Muslim Women's Marriage, Pregnancy, Abortion and Spacing of Children: Evidence from the United States, Iran and Malaysia

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Abstract

Background: This study investigates the decisions on marriage, pregnancy, abortion and spacing of children among Muslim women (MW) residing in the United States, Iran and Malaysia to explore the occurrences as well as socio-demographic characteristics associated with the likelihood of making an independent decision regarding sexual and reproductive health rights.

Methods: A total of 1140 MW in Washington, D.C. (the United States), Tehran (Iran) and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) participated in this study, and the number of respondents were equally distributed across the three cities. To examine the occurrences of sexual and reproductive rights violation, we report the descriptive statistics from the responses given by MW in these cities.

Results: On the decision to solemnize marriage, 84.5 per cent of MW in Malaysia reported that the marriage decision is made jointly with their husbands, but this figure stands at only 30 per cent in Iran
and 47.9 per cent in the United States. More than 80 per cent and 72 per cent of MW in Malaysia and Iran, respectively, make decisions on pregnancy, abortion and spacing of children jointly with their husbands.

**Conclusions:** Policymakers should promote jointly made (made by wife and husband together) decisions among Muslims, which accords with Islamic teachings and is considered as good practice among Muslims.

**Keyword**
Abortion, marriage, Muslim women, sexual and reproductive rights, spacing of children, pregnancy

**Introduction**

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948) stipulates that all individuals have the right to make decisions for themselves and to have their dignity respected regardless of their race, religion, gender or any other social or demographic characteristics (Lottes, 2013; Serour, 2013). Among basic human rights is the right to make decisions on sexual and reproductive issues such as marriage, pregnancy, abortion and spacing of children. According to the World Health Organization, ‘sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence’. According to Lottes (2013), for sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.

According to Islamic teachings, a woman has the right to choose her spouse and to practice family planning (Hessini, 2007; Serour, 2008, 2013). However, decisions on family planning should be made jointly by husband and wife, and both must agree on such decisions. In addition, family planning decisions should adhere to Islamic jurisprudence, which imposes certain conditions when practicing family planning (Hasna, 2003; Manning & Zuckerman, 2004; Schenker & Rabenou, 1993).

Although Islam grants women the right to marriage and family planning, some studies claim that Muslim women (MW) are deprived of these rights. This is because traditions and cultures have influenced society’s understanding of Islamic teachings regarding women’s affairs. Some studies claim cases of women in some Muslim countries being forced into marriage by their families, and later forced to bear children by the husbands or in-laws (De Jong et al., 2005; Ilkcaran, 1998). Although the results of these studies are questionable as they depend on mere estimates and subjective analysis, it is worth noting that research on sexuality may not yield precise data reflecting the status quo as respondents may not divulge accurate information about their sexual-related matters. This may be due to the norm of treating the subject as secretive in nature and deemed as taboo.

The objective of this study is to investigate the decisions on marriage, pregnancy, abortion and spacing of children among MW residing in the United States, Iran and Malaysia. This study sought to answer questions on who the decision maker(s) is/are in MW’s marriage, pregnancy, abortion and spacing of children. The study brings evidence from three countries: the United States, Iran and Malaysia. The selection of these three countries allows us to take samples from three different locations; the West, Middle East and Far East. The three countries also represent three different demographic settings of Muslim communities. In other words, according to CIA’s (2010) *The World Factbook*, while almost all