

Gender Equality, Peace and Socioeconomic Development

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Women's empowerment means more than political representation. It also involves socioeconomic status, including opportunities for education and employment, and lower fertility rates. In this sense women's empowerment is a function of governance capacity, especially the state's ability to deliver public goods and provide equitable access to education, public health services, and opportunities for economic development. All are crucial to the empowerment of women and are essential elements of good governance for peace.

Research shows a connection between women's socioeconomic status and the prevention of armed conflict. A study of three interrelated indicators—the percentage of women in democratic legislatures, the proportion of women in the labor force, and fertility rates—shows a direct link to the likelihood of inter-state conflict. The risk of militarized international disputes diminishes significantly in states where fertility rates are low, women participate fully in the work force, there is a longer history of female suffrage, and women hold a substantial percentage of seats in parliament.¹ The political, economic, and social empowerment of women helps to encourage more peaceful foreign policies and reduces the likelihood of war.² A related study using a composite gender equality index confirms that states with lower fertility rates and more women in the labor force are less likely to initiate the use of force in international disputes.³

The pacifying impact of gender equality on inter-state conflict is matched by a similar effect on the risk of internal conflict. In a 2005 study Caprioli examines the impact of women's socioeconomic status on civil violence within states. She finds that countries with high fertility rates (3+ children per woman) are much more likely to experience civil conflict than those with low fertility rates. States with low female participation in the labor force (10 per cent) are many times more likely to experience internal armed conflict than states with a high proportion (40 per cent) of women in the labor force.⁴ Lower birth rates are consistently related to a lower risk of deadly violence.

The identified links between conflict risk on the one hand and high fertility rates and low female participation in the workforce on the other could be measuring the level of economic development rather than an independent peace effect. Countries with high

levels of poverty are likely to have higher birth rates as well as higher rates of armed conflict.

Economic development is the strongest predictor of peace. Studies that have attempted to examine these questions point to interrelated and mutually reinforcing impacts for peace of both development and women's empowerment. The World Bank's 2012 report argues that "the links between gender equality and development go both ways."⁵ While economic development certainly can increase gender equality, gender equality also increases a country's productivity and economic development. The impacts of gender equality contribute to and reinforce the pacifying effects of development.

Part of that peace effect is related to levels of female educational attainment. Low educational levels for girls are directly associated with the prevalence of intra-state violence. Female educational levels are independently and directly correlated with lower levels of armed conflict. This finding holds true even when controlling for economic development or the degree of democracy in a county.⁶ Primary and tertiary enrollment for both girls and boys is significantly related to lower conflict onset. A relative increase in girls' enrollment at all levels of education reduces the risk of armed conflict.⁷ Female education also produces more educated children, creating a cascade effect for peace since educated boys are less likely to be recruited to rebel causes.

Gender equality in education is strongly correlated with indicators of good governance. An analysis by Marjit Bussman compares measures of gender equality with governance indicators for more than 100 countries. To measure governance she uses the international country risk guide (ICRG), based on 22 components that gauge political, economic, and financial risk factors. High rankings in the ICRG are significantly correlated with reduced risk of armed conflict.⁸ Female educational levels have the strongest direct link with reduced conflict risk, but other gender variables are also associated with improved governance and lower rates of armed conflict. All the major gender indicators—the number of years women have had suffrage, female labor force participation rates, educational enrollment and female literacy rates—are significantly correlated with good governance and peace.⁹

Gender equity in education also promotes peace through its beneficial effects on democracy. A study of more than 100 countries finds a strong relationship between women's educational status and the likelihood of democracy. In countries where the gap between male and female primary education is narrow, the prospects for democratic governance are higher.¹⁰ Others have reached similar conclusions. A study of Muslim majority countries links the democratic deficits in these regimes to the lower status of women, arguing that this is a more significant factor than religious systems in explaining

the lack of democracy.¹¹ Lower rates of democracy in these regimes are most strongly associated with gender indicators, especially the literacy gap that exists between men and women.¹²

Taken together these and other studies confirm that higher levels of gender equality, as measured by educational attainment and socioeconomic status, are directly correlated with development, improved governance and reduced rates of armed conflict. States characterized by gender equality are less likely to engage in militarized international disputes, have lower rates of military spending, and are less likely to experience internal armed conflict, repression and human rights abuse. Even when controlling for a state's level of democracy and economic growth rate, gender equality stands out as a significant factor in its own right. Societies in which women are empowered politically, participate in the work force, are well educated and have low fertility rates are more likely to be peaceful in relations with other states and internally.

Economic impacts

Gender equity promotes peace through its beneficial effects on economic growth and development. A World Bank paper notes that female education increases human capital and spurs economic growth, concluding that "female education is a good investment that raises national income."¹³ This is especially important in societies at or above middle levels of development that are dependent on skilled labor. The same study measures other indicators of gender equality in addition to educational attainment and finds that all are positively correlated with levels of per capita income.¹⁴ Gender equality and higher levels of economic development are mutually reinforcing.

Education has the greatest beneficial impact on development when it goes beyond primary school. Partial female education may inadvertently contribute to population growth and falling per capita income. A study of the impacts of various levels of education in 52 countries in sub-Saharan Africa found that education for girls up to 9th grade was associated with lower infant mortality rates but little change in fertility. As demographers note, lower infant mortality rates can lead to an increase in population growth if fertility rates remain high. In the absence of general economic growth and productivity gains, this can lower per capita income.¹⁵ When girls complete secondary education, fertility rates are substantially lower, which helps to offset increases in population. This research indicates that school enrollment for girls helps to lower fertility rates, but only if the educational process is sustained through high school and if public policies support access to family planning.¹⁶

The economic development prospects of lower income nations are strongly linked to gender equality. Global development patterns show that inequalities in male and female education and employment rates are associated with slower rates of economic growth. Imbalances in the number of years of schooling for boys and girls have a negative effect on growth. As a major study of the subject concludes, “the challenge of increasing the economic growth of a country is... to a considerable extent linked to the role played by women in the society. The costs of discrimination towards women in education and employment not only harm the women concerned but also impose a cost for the entire society.”¹⁷ The wide gender male and female employment gaps in South Asia helps to explain why that region continues to lag behind East Asia in economic growth rates. Barriers to female employment are not only disadvantageous to women, but also appear to reduce national economic growth rates. Conversely, countries with a greater proportion of women in the labor market achieve higher economic growth. Gender equality in employment is particularly important in countries with high levels of international trade.¹⁸

Fertility and demographics

A number of studies show that lower rates of fertility and population growth enhance economic growth and thereby reduce the risk of armed conflict. Decreases in birth rates raise a country’s median age, which generates potential economic dividends. Lower fertility rates enhance economic growth when the working-age population is growing and savings rates are rising. As fertility nears the replacement level, small families become common and working-age adults assume a larger proportion of the population. In East Asia this “demographic bonus” has played a significant role in facilitating rapid economic growth. Governance programs for public education, improved health care, and family planning have provided a major boost for economic development and in the process increase the prospects for peace.¹⁹

Approximately a third of the world’s countries are in the last stages of a transition from higher birth rates and shorter lives to lower birth rates and longer lives. Societies that have not started this transition or are in its early stages are characterized by high rates of fertility, higher levels of infant mortality, and large youth populations. These are all factors associated with a greater risk of violent conflict.

A Population Action Council report found that nearly half of the countries with birthrates higher than 45 per 1,000 people experienced an outbreak of civil conflict, while countries with falling birth rates have a lower conflict risk.²⁰ Movement along the demographic transition from high to low birth rates corresponds with a decreased risk of internal armed conflict. According to the report, “Countries in the earlier stages of the [demographic] transition are at greater risk [of conflict] than those near its end, and most

importantly...moving through the transition gradually reduces that risk.”²¹ The report attributes declining birth rates to education for girls, marriage at a later age, employment outside the home, and greater availability and use of contraceptives.²²

Societies with large bulges of uneducated and unemployed youth are prone to violence. A comprehensive study of population patterns in every country of the world finds that youth bulges significantly increase the risks of armed conflict, terrorism, and riots.²³ Countries in which youth comprise 35 per cent or more of the population have a higher risk of armed conflict than countries with normal population distributions.²⁴ This pattern holds regardless of regime type. Youth bulges increase the risk of conflict in both highly autocratic and democratic countries. Policies that reduce birth rates can help to mitigate this problem.

A 2011 Council on Foreign Relations report, *Family Planning and U.S. Foreign Policy*, highlights the profound influence of demography on development and peace. A high level of population growth “has the potential to jeopardize international poverty reduction measures, exacerbate security threats already present, and threaten the sustainable use of the world’s natural resources.”²⁵ The report argues that an increased prioritization of family planning measures will help to advance economic development, international security, and environmental sustainability. Policies that lower birth rates and flatten the population curve help to promote economic growth and reduce the risk of armed conflict. These goals are best accomplished through the empowerment of women. As girls have the opportunity to learn and stay in school, they are more likely to delay having children. As they gain access to productive employment they tend to have fewer children.²⁶ Fostering greater social and economic opportunity for women thus helps to advance the prospects for peace and prosperity.

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² Mary Caprioli, “Gendered Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 37 no. 1, 2000, 63.

³ Mary Caprioli, “Gender Equality and State Aggression: The Impact of Domestic Gender Equality on State First Use of Force,” *International Interactions* 29, 2003: 205.

⁴ Mary Caprioli, “Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (June 2005): 172.

⁵ The World Bank, *Gender Equality and Development*, *World Development Report*, Washington, DC, 2012, 46.

⁶ Bussmann, Margit, 2007, “Gender Equality, good governance, and Peace,” paper presented at the General Polarization and Conflict (PAC) Meeting, Gaillac (France), June 7-9: 10.

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- ²⁰ Richard P. Cincotta, Robert Engelman, Daniele Anastasion, *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict After the Cold War*, (Population Action International, Washington, DC: 2003): 30-31.
- ²¹ Richard P. Cincotta, Robert Engelman, Daniele Anastasion, *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict After the Cold War*, (Population Action International, Washington, DC: 2003): 27.
- ²² Richard P. Cincotta, Robert Engelman, Daniele Anastasion, *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict After the Cold War*, (Population Action International, Washington, DC: 2003): 25-6.
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