

Norms on Gender Equality and Violent Conflict

Written by Åsa Ekvall

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ÅSA EKVALL, JUN 10 2013

Since last year, a strong correlation between gender equality and violence, including armed conflict, has been established beyond any doubt. Using the WomanStats data base (WomanStats Project, 2012), which includes over 320 variables measuring gender equality for 175 states, Hudson, Ballif-Spanvill, Caprioli & Emmett (2012) have found very strong and statistically significant evidence that the physical security of women (including the prevalence of domestic violence, rape, marital rape, and murder of women) is the best predictor of state security, measured through the Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2012a), the States of Concern to the International Community Scale (Brinton, 2011) and the Relations with Neighboring Countries Index (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2012b), far ahead of traditional explanatory variables such as democracy, GDP per capita and prevalence of Islam. Furthermore, they found that unequal family law and the presence of polygyny also outperformed these traditional explanatory variables in explaining the variance of the physical security of women. They also found that if a state is not enforcing laws that protect women it is also less likely to be compliant with international norms. This is consistent with a number of earlier and smaller studies linking both different indicators of gender equality and so-called honor cultures with violence and conflict.[1]

Where does this correlation come from? Is there causality? Many of the authors of the previous studies have hypothesized that norms could be part of the explanation. Social norms are defined as customary rules of behavior that coordinate interactions between individuals (Young, 2008). Norms tell us what is “right” and what is “wrong”, and it is hard to think of a form of interaction between citizens that is not governed to some degree by social norms (Bicchieri, 2006). Norms thus play a crucial role in both gender (in)equality and the use of violence.

Norms on Gender and Violence

Many scholars in masculinities studies have found that patriarchal and traditional gender norms, and especially those on masculinity (or what a “real” man should be like), are associated with many forms of violence. The Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI) (Mahalik, Locke, Ludlow, Diemer, Scott, Gottfried et al., 2003) has been used in many studies on masculinities and violence and it assesses levels of conformity to masculine norms in eleven categories: Winning, Emotional Control, Risk-Taking, Violence, Dominance, Playboy, Self-Reliance, Primacy of Work, Power Over Women, Disdain for Homosexuals, and Pursuit of Status. The CMNI is grounded in Mahalik’s gender role norms model, which posits that socially dominant groups shape the gender role norms that are communicated to individuals in a society. Women also adhere to these norms. It has for instance been found that higher agreement with patriarchal social norms among women predicted a decreased likelihood of identifying an abused woman as a victim of spousal abuse (Ahmad, Riaz, Barata & Steward, 2004).

Adolescent boys often find the need to prove themselves to be men, and if they fail they are often thought to be homosexual. Calling a young man gay is thought to be the worst insult a young man can face. Kimmel (2008) describes the “Guy Code,” which entails proving one’s masculinity, and indeed, one’s heterosexuality, on a daily basis. To do so, young men must be popular, athletic, and in no way associated with anything perceived as feminine. The Guy Code also encourages the use of violence to avenge any perceived offense.

A concept closely related to patriarchal values, masculinity and violence is the so-called ‘honor culture’. Studies on so-called honor cultures show links between control over women’s bodies, sexuality and freedom of movement and

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high levels of interpersonal violence (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2010). So-called honor cultures are not only condoning and using violence against women but violence in general, although it's usually not called honor-related violence when not directed against women. It can range from the right to hit someone who has scratched one's car to the support of the death penalty and the freedom to kill in self-defence.

There are more explanations for how norms get influenced and interact. The 'subculture of violence' perspective (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967) argues that social groups exhibit high rates of violent behavior because of group members' adherence to values and norms that support, legitimize, and encourage violent behavior, often involving an emphasised ideal of masculinity. Studies on genocides and other forms of mass violence confirm that one reason people adhere to group norms that endorse violence is a fear of what might happen if they refuse to participate in the killings. (Bhavnani, 2006). These norms and threats linked to ethnic violence are structurally similar to the norms on so-called honor-related violence, where those who fail to comply with the community's norms are punished. There are also studies showing that violence breeds violence by normalizing it (Lansford & Dodge, 2008). Traditional masculinities are closely related to patriarchal values and also to gender inequality and violence, especially what Galtung (1969, 1990) defines as structural and cultural violence through norms and values.

Studying Norms on Gender Equality and Their Relation to Violence

How then to verify if norms on gender (in)equality and violence really are linked? Are norms on gender equality also linked to actual measureable levels of gender equality? Using data regarding norms on gender equality from the World Values Survey (WVS) (World Values Survey, 1981-2008), data on measurable gender equality in the political, economic, educational and health spheres on the state level from the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) (Hausmann, Tyson & Zahidi, 2008), data on the presence or absence of armed intra-state conflict from the Uppsala Conflict Data Base (UCDB) (Harbom & Wallensteen, 2009) and data on a more inclusive and general peacefulness from the Global Peace Index (GPI) (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2012a), statistical analyses were carried out to verify the following five hypotheses:

H1: The higher the level of political and socio-economic gender equality in a country, the less likely it is that it will experience an intrastate armed conflict.

H2: The higher the level of political and socio-economic gender equality in a country, the more peaceful the country is in general.

H3: The more people approve of gender equality in a country, the less likely it is that there will be an armed conflict.

H4: The more people approve of gender equality in a country, the more peaceful it will be in general.

H5: The more people approve of gender equality in a country, the higher the level of political and socio-economic equality.

A bivariate correlation was carried out, using the Spearman's correlation coefficient, in order to see the relationship between the aggregated gender equality value variable, the GGGI, the UCDB and the GPI.

All hypotheses were confirmed: the results were strong, positive (H1 = .403; H2 = .278; H3 = .563; H4 = .420; H5 = .643) and significant to the .001 level (two-tailed). The only correlation that is slightly less strong than the others, albeit still significant, is between the levels of political and socio-economic gender equality and the levels of general peacefulness (H2). A possible explanation for this is that the GGGI is not a good enough tool to measure gender equality.

While a causal link cannot be proven for any of the five hypotheses, the literature indicates that there might be one. The strong and significant relationships found between our norms and values on gender equality and actual levels of gender equality, conflict and general peacefulness show that there is a need to think about prevention of violence and conflict in a new way, not reducing gender equality to "women's issues" that can be dealt with later when the "hard"

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issues have been solved.

Further Thoughts

First, these findings encourage further research into the causal mechanisms of the relationship between (norms on) gender inequality and violence. The literature does suggest the causality might go two ways sometimes, which is not confirmed and if it happens, it might be possible that the different directions carry different strengths.

Second, the findings are crucial for the development of policies on conflict management, peace building and sustainable development. Making people think differently about gender norms, gender roles and gender relations will most certainly also change how they think about the use of violence. Governments, development agencies and NGOs working on conflict prevention and/or peace building focusing on changing patriarchal mentalities and structures should be much more successful than those who do not do so.

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This article is based on a longer paper by the author, called "Gender equality and conflict" that will be published shortly in Advances in Gender Research, Vol. 18a.

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[1] For an overview of other studies referred to in this article as well as for more information on the methods and data section see the longer article in *Advances in Gender Research*, vol. 18a (forthcoming, 2013).

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Åsa Ekvall is a former development/humanitarian aid worker turned academic. She has experience from working with women's empowerment and gender projects in various conflict and post-conflict situations, an experience she is using in her work on gender equality and violence at the Department of Political Science at the University of Antwerp.