

Oil, Islam, and Women

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Women have made less progress toward gender equality in the Middle East than in any other region. Many observers claim this is due to the region's Islamic traditions. I suggest that oil, not Islam, is at fault; and that oil production also explains why women lag behind in many other countries. Oil production reduces the number of women in the labor force, which in turn reduces their political influence. As a result, oil-producing states are left with atypically strong patriarchal norms, laws, and political institutions. I support this argument with global data on oil production, female work patterns, and female political representation, and by comparing oil-rich Algeria to oil-poor Morocco and Tunisia. This argument has implications for the study of the Middle East, Islamic culture, and the resource curse.

In the Middle East, fewer women work outside the home, and fewer hold positions in government, than in any other region of the world. According to most observers, this troubling anomaly is due to the region's Islamic traditions (e.g., Sharabi 1988; World Bank 2004). Some even argue that the "clash of civilizations" between the Islamic world and the West has been caused, in part, by the poor treatment of Muslim women (Inglehart and Norris 2003a; Landes and Landes 2001).

This paper suggests that women in the Middle East are underrepresented in the workforce and in government because of oil—not Islam. Oil and mineral production can also explain the unusually low status of women in many countries outside the Middle East, including Azerbaijan, Botswana, Chile, Nigeria, and Russia.

Oil production affects gender relations by reducing the presence of women in the labor force. The failure of women to join the nonagricultural labor force has profound social consequences: it leads to higher fertility rates, less education for girls, and less female influence within the family. It also has far-reaching political consequences: when fewer women work outside the home, they are less likely to exchange information and overcome collective action problems; less likely to mobilize politically, and to lobby for expanded rights; and less likely to gain representation in government. This leaves oil-producing states with atypically strong patriarchal cultures and political institutions.¹

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¹ Here and elsewhere, "oil" refers to both oil and natural gas; and "work force" and "labor force" refer to men and women who work in non-agricultural jobs that are outside the home and inside the formal sector, and who are nationals of the specified country.

This argument challenges a common belief about economic development: that growth promotes gender equality (e.g., Inglehart and Norris 2003b; Lerner 1958). Development institutions like the World Bank often echo this theme, and it is widely accepted among development experts (World Bank 2001). This paper instead suggests that different types of economic growth have different consequences for gender relations: when growth encourages women to join the formal labor market, it ultimately brings about greater gender equality; when growth is based on oil and mineral extraction, it discourages women from entering the labor force and tends to exaggerate gender inequalities.

It also casts new light on the "resource curse." Oil and mineral production has previously been tied to slow economic growth (Sachs and Warner 1995), authoritarian rule (Ross 2001a), and civil war (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). This paper suggests that oil extraction has even broader consequences than previously recognized: it not only affects a country's government and economy but also its core social structures.

Finally, it has important policy implications. The United States and Europe consume most of the world's oil exports, and hence have strong effects on the economies of oil-exporting states. One of these effects is to reduce economic opportunities for women; another is to reduce their political influence. A third effect may be to foster Islamic fundamentalism: a recent study of 18 countries found that when Muslim women had fewer economic opportunities, they were more likely to support fundamentalist Islam (Blaydes and Linzer 2006). Changes in Western energy policies could strongly affect these outcomes.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

Social theorists have long claimed that women can achieve social and political emancipation by working outside the home (e.g., Engels 1978 (1884)). Many recent studies support this claim. Female labor force participation helps raise female school enrollment and literacy: when families know that girls will be able to earn their own income—and contribute to household income—they tend to invest more in their health and education (Michael 1985). Female labor force participation is also linked to lower fertility rates: when