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Petroleum Patriarchy? A Response to Ross

Pippa Norris, Harvard University

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The notion of a "resource curse" has been most commonly applied in explaining why many countries apparently blessed with abundant reserves of nonrenewable mineral resources, such as Nigerian oil, Democratic Republic of Congo gold, or Sierra Leone diamonds, in fact, are commonly blighted with less transparency and probity, economic stability, economic diversification, social equality, and investment in human capital. In these conditions, the heightened danger of state capture and rent seeking by ruling elites generate poorer prospects for the transition from autocracy and the consolidation of stable democracies (Auty 1993; Boix 2003; Dunning 2008; Jensen and Wantchekon 2004; Ross 2001). Lootable mineral resources, in particular, are thought to make a country particularly vulnerable to civil war, insurgency, and rebellion (Collier and Sambanis 2005; Humphreys 2005; Ross 2004, 2006; Snyder 2006).

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In "Oil, Islam and Women" (2008), Michael Ross builds on this catalog of social ills by suggesting that petroleum also damages equality between men and women, both directly as well as indirectly. In particular, Ross's argument makes two core claims:

First, he suggests that the structure of an economy that is heavily dependent upon oil and gas resources is *directly* responsible for the inequality of men and women's participation in the paid labor force. Manual jobs in the mining, extraction, refining, and production of mineral resources are heavily male dominated, in contrast to service-sector economies.

Secondly, lower female labor force participation, he reasons, limits opportunities for females to run for elected office. Labor force participation, he suggests, affects women's identities and perceptions, as well as their engagement in formal and informal networks and the incentives for governments to take their interests into account. All these factors, Ross believes, should enhance women's political influence, and thus more women in the workforce should facilitate their representation in elected and appointed office. The resource curse (petroleum) is thereby seen to *indirectly* reinforce patriarchal states. If so, buying that new bicycle is not merely healthy for you and the planet; it also facilitates equality for women. Who knew?

To support these twin claims, econometric evidence is drawn from macro-level cross-national and time-series data. The key independent variable — the value of oil and gas production — is operationalized as oil and gas rents per capita. This represents the total annual value of a country's oil and gas production, minus the extraction costs in each country, divided by its population to normalize the value of the rents, measured from 1960 to 2002 in constant 2000 U.S. dollars. The dependent variables for the econometric models are aggregate-level indicators of women's status, including the proportion of women in the paid labor force, as well as the fraction of parliamentary seats and ministerial positions held by women in 2002. Controls include levels of democracy and economic development and the Muslim fraction of each country's population. The study also contrasts illustrative case studies of women's status in North African states that have poor mineral resources, including Tunisia and Morocco, with their position in oil-rich Algeria. Ross concludes: "The extraction of oil and gas tends to reduce the role of women in the work force, and the likelihood that they will accumulate political influence. ... In short, petroleum perpetuates patriarchy" (2008, 120).

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AND TRADITIONAL CULTURAL ATTITUDES?

The alliteration is certainly neat. The reasoning is persuasive. From a policy perspective, the argument implies that so long as the oil reserves hold, no matter how many women candidates challenge the status quo in Bahrain, Iran, and Jordan, few are likely to succeed. But greening the planet and reducing dependence upon fossil fuels may have unexpected benefits. Before these claims are accepted, however, the empirical evidence presented to support this argument needs to be reconsidered. Three sets of concerns about the evidence used by Ross can be highlighted.

Case Study Selection

First, a number of doubts arise from the case study evidence. As Mounira Charrad points out elsewhere in this special issue, the choice of illustrative case studies is inevitably somewhat selective, and different paired comparisons of countries, such as contrasts between Morocco and Tunisia, can generate alternative interpretations. If the resource curse is defined more broadly than oil and gas production — as it should be — then of course the comparison would have to account for cases such as South Africa, an economy founded upon gold and diamonds — and yet one where women have always made their voices felt effectively, through engagement in the antiapartheid struggles as well as by currently representing more than 43.5% of all members of parliament. Alternatively it might have been more persuasive to select cases from non-Muslim petroleum- and gas-rich states outside of the Middle East, such as Venezuela or Russia, although both of these societies fail to provide a good fit for the thesis, and energy-rich Norway and Canada (and Scotland?) are obviously even more extreme outliers.

Ross's discussion of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), as an illustration of the way that industrialization and women's entry into the workforce has opened doors to political representation, is somewhat unconvincing. The country currently ranks 87th worldwide in the proportion of women in parliament, well below the world average. Instead, a detailed discussion of particular historical cases, showing how patriarchy has been strengthened or weakened in economies that became more or less dependent upon mineral resources, would also have greatly strengthened the argument. Patriarchal cultures in Arab states did not spring up overnight in the mid-nineteenth century as the result of the discovery and commercial exploitation of refined petroleum;

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they have enduring historical roots that predate the discovery and production of oil. In the extreme cases of states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where women continue to lack the legal right to vote and to stand for office, it also remains unclear theoretically how any amount of female participation in the labor force will eventually facilitate women's representation in decision making.

Moreover, closer scrutiny of the data presented as evidence in the descriptive Figures 3–6 contained in the Ross study quickly reveals that any statistical relationship between oil rents and the economic and political status of women in the Middle East is due primarily to three main outliers – Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia). From observing the descriptive scatter-plots, in most other Arab states, once these countries are excluded there appears to be almost no linear relationship between oil rents per capita and any of the dependent variables, including female participation in the nonagricultural labor force; the year of female suffrage (where Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are coded, curiously, as allowing women to vote, although this has not yet occurred); the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women; and gender rights. By contrast, the scatter-grams highlight that substantial variation needs to be explained in all of these indicators of gender equality among those Arab states that have few or no revenues from oil rents. As we shall demonstrate later, a worldwide comparison demonstrates even weaker relationships between petroleum and patriarchy.

Econometric Models

Secondly, questions can also be raised about the econometric models that Ross uses to account for the proportion of women in parliament. From an institutional perspective, the suspicion remains that the controls that he incorporates into his models may be misspecified in one important regard. As Alice Kang emphasizes (in this issue), Ross controls for the impact of proportional representation in electoral systems with closed lists, but he does not examine the role of different types of affirmative action used for women in elected office. Reserved seats have long been used in Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan and Bangladesh (Norris 2007). Researchers also need to consider the contemporary popularity of voluntary and legal gender quotas for parliamentary candidates, as well as the interaction between the type of electoral system and the quota system (Dahlerup 2006; International IDEA 2008; Krook

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2009; Norris 2004). Elsewhere in this issue, Kang presents clear evidence that where quotas are introduced in mineral-rich nations, the effects on women's representation are indeterminate.

Ross theorizes that oil rents per capita should have 1) a direct role in shaping female labor force participation, and they should thereby also have 2) an additional indirect effect on women's representation in parliament. This suggests that properly specified cross-national regression models should include an interaction effect in order to monitor the impact of oil rents combined with female labor force participation on women's representation. It also remains unclear theoretically from his arguments why the value of oil production is expected to have any *direct* impact on women's parliamentary representation. Some plausible reasons could always be constructed, for example, concerning the way that the resource curse depresses the process of democratization, and as a result this may, in turn, limit the expansion of human rights, including women's equality. Torbin Iversen and Frances Rosenbluth (2008) present the argument that low levels of female labor force participation contribute to female underrepresentation in democratic polities by reinforcing traditional voter attitudes toward women (a demand-side feature) and by constraining the supply of women with professional experience and resources who are capable of mounting credible electoral campaigns. Whatever the precise underlying reason, the linkages in the argument presented in the Ross study remain underdeveloped.

In terms of measures, there are also certain pros and cons associated with the use of oil rents per capita to examine the impact of the resource curse. Ideally, a broader measure of nonrenewable natural resources would capture the underlying logic of the core argument more precisely; if the oil and gas extraction industries are overwhelmingly male dominated, then so too is the workforce mining gold, diamonds, and copper. Since the extraction and distribution of natural commodities forms a critical part of the economy in many diverse regions of the world, a measure that reflects a more comprehensive basket of these resources would also help to disentangle the complex effects of Muslim religious faith and oil.

Moreover, the theoretical link between the value of oil rents per capita and the structure of the labor market may also prove tenuous. In some cases, such as Trinidad and Tobago, energy production generates about 40% of the GDP and 80% of exports, but only 5% of employment. It is also worth noting that even in economies heavily dependent on oil production for revenue, this does not mean that manual work directly in this industry engages the largest sector of the workforce, by any means.

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For example, the petroleum industry in Saudi Arabia accounts for roughly 80% of budget revenues, 45% of the GDP, and 90% of export earnings, but nevertheless almost three-quarters of the Saudi workforce is employed in the service sector. Rather than oil revenues per capita, a stricter test of the structural claim would therefore be to examine the relationship between the proportion of the labor force employed by this sector of the economy and the representation of women in elected office. The Ross measure of oil rents per capita also generates some counterintuitive patterns compared with our popular image of oil-rich states; in 2006, for example, oil rents per capita are twice as high in Trinidad and Tobago as in Saudi Arabia. The socially egalitarian welfare states of Norway and Canada also have particularly high oil rents per capita by this measure, more so than Venezuela, Russia, Iraq, Iran, and Nigeria. This clearly suggests the need for considerable caution in generalizing about patterns of gender equality worldwide from our cultural stereotypes about oil-rich states.

Direct Evidence for Cultural Values

Lastly, leaving aside these issues for the moment, as legitimate questions where interpretations based on empirical issues of evidence, methodology, and measures can and do differ, there is still one remaining major lacuna to the resource curse thesis, representing the "dog which did not bark." Although Ross's argument is explicitly framed theoretically to reject cultural explanations, in fact the study does not consider any direct evidence concerning attitudes and values. Thus, the analysis is unable to test successive rival models that monitor how the public feels about women and men's roles in the workforce, family and public life, moral values toward sexuality, or any other direct measures about the strength of religiosity or religious identities and beliefs derived from public opinion.

As a proxy measure of culture, Ross controls for the proportion of Muslim adherents in each society. This measure (usually based on fairly crude estimates) does not take into account important variations among Muslim societies in the type of regime, levels of human development, and the official role of religion in the state, as well as contrasts between Sunni and Shi'a. For example, Muslims are over 90% of the population in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Mali, and Indonesia, yet according to Freedom House (2009), Egypt and Saudi Arabia are some of the most repressive autocracies around the world, while today Mali and Indonesia are electoral democracies. H. Rizzo, A. H. Abdel-Latif, and K. Meyer (2007) have emphasized that the comparison of *all* Islamic societies may

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overlook important distinctions, since attitudes towards gender equality and sexuality in Arab cultures are expected to be substantially more traditional than those of Asian Islamic cultures. Ross concludes that "[t]he persistence of patriarchy in the Middle East has relatively little to do with Islam, but much to do with the region's oil-based economy" (2008, 120). Without any direct survey evidence, however, the more cautious approach would be to remain agnostic in estimating how much the resource curse matters, compared with alternative cultural and institutional explanations in the literature.

Therefore, the research literature presents a wealth of evidence that the resource curse can probably be blamed for a multitude of ills, from conflict and civil war to anemic economic growth, corruption, state capture, and the contemporary push-back in Russia and Venezuela against the forces of democratization. But it has not yet been clearly established whether the resource curse, at least petroleum, is a major factor at the heart of the problems concerning the continuing gender disparities in elected office among Arab states.

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Studying Oil, Islam, and Women as if Political Institutions Mattered

Alice Kang, University of Wisconsin, Madison

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By asserting that oil, not Islam, hurts gender equality, Michael Ross (2008) has made an important contribution to the debate on whether Islam bodes ill for women (Fish 2002; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Spierings, Smits, and Verloo 2009). Ross suggests that oil production decreases the number of female workers in countries with occupational segregation. The more women are left out of the formal economy, the fewer opportunities and resources they have for becoming influential political constituencies. According to Ross, "[t]his leaves oil-producing states with atypically strong patriarchal cultures and political institutions" (p. 107). Employing the same set of countries and data used in Ross (2008), I show that the institution of gender quotas, which is omitted from his statistical analyses, offsets the effects of oil rents on women's political representation. Gender quotas increase women's representation in Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries and in countries that are oil rich and oil poor.[1] That "petroleum perpetuates patriarchy" (p. 120) is a tendency, not destiny.

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1. I make a conscious decision to use the term "Muslim majority." In Muslim majority countries, more than 50% of the population identify as Muslim. In Islamic countries, Islam is adopted as the state religion.

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