Unveiling the Mysteries of Aceh, Indonesia: Local and Global Intersections of Women's Agency

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Unveiling the Mysteries of Aceh, Indonesia:
Local and Global Intersections of Women's Agency

By Siti Kusujiarti[1], Elizabeth W. Miano[2], Annie L. Pryor[3] and Breanna R. Ryan[4]

Abstract

Forces of globalization, local culture, and Islam continuously inform one another and dynamically manifest in cultures across the world. Scholars often assume that these influences may have distinct and independent effects. However, we argue that these global forces occur simultaneously and they may contradict or complement each other along a spectrum within Aceh, Indonesia. The manifestations and responses vary depending on the nature of the interactions of global and local factors. This spectrum represents various ways in which women negotiate identity and agency, specifically within the context of the implementation of Shari'ah Law. This research investigates the specific ways in which women's identities influence and are influenced by the globalization of feminism, matrifocal traditions, and Islamic veiling practices in Aceh.

In the summer of 2012, the authors conducted field research in Aceh, Indonesia through interviews and observations. These included over 70 participants and 20 organizations which varied in formality and size. The interview participants include: activists, academicians, spiritual leaders, government officials, law enforcement agents, university students, and other community members from both rural and urban areas.

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Key Words: Muslim Women's Identity; Aceh, Indonesia; Ethnography

Introduction

In this study, the authors research three different but interconnected topics. The first focuses on how Acehnese women engage in both local and global feminist dialogues and examines the ways in which Acehnese activists articulate, implement, and redefine terms such as feminism and gender. The second addresses local matrifocal traditions and values that continue to impact women in their everyday lives, leading to individual and collective empowerment. The final topic focuses on emic understandings and interpretations of women's veiling practices. Theories on globalized feminisms, gender and Islam, and social capital contributed to the analysis of our research.

Women's Agency: Negotiating Space and Gender Performativity

Following Butler's idea of gender performativity, this research analyses the enactment of gender as an important factor in creating, redefining and perpetuating gender norms. Gender performativity is a stylized repetition of acts; there is always an opportunity for undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines (Butler, 1999, p. xv). Acehnese women are "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p.125) while reinterpreting and renegotiating the positions within the context of the society influenced by Shari'ah law.

Bourdieu (1986) proposes many forms of capital that factor into status and power discrepancies. For the purposes of this study, social and cultural capitals are used to provide a lens through which we analyze women's agency. Social capital refers to "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Membership in various organizations and communities provides a set of "credentials" which enhances Acehnese women's social capital. Cultural capital includes knowledge, skills and characteristics that enhance social standing. In Aceh, women employ cultural capital to transcend or transgress public and private spaces. Mernissi (2003) argues that Islam regulates sexuality in physical space, allocating public spaces to men and private spaces to women. Islam developed the ritual of veiling for women's transgressions of the perceived public space. Mernissi also suggests that even when a veiled woman enters this public space, she remains "invisible" and "has no right on the street" (2003, p. 493). The research discusses the possibility that Acehnese women who veil do not merely transgress male-ascribed public spaces, but rather transcend them. This notion contests the widely accepted binary of public and private spaces.

In Aceh, women alter the public and private aspects of their identity by degrees and by doing so they navigate through the structural culture systems. Social systems are the products of individuals employing rules and resources (structures) during individual interaction (agency). Giddens suggests (1998, p.76) that structure is both enabling and constraining. This concept differs from most other concepts on structure that emphasize the notion of structure as constraining. With this concept, Giddens also shows the interconnections of structure and agency and demonstrates that they do not always in direct opposition to each other. Expression of agency does not always mean a direct and open challenge to structure, however it may include

redefinition of existing structure that eventually creates structural changes. Agency includes self-definition and self-direction (Abrams 1999, p. 806) but this agency takes place within the context of certain structure. Following Giddens' departure of simplified dualism of structure and agency, this research shows how Acehnese women exert their agency and define themselves within the context of society influenced by Shari'ah law. For Acehnese women, structure actually provides the framework through which women can negotiate their agency by reclaiming those social functions already in place. Our research employs Giddens' idea of structure and agency for the purpose of debunking conceptions of Acehnese Muslim women as passive victims under the cultural context of Shari'ah law in an increasingly globalized world.

Methods

In Aceh, the authors conducted observations and semi-structured interviews with over 70 people from late May to late June 2012. Interview participants were recruited through a purposive snowball sampling method. Even though this sampling method has certain weaknesses, such as the tendency to sample similar groups of people, it also brings positive implications. To minimize the drawbacks, we included diverse groups of people in the pool of our sample. This method also yields closer relationships with participants that facilitate more open conversation. Local state universities provided translators, initial contacts, and other forms of support for this research. This strong local connection enabled the authors to recruit a broad range of interview participants and to conduct extensive observations. Interviews occurred in offices, homes, coffee shops, and restaurants. Participants included university students, politicians, religious leaders, activists, professors, and community members. To ensure confidentiality, we use pseudonyms in this article.

Geographic and Historical Context

Aceh's geographic location, on an international scale and within greater Indonesia, closely connects it to Asia's mainland and the Middle East. This strategic location yields to extensive regional and global influences in the forms of trade, traffic, travel, and migration. The intersection of ideas, people, and goods makes the province both vulnerable to and empowered by changes in external global forces. As the westernmost, northernmost province of Indonesia's Sumatra Island, it was shaped early on by economic trade routes, and served as part of the vital channel connected to the outside world. Aceh's location also exposed its population to external forces, influences, and shifts in transnational culture. Due to these global currents, today over 98 percent of Acehnese identify as Muslim (Siregar, 2008, p.1).

Aceh rests on a tumultuous fault line, where oceanic shifts caused the 2004 earthquake miles from Aceh's shores. Due to this, the region is highly prone to natural disasters. This earthquake and subsequent tsunami wrecked Aceh's core—wreaking destruction and desolation across the province. However, the locality of Aceh, coupled with its long history of struggle, makes it appear isolated or unchanged. Its local context does stem from external forces, but is not necessarily shaped by those forces. The authors instead argue that Aceh's susceptibility to these phenomena and proximity to the "Islamic world" provides the structure through which Acehnese women embody their identity and agency.

Historically, women have negotiated an Acehnese-Islamic structure in various ways. During times of conflict and colonization (by both the Dutch and the Indonesian Central

Government), women did not fall to the wayside; they were ascetics, rulers, and military leaders (Siapno, 2002, p.25). Our research considers how global factors, traditions of matrifocality and Islam contemporarily inform women's identities within Aceh. The 1999 implementation of Shari'ah law serves as a framework for considering how women are "doing gender" within an Acehnese social system (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p.125).

The pre-tsunami implementation of Shari'ah law (1999-2004) was marked by highly gendered enforcement, a long-standing concern of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activists and a number of women's groups. During this first phase of the implementation of Shari'ah law, "women, their bodies and sexualities" became subject to harsh implementation of the law (Kusujiarti, 2010, p.7). The second implementation was impacted directly by the devastating 2004 tsunami with Banda Aceh at its epicenter.

This tsunami killed over 170,000 people—over a quarter of the population of Aceh's capital city—and displaced over 555,000 others. The earthquake and tsunami crippled the capital, leaving infrastructure devastation in its wake (Drexler, 2008, p.204). In a post-tsunami society, the interpretation and implementation of Islamic law in Aceh was considered more lenient. The formation of the Charter of the Rights of Women in Aceh that asserts Acehnese women's agency and status marks this period, opening the discussion of reinterpretation of Shari'ah law.

Reconciling Global Feminist Values in Aceh

Acehnese women portray their complex identities as simultaneously Muslim, Indonesian, and Acehnese. Their beliefs and behaviors act as negotiating tools to navigate through their environment, and contribute to a unique Acehnese sense of identity, while encompassing both local and global spheres, from local institutions and traditions to the Islamic faith and feminist ideologies. How do Acehnese women form and negotiate their identities amid both local and global factors, particularly within the assertion of a global sisterhood? Through communal work with various organizations and as individuals Acehnese women exert agency through their Muslim faith that in turn forms and fortifies their identity. This instills a sense of localized solidarity that coincides with globalized feminist movements, but is not a direct product of their influence. This research teases apart how Acehnese women actively engage in the dialogue surrounding a global feminism and examines how this concept undermines the empowering agency intimately connected with their Islamic faith.

Though many Acehnese women share associative values with feminist ideology and larger global trends, feminism is not a widely accepted concept within the local culture. An idealized, universal sense of womanhood is a vastly misleading concept (especially in terms of feminist agendas) that fails to recognize cultural contexts. This is problematic, especially for the complex and often contradictory Acehnese women's identity because, as Mohanty (1988) writes, it "assumes an ahistorical, universal unity among women based on a generalized subordination...which limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities" (p.72). While unity and community are deeply ingrained values of the Acehnese social sphere, particularly for women, they act as unifying tools within Acehnese society. That's not to say that outside of Aceh, women are not willing to join forces across imagined boundaries—but that they recognize a shared experience and use that to their advantage in negotiating and empowering themselves.

The word "feminism" itself is loaded, and carries negative baggage in Aceh. Coupled with hesitation to directly align with what are perceived as highly Westernized notions, the sense of global or universal sisterhood is not addressed by the women we interview. However, elements of values often attributed to feminism are found in their social practices. For example, the organization PEKKA (Program for Women-Headed Households in Indonesia) strives to provide "advocacies, training, awareness, and ways to dialogue with local government" in order to bridge the gap between women and local political structures (Interview, 12 June 2012). While these pre-existing structures act as the social model by which the women interact with society, they negotiate their roles within them to assert their power.

Misconceptions about Muslim women often construct them as victims of their religion, particularly when they are living under Shari'ah law. Feminists and progressive advocates, on both local and global levels, often fear that Islamic laws threaten women's rights (Blackburn, 2004, p. 4). Conversely, others believe that enforcing traditional Islamic values within state law empowers women by rejecting the Western objectification of females and gives women a revered role as the moral guardians of their societies (Blackburn, 2004, p. 88). These conflicting viewpoints demonstrate the multiple perspectives and influences on individual identity.

The seemingly increasing rise in global connectedness might translate into more awareness of women's issues, yielding to more activism. For many women, the intersection between Islam and women's organizations acts as an influential factor in the development of their agency. Objectively, when asked if they would consider themselves feminist, most of the women interviewees said no. The answer was rarely so one-dimensional; after encouraging them to elaborate, many women spoke as to why they would not identify as feminist, what their definition of feminism was, or what value systems they shared with feminism. *Ibu* (Mrs.) Rizka works with the RPUK (*Relawan Perempuan Untuk Kemanusiaan*, or Women Volunteer Team for Humanity) and when asked about feminism in her community, she noted:

> *Most important thing is the concept, not the word. It's a Western term, [people]*
> *don't want it. For many, feminism means free sex. Some things that are associated*
> *with human rights are associated with Western notions and concepts. There are*
> *negative perceptions: [assumption of] freedom in sexual relationships, lack of*
> *morality.* (Interview, 5 June 2012)

Women felt strongly about being part of a unique Acehnese culture, and often rejected being associated with what they considered 'Western' ideas, such as feminism. Ibu Rizka drew correlations between the politics behind the implementation of Shari'ah law, describing how ideas like feminism or human rights issues become problematic both structurally and for individual women:

> *The stigmatization about human rights and Westernization are created by the*
> *government so that people can't think critically about the past. Fundamentalists*
> *and the local government are closely linked, [which] help to propagate...ideas*
> *that feminist means free sex, agnostic, homosexual. Unfortunately, these groups*
> *control strategic spaces in society, [so] misleading information or interpretation*
> *becomes more widespread.* (Interview, 5 June 2012)

Due to these common stigmas associated with the term, feminism is not well received by community members in Aceh. It is a "strategic consideration" to focus on the concept and principles of feminism and how that might apply to her audience, rather than the word itself. Ibu Rizka notes that another example is the term "gender", and for both words there is the issue of familiarity and even preconceptions of both as loaded, Western terms. Similarly, the word "gender" is not widely used in her community work, but the concept of delineating men's and women's responsibilities is associatively recognized and used. Therefore the concept or idea of gender permeates the social structure, but there is an intentional choice to avoid the term itself. For the women Ibu Rizka and her organization work with, this concept is apparent in their daily life, for example, in the way women manage the household and home finances and why that is important to their identity.

Alternatively, and as an anomaly in our research, Ibu Anita provides a unique perspective, as she is a self-proclaimed feminist and also follows the Qur'anic teachings. Her role in her community is to support and provide information for the youth and women of Aceh through the Planned Parenthood of Indonesia on reproductive rights, economic support and HIV/AIDS. Her very work focuses on the solidarity of women learning, training and sharing together, all of which she was introduced to in college working with non-governmental organizations called Alternative Education for Women and the Association of Muslim Students, which predominantly dealt with women's issues. For her, Islam and activism are both intimately tied to her values, which are "to be an independent person, sharing different experiences and anti-violence, which are more internalized the work I do" (Interview, 14 June 2012). One of Ibu Anita's biggest influences was her grandfather, who was a religious *ulama* highly concerned with women's reproductive issues. She asserts that misconceptions about women regarding menstruation as disease "does not come from Islam itself because that doesn't show equality between men and women" (Interview, 14 June 2012). She alludes to the disjuncture between the faith itself and institutions and systems that stand for it with a story from her childhood:

> *When I was a child, for example, I was afraid to get into a mosque (when I was menstruating) because of the assumptions, everyone told me that I wasn't supposed to go inside the mosque because I would pollute the mosque with the dirty blood, especially if the blood was dripping on the floor of the mosque. It was internalized through the families, through the schools.*
>
> *Everybody just told me...so I was afraid to come to the mosque. However, Islam itself doesn't actually teach that...Islam is internalized, and practiced better when no regulations exist because people want to do it.* (Interview, 14 June 2012)

To simplify the experience of Muslim women as a whole by attempting to align their experience with a larger movement is problematic not only because it undermines a woman's ability to define her identity by enacting her agency, but also because Acehnese women already identify with feminist principles along a spectrum, shaped by their Muslim faith. Notions of Islamic feminism and Western feminism serve as structural binaries, leaving ideological gaps that do not serve this spectrum. Just as the complexity of these women's identities renders their behavior and beliefs seemingly contradictory, they are in fact asserting that complexity by transcending normative spheres and negotiating the self through constant dialogue with Islam

and social systems. The quotes below portray how interwoven faith is with a woman's identity in Aceh:

> *Whenever women decide to get involved, they increase their capacities. The most challenging is changing behavior and mindset, takes time. How can I be Muslim and in position like this? No discrimination in Islam.* (Interview, 1 June 2012)

Here, a woman in power asserts her agency by attributing her successful social or political role to her devotion to the Islamic faith. She also alludes to the idea that knowledge and activities are tools to ignite this agency. This is parallel to what was suggested earlier, that social structure can be enabling, and certain individuals manage to exert their agency despite the seemingly constraining nature of social structure.

> *Women have a comfortable position in Islam, Islam respects women.* (Interview, 11 June 2012)

> *Islam is the same everywhere—culture makes a difference. Women have freedom in Aceh. Women have important roles in socializing and education for kids, strong positions in the families, receiving and greeting guests in the culture.* (Interview, 12 June 2012)

Despite outside misconceptions that when Islam is culturally applied it oppresses women, the women of Aceh found in their faith a certain power. As Saba Mahmood writes, in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, the agency is created "not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (Mahmood 2005, p. 15). Following Mahmood's assertion, Acehnese women engage in daily nuanced choices that "inhabit" their agency. The pride and devotion to social and religious practices as Muslim do not inhibit one another, but act as reinforcing agents.

> *I am a feminist. I believe [feminism] is an action to strive for justice. There are strengths. [I support] equal feminist, equal values to women and men. Islam and [feminism], they both strive for justice.* (Interview, 14 June 2012)

> *[We are] Muslim before we are born, [it is] internalized before birth*. (Interview, 15 June 2012)

These quotes may seem disjunctive or disparate, but they actually reiterate the same ideology: Islam and feminist identity are one and the same for Acehnese women. Many of our interviewees and contacts spoke of value systems that overlap between feminism and Islam. That is not to say that they are all feminists, or that they are all anti-feminism. Rather, they have created and continue to cultivate a unique space in which many ideologies are negotiated by varying degrees within one woman's identity.

The issue is not whether Islam and feminism are incompatible. As Blore writes, "Islamic feminism in particular sought to refute two aspects of Western feminism; firstly its claims of universal application to the experience of Muslim women, and secondly the orientalism of the experiences of Muslim women as a reassurance of Western moral superiority" (2010, p.7).

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Global or external factors shape and influence perceptions of feminism and the lives of women, but do not permeate individuals' sense of self to the extent that local influences do. Women in Aceh find solidarity and empowerment through dedication to faith, through communal practices within their social and private spheres, and by choosing to actively negotiate their own ideas of identity within their society. The following section addresses how local values and traditions intersect with women's agencies and empowerment.

Matrifocal Values, Traditions, and Women's Empowerment

Similar to Javanese society, the Acehnese apply a tradition of bilateral kinship, where lineage is traced both through male and female family members (Kusujiarti, 2012, p.31). However, Acehnese people trace their residence and inheritance along female lines. It is the daughters who inherit the family house and their husbands who move into this home. The daughter officially inherits the house, as well as the land and rice fields, if this falls within the family's means. This inheritance is made official after the birth of the wife's first child or after a period of two to three years (Twarog, 2006, p.12). This practice was primarily referred to by women from rural regions and is viewed as a kind of emotional and economic security for newly married women. However, the tradition continues to find relevance in urban centers as well, as expressed by several respondents. One informant mentioned that her older sister was to be married soon and that it was arranged that her husband would move, not the wife (Interview, 8 June 2012). This tradition allows women to remain within their communities, close to family and friends, and to always have a home and some level of personal security regardless of any hardship that may befall her or her husband.

The Acehnese word for wife is *po rumoh* which translates to "owner of the house" (Twarog, 2006, p.13). It is the women who maintain the stronger sense of "place" within the house and the community, giving the women power over the majority of household decisions, as the men have no right to inflict their will in these decisions. This, in turn, lends itself towards men becoming dependent on their wives (Twarog, 2006, p.13). This also may create a sense that the women need to behave well to ensure and demonstrate that they will manage the family's resources sensibly and strategically. To some extent this may create more control over women's behavior and moral character. In modern Aceh, in both rural and urban areas, household dynamics vary drastically. Through interviews, it would appear that women who are the owners of the home have a greater influence over family finances and are able to negotiate a 'democratic' relationship with their husbands for making decisions. Yet, women in general were more likely to be stigmatized as immoral and bear the brunt of these accusations. This is perhaps demonstrated best by the treatment of widows. Several participants recounted specific examples of individual widows who had felt personal discrimination, but also referenced a much broader trend in Acehnese culture that denotes a lower social standing to widows. Widows may find more self-reliance and participate more frequently in decision-making due to the absence of a direct male authority figure, but they also carry with them detrimental social stigmatizations. Widows are therefore more likely to be accused of breaking cultural mores and viewed with suspicion by their neighbors.

One informal strategy for women to attain cultural capital and therefore assert more personal agency is through the concept of *alim*. Alim denotes a person who is very polite, gentle, and knowledgeable of Islam and the correct way to act in particular situations, especially how to interact with elders and other respected figures. Being an alim woman is displayed in one's

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dress, one's speech, and one's actions. Women who are able to present themselves in this manner are much more likely to be accepted as leaders and are often treated as elders, even if they are not. For example, an alim woman is never referred to by the pronouns "you" or "she," but is instead treated with the more polite reference of her own name. Alim women generally carry more weight within their families and communities, their voices are often listened to and have power to influence others, and they are less likely to be questioned or blamed for certain behaviors. This is part of what Butler's named "gender performativity" and is used as a strategy for attaining both respect and power in Aceh. Numerous research participants view the concept of alim as an effective strategy of changing certain gender patterns from within the culture— using forms that are already in place to create gradual, but meaningful dialogue and change.

The Acehnese tradition of *merantao*, in which men leave their villages for the greater part of a year on several occasions in search of employment and experience, offers women a bigger role in the community economically and socially. Women are left to manage the house and the family's rice fields as well as participate more fully in village life. This tradition has given women an image of strength and self-reliance (Twarog, 2006, p.7). During the struggles between GAM (The Free Aceh Movement) and the Indonesian government that ended in 2004, it is estimated that nearly a quarter of the heads of households were women (Siapno, 2002, p.23). However, new interpretations and applications of merantao can be applied to address the movement of women from rural to urban areas. Women from rural regions increasingly seek education and work in urban centers such as the capital, Banda Aceh. Women's enrollment in higher education has already surpassed that of men for many departments, including economics, health, and education (Interview, 14 June 2012). From talking to students and professors at a state university in Banda Aceh, these new enrollment trends show no sign of slowing down. Likewise, of the various nonprofit organizations that the research team met with in Aceh, it was clear that women held the majority of positions within these organizations. While this gendered shift of increased female participation in the public sphere also applies to state agencies and private businesses as women seek out new horizons, it must be noted that men overwhelmingly outnumber women in higher paid, higher tier employment within both of these sectors. And while women remain underrepresented within urban manual labor, technology, science sectors, and the aforementioned higher-tier jobs (Vianen, 2006, p.5-11)—these trends do not indicate that women of Aceh participate less in the public sphere than women on a global scale (Peterson, 2010, p. 200-4).

Women's Social Agency

A common strategy for empowerment was the formation of groups or collectives that brought together groups of women to pursue gender equality and systems of support and solidarity. PEKKA, a national women's organization, is one example of this wider trend, bridging women from different provinces in Indonesia to foster measure of gender reform. PEKKA provides a support network for women—offering a space to convene with others and share their experiences. It fosters the members' desire to network and join an inclusive and positive group of individuals with whom they can empathize with, providing members with invaluable social capital that greatly affects women on both an individual and a broader levels. This fundamental premise of PEKKA has significant implications for the women, providing them with a sense of solidarity and increasing their self-confidence. Beyond this, PEKKA supports the empowerment of women, through policy, support, and trainings. The organization

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supports domestic violence writings, helps abused or neglected women procure divorces, and helps women receive basic access to information and services—including getting a birth certificate. Some of the members within the collective have also produced several books that discuss gender in Aceh, and leave an important legacy for future female authors (Interview, 15 June 2012).

PEKKA is creating tangible and effective changes in the lives of female heads of household, but also in gender relations and roles within their society. Patriarchal values, in varying degrees, do exist in both urban and rural areas in Aceh. PEKKA members solemnly recount how women are often not invited to village level meetings. If they attend the village meetings, they are unlikely to be taken seriously by the male attendees. They have faced substantial criticism in the past from not only their neighbors, but also the village leaders. Criticism of PEKKA members and their activities is often expressed through the perspective that women should not be heads of household based on a patriarchal interpretation of Islamic gender roles.

Yet, through dialogue and patient persistence, the PEKKA members are seeing noticeable change in the way their communities view working women. Several members were happy to report that after much hesitation and even active resistance, their communities are beginning to accept the work that PEKKA does, recognizing the positive impact it has had on its members (Interview, 15 June 2012). Through fostering advocacy, dialogue, and continuing to support female heads of household, PEKKA members aim to combat patriarchy. They see active and equal political participation of women as an important step along the way, but note that their work is not an easy one but a long work in process.

Women's Roles in Politics

In fact, women in Aceh are able to negotiate powerful roles within the public, decision-making realm. Banda Aceh's vice mayor, Ibu Kade, believes that the local culture and version of Islam is respectful of women and allows them a great deal of power. She does not believe that women are oppressed, economically or otherwise. Ibu Kade became the first woman to join the local parliament. She attended an economic institute, has travelled outside the province, and has a family (Interview, 1 June 2012). The example of Ibu Kade and many Acehnese women like her who are active participants in and conductors of the public sphere serve as necessary contrasts to the assumed gender relation dynamics within Islamic states and "developing" regions. "Western" concepts of global gender relations overwhelmingly deny women from "developing" countries agency or voice.

Reinforced through some of the more vocal threads of Western feminism, women in other parts of the world are often construed as submissive to their husbands, oppressed by local systems of patriarchy, and confined to the private sphere. This is not what is evidenced through interviews and observations in Aceh, Indonesia. Acehnese women employ agency and power through a multitude of ways, fluidly combining aspects of tradition and modernity that are often, and wrongly, presented as divergent concepts. Women assert their rights and redefine new ground for gender relations in all levels of Acehnese society, from the household to the government. Through culture, historical precedence, collective action, and individual and political agency, women in Aceh negotiate power and agency, while constructing a dynamic Acehnese identity. *Jilbab* or veiling is one of the ways in which Acehnese women express their identities and agencies.

Emic Interpretations of Veiling

This section examines the meaning and significance of the Islamic practice of veiling in Acehnese women's lives. It dissects each interpretation in order to illustrate the depth, detail, and variety of gender performativity within the context of Acehnese veiling practices. While this section does not include every interpretation of veiling, it aims to provide a more nuanced spectrum of women's interpretations of veiling. The projection of such a spectrum hopes to combat sentiments that veiling is an inherently patriarchal practice, and present the concept that women do gender in the realms of the public and private and, by veiling, actively work with, around and up against the Acehnese social structure.

Protection

Interview participants usually answered the question "Why do you veil?" with the word "Protection." Women typically had answers that varied along this spectrum: protection from sexual harassment, men, perceived others, bad desire, and their physical environment such as the sun and pesticides. While this analysis focuses heavily on the idea that women veil to protect themselves from men, it is important to note that women have multiple uses for the veil, particularly as a protective garment from other social and environmental factors. For example, during a group interview with women from PEKKA, one woman commented that veiling practices are based on Qur'anic teaching and moral codes. A woman is expected to cover her *aurat* (a part of the body—which varies from Islamic culture to culture—which Allah has pronounced sacred and, therefore, exposable only to one's spouse or close family networks) to avoid arousing men sexually. That is, the Acehnese social structure projects values of modesty onto Acehnese women. A number of participants suggested that if a woman does not veil, she may arouse men sexually and be raped. This perspective seems to echo Mernissi's observation (2003) that veiling is a practice that actively seeks to avoid punishment for the transgression into a male, public space (p. 493). However, considering the local context for which women have started veiling in Aceh, we might come to some additional conclusions about Islamic veiling practices.

Knowing that in recent history Acehnese women have suffered at the hands of both the central government of Indonesia and Shari'ah Law enforcement, woman might feel the need for symbolic protection. In a time in which women are looking for stability (post natural disaster, conflict, etc.), a symbol of piety is not simply a restrictive measure, but actually is a form of symbolic stability as well as protection from the legacy of violence against women. The veil is not the only form of protection against violence that women use in Aceh. Another form of protection that women traditionally carry is a type of dagger. As stated by one professor in an interview:

> *If you pay attention, traditional Acehnese women wear pants, with layers to make them appropriate. As well, they possess traditional weapons to protect themselves.* (Interview, 4 June 2012)

This notion suggests that while modesty and appropriate dress are religiously important, women are also protecting themselves physically. This quotation also demonstrates that clothing,

such as layered pants or the jilbab may act as physical boundaries that deter violence against women.

Equality, Freedom and Economic Access

A university student maintains that the veil also acts as an avenue through which Muslim women can be mobile, free and make money. The veil, in her eyes was not necessarily restrictive, but self-affirming. This participant argued further that:

> *Woman can do everything. Women can have many friends, they can get work, family...here, abroad, or everywhere... Because the woman can do anything and be everywhere.* (Interview, 2 June 2012)

Her statement "we can work, we can do everything" implies that Acehnese Muslim women have the capacity and avenue (the veil) through which to work and seek economic independence. This statement also suggests that veiling opens possibilities for women to develop social relationships with others. These social relationships allow a woman to increase and cultivate her social capital. This suggests that the veil is a space that gives women the power to move between public and private realms successfully. For her, jilbab offers a comfortable, alternative space that allows women to move beyond public and private domains.

Identity and Gender Performativity

The veil also functions as a signifier of identity. As an Acehnese woman, wearing the veil can be a sign of gender performativity, which directly informs the formation of identity. The stylized and repetitive act of veiling reifies certain gender norms and values that develop a strong female, Islamic identity. By dressing modestly and covering the aurat, women in Southeast Asia, and now in Aceh are starting to identify with a more global community of Muslims, in an intentional solidarity in the form of dress (Hooker and Fealy, 2006, p. 120). This conception of identifying with a transnational community can be a positive and reaffirming act for women in Aceh. For one participant, veiling was the way she showed what her "identity looks like" and that this is what "Muslim people look like" (Interview, 8 June 2012). Here, she expresses her solidarity and her transnational identity with Muslims (from both inside and outside of Aceh) through this intentional act.

Religious and Social Obligation

Another major factor that motivates women's veiling practices in Aceh is religious obligation. While obligated by current Islamic trends in the region, some women find that wearing the veil helps fulfill their religious connection to Allah. For many Acehnese women praying five times a day and veiling are acts highly connected to their religious and social obligations: "[We don't veil] because we want to look good or beautiful. It's because of religious obligation" (Interview, 17 June 2012).

To fulfill social and religious obligations women wear the veil as a form of gender performativity; by veiling in these circumstances women also enhance their social networks. Failing to do so could result in social marginalization. However, religious obligation also has positive implications in Aceh. For example, one student noted that "The rule [about veiling has] a positive impact for us, [it's] not a rule that force[s] us [or restricts us]...It's not a rule like that, but *hijab* is something [that] make us free" (Interview, 2 June 2012). The veil here is not always

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associated with the restrictive quality of rules and punishment for deviance, but rather, for this student, it is as symbol of freedom. With this freedom, women using the veil can transcend the public and private spheres.

The Idyllic Muslima

The ideal Muslim woman (*Muslima*) in Acehnese culture veils, granting her respect and social capital, as well as protection, identity, equality, economic stability and religious fulfillment. A male graduate student commented that a woman who wears jilbab emulates politeness, eliminates desire, and is more well-respected by men because of her actions (Interview, 2 June 2012). Thus, in Aceh, a Muslima is first signified visually, though many interview participants argued that a woman could wear jilbab and not be Muslima. Muslima must also be pious and approach all things with good attitudes, speech, intention and behavior. The veil is merely an easy marker for identification, not the only sign of a good Muslim woman.

A student who is also a radio announcer notes that the way a woman dresses in Aceh can determine whether or not people perceive her as "good" or "bad." She examines that the differences between a "good girl" and a "bad girl" may be dependent on a woman's veiling practices. She defines good girls as "Those who wear the big, loose clothing. [They] are usually called alim. It means those who have knowledge." Based on this and other interviews, we can infer that women who dress modestly and conservatively in Aceh, who wear loose clothes that are not form fitting and do not expose the aurat are perceived to be good Muslim women. Women who dress conservatively or appropriately in Aceh are also far more likely to gain status and privilege, whereas fashionable girls are less likely to be perceived as alim or Muslima.

Pushing Boundaries with Fashion

Fashion is also a form of agency that can challenge certain stigmatizations of women. According to the radio announcer mentioned above, many people think that girls or women who wear "short shirts" and "jeans" or dress fashionably are perceived as women who "like the night life," who "have many boyfriends [and] have free relationships." She maintains that being "fashionable means that she knows how to position herself (within Acehnese social structure). Because she lives in Aceh, she still has to follow the Shari'ah. However she doesn't have to wear the loose big clothes."

This young woman considered herself to be a fashionable girl: she wore tight jeans, a shirt that did not cover her upper thighs, and a brightly colored jilbab. The radio announcer automatically works to subvert certain conceptions that inform women's dress and behavior in Aceh by dressing strategically. For her wearing loose clothing does not necessarily indicate moral inclination; rather moral inclination is based on personal commitment to religious teaching, not outward appearances. She remarks:

> *I think that slowly over time [my behavior] will change the people's mind about stereotypes…about fashionable girls because smart and alim is not about the dress. Also about how they know many knowledge and how they also know their religious knowledge.* (Interview, 8 June 2012)

Ascribing to the identity of Muslima or alim to her means demonstrating religious knowledge and not simply dressing to impress authority. This participant challenges stereotypical ideas about "fashionable" women by acting as a positive community member. This

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for her is more important than ascribing to specific norms that inform dress code. By displaying both her religious knowledge and personal ideas about appropriate Muslima behavior, this participant intentionally asserts her agency. The veil she wears allows her to push the boundaries of public and private spaces. As a radio announcer she tends to stay out late at night and interact with members of the opposite sex; by continuing to wear the veil and presenting her religious knowledge she minimizes negative perceptions from her community.

Conclusions, General Trends and Implications

Spectrum (Macro, Meso, Micro)

Our research demonstrates the intersections of macro, meso (community as well as organizational or institutional levels) and micro influences. In the macro level, global and regional contexts shape the ways in which Shari'ah laws are implemented and interpreted. NGOs, local governmental organizations and neighborhood associations in the meso level interact with macro level factors to affect the implementations and manifestations of Shari'ah law while individuals actively and continuously shape and develop their own interpretations of the laws. These intersections create a spectrum of agencies and influences of societies that make up the diversities within Acehnese society.

Manifestations of History and Tradition in Daily Life

The Acehnese people have historically practiced distinct beliefs and traditions that lean towards a matrifocal, matrilineal culture. Four consecutive sultanas, military generals and public figures represent the strong leadership of women of Aceh. These individuals have helped to create a living legacy that influences the way women are perceived today and sets important precedents for gender relations and female emergence into positions of higher status and respect. Veiling negotiations, female power and leadership, and the practices of merantao and *muslihat* convey women's legacy within Aceh. These are not static occurrences, but part of an Acehnese living memory that influence and informs Acehnese culture and society into the present.

Contradictions of Binaries

Throughout our research we found that contradictions often appeared at the surface of women's identities. These contradictions often appeared on multiple levels, as various binaries informed their daily lives and activities. Some contradictory binary ideologies in Aceh were global and local, public and private, secular and religious, and rural and urban. Scholarship tends to put social phenomena into cleanly delineated boxes: a person is either religious or secular, lives in a public or private sphere, is either local or global. However, we maintain that while these binary systems may influence and inform the way women negotiate themselves, they do not inform women in isolation. That is, women negotiate all of these ideologies simultaneously, and therefore, at times seem to contradict themselves in belief and behavior.

Agency and Structure: A Dynamic Relationship

Women of Aceh exhibit their agency through leadership and organizing—by constantly reacting to their surrounding structures and environments. They absorb, reject and redefine external influences as both negotiation and renegotiation with their local structure while maintaining local cultures. This phenomenon transcends the global realm, wherein the dialogue between Acehnese women and larger hegemonic or theoretical ideas becomes active, and

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operates on a spectrum. The authors see this spectrum in a variety of intersecting social and private spheres, wherein the women of Aceh signify their agency by enacting their individual power through their faith and roles in society.

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