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Rethinking Muslim Fertility: Transitions and Diversity from Muslim-Majority Societies to Europe and Australia[1]

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Abstract

Fertility patterns among Muslim populations have undergone profound transformation over the past half-century. This paper examines fertility transitions in Muslim-majority societies and among Muslim populations in Europe and Australia, highlighting the remarkable diversity and convergence that characterize these demographic changes. Most Muslim-majority societies have experienced substantial fertility decline, often reaching or approaching replacement levels, driven by rising education, urbanization, and socioeconomic development.

The analysis draws on multiple data sources: UN World Population Prospects (2024) and Wittgenstein Centre Explorer data to trace fertility and educational transitions in Muslim-majority countries; Eurostat, Pew Research Center, and national vital statistics for European countries (Austria, the Netherlands, France, Norway, and the UK); and 2021 Australian Census microdata to examine completed fertility rates, childlessness, and parity progression by religion, education, and origin.

In Europe, fertility among women born in Muslim-majority countries has declined steadily, reflecting adaptation and generational change. In Australia, Muslim fertility remains slightly above average and has risen modestly among recent cohorts, yet varies widely by country of origin, underscoring compositional and socioeconomic diversity.

The findings demonstrate that the so-called *"Muslim fertility gap"* has narrowed markedly worldwide. Contemporary fertility differentials primarily reflect education, gender equity, and life-course opportunities rather than religious prescription. By linking fertility decline in origin societies with behavioral adaptation in new contexts, the study contributes to comparative fertility research and challenges enduring narratives of Muslim demographic difference.

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Introduction and Background

Islam is the world's second largest religion, encompassing more than two billion followers worldwide. Muslim populations are often perceived as demographically exceptional, marked by persistently high fertility and slow demographic transition. Such portrayals have shaped both academic debates and public discourse, particularly in the field of fertility research, where Muslim populations are often presented as demographically distinctive within both origin and destination contexts. However, a growing body of research shows that these assumptions are outdated and empirically unfounded. Fertility in most Muslim-majority societies has declined sharply over the past three decades, following trajectories comparable to other regions at similar stages of socioeconomic development (Abbasi-Shavazi and Jones, 2005, 2018; Groth and Sousa-Poza, 2012). Educational expansion, urbanization, women's labor force participation, and access to family planning have reshaped reproductive behavior in Muslim contexts. At the same time, fertility among Muslim migrants in Europe and Australia, though initially higher than among native populations, has shown steady convergence over time. The persistence of simplistic "religiosity" explanations for Muslim fertility not only overlooks this diversity but also reinforces stereotypes of Muslims as resistant to modernity or integration (Burner, 2012; Profanter and Maestri, 2021). This study therefore aims to provide a comparative, evidence-based account of fertility transitions among Muslim populations globally and within migrant-receiving societies.

Objectives and Analytical Framework

The central objective of this paper is to rethink the relationship between **fertility behavior and religion** by examining fertility transitions in Muslim-majority countries and among Muslim-origin populations in Europe and Australia. Specifically, the paper:

1. Assesses fertility trends and transitions in selected Muslim-majority countries since 1950, highlighting the timing and pace of decline.
2. Examines fertility differentials among Muslim migrants in Europe, analyzing diversity by country of origin, migration cohort, and socio-economic characteristics.
3. Investigates Muslim fertility in Australia using 2021 Census microdata to evaluate cohort fertility, childlessness, and parity progression by religion, origin, and education.
4. Challenges reductionist interpretations that attribute high fertility primarily to religion, showing instead the decisive influence of education, migration selectivity, and adaptation.

Data and Approach

The analysis draws on multiple sources:

- ***Muslim-majority countries:*** UN World Population Prospects 2024 data are used to illustrate fertility transitions since 1950. Wittgenstein Centre Explorer data are used to show the educational transition in Muslim majority countries.

- ***Europe:*** Aggregate indicators from Eurostat, the Birth Barometer database, Pew Research Center, and national vital statistics (Austria, the Netherlands, Norway, France, and the UK) are used to document fertility trends and differentials among women born in Muslim-majority countries.

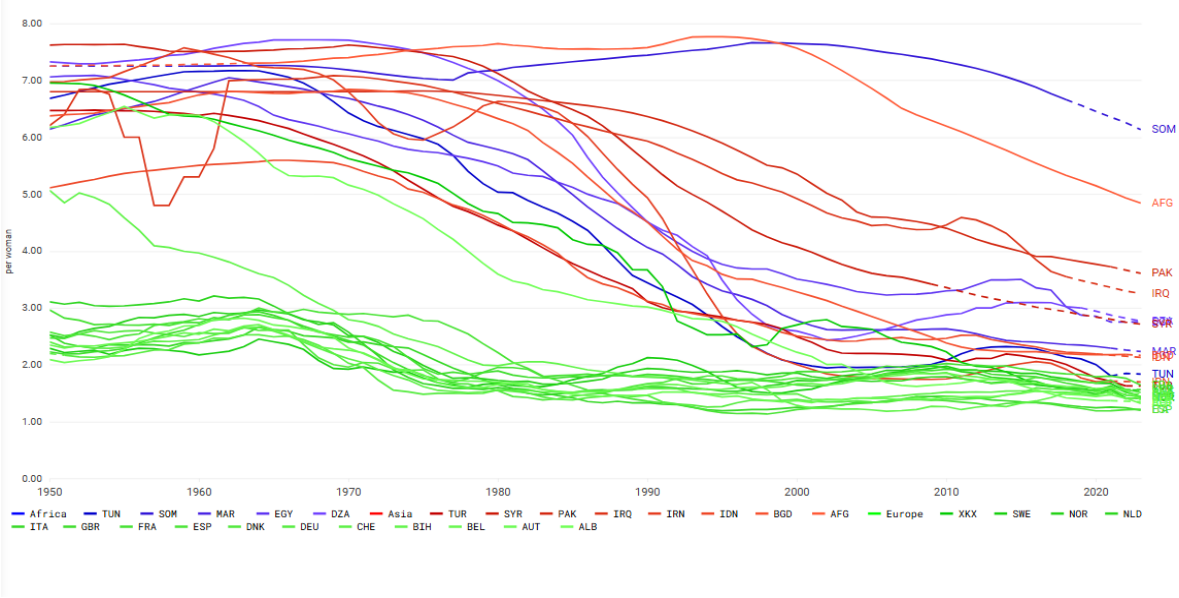
- ***Australia:*** Microdata from the 2021 Australian Census provide measures of completed fertility rates (CFR), childlessness, and third-birth progression ratios, disaggregated by religion, education, and country of birth.

These diverse sources enable a comparative analysis of fertility transitions across distinct socioeconomic and cultural settings, illustrating how education, modernization, and adaptation shape reproductive outcomes.

Findings

Muslim-Majority Countries

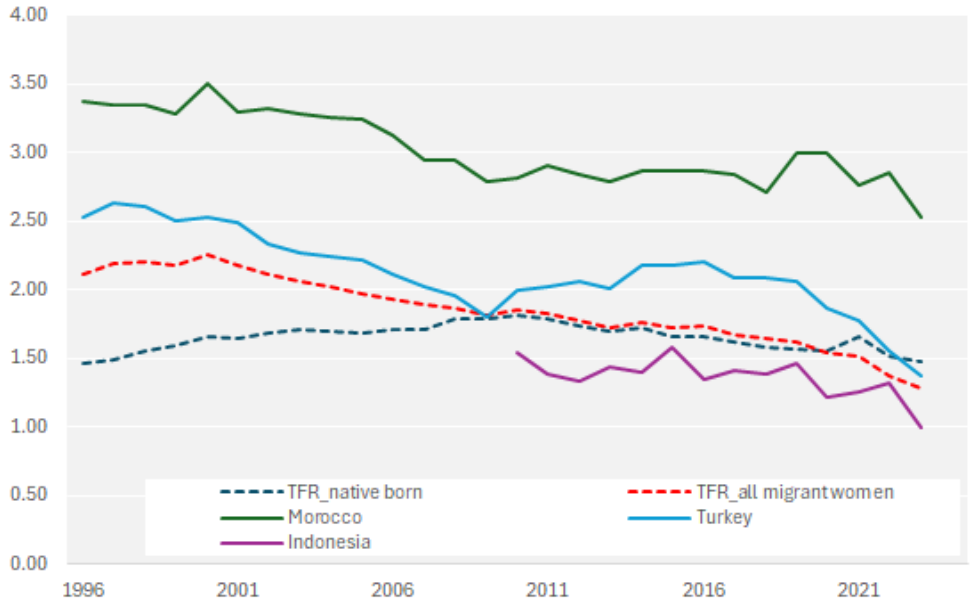
Muslim fertility has undergone a dramatic transformation. The total fertility rate (TFR) in countries such as Iran, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Tunisia fell from 6–7 children per woman in the 1970s to below-replacement level today, and Iran recorded the TFR of around 1.5 children per women in 2025. In several Persin Gulf states and Turkey, fertility has reached below-replacement levels. Educational advancement, particularly female secondary and tertiary education, has been a key driver (Abbasi-Shavazi and Torabi, 2012; Bora et al., 2023). Figure 1 compares fertility trends in selected Muslim-majority and European countries from 1950 to 2023, highlighting the rapid and sustained fertility decline across most Muslim societies and the resulting convergence toward the low and stable fertility levels observed in Europe.



Muslim Migrants in Europe

In Europe, Muslim fertility remains higher than the national average but has declined steadily since the 1990s. Country-of-origin diversity is striking: women from Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Indonesia show near-replacement fertility, whereas women from Afghanistan or Syria exhibit temporarily elevated fertility linked to recent refugee migration. Fertility convergence is evident across generations, with higher-educated and second-generation Muslims showing fertility similar to native-born populations.

Figure 2. Total Fertility Rate by Country of Birth, the Netherlands, 1996–2023



Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS StatLine database), data downloaded in October 2025.

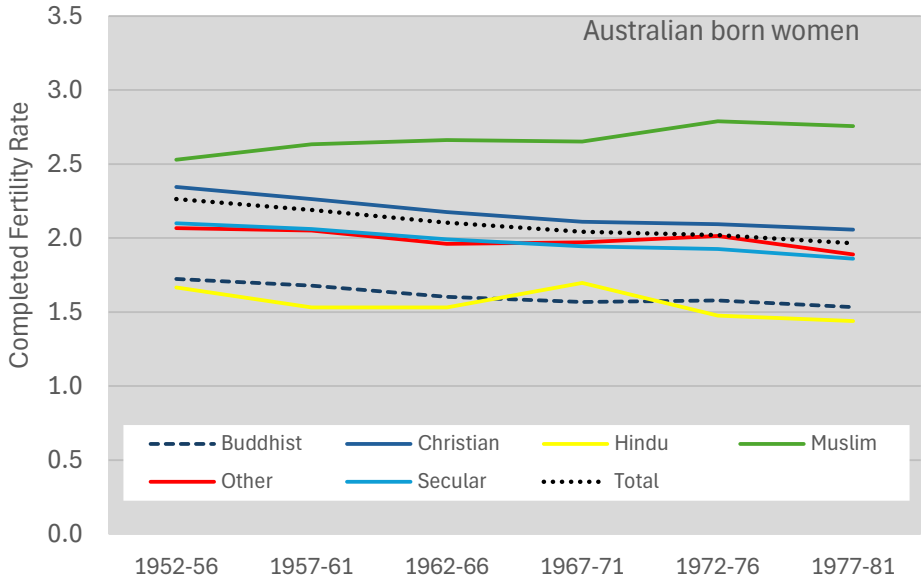
Comparable results are observed in **Austria** and **France** (figures not shown here). In Austria, fertility among women born in Afghanistan, Syria, and Turkey was initially well above that of native-born women but has fallen markedly in recent years, substantially narrowing the fertility gap. In France, women from Nor`th African countries (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) and from Turkey and the Middle East have also experienced sustained fertility decline and stabilization, reflecting long-term integration and educational advancement.

Taken together, these results confirm that fertility among Muslim migrants across Europe is neither uniform nor static. Instead, it follows a clear trajectory of decline and convergence toward host-country fertility norms. Religion alone offers limited explanatory power once broader socioeconomic, educational, and migratory factors are considered.

Muslim Migrants in Australia

In Australia, fertility differentials by religion also persist but follow similar convergent patterns. Using 2021 Census microdata, Muslim women show higher completed fertility (CFR ≈ 2.6–2.8) compared with Christian (≈2.1) and secular (≈1.8) women, driven mainly by lower childlessness and higher third-birth progression. However, fertility varies greatly by country of origin and education, with a clear negative gradient. When combined with results from Muslim-majority countries and European diaspora populations, these findings confirm that Muslim fertility in Australia is also diverse, adaptive, and influenced by education and integration rather than by religion alone.

Figure 3. Completed Fertility Rate (CFR) by Birth Cohort and Religious Affiliation, Australia-born Women



Source: Authors' calculations from the Australian Census 2021 (TableBuilder Pro).

Figure 3 shows completed fertility rates (CFR) by birth cohort and religious affiliation for Australian-born women. Muslim women consistently exhibit higher fertility than women of other religious groups across cohorts, though their CFR has gradually declined over time, from about 2.6 children per woman among the 1950s birth cohorts to around 2.4 among those born in the late 1970s. This gradual reduction mirrors the overall national fertility transition and indicates adaptation to broader social and economic changes in Australia.

The figure also reveals persistent but narrowing gaps between Muslims and other religious groups, particularly Christians and secular women, indicating a gradual convergence of fertility behavior despite differing cultural and religious contexts. The lower fertility of secular, Buddhist, and Hindu women contrasts with the relative stability of Muslim fertility across cohorts, highlighting the influence of cultural and familial norms emphasizing marriage and childbearing.

Discussion and Implications

Evidence from Muslim-majority countries, Europe, and Australia reveals a consistent pattern of fertility transition, diversity, and adaptation. The so-called “Muslim fertility gap” has narrowed substantially, both across Muslim-majority societies and within migrant populations in Western countries. Fertility differentials observed today reflect the influence of education, migration selectivity, and integration processes, rather than inherent religious prescriptions or immutable cultural norms.

This comparative perspective demonstrates that Muslim fertility is responsive to broader socioeconomic transformations, including women’s education, urbanization, and labor force participation. The results from Europe and Australia further highlight that fertility convergence occurs even in diverse policy and cultural contexts, underscoring the adaptability of Muslim populations to changing social environments.

These findings challenge long-standing demographic narratives portraying Muslim fertility as exceptionally high or resistant to change. They underscore the importance of situating fertility behavior within education, gender, and socioeconomic structures, rather than viewing religion as a dominant determinant. By integrating evidence from both Muslim-majority and diaspora settings, this paper contributes to comparative fertility research, revealing Muslim populations as demographically diverse, adaptive, and deeply influenced by modernization and life-course change.

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