Women in Islam

İsmail Başaran

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Living a life guided by wisdom and faith constitutes one of the fundamental principles of religious teachings in Muslim life. While religion conveys a profound spiritual dimension, it simultaneously manifests a social dimension through the rules and principles that shape everyday life.

In addition to emphasizing strong belief, Islam places considerable importance on the establishment of sound social relationships at all levels of society. Through examples found in the Qur'an and the Hadith, Islam outlines ways to regulate, balance, and enhance the complex network of human relations. Nevertheless, the responsibility for implementing these principles and achieving their ideal form is entrusted to individuals and society as a whole.

It cannot be claimed that Muslims fully adhere to these principles in every aspect of their social lives. Alongside religious teachings, various other factors—such as social dynamics, personal interests, and individual perspectives—play an equally influential role in shaping daily life. For this reason, contemporary analyses of social relationships, social roles, and individual positions should avoid broad generalizations.

The content of this case study can be summarized as follows:

In the introductory section, the author examines the role of women from an Islamic perspective based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Cultural differences among Muslim societies are deliberately excluded from this discussion, as culture, in its origins, does not represent the core principles of Islam, and each Islamic society interprets religious teachings in its own distinct manner.

In the section entitled *Current Perspectives*, the author refers to various viewpoints presented by Western scholars, including John L. Esposito.

In the section titled *Project Design*, the author explains the rationale behind conducting a survey composed of five sections and thirty questions (Appendix A).

In the *Findings* section, the results of the survey conducted with 100 participants are presented in percentage form (Appendix B).

In the *Discussion* section, the author interprets the findings and explores the meanings that can be derived from the data.

In the *Conclusions* section, the implications of the study are briefly addressed, the results are evaluated, and the contemporary role of women in the Muslim world is discussed.

In the *Evaluation* section, the study is reviewed by Prof. Saffet Köse.

Finally, all sources consulted throughout the study are listed in the *References* section.

Following this overview, several points can be emphasized. A historical examination of this topic reveals numerous periods in which women were assigned unfavorable roles within society. Regrettably, when the issue concerns Muslim societies, these negative perceptions of women's status are often directly attributed to Islam itself, without distinguishing between religion and culture. Within Muslim societies, the boundary between religion and culture is frequently obscured, as some individuals justify culturally rooted views on women through Islamic terminology, thereby perpetuating a continuous cycle of misunderstanding.

In brief, the issue of women remains a sensitive and complex subject. External observers often associate negative practices directly with Islam, while some Muslims elevate cultural traditions to the level of religious authority. A sound and balanced evaluation of this topic requires the consideration of multiple perspectives. The growing number of academic studies in this field will contribute to more objective and scientific observations.

Mr. Başaran's applied research on the status of Muslim women represents a highly successful empirical study that incorporates both Muslim and non-Muslim perspectives. Furthermore, this work contributes significantly to a deeper understanding of issues related to Muslim women.

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PREFACE

Having served for many years in the field of religious affairs at various levels, I chose to focus my Master's project on a religious topic. This particular subject was selected due to the persistent portrayal of Muslim women in the media as oppressed. In contemporary Muslim societies, many women remain unaware of the rights granted to them by the Qur'an. One of the central issues addressed in this study is that, as with many other religions, Muslims have incorporated additional elements into religious practice in the name of cultural adaptation. However, this synthesis does not always accurately reflect the authentic teachings of Islam.

The primary aim of this project is to examine the topic of *Women in Islam* based on the fundamental teachings of the religion and to explore the perceptions of Muslims in Rochester, New York. To this end, a survey consisting of 30 questions was conducted with the participation of 50 Muslims and 50 Christians. The collected data were subsequently analyzed in order to identify similarities and differences between the two groups.

Some of the key findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1.   The majority of Muslims believe that Islam does not oppress women and that the exclusion of women from social life stems primarily from cultural traditions rather than religious doctrine.

2.   In contrast, approximately half of the non-Muslim participants consider Islam to be oppressive toward women, largely because their perceptions are shaped by cultural practices rather than by Islamic teachings themselves.

3. Most Muslims in Rochester hold relatively liberal views on a number of issues. For instance, they regard monogamy as the most appropriate marital model for Muslims and support the inclusion of sex education in schools. Nevertheless, only 18% approve of interfaith marriage, which is limited within Islamic teachings. Another contributing factor to this low acceptance rate is the concern over preserving religious values and cultural identity. This indicates that while Muslims have adapted to their social environment, they have not undergone full assimilation. It also demonstrates their awareness of how to maintain a balance between their values and norms within a foreign society.

4. Half of the non-Muslim participants do not perceive interfaith marriage as problematic, largely due to their familiarity with the multicultural structure of the United States. As a result, they tend to acknowledge and respect cultural diversity.

The findings outlined above provide insight into the perspectives of both Muslims and non-Muslims in the United States regarding the issue of *Muslim women*, without resorting to generalizations. The study reveals that Muslims living in Western societies are influenced by their social environment and, as a result, adopt more liberal views on certain issues while remaining conservative on others. This dynamic becomes increasingly evident as the study progresses.

This work, completed as my Master's Thesis while I was residing in New York State, USA, between 2000 and 2002, was later published as a book by the Danish Turkish Religious Affairs Foundation. Over time, the necessity to revise and update the study became apparent. Consequently, the book has been comprehensively reviewed and prepared for republication. It is hoped that this revised edition will

contribute to academic discussions on *the perception of Islam in the West* and will be particularly valuable for understanding Western perspectives on *the role of Muslim women within the family*.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Ali Dere for encouraging me to publish this study, and to Prof. Dr. Saffet Köse for providing an evaluative contribution that served as a final touch to the book.

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Women in Islam

Abstract

Given that my academic and professional background is rooted in theology, I chose to focus my Master's project on an Islamic topic. The subject of *Women in Islam* was selected due to its prominent and often controversial representation in the media, where Muslim women are frequently portrayed as marginalized or oppressed. In recent years, many Muslim women have increasingly emphasized the rights and responsibilities that they believe are granted to them by the Qur'an. A central issue addressed in this study is the fact that, as in other religious traditions, Muslims have incorporated various practices into the religion in response to local cultural contexts, resulting in interpretations that may or may not reflect Islam's original normative teachings.

The primary objective of this research is to examine the issue of women in Islam based on the religion's foundational sources, namely the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad). In addition, the study seeks to explore the perceptions of Muslims living in Rochester, New York, regarding this subject. For this purpose, a survey consisting of 30 questions was administered to a total of 100 participants—50 Muslims and 50 Christians residing in Rochester. The collected data were subsequently analyzed to identify similarities and differences between the two groups.

The findings indicate that the majority of Muslim respondents do not view Islam as oppressive toward women and argue that practices such as the social seclusion of women are largely cultural rather than religious in origin. In contrast, nearly half of the non-Muslim participants perceive Islam as oppressive to women, a view shaped primarily by observable cultural practices rather than by an understanding of Islamic

teachings. Although Muslims in Rochester demonstrate relatively liberal attitudes in many areas—such as favoring monogamy as the most appropriate marital model for Muslims and supporting the inclusion of sex education in schools—only 18% approve of interfaith marriage, which is restricted within Islamic teachings. This limited acceptance is also influenced by concerns about preserving religious values and cultural identity. These findings suggest that while Muslims have adapted to their surrounding environment, they have not undergone full assimilation and remain conscious of maintaining a balance between their values and societal norms.

Furthermore, half of the non-Muslim participants consider interfaith marriage unproblematic, largely due to their familiarity with cultural diversity and their appreciation of multicultural societies.

I. Introduction

The aim of this project is to examine the treatment and conceptualization of women in Islam in light of its normative sources, namely the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the traditions of the Prophet). The study seeks to address several fundamental questions: How does Islam, as a religion, approach the issue of women? Are Muslim women oppressed? What are the spiritual, social, economic, and legal or political positions assigned to women within Islamic teachings?

This topic was chosen due to its prominent and often controversial portrayal in the media, where Muslim women are frequently depicted as marginalized or oppressed. Contrary to such representations, this study aims to present the issue based on the Qur'anic framework. Another objective of the research is to explore the perspectives of scholars and authors on women in Islam, as well as to analyze how Muslims and Christians living in Rochester—50 participants from each group—perceive the status of women in Islam through survey data.

The status of women in Islam is not as problematic as it is often assumed by those unfamiliar with Islamic teachings and cultural contexts. The approach of the Qur'an and the practices of early Muslim communities clearly demonstrate that women are as essential to life as men and are neither inferior nor considered a lesser category of humanity. Had it not been for the influence of foreign cultures and external traditions, the question of women's status would not have emerged as a controversial issue within Muslim societies. Historically, the equality of women and men was largely taken for granted and was not regarded as a subject requiring debate or justification.

To understand the rights Islam has established for women, it is not necessary to focus extensively on their conditions in the pre-Islamic era. Islam granted women rights and privileges that had not been fully recognized under other religious or constitutional systems. This becomes evident when the issue is examined comprehensively and comparatively rather than through isolated aspects. While the rights and responsibilities of women are equal to those of men, they are not necessarily identical. Equality does not imply sameness; rather, it acknowledges differences that arise from the distinct nature of men and women, who are created equal in value but not identical in form or function. When this distinction is properly understood, the perceived problem disappears, as absolute sameness is neither realistic nor observable even among individuals of the same gender.

The fact that Islam grants women equal—though not identical—rights demonstrates that it acknowledges their individuality, recognizes their independent identity, and accords them due consideration.

Islam does not portray women as sources of evil or as inherently sinful beings, nor does it depict men as absolute authorities over women who must submit unconditionally. Likewise, Islam did not introduce debates questioning whether women possess a soul. Throughout Islamic history, no Muslim has doubted the humanity of women or their possession of spiritual and moral qualities. Contrary to some traditional narratives, Islam does not place sole blame on Eve for the First Sin.

Furthermore, the Qur'an does not describe Eve as the temptress of Adam, as depicted in the Old Testament. Instead, it states that Satan misled both of them. The Qur'an explicitly affirms that Adam and Eve were jointly tempted, that both committed the sin, that both repented, and that God

accepted the repentance of both, addressing them collectively (Qur'an, 2:35–36; 7:19, 27; 20:117–123).

The position of women in Islam is unique and unprecedented, with no exact parallel in other social or religious systems. Even in democratic societies, women do not necessarily occupy an entirely favorable position. They often work under demanding conditions and, in some cases, receive lower wages than men for equivalent work. While they enjoy certain freedoms, these freedoms may sometimes extend to forms of excess. Historically, women in the modern world struggled for centuries to attain educational and professional rights, often at the expense of personal sacrifices and the loss of aspects of their natural roles. Despite these efforts, the rights achieved still fall short of those established for Muslim women through divine injunctions in Islam.

The rights of modern women were not granted voluntarily or purely through mutual agreement but were largely acquired through social pressure and economic necessity. Industrialization and economic demands compelled women to enter the workforce, pursue education, and compete alongside men. This transformation was driven more by circumstance than by natural progression. Whether all women are satisfied with the outcomes of this process remains debatable. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the rights granted to Muslim women by Islam are designed to align with their nature, ensure security, and protect them from degrading or unstable social conditions.

Several common Western stereotypes regarding Muslim women can be identified:

• Islam has not granted Muslim women rights comparable to those given in the Western world.

• Generally, "The Middle East" is treated as a model and assumed to represent the entire Islamic world.

- Muslim women are believed to be completely excluded from social life.

- Muslim families are perceived as being characterized by absolute male dominance.

- Muslim women are assumed to be uneducated.

As a framework for this study, the issue of *women in Islam* will be analyzed by examining Islamic teachings from four key perspectives: spiritual, social, economic, and legal or political.

Spiritual Aspect

In Islam, woman is acknowledged as a complete and equal counterpart to man in the continuation of humankind. While man fulfills the role of father and woman that of mother, both are indispensable to human existence, and neither role is superior to the other. Through this partnership, woman shares equally in human dignity, rights, and responsibilities. She possesses the same human qualities and moral capacity as her male counterpart. This principle of equality in the creation and continuation of humanity is emphasized by God as follows:

O mankind! We have created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other... (Qur'an, 49:13; cf. 4:1).

Woman is equal to man in assuming both individual and collective responsibilities and in receiving reward for her actions. Islam recognizes her as an autonomous individual endowed with full human potential and worthy of spiritual growth and aspiration. Her nature is neither inferior to nor a deviation from that of man; rather, men and women are described as mutual supporters and partners. This reciprocal relationship is clearly stated in the Qur'an:

And their Lord has accepted (their prayers) and answered them (saying): 'Never will I cause to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female; you are members, one of another... (Qur'an, 3:195; cf. 9:71; 33:35-36; 66:19-21).

In addition to equality, Islam grants women certain privileges that men do not possess. For instance, women are exempt from specific religious obligations, such as prayer and fasting, during menstruation and periods of childbirth. They are also relieved of financial responsibility. As mothers, women are accorded exceptional respect and honor in the sight of God (Qur'an, 31:14-15; 46:15). This elevated status is further affirmed by the Prophet, who stated that Paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers. In terms of familial affection, a mother is entitled to a greater share of her children's love and care than the father.

As a wife, a woman has the right to request a dowry from her prospective husband, which remains her exclusive property. She is entitled to full financial support and maintenance from her husband and is not obligated to contribute to household expenses. Any property she owns prior to marriage remains solely hers, and her husband has no legal claim over it. As a daughter or sister, she is entitled to protection and financial provision from her father or brother, respectively. Should she choose to work or contribute economically to the family, she is free to do so, provided that her dignity, honor, and moral integrity are preserved.

Muslim women are often associated with the longstanding practice known as the "veil." In Islam, the veil symbolizes values such as dignity, modesty, chastity, and moral integrity. Women are encouraged to avoid actions or behaviors that may provoke inappropriate attention or give rise to doubts about their moral character. They are advised not to openly display physical attractions before those who

are not lawfully related to them. The veil serves as a means of safeguarding a woman's inner and outer integrity—protecting her thoughts from moral excess, her gaze from improper desire, and her personality from moral decline. Islam places strong emphasis on the preservation of a woman's character, moral strength, and overall well-being (cf. Qur'an, 24:30-31).

Within this framework, sexual purity holds a highly esteemed position in Islam. Seyyed Hossein Nasr addresses the rationale behind the veiling of Muslim women in his work *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, stating that "The tenets of Islam based upon sexual purity, separation of the sexes in many aspects of external life, the hiding of the beauty of women from strangers, the like all derive from the principles that are to protect the family structure (Nasr, 1987:53)."

The question of why Muslim women are required to observe the veil (hijab) and the criteria governing it is rooted primarily in divine command. Islam derives guidance from two principal sources: first, the Qur'an, which is regarded as the revealed word of Allah, and second, the Hadith, which consist of the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, who serves as a model for humanity.

The Qur'an explicitly addresses the obligation of hijab in the following passages:

"O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women to draw their outer garments around them (when they go out or are among men). That is better in order that they may be known (to be Muslims) and not annoyed..." (Qur'an 33:59)

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should

lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty to their husbands..." (Qur'an 24:30-31)

Economic Aspect

Islam grants women full and equal economic rights, including the right to enter into contracts, engage in business activities, earn income, and own property independently. A woman's life, property, and honor are regarded as inviolable, just as those of a man. In cases where she commits an offense, the prescribed punishment is neither greater nor lesser than that imposed on a man under similar circumstances. Likewise, if she is subjected to injustice or harm, she is entitled to compensation equivalent to that of a man in the same position (Qur'an, 2:178; 4:45, 92-93).

Women are entitled to own all forms of property and are free to buy, sell, donate, give charity, and spend their wealth, provided that such spending is not wasteful and the property belongs to them. In matters of legal competence, Islam does not discriminate between men and women; if an individual is deemed legally incompetent, this ruling applies regardless of gender. By granting women the right to own, manage, and dispose of property, Islam recognizes them as full legal persons with complete authority over their financial affairs. Furthermore, Islam provides women with legitimate means of acquiring wealth, including dowry, inheritance, gifts, and other lawful sources.

Beyond acknowledging women as independent human beings who are equally vital to the continuation of humanity, Islam also secures for them a rightful share in inheritance. Prior to Islam, women were not only denied inheritance rights

but were themselves considered transferable property. Islam fundamentally transformed this practice by recognizing women as heirs rather than objects of inheritance, thereby affirming their inherent human dignity. Whether as a wife or mother, sister or daughter, a woman is entitled to a defined portion of a deceased relative's estate. The exact share is determined by her degree of kinship and the number of surviving heirs.

Dr. Hosny M. Gaber supports the view that women bear no financial obligation within the family structure. In his *Friday Khutbas*, he emphasizes that "…Even a rich wife is not legally responsible to help her poor husband, unless she willingly and freely desires (Gaber, 1982:65)."

Social Aspect

Marriage: Islam, marriage is regarded as a contractual agreement. As with any valid contract, the marriage contract requires the full and voluntary consent of both parties involved. While parents may offer guidance, advice, or persuasion, the ultimate decision to marry must be based on the free and independent choice of each individual.

Human nature has been created in such a way that men and women are naturally inclined toward one another. This attraction brings them together to establish a shared life and form a family. The instinctive drive between the sexes is meant to be guided and regulated so that it serves constructive and moral purposes within society. Although marital life initially arises from this natural instinct, it gradually develops into a comprehensive relationship encompassing spiritual, emotional, social, and economic dimensions. This holistic union is what Islam defines as matrimony. Consequently, marriage occupies a central place in the Islamic social system and is strongly encouraged in

both the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet. In this regard, the Prophet Muhammad stated: *"No institution of Islam is liked by Allah more than that of marriage."*

The primary objectives of marriage in Islam are twofold: first, to provide tranquility and emotional security for both spouses, and second, to ensure the upbringing of a new generation of morally upright, healthy, and faithful children. Concerning the first objective, the Holy Qur'an states:

"One of His signs is that He created for you spouses of your own species, so that you might find comfort with them. And He put mutual love and affection in your hearts. Surely in this there are lessons for the thinking people" (Qur'an, 30:21)

These verses illustrate that inner peace and emotional stability within marriage arise from the love and mercy that Allah places between spouses. However, this form of love differs from secular or purely romantic notions prevalent in non-Muslim, particularly Western, societies. Islamic marital love is deeply connected to devotion to Allah and the shared purpose of serving Him. It is this spiritual foundation that sustains the marital bond during times of hardship, fostering patience, sacrifice, and mutual support—not merely for personal satisfaction, but primarily to seek the pleasure of Allah, who holds individuals accountable for their intentions and actions.

Despite the sanctity of marriage, Islam acknowledges human weakness and recognizes that marital relationships may not always function harmoniously. Although divorce is strongly discouraged and disliked by Allah, it is permitted as a last resort when reconciliation becomes impossible or when the continuation of the marriage undermines the well-being of the family and its role within the Islamic community. Islam emphasizes responsibility in personal decisions, and both the

Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet consistently remind believers of their mutual rights and obligations. The practical application of these principles begins within the family, which explains why marriage is so highly esteemed in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad stated: *"When a person marries, he has completed half of his religious obligations."*

Polygamy in Islam is addressed explicitly in a single Qur'anic passage (4:3), which limits the number of wives permitted and imposes strict conditions of justice and fairness upon the husband. This verse was revealed after the Battle of Uhud, during which many Muslim men were killed, leaving behind widows and orphans. The historical context suggests that the continued permissibility of polygamy serves, at least in part, as a response to exceptional social circumstances, such as demographic imbalances caused by war. In this sense, polygamy functions as a moral and pragmatic solution aimed at protecting widows and orphans by ensuring economic support, social stability, and proper child-rearing within a family structure.

Women in Islam are equal to men in their pursuit of education and knowledge. When Islam commands the acquisition of knowledge, it makes no distinction between males and females. This principle has been emphasized by both religious texts and historical practice. Muslim guest essayist Mary Barry highlighted the importance of women's education in her article (*Democrat and Chronicle*, Jan. 25/02), stating: *"The wife has primary responsibility for the care of her home and welfare of her family. This is not to say that a Muslim woman cannot attend institutions of higher learning – the Qur'an commands us to gain knowledge – or work outside the home in professions that are vital to ensuring a healthy, wholesome environment (D.1)."*

Nearly fourteen centuries ago, the Prophet Muhammad clearly declared that the pursuit of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim, male and female alike. This principle was actively implemented throughout Islamic history, establishing education not only as a right but also as a duty for all believers. The Prophet stated: *"Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim,"* with the term *Muslim* encompassing both genders without distinction.

Islam also affirms a woman's right to freedom of expression. Her opinions are valued and cannot be dismissed on the basis of gender. Historical and Qur'anic records indicate that women openly expressed their views, engaged in debate, and participated in serious discussions with the Prophet Muhammad and other Muslim leaders (Qur'an, 58:1-4; 60:10-12). On several occasions, women voiced their opinions on public and legislative matters and even challenged the decisions of caliphs, whose rulings were revised in light of sound female argumentation.

A well-documented example occurred during the caliphate of Omar Ibn al-Khattab. When he attempted to limit dowries to a fixed amount, a woman publicly objected, citing the Qur'anic verse: *"even if you had given one of them (wives) a whole treasure for dowry take not the least bit back. Would you take it by false claim and a manifest sin."* Acknowledging her argument, Omar admitted his mistake and withdrew the restriction, declaring that individuals were free to give whatever dowry they wished.

Historical evidence further demonstrates that women actively participated in public life during the early Islamic period, particularly in times of crisis. They accompanied Muslim armies to care for the wounded, prepare provisions, and support soldiers. Women were neither confined nor marginalized, nor were they viewed as inferior or soulless

beings; rather, they were recognized as valuable contributors to the social and moral fabric of the Muslim community.

Legal Aspect

In certain civil transactions, Islamic law requires the testimony of either two men or one man and two women. This requirement should not be interpreted as an indication of women's inferiority. Rather, it serves as a precautionary measure aimed at safeguarding the rights of all parties involved in contractual agreements. Traditionally, women were less engaged in commercial and legal affairs, which could result in inexperience in such matters. In order to prevent potential misunderstandings or errors that might lead to injustice, Islamic law stipulates that two women may testify alongside one man. In this arrangement, if one woman forgets a detail or makes an error, the other may assist or remind her. This provision is designed to ensure accuracy, fairness, and transparency in civil dealings. It does not diminish a woman's social or moral status, nor does it imply any inherent inferiority.

There is no explicit text in either the Qur'an or the Sunnah that categorically excludes women from positions of leadership, with the exception of leading congregational prayer, which is regulated by the formal structure of prayer itself. A woman's position behind men during prayer should not be understood as a reflection of lower status. As previously noted, women are not obligated to attend congregational prayers that are mandatory for men. When they do participate, they stand in rows designated exclusively for women. This arrangement represents a matter of discipline and organization rather than a hierarchy of importance.

Islamic prayer involves physical movements such as standing, bowing, and prostration, requiring a high level of concentration and mindfulness. The separation of men and women during prayer serves to minimize potential distractions and helps worshippers maintain focus on their spiritual devotion. Physical contact between members of the opposite sex is not permitted during prayer, and standing side by side could inadvertently lead to such contact. Additionally, during movements of prayer, there is a possibility that a woman's clothing might shift, causing embarrassment or distraction. To prevent such situations and to preserve modesty, concentration, and spiritual harmony, Islam prescribes an orderly arrangement of prayer rows, with men standing in the front and women positioned behind children. Anyone familiar with the nature and objectives of Islamic prayer can readily appreciate the wisdom underlying this organizational structure.

From a broader perspective, Islam's approach to women and the family can be summarized as follows:

• All human beings, regardless of gender, are equal in their humanity and in the fundamental rights and obligations that arise from it.

• When it comes to the distribution of roles and responsibilities, Islam emphasizes principles such as balance, justice, fairness, competence, and ability rather than absolute sameness.

• Islam affirms equality between women and men in their status as servants of God and in their essential human rights and duties.

• Claims that portray women as inherently inferior or deficient are either unsupported by authentic religious sources or result from misinterpretations of those sources.

- In matters such as mutual respect and loyalty, safeguarding chastity, resolving disputes through arbitration, and cooperation in family management and child-rearing, women and men possess nearly identical rights and responsibilities.

Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi offered profound guidance concerning family relationships and the foundations of family life. As a prominent Sufi thinker, his philosophy continues to provide valuable insight into human relationships. According to Rumi, the foundation of the family rests upon love, compassion, and mercy. His advice to families is reflected in the following words:

- "Be like a flowing river in generosity and helpfulness, be like the sun in compassion and mercy,

- Be like the night in covering the faults of others, be like the dead in anger and irritability,

- Be like the earth in humility and modesty, be like the sea in tolerance,

- Either be as you appear, or appear as you are!"

II. Current Perspectives

A significant number of books written by Western authors tend to perceive Islam primarily through the lens of the Arab world, largely due to political developments in the Middle East. As a result, discussions on "Women in Islam" are often implicitly equated with "Women in the Arab World." For example, Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, in *Islamic Society in Practice* (Chapter 4, pp. 59–83), examines gender relations in Islam almost exclusively within Arab societies, particularly Egypt.

An important clarification must be made when addressing any topic from an Islamic perspective: a clear distinction must be maintained between the **normative teachings of Islam**, derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet), and the **varied cultural practices** found among Muslim societies. While the Qur'an and the Sunnah strongly encourage Muslim men to treat their wives with kindness and respect, the actual practices observed across Muslim cultures are diverse, complex, and often inconsistent with these ideals. In this context, John L. Esposito emphasizes the complexity of the subject in the introduction to *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, stating that, *"The study of women in Islam and Muslim society is complex, reflecting the diverse and varied realities of Muslim women and Muslim societies throughout the ages"* (Esposito, 1998: 11).

Similarly, Wiebke Walther notes in *Women in Islam* that *"the most decisive expression of Islamic thought and the essential nucleus of Islam in general"* lies in its foundational principles (Walther, 1992: 46). Nevertheless, many scholars tend to focus more on cultural manifestations than on the religious framework itself, often failing to distinguish clearly between

religion and culture. This conflation of Islam with local customs presents a major challenge in analyzing women's issues from an authentic Islamic perspective.

John L. Esposito explicitly distinguishes between Islam as a religion and Islam as a culture in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (volume 4). He explains that *"Islam as religion refers to regulations pertaining to piety, ethics, and belief. These spiritual aspects of Islam are considered duties of worship (ibadat) and hence called 'roots' or 'foundations' (usul) of the faith, for instance, Allah's uniqueness, the final Prophecy of Muhammad, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca…"* He further clarifies that *"Islam as culture refers to the ideas and practices of Muslims in the context of changing social, economic, and political circumstances. People not only worship God but also interact in social relationships (called mu'amalat, or 'transactions')"* (Esposito, 1995: 323).

A number of scholars agree that Islam significantly improved the social status of women when compared to conditions in pre-Islamic Arabia. Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, in *Women in the Muslim World*, argue that *"A central feature of the rules of conduct contained in the Qur'an, the primary source of Islamic religious law, is the intent to improve the social position of women. Under the customary tribal law existing in Arabia at the advent of Islam, women as a general rule had virtually no legal status. They were sold into marriage by their guardians for a price paid to the guardian, the husband could terminate the union at will, and women had little or no property or succession rights"* (Beck & Keddie, 1978: 37).

Debates

Much of the contemporary debate surrounding Muslim women focuses on issues of seclusion and oppression. However, Geraldine Brooks challenges this generalized

perception in *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, arguing that *"Islam did not have to mean oppression of women. So why were so many Muslim women oppressed… idea of seclusion found an easy audience"* (Brooks, 1995: 5).

Another major point of contention lies in the perspective adopted by non-Muslim female authors, who often assess Muslim women's status through a Western framework. These authors frequently conclude that Muslim women are inferior within Islamic societies. Muslim women themselves, however, often reject this interpretation. Shariffa Carlo, for example, illustrates this disconnect in her article *The Muslim Women* (*www.islamzine.com*), recounting an incident during the Gulf War in which a Western reporter interviewed a Saudi woman. Attempting to portray her as oppressed, the reporter asked, *"doesn't it bother you that you are not able to go and get a job as a waitress, if you wanted to?"* The woman replied, *"Are you joking? I am a woman with maids and servants, why would I want to lower myself to such a task"* (p. 2).

Despite these differing viewpoints, there is broad agreement among scholars that the Qur'an and the Sunnah brought about substantial improvements in women's status compared to the pre-Islamic period. John L. Esposito strongly supports this view and states in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, volume 4, under *"Role and Status (of women) in the Qur'an and Sunnah"*, that *"Islamic holy law (shari'ah) addressed some of the more flagrant gender inequities of the pre-Islamic period. For instance, Islamic regulation proscribed female infanticide; abolished women's status as chattel; emphasized the contractual, rather than the proprietary, nature of marriage; mandated that the wife, not her father, directly receive the dower; enjoined that a woman retain control and use of her property and maiden name after marriage; guaranteed her financial maintenance by her husband; accorded her the right to privacy; prohibited her*

husband from spying on or entrapping her; and prevented a woman's eviction from the house after divorce by requiring the husband to maintain his ex-wife for three menstrual cycles (until childbirth if she were pregnant)" (Esposito, 1995: 323).

At the same time, Beck and Keddie caution that contemporary Muslim women continue to face significant challenges. They argue in *Women in the Muslim World* that women must enhance their social and economic roles, noting that *"That Muslim women lack social and economic options outside marriage (which obviously constrains their behavior within marriage), often lack the freedom to marry the man of their choice, and are discriminated against by family and marriage laws mean that the Muslim wife occupies a subordinate status"* (Beck & Keddie, 1978: 85).

III. Project Design

Data Collection Instrument

In this Master's project, a survey was employed as the primary data collection instrument. One of the main reasons for selecting this method was my position as an Imam (Minister) within the community, which enabled me to access both Muslim and Christian congregants with relative ease and to obtain their responses in a timely and efficient manner. A memorandum of understanding related to this process is provided in Appendix D.

A survey consisting of 30 questions was designed to explore the perceptions of Muslims and non-Muslims (predominantly Christians) in Rochester regarding issues related to women and gender relations in Islam. These questions were structured into five thematic sections in order to ensure clarity and systematic analysis. A complete copy of the survey is included in Appendix A.

The first section focuses on issues related to marriage and consists of six questions. Questions addressing marriage were given particular importance, as marriage is strongly emphasized across societies and is widely regarded as the foundational institution for the formation of family life.

1- _Marriage_ is: a) The union of the two souls, b) An emotional connection that could end, c) A civil and legal arrangement (contract), d) None of the above.

In this question, I asked definition of the marriage, because it is very important how you describe it.

2-Do you believe that a woman should make her own decision about the choice of her partner in marriage?

This question will help me understand how much freedom they give their children as parents, either partly or unlimited. I also will know whether they need parents' support or not.

3-Do you think all Muslim men generally *marry four wives*?

This question will help me understand if either polygamy or monogamy is the norm among Muslims. I will also know what is non-Muslims' perspective on this practice.

4-What do you think about *interfaith marriage*?

In this question, I will find out whether Muslims and non-Muslims are optimistic. It will also help me understand if Muslims are flexible on this or not.

5- Is *polygamy* (the practice of having more than one wife) good for women?

This question will help me understand how they see this practice; is it exception or mandatory.

19-Do you think that *triple divorce* (it is a right to divorce women in Islamic Law) practice by men is misused in the Islamic World?

It is obvious that this practice is misused in the Islamic world. This question will help me understand how much they know about the Islamic world and also will help me understand whether they agree with that or not.

Section *two* deals with *Sexual relations* (5 questions).

6- What is *sexual intimacy* in your marriage?

Sexual relationship in the marriage is something natural and it's part of it. This question will help me understand that how they see it, if it is spiritual togetherness or a way to have fun?

7-<u>Do you think that *sex is a wife's duty*</u>?

According to religious understandings (in Christianity and Islam), people traditionally perceived that sex is a wife's duty. This question will help me understand if they still think the same.

8-<u>Would you marry someone if she/he had engaged in *premarital sex?*</u>

This question is clarifying the borders of the marriage in Islam and evaluating how much they emphasize sexual purity. It will help me understand their perspectives on it.

9-<u>Do you believe *homosexuality* leads to the destruction of the family?</u>

As humans, God has created us as a male (Adam) and female (Eve). This is the humans' natural structure and the mostly accepted norm. So, this question will help me understand if it is against this nature or if it might be not harmful or a matter of personal freedom.

27-<u>Do you believe the value of **"*Chastity*"** (Haya, moral and sexual purity)?</u>

Moral and sexual purity in Islam and Islamic societies is highly emphasized to protect the family structure. So, this question will help me understand how important it is for them.

Muslim way of life excludes the boyfriend/girlfriend system, mixed parties, dancing between men and women, taking alcohol or drugs, and other facets of the Western way of life which are well known to provide the situation from which pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations develop. So those relationships are very important because the understanding of sexual relations will help me know the people's (Muslim and non-Muslim) approaches whether they follow these principals or not.

Section *three* deals with *Family* (6 questions) structure and issues.

10-<u>Do you believe the family life must be based on mutual trust and confidence?</u>

If the couples do not trust each other regarding what is going on around the family, it will not work. So, this question will help me understand how much they emphasize mutual trust and confidence in the family life.

11-<u>Do you think that non-Muslim woman would be happy within this society in terms of family life?</u>

This question is asking for a feedback from non-Muslims and whether they consider themselves, happy or unhappy in their families because there are many social and moral issues within American families resulting with divorce.

12-<u>Do you believe that Muslim families are stronger than Christian and Jewish families in terms of family ties?</u>

Since kinship in Muslim families is very important, I tried to know what each side thinks about it. This question will help me understand their perspectives on it.

13-<u>Do you agree with *family planning* (that is a mutual decision made by spouses about how many children they want)?</u>

Islam insists and encourages marriage because of morality. It also wants us to have children. Although Islam does not allow abortion, it does not prohibit family planning that is decided before pregnancy.

18-<u>Do you believe *adoption* can be an option for those who don't have children?</u>

What Islam does in the case of adoption, as well as in other things, is to regulate the practice and put restrictions because adopter and adoptee do not have kinship at all. This

question will help me understand their perspectives on this issue.

25-<u>Do you believe that God has given man a degree of *authority over the women?*</u>

Muslims generally believe that man should be head of the family because he has a lot of responsibilities based on the religious teachings, and women's submissive role is emphasized as well. However, this question will help me understand what they think about this role.

Eventually, family is very important because it is the nucleus of all societies. It will also help me understand what two groups think about family matters such as adoption, family planning etc.

Section *four* deals with *Women's role in society* (7 questions).

20-<u>Do you agree that Muslim women are getting more liberated?</u>

This question is summing up the general picture of Muslim women in the World. This question will help me understand whether they agree with the liberation of Muslim women, in general or not.

21-<u>Do you believe in "*equality of man and woman*" before God?</u>

God has created man and woman equal as human beings and gave them different roles in society. So this question will help me understand whether they believe in equality of man and woman in front of God, or not.

22-<u>Do you believe that Islam oppresses women?</u>

This question is reflecting the wrong images of Muslim women in the West, which is not consistent with Islamic teachings. This question will help me understand whether they distinguish Islam itself from cultural practices or not.

23-<u>Do you think Muslim women in the Muslim world today receive the noble treatment described in the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings?</u>

This question actually is an explanation of question 22, which expresses very briefly how women are treated in Islam. So, I will learn their responses on this subject whether they agree or not.

24-<u>Do you think, *"looking after children"* is a duty for women?</u>

This is a traditional understanding and belief among people that looking after children is wife's duty. This question will help me understand how much they moved from the traditional understanding into the liberal one.

28-<u>Do you believe in the *original sin* (the condition of sin that marks all human beings as a result of Adam and Eve's first act of disobedience)?</u>

The idea of original sin was used to subjugate women to the authority of the church and men. For Instance, in St. Augustine's view, as temptress, woman is the instrument of the devil. But, in Islam Muslims partly believe in it, in terms of their mistakes, which both Adam and Eve sinned, and after their repentance they were forgiven, we cannot blame anyone for others' wrongdoings, either. So this question will help me understand what they think about it.

29-<u>Do you agree with *'hijab' (Muslim woman's dress code*) is obligatory for her?</u>

Since Muslim women's veil was accepted as a sign of oppression in the West, this question will help me understand how they see that, as an obligation or sign of modesty or no longer needed.

Women's role in Islam is very improved if we compare to prior Arabia. But today's Islamic world ironically ignores that

role. This section is very important because there are many negative images of Muslim women in the West. So it will help me understand what people think about those images such as the liberation of Muslim women or oppression of Muslim women.

Section *five* deals with *Social issues* (6 questions).

Social problems are moral problems and need to be solved because the issues of abortion, dating and domestic violence and others are mounting issues in the society. This section on social issues will help me to better understand of two groups' thoughts on those issues for instance, abortion is a woman's right or not and so on.

14-<u>Do you believe *abortion* is a woman's right?</u>

Today's society in the West sees that abortion is a woman's right. So this question will help me understand how they see abortion, is it a woman's right, or not but it is necessary in some cases.

15-<u>Do you think the *pregnancy* can be terminated with one of these circumstances</u>?

This question is an extension of the question 14. What I'm trying to know is which of the circumstances they agree in the case of abortion; ending pregnancies caused by rape, abortions that are needed to save the life of the woman, pregnancies in very young women, or all of the above.

16-<u>Do you think "*domestic violence*" is a private matter?</u>

Domestic violence is one of the matters that was used against women for years as men's authority over women because the Major religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) were ordering women to be submissive to their husbands. Since then, it is seen as a private matter in families. This question will help me understand what they think about it.

17-<u>Do you believe that religious leaders and priests talk enough about domestic violence in churches, mosques, and synagogues?</u>

This question is an extension of question 16. It will help me understand what they think about this issue, is it spoken enough in churches, mosques and synagogues by Ministers.

26-<u>Do you think that **"*dating"* is harmful to the society?</u>

Islam lays its social structure on the basis of a permanent relationship between a man and a woman in the form of a family. Consequently, to preserve this marital relationship, it forbids all forms of temporary associations between a man and a woman. So this question will help me understand what they think about this kind of temporary relationship.

30-<u>Should *sex education* be taught in schools?</u>

While cultural taboos and embarrassment may make many Muslim parents reluctant to discuss sex with their children, they should remember that the kind of sex education their children receive in public school is reinforced by the surrounding culture. This question will help me understand their point of view about this matter.

Data Collection Process

The population examined in this study consisted of two distinct groups residing in Rochester: (1) Muslim congregants affiliated with the Islamic Center of Rochester and the Turkish Society of Rochester, and (2) non-Muslim (Christian) congregants drawn from two local churches, namely Irondequoit Presbyterian Church and St. John's Lutheran Church.

A total of 100 individuals participated in the survey, with equal representation from each group (50 Muslim and 50 non-Muslim respondents). To facilitate data collection among the

Christian participants, I contacted the pastors of both churches. Having established personal relationships with them, and as a member of the Irondequoit Ministerial Association, I was able to distribute the survey forms through their assistance. Once the church congregants completed the surveys, the pastors returned the collected forms within a two-week period. For the Muslim participants, 25 survey copies were distributed and completed at the Islamic Center of Rochester, while the remaining responses were gathered within my own community.

Prior to administering the survey, I explained the purpose and scope of the study to both the pastors of the participating churches and the Imam of the Islamic Center of Rochester. Formal permission and approval were obtained from all parties to conduct the survey at their respective institutions. Each expressed willingness to support the project on a voluntary basis.

Note: This research project was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). A copy of the IRB approval letter is provided in Appendix C.

IV. Findings

In this section of the project, I present the findings derived from the surveys I conducted. The results are analyzed in detail, and numerical data are provided to illustrate how many participants responded to each question.

Section 1 (6 questions) Marriage, Questions; 1-2-3-4-5-19

Q.1: Marriage is: a) The union of the two souls, b) An emotional connection that could end, c) A civil and legal arrangement (contract), d) None of the above.

In this question, I wanted to find out what the marriage means to them and what I found is: 46% of all Muslims and 74% of all non-Muslims believe that marriage is the union of the two souls. 34% of all Muslims and 16% of all non-Muslims believe that marriage is a civil and legal contract as well. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question. See Appendix B for raw data for all questions.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	23	46%	2	4%	17	34%	8	16%
Non-Muslims	37	74%	2	4%	8	16%	3	6%

Q.2: Do you believe that a woman should make her own decision about the choice of her partner in marriage?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Yes, and she needs to have the opinion of her parents as well.

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out whether a woman should make her decision about her partner in marriage and what I found is: 56% of all Muslims and 98% of all non-

Muslims believe that she should make her own decision about it. 44% of all Muslims and 2% of all non-Muslims also believe she needs to have the opinion of her parents as well. Fifty Muslims and Fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	28	56%		%	22	44%		%
Non-	49	98%		%	1	2%		%

Q.3: Do you think all Muslim men generally marry four wives?

a) Yes

b) No, in fact, Islam encourages marry only one wife

c) It's a misconception against Islam

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about Muslim men's marriage of four wives and what I found is: 76% of all Muslims and 32% of all non-Muslims think that " In fact, Islam encourages marry only one wife". 44% of non-Muslims have no opinion about it. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims		%	38	76%	8	16%	4	8%
Non-Muslims		%	16	32%	12	24%	22	44%

Q.4: What do you think about *interfaith marriage*?

a) It is okay

b) Depends on which religion he/she is

c) I'm not optimistic

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about "interfaith marriage" and what I found is: 50% of all non-Muslims and 18% of all Muslims said, "it's okay" for interfaith marriage. 40% of all Muslims and 22% of all non-Muslims are not optimistic about it. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	9	18%	15	30%	20	40%	6	12%
Non-Muslims	25	50%	9	18%	11	22%	5	10%

Q.5: - Is *polygamy* (the practice of having more than one wife) good for women?

a) No, it degrades womanhood.

b) Yes

c) It might be exceptional

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about "polygamy", is it good for women or not and what I found is: 90% of all non-Muslims and 66% of all Muslims think that "polygamy" degrades womanhood. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	33	66%	3	6%	10	20%	4	8%
Non-Muslims	45	90%		%		%	5	10%

Q.19: <u>Do you think that *triple divorce* (it is a right to divorce women in Islamic Law) practice by men is misused in the Islamic World?</u>

a) Yes

b) No

c) Mostly

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about misuse of triple divorce practice in Islamic world and what I found is: 42% of all Muslims and 18% of all non-Muslims believe that it's misused by men in the Islamic world. 72% of all non-Muslims and 20% of all Muslims have no opinion about it. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	21	42%	11	22%	8	16%	10	20%
Non-Muslims	9	18%	3	6%	2	4%	36	72%

Section 2 (5 questions) Sexual Relations, Questions; 6-7-8-9-27

Q.6: <u>Is *sexual intimacy* in your marriage</u>:

a) A physical manifestation of spiritual oneness

b) A way to have fun

c) All of the above

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about sexual intimacy in their marriage and what I found is: 58% of all Muslims and non-Muslims think that it is a physical

manifestation of spiritual oneness and a way to have fun. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	21	42%		%	29	58%		%
Non-Muslims	20	40%	1	2%	29	58%		%

Q.7: <u>Do you think that *sex is a wife's duty*</u>?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It is an old understanding of religious teachings

d) No opinion

In this question I wanted to find out what they think about sex, whether it is a wife's duty or not and what I found is: 70% of all non-Muslims and 56% of all Muslims say it is not a wife's duty. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	7	14%	28	56%	7	14%	8	16%
Non-Muslims	8	16%	35	70%	3	6%	4	8%

Q.8: <u>Would you marry someone if she/he had engaged in *premarital sex*</u>?

a) No, sex should only take place in marriage

b) It depends on the circumstances of the person

c) One should not judge a person on their past experiences. Only God (Allah) has the right to judge.

d) Yes. It is not important if the person has had sex before marriage

In this question I wanted to find out what they think about premarital sex and what I found is: 40% of all Muslims and 4% of non-Muslims think that sex should only take place in marriage. 56% of all non-Muslims and 42% of all Muslims think that one should not judge a person on their past experiences. Only God has the right to judge. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	20	40%	4	8%	21	42%	5	10%
Non-Muslims	2	4%	12	24%	28	56%	8	16%

Q.9: Do you believe *homosexuality* leads to the destruction of the family?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It is a matter of personal freedom

d) No opinion

In this question I wanted to find out what they think about homosexuality and what I found is: 76% of all Muslims and 38% of all non-Muslims believe that it leads to the destruction of the family. 30% of all non-Muslims and 6% of all Muslims believe that it does not lead to the destruction of the family. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	38	76%	3	6%	4	8%	5	10%
Non-Muslims	19	38%	15	30%	8	16%	8	16%

Q.27: <u>Do you believe the value of *"Chastity"* (Haya, moral and sexual purity)</u>?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Depends on what you understand of chastity

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about chastity and what I found is: 86% of all Muslims and 50% of all non-Muslims believe in the value of chastity. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	43	86%	2	4%	4	8%	1	2%
Non-Muslims	25	50%	5	10%	13	26%	7	14%

Section 3 (6 questions) Family 10-11-12-13-18-25

Q.10: <u>Do you believe *the family life* must be based on mutual trust and confidence?</u>

a) Yes

b) No

c) This is easy to say but hard to practice

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about family life and whether it must be based on mutual trust and confidence, or not and what I found is: 94% of all non-Muslims and 90% of all Muslims believe in the family life based on mutual trust and confidence. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	45	90%	1	2%	4	8%		%
Non-Muslims	47	94%		%	3	6%		%

Q.11: <u>Do you think that non-Muslim woman would be happy within this society in terms of family life?</u>

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not many

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to know what they think about non-Muslim women in American society and whether they are happy or not in terms of family life and what I found is: 52% of all Muslims and 30% of all non-Muslims said that "yes, they would be happy". Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	26	52%	9	18%	7	14%	8	16%
Non-Muslims	15	30%	12	24%	6	12%	17	34%

Q.12: <u>Do you believe that Muslim families are stronger than Christian and Jewish families in terms of family ties?</u>

a) Yes

b) No

c) It depends

d) No opinion

Here, I asked a question similar to the eleventh question. I wanted to know about Muslim families and whether they are stronger than non-Muslim families or not and what I found is: 42% of all Muslims and only 4% of all non-Muslims believe Muslim families are stronger than non-Muslim families. 46% of all Muslims and 26% of all non-Muslims said that it depends. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	21	42%	4	8%	23	46%	2	4%
Non-Muslims	2	4%	20	40%	13	26%	15	30%

Q.13: <u>Do you agree with *family planning* (that is a mutual decision made by spouses about how many children they want)</u>?

a) Yes, spouses should decide and plan how many children they want

b) No

c) A husband should decide that

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out if they agree with family planning and what I found is: 100% of all non-Muslims

and 84% of all Muslims agree with family- planning. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	42	84%	7	14%	1	2%		%
Non-Muslims	50	100%		%		%		%

Q.18: <u>Do you believe *adoption* can be an option for those who don't have children</u>?

a) Yes

b) No, it will never be the same

c) The adoption industry turns children into commodities

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about adoption and what I found is: 98% of all non-Muslims and 78% of all Muslims believe in adoption as an option for those who do not have children. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	39	78%	3	6%	6	12%	2	4%
Non-Muslims	49	98%		%		%	1	2%

Q.25: Do you believe that God has given man a degree of *authority over the women*?

a) Yes

b) No, everyone is equal

c) Man should be head of the family in terms of his responsibilities

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about the man's authority over the woman and what I found is: 80% of all non-Muslims and 36% of all Muslims believe that everyone is equal and men don't have authority over the women. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	7	14%	18	36%	25	50%		%
Non-Muslims	3	6%	40	80%	6	12%	1	2%

Section 4 (7 questions) Women's Role 20-21-22-23-24-28-29

Q. 20: Do you agree that "Muslim women" are getting more *liberated?*

a) Yes

b) No

c) Very slowly

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about the liberation of Muslim women and what I found is: 66% of all Muslims and only 16% of all non-Muslims agree with liberation of Muslim women. 56% of all non-Muslims and 24% of all Muslims agree with it but very slowly. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	33	66%	5	10%	12	24%		%
Non-Muslims	8	16%	1	2%	28	56%	13	26%

Q.21: <u>Do you believe in *"equality of man and woman"* before God</u>?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not exactly

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about equality of man and woman before God and what I found is: 98% of all non-Muslims and 88% of all Muslims believe in equality of man and woman before God. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	44	88%	2	4%	1	2%	3	6%
Non-Muslims	49	98%		%		%	1	2%

Q.22: <u>Do you believe that *Islam oppresses women*</u>?

a) Yes

b) No, those practices are mostly cultural rather than religious

c) Not that I know of

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about the oppression of women and what I found is: 78% of all Muslims and 20% of all non-Muslims believe that Islam doesn't oppress women and those practices are mostly cultural rather than religious. 44% of all non-Muslims and 10% of all Muslims believe that Islam oppresses women. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	5	10%	39	78%	5	10%	1	2%
Non-Muslims	22	44%	10	20%	5	10%	13	26%

Q.23: <u>Do you think Muslim women in the Muslim world today receive the noble treatment described in the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings?</u>

a) Yes

b) No

c) It may vary and depends on cultures

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about Muslim women in the Muslim world today and whether they receive the treatment described in the Qur'an or not and what I found is: 48% of all non-Muslims have no opinion about it. 56% of all Muslims and 26% of all non-Muslims think that it may vary and depends on cultures. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	4	8%	18	36%	28	56%		%
Non-Muslims	1	2%	12	24%	13	26%	24	48%

Q.24: <u>Do you think, *"looking after children"* is a duty for women</u>?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It's not duty but they naturally have ability and tendency to do that

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about looking after children whether it is a duty or not for women and what I found is: 64% of all Muslims and 48% of all non-Muslims think that it is not a duty for women but they naturally have an ability and tendency to do that. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	10	20%	8	16%	32	64%		%
Non-Muslims	8	16%	16	32%	24	48%	2	4%

Q.28: <u>Do you believe in the *original sin* (the condition of sin that marks all human beings as a result of Adam and Eve's first act of disobedience)?</u>

a) Yes

b) No

c) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about the original sin and what I found is: 66% of all non-Muslims and 44% of all Muslims believe in the original sin. 42% of all Muslims and 22% of all non-Muslims don't believe in the original sin. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	22	44%	21	42%	7	14%		%
Non-Muslims	33	66%	11	22%	6	12%		%

Q.29: <u>Do you agree with *'hijab' (Muslim woman's dress code*) is an obligatory for her</u>?

a) Yes, it is an obligatory based on the Qur"an

b) Not obligatory, but a recommended sign of modesty

c) Best left to interpretation

d) Outdated and no longer needed

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about Muslim women's dress code as a religious obligation for her and what I found is: 48% of all Muslims and 10% of all non-Muslims agree with it as an obligation based on the Qur'an. 46% of all non-Muslims and 22% of all Muslims do not agree with it. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	24	48%	8	16%	7	14%	11	22%
Non-Muslims	5	10%	5	10%	17	34%	23	46%

Section 5 (6 questions) Social issues 14-15-16-17-26-30

Q.14: <u>Do you believe *abortion* is a woman's right</u>?

a) Yes

b) No, it is not woman right but it is necessary in some cases.

c) Neither promote nor deny

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about abortion and what I found is: 58% of all Muslims and 26% of all non-Muslims do not believe abortion is a woman's right but they believe it is necessary in some cases. 46% of all non-Muslims and 22% of all Muslims believe abortion is a woman's right. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	11	22%	29	58%	6	12%	4	8%
Non-Muslims	23	46%	13	26%	10	20%	4	8%

Q.15: <u>Do you think the pregnancy can be terminated with one of these circumstances</u>?

a) Ending pregnancies caused by rape

b) Abortions that are needed to save the life of the woman

c) Pregnancies in very young women

d) All of the above

In this question, I wanted to know what they think about the circumstances of abortion and what I found is: 66% of all non-Muslims and 50% of all Muslims agree that the pregnancy can be terminated with a-ending pregnancies caused by rape, b-abortions that are needed to save the life of the woman, c-pregnancies in very young women. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	2	4%	22	44%	1	2%	25	50%
Non-Muslims	3	6%	14	28%		%	33	66%

Q.16: Do you think "*domestic violence*" is a private matter?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It depends on what the problem is

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about domestic violence and whether it is a private matter or not and what I found is: 82% of all non-Muslims and 44% of all Muslims think that it is not a private matter. 42% of all Muslims and 18% of non-Muslims think that it depends on what the problem is. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	3	6%	22	44%	21	42%	4	8%
Non-Muslims		%	41	82%	9	18%		%

Q.17: <u>Do you believe that religious leaders and priests talk enough about *domestic violence* in churches, mosques, and synagogues</u>?

a) Yes

b) No

c) We don't need to talk about those things in those places

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out if they think that religious leaders talk enough about domestic violence in their places and what I found is: 68% of all non-Muslims and 58% of all Muslims believe that they don't talk enough about this matter in their places. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	12	24%	29	58%	5	10%	4	8%
Non-Muslims	5	10%	34	68%	2	4%	9	18%

Q.26: <u>Do you think that *"dating"* is harmful to the society</u>?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It is okay unless doing in young ages

d) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about dating and what I found is: 80% of all non-Muslims and 24% of all Muslims think that dating is not harmful to the society. 58% of all Muslims and 4% of all non-Muslims think that dating is harmful to the society. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	29	58%	12	24%	6	12%	3	6%
Non-Muslims	2	4%	40	80%	6	12%	2	4%

Q.30: <u>Should *sex education* be taught in schools</u>?

a) Yes

b) No

c) No opinion

In this question, I wanted to find out what they think about sex education in the schools and what I found is: 88% of all non-Muslims and 62% of all Muslims agree that sex education should be taught in schools. 36% of all Muslims and 10% of all non-Muslims do not agree with it. Fifty Muslims and fifty non-Muslims answered the question.

Answer	A		B		C		D	
Muslims	31	62%	18	36%	1	2%		%
Non-Muslims	44	88%	5	10%	1	2%		%

Groups Participated in the Survey

Groups	Count	Percent
Muslim Male	40	40%
Muslim Female	10	10%
Non-Muslim Male	30	30%
Non-Muslim Female	20	20%
Total	100	100%
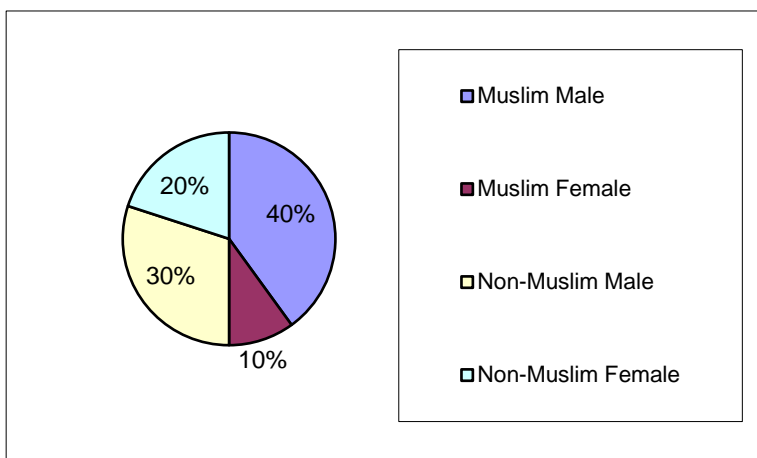
Note: Only 10% of all Muslim participants are female because the first generation of Muslims including female Muslims, do not know enough English to answer the survey questions.

V. Discussion

In this section of the project, I examine the perspectives of both Muslim and non-Muslim participants in Rochester regarding the questions posed in the survey. The analysis focuses on identifying areas of convergence and divergence in their views. The survey findings are evaluated in depth, and their broader implications are discussed. In addition, the results are compared with existing scholarly literature in order to assess the extent to which they align with or differ from previous studies.

Section 1 Marriage:

Q.1: <u>Marriage is: a) The union of the two souls, b) An emotional connection that could end, c) A civil and legal arrangement (contract), d) None of the above</u>.

What I learned from this question is non-Muslims strongly believe that marriage is the union of the two souls. That implies that marriage is a unity beyond the physical. This is an emotional approach (concept of love), which is consistent with the literature. Only 34% of all Muslims believe that marriage is a civil contract (it is the very basic definition of the marriage in Islam), which wasn't what I expected. So, Muslims who live in this culture are affected by American culture in different ways. A very low percentage of non-Muslims believe that marriage is a civil contract because the marriage in western culture is not taken seriously as in eastern cultures such as Turkey, and other Middle Eastern countries.

Q.2: <u>Do you believe that a woman should make her own decision about the choice of her partner in marriage?</u>

Muslims and non-Muslims think the same about the choosing of her partner in marriage. 98% of all non-Muslims

believe that she should make her own decision about it. It is a very liberal approach and consistent with the literature. The majority of all the Muslims agree with it as well. But, at the same time, 44% of all Muslims believe that she needs to have the opinion of her parents as well. The implication here is that Muslim families are patriarchal. They think that young couples could make mistakes about choosing their partners and they need help from their families to make the most appropriate decision, which is consistent with the literature.

Q.3: <u>Do you think all Muslim men generally marry four wives?</u>

The majority of all Muslims (76%) think that Islam encourages marrying only one wife, which is consistent with the literature. It means that monogamy is the norm among Muslims. 44% of all non-Muslims have no opinion about it. They probably do not know the verses that encourage marrying only one wife, or they are not comfortable with this question because they watched and saw the images of Muslim women on TV in the past 6 months.

Q.4: <u>What do you think about *interfaith marriage*?</u>

Half of all non-Muslims agree with interfaith marriage because they are used to seeing diverse cultures and religions that exist in America. On the other hand, Muslims do not think the same. And they (40%) are not optimistic and they are picky (30%) because they don't want to lose their values and culture with marrying someone from outside of their own religion.

Q.5: <u>Is *polygamy* (the practice of having more than one wife) good for women?</u>

What I learned is that the majority of Muslims and non-Muslims do not agree with polygamy, which is a very liberal approach in terms of woman rights. I could also say it is

consistent with the literature that I explained as an exception in some cases.

Q.19: <u>Do you think that *triple divorce* (it is a right to divorce women in Islamic Law) practice by men is misused in the Islamic World?</u>

What I learned is almost half of all Muslims (42%) agree with misuse of triple-divorce practice in Islamic world, because this (right of divorce by men in the Islamic law) is also interpreted in the favor of men. The majority of all non-Muslims said that they had no opinion about it. (I suspect they do not know what the triple divorce in Islamic law is.)

Section 2 Sexual Relations

Q.6: <u>Is *sexual intimacy* in your marriage: a) A physical manifestation of spiritual oneness, b) A way to have fun, c) All of the above.</u>

The majority of all Muslims and non-Muslims think the same about the definition of sexual intimacy. They think that it is a physical aspect of spiritual oneness and a way to have fun. There is nothing wrong with this result according to Islam.

Q.7: <u>Do you think that *sex is a wife's duty?*</u>

The majority of all Muslims and non-Muslims think the same in this question. They do not think that sex is a wife's duty because it is an old religious understanding in Islam and Christianity. This is also a very liberal approach in this matter.

Q.8: <u>Would you marry someone if she/he had engaged in *premarital sex*?</u>

In this question there is a difference in opinion between Muslims and non-Muslims. So, (40%) of all Muslims (only 4% of non-Muslims) believe that sex should only take place in marriage, which is consistent with the literature because sexual purity is highly regarded in Islam. The Majority of

non-Muslims believe that you should not judge a person on his/her past experiences. Again, it is a very liberal thought and it is not consistent with the literature.

Q.9: <u>Do you believe *homosexuality* leads to the destruction of the family?</u>

The majority of Muslims believe that homosexuality is harmful. But, only 38% of non-Muslims believe that it is harmful, because American society accepts many concepts and practices socially, they sometimes see them as a matter of personal freedom and autonomy.

Q.27: <u>Do you believe the value of *"Chastity"* (Haya, moral and sexual purity)?</u>

What I learned is Muslims (86%) strongly believe in the value of chastity and that is consistent with the literature. Only half of non-Muslims believe in it. I think that non-Muslims theoretically believe in chastity as a value, but in practice there is a conflict because only 4% of all non-Muslims said (Q.8) that sex should only take place in marriage.

Section 3 Family

Q.10: <u>Do you believe *the family life* must be based on mutual trust and confidence?</u>

Muslims and non-Muslims think the same in this question. They strongly believe that family life must be based on mutual trust and confidence and it is also consistent with the literature.

Q.11: <u>Do you think that non-Muslim woman would be happy within this society in terms of *family life*?</u>

The majority of Muslims vs. 30% of non-Muslims believe that non-Muslim women (it refers mainly to Christians) would be happy in American society in terms of family life. In this question, there are no dominant figures. I think this question wasn't understood well because it was very broad.

Q.12: <u>Do you believe that *Muslim families* are stronger than Christian and Jewish families in terms of family ties</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think very differently in this question. Muslims believe that they are stronger (family ties, etc.) than non-Muslim families because Islam and Eastern cultures highly emphasize kinship and family structure, which is consistent with the literature. On the other hand, non-Muslims don't think that Muslim families are stronger than non-Muslims and 26% of all non-Muslims also said that it depends. I think that neither side took this subject objectively. They wanted to honor themselves.

Q.13: <u>Do you agree with *family planning* (that is a mutual decision made by spouses about how many children they want</u>)?

All Muslims and non-Muslims think the same about family planning and both agree that everyone could decide how many children they want. It is also consistent with Islam.

Q.18: <u>Do you believe *adoption* can be an option for those who don't have children</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think the same about adoption and both believe in it as an option for those who do not have children.

Q.25: <u>Do you believe that God has given man a degree of *authority over the women*</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think differently about the man's authority over the woman. Non-Muslims strongly believe that God has not given men a degree of authority over the women and everyone is equal. However, half of all Muslim females don't accept authority of men (that is relatively a big percentage). Also, half of Muslim females still recognize that man should be head of the family because he

has lots of responsibilities such as earning a living, etc. This idea is very consistent with the literature.

Section 4 Women's Role

Q.20: <u>Do you agree that "Muslim women" are getting more liberated</u>?

The majority of Muslims and non-Muslims think the same about the liberation of Muslim women. Both agree with it but they also agree that the process is very slow.

Q.21: <u>Do you believe in *"equality of man and woman"* before God</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think the same about equality of men and women before God, which is consistent with the literature.

Q.22: <u>Do you believe that Islam oppresses women</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think differently about the oppression of women in the Islamic world. The majority of Muslims believe that Islam doesn't oppress women. In fact, those practices are mostly cultural rather than religious. On the other hand, almost a majority of non-Muslims believe that Islam oppresses women. The implication here is that non-Muslims do not distinguish between diverse cultures and the religion itself (Islam). They are also affected a lot by the images of Muslim women in the media.

Q.23: <u>Do you think Muslim women in the Muslim world today receive the noble treatment described in the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings</u>?

This question is also similar to question 22 because it requires knowledge about how Qur'an treated women. Muslims and non-Muslims think differently about it. Again, the majority of Muslims believe that it may vary and depends on cultures. It means that X-Muslim country's practices about

this issue might be different than Y-Muslim country's practices because of diverse cultures.

However, almost half of non-Muslims have no opinion about it because they are not sure what the Islamic teachings say and how women are treated in Islam based on both principles. This also shows that non-Muslims don't know too much about Islam.

Q.24: <u>Do you think, *"looking after children"* is a duty for women</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think almost the same about looking after children. They both agree that it's not a duty for women but they naturally have an ability and tendency to do that.

Q.28: <u>Do you believe in the *original sin* (the condition of sin that marks all human beings as a result of Adam and Eve's first act of disobedience)</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think differently about the original sin. The majority of non-Muslims (66%) and almost half of the Muslims (44%) believe in it, which is consistent with the Christian teachings. On the other hand, half of the Muslims believe in the original sin, which is not consistent with the literature. I think that the Muslims believe in it partly but not exactly the same as Christianity. They probably meant that with the original sin both Adam and Eve were tempted and both sinned, but God's pardon was granted to both after their repentance. According to Qur'anic verses, it must be understood that way.

Q.29: <u>Do you agree with *'hijab' (Muslim woman's dress code)* is an obligatory for her</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think differently about the hijab (veil). Half of the Muslims believe that it is an obligation based on Qur'an that is consistent with the literature. On the

other hand, only 10% of all non-Muslims agree that it is an obligation. In fact, there is no choice for us if God commands us to do something because it wasn't left to our interpretation. However, half of non-Muslims believe that it is outdated and no longer needed because they consider the Muslim women's hijab as a sign of seclusion or oppression or politics that are shown by the media.

Section 5 Social Issues

Q.14: <u>Do you believe *abortion* is a woman's right</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think differently about abortion. The majority of Muslims do not believe that abortion is a woman's right because it is a prohibition in Islam. Islam only permits abortion if the woman's life is in danger. On the other hand, almost half of the non-Muslims believe abortion is a woman's right because American culture encourages personal freedom and autonomy.

Q.15: <u>Do you think the pregnancy can be terminated with one of these circumstances?</u>

What I learned from this question is Muslims and non-Muslims think almost the same about the issue. They both agree that the pregnancy can be terminated with: a-caused by rape, b-to save the life of the woman, c- in very young women. Muslims think the same as the non-Muslims because they live in this culture and they are affected a lot by western norms.

Q.16: <u>Do you think "*domestic violence*" is a private matter</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think differently about domestic violence and whether it is a private matter or not. Non-Muslims strongly agree that it is not a private matter. It means that it is against the law and we need to talk about it. On the other hand, only half of the Muslims agree that it is not a private matter and almost half of the Muslims also believe

that it depends on what the problem is. They believe this because the concept of privacy is highly regarded in Islam.

Q.17: <u>Do you believe that religious leaders and priests talk enough about *domestic violence* in churches, mosques, and synagogues</u>?

This question is an extension of question 16. What I learned is Muslims and non-Muslims think almost the same about ministers' contribution to solving the problem of domestic violence. Both believe that ministers don't talk enough about this matter in their places; churches, mosques, and synagogues. It implies that ministers (ironically they are mostly men) perceive domestic violence as not a public issue or, they might think that this is not the place to talk about the matter.

Q.26: <u>Do you think that "*dating*" is harmful to the society</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think very differently about dating. The majority of Muslims think that dating is harmful to the society because Islam does not allow the relationships outside of marriage such as cohabitation, etc. Sexual purity is also highly regarded in Islam. At the same time, it is consistent with the literature. However, non-Muslims strongly believe that dating is not harmful to the society. They think this because it is socially acceptable and over the years, it became a norm as a contrast to Christian teachings. "Mary" is a popular name in the West because Mary represents virginity and sexual purity.

Q.30: <u>Should *sex education* be taught in schools</u>?

Muslims and non-Muslims think almost the same about sex education. They agree that sex education should be taught in schools. That also implies that Muslims think very liberally on this subject.

VI. Conclusions

The findings of this project indicate that Muslims in Rochester tend to hold more liberal views when compared to Muslims in many other parts of the Islamic world. At this point, this observation is not presented as a value judgment regarding whether such liberalization is right or wrong. Rather, it is important to emphasize that many of the rights associated with women's liberation were granted to Muslim women by Islam more than fourteen centuries ago. Although these rights exist in principle, a significant number of Muslim women today are unable to fully benefit from them in practice.

It is evident that the Muslim woman who is guided by Islamic teachings is envisioned as pure, constructive, productive, conscious, educated, and morally refined. She is fully aware of her responsibilities toward Allah (God), herself, her parents, her husband and children, her relatives, neighbors, friends, fellow Muslim women, and society at large, with all its diverse relationships, events, and social interactions.

However, what is observed in many parts of the contemporary Muslim world is a failure of Muslim women to attain the level of dignity and fulfillment that Islam prescribes for them. This situation is largely a consequence of the broader reality that many Muslims have distanced themselves from the original and authentic sources of Islam.

In the current millennium, the primary challenge facing Muslim families does not stem from external influences, but rather from internal factors. Islam offers comprehensive principles that support the stability and integrity of the family institution. The practical implications of the guidance found in the Qur'an are profound for those who seek to preserve family cohesion and social stability.

VII. Evaluation

As has been the case throughout history, one of the most revealing indicators of a society's social and cultural structure is its understanding and perception of women. In contemporary societies, the role and position of women in everyday life are widely regarded as key measures of modernization and the overall level of civilization. This approach should not be considered unusual, given that women have historically been subjected to various forms of injustice, discrimination, and marginalization across different cultures and belief systems.

For instance, within traditional Christian cultural narratives, "woman" has often been portrayed as the being who caused Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, leading to humanity's expulsion from heaven, the introduction of sin into the world, and the moral downfall of humankind. In this framework, women were frequently depicted as sources of temptation who seduced men and brought suffering, sin, and even death to earthly life.

During the Middle Ages in the Christian world, such perceptions resulted in the severe degradation of women and the institution of marriage. From the twelfth century onward, countless women were burned at the stake or drowned after being accused of practicing witchcraft. Marriage itself was discouraged, while celibacy and remaining unmarried were promoted as virtuous and spiritually superior lifestyles. These historical experiences played a significant role in shaping later reactions against religious authority.

Belief systems and practices such as these eventually contributed to the emergence of modern feminism and women's rights movements. From this perspective, it is

possible to argue that the image of the modern woman in the West developed, at least in part, as a stance opposing religion. Modernization in the West, including debates surrounding women, emerged largely as a reaction against the dominance and authority of the Church. The intellectual force driving this transformation was the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance.

Enlightenment thought fundamentally represents an opposition to religion, framing itself as a departure from what it characterized as the "Dark Ages." Consequently, modern Western civilization is often understood as a secular order in which human reason has replaced divine authority, science has taken the place of religion, logic has superseded revelation, and educational institutions have replaced places of worship. Within this framework, the modern Western woman is frequently portrayed as having constructed her identity through independence from religious values and institutions.

In contrast, the socio-cultural position of women in Muslim societies is shaped by multiple factors, including the Qur'an, the teachings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, social environments, ethnic traditions, and cultural elements inherited from pre-Islamic periods. These diverse influences contribute to varying perceptions of women across the Muslim world.

According to the two primary sources of Islam—the Qur'an and the Sunnah—the image of woman is one of equality with man in terms of fundamental rights and responsibilities. Neither gender possesses inherent or absolute superiority over the other. Rather, the natural differences between men and women, such as physical distinctions, are viewed as complementary, enabling cooperation and balance within society and the family.

Islam has conferred a level of value and dignity upon women that is arguably unparalleled in many other civilizations and cultural systems. Nevertheless, it is unrealistic to expect a single, uniform model of womanhood across all Muslim societies. Cultural, environmental, and historical contexts play an active role in shaping perceptions of women, and in many Muslim societies, views on women remain among the most resistant to change.

This reality raises an important question: in which Muslim societies, and to what extent, have the teachings and values of the Qur'an and the Prophet effectively influenced and shaped the understanding of women? For this reason, it is not possible to define an "Islamic woman" solely by examining the practices found in various Muslim societies. From this perspective, the negative image of Muslim women prevalent in Western discourse largely stems from this contradiction between Islamic teachings and cultural practices.

When evaluating the situation of Muslims living in Western societies, several observations can be made:

- For Muslims who live in accordance with the laws of their countries, issues such as polygamy, Islamic divorce regulations, inheritance laws, and witnessing rules often have little or no practical relevance.

- Western lifestyles tend to produce higher numbers of divorced single mothers rather than stable marital units.

- Islamic law, which establishes regulations aligned with human nature for both men and women, cannot reasonably be accused of cruelty based on the principles it upholds.

- Contemporary Western women often experience pressure from pursuits such as comfort, fashion, fame,

professional competition, and even harmful habits like smoking.

- The frequent emphasis on women's liberation in Western societies often serves male interests more than it genuinely empowers women.

These observations are reflected in Ismail Basaran's survey, which reveals that approximately half of the non-Muslim participants believe that Islam oppresses women. This conclusion is largely drawn from their exposure to the images of women in certain Muslim countries, where traditional and cultural practices are mistakenly equated with Islamic values. The findings of this research thus confirm the persistence of existing prejudices within Western societies. In contrast, Muslim respondents tend to approach the issue with greater objectivity.

Although this valuable study does not allow for broad generalizations, it nevertheless provides meaningful insight into how both Muslims and non-Muslims in a multicultural setting like Rochester perceive women in Islam. In this respect, the research is significant, as it sheds light on important social realities. I congratulate Ismail Basaran on this meaningful contribution and wish him continued success in his academic endeavors.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY QUESTIONS

The following survey is part of my graduate student master's project at St. John Fisher College. There are no negative consequences for not completing this survey. In fact, the survey does not ask for your name or any other specific information to identify respondents. In other words, it will not be possible to determine who responded and who did not. You may return your survey directly to me via postal mail at the following address. Please DO NOT use a return address.

Ismail Basaran
2409 East Ridge Rd. #167
Rochester, N.Y. 14622

Thank you for your assistance with this project. If you have any questions regarding this project you may contact me (at the above address) or you may speak with the St. John Fisher College contact person Dr. David Baronov at 385-8220.

Submitted by Ismail Basaran

WOMAN AND GENDER RELATIONS IN ISLAM

Christian   Muslim   Jewish   Other   (please circle one)

Male   Female   (please circle one)

Please answer the following 30 questions and *circle "Only one" choice.*

1-*Marriage is:*

a) The union of the two souls

b) An emotional connection that could end

c) A civil and legal arrangement (contract)

d) None of the above

2-Do you believe that a woman should make her own decision about the choice of her partner in marriage?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Yes, and she needs to have the opinion of her parents as well.

d) No opinion

3-Do you think all Muslim men generally *marry* four wives?

a) Yes

b) No, in fact, Islam encourages marry only one wife

c) It's a misconception against Islam

d) No opinion

4-What do you think about *interfaith marriage*?

a) It is okay

b) Depends on which religion he/she is

c) I'm not optimistic

d) No opinion

5- Is *polygamy (*the practice of having more than one wife) good for women?

a) No, it degrades womanhood.

b) Yes

c) It might be exceptional

d) No opinion

6-Is sexual intimacy in your marriage:

a) A physical manifestation of spiritual oneness

b) A way to have fun

c) All of the above

7-Do you think that *sex is a wife's duty?*

a) Yes

b) No

c) It is an old understanding of religious teachings

d) No opinion

8-Would you marry someone if she/he had engaged *in premarital sex?*

a) No, sex should only take place in marriage

b) It depends on the circumstances of the person

c) One should not judge a person on their past experiences. Only God (Allah) has the right to judge.

d) Yes. It is not important if the person has had sex before marriage.

9-Do you believe *homosexuality* leads to the destruction of the family?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It is a matter of personal freedom

d) No opinion

10-Do you believe *the family life* must be based on mutual trust and confidence?

a) Yes

b) No

c) This is easy to say but hard to practice

d) No opinion

11-Do you think that non-Muslim woman would be happy within this society in terms of *family life?*

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not many

d) No opinion

12-Do you believe that *Muslim families* are stronger than Christian and Jewish families in terms of family ties?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It depends

d) No opinion

13-Do you agree with *family planning* (that is a mutual decision made by spouses about how many children they want)?

a) Yes, spouses should decide and plan how many children they want

b) No

c) A husband should decide that

d) No opinion

14-Do you believe *abortion* is a woman right?

a) Yes

b) No, it is not woman right but it is necessary in some cases.

c) Neither promote nor deny

d) No opinion

15-Do you think the pregnancy can be terminated with one of these circumstances?

a) Ending pregnancies caused by rape

b) Abortions that are needed to save the life of the woman

c) Pregnancies in very young women

d) All of the above

16-Do you think "*domestic violence*" is a private matter?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It depends on what the problem is

d) No opinion

17-Do you believe that religious leaders and priests talk enough about domestic violence in churches, mosques, and synagogues?

a) Yes

b) No

c) We don't need to talk about those things in those places

d) No opinion

18-Do you believe *adoption* can be an option for those who don't have children?

a) Yes

b) No, it will never be the same

c) The adoption industry turns children into commodities

d) No opinion

19-Do you think that triple divorce (it is a right to divorce women in Islamic Law) practice by men is misused in the Islamic World?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Mostly

d) No opinion

20-Do you agree that "Muslim women" are *getting more liberated?*

a) Yes

b) No

c) Very slowly

d) No opinion

21-Do you believe in *"equality of man and woman" before God?*

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not exactly

d) No opinion

22-Do you believe that Islam oppresses women?

a) Yes

b) No, those practices are mostly cultural rather than religious

c) Not that I know of

d) No opinion

23-Do you think Muslim women in the Muslim world today receive the noble treatment described in the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It may vary and depends on cultures

d) No opinion

24-Do you think, *"looking after children"* is a duty for women?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It's not duty but they naturally have ability and tendency to do that

d) No opinion

25-Do you believe that God has given man a degree of *authority over the women?*

a) Yes

b) No, everyone is equal

c) Man should be head of the family in terms of his responsibilities

d) No opinion

26-Do you think that *"dating"* is harmful to the society?

a) Yes

b) No

c) It is okay unless doing in young ages

d) No opinion

27-Do you believe the value of *"Chastity"* (Haya, moral and sexual purity)?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Depends on what you understand of chastity

d) No opinion

28-Do you believe in *the original sin* (the condition of sin that marks all human beings as a result of Adam and Eve's first act of disobedience)?

a) Yes

b) No

c) No opinion

29-Do you agree with *'hijab' (Muslim woman's dress code)* is an obligatory for her?

a) Yes, it is an obligatory based on the Qur"an

b) Not obligatory, but a recommended sign of modesty

c) Best left to interpretation

d) Outdated and no longer needed

30-Should *sex education* be taught in schools?

a) Yes

b) No

c) No opinion

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