

# Modernization and the veiling of young women:

evidence from Indonesia

## Research proposal

Naila Maya Shofia

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### **Abstract**

What does the veiling of young women represents in the context of rapidly modernizing society? Using the data from Indonesia, this research attempts to understand how women, commonly marginalized group in the society, response to the rapidly changing economic, political and social environment. It attempts to show that the growing trend of veilling among young and educated women in Indonesia is not simply a sign of religious observance/fanaticism. Contrary to the common view, this orthodox religious symbol is, paradoxically, used to achieve a very progressive goals, such as participation in the labor force or even an opposition to an authoritarian regime. Hence, the use of veil may not represent backwardness or subjugation, but in contrary, it represents an attempts to break economic and political exclusion. This research provides empirical evidence of religious expression and its role in political and economic modernization in a way that may

completely challenge the current wisdom.

## 1 Introduction

One of the most notable changes among Indonesian women in the past thirty years is an unprecedented increase in the number of women wearing religious veil (in Indonesian, *jilbab*). In her field work, Smith-Hefner (2007) documents that the proportion of girls who are wearing religious headscarf in the campus where she conducted her study in the late 1970s is only around 3 percent. Surprisingly, this number increase to more than 60 percent when she revisit the same campus in 2002. Unlike in Iran or Afghanistan, where veiling is imposed by the theocratic government, most women in Indonesia wear the veil by their own willingness. On the surface, this phenomenon is perceived by many as a sign of increasing religious observance or even religious fanaticism.

If this claim on religious fanaticism is true, then this is the first puzzle: in all democratic election held in the same period (after the fall of dictatorship, 4 elections were held, in 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 respectively), none of the Islamist parties has ever reached the top two position in receiving popular votes. Interestingly, the number of votes for all Islamist parties even tend to decrease in the latest 2 elections.

If the rapid increase of women with veil is simply a sign of religious fanaticism, then we would expect that this preference would be expressed “politically” and thus we should observe Islamist party gaining more popularity. What seems to be happening is that parties which offer platforms

with religious tone does not seem to attract (increasingly religious) voters.

Another paradox is that, the trend of the “new veiling” did not spread among old, traditional and religious women in rural areas, but become especially widespread among young, well-educated and urban middle class women. It is gaining popularity in high-schools and campuses in cosmopolitan cities like Bandung, Medan, Surabaya and Yogyakarta.[7] Students who started to adorn the attire were originally from the faculty of engineering or medical school, girls who are at the best position to reap the benefit of economic development.(ibid)

In this research, I attempt to investigate this puzzle: what does the increasing trend of veiling among women symbolise in the context of rapidly growing economy like Indonesia? The research aims at a deeper understanding of the process of social transformation and how this process unravel in a society which struggle in the cross-road of modernization : how to reconcile modernity and cultural/religious values embedded in a society.

In particular, I am interested to understand how women ”utilize” a very conservative religious symbol as a mean to achieve, paradoxically, very progressive and modern goals. There are two hypotheses that seek to be proven in this studies: first, the religious veil is used as a symbol of political opposition under the authoritarian regime and secondly, the same device is used again by young women to erode the social barriers from participating in economic and public sphere, to enable themselves to reap the benefit of economic opportunity.

Indonesia provides a unique opportunity for social scientists who is interested in understanding how modernization should reconcile with cul-

tural/religious norms. First, Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world. Second, it has no mention of religion in its constitution (so, *de jure*, it is a secular country), but the fact that muslims consist of almost 90 percent of its 250 millions population, makes Indonesia the most populous muslim country on earth. Moreover, in contrast to its counterpart in the Middle East or North Africa where democracy is sometimes a taboo, Indonesia has been fledging on full democracy since the fall of authoritarian regime in 1998 up to now. All of these characteristics put Indonesia on a unique position where the force of democracy and modernization has to deal with the force of deep cultural/religious values embedded in its society.

## 2 Literature review

The vast majority of literature on economic development and the public role of women are inspired by Becker (1981). His original ideas was that the transformation in the economy has changed the incentives faced by women such that they are induced to participate more in the economy. One of the most noticeable consequences of this is the decline in fertility.

Given these transformations, the gap between men and women in economic or political participation, unfortunately, are still pronounce. This is especially so in the context of developing economies.(Duflo, 2012) The most cited term which becoming the jargon in the development field is probably “the missing women”, a phrase coined by Amartya Sen in the *New York Review of Books* in 1990. The studies in this strand also attempt to understand the relationship and interdependence between economic devel-

opment and increasing status of women. For instance, Duflo (2012) argues that although both phenomena are closely related, increasing one does not necessarily induce a consistent improvement on the others.

None of these studies however, consider how these transformation deal with the resistance from cultural/traditional values embedded in the society. These previous studies show the implication of economic development on various economic and social variable related to the role of women, but they do not really show the mechanism by which these transformation unravel or manifested in real life. How did these women do it? Did it happen smoothly or naturally? Were they resistance towards these changes as these may mean a misalignment with the previously held social values? My study would have an advantage of being able to capture directly how women response to these economic and political transformation by maneuvering through the social norms using religious symbols which are valued by the society.

The closest literature to my study is probably written by Carvalho (2013). He views that veiling is a commitment device for Muslim women which limits the temptation of engaging in religiously deviant behaviour. His analysis emphasize that using the veil enable women to take up outside economic opportunity while at the same time, preserving their social image and reputation within the society. In Indonesian context, the new veiling coincides not with the stagnation and social immobility, but in contrary, it goes hand in hand with economic growth and increasing opportunity for women to work outside their home.[7] Although providing a supportive model, Carvalho's study does not contain empirical evidence of the phenomenon. My study would potentially provide the evidence for this mechanism.

The second strand of relevant literature is that on social dynamics. Theories of modernization and social change has been challenged by the experience of various developing countries. For instance, improvement in gender equality and female status cannot be regarded as a natural consequences of industrialization.(Marshall and Stokes, 1981) The missing point here has a lot to do with how modernity may not be able to reconcile with the cultural norms and values indigenous to the society. Some countries/societies choose to modernize but also choose not to westernize. Given the experience of most currently developing countries, which were formerly colonized by western occupation, this choice seems to be understandable.

Several studies shed lights on the issue. For instance, Brenner (1996) argue that the wearing of Islamic clothing among Javanese muslim women has challenged both local traditions as well as Western model of modernity. Similarly, Smith-Hefner (2007) argues that veiling, especially in Java, could not be understood as the revival of traditionalism, since this tradition was not there before. Older and pious women used to adorn a loose translucent garment (in Indonesian, *kerudung*) on their head, but *jilbab* is different, it is something “new”. She maintains that this new trend is a conscious decision in responding to the incentive provided by the transformation in economic, political and social environment. Contrary to the current wisdom, where women veiling is seen a symbol of women oppression and subjugation, veiling, according to her, is a symbol of modernity and progressive political movement.

The trend of veiling in Indonesia is started in the late 1970s, which coincided with the aftermath of Iranian revolution. Commentators suggest

that the success of Ayatollah in toppling the Shah of Iran has inspired various student movements in Muslim-majority countries to use religion as a vehicle and symbol of political opposition. This seems to square well with the fact that Indonesia back then was under heavy militaristic rule by president Suharto. From here, it is plausible that the veiling was started as a symbol of modernity and opposition to the oppressive regime. Not coincidentally, religious veiling was banned by the authoritarian government to be worn in public schools and offices until the early 1990s.

In short, these literature seems to suggest that the veiling was, at least at the beginning, used as a political symbol to challenge the oppressive regime. It then transform as a way to embrace modernity and to tap the advantage of economic development. To my knowledge, no empirical work using a large-scale survey on religious veil has concentrated on this particular issues. This research attempts to provide the first large scale survey based empirical evidence to support these particular hypotheses.

In particular, the goal of the study is to establish either or the two hypothesis:

- The veiling was started off and continued as a symbol of political opposition towards oppressive regime until the fall of the authoritarian regime of president Suharto.
- The veiling is subsequently be used as a mechanism by young and educated women to reap the benefit of new economic opportunity.

### **3 The contribution of the study**

This research would contribute to the development of the theory of social change and economic development in several ways:

- This study would provide an alternative way of understanding the use of religious symbol, both in politics and economic sphere in a way that may challenge the current wisdom. The nominal meaning of the veiling may be seen as, at face value, simply represent religiosity, or even oppression and subjugation toward women. However, in this study, I attempt to show that the meaning and implications are more nuance than that.
- Most importantly, this study would yield an original dataset on the evolution of culture among women which would be extremely valuable for a wide range of studies of gender empowerment, identity politics and economic development. Just to mention a few, the dataset could be used to learn about the dynamic of fertility, education, marriage, divorce and other life-time events induced by this transformation in women identity.



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