

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.