

A qualitative study exploring the experiences of Muslim women in the South African workplace

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Orientation: More Muslim women are entering the labour market, and this requires an understanding of the cultural and social contexts as there may be challenges inhibiting their growth and advancement.

Research purpose: The purpose of this article is threefold: (1) to explore the perceptions of Muslim women relating to career success; (2) to identify the challenges facing Muslim women and (3) to describe the organisational culture as experienced by Muslim women in the South African workplace.

Motivation for the study: Literature often focusses on the challenges women face in general, yet little examines the challenges experienced by Muslim women in the work context. This article seeks to identify whether the challenges experienced are similar or whether specific interventions are required to ensure the career success of Muslim women.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative research design was employed using open-ended questions in an online survey as the data collection tool. Data were collected from 88 Muslim women across industries, professions and provinces within South Africa.

Main findings: Experiences of success focus on happiness, contentment and growth, whereas perceptions of success in the organisation are objective and include promotion, financial gain and status. The key challenges can include a lack of resources and support; however, respondents reported mostly a positive organisational culture supporting career and personal aspirations.

Practical/managerial implications: Enhancing cross-cultural awareness and understanding contributes to the experienced career success of Muslim women.

Contribution/value-add: The findings propose interventions to advance the career, wellness and overall experiences of Muslim women.

Keywords: Muslim women; South Africa; lived experiences; challenges; cross-cultural awareness.

Introduction

Women in Islam have been subjected to stereotyping, misconceptions and biases, thus contributing to the perception of gender inequality. The introduction of Islamic law afforded Muslim women the right to own property, inherit, and pursue education and employment (Qur'an: Al-Baqarah, 1934). Women were encouraged to work and earn a living, as seen in the example of Khadija (RA), the Prophet's (SAW) wife, who was a successful businesswoman (Jussawalla & Omran, 2022). Historical examples further show Muslim women engaged in various industries, including textile, medicine and business (Jussawalla & Omran, 2022; Marican et al., 2011). Aisha (RA), the third wife of the Prophet (SAW), was recognised for her significant contributions to religion, politics and education, and as a result, continued to serve the Muslim community for 44 years after the passing of the Prophet (SAW) (Noman, 2023).

Despite these examples and many others, the media portrays Muslim women as oppressed, veiled and submissive (Jeffery & Qureshi, 2022; Jussawalla & Omran, 2022; Mahmood, 2005; Navarro, 2010). These assertions contradict Islamic teachings, which emphasise gender equality and women's empowerment (Qur'an, Al-Nisaa, 1934). It is essential to address these misconceptions, and thereby promote gender equality and correct stereotypes.

The purpose of this article is to examine the lived experiences of Muslim women considering the unique cultural and social contexts that these women encounter in their personal and professional lives. The sub-objectives of this article are to:

1. Explore the perceptions of Muslim women regarding success.
2. Explore the challenges experienced by Muslim women in the work context.
3. Describing the organisational culture as experienced by Muslim women.

Main objective

The primary research objective of this article is to explore the experiences of Muslim women in the South African workplace.

Literature review

Women, equality and work

Globally, the economic participation of women currently stands at 55% (World Bank, 2022). Gender equality was measured in 190 countries using a variety of items ranging from marriage to pay (World Bank, 2022). Based on the key findings, in 86 of the countries, women faced various job and legal restrictions. Further to this, 33 of the countries attempted to bridge the gender equality gap by amending their legislation and regulations to be inclusive of women (Agherdien, 2023; World Bank, 2022). The Middle East, North and sub-Saharan Africa showed the greatest improvement; however, it is important to note that this could be because of the restrictions previously placed on women.

Gender inequality is based on marked interpretations of true religion and lower social and economic growth (Dangor, 2001, in Agherdien, 2023). Even so, in Islamic history, leading Muslim women participated in politics, education and government (Dangor, 2001; Jussawalla & Omran, 2022). Despite this, Muslim women remain negatively portrayed. Fifty South African Muslim women were interviewed, regarding Islamic notions from inheritance to education. According to the respondents, Islam promotes equality, but Muslim societies do not treat Muslim women equally (Dangor, 2001). Four of the respondents believed that women should be at home; however, the majority of women disagreed as 'working' provides a sense of identity and empowerment. In addition to the above, barriers to equality such as culture, legal frameworks, a lack of educational and professional opportunities, a lack of religious freedom, racism and societal perceptions were highlighted (Dangor, 2001 in Agherdien, 2023).

Jaiyeola (2020) highlights a patriarchal culture as a key driver of gender disparity. This study is positioned in South Africa; it is advisable to note how South Africa rates against Hofstede's Model (2011). The application of Hofstede's Model (2011) to South Africa asserts that white South Africans have a power distance score of 49 suggesting a significant acceptance of hierarchy. This recognition of unequal power distribution contributes to a patriarchal culture, which is a significant factor in the gender disparity in South Africa. Patriarchal cultures, often influenced by historical factors like colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa, contribute to the marginalisation of women. These

beliefs influence society's views on the roles of men and women, enabling the disparity between genders in modern society. Women in general and particularly in South Africa are marginalised, which contributes to their career choices and positions held in an organisation (Nomvele, 2021). Furthermore, patriarchal beliefs are linked to gender inequality, placing women, specifically Muslim women at a disadvantage in their personal and professional lives.

Career success: Challenges and successes

Career success is the driving force that motivates individuals to succeed, including, but not limited to, beliefs, attitudes and values. Additionally, career success includes objective and subjective aspects (Harry et al., 2019). Objective career success encompasses salary, status and promotions, while subjective career success encompasses the feeling of satisfaction within one's career (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Chinyamurindi, 2016; Smale et al., 2019; Spurk et al., 2019; Tlaiss, 2019).

Recently, career success has shifted to a subjective view characterised by the fact that people have different feelings, values and beliefs, about and towards success (Tlaiss, 2019). Metelski (2019) states that career success provides individuals with a sense of identity, meaning and work-life balance. Subjective career success is the reaction an individual has towards their career experience (Chauhan et al., 2022).

Success is measured by comparing individuals in similar positions or industries. Career success, then, is influenced by the belief individuals have in themselves, based on their own idea of success.

Traditional gender roles are important in describing the gender gap in relation to success (Evers & Sieverding, 2014). Additionally, Dicke et al. (2019) concur and conclude that gender-specific beliefs influence educational and professional outcomes. The above becomes an enabler, reflected in the social identities, future roles and goals of gender disparity.

In reality, educated individuals, regardless of gender, obtain career success. As with education, personality plays a role in whether an employee will experience career success. Genetic traits are often associated with career success Hentshel et al, 2019, such as assertiveness and competitiveness considered masculine traits, and associated with males (Bullough et al., 2022). Pullen and Vachhani (2018) explain that women thus experience pressure to conform. Women are consequently required to possess the confidence, competence and assertiveness to succeed (Agherdien, 2023).

An action plan to address challenges related to gender disparity, prejudice and transformation is essential in South African workplaces (Van der Walt et al., 2016). The SABPP Report (Bosch, 2017) highlights additional challenges faced by women, including both internal and external challenges. These include, but are not limited to, 'a lack of educational opportunities, traditional and religious practices, stereotyping

and organisational culture, women not being assertive (an internal barrier), gender bias, occupational and cultural jealousy, society ...' contributing to the declining number of representation and participation of women in the workplace (Bosch, 2017; Harcar, 2017; Van der Walt et al., 2016).

Arifeen and Gatrell (2019) and the Muslim Council of Britain Report (2015) highlight challenges to the career progression and success of Muslim women which include age and religious values, gender discrimination and wearing of the headscarf. Carrim (2017), in his South African study, identified further barriers including discrimination (wearing of the headscarf), the 'old boys club', networking and dietary requirements. Ali (2019) identified similar experiences to the career advancement and success of Muslim women such as discrimination based on wearing the headscarf, cultural interpretations of Islam and the place of women, and cultural views related to Muslim women and work.

Research design

Research methodology

This study follows an interpretive paradigm based on the subjective experiences of the population that was used (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Hair et al., 2018). To achieve the objectives of this study, the methodology employed was an online survey consisting of open-ended questions. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and will be reported through word clouds.

Research population and sampling

This article focusses on the experiences of Muslim women in the South African workplace. The target population for this study consisted of employees sourced from professional networks and included Muslim women across industries, professions and provinces within South Africa. For purposes of this article, $N = 88$. Non-probability sampling methods were used, namely convenience and snowball sampling. This was ideal as the technique selected was based on the availability and accessibility of prospective respondents.

Research procedure and ethics

An online survey was developed and administered using QuestionPro. Direct links to the survey were distributed on various social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook and WhatsApp, and via email to personal and professional networks. The survey comprised of six sections, namely, internal factors, family factors, social factors, organisational factors, organisational success strategies and success indicators. Each section included open-ended questions. For the open-ended questions, thematic analysis was employed. This involved the six-step approach, namely familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and the writing up of data (Clarke et al., 2015). Additionally, word cloud generators were used to identify the frequency and provide an overall depiction of the key terms identified in the responses. Furthermore, all

open-ended responses were recorded and will be reported verbatim. Examples of open-ended questions are presented in this section.

Examples of open-ended questions as stipulated in the survey

1. Please complete the sentences: Success to me refers to ...
2. At my organisation, people are considered successful if ...
3. The career challenges I face include the following:
4. In your own words, your organisation's culture can be described as ...

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Business and Economic Science at Nelson Mandela University, and a clearance number was issued: H21-BES-HRM-066. Ethical considerations, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from participation were addressed. A cover letter was provided, outlining the main purpose of the study and including a link to the consent form. All participants were required to complete the consent form to access and participate in the study. The online survey ensured the anonymity of respondents and their right to withdraw at any time.

Results and discussion

The cohort of Muslim women that participated in this study were mostly mixed race ($n = 44$), between the ages of 25–34 years ($n = 33$), married ($n = 42$), had no children ($n = 32$) and obtained a diploma or degree ($n = 34$).

The findings of the qualitative data analysis is presented using word clouds, highlighting the key terms emerging from the respondents.

Career success

As previously alluded to, word clouds are used to highlight emerging themes, by presenting the most frequent words used to describe success as perceived by the respondents. As seen in Figure 1, many of the respondents used the terms 'happiness' and 'content' as a key attribute of success. For example, one respondent indicated:

'When I am happy, I am successful. Material things are important, we all want it however when you are content within the environment you find yourself, happiness is felt and success is sure to follow.' (Participant 22, Female, Muslim)

'Being happy in what I do, ... how many people I am able to assist successfully per day how many people's attitude I can change successfully not just with the work that I do but also regarding my religion. how much time I am able to spend with my family regardless of the time that I spend working.' (Participant 21, Female, Muslim)

Achieving goals, experiencing growth, in both personal and professional capacities, and having a work-life balance are



FIGURE 1: Perceptions of success.

characteristics of success, as highlighted by a respondent: 'Content within my job and work environment. Manageable work stress that does not affect my personal life. Personal and professional growth within a work place. Overall happiness.' (Participant 3, Female, Muslim)

In addition, when asked what defines success at their organisations (Table 1), three characteristics were frequently mentioned: meeting targets (Performance and achievement), getting promoted (Career advancement) and effort, deadlines and results (Hard work and dedication). Based on these, successful individuals are those who meet deadlines, get promoted and advance in their careers. *Responses include* 'they make more money, and rub shoulders with the big bosses' and 'they achieve their goals and advance their career'. Interestingly, success, according to the respondents, is more subjective with a focus on growth, happiness and health, whereas perceived success at the organisation is more objective, highlighting deadlines, financial gain and promotions.

The aim of this article was to explore the experiences of Muslim women in relation to career success, the challenges faced by these women and the organisational culture evident in their workplace. As mentioned, there were three characteristics highlighted in the responses related to career success, namely, happiness, goal achievement and growth. Happiness, contentment and a sense of fulfilment were frequently used by the majority of the respondents in describing success. Additionally, respondents describe that success encompasses the achievement of goals in their personal and professional capacity. Many of the respondents spoke about the significance of personal and professional growth, work-life balance, well-

TABLE 1: Defining success: Themes identified.

Primary themes	Secondary themes
Hard work and dedication	Networking and relationships
Career advancement	Recognition and respect
Performance and achievement	Material success
Professional development	Personal qualities
Leadership and management	Teamwork and collaboration

being and quality of life. For some, success is about using their skills and abilities to uplift, empower, support and contribute to society. Respondents emphasised the importance of aligning their actions with their religious beliefs and values. The responses were more aligned with subjective career success and were supported by the underpinnings of this article (Chauhan et al., 2022; Tlaiss, 2019).

The importance of consistently meeting deadlines, exceeding expectations in their roles, commitment and networking are perceived as characteristics of success at their organisations. Advancement within a career, and reaching the ranks of senior management are indicators of career success. Financial rewards, material possessions and outward signs of status are also mentioned as indicators of success, although they are less significant than the emphasis on professional achievements. This is supported by the theoretical underpinnings of the article regarding objective career success (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Chinyamurindi, 2016; Dries et al., 2009; Tlaiss, 2019).

Career challenges

As identified in Figure 2, many of the respondents report facing several challenges in their workplace. These include, but are not limited to, a lack of growth opportunities, gender



FIGURE 3: Organisational culture.

Diversity and inclusion

Respondents alluded to their organisations being all-inclusive and diverse in respect of culture, religion, race and gender, as highlighted in the following verbatim quotes:

1. 'Diverse and inclusive' (Participant 8, Female, Muslim)
2. 'Inclusive of all people from various backgrounds, cultures, sexual orientations, etc.' (Participant 63, Female, Muslim)
3. 'Accommodating, inclusive of diversity, none judgemental' (Participant 45, Female, Muslim)
4. 'Promoting transformation not just in terms of gender, but also in terms of race and sexual preference'. (Participant 13, Female, Muslim)

Although many of the respondents alluded to their organisations striving for diversity and inclusion, some suggest that while this may be true, there are certain challenges. These challenges are mentioned as:

1. 'Theoretically diverse and inclusive, but practically imbalanced' (Participant 33, Female, Muslim)
2. 'Trying to be inclusive, but struggling, due to archaic stereotypes and ignorance' (Participant 53, Female, Muslim)
3. 'White male dominated with a huge focus on diversity and [inclusivity] that does not necessarily translate to the correct behaviour'. (Participant 51, Female, Muslim)

Respect and support

Respect and support were also identified as key themes emerging from the responses with regard to the organisational culture at their places of work. Examples of the responses are presented in the following verbatim responses:

1. 'Understanding towards me as a female and my religious beliefs' (Participant 11, Female, Muslim)
2. 'Mutual respect is most definitely important and maintained' (Participant 12, Female, Muslim)
3. 'We have a very diverse culture on the work front, each and every employee understands that respect is very important therefore it should always be mutual'. (Participant 22, Female, Muslim)

Religion

Interestingly, religion was highlighted by respondents when asked about their organisational culture. As seen in this section, responses are divided regarding religion, with some indicating respect and support for all religions, while others indicated that the intention may be to support but in reality, this is not the case. The excerpts are presented in the following verbatim quotes:

1. 'Religious based. So it makes it easy to be protected in the workplace according to my religion'. (Participant 26, Female, Muslim)
2. 'An environment where religious practices are respected and supported. We are 90% Christians and about 10% Muslim and the religious practices of these religions are supported and respected'. (Participant 43, Female, Muslim)
3. 'Trying to be accommodating towards different religions but minority religions always have to fight to be heard. They believe they take all religions into account but actually they don't. I sometimes blame it on ignorance'. (Participant 32, Female, Muslim)
4. 'All religions besides Christianity is not recognised. All organisations do not recognise other religions or cultures'. (Participant 12, Female, Muslim)

While organisations are moving towards accepting a diverse workforce and striving to create an inclusive environment, challenges still remain.

In relation to organisational culture, many respondents used terms such as 'inclusive', 'diverse', 'respectful' and 'supportive'. However, negative aspects were also mentioned and included a 'toxic' environment, 'patriarchal' structure and 'slow progress' towards gender equality. While some respondents felt that the organisation is genuinely inclusive and accommodating, others highlighted a disconnect between the stated values and the implementation of the values. Regarding religious diversity, some of the respondents focus on the organisation's efforts to accommodate all and promote awareness and understanding of all cultures and religions, while others express concern. Several respondents highlight a 'patriarchal' structure and thus promoting gender inequality, increasing the challenges faced by women (Berdahl et al., 2018; Dangor, 2001; Jaiyeola, 2020; Hofstede's Model, 2011; Nomvele, 2021; Seale et al., 2021).

This summary highlights the most commonly reported challenges faced by the Muslim women who participated in the study. It is important to note that these are lived experiences and as such will differ from person to person and may not reflect the experiences of all employees of the organisation.

Recommendations

Career advancement and success is a shared responsibility. Even though it appears restrictive by nature, it could be that women are not assertive enough in terms of taking charge of their careers. That said, there are various practical implications for the individual and the organisation to address these challenges.

This study has highlighted a number of themes related to the respondents' understanding of success, their challenges and the culture of the organisation where they are employed. Based on the key findings, a set of strategies has been identified to address the challenges.

Understanding success

Respondents highlighted happiness, goal attainment, access to opportunities, growth and work-life balance as success indicators. Based on these, the following strategies could be utilised by the respondents and organisations to experience greater success:

1. Understanding that success is a shared responsibility, the development and implementation of a People Plan will assist in mapping out the careers of individuals and teams. This tool may assist individuals, together with their managers, on a way forward regarding the advancement of their careers.
2. Finding ways to proactively manage their careers and personal lives to allow for balance and overall wellness. This could mean different things to different people, and as such the respondents will need to take the initiative,

with the support of their manager, to identify opportunities that will empower them to take control and have a work-life balance, and happiness or contentment that they desire.

Challenges experienced

Challenges identified by the respondents include discrimination, and other issues related to access, growth and work-life balance. There seems to be an overlap between perceptions of success and the challenges inhibiting success in the workplace. Access to developmental or growth opportunities and networking is a challenge faced by women, and not only Muslim women. Muslim women have additional challenges in the form of triple discrimination – religion, gender and race:

1. Again, this should be a shared responsibility. An organisation may offer opportunities and provide access, resources and support; however, if an individual does not step forward or actively seek out these opportunities, nothing will change.
2. Empowering Muslim women with resources and support paves the way for their success. The challenges mentioned by these women include a lack of growth and promotional opportunities, work-life balance, increased workloads and limited recognition for their contributions. Support can be provided in the form of success coaches, mentors, supportive colleagues and career-related counselling. By establishing the necessary infrastructure and support, a culture of equality can be created that allows Muslim women to thrive and succeed in their careers.
3. Muslim women face triple discrimination, as mentioned earlier, with respondents highlighting gender, racial, and religious discrimination. The responsibility for addressing this issue is two-fold. Individuals must create awareness and educate those around them about their culture and religion. At the same time, organisations have a duty to develop training on cross-cultural awareness. This will foster better insight and understanding within teams, as well as between managers and subordinates.

Organisational culture

Respondents alluded to their organisations being tolerant, supportive and religious. Support is required from the organisation to assist in addressing the career-related challenges faced by Muslim women, thus promoting their feelings of experiencing career success. These include:

1. An organisational culture influences employee behaviour, and attitudes towards issues such as gender, advancement, diversity and inclusion. Some respondents described the culture as toxic, patriarchal, discriminatory and male-dominated, which hinders the growth and career development of these Muslim women. This type of culture does little to combat prejudice, stereotypes and gender inequality. Organisations should therefore foster an inclusive environment that supports openness, transparency, diversity and equality, as these are crucial to the advancement and success of Muslim women.

Conclusion and limitations

The purpose of this article is threefold, to (1) explore the perceptions of Muslim women relating to career success; (2) identify the challenges facing Muslim women and (3) describe the organisational culture as experienced by Muslim women in the South African workplace.

Muslim women were asked to describe success, from a personal and professional perspective. It was highlighted that to the respondents, happiness, contentment and growth were key determinants of success. However, at their places of work, a more objective view of success was alluded to, focussing on promotion, financial gain and networking. Based on these, there is a mismatch between their definition of success and the organisation's view of success.

The challenges identified by Muslim women include the organisational culture, discrimination and prejudice based on religion, age, gender and race. Further to this, increasing workloads make work-life balance difficult to obtain. Limited growth and promotional opportunities were additional concerns raised by these women. A few of the women acknowledged their own personal challenges to their success, which included their lack of confidence and their inability to express themselves.

As much as inclusivity and diversity were key terms used to describe the organisational culture, a few women used words such as 'toxic', paper exercises and 'patriarchal'. This is indicative that even though South Africa is geared towards gender equality and equality in general, there is still significant work that needs to be carried out to address the gender and cultural divide.

This article focusses on the experiences of Muslim women in the South African workplace. Extending the research could yield valuable insights and comparisons. Additionally, a longitudinal study across generational cohorts, industries and countries could offer practical implications for the global advancement of Muslim women.

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Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

Author's contributions

N.A. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N.A., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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