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Beyond Confessional Cultures: Identity and the Role of Silence in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Interventions

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the confessional foundations of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work, which have emerged predominantly from Global North traditions rooted in Christian understandings of subjectivity. In such traditions, identity is asserted through self-declaration, visibility, and vocal articulation of difference, what we term a confessional culture. Drawing on Foucauldian critiques, we explore how this imperative to "confess" produces an extreme form of subjectivity that is paradoxically both overexposed and untrue to itself. In contrast, Global South contexts, particularly those shaped by Islamic epistemologies, offer alternative modalities of identity work rooted in subtlety, silence, and communal ethics. Here, the good is practiced rather than pronounced, and self-description can be experienced as disrespectful or even transgressive. By juxtaposing these divergent cultural logics, the paper challenges the universality of DEI frameworks that prioritize self-expression and visibility. It argues for the need to reimagine DEI practices that are attuned to silent negotiations of identity, relational forms of recognition, and implicit pathways to social change. In doing so, the paper offers a deeper, more culturally pluralistic understanding of co-existence, belonging, equity and inclusion beyond the confessional paradigm.

1 | Introduction

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices in the Global North have been deeply shaped by the politics of identity, where the act of naming, declaring, and narrating one's difference is central. The confessional logic underpinning DEI can be traced to Christian traditions in which moral subjects were required to avow inner truths as a means of purification and self-governance (Foucault 1978). Although Kant (1793/1998) sought to ground morality in rational autonomy rather than inherited guilt, modern institutions continue to reproduce confession as a secular technology of truth-telling. Foucault (1978, 2021) showed how such rituals of disclosure constitute subjects through power: the individual becomes both speaker and judge, producing an overexposed self continually seeking authenticity. This genealogy clarifies how contemporary DEI practices, through surveys, storytelling, and visibility campaigns, echo a moral economy of avowal rather than emancipation. The paper therefore questions whether the imperative to "speak" one's difference liberates or disciplines. We ask what forms of belonging and justice might emerge beyond this confessional paradigm and how alternative epistemologies, especially Islamic traditions that value discretion and ethical restraint, offer distinct grammars of inclusion.

This paper begins with a critique of this confessional foundation in DEI work. It questions whether the insistence on vocalizing identity, whereas productive in some contexts, risks reproducing the very forms of control, surveillance, and self-alienation that DEI aims to dismantle. These reflections bear significant implication for DEI scholarship, which increasingly grapples with the limitations of universalized frameworks grounded in liberal Western subjectivity that manifest as overt forms of voice and protest. Much of the existing literature has centered on

voice, visibility and recognition as normative goods (Bell et al. 2011), often assuming that equitable inclusion requires an open articulation of identity-based difference (Dobbin and Kalev 2018). Yet this orientation can obscure how institutionalized demands for self-disclosure may inadvertently reinforce disciplinary power, reinscribe normative categories, and marginalize ways of being that do not conform to dominant logics of expression. In fact, the expectation states theory (Berger et al. 1977) posits that in group settings, people form performance expectations of others based on status characteristics (e.g., gender, race, age, education, job title). These expectations influence who is given influence, authority, or leadership roles, turning identity-based voice to an iron cage that locks the marginalized in self-definition (Mor Barak et al. 2025).

This dynamic introduces a paradox within DEI scholarship: although it aims to dismantle systems of exclusion, it may simultaneously entrench a particular mode of subjectivity that is deeply entwined with Western notions of the self. The emphasis on recognition, voice and representational inclusion may thus risk flattening difference into institutionally legible forms, leaving less space for collective, relational, or non-discursive forms of identity and resistance that do not conform to the dominant liberal grammar. Therefore, we ask: what other modes of being, knowing, and recognizing difference might be possible outside the confessional paradigm for practice of DEI in the Global South in particular? And how might traditions with alternative understandings of selfhood, such as Islamic epistemologies of silence and submission, offer different grammars of inclusion?

Although our analysis draws on practical manifestations of DEI, such as disclosure rituals, visibility campaigns, or identity-based training, our use of the term confessional is primarily theoretical and genealogical rather than descriptive. We are not suggesting that organizational actors consciously reproduce theological confession, but that the moral and epistemic logic underpinning such practices mirrors a confessional mode of subject formation identified by Foucault (1978, 1997, 2021). Our argument therefore operates at two levels: at the theoretical level, we trace how the liberal subject of DEI inherits a moral imperative of self-disclosure as a secularized continuation of Christian truth-telling; and at the practical level, we examine how this imperative materializes in organizational routines and inclusion policies. Distinguishing these registers clarifies that our critique does not conflate theory and practice but instead seeks to expose their historical and affective continuities. In doing so, we align with post-structural and decolonial traditions that analyze how abstract epistemes sediment into everyday institutional life (Ahmed 2012; Asad 1993; de Sousa Santos 2014).

2 | Confessional DEI: Rethinking Inclusion Beyond Epistemic Universalism

The divergence between confessional and non-confessional modes of subjectivity unsettles the assumed universality of DEI frameworks, which have largely emerged from Euro-American liberal traditions of rights, recognition, and representation. Foucault (1978, 2021) regarded confession as central to the formation of modern subjectivity tracing the continuity and transformations of confessional techniques from early Christianity to modern psychology. Confession, hence, is not merely a religious practice but a pervasive cultural form through which individuals are compelled to speak the truth about themselves. This leads to a paradox: subjects are, on the one hand, encouraged and, to an extent, required to tell the truth about themselves; on the other hand, the very act of confession generates its own forms of falsehood, repression, or narrative distortion. Through confession, the subject is divided: the subject becomes both the one who speaks the truth and the one who is judged; both the confessor and the inquisitor. This reflexive structure leads to permanent work upon the self, an endless task of self-examination (Foucault 1997). These self-technologies, which have deep historical roots in Christianity, are still at play today, albeit in a different manner. United with identity politics, they give greater power to the public self, or the outer expression of the self, making confession an increasingly public phenomenon. This has contributed to a confessional tradition of endless self-declarations of identity that carry important value and power, but can also be instrumentalized and exploited. In particular, we highlight the risks these carry in reproducing exclusion under the guise of recognition by misreading silence, ambiguity, or ethical restraint as disengagement or deficiency.

To clarify the conceptual scaffolding of confessional culture, we define it as a system of subject formation, moral regulation, and epistemic legitimation that operates through three interlinked features: (1) the imperative of self-disclosure, whereby individuals are expected to articulate inner truths to be recognized as authentic (Ayaz et al. 2024); (2) the conversion of moral value into visibility, where ethical worth and belonging are often indexed to public avowal (Dickens and Butcher 2016); and (3) the institutionalization of surveillance through care, where confession appears as an emancipatory act but simultaneously enables control, categorization, and normalization (Foucault 1978, 1997; Dumas et al. 2023). In this sense, confessional culture is not a discrete event of speech but a pervasive regime of truth that shapes which subjects can appear, which emotions can be voiced, and which silences are rendered unintelligible.

Although this logic permeates multiple domains, its operations differ across organizational, cultural, and institutional terrains. In organizational contexts, confessional culture takes managerial form: employees are asked to bring their whole selves to work (Ayaz et al. 2024), complete diversity disclosures, and share personal narratives in training and campaigns (Özbilgin 2024). The confession here functions as a technology of auditability, a means of transforming moral identity into measurable compliance (Shore and Wright 2000). In cultural contexts, confession operates as a norm of authenticity embedded in popular and activist discourses: the self that speaks its truth is valorized as courageous and morally pure (Ayaz et al. 2024), whereas reticence or opacity risks being read as hypocrisy or complicity (Taylor 1989; Butler et al. 2000). Finally, in institutional contexts such as universities, corporations, or NGOs, confession is formalized through policies, metrics, and performative rituals that tie legitimacy to visibility. Here, the confessional becomes

bureaucratized and formalized (Özbilgin 2024), instruments through which organizations both solicit and contain differences.

Confessional culture operates simultaneously across organizational, cultural, and institutional levels. In workplaces, it appears as calls to "bring your whole self to work" and diversity disclosures; culturally, as a virtue of authenticity; and institutionally, as bureaucratized visibility through audits and campaigns (Ayaz et al. 2024; Özbilgin 2024). Across these domains, moral value becomes tied to public articulation, transforming diversity into a regime of legibility and surveillance (Shore and Wright 2000). In practice, this moral economy can quietly reshape organizational incentives, rewarding those who perform legible identity narratives and burdening those who prefer or require discretion. This multilevel dynamic forms the confessional culture of DEI, a moral economy in which voice is equated with virtue and silence with deficiency. Figure A1 (Appendix) visualizes this argument as a movement from context and disclosure costs toward a non-confessional design stance and a set of intermediaries (procedural trust, safety, epistemic justice) that can enable equitable outcomes without requiring identity disclosure. The figure is intentionally reductive: it highlights relationships that recur across cases, while bracketing the messier dynamics of contestation, backlash, ambivalence and historical specificity that the paper foregrounds.

2.1 | The Institutionalization of Confessional DEI and Its Limits

The global diffusion of DEI illustrates how the confessional imperative travels and encounters limits. Across contexts, from Tunisia's hybrid managerialism (Yousfi 2014) to Turkey's silent resistance among LGBTQ+ workers (Özbilgin et al. 2023), the same technologies of speech, visibility, and recognition are refracted through divergent moral grammars. In many settings, disclosure is not emancipatory but risky; visibility can violate ethical norms of modesty or discretion (Deneulin and Bano 2009). When exported uncritically, confessional DEI thus becomes a vehicle of epistemic imposition, privileging those who perform legible identities while excluding those whose belonging is enacted quietly or relationally.

The institutionalization of DEI in Global North organizations, such as universities, corporations, and public bodies, has largely followed a recognizable script. Initiatives focus on increasing representation, fostering inclusive climates, and ensuring that individuals can express their identities openly and safely. These aims are often operationalized through mechanisms such as self-identification surveys, unconscious bias training, public pledges, storytelling platforms, and affinity networks (Özbilgin 2024). At the heart of these interventions lies an implicit imperative: to speak one's identity into being and to make one's difference legible within institutional categories (Ahmed 2007; Shore and Wright 2000). This, moreover, has shown not to be always in the interest of respecting difference, with certain forms of self-disclosure, for example, in the case of menopause, having adverse effects on women's leadership and promotability (Steffan and Potočnik 2025).

This confessional model frames marginality as something that can and should be narrated. The act of voicing one's experiences of exclusion is cast not only as therapeutic but also as politically generative, bringing unseen injustices into view, thereby demanding redress. Although this model has created space for many to articulate long-silenced grievances, it has also produced unintended effects. As Ahmed (2012) cautions, the institutional welcome to difference often functions as a form of containment: individuals are encouraged to speak, but only within pre-approved frames that allow institutions to manage, neutralize, or commodify their claims. Hoque and Noon (2004) explain that many DEI interventions amount to empty shells, as the gap between policy and practice remains wide.

More crucially for this paper, the institutionalization of DEI-as-confession fails to travel well. Without meaningful "translation, the only way the assertion of universality can cross a border is through colonial and expansionist logic" (Butler et al. 2000, 35), whereas the language of translatability itself can be violent (Bhabha 1994). When exported to Global South or transnational contexts, through international university partnerships, corporate expansion, or development initiatives, these practices often collide with cultural logics that do not prioritize identity disclosure, self-narration, or personal testimony. In such settings, asking individuals to declare their difference can feel alienating or even coercive. For instance, publicly identifying as LGBTQ+ or disclosing experiences of religious marginalization may carry social, legal, or moral risks that Global North frameworks often overlook (Röell et al. 2024). In the case of the hijras defined as the third gender in Bangladesh, the imposition of LGBTQ+ terminology has been perceived as a form of homocolonialism (Hossain and Rahman 2024). Instead, Özbilgin et al. (2023) interrogate passing behavior among a group of working-class LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkey and identify that passing as heterosexual and cis gender presents a form of resistance for this group, opening up safe space and quiet negotiation at work.

Furthermore, the performative rituals of institutional DEI, such as mandatory training, visibility campaigns, or metrics-driven inclusion audits, may be met with skepticism or resistance in cultures where virtue is understood as inward, modest, and relational rather than outward, declarative, and individuated (Deneulin and Bano 2009; Küskü et al. 2021, 2022). The insistence on being "seen" or "heard" may be incompatible with practices of ethical discretion (Calder 2019), strategic silence (Özbilgin et al. 2023), or collective modesty (Hahner and Varda 2012), which are no less sophisticated but far less visible to institutional metrics.

As a result, the dominant model of DEI not only risks epistemic imposition but may also render certain populations hypervisible while keeping others illegible, neglecting locally meaningful yet silent relations of power and recognition (Tatli and Özbilgin 2012). It may reward those who are able or willing to perform recognizable forms of marginality and resistance, while excluding those whose difference does not fit the prevailing grammar of confession and visibility. Dominant conceptions of resistance are built upon voice, and silence is defined in contradiction. The in-between works as a horizon for differentiation, as that which cannot be named, which is another name

for indifference. However, in Western culture, it is taboo to talk about indifference and to account for silence, treating silence as having no distinction, which misses the recognition of the multiplicity of silences located in different spaces. Indifference is often equated with strategic ignorance and frowned upon (Erbil et al. 2025). The logic of inclusion thereby becomes paradoxically exclusionary: by demanding voice, it erases those whose identities are formed through silence, and by demanding visibility, it invisibilises other modes of presence.

It is important to acknowledge that within contemporary DEI discourse there is a growing reflexive backlash against the confessional imperative itself (Röell et al. 2024). Practitioners and scholars have begun to question the expectation that individuals who experience discrimination must also perform the emotional and intellectual labor of educating others about it (Ahmed 2012). This critique reframes disclosure not as an ethical duty but as a form of *affective exploitation*, in which the pain of marginalized groups becomes institutional currency for organizational learning. In response, modern DEI practice increasingly incorporates the language of *self-care*, *boundaries*, and *psychological safety*, recognizing that silence, withdrawal, or selective participation can be necessary modes of protection rather than disengagement (Bell et al. 2011; Erbil et al. 2025). These developments demonstrate that even within the liberal DEI paradigm, cracks are appearing: silence is beginning to be re-legitimized as an ethical and restorative stance. Our argument builds on this critical reflexivity, extending it beyond self-care to theorize silence as a structural and epistemic alternative to confession rather than merely an individual coping strategy.

2.2 | Islamic Ethics: Beyond the Confessional

To avoid essentialising, it is essential to clarify how "Islamic epistemologies" and "Eastern ethics" are mobilized in this paper. They are not presented as fixed or homogeneous systems of belief, but as ethical grammars and discursive traditions that interrupt the universalizing assumptions of liberal-secular DEI. Following Asad's (1993) view of Islam as a living, contested tradition, we approach these epistemologies as diverse and evolving repertoires of reasoning in which humility, relational accountability, and restraint are valorized over self-assertion (Mahmood 2005; Soroush 2000). References to "Eastern" or Global South epistemologies serve as heuristic contrasts to the confessional logic of modern DEI rather than as romanticized alternatives. Our comparative stance is therefore diagnostic, not essentialist: it traces how different ontologies of selfhood and belonging articulate ethical presence without recourse to confession (de Sousa Santos 2014; Escobar 2018). As scholars writing within Western institutions but in dialog with these alternative traditions, we do not claim to speak for them; instead, we draw on their conceptual resources to expand the epistemic space of DEI. This methodological reflexivity situates our analysis within a pluriversal ethics of translation (Mignolo 2011; Tsing 2024), resisting both the universalizing impulses of liberal modernity and the romanticization of cultural difference.

Within Islamic ethical traditions, the self is relational and accountable, defined through comportment and moral responsibility rather than self-assertion. Inclusion is expressed through adab—respectful conduct—and tawadu—humility—where discretion may signify dignity rather than disengagement (Soroush 2000; Mahmood 2005). Eger's (2021) work on gender equality in Morocco and Mahmood's (2005) analysis of Egyptian piety movements both show that ethical agency is cultivated through practice and restraint, rather than through voice or protest. In such contexts, DEI frameworks that demand visibility risk alienating those whose identities are ethically grounded in silence. Rethinking inclusion through these epistemologies requires an attitude of epistemic hospitality—an openness to moral grammars in which silence itself communicates care and belonging.

In this view, practical DEI work in pluriversal contexts must move beyond procedural inclusion and toward epistemic hospitality: the willingness to receive and engage with ways of knowing and being that do not mirror our own (de Sousa Santos 2014). This may start with a feeling of unfamiliarity that decenters common conceptions of selfhood, instead embracing that which we do not know and that which cannot be articulated. It must recognize that some people do not and cannot speak their difference in the terms currently sanctioned by institutions. Furthermore, it must begin to create spaces in which their forms of subtle negotiation, moral navigation, and situated resistance can be recognized, valued, and protected.

This contradiction points to an urgent need to reimagine institutional inclusion as a relational and context-sensitive practice. Institutions must begin by asking not simply who is excluded through the dominant discursive formations, but how different cultures of selfhood and ethics are being misread or overwritten by well-meaning inclusion policies. Such a shift requires humility: an institutional willingness to relinquish the idea that inclusion always looks like speech, self-expression, or participation in public identity discourse. Humility requires acceptance and surrendering to "the other's crucial role in the existence and meaning of the self" (Borgerson 2015, 109) and the sociality of human processes.

In the following section, we propose alternative pathways for developing DEI frameworks that honor epistemic multiplicity by treating silence not as a failure, but as a meaningful and sometimes powerful ethical stance. We argue that only by attending to the cultural and ontological conditions of inclusion can institutions avoid reproducing a colonial politics of recognition under the guise of diversity.

3 | Modalities of Silence: Humility, Subtlety and Submission in Global South Subjectivities

Our reading of silence as an ethical and political modality builds upon a long intellectual lineage that has already problematized the binary between voice and muteness. Feminist, postcolonial, and subaltern studies have offered diverse articulations of resistance through refusal, opacity, and indirection (Abu-Lughod 1990; Ortner 1995; Spivak 1988). Within this lineage, silence is not merely absence but a situated strategy of meaning-making, what Scott (1990) famously theorized as the "hidden

transcript" of the subaltern, and what A. Simpson (2007) later redefined as "refusal," the active choice not to render oneself legible within colonial regimes of recognition. Responding to the critique that not all silences are agentic or ethically chosen, we engage with different modalities of silence distinguishing between oppressive, strategic, opaque, ethical and generative silences. We situate our argument in dialog with these critical traditions, acknowledging that DEI's foundational theories have long gestured toward multiple modalities of resistance and agency. Our contribution lies in extending these insights into the organizational field, illustrating how silence, whether as restraint, relational ethics, or refusal, can become a post-confessional form of inclusion and ethical presence within institutional life.

3.1 | Oppressive Silences

Many silences are neither chosen nor benign. Sociological and organizational analyses of silence, such as R. Simpson and Lewis's (2005) work on gendered voice and visibility, show that silence is often structurally imposed. In their study of organizational life, Simpson and Lewis explore how silence is often a product of power, imposed through structures that privilege certain bodies and tones as audible and credible. Their concept of "silenced visibility" captures how women and racialized subjects can be hyper-visible yet unheard, their contributions rendered inaudible by the very mechanisms of inclusion that amplify diversity. Morrison and Milliken (2000) further caution that silence can be a dangerous barrier for organizational change with Bowen and Blackmon (2003) referring to spirals of oppressive silence that result from the acceptance of power and control, impeding a truly diverse and pluralistic organization. Importing DEI frameworks that prize visibility and self-narration into contexts structured by different ethical sensibilities risks not only ineffectiveness but also cultural violence.

Such impositions can disfigure local practices of solidarity and destroy the possibility of a collective sense of solidarity to emerge by imposing alien modes of recognition, as shown in the case of the hijra in Bangladesh (Hossain and Rahman 2024), while re-enacting colonial hierarchies of knowledge and subject formation (Spivak 1988). Spivak's (1988) work alludes to the imposition of knowledge frameworks that have shaped the (im)possibility of an "authentic" voice and a geography in which access to being heard is unequally distributed. This reframed silence as politically structured, rather than merely chosen, emphasizing the epistemic violence inherent in representational systems that claim to "give voice" to the marginalized. Silencing, here is not only an individual act of suppression but a structural condition of who is permitted to make sound. The coerced silence of the marginalized becomes a form of epistemic violence (Fricker 2007), where the denial of audibility forecloses the capacity to be recognized as a knower.

3.2 | Strategic and Opaque Silences

Not all silences are imposed. For many, silence is a strategy of endurance and discretion—a way of navigating conditions in which speaking invites risk (Röell et al. 2024). Rowe and Malhotra (2013) trace how feminist scholars and activists have used silence not merely as resistance but as an edge practice, a mode of survival that simultaneously conceals and communicates. Marling (2021), drawing on Glissant's (2020) poetics of relation, conceptualizes opaque femininities as strategies that counter neoliberal demands for transparency and visibility. To be opaque, to be silent, can be an assertion of self-determination: the right to remain unreadable. Agency often manifests through quiet acts of endurance, discretion, irony or withdrawal rather than overt opposition (Abu-Lughod 1990; Ortner 1995), what Scott (1990) terms hidden transcripts: everyday gestures, silences and coded behaviors that critique domination from within. Rather than dramatizing resistance as covert confrontation, Scott shows how the dominated produce parallel discourses of dissent that remain unseen or unheard by power. Silence here is ambivalent: A shield against surveillance yet also a reminder of constraint.

This resonates with decolonial critiques of power, which emphasize the importance of not trying to identify "resistors" but to study how resistance can become a diagnostic of power (Abu-Lughod 1990; Jamjoom and Mills 2023). An example thereof is given by Yousfi (2014), who explores the adoption of a management by objectives ("mise à mille") program in Poulina, a Tunisian company. The research shows how the "imported" management approach becomes fused and reinterpreted through the Islamic practice of ijtihad that elevates the independent interpretation of Islamic scriptures. Thereby, organizational members preserved their Islamic discursive practice as part and parcel of the new appraisal system, altering the underlying premise of the program to their own cultural and religious specificities and reclaimed a space for theological epistemology through a subtle realignment of practice.

The strategic refusal of the dominant terms of legibility show that knowledge and resistance do not always align with speech. This unsettles the binary between voice and voicelessness in which silence is not a mere absence but a deliberate concealment. The question is not whether one speaks but what kinds of silences can emerge within and against systems of representation. A. Simpson (2007) reorients this conversation through her notion of ethnographic refusal, which critiques the liberal assumption that speaking truth to power is inherently emancipatory. Resistance and change enacted through strategic silence are often articulated through tacit disobedience, quiet withdrawal, or subtle realignments of practice, not through the explicit contestations that dominate liberal models of inclusion (Scott 1990). Simpson, moreover, argues that for Indigenous peoples the refusal to share knowledge or to "give voice" within colonial frameworks can itself be an assertion of sovereignty. Silence, withholding and non-participation become acts of political integrity—ways of protecting epistemic and cultural worlds from appropriation. This is a crucial point for institutional DEI: "inviting stories" can easily become extractive. Post-confessional practice therefore shifts from soliciting personal testimony to changing conditions, policies, protections and decision rules, so that justice does not depend on marginalized people narrating their pain. Rather, Simpson's work transforms silence from an absence of agency into a form of political presence grounded in refusal.

3.3 | Ethical and Generative Silences

What distinguishes Islamic conceptions of silence is their grounding not merely in social strategy but in adab—a cultivated disposition of humility, care and ethical relation. Embedding DEI debates within the discursive communities of Islam and different spiritual traditions (Marques et al. 2024) requires a shift in ontological assumptions underpinning DEI research to understand different forms of identity cultivation. In Islamic epistemologies, the notion of the self is not anchored in self-revelation but in the ethical cultivation of behavior that aligns with divine and communal norms. Piety, for instance, is not something one claims, but something manifest through restraint, protecting the self and others from haram (forbidden actions) and engaging in the tacit safeguarding of moral conduct. Here, self-description, particularly in terms of virtue or victimhood, is not simply redundant. It can be considered offensive because it imposes a moral claim on others and disrupts the collective harmony by foregrounding the individual ego (Soroush 2000). In this context, what counts as ethical subjectivity is not disclosed but lived, not pronounced but practiced. The implications this has for religious practice are deeply rooted in individuals' connection with God without institutional mediation, as is usually the case in Christian traditions. The mosque and Imams do not have the same function as churches. They are merely places of worship and Imams are neither ordained nor sacred. This provides a realm of spiritual practice that builds on introspection and self-reflection between a person and God with no requirement of confession, which carries wider relevance for understanding subject formation (Mahmood 2005).

This subtle form of identity work challenges the efficacy and cultural appropriateness of DEI models that depend on disclosure, visibility, and identity-based advocacy. Practices of inclusion in these contexts are negotiated through implicit cues, gestures, and forms of silent alignment, which evade the vocabulary of contemporary DEI but are no less significant in shaping who belongs and who is recognized. The work of Mahmood (2005) provides an interesting perspective in this regard by challenging the secular-liberal assumption that agency necessarily manifests in resistance to norms and in the pursuit of self-emancipation. Drawing on ethnographic research among women in Egypt's Islamic piety movement, she demonstrates that agency can instead be enacted through embodied forms of religious practice, pious self-cultivation, and submission to ethical traditions, practices often dismissed by Western feminist and DEI frameworks as signs of passivity or internalized oppression. This is not merely a different political stance, but a fundamentally different conception of the self and its relationship to power (see also Asad 1993).

Where enforced and strategic silences react to power, generative silences originate from an ethics of relation and spiritual humility. Within Islamic epistemologies, silence functions not as erasure but as tawadu—humble submission before the limits of human knowledge. The Prophet's silence, as recorded in hadith traditions, is often described as wisdom (samt hikma): a recognition that restraint can be more truthful than speech (Zilio Grandi 2016). Whilst specific phrases attributed to the Prophet are not always fully authenticated, the silence-wisdom relation is one of guidance rather than absolute valorization of silence. The orientation shifts the moral center of epistemic practice from audibility to adab—showing how ethical silences can also become generative silences, privileging listening, humility and relation over assertion.

To understand these alternative grammars of inclusion, we must move away from the universalization of the confessional and protesting subject and toward a pluralistic account of subjectivity. This requires recognizing that silence, far from signaling passivity or oppression, can be a deliberate and dignified mode of negotiating power, resistance and belonging. Silence is also the origin of speaking, but in cultures where honor, modesty, and communal integrity are held in high regard, loud declarations of identity may not only be inappropriate (Eger 2021). Overt voices may actively undermine the moral authority of the speaker and alienate them from their community. Recognizing this plurality allows DEI work to move beyond the politics of representation toward a politics of resonance, where ethical silence becomes not complicity but care. The challenge lies in validating silence without romanticizing it. To do so requires treating silence as multiple—oppressive, strategic, opaque, ethical and generative—depending on its conditions and effects. The typology below in Table 1 maps these modalities, demonstrating that silence's value cannot be assumed but must be analyzed contextually.

4 | Toward a Post-Confessional DEI Practice: Relationality, Ethical Silence, and Contextual Recognition

If confessional DEI frameworks are built upon a model of subjectivity that prioritizes speech, disclosure, and individual visibility, then a post-confessional approach must center the value of relationality, ethical silence, and contextual recognition. Rather than reversing or opposing inclusion, it pluralizes it, making space for multiple ontologies of self and community that are often marginalized by dominant scripts of diversity. What is needed is an intercultural DEI praxis attuned to local ontologies of selfhood, modes of expression, and rhythms of resistance. This shift complements the dominant norms of being-for-the-self kind of authenticity for being-for-the-other form of authenticity (Ayaz et al. 2024). A post-confessional DEI thus decenters the confessional imperative, recognizing diverse negotiations of difference and belonging across contexts. Table 2 below synthesizes the contrasts between confessional and non-confessional cultures of DEI, showing how each defines subject, interprets inclusion, and organizes ethical life. Confessional logics equate authenticity with speech and render silence suspect. By contrast, post-confessional cultures, particularly those shaped by Islamic and communitarian ethics, link dignity to restraint, relational accountability, and moral discretion. The table aligns these logics with corresponding DEI interventions, offering a conceptual and practical roadmap for developing relational, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded DEI practices attuned to pluriversal organizational realities.

A relational model of inclusion shifts focus from the autonomous, speaking subject to the interdependent individual whose

TABLE 1 | Modality of silences.

Modality of silences	Defining features	Representative theorists	Ethical/political valence
Oppressive silences	Enforced muteness through hierarchy, fear, or institutional exclusion	R. Simpson and Lewis (2005), Morrison and Milliken (2000), Spivak (1988), Fricker (2007), Bowen and Blackmon (2003)	Coercive; produces epistemic and political invisibility
Strategic and opaque silences	Refusal of transparency and tactical withholding to resist domination; silence as protection	Glissant (2020), Marling (2021), Rowe and Malhotra (2013), Abu-Lughod (1990), Ortner (1995), Scott (1990), Yousfi (2014)	Ambivalent; counter strategy, constrained yet resourceful
Ethical and generative silences	Spiritual or epistemic quietude enabling listening, care and relational knowing. Preservation of dignity and humility	Mahmood (2005), A. Simpson (2007), Soroush (2000), Marques et al. (2024), Eger (2021), Asad (1993)	Transformative; asserts ethical relationality and restraint and enacts inclusion through humility

belonging is constituted through relationships, obligations, and embodied practice. Rather than asking how identities can be expressed, post-confessional DEI asks how care, solidarity, or resistance are already enacted and how institutions might support them without translation into confessional terms. This requires attunement to the implicit, gestural, and unspoken dimensions of inclusion, what Gandhi (2006) calls "affective economies of coexistence." However, this does not endorse oppressive spirals of silence (Bowen and Blackmon 2003). Instead, agentic silence creates space for otherness and oneness (Marques et al. 2024).

Here, ethical silence is redefined not as failure but as a situated practice of withholding—to protect, preserve dignity or avoid moral imposition (Eger 2025). As Das (2007) and Asad (1993) show, silence can be a powerful modality of ethical and political life, especially where voice has historically been dangerous or misunderstood. For DEI practitioners, this means reading silence as presence—an expression of agency, restraint, or relational care. Such sensitivity legitimates unspoken epistemologies and creates silent spaces for safety. The Indonesian LGBTQ+ movement illustrates this, seeking protection through silence rather than visibility (Röell et al. 2024).

Importantly, this reorientation questions universal metrics of inclusion, such as participation rates, disclosure and audit scores, in favor of contextual recognition and epistemic humility. It involves supporting informal, community-based networks rather than formal affinity groups; recognizing acts of mutual aid over public declarations; or valuing tacit mentorship and intergenerational bonds in place of individual leadership narratives. Institutions must interrogate which identities are legible to HR systems, policy or diversity dashboards, and on whose terms? Post-confessional DEI thus moves beyond managerial difference toward ethical engagement with alterity. It does not reject voice or naming injustice (Özbilgin 2024) but insists voice is not the only currency of recognition. By engaging silence, gesture, ambiguity, and moral opacity, DEI can become more globally resonant and locally just.

In addition to the conceptual argument, we provide two models to support theorization and translation into practice: a conceptual model of non-confessional DEI (Figure A1) and an implementation cycle for leaders (Figure A2) in the Appendix that align conceptual dimensions with concrete institutional levers and evaluation criteria. These models are offered as scaffolding rather than exhaustive representations of the argument's complexity and they should be read alongside the thicker historical, ethical and political analysis developed in the article. Importantly, the models are not meant to "resolve" the critique by turning it into a universal template. Rather, they are derived from the paper's genealogical and comparative argument as provisional devices for thinking and for institutional translation.

5 | Operationalizing Post-Confessional DEI: Principles for Practice, Pedagogy, and Policy

Translating this post-confessional ethos into practice requires reimagining inclusion as relational care rather than disclosure (see Figures A1 and A2). This involves mechanisms that honor discretion, interdependence, and local epistemologies. For instance, institutions in the Middle East and Southeast Asia have begun adopting quiet inclusion models privileging relational mentoring and informal trust networks over public self-identification (Eger 2025; Jamjoom and Mills 2023). Peer-to-peer allyship schemes cultivate protected spaces for mutual recognition without disclosure, as Röell et al. (2024) term it, covert allyship. These practices demonstrate that inclusion can emerge through confidentiality, and reciprocity rather than metrics or advocacy.

Figure A2 (Appendix) condenses these implications into a non-confessional implementation cycle specifying leadership levers, safeguards, training implications and forms of evidence that do not depend on compelled disclosure. It is meant to support leaders in sequencing their decisions without implying that change is linear or that cycles will look the same across institutions. The "repair loop" explicitly signals that silence can indicate harm as well as agency, and that institutions must treat breakdowns in trust as structural problems to address rather than as individual deficits to confess.

From a pedagogical perspective, post-confessional classrooms emphasize epistemic humility and intercultural reflexivity. Silence becomes a legitimate form of expression through

TABLE 2 | Contrasting confessional and post-confessional cultures of DEI.

Dimension	Confessional culture (global north DEI)	Post-confessional/non-confessional culture (global south DEI)	Illustrative DEI interventions for post-confessional workplaces
Ontological basis of selfhood	Autonomous, expressive individual who reveals inner truth through voice and visibility	Relational, contextually embedded self defined through moral conduct, humility, and communal accountability	Replace "bring your whole self to work" policies with "ethical presence" and collective responsibility frameworks
Mode of recognition	Voice, disclosure, visibility, and testimony as routes to legitimacy	Silence, discretion, and relational practice as routes to dignity and inclusion	Introduce protected "quiet inclusion" mechanisms—mentorship, informal networks, peer trust groups without public disclosure
Moral economy	Speech equated with authenticity and courage; silence often read as disengagement or complicity	Silence equated with ethical restraint, humility, and care; over-speech may be seen as egoistic or disruptive	Reframe silence in diversity training as a potential ethical stance, not disengagement
Institutional logic	Managerial and audit culture: DEI tied to metrics, participation rates, disclosure percentages	Relational and ethical culture: Inclusion measured through mutual care, trust, and moral conduct	Integrate qualitative and narrative evaluation tools to complement quantitative DEI metrics
Dominant technologies of inclusion	Self-identification forms, storytelling campaigns, visibility days, affinity networks	Covert allyship, tacit mentorship, collective rituals of care, ethical silence	Establish "right to opacity" policies protecting non-disclosure and cultural discretion
Agency and resistance	Emancipation through voice, critique, and disruption of norms.	Resistance through strategic silence, subtle alignment, and moral restraint.	Recognize "strategic and ethical silence" in performance and inclusion assessments.
Ethical grammar	Confession, authenticity, and self-revelation as virtue	Adab (ethical comportment), tawadu (humility), and submission as virtue	Train leaders to interpret adab and modesty as forms of ethical participation, not lack of engagement
Pedagogical mode	Participatory learning privileging voice, debate, and positionality statements	Reflective learning privileging listening, contemplation, and contextual sensitivity	Embed silent reflection, anonymous contributions, and listening rituals in DEI education

reflective pauses, anonymous contributions, or ritualized listening (de Sousa Santos 2014). Assessment expands beyond performance, recognizing collective forms of engagement, such as mutual teaching and collaborative reflection—reframing inclusion as ethics of attention rather than a politics of performance (Das 2007).

At the policy level, institutions can codify the right to opacity (Glissant 2020) protecting non-disclosure as legitimate agency. Confidentiality protocols enabling support without identity registration embed epistemic humility within bureaucratic systems. Similarly, qualitative approaches of narrative inquiry, participatory ethnography, or reflective diaries can complement audit-based measures, enabling institutions to listen differently to the moral texture of inclusion (Ahmed 2012; Shore and Wright 2000). By embedding these practices, post-confessional DEI becomes not a utopian abstraction but a lived institutional ethic. Transforming DEI beyond its confessional mode means redefining how institutions recognize and support differences. Instead of declarative speech and visible identity markers, post-confessional DEI praxis foregrounds relationality, ethical silence, and epistemic contextuality. It values silence not as lack, but as deliberate withholding, an act of dignity or protection. Participation norms must allow individuals to choose when and how to share, without penalty or erasure. Informal solidarities—trust networks, mentorship without self-disclosure, and silent acts of care—form the lifeblood of belonging, even when invisible to metrics (Shen et al. 2009). In pedagogy, this shift entails cultivating epistemic humility—holding silence alongside speech, ambiguity alongside clarity, while acknowledging the limits of one's own knowledge. They should invite comparative reflection on how different traditions, such as Islamic ethics, Ubuntu relationality, or Confucian modesty, conceptualize the self, ethics, and community. They should teach inclusion not merely as representation but as practice: performed through ritual, relational accountability, and embodied conduct. In doing so, educational environments become laboratories of ethical coexistence.

At the policy level, institutions must move beyond audit-centric metrics and develop qualitative and narrative-based evaluation frameworks that can respond to contextually meaningful signs of inclusion: mutual aid networks, acts of moral discretion, and silence as agency. Non-disclosure must be protected in policy,

not as a failure, but as valid expression and relational belonging recognized as institutional value. This requires epistemic humility, decentralization, and co-design with those whose subjectivities operate outside confessional scripts. Thereby, equity becomes less about legibility and more about care; inclusion becomes less about performance and more about solidarity; belonging becomes less about representation and more about relational integrity.

Reorienting DEI in this way produces a deeper, more pluralistic ethics of inclusion. Justice is no longer equated with visibility, but acknowledges quiet gestures, ethical discretion, and communal practices Confessional models, though enabling, also reproduce epistemic hierarchies. A truly global DEI must therefore pluralize its ontology of selfhood and belonging, recognizing that silence, restraint, and relational accountability are potent forms of ethical presence.

This repositioning demands both humility and courage. Institutions must relinquish the fantasy of complete knowledge and control and instead participate in a dialogic process guided by epistemic hospitality—valuing the unspoken as much as the spoken. Only then can diversity transcend performance to become a lived, ethical, and contextually meaningful mode of institutional life. A post-confessional paradigm aligns DEI's aspirations with the rich plurality of human subjectivities, and in doing so, invites a deeper, more just form of belonging.

6 | Conclusion: Extending DEI Theory Beyond the Confessional Paradigm

This paper has advanced a theoretical extension of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) by challenging its dominant reliance on a confessional paradigm, one that equates inclusion with identity disclosure, visibility, and vocal expression. Drawing on philosophical and decolonial traditions, we have argued that the central figure of DEI in the Global North is the expressive subject: one who becomes knowable, and therefore recognizable, by articulating their difference. Although this model has facilitated important gains, it is also epistemically bounded and culturally partial, as analyzed through Foucault's confessional mode. In contrast to the Foucauldian model of the subject as reflexively constituted through power/knowledge and constantly negotiating its autonomy through confessional truth-telling, we foreground the possibility of ethical subjectivities shaped not through critique and transgression, but through silence, habituation and moral opacity.

This reorientation has profound implications for DEI scholarship, which has largely assumed that inclusion is achieved through the recognition of marginalized identities articulated within liberal discursive norms. The privilege of visibility, voice and authenticity as sites of empowerment often excludes those forms of ethical and political life that do not conform to secular-liberal metrics. Muslim feminist scholars such as Barlas (2019) and Mahmood (2005, 2009), have similarly emphasized that religiously grounded agency cannot be measured by Western feminist logics of resistance or gender parity, but must be understood on their own epistemic and theological terms. These perspectives challenge the assumption, often implicit in institutional DEI work, that liberation is universally predicated on the decentering of religious authority, the rejection of gender norms or the assertion of individual rights.

The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in pluralizing the very ontology of the subject that underpins DEI frameworks. Although our argument aligns with postcolonial scholars such as Prasad (2012), Faria (2013), and Ibarra-Colado (2006) in critiquing the coloniality embedded in DEI and management knowledge, our intervention extends this conversation in a novel direction. Those earlier critiques expose how DEI reproduces global hierarchies of epistemic power by privileging Western categories of rationality, individuality, and modernity. Our contribution, in contrast, lies in diagnosing the confessional episteme that subtends both liberal and critical approaches to inclusion. By tracing the theological lineage of confession as a mode of subject formation, we show that even decolonial and critical DEI frameworks often remain bound to the same moral economy of disclosure and self-expression. The concept of post-confessional DEI thus offers a new theoretical vocabulary: it reframes inclusion not merely as a site of epistemic critique, but as an ontological problem concerning how subjects are made visible, knowable, and governable. In doing so, the paper moves beyond representational and managerial critiques to propose an ethics of relationality, humility, and moral discretion as alternative grammars of justice. This repositioning marks the paper's distinctive theoretical contribution to the ongoing decolonization of DEI scholarship.

By critically examining how dominant approaches to identity politics rest on what we term a confessional mode, drawing on Foucault's critique of modern subjectivity, we bring Islamic epistemologies and relational modes of selfhood into conversation with post-Foucauldian critiques of confession. Thereby, we introduce a post-confessional account of inclusion, one in which silence, modesty, and moral discretion are not barriers to justice but expressions of alternative ethical traditions of existence and resistance (Özbilgin et al. 2023). Future research must grapple with the epistemological and ontological tensions between confessional and non-confessional paradigms of subject formation. Rather than merely expanding the DEI framework to be "inclusive" of Muslim voices or religious minorities, scholars should interrogate the foundational assumptions of what counts as agency, emancipation and subjectivity in DEI discourse. This would involve developing conceptual tools capable of holding space for different forms of expression in which submission and silences are not necessarily markers of subjugation but may constitute ethical forms of subject formation.

This paper contributes to rethinking DEI work by arguing that inclusion must not be reduced to the act of speaking, nor justice to the metrics of legibility. Instead, we propose an expanded theory of subjectivity that accommodates relational presence, tacit practices of care, and culturally situated forms of belonging. This theoretical move reframes DEI not only as a program of representational justice but also as a site of ontological contestation. It shifts the question from "Who is included?" to "On what terms is inclusion made possible, and for whom?" (Morillas 2023). Epistemic hospitality is mobilized as an ethical and methodological orientation that invites

openness to other ways of knowing, particularly those rooted in Islamic traditions and Global South epistemologies. Rather than merely tolerating difference, it entails a willingness to be transformed by encounters with epistemic alterity. Moreover, to support those in leadership positions who are tasked with implementing DEI without reproducing "confessional cultures," we provide a conceptual model and an institutional implementation cycle in the Appendix. Together, these figures respond to the practical challenge of how to train and implement an alternative to confessional DEI while remaining justice-centered, culturally plural and attentive to the risks of both coerced silence and extractive disclosure.

Reorienting DEI beyond its confessional mode invites epistemic humility and openness to multiple ways of being. Inclusion, then, is not a matter of voice alone but of ethical relation. Silence, ambiguity, and restraint can express justice as powerfully as speech. A post-confessional DEI recognizes that belonging is achieved not only through articulation but through care, listening, and coexistence. In this pluralistic vision, diversity becomes less about representation and more about relational integrity.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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Appendix

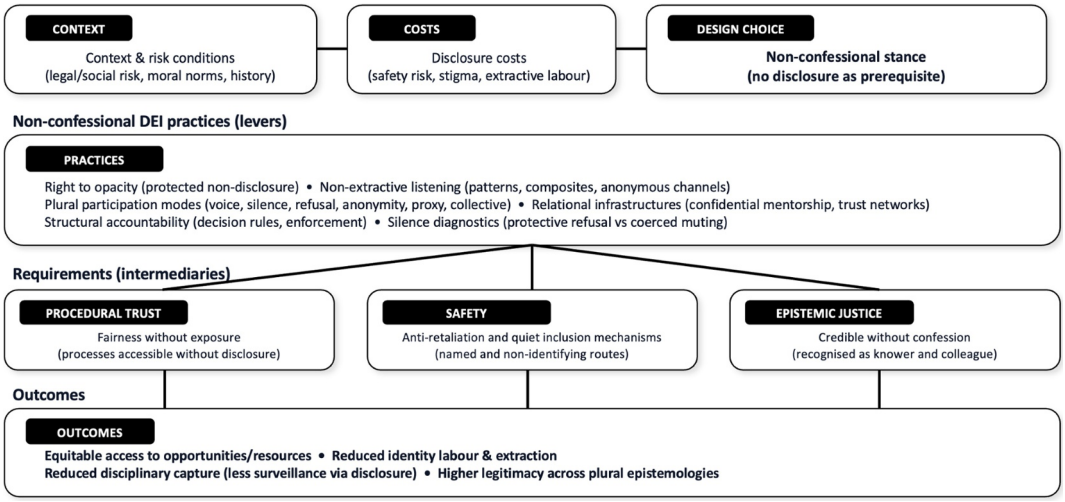

FIGURE A1 | Non-confessional DEI model. *Source:* Authors.

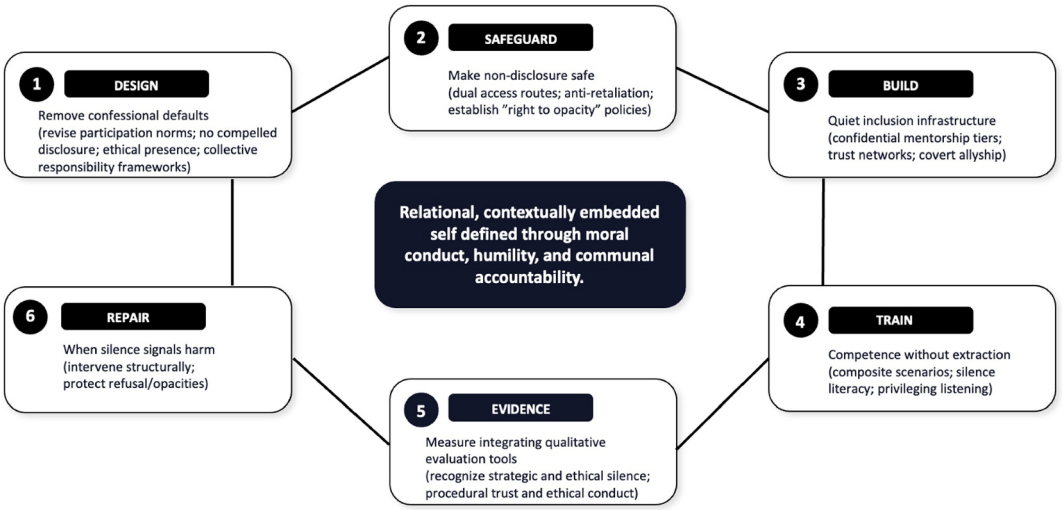

FIGURE A2 | Non-confessional DEI implementation cycle. *Source:* Authors.