

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

## My Hijab Covers My Mane, Not My Mind: Challenges Facing South African Muslim Women Academics

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Received: 23 October 2023 | Revised: 14 February 2024 | Published: 27 February 2024

Reviewing Editor: Dr. Grace Temiloluwa Agbede, Durban University of Technology

### Abstract

Muslim women in South Africa constitute 1.6% of the population, yet they have and continue to contribute significantly to the economy, pursue political freedom and rise to the upper echelons of academia. Research reveals that the identity of South African Muslim women centres on Islamic principles, such as modesty and dietary requirements, and cultural roles, such as being a mother and a homemaker. Despite Muslim women being more visible through media in recent years, literature shows that many remain marginalised, misunderstood, and often discriminated against for not subscribing to the dominant culture of the Western workplace. The study explores the challenges Muslim women academics face in South African higher education institutions when fulfilling their professional roles while maintaining Islamic and cultural obligations. Viewed through the lens of social identity theory, the study provides insight into the lived experiences of seven Muslim women academics and how they navigate the often-exclusionary spaces of academia. It will also provide practical solutions which may mitigate marginalisation and promote inclusivity within the South African academic landscape.

**Keywords:** academia; exclusion; Muslim; social identity; women

### Introduction

The world of academia remains largely gendered, despite the increase of women academics (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010; Fotaki, 2013; Shober, 2014; Letsebe, 2022). The gendered hierarchy, particularly in South Africa, continues to see more men fill research-intensive senior roles while women often occupy junior positions with larger teaching loads. Seedat-Khan *et al.* (2022) argue that the physical and emotional burdens placed on women academics during the COVID-19 pandemic only worsened the pressure placed on them to publish and maintain their productivity outputs. The gendered hierarchy within the academy and the expectations placed on women who perform the "double shift" (Sader *et al.*, 2005: 65) of working as academics and then working in the home as mothers, wives, cooks, cleaners, and primary caregivers and child-rearers in patriarchal homes, is often overlooked. This is particularly pertinent for Muslim women academics, a visible minority in higher education. Within South Africa, a predominantly Christian country with a legacy of segregation (Daniels and Dasoo, 2012), the paper seeks to uncover the challenges Muslim women academics face as they navigate the gendered higher education landscape, their Islamic identities, and familial and religious obligations. It will outline the nuances of academia and the nature of Islam and Muslims in South Africa, paying attention to the Muslim woman's role and identity markers. Based on the social identity theory, the findings show that Muslim academics face challenges at tertiary institutions surrounding Halaal food, wearing the hijab, finding space, and the weight of expectations from Muslim society. Social identity theory will be used to understand these phenomena.

The chasm between male and women academics has been well-researched. Roles, remuneration, research grant opportunities, respect and "unspoken rules," ensure men remain in positions of seniority within higher education institutions (Fotaki, 2013: 1253-1255). As Odejide (2007: 42) asserts, "women and men experience higher education differently." This is due to various operations of power at work and opportunities for research and growth,

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which are largely available to men (Lindqvist, *et al.*, 2021). Over the last 16 years, the number of women in academia has increased in South Africa. Between 2005 and 2020, the proportion of women academics grew from 44.1% to 49% in the country (Letsebe, 2022). However, their research outputs remained low (12-14% lower than their proportional headcount), indicating that these women are concentrated in junior positions rather than more senior, research-intensive posts (Letsebe, 2022). As Shober (2014) shows, this trend is mirrored across the world, with women academics receiving less funding, remuneration and opportunities to publish as opposed to their male counterparts. In an extensive study conducted by Wilson (2012), which analysed 400 years of Journal Storage (JSTOR) articles, the findings confirmed that only 22% of authors were women. While the number of women authors has risen in recent years, submissions and publications by women authors are still minimal. Statistics almost a decade later (Krebsbach, 2022) confirm similar trends in women authorship. Muflichah (2020) notes that output is particularly low for Muslim women academics in Indonesia. This was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw women academics having to shift their lectures online, while supervising the online schooling of their children, taking care of sick family members, and still fulfilling chores (Seedat-Khan *et al.*, 2022). This is in line with the "double shift" (Sader *et al.*, 2005: 65), which women must fulfil as she needs to complete their work at university and then fulfil their responsibilities as a wife and mother.

Ramnund-Mansingh and Seedat-Khan (2020) highlight how the 'old boys networks,' comprised of older male alumni occupying places in exclusive clubs, reproduce masculine-dominated hierarchies in tertiary institutions. As a form of in-group/ outgroup behaviour, this type of academic bullying is reinforced through events which exclude women. This is also executed using language or insinuations. For example, men are often addressed by their title, such as 'Dr.' or 'Professor,' while women academics are addressed by their first names (Scala, 2005). Shober's (2014) study found that to be accepted as figures of authority in academia; women academics must avoid being too emotional, work beyond teaching hours and find ways to enter male spaces like bars where many business discussions are held. This is due to the age-old belief that parenting is fundamentally female and pursuing a career as fundamentally male (Achour and Boerhannoeddin, 2011: 80). As Fotaki (2013) argues, there is a "masculine symbolic order" at universities and the women body is "unwanted," and thus made to feel unimportant and invisible. These financial, emotional, and psychological stressors and constant marginalisation result in reduced output and many resignations from women academics (Achour and Boerhannoeddin, 2011; Shober, 2014).

### **South African Muslim Women in Academia**

Muslims have existed in South Africa for over three centuries (Vahed, 2007; Morton, 2022). As indentured labourers, many travelled from India and Eastern Indonesia to South Africa the 1800s with the promise of a better life. Based on the racial categorisations of apartheid and subsequent geographic segregations, many Muslims, Hindus, Tamil and Telegu were categorised as Indian (those who arrived from India and settled mainly in KwaZulu-Natal) and Coloured or 'Malay' (those who were mixed race or arrived from East Indonesia and settled primarily in Cape Town). Thus, South African Muslims are divided by language, race, class, and culture and may have different experiences of being Muslim. Nevertheless, Muslim activists and politicians were key in the struggle against apartheid and, since democracy in 1994, continue to play a role in the fight for equality (Baderoon, 2014). Economically, despite comprising 1.6% of the population, Muslims contributed 10% of South Africa's GDP in 2020 (Isilow, 2018). There has also been a visible increase in Islamic events, Sharia (Shariah refers to laws derived from the Qur'aan and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s teachings) banking (Saini *et al.*, 2011), the demand for Halaal goods and Islamic entertainment. However, due to the similar markers of "Muslimness", such as the beard, hijab, Halaal food, and their portrayal in the media, Muslims are often referred to as a homogenous group, with the hijab being a symbol of "radical otherness" (Meer *et al.*, 2010).

Yet, as Vahed (2007) notes, race, class, and dialect denote the boundaries around and within Muslims in South Africa. Daniels and Dasoo (2012) posit that Muslims in South Africa are in a double bind: religion separates them from other minorities, while their race excludes them from the dominant groups in higher education institutions. Due to world events and media coverage, Muslim women are portrayed as oppressed or forced into wearing the hijab (Daniels and Dasoo 2012: 191). So, it is implied that Muslim women lack independence, freedom, or education. As a minority with the visible marker of the hijab, Dasoo and Daniels (2012: 192) state that Muslim women tend to stand out and don't blend in as easily as men do on campus. The gendered hierarchy of higher education institutions isolates Muslims women academics further. As authors note (Daniels and Dasoo, 2012; Arifeen, 2020), food and alcohol are an integral part of academic networking, yet professional Muslim women are either excluded from events or must persuade themselves into attending so as not to miss out on the networking

opportunity. Arifeen (2020: 646-648) explains that "happy hours" involving alcohol consumption are the norm in certain work-related social events, and as such, they are legitimised. Often, meetings are set during lunch or free periods in the middle of the day without considering Muslims, who need to fulfil their midday prayers (Ponnadu, 2022; Carrim, 2017). Various interactions, such as shaking male colleague's hands, using the communal kitchen, and travelling to conferences, pose specific challenges of varying degrees to Muslim women academics who are concerned with the Islamic guidelines around travelling alone, interacting with men, or sharing utensils which may have come into contact with haram (unlawful) food. These intricacies are often overlooked when organisations and universities implement policies and practices which suit the dominant culture. There is a failure to recognise diversity and differences, which reproduce the inequalities of the tertiary institution (DiTomaso *et al.*, 2007).

Despite the heterogeneity of Muslims, most remain committed to upholding the five pillars of Islam. Sayyid (1997) and Ramadan (2003), cited in Ramadan (2017: 26), aptly note, "there is one Islam...fixed fundamental principles, and these are clothed in the diverse forms of culture in which Muslims exist." This is upheld by the five pillars of Islam, which is the cornerstone of being a believer. These five pillars include the kalima (profession of faith), salaah (the five prayers a day), fasting (abstaining from food and water from dawn to dusk during the month of Ramadaan, zakaat (giving charity) and Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca). Further to this is adhering to the Qur'an as a guide to living one's life and ensuring one behaves ethically and modestly. This includes abstaining from drinking alcohol and pork, engaging in sexual relations before marriage, dressing modestly and ensuring one rear pious and respectable children (Severson, 2011). Tajfel and Turner (2004) posit that value systems engrained in religion and culture influence the personal identity of an individual, such as personal taste, beliefs, fashion, and food. In the case of Muslim women in South Africa, degrees of modesty and steering clear of prohibited foods would be an example of that dynamic. As a rather community-centred religion upheld by the five pillars, symbolised by congregational prayers at the mosque, and tied together through an Arabic Qur'an and daily Arabic vocabulary, there is a sisterhood between Muslim women. An identity marker such as the hijab implies a myriad of shared understandings, common values, beliefs, and, ultimately, belonging, despite some cultural diversities discussed earlier. Spaces such as the jamaat khana (prayer room for ladies) become facilitators for community identity while simultaneously exerting boundaries of exclusivity, which may differentiate between the dominant culture and the "other."

To communicate one's identity in a professional environment, however, requires one to contemplate how one chooses to express one's identity. In this case, to transcend the "otherness," women and particularly Muslim women, often engage in identity work, a fundamental tenet of social identity theory, to position themselves and project an identity that is acceptable to their peers, but which enables some autonomy (Ibarra, 2004; Palitsky *et al.*, 2020). Muslim women in academia will adapt as much as possible to conform to their peers until it imposes on their beliefs. This is conveyed through dressing, visibility, or consumption choices as well. Similarly, as Ramadan (2017) notes, some Muslim women wear the hijab at family gatherings to reinforce their communal identity but choose not to wear it at work to perform an identity that may seem more in line with the dominant culture. Some Muslim women academics settle for the vegetarian option not to appear 'difficult' and ask for strictly Halaal food (Daniels and Dasoo, 2012; Aziz and Ahmad, 2018). Thus, it is imperative to understand how the Muslim woman academic expresses, performs or limits her identity within the predominantly masculine, Christian landscape of higher education (Aumeerally, 2017).

## Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative nature which centered on the experiences of Muslim women academics. Phenomenological in design, the study aimed to collect descriptive, rich data which would yield an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences. As there is no list of Muslim women academics, the researcher adopted the snowball sampling method to find participants. Based on the criteria for selection, which included a) identifying as a Muslim woman, b) having completed their master's degree and c) being employed at a higher education institution in South Africa for over a year, seven participants were selected. An hour-long semi-structured interview was undertaken online as participants resided across South Africa. Ruslin *et al.* (2022) note that the semi-structured interview is one of the most powerful and reliable modes of investigation as the participant feels free to share their experiences in a conversation-like manner. These interviews were transcribed and subsequently analysed, according to Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2023) six-step thematic analysis method. This 'recipe' ensures themes (patterned responses which are relevant to the research questions) are categorised and analysed in a theoretically and methodologically sound way (Braun and Clarke 2006, 77- 81). The analysis was data-driven and

inductive, such that four themes emerged. All participants' names were changed (pseudonyms) in line with ethical considerations to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. To understand the context of the participants' work and home life, the researcher tabulated each participant's location, workspace and marital status or number of children in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Details of participants

Name	Location	Workspace	Marital status/ children
Ayesha	Gauteng	Own office	Single
Laila	Gauteng	Own office	Married, three children
Ruqayya	KwaZulu Natal	Own office	Married, two children
Shakira	KwaZulu Natal	Open plan	Married, one child
Firdaus	Gauteng	Own office	Married, two children
Amina	Gauteng	Own office	Single
Rehana	KwaZulu-Natal	Open plan	Married, two children

## Findings and Discussion

### *Understanding Halaal*

The consumption of halaal food is obligatory for all Muslims. Forbidden for Muslims is the ingestion of pork, alcohol and their byproducts, and food that has been obtained via unlawful means. To ensure the Halaal status of a product, accreditation bodies such as the South African National Halaal Association (SANHA) and National Independent Halaal Trust (NIHT) attach their logos to products or food outlets which they have inspected and deemed Halaal. Many South African Muslims, therefore, will only consume products that hold these logos. For the participants interviewed, the importance of Halaal was largely misunderstood at their higher education institutions. Lists of vendors for work functions rarely include Halaal vendors, so many participants opt for vegetarian meals.

In some cases, if the head of the department is Muslim, then it is easier to include more Halaal options in the vendor list. As Firdaus points out, having a Muslim woman in a position of authority in her faculty has made access to Halaal food easier in recent months. Nevertheless, Ayesha notes that Halaal is still a "foreign" concept, especially in Johannesburg and Pretoria:

"It (Halaal) is often overlooked, and I get a small side plate of something. Frequently, I have to tell them to just see to it that there are vegetarian options."

Further, the cross-contamination of Halaal with haraam food is still misunderstood. Utensils handling Halaal food must be separate from others to ensure Halaal food is not contaminated by particles from haram food. Laila narrated the following incident, which depicts the ignorance around Halaal food:

"We had a year-end function and I had specifically indicated that I wanted Halaal food. I was exhausted but I decided to go because I thought they had catered for me. But then I got there, there were all these bain-maries and I said, "but I am Halaal... I'm looking for Halaal." The waiter just scooped out a piece of fish for me with the same spoon he was using for all the other food...and I said, "how does that make this Halaal?" So now I asked for strictly Halaal food during the registration period and it comes in a Halaal box with packaging and the logo on it. It's delicious."

For some, receiving the Halaal box may cause some awkwardness as it is viewed as "other" than the norm, or it may arrive before others' meals do. Year-end functions where there is alcohol, music and dancing do pose moral dilemmas to Muslim academics:

"I would like to decline invitations to these events, but then I don't want them to feel like I don't support them, or I am being difficult," said Rehana.

This substantiates Arifeen's (2020) argument that Muslim women academics must emotionally prepare themselves to attend these events in order to network or downplay their otherness.



### **Degrees of Hijab**

Modesty is a vital element of Muslim women's identity (Dawood, 2011), and thus it was followed in various ways among participants. Participants varied in their degrees of modesty, from those who wore the full covering of the face (niqab) to those who wore a hijab with their tops and pants to those who did not cover their hair yet wore modest clothing. This is not to indicate their religiosity by any means but rather to convey their choice of wearing what they deem comfortable. Most of the participants who wore the hijab were asked by colleagues if their husbands insisted they wear it or if it was a ruling from Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). In their opinion, hijab is equated to marriage or a ruling by men rather than an instruction from God to protect a woman's modesty or a woman's choice. Sometimes, participants were asked by their co-workers about why some Muslim women wore the scarf and others did not, but these questions came from a sincere curiosity rather than an accusatory tone. In fact, two participants mentioned that they were complimented on their hijabs and abayas, especially during COVID-19, when they managed to match their masks to their hijabs and clothing:

Shakira elaborates:

"Once I wore a black and pink floral abaya with a matching hijab and my colleague said 'Oh my word, you look beautiful! I never thought I would find this beautiful but the way you put it together...stunning.'"

Ruqayya, who wears the niqab (full face covering), however, faced difficulty. Despite being a figure of authority in the department for many years, she is still harassed by the campus guards:

"They give me lots of problems. I have been here for many years. I have a staff parking disc; my staff card opens the boom gate, but I am always stopped. Now when they stop me, I ask them "please can I have your manager's number and your badge number?" and then they leave me alone."

These experiences can be linked to intergroup comparisons within social identity theory (Hornsey, 2008; Charness and Chen 2020) or stereotypes held by the guards of women in niqab. She explains that at academic functions, she must be enthusiastic and funny (an example of identity work) and always introduce herself first, as people tend not to approach women who wear niqab. Conversely, delegates flocked to her presentation at a conference in the United States to "hear what this Muslim has to say." She inspired Muslim students who looked like her and was invited to pray and eat with them. In this way, being Muslim symbolised her belonging or in-group identity. The participants agreed that there is a shared understanding of sisterhood between Muslim women, which does link Muslim women academics who all experience similar levels of 'othering' in higher education institutions.

### **Making space for Muslims**

Praying five times a day usually means one or two prayers must be completed during the working day for many Muslims. It is imperative that the believer performs wudu (ablution) in a clean place and then carries out their salaah (prayer) on a prayer mat. Many participants were able to complete their prayers in their private offices. However, those who worked in an open-plan setting had to find a space to pray, such as the corner of the library or an empty meeting room. They had to make ablutions in the bathroom for the differently abled, which were not always clean. In these ways, fulfilling one's religious obligations is met with some difficulty. Firdaus mentions that her co-workers do not understand that prayers are at set times and were often asked why Muslim students cannot do all their prayers in the morning to avoid disrupting the day. As cleanliness is a vital part of Islam, Muslims must cleanse themselves with water after relieving themselves in the toilet. Most of the participants carried bottles of water to and from the bathroom to fulfil this aspect of the religion, but for the two participants who asked for a jug to be kept in one of the bathroom stalls, this was seen by Hindu colleagues as an inconvenience.

Making space extends to accommodating various faiths in the curriculum and academic calendar. Jummu'ah (midday Friday prayers), Ramadaan (the month of fasting), Eid-ul-Fitr (which celebrates the end of Ramadaan) and Eid-ul-Adha (which commemorates the Hajj pilgrimage) arose as the key factors which need to be accommodated by higher education institutions. Those working in open-plan offices, like Rehana, related that the proximity to their colleagues allows for some discussion around fasting, but sometimes it is difficult when those around her are eating. Nevertheless, Rehana preferred working in the open plan office as it allowed her and her co-workers to understand each other's cultures. There are many instances where staff meetings are held on

Fridays at midday as it is regarded as a 'free period' for many university staff. Ruqayya is adamant about not missing her Jummuah prayers, and if there is a meeting scheduled, she offers to record her contribution and sent it to the organiser. These practices become more exclusionary over time as marginalised become legitimised (Shen and Dumani, 2015), and as Laila mentions, perhaps there is room for more communication in this regard.

### **Emotions and expectations**

The emotional challenges placed on the shoulders of Muslim women academics are two-fold. Firstly, as the literature illustrates, women often work harder than their male counterparts. Secondly, the reverence for motherhood and homemaking in Islam and South African Muslim culture places much responsibility on Muslim women academics (Daniels and Dasoo 2012). In this way, the communal or in-group identity is reinforced by the communal nature of Islam and the cultural expectation of Indian Muslim women.

In the higher education context, some participants were aware that there was a subtle, yet significant division of work based on gender. As Ayesha states:

"... it's taken for granted that there are certain departmental functions and tasks that you are best suited for. For example, women are told to serve on the teaching and learning committees as opposed to the research committee."

This is reflected in Muflichah's (2020) study, which showed that Muslim women academics experience more barriers than their male colleagues and are often pushed into teaching-intensive positions, leaving little room for research. Consequently, this impacts the productivity and number of outputs by women academics. This proves increasingly difficult when these academics are mothers. Laila shares that her passion for her career was questioned by her supervisor when she missed a conference to attend her youngest son's first day of school. Ruqayya relates to this, mentioning that during COVID-19, her productivity dropped due to her home responsibilities. Based on this, her male colleague who did not have these responsibilities was promoted. One of the most common feelings the participants shared was mom's guilt. Islamically, the role of the mother is revered such that children have rights over their parents. In turn, it is said that Jannah (heaven) lies under the feet of the mother. Being present as a mother, a homemaker, a wife, and a nourisher is critical to the identity of the Muslim woman (Dawood, 2011).

Most of the participants with children had responsibilities that included cooking dinner and making lunch, taking their children to extra-curricular activities, ensuring homework and prayers were done, bathing them, and putting them to sleep. Laila lamented that this is exhausting, particularly during Ramadaan, when she needs to prepare the sehri (pre-dawn meal) for her extended family as they live in a patriarchal home. Three participants shared that they sometimes take their laptops along to their children's extra-curricular activities to attend late meetings and then continue to work after their children have gone to bed. Similarly, when COVID-19 imposed the shift from face-to-face to online classes, Ruqayya stated that she used to record her lectures at 2 am when her home was quiet, and the upload speeds were better. She also had to supervise her own children's online schooling. In most cases, the participants' husband's work took precedence over their own.

"We had three bedrooms at the time; we slept in two and one was a study. My husband took the study and I used the bedroom. It was like I slept and worked in the same space. There were no helpers allowed into the complex. I couldn't cope so I reached out to my university's counsellor because I felt like I was going to have a panic attack or die or something." (Firdaus)

"I had an outburst once," Laila shares. "I said 'how is it that so much has changed, but I still need to maintain everything, I still need to manage everything with regards to the kids? I still need to do everything on top of my job?' I think made my husband realise that maybe she needs some sort of help here. Now he does all the transporting of the kids so that has been a great help."

On the other hand, Shakira and Rehana, felt fully supported by their husbands and all participants who had children leant on their mothers, extended family, and domestic workers for help after school or when they were on conference. The extended family arose as a support structure for Muslim women academics as this ensured their children were still raised Islamically while at work. Three participants lamented that academia does not care about how many children one has; rather, it is more suited to those without children as teaching loads are intensive and

the pressure to publish is immense. Contrary to this, marrying and having children is central to a Muslim's life to fulfil their duties and expand the ummah (Islamic nation).

For working mothers, outsourcing childcare or cooking becomes increasingly common. Yet as Muslim women, homecooked meals and rearing children are integral to identity. Still, in the Muslim community, being able to provide a spread for Eid day or iftar is expected of the Muslim wife and mother.

"I don't think anyone understands what a PhD means,' Laila says, 'for them the weighting is still on how many types of savouries you make, what types of cakes you make and how pretty it all looks."

The participants shared that their academic accomplishments did not yield as much approval as getting married, having children, and cooking. In fact, their elders warned many of them not to "study too much," or they would be "too clever" and would not find a husband. A Muslim woman's ambition must not trump her purpose as a wife, mother, and homemaker. In this way, the communal identity can be stifling at times. Shakira felt like while the hijab allows her to go out confidently or lecture students, having only one child or ordering food for Ramadaan was looked down upon:

'I think sometimes people see my hijab and they assume I am a mom or a cook, and then they are shocked that I have a doctorate...like I cannot be open minded or very educated because my hair is covered.'

Elders in the Muslim community voiced concerns to many participants that travelling to the conference was also not something a Muslim woman should do. However, participants mentioned that they travelled with colleagues when they could, but they did feel the uneasiness of being so distanced from the practicalities of being mom and wife and ultimately having to choose between fulfilling their Islamic obligations or pursuing their careers.

## Conclusion

The findings suggest some practical solutions that could mitigate the key challenges Muslim women academics face in the higher education milieu. Some aspects which could be addressed presently include a) increasing the number of certified Halaal vendors associated with the tertiary institution, b) ensuring no meetings take place at the Friday prayer time, c) securing Muslim-friendly ablution facilities and d) encouraging more publications from Muslim authors in spaces with broader audiences to stimulate understanding and conversation. In the long term, diversity workshops or committees could be created to discuss these intricacies that academics face daily and work together to create a multicultural learning environment. Participants indicated that a warmer attitude towards children and perhaps on-campus childcare would offer much relief to mothers. Based on this in-depth study, it is evident that Muslim women academics experience the pressure of Islamic and cultural obligations and the burdens of being part of the gendered and racial minorities in the tertiary education environment. Through identity work, the women Muslim academic in South Africa navigate aspects of Halaal, workspace, hijab, and everyday interactions, which are part of her work to progress in her career while still maintaining her Islamic identity. Despite the often-exclusionary landscape of academia, she perseveres, reaching positions of authority and paving the way for her sisters to follow.

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