



An impediment to gender Equality?: Religion's influence on development and reproductive policy

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 13 December 2017

Keywords:

Abortion
Gender discrimination
Religion and development
Religion and politics
Reproductive rights
Women's rights

ABSTRACT

The effects of religion on development in the area of gender equality have been considered substantial in academic work as well as in popular and political discourse. A common understanding is that religion depresses women's rights in general and reproductive and abortion rights in particular. The literature on reproductive rights, however, is disproportionately focused on Western cases, and is limited in its definition of religion as a variable. What happens, though, when we switch to a more inclusive framework? To what extent do a variety of religious variables correlate with policy on reproductive rights outside of the Western context? We examine the relevance of the religion-abortion link in a broad comparative framework. We introduce the *Comparative Abortion Index* and test the effects of a wide range of denominations and religious characteristics on reproductive rights. Our study finds that reproductive rights correlate only with some religious denominations, while others have no significance. Additionally, while religiosity correlates with reproductive policy, variables such as religious freedom, separation of religion and state and religious diversity show no correlative effect. The comparative analyses suggest that the connection between religion and development in general—and in the area of women's rights in particular—is far more nuanced than previously thought.

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1. Introduction

Religion, women's rights and reproductive policy have frequently been the topic of discussion in recent academic work and public discourse about international development (Echavarrri & Husillos, 2016; Ross, 2008; Joshi & Sivaram, 2014). Those topics did not just attract attention as unrelated issues, but have been addressed extensively in relation to each other (King, 2012; Norwood 2016; Wang & Sun, 2016; Wald & Wilcox, 2006, *inter alia*). For a variety of scholars and observers, the ties between religion and gender equality generally, and reproductive policy specifically, are inherent. As the degree of religiosity and the clout of religion increase, common wisdom would have it, so does patriarchal treatment of women. However, when checked on empirical validity and theoretical soundness, we find that such links are not so clear. This study uses legal access to abortion and women's political rights policy as dependent variables to test the boundaries of this relationship, its scope and its characteristics.

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Various theories see the link between religion and reproductive policy as particularly strong. Even those who argue that only certain types of women's welfare policy may be influenced by religion see abortion policy as highly susceptible to such influence (Htun & Weldon, 2010). However, we lack a serious critical examination of this link. Indeed, the limited attention given to date to religion in comparative development scholarship in general and abortion policy in particular represents a lacuna in how we think about the interplay between religion and gender discrimination.

Where religion was examined in the study of reproductive policy (both in the US and internationally), only limited dimensions of religion were included. For instance, most studies to date have focused on different denominations of Christianity. The second and third largest world religions, Islam and Hinduism, which represent a combined 2.6 billion people (38.2% of world population), are largely absent from scholarship on this topic. Still, Norris and Inglehart describe gender equality and sexual liberalization as “the most basic cultural fault line between the West and Islam” (2002, 235–236). Considering the significantly different ways various religions approach gender equality, it is critical to look beyond Western Christian states. This is particularly true given that many of the development challenges in the world are in places outside of Western Christian countries.

Furthermore, the approach to religion has ignored a range of features in the relationship between religion and policy. For instance, no large comparative quantitative study has been conducted, to our knowledge, to observe other religious variables such as religiosity, religious diversity or the formal laws of the religion-state relationship. Moreover, much of the previous research has focused on public attitude towards abortion rather than the actual reproductive policy in place, putting process over outcome.

This study proposes improvement on all those various aspects. First, we look at religion as a complex and multifaceted entity, exploring both different denominations and different variables of the religion-policy relationship. Second, we look at women's welfare policy as multidimensional, looking at religion's effects on both doctrinal reproduction policy, and non-doctrinal political rights policies. It is only such an examination of the multifaceted interplay between religion and women's welfare policy that allows us to reevaluate common perceptions concerning the effects of religion on women's rights. The results suggest that when both areas—religion and women's welfare—are treated as nuanced and multifaceted variables, the connection between them is more complex than previously thought. We explore these questions through large N quantitative analyses, using ordinal regression models and multiple indexes to test for robustness.

2. The abortion—religion connection

Religion can influence public policy and rights in many ways, whether directly through state action, or indirectly through the influence of civil society. As Robert Benne writes *“the vast and complicated interplay of religion and public life . . . simply cannot be shut down”* (2010, p. 14). Overlap between religious communities, institutions and traditions, and state governance is inevitable. As much as any state might try to relegate it to the private sphere, it is near impossible to avoid interaction between religion and state. Even a state with a “hands-off” approach to religious doctrine can and probably will find itself interacting with and crossing boundaries with religious institutions and questions (Garnett, 2009).

Despite its potential for influence, as Jonathan Fox (2001) observed, religion is often overlooked in the social sciences. Whether this is because modernization theorists reject its relevancy, methodologists find it hard to quantify, or liberal socialization has programmed researchers to disregard it, the fact remains that there is still much to explore in the relationship between religion and policy. Following Stepan's (2000) tradition of twin tolerations, Driessen (2010) argues that religious bodies can have an important role in the democratic state through civil society activity, rulers and regime legitimization, etc.¹ That said, how religion may influence a state varies based on regime type and constitutional framework. In a theocracy, the influence is direct. In democracies, and perhaps to a lesser extent in authoritarian states, religion indirectly influences policy through public opinion. We aim to capture some of these different ways religion interacts with policymaking.

The relationship between religion and women's rights in general, and reproductive rights in particular, is especially relevant. Regarding women's rights, organized religion is often perceived as associated with patriarchal structures and gendered role enforcement. Women and the family have a crucial role in constructing and maintaining group identity. This results in gendered images of women as mothers and caregivers; the moral guardians and teachers of culture and norms. Therefore, law regarding the role of women, particularly as mothers and caregivers, can be especially sensitive to religious influence (Shachar, 2005). In general, there is considered to be an important and negative link between

progressive women's rights and religious fundamentalism. Strict gender roles are seen as necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of traditional symbolic order. Therefore, it is often necessary to control women in order to maintain the social and political order of fundamentalism (Yuval-Davis, [1992]2005).

Feminism and religion have had a rocky relationship historically. As early as the 19th Century, first wave feminists expressed views ranging from tempered criticism of patriarchal Church ideology and structure to outright rejection of religious institutions. Later feminist waves reexamined the relationship between feminist ideology and organized religions. Some third wave feminist thinkers had an appreciation for the complex relationship, even claiming that religion, with its appreciation for the role of the mother and the family, could be empowering for women (Woodhead, [2001]2003). Woodhead claims, though, that despite this history of interaction, much of religious sociology remains “gender blind” leading to many unknowns in the relationship between religion and women's movements. Critics of religious doctrine often claim that religion relegates women to the private sphere, and uses its texts and discourse to present the male standpoint as universal and to support male dominance (Taylor & Whittier, 1995).

Gender equality is often used as a measure of liberalism and secularization in the relationship between religion and society. Citing gender equality as a key differentiator between religions, Norris and Inglehart (2002) even go so far as to argue that Huntington's “clash of civilizations” misidentified the fault lines between civilizations; rather than democratic values, civilizations are differentiated by social beliefs regarding gender equality. This is the main difference between Western and Muslim societies, they argue, with Muslim societies demonstrating great opposition to gender equality.

While not all scholars adopt such a sweeping view of the influence of religion, even those with a more nuanced approach cite its role (Grzymala-Busse, 2012). Htun and Weldon (2010) reject the notion of an all-encompassing effect for religion. Instead, they argue that religion influences only some types of gender equality policy. For them, the key distinction is between “doctrinal” and “non-doctrinal” policies. The former touch upon the core tenets of religious doctrine and codified cultural traditions. Non-doctrinal law, on the other hand, generally touches upon areas of life rarely addressed in religious doctrine. It is only in matters of doctrinal policy that we should expect to find religion to be influential. More often than not, abortion would fall within the doctrinal purview, which would lead us to believe even more strongly in the common wisdom cited above concerning religion's heavy influence on abortion policy. One of our key arguments concerns the distinction between doctrinal and non-doctrinal areas of development, with the former expected to be much more susceptible to religious influence. But before we delve into the influence of religion on this doctrinal policy issue, let us first review what the literature says about this topic.

By and large, abortion literature falls into one of two broad categories; US focused scholarship or comparative analyses. The first category typically applies quantitative methods to explore a wide range of variables that influence abortion policy. Firmly embedded within political science, this body of literature identifies religion, party affiliation, interest group membership, presence of female legislators, income level, education level and most importantly public opinion as critical predictors. This research has addressed the effects of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish voters, as well as religiosity. Yet, its findings are limited to a single country, the United States of America, and are based on a public opinion perspective (Combs & Welch, 1982; Berkman & O'Connor, 1993; Jelen & Wilcox, 2003; Cook, Jelen, & Wilcox, 1993, *inter alia*).

In the comparative literature, the connection between abortion and religion has been discussed also from an opinion perspective.

¹ While Driessen's work refers to democracies and our sample and theory include non-democracies as well, his work is still relevant here.

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