Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have recently revised Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis arguing that the core clash between the Islamic world and the West is not over whether or not democracy is the best political system, but over issues concerning gender equality and sexual liberalization. Using the World Values Survey, they found that citizens of Muslim societies are significantly less supportive of equal rights and opportunities for women than those living in Western democratic countries. In another study they found that “in virtually every authoritarian society, a majority of the public believes that men make better political leaders than women; in virtually every stable democracy a clear majority of the public rejects this belief…” The implication is that until citizens, particularly women, of Muslim populations believe that women and men are equal in all aspects of life, this will be the main cultural barrier to democratization in the Muslim world.

Islam and women’s rights

There is also growing evidence that Islamic values can be compatible with women’s empowerment and participation in society. Women themselves (secular, religious, and Islamist) in Iran, Egypt, and Kuwait, for example, are using Islamic principles to justify women’s equality, access to resources, and participation in the public sphere in order to increase democratization. My research on Kuwait builds upon this evidence and investigates the effect of women’s organizations and their interpretations of Islam on the political participation and attitudes toward extending the citizenship rights of their members.

In general, there has been little research on Gulf women because of the difficulties in gaining access to that population. To address the lack of representation, my research examined women’s voluntary associations, which are an important base for women’s social participation and involvement. The research included a range of women’s associations—ten in all. The leaders of the ten associations were interviewed extensively and a sample of 125 members was surveyed between January—March 1998. Leaders were identified through a snowball technique that began with colleagues and key informants at Kuwait University; these leaders distributed the surveys to their active members. The leaders provided information about the background, goals, structure, and activities of their organizations, especially on the topic of women’s political rights. Both leaders and members were asked about their perceptions of women’s problems, descriptions of their activism and routine political participation, and their attitudes toward including women more fully into Kuwaiti society and politics.

A divide between the more numerous service organizations and the professional women’s groups prevails. The leaders of the professional associations support the notion that achieving women’s formal political rights is an important goal. The leaders of the service organizations are more concerned with religious and social service activities than obtaining political rights for women. A few, especially among the Islamist service associations, are even opposed to granting such political rights based on religious interpretations that claim that Islam forbids women to govern or rule.

Secularization and women’s rights

Despite certain points of contention between the service organizations and women’s groups, the research indicated that Islam was not inherently incompatible with democratization or gender equality. Religious beliefs and practices did not serve as barriers for members of both types of groups in either their political participation or in their support for women’s citizenship rights. Instead, holding strong Islamic beliefs (adhering to the theology, orthodoxy) was compatible with support for extending political rights to women even after controlling for other factors. Thus, my findings support the thesis that secularization at the individual level is not a necessary condition for the processes of modernization and democratization.

Notes