## FEATURED SCHOLAR

Each month the Work and Family Researchers Network spotlights the contributions of a scholar who is making significant advances in understanding work-family concerns. We are delighted to present the following interview with **Feranaaz Farista.**

# Feranaaz Farista

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Experts Panel Link: https://wfrn.org/expert/feranaaz-farista/

**WFRN – How did you first get introduced to work-family issues and become a researcher in this field?**

**Feranaaz –** My interest in work-family issues was first shaped by observing my mother. As a single parent, she managed full-time employment while caring for me and running a household entirely on her own. Though I didn't have the language for it at the time, this early exposure sparked my awareness of the challenges involved in combining paid work and caregiving. I was formally introduced to the field during my Master's programme, where I conducted a dissertation on low-income mothers' experiences of negotiating breastfeeding and paid work. This research opened my eyes to the complex, intersecting challenges that mothers—particularly those from marginalised backgrounds—face when navigating work and family responsibilities. It also deepened my interest in exploring how structural, cultural, and organisational factors shape these experiences.

I was drawn to this field because I believe we need to move beyond simply accommodating family responsibilities in the workplace—we need to genuinely support them. This means amplifying diverse voices, recognising unpaid care as essential labour, and developing inclusive policies that acknowledge the realities of workers lives. My research aims to centre underrepresented perspectives and contribute to more context-sensitive and practical solutions for working families—particularly in the Global South.

**WFRN – How did you first get involved with the WFRN? What do you value most about the organization?**

**Feranaaz –** My first real engagement with the WFRN was attending the 2024 conference in Montreal, where I presented a paper from my PhD research and participated in the doctoral workshop. It was both an honour and a privilege to be among scholars whose work I had long admired, read, and cited. Being in that space was energising – it offered an opportunity to connect theory, lived experience, and practice in ways that were both intellectually rich and personally affirming. What I value most about the WFRN is its genuine investment in early-career researchers. The support offered through workshops and thoughtful programming reflects a deep commitment to nurturing the next generation of scholars. The organisation creates spaces that are not only intellectually stimulating but also deeply collaborative and inclusive. For me, WFRN feels like more than just a professional association—it feels like a community. One where dialogue, encouragement, and critical reflection are shared freely, and where the goal of improving work-family policies and

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practices is a collective one. I left the conference with new insights, meaningful connections, and a renewed sense of purpose for my research.

**WFRN – Tell us about your current research, what are you studying?**

**Feranaaz –** My current research, supported by a grant, explores how Muslim mothers in South Africa navigate and manage breastfeeding alongside paid employment. Using qualitative and longitudinal methods, I adopt an intersectional lens that recognises the multiple, often marginalised, identities these women hold—while also highlighting their agency, strategies, and resistance. As Muslims make up only 1.9% of the South African population, my research also considers what it means to be part of a religious and ethnic minority in a post-apartheid context. It aims to centre voices that are often overlooked in mainstream work-family discourse and contribute to more inclusive understandings of care, work, and belonging. In a related line of research, I am also examining the experiences of child-free women, particularly in the Global South, and how they anticipate and manage work-family conflict. While not mothers in the conventional sense, many of these women still hold complex and often invisible caregiving responsibilities—towards ageing parents, siblings, or extended kin. My work aims to expand current notions of care and challenge narrow definitions of family by recognising the diverse forms of labour and emotional work that shape people's everyday lives.

**WFRN – What are your big findings? Did you make any unexpected discoveries?**

**Feranaaz –** One of the most significant findings from my research is that centring religion offers a powerful lens to challenge universalised notions of motherhood and to extend current theorising on maternal decision-making. By focusing on Muslim mothers in South Africa, my research shows how religious beliefs and embodied practices—such as modesty and breastfeeding—shape unique experiences during the return-to-work transition. Building on Gatrell's (2019) concept of *abjection*—which refers to the ways in which certain bodies or experiences are treated as 'out of place' or devalued in society—I extend this towards the idea of *abjective liminality*. This term captures the 'in-between' space that many Muslim working mothers occupy as they try to reconcile the often-conflicting demands of their religion, cultural expectations, and workplace norms. This perspective helps to illuminate how the heavy mental load of motherhood is not just personal, but shaped by multiple and overlapping pressures, including religious beliefs and societal assumptions about gender roles.

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An unexpected and powerful discovery was how breastfeeding became a site where multiple tensions converged: it wasn't just about feeding—it was about negotiating religious obligations, navigating workplace structures, and maintaining cultural expectations around modesty and care. In this way, my research refines understandings of maternal bodywork by showing how Muslim mothers experience and resist these layered demands in deeply embodied ways. By situating religion, race, and gender within South Africa's post-apartheid socio-economic context, my research localises knowledge by acknowledging plural, co-existing ways of knowing and being.

**WFRN – How can your research guide the formulation of social policy?**

**Feranaaz –** My research contributes to more inclusive and context-sensitive social policy by centering the lived experiences of those often left at the margins of mainstream work-family debates. By exploring how Muslim mothers navigate breastfeeding and paid work in South Africa, my research highlights the need for workplace and public policies that recognise religious and cultural diversity—not just gender alone. It underscores how universal policies often fail to account for the specific constraints and commitments of marginalised groups. Similarly, my research on child-free women challenges assumptions that caregiving responsibilities only apply to parents. In many parts of the Global South, including South Africa, workers—regardless of parental status—often shoulder broader familial and community care. This research calls for a rethinking of "family-friendly" policies to better reflect these complex realities.

Together, my work advocates for more expansive, flexible, and culturally responsive social policies—those that support all forms of care work and acknowledge the intersecting identities shaping people's access to support. It also emphasizes the importance of including marginalised voices in the policy design process to ensure more just and effective outcomes.

**WFRN – How do you integrate work-family topics in your teaching and/or training? Do you have an assignment or approach that is especially effective?**

**Feranaaz –** I integrate work-family topics into my teaching by encouraging students to critically engage with context—particularly through an intersectional lens. In my undergraduate Organisational Psychology course, I aim to help students unpack how identity, privilege, and bias shape experiences within organisations, including work-family dynamics. One assignment I've run successfully for the past two years

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invites second-year students to explore privilege and bias through a group-based reflective exercise. In randomly assigned diverse groups, students participate in a structured activity where they must choose from a list of privileges—such as access to tertiary education or cultural support networks. With each round, fewer privileges remain, prompting strategic discussions about which are most valued and why. This leads to a collaborative reflection on how personal and group identities shape perceptions of fairness, inclusion, and organisational experience.

Students then create an individual video reflection where they discuss the group dynamics, challenges, and insights—particularly around unconscious bias and their evolving understanding of privilege in the workplace. Many reflect on how the discomfort of these conversations fostered deeper empathy and appreciation for perspectives different from their own. The assignment encourages students to move beyond abstract theory to engage personally and critically with the material. It also opens space for thinking about how organisational support (or lack thereof) is unevenly distributed based on gender, culture, class, and religion. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with students noting the impact of this exercise on their ability to reflect on team dynamics, appreciate diversity, and apply inclusive thinking to future organisational contexts.

**WFRN – What directions hold the greatest promise for discovery in the work-family field? We are thinking here of theory, methods, or research questions that might be posed.**

**Feranaaz –** First, there is an urgent need to centre voices and scholarship from the Global South—researchers, participants, practitioners, and policymakers alike. Too often, dominant theories, frameworks, and "best practices" are developed in the Global North and exported globally without attending to the diverse social, cultural, and economic realities of the South. We need more locally grounded, context-sensitive

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work that challenges hegemonic assumptions and reflects the lived experiences of underrepresented communities. This also calls for greater representation across journal editorships, conferences, and institutional spaces to diversify what counts as knowledge.

Second, we need renewed theoretical and empirical attention on the centrality of care in work-family life. Rather than treating care as a background issue, it should be recognised as a core form of labour that sustains both families and economies. There is much potential in exploring how care is unevenly distributed, both within households and across social systems, particularly along lines of gender, race and class. Future research might ask: How do different societies conceptualise and structure care? How can we better account for informal, intergenerational, and community-based care in work-family models? These lines of inquiry open space for challenging dominant individualistic assumptions in the field and instead invite more collective, relational, and culturally grounded understandings of care.

Methodologically, these directions require intersectional, transnational, interdisciplinary and participatory approaches that not only capture complexity but also disrupt extractive research practices. Longitudinal and collaborative designs may offer new insights into how work and care unfold over time and across contexts.

Ultimately, the future of work-family research lies in decolonising knowledge production, interrogating whose voices are prioritised, and crafting research that contributes to structural change. Only then can we generate more inclusive, just, and meaningful understandings of work-family life.

## ABOUT THE WFRN

The Work and Family Researchers Network's mission is to facilitate virtual and face-to-face interaction among academic work and family researchers from a broad range of fields as well as engage the next generation of work and family scholars. The WFRN welcomes the participation of policy makers and workplace practitioners as it seeks to promote knowledge and understanding of work and family issues among the community of global stakeholders.

To learn more about the WFRN, please visit our website WFRN.ORG. To become a member, please click on this link https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/.

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