

## **GENDER EQUALITY ATTITUDES OF MUSLIM MIGRANTS IN ITALY<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction**

The challenges of social integration and the question of diversity imply the need for a full understanding of the cultures that migratory phenomena are entering our tissues, which for a long period of time have been culturally homogeneous. It is particularly interesting in this sense to focus specific attention on the Islamic religion which, in an all-encompassing way, also generally involves the lifestyles of the faithful. In the approach to Islam it is therefore necessary to start from a fundamental methodological assumption: it cannot be reduced to the simple idea of religion, according to the classical approach, but one must contemplate both the religious and the political profile, since it is the rule of life, the law (El Ayoubi, 2000). Furthermore, it must be said that Islam as such does not exist, Islamic states may exist, but there is a different adhesion depending not only on the classic Sunni-Shiite bipartition (with a clear preponderance of the former) but on the legal schools of reference. As it is known, the first characteristic of Islam is that of the absorption of theology into law: the first juridical source is the Koran, which follows the Muhammadis imitation collected in the Sunna; we therefore have *iğmā* / consensus and *qiyās* / analogical reasoning. Sharia, the positive law, integrally regulates human activity and, in particular, contains the rules that regulate the life of Muslims, in their most personal sphere and regulate marriage, family, inheritance, etc. These rules apply to the *umma* / community of believers from birth and followed by the faithful, regardless of their residence.

Generally speaking, Islamic cultures show usually a strong gender inequality, legally structured, codified and defined at the social level. Women do not enjoy full citizenship but second class, their subordination is nothing more than the consequence of the application of Muslim family law, which derives from patriarchal and cultural norms. Among Muslims, the man-woman biological complementary has been embraced by traditional cultures (Mernissi, 2011) and has resulted in a legal

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<sup>1</sup> This work is the result of a close collaboration between the authors. As for this version, sections 3 and 4 has been written by Gabrielli; sections 1 and 2 by Carobene; section 5 by Gabrielli and Carobene.

complementarity, inspired by the principle of equity / *insāf* (and not the principle of equality / *musāwā*): women they do not perceive themselves as heads of families; instead receive protection and in return must obey their husbands). This principle has remained unchanged over time, despite the processes of colonization and modernization, with evident repercussions on gender identity. Understanding these dynamics can therefore provide us with the terms and tools to provide the new challenges that are imposed on our legislator. It is also possible to note that in contemporary Islam, few issues are as highly controversial as gender inequalities (Masoumeh, 2016). The more traditional interpretation still supports the principle of gender complementarity / *takāmul* and conceives a clear division of social roles by gender that establish the division of employment and domestic work, responsibilities in the private environment and in family decisions and relationships in society (Salvini and Angeli, 2021). Obviously, it is not possible to establish an archetype of Muslim woman, since an important factor is the social and legal status which depends on the social and cultural policies of the contexts concerned.

However, the process of globalization, which has taken various forms in different parts of the Muslim world, has undermined traditional conceptions of appropriate gender roles. As a result of these factors, progressive Islamic discourses on gender equality and cultural dynamics are evident in the positive changes in the traditional expectations of Muslim families. The most recent movement of the so-called "Islamic feminism", which emerged in multiple Islamic states, as a cultural, political and social reflection (obviously with different outcomes depending on the context of reference) has promoted "equality and justice in the Muslim family" through a renewed reading of the founding texts of Islam through the use of critical reasoning / *iğtihād* (Lorber, 2010; Pepicelli, 2010; Vanzan, 2013; Assirelli *et al.*, 2014; Capretti, 2017). In more recent years, the struggle for the so-called gender / *ğihād* has continued, always in the wake of the Koranic law, provoking a heated debate in some Islamic states more sensitive to the processes of "modernization".

When considering immigration to Europe, Muslims represent the largest (non-indigenous) group perceived as a major challenge of the nature of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity (Triandafyllidou, 2011). Despite these multilevel contexts, the difference within the Muslim communities of Europe is often described in media discourse as a single typology that can be analyzed by the same kind of policies. In Southern European countries, Muslim immigrants have increased especially in the last two decades as these destination countries have become poles of attraction for economic migrants. In Italy, the majority of Muslim residents came from Morocco and Albania. However, Muslim migrants cannot in any way be considered a homogeneous group, as they come from different countries, speak different languages, adhere to different versions of Islam. Therefore, Muslim migrants do not

fit well into a monolithic conception of Islam that takes on different connotations in time and space.

In the empirical analyzes on migrants and gender roles, little space has so far been dedicated, also due to a lack of data, to the gender attitudes of Muslims in Italy (Di Brisco and Farina, 2018; Salvini and Angeli, 2021; Tognetti, 2012). According to the existing literature (Pessar and Mahler, 2003; van Klingeren and Spierings, 2020), we aim to describe the gender-specific attitudes of Muslim migrant men and women in Italy considering the heterogeneities existing between different groups. Our main assumption is that the Islamic community in Italy is significantly diversified and that gender attitudes are influenced by different contexts of origin. The empirical analysis will allow to draw a descriptive picture of the variegated Islamic universe existing in Italy contextualizing the analysis on the socio-normative schemes of the countries of origin.

## 2. Theoretical Background

In our analysis we must focus on two main considerations: the role of Islamic women and the legal diversity of the contexts of the countries of origin. The social position of women is traditionally organized within marriage and the family (Aluffi Beck Peccoz, 1997). Girls are used to housework and often have time to learn to read and write in school, which is more than enough for a woman. At social level they are framed so that the maximum realization is marriage. All the energies and dreams of these girls will be directed precisely on this and not, for example, on education and work, two options rarely considered. According to Islamic law, marriage (*nikâh*) is, in the first place, a legal institution aimed at regulating the social order. It has as its main objectives the care of legitimate offspring and the legalization of sexual relations. The marriage contract has different purposes for the two spouses. For the husband, it concerns the rights conferred on the person of the wife: sexual enjoyment and marital authority, with particular attention to the protection of the integrity of the nucleus. Let us not forget that the penal codes provide for absolution or reduction of the sentence for men who commit «crimes of honour». For women, however, the subject of the contract is the right to the obligatory nuptial gift and to the satisfaction of other material and emotional needs. Let us not forget that even in the case of inheritance rights, women are entitled to lower quotas than those reserved for male relatives. The violation of rights is also highlighted by depriving women of the opportunity to express their will, reducing marriage to an agreement between families rather than between individuals with equal rights and obligations.

Relationships between spouses within marriage are certainly marked by the supremacy of the husband over the wife. The roles of the spouses are also clearly

defined within the education of children. The mother is entitled to custody */hadanâh*. She has the task of raising, caring for and supervising the child. Instead, the father has the power */wilâyah*, that is the power to decide on the education of the son, on his education, the start of work, marriage, and the administration of his goods. Children acquire citizenship and religious status only through their fathers. Polygamy is an important institution of Islamic family law. Within the Qur'an there is a single verse that authorizes polygamy, very complex and difficult to interpret. Polygamy has long been the subject of profound criticism from the Muslim world. The juridical inequality between spouses within marriage is still manifested at dissolution event: Muslim law grants the husband the exclusive right to divorce, that is, the right to terminate the marriage by means of a simple verbal statement.

If this is, in general, the Koranic context of configuration of social relations it is however important to emphasize the plurality of Islam present in the different socio-political contexts, linked to cultural factors, adherence to certain legal schools but also to the historical evolution of many countries, to the phenomena of colonization, revolutions, economic backwardness etc.

The common colonial destiny of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia with the submission to "western" laws, has favored the construction of a more modern Islam although, in the post-colonial period, Islam has acquired an important identity factor (Mcloughli, 2013). The comparison between the principle of equality and that of gender complementarity has encouraged a rewriting of the rules, especially in the areas of personal status and family law. On the other hand, the geopolitical situation of Egypt is different as, although geographically in Africa, it has always been Asian from a cultural standpoint. The Asian dimension has provided it with civilization - culture and religion. If the control by the State of the clergy is very strong in other North African countries, this has not yet happened in Egypt and this tends to leave room for the most conservative and traditionalist currents (Elsakaan, 2019).

In Western Africa, religious expansion has been linked not only to the activity of merchants, but also to that of the confraternities, which here have played a decisive role in the process of Islamization, mediating and seeking a dialogue between local pre-Islamic cultures, with ancient traditions, including the worship of ancestors and forces of nature, and helping to generate syncretic forms (Vercellin, 2000). This has also led to particularly violent forms of female submission (just think of female genital mutilation). The context of reference, especially on our example centered on Senegal and Burkina Faso, highlights a rural area, characterized by a low literacy rate that certainly does not favor the empowerment of women.

Completely different is, instead, the "European" Islam, that endogenous nature characteristic of areas of Eastern Europe that had to live with the decades of "severe" State atheism and communist repression, becoming a religion more open to secularity and Western values linked to gender equality. After the collapse of the

communist regime, religious sentiment flourished again, but this has never eradicated the much deeper sense of belonging to the nation. Religious belonging is now considered secondary to belonging to the nation.

Still different is Asian Islam where very different situations are highlighted. The Middle Eastern area is particularly heterogeneous within it and does not allow its reading as a single cultural block (Moghadam, 2004). Still different is the Islamic accession in the countries of the Persian Gulf area that have levels of female subordination difficult to explain (for us Westerners) with the high economic level reached. Strongly traditionalist is the area of Pakistan and Bangladesh that we can describe as deeply backward cultures also from the economic point of view, more linked to patriarchal codes. Unicum in the Asian landscape is the legal condition of Turkey, one of the few countries constitutionally secular, in which the construction of the State, at the beginning of the twentieth century was outlined as rejection of religious codes from public life (although Islam is currently forcefully reclaiming such spaces).

The contact with Western cultures, in migratory paths, therefore highlights a legal paradox in the dualism between equality, established at the constitutional level in the host country, and female subordination, that follows the subject as belonging to the Umma/Muslim community, regardless of its geographical location (Salih, 2008).

### **3. Data and methods**

Data was taken from the “Social Condition and Integration of Foreign citizens survey” (SCIF), conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) in 2011-2012. It is the only sample survey in the Italian system of multipurpose household surveys designed to collect data on families with at least one foreign citizen and to provide original information on foreign nationals living in Italy. The cross-sectional survey covers a random sample of about 9,500 households and provides information on the living conditions, behaviours, characteristics, attitudes and opinions of the foreign citizens in Italy including information on gender roles.

We considered the net sub-sample of men and women who arrived at adult ages in Italy (first generation migrants), who were aged 18-64 years old at interview, and who declared to be Muslim at interview. Among these, we selected 3,974 individuals coming from those countries of origin that had a sufficient sample size (more than 100 cases). The country of origin has been defined by the country of citizenship at birth. Table 1 shows the distribution of the final sample included in our analyses.

**Table 1** – *Unweighted sample size by country/area of origin. First generation Muslim adult migrants in Italy. Absolute (abs. val.) and percentage (%) values.*

Country/area of citizenship at birth	abs.val.	%
Albania	885	22.3
Former Yugoslavia	336	8.5
Morocco	1,460	36.7
Tunisia and Algeria	544	13.7
Egypt	128	3.2
Senegal and Burkina Faso	266	6.7
Pakistan and Bangladesh	355	8.9
<i>N</i>	<i>3,974</i>	<i>100.0</i>

*Source: our elaboration on SCIF data, 2011-2012.*

The data include seven 5-point Likert scale items on the support for gender equality attitudes: “it must be the man who economically supports the family”; “it must be the man who makes the most important decisions regarding the family”; “the woman has to take care only of the house and the care of the family”; “the woman should ask her husband for advice on people to associate with”; “it is right for men to help women with housework”; “family life can work if the woman works outside the home as well as looking after the house and children”; “there is nothing wrong with a man and a woman living together without being married”.

A synthetic index of gender equality attitudes was adopted to measure the gender disparities in the attitudes that we described so far. According to the literature (Blangiardo, 2013), it assumes continuous scores that range from -1 (max gender disparity) to +1 (max gender equality) and total mean value equals to 0. These scores are determined starting from the frequency distributions of the seven items, appropriately ordering the categories from the worst to the best situation of gender equality.

The score, assigned to each category of each variable, is obtained through the difference between the sum of the relative frequencies that belong to the previous modalities minus the sum of the relative frequencies that belong to the following modalities. All scores (as well as their arithmetic mean) are assigned to respondents according to their given answers.

To avoid compositional effects, we used the index of gender equality attitudes as dependent variable of three nested linear regression models in order to consider those individual characteristics and behaviours associated to gender attitudes.

All the analyses used weighted data in order to provide results which are representative for the migrant population residing in Italy.

#### 4. Results

Before turning to multivariate analysis, Table 2 presents some descriptive results on the characteristics and behaviours considered.

**Table 2** – *Sample characteristics by country/area of origin and gender. First generation Muslim adult migrants in Italy. Percentage values (%).*

Variable	Category	%M	%W	%M+W
% of Women		-	-	39.7
Age at interview	<i>(mean value)</i>	37.7	34.9	36.6
Time since migration in Italy (yrs.)	<i>(mean value)</i>	12.8	8.9	11.3
Educational level	No Educ. or primary	22.5	24.6	23.3
	Lower secondary	37.0	38.0	37.4
	Upper secondary	34.3	30.4	32.7
	Tertiary	6.1	7.1	6.5
Municipality dimension in the country of origin	Town	30.1	37.3	32.9
	Middle or small city	42.6	36.1	40.1
	Village or countryside	27.3	26.6	27.0
% of having Italian citizenship		9.5	5.3	7.8
% of having a paid job		93.5	39.2	71.9
Marital status	Single	29.1	13.4	22.9
	Married	54.1	79.4	64.2
	Divorced or separated	16.4	5.1	11.9
	Widow	0.4	2.2	1.1
Number of children	None	38.2	19.4	30.8
	One child	14.9	19.8	16.9
	Two children	22.5	29.7	25.4
	Three children	14.9	19.0	16.6
	Four and more children	9.4	12.1	10.4
Importance of religion <sup>(1)</sup>	<i>(Mean value)</i>	8.1	8.4	8.2
% of individuals observing fasts		72.1	73.5	72.7
Religious attendance	At least once a week	34.5	27.9	31.9
	At least once in a month	13.8	9.9	12.2
	At least once in a year	16.1	16.3	16.2
	Never	35.6	46.0	39.7
<i>N</i>		<i>2,353</i>	<i>1,621</i>	<i>3,974</i>

*Note: (1) Self-evaluation score of the importance of religion in a range from 0 to 10*

*Source: our elaboration on SCIF data, 2011-2012.*

The 39.7% of interviewees is women (W) who on average are significantly younger (34.9 years old) and arrived in more recent years than the men (M) counterpart. All respondents have on average an heterogenous educational level and come from different places of origin according to the municipality dimension. Only

9.5% of men acquired the Italian citizenship; the same percentage reduces to 5.3% among women. Almost all men have paid work at interview (93.5%), while less than half of women have the same (39.2%). Only 13.4% of women is single at interview, while this percentage is more than double among men (29.1%). Interestingly, a quarter of the interviewees has three or more children (27.0%) and another quarter of them has two children (25.4%).

When considering individual religiosity, we analyse both the subjective religiosity and the religious communal integration (van Klingeren and Spierings, 2020). The former is measured through the self-evaluation score of the importance of religion (in a range from 0 to 10) and the habit of fasting, as individual religious act. On average, both men and women give significant importance to religion (8.1 and 8.4 respectively) and almost three quarters of them observe fasts (72.7%). The religious communal integration is measured by looking at religious attendance. Interestingly, in this case respondents are divided among those who attend a place of worship (e.g. mosque) frequently (at least once a week, 31.9%), those who sometimes do it (monthly or yearly, 28.4%), and those who never do it (39.7%). In the latter group the percentage of women is significantly higher (46.0%) than the one of men (35.6%).

Moving the attention on gender equality attitudes (Table 3), the estimated synthetic index show, as we can expect, that migrants coming from Albania and from former Yugoslavia have the highest values (i.e. the highest gender equality among Muslims, 0.216 and 0.045 respectively), while Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria occupy a somehow middle ground position (-0.027 and -0.036 respectively), and Egypt, Pakistan and Bangladesh have the lowest values (i.e. the highest gender disparity, -0.105 and -0.137 respectively). Interestingly, Senegal and Burkina Faso assume a value (-0.049) closer to the ones observed for Northern African countries than to the ones observed for the two South-Asian countries.

**Table 3** – *Index of gender equality attitudes by country/area of origin. First generation Muslim adult migrants in Italy. Mean values and standard errors (std. er.).*

Country/area of citizenship at birth	Mean	Std.er.
Albania	0.216	0.315
Former Yugoslavia	0.045	0.326
Morocco	-0.027	0.341
Tunisia and Algeria	-0.036	0.329
Egypt	-0.105	0.256
Senegal and Burkina Faso	-0.049	0.307
Pakistan and Bangladesh	-0.137	0.284
Total	0.000	0.343

*Source: our elaboration on SCIF data, 2011-2012.*



In multivariate analyses, Table 4 presents how gender equality attitudes differ between the migrant groups according to their country/area of origin, controlling for the selected individual characteristics and behaviours. Model 1 (M1) mostly confirms what previously observed in the distribution reported in Table 3. In addition, Model 2 (M2) and Model 3 (M3) shows that the heterogeneity for country/area of origin of migrants somehow reduces their magnitude (lower coefficient) but persists in their statistical significance (p-value) after controlling for other factors.

**Table 4 – Determinants of index of gender equality attitudes. First generation Muslim adult migrants in Italy. Linear regression models. Coefficients and p-values.**

Variable (referent category)	Category	M1		M2		M3	
		b	p-val.	b	p-val.	b	p-val.
Citizenship at birth (ref. Morocco)	Albania	0.243	***	0.219	***	0.151	***
	Former Yugoslavia	0.072	***	0.082	***	0.053	***
	Tunisia and Algeria	0.008		-0.009		-0.021	
	Egypt	-0.078	***	-0.103	***	-0.063	***
	Senegal and Burkina Faso	-0.022		0.021		0.038	*
Pakistan and Bangladesh		-0.110	***	-0.106	***	-0.086	***
	Women			0.117	***	0.167	***
Gender (ref. Men)	Women			-0.007	**	-0.008	**
Age at interview	(continuos)			0.001		0.000	
Age-squared	(continuos)			0.018	***	0.016	***
Time since migration in Ita.	(continuos)			-0.001	***	-0.001	***
Time since migr.-squared	(continuos)			0.070	***	0.057	***
Educational level (ref. Primary or less)	Lower secondary			0.149	***	0.116	***
	Upper secondary			0.216	***	0.194	***
	Tertiary			-0.047	***	-0.043	***
Municipality size in the origin country (ref. Town)	Middle or small city			-0.119	***	-0.108	***
	Village or countryside					0.078	***
Italian citizenship (ref. No)	Yes					0.090	***
Paid job (ref. No)	Yes					-0.021	*
Marital status (ref. Single)	Married					-0.070	***
	Divorced or separated					-0.023	
	Widow					-0.001	
Number of children (ref. no children)	One child					-0.019	
	Two children					-0.050	**
	Three children					-0.082	***
	Four and more children					-0.010	***
Importance of religion <sup>(1)</sup>	(continuos)					-0.012	
Observing fasts (ref. No)	Yes					-0.002	
Religious attendance At least once a week (ref.)	At least once in a month					0.082	***
	At least once in a year					0.108	***
	Never						
Constant term			-0.027	***	-0.031		-0.042
Adj R-squared			0.096		0.197		0.241

Note: (1) Self-evaluation score of the importance of religion in a range from 0 to 10

Legend: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Source: our elaboration on SCIF data, 2011-2012.

For the control variables, Model 2 includes in the analysis the individual characteristics. Women are more associated to gender equality attitudes ( $b=0.117$ ) than men. The younger people are ( $b=-0.007$ ) and the longer is the time since migration in Italy ( $b=0.018$ ), the more attitudes are pro gender equality. Educated people, in upper secondary and tertiary level ( $b=0.149$  and  $b=0.216$  respectively), as well as those who come from town (the referent category) assume higher levels of gender equity than low educated people coming from small cities or villages ( $b=-0.047$  and  $b=-0.119$  respectively).

Model 3 considers socio-economic and demographic behaviours. Having Italian citizenship ( $b=0.078$ ) and a paid job ( $b=0.090$ ) are positively associated with pro gender equality attitudes. While being in (past or present) union ( $b=-0.021$  and  $b=-0.070$  respectively) or having a child of parity three ( $b=-0.050$ ) and four ( $b=-0.082$ ) are negatively associated to pro gender equality.

Last three variables consider the effects of individual religiosity and of religious communal on attitudes about gender equality. The direction of both effects indicates that more religious people are on average more opposed to gender equality. As expected, the coefficient of religious communal integration is substantially larger and more strongly significant than that of individual religiosity.

## 5. Synthesis and conclusion

In this article, we have described to what extent migration and secularization undermined the traditional views of Islamic complementary gender roles and determined various forms of gender-related attitudes among migrants coming in Italy from diverse parts of the Muslim world.

This issue supports the necessity to consider both religion and origin country in the analyses and not to assume that belonging to specific religion, such as Islam, is associated with unique behaviors or attitudes. As Read (2004) highlights, gender traditionalism is not synonymous with Muslim affiliation.

Even if relevant individual characteristics and behaviors are taken into account in the analyses, immigrants from a gender egalitarian country hold more egalitarian attitudes. In this origin country globalization and modernization have increased women's educational and social opportunities and eased their entry into paid employment, a role traditionally reserved for men.

Our findings also suggest that religious Muslims hold less gender egalitarian attitudes than more secular individuals. However, according to the literature, the factual explanatory power of migrants' religiosity lags far behind its prominence in public debates: religious commitment is just one among several factors and not even a particularly important one.

Younger, educated, employed migrants (more women than men) are challenging the patriarchal model of gender relations and assuming more gender equality attitudes. Muslims who live in large families tend to be more conservative attitudes than single ones, as well as Muslims who live since longer time in Italy or acquired Italian citizenship tend to assume more egalitarian attitudes than the others.

It has to be emphasized that our findings cannot be generalized to the whole Muslim population living in Italy. Since naturalized people, who are often less religious, and other less representative ethnic groups in Italy, who are often more religious, are not included in our analyses. Clearly, further research is needed to assess the relative impact of the Islamic culture and to disentangle it from other aspects of migrants' cultural background.

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## SUMMARY

### Gender Equality Attitudes of Muslim Migrants in Italy

In European public debates, Islam is often described as having a determinant role on gender inequality. However, Islamic community in Italy is significantly diversified and gender-related attitudes are affected by the different contexts of origin. By using multipurpose Istat data, we estimate a synthetic index of gender equality attitudes and conduct multivariate empirical analyses on migrant Muslim men and women. Results show that the heterogeneity among migrant groups persists after controlling for other factors. In addition, more religious Muslims are on average more opposed to gender equality. However, the role of religious communal integration is more important than that of individual religiosity.

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