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Published by: Harvard International Review
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43649268
Accessed: 22-10-2019 01:32 UTC

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Innovators of Inequality
Why the “Woman Solution” Does Not Work

ALICE HU

The US government and the Western world have seldom hesitated to call for women’s rights in Muslim nations in recent years. With events ranging from Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai standing against the Taliban to the rise of the Islamic State, the US government’s push for women’s empowerment in the Muslim world seems to have gained unprecedented momentum. However, as a mere continuation of previous political agenda, US efforts to improve women’s rights lack credibility and often fall short of bringing real change.

The US government assumes that its push to empower and educate women will help curb terrorism, facilitate democratization, and foster Western ideals. Yet this assumption neglects key differences among women in the Muslim world. It treats an immensely diverse demographic as a single entity motivated by similar ideologies and goals. Indeed, many women’s organizations in the Muslim world view democratization as a priority. However, treating women as a solution for violent conflicts and as a means to establish a Western-approved government undercuts any attempt by local women to initiate organic political changes, thus precluding the establishment of an authentic democracy.

Assumed to be a channel for Western democracy, women’s rights have been established as a strategic interest for the United States. As such, US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry may emphasize women’s empowerment in their diplomatic rhetoric, but when the matter conflicts with US military and economic interests in the Muslim world, the United States often abandons its commitment to the issue. The United States’ inconsistent stance and exclusive approach to women’s rights has undermined its international legitimacy as a harbinger and supporter of equality. The time has come for the country to reevaluate its approach—in order for the US to be recognized by people as a legitimate actor in international women’s rights, it must challenge its histori-

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Photos Courtesy Reuters
Women’s Rights as a Political Strategy

Indeed, human rights violations are rampant in conflict-ridden countries, but the rhetoric that targets human rights, particularly women’s rights, has almost always served to justify the actions of political leaders to an ambivalent public. After the attacks by the Islamist terrorist network al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001, the administration of US President George W. Bush launched the War on Terror, an international military, political, and ideological campaign against terrorist organizations and the regimes that support them.

To rally domestic support for the War on Terror, President Bush employed rhetoric about the oppression of women in Muslim countries. In November 2001, one month after the United States invaded Afghanistan, the US Department of State released the Report on the Taliban’s War against Women. The report described in detail the commonplace brutality endured by Afghan women under the Taliban, from the deprivation of medical care and education to the enforcement of a restrictive dress code and house imprisonment.

In one particular anecdote, the report recounted the experience of an Afghan woman who tried to seek medical attention for her sick child across town: “To go on her own meant she would risk flogging... she had no choice. Donning the tent-like burqa as Taliban law required, she set out... she was spotted by a teenage Taliban guard who tried to stop her... he raised his weapon and shot her repeatedly.” While these anecdotes provided a grounded understanding of how women were treated under the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, it is difficult to separate them from the underlying political intent.

The Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group consisting primarily of Pashtuns (an ethnic group in Pakistan and Afghanistan), has been active on the Pakistani-Afghan border since the early 1990s. It consolidated its rule over Afghanistan in 1996, imposing Pashtuns’ tribal code combined with strict Wahhabi interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic, law. Taking away previously protected civil liberties, the Taliban enforced public executions, banned most forms of mass entertainment, and required women to don an all-covering burqa and men to grow their beards. In 1998, the UN Security Council passed two resolutions condemning the Taliban’s treatment of women, and in 1999, the Council imposed sanctions on the regime for supporting al-Qaida. Until the 2001 invasion, however, the US government had been mostly silent on women’s rights in Afghanistan. Given the fact that the United States had funded the Mujahideen, the jihadist faction that had given rise to the Taliban, to fight the Soviet Union during the Cold War, it made sense for the United States to be selective in its condemnation of the regime.

In building public support for the war in Afghanistan, however, highlighting the Taliban’s violation of women’s rights suddenly became an effective political strategy. Portraying the US involvement in Afghanistan as one driven by humanitarianism and equality shifted attention from the complex relationship the United States had with the region.

The appeal of fighting for women’s rights was strengthened by inadequate media coverage of Muslim tradition and culture. With the US media focused on news of jihad and terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism became apparently synonymous with Islam as a whole. The misconceptions about Muslim countries were further reinforced by the long-standing ideas of Orientalism, a term coined by literary scholar Edward Said referring to the Western ideological construction of the Middle East as uncivilized and backward. In one of his speeches after the invasion of Afghanistan, President Bush appealed to such Orientalist stereotypes when he said that, “ruling cabals like the Taliban show their version of religious piety in public whippings of women.” The women under the rule of the Taliban were therefore construed as victims of a religion rather than of any particular regime or extremist group. Thus, the US government was able to position itself as the leader of an ideological campaign against the “Axis of Evil,” making the preservation of fundamental values such as freedom and justice contingent upon military success in the region.

Women, Misrepresentation, and Democratization

The characterization of women in the Muslim world as victims has been instrumental in generating consensus on military mobilization. At the same time, it has also played a vital role in democratization. In December 2002, the Bush
administration launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which aimed to “uproot” terrorism and promote democracy through widespread organizational reforms in the region. These reforms focused on advancing women’s empowerment, citizen entrepreneurship, and the capacity building of civil society.

MEPI, which continues to be administered under President Obama, targets a region that spans from Morocco to Pakistan. Despite the vast diversity in this region’s political and societal values, the initiative approaches women as uniformly oppressed. Operating under the perception that Islamic fundamentalism is a movement initiated and sustained by men, MEPI assumes that women, as primary victims of rising terrorism, will unquestionably oppose Islamist movements and align with Western forces. Concurrently, it assumed in its “women solution” that empowering women through US-led, top-down initiatives would weaken terrorism and initiate a transition to Western democracy.

In reality, the political and social conditions of women vary as much among different Muslim countries as they do in other parts of the world. There are progressive trends in Muslim countries that Western countries have yet to experience: Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—the three most populous Muslim-majority nations—have all had female heads of state. Geographic proximity also cannot be used to generalize women’s political status. While Tunisia and Algeria have legislatures that are approximately one-third female, Egypt—also a Muslim-majority nation in North Africa—elected a parliament that was only 1.8 percent female in the 2012 election. High female political representation, often a result of legislative gender quotas, do not always translate into improved rights for women. On the other hand, low rates of political participation does not necessarily signify an absence of women’s rights. Arab states tend to fare worse than other Muslim nations in women’s political representation—Oman and Kuwait rank in the bottom four out of more than 150 countries. However, the same two countries are also forerunners in addressing crucial women’s issues such as gender-based violence and reproductive rights.

Indeed, the use of the term “Muslim nation” is generalizing. There are even more wide-ranging nuances when considering intra-national differences in class, ethnicity, geographic location, and political ideology. The one strand that connects this diverse population is its religion, and even within that there are religious sects that divide the population.

Given MEPI’s neglect of key differences that define the experience of women in Muslim nations, it is unsurprising that both feminist and Islamist women’s movements in countries such as Morocco have dismissed the initiative. In their view, MEPI, like so many other US-led initiatives, was “another failed attempt by the US government to co-opt women’s organizations and create consent about the War on Terror,” as described by Zakia Salime, professor of Middle East and US relations. The skepticism many women’s organizations have towards Western governments stems from their controversial history with European colonialism. Some organizations such as L’ Association Démocratique des Femmes Marocaines, (Democratic Association of Moroccan Women), emerged from the independence movements of former colonies. Other organizations like the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), the oldest political organization for women in Afghanistan, began as campaigns against foreign occupation and control of the government.

Women’s rights movements in Muslim nations and other parts of the developing world have been historically inseparable from the struggle for individual and national sovereignty. When the US government promotes women’s rights as a means of Western democratization, it runs the risk of acting as a neo-imperialist force rather than a supporter of women’s rights. If the United States wants to be recognized by women’s organizations as a legitimate presence in the movement, it must move away from its emphasis on massive top-down initiatives. Instead, the US government should devote more resources to regionally-focused, community-based initiatives, and engage in active consultation and collaboration with local women’s organizations.

Women’s organizations around the world share the struggle for equality, freedom, and justice—these ideals are not limited to the West, as some cultural relativists would argue. “Culture does not justify suffering”, as stated by Paul Farmer, professor of global health at Harvard University and former deputy UN special envoy for Haiti. Indeed, all too often, culture has been used by the powerful as an “alibi” for blatant violations of human rights against the marginalized.

However, in order to achieve enduring progress toward these shared ideals, the approach must be tailored to the social and political environment of each country and locality. The United States could provide instrumental support in this respect, but the establishment of authentic structural changes can only occur when the women themselves are the primary agents.

Current Policy and the Woman Solution

Despite its ostensibly renewed commitment to women’s empowerment, the US government seems to continue to prioritize its interests over the rights of women. More than a decade after the establishment of MEPI, Secretary of State John Kerry has continued to employ an approach that operates under the same Bush-era assumptions about
women in Muslim countries.

Since coming into office, Kerry has vowed to maintain the momentum his predecessor, Hillary Clinton, had created to empower women. He has issued statements supporting the creation of a consolidated UN Agency for Women and condemning the attacks against girls in Afghanistan. However, in his speech to the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Kerry states, “we can be proud that even as we’re engaging the government and working to build their capacity of governance, we are also building it around a set of principles that are our values about those opportunities women ought to have.” The prioritization of “our values” in the building of governance capacity and enactment of reforms is exactly what drives away groups such as the women’s organizations in Morocco and Afghani-

In his visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2014, President Obama did not bring up any human rights concerns in his meeting with Saudi King Abdullah, despite the recent crackdown on human rights activists and peaceful dissent. In fact, Saudi Arabia has one of the worst women’s rights records in the Middle East, with male guardianship still legally required for women still largely in place. The United States has been reluctant to speak out against the policies of its diplomatic and military ally in the Arab peninsula in the same way it did with nations such as Afghanistan and Iran.

Whereas promoting "the women solution" was advantageous for the war in Afghanistan, pushing for the matter in Egypt or Saudi Arabia would have threatened US regional security interests. Despite its firm rhetoric, the standards the US government holds for women’s rights appear to be flexible, depending on its relation with the country and the interests at hand. Little more than a strategic interest, women’s rights have almost always been deemed a secondary concern when military and economic alliances are at stake.

Using women’s rights to antagonize the Muslim world has been detrimental for both the United States and the populations it is attempting to help. In positioning itself as the moral authority on international women’s rights and using the issue as a channel to push its own ideals and interests, the US government is perceived by many more as an imperialist force than an advocate for equality and justice.

Women’s rights, as politicized by the United States and other actors, have become a site of cultural politics, one which gives rise to hypocritical standards, distrust, and a lack of progress. Rather than perpetuating the East-West dichotomy that has dominated much of the discourse on women’s rights, it would be mutually beneficial for the United States to recognize the women themselves as agents within dispersed human rights movements that fall under an umbrella of shared ideals, and collaborate with them as such.

If the US government wants to establish itself as legitimate proponent of women’s rights, it cannot promote women’s rights when it simply serves a political or economic purpose. It must take a consistent stance and use an approach that works with the diverse composition and conditions of women in Muslim countries. Instead of using the advancement of women’s rights as means to export Western political ideals, the United States can play a crucial role by prioritizing the attainment of true agency for women. The answer to terrorism and authoritarian oppression is not “the woman solution” as constructed by the United States and the West. Rather the answer lies in women themselves, in their will, and in their push to create a more equal society.