Women and Politics in the Middle East: Study on the Broader Socio-Political and Religious Issues

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Abstract

Some scholars assert that women's political participation and religion are not associated with each other, and that formal institutions and structures could either facilitate or hamper women's political participation. However, other scholars posit that Islam is a major factor in influencing the role of women in Islamic societies. The main hypotheses investigated in this study are: 1) The degree of women's political participation in the Middle East is comparatively lower than in liberal societies; 2) Islam has not singly molded gender relations and gender ideology in certain Muslim countries, but interacted with other factors such as the state, patriarchy, and international politics; and 3) There is a relation between women's political participation and the variant of Islamism, either moderate or hardline, and the interpretation of the Quran and *Shariah* law. Some scholars also espouse that Islam is egalitarian in its original text, and it is *Hadith* (sayings of Muhammad) and *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) that endorse gender segregation and patriarchy. In literature, there are accounts and documents as to the type of women's political participation, the effect of Islam on their political participation, and the major factors that interact with Islam in affecting women's political participation. The major sources of data in the study are documents and existing records, and key informant interviews—to bridge the gap in the literature and to substantiate further from the expert's perspective and knowledge the discourse on the relations between Islam and women's political participation.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on women's political participation in the Middle East since participation of women in various levels of politics could be affected by structural, political, cultural, and religious factors.

Islamic feminism as a social movement is recognized to have formally started during the 1979 revolution in Iran. The toppling of the Shah of Iran turned the secular government into an Islamic state, which advocated Islam as the standard rule for society (Shojaei, 2010). Historically, the status of women was based on the teachings of Islam and *hadith*. The role of women during the various Islamic periods, e.g., the

Shii and *Umaya* caliphates, and the representation of women's sexuality in the *Sufi* hagiography, is a more fundamental type of Islam. This ideological reference gave the rationale for secular feminists to fight for the secularization of the state that was intrinsically tied to Islamic religion, and end hegemony of religion over civil society (Kia, 2000). However, some Muslim feminists felt that Dar-Al-Islam had degenerated as a result of western secular values, and in order to salvage their true *Quranic* identity, they launched a struggle against secularization and helped establish the Islamic state. The Islamic feminists

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believe that Islam is the only religion that does not exploit or marginalize them. Although Islam assigns the domestic sphere to women, they could in principle participate in the political and economic affairs of society. But in practice, the social relations remained to be gendered especially marriage and families (Ungor, 1968).

The main hypotheses investigated in this study were: 1) women's political participation in the Middle East is lower compared to liberal societies; 2) Islam has not singly molded gender relations and gender ideology in Muslim countries, but interacted with other factors such as the state, political parties, social movements, patriarchy, modernization, and international politics; and 3) the impact of Islam on women's political participation depends on the variant of Islamism, either moderate or hardliner, and the interpretation of the Quran and *Shariah* law.

2. Methodology

In order to answer the three hypotheses of the research paper, a comparative case study of Islam and its relation to women's political participation was done for eight countries: Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Yemen, Cyprus and Kuwait. So far, in the review of literature, there are accounts and documents in these countries as to the type of women's political participation, the effect of Islam on their political participation, and major factors that interact with Islam in affecting women's political participation.

The major sources of data for the study were documents and existing records, and key informant interviews—to bridge the gap in the literature and to substantiate further from the expert's perspective and knowledge the discourse on the relations between Islam and women's political participation, and related research questions. For the key expert interviews, the following were interviewed: 1) representative from government organization; 2) representative from non-governmental organizations; and 3) representative form academic institutions. The experts were: 1) Prof. Macrina Morados of the Institute of Islamic Studies; 2) Prof. Julkipli Wadi, also from the Institute of Islamic Studies; 3) Ms. Grace Bernabe from from Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process; and 4) Dr. Carolyn Sobritchea of the Asian Center in the University of the Philippines Diliman.

The ethics in research was followed. The objectives and research design were clarified with the interviewees/experts.

3. Presentation of Results and Discussion

Literature review, secondary data, and key informant interviews of experts were analyzed in terms of significant factors that are seen to interact with Islam in affecting women's political participation, as shown below.

3.1. Women's Political Participation in Muslim and Liberal Societies

In many Muslim countries, although women have gained entry into the labor force, they were not traditionally seen in politics due to the long held view that "politics is a man's world," and motherhood and marriage remain to be the most important goals and roles of women (Paxton & Knonovich, 2003). This is not due to lack of education of women, but from traditional values of society based on religious beliefs. This is substantiated by various quantitative studies which show that Middle Eastern countries have lower levels of female representation in the legislature due to their conservative gender and religious ideologies compared to Scandinavian countries that are more liberal (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). In more conservative societies, the legal status of the woman is incompatible with the modernist project of democratization. The seclusion of women is a symbol of gender-biased ideology, and likewise a means to further hamper any form of social organization where women and men could interact (Ungor, 1968).

In the key expert interviews, there were contrasting expositions on the role of Islam in relation to women's political participation. The key expert interviewee stated that Islam has not oppressed women or deterred their entry into the political sphere. In fact, Islam liberated women from slavery that was prevalent in the Arab culture in the seventeenth century. Islam, according to the expert, puts women on a pedestal, and this is why veiling or wearing of *hijab* or *purdah* is advocated within the religious creed. The woman must always manifest propriety and modesty, especially in public in order to attain the highest level of moral conduct. She said that there is no difference in rationale between a nun in the Catholic religion covering her head, and the Muslim woman who veils herself.

As for political participation of women, another expert interviewee said that the tradition of Islam, Qur'an, and the prophetic traditions of Prophet Muhammad endorse public participation of women. In fact, during the time of prophet Muhammad, women were allowed to ask questions directly to the prophet. Women can express their political views and can join movements. However, this should be in the context of limitations set by the Quran. Delineation is seen between the concept of women liberation in the West vis-à-vis the liberation enjoyed by the women in the Islamic code. There are these guiding principles of the Sharia in the conduct of a woman's life.

According to another expert interviewee, the official codes

of conduct or "generally accepted codes" in Muslim societies vary in different geographic locations. There are different forms of Islamism in various parts of the world. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the code of conduct for women is that they are not allowed to drive cars, or go out in public without an escort, while in Egypt, there is less restriction on women's driving. Women in Egypt are educated, can drive cars, and participate in universal suffrage, among others. The expert said that it is unwise to make a sweeping generalization on one cultural and religious reading of Islam's prescription for conduct. It is likewise unwise to only view a part of the broad spectrum of political participation. The spectrum of Islamism can range from *Radical Islam* to *Conservative Islam* to *Liberalist Islam.* The commonality among these different forms of Islam in regard women is the wearing of veil. It is the essential for Muslim women to wear purdah. Meanwhile, women's activities in the political affairs can range from direct to indirect political participation. Direct political participation includes electoral participation and running for public office. Indirect political participation can include women's support for their husband's political affairs and their role as educators of their children. From one point of the spectrum, a conservative society prohibits women in any form of political participation. On the other side of the spectrum are societies that encourage women to participate in social activities or even in political party's organizations. The expert said that one now can "find relatively distinct mode of new generations of Muslim women participating in different spheres of activities—many are active in the field of education, civil society, politics, bureaucracy." However, the code of conduct is invariably interpreted in different Muslim societies. Even the wearing of *hijab* differs in various Muslim countries.

On the other hand, political participation according to another expert interviewee, is an integral part of the political participation of a woman. This participation should be an active one in the arena of politics and governance so that the voices, interests, perspectives, and needs of the women can be brought to political discussions and governance frameworks. In the United Nations, one of the most serious gender equality problems is said to be the low participation of women in politics and governance.

For another expert interviewee, "Islam plays a huge role in the political participation of women. Islam for the women is their life; what the Qur'an says defines their life, which is why the impact of Islam on Muslim women is huge. Islam is their way of life." This is one of the challenges in working with Muslim communities—how to merge gender sensitivity with Islam."

3.2. Comparative Analysis of Women's Political Participation within the Context of Broader Issues of Modernization and International Relations

Women's political participation can emerge as a result of cultural and religious forces in society upon which it is articulated. For instance, Iran is essentially an Islamist state and while the Iranian woman has attained her full economic and political rights guaranteed by the Constitution, there are restrictions on women's autonomy and full expression of identity and sexuality. Women's political participation in Iran is thus articulated within the Islamic Shi'a Islamic values, diametrically opposed to western secular values (Shojaei, 2000). The low political and social location of women in the Middle East is often associated with the forceful hold of Islam in the region. The reign of patriarchal system remains a norm, and the *imams* (religious scholars) use Islam as a basis to reinforce this type of system. Therefore, in this context, Roded (2008) stated that Islam is an explanatory variable for the low rate of women's participation in the public sphere.

However, there are scholars who have a different view on the low political participation of women. Moghadam (1993) presumes that political and economic structures are responsible for the low social status of women in the Middle East. She states that there is limited industrialization and modernization in the region as opposed to Western countries, thus the capacity of the job market to accept labor, particularly female labor, is not available. She also draws a correlation on development strategies and women's employment. In countries such as Turkey, Tunisia and Israel, women's participation in the labor force is relatively higher than in the Gulf States. The economic backbone of the former states is labor-intensive and export-oriented industrialization, while oil-rich countries opt for more capital-intensive economic structure. Thus, labor demand in these states is low. Consequently, women's labor rate participation is low. Moghadam (1993) questions the positions of scholars who single out cultural determinism as the main factor of low rates of women's emancipatory status in the region.

In Saudi Arabia, women's political participation is hampered by religious forces and the state. Women's empowerment come in the form of education, but not co-education with males. This type of education is supervised by the *ulamas,* the Islam scholars. Religious content of the curricula ensured that women adhere to Islamic teachings on how they should act and behave. Gender segregation today is still prevalent, and this is shown by an incident of fifteen school girls burned to death in a Mecca school because the male police could not come near these girls who were "not veiled and properly clothed" (Blaydes & El Tarouty, 2009). Women's political

participation is therefore articulated within the framework of conservative education in Egypt.

The New Republic in Turkey has implemented several reforms for women. To ensure the break with the Ottoman Empire, the new regime abolished the caliphate state, and effected reforms for women including equal rights in marriage, family and inheritance laws, and women's political visibility. The victory of the Republics against the Ottoman Empire came in the midst of modernization influences of the West, and Turkey's search for national identity. There was a national sentiment to break away from the Islamic state. Women's political participation in Turkey, therefore, was articulated within the search for Turkish national identity, as well as the attempt of the state to modernize (Cosar, 2007).

In Egypt and Pakistan, women's political participation is articulated within the clamor of women for autonomy and agency, as well as lately, within the political agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood. Historically, women played an integral role in the success of nationalist and revolutionary struggles. There is a sense that a real discourse has emerged in Egypt in line with women's representation. But there are also those who espouse that women's struggles in the political arena have been strategically used by radical Islamic groups for mobilization during campaigns and elections. Thus, in Egypt, women have accommodated modernization to improve their living conditions while still adhering to their Islamic traditions (Blaydes & El Tarouty, 2009).

Meanwhile, women's political participation in Jordan, Yemen, and Cyprus is articulated within the political needs and expediencies of political parties that are male-dominated. In these countries, women's issues take a secondary significance to the overall political agenda of competing political parties. Women are accommodated to broaden electoral support and to placate international apprehension. Women's issues have not developed as a distinct agenda but as a strategic positioning. Hence, women's political participation in these countries is articulated within broader issues such as state agenda, modernization, nationalism, and international relations (Monshipouri, 2003).

Based on the key informant interviews, there are indeed factors that interact with Islam in affecting women's political participation. For instance, one expert interviewee stated that modernization and development projects of the state can give a better leverage for women. Women's political participation is not merely engaging in direct political actions, but in manifold ways of activities in the public sphere. Even if Muslim women do not directly participate in politics, they occupy important positions in the bureaucracy, entrepreneurship, or simply by supporting their husband in politics.

Another key expert interviewee said that culture conflated with religious beliefs especially the fundamentalist led to lower women's political participation. This is due to the long held beliefs that women should stay at home and the idealization of the domestication of women. There is an observation that Muslim women do not participate in public decision-making processes because of faith-based religious beliefs and practices. There are more restrictions in Muslim societies and as a case is Pakistan wherein the resurgence of fundamentalism in some villages in Pakistan led to the harassment or even killing of women who campaigned for women politicians."

3.3. Variants of Islam and Women's Political Participation

The variant of Islamism is important to analyze in this paper since Islamic influence on women's political participation is not a monolithic reading of the Quran (Prokop, 2003). There are many versions and interpretations of the Quran with regard to social, political, and familial relations. Hence, the effect of Islam on women's political participation depends on two discourses about Islam and Islamism: first, what is the religious text referred to as there are several sources of religious teachings in Islam, and second, what is the ideological stance of the Islamist group—either moderate or hardliner?

Another factor that should be considered in the interpolation between Islam and women's political participation is the actual interpretation of the Qur'an codified in the Muslim Personal Laws. The expert interviewee said that the Muslims have what they call the Code of Muslim Personal Laws (CMPL). The CMPL is the qualification of their personal laws—in relation to divorce, property rights, and women's rights. The CMPL is the operationalization of their Qur'an and what their civil laws stipulate. The CMPL is sort of an extension of the *Shariah* Law.

There are variants of Islamism based on the various interpretations of the Quran and the religious texts. The religious texts in Islam are the Quran, *tawhid* (declaration of the oneness of God), *tajwid* (recitation), *tafsir* (interpretation, commentary on the Qur'an), *hadith* (record of the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions) and *fiqh* or *Sharia* (Islamic jurisprudence) (Prokop, 2003). Some Muslim scholars such as Agaoglu (1985 in Cosar 2007, p. 119) and Paxton and Kunovich (2003) stipulate that *Sharia* or *fiqh* based on *tafsir* and *hadith*, not the Quran, relegates women to the domestic sphere, and this domestication is carried over to the public arena. Margot Badran (2002 in Jamal, 2009, p. 91) states that the basic argument of Islamic feminism is that the Qur'an affirms the principle of equality of all human beings but that the practice of equality of women and men (and other categories of people) has been

impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices. Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*, consolidated in its classical form in the 9th century, was itself heavily saturated with the patriarchal behaviors of the day. Thus a priority of Islamic feminism is to go straight to Islam's fundamental and central holy text, the Qur'an, in an effort to recuperate its egalitarian message. For the Turkish scholar Agaoglu (1985 in Cosar 2007, p. 120), the decline of women's status in Muslim societies is not due to Islam but to patriarchy rooted in the Persian (Shi'a in Iran) ideology.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that in the Middle East, the responses to the universalization of gender equality and inclusiveness have depended largely on several factors such as the relations of women within the family, the collectivity represented by the culture and religion, and the state.

The paper has argued that the effect of Islam on the political participation of women should not disregard the influence of political opportunities such as modernization, nationalisms, uprisings, political structures such as states and political parties, and political actors such as the women themselves, that interact with Islam in the understanding of the Islamic women's socio-political location.

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