

# The Socio-Economic and Administrative Empowerment of Women in Selected Muslim Countries: Practices and Issues

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## Abstract

*A stereotypical opinion about the role of Muslim women prevails. Most of the current literature presumes that Muslim women are not as efficient as women in the Western world because of religious, social, and institutional norms. This article assesses this opinion and surveys the literature published on the socio-economic and administrative role of Muslim women in different periods of Islamic history, i.e., the early period of Islam, the medieval ages, and the contemporary period. This study argues that Islam has given proper rights to women and appreciated their role in different socio-economic fields. If Muslim women are not participating in socio-economic and administrative activities, it is due to the culture in which they live but not because of religion. After a review of the published literature on the above subject, this study concludes that in different periods of Islamic history women played a significant role in different dimensions of life. Their role in childcare also has a significant positive impact on the family life of Muslim households. Moreover, in Muslim societies, the value of unpaid work is well recognized.*

## Keywords

Muslim countries, women, socio-economic activities, religious norms.

## Introduction

The significant role of women can be seen in many different dimensions of Islamic societies and economies. For instance, mothers play a key role in building up the next generation's intangible human, social,

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psychological, and religious capital by raising their children. As a key element in the labour market, Muslim women are participating in the process of economic growth and development. Every religion recognizes the role of women in different spheres of life, especially in social, cultural, economic, and religious spheres. Hence, the empowerment of women in Muslim societies has become a key issue for discussion by policymakers and academicians.<sup>1</sup>

This article examines the empowerment of women in some selected Muslim countries (i.e., Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey). It argues that religion and socio-economic factors play key roles in determining the status of women in society. The literature published in the contemporary developed world presents a stereotypical role of women in developing countries, especially in Muslim nations, suggesting that women in Muslim societies have fewer opportunities to participate in economic activities, especially in the private sector.<sup>2</sup> Some studies report that in most Muslim countries, there is a low participation rate of women in the labour market, particularly in executive positions.<sup>3</sup> Keeping that in mind, international and national organizations are now collecting data to further explore this topic.<sup>4</sup> However, there is a stereotypical misconception about Islamic society and Islam itself.

This article discusses the status of women in selected Muslim countries as well as the impact of their cultural and social norms on women. It also evaluates the status of women and their empowerment in these countries without applying any ethnocentric view. Other than

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<sup>1</sup> Toseef Azid and Jennifer Ward-Batts, "Dimensions of Women Empowerment and Gender Inequality: A Muslim World Perspective," in *Economic Empowerment of Women in the Islamic World: Theory and Practice*, ed. Toseef Azid and Jennifer Ward-Batts (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2020), 595-603.

<sup>2</sup> William E. Thompson, Joseph V. Hickey, and Mica L. Thompson, *Society in Focus* (Boston: Pearson, 2005); Helena Andrews, "Muslim Women don't See Themselves as Oppressed, Survey Finds," *New York Times*, June 8, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/08/world/middleeast/08women.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Rizzo, Abdel-Hamid Abdel-Latif, and Katherine Meyer, "The Relationship between Gender Equality and Democracy: A Comparison of Arab versus non-Arab Muslim Societies," *Sociology* 41, no. 6 (2007): 1151-70, doi:10.1177/0038038507082320; Valentine M. Moghadam, "The Reproduction of Gender Inequality in Muslim Societies: A Case Study of Iran in the 1980s," *World Development* 19, no. 10 (1991): 1335-49, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(91\)90077-U](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(91)90077-U).

<sup>4</sup> Dwight H. Perkins, Steven Radelet, and David L. Lindauer, *Économie Du Développement* (Bruxelles: De Boeck Supérieur, 2008); Rashmi Umesh Arora, "Gender Inequality, Economic Development, and Globalization: A State Level Analysis of India," *The Journal of Developing Areas* 46, no. 1 (2012): 147-64.

religion, many other factors, including economic, social, cultural, legal, and political ones, affect the role and behaviour of women. It is essential to keep two things in mind about the context in which this study approaches this topic to have a better understanding of the Islamic framework of the issue. First, the Qur'ān and *sunnah* of the Prophet (peace be on him) emphasize the importance of women, ensure their property rights and a share in inheritance, encourage their participation in economic activities, provide more respect to mothers than fathers, and make it the responsibility of the male head of the household to fulfil the needs of the family. Second, women as mothers, wives, or daughters serve the family as an unpaid service. Hardly any data is available for these services. However, in the Islamic world, one can see the extraordinary role that women play in serving their families and educating their children. According to the teachings of Islam, women are not considered to be inferior to men.

Despite the above, the process of economic development cannot be accelerated without greater female participation in the labour force. Historically, women played a significant role in agrarian societies and there were few restrictions on their participation. However, technological advancement now plays a vital role in how families view women's work beyond the domestic sphere. In the experiences of several societies, the U-shaped relationship between economic development and female participation has been observed. This article considers this pattern while discussing the status and empowerment of women in selected Muslim countries. It discusses the past and current social status of women in these developing or advanced-developing countries. Based on sociocultural attributes, individuals, communities, and countries interpret religion under regional cultural norms and customs.

Islam encourages its followers to seek knowledge. The Prophet (peace be on him) said, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim."<sup>5</sup> Islam does not see lactation as the sole duty of a mother; if she does such a task, it will be considered *aḥsan* (benevolent action). The Qur'ān states, "If you wish to engage a wet nurse you may do so if you pay her an agreed amount as is customary."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Mājāh, *Sunan*, kitāb al-muqaddimah, bāb faḍl al-'ulamā' wa 'l-ḥathth 'alā ṭalab al-'ilm.

<sup>6</sup> Qur'ān 2:233.

## The Empowerment of Women during the Islamic Medieval Period

Shatzmiller reviewed the participation of women in the economic activities of the overall Islamic world during the medieval Islamic period (eleventh to sixteenth centuries) and found that a significant number of women were involved in different professions, a comparatively larger proportion of women than those living in other parts of the world.<sup>7</sup> She found that Muslim women (particularly in Egypt and Turkey) worked in the manufacturing and service sectors, and monopolized employment in the textile sector, in which they had special expertise in spinning, dyeing, and embroidery. During that period in the Islamic world, women also worked as beauticians. Economically, this was an attractive profession. They also worked as brokers and received commissions on their tasks. Evidence shows that midwives and hairdressers were paid generously.<sup>8</sup> They were essentially entrepreneurs and hired others to work for their enterprises.

During the Mamlūk period in Egypt, the wives of soldiers had the authority to manage their property. If any deceased soldier had no son, his *iqṭa'* (estate) was transferred to his wife.<sup>9</sup> Rabbat has surveyed the economic participation of elite women in Egypt during the medieval period of Islam.<sup>10</sup> Among many of them, Shaqrā' and Fāṭimah bint Khāṣṣbak managed urban as well as rural properties. The most famous was a Mamlūk slave girl, Shajar al-Durr (r. 1249-1250 CE), who became the ruler of Egypt during the Mamlūk period.<sup>11</sup> During this period, the women from the royal family and some slave girls Urdutekin bint Nogay,

<sup>7</sup> Maya Shatzmiller, "Women and Wage Labour in the Medieval Islamic West: Legal Issues in an Economic Context," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, no. 2 (1997): 174-206.

<sup>8</sup> Maya Shatzmiller, *Labour in the Medieval Islamic World* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Carl F. Petry, "Class Solidarity versus Gender Gain: Women as Custodians of Property in Later Medieval Egypt," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Kedde and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 122-42.

<sup>10</sup> Petry, "The Estate of al-Khuwand Fāṭima al-Khaṣṣbakiyya: Royal Spouse, Autonomous Investor," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 277-94; Petry, "Class Solidarity versus Gender Gain," 122-42; N. Rabbat "Mamluk History through Architecture: Monuments, Culture and Politics in Medieval Egypt and Syria," *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 68, nos. 3-4 (2010): 430-33.

<sup>11</sup> Amalia Levanoni, "Šağar ad-Durr: A Case of Female Sultanate in Medieval Islam," in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Eras*, ed. Urbain Vermeulen and Jo van Steenbergen (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2010), 209-18.

al-Sitt Ḥadaq (a slave girl), and the concubine mother of al-Ashraf Sha'bān devoted themselves to different *waqf* projects (Islamic charitable trusts).<sup>12</sup> The Ottoman queens and princesses also constructed several buildings for educational and health purposes in Egypt.

Most women, especially from the elite class, had large trousseaux, which provided financial security. Sitt al-Mulk (d. 1023 CE), a Fatimid princess, was an expert in Islamic law. Umm Hāni' Maryam (d. 870/1466) had expertise in theology, law, history, grammar, and calligraphy. She had a command of the Arabic language and poetry.<sup>13</sup> Fāṭimah bint Sa'd al-Khayr (d. 541 AH) was born in Kashgar but travelled to Egypt to learn *ḥadīths* (Prophetic traditions). Umm 'Abd Allāh Zaynab bint Aḥmad al-Kamāl al-Muqaddasiyyah (d. 740 AH) travelled to Baghdad, Mardin, Syria, Alexandria, and Cairo to seek Islamic knowledge.

During the Ottoman and Seljuk periods, one finds many women who established *waqf* institutions for the needy sections of society and built buildings, bridges, Turkish baths, mosques, and schools.<sup>14</sup> Among the Ottoman women who established *waqf* foundations and built mosques, *kārvānsarā'ēs* (lodges for the travellers), hospitals, and other charitable establishments are, for example, Hüma, Despina, Gülbahar, Hafsa Valide, Mahidevran, Hürrem, Nurbanu, Safiye, Kösem, Hatice Turhan, Mihrisah, and Bezmialem Hanoums Sultans. They also had political influence. However, the two most famous women in political terms are Hürrem and Kösem. Hürrem earned the title of Haseki Sultan. She enjoyed the position of being Sultan's consort.<sup>15</sup> Kösem became powerful after earning the title of Haseki Sultan, the favourite consort of Ottoman

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Williams, "The Mosque of Sitt Hadaq," *Muqarnas Online* 11, no. 1 (1993): 55-64, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/22118993-90000332>; Howayda Al-Harithy, "Female Patronage of Mamluk Architecture in Cairo," in *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies*, ed. Amira El Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 321-36; Yossef Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Tim Winter, *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> A. C. S. Peacock, *Great Seljuk Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); T. A. Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey: An Architectural and Archaeological Survey* (London: Pindar Press, 1989); Oya Pancaroğlu, "The House of Mengüjek in Divriği: Constructions of Dynastic Identity in the Late Twelfth Century," in *The Seljuks of Anatolia: Court and Society in the Medieval Middle East*, ed. A. C. S. Peacock and Sara Nur Yildiz (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 25-67.

<sup>15</sup> Stephan Schmuck, review of *Roxelana in European Literature, History and Culture*, ed. Galina I. Yermolenko, *Renaissance Studies* 26, no. 3 (2012): 466-68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24420078>; Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Sultan Ahmed I (r. 1603-1617) and *valide* sultan as the mother of Murad IV (r. 1623-1640) and Ibrahim (r. 1640-1648), and grandmother of Mehmed IV.<sup>16</sup> All of the queens and princesses mentioned above spent enormous amounts of money on establishing the *waqf*.

In Iran, during the Safavid period, Queen Khair al-Nisā' Baigam (d. 1579) earned the title of *Mahd-i 'Ulyā'* (the highest-ranked cradle).<sup>17</sup> She was the wife of Muḥammad Khudābandah (r. 1578-1587) and the mother of Abbas I. She was extremely powerful and ruled the country even during the time of her husband. Other powerful queens included Annā Khānum (d. 1647), Nakihat Khānum (r. 1642-1666), Princess Marta of Kakheti (r. 1588-1629), Sulṭān Āghā Khānum (r. 1524-1576), Sulṭānum Baigam (1516-1593), Tājilū Khānum (d. 1540), and Yākhān Baigam (d. 1602).<sup>18</sup> Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad, a famous writer, received the proud title of *Musnidah-i Isfahān* (the great *ḥadīth* authority of Isfahan). She founded a Sufi lodge that her husband endowed most generously. Many students attended her lectures on *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī which were seen as being very prestigious.

In Mughal India, the women of the royal family played a significant and active political role. Aisān Daulat Baigam (d. 1505), the maternal grandmother of Bābur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, played a vital role in its establishment. Bābur wrote, "For tactics and strategy, there were few women like my grandmother, Aisan Begum. She was intelligent and a good planner. Most affairs were conducted with her consent."<sup>19</sup> Other women from the Mughal royal family who played an important role in governmental affairs include, for example, Qutlugh Nigār Khānum (d. 1505), the mother of Bābur; Khānzādah Baigam (d. 1545), the elder sister of Bābur; Māham Baigam (d. 1534), the wife of Bābur; Bībī Mubārikah, another wife of Bābur; Ḥamīdah Bānō (d. 1604), the wife of Humāyūn; and Māham Angah (d. 1562), the wet nurse of Akbar.<sup>20</sup> Girls were provided with an education and facilities to learn different skills, for example, cooking, embroidery, needlework, stitching, and tailoring.

<sup>16</sup> Peirce, *Imperial Harem*; Philip Mansel, *Constantinople: City of the World's Desire, 1453-1924* (London: John Murray, 2011); Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power*, 2nd ed. (London: Springer Nature, 2009); Baki Tezcan, "The Debut of Kösem Sultan's Political Career," *Turcica* 40 (2008): 347-59.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Savory, *Iran under the Safavids* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.; Andrew J. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012); Rudi Matthee, *Persia in Crisis: Safavid Decline and the Fall of Isfahan* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Babur, *Babur Nama* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (Noida: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

In Nigeria, Amīnah (r. 1576-1610) was the queen of the province of Zazzua. She came to power at the age of sixteen after her mother. She was a brave and intelligent woman who learned military skills and led the army of Zazzua. She ruled for 34 years and conquered neighbouring areas to expand her territory. Her focus was on forcing local rulers to accept vassal status and permit safe passage to Hausa traders. She ordered the building of defensive walls around each military camp that she established and thereby popularized earthen wall fortifications, which have since become characteristic of Hausa states. Towns grew within these walls, many of which still exist and are known as Amīnah's walls.<sup>21</sup>

In Indonesia, Ratu Kalinyamat (r. 1549-1579) was the queen regnant of Kalinyamat and Jepara. She is mainly known for her attacks and naval expeditions against Portuguese Malacca.<sup>22</sup> She was the first of four successive women to rule.<sup>23</sup> Her peaceful rule meant a dismantling of despotism in favour of institutionalizing law to protect both local subjects and foreigners. The seventeenth ruler of Aceh Darussalam, and the fourth successive woman to rule, was Sultanah Zainatuddin Kamalat Syah (r. 1688-1699).<sup>24</sup>

Cik Siti Wan Kembang (b. 1585) was the head of Kelantan (a state in Malaysia) and governed between 1610 and 1667. She ushered Kelantan into a golden age, during which it became a renowned centre for international trade and attracted merchants from all over the world. She ensured equality in access to education for both genders. Her intelligent and wise leadership brought peace and prosperity to Kelantan that was not seen again for a century. She is also renowned for her bravery as a warrior princess who would enter the battlefield on horseback accompanied by an army of female horse riders. One of her many legacies was her favourite pet, the muntjac (barking deer), which became

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<sup>21</sup> Abdullahi Smith, "Some Notes on the History of Zazzau under the Hausa Kings," in *Zaria and Its Region: A Nigerian Savanna City and Its Environs*, ed. M. J. Mortimore (Zaria: Department of Geography, Ahmadu Bello University, 1970).

<sup>22</sup> Uka Tjandrasmita, *Islamic Antiquities of Sendang Duwur* (Jakarta: Archaeological Foundation, University of California, 1975).

<sup>23</sup> Sher Banu A. L. Khan, "The Sultanahs of Aceh, 1641-99," in *Aceh: History, Politics and Culture*, ed. Arndt Graf, Susanne Schroter, and Edwin Wieringa (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 3-25.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*; Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since C. 1200* (London: MacMillan, 1993).

Kelantan's emblem as a reminder of this glorious past.<sup>25</sup> She was one of the longest-reigning queens in Malaysian history.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Empowerment of Women after the Medieval Islamic Period**

The empowerment of women has never been a problem in contemporary Indonesia. Megawati Sukarnoputri served as both Vice-President (1999-2001) and President (2001-2004) of the country. Likewise, many other women are lauded for their contribution to the protection and independence of their country over the last few centuries. Cut Nyak Dien (d. 1908), Hajjah Rangkayo Rasuna Said (d. 1965), Cut Nyak Meutia (d. 1910), Nyi Ageng Serang (d. 1838), Keumalahayati (d. 1615), and Siti Aisyah We Tenriolle (d. 1919) all fought against colonial powers.<sup>27</sup> Dewi Sartika (d. 1947) was a pioneer in educating women in Indonesia. Rahmah El Yunusiyah (d. 1969) was an Indonesian educational reformer and freedom fighter. Gusti Kanjeng Ratu (b. 1983) was the first female Sultan of Yogyakarta. Princess Ratu was seen as a modern independent woman. Ratu Hemas of Yogyakarta is the Queen consort of Yogyakarta and an active politician. Warung, a type of small-scale family-owned Indonesian store, is often run equally by men and women. In most parts of the country, Indonesian women have traditionally enjoyed a degree of social and economic freedom.

In Malaysia, a long list of prominent women is evidenced by Cecilia Ng, Irene Fernandez, Ivy Josiah, Maria Chin Abdullah, Marina Mahathir, Norano Othman, and Toni Kasim, all of whom were human rights activists and academics. Khatijah Sidek and Shamsiah Fakeh were also very prominent academics. Zainah Anwar and Rohaya Mohamed were the co-founders of "Sisters in Islam" and worked to promote women's rights, supported by Islamic jurisprudence. Later, Zainah Anwar was appointed as chairperson of the Security Commission Malaysia. Hajjah Zainon Munshi Sulaiman put her efforts into the cause of female education. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail is a strong advocate for women's

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander Wain, "Legacy of Southeast Asia's Muslim Women Rulers," *New Straits Times*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2019/03/471406/legacy-southeast-asias-muslim-women-rulers>.

<sup>26</sup> Rachael Lum, "9 Legendary Malaysian Princess from Almost Every State," *Lokalokal*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.lokalokal.com/blog/culture/%EF%BB%BF9-legendary-malaysian-princesses-from-almost-every-state>.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier: Acehnese and Other Histories of Sumatra* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2005).



empowerment in Malaysia.<sup>28</sup> Malaysian women are significant contributors to the establishment of *waqf*. In Selangor, 80% of *waqf* is donated by women.<sup>29</sup> In Penang, 52% is contributed by Mrs Rahmah and Seetee Aishah, who fund the *waqf* in Federal Territory and Penang respectively. Jamelah Jamaluddin was appointed in 2007 as the CEO of RHB Islamic Bank. Hajra Adeola was the founder, CEO, and managing director of Lotus Capital, a *sharīah*-compliant investment company.

In Iran, Taleqani, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Soheila Jelowdarzadeh, and Fatemeh Rake are very active in politics. Many other women are elected in the council elections in Iran. Articles 10, 20, and 21 of the Iranian constitution have discussed women's rights and responsibilities. A survey of the economic participation rate in Iran showed that the rate of women's economic activity has increased from 8.1% in 1986 to 14.9% by late 2016, although it remains far lower than men. However, this growth suggests that when the provision of education and health benefits improves for women, and the typical age of marriage increases, they will have more opportunities to participate in the social and economic life in the country. According to the latest census of population and housing in 2016, the literacy rate in the country is 87.64%, with the rate for men being 91.1% and for women, 84.2%. According to other statistics, 52.5% of female graduates were economically active in 2005, which increased to 62.8% in 2015. The Relief Foundation in Iran provides support to the female population in four areas, i.e., empowerment, employment, specialized services, and social insurance.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting to note that Iranian women resisted the *kashf-i hijāb* (unveiling) law in 1936, issued by the pro-Western ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi. In the years leading up to this event, the Society for Women's Freedom was established. Earlier, in 1918, the *Jam'iyat-i Nisvān-i Vaṭankhavāh* (Patriotic Women's League) published *Nisvān-i Vaṭankhavāh*. In 1922, Mohtaram Eskandari organized the Patriotic Women's

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<sup>28</sup> Aminah Ahmad, "Country Briefing Paper: Women in Malaysia" (Asian Development Bank, Programs Department East, 1998); Nooraime Ayub, "The Role of Women in Post Independent Malaysia: The Contribution of Ibu Zain (Tan Sri Hajjah Zainun Sulaiman)," <https://lib.iium.edu.my/mom/services/mom/document/getFile/S2fLjUxwDZpXw1jsYqALyy6Zg1CD5e9m20141112103055404>.

<sup>29</sup> "Asia-Pacific Human Development Report 2010, Power Voice and Rights, a Turning Point for Gender Equality in the Asia and Pacific, United Nations Development Programme Regional Centre for Asia Pacific, Colombo Office Human Development Report Unit 23, Independence Avenue, Colombo 7, Sri Lanka.

<sup>30</sup> M. Soleimani and H. Kiaee, "The Socio-Economic Conditions of Women in Iran," in *Economic Empowerment of Women in the Islamic World: Theory and Practice*, ed. Toseef Azid and Jennifer L. Ward-Batts (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2020).

Organization. Zandokht Shirazi, another female activist, organized the Women's Revolutionary Association. In 1968, Farrokhroo Parsa became the minister of education. She was the first woman to hold an Iranian cabinet position. In 1969, the judiciary was opened to women, and five female judges were appointed, including Shirin Ebadi, a future Nobel prize winner. Other notable fighters for women's rights in Iran were Tahirih, also known as Qurrat al-'Ayn, Fatimah Baraghani (1814-1852), and Zahra Khanom Tadj es-Saltaneh who were actively involved in improving the welfare of women. In Iran, the ratio of literate women to men aged 15-24 years (Literacy Gender Parity Index) increased to 99.30% in 2012. It is hoped that under stable conditions, the youth literacy rate can reach gender parity. The ratio of female university students to males also increased to 97.6% in 2011.<sup>31</sup>

In Pakistan, women have a great deal of liberty to take part in different economic, political, and social activities. The equality of citizens is the main subject of Article 25 of the Pakistani constitution. A significant number of women have played vital roles in the progress of the country. Fatima Jinnah, the younger sister of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was one of Pakistan's first famous female figures and stood as a candidate in the presidential election of 1965 against Ayub Khan. She was a source of the awakening of women's rights in Pakistan. Begum Rana Liaquat Ali, the wife of the first prime minister of Pakistan Liaquat Ali Khan, established the All-Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) in 1949. In 1952, she was the first female Muslim delegate to the United Nations. In the 1970s, she was appointed as the governor of the Sindh province by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. Benazir Bhutto was the first female prime minister (1988-1990) of Pakistan. Some of the federal ministers especially in education, law and population were women in different governments. Moreover, the participation of women in the national assembly is positively encouraged; 60 seats are reserved for women, one of which is reserved for non-Muslim minorities. This allows 20% of the seats in the national assembly to be represented by women.<sup>32</sup>

In Turkey, the Ottoman Welfare Organization of Women founded in 1908 was the first women's rights association. Kara Fatma (d. 1955), a successful militia leader, participated in the Turkish War of Independence. Nuriye Ulviye Mevlan Civelek (d. 1964) was the founder of the first feminist women's magazine and also established a Muslim

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Toseef Azid and Jennifer L. Ward-Batts, eds., *Economic Empowerment of Women in the Islamic World: Theory and Practice* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2020).

women's rights organization in Turkey.<sup>33</sup> Nezihe Muhiddin Tepedelengil (d. 1958) was a famous political leader. Fatma Aliye (d. 1936) was the first female Turkish novelist. The Turkish central bank printed her picture on a banknote in 2009 as an acknowledgement of her services to society.<sup>34</sup>

Since 1930, Turkish women have had the full right to vote and participate in elections. Sadiye Hanım was elected as mayor in 1930. In the elections of 1935, eighteen women were elected to parliament. In 1950, Müfide İlhan (d. 1996) was elected as the first city mayor. Hatı Çırpan was elected as village head and then elected as a member of the parliament. In 1993, Tansu Çiller was elected as the prime minister. The percentage of female members of parliament increased to 14.3% after the 2011 election, compared to 10.9% in 2006. Sule Yüksel Senler (d. 2019) developed a conservative women's movement and encouraged female participation in political and social life.<sup>35</sup> Sibel Eraslan served as the head of the women's section of the Refah Party, which supports the wearing of headscarves. The party fights for the identity, personality, and existence of Turkish Muslim women and promotes education to allow women to experience modern values within traditional forms. Since 2014, the ratio for the schooling of girls has exceeded that of boys. However, the female employment rate (for ages 15–64) was only 32.2% in 2017. The informal economy may suggest that the true figure is higher than this, but no statistics are available for this sector.<sup>36</sup>

In Nigeria, the national policy states that education is the fundamental right of everyone in Nigeria, irrespective of gender. However, the situation is less promising in northern Nigeria. In southern Nigeria, women receive Western-style education and are actively involved in every sphere of modern society. Despite this disparity between northern and southern Nigeria, many prominent women are actively engaged in socio-economic life in both regions of the country. Among them, Aisha Lemu (d. 2019) contributed significantly to the promotion of religious education in Nigeria with the support of many

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<sup>33</sup> Serpil Çakır, "Feminism and Feminist History-Writing in Turkey: The Discovery of Ottoman Feminism," *Aspasia* 1, no. 1 (2007): 61-83, doi:10.3167/asp.2007.010104.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth B. Frierson, "Women in Late Ottoman Intellectual History," in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elisabeth Özdalga (London: Routledge, 2005), 135-61.

<sup>35</sup> Hakan Arslanbenzer, "Şule Yüksel Şenler: A Pioneering Muslim Woman of Her Era," *Daily Sabah*, August 30, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/portrait/2019/08/30/sule-yuksel-senler-a-pioneering-muslim-woman-of-her-era>.

<sup>36</sup> Entang Mega Pertiwi, "Women's Existence in Sibel Eraslan's Hajar: A Feminism Study," *BAHTERA: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra* 17, no. 1 (2018): 90-99, doi:10.21009/bahtera.171.7.

other women, including Hajia Jubril, Alhaja Adiat Fahm, Hajia Muslimat Kamaldeen, and Hajia Saadiya Omar Bello. Nana Asma'u (d. 1864) was a poet, teacher, and a source of guidance for the later rulers of the Sokoto caliphate. She is held up as an example of women's education and independence under Islam.<sup>37</sup>

Charmaine Pereira (b. 1958) is a writer and an active supporter of gender equality in Abuja, Nigeria. In 2001, Yinka Jegede-Ekpe (b. 1978), herself HIV-positive, organized a group of women who had HIV and taught them how to live with the virus.<sup>38</sup> Hajiya Gambo Sawaba (d. 2001) served as the deputy chairman of the Great Nigeria People's Party and was elected leader of the national women's Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU). Hajiya Hadiza Ladi Kwali (d. 1984) was a celebrated Nigerian potter. She was awarded the title of MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) in 1962. Her picture appears on the back of a Nigerian banknote. Amina Muhammed (b. 1961) is the current deputy secretary general of the United Nations and the chair of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group.<sup>39</sup> She also served as minister of the environment, special adviser to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on post-2015 development planning, the founder and CEO of the Center for Development Policy Solutions, adjunct professor for the master's program in development practice at Columbia University, and senior special assistant to the Nigerian President on the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>40</sup>

Hajiya Bilkisu Yusuf (d. 2015) was a Nigerian journalist, columnist, and editor for some of Nigeria's most prominent newspapers. She was an adviser to the Nigerian President on international affairs and one of the

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<sup>37</sup> Suraiya Nawab, *The Contribution of Women to Muslim Society: A Study of Selected Autobiographical and Bibliographical Literature* (Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg, 2012); Chukwuma Azuonye, "Feminist or Simply Feminine? Reflections on the Works of Nana Asma'u, a Nineteenth-Century West African Woman Poet, Intellectual, and Social Activist," *Meridians* 6, no. 2 (2006): 54-77; Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u, 1793-1865, Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> J. H. Bryant, "Health Priority Dilemmas in Developing Countries," in *The Global Challenge of Health Care Rationing*, ed. Angela Coulter and Chris Ham (Philadelphia: Open University Press; 2000), 63-74.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.un.org/sg/en/dsg/index.shtml>.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Seddon, "Why is She here?" *The Nigerian Herder's Daughter Who Became UN Deputy Chief*, *The Guardian*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/may/26/why-is-she-here-nigerian-herders-daughter-un-deputy-chief-amina-mohammed>.

founders of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association (FOMWAN).<sup>41</sup> Zainab Alkali (b. 1950) is the chairperson of the National Library Board of Nigeria and also worked for the National Primary Health Care Development Agency in Abuja. Her novel, *The Stillborn* published by Longman in 1984 is one of the most widely-read English novels authored by a Nigerian woman.<sup>42</sup>

The empowerment of women in Egypt has a long history. In 1832, Muhammad Ali built a school at which girls and women were taught to be midwives. Further reforms were introduced by his successor, Ismail Pasha (d. 1895). In 1873, his wife Jashm Āfat Hānum (d. 1907) started the Sulyya Girls School, which taught girls subjects ranging from history and religion to mathematics.<sup>43</sup> Zaynab al-Ghazālī (d. 2005) was an activist and closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. After the assassination of Hassan al-Banna in 1949, she played a pivotal role in regrouping the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s. Mihrisah Valide Sultan (r. 1789-1805) and Princess Fatima Ismail (d. 1920) donated their land to support a university in Cairo. Qūt al-Qulūb al-Dimardāshiyyah (d. 1968) cooperated with her father in establishing El Demerdash Hospital in Egypt.<sup>44</sup> 'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 1998) of Egypt is a prominent name during this period in Egypt.<sup>45</sup> However, only 26% of Egyptian women participate in the labour force. Nevertheless, the percentage of women in parliament has increased from only 2% in 2016 to 15% and it is expected to rise to 35% by 2030.<sup>46</sup>

In Bangladesh, Article 28 of the constitution affords women equal rights to men, stating, "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and public life." As with other countries in the D8 group, a significant number of women have participated in socio-economic, religious, and political activities. Begum Rokeya (d. 1932) worked for the education of Muslim women; Nurun Nahar Faizannesa (d. 2004) led a feminist movement; Sultana Kemal (b. 1950) served as executive director of the civil rights organization; Syda Razia Faiz (d.

<sup>41</sup> "Hajiya Bilks Yusuf," <https://wisemuslimwomen.org/muslim-woman/hajiya-bilkisu-7/>.

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Busby, *Daughters of Africa* (London: Cape, 1992), 782.

<sup>43</sup> Beshara Doumani, *Family History in the Middle East: Household, Property, and Gender* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> Iman Mohammad Al Humaidan, *Women and Waqf* (Kuwait: Awqaf Public Foundation, Department of Studies and External Relations, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Kiki M. Santing, *Imagining the Perfect Society in Muslim Brotherhood Journals* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 225.

<sup>46</sup> *Economic Empowerment Study* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018).

2013) was the first female elected member of parliament; Hasna Begum (d. 2020) was a philosopher and held the prestigious Rokeya Chair of the University Grants Commission; Bibi Russel (b. 1950) graduated from the London College of Fashion and then established Bibi products in 2004, employing 35,000 weavers in Bangladesh. Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury was elected to one of the parliamentary seats reserved for women in 2009 and became minister for women and children's affairs until taking on the role of Speaker of Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) in April 2013. Yeasmin Kohinoor is the CEO of Tarango company, an export and import business that manufactures different types of products such as baskets, bags, rugs, and seasonal decorations.<sup>47</sup>

All the selected Muslim countries are members of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) which has many strategies and plans to improve the conditions of women. For example, the Women in Development Unit was established in 1998 and the Women's Advisory Panel was established in 2004. Recently, the IDB created the Social Capacity Development Division (SCDD) to focus on the empowerment of women. In 2005, the IDB launched two initiatives: the IDB Prize for Women's Contribution to Development and the IDB Group's Strategy for Mainstreaming Women. Other initiatives include the Arab Women's Enterprise Fund (AWEF), established with the cooperation of the UK's DFID for the support of female entrepreneurs from Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and Palestine.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Current State of Women in the Selected Muslim Countries**

There are 45 Muslim-majority countries with a total female population of more than half a billion. In addition, there is a significant minority Muslim population in more than 30 countries. The Muslim population (aged between 15-64) accounts for 8% of the world's total population, whereas all ages of the Muslim female population are 12% of the entire world population. Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world and so these percentages are likely to increase. The female populations of the selected Muslim countries are 81.3 million in Bangladesh, 49.67 million in Egypt, 99.1 million in Nigeria, 42 million in Iran, 138 million in Indonesia, 15.9 million in Malaysia, 103 million in Pakistan, and 43.1 million in Turkey—a total of approximately 572 million women. The potential socio-economic impact of such a number is evident. However,

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<sup>47</sup> "Of Kohinoor Yeasmin and Her Tarango," *The Daily Observer*, June 30, 2018, <https://www.observerbd.com/details.php?id=145374>.

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.dai.com/our-work/projects/jordan-egypt-and-palestine-arab-women-enterprise-fund>, accessed on March 2, 2021.

when we extrapolate the data from the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2018) to these Muslim countries (as depicted in Table 1) the rankings of the selected countries vary from 48th (Bangladesh) to 148th (Pakistan). Only Bangladesh has a score of more than 0.7 out of 1.0.

The criteria considered in the index are economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. In terms of economic participation and opportunity, Nigeria is the best-ranked country at 79th, with Pakistan the worst at 146th. All of the selected countries have a score of less than 0.7 in this category. In comparison, Malaysia achieved first place in the ranking for educational attainment, whereas Nigeria's position is 140th. All of these countries, except Nigeria and Pakistan, have a score of 0.95 or more in this category. These scores illustrate that these countries are far closer to Western levels of achievement (and in some cases exceed) in educational attainment. The gender gap between men and women in the category of political empowerment is still far from satisfactory. Bangladesh is ranked 5th in the world (but still only with a score of 0.526). Iran is ranked 141st. Indonesia, Turkey, and Pakistan have scores of 0.193, 0.101, and 0.127, respectively, but the other four members of this group are at less than 0.1. The gender gap in political empowerment reflects the low representation of women in political roles in these countries and the sporadic presence of women among heads of state.

Country	GLOBAL INDEX		ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AND OPPORTUNITY		EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT		HEALTH AND SURVIVAL		POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT	
	Rank	Score 0-1	Rank	Score 0-1	Rank	Score 0-1	Rank	Score 0-1	Rank	Score 0-1
Bangladesh	48	0.721	133	0.441	116	0.950	117	0.969	5	0.526
Indonesia	85	0.691	96	0.629	107	0.967	79	0.974	60	0.193
Malaysia	101	0.676	84	0.656	1	1.00	83	0.974	131	0.072
Turkey	130	0.628	131	0.466	106	0.968	67	0.976	113	0.101
Nigeria	133	0.621	79	0.661	140	0.806	132	0.964	139	0.052
Egypt	135	0.614	139	0.421	99	0.975	84	0.974	122	0.087
Iran	142	0.589	143	0.376	103	0.969	127	0.966	141	0.046
Pakistan	148	0.550	146	0.318	139	0.610	145	0.946	97	0.127

**Table 1: Global rankings related to women, 2018<sup>49</sup>**

<sup>49</sup> World Economic Forum, "The Global Gender Gap Report 2018," Geneva, Switzerland.

Table 2 presents the labour force participation rates by gender for the selected Muslim countries. The rates in all these countries are lower for women than men though the older population is also included in these figures. It should also be noted that there is a wider gap in terms of participation in the older cohorts in comparison to the younger ones, especially in the developing world. According to an estimate by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the ratio of female to male labour force participation in the world (both developed and developing countries) was approximately 0.67 in 2017.<sup>50</sup> Table 2 illustrates that in the group. Only Malaysia exceeds this ratio.

Country	Women	Men	Ratio (female/male)
Egypt	24.1	77.7	0.31
Indonesia	52.9	83.7	0.632
Iran	17.9	75.2	0.238
Malaysia	54.7	80.6	0.679
Pakistan	26.3	85.8	0.307
Turkey	36.1	77.4	0.466
Bangladesh	36.0	80.0	0.450
Nigeria	50.0	64.0	0.781

**Table 2: Labour force participation (%) rates of men and women aged 15-64 in the selected countries<sup>51</sup>**

The literature on developing economics states that by raising the participation of women in the workforce both total economic output and economic growth can be increased. This article argues that the forces that constrain women in these Muslim nations are not religion itself, but culture, social norms, laws, and lack of opportunities due to low levels of economic development. In almost all parts of the world, attempts to reduce the gender gap are receiving a lot of attention. Most governments are formulating policies in this direction as gender inequality persists in both the developing and developed worlds. The same has been observed in the selected Muslim countries.

Poverty is a global phenomenon and is particularly prevalent among children and women. However, in most developing countries, it is less gender biased because, especially in rural areas, neither boys nor girls can attend school. For example, in Pakistan, less gender inequality is

<sup>50</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sl.tlf.cact.fm.zs>.

<sup>51</sup> World Economic Forum, "The Global Gender Gap Report 2018," Geneva, Switzerland.



observed in low-income families than in wealthy ones. Some data suggests that the participation of women in the agricultural sector of developing countries is at approximately the same level as men. The wearing of the *hijāb* (veil) is also not strictly observed in low-income families, especially in rural areas. Rehman explains the above phenomenon as follows: “Small landowners who achieve prosperity start forcing their women to observe purdah. Even a slight improvement in prosperity permits peasant families to hire paid labour as a replacement for the work done previously by their female members.”<sup>52</sup>

It is interesting to note that wearing the *hijāb* is considered a luxury at the low end of the income spectrum. However, the gradually improving economic condition of such low-income families allows more freedom and empowerment. As countries achieve higher growth targets, economic opportunities increase, allowing women to work outside the home. Despite this, there is a U-shaped supply issue in the female labour force. In more traditional societies, when family income rises, women are reluctant to work outside of the home. However, when the income of a family rises by a high proportion, the supply from the women of that family increases. One may conclude that the level of education and the economic well-being of families plays a significant role in women’s empowerment in developing countries. Therefore, policymakers should target improvements in the welfare of women as part of their plans for economic development.

In the West, there is a stereotypical school of thought that believes that religion does not allow Muslim women to participate in social, economic, and political spheres. This seems to be ill-informed. Azid and Ward-Batts assessed the current situation as follows:

While we are aware of significant restrictions on the freedoms of women in some ways in certain settings, we also highlight herein some very significant achievements of Muslim women, both historically and in more recent times. Muslim women can and do participate in the economic, social and political sphere. They are prime ministers, ministers, CEO, Doctors, Professors, entrepreneurs, other professionals, and so on, in addition to providing care for their families.<sup>53</sup>

Another misunderstanding that prevails in the West is that the segregation of the sexes in the Muslim world implies gender discrimination. In the context of a given culture, such societal

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<sup>52</sup> Mushtaqur Rahman, “Women in Rural Development in Pakistan,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 3, no. 3 (1987): 249, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(87\)90073-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(87)90073-8).

<sup>53</sup> Azid and Ward-Batts, “Dimensions of Women Empowerment,” 596-97.

preferences differ. For example, it has been observed that Muslim women are happy with sex segregation because they have their own spaces to work and socialize without concerning themselves with men. In a Muslim society, families give women a special honour, which increases their sense of value.

It should also be stated that culture is often intertwined with religion, but it is not representative of the faith. Even those regions where the religion is the same may differ from one another culturally. For example, among the selected countries, Malaysian culture is different from Pakistani and Iranian cultures though all these countries have Islamic constitutions.

It is argued that not all the instruments traditionally used for measuring welfare are perfect.<sup>54</sup> Generally, different proxy measures, such as health, education, consumption, etc., are used. However, what if a mother feels she is most useful rearing and raising her children or serving her family and not working out of the home? This should also be considered productive work even if it is not transacted in the market. Unfortunately, economists and anthropologists still do not seriously consider this effective work and put their efforts into collecting and valuing work that has no measured worth in the market. If one can collect more detailed data, perhaps the concept of women's empowerment in Muslim societies will move in another direction.<sup>55</sup> It is vital to have data about self-reported well-being, measured as happiness, life satisfaction, and other related concepts. In some countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, collecting family life data implies valuing family life data.<sup>56</sup>

It is better to analyse the status of women in the context of a mix of tangible and intangible variables instead of just considering traditional measures such as income and education. For example, one might expect that Muslim women benefit from Islamic family rules, which place all financial responsibilities on the male head of the household. Most Westerners argue that because of the low participation of Muslim women in the labour market, these underemployed resources are the cause of underdevelopment. This is a narrow view. Without considering the value of the services that women provide to society, one cannot

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<sup>54</sup> Jennifer Ward-Batts, "Out of the Wallet and into the Purse Using Micro Data to Test Income Pooling," *The Journal of Human Resources* 43, no. 2 (2008): 325-51.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> See "RAND Family Life Surveys," <https://www.rand.org/well-being/social-and-behavioral-policy/data/FLS.html>.

conclude that their socio-economic contribution would be significantly greater if they joined the formal workforce.

Neo-classical economics fails to address questions such as what value should be placed on the leisure time women spend with their families and the satisfaction and happiness they experience without consuming material goods. Azid and Ward-Batts explain why Muslim women have low participation in the labour market as follows:

Muslim women have, according to true Islamic law, greater control of their own individual wealth than many non-Muslim women, as well as having a rightful claim on the market income of their husbands to provide for the support of their household, including themselves and their children. They may be more empowered than the traditional measures of empowerment are capable of showing. In the standard economic model, an individual will choose to work less when his or her wealth or income from another source rises. This could explain much of the low participation of Muslim women in the labor market.<sup>57</sup>

In the current literature, access to a good education is considered to be a necessary condition for reducing the gender gap. However, it is not a sufficient condition. For instance, in Sri Lanka, the literacy rate is very high, but the gender gap persists. Therefore, it is not a matter of education. It also relates to the socio-economic-legal system of a country.

## Conclusion

According to Islamic teachings, Muslim women have approximately equal rights to men. Islam also teaches that women achieve more satisfaction when they serve their families and raise their children. In Islamic societies, mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters have considerable societal value and importance. Therefore, it is not justified if one measures women's empowerment only through traditional economic instruments. One should look beyond this narrow view and analyse the subject using a wider lens, i.e., by including social, psychological, and religious aspects of well-being. This study argues that women create human capital through the services they provide to their families and generate social, psychological, and moral capital that ultimately increases the productivity and well-being of the whole society. In essence, their contribution to Muslim family life empowers both women themselves and society.

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<sup>57</sup> Azid and Ward-Batts, "Dimensions of Women Empowerment," 601.

The gender gap and gender discrimination undoubtedly prevail in most countries, both rich and poor. Emotional and social human ties cannot be tangibly measured. Certain aspects of the human condition demand an understanding of a complex set of socio-economic and legal contexts. For example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is not entirely based on the financial aspects of human life. This underscores the main argument of the present study, that is, simply having access to the labour market does not determine the level of women's empowerment and welfare in society.

The present study suggests redefining how the concept of the empowerment of women is measured in the selected countries to include women's prestigious status in Muslim families. Under the current narrow umbrella of criteria used to define women's empowerment, one cannot conclude that women are more or less empowered in one culture or another. The cultural, social, economic, and legal environment plays an important role in determining women's empowerment. Hence, additional research is required to explore women's empowerment, particularly in Muslim countries.

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