

## **Negotiating gender, religious and professional identities. Exploring some of the challenges of non-veiled Muslim women at work**

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### **Abstract**

Due to the increasing Islamisation, in contemporary Malaysia, non-veiled Muslim women have become the minority in many domains of public life, including the workplace (Hochel 2013; Izharuddin 2018; Mouser 2007). As the veil is widely regarded as a signifier of a Muslim woman's identity and her level of piety (Ruby 2006; Stirling & Shaw 2004), a woman's decision to not wear it can result in discriminatory treatment, such as exclusion from the religious community (Othman 2006). In this paper we give these often discriminated against women a voice and describe some of the challenges that they experience at work. Our particular focus is how these non-veiling women construct their identities – as religious Muslims, “good” women, and successful professionals – in a socio-cultural context where veiling is the norm (Hochel 2013; Izharuddin 2018; Khalid and O'Connor 2011). Drawing on 20 interviews with such women and using Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) relationality principle, we demonstrate how through their stories of personal experience these women mobilise and orient to a range of different identities – including gender, religious and professional – which are intertwined with each other in complex ways.

**Keywords:** Identity; gender; religion; hijab; Malaysia.

### **1. Introduction**

The veil (or hijab, as it is more commonly known) is not only generally regarded as an important signifier of a Muslim woman's identity (Ahmed 1992; Barlas 2002; Othman 2006; Wagner et al. 2012), but it has also generated contestation, and criticism more than any other form of dress (Hochel 2013). In

this paper, the term “veil” is used to refer to the Islamic headscarf (commonly known as hijab) that covers the entirety of the woman’s head and hair, and which can extend down to cover her bosom.<sup>1</sup> The Malay word *tudung* (literally, ‘cover’) is also used (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. A photo showing the common styles of tudung worn by Malaysian Muslim women (from the first author’s personal collection).

Although we acknowledge that numerous forms of female dress have previously faced scrutiny by the public and governments, such as the mini-skirt (see Tamale 2015; Vincent 2008), we argue that it is the Islamic head dress that is currently at the forefront of global conflict, largely due to dominant Discourses surrounding the war on terror and the fight against radical Islam (see Abu-Lughod 2002). The veil has attracted attention from researchers who have, for example, explored the oppressive and repressive nature of the veil, and discussed its political, cultural, religious, and social significance (Hammami 1990; Khalid and O’Connor 2011; Othman 2006; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Winter 2006). Several studies have looked at the meanings ascribed to the veil by those women who do and do not wear it (e.g., see Fadil 2011; Hochel 2013;

<sup>1</sup> The veil here does not refer to the more politically contested, and religiously debated burqa, niqab, or chador.

Izharuddin 2018; Peek 2005; Read & Bartkowski 2000) to challenge the dominant conception from the West and feminists who view the veil as a symbol of the oppression of women, as well as a marker of backwardness of Muslim societies (Abu-Lughod 2002; Droogsma 2007; El Guindi 1999; Hoodfar 1992).

This paper contributes to the growing scholarship on the veil by exploring some of the challenges that women who do *not* veil experience in their workplace context. Our particular focus is how non-veiling women in Malaysia construct their identities – as religious Muslims, “good” women, and successful professionals – in accounts of their experiences as non-veiling women in a country where veiling for Muslim women is the norm (Hochel 2013; Izharuddin 2018; Khalid & O’Connor 2011). We thereby hope to give a voice to these women who remain largely overlooked in current scholarship and who are often discriminated against in everyday public life (Othman 2006).

## 2. Identity and veiling

This paper adopts a social constructionist view of identity, which conceptualises identity as fluid, multiple, fragmented, and constructed in and through discourse (Van de Mieroop & Schnurr 2017). In contrast to earlier essentialist views of identity, which understood identity as something stable that people *have*, social constructionists view identity as something that people *do*. More specifically, according to this view, people co-construct (in collaboration, although not necessarily in harmony) different identities for themselves and others throughout an interaction. Thus, rather than assuming that a person’s identity (in the singular) captures the true nature of who this person “really” is, social constructionist thinking is interested in how people portray themselves and each other throughout an interaction.

In our analyses below we pay particular attention to the ways in which non-veiled Muslim women in Malaysia construct and negotiate their different identities – most notably their gender, professional and religious identities – when talking about their experiences at work. We thus contribute to the currently rather sparse linguistic research on religious identities (Sunderland 2007; Darquennes & Vandebussche 2011; Jule 2005, 2007), and show how these identities are closely intertwined with other identities.

Previous research has established a strong link between the veil and Muslim women’s identities (Ahmed 1992; Barlas 2002; Othman 2006; Wagner et

al. 2012). For example, Mouser (2007) argues that wearing (or not wearing) the veil not only indexes a religious identity, but also contributes to constructing gender identities. More specifically, “women actively engage in the construction and performance of gender identities on a daily basis, and the use of the tudong, or headscarf, is one stage upon which that performance takes place” (Mouser 2007: 165). Given this crucial role of the veil in terms of identity construction, we are particularly interested in whether the issue of (not) veiling is made relevant by our participants in their stories about their professional lives, and if so, in what ways their religious identities indexed by the veil interact with their professional identities.

These issues are particularly pertinent in the current context of Malaysia, which since the late 1970s and early 1980s has been undergoing processes of Islamisation.<sup>2</sup> Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multireligious Muslim-majority country, with Muslim adherents making up over 60 percent of the total population (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011). The *Bumiputera* (literally ‘princes of the soil’) comprising of the Malay-Muslims, the Orang Asli (indigenous persons) of Peninsular Malaysia, and the indigenous peoples of the Malaysian Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, constitute the majority of the population at 67.4% (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011). The Chinese and Indians comprise the two major minorities that make up 24.6% and 7.3% of the population respectively, and *lain-lain* (others) make up the remaining 0.7%. Islam is the majority religion at 61.3%, but there are sizeable adherents of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and other religions as well (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011). Malaysia’s diversity is embodied in the catchy “Malaysia Truly Asia” tourism tagline, and the country for many years have received praise for being an exemplary model of religious moderation and ethnic harmony (Ong 2017).

However, Malaysia’s ongoing Islamisation and nationalisation, which rigorously began since the late 1970s early 1980s, have threatened to destroy this reputation for moderation (Abdul Hamid and Ismail 2014). One aspect of this Islamisation is that the state is increasingly becoming more involved in matters regarding religion (Lee 2010). In particular, since the Mahathir era in the 1980s these processes of Islamisation have become more rigorous and wide-ranging,

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<sup>2</sup> This paper distinguishes “Islamisation” from the related term, “Arabisation”. Whereas the latter is characterised by proclivity towards Middle Eastern cultures and norms (Saat 2016), we subscribe to a less contentious definition of Islamisation as “heightened salience of Islamic symbols, norms, discursive traditions, and attendant practices across one or more domains of lived experience” (Peletz 2013: 159).

as evidence of Islamising policies can be found in the revival of impressive Islamic architecture, the increase in religious institutions, and the development of Islamic finance, among others (Aziz and Shamsul 2004; Lee 2010; Othman 2006). Its effects are also evident from the steadily increasing number of women wearing the veil (Izharuddin 2018; Khalid & O'Connor 2011; Mouser 2007; Tong & Turner 2008). Although no official statistics are available, it has been estimated that close to five million Muslim women in Malaysia wear the veil (Boo 2015). This visibly growing number of veiled Muslim women in Islamising Malaysia has led several scholars to observe that non-veiled women are in the minority in many Muslim societies even beyond Malaysia (Hochel 2013; Izharuddin 2018; Mouser 2007). Moreover, Izharuddin (2018: 162) observes that in Malaysia, "it is the veiled and pious iteration of middle-class Malay womanhood that is taken as the normative standard and ideal to which all should aspire". As a consequence, wearing the veil is thus considered to be the norm for middle-class Malay women, a view supported by Ong (1990) who observed that the veil was used to distinguish between the educated and religiously observant middle-class Malay Muslim woman from their working-class factory counterparts.

This quote also nicely illustrates the close link between religious and gender identities as indexed by the veil. More specifically, in the context of Malaysia, by veiling women arguably not only denote their religious identification with Islam, but they also signal shifts in gender roles, expectations, and judgements of character (Hoffstaedter 2011; Tong & Turner 2008). For instance, in current Malaysia a veiled Muslim woman is often considered to be pious, chaste, modest, and good, which improves on her marital prospects (Tong & Turner 2008), and wearing the veil is sometimes even regarded as promoting women's eligibility as spouses in the context of online match making as a study by Zwick and Chelariu (2006) has found. At the same time, women who do not veil are reported to experience greater scrutiny from society as they are perceived as being less morally upstanding than women who veil (Mouser 2007; Izharuddin 2018). In some instances, not wearing the veil is even regarded by some Muslims as an act against God (e.g., Izharuddin 2018; Marshall 2005; Othman 2006); and some particularly ultra-conservative regions, such as the Malaysian state of Kelantan, have introduced state-sanctioned religious policing of women's dress. One particular programme under such religious policing initiatives is the *Ops Aurat*, which has reprimanded not only Muslim women who were not veiled, but also those whom the authorities regarded to be indecently dressed (see newspaper articles by Azhar & Zulkiflee 2016; Beh 2016; Habibu 2016).

This negative perception of Muslim women who do not veil is also reflected in many popular sayings and imagery found in Muslim communities in Malaysia and overseas, with the most well-known one being the “unwrapped candy analogy” (see Khalife 2019 for an overview of some other examples). According to this analogy veiled women are likened to wrapped up confectionery, and non-veiled women to unwrapped. It objectifies both veiled and non-veiled women as “candies”, who essentially entice men with their sweetness, though the difference lies in the “quality” and cleanliness of the product. More specifically, as a consequence of being not wrapped, non-veiled women easily become “dirty” and are not safe to be “consumed” (rather, enjoyed) by men (AR 2014; Rahall 2018). Although this analogy has received considerable criticism by veiled and non-veiled women particularly on online platforms (see Eltahawy 2009; Sara 2013), it is still widely perpetuated in common speech in today’s Malaysia, and was in fact brought up by some of the participants in the interviews. (see excerpt 1 below for an example). Moreover, a common phrase used in Malaysia to refer to non-veiling Muslim women is “free hair” (Izharuddin 2018), which possesses numerous negative connotations about women’s moral values (see also excerpt 1 below).

Given this close intertwinement between religious and gender identities in the context of Islamising Malaysia, it is surprising that hardly any research looks at how these different identities are intertwined with each other from a linguistic perspective. We aim to address this gap in this paper by exploring some of the discursive processes through which non-veiled women in different workplaces in Malaysia talk about and make sense of their experiences and some of the challenges they experienced when (not) veiling in their professional environment.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Data and analytical framework

This paper is part of a larger study conducted for a PhD thesis (Abdul Fatah 2019). The primary research objectives of the thesis were (i) to examine the ways non-veiled Muslim women in Malaysia discursively construct their

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the various Discourses articulated by the non-veiling Malaysian women who participated in this research see Abdul Fatah 2019. In cases whereby “Discourse” is applied, we refer to the big “D” discourse, which is “socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the “right” places and at the “right” times with the “right” objects” (Gee 2014: 34).

identities (with particular emphasis on religion, gender, and ethnicity); and (ii) to explore the challenges and struggles the women face due to their non-veiling. To fulfill these objectives, three primary research questions were formulated, two of which are of relevance to this paper. They concern (i) the kinds of identities that were discursively constructed in-talk, and (ii) the forms of challenges and struggles the women experienced, as well as the ways these are constructed in-talk.

Primary and secondary data were collected to address these issues: primary data consisted of in-depth interviews, which were supplemented with the examination of secondary data in the form of contemporary media (selected film and television show, magazine covers, and newspaper articles) (see Abdul Fatah 2019). The primary data was collected via semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 20 non-veiled women who identify as Muslims and are living in Malaysia. The participants were recruited via a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, largely through personal contact and dissemination of a call for participant advert on social media, which invited them to speak about their experiences as non-veiled Muslim women in Malaysia. The women interviewed came from various ethnic and professional backgrounds and were aged between 19 to their late 50s. The interviews lasted between 40 to 90 minutes, with an average length of 55 minutes. Overall, more than 1000 minutes of interviews were recorded. All interviews were conducted, and then transcribed by the first author, who is herself a Muslim woman who does not veil. The interview questions were adapted from Read and Bartkowski's (2000) research on veiled and non-veiled Muslim women in the USA, which touched on topics such as the women's experiences with veiling (on practical, emotional, and spiritual levels), the reasons that led them to veil and/or stop veiling, as well as the consequences such decisions have had on their existing relationships. The language of most interviews was English or Malay (or a mix of the two) depending on the interviewee's preference, and we provide English translations (performed by the first author) for the latter.

During the interviews the women talked about their experiences of not veiling in a society where veiling is considered the norm for Muslim women, and we have chosen to analyse three extracts below where the interviewees specifically recount their experiences in their respective professional settings. The justifications for selecting these interviews are provided on the subsequent pages. While we do not claim that these experiences are representative of non-veiling women in Malaysia, we believe that they provide interesting insights into some of the challenges that the women who participated in our study

regularly encounter. In analysing their accounts, we focus particularly on how the interviewees construct and negotiate with the interviewer their different professional, religious and gender identities. We do this by drawing on Bucholtz & Hall's (2005) sociolinguistic principles of identity construction, which are emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness. Of these five principles we specifically use the relationality principle, the reasons for which we elucidate below.

According to Bucholtz & Hall (2005), relationality involves two aspects, (a) it stresses that identities always attain social meaning in relation to other available positions of identity and social actors; and (b) it reexamines the idea that identities fundamentally revolve around the notion of sameness/difference. Thus, the relationality principle is based on the premise that identities do not exist in isolation but are always constructed in relation to other identities, often the identities of those who participate in a given interaction. In our case, as the excerpts below illustrate, our interviewees constructed their various identities in relation to the interviewer, but also – reportedly – in relation to their colleagues and clients at work. Another important aspect of the relationality principle concerns Bucholtz & Hall's (2005: 598) claim that relationality is constructed via “several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy”. The last pair, authority/delegitimacy is particularly relevant for our analyses below because it relates to the structural and institutional aspects of identity formation. Authorisation is the “affirmation or imposition of an identity through structures of institutionalised power and ideology, whether local or translocal” (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 603). Delegitimation, by contrast, refers to the censorship, ignorance, and dismissal of identities by authoritative structures. Overall, we find that the relationality principle proves to be an insightful tool with which the processes of discursive identity construction can be examined, as the analyses show.

#### **4. Stories and experiences of (non)veiling**

Three examples have been selected to discuss some of the ways in which Muslim women who do not veil construct and negotiate their professional, religious and gender identities in the stories they tell about their experiences at their respective institutions. The domain of institution was operationalised to include settings with organised hierarchical structure, and the presence and



involvement of authority figures. Thus, institutional environments include workplaces and educational settings (such as college and university).

The first two excerpts recount instances where the non-veiling women felt disadvantaged and discriminated against because of their decision not to veil, whereas the last example shows the opposite, namely the participant feeling compelled to stop wearing the veil as she regarded it to interfere with her professionalism. We discuss each of these scenarios in turn with a particular emphasis on describing some of the discursive processes through which non-veiled women in different workplaces in Malaysia talk about and make sense of their experiences and some of the challenges they experienced when (not) veiling in their professional environment.

#### 4.1. Experiencing discrimination at university and work due to non-veiling

The first excerpt that we discuss here occurred during the interview with Siti (all names are pseudonyms), a Malay woman who at the time of the interview was in her early 20s and studied at a local university in Malaysia. In the excerpt below, she recounts the discriminatory treatment she experienced as a non-veiled student from a lecturer. Her answer came in response to the interviewer's question about her knowledge of the "wrapped vs. unwrapped candy" analogy mentioned above. The interview was conducted in both Malay and English, and code-switching between the two languages is a typical conversational feature among urban and middle-class Malaysians. As such, although we provide the English translation in excerpt 1, the italics in the translation column denote words and phrases that have been translated from Malay (the transcription convention used in this article is provided at the end of the paper).

Excerpt 1 (*St*: Siti; *F*: Farhana – interviewer)

	Original transcription	Translated transcription
01 St	I was free hair, going to classes.	I was free hair, going to classes.
02 F	<i>Okay</i>	<i>Okay</i>
03 St	ummm ada lecturer yang actually judged me, based...on just judge people based on what they wear.	Ummm <i>there was a</i> lecturer who actually judged me, based on...just judge people based on what they wear.

- 04 F *Mmm* *Mmm*
- 05 St dia macam amalkan favouritism yang I rasa memang very inappropriate, very unprofessional as a lecturer. *They like practised favouritism that I felt really very inappropriate, very unprofessional as a lecturer.*
- 06 F *Mmm* *Mmm*
- 07 St So sebabkan I tak pakai tudung *So because I don't wear tudung*
- 08 F *Mmm* *Mmm*
- 09 St Dia actually like - didn't give me a lot of marks, and dia sendiri cakap like, okay you tak pakai tudung, mulai - you patutnya tutup aurat seperti seorang islam bla bla bla! and I feel (.) I felt (.) so... (.) *They actually like – didn't give me a lot of marks, and they said like, okay you don't wear tudung, starting – you should cover aurat like a Muslim bla bla bla! And I feel (.) I felt (.) so... (.)*
- 10 F *Mmm* *Mmm*
- 11 St ((clicks tongue)) I've been treated so...un((snickering))fairly... ((clicks tongue)) I've been treated so...un((snickering))fairly...
- 12 F *Ya...* *Ya...*
- 13 St so... ((clicks tongue)) so... ((clicks tongue))
- 14 F *Okay* *Okay*
- 15 St Masuk degree so I pegi kelas pakai tudung. pegi kelas lah I pakai tudung. because I (.) feel like I don't deserve to be treated that way...and that's affecting my marks *Enter [my] degree [years] so I went to class wearing tudung. Going to class lah I wore tudung. Because I (.) feel like I don't deserve to be treated that way...and that's affecting my marks*
- 16 F *Okay* *Okay*
- 17 St So I pegi kelas pakai tudung. and uh (.) tapi benda lain pulak jadik. bila (.) dalam kelas pakai tudung, tapi bila duk kat luar tak pakai tudung, kawan kawan I pulak - I dengar lah murmurs here and there, yang I ni hypocrite. yang I ni main mainkan agama. Oh my God! *So I went to class wearing tudung. And uh (.) but then something else happened. When (.) in class [I] wear tudung, but outside [I] don't wear tudung, my friends actually – I heard lah murmurs here and there, that I am a hypocrite. That I am playing around with religion. Oh my God!*

In this example Siti recounts an incident where her religious and gender identities as a non-veiled Muslim woman were questioned in her professional context, namely the university. Using the term “free hair” at the beginning of her narrative (line 01) Siti explicitly indexes her religious and gender identities: this expression is commonly used to refer to non-veiled Muslim women in Malaysia (Izharuddin 2018). By describing the scene where this instance took

place (“going to classes” (line 01)) she simultaneously also makes her professional identity as a student relevant. She then sets herself in opposition to one of her lecturers whom she describes as criticising her for not veiling, which Siti interprets as an attempt to delegitimise her professional identity as a student (lines 07 and 09). This delegitimation here takes the form of Siti claiming that she has been treated unfairly by receiving “not a lot of marks” (line 09) in the lecturer’s course. In line 11, Siti even expresses her scorn at her predicament, emphasised from her tongue-clicking and snickering. “((clicks tongue)) I’ve been treated so...un((snickering))fairly...” Using direct speech, she vividly describes this unfair and discriminatory behavior by her lecturer who reportedly reminded her “you *should cover aurat*<sup>4</sup> like a Muslim bla bla bla!” (line 09). Particularly noteworthy here is the lecturer’s reported use of the explicit mentioning of the identity category “Muslim” through which he in a sense denies Siti membership of this religious group.

As a response to this incident, Siti recounts how she subsequently decided to wear the veil to protect herself against future unfair criticisms (“like I don’t deserve to be treated that way” (line 15)) and also in the hope to receive higher grades. Interestingly, this behaviour in turn receives criticism from her friends who accused her of being “a hypocrite” and “*playing around with religion*” (line 17). This is a typical accusation of Muslim women who only sometimes veil as this insinuates that Siti is playing around with religion, as her decision to only veil in certain instances and not in others can be regarded as disrespecting the (for some) religious obligation and commitment to veiling (Izharuddin 2018). So, at the end of this anecdote, Siti portrays herself as being caught in a catch-22 situation – regardless of whether she is wearing the veil or not, she receives criticism from different parties: while wearing a veil might help her construct a legitimate or authorised professional identity as a (good and religious) student in the classroom, the same behaviour (and the associated identity claims) are delegitimised by her friends – some of whom may veil while others do not.

While there is a lot to be said about this example, we are particularly interested here in the ways in which Siti’s story orients to and combines different identities, most notably her religious identity (of a good Muslim or, by contrast, a hypocrite), her gender identity (of being a good (Muslim) woman who

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<sup>4</sup> *Aurat* refers to the parts of the body that women and men are supposed to cover with clothing. For men, their *aurat* is from the belly-button to their knees, and for women, it is from the top of the head all the way down to the feet with only the hands and face being allowed to be uncovered.

is supposed to adhere to the behavioural norm of veiling), and also her professional identity as a (good) student – an identity that Siti feels is threatened by her lecturer’s criticism and her low grades. All these identities are closely intertwined with each other in complex ways throughout Siti’s story. As a consequence, she finds herself in a difficult situation (c.f. her exclamation “Oh my God” at the end of the excerpt) (for a discussion on “ideological dilemmas”, see Billig et. al. 1988).

Similar experiences of receiving criticism from their lecturers were also reported by some of the other interview participants. For example, Saleha recounted an incident at her university where both she and her (equally non-veiled) friend were publicly reprimanded by their lecturer in front of the entire class. She recalled how her lecturer made specific reference to the unwrapped candy analogy mentioned above: *“This...lecturer, they said right, if you (.) have a candy they said (.) one is wrapped and one is unwrapped [...] which one would you choose they said. And then [...] the - the whole class would say (.) aaa the wrapped one! [the lecturer asked] Why? Because the unwrapped one has lots of ants eating away at it!”*. Because of the sweet nature of candy, this analogy suggests that the unveiled woman will attract men (the ants) who will ravage her. Like Siti in her story above, Saleha felt that due to her not wearing the veil she was subjected to unfair and humiliating public treatment.

The stories of Siti and Saleha both demonstrate the constant struggles that many Muslim women experience as a consequence of their non-veiling: although they consciously attempt to juggle the different – and, as we have seen above, often opposing – demands and expectations from different parties and in different domains, they often find themselves caught in a catch-22 situation with no easy way out. As a consequence, they try to juggle these different demands and find ways to combine their professional, gender and religious identities in authentic and legitimate ways, while trying to avoid being positioned as marginalised and powerless by others.

We discuss one more example to demonstrate the negative experiences of non-veiling. Excerpt 2 comes from an interview with Amirah, who at the time of recording worked as a tutor at another university in Malaysia. The story below reports on an incident that happened after Amirah decided to stop wearing the veil (for reasons she did not disclose to us). This interview was conducted in English.

Excerpt 2 (*A*: Amirah; *F*: Farhana – interviewer)

- 01 *A* there is this one time ummm there was (.) there was like, not a party, there was like there was like a social gathering, and then the...the president, I think the deputy president saw me without the tudung, and then she reported it to my boss, and then my boss called me to the office and talked to me about that.
- 02 *F* *Okay*
- 03 *A* So...so that is why um the next day I wear tudung back ((nervous giggle))
- 04 *F* *Okay*
- 05 *A* Yeah
- 06 *F* *And how did that make you feel?*
- 07 *A* It was sad actually because people are still judging. (.) Okay. People are still judging you based on what you wear.
- 08 *F* *Okay*
- 09 *A* And...because some...I don't do anything, I don't do anything to them. It's just me and my work. It's just me and my department. But when they started to...you know, carry these stories around, just because of your appearance, it's not good.
- 10 *F* *Mmm*
- 11 *A* It's not good. It's bad. So...(unintelligible) so rather than...retaliating about it, so I just you know, just, I just wear something that they know me about *lah*, so, that's why I decided to wear tudung. And also my students also they started to ask me "Miss, how come all of a sudden you don't wear?"
- 12 *F* *Mmm*
- 13 *A* "Miss how come all of a sudden you don't wear?"
- 14 *F* *Mmm*
- 15 *A* So...because I'm an educator, and my image is...y'know portraying a good image to to your...students, and to people around you is very important. So that is why I decided okay at work I just wear tudung. But outside maybe I'm just being me.

Upon noticing Amirah without her tudung for the first time, the deputy president subsequently "reported" her observation to Amirah's boss and direct superior, who then as a consequence later approached Amirah about this issue in private. What is particularly noteworthy about this story is the observation that although the event during which the incident took place was described as

having an informal/casual atmosphere to it (“a social gathering”), Amirah’s use of the past tense verb “reported” to indicate the deputy president’s action of notifying Amirah’s boss about her non-veiling adds the effect of authoritative formality, marking the “reporting” to appear to be of serious reprimand. This action then allegedly resulted in Amirah being called to her boss’s office where they “talked” about the matter. As a consequence of this interaction and her students’ reported confusion (line 15), Amirah resumed wearing the tudung the following day (lines 03 and 05).

Through telling this little anecdote, Amirah performs identity work: she mobilises and orients to her religious and gender identities by portraying herself as a non-veiled Muslim woman – both of these identities are challenged by her decision to stop wearing the veil. However, at the same time she also demonstrates how her non-veiling plays a part in delegitimising her professional identity, which is in particular shown in the (verbal) reprimand she received from her superiors for this frowned-upon behaviour. Moreover, her repeated reference to work in line 09 (“It’s just me and my work. It’s just me and my department”) further strengthens this link to her professional identity and illustrates how she feels unjustly challenged and delegitimised in her professional identity for her non-veiling decision. Her story thus provides further evidence of the complex intertwinement of these different identities in relation to the practice of (not) wearing the veil.<sup>5</sup>

Amirah’s nervous giggling at the end of line 03 emphasises her discomfort at her decision to resume veiling under the threat of authority. She makes her feelings clearer in lines 07 and 09, as she relays her sadness at people’s judgment towards her choice of dress in the workplace. Her use of the generic “you” (“People are still judging you based on what you wear”) here is noteworthy as it enables her to make this a bigger issue and to transcend from her own personal experience to larger societal issues, which also affect others (represented by the generic “you”). She at the same time constructs a “me versus you” dichotomy in which she portrays herself as a victim (“I don’t do anything” (line 08)) and positions herself in opposition to others (“they” who started to “carry stories around” judging her based on her “appearance” (line 08)). Through her discursive choices Amirah thereby highlights once more the moral of the story, namely to showcase how her decision to (not) veil has had

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<sup>5</sup> This alludes to the notion of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw 1989; 1991) or rather, from a constructionist sense, the “doing of intersectionality” (Staunæs 2003), which is further discussed in the wider PhD study (Abdul Fatah 2019).”

a big impact on her professional identity and on the ways in which both her colleagues and superiors as well as her students reacted to her – in both cases treating the non-veiling as noteworthy and by implication unusual and problematic.

Amirah's story thus to some extent draws on and reinforces a larger societal Discourse according to which the decision to unveil is perceived as bringing shame upon the individual (Davary 2009). Several such cases are regularly reported in the popular media about Malaysian celebrities who have decided not to wear the tudung anymore (e.g. Uqasha Senrose who unveiled in 2016 (Awang Chik 2016), and most recently, Emma Maembong who stopped wearing the veil in early 2019 (Mohamad 2019; Othman 2019)).

Interestingly, at the end of her story, Amirah reports how she succumbed to the pressures that came from her superiors and her students, and she reverts to wearing the veil. This, according to her helps her to portray “a good image to to your ... students, and to people around you” (line 15). She thus creates and accepts a double-standard for her herself where in order to construct an appropriate professional identity as an “educator”, as she explicitly mentions, she conforms to expectations and wears the tudung, while “outside” of work she does not. Interestingly, in talking about this decision she makes an explicit reference to identity by saying “I'm just being me” (line 15) – creating the notion of an authentic self in a particular domain (private) and not in another (work). Thus, it can be seen that Amirah's experience echoes that of Siti's, particularly in the ways their respective identities as a student and educator have been called into question, or delegitimised by the respective authority figures due to their non-veiling. In their attempts to reclaim their identities in their respective contexts, both women resorted to wearing the veil. However, their decisions have resulted in conflict. For Siti, she has had to contend with accusations of being a hypocrite by her friends, whereas Amirah contends with assuming a “double identity” of an educator who veils at work, and a Muslim woman who does not veil outside of work.

In the next section we discuss one more example, which shows a different experience of not wearing the veil in the workplace.

#### **4.2. Experiencing not veiling as beneficial for one's professional career**

In contrast to the examples discussed above in which the decision not to veil has resulted in negative and often discriminatory experiences, the example in

this section shows a different picture. Excerpt 3 occurred during an interview with Dayana, a Malaysian Muslim who works in banking and who also experienced that veiling was an issue at her workplace.

Excerpt 3 (*D*: Dayana; *F*: Farhana – interviewer)

	Original transcription	Translated transcription
01	F Um...alright. So, kenapa you (.) you macam tak pakai tudung? Apa reason dia?	Um...alright. So, why did you (.) like you don't wear tudung? What's the reason?
02	D Um bila I start kerja in sales line	Um when I starte d working in sales line
03	F Hmhm	Hmhm
04	D Back in banking, I kena, bercakap dengan customer yang, sorry to say lah, mereka yang have, yang ada power to invest.	Back in banking, I had [to], speak with customers who are, sorry to say lah, those who have, who have power to invest.
05	F Mmm	Mmm
06	D So, they are not coming from [the] Malay [race]	So, they are not coming from [the] Malay [race]
07	F Mmm	Mmm
08	D My area yang I jaga tu, Bukit Bintang, and area dekat-dekat memang bukan Malay. You have to deal with Chinese, Indian. So bila I pakai tudung, I think macam benda tu (.) buat I di uh – macam mana ah rasa? Okaylah uh, because you are not my kaum	My area that I'm in charge [of is] Bukit Bintang, and the surrounding areas are really not Malay [areas]. You have to deal with Chinese, Indian. So when I wear tudung, I think like that thing (.) made me uh – how ah [I] felt? Okaylah uh, because you are not my race
09	F Mmm	Mmm
10	D And you, you are sangka macam, sebab all in banking not semua orang yang very ethical	And you, you are thought like, because all in banking not everyone is very ethical
11	F Mmm	Mmm
12	D Okay. So, bila they nampak you pakai tudung, they will just be macam (.) there's a barrier lah. You tak boleh nak connect easily dengan mereka.	Okay. So, when they see you wear tudung, they will just be like (.) there's a barrier lah. You can't connect easily with them.
13	F Mmm okay. Alright	Mmm okay. Alright.



- |      |  |   |
|------|--|---|
| 14 D | It's totally different. Bila bukak and lepas, I just nak share lah. Bila lepas bukak, I (perasan) jumlah sales I dapat or connections I dapat, and orang yang I lebih rapat, is much more bigger circle compared to bila I pakai tudung. | It's totally different. When [I] took it off and after, I just want to share lah. After I took it off, I (noticed) the sales amount I got or connections I got, and the people I am closer to, is much more bigger circle compared to when I wore tudung. |
|------|--|---|

This short story revolves around Dayana's experience of working with Malaysians who are ethnically Chinese and Indians (and thus, distinguished from Dayana who is Malay) and her perception of their (alleged) negative perception of the tudung as "a barrier" (line 12) which prevented her in the past from achieving her full potential professionally. However, this has reportedly changed once she stopped wearing it, as reflected in the increased "sales amount" and more "connections" (line 14) she was able to generate once she stopped wearing the veil. Dayana describes the outcome of these changes as being "totally different" (line 14).

Interestingly, similar to the stories discussed above, Dayana also orients to and constructs several identities here which are closely intertwined with each other – most notably her religious and gender identities (as a (non)veiling Muslim woman), her professional identity (as a more or less successful sales officer), and also her ethnic identity (largely in contrast to her clients who are notably not Malay and whom she describes as not being "my race..." as they were Chinese and Indian (lines 06 and 08)). Moreover, she describes her clients as being richer, and as a consequence more powerful than herself (line 06)). The latter sentiment is evidence of a belief dominant among Malays that they are socio-economically inferior to the more powerful non-Malays (see Nair 1999), an observation grounded on the reality that the Chinese and non-Malays control much of Malaysia's economy (Husin 2013; Noor 2009). Importantly, she describes her clients as "non ethical" (line 10), implying that the banking industry itself runs on unethical practices. With this last remark in particular, she thus draws on another Discourse that circulates in (Muslim) Malaysian society, namely the Discourse of virtue and piety associated with those women wearing the tudung. A similar argument is also made by one of the other interviewees who remarked that a veiled Muslim woman is "pure, clean, and all that stuff *lah*. So she's a good girl". According to this reasoning then, in Dayana's story of wearing the tudung – a marker of virtue – is set up in contrast to the allegedly unethical business setting and its clients. At the

same time, wearing the veil challenges and even delegitimises her professional identity.

Unlike in the first two stories above then, here the veil is constructed as “a barrier” (line 12) preventing the establishment of a connection with Dayana’s non-Malay clients. As a consequence, Dayana made the strategic decision to stop wearing the veil in order to enhance her professional identity. That this seems to be successful is reflected in her positive evaluation of the noticeable changes in her relationships with her clients, which allegedly resulted in an improved work performance (line 14).

## 5. Discussion

It was the aim of this chapter to contribute to the growing scholarship on the veil by exploring some of the challenges that women who do *not* veil experience in their workplace context. With our particular focus on how non-veiling women in Malaysia construct their various identities – as religious Muslims, “good” women, and successful professionals – we aimed to give a voice to these women who remain largely overlooked in current scholarship (Othman 2006). Moreover, while numerous articles exist in contemporary media in Malaysia focusing on how veiling Muslim women are often discriminated against in their workplace (particularly, in the hospitality industry) (see Chong 2017; Jennings 2018), the experience of non-veiling women tends to receive much less attention. However, as our analyses and discussion above have shown, members of this minority group often suffer under discriminatory practices, norms and expectations.

In contrast to much of the earlier scholarship on the veil, our particular interest was identity construction and the discursive strategies and processes through which women who do not veil create and orient to different identities. Here, this identity construction often takes place in and through short stories or anecdotes of personal experience which these women shared with the (also non-veiling) interviewer. We examined their anecdotes primarily through the lens of the authority/delegitimacy pair that make up Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) relationality principle. This principle has adequately assisted us in demonstrating the ways whereby “structures of institutionalised power and ideology” (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 603) – in this case, the university and the banking industry – discriminate against the women and influence their identity construction as non-veiled Muslim women. In the examples discussed above

we have identified and described some of the complex ways in which these women mobilise and orient to different kinds of identities – most notably gender, religious, professional, and ethnic. As we have shown, these identities are not distinct entities but are closely intertwined with each other – often to the extent that different identities are constructed at the same time, which makes it difficult to pinpoint to the most salient identity. The multiplicity of identities means that identities can contradict and juxtapose against one another in an individual's processes of articulating their sense of self (Litosseliti & Sunderland 2002); yet this contradiction and indeed, entanglement with interrelated identities “constitute the richness and the dilemmas of their sense of self” (Ivanič 1998: 11). Rather, the women's professional, religious and gender identities interact with each other in complex ways, and when orienting to one, another one is mobilised at the same time. For example, by recounting how they have been criticised for not wearing the veil in their professional context (excerpts 1 and 2), the women not only make relevant their professional identity – which was challenged in this instance – but at the same time they also mobilise and orient to their religious identity (as indexed by their (non)veiling) and their gender identity (which is closely related to questions around being a good Muslim woman, which in turn are also closely related to (not) wearing of the veil). The close link that thus exists between the women's often strategic decision to veil (excerpts 1 and 2) or not to veil (excerpt 3) and the professional identities that the story tellers construct in their short anecdotes is noteworthy.

In this socio-cultural context, then, the veil constitutes a (social and material) object that is closely linked with religious and gendered constructs which may or may not align with the norms, values, and expectations of certain professional settings. As a consequence, (non)veiling becomes a social practice that assists these professional women in mobilising and constructing different identities at the same time and voicing contradictions. In their stories the tellers describe their decisions (not) to veil as strategic and with a clearly identifiable transactional purpose, which is closely linked to their professional identities, namely to obtain better marks (example 1), to be perceived as a good educator (example 2) or a more successful financial officer (example 3). Although these decisions could thus be seen as primarily professional (as they enable the women to navigate their everyday workplace realities and professional and institutional expectations and constraints), two of the women (in examples 1 and 2) also recounted how these professional choices impact on their personal lives outside of work – for example in the form of receiving criticisms from their friends. Formerly distinct private and professional domains are thus

merged, and as a consequence the norms and practices that characterise one (especially in relation to (non)veiling) are carried over into the other. This merging of domains, however, poses an additional problem for these women as it means that they often find themselves in a catch-22 situation where they are damned if they do wear the veil (either by their friends (excerpt 2) and their clients (excerpt 3)) and damned if they do not (either by their employer (excerpt 1) and an authoritative figure (excerpt 2)).

While we hope that this paper has provided some insights into the complex relationships between the practice of (not)veiling and identity construction with a particular focus on how different identities are closely intertwined with each other, further research is necessary in this area. More specifically, the close link between religious and professional identities (especially in the increasingly Islamising context of Malaysia) warrants further exploration. This should be conducted in a wider range of professional settings, and in other sociocultural contexts where religion is becoming an increasingly relevant aspect of professional lives and where religious practices, norms and expectations are making their way from the private into the public domain. For instance, the hospitality industry, which in Malaysia has had a bad reputation for discrimination against veiled women by denying them employment opportunities (see Chong 2017; Jennings 2018). Moreover, although this paper focuses specifically on the socio-cultural context of Malaysia, we believe the insights described above can also be useful to understand the situation in other majority-Muslim contexts, such as in neighbouring Indonesia (see Beta 2014; Sunesti 2016), and Turkey (see Marshall 2005; Toprak & Uslu 2009), where issues of veiling and non-veiling remain controversial and divisive.

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## **Appendix**

Transcription conventions used in the excerpts (adapted from Jefferson 2004):

yes?	A question mark indicates rising intonation at turn completion.
yes.	A period after a word indicates falling intonation at turn completion.
((hand clap))	Double parentheses indicate transcriber's comments, including description of non-verbal behaviour.
(.)	A full stop inside brackets denotes a micro pause, a notable pause but of no significant length.
"xxx"	in-text quotation
xxx	non-English words
...	lengthened and hanging pause
(unintelligible)	word/phrase unclear to transcribe
[xxx]	input of own word/phrase