

On sex, Muslims and Hindus practice what they preach

by [Jeanie Groh](#) in the [November 28, 2012](#) issue

With their “True Love Waits” jewelry, conferences and T-shirts, Christians may be the face of the abstinence movement, but Muslims and Hindus are more likely to abstain from premarital sex.

That’s the conclusion of a new study in the *American Sociological Review*, which also found that Muslims and Hindus—at least in the developing world—are more likely than Christians and Jews to refrain from sex outside of marriage.

“All major world religions discourage sex outside of marriage, but they are not all equally effective in shaping behavior,” said Amy Adamczyk of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who coauthored the study with John Jay doctoral student Brittany E. Hayes.

Drawing on the Demographic and Health Surveys funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the study included data from 31 developing nations collected between 2000 and 2008. The authors focused on individuals’ responses to questions on religious affiliation, marital status and sexual behavior outside of marriage.

Adamczyk said the study evolved from another study she was doing that found countries with large Muslim populations have very low rates of HIV and AIDS. “I was trying to figure out why that would be,” she said. One reason she considered was lower rates of sex outside of marriage.

The authors hypothesized that the larger the proportion of Muslims and Hindus in a country, the lower the rates of premarital and extramarital sex.

Adamczyk and Hayes found that 94 percent of Jews in the nations they studied reported having premarital sex, compared to 79 percent of Christians, 65 percent of Buddhists, 43 percent of Muslims and 19 percent of Hindus.

As for extramarital sex, 4 percent of Jews reported having sex outside of marriage, compared to 3 percent of Christians. Less than 1 percent each of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists reported having sex outside of marriage.

“In many countries around the world—but in Muslim countries specifically—there’s just much less interaction between the sexes,” said Adamczyk. “It’s just going to be much less likely that they’re going to meet a potentially romantic partner.”

Paul Sullins, a sociologist at the Catholic University of America, said the study’s findings are not surprising, because much of the data comes from conservative Islamic nations.

“The burqa really works,” Sullins said. “When you cover your women head to toe with cloth to keep them from being viewed by men outside their family, and you keep them strictly segregated from men throughout their growing years until they get married, you’re going to have less premarital sex.”

Suzy Ismail, a marriage and divorce counselor and the author of several books on Muslim marriage, said low rates of premarital and extramarital sex among Muslims are rooted in the religion.

“For Muslims, any form of *zinna* [fornication or adultery] or anything that leads to *zinna* is religiously prohibited,” Ismail said. “In consistently reminding others and oneself of the importance of modest dress, modest actions and modest interactions, Muslims tend to inculcate the concepts of sexual morals from a young age.” —RNS

This article was edited Nov. 16, 2012.