

## **Different Faces of Shari'a: Women's Aspirations in Saudi Arabia and South Asia**

by Karl G. Feld and Will Hayes  
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Survey research has a role to play in providing Muslim women with a public voice where custom and culture do not permit them their own. It can be used to inform and shape empowerment policies from the perspective of each population. The Women In Muslim Countries (WIMC) study<sup>1</sup> is designed to measure women's empowerment in actual daily practice, providing a deep look into the oft-perceived gap between current public policy and empowerment initiatives and actual practice on the personal and local level. The answers are intended to yield a metric for promoting excellence in public policy by informing policymakers on women's attitudes about the affects of policy initiatives, as well as a measure of the degree of effectiveness of those policies.

Women in Muslim countries are faced with similar challenges, though these issues vary by country. Females in the South Asian nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh share similar opinions concerning aspects of their lives influenced by shari'a (Islamic) law, including financial independence, marital and work status, education and access to health care. However, their lives and opinions are very different from women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia who also live under shari'a. Attitudes in South Asia are driven by poverty. Women living in Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia are relatively well-off and educated. The latter women have aspirations as well, but they come from different interests and motivations. This paper explores how affluence does and does not appear to make a difference in women's lives under the shari'a system.

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<sup>1</sup> WIMC is sponsored and managed by D3 Systems ([www.d3systems.com](http://www.d3systems.com)) and is conducted in 22 Muslim majority countries of the world. Data has been collected from national surveys completed in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia along with 18 other countries. The surveys in South Asia were conducted in person in Dari, Pashto, Punjabi, Urdu, Sindhi and Bengali. In Saudi Arabia, the survey was completed via telephone in Arabic.



## Shari'a Law and CEDAW

The United Nations sponsored Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) acts as a bill of rights for women. Signatory nations agree to take actions to end discrimination and foster equality for their female citizens.<sup>2</sup> The WIMC survey attempts to measure women's views of the effectiveness of CEDAW in the context of shari'a law.

The overwhelming majority of women in Saudi Arabia (92%) believe their rights can be effectively protected and promoted within the realm of shari'a. Sixty-nine percent of Pakistani women and 65% of Afghan women feel the same. However, who these women are is extremely different.

Differences in opinion occur along educational lines. In Afghanistan, of the women who believe their freedoms are guaranteed under shari'a, 76% have zero to five years of education as opposed to 51% of Pakistani women with the same educational experience.

In Saudi Arabia however only 3% of women there who have a similar educational background feel their rights are protected. Instead, increased perceptions of individual freedoms tend to correlate with higher education levels as 80% of these Saudi Arabian women have nine to sixteen years of education.

Monthly income ranges in the above-mentioned South Asian nations are similar: 71% of Afghan women's households earn between \$42 and \$212 per month, 82% make between \$12 and \$125 monthly in Pakistan while 64% generate between \$43 and \$145 per month in Bangladesh. In stark contrast, 57% of Saudi Arabian female's households earn between \$5,340 and \$32,034 each month.

Tellingly, the fact that research in Saudi Arabia was conducted on the telephone while interviews in South Asia were done in person is reflective of a major economic and infrastructural discrepancy between life in South Asia and the Gulf. As income levels vary significantly by region, attitudes towards life and society also considerably differ.

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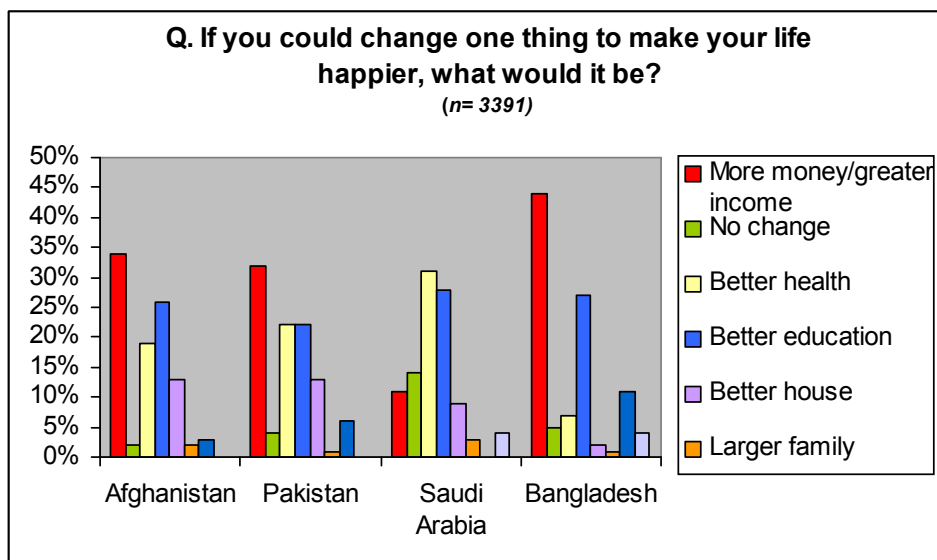
<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>



## Desires

A key goal of the WIMC survey is to gauge females' desires in Muslim countries. These desires serve as indicators for women's aspirations. When asked "If you could change one thing to make your life happier, what would it be?" the responses varied significantly by region and are further indicative of the economic status of each region.

Predictably, the plurality of women in Bangladesh (44%), Afghanistan (34%) and Pakistan (32%) mentioned more money or a greater income. On the other hand, only 11% of Saudi Arabian women said money. Instead the plurality of Saudi women (31%) mentioned better health and 28% mentioned education, the highest percentages of women in all four countries.



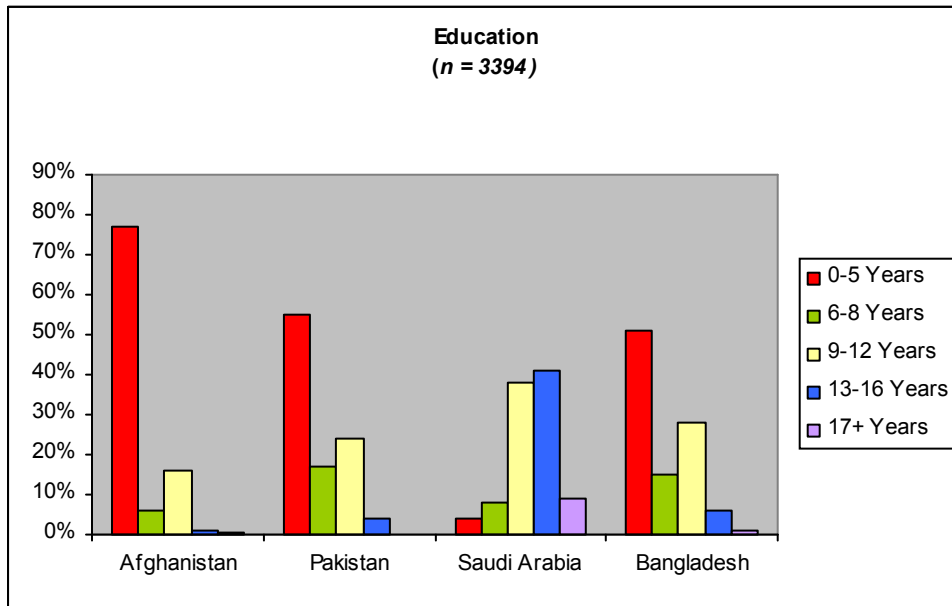
The fact that Saudi women are the most likely to express the strongest desire for better education and health is likely related to women in the Kingdom being much less concerned with daily needs such as money. Of the four nations, the highest percentage of women who said no change was necessary in their life was also in Saudi Arabia (14%).

The WIMC survey also attempts to measure female attitudes in South Asia and Saudi Arabia towards financial independence. When asked "Would you start a business if you had access to money and training?" Pakistani females were the most interested (99%) followed by Saudi

women (70%) and those in Bangladesh (68%). Interestingly, Afghan women are the least interested (36%) which seems to conflict with Afghan women being the second most interested in having more money.

### Education

Women in Saudi Arabia hold much higher levels of education than any of the South Asian nations. The plurality of Saudi women (41%) has thirteen to sixteen years of education. In contrast, the majority of women in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh have zero to five years of education with Afghan women being the least likely to be educated.



Of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women who have nine or more years of education, the majority are still homemakers: 91% and 69%, respectively. In contrast, women in Afghanistan are more likely to be employed as 24% indicate they are “paid by someone else”. Furthermore, though Saudi women are the most educated and least likely to be homemakers, of Saudi Women who have nine or more years of education, only 23% are employed (less than Afghanistan’s 24%).



## **Conclusion**

Saudi women and South Asian women both have aspirations in areas governed by both the CEDAW and shari'a. What women want seems in part to be influenced by the wealth of the societies in which they live. Affluent Saudi society supports women with aspirations to better health and education. Saudi educated women view the role of shari'a in protecting their rights positively. In contrast, it is uneducated and poor South Asian women who view empowerment through shari'a positively, and they generally seek greater financial affluence over other concerns.

In all countries except Afghanistan, most women indicate a willingness to start businesses, including the Saudis. Only the Afghans do not, which may be a function of cultural norms in their society, as opposed to legal constraint under shari'a.

