

## A Resource Curse? Oil and Women's Rights

Feryal M. Cherif  
Department of Political Science  
Loyola Marymount University  
[fcherif@lmu.edu](mailto:fcherif@lmu.edu)

Conventional wisdom holds that religion, and particularly Islam, inhibits advances in gender equality. Islam, it is argued, focuses on the complementary nature of men and women, prescribes differential treatment of the sexes, and ultimately fosters traditional gender norms, thereby impeding women's rights reform. Research broadly corroborates this view by documenting significant differences between women's economic, social, and political standing in Muslim majority countries when compared to other states (Cherif 2010, Donno and Russett 2004, Fish 2002).<sup>1</sup> Others suggest, however, that early studies misidentify the barriers to reform and contend that it is the economy of oil, rather than Islam, that explains inequities (Ross 2008, 2012).

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in scholarly research examining the status of women's rights in Muslim majority countries and a debate has emerged about the influence of oil. Some are dubious that oil is the main or even a primary contributor to gender inequality (Charrad 2009; Groh and Rothschild 2012). Patriarchal structures in the

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<sup>1</sup> Muslim majority countries refers to states where 50% or more of the citizens are identified as Muslim. For convenience, I will interchangeably use the following terms to refer to the same concept: Muslim majority states, Muslim societies, and Muslim countries. None of these terms should be construed to imply anything about the religiosity of the states or their leaders.

Middle East pre-date the discovery of oil, such that oil cannot be the *sole* culprit (Charrad 2009; Groh and Rothschild 2012). Less clear is the extent to which oil matters. Others suggest that oil-economies do not produce a gendered resource curse, but instead select producers do (Groh and Rothschild 2012; Rorbaek 2016). Research has also focused narrowly on some rights (e.g., women's labor force participation and representation in office) at the expense of others and has largely examined patterns across countries rather than in the sample of interest, Muslim majority countries (but see Rahman 2012). Together, these issues suggest that less is known about the impact of oil and the barriers to gender equality in Muslim majority countries than typically believed. The focus on barriers, oil v. Islam, also detracts from an important ancillary question: which factors, if any, challenge the inhibiting effect that oil is believed to play? Interest in the oil-inequality relations stems from a broader question about what accounts for variation in women's rights across Muslim countries, but perhaps inadvertently narrows the scope of query.

In what follows, I examine the influence of oil on women's educational attainment, participation in the labor market and politics, and right to own and manage property across countries and subsequently in a sample of Muslim majority countries. I also examine two prominent accounts of how, where, and why women's rights advance, as oil alone is unlikely to account for variation within Muslim majority countries. The empirical analyses suggest that oil economic structures only weakly influence women's rights, and at times, appear to operate more as an advantage than curse. Instead Islamic, Middle Eastern, and North African culture continue to pose more powerful barriers, though these impediments appear to be challenged by the strength of women's rights advocacy and levels of education.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The term, Islamic culture, refers to the effect of Islam, measured by whether 50% or more of a state's population is identified as Muslim. This is a crude measure of Islam, but is

## *Oil, Patriarchy, and Women's Rights*

Social scientists have long argued that natural resource abundance creates special hurdles to economic and political development. Resource abundant states, particularly those endowed with rich deposits of oil, gas, and minerals, are thought to suffer from a resource curse that leads to slower growth, more autocratic forms of governance, and more corruption than resource scarce ones. In recent years, insights from this research have been applied to understanding why women's rights continue to lag in some countries. In path-breaking research, Michael Ross (2008) argues that particular types of development limit women's opportunities and participation in areas central to the advancement of other rights. Ross (2008, 2012) makes three central claims: (1) labor force participation is essential to enhancing gender equality, specifically women's political influence, and (2) in oil economies, women are discouraged from entering the labor force, and (3) oil perpetuates strong patriarchal norms and institutions.

Natural resource-based economies depress women's rates of participation in the labor market by decreasing female wages and increasing household income (Ross 2008, 2012; Simmons 2016). Resource booms lead to a contraction of the traded goods sector. Oil sales, for example, lead to an influx of foreign currency, increased demand for non-traded goods, and a higher real exchange rate, such that imports become cheaper (Ross 2008, 2012). Concomitantly, booms encourage production to shift from less profitable sectors to the booming one. The result is that the production of other traded goods suffers, and there is a contraction of the industries that typically employ women, such as export-oriented factories

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conventionally used in crossnational analyses to capture the influence of this religious tradition. Given the conceptual ambiguity, I refer to this effect as one tapping Islamic culture rather than Islam, though the latter would be impossible to measure as a construct as well. Middle Eastern and North African culture, similarly, refers to whether a state is located within the region or not.

and agriculture (Ross 2008, 2012). As a result, women's opportunities for employment are fewer and wages decrease.

Oil booms also expand the non-traded sector and increase demand for labor in booming industries. Owing to occupational segregation, the growth of the non-traded sector is likely to disproportionately benefit men. The profitability of the non-traded sector leads to higher male wages, thereby increasing household or unearned female income (Simmons 2016). As household income increases, the reservation wage, or the point at which women enter the labor market, increases (Ross 2008; Simmons 2016). Overall, lower female wages and higher household incomes dissuade women from entering the labor market. Structural shifts, such as contractions of the traded sector, also mean that there are fewer jobs available. Together, these factors lead to lower rates of participation by women in the labor force by reducing the incentives and opportunities to work.

Why is labor force participation so important? Participation in the labor force is seen as key to the advancement of other rights. It fosters skills, enables (financial) independence, and exposes women to new social contexts and networks (Banaszak and Leighly 1991; Banaszak and Plutzer 1993; Cherif 2015; Feree 1980; Ross 2008, 2012; Sassen 1998; Simmons 2016). Work may improve self-confidence and teach negotiation skills, while independent income often leads to greater leverage and bargaining rights within the home (Agarwal 1994; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010; Kabeer and Mahmud 2004; Sassen 1998). It is also a mechanism that connects women, facilitates idea sharing, and encourages political engagement and influence (Banaszak and Leighley 1991; Mutz and Mondak 2006; Ross 2012; Simmons 2016). To the extent that oil-based economies dampen women's economic activity and political participation, oil is argued to nurture and insulate patriarchal norms.

Ross offers a novel and compelling explanation of why gender inequality persists in Muslim societies. The sectors that typically employ women are small and unprofitable, while those that employ men are booming and facilitate the persistence of single-income households. Moreover, crossnational data on women's participation in the labor market and political arena reveal that, once oil is accounted for, Islamic culture no longer appears to create an impediment. In a study of resource abundance and women's rights in the United States, Joel Simmons (2016) reaches similar conclusions. As resource wealth increases, women's participation in the workforce and political institutions decreases.

Despite the richness of these accounts, others are more skeptical about the presence of a resource curse or the idea that Islam is not responsible for the slow pace of progress among Muslim countries, particularly Arab states. Some suggest that Arab oil producers, largely countries from the Persian Gulf, are responsible for the oil-inequality relationship that is observed (Groh and Rothschild 2012, Rorbaek 2016). Others reason that the conclusions drawn about the effects of oil relative to Islam are premature. Fatima Rahman's (2012) study of women's education, labor force participation, and political representation in Muslim majority states shows that the conservativeness of family law is a better predictor of inequality than oil. Similarly, Lasse Rorbaek (2016) contends that it is the orthodox practices enshrined in Islamic law and religious institutions centuries earlier that accounts for the unequal status of women.

While these studies cast some doubts about the barriers posed by oil, little research examines the hypothetical relationship between oil-inequality across a broad set of rights both across countries and within Muslim societies. Further, the desire to understand how oil and Islam affect women's rights originates from a deeper interest in what affects the status of women in Muslim societies. To the extent that fluctuations in oil prices do not account

for this, far less is known about what explains variations in practice within Muslim majority countries. The relatively time-invariant cultural factors, such as religion and Arab culture, speak more to the barriers of reform than what may explain how, where, and why gender equality has increased over time. That is, these factors offer limited leverage in understanding change, though they may certainly account for the slower pace of liberalization.

### *Advances in Women's Rights*

Though the study of gender in Muslim societies has disproportionately focused on why inequality persists, women's rights have evolved and improved over time, albeit more slowly over some issues (e.g. family law). What may account for these changes? Two theories are often proffered to explain advances in women's rights: advocacy and core rights. Advocacy-based accounts reason that activism can spur normative and behavioral changes through the power of principled ideas or norms. Core rights-based explanations, in contrast, emphasize the individual and collective benefits that accrue from fostering women's education and participation in the labor market. These accounts contend that investments in core rights, education and workforce participation, facilitate normative changes and the development of stronger political interests.

Women's rights advocacy is thought to contest and reduce gender discrimination. Activists bring about reform by conscious raising, mobilizing support, and highlighting state behavior (Keck and Sikkink 1998). They may also assist with norms-development by bringing attention to new issues and expediting their recognition. Advocates engage in norms-building by promoting the validity of new ideas and pressuring states to adopt international norms. Through information sharing and framing, they seek to persuade governments to adopt new standards and to reform (Haglund and Aggarwal 2011). If these

tactics fail or progress stalls, advocates may expose the “wrong” practices of states and shame them for failing to adhere to accepted standards. Though material incentives or sanctions may occasionally be available, advocacy overwhelmingly relies on soft power, specifically the power of persuasion (Cardenas 2007; Franklin 2008). Accordingly, advocacy is seen to be more effective in states that are more susceptible to international pressure, such as those value their reputations, or are more dependent on foreign trade and assistance (Cardenas 2007; Franklin 2008).

Though soft power may have limits, women’s rights advocacy is credited with bringing about tremendous changes in the status of gender equality worldwide. Women’s groups, the human rights regime, and international institutions were instrumental in bringing about global acceptance of suffrage, family planning rights, equal pay laws, and maternity leave (Berkovitch 1999; Eager 2004; Moghadam 1999; Ramirez, Shanahan, and Soysal 1997; Simmons 2009). These actors have also increased the adoption of party and legislative quotas to enhance women’s representation in political institutions (Bush 2011). Gender mainstreaming, or explicit efforts to consider the implications of particular policies on men and women, is now an engrained practice of major international institutions.

Core rights explanations, on the other hand, hold that the status of women’s education and participation in the labor market facilitate the acquisition of other rights (e.g., those pertaining to citizenship, inheritance, etc.). The core rights framework builds on the work of Ross (2008) and earlier scholarship (to name a few, Sapiro 1981; Gurin 1985; Klein 1984; Moghadam 2003; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010) to articulate how education and labor force participation enable the advancement of other rights. In contrast to socioeconomic accounts that focus on women’s empowerment, the core rights framework also explains how

collective goods that accrue from investing in women's education and facilitating their entrance to the labor force develop.

At the individual level, core rights empower women to challenge discrimination and usurpations of their rights by enhancing their resources, autonomy, and leverage (Agarwal 1994; Sassen 1998). Briefly, investing in female education helps women develop skills that facilitate outside employment, which in turn affords greater leverage in the household and independent resources (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010; Agarwal 1994). Labor force participation creates new opportunities to network outside of traditional circles (Agarwal 1994; Sassen 1998). With more resources, independence, and the ability to develop networks outside of kin, women are in a stronger position to pursue and defend their rights.

Collectively, core rights facilitate political organization, enhance women's status, and spur attitudinal changes, increasing elites' incentives to represent women's rights (Cherif 2015; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010; Moghadam 2003; Ross 2008; Sapiro 1981). Core rights encourage the development of stronger political interests or groups through two mechanisms. First, education spurs gender consciousness among women. College-educated women are more aware of inequalities and are more likely to recognize their status as the product of structural disadvantages related to gender (Gurin 1985). There is also considerable evidence that a woman's educational and employment status increases her support for feminist values (Banaszak and Leighly 1991; Banaszak and Plutzer 1993; Ferree 1980; Klein 1984). By encouraging group identification and increasing demands for gender equality, core rights nurture the growth of formal and informal women's rights constituencies.

Second, core rights may influence the strength of political organization by stimulating interest, easing coordination, and increasing resources. Those who are better



educated, for example, tend to be more politically engaged, more likely to vote, and more likely to participate in civic and political groups (Glaeser, Ponzetto, and Schleifer 2007). The workplace may also serve as focal point for political organization and is often a site for political discussion (Cobble 2004; Mutz and Mondak 2006). The level of women's educational and professional attainment also influences the quality of social capital and resources that activists may tap into to pressure politicians for change (Lin 2001). Cumulatively, core rights nurture the development of key resources for political mobilization, such as group identification and social capital, while also lowering coordination costs.

Strong core rights may also facilitate advances in gender equality, even when mobilization is more limited. Educational and professional advances, or socioeconomic improvements, have the ability to transform women from a marginalized to a more important interest that politicians are keen to represent. Available data also suggests that a woman's educational and employment status may lead to greater acceptance and support of gender equality by family members, either because these activities foster new identities, there is a desire to harmonize attitudes with lifestyle, or because women's financial contributions give husbands and children a direct stake in women's rights policy (Boehnke 2011; Davis and Robinson 1991; Huber et al. 1978; Klein 1984; Kroska and Elman 2009). Overall, research suggests that there are diffuse effects of female education and employment. Attitudinal changes extend beyond women themselves and create a political environment more receptive to reform.

While advocacy- and core rights-based explanations emphasize different factors, they point to a common theme. Women's rights are best advanced in environments that cultivate empowerment tools – whether through advocacy efforts or the cultivation of core rights.

### *Does Oil Inhibit Women's Rights?*

To explore the oil-inequality relationship, I construct a series of empirical tests that exploit time-series and crossnational data of several women's rights indicators. To a large extent, research on oil and women's rights has focused on women's participation in the labor market and politics (but see Rorbaek 2016). While these rights are critically important, they are two of four issue areas that are thought to serve strategic gender needs, or rights that men and women require to improve their status (Agarwal 1994; Molyneux 1985). Even if oil economies suppress the development of strategic rights, economic structure offers only a partial answer about how, where, and why rights evolve or stagnate. In what follows, I examine the impact of oil, core rights, and advocacy across four areas: women's rates of labor force participation, secondary education, and representation in public office as well as their rights to own and manage property.

### *Expectations & Data*

Most research on women's rights in Muslim countries seeks to understand why patriarchal norms and institutions are so enduring. While some emphasize kinship structures (see Charrad 2001; Joseph 2000), there is an extensive scholarship on how Islam, its norms, institutions, and cultures, engender inequality between the sexes (Fish 2002; Rahman 2012; Rorbaek 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Cherif 2010). Until Ross (2008), it was widely accepted that Islam was a primary impediment to women's rights reform in Muslim countries. The resource curse has the potential to explain some of the puzzles that have long been observed, principally that (some) Arab states appear to be more conservative than their Muslim peers and more insulated from pressures to reform. That is, large producers and remittance economies, such as those in the Gulf states and Jordan, are less equitable

than Morocco or Tunisia, despite relatively similar religious, cultural, and historical landscapes.

The gendered resource curse, as the oil-inequality relationship is known, has multiple implications. Oil-based economies reduce opportunities and incentives for women to enter the labor force, such that as oil production increases, women's share of the market declines. Insofar as labor force participation is a core or strategic right, oil indirectly impedes the advancement of other rights.<sup>3</sup> Though Ross (2008, 2012) and Simmons (2016) narrowly focus on political participation, oil is hypothesized to perpetuate patriarchal norms and institutions, in essence to reinforce, if not foster, a distinct culture. Even though the causal links between oil and women's employment are clearest, oil's deleterious influence on women's rights should be relatively diffuse.

Accounts emphasizing women's rights advocacy and core rights emphasize the importance of investments in empowerment goods or tools. There are several ways that women's groups and international institutions may lobby, pressure, and influence states. Generally speaking however, advocacy-based explanations suggest that a country's willingness to conform to international norms is a function of their acceptance of these standards and the strength of activism within a country. Consistent with these explanations, there is likely to be greater parity and respect for women's rights in states that recognize equality norms and are subject to greater pressure from activists.

Core rights explanations, in contrast, suggest that reform is a product of norms-

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<sup>3</sup> According to Ross (2008), oil indirectly affects the status of women's rights, except labor force participation. His model highlights the following paths: oil decreases women's employment, and female labor force participation is a mechanism for the acquisition of other rights, namely political representation. All studies that examine the impact of oil analyze its direct effect on women's status indicators (e.g., Ross 2008, 2012; Simmons 2016; Rahman 2012; Rorbaek 2016).

building and the development of stronger political interests that emanate from the facilitation of women's education and employment. Core rights position women to challenge family and state-based violations of their rights, such that in states with higher rates of female labor force participation and educational attainment, women enjoy more equitable rights overall.<sup>4</sup>

To operationalize these explanations, I draw on data from several sources. To capture the influence of *Oil* on gender equality, I use data from the World Development Indicators that measures oil rents as a percentage of GDP. Most arguments about the (gendered) resource curse focus on the deleterious effects of rents on sociopolitical outcomes (Ross 2008). By accounting for GDP, it also provides a gauge of the magnitude of oil production relative to other industries.<sup>5</sup> To examine claims about rights advocacy, I examine how adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (*CEDAW*) and the number of *Women's Rights Organizations* operating within a country affects women's education, political representation, and property rights. Finally, core rights accounts imply that investments in women's education and their participation in the labor market fosters improvements in women's rights by encouraging individual-level empowerment and the development of stronger feminist constituencies. I operationalize these arguments, and the oil-employment-inequality thesis, using data on the

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<sup>4</sup> Ross (2008, 2012) and Simmons (2016) arguments about the importance of labor force participation are consistent with the core rights framework, except that the latter emphasizes education and employment. Further, core rights accounts are about the ancillary part of their argument rather than oil.

<sup>5</sup> Though it does not control for population size, in examining rents, the measure takes into account the difference between the price of the commodity and the costs of producing it, offering a more accurate picture of the amount of wealth produced by oil. Because oil economies depress women's employments not simply through rents but also decreased opportunities to work, this measure may offer a better proxy for the size of the oil economy relative to other sectors.

percentage of women in the *Labor Force* and enrolled in secondary *Education* (World Development Indicators).

Scholars have identified several other factors that may help to explain the status of women's rights across countries and within Muslim countries. Because of their centrality, two explanations, and the variables that represent them, are controlled when examining each of the dependent variables. Prevailing wisdom holds that Islam, its norms, institutions, or culture, lead to circumscriptions of women's rights. Mainstream interpretations of Islamic law (Shari'a), for example, are said to discriminate against women, providing only limited rights in divorce, child custody, inheritance, and at times are used to exclude women from political office (Rahman 2012; Rorbaek 2016). Others suggest that it is not Islam but rather the institutionalization of religion in politics, or a lack of separation of religion and state. Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon (2015), for example, argue that incorporating religion in politics creates additional hurdles that complicate women's rights reform. State recognition of religion may confer additional legitimacy to religious values and institutions, elevate the status of these norms, and give religious elites incentives to protect their spheres of influence, such that change becomes more difficult (Htun and Weldon 2015). Others still reason that, while Islam is a barrier, it is only one of many factors that enable strong patriarchal structures. Charrad (2001) and several other scholars of gender in the Middle East contend that patriarchal institutions persist because of the prerequisites of political survival. Briefly, statesmen have found it politically advantageous or necessary to ally themselves with patriarchal actors (e.g., kinship networks or Islamists). To capture these arguments and to test the robustness of oil relative to religious and cultural factors, I include three dichotomous controls: *Muslim majority* (which measures whether 50% or more of a state's population is Muslim), *Established State Religion* (which measures whether there is an

official state religion), and *MENA* (which controls for the countries of the Middle East and North Africa).

There is also an extensive literature on the relationship between economic development and gender equality. Economic development leads to increases in industrialization, urban living, and education, all of which are correlated with more egalitarian attitudes (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Economic growth also tends to produce higher market wages and encourage women to enter the labor force to take advantage of these increases (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010). While scholars, on the whole, agree that development facilitates stronger rights for women, they disagree about the nature of this relationship. Some suggest that there is a U-shaped relationship between development and gender equality, whereas new scholarship contends that it may more closely resemble a kuznet curve (Goldin 1995; Eastin and Prakash 2013). Per capita  $GDP$ ,  $GDP^2$ , and  $GDP^3$  measure linear, quadratic, and cubic levels of development, representing the various relationship between development and gender equality that scholars suggest. Finally, the models may include controls for the level of *Democracy* (a 21 point measure taken from the Polity project) or the rate of boys' enrollment in secondary education (*Male Level*).

*Dependent Variable: Women's Rights*

There are four measures used to gauge the status of gender equality across countries: the rate of labor force participation, level of enrollment in secondary education, percentage of cabinet-level seats held by women, and the right to own and manage property. Each of these rights serves a strategic gender need. Labor market participation, education, and property rights speak to women's ability to build and develop resources, independence, and leverage within families, while the level of women's representation in office provides a measure of political influence. The state of women's education and labor force participation

also speak to the ability and desire to politically mobilize as well as to spur attitudinal shifts.

The four dependent variables are measured accordingly:

*Labor Force Participation*, 10-year average rate of female non-agricultural labor force participation (years: 2003, 2013);

*Education*, 5-average rate of girls' enrollment in secondary education (years: 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010);

*Ministers*, the percentage of women holding cabinet-level positions (years: 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010);

*Property*, the right to own and manage property.<sup>6</sup> An ordinal measure coded as follows: (0) Women have few or no rights, (1) Women have some property rights or some women have equitable property rights, (2) There are no distinctions between men and women's property rights.

### *The Influence of Oil*

Does oil impede gender equality? Recall that the resource curse model stipulates the following causal relationship: oil depresses women's rates of labor force participation, which in turn reduces political influence and rights more broadly. Additionally, if the core rights model is correct, wherein the status of women's educational and professional achievements affect the development of feminist political interests and mobilization, and oil inhibits the development of these rights, then natural resource abundance may stymie the pillars of gender equality.

Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 present the regression analyses of women's labor force participation, enrollment in secondary school, representation in ministerial positions, and

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<sup>6</sup> Property rights measures women's ability to own and manage property. Inheritance, while a form of property, is measured separately. It is possible for a state to afford women full rights to manage property while also limiting what women may inherit.

property rights. The models presented, with the exception of those in Table 4, feature either country or year fixed effects. The models with country fixed effects are the preferred specification, as they allow us to observe the effect of individual variables above and beyond factors unique to each country (e.g., religious, cultural, or historical background).

Unfortunately, these models are unable to account for (relatively) time-invariant variables like *Muslim majority*, *Established State Religion*, and *MENA*. When examining the effects of oil, religion, and Middle Eastern culture simultaneously, I employ year fixed effects to control for the general secularizing time trend. To ease examination, the coefficient for oil production is located in the first row of each table. Generally speaking, the empirical analyses reveal a weak relationship between oil and women's rights, and suggest that over some issues, there may be a resource blessing as much as a resource curse.

[Insert Table 1, 2, 3, & 4]

The causal logic about oil and inequality is most closely tied to the status of women's employment. Oil economies, scholars argue, tend to have fewer jobs in the sectors that typically employ women, depress wages due to the unprofitability of these industries, and have increased household income, because booming industries demand more and pay more for male labor. Yet, a quick glance at Table 1 shows that there is little evidence that oil inhibits women's labor force participation. Only model 2 provides evidence of a harmful relationship between oil rents and women's participation in the labor market. It is instructive to note that support for this correlation disappears once the level of women's education is controlled for. In other words, once the pipeline of women most likely to enter the workforce is accounted for, there is no longer any clear relationship between oil and women's employment. Further, there is no evidence that oil influence rates of women's labor force participation in Muslim countries, arguably the sample of interest.



Table 2 permits investigation of how oil affects the status of girls' education. Here there is some evidence to suggest that natural resource abundance may increase girls' access to education. Both across countries and within Muslim majority states, oil production is correlated with higher enrollment rates for girls, even after controlling male levels. Across countries and within Muslim societies, when oil rents are increased from their lowest to highest levels in the sample there is nearly a 8 point increase in girls' enrollment rates, or a 10% increase from average levels of schooling between 1990 and 2010.

In contrast to earlier research, there is also no clear relationship between levels oil production and the amount of political power that women hold. Across all but one model, *Oil* is positively correlated with women's share of cabinet-level positions, though it only reaches conventional levels of statistical significance in one. At best, women's share of cabinet-level positions increases approximately 2 points in Muslim states with average levels of oil production, and around 7 points for those in the upper 10% of the distribution. These are relatively large effects given that women hold only around 5% of cabinet-level positions between 1990 and 2010.

The strongest evidence of a gendered resource curse is apparent over women's property rights (see Table 4). *Oil* has a consistently negative effect across developing countries and increases the probability of discrimination by over 40 points from the lowest to highest levels of oil production. Why do we not witness a similar effect within Muslim countries? The right to own and manage property is firmly established in Islamic law. To the extent that as Ross (2008) argues oil perpetuates patriarchy, perhaps it is best able to do so when these institutions are already firmly in place. That is, it may reinforce existing structure more than generate new ones.

In many ways, the resource curse hypothesis has drawn attention because of the claim that oil rather than Islam inhibits women's rights in Muslim countries and the Middle East in particular. Unfortunately, the data do not bear out these claims, but instead suggest that religious and cultural barriers remain in some areas. The year fixed effect and crossnational models presented in Tables 1-3 and Table 4, respectively, examine the influence of *Oil*, a *Muslim majority*, an *Established State Religion*, and Middle Eastern and North African culture facilitating a comparison of the effects of oil relative to religious and cultural factors. To parse between more and less religiously conservative states in the sample of Muslim countries, I use recognition of an *Established State Religion* to distinguish between where religion is accorded a more and less privileged position in the operating of the state, or where there is more or less religion-state separation.

Though religious and cultural variables do not appear to affect women's property rights, they do exert a substantial and negative influence on labor force participation, and to a lesser extent, women's levels of education and political representation. Women's participation in the labor market declines by approximately 6 to 7 points in *Muslim majority* countries, and 5 points in more religious Muslim societies (shown in Table 1, Model 4). Middle Eastern and North African culture appears to present the most formidable challenge, decreasing women's share of the workforce by around 14 points. Given that an equitable distribution of the labor force should be slightly more than a majority, these are rather large effects. In contrast, there is only a 2 point difference between Muslim and other states in the area of education.<sup>7</sup> Further, enrollment rates are somewhat higher, a 2 point increase, in countries that recognize an official state religion. In other words, states with a Muslim

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<sup>7</sup> These are more modest effects, given that about 67% of girls attended secondary school between 1990 and 2010.

majority that privilege religion, arguably more conservative states, resemble other countries in the sample. Lastly, there is some evidence that conditions in the Middle East and North Africa restrict women's promotion to higher office, decreasing representation in cabinet positions by 3 points (see Table 3, Model 2-3).

Overall, the analyses present a somewhat different picture than the resource curse models suggests. While oil-based economies tend to discriminate against women's rights to own and manage property, there is only weak evidence that oil limits women's participation in the labor market. Moreover, there is modest evidence of a resource blessing inasmuch as oil-based economies facilitate girls' access to education and women's ascension to higher office in Muslim societies. Instead cultural and religious barriers continue to limit gender equality, particularly over issues like employment. Middle Eastern and North African culture, as other studies suggest (see Donno and Russett (2004)), appears to present the largest obstacle to reform.

For many, oil has been a welcomed answer to the question of why inequality persists because religion or religious culture is often thought to be impervious, or too slow, to change. To the degree that reformers hope Islamic feminism can chip away at illiberal beliefs and practices, the fact that patriarchal norms are more deeply entrenched in Middle Eastern and North African culture should give us pause. The effects of *MENA* culture on women's rate of employment remain large after controlling for levels of oil production, wealth, female education, Islamic culture, and institutionalized religion. In other words, there is a substantively large and harmful effect of *MENA* culture after accounting for a number of factors that we might otherwise think make the region different. Scholars of gender in the Middle East and North Africa may suggest that these results speak to strength of patriarchal

kinship networks in the region, but there are good reasons to suspect that this only accounts for part of this effect. There are likely other factors that have yet to be identified.

### *How, Where, and Why Do Rights Advance?*

Though religion and culture remain significant obstacles, the empirical analyses also highlight two paths forward. Consistent with prevailing theories of how, where, and why rights advance, women's rights appears to depend critically on the status of core rights, particularly education, and women's rights advocacy.

The analyses presented in Tables 1, 3, and 4 show a fairly strong, consistent, and positive correlation between the status of women's educational achievements and their employment, political representation, and property rights. To calculate the marginal effect of education, I use the country fixed effects models, as they better account for factors specific to individual states. Holding all other variables at the mean, increasing education from the bottom 10% of the distribution to the top 10% leads to an 8-9 point increase in women's employment across countries and within Muslim societies. This constitutes just below a 20% increase, given that equity in employment should slightly exceed 50%. Education has a comparably large effect on the rates of women appointed to cabinet-level positions. Women's share of ministerial positions grows from 1.2% to 13.5%, as rates of education increase from the lowest to highest levels, and from approximately .5% to 9% in Muslim countries.<sup>8</sup> Finally, discrimination against women's ability to own and manage property also declines. Among developing countries, women are nearly equally as likely to be discriminated against as to possess equal property rights, while in Muslim countries, they

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<sup>8</sup> From the 10<sup>th</sup> to 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of the distribution.

are more likely to be discriminated against.<sup>9</sup> As the rates of girls' education increases from average levels to 100% enrollment, the probability of discrimination drops by 28 and 24 points, respectively.

In contrast to the diffuse effects of education, the influence of women's employment appears more narrowly related to the status of political representation. While it does not appear to influence appointment decisions in Muslim countries, women's status in the labor market is consistently correlated with higher levels of political office-holding across states (shown in Table 3, models 1-3). There is nearly an 8 point difference between countries with the lowest and highest levels of women's integration into the workforce.<sup>10</sup> It may also be worth noting, that while it does not reach conventional levels of significance, women's status in the labor market is also positively associated with the caliber of their property rights.

There is also evidence that advocacy by women's groups improves women's appointment to higher office and access to more equitable property rights (shown in Table 3 and Table 4). Increasing the number of women's groups, for example, from the lowest to highest levels leads to a 10 point increase in women's share of cabinet positions.<sup>11</sup> The analyses suggest that cultivating denser networks of women's rights organizations may substantially increase the number of women who hold higher office across countries. The strength of activism also appears to explain at least part of why some Muslim countries respect women's property rights while others do not. As the number of women's groups

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<sup>9</sup> Within the average Muslim country the probability of nondiscrimination is .41, whereas it is .5 in the average developing state.

<sup>10</sup> From the 10<sup>th</sup> to 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of the distribution.

<sup>11</sup> The percentage of women in cabinet position increases from 7.7% to 17.2% when the number of women's groups increases from the bottom 10% of the distribution to the top 10%, and from 3.9% to 13.9% in Muslim countries.

increases from the mean to maximum, discrimination declines from .59 to .32. That is, these states shift from being more to less likely to discriminate. Finally, there is weak evidence – inconsistent – that acceptance of human rights norms leads to greater investments in girls' education. Consistent with research by Simmons (2009), adopting CEDAW leads to modest improvements in the number of girls attending secondary schools.

Generally speaking, these results offer two clear policy implications: facilitate the education of girls and women, and to a lesser extent, cultivate women's groups and women's integration into the labor market. Developing cadres of educated women appears key to furthering their desire and ability to enter the labor market, ascend to higher office, and defend their rights to property. In a similar vein, strengthening women's groups appears to increase key resources and tools used to combat gender discrimination. Much like labor force participation, it may also create a pool of politically experienced and networked women ready, able, and willing to enter the political arena. With the exception of labor force participation, these tools – education and advocacy – appear to operate much the same way in Muslim countries as they do across countries. In spite of persistent barriers, education and advocacy enhance women's agency and their ability to demand accountability to upholding their rights from politicians and family members.

### *Conclusion*

Does oil impede gender equality? There is about as much evidence to support the idea of a resource blessing as to support the idea of a resource curse, except in the area of property rights. Across developing countries, oil appears to significantly reduce women's ability to own, manage, and dispose of property. Instead the status of women's rights, particularly for women living in Muslim countries, depends on access to higher education and the presence of strong women's groups.

Countries that invest in girls' education lay the foundation for women's rights constituencies to develop and mobilize. As education charts a path to increased participation in the labor force, it creates opportunities for outside employment, financial independence, and exposure to new social contexts and network. Complementing this process of domestic norms-building and political mobilization, women's right advocacy also appears to be furthering advances in women's political representation and access to equitable property rights. Particularly, in less developed countries, where girls and women's education lags due to a lack of resources, advocacy offers an alternate strategy to contest discrimination in some issue areas. These mechanisms, education and women's groups, speak to the importance of investing in strategies that enhance women's individual and collective empowerment, which may in turn be harnessed to demand greater state and societal accountability.

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Table 1. The Status of Female Labor Force Participation, 2003 & 2013

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Oil	0.04 (0.07)	-0.15** (0.06)	-0.07 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.08)
Muslim majority		-6.05*** (1.69)	-6.83*** (1.63)	
Est. State Religion		-1.56 (1.49)	-0.91 (1.43)	-5.19* (2.81)
MENA		-14.34*** (2.36)	-13.88*** (2.30)	-13.93*** (3.56)
GDP per capita <sub>logged</sub>	30.56 (48.46)	-37.27 (39.93)	-45.03 (37.65)	-66.87 (80.24)
GDP <sup>2</sup> per capita <sub>logged</sub>	-4.21 (5.91)	5.72 (4.71)	5.78 (4.44)	8.96 (9.66)
GDP <sup>3</sup> per capita <sub>logged</sub>	0.19 (0.24)	-0.25 (0.18)	-0.24 (0.17)	-0.39 (0.38)
Education	0.10*** (0.03)		0.17*** (0.03)	0.10** (0.05)
Democracy	-0.00 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.11)	-0.45** (0.21)
Fixed Effects	Country	Year	Year	Year
Countries	All	All	All	Muslim Maj.
No. of Obs.	199	210	199	51
R-Sq.	0.21	0.64	0.71	0.64

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

Table 2. The Status of Female Secondary School Enrollment, 1990-2010

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>
Oil	0.15 (0.11)	0.11** (0.05)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.14** (0.07)	0.02 (0.05)
Muslim majority			-1.80** (0.75)		
Est. State Religion			2.27*** (0.70)		1.94 (1.51)
MENA			-1.20 (1.10)		2.42 (1.96)
GDP per capita <sub>logged t-5</sub>	7.85*** (2.10)	23.97*** (4.58)	11.82*** (1.84)	1.78 (2.29)	3.16*** (0.86)
GDP <sup>2</sup> per cap. <sub>logged t-5</sub>		-1.53*** (0.28)	-0.65*** (0.10)		
CEDAW <sub>t-10</sub>	2.69** (1.19)	0.63 (0.56)	0.65 (0.62)	-0.28 (1.06)	2.89** (1.29)
Democracy	0.24* (0.13)	0.09 (0.06)	0.05 (0.05)	0.17* (0.10)	0.10 (0.12)
Male Level		0.91*** (0.03)	0.54*** (0.03)	0.73*** (0.06)	
Education <sub>t-5</sub>	0.62*** (0.04)	0.20*** (0.02)	0.46*** (0.02)	0.39*** (0.04)	0.87*** (0.02)
Fixed Effects	Country	Country	Year	Country	Year
Countries	All	All	All	Muslim Maj.	Muslim Maj.
No. of Obs.	519	519	515	131	128
R-Sq.	0.60	0.91	0.98	0.93	0.97

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

Table 3. The Status of Women in Cabinet-level Positions, 1990-2010

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>
Oil	0.08 (0.11)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.18*** (0.06)	-0.01 (0.03)
Muslim majority		-1.23 (0.97)	-1.18 (1.01)		
Est. State Religion		1.20 (0.82)	1.11 (0.86)		-1.56 (0.94)
MENA		-2.97** (1.33)	-3.12** (1.41)		-1.09 (1.05)
GDP per capita <sub>logged t-5</sub>	4.39** (2.23)		0.59 (0.39)		
Education <sub>t-10</sub>	0.14*** (0.04)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.09** (0.04)	-0.04** (0.02)
Labor Force <sub>t-10</sub>	0.39* (0.20)	0.07* (0.04)	0.09** (0.04)	-0.27 (0.20)	0.01 (0.06)
CEDAW <sub>t-10</sub>	-1.65 (1.37)	0.29 (0.87)	0.32 (0.93)	0.36 (1.35)	0.63 (0.93)
Women's Rights Orgs. <sub>t-10</sub>	4.26*** (0.89)	1.48*** (0.44)	1.21** (0.49)	3.86*** (0.84)	-0.10 (0.47)
% Female Cabinet Mbrs <sub>t-5</sub>	0.16*** (0.05)	0.60*** (0.04)	0.60*** (0.04)	0.05 (0.09)	0.43*** (0.08)
Fixed Effects	Country	Year	Year	Country	Year
Countries	All	All	All	Muslim Maj.	Muslim Maj.
No. of Obs.	595	634	595	169	169
R-Sq.	0.33	0.41	0.42	0.41	0.43

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 4. The Status of Women's Rights to Own and Manage Property, 2009

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Oil	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Muslim majority	0.10 (0.61)	0.18 (0.63)		
Est. State Religion	0.71 (0.69)	0.80 (0.71)	-0.29 (1.03)	-0.28 (1.04)
MENA		-0.56 (0.95)		1.35 (1.29)
GDP per capita <sub>logged t-10</sub>	0.20 (0.30)	0.22 (0.30)		
Education <sub>t-10</sub>	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
Labor Force <sub>t-10</sub>	0.05 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.06 (0.06)
Women's Rights Orgs. <sub>t-10</sub>	0.17 (0.33)	0.16 (0.33)	1.13** (0.54)	1.03* (0.55)
Countries	Developing	Developing	Muslim Maj.	Muslim Maj.
No. of Obs.	110	110	40	40

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01