

**Independent Women:  
Muslim Women in Western Europe**  
by  
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**Introduction**

Muslim women in Western Europe<sup>1</sup> tend to exert significantly more control and independence than Muslim women in other countries. They are significantly more likely to work outside the home, make household decisions, and control the finances. They are less likely to be denied basic services such as health care. Like the Muslim women in other countries, the Muslim women in Western Europe are most likely to report needing more money to make their lives happier. This report addresses results of the Western European survey in the context of Muslim majority countries outside the European Union. It specifically focuses on the level of independence Muslim women have in Western Europe compared to that of Muslim women in other countries.

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>2</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.

To better understand the status of rights (in practice and beliefs) of Muslim women around the world, D3 Systems, Inc. has sponsored and managed surveys in 26 countries on topics related to WIMC. A total of 629 Muslim women in the Western European countries of Spain, Italy, and France were interviewed in person between December 11, 2009 and January 16, 2010. With

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, Western Europe includes Italy, France and Spain. Future waves of the WIMC survey will aim to broaden its scope to include Muslim women in additional western European countries.



95% confidence, results from this survey can be expected to have a margin of error of +/- 4 %. The WIMC project currently contains data on women in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. This data and information can be found in selected publications at <http://www.d3systems.com/women-in-muslim>.

### **Women's Rights**

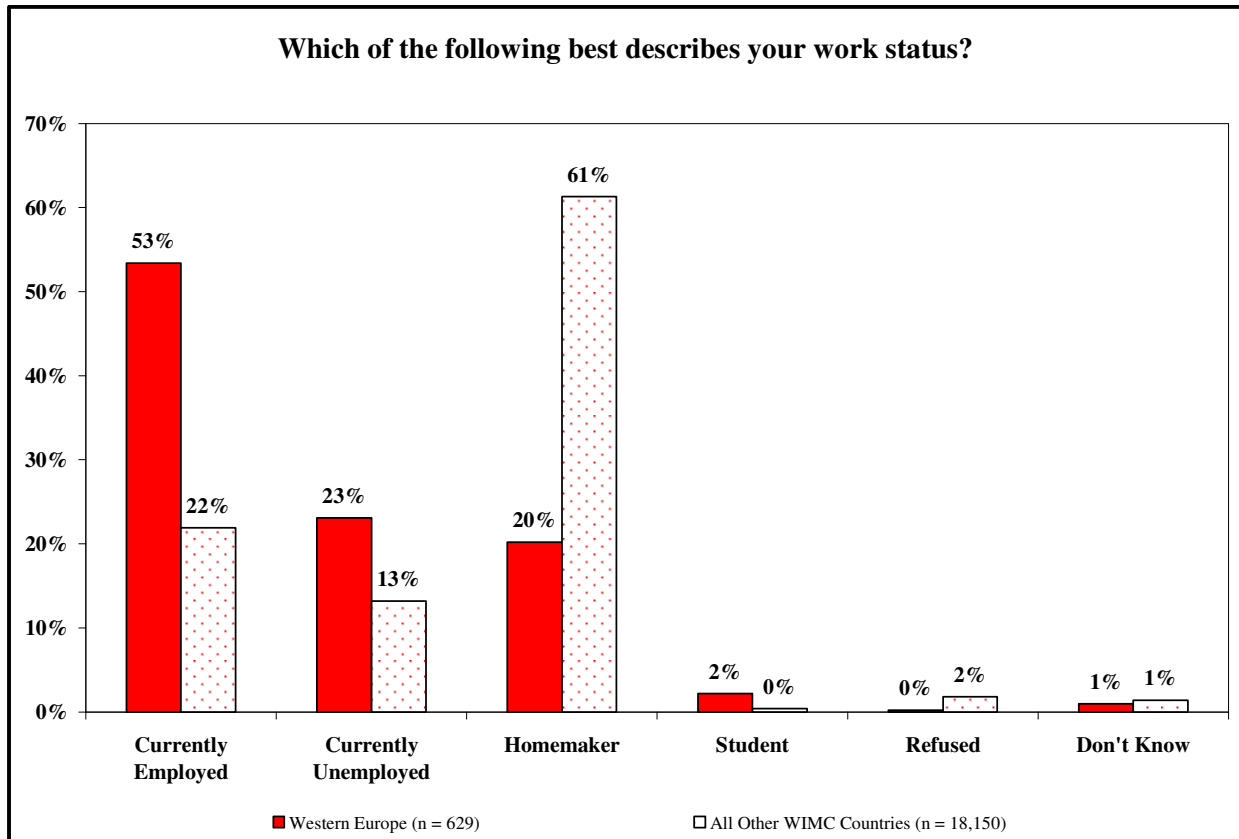
Historically, Muslim women in many societies have been expected to get married, raise their children and steer clear of becoming involved in public affairs. They have also been denied certain rights because of their gender. However, Muslim women in Western Europe are far less likely to be denied rights because they are women. While 17% of women in all other WIMC countries tell our interviewers they have been denied health care due to their gender, only 5% of women in Western Europe report this experience.

### **Employment**

It is generally accepted that women who earn money and have some level of control of that money have the capacity to be more independent than their non-working counterparts. While approximately 3 in 5 Muslim women interviewed for the WIMC study are homemakers (61%), the majority of Western European Muslim women respondents work outside the home (53%) (see Figure 1). It is interesting to note that while most of the respondents outside of Western Europe are homemakers, many of them said they would take advantage of the opportunity to start a business if given the proper training and money (43%) to do so. This is comparable to the Muslim women interviewed in Western Europe (40%), reflecting a common level of interest; but a disparate level of opportunity.



**Figure 1.**



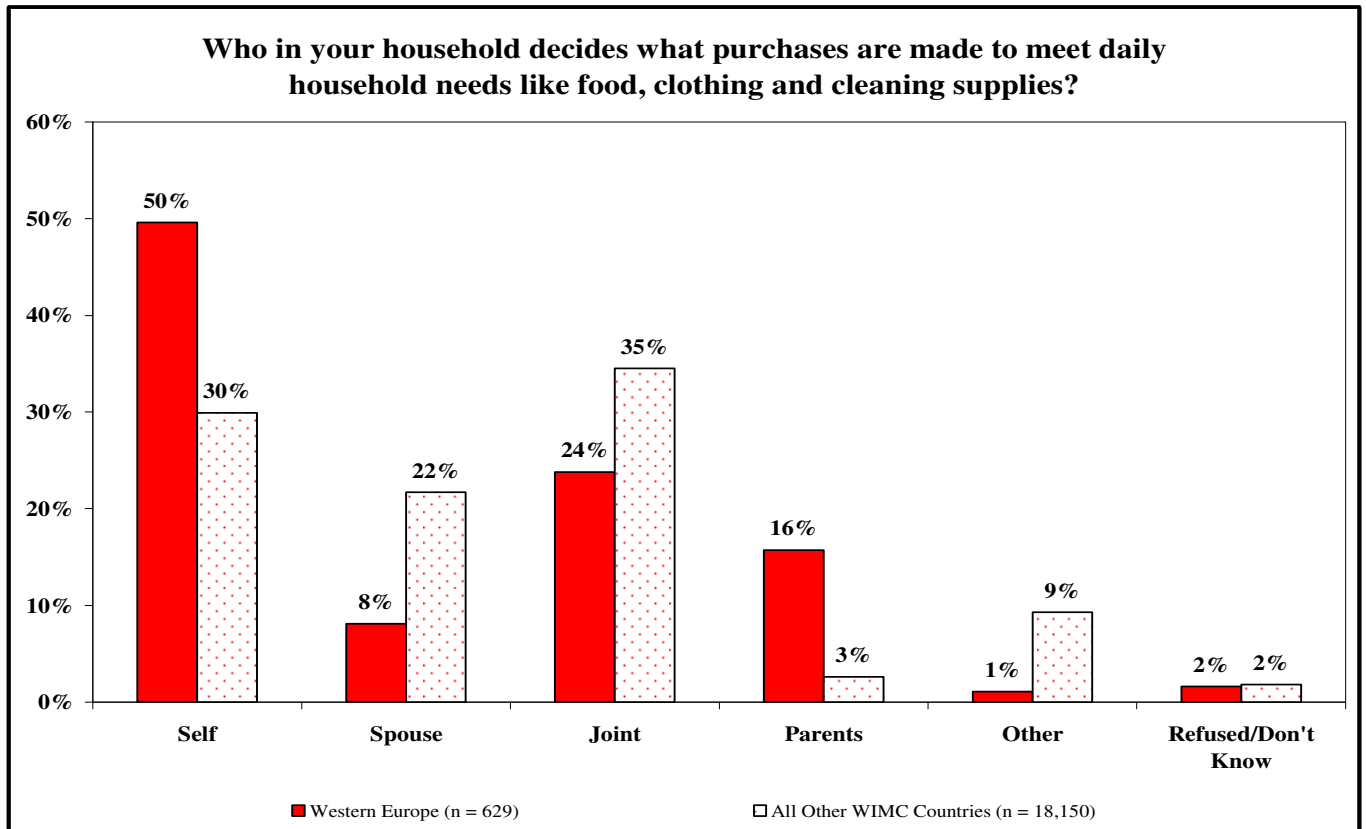
**Equity In Domestic Control**

Twenty-two percent of Muslim women in Western Europe proclaim themselves as the head of their household compared to only 7% of respondents in the remaining WIMC countries. The Western European respondents (50%) are significantly more likely than women in the other WIMC countries (30%) to decide what purchases are made to meet daily household needs like food, clothing and cleaning supplies (see Figure 2). For women in the other WIMC countries, such household purchases are more likely to be joint decisions (34%). One may think this is due to the fact that respondents in these countries are far more likely to be married than those in the Western European countries (72% vs. 53% respectively). However, even among married Western European Muslim women, respondents are significantly more likely to make daily



purchase decisions (46% of married Western European respondents vs. 27% of married women in other WIMC countries).

**Figure 2.**



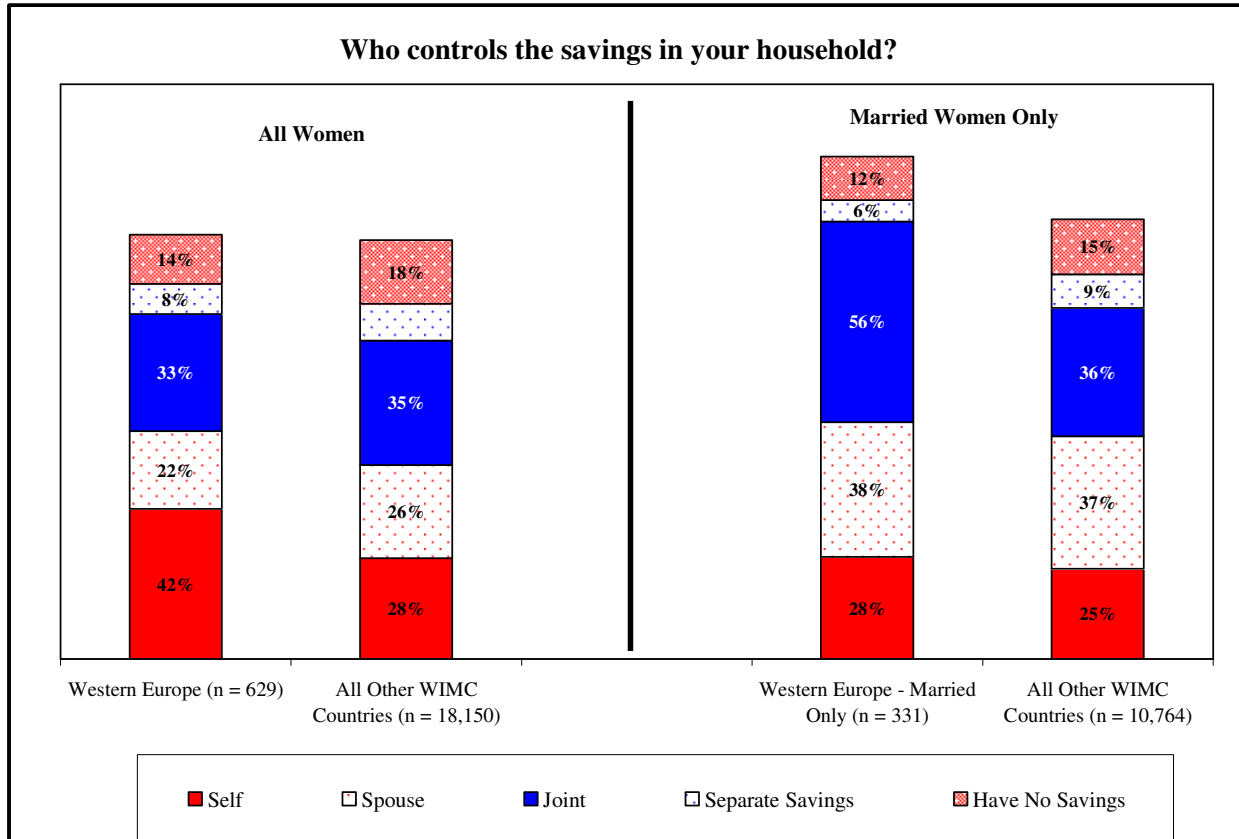
### Financial Independence

In general, Muslim women in Western Europe are more likely to control their household savings than those in other WIMC countries (42% vs. 28% respectively). Women in the other WIMC countries are most likely to say they have joint control of their savings (35%). *Married* Muslim women in Western Europe are more likely to say they have joint control of their savings than their counterparts in the other WIMC countries (56% in Western Europe vs. 36% in other WIMC countries). This is surprising given that Western European Muslim women have typically



answered questions in a way to seem to indicate a higher level of independence than Muslim women in the other WIMC countries (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.**



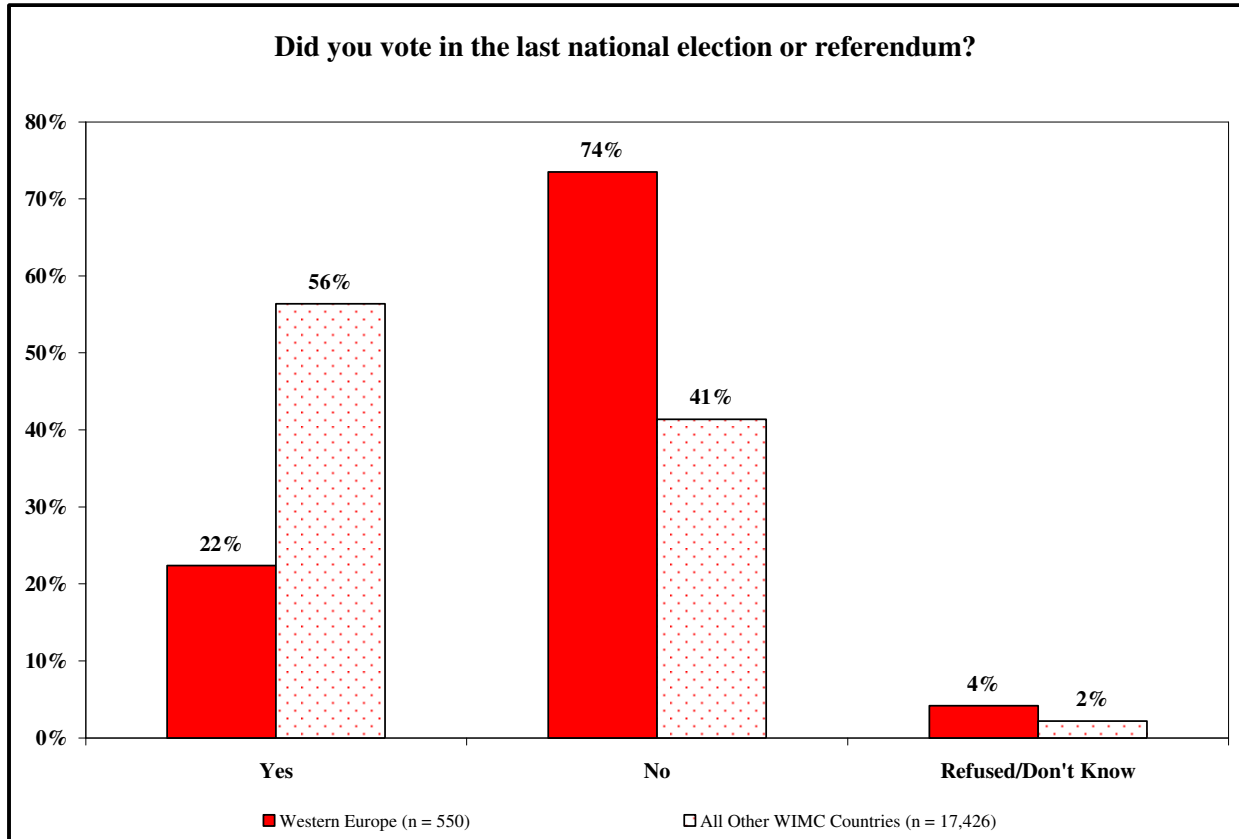
**Politics**

Western European Muslim women may be in control of what is going on in their households, but they tend not to be involved in the political process. Overall, women in the other WIMC countries are nearly three times as likely to have voted in the last election as respondents in Western Europe (56% of women in the other WIMC countries vs. 22% of women in Western Europe). This discrepancy is consistent when looking at married Muslim women as well (59%



of married women in the other WIMC countries vs. 19% of women in Western Europe) (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4.**



Further investigation reveals that voting laws in the Western European countries of Spain, Italy, and France may play a key role in voting behavior of Muslim women in these countries. In Spain, immigrants from countries who are not part of the European Union were not allowed to vote. Respondent ethnicity data reveal that only 15% of respondents identify themselves as “Spanish.” Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) say they are “Moroccan.” In 2006, the government of Spain approved a motion allowing immigrants from a few countries other than those in the EU the right to vote. Immigrants from these countries who sign a reciprocity agreement allowing Spanish nationals to vote in their country will have voting rights in Spain.



These countries include Colombia, Perú, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Venezuela, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, South Korea, Iceland and New Zealand<sup>3</sup>. While this motion did not apply to the 2007 elections, immigrants from the aforementioned countries will be eligible to vote in Spain beginning in 2011, provided they have lived in Spain for the previous five years and have properly registered to vote. While this will increase the overall number of eligible voters in Spain, there will be no significant affect on the number of Muslim women who are eligible to vote due to the fact that about two-thirds of respondents in Spain are of Moroccan descent. Morocco does not have a reciprocity agreement with Spain.

Female Muslim respondents living in Italy are most likely to identify themselves as Moroccan (28%) or Albanian (27%). Documented immigrants enjoy nearly all of the same social and civil rights as Italian citizens. Proposals have been made to extent voting rights to immigrants, but it has since been deemed unconstitutional<sup>4</sup>.

The plurality of female Muslim respondents living in France are Algerian (42%). As in Spain, immigrants living in France who are from EU countries are eligible to vote in local elections.

### **Conclusion**

The data reveal that the majority of Muslim women in Spain, France and Italy live more independent lives in all areas measured by WIMC than the women in Muslim majority countries. At least half of female respondents in Western Europe work outside the home, are sole decision makers about daily household purchases, and control the household's finances. Future research and analysis should focus on the desire of Western European Muslim women to participate in the political process. It will also be important to track developments and changes in the voting laws of Western European countries as it pertains to immigrants. Future WIMC surveys will seek to include respondents from additional European countries.

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<sup>3</sup> Sara Ortiz Escalante, "Voting Rights for Non-EU Immigrants: Local Impacts of Expanding Immigrant Rights in Spain" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Giovanna Zincone, "Italy: Main features of Italian immigration flows" (2001).

