Approaches to Agency of Muslim Women in a Secular Society: A Case Study of Migrant Muslim Women in Tohoku, Japan

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Approaches to Agency of Muslim Women in a Secular Society: 
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1. Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the complex experience and individuality of foreign Muslim women in Sendai and how agency is created. It focuses specifically on how they as Muslim women in a non-Muslim society self-translate the meaning of “Halal” and how they negotiate with their surroundings.

This article is based on the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Sendai, Japan since April 2018. First, I introduce the role local Muslim associations play in their daily life. Then, I examine the difficulties Muslim women face and what changes they make in their religious practices in order to live among non-Muslims. Finally, I discuss how they acquired their agency in this process.

As the population of foreigners in Japan increased, research on them has increased in Japan as well. In addition to the studies on the increasing foreign population in local regions and the resulting conflict with local residents, many researches have also been done on the formation of identities and ethnic communities (Hirota 2006). In particular, research has been conducted on labor issues, human rights, child education, suffrage, symbiosis/integration issues which all relate to Japanese socio-economic and institutional problems (Kajita, Tanno and Higuchi 2005). However, most of those researches have only been done in big communities such as Nikkei and Korean residents with a large population. Studies on other foreign groups like Muslim community still remain scarce (Okai, Ishikawa 2011).

On the other hand, research on foreign students tend to be very general. Such research usually focuses on Chinese students, the biggest group of international students in Japan (Tang 2004). Muslims and vegetarian students who have special needs are grouped, if mentioned at all, as “other international
students,” and are not studied in depth (Nakano, Okunishi and Tnaka 2015).

Research on Muslims in Japan gradually began in the 1990s. Sakurai (2003) conducted the first comprehensive study of a Muslim “community” in 2003. Many community studies followed. Tanada and Okai (2015) outlines the current state of Islam in Japan by doing research on the mosques and Muslim community in Japan and by studying religious practices and other social activities held in a mosque. In recent years, studies focusing on Muslim international students have begun too (see Nakano, Okunishi and Tnaka 2015).

On the other hand, Kudo (2008) studied converted Japanese Muslim women who married Pakistani Muslims, but the research target was limited. Further, despite the fact that women are required to conduct religious practices differently from men, Muslim studies in Japan are still biased toward men. The issue of how Muslim women practice their religions in non-Muslim countries and how they negotiate with others has received little attention. Yet, if we are to understand the whole picture of Muslims in Japan, we must not ignore Muslim women.

This study is based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in the city of Sendai, Japan. During the process, I was able to carry out participant observation on the daily life of Muslim women. My key informants include Shahida from Saudi Arabia, Imani from Algeria, Maddah, Amal from Indonesia and Rahmah from Morocco. Their age ranges between 20s and 30s; all of them were born and grew up in their home countries and stayed there until entering university; all of them are graduate students at Tohoku University. Their Japanese ability is somewhere between beginner and intermediate level, and all of the courses they take at Tohoku University are taught in English. Besides conducting semi-structured interviews with them and observing them in various situations since April 2018, I also joined Islamic holiday activities and went to Islamic events with them. I joined in activities as both “guest” and “helper” and took pictures and made videos while preparing for and during the event.

Theoretically, the article integrates feminist standpoint theory with recent theories of agency and subjectivity. In this article I analyze their living in
Sendai, a non-Muslim society, and examine how the intersections of Islam, gender and community regulation are experienced, how agency is acquired in such intersections, and how the local conditions both enable and constrain their activities.

2. Ethnographic Background

According to the Japanese Ministry of Justice (2019a), the foreign residents numbered more than 2,600,000 at the end of 2018. But because no census is taken on religion in Japan, we can only guess the number of Muslims from the data on nationalities. Adding up the numbers of foreigners from majority Muslim nations, Komura (2019) estimates that by the end of 2018, the number of foreign Muslims in Japan was around 120,000 ~ 130,000, or only about 0.5% of all foreigners. According to the distribution of foreign residents in Japan (2019b), around 60% of the whole foreign residents live in the metropolitan areas around Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka. By contrast, only 60,120, or 2% of the total number of foreigners in Japan live in the Tohoku region. Miyagi, the most populated and urban prefecture in Tohoku region, has the largest foreigner population in the region, but the number is only 21,614 or 0.8% of the national total, of which more than half live in the capital city Sendai.
According to the national data (Sendai city 2019), the majority of foreigners living in Sendai are from China, South Korea, Vietnam, and other East Asian countries, which together account for about 70% of the total. People from countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, where the majority of the people are Muslims, together numbers 758. I assume this number is roughly the same as that of Muslims in Sendai. They account for 6% of the whole foreigner population in Sendai. Of these 758 people, 252 are women and 506 are men. In other words, there are twice as many men as women. It is clear that Muslims as a whole are a minority in Sendai, and Muslim women in particular are a minority within the minority. Looking across Japan, except for Tokyo, Osaka, Aichi and other big urban areas, Muslims are an ultra-minority also in most parts of Japan. Therefore, Muslims living outside of big cities should not be ignored. Sendai then is a good research site to study “scattered Muslims” in Japan.
3. Theoretical Framework

(1) Agency

Defined as “the free exercise of self-willed behaviour” (Mack 2005), agency hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007: 6). Agency is particularly important in post-colonial theory and thus became a key concern for emancipatory politics, in anti-racist, feminist and anti-colonialist movements (Bilge 2010: 12). Among feminist scholars, asserting and denouncing women’s lack of agency was politically foundational, and some believe that veiled women are either forced to wear a veil or develop a false consciousness (Bilge 2010: 14). This way of thinking simultaneously associates the veil with political Islam, ultimately turning veiled women from unconscious agents into dangerous agents of Islam qua diasporic political force threatening Western Weltanschauung (Bilge 2010: 14). Ideological rallying cry of “saving” oppressed women from their patriarchal culture/religion and male kin has been rising, but it also became a powerful tool for justifying U.S military intervention in the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 2013).

The ‘turn to agency’ emerges in response to this problematic reliance on false consciousness (Bracke 2008:62). Those scholars fervently engaged with the concept to make visible agentic capacities of formerly non-agentic non-subjects, and underline their ability to resist/subvert Western hegemony (Bilge 2010: 18). According to Bilge (2010), these approaches tend to locate veiled women’s agency in resistance, whether against Western imperialism, global capitalism, commodification of women’s bodies or post-9/11 Islamophobia. In that respect, Avishai (2008), distinguishes four conceptualizations of agency used to describe women who participate in gender-traditional religions, which are resistance, empowerment, instrumental, and her own conceptualization of “doing religion.” Burke (2012) extend Avishai’s discussion and place her “doing religion” approach under a broader category of compliant agency, discussing the advantages and
limitation of the four approaches. On the other hand, Mahmood (2011 [2005]) studies the piety movement in Cairo and suggests that in order to understand the Islamic female forms of moral subjectivity and embodied spiritual interiority, we must move beyond Western Imperialist notions of liberatory emancipation and the deterministic binaries of resistance/subordination by which Muslim female subjectivity and agency are so often judged (Mirza 2013). Under post-structuralist critiques, the humanist account of agency started to lose some of its authority within feminist theory in the 1990s (Bilge 2010: 13). Following Mahmood’s argument, to understand Muslim women’s agency, we must see it in a broader social environment.

As Bartkowski and Read (2003) points out, Muslim women exhibit a remarkable degree of agency in crafting religious identities. And these women’s religious identities are forged through the creative application of their specific faith commitments and cultural tools to meet the particular demands of their life circumstances. Qualifying veiling as a micropractice, Harkness (2018) argues that the act of veiling, is significant because they enable women to exercise agency within the confines of clothing that is intended to regulate and control behavior. Adachi (2016) studied Muslim women in the British education system and argues that “education, or school, is a space where the values of Western Europe and Islam meet and clashes with each other. It is, however, also a place where those women acquire the agency to manage their own lives and realize their dreams while resisting social prejudice and community regulations” It indicates that being in a foreign teaching system played a significant role in the process of acquiring agency of Muslim women.

However, unlike the situation in the UK or Muslim majority countries, in Japan, especially in a city like Sendai, Muslim women remain an ultra-minority both in school and society. How Muslim women in Japan differ from European counterparts where the size of Muslim population and the living conditions are so different from Japan?

To answer this question, I present the stories of several foreign Muslim women’s lives in Sendai to illuminate how they actually cope with movement
across cultures and languages and how they work out their own ways of life out of their encounters with different cultures.

4. Associations that support lives of Muslim in Sendai

(1) ICCS (Sendai Mosque)

There is only one mosque in the area of Sendai, Muslim usually refer to it as Sendai mosque or Sendai masjid. Its operator is the Sendai Islamic Cultural Center (ICCS), which was established in 1985. Long after ICCS was established, ICCS rented rooms in buildings or apartments to provide prayer rooms and set up Arabic courses (Nishikawa, Ai 2020). With the increase in the Muslim population and their religious activities, call for a mosque grew. To meet the demand, the Sendai Mosque was built in 2007, with donations from international Muslim students, Japanese converted Muslim and oversea Muslim (Tanada, Okai 2015). The Sendai mosque is located in Hachiman and can accommodate up to about 200 people. It is the first Mosque in the Tohoku region and the home and office of the Islamic Cultural Center of Sendai aka ICCS. As written on the homepage, ICCS was built in order to strengthen relationships among Muslims and help them to maintain their Muslim identity, as well as to promote Islamic culture to non-Muslims in Sendai. Activities including Friday prayers, Quran classes, and the Ramadan Iftar party are conducted there.

(2) TUMCA

Tohoku University Muslim Cultural Association (TUMCA) is a student organization formed by the Muslim students in the university. Founded in April 2006, it aims to show the true face of Islamic culture through several activities that enable Japanese people to get first-hand interaction with Islamic culture (TUMCA 2020).

In addition to organizations like ICCS and TUMCA, whose participants are from different countries, there are also nationality-based organizations. For example, there are the “Sendai Indonesia Muslim Family” (Keluarga Muslim Indonesia di Sendai) organized by Muslims from Indonesia and the “Tohoku
Family” (Keluarga Tohoku) mainly composed of technical interns who come from Indonesia. The two organizations hold both religious and nonreligious activities like Islamic study classes and farewell party for interns who leave Japan (Nishikawa, Ai 2020).

Even though the members and activities of the ICCS, TUMCA and nationality-based organizations vary, there is a huge overlap. As religion-based organizations, they not only play an important role in connecting Muslims and severing as places for religious practices in a non-Muslim society, but also meet the needs of individual group members and play a role in enriching their lives especially in providing opportunities for communication between Muslims and local Japanese. Moreover, as the network hub that connects various organizations and individuals in a non-Muslim society, Sendai mosque plays an important role.

(3) Halal groceries store and Halal restaurant

There are two types of stores that sell Halal food in Sendai, the first kind is grocery stores run by foreign Muslims, and the other is supermarkets or stores selling imported products. As far as I am aware of, as of February 2020, there are only two Halal grocery stores run by foreign Muslims in Sendai.

Halal products are placed in various sections of supermarkets and stores, as they do not have an independent Halal products section as do grocery stores run by Muslims. It is not unusual for Muslims to travel far to buy Halal products. However, since it is difficult for one Muslim to grasp the Halal information all over Sendai, message like “Halal XX is sold at that store” is shared between Muslims. In addition to Halal grocery stores, supermarkets and stores, some Muslim students occasionally buy Halal-certified groceries at online shops.

By contrast, there are 9 restaurants in Sendai that offer Halal-certified meals according to “the Guide for Muslim in Sendai” of which 8 are Indian restaurants and the one is Arabic. In addition, there are a number of restaurants that do not have Halal certification but serve dishes that follow the mainstream definition of Halal. Since these restaurants are not specially set up for Muslims, the menu often includes non-Halal dishes. In other words, there are few places
where some Muslims can choose to eat safely.

5. Findings

Islam governs not only religion in a narrow sense but also the whole social life. The daily life of a Muslim is heavily influenced by the words of Allah and the prophets. In this part I present findings on eating and clothing to illustrate the daily lives of Muslim women living in Sendai.

(1) Iftar party

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam. During Ramadan, the predawn meal is referred to as suhur, and iftar is the evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset, usually at the time of the call to prayer for the evening Maghrib prayer. Ramadan, in Muslim belief, is a blessed, holy month which constitutes a special period of piety that involves much more than just fasting (Schielke 2009: 526).

During the month of Ramadan, Iftar parties are held every Sunday by ICCS. In 2019, Ramadan begun on May 5 and ended on June 3 in the solar calendar, with a total of four parties. Each iftar party can be divided into three parts, in sequential order, iftar, Maghrib prayer, and dinner. As for iftar and dinner, the expense was paid with the donation from Muslims, and every week’s cooking duty is assumed by people from different Muslim countries. The parties in 2019 were to be held in turn by Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Arab Africa and Japan. The first three parties were held in Kitayama civic center and the last one at Sendai mosque. This party is not only for providing iftar to fasting Muslims, but also for offering a chance for non-Muslims to experience Islamic culture.

As one of the few Arab people in Sendai, Shahida voluntarily applied for cooking duty in the fourth “Arab, African and Japanese” party. But since not many Arab and African people were in Sendai, not enough people signed up by a week before the party. After receiving a message that "Everyone is OK, it doesn’t matter whether she/he is a Muslim or not," I also joined the cooking team. In the end, it turned out there were seven voluntary cooks including me, and all of the
cooks were female. The seven people were divided into two groups, and we respectively rented the kitchens at the 1st and the 2nd International House, which are dormitories for international students at Tohoku University. The first team was mainly in charge of Iftar, rice, and salad, and the second team chicken and eggplants.

At International House 2, where I was, there were several Muslim men in the public space who seemed to be in their 20s and 30s. But besides helping with heavy items and putting the food into boxes, most of the time they were just chatting with other people, using their phones, or playing with children. Seeing this Shahida said, “They (men) think it’s women’s job to cook, but in fact they are only being lazy.” “It’s impossible for me to do the cooking alone after I get married.” Shahida’s statement shows that even though her behavior was in line with the expectations on the role of housework that some men have, but she does not fully agree with it. In other words, Muslim men and Muslim women may have different gender perspective.

Despite the fact that most of the participators being Muslims living in Sendai, the languages they speak, the cultures they held and the religious schools
they followed are not all the same. However, the prayer room was not divided by religious sect, but by men and women, which is a practice that most Muslims follow. The party venue was divided into two parts, one for men and one for women. In the women’s room, it was observed that many of the participants came with other Muslim friends. Also many women came with their children.

Since Muslim prayers take place at the time determined by the position of the sun in the sky, fasting time varies greatly depending on where the individual is. During Ramadan, religious authorities usually begin by actually seeing the sun set and then end fasting after the darkness of the sky is confirmed, but prayer time can also be calculated by formula, and one can easily get the timetable just by searching online. ICCS also has published Maghreb's prayer time during the month of Ramadan on its homepage before it started. However, even though Shahida and Imani heard the call for fast breaking and saw some people started eating around them, Shahida doubted “the time is only predication, things might be different in reality.” Having waited for about five minutes then she made the judgement that “the sun has completely fallen” and began eating.

The Iftar Party held by ICCS not only provided iftar and offered a place to conduct religious practices but also served as a place for Muslim women to interact and build relationships with each other and strengthen the Muslim identity. However, some Muslims don’t just follow the words they are told but also make their own judgement.

(2) Dining

As mentioned above, most Japanese are ignorant of Muslim dietary rules, and the number of restaurants that can offer Halal food in Sendai is small. Says Shahida, “it happens more than once when I go to a restaurant and ask the chief, ‘Is this Halal?’, and no one could understand me.” She then have to ask the question differently: "is there any meat or alcohol in this dish?" Some restaurant staff may know that “Muslims don’t eat pork and don’t drink alcohol,” but not serving these things is not enough. Muslims who follow rather strict dining rules need to pay special attention when going to restaurants. To address this situation, as described above, TUMCA issued the Halal Card. Several ingredients and
seasonings that Muslims should pay attention to at the restaurant are written in
Japanese on Halal card.

Users of this card may show it to restaurant staff if they cannot communicate in Japanese or if the staff does not understand what Halal means. As the card says, the staff has to pay attention not only to meat but also to seasonings. because such materials as vinegar, soy sauce, “mirin” or sweet Japanese rice wine, may contain alcohol and animal by-products. In addition, it is desirable that special cooking utensils and dishes are used to avoid contamination. Most of my informants first try to judge by themselves and if they can’t tell whether the food is Halal or not, they ask the cook, but sometimes the cook also cannot tell. Then again, they may call up a customer center. But even though they try hard to avoid these things, many told me that they mistakenly ate non-Halal food without knowing it.

However, the interpretation of Halal in food are different between different sects, not all Muslims have the same idea of the specific content of Halal. The judgment differs among individuals and it also depend on their attitude
towards Islam and the degree of their devotion to Islam (Komura 2019: 188). In addition, individual's attitude towards Halal is not static, but dynamic. People's definition of Halal and the practice they conduct change as the environment changes. In Rahmah’s case, she only went to eat in Halal restaurant when she first came to Japan but then stopped doing so as she lost 5 kilograms in one month. Now she casually eats beef and chicken and only avoid pork. It is OK to consume meat for her as she relies on the interpretation that some Islamic scholars claim “it’s permitted to consume meat if one is driven by necessity” and believes the situation she was facing meet this condition.

Another case is Imani’s. Her attitude about Halal has changed from “it's OK to add alcohol during cooking, since it will evaporate” to “it’s safe to eat 'shari’ or sushi rice with vinegar.” Alcohol doesn’t evaporate from shari. But now she thinks it is OK. In other words, it no longer matters to her if alcohol is still there, because eating sushi does not make her drunk. And it is getting drunk that is prohibited by her faith. Rahmah agrees with Imani on this.

Two years after coming to Japan, Shahida began to doubt her assessment of alcohol and Halal. Shahida's mother once told her, "Even if a drop of liquor falls into a water bottle, it is no longer Halal." Shahida has been following this rule quite strictly and refusing to use any seasonings that contained alcohol. She never pointed this out to other Muslims who followed rather relaxed rules even though their habit was wrong by her standard. However, seeing most of the people around her doing so, Shahida started to doubt: "I remember the story my mother told me, but a lot of people said that it was OK to add a little alcohol during cooking as it will be gone with high temperature. I do not know who is correct." And finally Shahida decided to ask Islamic scholars to get a clear answer after going back to Saudi Arabia.

Because the number of restaurants that can offer Halal meal is small, most of the time Muslim women often buy groceries at Halal groceries stores and prepare their own meals by themselves to avoid eating non-Halal food without knowing it.

The way of dealing with Halal is diverse in reality, and it is often
entrusted to the education received by Muslims and the way they are raised in families (Tanada 2015: 59). But the criteria are not immutable in most cases. Through finding alternative interpretations of sacred texts, Muslim women try to reduce frictions with the alien practices of a non-Muslim society.

(3) Clothing

Clothing also identifies religious groups. The word hijab means “to cover” in Arabic, and although the attire is synonymous with Muslim women, its origins predate Islam (Zahedi 2008). Three Quran verses are often quoted to demonstrate that women should wear a headscarf (Bartkowski and Read, 2003). Although Hijab practices differ across nations, cultures, tribes, religious sects, families, generational cohorts, and other groups (Zwick and Chelariu 2006), as a symbolic object, the hijab is subject to multiple interpretations (Williamson 2014).

Madaah and Amal, who both come from Indonesia, wear the veil in almost the same way. The veil covers most of the chest in a triangular shape and usually they use a needle to hold it in place. Similarly, Shahida and her sisters wear the veil in the same way and their style is different from the Indonesians. They wrap the veil around the face then just leave the sagging cloth on their chest. Algerian Imani’s style, again, is different from others. The veil covers only a little below the neck. Even though all of them know many ways to wear veils, they have their own preference, and sometimes you can tell where they come from just by looking at their veils. Furthermore, they not only wear their veils differently, but also change the color of veil according to the color of their clothes: a beige veil if they are wearing white clothes, a red veil if they are wearing brown clothes, etc. Besides that, all of them individualized their veils to some degree by putting accessories on the veil, which includes not only hairpin head chains but also sunglasses. But some of them repeatedly told me that wearing a veil attracts stares from Japanese passersby and keeps some Japanese away from them.

Japan, however, offers new opportunities to Muslim women as well. When Shahida was in Saudi Arabia, she went out usually wearing a burka, which completely covers her body from the top to the bottom. She did so because her father preferred that and she also felt comfortable that way. But since she came
to Japan, Shahida has stopped wearing burka and instead wears common clothes within the limits of the mainstream Islamic law. Walking on the street in Sendai and seeing girl wearing a veil, Shahida would smile at them. Sometimes passing male Muslims would also say "Salam" to her. When Shahida came to Japan for the first time, an Egyptian girl came to talk to her just because she saw her wearing a veil, which meant to the girl that Shahida was a Muslim. Shahida thus made her first friend in Japan. Such an incidence is unlikely in Muslim-majority societies. Because there are so few of them, a natural affinity exists between Muslim women.

Rahmah chose a rather direct way. She wears veil in her home country Morocco to respect the culture, but does not wear it abroad and claims there is no direct connection between veiling and devoutness, as the following quote illustrates:

“I'm not wearing veil because I'm overseas. Doing so allows me to avoid racism and to integrate myself more easily into a non-Muslim society. (...) Another reason is that I think that one need to be pious enough and a great person to wear veil and I might consider wearing it when I think that I am religiously mature enough.”

Rahmah’s narrative shows that Muslim identity means a lot to her, and she sees veil as a symbol of devoutness to Allah. But still, she is postponing wearing it. This dilemma fits into a context where two values clash with each other. Since not wearing a veil is a more accepted practice in Japan and people know little about Islam in Sendai, Rahmah found wearing a veil interfering with her daily life, and she choose to take it off. By doing so people didn't know she was a Muslim until she told them and she feels more at ease to integrate into Japanese society this way. The fatwa claiming “Muslim women can take off their hijab if it becomes a reason of harassment” also helps Rahmah justify her behavior.

Rather than an either-or phenomenon, hijab micropractices are
multifarious and range on a continuum that engenders considerable flexibility (Harkness 2018: 84). As a clear and well-known symbol of Muslim women, the veil as a proof of their Islamic faith gains even greater significance among Muslim community in non-Islamic societies, Muslim women see the veil as a symbol of “the same kind.” In non-Muslim society, the veil generates affinity between the Muslims especially when the population is small. Which give opportunities to recognize “the same kind” easily among Muslims but at the same time also easily recognized as “foreign” to Japanese.

6. Discussion

I argue Muslim women in Sendai acquire their agency at the crossroads of religion, gender and community regulation in the context of being in a non-Muslim society. And they show their agency in various aspects of their lives not only when they face ignorance and resistance. Furthermore, their conducts are not like the resistance against Western imperialism, global capitalism, commodification of women’s bodies or post-9/11 Islamophobia that most of the studies on agency indicate (Bilge 2010). The difficulties Muslim women need to deal with and the resistance they face in Sendai are not such macro issues but rather micro ones.

(1) Religion

Despite being in a non-Muslim society, faith and religious practices are important markers of Muslim women’s agency. In light of the continuing rarity of Muslim-friendly facilities and Muslim population, Muslims usually find it difficult to live in Japan in a “Halal” way. Although associations that support lives of Muslim in Sendai have been trying to provide opportunities for Muslim and Japanese to communicate, the result seems rather limited and the extent of the communication also relies heavily on personal judgment. To deal with the conflicts caused by religious doctrine and the secular context, some choose to loosen the rules of clothing and by relaxing the limits of Halal to adapt to life in Japanese society. It provides opportunities for Muslim women to exercise their
agency through the process of choosing, which sometimes is stretched within the religious limitation.

(2) **Gender**

Gender and Islam are closely combined as Islam is one of a gender-traditional religions (Burke 2012). Based on gender, Muslim women are required to conduct religious practice differently from men. Veiling is a good example, being in Sendai, Muslim women clearly distinguish themselves from people in the host society by wearing a veil, which sometimes attracts unnecessary attention and causes other inconveniences to their daily lives. Therefore, some chose to change the religious practices they practiced in their home countries, Rahmah reinterprets the mainstream Islamic teaching to justify her choice she makes so that she can more easily integrate into a non-Muslim society. In Shahida’s case, it can be seen that some Muslim women do not share the gender norms that some men have, or gender norms Muslim women believe that Muslim men have. It also illustrates that one’s motivation is not necessarily in line with the ideology.

(3) **Community Regulation**

Muslim women acquire agency through the process of all kinds of negotiation in non-Muslim city Sendai, but their actions are also structurally constrained by their gender socialization and by patriarchal processes. The conception of Halal that Shahida has been conditioned by her mother, and her dress code is also constricted by what her father told her. Their ideas of beauty may also be constrained not only by doctrinal teaching but also by mainstream Islamic beauty standards in which their family or their community believes. So are the choices about dining and other behavior. But sometimes Muslim women also express ideas that more or less contradict their community regulation, which is also a sign that Muslim women find some room to exercise their agency.

7. **Conclusion**

This article has explored how Muslim women negotiate with their
surroundings in a non-Muslim society in their dealing with daily dining and clothing. Many women in this study aspire to earn college degrees and build careers, but maintaining a Muslim identity seems equally important to them. Being a Muslim woman itself is neither empowered or victimized, liberated or subordinated but the environment that they are and different choice they make affect them. Religion and gendered practices isolate Muslim individuals from Japanese to some extent, but at the same time they enhance their Muslim identity and strengthens the tie among Muslim community. As the situation in Japan is very different from that of the western nations, the discourse over Muslim in western countries may not apply to the Muslim women in Japan. Even though prejudice against Muslims also exists in Japan but it is far weaker than so-called Islamophobia in the West. Nevertheless, it is these micro-dimension resistance in a non-Muslim society that assist Muslim woman to get agency, and it is clear that there are more than one way that one can exercise its agency. My findings about Muslim women’s agency in Sendai may be similar to the “resistance agency” found by Avishai (2008) and Burke (2013) in some respects. However, the political and social environment of Sendai is different and it seems to empower Muslim women in a different way too. But we should always aware not to take for granted the meaning of agency as one that is fixed or universal. This article hopefully showed a unique context in which Muslim women acquire and exercise their agency.

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