



Polarization, religiosity, and support for gender equality: A comparative study across four Muslim-majority countries

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on links between religion, political polarization, and support for gender equality, empirically studying Turkey, Indonesia, Tunisia, and Malaysia. These four Muslim-majority electoral democracies include different degrees of polarization between secularists and Islamists, whereby Islamists vilify secularists' supposed Western ideals as gender equality. We explore whether regional polarization between Islamist and secularist sentiments impacts common peoples' gender equality attitudes and the link between their religious and political positions and their gender equality support. Applying multilevel analyses to World Values Survey data, we find that the more strongly and politically religious and more right-wing people tend to support gender equality less, while regional polarization does not significantly affect gender equality in general. However, polarization does fuel support for women's political leadership (not educational and economic equality) among men, which might echo the strategical deployment of female candidates in polarized regions. Clearly, gender equality's dimensions have their own dynamics.

1. Introduction

Current Western populist public debates argue that Muslims do not support gender equality at all, due to Islam (Koopmans, 2015; cf. Roggeband & Verloo, 2007). As these claims have been made repeatedly and vocally by prominent politicians for years now and they have been discussed at length by a plethora of academic works (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2009; Roggeband & Verloo, 2007), these arguments come as no surprise to us anymore. Consequently, part of the academic focus is now on how these political narratives actually affect European Muslims themselves, showing that Muslim people tend to oppose gender equality more when they are more exposed to hostile claims on Islam and opposition to gender equality (Glas, 2022; Glas & Spierings, 2022; Röder & Spierings, 2021). While such amalgamation of Islam and gender conservatism is not unique to the discourse of West-European political actors, the effects of similar discourses within Muslim-majority countries have not been comparatively studied. In a context of globalization, neocolonialism, and religious resurgence, these narratives ironically unite secular as well as Islamic forces across the world. However, it is unclear how the saliency of this issue and polarization on the issue of gender equality in Muslim-majority countries in turn shape the support

for gender equality and its linkage to people's religiosity (which studies on Western Europe suggests it might do). This study contributes to creating a better understanding of such dynamics regarding Islam and support for gender equality in diverse Muslim-majority countries.

The present study addresses to what extent polarization between conservative Islamist and progressive secularist sentiments negates public support for gender equality and causes publics to alter the gendered meanings they attach to their politico-religious positions in Muslim-majority countries. Doing so, we add to the literature by resisting rather crude notions of right-wing populist and Islamist voices and some studies that claim Islam, as a religion, is inherently patriarchal and begets opposition to gender equality among all Muslims (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Instead, we draw attention to how religious identities and meanings are reconstructed, politicized, and used. Especially in polarized regions, Islam is not only a personal faith but can also be used as an instrument to legitimize political goals (Moghadam, 2003; Mohyeddin, 2005; Timmermann, 2000). Consequently, we study whether religious meanings are dependent on contextual polarization and explore whether conservative-rightist Islamists' claims that gender equality would not fit authentic Islam changes the gendered meanings ordinary Muslims attach to their religion.

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Because the debates between Islamists and secularists are structural and highly visible in Tunisia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey, they are likely to be manifested in public sentiments that are polarized between, on the one hand, leftist-progressive secularists and, on the other, rightist-conservative Islamists. Our case studies focus on countries classified as partly free democracies according to Freedom House.¹ Despite not being full democracies, they have relatively fair elections, exhibiting some features that distance them from autocracies. These countries hold elections that allow a certain degree of electoral competitiveness and political pluralism, enabling us to examine political polarization. The paper aims to compare over 70 subnational regions. We focus on comparing regions within countries, rather than the countries themselves. Our goal is not to conduct a typical small-N comparative study focusing on variations between countries, but rather to examine the regional dynamics within these countries.

As discussed, in each ongoing public tensions exist between conservative-Islamists and progressive-secularists. This creates a dynamic of polarization, characterized by continuous debates between leftist-progressive secularist and rightist-conservative Islamist groups. The presence of such active political divergences allows for a rich analysis of societal tensions and polarization. A prime example might be observed in Turkey, where striking polarization is evident: the Western regions, encompassing large, industrialized areas, tend toward a more secular-progressive stance with relatively more diversified and polarized settings, while the Eastern parts are characterized by their Islamist-conservative inclinations with less polarized settings.

In this paper, we utilize these polarized public sentiments and study whether they shape public support for gender equality. However, rather than focusing on differences between countries, as comparative studies tend to do (Alexander & Welzel, 2011; Glas & Spierings, 2019; Glas et al., 2019; Price, 2015), we focus on differences in polarized sentiments between *regions within* countries. Although such subnational differences have received relatively little attention, they might actually be of greater importance than national differences, because they represent smaller-scale locales that consequently might have stronger impacts on the lived experiences of their inhabitants (Alexander & Parhizkari, 2018; Longwe & Smits, 2013; Spierings et al., 2010). By focusing on polarization between Islamist and secularist sentiments in subnational regions, we can pinpoint more precisely whether people are embedded in polarized contexts, allowing us to get to the root of the nexus of polarization-and support for gender equality.

Altogether, this study addresses to what extent attitudinal polarization between rightist-conservative Islamist and leftist-progressive secularist sentiments at the subnational level in Indonesia, Malaysia, Tunisia, and Turkey affects support for gender equality. Our results imply that regional political polarization might indeed shape people's support for gender equality, but not in the way previous studies have led us to expect; rather, special attention needs to be paid to different dimensions of gender equality attitudes and the strategic positioning of conservative parties in contested, polarized settings.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Individual religio-political positions

Before turning to the role of polarization, we shortly outline how people's religio-political positions tie into their support for gender equality in general. Concerning religious positions, eminent scholars as Huntington (1993) and Inglehart and Norris (2003) have argued that

Islam opposes gender equality. Those general claims have been criticized by scholars noting Islam is not inherently patriarchal. The latter scholars argue that way religiosity shapes gender attitudes is complex and depends on how people live their religion in particular contexts and how they connect it to particular gender attitudes. This acknowledges and show how seemingly related religious expressions can shape gender values in completely different ways (Glas, 2022; Glas et al., 2018; Glas & Alexander, 2020; Kostenko et al., 2016; Spierings, 2014a, 2014b; Spierings et al., 2009). We follow those arguments and empirically differentiate between different aspects of religious positions (identification, service attendance, and political Islamism) and gender equality attitudes (in politics, education, and employment).

As a general starting point, however, we still propose that when people identify as more strongly religious or attend religious services more often, they are more likely to internalize *the currently dominant interpretation* of Islam, which includes gender traditionalism. Additionally, we expect that people with more strongly politically Islamist views are also more likely to follow Islamist interpretations on the gender traditionalism of Islam (Arat, 2010; El-Mahdi, 2010; Rizzo et al., 2007). Therefore, as a starting point of further theorization, we formulate the general expectation that: *People who identify more strongly as religious (a), who attend religious services more often (b), and who support political Islamism more (c), support gender equality less* (hypothesis 1).

At the same time, we argue that individual positions do not only shape gender attitudes via religious interpretations strictly speaking but also via political motives. We thus also expect that individuals' political orientations shape their gender views. Leftist-progressive orientations are connected to prioritizing equality (between genders) while rightist-conservative orientations reflect preferences for hierarchies. In general, progressive individuals around the world have been shown to support women's rights more than conservative citizens (Htun, 2004; Wilcox, 1991), including in Muslim-majority countries (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Thus, we also formulate the general expectation that: *people who are more conservative support gender equality less than those who are more progressive* (hypothesis 2).

2.2. Islamist versus secularist sentiments in Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, and Tunisia

The main focus of our study, however, is how polarization ties into these individual religio-political positions and public support for gender equality. Polarization is a multidimensional phenomenon, spanning elite and public polarization (Abramowitz, 2010; Bermeo, 2003; Druckman et al., 2013) as well as issue (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008), affective (Abramowitz, 2010), and attitudinal polarization (Downey & Huffman, 2001). This study focuses on a major fault line in Muslim-majority countries (Dennison & Draege, 2021; Wegner & Cavatorta, 2019): polarization between conservative-Islamist sentiments and progressive-secularist sentiments in the shadow of anti-Western imaginaries. In this section, we outline this form of polarization, after which we move on to its connection to public support for gender equality in the next.

When they face challenges by secularists, Islamists have been argued to emphasize their authenticity by decrying secularists' supposedly Western and neocolonial support for women's rights (Malik, 2017). To win support in a contested field, Islamists call to stop imitating the colonial West and instead to return to (fundamentalist) Islam as a means "of regaining their true identity" (Munson, 2003). In this respect, some Islamist leaders portray feminism as a foreign ideology contradicting nationalist and religious sentiments (Abi-Hassan, 2017; Glas & Alexander, 2020; Glas & Spierings, 2019). Particularly in contexts where secular sentiments are also prominent, Islamists thus re-construct gender equality as Westernized and unbefitting of Islam. Through policing women's appearance and behaviour and defending traditional family structures, Islamists show their Islamic identity and resistance to the West (Moghadam, 2009).

¹ According to Freedom House reports published in 2022, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Tunisia are defined as partly free, while Turkey is defined as not free. However, the reports underline that relatively free and fair elections are held. See for more details on <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.

We argue that those contexts may be found – to different degrees – across Malaysia, Turkey, Tunisia, and Indonesia, because these four countries are electoral democracies featuring public tensions between conservative-Islamists and progressive-secularists. In Malaysia, the May 13, 1969 racial riots were the basis of the current race-based polarization between Chinese and Malay Muslim groups in the country. The interracial dimension of political polarization has also been affected by Islamist elements, which perform a signifier role for Malay ethnic identity. In terms of gender equality, the pressures on LGBTQ individuals have recently become a polarizing issue between secularists and Islamists, because women NGOs supported LGBTQ groups at the expense of dehumanisations by religious authorities (Hui, 2019). Consequently, some scholars claim that Islamic identity merging with the dominant Malay ethnic identity increased polarization between Muslim and non-Muslims (Ambikaipaker, 2013).

In Turkey, polarization has occurred already after the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire with the victory of the Kemalist-secular elite. More recently, scholars have noted a severe mass polarization under the Islamist AKP rule (Erdoğan & Semerci, 2018). President Erdoğan's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention – an international treaty protecting gender rights – with the claim that “it is incompatible with Turkish family values and it normalizes homosexuality” has been criticized by feminist NGOs, furthering societal polarization (Taşkın & Çakın, 2022: 274).

Tunisia is similar to Turkey in terms of the legacy of state-sponsored secularism based on French *laïcité*. As Wing & Kassim (2007: 1551-52) note, “Along with Turkey, Tunisia has taken the most secularized approach to women's rights among majority-Muslim countries.” Habib Bourguiba as the first president of Tunisia has become the architect of Tunisian independence as well as the initiator of important secularist and empowering reforms (Grami, 2010). Following the Arab Spring, Islamist sentiments became more prominent in Tunisian politics, as the Islamist Ennahda Movement gained support. While Ennahda compromised with the progressive-secularist Nidaa Tounes, scholars have noted this did not eliminate the historical divide between Islamists and secularists. Haugbølle and Cavatorta (2011) state that there are still profound ideological divisions between secularists and Islamists in Tunisia, and the status of women and conservative arrangements are one of the most controversial topics in the country (El Issawi, 2015).

Finally, in Indonesia, polarization has become more prevalent since 2014, with the 2014 gubernatorial elections in Jakarta and the 2019 presidential elections as moments of manifestation (Warburton, 2020). Although Islamist parties such as PPP (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, United Development Party) and PKS (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, Prosperous Justice Party) could not manage to win the elections, the legitimate place of Islam is clear and observed in all political parties' discourses (Croft-Cusworth, 2014). Another dimension that increases the tension between Islamist and secularist groups has become the increasing role of decentralized governments over central government. This also allowed installing sharia-based law in subnational realm by increasing different law and the effect of clerics in subnational level (Spierings, 2014c).

In sum, specific histories of polarization in all four Muslim-majority countries occur along the lines of Islamist-secularist cleavages and result in narratives that attribute Western neocolonialism to gender equality while “culturally authentic”. Islam would be patriarchal. However, we argue that these country-level narratives are not omnipresent and passively adopted by all citizens alike but rather more prominently manifested in certain spaces and times, notably when secularists and Islamists vie for power in contested fields, to which we shall turn now.

2.3. Polarization, politico-religious positions, and support for gender equality

We expect that gender equality becomes a more salient topic among general publics in certain, more polarized subnational regions, namely

regions where public sentiments are more divided between secularism and Islamism. In these regions, conservative-Islamist politicians are expected to feel more threatened by incumbent progressive-secularists and consequently try to garner support by arguing that progressive-secularists are neo-colonial Western-proponents based on their support for “Western values” like gender equality (Abi-Hassan, 2017; Glas & Spierings, 2019; Malik, 2017; Munson, 2003).

As Moghadam (2009) suggested, in the mid of such tensions, Islamists use Islam to legitimize their position and argue their superiority over secularists by referencing “cultural authenticity”, which Islamists connect to gender traditionalism (Kandiyoti, 1994). Thus, secularist incumbents in those regions have been blamed by Islamists for “collaborating with Western imperialist countries”. Therefore, in regions with more polarized sentiments, we expect the dichotomy between “culturally authentic gender traditionalism” versus “Westernized gender equality” to be particularly salient. Moreover, we expect that these narratives to also find their place in publics' minds, causing general publics to attach gender equality to neo-colonialism as well. Vice versa, in regions where secularist sentiments are less widespread (i.e., less polarized regions), we assume that Islamists are less vocal on gender equality, because they feel less need to use gender equality as a political tool to harness support. This leaves more space for the public to attach their own meanings to gender equality.

Existing studies present findings that also point in the direction of these expectations or support some of the assumptions in our reasoning. For instance, Bulut and Yildirim (2021) argue that especially in “politically fragile contexts”, non-egalitarian discourses of political elites decrease publics' support for gender equality. Similarly, Glas and Alexander (2020) argue that in Arab contexts with stronger anti-Western sentiments, gender equality is tarnished as Western neocolonialism, causing general Arab publics to support gender equality less. Bringing this together, we thus expect that polarization between conservative-Islamist and progressive-secularist sentiments reifies narratives that gender equality is not culturally authentic, leading general publics to view gender equality more negatively: *public support for gender equality is lower in more polarized regions* (hypothesis 3).

Finally, we take this literature a step further by arguing that the more salient discourses on gender equality being a neo-colonial construct in polarized contexts shape how individuals interpret their politico-religious positions and connect those to gender equality. While we can formulate logics that seemingly contradict each other, we expect one to link more strongly to people's religiosity and the other more to their political views.

First, the dichotomy between Islam and gender equality might find its place in general publics' minds, as we argued above. If so, we can then expect religious positions to tie into opposition to gender equality more strongly. Stronger religious identifications, more frequent service attendance, and stronger support for political Islam thus might have especially patriarchal effects in more polarized regions. Vice versa, we expect that the least religious citizens resist the claims of Islamists in polarized contexts more, because claims of “losing true Islam” might be less biting to – or even welcomed by – this group. Therefore, we expect that *the negative relations between religious identification (a), religious service attendance (b), and political Islamism (c), and support gender equality are stronger in more polarized regions* (hypothesis 4).

At the same time, we might expect the gaps between progressive-secular and conservative-Islamist citizens' support for gender equality might actually reduce in more polarized regions. As noted, in these regions, conservatives are expected to be more vocal in attributing negative meanings of Western neo-colonialism to gender equality, which are also expected to influence the ways general publics' interpret gender equality. However, given our general expectation that conservative people in general prioritize hierarchy over equality already (cf. a floor effect), we expect that polarizing narratives in particular change the way progressive individuals view gender equality. In polarized regions, the narrative that gender equality is a Western import is thus expected to

diminish especially progressive people's support for gender equality, as they are the ones who viewed gender equality more positively in the first place and can lose more of that support. In turn, this closes gaps between progressive and conservative people's views, and therefore we expect that *the positive relation between progressive orientation and support for gender equality is weaker in more polarized regions* (hypothesis 5).

3. Methods and data

To test our hypotheses, we used the most recent wave (wave 7) of the World Values Survey conducted in Tunisia, Indonesia, Turkey, and Malaysia, which aims to represent the population of 18 years and older. Respondents were sampled using stratified random or national full probability sampling and were mostly interviewed face-to-face. Our initial data contained 8136 respondents and after selecting valid responses, our sample consists of 6526 respondents (80.2 % of original data). Crucially, these data also include information on the subnational region in which people live. Our cases include 6 regions in Indonesia, 16 in Malaysia, 24 in Tunisia, and 26 in Turkey. These regions are classified by the WVS based on scholars' preferences for grouping provinces. In some countries, the data overlap with administrative provinces (e.g., Tunisia), while in others, it shows regions (which include multiple provinces) (see the Appendix, Table A.5).

Although the number of respondents from each country is not proportional to their respective populations, this skewness does not pose a problem in terms of context-level variables. This is because we estimate fixed effects using the country as a control variable, which provides a relative alignment in representation. Our use of multi-level analysis ensures a balanced and representative examination of the data across all countries involved in our study. This method enables us to account for the varying sample sizes by considering each country as a separate level in the analysis.

Furthermore, the focus of our study is not on a “most similar systems design,” but rather on identifying regions where polarization is potentially present. By focusing the regions within these countries and arguing for a nuanced understanding of societal tensions arising from polarization, this study posits that a more comprehensive insight into these societal tensions can be achieved through examining the regional interactions and their influence on gender attitudes. Our decision to use only the seventh wave of the dataset stems from our research objectives, which prioritize the most recent societal attitudes over a longitudinal analysis. Using the latest wave allowed us access to a sufficiently large sample size, ensuring the robustness of our findings without emphasizing temporal changes.

3.1. Support for gender equality

We measure support for gender equality through three items tapping gender equality in political leadership, employment, and education: “On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do”; “When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women”; “A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl”. For all the answers ranged from agree strongly (0) to strongly disagree (4). We average the scores of respondents who provided valid answers to all three statements to create the scale “support for gender equality”. However, we also analyse the three attitudes separately to assess whether our results hold across different gender values, as it is known dynamics might differ (Glas, 2022).

3.2. Individual-level variables of interest

Individuals' *religious identification* is measured through the question “independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are...?” (0: an atheist, 1: not a religious person, 2: a religious person). *Religious service attendance* is measured through the question “apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend

religious services these days?” (0: never to 6: more than once a week). Individuals' *support for political Islamism* is measured by “I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? Having a system governed by religious law in which there are no political parties or elections” (0: very bad to 4: very good).

Individuals' general ideological orientation is measured by: “in political matters, people talk of ‘the left’ and ‘the right.’ How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?” (0: left to 9: right), whereby right-wing taps conservatism, an appreciation of social hierarchy.²

3.3. Region-level variables of interest

We operationalize *polarization* at the subnational level in two distinct ways. First, we use the measure of individuals' conservative orientation discussed above and take the standard deviation per subnational region. This shows the variance, which we use as indicator for *polarization in progressive versus conservative orientation* within a certain region. Similarly, we use the standard deviation of the support for political Islamism measure discussed above within each region, creating *polarization in political Islamism*. To make sure the absolute levels of conservative orientation and political Islamism in each region do not bias our results, we control for their absolute regional levels.³

Second, we incorporate entropy as an additional measure of polarization to complement our primary standard deviation-based approach. Originally developed by Shannon in 1948 to quantify uncertainty in information content and, Shannon's H is a measure of entropy that has found extensive application for measuring diversity and unpredictable environments in systems. The formula for its calculation is as follows:

$$H(X) = - \sum_{i=1}^n P(x_i) \log_b P(x_i)$$

The aim of using Shannon's H is related to its capacity to capture the diversity and distribution of opinions within a population. Entropy provides an alternative mechanism to examine how different ideological leanings and opinions regarding political Islam are distributed across a spectrum. This is important for understanding polarization, not only because it extends the divergence of views, but also because it illustrates how these views are dispersed or concentrated in a region. Therefore, we calculated regional entropy for both progressive-conservative orientation and the support for political Islamism to provide a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional understanding of polarization.

Our approach provides insights into both the intensity of differing opinions (through standard deviation) and the complexity of their distribution (through entropy), thereby offering a robust and multifaceted analysis of regional polarization dynamics. Accordingly, we present the results for both measures separately in the results section (Tables 2a and 2b respectively, and separate rows in Table 3 on the interaction effects), but discuss them together, highlighting differences were relevant.

3.4. Control variables

We control for respondents' gender, denomination, marital status,

² For Western countries, this item is often used to tap the economic dimension of political space. This might partly hold for the countries studied here too, but the dimension is far less pronounced in such terms in them or partly collapses with the progressive-conservative axis, for instance with typical more socialist actors also being relatively more progressive. Therefore, we chose to use the terms ‘conservative-Islamists’ for the right and ‘progressive-secularists’ for the left.

³ In general the models with this measurement also serve as basis for other robustness tests.

employment status, political interest, age, and education level. Self-reported gender distinguishes between men (0) and women (1). Respondents' self-reported denomination distinguishes between Muslims (1) and non-Muslims (0) in these four Muslim-minority countries. Marital status distinguishes between married, single, and other. Respondents' employment status distinguishes between "employed", "homemaker", and other "non-employed". Political interest is measured by "How interested would you say you are in politics?" (0: not at all; 3: very interested). Age is measured in years and standardized (mean of 0, standard deviation of 1). Lastly, respondents' highest level of education is included as a 10-point scale from "Early childhood education/no education" to "doctoral or equivalent", which was also standardized.

3.5. Analytic strategy

We use linear (two-level) multilevel models because our data encompass respondents nested within subnational regions. The regions are in turn nested within four countries; these countries could constitute the third level, but we estimate this fixed effects, using country as control variable. In doing so, we eliminate the variation at the higher level, ensuring that country differences do not render our results spurious. To further ensure the robustness of our models, we have incorporated multicollinearity checks, including the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance, into the Appendix (see Table A.7 for VIF and tolerance, and Table A.6 for correlations). These checks confirm the absence of multicollinearity issues, as evidenced by all VIF values being below 10, tolerance values exceeding 0.20, and Pearson correlation values remaining under 0.8. Our criteria for these checks adhere to existing literature: a VIF exceeding 10 (Chatterjee & Price, 1991; Marquardt, 1970) or a tolerance value below 0.20 (Menard, 1995: 66; O'Brien, 2007) would indicate a multicollinearity problem. To test the rigor of our models, various robustness checks were also conducted, including analyses of subsamples (only Muslim, women, men). We will mention our robustness checks (available in the Appendix) in the main text if results alter our conclusions (see Table 1).

4. Results

Tables 2a (standard deviation) and 2b (entropy) show the results of the multilevel models for the combined index of support for gender equality and separately for its three components (politics, employment, and education). The latter are included as our models show some eye-catching differences, especially concerning support for political gender equality.

4.1. Individual religio-political positions

First, concerning individuals' *religious positions*, virtually all results in Table 2 are in line with our expectations. People who identify as more religious, who attend religious services more often, and who support political Islamism more support gender equality significantly less in these four countries (see Models 1), and this by-and-large holds for the separate dimensions of gender equality as well (Models 2 through 4).

There are some exceptions to this general pattern, though. Most notably, people who identify as more strongly religious do not support women's education significantly less than those who identify as less religious (see Models 3). This might be unexpected to some, but it is actually in line with previous studies that show that religiosity tends to show weak and inconsistent impacts on attitudes toward women's education, which has been attributed to the understanding in society that education would also prepare women for religiously-inspired wifehood and motherhood roles (Glas & Spierings, 2019; Mahmood, 2005; Price, 2014) as has been propagated by the Egyptian Qasim Amin in 1899 already (Amin, 2000).

Additionally, our robustness tests show that a) relations between religious identification and support for women's political leadership do

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Dependent variables					
Support for gender equality (combined)	6526	0	3	1.34	0.67
Support for women's political leadership	6526	0	3	1.25	0.89
Support for women's education	6526	0	3	1.70	0.91
Support for women's employment	6526	0	3	1.06	0.89
Individual-level independent variables					
Religious identification	6526	0	2	1.79	0.42
Religious service attendance	6526	0	6	3.81	1.92
Support for political Islamism	6526	0	3	1.38	0.98
Conservative orientation	6526	0	9	5.23	2.46
Region-level independent variables					
Regional polarization in progressive-conservative orientation	72	0.82	4.24	2.32	0.54
Regional polarization in political Islamism	72	0.37	1.15	0.91	0.13
Regional entropy of progressive-conservative orientation	72	0.31	2.31	1.76	0.36
Regional entropy of Political Islamism	72	0.35	1.37	1.20	0.18
Control variables					
Regional level of conservative orientation	72	3.56	8.60	5.23	0.66
Regional level of political Islamism	72	0.16	2.06	1.38	0.36
Gender					
Male	6526	0	1	0.48	
Female	6526	0	1	0.52	
Denomination					
Muslim	6526	0	1	0.83	
Non-Muslim	6526	0	1	0.16	
Marital status					
Married	6526	0	1	0.68	
Single	6526	0	1	0.23	
Other	6526	0	1	0.08	
Employment status					
Employed	6526	0	1	0.67	
Nonemployed	6526	0	1	0.13	
Homemaker	6526	0	1	0.19	
Country					
Turkey	1722	0	1	0.13	
Tunisia	907	0	1	0.39	
Malaysia	1310	0	1	0.20	
Indonesia	2587	0	1	0.26	
Political interest					
Age	6526	-1.59	3.49	0	1
Age (non-standardized)	6526	18	87	39.64	13.54
Education	6526	-1.46	3.09	0	1
Education (non-standardized)	6526	0	8	2.5	1.77

Source: WVS wave 7.

not reach statistical significance in any of the subsamples and b) relations between religious service attendance and particular dimensions of gender equality do not always reach statistical significance in per-gender subsamples (more on both below) (see Appendix, Table A.1).

Generally, though, our findings confirm hypothesis 1 and imply that in Malaysia, Turkey, Indonesia, and Tunisia, dominant religious interpretations remain patriarchal – perhaps due to politization on these issues – and people who are more strongly and more politically religious,

Table 2a
Multilevel analyses of support for gender equality ($N = 6526$).

	Model 1 (Combined gender equality)		Model 2 (Political leadership)		Model 3 (Education)		Model 4 (Employment)	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Intercept	1.98	0.25	2.12	0.26	1.67	0.34	1.76	0.36
Individual-level variables								
Religious identification	−0.06**	0.02	−0.06*	0.02	−0.04	0.02	−0.08**	0.02
Religious service attendance	−0.02**	0.00	−0.02**	0.00	−0.02**	0.00	−0.01**	0.00
Political Islamism	−0.08**	0.01	−0.07**	0.01	−0.10**	0.01	−0.08**	0.01
Conservative orientation	−0.01**	0.00	−0.00	0.00	−0.01**	0.00	−0.01**	0.00
Region-level variables								
Regional polarization in progressive vs conservative orientation	−0.10	0.06	−0.12*	0.06	−0.06	0.07	−0.02	0.08
Regional polarization in political Islamism	0.36	0.29	0.20	0.22	0.21	0.30	−0.10	0.31
Controls								
Regional level of conservative orientation	0.01	0.03	−0.01	0.03	0.07	0.04	−0.01	0.04
Regional level of political Islamism	−0.08	0.09	−0.05	0.09	−0.14	0.12	−0.04	0.13
Male (ref = female)	−0.21**	0.01	−0.23**	0.02	−0.17**	0.02	−0.23**	0.03
Muslim (ref = non-Muslim)	−0.23**	0.02	−0.35**	0.03	−0.12**	0.03	−0.22**	0.03
Marital status (ref = other)								
Married	−0.00	0.03	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.04	−0.05	0.04
Single	0.05	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.08	0.05	0.05	0.05
Employment status (ref = non-employed)								
Employed	−0.06**	0.02	−0.06*	0.03	−0.07*	0.03	−0.05	0.03
Homemaker	−0.09*	0.02	−0.12**	0.04	−0.02	0.04	−0.14**	0.04
Country (ref = Turkey)								
Tunisia	0.03	0.14	0.12	0.13	−0.24	0.19	0.20	0.86
Malaysia	0.02	0.10	−0.03	0.10	−0.22	0.14	0.34	0.85
Indonesia	0.29**	0.08	0.34**	0.08	0.10	0.11	0.44	0.84
Political interest	−0.02*	0.01	−0.04**	0.01	−0.00	0.01	−0.00	0.01
Age	0.00**	0.00	0.00**	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Education	0.05**	0.004	0.02**	0.00	0.08**	0.00	0.04**	0.00

Note: ** $\alpha < 0.01$; * $\alpha < 0.05$.

in turn, tend to support gender equality less on average.

Moving on to individuals' *political positions*, our results show that people who are more conservative support gender equality significantly less (see Models 1, 3 and 4 in [Tables 2a and 2b](#)). However, our robustness analyses show this result is driven by men (see the Appendix, Table A1); conservatism does not beget gender traditionalism among women. We thus accept Hypothesis 2 only among men. Our results below also indicate that politicized contexts affect women's support for gender equality far less than men's. These results indicate that women decouple politics from their gender attitudes, which might reflect that women are on average less interested in politics and might thus be less attentive to political messages ([Fraile & Gomez, 2017](#)). Alternatively, women might agentically resist political narratives on gender values in particular and instead make up their own minds on issues that deeply affect them in particular ([Charrad, 2011](#); [Ferrín et al., 2020](#); [Glas et al., 2018](#)).

Regarding the different aspects of gender equality, we find no statistically significant relationship between conservatism and gender equality in politics (see Models 2; also Appendix, Table A1). What might explain these aberrant patterns for women's political leadership – of which we find more below – is that conservative parties might include women in their ranks, especially when they are vying for power with progressive-secularists, as was documented for Tunisia by others too ([Mhajne & Brandt, 2021](#)). In Tunisia, 42 out of 49 women elected to parliament after the Arab Spring revolution belong to conservative-Islamist Ennahda, and women also held leadership positions as

Ministers or Secretaries of State ([Khalil, 2014](#); [Mhajne & Brandt, 2021](#)).

A similar approach has also been observed in Indonesia, where Islamist parties have taken measures to increase women's representation through the implementation of gender quotas ([Prihatini, 2020](#)). Although these parties tend to emphasize gender essentialism and relegate women to fields as education, health, and “women's affairs”, they might still signal to their electorates that women can occupy political leadership roles, which would explain why we find that more conservative men support gender equality in education and employment less, but not in politics.

4.2. Polarization

Moving on to the importance of context, contrary to our theory-based expectations, our results generally do not show that publics support gender equality significantly less in more polarized regions (see Models 1, 3, and 4, [Tables 2a and 2b](#)). In regions with greater polarization in conservatism or Islamism, average support for gender equality is not significantly different than in less polarized regions. In fact, even absolute levels of conservatism and political Islamism at the regional level do not show significant impacts, which means that (considering people's individual positions) average support for gender equality is not additionally lower in regions with stronger conservative-Islamist sentiments. Overall, these results falsify hypothesis 3: in regions with stronger polarization between conservative-Islamist and progressive-secularist sentiments, support for gender equality does not differ from regions in

Table 2b
Multilevel analyses of support for gender equality with Shannon's H Entropy (N = 6526).

	Model 1 (Combined gender equality)		Model 2 (Political leadership)		Model 3 (Education)		Model 4 (Employment)	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Intercept	2.20	0.30	2.16	0.31	2.03	0.97	2.44	0.42
Individual-level variables								
Religious identification	−0.06**	0.20	−0.06*	0.02	−0.04	0.02	−0.08**	0.03
Religious service attendance	−0.02**	0.00	−0.02**	0.00	−0.02**	0.00	−0.02**	0.00
Political Islamism	−0.09**	0.01	−0.08**	0.01	−0.10**	0.01	−0.08**	0.01
Conservative orientation	−0.01**	0.00	−0.00	0.00	−0.01**	0.00	−0.01**	0.00
Region-level variables								
Regional entropy of progressive vs conservative orientation	−0.02	0.10	0.06	0.04	−0.06	0.14	−0.07	0.14
Regional entropy of political Islamism	−0.08	0.17	−0.10	0.18	−0.24	0.24	−0.25	0.24
Controls								
Regional level of conservative orientation	−0.00	0.04	−0.01	0.03	0.05	0.05	−0.04	0.05
Regional level of political Islamism	−0.00	0.10	−0.05	0.09	−0.06	0.14	0.00	0.14
Male (ref = female)	−0.21**	0.02	−0.23**	0.02	−0.18**	0.02	−0.23**	0.03
Muslim (ref = non-Muslim)	−0.23**	0.02	−0.35**	0.03	−0.13**	0.03	−0.22**	0.03
Marital status (ref = other)								
Married	−0.00	0.03	−0.01	0.04	0.03	0.04	−0.03	0.04
Single	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.09	0.05	0.07	0.05
Employment status (ref = non-employed)								
Employed	−0.06**	0.02	−0.06*	0.03	−0.07*	0.03	−0.05	0.03
Homemaker	−0.10**	0.02	−0.12**	0.04	−0.02	0.04	−0.14**	0.04
Country (ref = Turkey)								
Tunisia	−0.06**	0.14	−0.26**	0.08	−0.08	0.19	0.20	0.86
Malaysia	−0.20*	0.09	−0.29**	0.09	−0.24	0.14	0.34	0.85
Indonesia	−0.28*	0.12	−0.29*	0.12	−0.33	0.11	0.44	0.84
Political interest	−0.02*	0.01	−0.04**	0.01	−0.00	0.01	−0.00	0.01
Age	0.00**	0.00	0.00**	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Education	0.05**	0.004	0.02**	0.00	0.08**	0.00	0.04**	0.00

Note: ** $\alpha < 0.01$; * $\alpha < 0.05$.

which the public is less polarized.

There is one exception on the above: public support for women's political leadership is significantly lower in regions with greater polarization in terms of progressive versus conservative orientations when measured in standard deviations (see Model 2, Table 2a). The results for entropy align in the same direction but do not show significant results, making it less robust. Moreover, our robustness analyses show that the result for standard deviations is – once again – driven by men (see the Appendix, Table A1). We should be very careful about overinterpreting this one significant relationship. One might argue that it echoes insights from qualitative studies which contend that, particularly in contested fields, conservatives garner public support by decrying “Western” gender values, values that their opponents are likely to hold (Abi-Hasan, 2017; Malik, 2017; Munson, 2003). However, we found this only for men, and our interaction models below further undermine this interpretation, as our other results point in a different direction for progressive-secularist publics, to which we now turn.

Our moderation analyses are summarized in Table 3, for both measures of polarization. For all hypothesized interaction effects, we present the interaction coefficients for the index of support for gender equality. For reasons of comprehension, the table furthermore only includes results for a specific gender equality dimension if they were markedly different. The results in Table 3 show, first, that impacts of people's politico-religious positions are not significantly different in more polarized regions on gender attitudes *in general*. None of the interactions between individual positions and polarization are statistically

significant for the overall gender equality index. There is one exception (Model 11), but that effect is fully driven by the political dimension of the gender equality index and was not reproduced for our second measure, entropy (same direction but not statistically significant).

Looking at the separate dimensions of gender equality, polarization does not significantly shape how individual religio-political positions affect gender equality in education (2/16 moderations reach statistical significance), nor is it clearly influential in employment (3/16). Furthermore, 5/16 of our tested moderations for political gender equality are statistically significant. But even for this dimension we should be careful. It shows quite a number of significant effects, but mainly based on one measure of polarization, and results on entropy-based and standard deviation-based operationalizations at times contradict each other (Model 7.2), and in our robustness analyses the effects show to be driven by men (see the Appendix Tables A.3. and A.4.). Overall, we cannot accept hypotheses 4 or 5 due to the inconsistency of our results. However, we do tentatively argue how men link their religio-political positions to their stances regarding women's political leadership in particular is more sensitive to men's exposure to more polarized sentiments.

For instance, religious identification decreases support women's political leadership in non-polarized regions, but increases support in polarized regions (see Models 5.2 and 6.2 and Table 3). Similarly religious service attendance seems to decrease opposition to women's political leadership in more polarized regions when measured in terms of entropy; however and conversely, religious service attendance seems to

Table 3Summary of moderation results of multilevel models of support for gender equality ($N = 6,526$).

	M5.1	M5.2	M5.3	M6.1	M6.2	M7.1	M7.2	M8	M9.1	M9.2	M10	M11 ^a	M12
	GE	Pol	Emp	GE	Pol	GE	Pol	GE	GE	Emp	GE	GE	GE
Religious identification	0.04	−0.37**	0.30	−0.09	−0.54**								
	−0.07	−0.33*	−0.02	0.00	−0.42*								
Polarization/Entropy in conservative orientation	−0.05	0.13	−0.18*										
	0.00	0.16	−0.05										
*Polarization/Entropy in political Islamism				0.04	0.53**								
				−0.06	0.30								
Religious service attendance						−0.02	0.02	−0.05					
						−0.06**	−0.08**	−0.03					
*Polarization/Entropy in conservative orientation						0.00	−0.03**						
						0.02	0.03*						
*Polarization/Entropy in political Islamism								0.03					
								0.00					
Support for political Islamism									−0.18**	−0.23**	−0.09		
									−0.01	0.04	0.02		
Polarization/Entropy in conservative orientation									0.04	0.07			
									−0.05	−0.07			
*Polarization/Entropy in political Islamism											−0.04		
											−0.10		
Conservative orientation												−0.07*	−0.00**
												−0.03	−0.03
Polarization/Entropy in conservative orientation												0.02	
												0.01	
*Polarization/Entropy in political Islamism													−0.00
													0.01
Polarization/Entropy in conservative orientation	0.01	−0.46**	0.29			−0.09	−0.07		−0.13**	−0.13		−0.23*	
	−0.05	−0.26	−0.01			−0.09	−0.04		0.07	0.07		−0.05	
Polarization/Entropy in political Islamism				0.12	−0.62			0.02			0.25		0.11
				0.06	−0.59			−0.12			0.05		−0.23

GE = combined gender equality. Pol = women's political leadership. Emp = women's employment. All models are controlled for all control variables. b-parameters are always shown for combined gender equality but only for its separate dimensions if results meaningfully differ. *** $\alpha < 0.01$; ** $\alpha < 0.05$; * $\alpha < 0.10$. ^a Significant moderation results of Model 11 are driven by women's political leadership and are not statistically significant for women's education or women's employment. *Italics are the calculations based on Shannon's H Entropy.*

increase opposition to women's political leadership in more polarized regions (see Model 7.2), and this result is not robust in the subsamples (see Tables A.2, A.3, and A.4 in the Appendix). Also, the results in Model 11, were driven by the political dimension of gender equality. While this clearly shows that particular the linkage of religio-political positions and support for political gender equality is most easily moderated by polarization in the context, the direction of the relationship varies and before we can draw clear substantive conclusions more (in-depth) research is needed. One direction for this might be found in the above discussed role of female political representation in conservative-Islamist, which might change in more contested fields. For instance, the progressive-secular backlash faced by the conservative-Islamist Ennahda over women's rights “served as a catalyst for women's politicization and mobilization within” the party (Mhajne & Brandt, 2021: 603).

5. Conclusion

Although polarization is well-documented in terms of its effects on democratic backsliding, the economy, and populism, few studies have addressed how polarization shapes public opinion on gender equality, especially in Muslim-majority contexts (Castle, 2019; Jones & Brewer, 2020). This is particularly troublesome because polarization in Muslim-majority countries tends to follow schisms between on the one hand conservative-Islamists and on the other hand progressive-secularists, where gender becomes a central battleground (Dennison & Draege, 2021; Wegner & Cavatorta, 2019). In-depth studies have shown how, in contested fields, conservative-Islamist parties try to garner public

support by emphasizing that they represent “culturally authentic Islam”, which would oppose gender equality, while their progressive opponents would represent Western neocolonial views when they argue in favour of women's rights (Kandiyoti, 1991; Moghadam, 2009).

As some scholars argue, the multidimensionality of gender equality policies complicates their examination and renders the addressing of these issues from a cross-national perspective challenging (Caiazza, 2002; Ertan, 2016; Mazur, 2002). Therefore, Ertan (2016) suggests the combination of different approaches, namely sectoral and issue-based, to study gender equality policy in various countries. This combination aims to capture multidimensionality and to prevent generalizations. Aligning with these viewpoints, our approach also focuses on the variations in gender equality. However, since we examine gender equality attitudes at a multilevel rather than gender equality policy at a country level, we adopt an issue-based approach. This approach underscores the multifaceted and nuanced narratives pertaining to gender equality in polarized Muslim-majority regions.

The present study addressed whether those narratives in polarized regions are also reflected in general public opinion and among whom: *Do Muslim-majority publics, and particularly the more religious and conservative part thereof, echo Islamists' claims and consequently juxtapose Islam and gender equality and more so if the context is polarized?* Empirically, we applied multilevel regression analyses to WVS data on public support for gender equality among 6526 respondents in four fairly electorally democratic Muslim-majority countries with contested fields – Turkey, Tunisia, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Generally, our results show that more religious and more conservative people on average support (economic, political and educational)

gender equality less; however, the influence of men's religiousness and progressiveness on their support *political* gender equality tends to be more sensitive to the degree of polarization in their region, albeit it not in a way consistent with our expectation. Contrary to our general expectations, it thus does *not* seem to be the case that conservative-Islamist narratives in polarized regions that gender equality is a Western neo-colonial construct makes people draw away from gender equality, regardless of their own conservative and religious positions. Having that said, at the same time, these narratives might have been internalized by the more religious and conservative individuals, which we control for in our analyses. Still, would that be so, they should be gender conservative in more polarized regions, for which we find no evidence.

We tentatively argue that these unexpected results might reflect another strategy employed by conservative and Islamist political actors when vying for power with progressive-secularists, which might partly counteract the theorized mechanism: platform women who espouse a message of gender essentialism framed in terms of human rights and democracy (e.g. Khalil, 2014). This signal is strategically employed by conservative-Islamist parties in contested fields to garner public support, especially of moderate members of the public, who might otherwise consider Islamist parties too radical. Because women are then (at least) descriptively well-represented in such parties in polarized regions, the male base of those parties might consequently support women in politics more or to some extent change their views on women in politics due to this (relatively new) exposure. Our results could suggest that this mechanism or strategy is at play as well as the more progressive actors being driven to take on 'less Western'-stances in more polarized contexts. The question that our study raises could then be under what conditions which mechanism becomes most dominant. Part of this could also be the disparity in the implications of how we measure polarization, which highlights the intricate mechanisms underpinning the formation and expression of public opinions, particularly in relation to the support for women's political leadership.

At a more general level, our findings imply that there are real and meaningful differences between different gender attitudes. For instance and again while we find no indications that support for gender equality in education or employment significantly differs between more or less polarized regions, support for gender equality in politics might. However, most existing studies on Muslim public opinion combine different attitudes into one index (e.g., Glas et al., 2018; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Kostenko et al., 2016), thereby foreclosing the possibility of uncovering such differences. This is regrettable, because disentangling different gender attitudes promises to provide greater understanding of what drives their adoption. Only through disaggregating different gender attitudes could we come to the suggestion that polarization does not cause general publics to view gender equality more suspiciously – as we expected – but in fact spurs on female political leadership and support thereof among male conservative-Islamist segments of the population.

On the flip side, the divergent results also imply that increased support for one domain of gender equality will not necessarily or straightforwardly spill over into increased support for another. Most particularly, the public support for female political leaders, which might stem from visibility of women politicians in Islamist movements, seems to stand out and might not immediately spill-overs into support for other equalities as these women politicians tend to voice strongly traditional and essentialist views. Additionally, our results do question simplistic views on Islam being inherently patriarchal. We find some indications that under specific contextual political circumstances those who identify as strongly religious support gender equality actually *more*. While this positive relationship is relatively rare in the four contexts studied (but also see Glas et al., 2018; Glas & Spierings, 2022), it implies that Islam should not be viewed as a strictly religious phenomenon with one innate patriarchal core, as some seem to imply (Huntington, 1993; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Islam is better considered as a socio-political force whose meanings are context-dependent rather than fixed, even if the most predominant and lived interpretations are patriarchal. In turn, this

implies that future studies should turn their attention to variation *within* “the Muslim world” – rather than focusing on differences between Muslim-majority contexts and Muslim-minority contexts (e.g., Huntington, 1993; Inglehart & Norris, 2003) – which might shape how people view gender and live their religion.

Besides the pathways for future work based on the results as discussed above, the limitations of our study also provide some routes for further research. Echoing the varying results for the contextual factors, we acknowledge more broadly that our setup may not fully capture country-specific differences such as cultural, historical, or political influences intrinsic to each country that play crucial roles in shaping public opinions, polarization and their interrelatedness. Although we control for country differences, our setup does not explain them; for instance, the constitutional role of Islam may be considered an important factor in explaining attitudes toward gender equality and political polarization. Similarly, we formulated several explanations for the differences found between dimensions of gender equality and between men and women, which the data did not allow to delve in deeper in order to assess the proposed mechanism. At this point, our suggested explanations, remain suggestions.

Considering it all, our study has shown that in the contemporary contexts of Indonesia, Malaysia, Tunisia, and Turkey, different aspects of religiosity relate negatively to support for gender equality. However, a closer look reveals that these relationships are conditional on gender, the aspect of gender equality focused on, and, in some cases, the political context—particularly the degree of polarization when it comes to gender equality in the political sphere. The religiosity-gender equality linkage is predominantly but far from univocally negative, and under some conditions even positive. In other words, also in the context of Islam being the dominant religion, the impact of religiosity is shaped by gendered meaning-making as a socio-political process.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Berfin Çakın: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Saskia Glas:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Niels Spierings:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2024.102880>.

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