Gender Embodiment of Non-Cisgender Muslims in a Catholic Space

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Keywords

Non-cisgender Muslims, quality education, policy for inclusion of gender divers persons, Catholic higher education, gender embodiment

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences and perceptions of non cisgender Muslim students toward gendered structures within a Catholic higher education institution, grounded in the experiences of respondents who possess multiple intersecting identities. The study utilizes Snowball Sampling to gather data, which was examined using thematic analysis. Drawing on Gender Socialization Theory (GST) and the concept of gender embodiment, the paper examines how these individuals interpret institutional operations and their perceived influence on the embodiment process. Findings indicate that students navigate a liminality of social norms, reflecting tension between traditional, rigid norms and evolving, inclusive ideas about gender. Institutional structures, specifically the uniform policy, gender inclusion advocacy, and the classroom environment, are direct reflections of these structures, shaping students' reflexive identity work and cautious self-presentation. The analysis concludes that institutional inclusivity is experienced less through objective policy content and more through student interpretation; consequently, policies that exist "on paper" do not translate into felt safety unless they are performed visibly, consistently, and recognizably to marginalized students. Institutions must revise policies, promote inclusive teaching, and offer support to help non cisgender students navigate this liminal space.

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Introduction

In the Philippines, terms such as 'queer' and 'non-cisgender' are often associated with *bakla* (gay), *tomboy* (lesbian), and *binabae* (female cross-dresser); however, these are relatively recent terminologies designed to capture the diversity within the spectrum of gender identities. In light of the nation's colonial legacy and entrenched adherence to Catholicism, discourse on gender identity and corresponding forms of life has developed only gradually (McMorris, 2018; Tan, 2023: 23–26). Even beyond the country, Gender and Religion already is a complex intersectional dimension in Gender studies (Höpflinger/Lavanchy/Dahinden, 2012: 615–618). Hence, before delving into the complexities of the field, it is imperative to establish clear definitions of both "religion" and "gender" to have a clearer visualization of how they overlap and in which ways their nuances intersect. Religion, as defined by classic sociologists like Durkheim, is a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community"[1]. This encompasses most of religion's unique characteristics and how it has the capacity to set and define norms in terms of what is acceptable and forbidden, often acquired and adapted by the "moral community" or by institutions affiliated with the particular religion.

The Nature and Role of Religious Universities

Universities can adopt these norms given the historical influence and involvement that varying religions have in higher education, which "continues to be extensive and manifests itself through the presence of believing Christians, Jews and Muslims in almost all universities and colleges in the world" (Arthur, 2008: 197). Universities founded by religions often are the most saturated in terms of these ideals, guiding principles, and core values that permeate the institutions they established (Pressimone, 2013). Although this is not the case for all institutions, the existence of a portion of them is enough grounding for the assertion's justification. This is an interesting field of discussion because it raises questions about how certain universities, especially those identified with or founded by specific religions, implement rules and protocols, particularly in relation to the gendered aspects of

[1] Durkheim, Emile [1912]. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Trans. by K. E. Fields, New York: The Free Press, 44.

their students and how these influences raise questions about how certain universities, especially those identified with or founded by specific their process of embodiment. Another angle that could also be studied from this logic is the converse influence of gender on these institutions and how policies adjust to accommodate gender identities. However, this study will focus on the former and describe the experiences of students who do not identify with the gender binary of male or female.

Non-Cisgender Identity and Embodiment

Gender refers to "the roles and expectations attributed to men and women in a given society, roles which change over time, place, and life stage" (Phillips, 2005: 2). Mason (2018: 95–96) pushes this further and explains that "Gender is not determined by the body, yet as social performance, it is always evaluated to [be about] the body. Thus, any attempt to understand gender — particularly gendered inequalities — must ask how gender is embodied". The question of an individual's embodiment process can then be assumed to be an outcome, to some extent, of their environment and the socialization that occurs, which determines their "embodying procedure", consequently, the way they will perceive their own identities. While Phillips (2005) critiques the binary imposition of masculine and feminine gender embodiments, Costello (2020) goes beyond this and tackles the embodiment process of those in the third sex, specifically those who do not identify as straight—or as *cis-gendered* and are therefore recognized as *non-cisgendered* individuals. Non-cisgender orientation can be defined as not identifying with the gender assigned at birth, but with a spectrum of "diverse gender identities that do not match people's sex assigned at birth, including transgender, genderfluid, and non-binary" (Freeman et al., 2022: 10). There are two main reasons why it is useful to explore non-cisgender. In essence, firstly the study allows an understanding of the individual process that people take to fully comprehend themselves, their romantic and sexual preferences, and their gender identity and expression (O'Brien/Penna/Hay, 2014), all of these things and their process of actualization differing from person to person. Secondly, as result, inquiries regarding the influence that institutions have on diverse and varied embodiment procedures should be opened, and attention focused on the normative dimension of policies created in response, and how their influence is perceived in return by their recipients (Worthen, 2016). The specific metrics that embodiment includes a) awareness—being cognitively conscious of the body you

are in, b) interaction—identifying with the body you perceive from the way you are interacted with and treated, and c) action—aligning with the body and the identity you personally resonate with from the basis of your own behavior and your perceived external reception of it; all of which are phases and elements of the process. There is no conclusive sequencing or definite weighing by degree of importance among these elements within the process, given the variances that exist in different studies concerning the concept.

Gender Inclusion or Discrimination – Muslim-majority Contexts

Non-cisgender Muslim/Islam-identifying individuals face severe risks not only of micro-aggression but also of violence and institutional exclusion (Shah, 2016). Research on transgender lives in Muslim-majority contexts documents persistent stigma, limited legal protections, and social invisibility, which can contribute to significant psychosocial harm (Taslim et al., 2022). Their conditions within the university, if not extremely violent, are tailor-fitted to be micro-aggressive. This situation can severely differ by extent and interpretations, and while this is not definitive and conclusive absent a discussion on its frequency, its mere existence stands as a necessary precedent for further investigations. Understanding the experiences of the university environment among non-cisgender Muslim students is integral in readjusting how we interact, the projects and efforts our institution implements in line with catering to this demographic, and the social conditions we set that define them. As it is, *non-cisgenderism* is a difficult issue to talk about, especially in evaluating how we influence the process that individuals take to identify with this gender identity. It is a crucial issue, especially when discrimination against homosexuals is currently receiving attention and becoming more common, as homosexuality is slowly becoming more visible and has gained more traction over the years as well.

One of the two facets of discrimination, and the method by which this bias is frequently enacted, is expressed verbally—especially in institutional contexts where individuals use derogatory language toward members of the LGBTQI and broader non-cisgender community (Collins & Clement, 2012). Furthermore, Lucchese (2022: 4) offers, in their assessment of gender-reporting guidelines within universities, that “gender equity is a topic of significant interest for universities, which are called upon to plan strategies and measures to increase gender equality in

line with international policies". This aligns directly with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 5, 4, and 16, which emphasize gender equality, quality education, and building strong, inclusive institutions—standards that necessarily include gender minorities such as non-cisgender individuals. Combating gender-based discrimination is likewise integral in protecting minorities from internal and often psychological crises that may lead to depression, anxiety, or—in the most severe circumstances—death (Alibudbud, 2022). Zabaniotou (2020) further expands on the significance of advocating for change through systematic and coordinated institutional efforts aimed at advancing gender equality, emphasizing how universities hold paramount influence in shaping policies that directly affect students' gendered perceptions.

While Zabaniotou focuses on the 5th SDG, Goetz and Jenkins (2016: 127–130) introduce SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, and explain that the institution, in this discussion—the university, can only pursue this sustainable development goal by improving the conditions under which gender-based conflicts are mitigated and apprehended through policies that protect gender minorities. This version of policy scaffolding ties back to education and how defining its quality should include standards of fairness and an evaluation of social treatment toward this demographic, a reflection of SDG 4. The 2016 analysis of Oxfam similarly emphasizes that SDG 16 necessitates governance structures that are gender-responsive, equitable, and capable of ensuring justice and institutional accountability, reinforcing the role of educational institutions in creating socially safe environments (Oxfam, 2016: 3–6). Likewise, part of being a strong institution is to presume fair and non-discriminating policies that ensure cohesion, that ensure peace and justice (Goetz & Jenkins, 2016).

1. Theoretical Backgrounds

This research integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to explain the intersectional dimensions of gendered experience within formal educational institutions. *Gender Socialization Theory* (GST) explains how institutions function as socializing agents, shaping identity through the internalization of norms and roles. It refers to the "process by which individuals learn to 'do' gender through interactions with key agents such as family, peers, media, and educational systems" (John et al., 2017: 6). In this study, schools and universities are emphasized as

primary agents of gender socialization, transmitting values and behavioral standards through interactions among teachers, peers, and curricula (Witt, 2000; Wentzel, 2014). These mechanisms allow institutions to influence how individuals come to understand and embody gender, which grounds the metrics for which we define how the institution "influences" the demographic through its a) policies, b) engagements, c) teaching and learning methods. The GST also maintains that every individual undergoes socialisation for as long as they take part in the broader functions and operations of social spheres and socialising agents. This study will primarily focus on Schools and Universities, and how they play a significant role in the process of gender socialization.

The Gender Embodiment Theory (GET) complements the GST by focusing on how individuals internalize and enact gender through bodily and subjective experience. Embodiment may be understood as "an ongoing process of configuring subjectivity and the ensuing gendered agency" (Selgas, 2014: 190). It encompasses three key dimensions: biological difference (the body as organism), socio-cultural imprint (the body as regulated), and lived experience (the body as felt and perceived). However, the study only uses its implication analysis that individuals adopt during the embodiment phases which are a) awareness, b) interaction, and c) action as metrics for evaluating perceived institutional influence from the demographic. In this study, embodiment serves as an analytic tool for interpreting how participants become aware of, interact with, and act upon institutional gender structures.

Furthermore, *Agency Theory* (AT) provides a counterbalance to structural determinism by emphasizing individuals' capacity to act within and upon constraining systems. While agency can be defined as the ability to act independently of social structures[2], Giddens (1984) resolves this apparent dichotomy by proposing that structure is both enabling and constraining; that there shouldn't be a simplistic polarization of *structure* and *agency*, as it is a false dichotomous assumption. Additionally, its influence on individual decision-making operates to varying degrees, none of which can be adequately represented within the statistical framework of the present study. Giddens (1984: 25), moreover, infers from interdependent dimensions of social life based on the assumption that structure and

[2] "Agency: Definition & Explanation." Website Sociology Plus. 2022. https://sociology.plus/glossary/agency/

agency are not opposites a conceptual reconciliation, which grounds the study's assumption that participants may be in position of assessing and interpreting their own experiences, even within institutional constraints. In addition, the Reflexivity Theory (RT), as developed by Giddens (1984), extends the framework by focusing on perception and self-monitoring, as key tools in meaning-making. Individuals do not experience reality directly but through interpretive processes, shaped by prior knowledge and social context. Reflexivity thus becomes a mechanism through which individuals construct coherence, interpret institutional influence, and assign meaning to their experiences (Giddens, 1984). According to Robert Kegan, the reflexive-self framework conceptualizes identity formation, as emerging from the interplay of cognition, emotion, and moral awareness (1982)[3]. His synthesis of phenomenology and psychoanalysis emphasizes that self-understanding arises from both intellectual reflection and emotional recognition of difference (1982: 128–136). This developmental and affective view deepens the sociological model of reflexivity, by anchoring it in lived experience. For non-cisgender individuals, particularly within religiously grounded institutions, Kegan's conception of difference as a formative force reflects the ongoing negotiation between self-concept and social expectations. In educational settings, this reflexive self-process unfolds within environments that shape not only cognition, but also moral and emotional growth. Learning spaces, therefore, act as moral and affective arenas as much as cognitive ones. Reflexivity functions as both a developmental and an ethical process, enabling individuals to construct coherence amid conflicting narratives of gender, religion, and institutional policy. Kegan (1982) additionally argues that identity development unfolds through a series of meaning-making stages, each necessitating a reconfiguration of the self in light of social expectations—thereby strengthening the study's use of reflexivity as a fluid and contextually situated process. Within the framework of embodiment theory, this study conceptualises identity formation as a multidimensional process that integrates psychological growth, sociocultural interaction, and engagement with institutional structures.

Ultimately, the study does not attempt to determine whether gender is defined solely by environment or by individual agency. Instead, it explores the intersection between

[3] Jackson, R. L. & M. A. Hogg (Eds), "Reflexive Self or Reflexivity." 2010. In *Encyclopedia of Identity*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412979306.n201

the two—how institutional structures within catholic higher education shape, and are simultaneously reshaped by, individual processes of embodiment, reflexivity, and agency.

2. Methodology and Design

This study focused on the respondents' experience of university policy, engagement in university-supported advocacy, and the classroom. All of which are considered in this study as gendered structures. A descriptive qualitative approach using key informant interviews (KIIs) was utilized in this study to describe the experience and perceptions of the gender embodiment process of non-cisgender Muslim students on institutional policy, engagement, and teaching and learning methods. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique, where subjects were recruited through referrals from individuals who shared relevant characteristics (Moss/Donnellan/O'Neill, 2012; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The study targeted a sample size of 5 to 6 participants, with the final number determined by reaching data saturation—when no new insights emerged from further interviews (Holloway, 2013). Six (6) informants were recruited for the face-to-face interviews, using a semi-structured set of open-ended questions allowing the participants to freely share their experiences and perceptions. A Key Informant Interview (KII) table based on in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals who have informed insights, to ensure the proceeding thematic analysis was referenced from transcribed and grounded data, in order to ensure consistent and accurate analysis. (Braun, 2019). This study was submitted to Xavier University Research Ethics Office (REO) for review by the institutional ethics board.

3. Presentation of Findings

The study describes the respondents' experiences of the institutionalized uniform policy, gender-related engagement or advocacy, and the classroom to note how these experiences shape their perceptions to infer its influence on their own gender embodiment procedure. The aim is to explore these elements and determine the process of them becoming aware of themselves and the feelings and emotions they experience, the interactions they have with others, and their observation of behavior. These findings are discussed in the sections below.

Liminality of Social Norms

Liminality can be described as the quality of being in between two places or stages, on the verge of transitioning to something new[4], which describes the experiences of the respondents who answer the condition of being between two states or not fully in one category or another. As explanandum, these respondents shared a puzzling "difficulty" and "feelings of hesitation" as consequence of their experience of liminality; the intelligence/rationality of their mode of comprehension and acceptance of personal and social identity are based on experiences encountered, from different groups and socializing platforms, and consequently all offered different reception and responses to the expressions of their gender identity. As explanans, the becoming aware of a given gender, as shared by the respondents, is determined not only by experience but also the type of social norms they are exposed to. While this is a promising point of inquiry, as there is merit in exploring how different households shape the reported "difficulty" of this journey, the bigger and more noticeable pattern among these answers was the theme of liminality among them, especially the one experienced within the formal educational institution. The study found that while different respondents grew up in different households, shared to either be "conservative" or "liberal" from the preliminary questions, the commonality of liminal converging social norms was frequent among these environments, extending even to their attended catholic higher education.

Tied back to their experiences within the university, while all of them agreed that the uniform policy, which allows *transgender students* to wear the uniform they feel they identify with, is a "progressive" step for inclusion. Respondents had different responses in terms of their experiences and further perceptions of them. *Trans-Muslim* respondents shared experiences of "being catcalled or being made fun of in the classroom by some peers and a few faculty when opting into the policy's allowances"[5]. The informants indicated that, despite its intention to be inclusive, the policy also generates discomfort in their process of self-recognition. A key concern they raised relates to the policy's limited scope. On days when they are not wearing the prescribed uniform, they reported uncertainty about whether they are still permitted to present according to their gender identity, since the policy explicitly

[4] "Liminality." *Vocabulary.com Dictionary.* Accessed September 18, 2024.

[5] Informant 2 (Face to Face Interview, June 2024).

covers only the use of gender-affirming uniforms and does not mention civilian attire—its implementation often left to "the guard's arbitration"[6]. This conditional form of recognition, which informants described as an "exclusive dignity,"[7] leads some of them to question whether pursuing transition is feasible or desirable, given the emotional and social strains, associated with navigating these inconsistent institutional allowances.

Non-binary Muslim students, on the other hand, prefer for there to be a genderless uniform so they don't have to be associated with both binary ways of identification, which is an experience they often encounter with classroom interaction, groupings, assignments, and even leadership positions. This concern also shapes how they understand themselves in relation to their own experiences of gender dysphoria. Respondents explained that the gendered design of the uniform often conflicts with their preferred modes of presenting themselves, including more androgynous expressions. They emphasized that this preference is not universal or homogeneous among non-cisgender students; rather, the difficulty arises when they imagine the version of themselves, they hope to embody and find that the uniform's imposed design does not align with that self-image. Finally, the *genderfluid* respondents wished the policy to have been more flexible, while they get accepted for wearing the opposite uniform if they wish to, they are often met with confusion in the classroom setup when they shift from either uniform category. They get asked what gender they really prefer more, which often leads to doubts and feelings of internal rejection and dispute.

Informants shared liminality, especially on the intersection between the central student government's progressive policies and the persisting instances of conservative treatment that exist and stem from certain faculty members, and described it as:

> "very hard and confusing to feel comfortable about your own skin when there are different opinions that revolve around its acceptance, there are teachers who are very accepting and who would encourage us, and there are those who aren't - who would openly ask us if

[6] Informant 3, Face-to-Face Interview, June 2024.

[7] Informant 3, Face-to-Face Interview, June 2024.

> it's allowed within our religion or if we aren't scared to be persecuted because of it. (Informant 4, Face to Face Interview, June 2024).

Another informant described an incident in which a faculty member asked, *"Are your parents okay with the way you dress, especially as a Meranao? Doesn't your religion forbid that and say you're going to hell if you violate it?"*[8]. The informant characterized the encounter as deeply distressing, noting that the question was delivered in an interrogative and accusatory tone and was asked publicly in front of peers and classmates, which intensified the sense of embarrassment and trauma.

Respondents also described comparable feelings of discomfort when interacting with certain members of the student government, who publicly advocate for gender inclusion yet are "very ignorant of how pronouns work or who joke about it openly simply because they're also members of the LGBTQ+ but aren't necessarily non-cisgendered"[9]. Although the informants could not quantify how often these instances occur, they noted that even isolated negative encounters contribute to a broader sense of uncertainty regarding the community's acceptance of their identities, given the liminal and often contradictory responses to their gender expression.

These overlapping points of liminality—where "progressive policy" exists within a "conservative environment"—illustrate the dispersed and uneven experiences of non-cisgender Muslim students as they navigate the gender embodiment process, particularly in moments of becoming aware of and affirming who they are.

Identity as a Reflexive Response

The study found that all respondents interacted on the baseline of "feeling comfortable" with the receiving party and having a "sense of reception", specifically noticing varying differences in reflexive response from previous direct or indirect interactions with the recipient. Reflexive response is a commonality among all respondents; it explains a subconscious knee-jerk reaction stimulated by preceding encounters and indicated by feelings referenced from that encounter. For the uniform

[8] Informant 5, Face-to-Face Interview, June 2024.

[9] Informant 1, Face-to-Face Interview, June 2024. Ed. Note: LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and other identities.

policy, while the participants had different perceptions on whether or not the provision made it easier for them to interact or not: gender fluid participants shared not having particularly strong feelings towards it because their experiences dictated they could still blend in and interact if they acted cis-passing, nonbinary Muslim respondents would rather opt into civilian, while the trans respondents had mixed emotions - all of them shared the experience of interacting based on who they felt " to be more comfortable around" when wearing the opposite uniform. Groups such as "best friend circles" and "liberal teachers" were indicated to have more frequency of interaction with and a higher and more open expression of their gender, while "external peers and classmates" and "conservative teachers" were flagged by the respondents to have hesitations interacting with, and expressing more extreme expressions of their gender. The respondents indicated that this difference was from positive experiences with the former group: complimenting them on their hairstyles matched with the uniform for the trans respondents, using non-binary pronouns like they/them/Mx. For non-binary respondents, allowing gender-fluid participants to alternate between uniforms, while denying this option to others, both signals and influences the nature of interactions they are prepared to engage in.

In terms of engagement, all respondents shared that they felt more comfortable interacting with the people around them, given the comfort of a proactive and inclusive student government that openly supports and advocates for inclusion and welfare for gender minorities. Respondents consistently reported experiences such as viewing tarpaulins, posters or banners, engaging with online solidarity posts, and participating in gender-inclusion activities (e.g., legislative efforts, SOGIE education). These encounters informed their judgements about which individuals 'they could' feel comfortable with, contingent on those individuals' perspectives on Student Government initiatives. One informant described being able to take an HIV test openly, without fear of being outed, because the Student Government assured strict confidentiality. Respondents also recounted showing their parents an episode of "Tough Conversations", an online talk show produced by the Student Government that addresses key social issues, including the acceptance of non-cisgender people. This talk show had a wide impact, as "the first step […] parents have taken" allowing them to understand "why we were the way they were." A respondent shares clearly:

"It made accepting myself easier because the project made my parents try (to understand) for once"[10].

In the classroom, all of the respondents adjusted the way they interacted depending on who they were interacting with. Closer classmates who they've had more years with were shared to be comfortable spaces for interaction, while newer peers weren't flagged as much to have the same description. Teacher treatment was also indicated to be a big factor in determining how the respondents were going to interact. Belittlement from the teacher, binary treatment, joking about their identity, or targeting remarks and complete disregard of their pronouns are experiences that deterred them from freely interacting with the teacher, their classmate, and even peers outside of the classroom. Several *trans respondents* recounted being called "Raul", a derogatory term for trans women, or being asked whether they menstruated. These interactions influenced how they subsequently related to their peers. For some, they became reasons to "tone down their expression" or to "reduce opposite-gender expressions". This applies to the non-binary and *gender fluid informants* as well, who either conform more to their gender assigned at birth or had to deter the frequency of their expressions "liquidity" or their tendency to shift from masculine to feminine expression.

Consciousness of Bias

In terms of behaviour, the majority of the respondents shared hesitation in behaving freely from experiences of bias and prejudice. Experiences such as being ridiculed for wearing opposite-coded attire, being stared at or asked why they behave the way that they do, or expressing differently from their expected cisgender characteristics within the institution have made them feel apprehensive about behaving comfortably and become more conscious of other people's perspectives. They notice being more sensitive towards performing and acting the way they want to, especially in public areas, even in the absence of direct observation. In terms of the uniform policy, while *gender fluid people* only feel apprehensive and conscious of this bias when shifting from the binary categories of it, they unanimously described a shift in mood, especially during days when they essentially prefer to present oppositely but are unable to do so, specifically because of the attire. The non-binary individuals

[10] Informant 6 (Face-to-Face Interview, June 2024).

indicated consciousness "only when required to wear the uniform, affirming their assigned gender at birth," but during no uniform days like Wednesdays and weekends, they indicated being more comfortable and having fewer indications of consciousness, especially in the way they present. *The trans respondents* shared a higher degree of consciousness, especially towards the Uniform Policy's provisions when entering the university and during days when they attend public university events. While it did bring them some degree of dignity and comfort, they shared experiencing feelings of anxiety and discomfort during times when they could feel the stares of individuals they knew. Frequently, they avoid areas with members who belong to the Islamic community, especially when wearing the opposite uniform.

In terms of advocacy, all respondents shared and indicated they became more conscious of the bias and prejudice of their peers during observations of their reaction towards the central student government's advocacies. They recall hearing remarks such as "Are these advocacies really necessary?" or "Aren't these advocacies overpowering straight people?" (Informant 4, Face-to-Face Interview, June 2024), which allowed them to be conscious of bias, or at least "implicit and homophobic undertones" as per the informants. They also shared feelings of unfairness in terms of the advocacies' coverage and the topics that are introduced within these engagements - while necessary, they only extend toward certain parts of the spectrum. A lack of nuance in existing advocacy programmes has been frequently noted, affecting both the wider non-cisgender community and, more acutely, those of the Islamic faith, for whom aligning gender identity with religious commitments presents heightened difficulties.

The findings on the classroom setup were unanimous in terms of the informants' consciousness of bias from the way they are treated and addressed, and even their positionality among their peers. Participants indicated that hesitancy from cisgender peers in forming groups or arranging seating contributed to their own caution in initiating interactions. They described intentionally regulating their behaviour, curbing participation, and concealing their identity to minimise discomfort for others and avoid becoming the focus of attention.

5. Discussion of Results

The study illuminates the significant influence of gendered structures within the educational institution on the gender awareness and embodiment process of non cisgender Muslim students. The discussion links the concept of social norms' liminality to the varied experiences students have of institutional policies, engagement strategies, and teaching and learning methods. Specifically, the uniform policy, gender inclusion advocacy, and the classroom environment serve as direct reflections of these gendered structures. As the respondents shared, these structures influenced their self-perception, self-awareness, interaction with others, and behaviour. This awareness process is consistent with the *Gender Socialization Theory* (GST), which posits that formal education systems transfer values, behaviour patterns, and standards through interaction with key socialization agents such as teachers, peer groups, and curriculum (Wentzel, 2014: 251–276; Hoominfar, 2019: 3–5). In this context, awareness is the process by which individuals develop, refine, and learn to 'do' gender by internalizing gender norms and roles as they interact with social institutions (John et al., 2017: 4–6).

The process of becoming aware of oneself and having a version of one's identity represents a step in the gender embodiment process. Embodied gender is defined "as encompassing the shape of one's body, the feeling of one's body, and the behaviour enacted by one's body" (Dubois/Puckett/Langer, 2022). The uniform policy is crucial from this perspective because gender embodiment necessitates a visual embodiment of identity, especially one that can be perceived through the uniform. Non cisgender Muslim students' process of embodiment is therefore affected by their experiences of institutional policy, engagement, and teaching and learning methods.

The study's findings highlight the tension between traditional, rigid gender norms and evolving, more inclusive ideas about gender (Höpflinger/Lavanchy /Dahinden, 2012: 615–618). This tension is evidenced by the convergence of different social norms, indicating a shift from older to newer sets of values. While uniform policy and institutional advocacies may reflect the newer norms, the experienced classroom setup often indicates the former. Rigid uniform requirements can restrict students' ability to express their gender identity, while active gender inclusion advocacy helps foster validation and support, reducing feelings of marginalization (Lucchese et al.,

2022: 10–12). Classroom dynamics, such as gender segregated seating or the absence of diverse gender representations, also influence gender socialization, often reinforcing traditional roles (Wingrave, 2016, 588–590). As students navigate these conflicting norms, gender embodiment becomes pivotal in their self-awareness and identity formation (Costello, 2020).

To address contrasting perspectives on gender and liminality, it is important to acknowledge conservative arguments that distinguish between *being* a gender and *identifying as* a gender. Tomas Bogardus (2020), for instance, argues that "it's one thing to be a woman, and another thing to identify as a woman." Applying this logic to this study's context, one may say that it is "one thing to be a man or a woman, and another thing to identify as being that way." Including this perspective highlights the broader social and philosophical debates that frame gender identity negotiations, and it underscores the tension that non cisgender Muslim students must navigate as they operate within institutions structured around traditional understandings of gender.

The identity work of non cisgender Muslim students is best understood as a reflexive response, shaped by continuous self-monitoring, anticipatory judgment, and adaptive behaviour within educational spaces, aligning with Giddens' accounts of reflexive monitoring of action (Giddens,1984 & 1991). Students evaluate the "social climate" of classrooms, religious expectations, and peer dispositions, adjusting their conduct through the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991). Students' actions are often based on their perceptions of ideological safety rather than objective realities. Their decisions to reveal, regulate, or withhold aspects of their identity are guided by expectations formed long before each interaction, which serve as "background theories" shaping their anticipation of acceptance or hostility (Popper 2020). This identity adaptation functions as a form of psychological protection consistent with the concept of the *evolving self* (Kegan 1982: 74–78, 112–115), wherein students selectively express identity in spaces where they anticipate greater safety and control.

This strategic adaptation is further clarified by Goffman's dramaturgy, specifically the discussion of frontstage behaviour and impression management (Goffman 1959, 22–30, 66–69). The analysis indicates that students adjust their cautious, audience-sensitive performance based on expectations. The institution itself, through its actions, policies, or public statements, becomes an actor whose "performance of

inclusivity" determines the safety students feel. Therefore, institutional inclusivity is experienced less through the objective content of policies and more through how students interpret them. Non cisgender Muslim students engage with institutional actors based on how they are interpreted—as supportive, hostile, neutral, or "progressive" (Popper 2020). Policies that exist "on paper" do not translate into felt safety unless they are performed visibly, consistently, and recognizably to marginalized students. By revising policies, promoting inclusive teaching practices, and offering support, institutions can better support non cisgender students in navigating this liminal space (Alibudbud, 2022: 433–435; Zabaniotou, 2020: 6–8; Goetz & Jenkins, 2016: 129–132).

6. Conclusion

This research provides valuable insights into how gendered structures in educational settings influence the experiences and perceptions of non-cisgender Muslim students, particularly concerning institutional gender norms and expectations. The study specifically focused on three key areas of institutional practice that affect these students: uniform policy, engagement/advocacy, and classroom setup. These institutional structures provide important data regarding the unique challenges and lived realities faced by this demographic within educational environments.

The findings emphasize that these institutional factors profoundly affect the gender embodiment and self-realization of non-cisgender Muslim students. Their journey to self-awareness and gender realization is deeply influenced by the liminal spaces they occupy, both socially and institutionally. As part of their gender embodiment, these students move through stages of self-awareness, interaction, and behaviour, constantly facing tension between their emerging identity and the social and institutional structures that shape it. Moreover, their gender identity expression is not a fixed concept; it is a fluid, socially constructed reality that is continuously formed and reformed in response to the environment. Their behaviours, attitudes, and interactions are reflexively influenced by their past experiences and perceived reception, including their engagement with institutional policies.

The study hypothesized that non-cisgender Muslim students experience identity negotiation and reflexive self-regulation, as a result of institutional structures that

simultaneously advance inclusion and reinforce gendered expectations. Specifically, the hypothesis proposed that uniform policy, classroom practices, and institutional engagement produce liminal spaces that shape how these students express and embody their gender identities. The findings support this hypothesis: respondents consistently reported regulating their gender expression in response to policy constraints, inconsistent advocacy, and classroom dynamics. Their accounts affirm that institutional structures do not merely influence but actively mediate their gender embodiment, validating the core premise of the study.

While this study yields important qualitative insights, its scope and sample impose limitations on generalizability. The research was confined to three institutional practices and did not extend to other areas, including broader social interactions, routine religious observances, or the management of identity over time, which constrains the overall breadth of the institutional analysis. In addition, the qualitative design and the limited number of respondents constrain the ability to represent the full range of experiences among non-cisgender Muslim students. These constraints should be borne in mind, when interpreting the findings and recommendations; future research with larger and more diverse samples would help validate and extend the present results.

Conceptually, this study contributes to understanding identity as a reflexive response and highlights liminality as a central analytic frame for non-cisgender Muslim students in educational settings. By integrating reflexivity, liminality, and embodiment, the study situates participants' identity work at the intersection of perception, performance, and institutional structure—demonstrating how progressive policies and conservative social norms can coexist to produce ambiguous receptions that shape students' self-presentation and sense of belonging.

While institutional policies and advocacy efforts have made strides toward inclusivity, the complexities of gender identity intersecting with religious beliefs have not been fully addressed. Non-cisgender Muslim students report that their daily lives are significantly influenced by a consciousness of bias. This constant awareness often leads to self-regulation and suppression of their gender expressions. Therefore, the influence of university policies (such as uniform policy), engagements and advocacies, and classroom arrangements shapes whether students feel safe and free to express their gender without fear of judgment or reprisal. Understanding how

these specific institutional elements impact the intersectional experiences of non-cisgender Muslim students is crucial for creating more inclusive educational environments that support the diverse needs of all students.

Based on the study's findings regarding the experiences, perceptions, and preferences of non-cisgender Muslim students, several practical recommendations are offered to improve inclusivity and support within educational settings. To establish a clear, protective, and responsive institutional framework, a gender-sensitive committee should be established to work directly with school administration to review and revise policies, including those related to uniform guidelines, student discipline, and inclusivity. This committee must include diverse representation from various gender identities and Islamic faith perspectives to ensure that policies are crafted in a way that supports the entire spectrum of student identities, and it can also serve as a platform for ongoing dialogue between students and staff. Policy adjustments must also address the restrictive nature of uniform policies, which was a consistent issue raised by participants. The study recommends developing a more flexible, gender-neutral uniform policy that does not enforce rigid gender norms, allowing students the choice to wear uniforms that align with their gender identity. Additionally, the school handbook must include explicit provisions defining gender identity and sexual orientation as protected attributes under equity policies. This action establishes a clearer framework for how to address incidents of discrimination or bias based on gender identity, sending a strong institutional message of inclusion.

The academic environment requires adapting both educational content and teaching approaches to be responsive to the needs of non-cisgender Muslim students. This includes adapting the curriculum to incorporate more diverse representations of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, all faculty, both teaching and non-teaching, must be equipped with the necessary skills to effectively respond to students' gender-related needs and concerns. This can be achieved by offering seminars or workshops that train teachers on gender sensitivity. Gender-sensitive teacher-student interaction seminars could help create a more supportive and understanding school environment, ensuring teachers are trained to recognize and address gender-related issues in the classroom with sensitivity and awareness. It is also crucial that gender education and advocacy be nuanced to accurately reflect the full spectrum of the

non-cisgender community. This necessitates recognizing gender diversity while also understanding the crucial intersections between gender identity, cultural practices, and religion. Gender advocacy should therefore be inclusive of all gender identities, with particular attention paid to the unique challenges faced by Non-Cisgender Muslim students; tailored programs that offer specific resources, advocacy, and peer support can make these students feel seen, heard, and supported in their educational journey.

Finally, institutional leadership must ensure proactive engagement and advocacy, an area identified by respondents as needing improvement. Educational institutions must increase their level of engagement and take a more active role in supporting non-cisgender students by organizing awareness campaigns, workshops, and creating spaces for open dialogue about gender diversity. This helps foster a more inclusive and supportive school environment. Educational institutions must spearhead these initiatives themselves, rather than leaving them solely to student groups or outside organizations. This is because institutional leadership is crucial in legitimizing the importance of gender inclusivity within the school culture.

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