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Engaging Men in Women's Rights and Empowerment in South Asia and the Middle East

Summary

- The role of Islam in society must be taken into account and better understood by international institutions and civil society as women's programming is designed and implemented in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa.
- Engaging male leaders including Imams on issues of women's rights is often overlooked but critical to a long-term strategy.
- Broadening the educational discourse around Islam and creating spaces for female religious scholars in male-dominated educational institutions is a high priority for many Afghan women.
- Expanding women's political involvement must not be solely based on a quota system.
- Engaging young people as key resources for the advancement of women's rights is essential.
- Employing media resources as a tool of education on the importance of women's rights is one of the areas for further exploration.
- Promoting masculine ideals that include non-violent approaches to problem solving is a critical consideration in advancing women's rights.

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Introduction

On November 19, 2012, the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) and its Center for Gender and Peacebuilding's Working Group on Lessons Learned and Best Practices on Women's Programming in Afghanistan and Iraq held a roundtable discussion on how best to engage men to support women's rights and empowerment in South Asia and the Middle East.

The expert panel made up of Imam Yahya Hendi of Georgetown University, former Iraqi Ambassador to the United States Samir Sumaida'ie, Ms. Palwasha Kakar of The Asia Foundation, and USIP's Dr. Qamar-ul Huda spoke of their professional and personal experiences in engaging men in these regions. The panel offered insights on best practices for engaging men to support the rights of women, including engaging male religious leaders, young people, the media, and the private sector. The following are some of the highlights from the discussion.

The Role of Religion

Islam underpins social and cultural traditions in South Asia and the Middle East, and greatly influences the perceived and actual roles of women and girls in these societies. In some regions, narrow interpretations of Islam have been effectively used to silence narratives that challenge local norms and advocate for women's empowerment. Though Islam is a defining characteristic of most spheres of interaction in these regions, and is sometimes seen as monolithic, in reality male religious leaders can be engaged in the empowerment of women. The dominant dialogue, however, has framed the issue as one of "Islamists versus Secularists," making it difficult for narratives inclusive of both Islam and women to gain productive traction.

Several ways of engaging the religious community in women's rights and empowerment have been suggested. One way suggested by the panelists is to educate women on their rights according to Islamic religious texts. Practitioners on the ground in Afghanistan have found that women seek not only educational inclusion and political participation but also a better understanding of Islam. This desire to learn more about Islam opens the door for a nuanced and expanded discussion of the role of women in Islam and their rights according to the Koran. The second is to engage religious scholars in dialogue on these issues. This conversation can take place when traditional scholars play a role. Including credible male religious leaders who believe in women's role in Islam greatly reduces the risk of women's advocates being dismissed as "reformist" or "liberal." This approach could ensure that alternative voices are heard and are more likely to find common ground with supporters of more restrictive interpretations of Islam.

Practitioners have emphasized the importance of engaging directly with male religious leaders. As a central part of the culture and community, they understand the context within which women's empowerment will take place. Due to their role in the community, education, and other factors, these leaders have legitimacy with both male and female community members at all levels. They are some of the most credible resources for reaching out to a larger community. Male religious leaders act as a locus of information and, through actions ranging from personal interactions to fatwas and other proclamations, they are able to educate and influence significant elements of the population. Imams and other leaders could be encouraged to be more interactive and act as a sounding board for their communities. Informing and empowering religious, tribal and other male leaders to consider gender in religious contexts can enable them to move forward with women's empowerment in culturally appropriate and lasting ways.

It is important to create a safe space for dialogue for male religious leaders—both male and female—to discuss sensitive issues in Islam. Additionally, safe spaces should be created where religious and secular groups can come together to find shared solutions to problems in their communities and society. The full and active engagement of the religious sphere is a key part of promoting women's empowerment.

The Political Sphere

In recent decades it has been common practice to focus on the numbers of women who hold office to evaluate the level of women's political participation. However, the panelists noted that higher numbers of women in parliaments does not necessarily translate into an increase in their meaningful participation in these, and other, decision making processes and does not de facto result in improved protection of women's rights. Women candidates who gained power through quotas remain subject to the overarching and dominant views of their political parties. Because of these dominant structures, women are often pressured to vote against their own rights in order to maintain party values. This means that, while the number of women in politics may be increasing, their full participation is still hindered by political and cultural norms. Thus, it is vital to persuade the larger public the value of women serving at the decision-making level.

Education as a Tool for Transformation in the Middle East

In many countries, politics and education are closely tied and political decisions dictate the amount and distribution of educational funding. Inadequate funding weakens a society as a whole, and can result in a proliferation of exclusionary social structures. Underfunded schools are less likely to integrate women's rights into the curriculum, resulting in the perpetuation of entrenched norms that exclude women. In situations where access to education is limited due to funding shortages, it is far more likely that male children will be given preference over female children. These factors result in a limited and inferior education for young women and girls and are some of the main reasons they remain disenfranchised and are excluded from the political processes.

Recent history in the Middle East has seen an observable "branding" of youth along political lines. This early politicization often takes place in schools, madrassas, and universities—loci of potential change. The political demarcation includes, and in some cases revolves around, the exclusion or marginalization of women's voices and the distinction between 'boys' and 'girls' roles in all aspects of civil, political and social life.

According to the panelists, two issues should be addressed to ensure an educational system supportive of women's rights. First, outside scholars and institutions should engage with and encourage local women scholars to be present in the classroom and add their voices to the educational discourse. The second, and more difficult task, is to reform current education systems. Core curriculum needs to address women's rights and present women as active equals in all spheres. Classroom materials should encourage women and girls participation outside the home and provide them with the skills necessary to do so. Women and girls must be physically present in classrooms, represented equally in textbooks and fully engaged in the learning process.

Communicating about Women

The role of media, including privately funded media, is increasingly important in engaging a wider audience and bringing men into the dialogue on women's rights. Booklets, television, radio and the internet have all been employed in this task. Some Imams have posted videos on YouTube and hosted television and radio shows where they take questions from an audience on women's rights, how to be a good Muslim man, and other social issues. Public service announcements and even soap operas can be used to promote a dialogue about gender roles in a Muslim society. These media tools are useful and should be employed to engage both women and men. Radio can be used to engage with illiterate populations and increase awareness of women's rights in rural areas. Social media platforms are an effective way for reaching much of the younger generation.

Variation in Masculinity Norms in Muslim Societies

Although a great deal of effort has focused on the formation of female identities in Muslim societies, very little focus has been given to masculine identities. The panelists concurred that this is an important conversation to have since these masculinities comprise the status quo and have largely defined what feminine ideals are in these regions.

Masculinity in these regions is sometimes expressed in a hyper-male version, which emanates from the idea of being a protector, for example, or as the head of household. This has been used to encourage male decision-makers to protect women's rights. On the negative side, it has been expressed through unquestioned dominance and behavior such as limiting the mobility of female family members and their interaction with others. In the context of violent conflict, the ability to create nuanced, multi-dimensional identities is severely reduced.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Anne Angarola is a research assistant with USIP's Center for Gender and Peacebuilding and has been involved in women's programming in rural Tanzania with a small development nongovernmental organization since 2005. Steve Steiner is a gender adviser with the USIP Center for Gender and Peacebuilding and served as a senior adviser in the Department of State Office of Global Women's Issues, and Shannon Zimmerman is a program specialist with USIP's Center for Gender and Peacebuilding and focuses on the nexus of security and women's empowerment. This brief is based on a forum held by the Center for Gender and Peacebuilding at USIP on engaging men in support of women's programming. In expert dialogues facilitated by Kathleen Kuehnast, director of the center, and Ambassador Steven E. Steiner as part of a larger project funded by USAID, women from Afghanistan and Iraq identified the necessity of engaging men in support of women's programming in order for that programming to be successful. Four experts spoke at USIP on November 19, 2012 about their experience in engaging men to support women's rights. This brief details the experiences the panelists presented.



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In order to examine these concepts of masculinity, gender identity formation must be examined. The two main sources of identity formation are families and the educational system. Within families mothers are frequently cited as the main disseminators of masculine identity. Within the education system there is an emphasis on separate identities of girls and boys, which reinforces a narrow range of masculine identity and behaviors.

To successfully challenge narrow notions of masculinity, alternative non-violent and inclusive expressions of masculinities must be encouraged. This requires an understanding of how everyday interactions shape and reinforce masculine identity. Both fathers and mothers must understand how masculinity is created and what they can do to generate more nuanced identities for their sons. On a larger scale, space must be created for multiple masculine identities in society as part of peacebuilding efforts. According to one of the panelists, and taking Afghanistan as a case in point, while the Taliban propagated a limited sense of masculinity especially lacking in emotion, many Afghan boys and men are now opening up emotionally due to the influence of societal role models, soap operas and other media.

Recommendations Moving Forward

- Education needs to be a priority and school curricula should include women's rights.
- Programs should reach out to rural areas and engage with the more conservative male religious leaders.
- These programs should engage the private sector at all levels, including television stations, radio, online resources, and male and female business leaders.
- Greater understanding is needed of the processes that cause opposition and retrenchment, in order to better protect the efforts of both women and men who are working to promote women's rights.
- Dialogue should be established with male religious leaders to facilitate other interpretations of societal norms, which include an expanded understanding of women's rights.
- Women's empowerment efforts should engage all sectors within a society, including political, educational, and religious, including families and the local civil society. This is the best way to ensure that those advocating for women's rights are effective.