

Redefining status through *burqa*: Religious transformation and body politics of Indonesia's woman migrant workers



Authors:

Inayah Rohmaniyah¹ 
 Agus Indiyanto² 
 Zainuddin Prasajo³ 
 Julaekhah Julaekhah⁴ 

Affiliations:

¹Faculty of Ushuluddin and Islamic Thought, Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

²Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

³Department of Social Science, Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Pontianak, Pontianak, Indonesia

⁴Department of Graduate Studies, Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author:

Inayah Rohmaniyah,
 inayah.rohmaniyah@uin-suka.ac.id

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Apart from being commonly understood as a symbol of religious identity, full-face veils (*burqa*) are also a process through which women redefine their bodies and social status. This article investigates Indonesian women's commitment to wearing *burqa* after their work migration in Taiwan and Hong Kong. It focuses on the signification and the redefinition of the body through *hijrah* (transformation). In-depth interviews conducted with nine Indonesian women migrant workers (WMWs) revealed that this *hijrah* process characterised by the wearing of the *burqa* is not always motivated by a religiously radical mindset but more likely by practical considerations aiming to create a sense of security and comfort while working overseas. The *burqa* is perceived as a symbolic shift in body definition: from being a source of harm, to piety and privilege, paving the way for women to join an emerging elite community, rendering them a new noble and influential social status through socio-religious activities. This study recommends that further research on WMWs in the Middle East needs to acquire a more comprehensive picture taking into account its complexity.

Contribution: Beyond the symbolic religious identity, *burqa* wearing is also a form of political participation. It illustrates women's agency and transformation in redefining their bodies, public space, authority and public recognition.

Keywords: *burqa*; woman migrant workers (WMWs); the body; *hijrah* (religious transformation); social recognition; participatory politics.

Introduction

The *burqa* that has been taken for granted as an expression of religious identity encompasses a complex process of body redefinition and, hence, should be apprehended from multiple perspectives. Full-face veils (*burqa*) are perceived as a demonstration of a radical-oriented separatist identity and are associated with Salafi groups, oppression and intolerance against women (Chesler 2010; Nisa 2012). This depiction has led some countries to put an official ban on wearing *burqa* in public spaces. French discourses from the political class relate the wearing of *burqa* to subjugation and oppression of women, the former President Nicolas Sarkozy, therefore, claimed that *burqa* was 'not welcome' in France where liberty is upheld (BBC News 2018). Notwithstanding that it also intertwines with a discourse on women's freedom of choice in clothing (Nussbaum 2010). Similarly, Indonesia also prohibits *burqa* from being worn in universities (BBC News 2021) and by state civil apparatus, said the Indonesian Minister of Religious Affairs in 2019 (BBC News 2021).

Studies on the phenomenon of *burqa* have so far focused on three aspects. The first looked at *burqa* as an expression of religious identity (Beck-Peccoz 2016; Chowdhury, Abu Bakar & Elmetwally 2017; Ferrari 2016; Hass 2020; Nisa 2012; Nussbaum 2010). In this regard, *burqa* is understood as an expression of freedom and a symbol of complete observance to God's commands (Nisa 2012). The second linked *burqa* to radicalism, religious intolerance and women's oppression (Chesler 2010; Clarke 2013; Mohammadi & Hazeri 2021; Saiya & Manchanda 2019). The third scrutinised *burqa* in relation to the concept of women's fashion in Islamic literatures (Beck-Peccoz 2016:15; Hass 2020; Rasyid & Bukido 2018), emphasising its interrelation with the concept of women's intimate parts that must be covered (*aurat*) and women's clothing (*hijab*). Instead of seeing the veils as a transformative mechanism with an emphasis on the symbolic aspects of redefining the female body and their impact on social practices, all these studies showed a tendency to treat the phenomenon as a mere object of scrutiny.

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This article aims to fill the gap in the literature by throwing light on the symbolic transformation of the *hijrah* phenomenon among Indonesia's woman migrant workers (WMWs). It will address the main questions of how and why the veiling practices have facilitated transformation among WMWs. This article will bring attention to three aspects in particular. The first is the meanings given by the WMWs to the *burqa* and their bodies. The second is the process by which the WMWs, both individually and collectively, become involved in relevant religious and organisational activities. The third is the redefinition of the body as a process of transforming the signification of the body and changing women's social status. These three aspects will give a comprehensive account of *hijrah* and transformation of status and their impact on women's social activities. This study is significant as the public often perceive women as passive and dependent, a stereotype perpetuated by the *burqa*. This study shows that women are able to utilise their agencies and resources to change their social status and role. In this case, the *burqa* is a participatory politic of women to cope with the structural inequality and achieve a higher social status.

This article is built upon the argument that the new trend of wearing *burqa* is not limited to the upper middle class, female students in universities or those affiliated with conservative or even radical groups; rather, it also applies to the WMWs, most of whom are surprisingly working in non-Middle Eastern countries. The decision to wear the *burqa* exhibits not only a shift in understanding of religious norms and rituals but also a change in status. This can be explained by three fundamental arguments. Firstly, the understanding of the body and *hijrah* has become the primary reason for the WMWs to wear the *burqa*. Secondly, the shift of mindsets in perceiving 'the body' and 'the veils' has provided them with both symbolic and cultural capitals. Thirdly, the participation in Islamic preaching activities has granted them a new social status. Thus, the attitudes and behaviours incited by the wearing of the veils are not simply religious manifestations but also a new strategy to define social status and to win space, authority and public recognition.

Materials and methods

This article is built upon research conducted in 2018 and 2019 on nine women workers in Indramayu, West Java, Indonesia and continued in 2021 with a particular focus on those who have returned or have been on their way homes to their regions. The district of Indramayu is worth studying because it ranked highest for supplying WMWs in Indonesia. There are two reasons for choosing female migrant workers as the object of research: Firstly, women working overseas make up a bigger portion of the workforce than men workers did. In 2019, for example, the Central Statistics Agency reported that the overall number of Indonesia's WMWs working overseas reached for 276 553 people, with women workers accounting for 69.15% of the total (Idris 2020). Secondly, the WMWs who decided to wear *burqa* join networks that enable them to improve their religious knowledge and strengthen their new identity. These WMWs were usually being employed in

nursing home foundations as housekeeping assistants or caretakers for the elderly people. Malaysia and Taiwan, being home to 79 662 and 79 574 migrant workers, respectively, were the major destination countries. In Indonesia, Indramayu constituted the top-ranked region, followed by East Lombok, for deploying migrant workers, including women, to other countries.

This study was based on both primary and secondary data. We used a qualitative approach throughout the research and conducted in-depth interviews with the research informants to supply the primary data. We met and spoke with them about their experiences working overseas and their personal encounters with religious communities or sources of knowledge. In addition, we attended their religious events and kept up with their social media accounts. During the pandemic period, when face-to-face interaction was restricted, we maintained contact with them and discussed via WhatsApp about whatever we needed for clarification or better understanding.

We engaged with nine face-veiling WMWs as the key informants (see Table 1). They were chosen at random based on several criteria: (1) they were from Indramayu; (2) they were working as migrants in Taiwan or Hong Kong; and (3) they were wearing the *burqa* while working in Taiwan or Hong Kong. Eight worked in Taiwan and one in Hong Kong for a minimum of two years. The selected informants were those who have returned home or were on the way home to their hometowns in Indramayu, West Java, Indonesia. Interviews were performed for several reasons. The first was to examine their perceptions of the veils and their bodies. The second was to delve into their personal lives following their return from overseas, including their activities and social relationships with socio-religious activists or groups. The third was to scrutinise the process and motivations for religious transformation and social status and their relation to contextual narratives.

The research began with a literature study to gain an overview of the research subjects and then moved on to the identification of informants, after which interviews were conducted. The interviews were held using a semi-structured interview technique, during which the interviewer outlined the issue being studied. The interviewer also employed a list of questions, notebooks, cameras and cell phones to conduct online interviews. The investigation followed Huberman's steps, which include data reduction, visualisation and verification. Interpretive analysis of the verified data began with restatement, description and interpretation.

Radicalism, *hijrah* and *burqa*

The concepts of *burqa*, *hijrah* and radicalism have close relations. The *burqa* has been perceived as an expression of radical religious identity and oppression against women (Chesler 2010; Nisa 2012). It also symbolises *hijrah*, the personal transformation from the self with all its negative aspects in the past to the new and true one, from wearing the usual head

covering that covers the whole body and the face (Purwaningwulan et al. 2019). The following sections will explain the three concepts in more detail.

Radicalism among the migrant workers

Radicalism has escalated into a global phenomenon linked to a particular religion. Radicalism refers to an ideology or a sect that aspires to immediate and extreme social or political changes (Bakri 2019; Muhammadiyah 2019). The changes or reforms sought by radicalism have contributed to the emergence of fragmentation by eliciting criticism and resistance from people in the surroundings (Silver 2018). Radicalism is accompanied by a series of change referring to a process, a practice and a set of beliefs that are interrelated to each other. In practice, radicalism is frequently related to a set of actions and strategies that go beyond acceptable limits of religious or political protests and is therefore regarded as illegal (Cross & Snow 2011). In relation to this, radicalism manifests itself as a subjective experience in perceiving the surrounding realities of life. The radical experience then develops into a consciousness that is voluntarily, pervasive, and visible in symbolic actions (Emelin & Tkhostov 2019). As a result, the reforms sought by radicalism, in general, have been subject of harsh criticism and resistance (Trehearne 2018).

Radicalism has been always tied up with two isms, that is, religion and the politics of a regime. Religious radicalism stems from the belief that revelation must be taken literally and read according to what is recorded or documented in the scriptures. It reflects a narrow- and shallow-minded fanaticism on a single truth of scripture (Damanik & Ndona 2020). In line with this, it has been understood that religious radicalism aims for a return to the true religious teachings in the Qur'an, giving rise to religious perceptions and behaviours that are believed to be the truest ones (Sutiyono, Mughni & Siahaan 2015). Radicalism is also closely related to ruling political regimes, crucial socio-economic deprivation and globalisation (Muzakki 2014) wherein it is inseparable from idealistic pathways towards political reconstruction (Zheng 2015). It is also associated with fundamentalists or people supporting or mirroring extreme political orientations (Hysing, Olsson & Dahl 2016). When it comes to radical migrant workers looking for political participation, all is done within a global mindset. This indicates a form of migrant workers' involvement shifting from radicalism to community-based politics (Battiston 2019). These two types of radicalism correlate with the efforts to justify their interpretation of religion and politics to which they belong.

The dynamic concept of *hijrah* (transformation)

Hijrah is a term that refers to the process of separating, leaving, breaking up relationships and moving or migrating from a miserable life to a much better one (Halim & Maros 2014). However, the traditional definition of *hijrah* focuses exclusively on spatial changes by looking at the living place (Artamonova, Asochakova & Chistanova 2018). Beyond this

definition, the evolving concept of *hijrah* suggests that the term can also point to a change of lifestyle that occurs on a wide scale both culturally and socially and symbolically and is used to epitomise transformation. As change is intrinsically linked to the commitment nurtured for personal goals, it encompasses all facets of individual's personality (Darwish 2014). *Hijrah* in this new light emphasises personal transformation, especially the transition from the old self with all its negatives in the past to the new and true one. This is reflected in a change in clothing styles, from wearing the more-revealing outfits to the less-revealing ones and, in some cases, coupled with face-coverings (Purwaningwulan et al. 2019). In general, religious *hijrah* has been growing to the extent that it becomes a popular trend and an integral part of the global human experience (Johnson & Bellofatto 2012).

Hijrah has a number of significant objectives. Firstly, it seeks to promote religion throughout the globe as an example and model, because of which *hijrah* is frequently referred to as a religious struggle (*jihād*) (Bukay 2017). This is consistent with the *hijrah* of Prophet Muhammad, implying that *hijrah* for Muslims means to propagate Islam in a wise manner (Lushenko & Williams 2016). Secondly, *hijrah* aims to increase the faith of individuals in God. The quest for God would help the believer to cope with all hardship throughout his or her life's journey and become a true believer. Muslims are drawn to the new realm where they can relocate and live according to Islamic standards without jeopardising their dignity (Toguslu 2019). This *hijrah* process compels many of them to emigrate and subsequently abandon their previous professions in order to devote more time to Islamic preaching (Lyansari 2019). Thirdly, *hijrah* enables the formation of a new identity in a new culture, resulting in a personally established faith. The newly formed identity makes religious conviction become dynamic, unique and relevant to personal self-improvement (Casteel 2020). These three objectives of *hijrah* have impacts on one's commitment to religious *hijrah*.

The *burqa* and identity

Burqa is women's attire covering most parts of the body (Druxes 2020) including the face, except eyes and eyebrows (Dave & Shrivastava 2013). The *burqa* by definition is not ideological as it is considered the product of social construction through which women reconstruct and modernise their social status, disassociate themselves from the roles and stereotypes imposed upon them and differentiate themselves from others through their creativity and innovation (Mohammadi & Rastegar 2018). Furthermore, the *burqa* serves as a cultural symbol for Muslim women. They wear it to comply with Islamic demands for covering their bodies and concealing them from the sight of foreigners (Dave & Shrivastava 2013). In countries in which *burqa* wearing has a longer tradition and Muslims are majorities, the political status of the *burqa* has gone unnoticed; this is because it has been ingrained in the mainstream culture and therefore deliberate efforts should be made to reclaim the authentic, not political, identity for the Muslim attire (Al-Kazi & González 2018). On the contrary, in the Western countries where Muslims are minorities, the

burqa practice has triggered rejections and prohibitions because of an alleged attribution to radical groups (Yasmeen 2013). Indeed, *burqas* are merely cultural garment worn by Muslims to comply with Islamic teachings, not for political interests.

The wearing of *burqa* entails three major distinct identities in the life of Muslims. Firstly, it serves as a symbol of religiosity for Muslim woman. The garments covering the entire body, including the veils, cannot be separated from the wearer's identity because they reflect religious obligation and religiosity (Eid 2015). This religiosity is also shown in the extent to which she reads and comprehends the scripture (Utomo et al. 2018). Secondly, it is a symbolic denial of women's liberty. This is prominent particularly in the Western countries where discrimination against Muslims occurs out of Islamophobia (Doyle 2011). Discrimination against face-veiling Muslim women has discouraged many Muslim women from wearing the veils in Muslim minority countries (Hancock & Mobillion 2019). Thirdly, it is a historical identity. The veils are inseparable from Muslim countries wherein the government exploited them as a selling point and a source of historical and national identity (Causevic & Neal 2019). These three identities are inextricably linked to Muslim women, veiling or unveiling, because they share the same Islamic identity.

Results

Redefining the body: From the source of harm to salvation

The Indonesian WMWs who worked in Taiwan understand the *burqa* as face-coverings required in women's attire according to the Sharia (Islamic laws). For them, the Sharia commands women to wear loose clothing, covering the entire body and the head, including face. However, wearing the *burqa* is considered a religious instruction falling under the category of recommended not compulsory (YNT). A loose garment, a long scarf draped across the head and shoulders (*hijab*) and *burqa* is considered Islamic and, therefore, obligatory for a good Muslim woman to wear. It is considered a prerequisite for women to engage in public activities and interact with *non-mahrams* (refers to those who are forbidden to marry because of blood ties, marriage or breastfeeding relations) in order to protect themselves and men from sexual offenses (AS). By concealing their faces, they are safeguarding both themselves and men from committing sexual offenses. As HN stated:

'By wearing the *burqa*, I am feeling comfortable and safe from anything; I am also feeling secure and protected from anything.'

They prefer to avoid the potential for sexual harassment by covering their bodies with a loose garment, a long headscarf and a *burqa* in order to keep themselves away from becoming a victim of immoral behaviours and moral decay of society.

The WMWs who have returned back to Indramayu use the *burqa* to symbolise the shifting meanings of the body and

religious piety. They regard their bodies as objects, sources of shameful sexual temptation that could incite male sexual desires. HN (2018) stated:

'Honestly, I myself aspire to wear a veil because I feel ashamed before God for having caused moral injury several times to men staring at me ... seeing me smile or hearing me talk was enough to make them "horny."'

Uncovered bodies, particularly the face, are regarded as a hazard to women. Sexual harassment and violations against socio-religious norms committed by men, as pointed out by SS, stemmed from women's bodies appealing to male lust.

However, the body has been taken not only as a source of harm but also as a centre of piety, safety and notability for women. The body, particularly the face, will turn to become a source of safety when it is covered by a *burqa* (JMR). The *burqa* serves as a shield that protects women from sexual predators and becoming a symbol of religious submission and woman's dignity (AS). Hence, the body has been perceived not only as a source of moral harm but also of goodness for women and the *burqa* becomes a symbol of women acting as agents of preventing moral decay in men and society.

A new understanding of the *burqa*

The informants claimed to have been familiar with the *burqa* when they were working abroad. Prior to that, they gave little weight to the *burqa* and had a twisted perception of it. They admitted that they had viewed the *burqa* as something uncomfortable, out of date, fanatical and excessive (FT). They were interested in knowing more about the *burqa* when joining informal religious gathering of WMW in the country they were working in. The alertness to the importance of the *burqa* began to grow and nourish as they were participating in regular events organised by their groups (AS), including that religious gathering attended by a well-known male or female Muslim clerics. This activity provided the informants with a new understanding of the *burqa*, perceiving them not just as a religious symbol but also as a strategy for overcoming discomfort and loneliness (HN). YNT said:

'Living in another country, I was always feeling "down" ... all I did was praying and prostrating to God because this was the way I could recall the dark days on my past ... I wanted to become a better person by doing small things first, such as praying on time and dressing more properly ... wear a *burqa*.'

Despite feeling down and lonely, all the informants said that wearing the *burqa* has brought a sense of safety and comfort to them when doing outdoor activities.

Their online activities also have an impact on their new understanding of the *burqa*. The informants claimed to be active followers of social media accounts (YouTube, Instagram and Facebook) on Islamic preaching and listening to contents uploaded by well-known male and female Muslim clerics. Among them included Arifin Ilham, Oki Setiana Dewi, Habib Novel and Ustaz Khalid Basalamah

(WS). The desire to perform *hijrah* by wearing the *burqa* grew stronger after getting motivations from the fellow WMW (AS, WS, YT). AS, WS and YT acknowledged that the interaction with and motivation from their fellow WMW who have 'migrated' (*hijrah*) prompted them to wear the *burqa* as well.

Participation in religious activities and socio-religious organisations

Some of the informants decided to go back working abroad. However, some others no longer wanted to reclaim the status of WMW and preferred to pursue their interests in becoming religious preachers. They started getting involved in *da'wah* (missionary activity) activities in their own ways, being committed to create changes in society. AS illustrated:

'I do not want to work as a WMW anymore, I would rather study and focus on memorizing the Qur'an and conducting *da'wah*.'

They are now active in becoming preachers and calling for new insights and norms in societies. For this purpose, they are joining communities that have concerned with preaching and social services (AS). Two groups navigated by these women include Gerakan Indramayu Menutup Aurat (GIMA) (Indramayu Movement for Covering Aurat) and Sahabat *Hijrah* (*Hijrah* Friends), which promoting the necessity to wear Islamic clothing, particularly the *burqa* (YT). Both communities are well known for their activities not only through offline activities but also through social media. For instance, the GIMA Fanpage on Facebook has 3688 members (friends) with 1022 followers. This community actively gives voice to support global Islamic issues through fundraising for Palestine and other actions in favour of groups perceived as radical (like the Islamic Defender Front).

These informants feel much obliged to preach and invite other women to wear the *burqa*. They even encourage women who wore 'normal' headscarves to emigrate (*hijrah*) by putting on a piece of clothing covering their face. These communities are very active in promoting what they call Islamic clothing through regular study programmes, informal meetings and charitable works. They usually invite famous individuals (*hijrah* artists, government officials and preachers) to attend all these activities. They also distribute alms to the needy people through their social care initiatives for which they conduct religious sermons to convey the messages of covering aurat. Table 1 shows the activities of the face-veiling WMW.

Burqa as a symbol of religious and class transformation

The *burqa* practice should not be understood solely as a manifestation of radical thoughts or attitudes. This study on the face-veiling WMWs in Indonesia revealed the complexities in comprehending the *burqa*. Firstly, the *burqa* is viewed as a means of increasing religious consciousness. It symbolises a shift in defining the body from being a source of hazard to piety and prominence. Secondly, the *burqa* serves as a strategy,

TABLE 1: Activities of face-veiling woman migrant workers after returning home.

Participant initials	Country	Current age and start date of face-veiling	Latest education	Current activities
1. FT	Taiwan	23 years old Began face-veiling in 2018	Senior High School	A preacher or teacher in religious gatherings An influencer Active in religious social organisations Previously active in GIMA
2. HN	Taiwan	25 years old Began face-veiling in 2018	Senior High School	Conducts <i>da'wah</i> on social media Attends religious gatherings
3. YNT	Taiwan	26 years old Began face-veiling in 2015	Senior High School	A preacher or teacher, teaching the Qur'an Participates in an organisation of religious gathering in Taiwan
4. YT	Taiwan	22 years old Began face-veiling in 2016	Junior High School	A preacher or teacher, teaching the Qu'an Conducts <i>da'wah</i> on social media or to friends Has joined the community of <i>Sahabat Hijrah Indramayu</i> Participates in religious gatherings, charitable works, calling for covering the <i>aurat</i> distribution of free <i>hijabs</i> in villages
5. AS	Taiwan	24 years old Began face-veiling in 2018	Junior High School	A preacher or teacher, focusing on memorisation of the Qur'an and <i>da'wah</i> Decided to quit her status as a WMW Joined the organisation of Gerakan Indramayu Menutup Aurat (GIMA) Joined a committee of <i>Sahabat Hijrah Indramayu</i> Participates in religious gatherings, charitable work, calling for covering the <i>aurat</i> , distribution of free <i>hijabs</i> in villages
6. SS	Hong Kong	27 years old Began face-veiling in 2016	Senior High School	Has joined the <i>Sahabat Fillah Indonesia</i> Is a housewife Sells of <i>Hijab Syar'i</i> Resells Mini Gold Active in attending Islamic study forums and organisations
7. WS	Taiwan	25 years old Began face-veiling in 2017	Senior High School	Joined a committee member of <i>Sahabat Fillah Indonesia</i> Owner of Syar'i Wedding Organiser Provides Syar'i bridal make-up services Participates in religious gatherings and charitable work
8. WYT	Taiwan	26 years old Began face-veiling in 2018	Senior High School	Shares <i>da'wah</i> content on social media or with friends Awaiting the process of departure to resume employment as WMW in Taiwan

Table 1 continues on the next page →

TABLE 1 (Continues...): Activities of face-veiling woman migrant workers after returning home.

Participant initials	Country	Current age and start date of face-veiling	Latest education	Current activities
9. JMH	Taiwan	23 years old Began face-veiling in 2018	Junior High School	Active member of GIMA Taiwan Joins religious gatherings Returned to Taiwan to work

particularly for those displaced women, to retain safety (from sexual assaults) and comfort while engaging in activities and mingling in public settings. Thirdly, wearing the *burqa* has granted access to a new elite community. Participation in religious organisations' activities confers authority, recognition and an elegant new social standing in which the WMW are not only successful economically but also become influencers and suppliers of religious knowledge in their socio-religious activities.

Three critical points are reflected in the aforementioned fact. Firstly, religion occupies an important domain in the construction of social structure in Indonesia. In this sense, religious symbols continue to play a significant role in establishing hierarchy and social status. Thus, the use of religious symbols and the affiliation with religious organisations has elevated the WMWs to a new status of respectability. Secondly, religious and political changes in the bodies of migrant women occur mainly through the internet. Social media has become a new medium for gaining religious knowledge that allows them to participate in religious activities under a new status. It also connects them to a broader network and develops solidarity. Thirdly, this study reaffirmed the sublimation in women's body politics through the *hijrah* movement among the face-veiling WMWs. This is shown in the articulation of the *burqa* as a means of religious atonement for past mistakes. The sublimation is also visible in the transformed meanings of the body as a symbol of women's religious piety and nobility and a marker of the wearer's new authority and social status.

The phenomenon of religious transformation (*hijrah*) among Indonesian face-veiling WMWs and their involvement in socio-religious movements occurs because of these three factors. Firstly, the displacement situation faced by the women migrants that led to the emergence of these two following simultaneous processes. Secondly, the process of adapting to new situations in the destination country that has incited discomfort and vulnerability, driving the women migrants to create bonds that could give them a great sense of relief. Thirdly, the process of spiritual transformation that goes hand in hand with intensive interactions in the community, giving rise to new awareness about religious practices considered better (Halim & Maros 2014), all of which is then expressed personally by wearing the *burqa* (Darwish 2014; Purwaningwulan et al. 2019). At the next level, politically they build solidarity by joining organisations and communities that share the same concern (Battiston 2019).

On the one hand, this transformation gives an impact on the ex-women migrants' social status and political space by which they seek to make changes in society. It elevates them from being migrant workers to being a new elite community member and source of religious knowledge. On the other hand, this study also confirmed the sublimation of these face-veiling women migrants because this movement rests on the reproduction of patriarchal ideology that objectifies the female body. This sublimation is evident in the construction of knowledge and behaviours of the WMWs, particularly with regard to their bodies (Rohmaniyah 2020). In this patriarchal framework, women are positioned as objects of reality viewed through the lens of men (Rohmaniyah 2017) and women's bodies are positioned as objects of male sexuality. This point of view implies the dominance of masculine knowledge (Bourdieu 2001) that relegates the female body to an object of male. In other words, the *burqa* is cultural artefact of patriarchy (Johnson & Bellofatto 2012) being perpetuated through the process of religious and cultural transformation (*hijrah*).

Such a gap also demonstrated the need for a clearer and distinct perspective while examining the phenomenon of the face-veiling WMWs. Previous studies on the *burqa* has tended to be monolithic and unable to go beyond the interpretative approaches of religious symbolism, leading to the conclusions that centred exclusively on the issues of identity (Al-Kazi & González 2018), religiosity (2015), religious expressions (Nisa 2012) and radicalism (Yasmeen 2013). Doyle (2011) did a somewhat different study in which he related the *burqa* to women's freedom, which immediately provoked widespread controversy (Saiya & Manchanda 2019; Samuel 2018). This study that puts the *burqa* within the context of women's political participation, suggested the importance of a new perspective in seeing the efforts to redefine the body and attain the status through the *burqa*.

This article exhibited that the wearing of *burqa* should not be necessarily interpreted as an indication of intensified religiosity or a radical mentality. Yet, the future challenges that WMWs might deal with include the social demand to strengthen their religious knowledge to maintain their new social status. They also have to broaden their network and sources of knowledge to detach the existing stereotype of their relationship with radicalism. Yet, they have an opportunity to enjoy a new life as an elite group and receive social trust as being sources of religious knowledge. This study, which involved WMWs in non-Muslim countries such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, presented a new dimension in comprehending the wearing of *burqa*. This will be undoubtedly different from studies on the WMWs in Middle Eastern countries. Thus, it is crucial to investigate the primary variables that allow for the creation of motivation and changes, that is, factors that facilitate them to make a shift or change. The result of this study is beneficial to the government in understanding the groups taken for granted as radical, the underlying causes of the problems and the potential that may develop from them.

This is particularly helpful in dealing with and formulating strategies about various radical movements and groups. The research findings can also serve as a guidance for advocacy programmes conducted by non-governmental organisations working with the victims and perpetrators of terrorism and other incidents of public safety risks.

Conclusion

This article emphasised that wearing the *burqa* should not be taken for granted to imply an Islamic identity, level of religiosity or radicalism. This study on the face-veiling WMWs who have returned to Indonesia from Taiwan and Hong Kong disclosed that the *burqa* constitutes a strategy to redefine the body and gain access to public space, authority, recognition and interaction with the outside world. Vulnerability, particularly to sexual assaults when working abroad, necessitates a unique strategy that brings a sense of safety through involvement in religious gatherings. On the one hand, this participation not only gives protection, but also creates a new contemplative religious understanding. On the other hand, the attribute of wearing the *burqa* and the affiliation with the face-veiling groups pave the way for participation in middle-class *da'wah*.

This article confirmed the thesis that the *burqa* correlates with the objectification of women's bodies in the sense that they strengthen the domination of patriarchal ideology inherent in religious symbols. Indeed, the redefinition of women's bodies is built upon the concept of a female body as a sexual object, which eventually gains acceptance in religion. However, the phenomenon of *burqa* among the WMWs also creates a space for women's agencies to redefine their bodies. The new meanings given to the concept of the body exhibits women's capacity to generate rational interpretations in pursuant to their contexts and interests. At the next level, this new understanding of the body provides a modality for women to transform themselves and take part in middle-class groups.

This study focused solely on Indonesia's WMWs in East Asia, particularly Taiwan and Hong Kong, giving no attention to those in other countries, particularly the Middle East. In addition, it did not explore in more details women's agency and its relevance to their strategy as a minority in a non-Muslim majority country. To gain a more comprehensive picture, it is necessary to bring a greater variety of cases into the analysis. Thus, this article recommends that WMWs in the Middle East should be taken into account in further research. Comparing WMWs in the Middle East with those in other countries would provide a bigger portrait of the process of redefining women's bodies and the dynamics of women's status.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

I.R. was responsible for the conceptualisation, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology and writing of the original draft. I.R. and A.I. conducted the formal analysis. A.I. and Z.P. supervised the article to completion. J.J. was responsible for the investigation. I.R., A.I. and Z.P. contributed to the review and editing of the article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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