15th Annual NARTI Conference

Abstract

Research Area: Organisational Behaviour

Title:

Negotiating religion, sexuality and the obedient body at work:

An intersectional approach to exploring barriers to career among heterosexual and Lesbian religious minority women professionals with children

Keywords: maternal bodies; women professionals; religion; sexuality; gender and organization

Introduction

This project contributes to gender and diversity research by exploring how Lesbian and heterosexual Muslim and Jewish mothers navigate tensions between faith, personal values and career progression. My research will extend intersectionality theory by collecting and examining rich empirical evidence to theorize the complex interstices between religion, sexuality, motherhood, and organisational structures [1].

Existing research on sexuality in organisations usually assumes LGBTQ+ are white [2]. Similarly, scholarship has begun to consider how maternal capacity - women's potential for pregnancy, menstruation and menopause constrain careers. It is established that women feel pressured to control their 'maternal bodies' to conform to standards of professionalism as a form of internalized obedience [3]. However, diversity *and* management literature does not yet offer a cohesive understanding of the link between occupational pressures, sexuality, religion, motherhood and internalised obedience.

Intersectional and interdisciplinary research designs are recognised as robust and valuable approaches to illuminate how multiple dimensions of diversity interact to produce organisational inequalities and barriers for ethnoreligious women professionals [4]. UKRI's 2020 evidence review on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) research highlights how racial harassment and LGBTQ+ discrimination persists, while the influence of religion has received limited attention in organisational research [5]. This echoes scholarly calls [1] to move beyond the intersecting axes of gender and race. The proposed research begins to address these

gaps by illuminating the experiences of Lesbian and heterosexual Muslim and Jewish women professionals.

State of the Art

Despite an increasing number of religious minority women attaining professional qualifications, research indicates that UK Muslim women, especially those originating from Pakistan or Bangladesh face career progression barriers attributed to being female, non-white, and an ethnoreligious minority [4]. Furthermore, between 25% and 66% of LGBTQ+ employees experience workplace discrimination based on their sexual orientation [2]. It is, further, well known that motherhood is associated with workplace discrimination and career constraints [3]. Yet present management research does not sufficiently recognise the complexities of the relationships among and between difference and discrimination. Extending intersectionality theory is essential to better understand employment experience among workers who embody multiple forms of difference [6].

Specifically, the research will address calls for more qualitative interdisciplinary research on the experiences of "religious minorities", "non-heterosexual individuals", motherhood and "non-traditional forms of family" [6, p. 184].

This interdisciplinary research contributes to medical research on health and well-being and key themes of the Humanities (i.e. Philosophy and Religion). The workplace spirituality literature indicates there is little consensus over the meaning of faith and its effect on workers [7]. Similarly, little attention has been paid to how biological, social and environmental factors influence the physical and mental health of religious minority women professionals with children [8]. My research will help address these limitations by interrogating normative public health valorisations of the ideal 'professional' worker whilst providing new insights into how ethnoreligious and sexual minority women make sense of their multiple roles within organisations.

The overall aim is to illuminate how religion, sexuality and socially constructed notions of 'good' motherhood [8] influence Muslim and Jewish women's employment experiences. In

doing so, this interdisciplinary, qualitative research contributes to *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)* in two key ways:

First, it investigates the career progression challenges Muslim and Jewish women professionals (heterosexual and Lesbian) experience before and after being mothers. The research seeks to understand what conflicts and constraints these women experience regarding their faith, sexuality and their employer's cultural and social expectations. The research explores how far (or otherwise) Muslim and Jewish women professionals feel able to personify the image of embodied organizational 'obedience': an idea developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault [9] that identifies how workers may be rewarded (or punished) depending on their capacity to conform to the organizational systems and expectations that privilege certain groups. For example, receptions, where alcohol is served, may disadvantage employees who feel obliged to decline.

Second, it examines how the labour of production (employment), as well as notions of 'good' motherhood (reproduction), are negotiated by Lesbian and heterosexual religious minority women in the presence of 'stratified reproduction' [10]. This concept explains how reproduction among white, privileged populations is highly valued by public policies and society, while childbearing among ethnoreligious and sexual minorities is denigrated. Given the above, the **proposed research questions** are:

RQ1. How do Lesbian and heterosexual Muslim and Jewish mothers navigate, resist or conform to career progression barriers?

RQ2. How does the intersection between religious lifestyle arrangements and maternal ability shape career barriers and 'obedient bodies?'

Methodology

This research assumes that gender, sexuality and perceptions of `good motherhood` and maternal bodies are socially constructed [4] and therefore will be informed by a social constructionist perspective.

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An innovative in-depth multi-method qualitative approach will be adopted using digital diaries and semi-structured interviews [11]. Qualitative digital diaries will contribute new insights to existing management literature on work, identity, and family by providing rich episodic data that dynamically captures the relationship between work demands, personal and family responsibilities in a way that traditional approaches cannot [11]. Offering the advantage of immediacy, qualitative diaries facilitate participants' reflexivity – meaning the ability to gain a deeper understanding of the holistic nature of their work-life dynamics, offsetting the problems of retrospective accounts and enabling recent events or daily practices of work-life negotiation to be recalled in detail [12]. Online interviews will be conducted prior to and following the collection of episodic diaries. Participants will complete their digital diary in the mode they prefer e.g., written/audio-recorded using a smartphone.

The participants will be educated to university degree level or higher and will identify as: Women with children; Lesbian or heterosexual, and Muslim or Jewish. In line with recommended sample sizes [13], I shall recruit a minimum of 10 participants from each religious group. To overcome any potential challenges when recruiting participants, two strategies will be employed. First, as a religious minority and member of the LGBT community, I will use my professional networks to access participants. I have established initial contact with *The Women's Organisation Liverpool, Avenir Consulting* (a consulting agency promoting the establishment of more inclusive and diverse workplaces), and *The Liverpool Commonwealth Association* who will all support this project. This initial approach will be followed by snowball sampling, an appropriate approach to recruit minority populations [12].

The data will be analysed inductively using template analysis as it offers a flexible and reliable approach to explore different perspectives within a specific context [11]. This approach is particularly beneficial when analysing qualitative multi-modal data that capture different perspectives on work-family boundaries across time [11].

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Expected impact

Extending intersectionality theory by explaining the complex intersection of motherhood, religion, sexuality and gendered organisational structures will offer diversity and management research new theoretical perspectives. My research will also offer a strategic foundation, enabling policymakers, businesses and external stakeholders to better understand, measure and facilitate sustainable EDI government policies that help *improve UK productivity and worker well-being.*

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