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Women and National Security; Kin Groups, Environments, and Security

Valerie M. Hudson

(co-authors Donna Lee Bowen, Perpetua Lynne Nielsen, Emily Sellars, Catalina Monroy, Leslie Ruyle, Laura Renner, Kathleen O'Reilly, Chad Emmett, and others)

In the 21st century, states are seen as the primary security provision mechanism for collectives. Historically, that has not been the case. For most individuals throughout history, states either did not exist or were not reliable guarantors of physical security. Rather, the extended kin group, focused around males bonded by blood ties, was the primary security mechanism. We assert that this historic mechanism is by no means extinct; rather, it continues to exist in most societies, and is capable of resurging when states weaken. In other societies, extended kin groups have captured the state apparatus, rendering the state an extension of their reach.

Male-focused kin groups solve the cooperation problem necessary for security provision. Male kin, bonded by blood ties, become preferred alliance partners, for biologists tell us, "the more closely related individuals are the more willing they are to take risks for one another" [1]. Gottschall notes, "might is determined not only by one's physical prowess, but by the number, age range, and sex ratio of the kin network. Muscular kin networks could assert their interests over weaker networks. Large kin networks achieve positions of eminence in their communities, and thus the capacity to resolve conflicts in their favor" [2].

However, male-bonded kin groups cannot exist without the subordination of women. Women's aspirations for themselves and their children must remain secondary to those of the men in the group for the male bond to persist. This creates a logically interlocked system of subordination, which begins with exogamy for women in order to maintain blood-related men within the group [3]. That syndrome of subordination includes phenomena such as male-on-female domestic violence, exclusion of women from property rights, intense son preference, early age of marriage for girls, underinvestment in females, patrilineality and patrilocal marriage, deep inequity in family and personal status law favoring males, and either brideprice/polygyny or dowry/abnormal sex ratios as common.

This syndrome of the subordination of women, however, has catastrophic effects on national security. Many dimensions of national security are negatively affected by specifically female subordination: for example, in these nations we find significantly higher levels of food insecurity and malnutrition, higher levels of inter- and intra-state conflict, higher incidence of terrorism, higher infectious disease burdens, lower life expectancy, poor governance, higher levels of corruption, high fertility rates, and lower levels of economic prosperity [4]. Beneath each correlation lies a causal mechanism linking the poorer outcome to the situation, status, and security of women. So, for example, food security is undermined by female subordination because though women contribute the lion's share of agricultural labor, land ownership is given preferentially to males, as is agricultural extension training and access to fertilizers and seed. The FAO calculates that if women were

given the same assistance in farming as males, malnutrition would drop 17% globally [6].

Male-focused kin groups also are prone to marriage market obstruction. For example, about 75% of the world's population lives in countries where men must obtain enough resources to afford to marry, by providing a brideprice. Because brideprice is based on the "going rate" for a bride within the society, it acts as a flat—and therefore regressive—tax on all young men therein [5]. Brideprice is also subject to very sharp increases over short periods of time, and virtually never falls. In periods when brideprice is increasing significantly, most poorer young men will not be able to marry. Furthermore, rich men are able to marry polygynously, further obstructing marriage markets.

Marriage market obstruction creates an explosive situation within such societies, as deep grievance among young men coupled with desperation to accumulate resources facilitates the efforts of terrorist and rebel groups to recruit them. The list of such groups who offer to help young men with brideprice—or even brides—is quite long, and includes groups such as Boko Haram, Daesh, and Lashkar-e-Taliba [5]. One important, but quite overlooked, early warning indicator of destabilization is brideprice trajectory.

The linkages between the situation, status, and security of women and national security are abundant, but what has been missing is support from the intelligence and security policymaking community to develop explanatory frameworks and collect, track, and analyze the necessary indicators. Where in the national security establishment, for example, are brideprice trajectories in South Sudan being tracked? If the answer is "nowhere," then that is a clear lacuna in our nation's ability to understand and mitigate threats in the international system.

Our own project, The WomanStats project, is an example of research projects offering the theory, data, and analysis necessary to explore these linkages (<http://womanstats.org>). For example, our online database contains over 350 variables for 176 countries (all those with at least 200,000 population), from 1995 to the present. Over 25,000 sources have been examined, resulting in over 221,000 individual data points. Innovative ordinal scales are developed, allowing for cross-national comparison. As an illustration, consider that The WomanStats Project has a scale of brideprice and dowry.

There is also a second level at which to analyze the relationship between the security of women and national security: at the intersection with environmental security.

Environmental insecurity causes population dislocation; it may also cause conflict. This much we know from decades of empirical research [7, 8, 9] However, missing from much of the theoretical and empirical literature is an understanding that population dislocation caused by environmental insecurity is a profoundly gendered phenomenon. This fact colors the effects of dislocation felt both in the areas of migrant origin and destination. We argue that an understanding of societal resilience in the face of environmental insecurity is not only incomplete, but actually misleading, without a general theory of gendered population dislocation.

Those who have theorized the connections between social instability and the environment have been slow to incorporate gender. Thomas Malthus famously

argued that the rate of human reproduction would outstrip increases in food production, creating grave insecurity, but never inquiring why women would have more children than they could feed. More recently, Thomas Homer-Dixon (1999) outlined a complex interplay between resource scarcity, government capacity, and population adaptation, noting that resource scarcity often produced violent conflict where government capacity was low. Remarkably, Homer-Dixon never mentions women and their roles in adaptation to environmental change.

Gender roles at multiple levels. Men and women have significantly different relationships to their environments [10,11], which may alter the process of population adaptation. Due to gendered divisions of labor in many countries, women may feel the effects of environmental stress more intensely and directly [12]. For example, when there is a drought, it is African women who primarily shoulder the responsibility to provide food for their families and save seeds for the planting season [13]. Gendered divisions of labor also directly affect death and migration rates. Female mortality rates from the Ebola epidemic in Africa, for instance, were significantly higher than male rates due to gendered caretaking responsibilities, and these same caretaking responsibilities make women less able to migrate to earn higher wages in a city or foreign country. At the same time, women tend to be underrepresented in environmental decision-making from the local to the global level, resulting in women's perspectives about environmental management, resource use, and adaptation schemes frequently being left out of policymaking approaches [10].

Gendered vulnerability. Often overlooked is the gendered nature of vulnerability. For example, codes of honor and shame have disproportionately large effects on women's mobility in the face of natural disasters, which could explain why women on average die more frequently than men in disasters [14]. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami provides a striking illustration. Three to four times more women were killed than men due not only to differences in caretaking responsibilities, but also to norms of honor and shame that limited women's ability to flee [15, 16]. Even in less dire circumstances, societal resilience may be hampered by restrictions on women's movement. For example, women may be unable or unwilling to use public transport in megacities because of the gendered threats to their security or social status. Deeply gendered crimes such as rape, forced pregnancy, child marriage, and sex trafficking may create pressures to flee during social and environmental disruption, and studies have shown higher mortality rates for women than men along hazardous migration routes. [20] Each of these gendered dimensions of vulnerability therefore shape the social response to environmental change.

Gender and dislocation. The effects of female and male movement may be very different for reasons best understood through a careful focus on gender. And where women go, there also go those women are tasked to care for, including not only children, but the elderly and the infirm. We argue that female exodus and male exodus may have quite dissimilar effects on origin as well as destination locations. Male exodus may promote stability in some cases [17], while female exodus may completely destabilize communities, which is why women are often special targets in conflict [18,19].

A basic theory of gendered population dislocation would thus offer important insights about the ways roles, vulnerability and resilience are multi-scalar, spanning the household to the community to the regional level of analysis. Such a theory would have critical implications for national security and defense, given the growing importance to the U.S. of both environmental change and migration.

In our own research, we have approached this topic by determining the conditions under which women “leave” a geographical location. Female “absenting,” we assert, can take one of three very different forms: (1) actual exodus (i.e., migration due to resource scarcity), 2) disproportionate death (i.e., from natural disaster, epidemic, etc.), 3) seriously constrained mobility (e.g., due to urban insecurity issues). In the last case, we theorize that such extreme immobility can actually create conditions similar to female exodus through women’s absence from important areas and from important tasks. When women cannot, for example, gather firewood due to insecurity, it is as if they have ‘left’ or ‘absented’ themselves in terms of that activity’s important contribution to societal resilience.

Our own research at the intersection of women, security, and environment is focused on nations such as Colombia, Mexico, Ghana, and Indonesia, where environmental change and its attendant food insecurity, rapid urbanization, and natural disasters have wrought havoc on national security. Once again, this is an intersectional topic that has not received as much attention as it should from the national security policy community.

Our strong recommendation is that the decadal survey of the social and behavioral sciences for national security highlight the pressing need for support of research and data collection/analysis that examines linkages between the situation, status, and security of women, on the one hand, and the resilience, stability, and security of nation-states on the other. Just as national security planning is a “whole of population” task, so research and data collection to inform such planning must incorporate a “whole of population” approach.

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