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Fostering Gender Equality as a Means to Counter Radical Religious Islamic Movements

Wolfgeher, Stephane

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On the cover. U.S. Army soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group instruct recruits in the Afghanistan National Army on the operation of their 7.62 mm AK-47 assault rifles, during a live fire exercise held on the range near Kabul, Afghanistan, during Operation Enduring Freedom (DoD photo).
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Foreword

The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) partnered with the Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Chapter of the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) in sponsoring the annual chapter essay contest. The first-place winner is recognized each year at the NDIA SO/LIC Symposium in mid-February, and the prize is $1,000 cash. The runner-up receives $500.

The competition is open to resident and nonresident students attending Professional Military Education (PME) institutions and has produced outstanding works on special operations issues. These essays provide current insights on what our PME students see as priority national security issues affecting special operations.

Essay contestants can choose any topic related to special operations. Submissions include hard-hitting and relevant recommendations that many Special Operations Forces commanders throughout United States Special Operations Command find very useful. Some entries submitted are a synopsis of the larger research project required for graduation or an advanced degree, while others are written specifically for the essay contest. Regardless of approach, these essays add value to the individuals’ professional development, provide an outlet for expressing new ideas and points of view, and contribute to the special operations community as a whole.

JSOU is pleased to offer this selection of essays from the 2010 contest. The JSOU intent is that this compendium will benefit the reader professionally and encourage future PME students to enter the contest. Feedback is welcome, and your suggestions will be incorporated into future JSOU reports.

Kenneth H. Poole
Director, JSOU Strategic Studies Department
Fostering Gender Equality as a Means to Counter Radical Religious Islamic Movements

Stephane Wolfgeher

The U.S. has implemented various strategies in countries where radical religious threats abound and yet still continues to fight the same threats. Studies indicate states with higher levels of gender equality engage in less severe or lower levels of inter- and intrastate violence. This suggests that fostering gender equality may be a viable long-term alternative strategy to target the societal acceptance of these threats.

Recent conflicts have not been characterized as mass against mass or state vs. state, but as states against terrorist, insurgent, or radical religious groups. The United States has attempted to combat these adversaries through the elimination of specific threats and the establishment of democratic governments in states where these groups operate. Today the U.S. is still fighting against the same threats. It is unlikely that one golden strategy exists that will defeat or diffuse all these threats and, therefore, there are additional strategies that may be pursued to reduce support for these groups in the countries where they are present. It is under the guise of alternative methods that this essay argues for support for improved gender equality, especially in the realm of personal status codes (family law), education, and political involvement to foster an environment that is less tolerant of specifically radical religious groups.

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Why Islamic States?

The World Economic Forum Gender Gap report assigns a grade to all countries meeting minimum measurable requirements.¹ This grade is a compilation of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Of countries that are a part of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and that meet minimum measurable requirements (of which there are 35), only five countries are in the top 50 percent. Twenty-two countries occupy the bottom 28 places. Those occupying the bottom spots include Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Yemen.

Radical religious groups are not restricted to Islamic states or the Middle East. Gender inequality is also not limited to these areas. However, the focus of this essay is on states that have tangible means of implementing structural inequality through codes or laws. As the U.S. is actively engaged in combating the spread of terrorism by radical extremists, this essay targets areas that are often seen as the nexus of these movements.

Women’s Peace Theory

There are two predominant arguments as to why women are associated with peace—the essentialist and the constructivist argument. The essentialist argument is based on the idea that “female aversion to violence is inherent in the essential nature of women” and the constructivist argument assumes that “gender roles and their accompanying attitudes are socially constructed.”² There is, however, a third argument that distances the premise away from attributes of women, whether inherent or constructed, and focuses instead on the socially constructed attitudes of dominance, violence, and subordination in both the domestic and international sphere and which can be expanded to include other forms of discrimination, such as ethnic inequality. Structural inequality manifests when societal order is based upon “subjugation and inequality that is rooted in hierarchy, domination, and the use of force.”³

The definition of gender equality changes depending on the source—it can be equality of opportunity in education, work, and political circles; equality under the law; suffrage; or equality of self-determination or choice. A United Nations (UN) report suggests a culturally neutral definition of gender equality: “Gender equality refers to the goal of achieving equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and boys and
girls.”⁴ This definition supports the argument for structural equality instead of focusing on individual characteristics and attitudes of men or women.

There is no one measure of gender equality. Rather, various studies have used different variables to capture the level of gender equality of states, such as the presence of state female leadership, percentage of female parliamentary participation, and the ratio of female-to-male higher education attainment; parliamentary participation and length of suffrage rights; or percentage of women in the workforce and fertility levels (positing that fertility levels are a complex measurement of interrelated social, political, and economic status of women in society).⁵ Regardless of which variables were used to measure gender equality, the following hypotheses were supported in the studies on gender equality and inter- and intrastate violence:

a. States with higher levels of gender equality use lower levels of violence during crises, are less likely to use force first in interstate disputes, and are associated with lower levels of intrastate armed conflict.⁶
b. States with higher levels of domestic repression and discrimination are more likely to use force first in interstate disputes.⁷

These five studies focused on the state level of analysis and did not presume that gender equality directly caused reduced levels of violence. Instead they postulated a correlation between gender equality and reduced violence, with other intervening variables present.⁹ They argued that measures of gender equality supersede those of economic development as statistically significant in the levels of internal violence. Specifically, the relationship between gender equality and economic advancement is what exerts the pacifying influence on inter- and intrastate violence.¹⁰

In the various studies, the following variables were significant in determining the resultant level of violence:

a. Economic development, conflict history, and democracy¹¹
b. Presence and number of at-risk minorities, transitional polities, and GDP¹²
c. Trigger and democracy score¹³
d. Economic growth, allies, democratic homogeneity, and democracy.¹⁴
The following variables were considered insignificant: ethnic dominance, critical mass of women in parliament, and years since regime change; and polity type (either autocracy or democracy, but not transitory types).\(^\text{15}\) As stated in one of the studies by Caprioli, “the spread of gender equality is an indirect method for reducing the level of violence among states internationally in the long term.”\(^\text{16}\)

Research at the state level of action seems to support the theory that increasing gender equality will ultimately result in less severe or lower levels of inter- and intrastate violence. At the individual level, societies whose attitudes are more inclined towards gender equality are more supportive of nonviolent conflict resolution. Under the UN definition of gender equality, the most obvious illustration of structural inequality in Islamic states are those related to family law and personal status codes.

**Is Islam the Problem?**

As personal status codes and family law are based on *shari’a* (Islamic law), one might wonder if Islam is the source of gender inequality in Islamic states. Various authors have made the argument that gender inequality is not congruent in Islam and is due to pre-Islamic cultures, geographic traditions, and historical predominance of patriarchal societies of those regions.

For example, Minault summarizes Sayyid Mumtaz Ali’s quest to rectify gender inequality as early as the late 1890s.\(^\text{17}\) Sayyid Mumtaz Ali was a Deobandi, with an education in Islamic sciences. He studied the Quran, Arabic grammar, Persian literature, *fiqh* (law), and *mantiq* (logic) and used these skills in his argument against gender inequality. He believed that “the position of women in Islamic law was theoretically much higher than their current status was in fact,” and “keeping women in ignorance and isolation is not a requirement of Islam, and to say that it is betrays a lack of understanding of religion as well as a fundamental mistrust of women which is destructive of family life, of human love, and of all that the Prophet stood for in a dynamic, just human society.”\(^\text{18}\) His treatise on women’s rights in Islam, *Huquq un-Niswan*, focused on disputing arguments about men’s inherent superiority, advocating women’s education, discussing *purdah* (modest behavior) and marriage customs, and clarifying the relations between husband and wife. He used not only Quranic verses to dispute conventional wisdom but also logically interpreted the Quran in an attempt to change archaic beliefs in response to current conditions. Ultimately, Ali stated that
gender equality is promoted in Islam, inequality is maintained by social customs (social structuring), and inequality is deleterious to society and to human relations.

Moghadam’s UN background paper specifically targets the manifestation of gender inequality via the personal status codes or family law in Arab and Middle Eastern societies.\textsuperscript{19} Often these laws (or the stricter interpretation of these laws) were implemented in order to placate Islamist movements, to reinvigorate state legitimacy, or as a means to distance a society from western influence. Secular feminists in the region have targeted the content of the laws as the source of oppression but are adamant that the laws are based on patriarchal interpretations of Islam and not true Islam. It is important to highlight they are not attacking Islam as a religion and not denying their adherence to Islam, but arguing that the laws are inaccurate interpretations of Islam; their cultures are sexist, their religion is not.

Mashour, in the discussion over divorce and polygamy in Tunisia and Egypt, focused on the idea of shari’a as an evolving concept.\textsuperscript{20} She stated that of the five sources for shari’a, three are human creations, and specifically that \textit{ijtihad} is the avenue of progressive (or new) interpretation using independent juristic reasoning. Her argument focuses on the fact that Quranic texts are traditionally interpreted by men, laws are traditionally drafted and enacted by men, and the societies where Islam is present are societies that are traditionally (not based on Islam) patriarchal and have repressed and marginalized women for centuries. The solution, she postulates, is that to change this mindset, there needs to be movement for feminist \textit{ijtihad}—that women need “to engage in a process of understanding Islamic law, its interpretations, and Islamic jurisprudence as well as to articulate counter arguments to prove that patriarchal viewpoints are unwarranted and inconsistent with Islamic teachings.”\textsuperscript{21}

Interestingly, many Islamic countries guarantee equal rights in their constitutions. Most Islamic states have ratified (with reservations) the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a UN product.\textsuperscript{22} Regardless of their constitutions or their ratification of international treaties, they still justify inequality based on their personal status laws or family codes, which in turn are supposedly rooted in Islamic interpretation, but more often are a result of structural inequality based on a traditionally patriarchal society.
What do women in these Islamic countries want? Esposito and Mogahed compiled information from Gallup polls and illustrated that “majorities of women in virtually every country we surveyed say that women deserve the same legal rights as men, to vote without influence from family members, to work at any job they are qualified for, and even to serve in the highest levels of government.” Women in these countries want equality; however, they want it in a way that is congruent with their culture and religion. They want equality to arise from within, not in reaction to pressures from without. The Gallup polls also refute the argument that greater religiosity correlates to decreased egalitarian views towards women. This supports the argument that gender inequality in Middle Eastern states is more based on societal structure vs. religion.

Case Reviews
Morocco and the struggle over the personal status law (moudawwana) is the first case review. Traditionally, in Morocco and in many other Middle Eastern countries, the society can be characterized as “hierarchical, patriarchal, and class-based, leaving women, children, and the poor as their most repressed elements.” Women were secluded and segregated; their roles included wife, mother, daughter, but rarely professional; women were discriminated against in areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and ownership of property; a woman was considered a minor throughout her life; and women were expected to embody morality, obey their husbands, and submit. The laws governing the private space for females were in direct contradiction to the laws governing the public space, such as the constitution and international covenants, which guarantee universal standards. The feminist movement in Morocco has existed since 1956, but it has not been until recently that it has seen significant changes in personal status laws.

As early as 1947, the monarchy advocated expanding women’s roles through their personal actions, such as educating their own daughters, but not in law reform. In the 1990s, women’s movements and leftist political parties began pressing for reforms to the moudawwana. Specifically, they wanted equality, majority status at legal age of maturity, rights for a woman to contract her own marriage, equalized divorce processes, polygamy outlawed, and to make education and work a right, not a concession. The monarchy
also joined the push for reforms at this time. There was strong opposition from religious circles, which resulted in shelving some efforts until later.

The King of Morocco has a unique position as the “Leader of the Faithful.”²⁷ In that capacity, he framed the issue of equality in an Islamic context and asserted that 1) the moudawwana was not a sacred text, 2) Islam advocates equality and dignity, and 3) the new laws were not flawless and should be revised in an ijtihad effort (another association with Islamic interpretation). The major reform in 2004 came in the aftermath of the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks.²⁸ This important public opinion was decidedly soured against Islamists (the major opposition of the moudawwana reform) in response to these attacks and forced them to a position of weakness and cooperation with the Moroccan monarchy. While the reforms are not perfect, it marks a step along the path to gender equality.

Resistance was mainly from religious and conservative groups focused on maintaining the status quo. The dissenters argued that changing the moudawwana disparaged Islamic law and posed a threat to the Islamic way of life. The Moroccan King countered these arguments by couching the reforms in religious context, divorced from western influence. There was no mention of the inherent right of women, such as detailed in the CEDAW. In addition, there was great support from left-wing political groups, women’s activist groups, and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).²⁹

In contrast to Morocco is the second case review of Jordan’s lack of advancement in personal status laws. Jordan and Morocco have similar political structures, majority Muslim populations, similar political relations with the U.S. and Israel, secular constitutions that guarantee equal rights, and influential Islamist movements that are socially conservative.³⁰ Both countries signed on to the UN CEDAW in the early 1990s with reservations regarding personal status laws, and both reform movements attempted to co-opt Islamists and/or religious conservatives by modifying the proposed changes to mollify some concerns. Women’s movements began in earnest in the early 1990s (as was the case in Morocco) and the Jordanian monarch attempted to reform personal status laws in 1996, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004. Reforms were defeated in the lower house in 2004.

The differences affecting the eventual outcome were many. Islamists eventually cooperated with the Moroccan King, but not with the Jordanian King. Leftist parties in Morocco supported women’s associations and human rights activists. Jordan lacked any significant left-wing political
groups, and its politics were dominated by groups with tribal affiliations. Morocco had more female representation in parliament due to active quotas, whereas female representation in Jordanian politics was small and biased and populated with women from rural, socially conservative tribes. NGOs were restricted in Jordan, resulting in less opposition to Islamist and conservative movements. Finally, Morocco couched their reforms in a culturally (and religiously) acceptable indigenous reform movement versus reliance on arguments about equality and human rights that were seen as products of western thought and institutions. The combination of supposed foreign thought and lack of political backing prevented the reform of the Jordanian personal status laws.  

Cautions

It is naive to think that implementing change so contrary to established customs and beliefs will be embraced by all. It is also naive to think that if the structural equality theory is correct, that in an environment of violence and oppression, the opposition will allow the change to peaceably occur. In Uzbekistan, women were either prosecuted by the communists for failing to unveil or killed by family members for unveiling during the 1920 reform movements by the Soviets. Afghan women have been killed for demanding their rights and attempting to change the status quo. Afghan girls have been assaulted with acid while attempting to go to school. Women have been verbally attacked and defamed for working outside the home or failing to cover themselves. Change will not be without resistance.

What can we do?

Studies about gender equality and violence have shown that patriarchal societies which foster domestic environments of oppression and dominance, measured as gender inequality, act in the same way in inter- and intrastate conflicts.

An avenue exists to combat structural (specifically gender) inequality by addressing personal status codes or family law. By addressing these laws, one aims to increase female education, participation in government, and overall levels of gender equality. While the studies did not propose a direct causal relationship between gender equality and less inter- and intrastate violence, and while there are multiple other significant variables that may also affect a state’s level of violence, increasing gender equality has other
positive effects, such as lower infant mortality rates due to better education, lower fertility rates, potential economic growth, and basic adherence to intrinsic human rights.\textsuperscript{36}

So how does the U.S. go about increasing gender equality in Middle Eastern or Islamic societies? One route that has not worked in the past is encouraging the change through western prodding, often taken as western cultural superiority. Boris Johnson, a British parliamentarian and journalist, said “it is time for concerted cultural imperialism. They are wrong about women. We are right.”\textsuperscript{37} Karen Hughes—in her tour of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt—compared the status of Saudi women to the “‘broken wing’ of a bird because they lack the right of full participation, including the rights to vote and drive.”\textsuperscript{38} This type of rhetoric alienates potential allies and fuels fundamentalist religious opposition. Changes put forth that hinted of western culture or influence often did not succeed.

In some movements for gender equality reform, there were bastions of support from NGOs, home-grown women’s rights groups, and established political parties. In others, NGOs were forbidden, independent political parties were banned, and women’s rights movements were only active underground. This emphasizes that there is not one solution to the problem. One must take a look at the society as a whole, the political structure and political freedom, the language and history, the laws codifying structural inequality, and the potential for social movements. It is important to recognize that not every state is the same and that the approach must be tailored to the situation.

Othman and others suggest multiple supporting avenues to stimulate change.\textsuperscript{39} First and foremost, Islamic feminists must be taught and trained in Islam to be able to contest patriarchal interpretations. They must be credible to sway both men and women. Groups advocating change must establish coalitions; they must cooperate with domestic groups, such as civil society and political parties, and with international groups or organizations in other countries, such as the Malaysian group, Sisters in Islam (SIS). Actions to take include advocacy through memorandums to government officials or letters to the editor of public newspapers or magazines; public education and awareness; seminars and workshops to discuss gender and law issues; public lectures; training on women’s rights for men and women, professionals, lawyers, and young political leaders; creating resource centers; and networking with state actors, NGOs, and other women’s groups (secular, traditional, and Islamist).
If the U.S. wants to help change the status quo, it has to do it in a culturally sensitive and respectful way. In reality, it should be done in an indirect manner. Zainah Anwar stated “overt support by Western groups is actually counterproductive because it undermines the local authenticity of moderate movements in the eyes of the public.” Often, support and praise from western groups and governments are “shortsighted and unwelcome.” The U.S. already supports some pursuits, such as funding for political education, voter education, and leadership training for women in Iraq, but could take some lessons from Special Operations Forces and find a way to work with feminist groups by, with, and through, with only a local face. The U.S. could deploy specially trained groups or individuals to work directly with host-nation organizations to support changes with resources, knowledge, experience, and connections.

Ultimately, this essay recommends investing in another approach to curtail support for radical religious, insurgent, and terrorist groups by increasing gender equality. This approach must not be framed as cultural superiority, or the West against the Islamic world. It must be tailored to the country the U.S. wishes to influence, congruent with their culture, language, societal structure, history, political capabilities, laws (and their basis), and beliefs. Overt support could jeopardize advancement and the best help the U.S. can provide might be using covert or indirect means to train, finance, resource, or otherwise support indigenous equality movements. Breaking down structural inequality and increasing gender equality may ultimately result in a society that does not support attitudes of dominance, violence, and subordination in both the domestic and international sphere, resulting in less support for domestic insurgent, terrorist, or radical religious violent movements.

Endnotes


5. Melander, “Gender Equality.”


10. Melander, “Gender Equality.”

11. Ibid.


13. Caprioli and Boyer, “Gender, Violence.”


18. Ibid., 149-150.

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21. Ibid., 594.


24. Ibid., 123.


27. Ibid., 345.


38. Ibid., 124.