The Objectification of the Covered: Understanding Muslim Female Students' Limited Engagement in Physical Activities

Difa Mahya Zahara

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Indonesia
Corresponding E-mail: difa.zahara@uiii.ac.id

Abstract

Patriarchal culture in Indonesia impacts various aspects of social life, including students at schools where they don't only study school subjects but also learn about social and gender norms. One of the main gender-related issues that arise within a patriarchal culture is the objectification experienced by female students in schools. This article is drawn from the data, collected in a qualitative study conducted on Muslim female students in an Indonesian Islamic Middle School. The study aims to explore their experiences of objectification by applying a psychosocial feminist objectification theory (Fredrickson and Robert, 1997). The study discovered that male peers exhibit non-sexual objectification through their gazes and comments on female students' general physical appearance – particularly on female students' Islamic dressing—the veil and modest Muslim style clothing. The more direct sexual objectification by male peers is their sexual comments with their eyes fixed on certain body parts of female students, such as chests and hips. The male-centric interpretation of the Islamic feminine ideal contributed to the withdrawal of female students from physical activities at school, such as Physical Education, art performances, and sports. This study suggests the separation of female students in PE classes as a temporary solution to encourage the participation of female students in school activities.

Keywords: *objectification, gender, education, feminism, physical activities*

Introduction

The recognition of gender equality as a global concern has increased significantly over the past 50 years. Gender equality does not only support the rejection of discrimination and promotion of human rights, but also is crucial for the sustainability of a peaceful and violence-free world, as emphasized in the fifth Sustainable Development Goals. The other goal is to improve the quality of education by empowering women and girls which is just like jewels on a crown. On the positive side, the global effort towards the achievement of gender equality in education has resulted in a significant increment of female students' enrollment in primary and secondary schools (UNESCO, 2021b). According to World Economic Forum (2021), the gender gap has decreased in 121 countries, including Indonesia, and more women are enrolled in higher education. Despite these improvements in gender equality, there are still significant challenges – such as a lower number of female students pursuing doctoral degrees. The ongoing imbalance can be observed in universities, where only around 30% of the researchers are female. In addition to that, women are also overrepresented in the teaching field, but underrepresented in leadership roles (UNESCO, 2021a).

Given the significance of these gender-related challenges in higher education, it is important to acknowledge and address them in schools as well, which means all educational aspects are to be taken into account. One of the main concerns is violence in school, where male students are more susceptible to physical violence while female students are more prone to experience sexual and psychological ones (UNESCO, 2019). This article focuses on the prevalence of psychological and sexual violence in educational institutions, which is often considered normal even though it possesses a threat to female students – violating their fundamental rights to education and well-being as humans. The negative impacts of these factors on girls' school activities and participation are significant which can even hinder the nation's progress toward achieving inclusive and equitable quality education on the national level (Greene et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2019). Likewise, the policies implemented in Indonesia demonstrate a strong commitment in protecting students from violence as reflected in the Ministerial Regulation No. 82 of 2015, supporting the prevention and management of violence in educational institutions. Article 9 of Law No. 35 of 2014 also recognizes the rights of every child to be protected from sexual offenses and violence.

The issue of sexual and psychological violence against women has been extensively discussed in objectification studies. Objectification refers to the act of dehumanizing women or girls who are treated as sexual objects for male pleasure or as mere physical appearances. This type of treatment can lead to self-

objectification, which may result in negative psychological consequences (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Morris et al., 2018). Studies indicated that the sexualization of school drama performances promoted the normalization of female students' objectification (Schick, 2014). Other research also indicated that when students are sexually objectified, teachers may have negative perceptions on their abilities (Cabras et al., 2018).

The act of objectification leaves severe negative effects on students, which include lower academic performance and the lack of school enjoyment (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2019). To better understand the extent of objectification in Muslim societies, it is important to investigate the impact of distinctive practices like veiling, especially considering clothing as one of the cues that may potentially lead to objectification (Fasoli et al., 2018). This issue is particularly relevant, given that objectification is pervasive in Western societies. In Indonesia, as one of the countries with the largest Muslim population, cases of female students' sexualization, rape, and harassment are evident in the educational context (Istiadah et al., 2020; Poerwandari et al., 2021). This indicates that there are underlying concerns that go beyond the traditional expectations imposed on girls regarding their appearance and behavior by patriarchal norms.

The negative impacts of such objectification within educational sectors extend beyond internal issues, as objectification manifests a form of bullying in school, which may ultimately result in poor educational outcomes (UNESCO, 2019). Female students who are the victims of internalized objectification tend to prioritize their appearance-related activities over their academic studies, resulting in lower grades (McKenney & Bigler, 2016). According to Stone et al. (2015), peers tend to perceive objectified students as less intelligent, kind, and athletic. Starr & Zurbriggen (2019) also emphasizes that objectified students tend to exhibit poorer academic performance and lower levels of enjoyment in school. Moreover, the act of reducing girls to mere sexual objects solely based on their physical appearances – whether it is self-inflicted or imposed by others, will hamper progress in social change and the pursuit of quality education.

Although issues on gender and education have been widely discussed, objectification has not received enough attention in educational research as it was initially studied in psychology, focusing on intrapersonal experiences. Recently, the study of objectification has expanded into interpersonal experiences (Cabras et al., 2018; Gervais et al., 2019). However, the majority of studies still focus on blatant sexual objectification – like rape and sexual harassment. This limits the understanding of objectification to merely hostile forms and overlooks non-sexual objectification, such as being stared at and judged based on physical appearance (Loughnan & Pacilli, 2014; Morris et al., 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this

research is to understand the role of objectification on female students' participation in school activities, including both sexual and non-sexual forms of objectification that they experience in educational settings.

Method

Research Methodology

In line with the research objective, the aim is to have an in-depth exploration. This study applies an interpretivist paradigm in order to comprehend social phenomena by considering the perspectives of the individuals involved in this research (Mack, 2010). Therefore, this research uses a qualitative phenomenological research methodology known as IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) to achieve the research objectives of in-depth exploration. This approach concentrates on individual experiences and aims to understand their shared experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

The interpretation of this study was done by applying a feminist approach. The main characteristic of a feminist framework is that it employs feminist theory in the research (Marshall & Young, 2006). In this study, the feminist theory of objectification is applied to comprehend the female students' experiences in their interaction with male students, and to examine the impact on their school activities. The focus of objectification was previously limited to intrapersonal experiences of self-objectification. However, scholars have since challenged this perspective and expanded its definition to include interpersonal experiences that manifest in social interactions, as reflected by this study (Loughnan & Pacilli, 2014).

Research Context

Indonesia, a country with the largest Muslim population in Southeast Asia, follows patriarchal gender norms. One of the indicators reflected in marriage law no. 1/1974 article 31 (3) is that husband is the breadwinner of the family and wife is the assigned person to do the domestic duties. Indonesia is one of the biggest Muslim-populated countries, where male religious figures heavily dominate the interpretation of Islamic sources. The educational system in Indonesia is both under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, Technology and the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

This research was conducted in an integrated Islamic Middle School (*SMP Islam Terpadu*), a private Islamic Middle School located in West Java, Indonesia. The name is disclosed for ethical purposes. This school places great emphasis on Islamic education, including memorization of Quran and Islamic teachings. In addition, it also offers general education courses for both male and female students, who are taught together in the same classes. This school is attended by local Muslim

students – ranging from lower to middle-class backgrounds. A total of 6 participants were involved in this study with 2 participants came from grade 7, 8,and 9, respectively. All participants are from the lower social class, except for Gusti (pseudonym). This socioeconomic background is a crucial aspect to consider in understanding the overlooked complexity of objectification, since previous studies have been focusing on the urban context and their technological developments, such as the influence of social media on students' objectification.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this research was collected through interviews with six purposively chosen participants: Ana, Nuzi, Nisa, Gusti, Alya, and Nila (pseudonyms). They are students of grades 7-9, aged 12-15 years old. This research also included regular students and students living in dormitories, who were exempted from the obligation to study from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to narrow this qualitative research down, the researcher conducted informal group discussions with female students who had experienced or witnessed objectification in this school. During the group discussion, two main indicators were identified as means in which objectification was communicated to females by male members such as comments and gazes based on girls' appearances (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gervais et al., 2019). The final selection criteria of the 6 participants were decided with the help of the headmaster who was familiar with the students, and knew which students would most likely feel comfortable sharing their stories. The participants' parents or guardians were aware and gave their consent for their children to participate in this research.

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant by visiting the school in person. The first interview was conducted during the participants' free time after school. The discussion focused on their interactions with male students and their participation in various school activities. Each student took around 30 minutes. Follow-up discussions with each student were conducted during the participants' lunch break, which also took 30 minutes. The researcher obtained consent from the participants to record the interview using an audio recorder and also took field notes. The researcher made sure to inform the participants about the confidentiality of their stories.

This research also used other data collection instruments which include participants' notes and video recordings. Participants were requested to write down the details of what was discussed during the interview, and to recall any points they might have missed and any related stories, they wanted to share within the period of 2-3 days. The researcher obtained permission to access the school's videos of students' art performances, which were used to collect data on female students' school activities.

To analyze the data, the research transcribed the primary data from the interviews, followed by identifying the emerging themes arising from the students' discussions, while taking into account the specific details of their experiences. The collected data was cross-referenced with the information from the participants' notes and video recordings to ensure consistency. The researcher then used verbatim to maintain the authenticity of participants' responses along with the researcher's own description and interpretation when presenting the data. The researcher then translated the verbatim responses from Indonesian to English. Finally, the findings were discussed with the participants through group discussion to ensure accuracy and validity.

In addition to the research approach and paradigm, it is important to note that the researcher has a personal connection to the subject being studied. Just like the participants, the researcher is an Indonesian Muslim woman, who has previously taught extracurricular activities at the school. Therefore, the participants are familiar with the researcher, although she had never interacted with or taught them before. The fact that the participants were familiar with her presence, helped to establish a comfortable relationship between the researcher and participants, which made it easier for them to share their experiences

Result and Discussion

'It is still visible from the side': The Objectification of the Covered

During their social encounters with male peers at school, all six female students shared their experiences of receiving comments on their physical appearance. For instance, they were called short, small, too skinny, pimply, as well as being referred to as dark-skinned in a demeaning way. These girls have a negative perception of these appearance-focused comments. As a result, these comments shape their perception of beauty ideals. However, a unique form of appearance-based comment was identified in this study. It was discovered that in the experience of the six Muslim female students, the comments on their appearance were mainly focused on their Islamic clothing rather than their physical features. Nuzi, expressed her disappointment for not receiving compliments. She felt that she was evaluated based on how she wore her veil instead of other physical features.

> Nuzi mentioned that she received comments when her front hairs were visible, and I told them, "I see, thank you for reminding me". Sometimes, they also say something like, hm… that I forgot to pin this part [pointing at the hijab on her chest] so it was revealing her chest area." (Nuzi, 7th grade)

Nuzi's reaction to the comments demonstrates the fact that she perceived them as reminders to wear her veil properly, which is consistent with the school's regulations requiring female students to wear an inner *hijab* in addition to covering their hair and chest. Regardless of who reminded her, these comments made her feel grateful. She also acknowledged that she was perceived as someone who lacked the skill to cover herself properly. Ayla also shared a similar viewpoint, admitting that her inability to keep her *aurat* hidden from male peers is due to her clumsiness.

"I think it was because a part of my chest was often not covered. My hijab flew around here and there because I did not pin them properly, haha. Yes, I am often very clumsy, sis… sometimes, it is because the girls are not being careful enough, like that… because our hair can be very long right, sis? So, they become visible, "Hey, your hair is long. We can see it and your chest as well." (Alya, 9th grade)

While giggling, Alya didn't seem to consider the boys' comments as a violation of her safety. Instead, she viewed it as a caring gesture, a reminder to dress properly as a good Muslim girl. Although, later she reckoned that the way they reminded her was rather harsh or rude. From these discussions with Nuzi and Alya, it is evident that although the comments on their veils were non-sexual, there are certain cues signaling that the comments on the girls' chests need to be evaluated.

It is noticeable that among the various comments on physical appearance, the objectification of sexual body parts, such as the chest and rear end in particular, cause a high level of concern and discomfort. The biological change of bodies experienced by teenage females in middle school seemed to attract overwhelming attention. Here is one of the examples where Nila witnessed a friend being objectified by male students.

"When she was walking, she was being stared at her [chest]. So, it was like, it's difficult, right? Because we're [physically] grown now. And then, [although the veil covered the chest from the front], it was still visible from one side… So, when she was walking, the boys peered their eyes on her saying, "Oh my, oh my, oh my!" like that. Of course, it is uncomfortable." (Nila, 9th grade)

There was silence and pauses in between when Nila told her story and hesitated to tell the detail of her chest being stared at. Though Nila was only witnessing, she expressed her feeling of helplessness and internal conflict between the natural transformation of the female body and the inadequacy of the long veil to completely cover the shape of the changing body. Her frustration is evident in her statement that they have no control over the transformation of their bodies. The

boys' loud voices while staring at her friend's body only intensified her feeling of discomfort.

There is consistency in the male gazes and comments towards female's bodies as experienced by Nila herself while walking to school, unaware of a boy walking behind her. Sexual comment directed at her hips, "*Right, left, right, left*", was undeniably a form of verbal coercion, leading her to the conclusion that she should never walk in front of boys anymore, but stay behind them just to be safe. This type of verbal sexualization is, in fact, a component of daily psychological aggression that poses a greater threat to girls' sense of safety at school (Shute et al., 2016).

Still in this topic, the example of sexual objectification is reflected in Nisa's case where gazes and comments on girls' rear-end bodies in the simplest act of walking. Nisa described how boys gazed and commented on girls' rear-end bodies. The boys even used hand gestures to illustrate how the girls moved – a form of sexual violence through gestures (Istiadah. et al., 2020) and sexual bullying at school (UNESCO, 2019).

It is important to note that these events occurred despite the loose-fitted uniform the girls daily wore in schools. Their tunic uniforms went down up to the knees, and a long skirt that reached their feet. However, despite feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, and uneasy, the girls regarded the boys' acts as inevitable or unchangeable behaviors, describing them as childish, bored, or naughty. Therefore, the female students did not have any expectation for the male students to change. Alya shared a similar story in which she attributed the boys' gazes on girls' bodies as being unnecessary.

> "[The boys'] eyes are naughty. Sometimes, when they see girls, they really put so much attention... like in the way of walking, like that, sis. For example, for those with curvy bodies, they would tease, "Right, left, right, left". They often do that, sis." (Alya, 9th grade)

Alya's story bears a resemblance to that of Nisa's and Nila's, providing further insights on the existence of sexual objectification in schools. While sharing her story, Alya displayed a notable concern as her intonation placed a significant emphasis on the word "really". It seems that the comments focus on the girls' bodies, particularly those with curvy body shapes.

'That's because he is tempted by shaitan': Taking the Blame

The previous discussion highlights the objectification experienced by female students in their social interactions with male peers. The girls expressed the need to take control over their appearances in order to avoid the unwanted

objectifying treatment. Despite their noticeable attitudes towards it, their responses primarily indicate a focus on their perceived lack of responsibility or their inability to veil properly, rather than attributing the issue to the invasion of male students.

> This is due to the perception that girls are not wearing their veils properly or may be seen as an invitation to boys' desire. For example, we wear veils, but our hair or *aurat* are still visible." (Ana, 7th grade).

Ana's response highlights the fact that despite Muslim girls cover their bodies and hair, they are still evaluated based on their appearance and even being sexualized. She suggested that the first thing that came to mind was how properly the girls wore their veils. Objectification primarily arose from the girls' struggle to present themselves as unappealing as possible. This idea implies that girls have the primary responsibility to determine how boys perceive them, in a way, giving them a sense of control. In that manner, Nuzi might have implied that she had the power to attract any attention through her appearance or not.

> "If we wear clothes that are long and covering, the *aurat* will be invisible. As a result, boys also will react normal when they see us. There are many students out there whose *aurat* are exposed, and the boys see them differently… These days, sis, a lot of girls are wearing their veils improperly, revealing their chest area. So, it is visible to the boys. The chest is being exposed." (Nuzi, 7th grade).

Nuzi believes that females who wear Muslim attire properly have better chance to avoid being objectified by boys. She draws a comparison between girls who cover themselves properly and those who do not – suggesting that the latter are somehow inviting for such treatment by revealing themselves. Despite exhibiting self-blaming tendencies in understanding of how these experiences occur, all of the female students expressed that the responsibility should not be solely attributed to girls, but rather by both parties. However, this acknowledgment comes with a condition in which boys are held accountable only after girls have fulfilled the responsibility of covering themselves properly. Ana provided an intriguing insight compared to other students, stating in her own words, "That's because he is tempted by *shaitan*… Therefore, he is not keeping his gaze lower enough."

The statement was shared by Ana after she listed the responsibilities that girls should fulfill. However, when it comes to discussing boys' responsibilities, she acknowledged that objectifying women is not entirely their fault. The objectification was not only because of how the girls wore their clothes, but it was also linked to the influence of *shaitan* on boys' behavior. Although there was indeed an acknowledgment that boys had the ability to lower their gazes, it is evident that the

partial responsibility for the boys' objectifying behavior was attributed to *Shaitan* or the devil. Gusti also expressed a similar idea, emphasizing the need for girls to keep their distance from boys.

> "If we do not maintain our distance from boys, there is a possibility that we will become too close, which may lead to an immediate arousal of their sexual desire. Their minds will immediately wander to inappropriate places, which might give them the capacity to do things that are unimaginable." (Gusti, 8th grade)

This understanding builds upon the previous notion that boys are often perceived as childish and easily bored, or mischievous. As Gusti described, male peers are perceived as objectifiers and viewed primarily as sexual beings, whose presence around girls can potentially trigger their own sexual desires. This complex view on boys' characteristics may help to understand why the girls generally did not anticipate the boys to understand their challenges.

As previously mentioned, the act of veiling is viewed as a means to empower them with the ability to control over how others treat them. Nevertheless, their stories suggested that covering is more about disengagement rather than active control. The absence of active voices, questioning, or challenging implies a passive rejection, which suggests a lack of agency. The fact that the girls' perception of veiling as a means to prevent boys' sexual desires highlights a male-centered perspective on the issue of objectification.

The discussion further reveals the male-centered perspective as one-sided responsibility, where the female students emphasized their obligation as Muslim women to follow God's commandments. These responsibilities include covering their *aurat*, wearing loose-fitted clothing and hijab, using large and long veils that fully cover the chest, dressing in non-see-through garments, lowering their gazes, and not revealing their adornments to non-mahram individuals. In contrast, the responsibility of men mentioned is only to lower their gazes.

The view expressed above can be referred to QS. Nur (24): 30-31. Yet, the interpretations presented by female students suggest that the verse 30 specifically addresses men's responsibility to keep their gazes lower and suppress their desires, while verse 31 addresses women and implies that both verses are interconnected. The interpretation differs from that of Moghissi (2004) which is derived from the works of ideologues, Sayyid Qutb and Abu al-'Ala al- Mawdudi. His interpretation suggests that these verses emphasize that men are mentioned first to control their gazes and suppress their desires. Likewise, Haqqi (2014) adopted a contextualist approach regarding QS. An-Nur (24): 31. He argued that although it addresses women, it should be perceived as a continuation of the previous verse, which is applicable to both men and women. A feminist perspective challenges that the

interpretation used to legitimize seclusion as unreasonable, especially in the light of the other verses in Quran such as At-Taubah (9): 71, Al-Ahzab (33): 35, Ali-Imran (3): 195, An-Nisa (4): 124, which promote the equality of men and women (Haqqi, 2014). Considering feminist perspective is important in explaining this matter as it enables us to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Quran that is taken out of context (Shah, 2018).

When it comes to direct reference from the verses of Quran, the female students, except for Nisa, mentioned QS. Al-Isra: 32, from which they derived the understanding that both men and women need to avoid *zina*. Based on their understanding of Islamic values, the female students view their obligation to cover themselves is more than just a matter of personal preference, but rather of a moral responsibility. Ana's story vividly illustrated how the need to cover herself is accompanied with the moral obligation to protect her father from hellfire, and to guide him to paradise as she said, "We can, um, ensure our fathers' path to paradise if we protect our *aurat*. If we expose our *aurat*, later, our father burns in the hellfire." The relationship between veiling and protecting her father introduced a new aspect in understanding the girls' perception. It highlighted the male-centric approach that influenced their decision to veil and cover themselves, rather than the girls' own needs, desires, or ideas. In other words, there is a lack of *ijtihad* or an individual reasoning and reflection to question the rationale behind such responsibilities. Moreover, their sense of responsibility goes beyond the requirements of external appearance, as they also listed the ideal Muslim feminine behaviors, such as showing a sense of modesty, speaking softly, avoiding attention-seeking with movements or behaviors and so on.

With their perception of responsibility based on a male-centered view of Islamic values, it is evident that why the girls hold themselves accountable for objectification, even though they have covered their bodies and maintained a modest appearance. As a result, their approach to resist objectification does not involve challenging or confronting the treatment of male directly, but rather to passively reject it by keeping their objections to themselves and regulate their own appearance.

'When boys are around, I feel restricted in my movements': From Regulating the Physique to Regulating its Function.

The girls' experiences of objectification are not limited to informal settings outside the classroom. They also experienced feelings of discomfort and unease associated with their bodies and appearances during the Physical Education (PE) activities. Nila's experience is a good example of this. She expressed apprehension

about the possibility of the male students seeing her body in mixed-sex PE classes. According to her, the PE uniform accentuated her body silhouette, making her more vulnerable to boys' gazes and causing her feeling of discomfort. It is important to highlight that although the PE classes are mostly conducted separately for male and female students, it is not entirely possible to completely avoid seeing each other. Therefore, conducting the PE classes separately was a holistic alternative, requested by female students. Similar to Nila, Alya's concern demonstrates the fact that how she takes care of her physical appearance before and during PE classes.

> "Because I wear pants, right? Since I am in grade 9 now, the uniforms became tighter. So, it was like, uhm, I borrowed the uniforms from my junior classmates who had bigger bodies than me, or from seniors who were bigger than me. It takes a lot of hands, sis, for PE class. Borrowing from here and there... sometimes, I needed to pull it down. (Alya, 9th grade).

It is evident that Alya made considerable efforts before PE class in order to feel more comfortable with her appearance, including seeking alternative resources. However, it is important to note that female students from lower economic backgrounds may find it difficult to purchase new uniforms as a solution to this issue. According to Alya, the discomfort she faced is likely experienced by many other female students. She was aware of the changes in her body size and shape as a teenager. Alya nervously laughed as she recounted her efforts to hide her body by pulling down her uniform to hide her rear end. This illustrates a crucial point that the girls do not only regulate the appearance of their bodies but also their functionality.

> "Because I feel embarrassed ... sometimes, I skipped certain movements..., I would just squat down in the back... skipping the movements... At that time, we had to do pushups. The girls were doing pushups against the wall, and the boys were staring... I don't know, they were whispering ...I was afraid they were talking about me." (Alya, 9th grade)

Alya's withdrawal from PE demonstrated her effort to regulate her bodily function by moving to the last rows in the back and hiding herself by squatting down. Alya's sense of embarrassment was not without reason. It was based on her previous experiences that she encountered during a pushup activity when she noticed boys were staring at her and whispering. Although she was not sure of what the boys were whispering about, Alya felt a sense of fear or anxiety that the boys might have been commenting on her body. This caused her to restrict her movements. Similar experiences were noticed in Nila's case.

> "In PE class, there was usually a warm-up session before it began. There were hand movements going up and then into *rukuk* position (bending),

which was very uncomfortable... So, during the PE class, I would act lazy but in reality, I felt embarrassed and afraid... haha." (Nila, 9th grade)

While describing her experiences during the physical warm-up session, Nila showed an awareness of her lack of participation in PE. It is essential to underline that she realized that her passiveness was not due to the lack of ability, but rather stemmed from a sense of fear in an unsafe environment. Her somehow lighthearted response and giggles indicated a lack of awareness regarding what she had missed out on by not participating. Gusti also mentioned a similar sense of fear regarding the PE environment.

"A few days ago, we had to do pushups. It made me feel a kind of, uhm, what is it.... exposed. When I was down in a bending position, the shape of my body became apparent. I just felt afraid. Luckily, the majority of the boys were playing soccer, so they were not really looking. But, some of them were." (Gusti, 8th grade)

It is evident that the male gazes followed them everywhere - especially during a vulnerable situation while the girls were doing pushups. This resulted in Gusti's withdrawal from physical activities. Her preference to avoid contact with boys during the PE class or having a separate PE class is evident. A similar attitude was observed in Nisa who explicitly stated that why she did not wish to participate in the PE class.

"[During] warm-ups, sis. When there are movements involving the hips, sometimes I choose not to join in... When there are boys around, I do not feel like making any movements." (Nisa, 8th grade)

A similar problem of objectification arises when the discussion shifts to the focus on girls' body parts. Females make a conscious decision to hide their rear end or hips – not only in terms of visibility, but even in the slightest movements, especially in the presence of boys. Ana's story sheds light on how disturbing these gazes can be – to the point, where she directly told her male peers to stop staring. Her response was different compared to other female students, who usually keep their discomfort to themselves or withdraw from physical activities.

The absent of female students' body movements is not limited to the PE class but can also be observed in other physical-related activities, such as dance class and art performances. Nuzi's experience of performing dance at school sheds further light on this aspect.

"If [the PE subject] is mixed, sometimes we got teased, sis. For example, during the dancing session, our movements became slower... I felt embarrassed and less confident in mixed-class activities... I was practicing in the dance session at the dormitory, uh, and didn't realize that the boys

were watching from their dormitory. I immediately went inside because I was embarrassed." (Nuzi, 7th grade).

It is evident that Nuzi experienced limitations to her movements during dance class. Despite knowing the fact that dance would be performed in front of an audience, Nuzi felt uncomfortable being watched while practicing and made considerable efforts to minimize her exposure. During the final performance, it was obvious that Nuzi lacked confidence and was hesitant in her movements. Despite having a spacious stage, the girls mostly occupied the central part with a few formation changes, which again resulted in limited body movements. In contrast, the male students confidently occupied almost all parts of the stage, displaying a wide range of body movements, including raising their hands up high and moving their hips freely.

> "When Nila and I danced with my female friends, there were boys behind us. It felt embarrassing to make free movements. We didn't feel comfortable... I found myself holding back from dancing, haha... and so did others. Our movements were limited – not as expressive as they were supposed to be." (Nila, 9th grade).

During Nila's performance, a significant difference was noticed in her movements. In Manuk Dadali dance, she was supposed to raise her hands above her head, but she only raised her hands as far as her ears, keeping her upper arms close to two sides of her body. This limited and restricted kinesthetic participation was also evident in other class activities.

> "There was a singing activity, and then some movements – the one in the textbook. I forgot. Physical training!... There was a slight feeling of embarrassment... because I had to practice it in front of the class, including in front of boys." (Ana, 7th grade).

It is interesting to notice that the girls do not find singing as uncomfortable as dancing. Indeed, in the video performances, despite hesitance in the movements, they sang clearly and loudly in harmony. However, when it comes to body movements, the repeated feeling of embarrassment is evident. The subsequent social withdrawal that occurs further indicates the manifestation of embarrassment (Shame – APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.). This is a concerning issue from an equity perspective as pedagogy should foster a sense of belonging among students (Thomas, 2015), rather than exacerbating the feelings of disconnection and shame. Meanwhile, the girls' experiences serve as a confirmation on how sexual harassment resulted in students' disengagement and alienation (Gruber & Fineran, 2016).

In the light of a more complex understanding, the withdrawal observed among female students can be associated with their perception of femininity within

the context of Islam. Nisa further explained her understanding of the ideal Muslim girl, who is expected to maintain her movements and refrain from drawing attention.

> "In fact, I am a highly active individual, sis. So, my friends often tell me, "Nis, you're a girl. You should be demure and modest." Of course, I also had similar thoughts. Oh, they're right … correct, sis? I began to believe that a girl should be, according to my friends, a Muslimah girl, sis." (Nisa, 8th grade).

The notion of reservedness, expected from a Muslim girl is perceived as one of the ideal characteristics. It is evident that Nisa's nature of being active, vocal, and expressive was transformed into a more passive demeanor. As evident in her response, there appears to be a lack of recognition and awareness regarding the distinction between religion principles and cultural values. The concept of ideal femininity is perceived through a religious lens, rather than being solely a fruition of cultural or societal constructs. However, among the girls, Nisa can be seen as a potential source of resistance against the rigid interpretation of religious sources. She demonstrates a willingness to *ijtihad*, as witnessed in her questions that involve certain values, such as why she could not touch her relatives with whom she shared blood after *wudu* (ablution).

In contrast to the resistant experiences faced in PE and art performances, the female students exhibit acceptance of mixed-sex classes – when the lessons are in the form of group discussion, presentation, and note-taking. Many of them even expressed that female students tend to be more active than boys. This evidence is in contrast with the influence of objectification experienced by female students during physical-related activities in school.

Objectification, Islamic Values, and the Passive Response of Female Students

The non-sexual comments that Muslim female students received were not only limited to their general physical appearances such as body shape, height, facial features, skin, etc. but also extended to their Islamic apparel, particularly their veils. These comments can be considered as sexual objectification – especially when they focus on how the girls' chests are covered. The subtlety of this objectification often goes unnoticed or overlooked by girls. Direct sexual comments targeted the bodies of females, particularly the chests and rear ends, are undeniable and evident in the explicit remarks, made by male peers. Accompanied by feelings of shame, these experiences of objectification led to the withdrawal of female students from physical activities. Their passive response in rejecting objectification and

participation in school activities, is reinforced by their understanding of the ideals of Muslim girls and justified by their religious beliefs. This way, the objectification and patriarchal interpretation of Islamic values serve as a mechanism to regulate their appearance and bodily function.

This notion carries great significance in the realm of education, as quality education should encompass physical activity, recognizing the importance of health as fundamental human rights (Kirk & Wing, 2012). This research also identified concerns in regard to girls' participation in physical education and school-related activities. One significant factor contributing to these concerns is the perception that sports, physical activities, and physical strength are closely associated with masculinity, perpetuating a sexist attitude that ascribes different abilities to girls and boys based on biological factors (Kirk & Wing, 2012). Therefore, this study challenges such perspectives by emphasizing on the evidence that the lack of physical activeness among girls is not due to biological factors, but rather social interactions with male peers.

However, the complexity of this issue extends beyond what has been mentioned as oppression intersects with religious values, cultural beauty ideals, and economic factors. In Muslim societies, including in its educational institutions, gender roles are intertwined with culture and religion (Shah, 2018). The statements made by female students on the importance of covering their *aurat*, dressing modestly, and protecting their fathers from hellfire, among others, highlight the presence of a male-centered interpretation and place a significant burden on girls to prevent objectification. It is evident that there are complex power dynamics within the school environment among students through objectification, which ultimately leads to the exclusion of certain individuals from participating in physical activities. Muslim girls' participation in physical activity within the educational context involves a negotiation process influenced by various factors such as, culture, religion, competition, family, community, etc. (Stride, 2016).

Therefore, this research reveals that associating females with superior language skills and males with science or physical education is not less than mere stereotypical beliefs. In fact, the primary obstacle to female students' success in physical activities is a lack of effort in providing a safe environment, where they feel secure and encouraged to participate in all physical activities on an equal footing with boys. This finding is aligned with previous studies that highlight how girls, as active social actors, adhere to gender norms by limiting their bodily movements (Paechter, 2010). It is important to note that women who experienced objectification tend to limit their movements, occupy less space, and adopt behaviors that align with object-like characteristics (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014).

In addition to that, girls are not only passive recipients of gender socialization, but rather actively engaged in performing gender roles.

In accordance with the aforementioned practices, the school's dormitory is designed to accommodate cooking facilities for female students, while the physical work is assigned to male students. Apart from that the male students are given the opportunity to participate in weekend futsal activities, the girls are encouraged to stay at the dormitory and rest. The existing culture in this school perpetuates the limited physical activity for girls, and indicates the direct and indirect communication of gender stereotypes within the educational environment. Therefore, it is important to prioritize gender education, starting from the home environment (Nurmila et al., 2021), and to be extended to school settings – with a particular focus on the dormitory which serves as the daily living space for students.

Therefore, based on the findings of this study, the conclusion that emerged from female students themselves suggests the implementation of separate physical education (PE) classes as an alternative for schools, where passive participation of female students is a prevalent issue. It is worth noting that this approach has been embraced by many schools around the world. It is important to acknowledge the significant impact of the interaction between physical education (PE), cultural and religious values in certain situations, particularly in the context of single-gender programs as it can yield greater advantages (Kirk & Wing, 2012). Although the implementation of such programs can potentially lead to an increment of physical activity, it is essential to effectively confront and overcome the oppressive treatment that girls experience by addressing the root causes of the issue. This has the potential to lead to gender dualism and provide exclusive safety to those who adhere to the feminine norm (Hill, 2015). Therefore, this system can be seen as a temporary alternative solution.

Another important implication of this study is the necessity for the Indonesian government to proactively advocate for a better physical health curriculum. This promotion has been found to have a positive contribution on the participation of female students in physical activities (Clark, 2018). In the meantime, it is crucial to ensure that this curriculum does not provide another means to perpetuate or reinforce traditional notions of hegemonic femininity. Lastly, it is important to encourage students to reflect on their religious understanding critically. The tendency to transfer religious knowledge from a narrow perspective by the authorities and teachers can indeed lead students to a rigid understanding of religious interpretation. As a result, those who do not practice veiling as they do, are deemed wrong and subjected to dehumanizing objectification.

Conclusion

Objectification within the educational environment is a manifestation of gender inequality. Despite having equal access to available resources, it undermines the equivalent participation and benefits that female students should have in their school activities. This issue is deeply rooted in a complex dynamic of oppression and dehumanization, as girls are systematically restricted and diminished in terms of their abilities and competencies. By acknowledging the gender disparity in school participation, we gain a deeper understanding of female students' complex experiences. This understanding will also enable us to explore alternative solutions to address the practical challenges within physical educational practices.

This study acknowledges certain limitations and provides an opportunity for future research. This study's limitation lies in its exclusive focus on a particular type of Islamic school, by excluding other educational settings like *pesantren, madrasah*, or non-faith-based schools. Incorporating these additional contexts would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of objectification in education, allowing for a broader range of perspectives on the topic to be explored. To enhance our knowledge in this area, future research should consider expanding the scope to incorporate these diverse educational contexts. Focusing on schools where physical education classes are separated for girls and boys will gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of this approach as one of the proposed alternative solutions. In conclusion, it is crucial to acknowledge that this research primarily focuses on students residing in the school dormitory during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, conducting a study that includes students who pursued their education from home and exploring their experiences upon returning to school would yield valuable insights and contribute to a more holistic understanding of the topic.

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