

# Women and Gender in the Muslim World

Exploring Muslim Societies in the Modern  
World

## Primary source:

'Women and gender in the Muslim World' – Valentine M. Moghadam & Namrata Mitra chapter in Islam in the Modern World edited by J. Kenney and E. Moose (Routledge)

This presentation has been adapted from the above chapter, with additional images and commentary. It is recommended that you read this chapter as part of your studies.

- The Muslim world is too vast differentiated there to exist a homogenous "Muslim woman". Muslim women are situated in diverse socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts.
- Women and gender constitute an integral parts of the Muslim world's histories and movements, including modernity, nationalism, fundamentalism, legal reforms and political change.
- The study of Islamic texts is not irrelevant to an understanding of the legal status of women in the Muslim world, and family law does exert influence on women's roles.
- Conservative Muslim family laws are increasingly challenged by new social forces, notably women's rights groups.

Since the 1980s, the issue of women and gender in the Muslim world has been tied to Islam's cultural and political reassertion

This has focused on so-called fundamentalist and/or politicised movements

There are diverse responses to this issue, from a variety of sources and perspectives.

People identifying with Islamic law are convinced that Islam provides all the necessary rights for humankind and womankind, and that Islamic states - such as the Islamic Republic of Iran - go the furthest in establishing those rights.

So-called secular feminists have described as adherence to Islamic norms, laws and values as the main impediments to women's advancement.

Others stress the "complementarity of the sexes", distinguishing "authentic Islam" from "pseudo—Islam", suggesting that the former is emancipatory.

People who describe themselves as "Muslim feminists" emphasise the egalitarian and emancipatory content of the Qur'an, which they maintain has been hijacked by patriarchal interpretations

Islam is experienced differently in terms of practice and interpretation across diverse contexts.

This can include variations in terms of religiosity, from extremely orthodox in **Pakistan** to syncretic and flexible in **Indonesia** and to non-religiosity in most of **Kazakhstan**.

Tunisia has long produced female lawyers, judges, parliamentarians, government officials, and political activists.



Judge Kalthoum Kannou has recently made history as the first female presidential candidate in modern-day Tunisia.  
[Source: alarabiya](#)

In Senegal, the majority of women are not veiled and dress in the traditional African fashion.



[Source: microcred](#)

In Malaysia, women fully participate in the country's economic development and are employed in the exports-manufacturing sector in large numbers.



Source

In Saudi Arabia, women lack all of these advantages.



Source: Telegraph

### **Nationalism and women**

Nationalist movements have had 'positive' and 'negative' features:

- They may be expansive and inclusive or narrow and exclusionary.
- Nationalism may be imbued with concepts of inclusion and equality, modernity and progress, in which case it is often compatible with women's participation, advancement, and rights.
- Nationalism may have elements of cultural defensiveness and nostalgia for a bygone era or invented golden age, placing on women the burden of reproducing cultural values and traditions through prescribed dress and comportment.

In some Asian independence and liberation movements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's emancipation was an explicit objective, inasmuch as it was a necessary component of the national goal of emancipation from feudalism, illiteracy, and backwardness.

Women's activism in the anti-colonial movements was generally welcomed, and resulted in their inclusion in postcolonial state-building projects, the adoption and implementation of favourable legal frameworks and social policies, and state-sponsored education for women and girls.

In Turkey, Egypt and Iran, progress and modernity were equated with women's emancipation.

Some attempts at modernisation failed, such as in Afghanistan.

Nationalism in Indian contexts is more complex, given constructs of Hindu or Muslim womanhood as "pure", embodiments of tradition, and repositories of communal honour.

Womanhood became a subject where there were competing nationalistic battles.

Many nationalists elevated the domesticity of Indian women, but some elite women took exception to this image and advocated for education and the end of seclusion.

Liberal nationalism in Egypt, Iran, Turkey and Syria favoured national integration via social and educational reforms, the promotion of the national language, and the establishment of a modern nation-state.

Some scholars have noted tensions between the goals of women's rights and of national liberation.

Some movements focused on the role of women within nationalist struggle, for example in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine.

In the 1930s that demands for political rights and equality were often suppressed, due to the hostility of Conservative male leaders, as noted in Eastern Women's Congresses in Damascus and Tehran in 1930 and 1932.

In Turkey, Kemal Ataturk granted Turkish women the right to vote in 1930 but this did not occur in Egypt, Iran or Syria until much later.

Nationalist causes were often seen as ways of emancipating women, especially during a period of decolonisation in which postcolonial countries provided political rights to women and men, including the right to vote.

In many of these states, opportunities for female participation were made available in education, health, and public administration.

While the majority of women remained in rural areas, some urban women were able to find work in the growing industrial sector.

Nationalism could also be destructive, especially in the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and East and West Pakistan. There was violence on all sides, including mass rape and sexual violence against Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh women.

Victims could often be encouraged to commit suicide because of dishonour and shame.

The East Pakistan independence movement, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, entailed the mass rapes of Bengali women by Pakistani soldiers, as well as civilian men, in 1971.

The 1980-88 war between Iran and Iraq, which was based in part on competing narratives of secular Arab nationalism and revolutionary Shi'ism, did not entail mass violation of women, but did focus on ideas of control of women and hyper- masculinity.

In the 1990s, the Serbian-Bosnian war saw the systematic rape of Bosnian Muslim women



In East Timorese independence struggle, numerous women were raped by Indonesian soldiers

In the Indonesian uprising against President Suharto in 1998 there were sexual assaults against Chinese women, who were seen to be part of a group that have benefited from President Suharto's role

These issues have played out in the nationalist contestation over Kashmir by India and Pakistan.

Studies on women's lives in contemporary Kashmir show how nationalist resistance has been heightened due to sexual assaults, displacement and loss of life suffered by Kashmiri women, primarily at the hands of Indian security forces.

The identities of Kashmiri women are focused on cultural and ethnic ideals, focusing on religious values.

Kashmiri women have also joined resistance movements, including so-called fundamentalist women's groups that support the integration of Kashmir into Pakistan. This group is known as the Daughters of the Nation (Dukhtaran-e-Millat)

### **Dukhtaran-e-Millat**

- enforce codes of conduct
- focus on Islamic dress for women
- Banned beauty parlours and wine shops
- Carry out attacks in cafes and restaurants that allowed women to meet unrelated men
- Kashmir was traditionally a liberal Sufi stronghold, but has seen backlashes.
- There have been attempts of control and violence against women, and these have also occurred in other locations.

Dukhtaran-e-Millat protest against the amateur film 'Innocence of Muslims' on September 21, 2012



Source: Getty Images

## Dukhtaran-e-Millat



Source Indileak, Oct 2015

Women's crucial role in the socialisation of the next generation makes them symbols of cultural values and traditions, and thus they are expected to behave and dress in prescribed ways

Some Muslim women regard this role as an exalted one, and they gladly assume it, becoming active participants, although rarely ideologues, in Islamic movements.

Other women find it a burden; they resent restrictions on their individuality, mobility, and personal freedoms.

Such non-conformist women may rebel in various ways; they may discreetly pursue alternative lifestyle; they may leave the country and settle elsewhere; they may join for women's rights organisations.

Yet other Muslim women have challenged political Islam through the intellectual and theological project known as "Islamic feminism".

The influence of fundamentalist movements and political Islam has generated polemic surrounding hijab (modest Islamic dress for women) in every country and (re-)veiling has spread since the 1980s

For example: Indonesian women began to don the **jilbab** (head scarf covering hair, neck and shoulders), leading to discussion within women's rights groups about its meaning.



Opinions: some emphasise the personal choice and enhanced opportunities for mobility the veiling represents, especially for the women of the lower middle-class and conservative families.

Others stress it is linked to the appeal of fundamentalism and religious identity among women

Veiling is compulsory in some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran

There are social pressures elsewhere to veil and achieve "respectability" or "authenticity"

Such pressure sometimes takes the form of harassment and intimidation by self-styled male enforcers of 'correct' religious behaviour and public morality

Veiling can be regarded as an identity marker (of piety, of tradition, or of a distinct cultural or religious group)

It can be regarded as affiliation with the values and goals of political Islam

## Muslim family law

### issues include:

**patrilineality** - privileges and authority for male kin

**marriage**: formal marriage contracts require the wife's consent, and in some countries women may include stipulations in the contract such as permission to divorce

Marriage is agreement between two families rather than to individuals with equal rights and obligations

Men may marry up to 4 wives simultaneously, only men can divorce unilaterally without cause

Children acquire citizenship and religious status through their fathers, not their mothers

Fathers or others in the male line are guardians of children

Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim man

Muslim family law renders women as economic minors and denies them autonomy; inheritance can be less than the male line

In a marriage, groom offers a dowry to the prospective bride and must provide for her

In family law the male is to expect obedience and childbearing

There is no concept of shared matrimonial property and in the case of divorce the husband is liable only for the promised dowry

Because male kin maintain women as well as children, the concept of male guardianship has evolved to mean that women are required to obtain permission father, husband rather male guardian to undertake travel, including business travel, or to start a business

Educated women may stipulate certain aspects of these conditions within their marriage contracts

In some countries, certain occupations or off-limits

### **key aspects to family law:**

Women are "second-class citizens and minors"

They may deny women's political agency, therefore preventing contributions to political and other development

Being locked into a family unit, without being able to contribute to economic development, means that there is an economic and social cost

Example: see the case study presented on page 160 and 161 of the chapter

### **Campaigns involving Muslim groups promoting family law reform:**

**Egypt:** campaign for women's right to divorce in Egypt, one in 2000

United Nations supported global women's rights agenda

**Moroccan** campaign for family Law reform in 2003-4

**Malaysian** campaign by Sisters in Islam

**Algeria:** amendments to the Algerian family law in 2005

### Significant factors impacting on Muslim women:

- High rates of fertility
- Low literacy
- High maternal mortality
- Limited labour force participation
- These are indicators of low female status

There are significant differences between different sectors, from oil-rich economies through to socially developed countries through to extremely poor countries.

### Key factors relating to gender gaps include:

- Resource endowments
- Level of development
- State policies
- Class structure

Table 7.1: Social/gender indicators, Muslim-majority countries by region (2010)

|                               | Total population (millions) | GDP (BIS, billions) | Mean age of marriage (f, years) | Fertility rate | Female share, paid labor force | Female share, parliamentary seats | Year women receive vote |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Eastern Europe</b>         |                             |                     |                                 |                |                                |                                   |                         |
| Albania                       | 3.14                        | 5.66                | 23                              | 1.9            | 33                             | 16                                | 1920                    |
| <b>Central Asia/ Caucasus</b> |                             |                     |                                 |                |                                |                                   |                         |
| Azerbaijan                    | 8.68                        | 18.5                | 23                              | 2.1            | 44                             | 11                                | 1918                    |
| Kazakhstan                    | 15.67                       | 37.27               | 23                              | 2.3            | 50                             | 18                                | 1924, 1993              |
| Kyrgyzstan                    | 5.28                        | 1.98                | 22                              | 2.5            | 51                             | 26                                | 1918                    |
| Tajikistan                    | 6.84                        | 1.67                | 21                              | 3.4            | 37                             | 20                                | 1924                    |
| Uzbekistan                    | —                           | —                   | —                               | —              | —                              | 22                                | —                       |
| <b>South Asia</b>             |                             |                     |                                 |                |                                |                                   |                         |
| Afghanistan                   | —                           | —                   | —                               | —              | —                              | 27.5                              | —                       |
| Bangladesh                    | 160                         | 73.94               | 19                              | 2.3            | 20                             | 19                                | 1935, 1972              |
| Pakistan                      | 166.11                      | 108                 | 23                              | 4              | 13                             | 22                                | 1956                    |
| <b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>     |                             |                     |                                 |                |                                |                                   |                         |
| Chad                          | 10.91                       | 3.02                | 18                              | 6.2            | 6                              | 5                                 | 1958                    |
| Eritrea                       | —                           | —                   | —                               | —              | —                              | —                                 | —                       |
| Mali                          | 12.71                       | 3.74                | 18                              | 5.5            | 35                             | 10                                | 1956                    |
| Nigeria                       | 153.21                      | 74.18               | 21                              | 5.3            | 21                             | 7                                 | 1958                    |
| Senegal                       | 12.21                       | 6.55                | 21                              | 5              | 11                             | 23                                | 1945                    |
| <b>Southeast Asia</b>         |                             |                     |                                 |                |                                |                                   |                         |
| Indonesia                     | 227.35                      | 247.23              | 23                              | 2.2            | 32                             | 18                                | 1945, 2003              |
| Malaysia                      | 27.01                       | 139.16              | 25                              | 2.6            | 39                             | 10                                | 1957                    |





**women and gender in the muslim world**

Table 7.1: continued

|                                       | Total population (millions) | GDP (US\$ billions) | Mean age of marriage (r, years) | Fertility rate (r, years) | Female share, paid labor force | Female share, parliamentary seats | Year women receive vote |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Middle East &amp; North Africa</b> |                             |                     |                                 |                           |                                |                                   |                         |
| Algeria                               | 34.37                       | 75.28               | 29                              | 2.4                       | 13                             | 8                                 | 1962                    |
| Bahrain                               | 0.78                        | 13.16               | 26                              | 2.3                       | 10                             | 3                                 | 2002                    |
| Egypt                                 | 81.53                       | 145.59              | 23                              | 2.9                       | 19                             | 2                                 | 1956                    |
| Iran                                  | 71.96                       | 151.8               | 24                              | 1.8                       | 16                             | 3                                 | 1963                    |
| Iraq                                  | —                           | —                   | —                               | —                         | —                              | 28                                | —                       |
| Jordan                                | 5.91                        | 14.62               | 25                              | 3.1                       | 16                             | 6.4                               | 1974                    |
| Kuwait                                | 2.73                        | 61.4                | 27                              | 2.2                       | 23                             | 8                                 | 2005                    |
| Lebanon                               | 4.19                        | 24.38               | 27                              | 1.9                       | 14                             | 3                                 | 1952                    |
| Morocco                               | 31.61                       | 55.16               | 26                              | 2.4                       | 21                             | 10                                | 1959                    |
| Turkey                                | 73.91                       | 376.87              | 23                              | 2.1                       | 22                             | 9                                 | 1930                    |
| Tunisia                               | 10.33                       | 28.34               | 27                              | 1.9                       | 25                             | 28                                | 1959                    |
| Oman                                  | 2.79                        | 27.2                | 25                              | 3.1                       | 22                             | 0                                 | 1994, 2003              |
| Qatar                                 | 1.28                        | 29.27               | 26                              | 2.4                       | 13                             | 0                                 | 2003                    |
| Saudi Arabia                          | 24.65                       | 252.63              | 25                              | 3.3                       | 15                             | 0                                 | —                       |
| Syria                                 | 20.58                       | 27.37               | 25                              | 3.3                       | 16                             | 12                                | 1949, 1953              |
| Yemen                                 | 22.92                       | 12.86               | 22                              | 5.2                       | 6                              | 0                                 | 1967, 1970              |
| UAE                                   | 4.48                        | 113.77              | 24                              | 1.9                       | 20                             | 23                                | 2006                    |

Source: Compiled by V. Moghadam from World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2010. Data not available for Afghanistan, Bosnia, Eritrea, Iraq, Libya, Niger, Uzbekistan.

### Talking Points

**Indonesia and Malaysia** have relatively low fertility rates and high rates of female participation in paid employment

**Sub-Saharan African** countries tend to be poorer, with higher fertility rates and female illiteracy; however, Senegal has at 23% a significant share of parliamentary seats, greater than that of the United States (17% in 2010)

In **Bangladesh**, the average age of first marriage is 19, but the fertility rate has dropped to 2.3 children per woman

In **Bangladesh**, countries export manufacturing development strategy has drawn a relatively large segment of the female economically active population out of the household into the paid labour force

In the **Middle East and North Africa\***, the average age at first marriage for women has risen

Fertility rates of decline dramatically in Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates

In MENA, share of university enrolment has eclipse that of men in the region

The region exhibits the lowest levels of female paid employment as well as parliamentary seats

**\* For comparative purposes (this zone is not the focus of the present module)**

Women's rights groups among the chief proponents of democratic development and of its correlates of Civil Liberties, participation and inclusion

see the listing on page 166-167 of the chapter

it is important not to generalise about the status of women within the modern world, but rather to present case studies based on specific evidence drawn from different locations

However, some shared experiences across diverse locations can be distilled from available data, including common themes (discussed above)

Women form significant components within many male dominated movements and political projects

Women have self organised, especially around women's rights movements and networks

So-called "Islamic feminism" seeks to attain women's rights by reclaiming Islam from patriarchal interpretations