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Women's Electoral Participation in Muslim Majority and Non-Muslim Majority Countries¹

By Sophia Francesca Del PradoLu²

Abstract

This paper aims to look and discuss the association of Islam and women's electoral participation in Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries. The dataset that was used for the analysis, entitled "Party Variation in religiosity and women's leadership: A Cross National Perspective, 2008-2010", was taken from the Inter-University Consortium of Political and Social Research, University of Michigan who approved the use of their dataset. The unit of analysis targeted 329 political party lists in 26 countries. Women's political participation was operationalized as electoral quota for women, internal party quota, percent share of women in decision-making bodies, interaction of percent female leadership with female membership, and percentage of female nominees. Test statistics, such as t-test, Pearson's r, chi-square, and correlation were applied in analyzing the data in order to come up with empirical relationships. The results show that there is an association between Islam and women's political participation, as well as difference in women's electoral participation between Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries. However, the coefficient of determination was small which suggests that there are other factors that explain women's electoral participation in these countries. Also, this paper illustrates two opposing views regarding secularist feminism and Islamic feminism.

Key Words: Women's electoral participation, Islamic feminism, Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries, Secular feminism, electoral quota, women in parliament

Introduction: The two discourses on the effect of Islam on women's issues

Social scientists are divided on the issue of Islam being either a positive or negative influence on women who live in such a political and social landscape. Although this paper has empirically shown through interviews with political parties in 26 countries categorized as either Muslim majority and non-Muslim Majority that Islam has led to a low level of women's participation in certain countries, the discussion of both the positive and negative effects of Islam in the political arena may be of use for future research.

Liberalism is often perceived as opposing to Islam ideologies. However, Arat states the contrary, she mentions that liberalism and Islam coincide. Arat sees them as overlapping in some respects. The Turkish women interviewed by Arat contradict the notion that Islam gives restriction to women. Women say that they have expanded their political participation and social status "by returning to Islam." She states that it is through the Refah Party that women have become both

¹ Acknowledgement is cited for the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, entitled "Party variation in religiosity and women's leadership: across-national perspective, 2008-2010," ICPSR 30742, University of Michigan, USA. www.icpsr.umich.edu for the use of their dataset, as well as to Prof. Clarinda Lusterio Berja of the University of the Philippines Manila for her re Department of Political Science, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines Diliman, sophia_fran@yahoo.com

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politically active and religiously engrained. Arat explains that given the right approach, women can “shape their community.” (Micallef 2005).

The “introduction” and “reintroduction” of Islamic laws in Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan and Iran have become one of the potent reasons why the *Shariah* law has become a mainstay in the countries’ political atmosphere. Moreover, the presence of the Shariah law is increasing. According to Christiansen, women who have adopted this “Islamization” state that it has led to the enhancement and betterment of their skills, knowledge, and “sense of self” (Yirmibesoglu 2008).

On the contrary, other literatures and research findings show that Islam has restricted women’s political participation. According to Yirmibes, the reason why women are not considered as important actors in the political sphere is that power is usually attributed to men. Women in the Middle East usually do not play a significant role in the political arena. Even though women’s rights have been advocated in many Muslim-majority countries, there is little progress in women’s political participation in Muslim-majority countries compared to “liberal” or “Western” countries. One may posit that the reason for this phenomenon is that Islamic ideologies have been engrained in the lives of Muslim men and women. This ideology stresses that there are certain privileges women are restricted to access (Yirmibesoglu 2008).

In light of the argument that Islam has restricted women’s political participation, there is a growing politicalization of women in the Middle East as evidenced by the recent Arab uprisings. Women’s legal rights remain unstable in most Muslim-majority countries. In the post-Arab Spring context, many are optimistic that the change in government and governance will result to more “Western” government. However, there is little improvement to what they call “democratization.” After the Arab Spring, there was only a change in leadership, not system. It is the system in which the government operates in that dictates the flow of policies and execution of rules and regulations. In 1985, the Personal Status Laws of Egypt were repealed because of the way it was imposed by then president Sadat. Meanwhile, in 1989, Bashir made use of Nimeiri’s “Islamization” program and banished Sudanese women from work and prevented them to saunter without a male companion. In the present context, the governments of repressive states are still dominated by men. And it is very likely that these legislations will remain unchanged (Al-Tarrah 1994). In Egypt, although the Ministry of Education manages the curricula of schools, it has not maintained authority over “the political, cultural, and economic transformations resulting from the politicization of Islam.” Islamists have their ways in which they can control the educational system and exert influence over the students. The seriousness and extremeness of this case has caught the attention of the Minister of Education, so much so that he has described “Egyptian schools as factories of terrorism” (Aman 2003). Education is important in shaping the people’s ideology and beliefs, therefore, it is seen as one of the most important tools for training and engraining Islamic laws to the people.

Despite the constant repression of women’s rights and political freedoms, women in Islamic states have not lost their passion to strive for change in the social and political spheres. Their unscathed resistance against the subjugation of their legal rights as individuals may lead to their eventual victory in the political arena (Yirmibesoglu 2008).

Considering the above as a context for political research, this study aims to look at how Islam affects the electoral participation of women in Muslim-majority, and non-Muslim majority countries. This is in consideration of the trajectory that having women in political office could widen the landscape for the accommodation of women’s issues traditionally and culturally ignored by male policymakers.

Prior to the Arab uprising, a research was done by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research entitled “Party variation in religiosity and women's leadership: across-national perspective, 2008-2010.” This study looked into religious components in the party's political platforms or the extent to which religion penetrates a party's political agendas. It covered 26 countries, both Muslim-majority, and non-Muslim majority, and studied 329 political parties. It is this dataset that was used to elaborate and substantiate the research question of this research paper which is: “What is the electoral participation of women in Muslim-majority, and Muslim minority countries?”

The discourse of women's political participation is significant since it is an expedient factor in the representation of their interests and concerns. A related study in the United States showed that having more women in elected office is associated with more women-friendly policy (Caiazza 2002). The study revealed that variations in women's levels of elected representation coincided with trends in women-friendly policy across the various states, which point to the fact that political participation of women in office is a significant factor in protecting the interests of women in society.

METHODOLOGY

Sample Description

Original Dataset

The original dataset was culled from the research study of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research based in the University of Michigan, USA. The study is entitled “Party Variation in Religiosity and Women's Leadership: A Cross-National Perspective, 2008-2010”. The study looked beyond the national domestic level into individual party-level explanations for women's political leadership focusing on 26 countries. The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of political party structure on gender inequality, particularly in parliament. The study records the level of religiosity of political parties, where it refers to religious components in the party's political platforms or the extent to which religion penetrates a party's political agendas.

Data on women were gathered in 329 political parties in 13 Arab and 7 non-Arab Muslim-majority countries, 5 European countries plus Israel from 2008 to 2010. Structured interviews were done with party administrators and party officials. The inclusion criteria for respondents included political parties that occupied at least one seat in the latest parliaments. The inclusion of Arab and non-Arab Muslim Majority countries is having a population of more than 50 percent Muslims. For non-Muslim majority countries, 5 European countries were included with significant Muslim populations. In fact, Muslim is the largest minority in Europe which is why some European countries were included in the list of non-Muslim majority countries.

Dataset Adopted for this Research Study

Since the research question set out for this study is “How does Islam affect the electoral participation of women in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim majority countries,” only pertinent variables were considered. The sample still consisted of 329 political parties coming from 26 countries. The unit of analysis consisted of the political parties which has at least one seat in the latest parliaments. This study narrowed the analysis to-1) Muslim majority countries, having more than 50% Muslims in the population, and 2) non-Muslim majority countries having less than 50%

Muslims in their population. This shifted away from the categorizations of the original dataset focusing on 1) Arab, 2) non Arab Muslim majority countries, and 3) European countries with Muslim population.

The general objective of the study was to determine the effect of Islam on women's electoral participation in Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries. The specific objectives were: 1) to look into the effect of religiosity on women's electoral participation in Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries; and 2) to look into the difference in women's electoral participation between Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries.

Two main variables were considered in this study, namely, 1) Islam, and 2) women's electoral participation. Based on the dataset, Islam was operationalized using two indicators- 1) religiosity, and 2) Muslim-majority and non-Muslim majority countries. For women's electoral participation, the indicators used were the following: 1) percentage of female nominees on party's electoral lists for parliament, 2) share of women in decision making bodies, 3) interaction of female leadership and female membership, 4) internal party quotas for women, and 5) electoral quotas for women.

For the level of measurement of variables, religiosity was measured at the interval scale in terms of score (1-5). The country category of Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority was taken as two sample groups. For the indicators of women's electoral participation, the percentage of female nominees for parliament, the share of women in decision making bodies, and the interaction of female leadership and female membership were all ratio variables, while internal party quotas for women and electoral quotas for women were both nominal data.

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Descriptive analysis was used for the frequency distribution, measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion of the various variables in the study. Chi-square test of independence was used to look into the association between two nominal variables which are the Muslim categories, and quotas for women. Chi-square in this study was used as a descriptive statistics, and not inferential statistics.

To answer the objective on the effect of religiosity on women's electoral participation in Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries (Objective 1), a t-test for two samples was used. On the other hand, to answer the objective on the difference in women's electoral participation between Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries, a bivariate correlation was used. To see the overall fit of the association, a coefficient of determination was calculated. Inter-correlation analysis was also done to look into the interaction of variables with each other. Data were analyzed using SPSS 17.0.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The unit of analysis was political parties in 26 countries covering Muslim majority, and non-Muslim majority countries. A survey was conducted among political parties in 26 countries, namely Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, Yemen, Albania, Indonesia, Senegal, Turkey, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Israel. The sample size consisted of 329 political parties. From the 26 countries, 20 were Muslim majority countries, and 6 were non-Muslim majority countries. From the 26 countries, Egypt had the most number of political parties that participated in the study (7.6%), followed by Senegal (7%), and then Algeria, and Bahrain (5.5% each). The least number of samples was taken from Yemen (1.2%). The mean number of seats occupied by the parties in the current or last parliament was

7.84 (s.d. 14.09).

The year of founding of the political parties was from 1863 to 2010. The median for the founding year was 1997, and the mode was in 2007 accounting for 7.3% of all parties. This means that there were many political parties founded in 2007.

The variable *religiosity* in this study was in an interval level of measurement ranging from 1 to 5, a score of 1 being most Islamic, and 5 being the most secular/a-religious.

For women's electoral participation, the data showed the mean percentage for women in decision making bodies was 15.94 (s.d. 14.37) while the percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament was 14.12 (s.d.18.6).

For the Islam indicator, the Muslim majority countries had lesser internal party quotas for women (16.2%) than non-Muslim majority countries (57.9%) (Figure 1). However, for external quota for women, more non-Muslim majority countries had electoral quota for women (95.5%) compared to Muslim majority countries (63.2%). This is because the Muslim population even in non-Muslim majority countries adhere to the strict interpretation of Islam religion in regard women's electoral participation (Figure 2). This shows that Islam being the main political factor in Muslim majority countries has an influence on women's electoral participation.

Figure 1. Distribution of Category of Muslim Country on Internal Party Quotas for Women

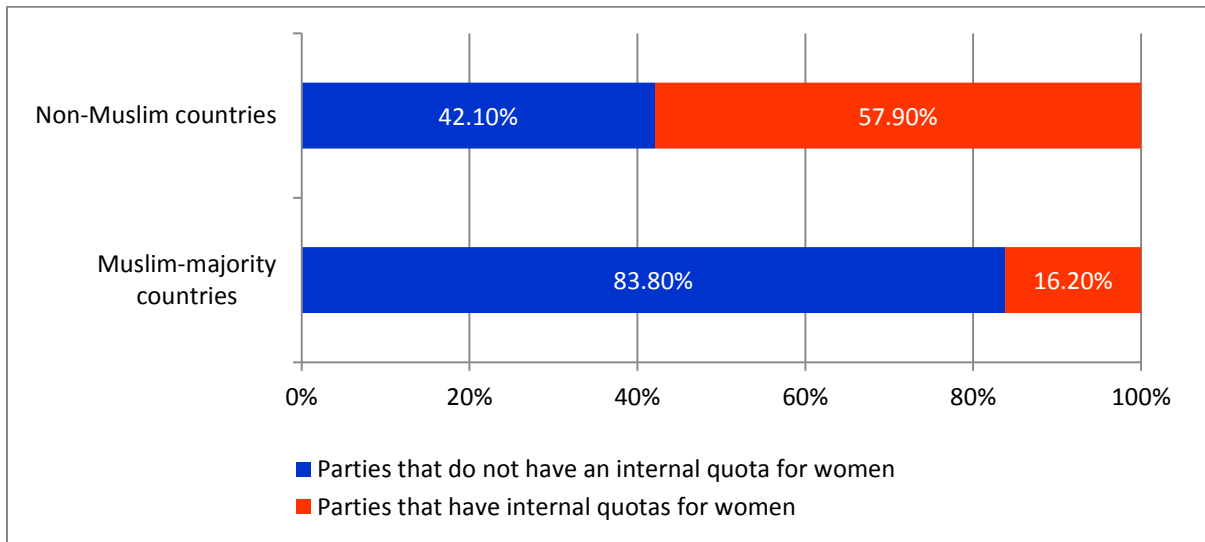
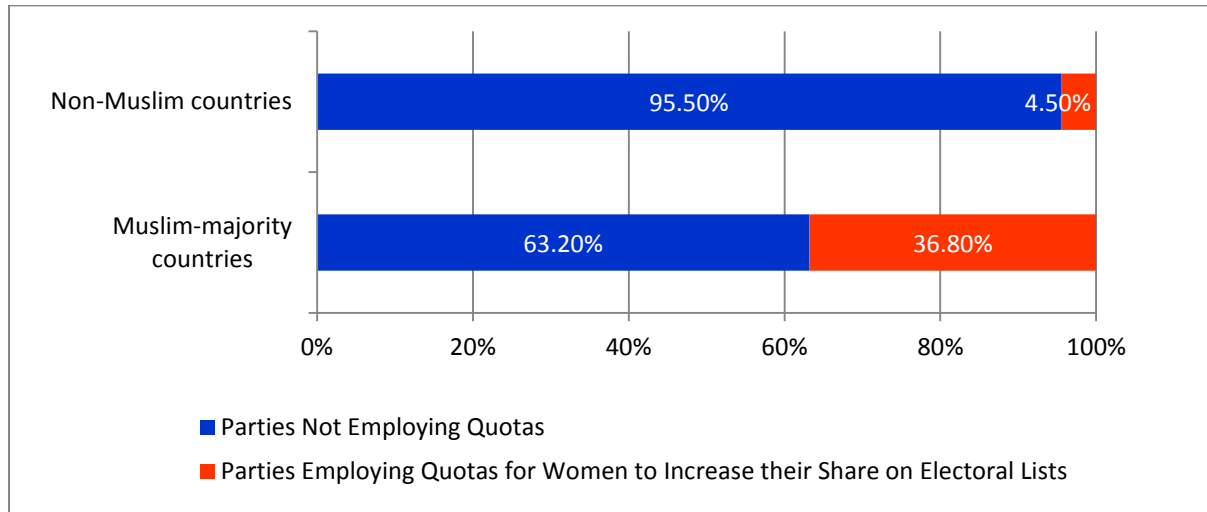


Figure 2. Distribution of Category of Muslim Country on Electoral Quotas for Women



To see if there is a significant association between category of Muslim country with the two quotas, chi-square test of independence was used. The results showed that there was moderate association between Muslim country category, and internal party quotas (Cramer’s V=0.338), and with electoral quotas (Cramer’s V= 0.416). See Table 1.

Table 1. Chi-Square Test of Independence between Islam Indicators and Women’s Electoral Participation

Islam Indicator	Women’s Electoral Indicators	Chi-Square value (significance)	Cramer’s V
Muslim-majority countries vs. non-Muslim majority countries	Internal Party Quota	37.49 (0.001)	0.338 (moderate)
	Electoral Quota	53.94 (0.001)	0.416 (moderate)

To test the difference of means of women’s electoral participation between Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries, a *t*-test of difference between two independent samples was used. The criteria set for rejecting the null hypothesis was one-tailed with *alpha* at 0.05 which yields a tabular statistic/ *t*-critical of 1.65. The *t*-test statistic is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. T-test of Difference of Means of Women’s Electoral Participation between Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries

Electoral Indicators	<i>t</i>-test statistic (<i>t</i>-critical=1.65)	<i>p</i>-value (alpha 0.05, one tailed)
Share of female nominees on party’s electoral lists for parliament	4.669	0.001
Share of women in decision making	5.375	0.001
Female leadership x Female membership	5.712	0.001

As shown above, the absolute values of the test statistic for share of women nominations in parliament (4.669), share of women in decision making in parliament (5.375) and the female leadership with female membership (5.712) all exceeded the tabular statistic of 1.65. This means that the population of Muslim majority has lower electoral participation for women compared to that of non-Muslim majority countries. .

For the association between religiosity and women’s electoral participation, a bivariate correlation was done. The criteria for rejecting the null hypothesis is two-tailed at a level of significance of 0.05 (*alpha*). The tabular Pearson’s *r* for a sample of 329 is 0.113. The values of Pearson’s *r* for the sample data are shown in Table 3. The data showed that there is an association between religiosity and women’s electoral participation, but the overall variances explained by the association are only 3.7% for female nomination, 15.7% for female leadership with membership, and 12.7% for women’s share in decision making. There are other factors that affect such associations.

Table 3. Pearson’s Correlation between Religiosity and Women’s Electoral Participation

Religiosity and Women’s Electoral Quota	Pearson’s <i>r</i> (tabular r=0.95)	<i>p</i>-value (alpha 0.05, 2-tailed)	R squared
Percentage share of women in decision-making	.357 (moderate)	.000	.127
Percent female leadership x female membership	.157 (not significant)	.05	.157
Percentage share of female nominees on parties’ electoral lists for parliament	.193 (weak)	.001	.037

An inter-correlation was also done to see how the various variables were associated or related to each other (Table 4).

Table 4. Inter-correlation of Variables on Women’s Electoral Indicators

Electoral Indicators	Pearson’s <i>r</i>	<i>p</i>-value (alpha 0.05, 2-tailed)
Percentage share of women in decision-making bodies with Percent female membership x Percent female leadership	0.837 (strong)	0.001
Percent female leadership x Percent female membership with Percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament	0.658 (strong)	0.001
Percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament with Percentage share of women in decision-making bodies	0.511 (moderate)	0.001

In summary, the test statistics of *t*-test and bivariate correlation showed that- 1) there is a difference in women’s electoral participation between Muslim majority, and non-Muslim majority countries. The Muslim majority countries had lower mean on women’s electoral participation; and there is an association between religiosity and electoral women’s participation.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data above substantiated by empirical evidence show that religion, in particular, Islam, is a strong factor in women’s electoral participation. The data show that women’s electoral participation is lesser among Muslim majority compared to non-Muslim majority countries. The data also lend credence to the empirical evidence that religiosity is correlated with women’s electoral participation. The *t*-test and the bivariate correlations confirmed this pattern.

The social attitude toward women is indeed influenced by religion, and in this case, Islam. In a study in Morocco, there is a prevalent stereotypical view of women’s image in terms of their family and societal roles (IFES et al,- Morocco 2012). This social attitude pertains to male mentality that restricts women’s role to marriage, childbearing, as well as having weak presence in the decision making positions in Morocco. This is the similar to this study among Muslim countries where only an average of 15.9% seats in decision making bodies were occupied by women.

Traditional views on women tend to be a deterrent in their accommodation in politics. These traditional views, in turn, are influenced by religion. In a study in Morocco, among those who would not encourage their daughter to become involved in politics as a municipal or parliamentary candidate, the most prevalent reasons for saying so are that politics is difficult for women, that women should not work outside the home, and traditional views of women’s abilities and roles (IFES et al,-Morocco 2012). Similar results were culled in this study among Muslims in that among those who were more religious, the mean for women’s electoral participation was lesser than for the secular respondents (*p*=.001).

In this study among Muslim countries, the percentage share of women nominees on parties’ electoral lists for parliament was only 14.1%, It also revealed that religiosity, being extremist Islam, is associated with lesser women nominees in party lists. The role of religion in women’s participation in politics is also shown in a study conducted in Lebanon, another Muslim country,

where Sunni Muslim women were less supportive of women becoming involved in politics as candidates for office compared to Christian women in the same country. These Sunni women were less likely to encourage their daughters to participate in politics than the Christian women (IFES et al.,-Lebanon 2012). Among the reasons cited by the Lebanese respondents for not encouraging their daughters in politics are the beliefs that politics are better for males than females, that women must stay at home, and that women are not qualified/ educated. All these social attitudes toward women in regard politics are in consonance with the teachings of Islam (Dalacoura 2011).

As was cited above, the percentage representation of women in decision making bodies in this study was low, accounting only for 15.9%. In the study among Lebanese, there was a statistical difference between men and women who strongly oppose women to be members of parliament, as well as women becoming members of political parties. Men tended to oppose women's political engagements compared to the women (IFES et al.,-Lebanon 2012).

Gender relations are affected by religion. It was the hypothesis of this study that religiosity was associated with women's electoral participation. This was proven to be the case in that more extremist religiosity was associated with lower mean on women's electoral participation ($p=0.001$). In a similar study, more males agreed that men make good political leaders, while more women disagreed with this statement (IFES et al.,-Lebanon 2012). This attitude among males can hinder women from these significant leadership positions (ICG 2011 in Dalacoura 2012, p. 64).

This study also showed internal party list quota and electoral quota allotted for women. Parties that have internal quota for women were far less in Muslim majority countries (16.2%) than in non- Muslim majority countries (57.9%). The chi-square test of independence confirmed the statistical difference between these two groups ($p=0.001$). In Lebanon, two-thirds of women support the introduction of gender quotas in parliament. In Yemen, a different finding emerges. Very few of the Yemenis seem to have heard about gender quotas. A sweeping majority of 80% of women had not heard about "the notion of reserving a share for women in parliament and in elected bodies so that women have a specific percentage of seats" against 20% of the men (IFES et al.,-Yemen 2012). Having a low awareness on gender quotas may pose an obstacle in the campaign for the introduction of gender quotas in elected bodies in Yemen. In this study among Muslim populations, the gender quota (referred in this study as electoral quota) is also negligible across the 26 sampled countries.

Based on the results of this research study in conjunction with the results of related researches conducted in Muslim populations and Muslim countries, there are patterns of relationship between religiosity and women's electoral participation. However, this does not unequivocally mean that other factors do not affect women's electoral participation in these countries. As Keddie (in McAleese, 2007) poignantly stated, Muslim women's status in their societies should be contextualized within the broader socio-economic and political histories as affected by Western influences, oil politics, authoritarian regimes, and world politics. Hence, an elaboration of Islamic feminism and secular feminism can initially provide a qualitative data on how Islam women perceive themselves and their status.

Islamic Feminism vs. Secular Feminism

The issue whether the struggle for feminism is a fight against a form of discrimination or a form of defending cultural identity has sparked debates within the academe. Mehrdad (2000) and McAleese (2007) provide opposing views of how women perceive their socio-economic status in an Islamic government.

Mehrdad (2000) explains that there are two types of feminist movements within Iran-secular feminists and Muslim feminists. Secular feminists are those who challenged the Islamic state and its laws because they saw religious influence as negative and as such, demanded an end to the hegemony of religion over civil society, and the separation of religion from state. On the other hand, Muslim feminists “constructed an ideal Islamic image of Muslim women in the late twentieth century” and resisted the very essence of capitalism and imperialism, which have been dominant ideologies in the *Pahlavi* period. Also, Muslim feminists’ focus on ideology rather than “material issues” has created huge gap between their views and that of the secular feminists. Secular feminists find “material issues” a significant issue. To illustrate, the prohibition of women to work in public spaces imposes a great deal of concern.

Since 1979, politics in Iran was under the control of Islamists, therefore laws regarding gender seclusion were reinforced under the guidelines of the Shariah law. Women were segregated from men in public places such as in schools and sports. Despite the major reforms of gender laws to include women in the labor force due to the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, the seclusion and segregation of women were not addressed. Poya, an Islam academic and researcher, states that “the return of women to the labor force did not alter the gender social relations that placed women at a disadvantage within the labor market.” This illustrates Poya’s claim that although there are formal laws that place women in a sphere where they are seen as equal to men, women are still seen as incompetent to work in a public sphere. Society still adheres to the traditional ideology that women are better off working within the household. With that stated, Muslim feminists, who started to resist the state, and secular feminists, who continued to resist the state, were brought together by their fervor to increase women’s rights both in the political and social arena (Mehrdad 2000).

Keddie, author of *Women in the Middle East, Past and Present*, provides a different perspective of women secularism and women wearing veil. Keddie explains that the marginalization of women was present even before the rise of Islam in the region. She states that in pre-Islamic periods, there were already seclusion of women and the wearing of the veil. This was, however, to distinguish socio-economic status among women. Wearing of veils denoted an urban woman who is privileged and well-off, while slaves or tribal women who worked were “less-likely to wear veils.” In the present day, Muslim conservatives see the increasing power of West over the economy and politics in the region as a threat to the cultural identity of the people, especially the women. As a result, they promoted the wearing of veils to protect the women’s cultural identity. Lower-class rural and urban women readily accepted this change, while upper-class women who profited from Western influences adopted Western fashion styles (McAleese 2007).

Keddie further espouses that Islamist women became more supportive of the wearing of veils and *hijab* as a response to the attempt of “modernizing” secular leaders to abolish these practices. These women adhere to traditional values such as wearing of veils in order to protect their “cultural identity, national pride and religious piety” (McAleese 2007).

CONCLUSION

Women’s experiences and needs may be ignored in the policymaking process due to their non-representation or underrepresentation in elected office. All the above cited findings point to religion being a political factor in women’s politics in the countries being studied. Further researches, however, have to be done to look into the gains of women as a result of Islam as espoused by Micallef (2005) and McAleese (2007) in order to see the particular and specific contexts of Islamic feminism vis-à-vis internal and international politics.

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