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Education and Islamic Spirituality in South Africa: The faith informed agency of Muslim women

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Abstract

Muslim women enduring a life as minorities, face several persistent barriers within the realms of education, employment and a life in the public light, i.e. discrimination within the workplace, unequal opportunities for higher education, and are therefore stereotyped as the oppressed or symbols of resistance. Neither portrays the depth of complexity of the characters these women have built through experience, nor the critical role that education and the Islamic faith carry. This paper serves to question: how does education and Islamic spirituality, specifically *sabr* (patience) and *tawakkul* (trust in Allah) which aligns within Qur'anic discourse, enable Muslim women to execute agency in the context of minority? Highlighting theory of feminism, capability approaches, alongside Islamic feminist scholarship, this paper develops the Faith Agency Framework (FIAF) as a conceptual response. The FIAF puts forth the notion that the agency emerges through triad of interdependent elements, which are as follows: First, the place of education, it works to empower women, practically through economic independence, social mobility and personally as a dedicated space for formation of one's identity and critical awareness. Followed by, spirituality driven by Islamic spirituality provides resilience, purpose and endurance providing sustenance to women facing structural adversity. Lastly through contextual negotiation, it serves to capture active process through which women may draw on education as well as faith simultaneously to navigate through barriers and make meaningful choices through life. Practically, FIAF possesses direct implications for the policy regarding education, curriculum design, and equity in workplace, particularly in contexts where faith and structural barriers meet.

Keywords: Muslim women, agency, Islamic feminism, education, Global South

Introduction

Challenges persist for Muslim women living as religious minorities, particularly regarding access to education, employment, and public participation. In the setting of South Africa, discrimination presents itself in the multitude of contexts, such as: within the workplace, education wherein it introduces itself as unequal opportunities. Moreover, as the oppressed victims of religion or as symbols of resistance, they are persistently being stereotyped (Haddad et al., 2006; Vahed and Waetjen, 2010). In order to shape women's lived experiences; these reductive framings interfere with the complex ways in which faith and education interact.

Additionally these barriers do not exist by themselves. They are shaped by being compounded through overlapping inequalities of gender, race, religion, and class, which all together may limit the number of opportunities and further adjunct marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; MirHosseini, 1999). For Muslim women in South Africa, navigating through these realities requires taking up multiple and intersecting resources, yet the currently existing research rarely reflects this notion.

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Much of the scholarship appealed for Muslim women has approached the subject from one of two points of view. The first serves to portray religion as a source of restriction, placing the practices in Islam as a barrier to empowerment. The latter centralizes on resistance, portraying Muslim women as figures going against the structures of patriarchy (Mohanty, 2003). Both framings share a common limitation: being that they treat faith and empowerment as two separate entities, rarely assessing how Islamic spirituality may in itself operate as an internal resource for agency (Mahmood, 2005).

Concepts such as*sabr*, the Islamic virtue of patience and resilience, and *tawakkul*, trust in Allah in the face of adversity, remain predominantly void from empowerment literature, despite their central focus on how many Muslim women navigate through their daily life (Kütük-Kuriş, 2021; Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999; Afsaruddin, 2023) which corresponds within Qur'anic discourse. More recent scholarship continues to substantiate this gap: as one theorises Islamic feminism through Sufi imaginaries of love and justice (Shaikh, 2023), while other demonstrates that Muslim women's educational engagement in South Africa remains shaped by, rather than separate from, their commitments of faith and citizenship (Davids, 2023).

Unlike already existing empowerment models that privilege secular education or religious critique, this paper works to put forth the Faith-Informed Agency Framework (FIAF). FIAF combines education, Islamic spirituality, as well as contextual negotiation into a singular model. Its individuality lies in portraying that the agency is not produced solely by one dimension rather by their dynamic relationship. Education aids to empower women both practically (through economic self-sufficiency and social mobility) and personally, as a sacred place where one's identity is developed and critical consciousness is built (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1994). Islamic spirituality aids to provide inner resilience, purpose, and endurance that sustain women throughout structural adversity (Mahmood, 2005; Hermansen, 1996).

The active process as described by contextual negotiation, through which women pick from education and faith simultaneously, to steer through barriers and exercise meaningful choices within life (Kabeer, 1999; Giddens, 1984).Three contributions are made through this framework for the currently existing scholarships. Firstly, it challenges the assumed notion that religion and empowerment are inherently under tension, demonstrating instead that Islamic faith plays its role as a dynamic and enabling force (Wadud, 1999; Mir-Hosseini, 1999). Secondly, it overpasses Western feminism and Islamic understandings of agency, which have frequently been seen as a paradox, incompatible in nature (Mahmood, 2005; Mohanty, 2003). Thirdly, it puts forth a perspective from the Global South which focuses on contexts with regard to realities of minorities instead of applying frameworks which were developed in and for Western settings (Connell, 2007).

Rather than just the consideration of scholarship, these contributions carry the load of relevance. Practical relevance is evident through policymakers, educators, and community leaders, who may appreciate the interdependent role that faith and education carry in the path of empowerment therefore has direct implications for how structures supporting the same are designed and delivered. Existing empowerment theories tend to privilege either external capabilities (education, economic opportunity) or resistance-based agency, while FIAF conceptualises agency as emerging from the interaction between external capacities and internal faith-based meaning systems.

Methodology

This study is a conceptual paper which develops the Faith-Informed Agency Framework (FIAF) by synthesising theoretical as well as empirical scholarship. It draws on comprehensive review of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, and historical studies on experience of Muslim women who are in the minority contexts, with

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particular reference to South Africa. The literature search was conducted systematically from inception to May 2026 using the following academic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCOhost. Additional targeted searches were performed on repositories such as ResearchGate, and Academia.edu. Keywords and Boolean combinations included terms such as “Muslim women” AND (agency OR empowerment) AND (education OR spirituality OR sabr OR tawakkul) AND (“South Africa” OR “Global South” OR minority); variations also incorporated “Islamic feminism,” “intersectionality,” “capability approach,” and related terms. Reference lists of key sources were also reviewed to identify additional relevant works.

Inclusion criteria encompassed: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and book chapters published primarily in English from inception (to capture post-apartheid contexts and contemporary scholarship); (2) works addressing Muslim women’s experiences in minority or Global South settings, with emphasis on education, Islamic spirituality, agency, or intersectional identities; (3) sources providing theoretical contributions to feminism, capability approaches, or Islamic feminist scholarship; and (4) empirical or historical studies grounded in South African contexts. Exclusion criteria included: non-scholarly sources (e.g., popular media or unpublished theses unless highly relevant), works not addressing gender/faith intersections, and sources lacking substantive engagement with agency, education, or spirituality.

Primary key theoretical lenses integrated in the framework include feminism theory, the capability approach, intersectionality, structuration theory, and Islamic feminist scholarship. In addition to the literature review, the development of the FIAFis grounded in the lived realities of Muslim women in South Africa. The information and knowledge which serve as illustrative anchors involve the educational and professional negotiations (Moos and Shaikh, 2024; Daniels and Dasoo, 2012), the cultural organising of the Durban Women’s Cultural Group (Vahed andWaetjen, 2010), and the faith-based strategies (Shaikh, 2003; Meer 1975; Shaikh, 2012). The contextual depth is provided to the interplay between education, Islamic spirituality (particularly *sabr* and *tawakkul*) which is grounded in Qur’an, and contextual negotiation by these sources.

An iterative process of thematic synthesis was utilised to construct the conceptual framework. The domains were integrated with established theories to form the three interdependent dimensions of the FIAF: Educational Capital, Islamic Spiritual Resources, and Contextual Negotiation. For the current study, no primary empirical data were collected. For bridging existing gaps in empowerment literature, the aim was to propose a new conceptual model which can guide future empirical research in South African and other Global South minority contexts. A formal ethical clearance was not required, as this is a desktop-based conceptual study relying exclusively on published sources which have been appropriately cited and credited. The literature was thus carefully analysed through a thematic synthesis approach, identifying recurring conceptual categories related to education, spirituality, agency, and structural constraint. These themes were then mapped against existing theories of empowerment to develop the FIAF dimensions.

The paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, it reviews the relevant literature on Muslim women in the minority contexts, agency and empowerment, education, and Islamic spirituality. Secondly, it presents the FIAF in its entirety which is followed by discussing the framework in relation to broader theoretical debates along with conclusion with implications for future research and policy. This paper notes and addresses a critical gap: the lack of frameworks which integrate Islamic spirituality and education as co-constitutive resources of agency for Muslim women in minority contexts, particularly within the Global South.

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Muslim women in minority contexts: The South African Case

Muslim women in South Africa contend with several layers of social inequalities, historically deep rooted within colonialism, slavery, and apartheid, which still continue to shape their access to different opportunities pertaining to education, employment, and public life. As a religious minority which constitutes less than two percent of the nation's population, South African Muslims (predominantly of Indian, Cape Malay, and African descent) have long steered through exclusion from both Caucasian dominated and African nationalist spaces (Baderoon, 2014). For Muslim women; race, religion, and gender come together in ways that cannot be understood by examining any single dimension independently (Crenshaw, 1989).

An important historical foundation is provided by Baderoon for the understanding of this marginalisation. Her analysis of the 350-year archive of the presence of Islam within South Africa showcases that the legacies of slavery and apartheid to this date continue to shape how an identity in religion and Muslim womanhood in particular, is perceived and experienced today (Baderoon, 2014). Muslim women have been exposed and subjected to racialised stereotyping in the broader public life and gendered constraints within their own communities, leaving them navigating through multiple and often paradoxical expectations.

With regard to education and career orientation, the documentation of the negotiation that Muslim women undertook in the areas of academia was provided by Daniels and Dasooshowing how they balanced between their identities in religion, race and the professional ambition in the environments wherein it seemed incompatible (Daniels and Dasoo, 2012). Rather than their retrieval from the study, the subjects actively attempted to negotiate with any form of resistance they came in contact with, thereby attempting to assert their value of their presence in the academic settings. Furthermore, drawing from the idea of negotiation, it is an active process.

Similar challenges surface in the settings of a workplace. The Muslim community and much of the broader South African community share the constructed patriarchal ideologies which have restricted women’s access to many opportunities in leadership roles and professional advancement. Dixit provide an alternative view on how Muslim women draw on the education provided to steer though these restrictions, using it as a path to immerse into economic participation and develop critical awareness while renegotiating their professional identity as a Muslim and a South African (Dixit, 2022).

Vahed and Waetjen (2010) brought a relevant historical example, referencing their previous study comprising of the Women’s Cultural Group of Durban which shows that even under apartheid, when Muslim women were formally excluded from the political and customary point of view, they came together and emerged with an alternative space of participation in society through the methods of cultural organising, welfare work, and educational initiatives. It is the very same historical pattern which is what this paper serves to theorise as contextual negotiation, drawing from the available resources to exercise agency within structural limitations. Shaikh furthermore supports the same notion and argues that South African Muslim women have developed strategies based on the very same faith towards the resistance, using the same Islamic texts to challenge the ideologies of patriarchy while simultaneously maintaining their devotion to spirituality (Shaikh, 2003).

Furthermore it is represented as a form of agency that is concurrently combined with intellectual, spiritual as well as political. The early work of Fatima Meer’s provides additional historical grounding based on Black women in Durban (Meer, 1975). Documenting Muslim women’s educational and welfare organising in a timeline wherein women’s participation in public were severely restrained due to structural racism and patriarchy. Meer establishes that

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Muslim women's utilization of education and community organising as tools of empowerment has deep historical roots anchored in South Africa (Meer, 1975).

Three arguments were developed from this literature; its emergence furthermore underpins the Faith-Informed Agency Framework. First, Muslim women in South Africa face extensive marginalisation which cannot be localised to focus on any single inequality. Second, despite the presence of the obstacles faced, Muslim women have consistently demonstrated agency: through the roles of networking, cultural organising, educational acquisition and faith based resilience. Third, Islamic spirituality has not functioned as a barrier to this agency rather as one of its most significant supportive resources. These examples show that Muslim women's agency in South Africa is shaped by compounded inequalities but also sustained through education and faith. This directly underpins the FIAF, which positions agency as emerging from the interaction of structural challenges, educational capital, and spiritual resilience.

Agency and Empowerment

The inquiry of what it means to act liberally is not merely theoretical; for Muslim women navigating through the contexts of minority, how an agency is formulated directly shapes whether their choices are being recognised as an act of empowerment or dismissed as compliance. Agency refers to the capacity alongside the ability to make meaningful choices while being able to act on them, even within barriers. Kabeer (1999) describes agency as not simply a process of decision making but also the subtler processes of negotiation through which people may navigate through their circumstances. She argues how an agency cannot be secluded from the conditions in which it is being exercised in. When a choice is made under severe constraint, it serves to qualitatively be different from one that was made in relative freedom. Empowerment, relatedly, is the ongoing process through which those denied strategic life choices acquire that ability, involving shifts not only in material circumstance but in identity, consciousness, and self-determination (Kabeer, 1999).

Sen and Nussbaum broadens this concept through the approach of capability, which pictures empowerment in the form of substantive freedom people have to live lives they value (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). According to Sen (1999), the liberation of human lives plays a much higher role to just economic growth and thereby defines development. Nussbaum uses this concept with more regard to women, by putting forth that the following entities; education, health, and social participation are not to be earned rather they are essential foundations for a well- respected life of dignity. When both ideologies come together, they establish that empowerment is structural as well as individual, constantly being moulded by the social conditions which follow them and make it genuinely possible(Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Butler adds on another dimension, arguing that agency is visualised through the patterns by which individuals negotiate, repeat, and at times subvert the social norms that govern them (Butler, 1990).

This performative understanding of agency makes it possible to recognise how resistance may come in different forms. A significant tension runs through this literature. Western feminist frameworks have tended to equate agency with resistance to patriarchal and religious norms (Mohanty, 2003). In this context, a woman who observes Islamic practice or draws on faith as a resource is assumed as lacking agency. This is decisively challenged by Mahmood by putting forward the argument that women who emerge through Islamic spirituality and cultivate piety are executing a form of agency that is not readily recognised by Western feminist frameworks, one adhered to moral self-cultivation and meaning-making, not in resistance (Mahmood, 2005).

This distinction is fundamental for the foundations for the Faith-Informed Agency Framework (FIAF). Through the adoption of a broader definition of agency, one that is inclusive of faith-

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informed action alongside resistance and negotiation, this paper positions Islamic spirituality not as a restriction on Muslim women's empowerment rather as one of its most significant enabling resources. Upon putting these two together, these theories highlight that agency is not only the cause for resistance but also negotiation and self-cultivation. This broader understanding is essential for the FIAF, which integrates both structural and spiritual dimensions to explain how Muslim women enact agency in minority contexts.

Education as Empowerment

Education plays two distinct roles however they intersect in Muslim women's empowerment. The first is instrumental: education provides a form of economic independence, mobility in society, and access to opportunity. Stromquist argues that education prepares women with the skills and resources to expand their ability to partake in the labour market and public life, seeking for the four dimensions of empowerment (inclusive of economic, political, knowledge, and psychological), all of which education can foster (Stromquist, 1995). Unterhalter similarly contends that schooling is central to global social justice; it acts to enable women to challenge the exclusion and claim rights which rightfully belong to them (Unterhalter, 2007). For Muslim women in minority contexts such as South Africa, education protects them by acting as a gateway to material empowerment, opening newer paths to employment, leadership, and civic participation (Stromquist, 1995; Unterhalter, 2007).

The second role is transformative: education is a medium through which women develop critical consciousness, renegotiate their identity, and find their voices amongst the silence. Freire describes education as a process of conscientisation (critical consciousness) which entails the awakening awareness of structural inequality and enabling collective action against the same (Freire, 1970). Hooks highlighted on the importance of education, as a way of liberation wherein the students actively resist against the silencing and regain the agency, reclaiming as their own (Hooks, 1994). Mirza demonstrates how women of a minority context utilise their experience in higher education not merely to prove their qualifications but as armour they use going against the norms to serve themselves in renegotiating their identity, challenging stereotypes and building alternative solidarities (Mirza, 2009). Dixit show similar dynamics specifically within the context of Muslim women in South Africa, where education becomes an open ground for negotiation between what is known when it comes to cultural belonging and social participation (Dixit, 2022). These challenging ideologies are strongly considered because not only do they allow Muslim women to gain access opportunities but to ultimately aid in reshaping the terms of their participation.

With the consideration of South Africa as the setting, education must be understood within broader conditions of structural inequality and identity negotiation. Aslam Fataar in an environment such as post-apartheid South Africa, the academic experience is deeply influenced by the location, identity, and structural inequality of society thereby requiring individuals to actively try to navigate and reinterpret their positions within institutions. For Muslim women, this reinforces the notion that education does not simply lead to empowerment, ongoing negotiation wherein the concepts of race, religion, and gender intersect with one another still exists. The same notion parallels with the argument of this paper wherein education becomes meaningful only when combined with other resources, to be specific, Islamic spirituality, to sustain agency under constraint.

Yet education by itself is not neutral, as expressed byUnterhalter and Mirza, that highlight how inequalities still persist, racialised stereotypes, schooling and education involve curriculum that is gender biased, and discrimination at institutions (Unterhalter, 2007; Mirza, 2009). Many Muslim women because of which view that empowerment cannot be guaranteed solely through education. As a complementary resource, this is how faith comes into play. In Islam, in educational environments, perseverance, resilience and moral grounding is provided

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through spirituality, particularly *sabr* (patience) and *tawakkul* (trust in Allah) which is grounded in Qur'an principles, which enables women to navigate the contradictions they encounter.

The Faith-Informed Agency Framework (FIAF), the idea of empowerment emerges from the way Muslim women actively integrate both faith as well as education on the basis of knowledge and inner strength to challenge opposition and attain an identity of coherentness. While Education provides the practical opportunities and transformative spaces, it cannot stand alone. FIAF puts together education as well as faith for the formation of agency furthermore highlighting the notion that Muslim women's empowerment is produced via the dynamic relationship between external resources of education and internal resilience such as one's spirituality.

Islamic Spirituality as a Resource for Agency

The presence of a persistent limitation within literature with regard to empowerment is its nature to view religion as a barrier rather than a resource. While this paper foregrounds the enabling potential of Islamic spirituality for Muslim women in minority contexts, it is important to acknowledge that religious traditions are not monolithic and are subject to diverse, often contested interpretations across communities (Mir-Hosseini, 1999; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002). In the minority context, Muslim women do not believe that this limitation is not just theoretically inadequate; moreover it is foundationally inaccurate. The Islamic spirituality is viewed as a resource stemming internally which when held strong with resilience, provides a purpose and hence enables Muslim women to steer through structural barriers upon which they encounter.

In the focus of Islam lies two concepts which persist throughout the life of a Muslim woman: *sabr*and *tawakkul*. While *sabr*is often translated simply as "patience," its Islamic meaning is deeper and actively involved. In the face of hardship, *sabr*compasses stability in morals, spiritual endurance, and disciplined perseverance. While sustaining morality and spiritual integrity through one's self and ethical resilience, it is an active as well as an ongoing practice of what sustains the individual through trials (Al-Ghazali, 2000; Siddiqi, 2006) which corresponds to the principles of the Holy Qur'an. In the face of hardships, it is the conscious ability to endure and persist to navigate through personal and structural barriers.

Tawakkul, often understood as "trust in Allah," similarly broadens much beyond simply the idea of resignation to divine will. Central to reliance on God which is moreover transformed into a physical action that is both intentional and meaningful even amongst the unknown. *Tawakkul* is related to ethical responsibility, taking initiative, and making of decisions, highlighting a dynamic balance between human effort (ijtihad) and trust in God's ultimate wisdom (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, 1999; Al-Baydawi, 2010). In one's life, practicing *tawakkul*does not eradicate the planning and preparation; rather, within the guardianship of higher divinity, it frames an intentional action which further sustains confidence and morality in hardships which aligns with the principles of Qur'an.

Nevertheless, interpretations of sabr and tawakkul can vary significantly. In some community contexts, they may be invoked in ways that encourage passive endurance or acceptance of unequal gender norms, potentially constraining rather than expanding agency (see, for example, critiques in Kütük-Kuriş, 2021; Shaikh, 2003). This paper does not suggest that all expressions of Islamic spirituality are inherently empowering; rather, it highlights how progressive and reflexive engagements with these concepts, particularly through critical Qur'anic hermeneutics can function as powerful resources when combined with education and contextual negotiation.

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Additionally, *sabr* and *tawakkul,* constitute a distinct Islamic framework of inner strength and resilience that is both equally enabling as it is transformative. To exercise agency, especially in settings defined by structural marginalisation, they provide resources. The cultivation of piety through patience, prayer, and disciplined religious practice, as reported by Mahmood, is not the surrender of selfhood but anethical and strategic formation of the self (Mahmood, 2005). Within life, women who embody *sabr* and *tawakkul* actively strive in the cultivation of resilience, in the making of meaning, and moral clarity, preparing themselves to steer through complex social and structural constraints. These concepts are made known as central internal resources within the FIAF, highlighting how an agency can emerge not only from external qualities of education and economic opportunity but also from intentional spiritual practice.

Importantly, sabr and tawakkul are not agency in themselves. Rather, they function as vital internal spiritual resources that enable and sustain agency. Agency, in this framework, is understood as the capacity to make and act upon meaningful choices within structural constraints (Kabeer, 1999; Giddens, 1984). Education expands the range of available choices and capabilities by providing economic independence, social mobility, knowledge, and critical consciousness. Islamic spirituality, through concepts such as sabr and tawakkul, offers meaning, resilience, moral orientation, and inner strength that allow women to persist, navigate adversity, and exercise those choices with purpose and ethical grounding. This distinction is crucial: sabr and tawakkul do not replace action but empower women to act meaningfully despite barriers, complementing the external opportunities afforded by education.

Wadud furthermore states that the patriarchal interpretation rather than the Qur'an in itself has historically been used to justify women's subordination. Muslim women who would carefully engage with the Holy Scripture utilise both intellectual and spiritual agency, thereby proving the authority to interpret their own tradition (Wadud, 1999). Barlas furthermore supports the same saying that Islamic texts contain heavy sources for justice in gender that patriarchal scholarship has long suppressed (Barlas, 2002). At the same time, such reinterpretive work remains contested within and across Muslim communities, reflecting ongoing debates about tradition, modernity, and gender. For Muslim women, especially in the minority context, showing their active participation with these traditions represents a form of empowerment deeply anchored in faith rather than opposed to it.Shaikh backed these arguments in the South African context, of the notion of Muslim women in South Africa who had drawn from the Islamic scholarship to challenge gender bias within the communities, through the development of strategies derived from faith which operate through spiritual commitment rather than despite it (Shaikh, 2003). This was one of the main distinctions for the FIAF: Islam is not framed as a coping mechanism but rather as an active supportive force of spirituality that interacts with education allowing for a meaningful agency.

This recognition of interpretive diversity strengthens rather than weakens the FIAF: it underscores the importance of the "contextual negotiation" dimension, through which women actively select, reinterpret, and integrate spiritual resources with education to advance their agency.

For Muslim women, this section entails how spirituality is not incidental nor supplementary to the empowerment, it merely stands as one of its foundations. In combination with critical readings of Islamic tradition for Muslim women, the resources of *sabr* and *tawakkul*, provide with resilience which is not explained by secular empowerment frameworks, rather than a barrier Islamic spirituality thus emerges as a constitutive resource for agency. Sabr and *tawakkul*remain central with education within the FIAF, allowing Muslim women to navigate through structural barriers while maintaining their integrity.

The Faith-Informed Agency Framework (FIAF)

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The FIAF draws upon feminist theory with the approach of capability, Islamic feminist scholarship, and the lived realities of South African explain how these women in minority contexts exercise agency. It rests on three interrelated dimensions which are discussed below. Agency could not be produced by education alone nor faith, but by their dynamic relationship within structural obstacles faced.

Dimension 1: Educational Capital (External Foundation)

Education functions as a resource of external empowerment. Drawing on Bourdieu's ideology of providing capital, educational attainment to Muslim women, with the essentials of academia, skills and proven credentials it may further grow into economic independence, social mobility, and an access to opportunity (Bourdieu, 1990). It furthermore allows for the renegotiation of identity and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1994; Mirza, 2009).

Educational capital broadens the aspect of substantive freedoms (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), but it is never neutral; it may reproduce inequalities in the discrimination of racism, gender bias, and religious stereotyping (Unterhalter, 2007). For Muslim women situated in the minority complex, education is more than an opportunity, it is the area where struggles and difficulty lies the most, and this is where the essentiality of spiritual resources come into play.

Dimension 2: Islamic Spiritual Resources (Internal Foundation)

Islamic spirituality functions as an internal empowerment resource. Building on the discussion above, sabr and tawakkul serve as active spiritual practices that cultivate endurance, moral clarity, and meaning. As illustrated, the cultivation of piety through self-formation offers a form of agency centred on ethical subjectivity rather than overt resistance (Mahmood, 2005). When combined with education through contextual negotiation, these resources sustain women's capacity to act with critical clarity amid marginalisation. Faith, therefore, is positioned not as a barrier but as one of the primary internal sources of agency in the FIAF.

Dimension 3: Contextual Negotiation (Integrative Dimension)

Contextual negotiation is the dynamic process through which Muslim women may be able to draw from both aspects of educational capital as well as spiritual resources in order to steer through challenges, resist the idea of marginalisation while successfully having the ability to exercise a meaningful agency. Giddens argues that agency is exercised within structures, but it is those same structures that have caused reshaping in the practice, a dynamic that captures how Muslim women in South Africa and other minority contexts operate (Giddens, 1984). When external and internal resources come together, they form contextual negotiation. It allows for women to refute stereotypes, challenge the discrimination, and render a feeling of belongingness in higher education, a place of work and public life. Muslim women are reflexive, active agents rather than passive victims of intersecting oppressions.

Interaction of the Three Dimensions

The three dimensions are interdependent and intersect with one another: (1) Educational capital allows for the availing of external opportunities; (2) Islamic spirituality is devoted to sustaining internal resilience; and (3) Contextual negotiations the integration of both, thereby transforming constraint into agency.

Educational capital by itself produces existing inequalities, while spirituality without the support of education risks is confined. Agency proves to be adequate when both factors come together through contextual negotiation. The cyclical model represents empowerment, through education it opens doors to a multitude of opportunities, faith helps to sustain the aspect of resilience and negotiation transforms the set of constraints into an agency that directly refutes the narratives that portray religion as restrictive and instead placing Muslim women under the minority context as active agents.

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Education allows for the Muslim women to grow providing opportunities, and the essentials such as knowledge, skills, and proven credentials which not only enable financial independence but also a place in society which can be mobilised rather than restricted, and identity negotiation. At the same time, Islamic spirituality works to provide internal resilience, and a grounding agency through the practices of sabr (patience) and tawakkul (trust in Allah) that serve to cultivate endurance, moral clarity, and make it meaningful.

The incorporation of both internal and external resources forms contextual negotiation which hereby transforms the structural constraints into spaces of agency. Deriving from this take, empowerment is solely formed through education or faith alone, but due to their dynamic interplay, it allows for Muslim women to act meaningful within and against structural barriers.

External opportunities are provided by educational capital, while internal resilience is sustained through Islamic spirituality. Both are integrated in contextual negotiation thereby, transforming structural constraint into agency. Risks arise when the internal and external resources do not combine hence reproducing inequalities, while without education, spirituality risks confinement to the private sphere. For example, without sufficient educational capital, Islamic spiritual resources such as sabr and tawakkul may lead to forms of endurance that remain confined to the private or domestic sphere, limiting women's public participation and reinforcing traditional gender roles despite strong personal faith (see Shaikh, 2003; Vahed and Waetjen, 2010).

Conversely, women with educational capital but limited integration of spiritual resources may experience heightened identity conflict, alienation in institutional settings, or difficulty sustaining long-term resilience against intersecting forms of discrimination, resulting in burnout or withdrawal. When internal and external resources fail to combine, inequalities are reproduced rather than challenged. When both aspects in cooperate together through contextual negotiation, agency is produced. This cyclical model of empowerment: education expands opportunity followed by faith sustains resilience, and negotiation transforms constraint into agency, express a challenged narrative that portrays religion as restrictive rather than positioning Muslim women as active agents.

South African context

This interdependence described is showcased in the context of South African Muslim women through the documentation provided by Vahed and Waetjen (2010) it was understood how Muslim women in Durban drew on both cultural and educational resources in order to forge public participation under apartheid (Vahed and Waetjen, 2010), while Shaikh demonstrates how South African Muslim women utilised the engagement of educations and faith filled resilience as a driving force to challenge patriarchal structures (Shaikh, 2003). These examples thereby validate that the contextual negotiation is not just a theoretical concept but an entirely lived practice which possesses deep anchors in the tradition and history of South Africa.

Global South Perspective

The FIAF progresses with Global South epistemology, focusing mainly on minority contexts and Islamic frameworks rather than relying on secular models based on the Western. It utilises the ideology of Muslim women's agency as a product of the intersection of education and faith, negotiated against the structural barriers which include racism, patriarchy, gender bias and religious stereotyping along with other barriers.

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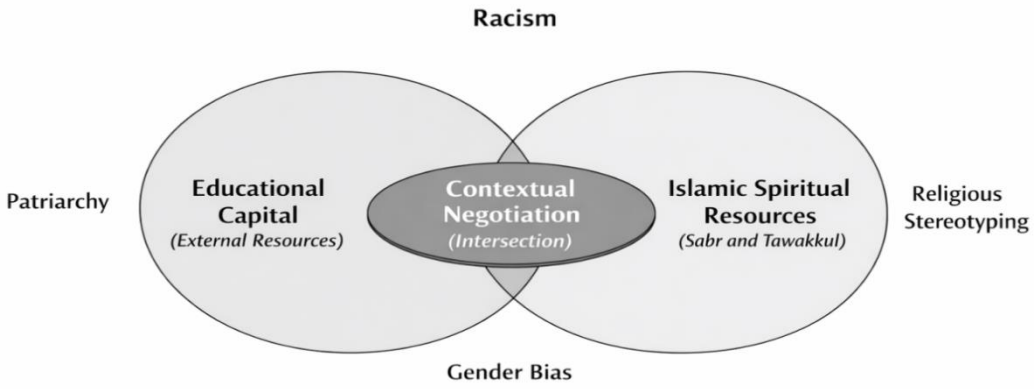
Figure 1. The Faith-Informed Agency Framework (FIAF)



Note: Figure 1, The Faith-Informed Agency Framework (FIAF): agency that has been produced through the intersection of educational capital (external resources) and Islamic spiritual resources (sabr and tawakkul) through contextual negotiation. Structural barriers (including racism, patriarchy, religious stereotyping, and gender bias) surround the model, illustrating the conditions within which agency is negotiated rather than given.

When taken all together these dimensions play out on how the agency is produced through the intersection of; educational, spiritual, and contextual factors. This conceptualisation is further developed in the discussion section, where the FIAF is visualised under theoretical debates on intersectionality, feminist theory, and Global South perspectives. The FIAF does not function in mere isolation; it enters through established theoretical debates and makes a distinct contribution to each. In doing so, it not only serves to engage the already existing theory but also extends it in ways that are well-informed by existing scholarship documenting the lived realities of Muslim women in South Africa. Specifically, the FIAF engages with three debates central to empowerment theory: intersectionality, the divide between Western and Islamic feminist approaches, and the Global South critique of empowerment frameworks.

Intersectionality and Muslim Women's Agency

Muslim women's experiences cannot be explained by any singular term of inequality. Race, religion, gender, and minority status simultaneously converge and compound into one another in ways that require intersectional analysis. Crenshaw had demonstrated that experiences moulded by multiple forms of marginalisation cannot be deliberated by examining race or gender alone; the intersection itself produces a qualitatively distinct form of exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989). Collins puts forth her concept of interlocking oppressions, and extends this, showing how race, gender, and class work to support one another within systems of power (Collins, 2000).

These interlocking oppressions for Muslim women in South Africa are particularly acute: the patriarchal norms within Muslim communities, apartheid inherited racial hierarchies, along with the stereotyping of Islam in secular public life; all intersect to cause the formation of marginalisation that no single framework can appropriately delegate. Due to the overlapping nature of these conditions, they unfortunately create a complexity in the social reality where all the experiences are undergone at once rather than separately. The FIAF serves to respond to this complexity by illustrating the agency which emerges with the intersections of all of them rather than despite them. Muslim women do not choose between their identities, let it be racial, religious, nor gender; they steer through the challenges of them all simultaneously, drawing on the influence of education and faith, including practices of sabr and tawakkul, as internal resources for doing so. Education may be understood as the availability of larger opportunities provided that faith too plays a role through the teachings of meaning, resilience, hence

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providing a direction. It is through this that the FIAF moves intersectionality beyond its diagnostic function and uses it as a generative lens, explaining how the ingredients of formulating an agency, rather than going against, due to the compounding forms of constraint. This shifts the light from viewing women only as constrained and restricted to recognising how they are able to actively respond within those same constraints due to the contextual negotiation.

Bridging Western Feminist and Islamic Understandings of Empowerment

Western feminist frameworks have often portrayed Muslim women as lacking agency when they draw on Islamic practice, equating agency primarily with resistance to religion (Mohanty, 2003). The FIAF challenges this binary. It demonstrates that Islamic spirituality, particularly through sabr and tawakkul which can provide an active, enabling form of agency when reflexively engaged, complementing rather than opposing external capabilities such as education (Mahmood, 2005; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002).

By integrating material (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Kabeer, 1999) and spiritual dimensions, the framework offers a more holistic understanding that bridges secular and Islamic feminist thought. Interpretive diversity is acknowledged: while some readings may constrain agency, progressive hermeneutics open pathways for empowerment.

A Global South Contribution

The theory basis for Empowerment has been developed most predominantly in the context of Western based academics, providing their opinion on the different aspects of individualism, secularism, moreover the relation between religion and freedom which do not serve to provide in the contexts of minority within the Global South. The same assumptions can restrict the way empowerment is understood in the areas where community, history and faith play a major role. Connell weighs in, stating that the theory discussed does not simply involve the application of Northern frameworks to Southern contexts but rather the generation of newer frameworks from Southern realities (Connell, 2007). The FIAF addresses the same. It is on the basis that the experiences in the South African Muslim women, drawn from the Islamic feminist scholarship developed outside the secular traditions which were formed in the West, and mainly centralises the notions of faith as a legitimate and productive component of empowerment instead of viewing it as a barrier. Through the incorporation of sabr and tawakkul as internal resources, the framework portrays the resilience and trust which must operate alongside structural interventions.

The importance of the positioning of Global South is beyond South Africa. Muslim minority communities exist across diverse national contexts, including Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Western diaspora settings, and through the intersections of faith, education, and structural marginalisation that shape South African Muslim women's lives are recognisable across these contexts. The FIAF provides a framework that travels because it is built on the specificity of one context rather than the neutrality of a universal model. Its relevance lies in its ability to speak to similar experiences across different settings, demonstrating how locally grounded knowledge can generate broader insights without erasing contextual differences. In this way, the framework encourages adaptation rather than replication, allowing it to remain responsive to diverse social, cultural, and institutional realities.

Compounded Inequalities and Unique Forms of Agency in South Africa

The South African context is particularly instructive for the FIAF and what makes it so is the way in which building of inequalities and bias have compounded together thereby producing forms of agency that Western feminist frameworks are not structurally prepared to recognise.

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The barriers that lie in South Africa comprise of race, religion, gender, and class which do not operate parallelly; they are layered one over the other and mutually constitutive. A Muslim woman navigating a post-apartheid university is not merely refuting the idea of gender bias rather she carries the entire load of racialised discrimination and marginalisation which were deeply rooted in centuries of colonialism and apartheid exclusion, wherein the aspect of the university accepting a religious minority community, and the ongoing negotiation of professional identity were not designed with her in mind.

The intersection of these pressures formulates a distinctive social response, one that cannot be adequately captured by assessing a single barrier by itself; it is precisely within this intersection that a distinctive form of agency emerges. From drawing simultaneously on external sources such as educational capital and on internal sources such as Islamic spiritual resources (sabr and tawakkul), South African Muslim women develop modes that are integrative rather than oppositional, reflexive rather than reactive in order to steer through the world and are deeply embedded in both lived history and spiritual tradition. This is not the universal subject of Western feminist theory; it is a contextually specific, historically supported under years of sedimentation, and spiritually sustained form of agency that the FIAF is uniquely positioned to name and theorise.

FIAF in Comparative Perspective: Beyond Secular Empowerment Models

Understanding the distinctiveness of FIAF is furthermore sharpened through the comparison with two influential secular empowerment frameworks: the capability approach and Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1970). Empowerment is demonstrated through the expansion of substantive freedoms, asking what people are genuinely able to do and be (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). It is a powerful framework which foregrounds structural conditions, challenges purely economic interpretation of what development is, and insists on the respect and dignity of each person. Overall on the basis of which it is built upon, the capability approach is essentially secular. Its relevance as an analyser is present as it identifies capabilities and examines their availability through the criteria which may be externally observed. With the framework in mind it is difficult to explain the inner dimension of empowerment: the way wherein spiritual conviction plays a role, practiced patiently over time through sabr and tawakkul, wherein it is being utilised to broaden a woman’s effective freedom, sustaining her capacity to act even when external capabilities remain constrained.

On the same level of interest, Freirean pedagogy provides another approach. Demonstrating how education becomes absolutely essential when it aids to cultivate critical consciousness, moreover enabling learners to name and refute the structures that aim to restrict them (Freire, 1970). The FIAF affirms this insight and builds on it. Education indeed plays a transformative role within FIAF, as it prepares women to negotiate upon their terms with regard to their participation in public life and cultivates aspects of critical awareness, and provides more doors to opportunity. But where Freire’s model states the transformative changes caused by education in the dialectic between learner and social structure, the FIAF introduces a third, irreducible element: Islamic spirituality.

For Muslim women, the internal resources of faith are not supplementary to the educational process; they are constitutive of it. The roles played by Sabr are to sustain the will to persist through educational institutions that can be alienating and exclusionary whereas Tawakkul provides the grounded confidence to act purposefully even in environments of uncertainty and discrimination. Nuraan Davids, discusses the resonance between Muslim women's identities of faith and citizenship, arguing that educational engagement is shaped through faith commitments and religious understandings rather than existing independently of them(Davids, 2023).

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By foregrounding sabr and tawakkul as constitutive rather than supplementary resources, FIAF reframes empowerment through a cyclical process wherein the external opportunity and internal resilience converge. This reconceptualisation refutes the assumption of secular feminist, that the agency must be oppositional, rather than accepting that Muslim women's agency to be integrative, reflexive, and deeply contextual. In doing so, FIAF advances Global South epistemologies by centring Islamic concepts as legitimate analytical categories, rather than importing Northern frameworks and then adjusting them at the margins for a minority religious context.

Muslim Women as Active Agents

Going through all three debates the FIAF insists that Muslim women's experiences cannot be reduced to a simple oppression–empowerment binary. Drawing simultaneously on educational capital to expand opportunities and Islamic spiritual resources (sabr and tawakkul) for resilience, women actively negotiate structural barriers through contextual negotiation. This produces an integrative, reflexive form of agency that is historically grounded in South African Muslim women's organising traditions (Vahed and Waetjen, 2010; Shaikh, 2003; Meer, 1975). Rather than choosing between faith and empowerment, they continually integrate both, redefining agency as an ongoing, lived practice sustained by education and spirituality.

Conclusion

While FIAF is considered as a developed conceptual framework, its applicability requires empirical testing across the various, diverse contexts of minority. Future research should explore how Muslim women in different regions utilise and draw from the educational capital and spiritual resources in practice. Comparative studies in Europe, Southeast Asia, and North America could reveal how the different structural backgrounds comprise of conditions (such as Islamophobia, migration, or postcolonial legacies) that influence the interaction between education and faith. Qualitative methodologies, including ethnography, life-history interviews, and participatory action research, would be especially effective in visualising the different forms of contextual negotiation that were lived and theorised in FIAF. Longitudinal studies could further examine how sabr and tawakkul sustain the agency over time, especially due to the important roles they play in battling against the environments of persistent discrimination which aligns with the principles of Qur'an. Extending FIAF empirically would not only validate its theoretical claims but also contribute to a global discourse on empowerment that is inclusive of Islamic epistemologies and responsive to minority realities. In this way, FIAF opens pathways for scholarship that provides a bridge between the conceptual innovation with the lived experience, ensuring the relevance and applicability in both, within South Africa and across Muslim minority communities worldwide. This paper has argued that Muslim women's agency in minority contexts is both comprised of faith informative and education enabled, and that these two dimensions cannot be separated. The FIAF demonstrates that empowerment emerges from the dynamic relationship between educational capital, Islamic spiritual resources, and contextual negotiation. By integrating external opportunities with internal resilience, the FIAF reframes the idea that Muslim women are not merely passive subjects of oppression but rather as reflexive agents who actively navigate through structural barriers that stand in their way.

The FIAF is mainly a conceptual framework, while it provides the theory and scholarship across domains such as capability, feminism and Islamic perspectives, temporal testing is required to examine its validity and applicability amongst variation in contexts. Within particular contexts of minority (such as higher education in South African, diasporic communities in North America or Muslim communities in Europe) future studies should aim to utilise the FIAF framework to understand the relation between education and faith, observing how they interact in order to provide the agency. To capture the multidimensional aspects of contextual

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negotiation which is theorised in the framework, qualitative methodologies (such as in-depth interviews, ethnographic approaches and case studies) would be most appropriate.

The relevance of FIAF is direct. Through the recognition of the relationship between faith and education as interdependent resources of agency which moves beyond the secular ideologies that portray religion as restrictive or peripheral. Designing of the curriculum may integrate faith sensitive approaches which acknowledge the different spiritual commitments as a source of identity development and persistent resilience. This does not mean hierarchy in religion is in any way appropriate rather by including inclusivity where internal resources such as in Islam, sabr and tawakkul are recognised as legitimate sources of empowerment. Similarly through initiatives in the workplace may be largely beneficial when acknowledgment of spirituality in sustaining professional participation. Company policies which accommodate the variability in religion (such as flexible schedule for prayer, recognition of faith informed leadership practices). These can help to involve faith and enhance a working Muslim woman's ability to thrive in a professional workspace. This may also aid policy makers and educators to create environments wherein empowerment is attained through both external and internal resources such as opportunity and resilience for the latter.

The contribution of the FIAF is substantial. It refutes and challenges the ideas put forth by Western centric empowerment models by centring the epistemologies based in Islam and Global South perspectives. It bridges the division present between secular feminist and Islamic feminist thought, demonstrating that faith functions not as a constraint on Muslim women's agency but as one of its most significant enabling resources. It positions Muslim women as active, reflexive agents who do not simply choose between oppression and empowerment but continually negotiate both, drawing simultaneously on education and spirituality to do so. While based in South Africa, the framework may be applicable to other minority contexts, including Muslim communities present in areas such as Russia and Europe. By reconceptualising Muslim women's agency as simultaneously education enabled and faith informed, this study offers a framework relevant not only to South Africa but to Muslim minority communities worldwide. In doing so, it contributes to global debates on intersectionality, empowerment, and Southern theory, while opening pathways for empirical research that can further refine and extend the framework.

This article thus develops the Faith-Informed Agency Framework (FIAF), a conceptual model explaining how Muslim women in minority contexts negotiate agency through the interaction of educational capital, Islamic spiritual resources, and contextual conditions. Rather than positioning faith and empowerment as oppositional, FIAF demonstrates how religious meaning systems may function alongside educational opportunities as resources through which women navigate structural constraints.

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