Why we still need feminism

Equality for women has been a long hard struggle throughout the world. Our achievements have often been piecemeal, as exemplified by the history of the right to vote. New Zealand was the first in 1893, and Australia soon followed, with South Australia in 1894 and others shortly thereafter, but for other states the history of women’s voting is much more recent: Switzerland in 1971, 1994 for black women and men in South Africa, and 2005 for Kuwaiti women. This week, women in Saudi Arabia are registering to vote for the first time in the upcoming December election. The reform of laws and practices has enabled women to claim their space alongside men in public life, a sphere traditionally held by men.

But the feminist project is unequal, even in developed, democratic states, particularly for women in lower socio-economic classes and among particular ethnic groups. For as many women who joined the ‘why I don’t need feminism’ campaign in the US and UK, there are as many who participated in the ‘why I need feminism’ campaign. These recent campaigns demonstrate the fact that feminisms are multiple and varied.

While I would argue that we, in the West, do not live in patriarchal states, this does not mean that women have full equality with men. Gender stereotypes and the pressure to conform are still present in the education system, the market, and in homes. If the feminist project is still necessary, even in the West, it is particularly so in the developing world. Women’s groups worldwide are struggling to achieve even the most basic rights for women, struggling to apply pressure to their governments to change laws, struggling to then change practices within their homes and communities.

Many women lack the basic freedom of movement; they are prisoners in their homes unless given permission to leave by men and are viewed as male property. Afghanistan’s prisons are overflowing with women who have been imprisoned because they dared to attempt to flee abusive husbands. They claim that they are better off in prison because once released, they could be killed. In criminal cases in Algeria, the testimony of a female witness is only worth half of a male witness. In Armenia the legal system should treat men and women equally, but women reporting domestic violence are asked what they did to deserve their beating, or are sent home because wife-beating is a family matter.

I am one of a group of scholars participating in a global data project called WomanSTATS (www.womanstats.org), which is collecting and analysing information concerning the situation of women, including laws, data, and practices. All of our information is triangulated from multiple sources, and these sources can vary greatly, thus final decisions require careful analysis of the data points. Here are some of our findings.

[See Figure 1 to 6 on page 9]

Let me give you one example that really highlighted the need to include women in development projects. I can recall a study of a development project in Mexico regarding the introduction of

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the use of a newly developed strain of maize that was resistant to more diseases and therefore could produce higher yields. Despite the fact that women are the primary users of the end product (the corn), they were not consulted in the months leading up to the planting of the crop; only the village men were consulted. The harvest was indeed bountiful, but when the women attempted to grind the maize to make cornmeal tortillas, they discovered that this particular strain would not grind with the right consistency and therefore was not fit for purpose.

As this example demonstrates, adopting a gender equity approach benefits more than just the women. It benefits the family and community, in particular, empowering women leads to greater achievements in overall child wellbeing, family welfare, development, and economic growth.

One of the key issues faced by women and men the world over is violence, whether violence in conflict-torn regions or violence in the home. International relations scholars have shown that the two are interrelated. The level of violence exhibited by a state, whether in a civil or international conflict, is mirrored in the violence directed at women within the state. Peace and gender equality are thus united.

There are numerous states where the rights of women and girls are subordinated to the interests of men and to the state. Adopting a gendered lens enables us to see more than just the situation of women, but the possibilities for tolerance and governance more broadly, because as one anthropologist notes, 'the degree to which men dominate women and control their sexuality is inextricably intertwined with the degree to which some men dominate others.' States in which women are oppressed through harmful laws and practices tend to undermine the possibility of a functional, capable state.

The practices that are key in terms of women’s subordination are those that affect marriage (child and cousin marriage in particular), family law, and property and inheritance laws. Empirical support demonstrates that states with high levels of gender inequality and violence against women are dysfunctional: they are more likely to be states 'of concern' in international relations (human rights violating), and are more likely to start conflicts and to use greater force during conflicts.

Creating a more gender-equitable world requires the mobilization of an international feminist network. This network relies on the support of feminists in developed democratic states to assist in applying pressure to states to change laws and practices that are harmful to women. We need, therefore, to add our feminist voices to those who believe that feminism has lost its meaning and reaffirm the need for feminist projects at home and globally. If some women feel that feminism is no longer necessary because they are free to enjoy equal rights and opportunities with men, wonderful! But there are many ways in which they can offer their support to women who are still struggling for those freedoms.

**Figure 1**

Inequity in Family Law/Practice
Scaled 2011

- Family law is equitable between men and women, and the law is respected
- Family law is generally equitable between men and women, with few exceptions
- Family law is somewhat inequitable, and those laws which are equitable may not be enforced
- Family law is largely inequitable, and/or there may be state-recognized enclaves of inequitable family law
- Family law is grossly inequitable towards women

(Mapped by HILLYRYU)

(Please see codebook for details and definitions.)

**Figure 2**

Prevalence and Legal Status of Polygyny
Scaled 2010

- Illegal and extremely rare. Multiple simultaneous cohabitations are also rare
- Illegal and this law is enforced. Multiple simultaneous cohabitations are tolerated
- Minority enclaves with polygyny may exist; <5% of women in polygyny
- May or may not be officially illegal, but the law is unenforced; <25% of women in polygyny
- May or may not be officially illegal, but the law is unenforced; >25% of women in polygyny

(Mapped by HILLYRYU)
Underage (16 or younger) marriage is illegal and there are very few exceptions with less than 5% of girls married at age 16

Underage (16 or younger) marriage is illegal, but there is little attempt to enforce the law, or 5-10% of girls are married at age 16 or younger

Underage (16 or younger) marriage can occur with parental consent and 5-10% of girls marry at age 16 or younger

Underage (16 or younger) marriage for girls is generally sanctioned by law and is not uncommon

Underage (16 or younger) marriage is legal and over 10% of girls are married at age 16 or younger

No Data

Virtually no discrimination is codified in law, and practice follows law

Virtually no discrimination is codified, and practice tends to discriminate more than law

Moderate discrimination may be codified in law, and practice follows law

Moderate discrimination is codified in law, and practice discriminates even more than law

Significant discrimination is codified in law, and practice follows law

No Data
Figure 5

Son Preference and Sex Ratios
Scaled 2015

- Normal sex ratios, no son preference.
- Normal sex ratios, limited son preference.
- Normal sex ratios, common son preference.
- Somewhat abnormal childhood sex ratios favoring males.
- Extremely abnormal sex ratios favoring males.
- No Data

(Permission see codebook for numerical definitions of abnormality)

Map by Think Spatial

Figure 6

Physical Security of Women
Scaled 2014

- Women are physically secure
- Women have fairly high levels of physical security
- Women have moderate levels of physical security
- Women have low levels of physical security
- Women lack physical security
- No Data

Mapped by HR/LH/SSU
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