

What do Muslim women want?

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In an analysis called "What women want: Listening to the voices of Muslim women", the Washington-based Gallup Organisation learned about the viewpoints of women from predominantly Muslim countries.

Women living in the Muslim world do not consider themselves oppressed, and felt other issues more pressing than gender -- such as Muslim unity, extremism, and political and economic corruption -- according to a survey released by the US-based Gallup Organisation on 6 June.

The analysis came from a 2005 survey carried out by doing 8,000 face-to-face interviews in Morocco, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Dubbed "What women want: Listening to the voices of Muslim women", it is part of a larger Gallup World Poll initiative in which both men and women are being interviewed.

[Getty Images] Muslim women are concerned over the rise of violence in their societies.

They did not list oppression or gender inequality in their answers to the open-ended questions.

The surveyed women cited lack of unity among Muslim countries, violent extremism and economic corruption as the societal issues they were most concerned about.

There were other answers that "flew in the face of conventional wisdom", Dalia Mogahed, executive director of Muslim studies at the Gallup Organisation, told Magharebia. "The women we surveyed were very conscious of the rights they deserved. There's a perception that Muslim women are silent victims. But they assert themselves," she said.

Mogahed, who was born in Egypt, acknowledged that some of the results even surprised her. She specifically pointed to the view that similar education levels were attained for both men and women -- even in Saudi Arabia -- where human rights organisations often report gender inequality in education.

More predictably, when asked what they liked least about the West, the most common responses among the surveyed women were moral decay, promiscuity and pornography -- which the respondents associated with the West and considered offensive to women.

However, the respondents acknowledged they admired western values about women's rights and political freedoms. Still, most did not think adopting western values would help their region's political and economic progress. "Some of our findings showed the complexity of Muslim women and what they think of the West," said Mogahed. "On the one hand, there's

much they admire about the West -- such as technology and equality. On the other hand, they don't want the wholesale adoption of western values."

Mogahed said she thought that westerners might be surprised to know how highly Muslim women value their faith. "When asked what they admired most about their society, the most common response was 'people's attachment to Islamic values'," she noted.

The majority of women asked believe they deserve the right to vote, drive, work outside the home, and serve in government.

In Morocco and Egypt, 95 per cent of the women surveyed said they should make their own voting decisions in elections. Lebanon had the highest rate of women answer affirmatively at 97 per cent, while Pakistan had the lowest rate at 68 per cent.

The larger Gallup World initiative will include the "systematic polling of over 130 countries every year on a key set of core questions that look to record the state of well-being for the citizens of those countries", Eric Nielsen, senior director of media strategies at Gallup, told Magharebia. He said the survey is expected to eventually cover 95 per cent of the world's population.

"One of the goals of the Gallup Organisation is to help inform policy makers about the one element they don't have access to -- the point of view of the people," said Mogahed.

"We believe that the voices of the people need to be an integral part of a world leader's decision-making process," Nielsen added.