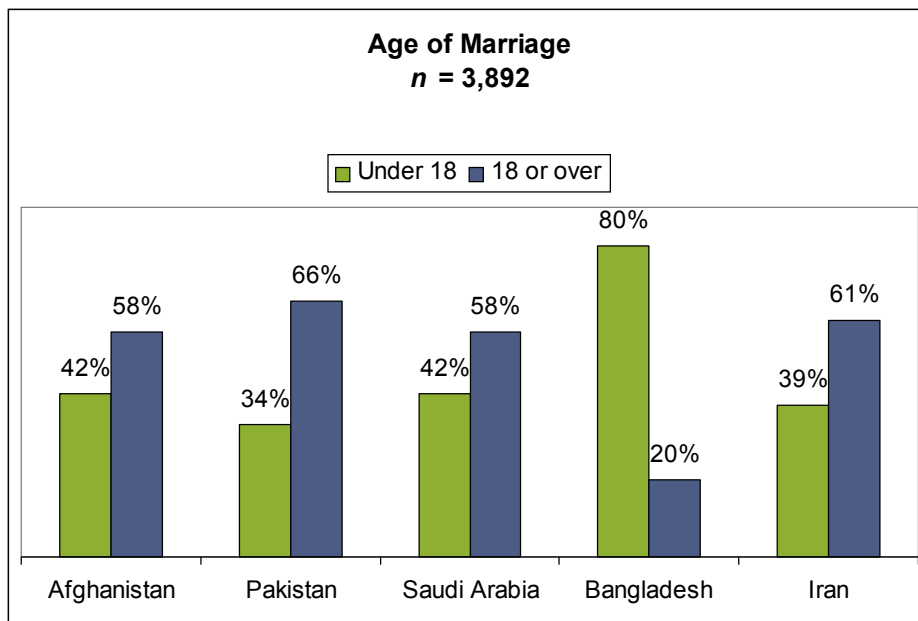


**Growing Up Early:
The Female Experience In Bangladesh**
by Karl Feld and Will Hayes
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Survey research has a role to play in providing Muslim women with a public voice where custom and culture do not permit them their own. It can be used to inform and shape empowerment policies from the perspective of each population. The Women In Muslim Countries (WIMC) study¹ 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.



The majority of Bangladeshi women are Muslim, with a significant Hindu minority. Despite their religious differences, the majority of all women in Bangladesh are poorly educated homemaker mothers. They share similar challenges and aspirations including family dynamics, financial

¹ WIMC is sponsored and managed by D3 Systems (www.d3systems.com) and is currently conducted in 22 Muslim majority countries of the world. Data for Bangladesh was collected from March 27 to April 7, 2007 from *n*=753 women sampled nationwide on a stratified, random basis. Interviewing was conducted face-to-face by native Bangladeshis.



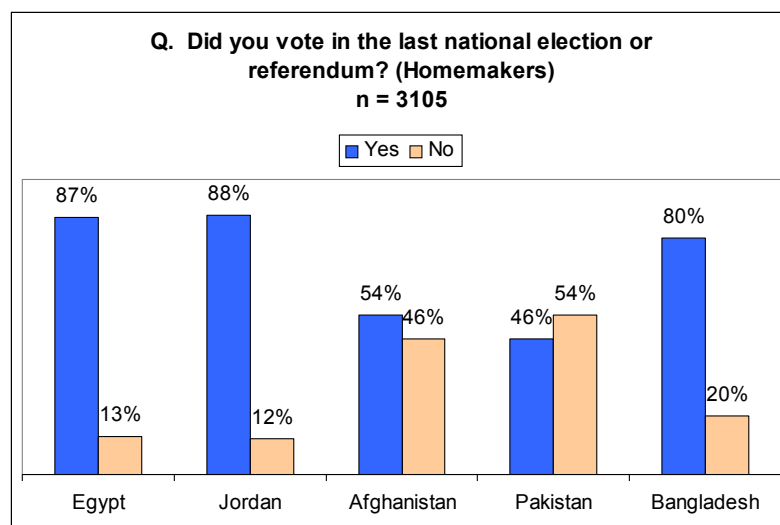
independence and low-education rates. But they have very different perspectives on possible solutions to their situation.

Bangladesh has the highest rate of childhood marriage of any country in the survey. Eighty percent of women who are married were younger than 18 at the time of marriage; less than 18 being the UN definition of childhood. Hindu women are slightly less likely to have been married as children (Hindus 54%, Sunni Muslims 65%). There appears to be no relationship between family income or educational attainment and Hindu or Muslim child marriages.

Twenty-two percent of Bangladeshi women also experience childhood maternity in equal proportions across the religious divide. Of those who have born children before they were eighteen years old, the majority (78%) reside in rural regions of the country. These women are also more likely to be impoverished as opposed to those who bear children at an older age.

A significant number of Bangladeshi women express that maternity issues are a priority for them. When asked if they could change one aspect of their lives to make them happier, 11% mentioned having a smaller family, the highest percentage of any national population in the twenty-two country survey. These women are roughly equal proportionally across the Hindu and Muslim divide.

Women in Bangladesh, both Muslim and Hindu, also share a strong desire to have more money. Sixty-four percent of women indicate they would be interested and willing to found their own business if provided with the necessary resources and training regardless of religious identity or geography. Seventy-seven percent of these women are homemakers who reside in rural areas. Roughly half of them live below the Bangladeshi poverty line, earning less than USD 70 a month.



Seventy-two percent of women in Bangladesh are homemakers, also with little variation between religious groups. The majority of Muslim homemakers are practicing Muslims (defined by their frequency of prayer and fasting during Ramadan) of whom the majority were married as children and have 0-8 years of formal education (72%). Hindu Bangladeshi women reside primarily in the Chittagong, Sylhet, Khulna and Barisal divisions. These women are generally homemakers as well (80%). Of these women, 52% express interest in founding their own business.

More Muslim women in Bangladesh appear to have greater financial influence in their households than their Hindu counterparts. However, they are still the minority of all adult Bangladeshi women. Thirty-nine percent of Muslim women decide what purchases need to be made to meet daily household needs as opposed to 29% of Hindu females. Furthermore, 23% of Muslim women in Bangladesh control household savings while only 13% of Hindus do so.

A simple majority of women in Bangladesh believe shari'a would not protect their rights. Fifty percent of Bangladeshi Muslim women surveyed believe shari'a cannot protect their rights under the UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. This suggests Muslim women in Bangladesh are heavily divided on this issue. On the other hand, 90% of Hindu females believe shari'a would provide little or no protection.

Women are politically active news consumers in Bangladesh. Eighty percent of homemakers voted in the last national election or referendum regardless of religion, one of the highest national percentages for women in the twenty-two country survey. Sixty-three percent of all women rely on television as their source for news and information. The majority of those who watch television have similar beliefs about shari'a as the general female population. This suggests that television may be an effective way to promote change regarding current and future gender initiatives in the country and warrants further examination.

