



## Perspectives of Women in the Muslim World

by Dalia Mogahed, Executive Director Muslim Studies

A 2005 Gallup Poll of U.S. households found that “gender inequality” was among the top responses American women gave to the open-ended question, “What do you admire least about the Muslim or Islamic world?” But how do the majority of women in several predominantly Muslim countries perceive Islam and their own status in Muslim society?

Gallup’s 2005 Gallup Poll of the Muslim World helps shed light on the perspective of those women. More than 1,000 face-to-face surveys were conducted in each of eight predominantly Muslim countries: Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Nationwide probability samples of both urban and rural sectors in each country ensured that the surveys were nationally representative, with a sampling error of  $\pm 3$  percentage points. Following are a few important questions the survey helped inform.

### **Are women in the Muslim world socialized to expect second-class status?**

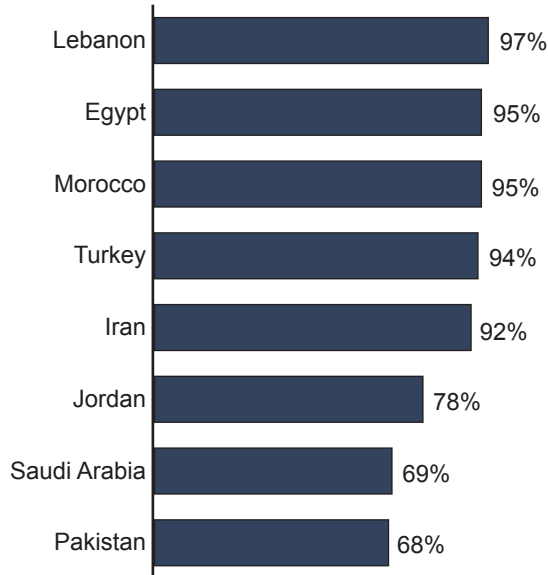
In most cases, the diversity of achievements and the expectations of women in the region defy that idea. For example, it is hardly unusual for women in predominantly Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa to have achieved higher education levels. The education “gender gap” ranged from zero in Iran, indicating no difference, to women needing to increase their levels 73% in Pakistan to equal that of men. For perspective, while the United States, like Iran, boasts no gender gap, and other developed countries such as Japan have reverse gender gaps (a greater proportion of women than men pursue higher education), France and Germany have gender gaps of more than 50%.

In that light, it should be no surprise that most women in the Muslim world are well aware that they have the same capabilities and deserve the same fundamental rights as men. Majorities of females in each of the eight countries surveyed said they believe women are able to make their own voting decisions, to work at any job for which they are qualified, and even to serve in the highest levels of government.



*"Women are able to make their own decisions on whom to vote for."*

Percentage of women saying "yes, agree"



**How do Muslim women view the West?**

Muslim women’s views toward the West are complex. On one hand, high percentages associate the statement “both sexes enjoy equal legal rights” with Western nations; far fewer associate the same statement with Arab/Muslim nations. In addition, both men and women cite political freedom, free speech, and gender equality among the most admired aspects of the West.

Nevertheless, many women in the Muslim world disapprove of the way women are treated in Western societies, just as Western women do the treatment of women in Islamic societies. Perhaps most revealing were the responses to the open-ended question, “What is it you most resent about the West?”, which often included descriptions of promiscuity, pornography, and public indecency – impressions gathered from Hollywood images exported daily to the Muslim world. So while the veil is often perceived by many in the West as a symbol of women’s inferior cultural status in the Muslim world, in Muslim societies, the perceived lack of modesty portrayed in Western media is thought to signal women’s degraded cultural status.

This ambivalent perspective on the status and values of the West can be summarized by looking at the two items Muslim world residents are most likely to associate with their own societies: “eager to have better relationship with the Western world” and “attachment to their spiritual and moral values is critical to their progress.”

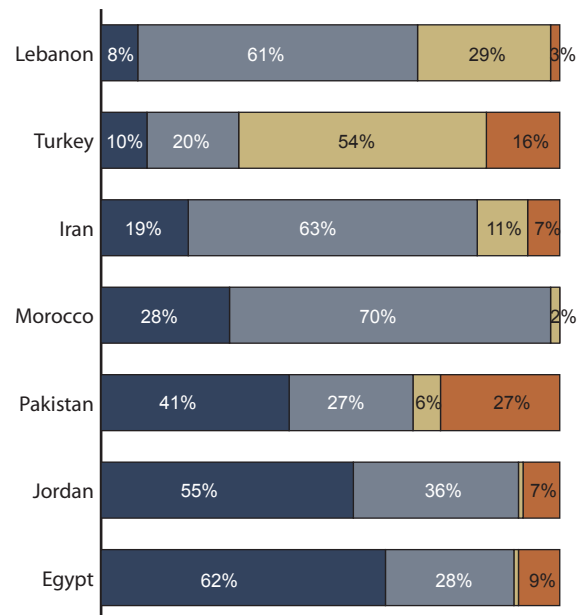
**How do Muslim women view the cultural divide between Islam and the West?**

One of the most pronounced themes to emerge from the study was the great importance Muslims attach to their faith, both for personal guidance and for the progress of society at large. For example, when asked on an open-ended basis what they most admired about their own societies, by far the most frequent response was “people’s adherence to Islamic values.” In none of the eight countries surveyed were women less likely to offer this response than men.

*Sharia as a Source of Legislation*

Percentage among women

- Only source
- A source
- Not a source
- Don't know



What’s more, Muslim women clearly tend to agree that Islamic principles should guide public policy. Respondents in each country were asked for their

point of view regarding the role of Sharia, Islam's sacred law, in creating government legislation. Majorities of women in all countries surveyed (with the exception of Turkey, which has a secular government), chose either "Sharia should be the only source of legislation" or "Sharia must be a source, but not the only source of legislation" over "Sharia should not be a source of legislation," with a plurality often choosing the second option.

**Do women in the Muslim world place gender inequality among their societies' biggest problems?**

Not typically. While relatively few women and men chose "equal legal rights" as a description they would associate with the Muslim world, gender inequality did not commonly appear as an unprompted response in open-ended questions critiquing the region. That is, unlike their American counterparts, Muslim women don't spontaneously cite gender inequality as an aspect of Islamic societies they don't like. Rather, the aspects of the Arab/Muslim world that Muslim women most often said they admired least were similar to those that their male counterparts most often complained about -- lack of unity among Muslims, extremism, and political corruption topped the list.

Gender inequality was not mentioned at all in response to this question among Jordanian women, and was cited by no more than 2% of women in Egypt and Morocco. It was mentioned somewhat more frequently by Saudi women (5%), but "lack of unity" and "high unemployment" outranked it. The two exceptions were Lebanon and Turkey, by far the most Westernized of the eight countries surveyed, where this sentiment was expressed by 9% to 11% of women, among the top five spontaneous responses. (In these two countries, because the question asked about the "Arab/Muslim" world, respondents may have felt it applied to other societies in the region rather than their own; 40% of Lebanese respondents are Christian, while Turks are not Arab and many are secular Muslims.)

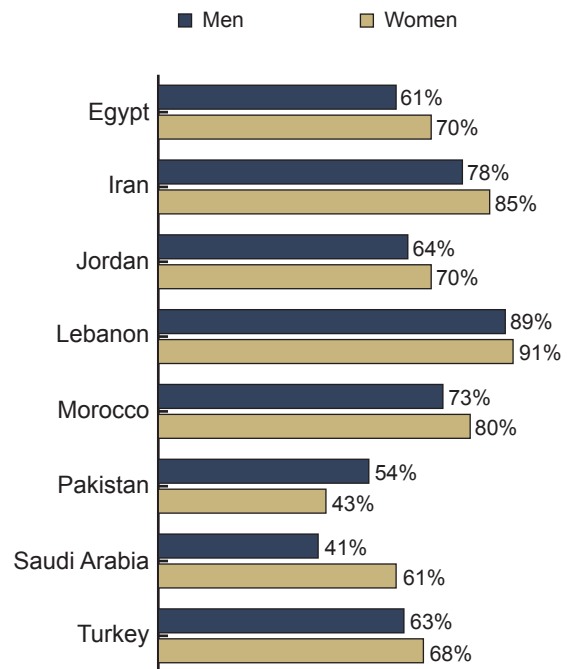
**How do men in the Muslim World feel about women's rights?**

Do Muslim men believe women should have the same basic rights that the women themselves do? The short answer is yes, but in some cases with less enthusiasm than Muslim women. This gap ranged from the case of

Turkey and Lebanon, where the survey found virtually no gaps (92% of both women and men in Turkey said women should have the same legal rights as men, for example), to Morocco, which had the largest gender gaps (55% of men and 87% of women said women and men should have the same legal rights).

Majorities of men in virtually every country surveyed agreed that women should be allowed to vote without influence, work at any job for which they are qualified, and enjoy the same legal rights as men. That includes Saudi Arabia, the only country surveyed in which women are not allowed to vote. However, in Saudi Arabia less than a majority of men (41%) said that women should be allowed to drive a car by themselves, compared with 61% of Saudi women, representing the largest gender gap in any nation on this question. Such remaining gaps signal that there is work yet to be done to bring about a common vision for a woman's role in society across the Muslim world.

*Percentage who feel women should be allowed to drive a car by themselves*





**If one's goal were to help promote justice for women in the Muslim world, what approach would Gallup's analysis suggest?**

Outreach will have to center around addressing the problems they are most concerned about, which, in most countries are more likely to be economic and political corruption than gender issues. What's more, while women in the Muslim world are not slavishly uncritical of their own societies, they are far from favoring wholesale adoption of Western culture. Associating women's rights with a Western value system that men and women in the Muslim world view critically will only empower those who oppose women's rights as cultural guardians against Western hegemony.