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Muslim employees' religious and intersectional identities as sources of discrimination: how deeper understanding can improve managerial practice

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Abstract

Purpose

This study aims to explore how intersecting identities shape experiences of workplace discrimination faced by Muslim employees in Catalonia, Spain. We seek to understand the interplay of religion, ethnicity, gender, and age in their employment experiences in order to improve managerial practices.

Design/methodology/approach

The research employs a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth interviews with 39 diverse Muslim employees in Catalonia through convenience and snowball sampling to support an intersectional analysis.

Findings

Findings reveal that Muslim employees navigate a workplace environment where their experiences of discrimination are shaped by intersecting identities including religion, age, gender and ethnicity which become salient at various stages of their careers, prompted by HRM practices such as recruitment, selection, and promotion. Their experiences as recipients of these practices illuminate the complex ways in which intersecting identities shape the experiences of discrimination. The study reveals the hiding of their religious identity, giving up on traditional career paths, seeking social support from other Muslims, and emphasizing privileged identities, to deal with discrimination.

Originality

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This study deepens understanding of the complexity of religious identity in minorities and explores its role in workplace discrimination. In particular, the research sheds light on the psychological impact in the form of feelings of guilt and shame which arise from coping strategies such as concealing religious markers which are adopted by these employees in response to organizational and managerial practices. Lastly, the paper stresses the need for intersectional approaches in order to improve effectiveness of HR policies and managerial practices.

Keywords: Discrimination, cultural literacies, intersectionality, Muslim identity, religious identity, managerial practices

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Global migration has led to increased diversity of ethnic groups in many countries, and a proliferation of research examining the discrimination often experienced by migrant workers (Baltes and Rudolph, 2010; Bell et al., 2014; Triana et al., 2021). Stereotypes, regarded asoversimplified beliefs or generalizations about a group of people, are known to create self-fulfilling prophecies as a result of stereotype threat (Steele, Spencer and Aronson, 2002);, thus contributing to discrimination faced by migrant workers. In particular, religious minorities, such as Muslim individuals in Western Europe, frequently face such discrimination in the workplace (Gebert et al., 2014; King and Ahmad, 2010). In this paper, we draw on intersectionality as a framework that allows us to examine inequalities and experiences of oppression arising from multiple and simultaneous marginalised identities (Atewologun, 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; Rodriguez et al., 2016). When individuals belong to multiple marginalized groups, associated stereotypes can converge to create a more complex pattern of harmful biases and discrimination. We consider the juxtaposition of the religious identity of Muslims with other identities such as gender, age, and race. In particular, we explore the experiences of marginalization which result from the interplay of varying and overlapping identity sources made salient by different managerial practices (e.g., recruitment). In light of the increasing Muslim demographic in Europe (Eurostat, 2020), understanding how religious identity intersects with other social categories becomes paramount for senior leaders and managers to successfully challenge and reduce persistent inequalities inherent in organizations' normalized practices, routines and processes (Berger et al., 2017).

While religious identity has been widely researched, and with some focus on the intersection with gender (Fernando et al., 2020; Tariq and Syed, 2018), less is known about how it intersects with other social markers (see Rafferty, 2020 for an exception). Age is known to shape perceptions of Muslims, with younger Muslim men having faced heightened suspicion

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due to stereotypes linking them to terrorism (Dwyer et al., 2008), yet age is rarely considered when examining their minorities marginalization in employment. We argue that understanding religious identity needs a more nuanced lens, acknowledging how factors like age, gender and ethnicity intersect with the category of "Muslim" to create unique experiences of discrimination. We draw on qualitative data gathered from interviews with 39 Muslim women and men in Catalonia, Spain, where they are a religious minority. Greater understanding from an intersectional perspective will facilitate organizations in reviewing and adapting their policies and practices to foster greater inclusivity.

This article makes two contributions to scholarship. Firstly, it deepens our understanding of religious discrimination in the workplace (Gebert et al., 2014; Ghumann et al., 2013) by examining the multiple forms of marginalization prompted by managerial practices that Muslims experience and how these experiences differ based on intersecting and multiple identities of religion, ethnicity, age and gender. In adopting this intersectional lens, the article provides practical implications for increasing effectiveness of managerial policies and practices to reduce discrimination and increase inclusivity, therefore responding to calls to expand work on the institutionalisation of systems of inequality (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Secondly, we contribute to the literature on religious identity (Héliot et al., 2020; Singh and Babbar, 2021) through identification of coping strategies adopted by Muslims that do not prevent perceptions of exclusion and stigmatization, and additionally cause guilt and shame as a result of the apparent public denial of their religious affiliation. This focus on agency moves beyond the experiences of discrimination into the dynamic nature of these experiences, recognizing that employees actively engage with their environment and seek strategies to overcome or mitigate the perceived barriers they face (Murray and Ali, 2017). By understanding these coping mechanisms, organizations can develop more targeted support

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systems which might go some way to counteracting the individual internalisation of the responsibility to manage experiences of discrimination, which add to the psychological burden of those who are marginalised.

We begin by reviewing the extant literature on Muslims' workplace discrimination based on religious identity intersecting with other sources of identity. We explain our chosen methodology and then present findings organized into two main themes: (1) Muslim women and men's intersectional experiences of discrimination and (2) the strategies that Muslim women and men in Catalonia use to overcome discrimination and to persevere in employment. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications for theory and practice which may help to overcome discrimination against Muslims in the workplace setting.

Theoretical background

Religious Identity and Workplace Discrimination Against Muslims

Religion is often a fundamental element of cultural values and an important aspect of social identity (Bendl and Gröschl, 2015). Religious identity is more than a belief system as it is shaped by identification with a religious group or institution (Ysseldyk et al., 2010) and a moral authority or "search for the sacred" (Héliot et al., 2020, p. 155). As a deep-level diversity attribute (Gebert et al., 2014), it can provide a sense of stability (Kinnvall, 2004) and positive self-esteem (Héliot et al., 2020). However, religious identity can also prompt negative responses such as discrimination and exclusion, particularly for minority groups like Muslims in Western societies (Prasad et al., 2006).

Research has shown that labour discrimination based on religious grounds has doubled (Ghumman and Ryan, 2018), with Muslims being particularly affected (Scheitle and Ecklund, 2017). For example, Lancee et al. (2021, p. 1182) explain a "Muslim penalty" which affects every stage of the employment process including fewer interview calls for Muslim applicants

(Forstenlechner and Al-Waqfi, 2010) and shorter interviews with more negative ratings for Muslim women in religious attire (King and Ahmad, 2010). This helps to explain why Muslims are overrepresented across the European Union (EU) in lower-paid jobs and in certain sectors of the economy compared to other religious groups (Longhi and Brynin, 2017).

Discrimination persists even after hiring; visible religious markers (e.g., beards, headscarves) can heighten workplace discrimination for Muslims compared to other groups (Tariq and Syed, 2018). Women in employment report being admonished for wearing the hijab as a religious symbol (Héliot et al., 2020) and being discriminated against in promotion decisions (Ghumman and Ryan, 2013). Understanding these discriminatory practices is crucial to developing effective strategies for promoting workplace inclusion for Muslims.

However, existing studies often approach Muslims' experiences of discrimination through a broad lens (Forstenlechner and Al-Waqfi, 2010), which may overlook the intersectionality and multidimensionality of Muslim identity. Muslims are often categorized as a monolithic group, despite the vast diversity in ethnicity, gender, and other factors (Bartkoski et al., 2018). While these identities can overlap (Muldoon et al., 2009), their individual effects are often blurred. For instance, a study by Brüß (2008) found that 47% of Moroccan Muslims in Spain faced career setbacks due to ethnicity, and 54% due to religion. An Arab-sounding name can further compound discrimination as individuals are perceived as both Muslim and foreign (Arai and Skogman Thoursie, 2009). An intersectional approach is, therefore, crucial to provide deeper understanding of the unique and multifaceted experiences of discrimination and marginalisation faced by Muslims as a result of the interplay of various social identity sources (Tariq and Syed, 2018). For instance, a young Arab man working as a lawyer is likely to have different experiences than a Moroccan woman in retail. Both are Muslim but their gender, age, occupation and ethnicity shape different experiences of discrimination. In the

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following sections, we further justify the adoption of an intersectional approach and the selection of a diverse sample to accomplish the purpose of the study.

Religious Identity and Intersectionality: Revisiting a Multifaceted Concept

Intersectionality theory offers a robust framework by acknowledging the complexity of multiple and simultaneous identities and their impact on experiences of oppression (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Tariq and Syed, 2018). This lens rejects the idea of singular identity categories and recognizes how individuals navigate a complex web of multiple social categories that shape their experiences. While intersectionality has gained traction in organization studies, it has often focused on the interplay of gender and other dimensions of diversity, often race or ethnicity, yet neglecting religion (e.g., Tariq and Syed, 2018). Similarly, research on Muslims' workplace discrimination rarely considers the simultaneous and shifting effects of age, ethnicity, gender and religion (Ghumman et al., 2013). Organization studies have traditionally emphasized religious affiliation as sources of relational conflicts in the workplace (Gebert et al., 2014) or clashes between religious and professional identities (Chan-Serafin et al., 2013; Gebert et al., 2014; Ghumman et al., 2013). However, such perspectives fail to capture the nuances of discrimination faced by Muslims at the workplace.

Incorporating an intersectional perspective is essential for HR Management (HRM) practices to avoid unintentionally creating disparities among employees (Köllen, 2021) while addressing the organizational structures and processes which contribute to experiences of inequality in employment experiences (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Diversity initiatives designed with a single-category lens can sometimes reinforce existing power dynamics and marginalize individuals with intersecting identities (Dennissen et al., 2020). This often occurs due to the dominance of single-axis frameworks in HRM policies, which fail to grasp the layered nature

of discrimination experienced by individuals embodying multiple marginalized identities (Beauregard, 2019).

This understanding aligns with the foundational principles of intersectionality, which originates in critical race studies about Black women's experiences of "double discrimination", capturing the simultaneity of race and gender as axes of inequality and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). However, understanding and application of intersectionality has evolved beyond its original categorizations, with increasing calls to include other dimensions of diversity (Rodriguez et al., 2016) including religion which is an important source of identity. In her work, Crenshaw emphasized 'the multidimensionality of subjects' lived experiences' (1989, p. 139), illustrating the broader scope for considering multiple identities of marginalised subjects. Rice et al. (2019) built on this by advocating for a recognition of the heterogeneity within categories and the complex interplay of identities in shaping lived experiences. Comparisons involving a broader array of identities may further clarify the synergies involved when simultaneous identities intersect (Nash, 2008).

This paper addresses the research gap of studies from the intersectional framework necessary to understand the nuanced dynamics of discrimination faced by Muslims in the work environment. The study focuses on the intersection of religious identity, specifically Muslim identity, with other demographic factors in shaping workplace experiences. The importance of context in understanding religious discrimination in employment is also critical yet often under-addressed (Fleischmann and Dronkers, 2010). Our sample consists of Muslim employees in Catalonia, Spain, a region with a large and growing Muslim population (2.2 million, 4.5% of the national population) due to immigration (UCIDE, 2022). Catalonia provides a strategic context to explore Muslim workplace discrimination as Spain has a high prevalence of such issues according to reports (FRA, 2009; 2022). Macro-contexts (i.e.,

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country and culture) have implications for how religious minorities are portrayed and understood, and micro-contexts such as professions and occupations relate to the kinds of stakeholders involved in interpersonal interactions with the religious minority. Official statistics indicate Spain has experienced substantial immigration growth, with over 5 million immigrants in 2022 (INE, 2022), with the country's largest group of immigrants composed of Moroccans, who predominantly follow the Islamic faith (Domingo and Bernad, 2017). Despite an increase in the Muslim population, Spain is confronted with significant challenges pertaining to the integration and acceptance of Muslim immigrants. Spain has a lengthy and frequently contentious history with the Arab-Islamic world, commencing with the 8th-century conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. As explained by Ali (2020) anti-Muslim sentiment in Spain is deeply embedded in a historical anti-Moorish bias, shaped by the "Reconquista" narrative that pervades school textbooks. This results in all Muslims, Spaniards, Pakistanis from the Maghreb, and so forth, becoming collectively imagined as "Moors" (Ali, 2020; Corral et al., 2023). While there is a prevailing positive perception of Muslims among the general Spanish population, Islamophobia (extreme fear and hostility to Islam and Muslims) and hate crimes continue to represent a significant concern. Research shows that media coverage of terrorist attacks in Western countries reinforces negative stereotypes about Muslims (Corral et al., 2023). This includes terrorist attacks in Spain, such as in 2017 when Catalonia became the target of attacks by jihadists from Ripoll, and 16 people were killed and 128 injured (Izak, 2024).

At the micro level, as noted by Héliot et al. (2020), research about the expression of religious identity in the workplace has rarely distinguished between service and non-service

occupational contexts. However, this distinction is crucial since it has implications for the extent to which workers must interact with customers who are not bound by organizational policies on behaviour, and who drive demand for aesthetic labour (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007) and therefore may treat religious minorities differently than do their colleagues. In particular, we aimed to respond to the following research questions:

1. How do women and men in service and non-service work in secular organizations experience discrimination based on their Muslim identity alongside other salient aspects of their identity?

2. What strategies do individuals develop to overcome the perceived barriers in their employment?

Method

Aligned with an interpretivist perspective, we chose to gather qualitative data using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Our choice of qualitative methods is designed to uncover the deep-seated nuances of discrimination and intersectionality that quantitative approaches might overlook (Symon et al. 2018). The qualitative approach is particularly suited for exploring rich, detailed insights in studies like ours, where personal experiences and perceptions are crucial for understanding complex phenomena such as workplace discrimination (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This approach emphasizes a deep understanding of the phenomena under study rather than focusing on breadth, aiming to explore complex issues within their natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton, 2014).

As well as the different occupational contexts, three inclusion criteria guided participant selection: identifying as Muslim, residing in Catalonia, and prior employment experience in different organizations. Field researchers often find that religious minorities are 'hard to reach'

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groups (e.g., Ozturk and Tatli, 2016). For these reasons, initial interviewees were identified via personal contacts of the first author (convenience sampling), and snowballing was used to recruit further participants. However, efforts were made to capture diversity in terms of respondents' gender, age, origin, education level, and customer and non-customer facing employment in order to support the intersectional analysis (criterial sampling). We distinguished between service and non-service work, since it has implications for the extent to which workers must interact with customers who are not bound by organizational policies on behaviour, and who drive demand for aesthetic labour (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007).

Data was gathered from 39 residents of Catalonia (21 women, 18 men), whose ages ranged from 18 to 56. Data saturation was achieved with 24 participants, as subsequent interviews beyond the 24th offered minimal additional insights, thus confirming the adequacy of our sample for achieving comprehensive data saturation and thematic depth (Mason, 2010). Despite reaching saturation, we proceeded to interview the remaining participants who had already consented, to honour their commitment and enrich our dataset. The sample size aligns with qualitative research methodologies that emphasize depth and richness over breadth (Symon et al., 2016), facilitating profound insights into the experiences of workplace discrimination (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006) and enabling a nuanced exploration of intersectional identities. Consequently, our sample size is not only suitable but also consistent with established scholarly guidelines, underscoring its capacity to reveal complex insights as advocated by Symon et al. (2016).Respondents had varied levels of educational attainment, with 16 participants achieving less than secondary school level, 14 achieving secondary school level education, and 9 completing higher education or above. The interviews were carried out by the first author in the home of the participants, or a place agreed with the participants, and lasted between 30 and 80 minutes. Both Spanish and Catalan languages were used to interview

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the participants according to the preferences of the participants. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English so that all authors could familiarize themselves with the data.

Philosophically, the interviews were guided by the principles of relationality and social constructionism which Windsong (2018) argues is crucial for intersectionality-driven qualitative interviews. Respondents were asked questions about their workplace and employment experiences, the extent to which they believed that their religion affected those experiences, the factors that they considered could lead to exclusion in the workplace, and the strategies they employed to cope with negative experiences. An inductive thematic analysis was performed in the study to organize the data sets, identify thematic patterns within data, grouping and labelling them according to the intersectional lens (Frost, 2011) and codifying themes in the participants' narratives following the systematic step-by step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis allowed us to focus on exploring how religion, age, gender, ethnicity, and in some cases foreignness, intertwined between them creating different experiences of exclusion for the participants. In addition, we sought to articulate how categories of difference are "dynamic productions of individual and institutional factors" (Hancock, 2007, p. 252). Hence, following Nash (2008), we sought to explore the agency of respondents in their navigation of the labour market, demonstrated by mobilizing (or concealing) particular aspects of their intersectional identities, along with other adaptive strategies.

During the initial stage of analysis, the researchers thoroughly read and reread the transcripts, employing a pattern recognition approach to identify recurring themes, salient identities, and the contextual cues in terms of managerial practices that evoke them. Demographic and social identities were considered as analytical categories, and intersectionality served as a tool to explore the intersections among these categories. As our data collection focused on analysing

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individual experiences, we began by coding “incident by incident” (e.g., discrimination) (Charmaz, 2006), adopting “intersectional sensibilities” throughout the analysis (Crenshaw, 1989). In line with Anthias' (2008) concept of translocational positionality, we paid close attention to the local social context inhabited by respondents to identify possible identities, beyond religion, that may contribute to disadvantage given the participants' complex positionalities across multiple locales.

In this manner, we identified to what extent religion and other identities became salient in the work experiences of participants, the varying experiences of discrimination, and how individual categories emerged in the way participants communicate their experiences. For example, mentions of being recognized by a Muslim name, wearing a hijab, or having a beard were coded as aspects related to the "attire of Muslim religion" and discussions about responding to prejudice and discrimination were coded as "addressing visible signs of their religion." The resulting initial codes were used by two authors to codify the 39 interviews, a process for which inter-coder reliability (Krippendorf, 2004) was 0.90. In those cases where coding was different, authors discussed to reach agreement.

In the next phase, researchers explored data patterns and the intertwining of identities. Namely, researchers engaged in an in-depth examination of the data to discern how various identity factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and religion, intersect and influence the experiences of the participants. This analytical process was pivotal in recognizing the nuanced ways these identities contribute to individual experiences and the broader dynamics within the workplace. Table 1 serves as a visual representation of this analysis, mapping out key demographic attributes for each participant, such as gender, age, occupational sector, education level, and nationality. The placement of an 'X' under the second columns labelled as 'Intersecting Identities' highlights the identity factors that the participants themselves deemed significant in

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defining their experiences. For example, Jafa, a 24-year-old man from Morocco working in retail and holding a Bachelor's degree or higher, has 'X' marks adjacent to his entries for religion, ethnicity, gender, and age. This indicates that from his description these aspects are interconnected and significant in shaping his experiences within the scope of our study. Such intersectional analysis is essential for understanding how multiple identities are intertwined and their impact on the participants' experiences, thereby enriching our qualitative analysis and broadening our understanding of their lived realities.

---------- INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE ----------

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Two main themes were proposed: 1) intersectional experiences of discrimination, and 2) strategies to overcome perceived barriers to Muslim employment and careers (see Figure 1).

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Findings

Our analysis highlights that the discrimination encountered by participants is not based on singular identity sources but instead is a manifestation of the complex interweaving of their gender, religion, ethnicity, and age.

These intersecting identities collectively influence their experiences shaping the contours of inequality and marginalisation within the workplace.

Theme 1: The intersection of identities in shaping experiences of discrimination

The varied ways in which discrimination is experienced illustrate how religious identity intersects with gender, ethnicity, and age to produce different forms of disadvantage based on each respondent's multidimensional identity. Muslims may face "multiple jeopardies" due to

these overlapping identities, leading to intensified stereotypes (Blair et al., 2002). Here the most salient intersections were religion with gender, ethnicity, and age.

The intersection of religious identity with gender. Occupational segregation in Catalonia creates challenges and several of our participants talked about being in jobs for which they were significantly over-qualified. For example, Iesha, a qualified chef, struggled to find work in male-dominated restaurant kitchens due to her name and Muslim identity. As she remarked, "My name identifies me, my religion, my identity." Similarly, Thana, with a computer science degree, faced stereotypes of Muslim women as submissive and unqualified for IT jobs, hindering her career progression:

> "I still don't have the job of my life; I know I will have it one day. I need to get more experience. I worked in a phone shop fixing phones ...that was not what I wanted to do but it was okay, then the shop closed and now I am in [company name]. I maintain equipment in operating conditions." (Thana)

The women in the sample reported discrimination as a result of intersectional stereotyping which they felt contributed to, and exacerbated, the lack of respect that is a common experience for women in male-dominated fields more generally. For example, Aaliyah had been working in an automobile manufacturing company for more than 7 years, yet still perceived that her colleagues showed a lack of confidence in her abilities based on her gender and religious identity:

> "Many co-workers do not count so much on me to make decisions. I feel isolated in this sense . . . I come here to work, but it hurts when you don't consider yourself different, right? (…) They preferred to look for *fulanito* [John Doe man] first, and if they can't find one . . . for *fulanita* [Jane Doe woman] who is not Muslim, even if they had less experience." (Aaliyah)

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Aaliyah's comment shows her sense of marginalization as a result of being Muslim, ***and*** a woman.

Muslim men faced similar gender-based discrimination, especially in female-dominated fields like nursing and tourism, where their religion intersected with gender. Further, for most men, untangling the effects of religion, ethnicity and age proved difficult, as they were intersectional, such as with Khalid. As a young Muslim man with a tourism diploma in tourism, he struggled to find work after the 2017 terrorist attacks in Catalonia. Unlike non-Muslim colleagues or a young Muslim woman who removed her veil, Khalid's age, gender and religion seemed to pose a threat in the tourism sector:

> "The job was at a hotel in Salou; I thought they were going to call me back, but […] I know that normally a woman is expected more, right? No, they didn't call. They are quite sceptical because I think it's a matter of reliance. It was here on a beach, just two kilometres away, that people were killed[1] and in the summer, like now. People remember this and after all, you work with clients, and what counts is how you look on the outside, what they see." (Khalid)

The intersection of religious identity with ethnicity. Many respondents felt Muslims lack opportunities for promotion due to their religion ("It's not for being an Arab, it's for being a Muslim" (Abdou). However, ethnicity sometimes plays a role. Zahara (aged 45) thought that she did not look obviously Muslim but explained that her name triggered questions about her ethnicity and religion during interviews. Others faced similar situations, with seemingly irrelevant resumé details leading to questions about religion. Jafa's experience, where revealing Arabic language skills seemed to lead to interview rejection, exemplifies this:

[1] Referring to the attack on Cambrils beach in 2017

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> "My name and surname in my CV are Spanish-adapted but…when you write down in the CV that your mother tongue is Arabic and Catalan, because at home I speak Arabic but I was born here and I speak Catalan; this should be an advantage but it is not. [At one interview] they asked me whether I speak Arabic and I said: yes, my parents are from Morocco. And when again asked if I practice Islam and I said yes. Well, I didn't get the job. They never told me why." (Jafa)

The intersectional impact of religion and nationality was also raised by several of the interviewees. For example, Salim felt that his treatment by a former employer varied depending on which aspect of his identity seemed more prominent at the time:

> "I always say that I am French, because I lived in France although my parents are from Algeria, and I have blue eyes, I'm pale-skinned, I'm both. I think it helps that if they know that you are French, because they see you with a different eye, they still think that you are not so capable of doing things, but sometimes . . . at that time they knew I am Muslim otherwise, maybe they would have given me a chance to do some more training." (Salim)

Salim suggested being "foreign" can create a hostile climate for "outsiders" like him. He also hinted at "whiteness" as a workplace advantage, implying French nationality might have lessened the impact of his Muslim identity. Other participants felt their religion combined with ethnicity disadvantaged them compared to Christians from other ethnic origins or cultures. One Muslim woman confirmed this intersectional effect:

> "It's not just that I'm not Catalan, which of course influences, it's also the fact that I'm not a 'good foreigner' for them. You can see that I'm different, both in appearance and in the way I think. In fact, there are many foreign workers; some of them have very good positions within the company and are more likely to move and change to a better

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position. But of course, my religion is my culture and this differentiates it, for example, from Latin Americans. Companies prefer a Christian to a Muslim because … they see them as similar, more peaceful, not aggressive …" (Nassim)

Nassim suggested "foreignness" is judged against whiteness and Christianity. Despite her work experience, her Moroccan and Muslim identity excluded her from being considered a 'good' foreigner. This limits employees' career advancement in Spain's precarious labour market.

The intersection of religious identity with age. Several young Muslim men felt their age and religion combined to create disadvantages. They experienced stereotyping and exclusion, especially after the 2017 terrorist attacks. Age, religion, and ethnicity were all cited as important factors in the hiring phase. Yassine explained his experience:

"I applied to a job offer that required someone speaking Arabic. … In the end they did not select me but took a boy older than me. This has happened to me in other jobs. … We were both Arabs, but …. (pause)

Interviewer: Why do you think this has happened?

I don't know. Young (people) are seen as radical on the TV, I think. Perhaps because I have less work experience. I mean, I think I had quite a lot but …. (long pause) But of course, this is just speculation." (Yassine)

Similarly, when looking for a job, Musa felt that "discrimination against young (Muslims) has become very high." Achraf, who could not find a job as an accountant, stated that:

"You can clearly see how old I am, where I am from [Morocco], and how I am [referring to his beard] and that makes them lock you up in that category of 'suspect'." (Achraf)

Discrimination on the basis of religious identity was especially salient for younger men who worked or aspired to work on the service sector in occupations that demand direct interactions

with members of the public. Older Muslim men reported less discrimination, suggesting they may be seen as more reliable due to their age (e.g., Mustafa, an older automotive company employee, noted "Muslims like my nephews are in a riskier group"). These accounts are a stark reminder that while males are privileged for many occupational positions, the interviewees' gender, age and religious identity often intersected to produce deeper marginalisation for Muslim young men.

Theme 2: Strategies to overcome perceived barriers in Muslim employment and careers

Key subthemes that emerged from the interviews are (i) removal of visible signs of religious identity, (ii) ethnic and religious-based in-group relationships at work, (iii) emphasis of privileged identities (such as high social class), (iv) career self-resignation or self-employment.

Removal of visible signs of religious identity. During recruitment, some Muslims felt pressured to hide their religion, even sometimes adapting their name. While race/ethnicity is a visible and unalterable marker of minority status at work, religious markers were removed to avoid stereotypes and discrimination. Some young men shaved their beards, especially to avoid associations with extremism that was affecting young Muslim men. Several women removed their headscarves. This highlights how Muslims may suppress their religious identity to be accepted.

Young Muslim custom service workers fear being seen as threats due to stereotypes linking Islamic with extremism (Reeves et al., 2012). Ibrahim, a young man from Morocco, thought others considered "Moroccan lads" in Catalonia to be susceptible to indoctrination by extremists. He shared his strategy to overcome intersecting identity stereotypes of gender (male), religion (Muslim), age (young), and ethnicity (Moroccan):

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> "My job is commercial and I know I can't wear a beard or an Arab robe... Muslims want the job, they don't want to be treated differently. …My boss tells me not to say that I'm Morrocan…because there are clients who have prejudices." (Ibrahim)

Fear of discrimination led some to hide their religion at work, even hiding prayer practices, although some, like Yasmine, for example, felt such strategies were futile.

> "It is not worth removing my scarf. I am going to be discriminated against anyway for being a Muslim." (Yasmine)

Ethnic and religious-based in-group relationships at work.

Many interviewees found comfort and support by building stronger connections with colleagues from similar backgrounds. This helped them cope with the negative effects of discrimination:

> "I believe that you subconsciously feel more understood and feel comfort in being with those who are like you, they raise your morale when it is low." (Zeinab).

Emphasis on privileged identities. A few participants used a source of positive identity (wealth, education, older age, whiteness) to counter discrimination. One participant used employment interview questions that focused on his background to showcase these traits to his advantage:

> "In an interview, they always ask me where I come from. When I tell them that I am from here, they say, 'Yes, but where were you born?' And I tell them here, so they ask me again, 'Are you from here?'. You can hardly tell I am a Muslim; also, in my cv it says that I have studied in the US. But they always ask me. It is the star question. … I think they are surprised that I have a high level of education. There is always this prejudice of the Moroccan immigrant who comes here to seek a better life." (Qadira)

Qadira referred to the importance of being from a wealthy family who could afford to support their childrens' studies, which prepared them for their "professional lives." To a lesser extent,

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Salim also gained some advantage based on his nationality (French) and racial appearance (white). However, this option was not available to many respondents, who did not have the high-status attributes.

Career self-resignation or self-employment. Some highly qualified Muslims took lower-paying jobs to be with other Muslims and practice their religion freely and therefore reduce the potential for receiving micro-aggressions and discrimination. One legal worker, Oma, frustrated by a lack of advancement, described how some left the firm to start their own business. Oma felt religion and foreignness were key factors. The Muslim workers were stuck in low positions and barred from client interaction due to client bias. Oma explained that "being a foreigner had an impact but being Muslim was one of the 'key aspects'" that influenced the decision to leave the company. Religion and foreignness presented a double disadvantage that interfered with the opportunity to develop their professional career, skills and experiences.

Career self-employment strategy was also particularly relevant when Muslims perceived that the stereotypes associated with their age, gender and religion represented a significant barrier to employment and the development of their professional careers. Like Rachel explained: "They hardly give you a job if you are a boy like me (young Muslim) even if you are good." Discrimination thus limits the freedom of Muslim professionals to get the kind of job they aspire to, placing them at a disadvantage while reducing their opportunities to develop their potential and qualities, and to be promoted based on their qualifications and skills.

While this study is primarily qualitative, we extended our analysis to include a quantitative exploration of the data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the patterns of discrimination experienced by Muslim employees. Table 2, extrapolated from the detailed findings presented in Table 1, offers a summary of the intersectional categories identified in the study.

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---------- INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE ----------

The table highlights that all participants, both women and men, reported experiences of discrimination linked to their religious identity, intersecting significantly with gender and ethnicity. Interestingly, the data reveals that age-related discrimination appears to impact men under 30 slightly more than women when intersecting with religion (50% of men vs. 47.6% of women). This reinforces the qualitative findings and suggests that younger Muslim men may face additional challenges, particularly in environments where their religious, age and ethnic identities intersect with stereotypes associated with them. This dynamic likely exacerbates the discriminatory experiences of these younger men, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address these compounded biases.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although some researchers have addressed how religious identity can be a source of oppression in the workplace, there have been continued calls for studies to explore diversity and discrimination from an intersectional framework that approaches social and demographic identities in relational rather than isolated units of analysis (Fletcher and Beauregard, 2022). This study goes some way to addressing this, by investigating the challenges of Muslims living and working in Catalonia. In particular, we looked at issues faced in their access to employment and development of their careers and the strategies they used to cope.

Our first contribution builds upon existing research on religious discrimination (Gebert et al., 2014) by revealing the nuanced ways in which religious identity (in this case, Muslim)

intersects with other sources of identity like gender, ethnicity and age and combine to create unique forms of marginalization. Our findings show that gender intersects with ethnicity and even more so with religion. External signifiers of Islamic identity prompt negative and stereotypical reactions from employers and prospective employers, a phenomenon that is well-established with regards to women who wear the hijab in Western workplaces (Amer, 2014). Muslim women experienced discrimination based on both their gender and religion, leading to challenges in career advancement and a lack of respect in male-dominated fields. Muslim men faced similar discrimination, particularly in female-dominated professions. Their experiences were further impacted by their age and the timing of terrorist attacks. That is, the association with terrorism resulted in discrimination against those fitting with the stereotype of a young male Muslim. Our findings suggest that Muslim workers are at greater risk of identity incongruence (Héliot et al., 2020), in which two or more identities (e.g., occupational and religious identity) conflict due to real or perceived incompatibility of their respective values and norms. A good example of this was the participant mentioning he could not wear a beard in his commercial job, because it was considered an expression of religion. While a person may strongly identify with the occupation wanting to conform to the norms of show a job-appropriate appearance, however, this conflicts with wearing a beard which is a sign of honour and holiness for Muslim men, and an expression of their religious identity. As such, the occupational and religious identity showed incongruence.

Our second contribution deepens understanding of the strategies used by Muslims to deal with experiences of discrimination, and the resulting adverse psychological impact on individuals. This included the just discussed concealing of religious identity (see also Syed et al., 2005; Tariq and Syed, 2018). Religious identity can to a certain extent be hidden as a deep-level source of diversity, and the participants indeed were expected and/or felt the necessity to

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conceal and not mention they were Muslims. However, unlike some other "hidden identities", such as certain disabilities or sexual orientation (e.g., see Dhanani et al., 2024), the present study also showed that Muslim identity is difficult to hide, sometimes even assumed just by a person's name. As such, hiding their religion seems to go beyond a person's disregard for religion at work and therefore seems closer to a sense of self-emptying.

Participants were also found to shift from traditional career paths to self-employment. This facilitates Muslims being able to rely on and seek social support from other Muslims, while a less common strategy was to emphasize privileged identities, such as high social class, to counteract discrimination. The results demonstrate that while some coping strategies (e.g., shaving the beard or not wearing the hijab) may be seemingly easy to implement, they do not prevent experiences of exclusion and social stigmatization. What is more, these and other strategies (e.g., avoiding praying) may cause guilt, remorse and shame among those who decide to implement them affecting their authenticity and hindering their inclusion. This could jeopardise their well-being at the workplace.

Managerial implications

This study highlights the impact of management practices concerning recruitment and selection and career development, on the experiences of discrimination of a religious minority in Spain, Muslims. Therefore, it points out the importance of re-evaluating organizational diversity practices to address the multifaceted discrimination faced by Muslims in the workplace. In particular, it suggests that a deeper understanding of Muslim intersectional identities can facilitate the development of more nuanced HR policies and organizational practices that lead to a more inclusive workplace climate. This approach goes beyond traditional analyses and allows for the expression of all identity sources and their intersections rather than implementing superficial diversity actions based on a single identity source such as quotas to be met (e.g.,

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gender quotas, see also Hicks-Clarke and Iles, 2000). Inclusive climate, workplaces and leaders require this more nuanced and complex intersectional analysis of diversity that allows to focus on processes and practices "of inclusion and discrimination" based on employees' perceptions rather than on workforce differences.

As a case in point and derived from our results, managers should not discriminate or hire Muslims because they are Muslims but hire them based on their person-job fit and strengths, offer a climate of psychological safety and inclusion for them to freely express their religious and multiple identities without discrimination and make them feel part of the organization. HR professionals and line managers as leaders play a central role in promoting a culture of inclusion and respectful pluralism central to the organizational identity and it is therefore crucial that they have a comprehensive understanding of the concept of intersectionality and multifaceted identities. Muslim identities in the workplace are not monolithic but multiple and intersectional leading to unique and intersectional experiences of marginalization that require a processual and intersectional view. A Muslim woman, for instance, might face a unique combination of religious and gender bias. Creating a truly inclusive environment could involve a shift from unconscious bias training to a greater focus on inclusive leadership practices which are reflected in changes in both policy and processes, addressing religious bias alongside other forms of prejudice to develop a culturally literate cadre of managers at all levels. This would require a focus on behaviour change, having explored their values and attitudes about ethnic, gender and religious diversity. Additionally, offering practical solutions, such as flexible prayer breaks or accessible prayer spaces can contribute to meeting the diverse needs within the (Muslim) employee population. This will be especially true when made in open conversation with employees, facilitating participation,

voice and belonging without requiring assimilation, with an open mind towards different aspects of identity instead of on one dimension in particular.

Related to this, is the recommendation of Ryan and Gardner (2021) to provide individuating information to lessen stereotypes. This can be done by the employee, but also stimulated by managers. For example, in job interviews, people can learn to ask questions about unique characteristics, traits and skills people think they will bring to the job. Or when delegating tasks, people can be stimulated to investigate the strengths of each individual rather than to trust on intuition. It is also important to mention that an inclusive climate may activate bystanders, meaning that people who witness discrimination can realize they can bring awareness and try to mediate instead of remaining uninvolved (Ryan & Gardner, 2021). During a solicitation, they can, for example, point out positive qualities of the interviewee when they get the impression that they are not taken seriously by the other interviewees because of religion or ethnicity.

An inclusive climate does not only affect to the hiring process but also extends to all organizational members as our informants reported when feeling excluded or not considered for promotions or decision-making in their organizations.

Promoting an inclusive environment is not only important but also valuable. Discrimination at the workplace involves costs, including by long-term sickness absence because of reduced mental well-being (Clark et al., 2021) and reduced task-performance (Walker et al., 2021) . Previous studies have further revealed that an inclusive environment helps organizations profit from workplace diversity, improving organizational performance (Ding & Riccucci, 2023; Moon & Christensen, 2019). Moreover, workplaces are microcosms of society, and the treatment of minorities in organizations reflects and reinforces their treatment in wider society. By developing a more inclusive climate, organizations become

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more socially sustainable and have a key role in improving societal equality. Leaders and managers at all levels should appraise themselves of the strategies used by Catalonian Muslims to cope with oppression in the workplace and take appropriate action to reduce the need for them to disguise their religious identity.

Limitations and future research

The sample was drawn through snowballing methods and was limited to Muslims currently working and residing in Catalonia, making the findings less generalizable. For example, findings may be different in regions or countries where no terrorist attacks have taken place. Additionally, the sample predominantly consisted of Muslims from Morocco, with only a few participants from Algeria and Syria. This composition reflects the larger demographic trends in Catalonia but may limit the diversity and interpretation of the findings, as these groups are often perceived more homogeneously than they are in reality. Furthermore, the absence of participants with Spanish nationality restricts our ability to compare the experiences of foreign-born Muslims with those who are nationals, which is a significant limitation considering the potential differences in discrimination experiences. Future researchers might build a broader, more representative sample to test quantitatively these qualitative insights. A more diverse sample could help uncover how various factors, including nationality, affect perceptions of discrimination.

A second limitation is the specific focus on Muslims. Future research might consider whether and how other religious identities, both minority and majority shape perceptions of organizational oppression. Furthermore, other identities, both achieved and ascribed, that may intersect with religious identity to produce prejudice and discrimination. We only interviewed Muslim employees, not to their employers, hence we cannot fully determine how well the

perceptions of discrimination reflect actual attitudes, intentions, and practices. Moreover, we also did not ask the participants what they thought their managers could do to reduce discrimination. More research is needed to understand how managerial practices and organizational contexts contribute to or mitigate discrimination based on religious identity or other factors to create inclusive workplaces. The robust sample size of 39 participants in this study surpasses those typically featured in related research within this journal, providing a strong foundation for comprehensive analysis and enhancing the richness and diversity of the collected data (Smith & Davis, 2020). However, to further enhance the generalizability and applicability of these findings across different contexts, future studies could benefit from incorporating quantitative methods alongside the qualitative approaches employed here (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Implementing a mixed-methods framework in subsequent research will not only validate and extend the qualitative insights obtained but also broaden their relevance, significantly enriching both the theoretical and practical implications of the findings (Bryman, 2012; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Future research could also explore the role of emotions in relation to the strategies developed and how these emotions influence choices and behaviours in their careers. Despite these limitations, we hope this study has highlighted the complex intersectional discrimination experiences of Muslim workers in Catalonia. This research should spur further studies on the discrimination faced by Muslims and other religious minorities in employment and inspire reflections on how managerial practices can incorporate an intersectional approach to foster inclusive work environments through inclusive leadership in Catalonia and beyond.

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	DEMOGRAPHICS					INTERSECTING IDENTITIES			
Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Occupational sector	Education	Nationality	Religion	Ethnicity	Gender	Age
Fatima	F	35	Retail	L	Morocco	X	X	X	
Mustafa	M	49	MFG	SE	Algeria	X		X	
Houda	F	38	Agric	L	Morocco	X	X	X	
Rami	F	18	Agric	SE	Algeria	X		X	
Lupe	F	33	Agric	L	Algeria	X		X	
Gamila	F	30	Serv/Hosp	L	Morocco	X	X	X	
Aisha	F	49	Agric	L	Morocco	X			
Nassim	F	30	Retail	SE	Morocco	X	X		
Mouad	M	24	Retail	SE	Algeria	X		X	X
Takisha	F	40	MFG	Unknown	Algeria	X	X		
Bilal	M	27	Serv/Hosp	SE	Morocco	X	X		
Abdou	M	57	MFG	L	Morocco	X	X		
Salim	M	29	Retail	SE	Algeria	X	X		
Xena	F	58	Agric	L	Morocco	X	X		
Iesha	F	32	Serv/Hosp	SE	Morocco	X		X	
Zahara	F	45	Serv/Hosp	B/HE	Morocco	X		X	
Thana	F	31	MFG	B/HE	Morocco	X		X	
Walid	M	33	Serv/Hosp	L	Algeria	X		X	
Zeinab	F	30	Retail	L	Morocco	X		X	
Latifa	F	50	MFG	L	Morocco	X		X	
Amina	F	39	Retail	L	Morocco	X		X	
Musa	M	31	Serv/Hosp	L	Morocco	X		X	
MohamedJ	M	27	Serv/Hosp	B/HE	Morocco	X		X	
Lubna	F	21	Agric	SE	Morocco	X		X	
Yassine	M	28	Serv/Hosp	B/HE	Morocco	X		X	X
Jafa	M	24	Retail	B/HE	Morocco	X	X	X	X
Qadira	M	46	Serv/Hosp	B/HE	Morocco	X	X	X	
Mehdi	M	21	MFG	L	Morocco	X	X	X	X
Salima	F	35	MFG	L	Morocco	X	X	X	
Yasmine	F	25	Retail	SE	Morocco	X	X	X	
Xiomara	F	43	Retail	SE	Algeria	X	X	X	
Djamila	F	42	Retail	SE	Morocco	X	X		X
Oma	F	34	Serv/Hosp	B/HE	Morocco	X	X		X
Khalid	M	25	Agric	SE	Morocco	X		X	X
Aaliyah	F	55	MFG	L	Morocco	X		X	X
Ibrahim	M	29	Serv/Hosp	SE	Morocco	X		X	X
Rachid	M	23	Agric	L	Syria	X		X	X
Omar	M	29	Serv/Hosp	B/HE	Morocco	X		X	X
Achraf	M	28	Agric	B/HE	Morocco	X	X	X	X
	F=21	Average	Agric = 9	L=16	Morocco=30				
	M=18	34	MFG = 8	SE=14	Algeria=8				
			Serv/Hosp=12	B/HE=9	Syria=1				
			Retail =10						

TABLE 1. *Intersecting identities in participants' experiences*

Note

Agric=Agriculture

MFG= Manufacturing

Serv/Hosp=Service/Hospitality

Retail

L=Less than Secondary School

SE=Secondary Education

B/HE= Bachelor's degree or Higher

Table 2. Percentage of Discrimination Experienced by Participants Across Intersectional Categories

Intersectional Category	Total Participants	Women	Men	% Women Discriminated	% Men Discriminated
Religion + Gender	39	21	18	100%	100%
Religion + Ethnicity	33	18	15	85.7%	83.3%
Religion + Age	19	10	9	47.6%	50%
Gender + Age	19	10	9	47.6%	50%
Religion + Ethnicity + Gender	33	18	15	85.7%	83.3%
Religion + Gender + Age	19	10	9	47.6%	50%

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Key themes	Sub-themes	Illustrative quotes
Experiences of intersectionality in the labour market	The intersection of religious identity with Gender	When I started my first job (flower harvesting) my colleagues, (after I asked, he said: " basically all female") were not comfortable working alongside me, and that any innocent gesture or comment could be interpreted as threatening. For instance, one of my colleagues refused to work with me during the month of Ramadan, not sure why. (Rachid)
	The intersection of religious identity with ethnicity.	", and the guy (a colleague) was all up in my business, asking me where I'm from and stuff. And then he started asking about my religion and how often I pray! I was like, dude, what's that gotta do with what we are talking about? It made me feel so awkward. I think he didn't like that I was Moroccan or Muslim or something."(Omar)
	The intersection of religious identity with age.	When I started the new job some of my colleagues seemed scared of me. It was like they thought I was somehow an extremist, I think. It made me feel really isolated and uncomfortable at work.(Mehdi)
Strategies to overcome perceived barrier	Removal of visible signs of religious identity	A few years ago, the hijab represented me, but now at work I take it off. I don't feel comfortable, I have noticed that if I don't wear it they are more chatty and friendly. (Iesha)
	Ethnic and religious based in group relationship	There weren't many Muslims in the company and at that time I realized I was different and I also ended up becoming friends with a couple of girls, one from Morocco and one from Algeria, they were Muslim and who lived in Lleida. I think they felt that I was like them (MohamedJ).
	Emphasis of privileged identities	Yeah, I felt like the interviewer was trying to put me in a box. But I didn't let it get to me. I started to change direction by talking about my experience in the industry of my family. I wanted to show that I had more to offer than just my religion (Zahara)
	Career Self- resignation or Entrepreneurship	After collecting onions for many years and seeing that there was no possibility for change, I thought that the only way to earn money was become self-employed and I did so and now I have four Moroccans working with me (Mustafa).

Figure 1. Illustrative quotes to showcase participants' voices and to validate themes