

Beyond Subordination: Stigmatisation, Intersection, and Coping Strategies of Women with Niqab in Langsa, Aceh

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ABSTRACT

Studies on the practice of wearing the niqab or *niqab* as a living culture of Muslim women have focussed primarily on transnational political contexts and the association with radical religious movements. Many studies have been conducted on Muslim minority communities, while scholars have neglected the subjective experience of women with the niqab in Muslim-majority microenvironments. Based on a case study of a small Indonesian city that practices Islamic law, this article examines stigmatisation, environmental intersectionality, and the coping strategies of niqab-wearing women to overcome unequal power relations. The current study used an ethnographic approach, implementing observation, interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) as data collection techniques. Using scientific interdisciplinary theory, the main findings of this study reveal that women with a niqab are not passive subjects. Still, they are active agents in overcoming every element that might create stigma. A creative coping strategy is chosen by women with niqabs as an attempt to overcome the stigma pointed at them so that they can subsist and be productive, without any connections with radical actions. In addition, this creativity demonstrates women with a niqab's ability to overcome subordination to others.

Keywords: Coping strategies, intersection, Muslim women, niqab, stigmatisation

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INTRODUCTION

The negative stigma against women who wear the niqab spreads globally, as described by Kariapper (2009) based on the experience of women with niqab in the UK. Many European countries are widely seen as highly hostile towards women who

choose to wear the niqab. This prejudiced mindset leads to the marginalisation and mistreatment of women who choose to wear the niqab because of its association with religious extremism (Yeste et al., 2020). The negative stigmatisation of women who wear niqabs not only directly impacts them as individuals but also has broader consequences, including the formation of societal segregation towards these women in public settings (Lindemann, 2021). In Indonesia, several manifestations of stigma have emerged, such as labelling women who wear the niqab as radical Islamists, terrorists, and individuals incompatible with Indonesian culture (Kistoro et al., 2020).

The stigmatisation of niqab-wearing women intensified globally after the 9/11 attacks. Several Western countries, including the U.S., France, and Germany, enacted laws banning the niqab in public spaces, viewing it as incompatible with secular values and associating it with radicalism. Additionally, Jadoon (2021) and Bucar (2017) argue that the niqab reflects female orthodoxy, while Bhowon dan Bundhoo (2016) sees it as a symbol of patriarchal oppression. Furthermore, Amiraux (2013), Bracke and Fadil (2012), Korteweg (2008), and Scott (2007) highlight how niqab-wearing women face marginalisation from religious institutions. Negative labelling, such as being referred to as a terrorist, ISIS, extremist, radical, old-fashioned, and oppressed, is the stigma that is frequently directed at niqab-wearing women. They are often negatively labelled as extremists or terrorists, linked to potential threats to state

security (Nisa, personal communication, 2022). Some researchers in Indonesia are linking the niqab with the dynamics of its prohibition in Higher Education because considers conflicting university policies (Nisa, personal communication, 2022), immoderate, and triggering religious radicalism (Andiko, 2018). The niqab is considered a source of conflict and the cause of social cohesion failure (Amiraux, 2013). Other studies conducted by Zempi and Chakraborti (2015), Kistoro et al. (2020), Allen (2015), Azim and Parkins (2019), Nelson (2015), as well as Najib and Hopkins (2019) linked the niqab-wearing debate with Islamophobia.

Various reasons contribute to the stigmatisation of women who choose to wear the niqab. The aspects of the issue may arise from the convergence of factors such as environment, race, social class, gender, economics, religion, education, and the development of the social world (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Another study clarified that women are stigmatised due to their incapacity to resist external forces (Foucault, 1991). The power mentioned refers to communication that shapes society's understanding of niqab-wearing women. This influence is evident in cases where the niqab is banned or when women are stigmatised as extremists, fanatics, or terrorists.

Consequently, stigmatisation leads to niqab-wearing women being ostracised, suspected of radicalism, and discriminated against in public. Studies by Lindemann (2021) show that this stigma causes

significant psychosocial impacts, including worry, anxiety, and social isolation. Similarly, a study conducted by Piela (2019) revealed the psychological impact of stigmatisation among niqab-wearing women in the UK, who reported feeling insecure, humiliated, oppressed, isolated, and afraid to live in and travel to certain areas. Likewise, Chapman (2016) also stated the psychological condition of niqab-wearing women in Denmark and England who felt threatened and tarnished because of the stigma they experienced.

The detrimental effects of subjecting someone to negative stigma can be highly perilous, particularly when the stigmatisation is repeated and persistent (Bartlett, 1998). Stigma can significantly affect an individual's mental, physical, social, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual well-being (Harrison et al., 2018). To address and overcome these circumstances, each individual will engage in a process known as coping (Semmer et al., 2005). Coping refers to deliberate actions taken to manage, reduce, or endure stress caused by stressors (Weiten & Lloyd, 2006). According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), two primary coping techniques commonly employed to manage stress are problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Thus, it is crucial to address the coping strategies used by niqab-wearing women when facing the stigma.

This article challenges the liberal Western feminist view that portrays niqab-wearing Muslim women as oppressed, outdated, weak, passive, extreme, dangerous, and radical.

In Langsa City, where Sharia shapes public life, women wear the niqab not out of orthodoxy, radicalism, or oppression, but as an expression of personal faith, cultural pressure, and legal norms. They creatively adapt to modern times, presenting themselves as fashionable, modern, polite, and Islamic in public spaces (Fitria et al., 2023). This creativity helps them navigate stigma without resorting to extreme measures. Previous studies have primarily examined the niqab in the context of transnational politics and radical religious movements, overlooking other perspectives. By focusing on patterns of stigmatisation, intersectionality, and the creative coping strategies niqab-wearing women employ, this study fills that gap, offering a more nuanced understanding of niqab practices beyond political and radicalisation narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stigmatisation

The concept of stigmatisation refers to the process by which individuals or groups are socially discredited or labelled based on characteristics that set them apart from societal norms that make them perceived as inferior, undesirable, threatening or feeble (Goffman, 1963). According to Goffman's theory of social stigma, individuals who possess a "discredited" trait, such as wearing the niqab, are often subjected to exclusion, discrimination, and prejudice. This theory helps explain why niqab-wearing women in Langsa City may face public hostility and be perceived as deviant or threatening based on visible markers of religious and cultural identity.

These women may experience felt stigma, which relates to their awareness of being socially marginalised, and enacted stigma, which manifests in actual discriminatory behaviours from others (Link & Phelan, 2010).

Intersectionality

The intersectional concept was first introduced by Crenshaw (1991) to analyse the oppression of black women. Crenshaw portrays the black woman as being in the middle of an intersection. At the same time, the girl can be hit from various directions, thus eliciting her helplessness. Crenshaw's (1989) analogy shows that stigmatisation and discrimination can occur when a woman's background or identity meets other elements in her environment. These elements, such as race, ethnicity, social class, religion, occupation, ability and so on. Intersectionality theory helps analyse how these overlapping identities contribute to the unique stigmatisation and social exclusion that niqab-wearing women experience, and how this shapes their coping strategies.

Coping Strategy

The third theoretical lens is creativity in coping. Coping or stress management is the process of addressing internal and external demands perceived as burdens beyond an individual's capacity to manage (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Witen and Lloyd (2006) define coping as the endeavour to surmount, diminish, or endure threats resulting from stress. Coping is a process employed to mitigate stress resulting from stressors, and the methods an individual utilises to

address these challenges are referred to as coping strategies. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two ways to manage stress: problem-focused coping, which seeks to address the root causes of stress, and emotion-focused coping, which strives to alleviate the negative emotions associated with stressors.

METHODS

The present study implemented an ethnographic methodology which narrated based on real and factual field data that has been systematically analysed and presented according to actual results (Creswell, 2014). This method is applied to investigate the lived experiences of women who wear the niqab in Langsa City. Ethnography was preferred due to its immersive nature, which provides a comprehensive comprehension of the social stigmas and cultural expectations that these women encounter, as well as valuable insights into their daily lives and coping strategies.

Ten niqab-wearing women from Langsa City participated in this study, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age and socioeconomic status (see Table 1). The criteria for participants were as follows. First, the participants are niqab-wearing women who were accessible for data collection and willing to participate in the research process. Second, they had experienced negative stigma while wearing the niqab. Third, actively involved in various socio-religious activities.

Table 1
Participants information

Name	Age	Year Wearing Niqab	Occupation
Mutia Balqis	20	2014	Teacher
Kurnia Fitri	57	2008	Civil Worker
Dini Iestari	45	2020	Entrepreneur
Murlina	42	2020	Health Worker
Kunia Ningsih	42	2003	Entrepreneur
Mughni Rahmayani	26	2018	Teacher
Rea	35	2011	Housewife
Syamsidar	48	2006	Entrepreneur
Syarifatulain	40	2015	Therapist
Wardani	40	2002	Housewife

Data collection involved repeated participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews as well as Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted over a period of six months from February to September 2022. The interview guidelines were developed based on stigmatisation theory, intersectionality, and coping strategies. Researchers spend extended periods in the community, observing social interactions, dress practices, and participation in religious and cultural events. These observations were supplemented by detailed interviews that focussed on participants' personal experiences of wearing the niqab and the social reactions they encounter.

The collected data were validated through three techniques: triangulation, audit trail, and thick description (Moleong, 2013), whereas data from interview and FGD were transcribed and analysed using grounded theory, an approach aimed at generating theory based on data obtained from interviews, observations, and other sources (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Afterward, data were analysed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (2014) that consists of several steps, including data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusion/verification. After the data was validated, the findings were presented in an in-depth description. The results are structured around the core themes of stigmatisation patterns, environmental intersectionality, and coping strategies used by the women in deciding to wear and maintain the niqab.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three primary themes emerged from the analysis of participants' experiences: (1) patterns of stigmatisation, (2) intersectionality of environment and identity, and (3) coping mechanisms. Each theme is elaborated upon in detail below.

Theme I: Stigmatisation of Niqab-wearing Women in Langsa City

Literature written by Lombard (1991), and also Hurgronje (1906), mentions that

Acehnese women, since ancient times, have covered their heads, even with a shawl. Accordingly, the ethnographic study conducted by Siapno (2002) between 1992-1996 provided comparative information that hijab was already worn by Acehnese women. Considering these discoveries, wearing the niqab and hijab for Acehnese Muslim women is not because they are pressured by Islamic law, but a form of inborn awareness to practice Islamic law and follow Acehnese culture.

However, living among the majority of Aceh's Muslim community does not guarantee that niqab-wearing women are free from stigma. This fact is based on the biographical data of the experiences of ten niqab-wearing women in Langsa who were stigmatised because of their niqabs. The stigma experienced by niqab-wearing women in Langsa City is in the form of negative labelling, such as being called a ninja and terrorist as reported during the interview:

Once I was walking on the sidewalk of Langsa City, I was suddenly surprised because people were passing by on motorbikes while shouting at me with the term *ninja*. Hearing that, I was surprised, because I would not have thought to be treated like that. But I just thought positively, because they might still feel strange with my clothes (Rea, personal communication, 2022).

I was considered strange and was ostracised in the surrounding environment. I was considered a

religious person, called a *ninja* and even someone called me a terrorist (Wardani, personal communication, 2022).

Furthermore, Ningsih (personal communication, 2022) is called a ghost because there are children who cry in fear when they see her. Some are accused of being radical and Wahhabis, so they are expelled from the organisation (Syarifatulain, personal communication, 2022). Some are accused of being ISIS devotees (Syamsidar, personal communication, 2022), and some are accused of being pious and terrorists (Wardani, personal communication, 2022).

The mentioned statements and experience highlight the experience of social isolation, a key aspect of the stigmatisation pattern, as participants feel ostracised based on their appearance. According to Goffman, stigmatisation occurs because those who give the stigma feel superior and more dominant, while those who are stigmatised are considered inferior, worse, dangerous or weak (Goffman, 1986). Goffman's view parallels the experience of niqab-wearing women in Langsa city who are stigmatised because they are considered threatening. This finding also reveals that the stigmatisation experienced by niqab-wearing women in Langsa occurs in very diverse patterns. The pattern is classified into two types, namely formal and informal stigmatisation.

Formal Stigmatisation

Formal stigmatisation usually occurs by those in positions of authority, including

governmental and private institutions. Following Foucault's (1995) logic, this practice is called a power relation. The niqab-wearing woman in Langsa city is an object that is subordinated and stigmatised by the dominating power of several policies imposed by the government or the power holder. This argument is strengthened by investigative facts about the experience of niqab-wearing women who were discriminated against because of government intrusion in regulating women's clothing. Like the experience felt by a school principal named Intan (personal communication, 2022) in 2019, she was banned from participating in a school supervisor meeting at a government agency if she was still wearing the niqab. Fitri (personal communication, 2022), who works in a government agency, also shared her experience where she was forced to refuse an offer for a promotion because the requirements were very illogical, that is, she had to remove her niqab.

When I received a message from the leader entrusted to me through a friend, asking me to take off my niqab so I could get a position, my emotions were a bit high. In a rather firm tone, I said, take that position. Don't let me give up my faith because of that position. Tell the boss, just give the position to someone else (Fitri, personal communication, 2022).

The experience of the two informants who have been mentioned above shows the strong influence of the power instrument

in stigmatising. Practices like this are exceptionally visible in 2019, the beginning of the second term of Joko Widodo's administration. Under the pretext of countering terrorism, understanding religious radicalism and national security, the Indonesian government, through the Minister of Religion, Fakhruddin, actively supports the discourse on banning the niqab in public places, such as schools, government agencies and campuses (Nisa, personal communication, 2022). This condition makes niqab-wearing women progressively stigmatised, because they are considered a dangerous, radical group, and become an alarming terror for the country.

Another formal institution that also triggers the stigmatisation of niqab-wearing women is the Ulema Assembly. The views of ulema who diverge in interpreting the use of the niqab have caused polarisation in society; some support it and others reject it according to the interpretation of their respective role models or ulema. Campuses, as formal institutions, also play a role in spearheading the ban on the niqab. In *Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta*, niqab-wearing female students are considered as people who need to be guided. In Bukit Tinggi, a lecturer was fired for wearing a niqab (Safitri, 2021). These facts indicate the strong power of formal institutions in stigmatising women who wear the niqab.

The complexity of stigmatising niqab-wearing women is inseparable from national and international political agendas, especially in this case, America

(the Western) and its allies (Terman, 2015). The reason is that niqab-wearing women in many places are plausible for transforming into a new identity political power movement that is feared to dominate the world (Kunst et al., 2012). For instance, the persistence of the Muslim women's movement in Egypt, which made the hijab a symbol of power in its political movement (Ahmed, 2011). This phenomenon can also be observed distinctly with the surfacing of niqab-wearing women's organisations in Indonesia, such as the Niqab Squad and the Indonesian niqab-wearing women group named *Wanita Indonesia Bercadar* or WIB. Although this organisation only intended to remove the stigma against niqab-wearing women, and organisationally they are not involved in political movements, they are directly involved in various actions, such as the action to defend Islam 212. Thus, naturally, the phenomenon of the niqab, which was originally an Islamic identity, turned into a political spectacle.

For America, for example, this concern has intensified in the last fifteen years, as the number of young European and North American Muslim women wearing the niqab has increased. They are not people who migrated from Middle Eastern countries but were born and raised in the West. So, prohibiting, hostile and stigmatising niqab-wearing women is a scheme to prevent the increase in the number of niqab wearers (Hoodfar, 2003). Similarly, in Indonesia, niqab-wearing women are considered a threat to national integration. This condition further adds to the verdict that

the stigmatisation of niqab-wearing women in Langsa City is an impact of national and international political agendas. Therefore, King (2009) suggested that Muslims should be more cautious in dealing with orientalist political propaganda that is not necessarily acknowledged to be true.

Informal Stigmatisation

Informal stigmatisation, namely, stigmatisation carried out by the common people. This stigmatisation arises because of the wrong interpretation of the niqab wearer. The response of participants, Dini (personal communication, 2022), who is also a neighbour to a niqab-wearing woman in this study. She associates niqab-wearing women with the wives of terrorists and has radical views, after seeing her niqab-wearing neighbour changing her behaviour and restricted circle.

I have known Ningsih for a long time because we are neighbours. But what I am surprised about is that, since she started wearing a niqab, she has become quiet, rarely socialising with neighbours. If she goes out of the house, it is usually to take her children to school. So, I thought after seeing the drastic change in her behaviour. Maybe that is the teaching of radical Islam, limiting the wife's socialising if she wears a niqab (Dini, personal communication, 2022).

This comparative information from residents shows the false manner of society in interpreting niqab-wearing women.

This misinterpretation is caused by low and limited insight and knowledge in interpreting the niqab. This parallels the study by Apriliana and Nafiah (2021), who explained that the low level of education and the extent of knowledge contributed to stigmatisation. This notion is correlated with Aceh's education atmosphere, which until 2010 was in a low position, which was ranked 25th out of 34 provinces (Majid, 2014).

The misinterpretation of niqab-wearing women stems from society's reliance on a single media source, particularly liberal mass media, which often portrays them as terrorists or extremists. With limited Islamic media providing alternative perspectives, these negative portrayals create discomfort and unfavourable perceptions. This was evident in Kurnia Ningsih's experience when she began wearing the niqab in 2003, shortly after the Bali bombing, which heightened distrust due to media associations of the niqab with radical groups. Her experience highlights the formal and informal stigmatisation faced by niqab-wearing women, leading to public discrimination and hatred. Furthermore, Mowlana (1993) vehemently criticises media coverage that undermines humanitarian principles, as such activities go against the Islamic communication paradigm that supports the principles of monotheism, ethics, community, and piety. Additionally, Mowlana (2007) emphasizes that the social role of communication and cultural framework should not be undervalued in daily communication activities.

Absence of these four principles in secular mass media results in the failure to establish a humanistic cultural civilisation in society.

Consistent with Mowlana's perspective, numerous significant studies confirm the media's excessive reporting, which results in prejudice against women who wear the niqab. As an illustration, Zempi (2019) demonstrates the significant impact of the media in Europe on the prohibition of face veils in public premises. Reports from the British press indicate that the veil presents a potential danger to the security and national identity of England (Sadar, 2014). According to Perry (2014), the media actively contributes to the dissemination of animosity and Islamophobia towards women who wear the niqab. The results of this study indicate that women in Langsa who wear a niqab do not respond by resisting, even though they are discriminated against due to information overload. Thus, the niqab is worn as part of the mission to promote the concept of mercy for all worlds and the benign values of Islamic law, as well as to uphold the dignity of believing women.

Theme II: Environmental Intersection

Based on Crenshaw's intersectional concept, this study reveals the intersectional experience of ten niqab-wearing women with their environment in Langsa City. The intersection is described as follows.

Referring to Figure 1 shows the position of niqab-wearing women at the crossroads of various overlapping elements. The current study reveals that there are overlapping intersections between various

elements, such as understanding of religion, culture, politics, public opinion and social status, causing women who wear the niqab in Langsa City to be stigmatised and discriminated against.

Misogynistic interpretation of religious texts has caused women with niqabs to be stigmatised. Likewise, the use of the niqab, which is considered incompatible with the local culture, also contributes to stigmatising women who wear the niqab. Like the response of a resident named Atik, who stated:

In my opinion, wearing a niqab is a traditional dress for women in Arabia. In Aceh, wearing a jilbab is enough. That's why I often bother Mrs. Ningsi. I said why you are following Arab culture. Her whole body is covered. Isn't it hot? Even I, who am like this, still feel hot and stuffy. When told like that, Ningsih just smiled (Atik, personal communication, 2022).

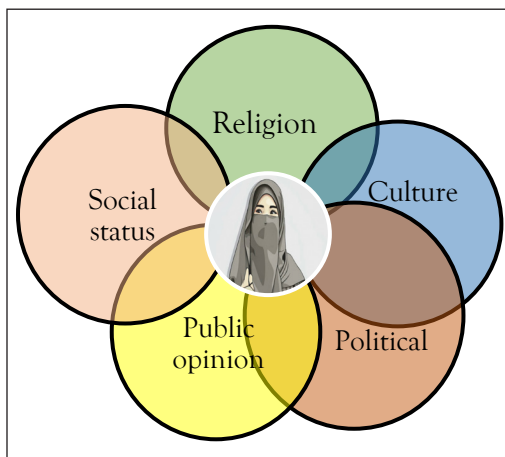


Figure 1. The intersection of niqab-wearing women with the environment in Langsa City

This is a fact that contributes to the misogynistic understanding of religion and culture in stigmatising women who wear the niqab. Likewise, political issues and public opinion have contributed to stigmatising niqab-wearing women. As mentioned by Syamsidar (personal communication, 2022), the issue of radicalism is media-driven propaganda aimed at damaging the image of niqab-wearing women and instilling fear. Not all niqab-wearing women are terrorists or radicals. The informant's account shows that niqab-wearing women are aware of how media politicises their attire, with repeated exposure reinforcing societal perceptions. Correspondingly, Herriot (2009), Williamson and Khiabany (2010), and Ratri (2011), radicalism and religious fundamentalism movements that are continuously informed by the media can make niqab-wearing women stigmatised. Theoretically, this notion is correlated with the cultivation theory (information enrichment theory) introduced by George Gerbner, and the Bullet Theory introduced by Wilbur Schramm, both of which postulate that information that is broadcast repeatedly through the media can affect beliefs, perceptions and someone's attitude (Severin & Jr, 2014).

Theme III: Women in Niqab Coping Strategies

Environmental intersectionality stigmatises niqab-wearing women, placing them in marginalised, second-class positions. However, in Langsa, they actively cope with this stigma rather than remain passive.

Furthermore, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explain two possible coping strategies that a person chooses to overcome stigma, namely problem-focussed coping (oriented to problem-solving) and emotion-focussed coping (oriented to emotional regulation).

Direct observations at the research location revealed that the two coping strategies mentioned by Lazarus and Folkman were carried out by niqab-wearing women in Langsa in creative ways. These coping strategies are internalised by niqab-wearing women in the form of positive coping responses, such as adapting and seeking social support, becoming religious social volunteers, participating in social activities, regulating emotions, and avoiding problems.

Adaptation and Pursuing Social Support

In Langsa City, niqab-wearing women, as a stigmatised minority, use coping strategies like adaptation and seeking social support to consolidate their identity. Two factors might explain these decisions: first, recognising their minority status, they aim to align with the majority group, and second, they seek to blend into the community reasonably. These two factors are noticed in the daily life of niqab-wearing women in Langsa City. Like the experience expressed by Rea (2022), who works as a nurse, shared her experience of overcoming stigma by participating in community activities, such as attending mosque recitations, funerals, and gatherings, joining a "wirid," becoming part of a helping union, and organising social events for women. Another form of adaptation can be

seen in the efforts of niqab-wearing women to say greetings first, with politeness and a friendly attitude when meeting other people. Like Wardani's (personal communication, 2022) experience, she always greeted other people first, so that people's suspicions would disappear, and the public would sympathise and love her. Similarly, the same experience was also expressed by Maya (personal communication, 2022), who works as a Guidance and Counselling teacher at a High School in Langsa city.

When I started teaching, many of the teachers were surprised to see me, because they didn't know me and I was also wearing a niqab. But I understood the situation, so I quickly adjusted to the school environment. From then on, I reprimanded the teachers at school, both young and old teachers. Because I was new to the school. I shook their hands every time I met them. That was my way, so that I could be accepted at the school, and in that way I also broke the mindset of people who said that women who wear niqabs are closed, don't want to socialise (Maya, personal opinion, 2022).

The interview results above indicate the creativity of niqab-wearing women in Langsa city in negotiating their identity in the public sphere. It can be seen that the idea of eliminating the stigma mindset involves initiating communication with other people, greeting gently, and behaving in a friendly and polite manner. Mahmood (2005) called this fragmentation docile

agency, active and creative. This means that niqab-wearing women do not have to confront the oppression aggressively, but they take creative actions with ethical awareness that are based on sincerity, politeness and patience. In various places, similar creative coping strategies are also practised by women who wear the niqab to overcome the stigma against themselves. For comparison, it can be referred to the "Hug Me" movement carried out by the niqab-wearing women's community at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout and in the city of Manado (Putri, 2018). Metaphorically, these creative actions aim to convince and attract public sympathy that niqab-wearing women do not need to be feared, suspected and hated.

So, Niqab-wearing women in Langsa function as active personifications of the niqab, with personal awareness that allows them to construct and reproduce the meaning attached to wearing the niqab. The niqab, which was initially considered scary because it was all black, became a fashion trend for modern women, which is fashionable, Islamic and lovable. Corresponding to Murlina's (personal communication, 2022) experience, a niqab-wearing woman who works as a niqab manufacturer intentionally modified the black niqab with a luxurious fabric made of Chinese silk suitable for hot weather. Additionally, niqab-wearing women in Langsa were found looking fashionable on several occasions, wearing Korean fashion boots and driving a car when going shopping at the supermarket. Like Syamsidar's (personal communication,

2022) experience, she always wears a fashionable niqab with a choice of soft colours, not just black, especially when going to the mini market and parties. The intention is to be more confident and able to present herself as a niqab-wearing Muslim woman who appears elegant, polite, Islamic and modern in public spaces.

Creativity shown by niqab-wearing women in Langsa city, has been carried out by niqab-wearing women in Western countries who express themselves through spreading fashionable niqab-wearing photos on the online media Flickr, a photo-sharing website, because they think this method can inspire others (Piela, 2013). Bilge (2010) also describes the experience of niqab-wearing women's agency in choosing strategies to promote themselves as good Muslim women, and to fight against Western hegemony, which sees it as oppression by the patriarchy. Zempi (2016) also describes the experience of niqab-wearing women in England who feel naked when they are not niqab-wearing.

Accordingly, the analyses that have been mentioned are comparative and sufficient to strengthen the argument that Muslim women in Langsa city decided to wear the niqab not because they are radical, old-fashioned, oppressed by religion and patriarchal culture, in contrast to the presumption of secular Western feminists. The niqab-wearing woman in Langsa city is a creative agency capable of overcoming the stigma and subordination of patriarchal culture. This ability is driven by three factors, specifically knowledge, experience, and skills.

First, knowledge is related to understanding oneself as a minority group that is stigmatised and must rise against subordination but adhere scrupulously to religious values. Second, experiences as a person who is stigmatised and marginalised encourage niqab-wearing women in Langsa City to be more inclusive in society. Lastly, skills are related to the ability of niqab-wearing women to choose creative and adaptive coping strategies after analysing the situations they are in.

The three components are acquired from autonomous self-awareness, which is the awareness that arises within the subject to become a self that has power. Foucault (1990) stated that the occurrence of an autonomous self is because someone wants to achieve certain goals, senses the importance of change, can adapt, and there are concrete strategies that are carried out. The statement Foucault mentioned is identified in the creative coping carried out by niqab-wearing women in Langsa City to overcome the stigma against them. This creativity also occurs because it is driven by the power of knowledge. As mentioned by Foucault (1982), someone takes action or fights because he is driven by the power of the knowledge he has. Thus, the creative coping actions carried out by niqab-wearing women in Langsa City aim to fight against subordination. Similar creative actions are also reflected in Srimulyani's (2013) study, which explores the experiences of Acehese women ulama in advocating for women's rights.

Therefore, without intending to dramatise the situation, different perspectives must be

reviewed in determining the meaning of the niqab and the choice of Muslim women to wear it. This aims to prevent situational generalisation that portrays all niqab-wearing women as being motivated by oppression, religious orthodoxy, or religious radicalism. Western feminists claim that niqab-wearing women are oppressed by the niqab, their activities are limited in public spaces, and old-fashioned ideas are not found in the current study. On the contrary, the niqab for Muslim women in Langsa City is a creative response in responding to the dynamics of modernism, staying Islamic but not outdated, even though the niqab is stigmatised with negative labelling.

This fact serves as a rebuttal for liberal feminism, which stigmatises women with a niqab, as well as strengthens the argument of the niqab as the creativity of Muslim women in responding to modernity. As has been proven by several studies, one of which is Mouser (2007), who reports on the experience of Malay women in Kuala Lumpur wearing the hijab and niqab because they feel more modern and enlightened in Islamic ways. Roy (2004), a French sociologist, also gives his opinion on the increasing number of Muslim women who wear the hijab in Europe, because they want to appear more religious in a secular European society. Thus, the desire to appear religious, Islamic and modern indicates that niqab-wearing women are exceptionally active in overcoming the stigma against themselves in a creative way.

Regulating Emotions and Avoiding Problems

Based on the experiences of ten niqab-wearing women in Langsa, they face significant psychological pressure from stigma, including emotional turmoil such as anger, irritation, depression, and even the urge to remove their niqab. Fitri (personal communication, 2022) stated that she felt angry and irritated when she was called a ninja and a terrorist. Similarly, Rea (personal communication, 2022) stated that she feels upset and stressed for days and experiencing mental pressure and wants to stop wearing a niqab.

To stay productive, niqab-wearing women cope with stigma by regulating emotions and avoiding conflict. They view stigma as a test of faith, practising patience not as passivity, but to avoid conflict and seek more elegant ways to gain public sympathy. They believe responding to verbal stigmatisation with violence would worsen the situation and cause greater harm. So, based on Syamsidar's (personal communication, 2022) answer, she stated that when she was stigmatised as a ninja and ISIS member, she prefers to be patient and pray for those who stigmatise her to avoid slander and conflict. However, she remains active in advocating for women and empowering women to plant vacant land with hydroponic plants.

The decision to embrace patience as a coping strategy demonstrates the emotional regulation skills and creativity of niqab-wearing women in Langsa City, enabling them to transform negative emotions into positive ones and maintain stability and productivity. Actions like this have been

carried out by Muslim students wearing headscarves in London, who are stigmatised and prefer to act politely and patiently in interacting with others (Chapman, 2018). Thus, patience becomes an alternative coping strategy as a creative response for niqab-wearing women to overcome stigma. Patience among niqab-wearing women in Langsa is not a result of an inability to resist, but rather a deliberate choice rooted in piety, aimed at preserving a peaceful environment. It also does not mean running away from reality, but avoiding the source of the stigma while looking for other, more elegant strategies. Like Desi Lestari (personal communication, 2022), who chose to avoid crowds that stigmatised her, and maintain politeness and friendly communication when interacting with other people. Likewise, Mutia Balqis (personal communication, 2022) prefers to avoid sources of stigma, but provides religious consultation services at home and teaches children in Musalla. According to Balqis, this method can change people's perceptions of niqab-wearing women.

Even though I don't socialise much in society, I still teach children to recite the Quran at the Musalla. That's my way to overcome the stigma of society, because by teaching children, I can convince society that I'm not like the veiled women that society has always thought of. I can also socialise with their parents when they come to pick up their children at the Musalla. That's my way to overcome the stigma (Balqis, personal communication, 2022).

So, generally, these niqab-wearing women cope with stigma by being patient and taking creative actions, such as adapting to their environment, regulating emotions, and seeking social support. They face a dilemma as a minority: fight back and risk being labelled terrorists or remain silent and be viewed as passive, which prolongs discrimination. Thus, patience becomes the best option, though it does not equate to silence or inaction. This strategy is described by Piela (2012) as niqab-wearing women in America, who are stigmatised. To overcome the stigma, niqab-wearing women prefer to stay in America, while changing strategies to promote a tolerant Islam, rather than migrating to Muslim-majority countries.

Irrefutably, patience as a coping strategy allows niqab-wearing women to overcome stigma without conducting any radical actions and is influenced by cultural background, knowledge, experience, social environment, and self-concept (Suzanne, 1992). This creative approach reflects cognitive restructuring, driven by their desire to escape stigma, marginalisation, and subordination. It's evident how they balance being Islamic with appearing modern, elegant, and fashionable in public. Thus, this study complements Saba Mahmood's (2005) ethnographic research that establishes the religious mobility of women in Egypt without necessitating resistance. Religiousness delves into fundamental aspects, encompassing individuals who are continuously instructed to perform virtuous acts, so establishing a habitual practice.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights three key points: First, environmental intersectionality causes widespread stigma against niqab-wearing women, isolating and marginalizing them. Niqab-wearing women are stigmatised formally and informally. Second, niqab-wearing women are not passive but actively use creative, adaptive coping strategies to overcome stigma without resorting to radical actions. Finally, this study challenges previous research that portrays niqab-wearing women as radical, oppressed, or subordinated by patriarchy, calling for broader research from different perspectives for comparison.

This research has significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it challenges dominant narratives that depict niqab-wearing women as submissive, oppressed, or politicized (Zine, 2017) and also advances feminist theory, by rejecting the idea that they are uniformly subjugated by patriarchy (Mahmood, 2005). It highlights their resilience and ability to exercise autonomy amid constraining societal contexts. Furthermore, the current study enhances the understanding of how niqab-wearing women manage societal stigmatisation and marginalisation by emphasizing their agency, and innovative and adaptive coping methods. The notion of intersectionality, in this context, expands our theoretical comprehension of how several forms of discrimination—rooted in gender, religion, and public visibility—intersect to influence the lived experiences of women who wear the niqab (Crenshaw, 1991).

This study enhances feminist and sociological views by demonstrating that niqab-wearing women are not only victims of their circumstances, but rather active agents in their own lives, expressing autonomy within constrained contexts

These findings have important implications for public policy, community engagement, and education. Anti-stigmatisation policies should be grounded in an understanding of the social mechanisms that marginalize niqab-wearing women, including media portrayals, institutional practices, and everyday interactions. Public awareness and community programs should focus on dispelling misconceptions by emphasizing agency, personal choice, and social participation.

Educational institutions, workplaces, and governmental services are encouraged to implement inclusive and non-discriminatory policies, including clear dress code guidelines and equal access to opportunities for niqab-wearing women (Brown, 2020). Creating supportive environments may enhance social inclusion and gender equality. Future research should explore niqab-wearing women's experiences across diverse cultural contexts to inform context-sensitive policies.

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APPENDIX

Interview Results

Atik. *Neighbours Kurnia Ningsih in Langsa City, Interview Results on 2022.*

Balqis, Mutia. *Interview Results with Neighbours in Langsa City, Mei, 2022.*

Fitri, Kurnia. *Interview Results in Langsa City, April 2022.*

Intan. *Interview Results in Langsa City, September 2022.*

Lestari, Dini. *Interview Results in Langsa City with Neighbours Kurnia Ningsih, July 2022.*

Murlina. *Interview Results in Langsa City, June 2022.*

Ningsih, Kurnia. *Interview Results in Langsa City, April 2022.*

Rahmayani, Mughni. *Interview Results in Langsa City, Mei 2022.*

Rea. *Interview Results in Langsa City, Mei 2022.*

Syamsidar. *Interview Results in Langsa city, June 2022.*

Syarifatulain. *Interview Results in Langsa City, Mei 2022.*

Wardani. *Interview Results in Langsa City, June 2022.*