

Consolidated Response

The Impact of Religion on Women's Leadership Roles in Politics and Public Life

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Introduction

Despite comprising more than 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to lack access to political leadership opportunities and resources at all levels of government. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but a necessary pre-condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Governance structures which do not result in the equal participation of men and women, or their equal enjoyment of benefits from state interventions are by definition neither inclusive nor democratic.

In 2007, recognizing that over the last century women's gains in the political arena have been slow and inadequate, five international organizations came together to make women's political participation their collective priority and devise a strategy that would scale-up each of the organization's efforts to foster gender equality in politics:

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)
Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
National Democratic Institute (NDI)
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)

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Consolidated Response on the impact of religion on women's leadership roles in politics and public life

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff and the contributions submitted by Azza Karam, Senior Culture Adviser at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); and Margaret Mensah Williams, Member of Parliament in Namibia.

Question

Do religion and religious norms impact women's participation in politics? If a religious clergy in a country refuses to promote women to religious leadership positions, does it send a signal for women's limited role in politics and public life?

Introduction

Religion and religious norms historically have played an important role in shaping public policies and public life in many countries around the world. Some countries may experience the impact of religion on their public life more than others. In many countries, this impact ebbed and flowed throughout the course of history. Experts suggest differentiating between religion and religious norms. For instance, Dr. Azza Karam, Senior Culture Adviser at UNFPA, points out the following:

“Religion and religious norms are not one and the same thing. Religion itself is a reference to a complicated set of institutions, texts (most considered holy, together with a body of interpretations thereof), as well as norms and values which are difficult to quantify, and almost impossible to group into one term. Moreover, religion also incorporates a range of spokespersons - some of whom are clergy and many of whom are, or can, be scholars, laymen and women, as well as, sometimes, political actors themselves. Religious norms is a more specific – yet still complicated – wording that refers to what some believe to be a form of behavior which is validated by religious beliefs.”
(Karam, A. Expert Opinion. 2009)

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the role of tradition and cultural norms that may be formed separately from religious norms or affect religious ideology.

This consolidated response highlights the impact of religious norms and religion on women's political participation. The response also describes women's participation in religious institutions and religious political parties, as well as women's resistance to religious limitations to their political participation.

Women's Participation in Religious Institutions

Research shows that women's participation in religious institutions around the world varies not only from a religion to religion, but also within the denominations of the same religion and can depend on cultural norms and traditions existing in a country or region. Speaking about religion and women's movements in the Middle East, Dr. Nadjé Al-Ali mentions that Islam itself is lived heterogeneously in the region, and highlights that while most Middle Easterners are Muslims, there are differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims as well as other Muslim groupings, such as the Alawite minority in Turkey. Dr. Al-Ali adds that women belonging to minority religious groups, such as the Maronites in Lebanon or the Copts in Egypt, are generally exposed to similar or the same cultural and social codes and traditions as their Muslim counterparts of the same social class. (Al-Ali, N. p.2. 2002)

Azza Karam, Senior Culture Adviser at UNFPA, highlights that in countries where religious institutions play an important role in determining national policy trends and international platforms, women's representation in such institutions can be considered as a form of political participation. Dr. Karam mentions that:

"The involvement of women in these institutions – or their absence from within them - at different levels, are important indicators of the extent to which these religious institutions sanction women's political participation." (Karam, A. Expert Opinion. 2009)

This statement is also supported by Ms. Margaret Mensah Williams, iKNOW Politics Expert and Member of Parliament in Namibia, who highlights that the refusal to promote women to leadership positions by a clergy of a specific religion is an indication that this specific community may not be ready to accept women into political and public life. (Williams, M. Expert Opinion. 2009) In their book, Pamela Paxton and Melanie Hughes talk about the impact of Confucianism on the role and participation of women in politics in China and in other Asian countries, including China, Japan, the Koreas, Vietnam, and Singapore. They mention that under Confucianism, women at every level are to occupy a position lower than men. For instance, in the Confucian Book of Rites it says that the woman should follow the man in her youth, as she follows her father and elder brother; when married she follows her husband and, when her husband is dead, she follows her son. Ms. Paxton and Ms. Hughes

state that when a culture dictates that women should be subordinate to men and should follow the opinions of their husbands and fathers, they are less likely to be politically active. Simultaneously, the few women who are politically active are not taken seriously by political leaders or regular citizens. (Paxton, P and Hughes, M. p.247. 2007)

Some religious institutions are more willing to involve women in their structures and give them a more prominent role. Pamela Paxton and Melanie Hughes suggest that in addition to electoral systems and political processes in each country, a country's dominant religion often influenced the development and success of first-wave women's movements. In their analysis, they mention that countries where Protestant Christianity is a dominant religion women's suffrage and representation in politics can be found earlier than in the countries with the dominance of Catholicism. Among the reasons cited as to why the Protestant religion may have encouraged women to participate in politics, Ms. Hughes and Ms. Paxton highlight the philosophical notions of Protestantism about the rights and responsibilities of the individual, particular emphasis on education, and individualism of both sexes. (Paxton, P and Hughes, M. pp.53-54, p.220. 2007)

Another example of a religion promoting women's participation in its structure is Pentecostal Christianity in Africa. According to Charlotte Spinks, African women are attracted to Pentecostal Christianity because, according to her, it rejects the socio-cultural status quo aspiring to escape from marginalization of certain groups, including women, in "patriarchal" societies. This form of Christianity, according to her, also preaches individual prosperity, which legitimizes ambitious young women seeking to break traditional barriers in order to achieve economic, social, and political independence. Ms. Spinks also points out that while many mainline Churches and traditional African cultures preserve leadership positions for men and the elderly, in Pentecostal Churches she says that women and youth are encouraged to exercise responsibility. (Spinks, C. pp. 22-26. 2003)

Exclusion of women from religious institutions and religious leadership may have a negative impact on women's status in society and limit their opportunities in politics and public life. Ms. Fatou Sow in her article about the influence of religion and traditions in Senegal mentions that in traditional Senegalese rituals women were highly respected and acted as leaders of worship, presided over fertility and possession rites, and represented divinities in the areas bordering the sea and rivers, specifically in the areas between Dakar, Cape Verde and Saint Louis. Ms. Fatou argues that women's role and status in society as well as cultural practices in Senegal changed after the introduction of Islam to the country. These changes resulted in women's absence in religious leadership positions and rituals, and in the dwindling role of women in society as a whole. (Sow, F. 2003)

Another example is Zambia where Christianity was declared as an official religion in the late 1970s. According to Isabele Phiri, Evangelical women seized the opportunity after Zambia declared itself a Christian nation to voice their views on politics. She mentions that some women leaders during their political campaigns used religious calls and claimed that joining politics was a response to a call from God. However, Ms. Phiri adds that neither Christianity nor cultural norms in Zambia fully promoted women to leadership positions in church and society. According to Ms. Phiri, this might be because Zambian male Evangelicals have not abandoned their assumptions about the need for male "headship". (Phiri, I. pp. 96-116. 2008)

Additionally, including women into religious leadership can inspire them in the future to run for public office. In her interview for iKNOW Politics, Violet Sampa Bredt, Member of Parliament in Zambia, spoke about her experiences and inspirations being the first woman minister in the United Church of Zambia and the first ever ordained woman clergy in Africa. Ms. Sampa Bredt mentions:

" I had a lot of challenges, first of all, to enter the church ministry because at that time it was unheard of for a young woman to be accepted for ordination, but I did go through a lot of difficulty and I overcame these things. I served my church faithfully at different levels for five years. I rose to the highest church rank one could ever think of, I served on the central control of the World Council of Churches for seven years, and I was for ten years the undersecretary of the Council of Churches in Zambia."(Bredt, Z. Interview with Violet Sampa Bredt, Member of Parliament, Zambia. iKNOW Politics. 2009)

Ms. Sampa Bredt concludes by saying that her work in the church inspired her to enter politics and stay active in public life. She adds that after leaving the Church she felt that both her community in the church and society in general needs her.

As described above, the impact of religion and religious norms on women's political participation may vary from country to country, and may even differ within the same religion depending on the rituals and ideology preached within a specific denomination of that religion.

Women and Religious Political Parties

Historically it has been sometimes assumed that secular and left-of-centre parties are more willing to promote women in politics, while conservative and religious parties limit women's

participation in politics and public life. Recent developments show that this is not always the case, since some religious parties started recruiting more women members to promote their political agendas. For instance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a coalition of religious political parties in Pakistan, despite its stated opposition to women's participation in political and public life, promoted women candidates in the 2002 elections to the National Assembly. As a result, 12 MMA women candidates were elected to the National Assembly in Pakistan. According to Ashutosh Misra, by promoting women in the national elections, MMA gave priority to power over ideology. (Misra, A. p.201. 2003)

Another documented example of a religious-based party promoting women's rights is Turkey's Islamist Welfare Party. According to the report of the European Stability Initiative about modern Turkish politics, the Islamist Welfare Party in Turkey was instrumental in opening up new opportunities for women in urbanizing areas such as Umraniye, where nearly half of the 50,000 registered party members were women. The report also points out that in the mid-1990s, the Welfare Party developed a very active women's wing that provided women new opportunities such as the chance to be trained, to work outside the home, and to exercise a voice on public affairs. However, the political platform of the Welfare Party continued to emphasize that a woman's place was with her home and family, and when the party first made it into the national parliament in 1991, it did not have a single woman among its 62 Members of Parliament. Even when in 1995 it became the largest party in the parliament with 158 deputies, the party still had no women represented. (Sex and Power In Turkey: Feminism, Islam And The Maturing Of Turkish Democracy. pp.10-11. 2008)

Research shows that in some cases religious political parties promote women in politics and women's interests in their policy platforms. Some religious parties were willing to advance women's interests and to create more opportunities for women in public life in order to win and hold political power in their countries.

Women's Resistance to Religious Limitations

Although in some countries women may have faced resistance from religious institutions to hold decision-making positions in public and religious life, women's movements and individual women leaders were able to form resistance movements from within the religious structures. Dr. Azza Karam, Senior Culture Adviser at UNFPA, highlights that the more there is religious resistance against women's public participation, the stronger the mobilization and range of opposition to such dictates from women and men in these communities and societies. Dr. Karam notes that faced with religious limitations to their political participation and equality, women organize themselves in a very targeted and deliberate political activism. She adds that in religiously conservative societies where women face limitations to their

equal participation in politics there are always alternative voices and movements from within the religious domain advocating for greater women's role in public life. For instance, Dr. Al-Ali mentions that the women's movement in Egypt has resurged in the mid-1990s as a response to the implementation of more conservative laws and policies toward women, including pressure to implement Shari'a laws in the country. Women's movements and individual activists became united by their commitment to retain and expand their civic rights and equality before the law, and they started actively campaigning and resisting the changes in public policies. Dr. Al-Ali also points out that there are an increasing number of Islamic women activists in Egypt who have managed to gain a voice in the mainstream Islamic discourse, and to criticize and challenge their male counter-parts for misinterpreting Islam. (Al-Ali. pp. 7-15. 2002)

Speaking about religious institutions and norms discriminating against women, Margaret Mensah Williams, iKNOW Politics Expert and Member of Parliament in Namibia, points out that:

"Just as the world started to change politically, socially, and culturally to allow women to take up their rightful places and we, as women, use that as a barometer, we should start challenging the religious institutions that discriminate against women." (Williams, M. Expert Opinion. 2009)

An example of religious transformation is Latin America where in the 1970s feminist theology became a popular movement among women rediscovering their roles in Christianity and reinterpreting the teachings of the Bible. According to Monica Maher the feminist theology in Latin America arose within the context of liberation theology, which emphasized economic justice and the preferential option for the poor, inspiring women to participate in Christian communities and popular social and political movements. Ms. Maher describes the three development stages of the feminist theology first focused on the struggle for liberation based on rediscovering women's leadership roles in the Bible; then led to the feminization of theological concepts and discovery of feminine face of God, and, in the third stage, offered full reconstruction of theological paradigms. Monica Maher says that these stages are not exclusive and coexist and overlap depending on the particular country, group and history. Feminist theological scholarship and activism of its main scholars are key examples of the feminist religious activism in the Latin American region. According to Ms. Maher, this movement is now grounded in the experiences and struggles of many grassroots organizations and groups through the region. (Maher, M. pp. 270-273. 2007)

Another example of religious feminism can be found within Islam. Ms. Margot Badran mentions that in the 1990s, a new feminist paradigm in the language of Islam caught the attention of Muslim women in different countries around the world and led to the creation of the Islamic feminism. The Islamic feminism was grounded in rereading of the Qu'ran seeking equality of rights and justice for both women and men. Key concepts of the Islamic feminism were gender equality and social justice. Ms. Badran further notes that Islamic feminists elaborated the principle of gender equality as part and parcel of all equalities within Islamic discourse and tried to showcase the difference between Sharia'ah as path to follow in life and the Sharia'ah laws, which are man-made and therefore, are open to change. (Badran, M. pp. 176-178. 2007)

As seen from the examples above, throughout history women of faith have successfully worked from inside religious structures to resist limitations on their rights and their participation in religious leadership and political process. Women's groups also work to reinterpret religious teachings and paradigms making them more inclusive of women and women's interests.

Conclusion

Researchers and experts suggest that exclusion of women from religious leadership positions and religious institutions may set a precedent for excluding women from political life. Some religions send positive signals about the role and status of women by promoting their interests and rights within the community and religion. Additionally, some religious political parties have started promoting women's participation in political processes in order to improve their own electoral prospects. Both religious institutions and religious political parties play an important role in creating social norms accepting women's leadership in public life and eliminating stereotypes against women engaged in politics.

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