Critique of Michael L. Ross’ Article, “Oil, Islam, and Women”

Tofol Al-Nasr
In his study on the relationship between “Oil, Islam, and Women,” Michael L. Ross concludes that gender inequality in Arab states is influenced by oil rather than Islam. This is a captivating argument to me as a female from energy-rich Qatar who is most familiar with the legal rights granted to women. Throughout this paper, I challenge Ross’ conclusions based on components of Sharia, and argue that Islam, as a basis for “Bedouin biases” is indeed the central cause for “gendered citizenship.” Further, reform is taking place in some countries as a result, rather than in spite, of oil revenues.

Ross bases his argument on the “Dutch Disease” paradigm, alluding to the fact that as oil production increases, female labor participation decreases, thereby reducing their political power. Moreover, he argues that Islam has little or nothing to do with gender inequality in Arab culture and that oil production has resulted in Arab states’ patriarchy.

Ross’ argument is compelling but dilutes the powerful influence of Islam on Arab culture—which predates the discovery of oil by several millennia—a crucial key to understanding the status of women in contemporary Arab societies.

Laws in Arab states are segregated into two categories: civil law and personal status or “family law.” This distinction is significant because while civil law refers to “an individual’s rights and obligations in the public sphere,” family law controls private rights; including marriage, divorce, inheritance; and personal freedoms such as driving, working, and travelling. “Family law” is derived from Sharia, which is based on teachings from the Quran. Maktabi states that arguments within family law are justified based on “fiqh,” or Islamic principles. It is arguable that Sharia law intrinsically establishes “gendered citizenship” through the patriarchal norms within Islam where “men are the ‘protectors and providers’ of women and children.”
It is vital not to underestimate the power of Islam on gender roles, as Sharia traces back to Ottoman rule in 1517. Oil on the other hand was discovered in Arab states merely a few decades ago. By definition, classic Sharia law rules in favor of “gender hierarchy” as evidenced by polygamy, men inheriting double the amount that women may, divorce rights granted solely to men, and requirements of male guardianship for what are considered personal freedoms in the Western world. “Gendered citizenship” is perhaps best illustrated in Sharia courts’ requirement for two female testimonies in order to qualify as a witness account as opposed to only one from a man.

Having established the foundation of Sharia law, “Bedouin biases” are then comprehensible. As specified in a report conducted by the World Bank, gender “refers to the socially learned behaviors and expectations associated with the two sexes.” Therefore, the process of socialization in Arab states establishes gender inequalities justified by Sharia-defined norms.

Ahmed-Ghoush argues that Arab women undergo “patriarchy trading” by consciously accepting their role as defined by Islam, regardless of whether this role is considered oppressive by others, particularly in the West. It is crucial to note that in this argument, women conform at their will, which denotes a choice to conform rather than reform. Since Sharia is perceived as divine, it is not socially acceptable to be questioned by women, or men for that matter. Not only is questioning Sharia socially unacceptable, it is punishable by death as blasphemy. Oil, then, is irrelevant in “gendered citizenship.” This refutes Ross’ claim that “atypically strong patriarchal cultures and political institutions” are derived from oil rather than Islam.

Ross’ statistical model includes a variable entitled “Islam,” consisting of the percentage of each country’s Muslim population. He studies the relationship between this variable and
several others, including “Oil Rents,” (oil revenues used by government expenditure) to draw linear relationships between oil, religion, and gender equality. “Islam” as a variable is problematic in that it does not account for differences in Islamic sects that disagree on interpretations of Sharia and the Quran, including Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyya, and Ismaili sects.21

In his study, Ross uses examples of both gender equality and inequality to compare the differences between oil-producing states including Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, and Djibouti; to oil-rich countries consisting of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Ross’ model compares these categories by correlating the “Islam” and “Oil Rents” variables. He then concludes that the non-oil-producing countries have higher gender equality because of the lack of “Oil Rents,” rather than “Islam.”

This is a flawed comparison as the differences between these countries are incredibly vast, with oil production representing merely one element of the wide gap. There isn’t a metric to recognize the effects of multi-cultural/religious populations on political culture and institutions.

Geographically, the two categories of countries are closely clustered. Historically and demographically, however, these countries have very little in common. While the selected oil-rich countries are monarchies of predominantly Bedouin, Muslim populations, the category of non-oil-rich countries consists of semi-democratic/democratic, primarily Levantine, “multi-religious states [where] religious groups maintained autonomy in defining and implementing family law.”22 In my opinion, diverse societies develop mechanisms to enhance recognition and acceptance of different ideologies, perhaps initially as a means of conflict resolution. These mechanisms translate into calls for equal representation in legislation as reflected by the category of non-oil-producing countries.
“Oil rents” have different effects on gender equality. While governments may use oil revenues to subdue calls for democracy and equality, they may also use “oil rents” as drivers of development and modernization. Qatar serves as a prime example of the latter effect: As government initiatives toward empowerment of women are on the rise in a heavily oil-dependent country. Examples of gender equality initiatives include the strategic “Qatarization” plan, with a goal of increasing female labor participation in the energy sector. In this case, oil appears to have the opposite of Ross’ assumption on gender equality, as “oil rents” have resulted in a “modernization effect” of the Qatari female population.

I firmly believe that Islam is the driving force behind gender inequality in Arab culture as it precedes the discovery of oil. What is more, gender inequality will retain its prominence regardless of the presence of oil unless conscious agents of change are introduced. “Oil rents” have proven to serve as the catalyst of change in Qatar, where top-down reform is evident. However, it is essential to observe these changes as they take place over time. “Bedouin biases” are being reformed slowly by the Qatari government, beginning with gender equality. I encourage the case of reform in Qatar be monitored closely in the forthcoming years to measure the impact of oil modernization on secularism in an oil-rich country, and whether traditional ideologies are responsive to reformation.
Notes


6 Maktabi, “Family Law and Gendered Citizenship.”

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ahmed-Ghoush, “Dilemmas of Islamic and Secular Feminists and Feminism.”

10 Maktabi, “Family Law and Gendered Citizenship.”

11 Ahmed-Ghoush, “Dilemmas of Islamic and Secular Feminists and Feminism.”


14 Maktabi, “Family Law and Gendered Citizenship in the Middle East.”

15 Ahmed-Ghoush, “Dilemmas of Islamic and Secular Feminists and Feminism.”

16 Ibid.


18 Ahmed-Ghoush, “Dilemmas of Islamic and Secular Feminists and Feminism.”

19 Please see McDonough 2008 and UNHCR 2008.

20 Maktabi, “Family Law and Gendered Citizenship.”

21 Ahmed-Ghoush, “Dilemmas of Islamic and Secular Feminists and Feminism.”

22 Maktabi, “Family Law and Gendered Citizenship.”


25 Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?”

27 Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?”
28 Ahmed-Ghoush, “Dilemmas of Islamic and Secular Feminists and Feminism.”
Bibliography


