peers, especially males, dominated the interaction and ignored it. When interacting in the classroom, W4, who is one of the research participants, is often overlooked when interacting and discussing. W4, which regularly participates in religious studies and rarely participates in organizations, has fewer discussion skills. So when expressing an opinion, he must strengthen his determination so that he can speak in front of his friend. As W4 points out,

"When expressing an opinion, my friend didn't pay attention to me, even busy talking to others. Some of them watched me, but with expressions that took me for granted and also did not dare to look me in the eye."

The condition experienced by W4 confirms the degrading form, albeit indirectly. They conveyed the message that W4 was not welcome.

d. Considered incompetent

Students with veiled are considered incompetent in their chosen field of study, regardless of their abilities and expertise. When electing class leaders or chairmen in student organizations, he is often overshadowed by the view that students do not have the competence to be leaders. W3, who is active in student organizations, is rarely given strategic responsibilities and positions. W3 usually only does tasks according to the direction of the leadership. As revealed by W3, i.e. ;

"I am involved in student organizations and proselytizing organizations. But in student organizations, I was treated unfairly and considered incapable of doing organizational tasks. I feel like I'm being treated differently for using a veil. In fact, in organized proselytizing, I often get strategic positions and am given the mandate to lead certain activities."

Another participant, W4, said that when taking the exam, he was considered unable to be a good teacher because he used a veil because, according to the lecturer, non-verbal language is important, which can be shown by expression. As stated

"How do you teach later, if you are a teacher, when your students are obliged to look at your face? Expression when teaching is also important to be displayed by the teacher."

The lecturer's views seemed intimidating to W4 until W4 considered that he was seen as incompetent from the way he dressed alone, not in terms of knowledge and

competence. In fact, when compared to others, W4 can compete with its outstanding peers.

e. The feeling is better protected from sexual objectification.

W2's view of nakedness, made him choose to use a veil. According to him, by being calibered, he can avoid sexual objectification and can keep himself from causing shamanism. During the use of the veil, W2 felt more appreciative from the perspective of sexual objectification, especially his male companions. Before wearing the veil, she had a male friend who conveyed a microaggression message to her that "you are beautiful, but it would be prettier if it was as tall as agnesmo (Indonesian artist)" or "dazzling sweet black, rarely my friend is like you". The message made her uncomfortable and uncomfortable hanging out with her male friend. So deciding to be veiled was his choice to avoid sexual objectification. As stated by W2

"Before I got married, I was often the subject of jokes from male friends. Perhaps it was because they were too familiar, so they thought that his jokes were casual. But it hurt my heart. After the beraliber, I became more protected and more valued, albeit with all the consequences."

Almost the same as W2, W1 chose to be veiled because he wanted to live this life quietly without having to feel sexual objectification. W1 has had a bad experience when walking in front of his juniors in the campus. At that time, his younger siblings gathered in front of the class, and W1 walked alone in front of them. He was then teased by his level of adek by delivering the messages

" my beautiful senior sister, but still alone" and "ask for her phone number senior sister". The experience may be taken for granted to others. But for W1, it violated her privacy as a woman. After the rebuff, he never again experienced such an act, so he remained consistent in covering his face.

## Discussion

Our participants' experiences of gender microaggression on campus reflect the current theoretical and empirical literature on the treatment of disgraced students. Students with veiled have long been stigmatized as radical and fundamental figures (Nisa, 2022). The stigma suggests that campuses are a place of social injustice for minority identities (Arkes & Dent, 2019; Azim & Happel-Parkins, 2019; Hanassab, 2006; Kumar, 2016; Manejwala & Abu-Ras, 2019; Toker Gökçe, 2013; Woodford et al., 2014)

Socio-religious conditions of Indonesia with the largest Muslim population country in the world (Nurlatifah et al., 2022; Wanandi, 2002), It does not necessarily make the society have a great tolerance for the identity of women with veiled. Various incidents of terrorism and radicalism carried out by the *perempuan bercadar*, make the identity of the identity associated with terrorism-radicalism. Simultaneous efforts have been made by the Indonesian government by issuing various policies so that women with veiled are no longer considered scary figures. Through this policy, the Indonesian government also emphasizes that the culture of Indonesians is to respect differences and should accept any identity that does not conflict with Pancasila and Undang-undang Dasar.

Our findings are that students with bigoted stigma against religion show

religious knowledge and how to dress, not directly proportional to (Hemminger, 2021). This fanaticism can even trigger the emergence of verbal and nonverbal violence (Percia, 2020). Violence in subtle forms such as microaggression, can also occur in identities such as women with veiled that are considered radical (Azim & Happel-Parkins, 2019). Thus cara dress which is considered religious, does not represent their deep understanding of the science of religion. Finally, the way of dressing is considered a form of observance of religion, which is actually pseudo-observance (Cabrera-alvarado et al., 2013).

The next experience of gender microaggression is that students are marginalized in social groups. These findings suggest a link between veil use and marginality among women (Mohammadi & Hazeri, 2021; Saiya & Manchanda, 2020). They recounted their experiences that were ignored when in class not because they were unable to understand learning, but because of their attire. Participants recounted that he had many bad experiences because of his identity, being shunned by his friend and being bullied by lecturers. Findings Garcia Yeste et al., (2020) In 10 women in Spain, they also found that they experienced personal attacks, and social isolation. The difference is that the attacks that occur on our participants tend to be subtle. Marginality towards minority groups is a form of microaggression (Nair & Good, 2021; Sterzing et al., 2017).

Throughout the experiences of gender microaggression experienced by participants, they described how their clothing choices were noticed, questioned, and questioned. As stated Ghumman and Ryan (2013) that women who wear the hijab (veil) become a



sign of religiosity as well as being subjected to religious anti-conservatism sentiment, receive many comments, as well as scrutiny in public spaces. In addition, the research conducted by McDermott-Levy (2011) in Omani students in the U.S., found that minority student groups tend to be avoided and even often verbally alluded to in the form of confrontation.

Students with veiled are also considered incompetent. The assessment is not based on his ability to understand the lecture material, but is assessed in advance from the way he dresses. The use of clothing is used as a fashion of religious identity (Beck-Peccoz, R.A., 2016; Hass, 2020). These findings demonstrate participants' low ability to think openly and critically about their religion.

The participants we interviewed tended to avoid more in-depth, personal, and nuanced conversations about their feelings, thoughts, and experiences about the religious context. They offer less of an alternative perspective or point of view. This causes the stigma against them to be lasting.

On the other hand, the use of the veil actually made participants feel protected from forms of sexual objectification. They considered that with a veil, the nakedness and curves of his body could be covered. Thus the hijab or veil serves to reject sexual objectification and give respect (Droogsma, 2007; Zempi, 2016)

In general, participants defined the meaning of wearing a veil for them to be against sexual objectivization as a unit of their main motivation for wearing it. By wearing a veil, they have control over their bodies in society (campus) and help them fight patriarchal culture over their bodies, so they hope that the use of the word sexist in the form

of microaggression is no longer done (Chaudry, 2021)

### **Implications for Counseling Services in Higher Education**

Counseling services in higher education play a pivotal role in addressing the microaggressions that veiled students often encounter due to their religious beliefs and practices. Veiled students can experience microaggressions in various forms, including stigmatization, marginalization, perceived incompetence, and even sexual objectification.

Counselors provide a safe and understanding environment where these students can openly discuss their experiences. This allows students to express their feelings and challenges without fear of judgment. These conversations help validate their experiences and emotions, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and respectful campus atmosphere.

Psychoeducation within counseling services aids veiled students in explaining the cultural and religious significance of veiling, which can counteract the microaggressions rooted in misunderstanding and misinformation. Additionally, supportive peer groups are formed to allow veiled students to connect with peers who share similar experiences, creating a sense of belonging, mutual understanding, and empowerment in response to microaggressions. Conflict resolution skills are imparted to students, helping them respond assertively and communicate effectively when addressing microaggressions, such as subtle insults and dismissive behavior.

Counselors also take on the role of advocates, raising awareness about the microaggressions veiled students encounter and working with campus leadership to promote inclusivity. This ensures that the campus environment values and respects diverse religious beliefs, reducing the occurrence of microaggressions. Furthermore, counseling services are prepared to provide mental health support to address the stress, anxiety, and depression that may arise from these microaggressions. This support safeguards the overall well-being of veiled students as they navigate their academic journey.

### **Conclusion**

Students with veiled faces many challenges when wearing a veil. As explained above and illustrated through our data, they are faced with oppressive and derogatory representations of relationships. The complex struggle is further compounded by the difficulty of following the lecture process and completing a bachelor's degree.

The experience of gendered microaggression of students needs to be understood as complex because it represents religious, cultural, and personal identities. With this understanding, the results of this study do not corner any identity but open up the fact that minority identities experience discrimination. Because the campus is a place for knowledge transformation, it is appropriate that every identity needs to be accepted. To realize this condition, educators and students need to have pedagogical competence in overcoming microaggressions, and students face many challenges when using the veil. As explained above and illustrated through our data, they are faced

with oppressive and derogatory representations of relationships. The complex struggle is further compounded by the difficulty of following the lecture process and completing a bachelor's degree.

The experience of gendered microaggression of students needs to be understood as complex because it represents religious, cultural, and personal identities. With this understanding, the results of this study do not corner any identity but open up the fact that minority identities experience discrimination. Because the campus is a place for knowledge transformation, it is appropriate that every identity needs to be accepted. To realize these conditions, educators and students need to have pedagogical competence in overcoming microaggression (Melendez & Thompson, 2020). As an educator (lecturer) who has a commitment to social justice, I need to be active and involved in creating an environment that is equitable, fair, and respectful.

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