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How Muslims Relate their Religiosity to Support for Gender Equality around the Globe: Context Matters

In recent decades, right-wing populist debates in Muslim-minority countries have increasingly excluded Muslims based on their supposed lack of support for “core Western values”. Gender values receive special attention, with populists proclaiming that Muslims’ religion is necessarily at odds with women’s empowerment. Simultaneously, eerily similar arguments are presented by conservative Islamist voices in Muslim-majority countries, who portray feminism as a Western neo-imperialist construct that would not fit “pure, authentic Islam”. Thereby, both populists in Muslim-minority countries and Islamists in Muslim-majority countries paint a picture of one essentialist, patriarchal Islam to which all Muslims would adhere.

In this contribution, I reject the notion of one patriarchal Islam and simultaneously study the influence of narratives that portray Islam as such. Doing so, I draw attention to the diverse ways Muslims live their religion and connect it to gender equality around the globe, which I argue are varied and context-dependent rather than fixed and essential. More specifically, first, I decline the dominant approach in the public opinion literature of comparing Muslims to other people – which homogenizes both groups – and instead unpack religiousness among Muslims. Following classic insights from the sociology of religion, I argue that and study whether religious beliefs (e.g., particularism), behavior (e.g., mosque attendance), and belonging (e.g., attachment to Islam) shape support for gender equality in diverse ways. Second, I depart from the dominant focus on differences between individual people in varying literatures and instead argue that context matters. I propose that and test whether contexts that essentialize Islam alter how Muslims relate their religion to gender equality, although I expect those responses might depend on whether Muslims are in a besieged minority position or part of the dominant majority in a particular context.

Empirically, I test my framework using the most recent wave of the World Values Survey (2017-2022), which covers over 20,000 Muslim respondents located across 300 subnational regions in 40 countries. Using multilevel regression models, I test how relations between individual religious expressions and support for gender equality are conditioned by subnational and national contexts.



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