EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Muslim migrant fertility in Europe: What does it tell us about Islam and fertility?[1]

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Abstract

Muslim migrant populations in Europe have historically exhibited higher fertility than non-Muslim populations, which has fueled misconceptions about Muslim demography and contributed to xenophobia. This paper challenges the simplistic notion that Islam or religiosity alone drives higher fertility among Muslims. Instead, it demonstrates that socio-economic status, cultural factors, and the country of origin play a more significant role in shaping fertility behavior. Using data from various sources, this study examines fertility trends and differentials among Muslim women across Europe. It also explores how these trends align with the fertility transition in Muslim-majority countries and investigates the influence of education, migration status, and religiosity on fertility behaviors. By providing a nuanced understanding of Muslim fertility in Europe, the research aims to dispel myths of consistently high fertility and offers insights into the demographic integration of Muslim migrant populations. These findings have important implications for both policy and demographic projections in Europe.

The research idea

Islam is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity, with about 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide. Muslim fertility globally, and those of Muslim migrants in Europe has always been higher than the fertility of women with other affiliations. This has contributed to a peculiar "*Islamic*" explanation of higher fertility among Muslim women, leading to misunderstandings about Muslim demography, and contributing to xenophobia against Muslims in Europe. One of the problems with this simplistic "religiosity" explanation is that it treats as monolithic a trait shared by close to two billion people worldwide, which has been in reality adapted to, and affected by diverse regional and socio-economic contexts. The diversity in the doctrine and the cultural context of Islam calls into question the recourse to Islam as an explanation for demographic trends. Addressing this groundbreaking question is at the heart of this paper.

Background and motivation

In the past half a century fertility among Muslim women has been higher than the fertility of other religious groups in all major world regions (Pew Research Centre, 2015). Various explanations including religion (Islam), religiosity, low level of socio-economic status, and earlier marriage among Muslims have been proposed for their higher fertility (Kirk, 1966, Morgan et al. 2002, Lucas and Meyer, 1994).

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However, there are diverse levels and patterns of fertility in the Muslim world, and fertility transition has been underway in most of the Muslim-majority countries since the 1980s (Weeks, 1988, Obermeyer, 1992, Karim, 1997 & 2004, Abbasi-Shavazi and Jones, 2005, 2018).

Past studies showed that Muslim populations in Europe have, on average, higher fertility rates and younger age structures than populations with other religious affiliations and, in particular, than religiously non-affiliated populations (Burner 2012, Pew Research Center 2015, Westoff and Frejka 2007, Stonawski et al. 2015, Blekasaune 2020). As a result of a relatively high share of Muslims among immigrant populations, their higher fertility and younger age structure, the number and the share of the Muslim population are expected to increase in Europe in the next decades (Pew Research Centre 2015 & 2017*,* Rostan and Rostan 2019). According to the Pew Research Center's estimations, Muslims will account for 8% of Europe's total population by 2030, up from 4.1% in 1990 and about 6% in 2010. Often this trend, in combination with rather negative attitudes towards Muslim minorities in many countries, leads to problematic perceptions of demographic trends among Muslim populations in Europe, including biased views of their presumably "very high" fertility, their population dynamics, size, and rates of population growth (Behrman and Erman, 2019: 617, Bell et al. 2021: 1, Gusciute et al. 2019: 1; Pew Research Centre, 2017).

In popular and policy-related debates, these misperceptions are further cementing existing prejudices against the Muslim minority and their presumably "failed" integration (Profanter and Maestri, 2021; Preljevic´ and Ljubovic, 2021). They are also fuelling unfounded claims and conspiracy-like theories, including the idea that Muslims of migrant origin will eventually become a majority in Europe, "replacing" the "native", predominantly Christian populations (Westoff and Frejka, 2007; Rostan and Rostan, 2019). Even some seemingly scientific research is based on simplistic predictions of this kind, based on unrealistic assumptions about Muslim minorities' current and future fertility, migration, and religious switching (or the absence of it) (e.g., Rostan and Rostan 2019: 283). As Islam (2012:283) noted, however, "despite vitriolic warnings that this so-called 'demographic time bomb' is going to turn Europe into a mythical 'Eurabia' in which Shariah rules supreme, there is little evidence to validate such claims". In contrast with these claims, more in-depth research on Muslim "demographics" in Europe shows that Muslim population is likely to continue growing in the next three decades, without expanding to the extent suggested in popular debates. For instance, the Pew Research Centre (2017) report, taking into account the impact of the refugee crisis around 2015-16 (Profanter and Maestri, 2021), projects that the Muslim population in Europe would expand to 11% of Europe's population in 2050 according to the medium migration scenario. This is well below the projected share of both Christian (65%) and unaffiliated (23%) populations (Pew Research Centre 2015).

A decisive factor behind these projections is the current and projected fertility rate among Muslim populations. Past research clearly illustrated the diversity of Muslim populations with respect to their fertility levels and trends, but also with respect to their broader family behaviours (Abbasi-Shavazi and Jones, 2005 & 2018, Westoff and Frejka 2007; Profanter and Maestri, 2021: 13-15). On the whole, Muslim women in Europe and migrant women from predominantly Muslim countries have higher, but not very high, fertility than non-Muslim women, with a huge variation by country of origin (Behrman and Erman 2019: 617), duration of stay in the country, socio-economic status, and level of religiosity (Stonawski et al., 2015, Goujon et al. 2018, Kulu et al. 2019)**.** The fertility of Muslims in the past has been researched especially from the perspective of their country of origin, with projections often assuming that it will stay higher and distinct from other populations in the future (Pew Research Centre 2017). These assumptions, however, are questionable in the light of rising education in Muslim countries (Abbasi-Shavazi and Torabi 2014; Abbasi-Shavazi and Jones 2018), and the continuing global fertility decline, which has progressed rapidly in many Muslim-majority countries including Bangladesh (Caldwell et al. 1999, Roy and Hossain, 2017, Bora et al., 2023), Indonesia (Hull 2009 & 2016), Iran (Abbasi et al, 2009, McDonald et al. 2015), Kosovo, Malaysia, Tunisia, Turkey (Ergocmen, 2012), and

United Arab Emirates (Jones and Karim 2005, Groth and Sousa-Poza, 2012, Basten, Sobotka and Zeman 2013, UN WPP 2022). Thus, there are gaps in our knowledge of demographic trends among Muslim populations that need to be addressed.

Main aims

This paper builds on past work and currently available data to provide a picture of fertility trends and diversity among Muslims in Europe. At the heart of the research is the argument that the seemingly "distinct" fertility among Muslims is in reality not different from other population groups once we take into account their socio-economic status and specific cultural and normative factors linked to their country of origin. In fact, high fertility and religiosity have been found among other religions. Previous studies have consistently shown that religious persons both intend and have more children than their non-religious peers (Sobotka and Adigüzel, 2003, Frejka and Westoff, 2008, Hayford and Morgan, 2008, Dilmaghani, 2019, Buber-Ennser and Berghammer, 2021). Moreover, the influence of the country of origin is likely to decline over time, as many Muslim-majority countries are experiencing the transition to a low fertility level (Abbasi-Shavazi and Jones 2005 & 2018). In other words, higher-educated Muslim women in Europe, especially those born on the continent or not originating from high-fertility countries, are likely to have similar fertility as higher-educated "native" and non-Muslim women (Stonawski et. al. 2015). Social change and secularization have also changed the level of religiosity and adherence to religious beliefs (Knippenberg, 2015), and in turn, affected fertility behaviour and ideals (Goujon & Bauer 2015: 2147-2148).

Research questions and aims

The following questions will be addressed in this paper.

a) Factors based on the review of past research

Q1 What are the key factors affecting fertility levels, trends, and differences among Muslim populations? In particular, what is the role of higher religiosity in fuelling higher fertility?

b) Trends

Q2 What are the trends of fertility among Muslim women in European countries? Is their fertility distinct from the majority population? Does it decline over time, in sync with broader fertility trends in their countries of residence?

c) Diversity

Q3: How is the fertility of Muslim women differentiated by their socio-economic status, migration status, country of origin, and religiosity? How do fertility trends of predominantly Muslim migrant women in Europe compare with fertility in their countries of origin?

d) Future

Q5: Taking together the findings related to the questions posed above, what can we say about the likely future trends in fertility among Muslim women in Europe? Do our findings challenge conventional expectations and past projections about future fertility and population trends among Muslim minorities in Europe?

Hypotheses and expectations

H1: Islam and the Muslim religion have no or only a minor influence on fertility behaviour once socio-economic status and country of origin are taken into account.

- H1a: The main influence of the Muslim religion, if any, will run via the higher levels of religiosity among some of the Muslim populations in Europe, which is linked with higher fertility rates.

H2: Most Muslim populations in Europe show a long-term trend towards lower and sub-replacement fertility rates

- H2b: Muslim women originating from selected high-fertility countries and regions, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Syria form a minority retaining high fertility levels

H3: Muslim women in Europe show a strong negative education gradient in fertility and fertility intentions, with university-educated women having a low level of both intended and realised fertility.

H4: Fertility of most populations of migrant women in Europe from predominantly Muslim countries has declined over time, in line with the fertility declines experienced in their country of origin

Data, measurement, and collaborations

Various sources and data will be used to meet the objectives of the study. A systematic review of the literature will be conducted to review the relevant publications on Muslim fertility in general, and those on Muslim fertility in Europe, in particular. In addition, available data from the UN agencies, Wittgenstein Center, Eurostat, and those published at the national level will be used to ascertain the levels, trends, and patterns of fertility of Muslims in Europe. Period and cohort measures of fertility will be calculated to examine fertility trends and variation among Muslim migrants in Europe. In order to test the competing hypotheses for migrant/Muslim fertility including duration of stay, attention will be focused on specific countries where individual data on migration fertility behaviour and intentions are available.

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