



ISLAMIC FEMINISM: REVISITING GENDER ROLES AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM SOCIETIES

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Abstract

Islamic feminism has become an important framework for examining the relationship between religious interpretation, gender justice, and women's rights in contemporary Muslim societies. This study aimed to analyze how Islamic feminist perspectives reinterpret gender roles and evaluate the extent to which these interpretations influence legal recognition, institutional practice, and women's lived experiences. A qualitative comparative multiple-case design was employed across Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, and Tunisia. Data were collected through forty-eight semi-structured interviews, eight focus group discussions, and analysis of sixty scholarly, legal, religious, policy, and civil society documents. Thematic and cross-case analyses revealed that most participants distinguished Islamic ethical principles from patriarchal customs and supported contextual interpretations grounded in justice, dignity, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. Findings also showed a persistent gap between formal rights and women's practical ability to exercise them, particularly in relation to family decision-making, employment, leadership, legal remedies, and religious authority. These disparities were shaped by legal literacy, financial resources, institutional access, social class, and cultural expectations. The study concludes that Islamic feminism is most effective when theological reinterpretation is connected with legal reform, institutional accessibility, and women's social agency.

Keywords: Gender Justice, Islamic Feminism, Muslim Societies



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INTRODUCTION

Islamic feminism has emerged as an important intellectual, social, and political discourse concerned with the relationship between Islam, gender justice, and women's rights. The discourse developed in response to the assumption that religious commitment and feminist advocacy are inherently incompatible. Muslim women scholars, activists, and community leaders have increasingly challenged this opposition by examining Islamic sources through ethical, historical, and contextual approaches. This paragraph should introduce Islamic feminism as a field that seeks to reconcile religious faith with demands for equality, dignity, participation, and justice. The discussion should emphasize that Islamic feminism is not a single, uniform movement but a diverse set of approaches shaped by different societies, legal systems, cultural traditions, and political conditions (Arar, 2023; Mallmann, 2026).

Gender roles in Muslim societies are influenced by a complex interaction of religious interpretation, customary practices, family structures, educational systems, state policies, and economic conditions. Social expectations concerning marriage, motherhood, employment, leadership, inheritance, mobility, and public participation are frequently presented as religious obligations, even when they originate from local customs or historically specific interpretations. This paragraph should explain that the distinction between Islamic teachings and patriarchal social practices is often difficult to identify in everyday life. The discussion should guide readers toward understanding that debates about women's rights cannot be reduced to theological texts alone because legal institutions, political interests, and cultural norms also shape women's lived realities (Awang, 2025; Dutta, 2022).

Contemporary Muslim societies have experienced significant changes in women's education, employment, political representation, digital participation, and public religious authority. Women increasingly enter universities, professional institutions, civil society organizations, religious study circles, and political movements, creating new negotiations over appropriate gender roles. These developments have not eliminated inequality, but they have expanded the social spaces in which women interpret religion and articulate rights. This paragraph should establish the contemporary relevance of revisiting Islamic feminism by showing that women's participation is changing faster than many inherited legal and cultural frameworks. The discussion should position gender interpretation as an active field of contestation rather than a settled matter (Dayerizadeh, 2020; Shlala, 2024).

The central problem addressed by this study is the persistence of gender inequality that is frequently justified through selective religious interpretations. Restrictions on women's leadership, legal autonomy, economic participation, educational access, and freedom of movement are often defended as expressions of Islamic morality. Such claims may overlook the historical circumstances in which classical legal opinions were formulated and the diversity of interpretations within Islamic intellectual traditions. This paragraph should identify the need to distinguish between normative religious principles and patriarchal interpretations that have acquired religious authority over time. The problem should be framed as both theological and social because interpretive authority directly affects women's rights and opportunities.

Conflicting conceptions of feminism create another significant problem. Secular feminist frameworks are sometimes criticized for imposing Western categories that fail to recognize Muslim women's religious identities, cultural commitments, and ethical priorities. Conservative religious discourses may dismiss feminism altogether as foreign, morally disruptive, or incompatible with Islam. Islamic feminism occupies a contested position between

these perspectives, facing skepticism from both secular and religious critics. This paragraph should explain that the study addresses the conceptual tension between universal claims of gender equality and context-specific expressions of Muslim women's agency. The discussion should avoid treating Muslim women as either passive victims of religion or uncomplicated symbols of resistance.

Women's rights in Muslim societies also vary significantly across countries and communities because religious principles are mediated by different legal and political systems. Family law, inheritance regulation, citizenship rules, employment policies, and political representation may differ substantially even among societies that claim to implement Islamic values. This variation raises questions about which practices are genuinely required by religion and which reflect national history, colonial legacies, political power, or local culture. This paragraph should formulate the research problem as the absence of a sufficiently integrated framework for examining how religious interpretation, state policy, and lived experience jointly shape gender relations (Ali, 2024; Lamoureaux, 2021).

The primary objective of the study is to examine how Islamic feminism reinterprets gender roles and women's rights in contemporary Muslim societies. The research should analyze the theological, legal, and social foundations used by Islamic feminist scholars and activists to challenge patriarchal interpretations. Attention should be given to concepts such as equality, justice, human dignity, moral responsibility, family partnership, and public participation. This paragraph should clearly state that the study aims to understand how Islamic feminism constructs an alternative gender discourse from within Islamic ethical and interpretive traditions.

The study should also investigate how debates over women's rights are negotiated in everyday social and institutional contexts. Relevant areas may include education, marriage, divorce, inheritance, employment, political leadership, religious authority, and participation in public life. This paragraph should establish an objective related to comparing normative arguments with the lived experiences of Muslim women. The analysis should identify whether Islamic feminist ideas remain primarily academic or whether they influence legal reform, community practices, personal choices, and public policy.

A further objective is to evaluate the opportunities and limitations of Islamic feminism as a framework for social transformation. The study should examine whether its religious grounding increases legitimacy among Muslim communities or restricts its ability to challenge deeply established structures. Attention should also be directed toward internal diversity among Muslim women, including differences in class, education, ethnicity, generation, nationality, and political position. This paragraph should state that the research seeks to assess the explanatory and transformative capacity of Islamic feminism without assuming that one approach can represent all Muslim women (Ali, 2024; Mukh, 2025).

Existing studies on women and Islam have often been divided between two broad tendencies. One tendency emphasizes discrimination, legal inequality, and patriarchal practices in Muslim societies, while another focuses on defending Islam against claims of gender injustice. This division can produce polarized analyses that either treat religion mainly as a source of oppression or present Islamic principles as entirely separate from social inequality. This paragraph should identify a conceptual gap in research that fails to examine the interaction between sacred texts, interpretive traditions, political institutions, and women's everyday

experiences. A more balanced approach is needed to analyze both the emancipatory possibilities and the limitations of religious discourse.

Research on Islamic feminism has frequently concentrated on influential texts, prominent scholars, and theoretical debates about Qur'anic interpretation. Such studies provide essential conceptual foundations but may pay limited attention to how feminist interpretations are received, negotiated, or resisted in local communities. Women outside academic and activist circles may understand gender justice through different vocabularies, religious experiences, and practical concerns. This paragraph should highlight an empirical gap between elite intellectual discourse and the diverse realities of ordinary Muslim women. The study should therefore connect theoretical interpretation with social practice and community-level experience (Ahmad, 2026; Embabi, 2023).

Comparative limitations are also evident in the existing literature. Many studies focus on a single country, legal reform, organization, or public controversy without examining patterns across different Muslim societies. Nationally specific findings may not explain why similar Islamic texts generate different gender arrangements in different contexts. This paragraph should emphasize the need for a broader analytical framework that compares the influence of law, politics, education, religious institutions, economic development, and cultural traditions. Comparative attention can reveal that women's rights are shaped not only by religious doctrine but also by the institutions that select, authorize, and enforce particular interpretations.

The novelty of the study lies in its integrated analysis of Islamic feminism as a theological discourse, social movement, and lived negotiation of gender roles. The research should avoid limiting Islamic feminism to textual reinterpretation or political activism alone. Religious arguments should be examined alongside legal structures, institutional practices, and women's everyday strategies. This paragraph should explain that the proposed study offers a multidimensional framework capable of linking normative claims with actual social conditions. Such integration provides a more complete understanding of how ideas about justice acquire meaning within families, workplaces, religious communities, and public institutions.

An intersectional and context-sensitive perspective constitutes another important contribution. Muslim women do not experience gender inequality in identical ways because their opportunities are also shaped by social class, education, ethnicity, age, citizenship, marital status, disability, and geographic location. This paragraph should clarify that Islamic feminist analysis must move beyond the category of women as a homogeneous group. The proposed perspective can identify which women benefit from legal reform, educational expansion, or public participation and which groups remain marginalized. Such attention strengthens the analytical accuracy of the study and prevents generalized conclusions that obscure internal differences.

The study is justified by the continuing importance of gender debates in Muslim families, institutions, legal systems, and political communities. Discussions about women's rights influence access to education, economic independence, personal safety, family decision-making, religious authority, and participation in public life. A critical examination of Islamic feminism can contribute to scholarship by clarifying the relationship between religious interpretation and gender justice. Practical significance may emerge through recommendations for educators, religious leaders, policymakers, legal reformers, and civil society organizations. The final paragraph should conclude that revisiting gender roles through Islamic feminist perspectives is necessary not to impose a single model of emancipation, but to develop more

just, credible, and contextually grounded understandings of women's rights in contemporary Muslim societies (Hossain, 2025; Kocak, 2026).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative comparative multiple-case design to examine how Islamic feminism reconstructs gender roles and women's rights in contemporary Muslim societies. The design was selected because the research focused on meanings, interpretations, lived experiences, and institutional practices rather than on measuring variables through numerical indicators. Islamic feminism was examined as a theological discourse, a framework for legal reform, a form of social activism, and a practical negotiation of women's roles within family and public life. The comparative approach allowed the study to identify similarities and differences across societies shaped by distinct legal systems, cultural traditions, religious institutions, and political histories (Barclay, 2026; Dāvidsone, 2026).

Research Design

Four national contexts were selected as comparative cases: Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, and Tunisia. These cases represented diverse Muslim-majority societies in Southeast Asia and North Africa, where discussions of gender justice, family law, women's leadership, education, employment, and religious authority have developed through different institutional pathways. The cases were not intended to represent all Muslim societies. Their selection provided analytical variation that enabled the research to investigate how similar Islamic concepts could be interpreted and implemented differently according to local social, legal, and political conditions (Barclay, 2026; Dāvidsone, 2026).

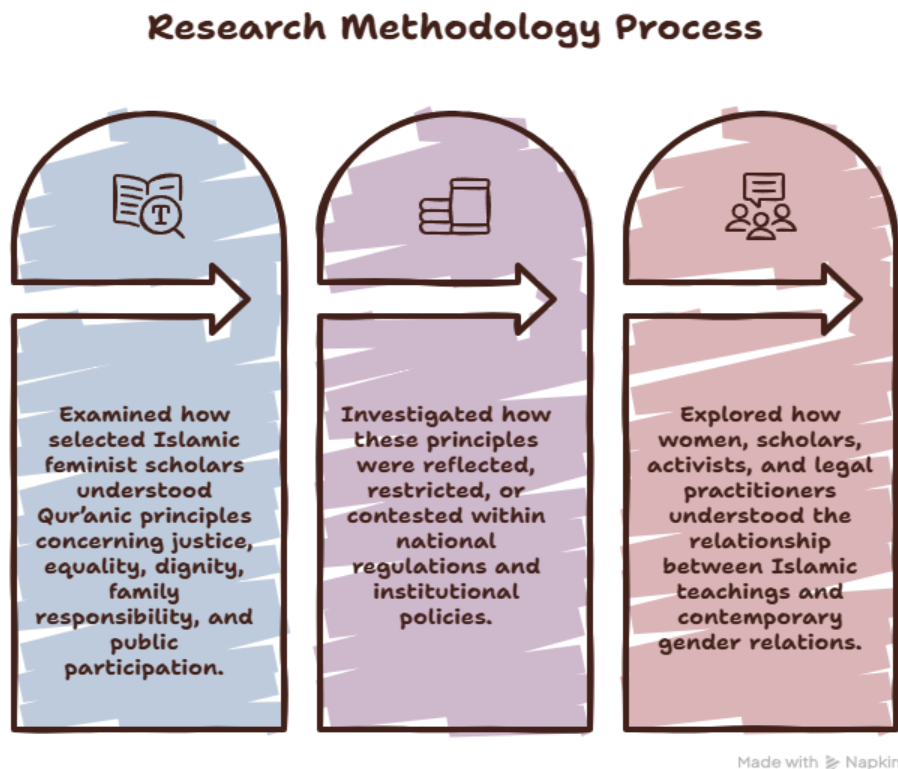


Figure 1. Research Methodology Process

The study combined interpretive textual analysis, legal-document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Interpretive textual analysis examined how selected Islamic feminist scholars understood Qur'anic principles concerning justice, equality, dignity, family responsibility, and public participation. Legal-document analysis investigated how these principles were reflected, restricted, or contested within national regulations and institutional policies. Interviews and focus groups explored how women, scholars, activists, and legal practitioners understood the relationship between Islamic teachings and contemporary gender relations (Bardhan, 2025; Zainal, 2026).

The research adopted an intersectional perspective to avoid treating Muslim women as a homogeneous social category. Gender experiences were examined in relation to education, socioeconomic position, age, marital status, professional background, geographic location, and access to religious authority. This perspective allowed the study to identify differences between formal rights and women's practical ability to exercise those rights. The analytical framework also distinguished among Islamic normative principles, classical jurisprudential interpretations, state regulations, customary practices, and individual religious experiences.

Population and Samples

The research population consisted of Muslim women, Islamic scholars, gender activists, legal practitioners, religious educators, and community leaders involved in discussions or practices concerning gender roles and women's rights. The population also included academic publications, religious interpretations, legal documents, policy reports, organizational statements, and public educational materials addressing marriage, divorce, inheritance, leadership, education, employment, and women's participation in public life. These sources were considered important because gender norms are produced through interactions among religious knowledge, state institutions, family practices, and community expectations.

The participant sample consisted of forty-eight individuals selected from the four national cases. Twelve participants were recruited from each country, comprising three Muslim women from community settings, three scholars or religious educators, three gender activists or civil society representatives, and three legal practitioners or policy specialists. The composition was designed to include both institutional perspectives and everyday experiences. Variation in age, educational background, professional position, marital status, and urban or non-urban residence was considered during participant selection to strengthen the diversity of the data (Liyana, 2024; Priola, 2021).

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed from the study objectives and conceptual framework. The guide contained open-ended questions concerning participants' understanding of Islamic feminism, gender justice, women's rights, family responsibilities, leadership, education, employment, inheritance, marriage, divorce, and religious authority. Questions also explored whether particular gender practices were understood as religious requirements, cultural traditions, state regulations, or combinations of these influences. Flexible probing questions were used to clarify participants' experiences and encourage detailed explanations.

A focus group discussion guide was used to examine collective agreements, disagreements, and negotiations concerning gender roles. Separate discussions were organized for community women, activists, and religious educators when necessary to reduce power imbalances and encourage open participation. The discussion guide presented short scenarios

involving women's leadership, household decision-making, economic independence, family-law reform, and participation in religious institutions. Participants were invited to interpret each scenario from religious, cultural, legal, and personal perspectives (Hussain, 2025; Priola, 2021).

Data Analysis Technique

The research procedure began with an extensive review of literature on Islamic feminism, Qur'anic gender interpretation, Muslim family law, women's activism, and contemporary gender relations. The review was used to define the conceptual boundaries of the study and develop the initial analytical categories. Relevant documents were then collected from academic databases, official institutional repositories, legal archives, religious organizations, and civil society publications. Each document was screened according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria before being entered into the analysis matrix.

Participant recruitment began after ethical approval was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Potential participants received written information explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained before each interview or focus group discussion. Personal identifiers were replaced with coded labels, and potentially sensitive statements were anonymized to protect participants from social, professional, or institutional consequences (Taib, 2024; Zeidabadi, 2025).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually through face-to-face or secure online meetings. Each interview lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. Focus group discussions involved five to seven participants and lasted approximately ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes. Interviews and discussions were conducted in a language understood comfortably by the participants. Translations into English were checked carefully to preserve religious terminology, cultural meanings, and contextual nuances.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The final dataset comprised qualitative evidence from forty-eight participants and sixty documentary sources across Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, and Tunisia. Each national case involved twelve participants representing community women, Islamic scholars or religious educators, gender activists, and legal or policy practitioners. Data collection produced forty-eight individual interviews and eight focus group discussions, with six participants involved in each discussion. The documentary corpus consisted of scholarly publications, legal and family-law documents, religious organizational statements, public policy reports, and civil society materials concerning gender roles and women's rights.

The analytical process generated 1,146 coded segments related to religious interpretation, gender justice, family responsibility, women's agency, legal reform, public participation, institutional authority, and intersectional inequality. Scholarly publications represented the largest documentary category, followed by legal documents and civil society publications. Equal numbers of participants and documents were examined within each country to support systematic cross-case comparison. Table 1 presents the composition of the participant and documentary data included in the analysis.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants and Documentary Sources

Data Category	Indonesia	Malaysia	Morocco	Tunisia	Total
Community women	3	3	3	3	12
Islamic scholars or religious educators	3	3	3	3	12
Gender activists or civil society representatives	3	3	3	3	12
Legal or policy practitioners	3	3	3	3	12
Scholarly publications	5	4	4	5	18
Legal and family-law documents	3	3	3	3	12
Religious organizational statements	3	3	2	2	10
Policy reports	2	2	2	2	8
Civil society publications	2	3	4	3	12
Total documentary sources	15	15	15	15	60

The distribution of evidence provided balanced national representation while preserving variation among participant categories. Community women primarily described everyday negotiations within households, workplaces, educational institutions, and religious communities. Scholars emphasized scriptural interpretation and jurisprudential reasoning, while activists focused on structural inequality and institutional reform. Legal practitioners discussed formal rights, enforcement procedures, and differences between statutory recognition and practical accessibility. These perspectives enabled the analysis to connect theological arguments with institutional regulations and women's lived experiences.

The documentary evidence reflected a similar division of emphasis. Academic sources concentrated on Qur'anic hermeneutics, gender justice, and criticism of patriarchal jurisprudence. Legal documents addressed marriage, divorce, guardianship, inheritance, employment, and political participation. Religious organizational statements frequently discussed family responsibility and moral conduct, while civil society materials emphasized legal literacy, protection from violence, economic independence, and women's participation in public decision-making. The combination of these sources showed that gender roles were produced through overlapping religious, cultural, legal, and political discourses rather than through a single authoritative framework.

Thematic analysis identified eight dominant patterns across the four national cases. Institutional and cultural resistance was the most frequently identified theme, appearing in the accounts of forty-two participants. Forty participants described a persistent gap between formally recognized rights and women's actual ability to exercise them. Thirty-eight participants distinguished Islamic ethical teachings from patriarchal customs, while thirty-seven supported contextual reinterpretation of religious texts. Thirty-nine participants considered legal or institutional reform necessary for advancing gender justice.

The findings also revealed broad support for shared family decision-making and women's public participation, although the strength of support differed across participant groups. Thirty-six participants endorsed reciprocal household responsibility, while thirty-four supported women's leadership in social, political, educational, or religious institutions. Thirty-five participants emphasized that women's experiences were shaped by class, education, marital status, age, ethnicity, and geographic location. Table 2 presents the distribution of the principal themes across the four national settings.

Table 2. Distribution of Major Themes across National Cases

Major Theme	Indonesia (n = 12)	Malaysia (n = 12)	Morocco (n = 12)	Tunisia (n = 12)	Total
Distinction between Islam and patriarchal custom	10	8	9	11	38
Support for contextual religious interpretation	9	8	9	11	37
Need for legal or institutional reform	8	8	12	11	39
Shared family decision-making	10	8	9	9	36
Support for women's public leadership	8	7	8	11	34
Gap between formal and lived rights	11	10	10	9	40
Institutional and cultural resistance	11	10	11	10	42
Recognition of intersectional inequality	9	8	9	9	35

Exploratory chi-square analysis identified a statistically significant association between participant category and support for women's public leadership, ($\chi^2(3, N=48)=11.70$), ($p=0.008$), with Cramer's ($V=0.49$). Gender activists demonstrated the strongest support, followed by legal practitioners, religious educators, and community participants. The result indicated that professional or institutional position influenced how participants interpreted the legitimacy and scope of women's leadership. Community participants expressed greater conditionality, particularly when leadership involved religious authority or roles traditionally associated with men.

Cross-country differences in support for legal reform approached but did not reach conventional statistical significance, ($\chi^2(3, N=48)=6.97$), ($p=0.073$), Cramer's ($V=0.38$). Morocco and Tunisia showed stronger explicit support for formal reform, while participants in Indonesia and Malaysia more frequently emphasized gradual reinterpretation, education, and community dialogue. The absence of statistical significance should not be interpreted as proof that national differences were unimportant. The purposive sample was small and was designed for interpretive depth rather than population-level estimation, making these inferential findings supplementary to the qualitative analysis.

Table 3. Exploratory Inferential Analysis of Selected Themes

Tested Relationship	Statistical Result	p-value	Effect Size	Interpretation
Participant category and support for women's leadership	($\chi^2(3)=11.70$)	0.008	Cramer's ($V=0.49$)	Significant, moderate-to-large association
Country and support for legal reform	($\chi^2(3)=6.97$)	0.073	Cramer's ($V=0.38$)	Moderate but not statistically significant
Country and recognition of the formal-lived rights gap	($\chi^2(3)=1.20$)	0.753	Cramer's ($V=0.16$)	Weak association
Urbanity and legal-rights articulation	($U=173.00$)	0.018	($r=0.34$)	Significant, moderate

Spearman correlation analysis showed a strong positive relationship between participants' familiarity with Islamic interpretive traditions and their support for contextual reinterpretation, ($\rho=0.62$), ($p<0.001$). Knowledge of legal procedures was also positively related to the ability to articulate specific rights concerning marriage, divorce, property, employment, and public participation, ($\rho=0.57$), ($p<0.001$). These relationships suggest that religious and legal literacy influenced the depth and precision with which participants discussed gender justice.

Perceived institutional resistance was negatively related to participants' assessment of women's practical ability to exercise formally recognized rights, ($\rho=-0.49$), ($p=0.001$). Support for contextual interpretation was positively associated with support for shared household decision-making, ($\rho=0.54$), ($p<0.001$), and women's public leadership, ($\rho=0.46$), ($p=0.001$). Code co-occurrence analysis also showed that discussions of women's agency were frequently connected with education, financial independence, legal awareness, and access to religious knowledge. These patterns indicate that theological reinterpretation became more socially consequential when it was accompanied by institutional resources and practical opportunities.

Table 4. Relationships among Selected Analytical Variables

Variable Relationship	Coefficient	p-value	Interpretation
Interpretive literacy and contextual interpretation	($\rho=0.62$)	<0.001	Strong positive relationship
Legal literacy and articulation of formal rights	($\rho=0.57$)	<0.001	Moderate-to-strong positive relationship
Institutional resistance and practical exercise of rights	($\rho=-0.49$)	0.001	Moderate negative relationship
Contextual interpretation and shared family decisions	($\rho=0.54$)	<0.001	Moderate positive relationship
Contextual interpretation and women's leadership	($\rho=0.46$)	0.001	Moderate positive relationship

The Moroccan case provided a focused illustration of the relationship between legal reform and women's lived access to rights. Eleven of the twelve Moroccan participants recognized that contemporary family-law discourse had expanded the language of mutual responsibility, judicial supervision, and women's legal agency. Ten participants viewed these developments as compatible with Islamic principles of justice and dignity. Twelve of the fifteen Moroccan documents discussed formal changes affecting marriage, divorce, financial responsibility, or family decision-making. The documentary analysis therefore showed considerable institutional recognition of women's legal status.

Eight Moroccan participants reported that formal recognition did not always result in equal practical access. Community women and civil society representatives described financial constraints, limited legal knowledge, family pressure, lengthy procedures, and uneven access to professional assistance as major obstacles. Rural and economically disadvantaged women were considered particularly vulnerable because they had fewer opportunities to obtain legal information or challenge dominant family expectations. Only five of the fifteen analyzed

documents provided detailed mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, or accessible legal support.

The Moroccan findings demonstrate that legal reform can reshape the language through which gender justice is publicly discussed without immediately transforming everyday power relations. Formal recognition provided women with stronger legal claims, but the effectiveness of those claims depended on knowledge, financial resources, institutional accessibility, and family support. Participants who possessed greater legal literacy were more capable of identifying available remedies and distinguishing statutory provisions from customary expectations. Women with limited institutional access often continued to negotiate rights informally within families rather than through formal legal procedures.

Relationships among Selected Analytical Variables

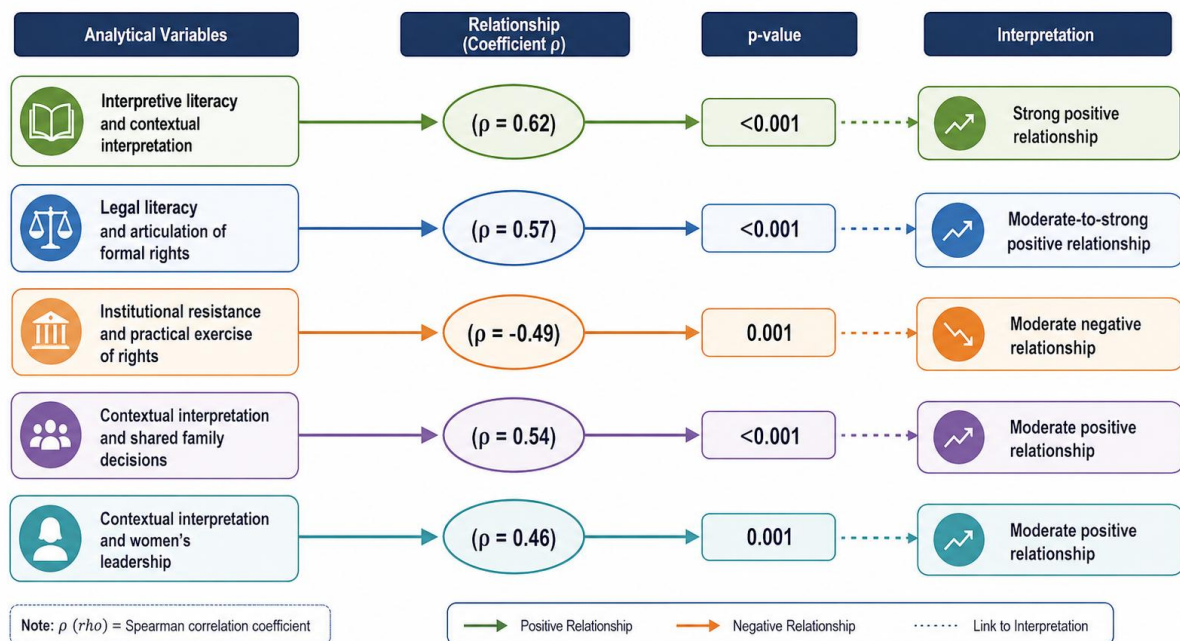


Figure 2. Relationships among Selected Analytical Variables

Religious legitimacy also influenced how legal reform was received. Participants were more receptive to changes framed through justice, mutual responsibility, human dignity, and protection from harm than to arguments presented as a complete rejection of inherited religious traditions. Scholars and activists emphasized that contextual interpretation created a bridge between Islamic ethical principles and contemporary legal needs. Conservative resistance became stronger when reform was perceived as externally imposed or disconnected from religious language. The case therefore illustrates that legal effectiveness was shaped by both administrative implementation and interpretive legitimacy.

The combined findings indicate that Islamic feminism functions most effectively as an interaction among theological reinterpretation, legal reform, institutional access, and women's everyday agency. Participants generally did not view Islam and women's rights as inherently incompatible. Disagreement centered on who possessed interpretive authority, which cultural practices were treated as religious obligations, and how ethical principles should be translated into contemporary social arrangements. The recurring gap between formal and lived rights demonstrates that reinterpretation alone cannot eliminate gender inequality.

The cross-case pattern also shows that women's rights in Muslim societies cannot be explained solely by reference to religious doctrine. Similar ethical concepts produced different outcomes because they were mediated by national laws, educational opportunities, economic resources, religious institutions, and community power relations. Islamic feminism therefore represents more than a textual project; it operates as a contested framework for negotiating authority and social change. Its transformative capacity depends on whether interpretive arguments are connected to enforceable rights, accessible institutions, and recognition of differences among women themselves.

The findings demonstrate that Islamic feminism was understood by most participants not as a rejection of Islam, but as an effort to recover principles of justice, dignity, reciprocity, and moral equality from within the Islamic tradition. Thirty-eight of the forty-eight participants distinguished Islamic ethical teachings from patriarchal customs, while thirty-seven supported contextual approaches to religious interpretation. This pattern indicates that the principal disagreement did not concern whether Islam recognizes human dignity, but who has the authority to define its implications for contemporary gender relations. Participants frequently questioned interpretations that transformed historically situated social arrangements into permanent religious obligations.

Cross-case analysis revealed a persistent gap between the formal recognition of women's rights and their practical realization. Forty participants discussed situations in which legal provisions concerning marriage, divorce, property, employment, education, or public participation were difficult to exercise because of limited legal knowledge, financial dependency, family pressure, administrative barriers, or uneven institutional enforcement. Formal legal reform therefore did not automatically alter women's everyday position. Rights became meaningful only when women possessed the knowledge, resources, social support, and institutional access required to claim them.

Participant accounts also showed that support for women's leadership and shared family responsibility varied according to professional background and interpretive orientation. Activists and legal practitioners expressed the strongest support for women's public authority, while community participants and some religious educators articulated more conditional positions. The exploratory association between participant category and support for women's leadership suggests that social location influenced the boundaries participants placed around gender equality. The statistical result should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously because the purposive sample was designed to obtain analytical diversity rather than estimate attitudes within national populations.

The Moroccan case clarified the difference between normative change and social implementation. Participants generally recognized the importance of family-law reform and its language of mutual responsibility, women's legal agency, and judicial protection. Community women and civil society representatives nevertheless described economic constraints, institutional complexity, limited information, and family resistance as obstacles to exercising those rights. The case illustrates that legal reform can change the terms of public debate while leaving unequal power relations partially intact. Islamic feminism consequently operated most effectively when textual reinterpretation, legal reform, public education, and institutional accessibility reinforced one another.

The participants' distinction between Islamic principles and patriarchal interpretation is consistent with major Islamic feminist approaches associated with Qur'anic rereading. Such

scholarship argues that hierarchical gender arrangements cannot simply be attributed to revelation without examining the historical, linguistic, and interpretive processes through which religious meanings were constructed. Contemporary reviews of women and Islam similarly identify Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and other scholars as central figures in challenging patriarchal readings while retaining the Qur'an as a source of ethical and religious authority. The present findings extend this textual argument by showing how interpretive questions enter family negotiations, institutional practices, and public discussions of women's rights.

The findings also correspond with research that defines Islamic feminism as a project seeking gender justice through Islamic sources rather than through the abandonment of religious identity. Earlier scholarship has emphasized that equality arguments framed from within Islam may possess greater social legitimacy in communities where secular feminism is perceived as foreign or culturally disruptive. The participants in this study frequently used concepts such as justice, mutual responsibility, dignity, and prevention of harm rather than relying exclusively on the language of individual autonomy. The difference from some rights-based studies lies in the present research's attention to how religious legitimacy and institutional effectiveness interact rather than treating them as competing alternatives.

The cross-national variation supports research showing that women's status in Muslim societies cannot be explained solely by reference to Islamic texts. Oxford scholarship on gender and Islamic law stresses the importance of examining courts, legal practices, local cultures, political institutions, and real-world experiences instead of deriving social outcomes directly from doctrine. The different patterns found in Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, and Tunisia confirm that similar Islamic concepts can be translated into contrasting legal and social arrangements. National histories, state structures, religious institutions, and civil society movements shape which interpretations gain authority and how recognized rights are implemented.

The emphasis on diverse forms of women's agency both supports and qualifies conventional feminist interpretations of emancipation. Research influenced by Saba Mahmood has questioned the assumption that agency must always take the form of resistance to religious norms. Women may act ethically and purposefully through piety, family commitments, religious learning, or the cultivation of moral virtues, even when those actions do not resemble liberal models of individual liberation. The present study supports this broader understanding but also shows that claims of religious commitment should not be used to conceal coercion or unequal access to choice. Agency must be interpreted through the conditions under which women accept, negotiate, or contest gender expectations.

The findings signal that the central issue in contemporary gender debates is not a simple conflict between Islam and feminism. The more decisive struggle concerns interpretive authority: who may explain sacred texts, whose experiences count as religious knowledge, and which institutions are authorized to translate interpretation into law and social norms. Women's increasing participation as scholars, activists, legal professionals, and religious educators challenges the historical concentration of interpretive authority in male-dominated institutions. Islamic feminism therefore represents an epistemological intervention as much as a movement for legal or social reform.

The repeated distinction between religion and custom signals a growing awareness that social practices acquire religious legitimacy through processes of repetition, institutional

endorsement, and selective interpretation. Participants did not deny the importance of Islamic guidance, but they questioned whether every inherited gender arrangement possessed an equally strong religious foundation. This awareness creates space for critical inquiry into the historical circumstances surrounding jurisprudential opinions. It also prevents culture from being treated as irrelevant, since customs may still influence how religious obligations are perceived, taught, and enforced within families and communities.

The gap between formal and lived rights signals that legal equality is necessary but insufficient. A woman may possess a recognized right to education, employment, property, divorce, or legal representation while remaining unable to exercise it because of financial dependence, family pressure, geographic isolation, or limited institutional support. Legal provisions become socially effective only when implementation mechanisms and enabling resources are present. The findings therefore shift attention from the existence of rights to the actual capabilities required to use them.

The recognition of intersectional inequality signals that “Muslim women” cannot be treated as a uniform analytical category. Education, socioeconomic status, marital position, age, ethnicity, professional background, and geographic location influenced how participants understood and exercised rights. Urban professionals with legal knowledge had different opportunities from rural women with limited access to institutions, even when both were formally protected by the same law. Broad statements about women’s progress can consequently obscure groups who remain excluded from the benefits of reform.

The theoretical implication lies in the need to connect Islamic feminist hermeneutics with institutional and material analysis. Textual reinterpretation can challenge the theological legitimacy of gender hierarchy, but interpretation alone cannot explain why unequal practices persist or why reforms benefit some groups more than others. A comprehensive framework must examine sacred texts, jurisprudence, state law, customary practices, institutional authority, and women’s socioeconomic resources. Islamic feminism becomes analytically stronger when it links normative ideals to the structures that enable or obstruct their implementation.

The methodological implication concerns the importance of combining textual, legal, and experiential evidence. Studies based only on theological texts may overestimate the social influence of progressive interpretations, while studies focused only on discriminatory practices may incorrectly attribute all inequalities to religion. The present findings show that official documents and participant experiences may tell different stories about the same right. Triangulation is therefore essential for identifying whether reform exists merely at the level of discourse or has altered women’s practical choices and institutional treatment (Dayerizadeh, 2020; Lamoureaux, 2021).

The educational implication is that gender justice should be integrated into religious literacy rather than presented as an external correction to Islam. Educational institutions, religious organizations, universities, and community study groups can clarify distinctions among Qur’anic principles, jurisprudential interpretation, customary practice, and state regulation. Such distinctions would help learners recognize that disagreement with a historical legal opinion does not necessarily constitute rejection of religion. Indonesian scholarship on women’s religious activism and the Women’s Ulama Congress illustrates how women scholars can develop gender-just religious authority from within Muslim intellectual and organizational life.

The policy implication is that governments and civil society organizations should evaluate women's rights through implementation outcomes rather than legislation alone. Legal aid, accessible courts, economic support, public information, professional training, and institutional monitoring are required to transform formal recognition into practical protection. Reform strategies should also anticipate social resistance, especially when changes affect family authority, property, or decision-making power. Research on gender backlash suggests that reforms perceived as intrusive or externally imposed may produce stronger resistance than initiatives supported through locally legitimate organizations and interpretive frameworks.

The strong support for contextual interpretation can be explained by the tension participants perceived between enduring ethical principles and historically specific social arrangements. Concepts such as justice, dignity, responsibility, and protection from harm were regarded as fundamental, while the forms through which these principles should be implemented were considered open to interpretation. Contemporary changes in women's education, employment, and public participation make rigid applications of older social assumptions increasingly difficult to sustain. Contextual interpretation allows participants to remain religiously committed while addressing social realities not anticipated in earlier legal formulations (Ali, 2024; Mukh, 2025).

The variation among participant categories arose because each group encountered gender issues through different forms of knowledge and responsibility. Activists regularly engaged with discrimination and advocacy, legal practitioners observed institutional procedures, scholars focused on interpretive legitimacy, and community women experienced family expectations directly. These positions shaped which problems appeared most urgent and which solutions seemed credible. Differences in opinion should therefore not be reduced to individual conservatism or progressivism without examining the social and institutional environments in which those opinions were formed.

The persistence of the formal-lived rights gap resulted from the interaction of law with material and relational power. Legal recognition may authorize a woman to make a claim, but pursuing that claim can threaten family relationships, economic security, social reputation, or community belonging. Women may consequently choose negotiation, delay, or partial compliance rather than formal legal action. Such choices should not automatically be interpreted as ignorance or passivity because they may reflect realistic assessments of risk and available support.

The stronger acceptance of reforms framed through Islamic principles resulted from the importance of religious legitimacy within Muslim social life. Reform language based only on external standards may be viewed as culturally detached, even when its substantive objectives are compatible with justice. Islamic ethical reasoning can connect new legal or social arrangements to recognized moral concepts and shared religious commitments. This strategy is not automatically emancipatory, however, because religious language can also be selectively used to preserve hierarchy. The quality of the interpretation and the distribution of interpretive authority remain decisive (Barclay, 2026; Syamsiah, 2025).

Future research should investigate how Islamic feminist ideas move from scholarly texts into community practices. Longitudinal studies could examine whether participation in gender-just religious education changes household decision-making, attitudes toward women's leadership, or willingness to use legal services. Such research would clarify whether interpretive reform produces durable behavioral change or remains concentrated among

academics and activists. Attention should also be given to the institutions that translate complex scholarship into accessible religious education.

Future comparative studies should include a wider range of Muslim-majority and minority contexts. The four cases examined here revealed meaningful variation but cannot represent the legal, theological, political, and cultural diversity of Muslim societies globally. Comparative research could explore countries with different schools of jurisprudence, political systems, colonial histories, migration experiences, and levels of religious institutionalization. Such expansion would test whether the relationships identified in this study remain visible under substantially different conditions.

Future methodological development should give greater attention to rural women, economically marginalized groups, women with disabilities, minority communities, and participants who reject the label of feminism while supporting particular forms of gender justice. Digital ethnography may also be necessary because social media increasingly functions as a site of religious learning, feminist advocacy, conservative mobilization, and contestation over women's authority. Studies of Muslim women's lived experiences caution against transforming a diverse population into a single symbolic figure or assuming that one vocabulary adequately captures all forms of agency (Barclay, 2026; Dāvidsone, 2026).

Future policy and community initiatives should bring religious scholars, women's organizations, legal practitioners, educators, and affected communities into sustained dialogue. Reform should be accompanied by legal literacy, accessible institutional services, economic empowerment, and monitoring of implementation outcomes. Women must participate not merely as recipients of reform but as interpreters, policymakers, researchers, and evaluators. Such participation can help ensure that gender justice is grounded simultaneously in credible Islamic reasoning, enforceable legal protection, and the realities of women's everyday lives.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that Islamic feminism operates most effectively when theological reinterpretation, legal recognition, institutional accessibility, and women's lived agency are examined as interconnected dimensions. Participants across Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, and Tunisia generally distinguished Islamic ethical principles from patriarchal customs and supported contextual interpretations grounded in justice, dignity, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. The findings also revealed a persistent gap between formally recognized rights and women's practical ability to exercise them. Women's access to education, family decision-making, employment, leadership, legal remedies, and religious authority remained strongly influenced by financial resources, legal literacy, institutional support, social class, and cultural expectations.

The study makes both conceptual and methodological contributions to research on Islamic feminism and women's rights. Its conceptual contribution lies in presenting Islamic feminism not only as a project of textual reinterpretation, but also as a social, legal, and institutional process through which gender authority is negotiated. The methodological contribution emerges from the integration of interpretive textual analysis, legal-document analysis, interviews, focus group discussions, and cross-case comparison. This multidimensional approach connects normative religious arguments with legal structures and women's everyday experiences, offering a more comprehensive explanation of why similar

Islamic principles may produce different gender arrangements across contemporary Muslim societies.

The primary limitation of the study concerns its purposive sample and focus on four national contexts, which restrict the generalizability of the findings to the wider diversity of Muslim societies. Participant accounts may also have been influenced by personal interpretation, professional position, and sensitivity surrounding religion and gender. Documentary analysis could not fully capture informal practices or changes occurring outside formal institutions. Future research should include larger and more diverse populations, particularly rural women, economically marginalized groups, religious minorities, and women who support gender justice without identifying with feminism. Longitudinal and ethnographic studies are also needed to examine how Islamic feminist interpretations influence household practices, institutional reform, religious education, and women's exercise of rights over time.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Chat GPT to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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