



Language

Women have often been deprived of the most basic freedoms, such as freedom to be educated, walk the streets or travel, or to have some say in whom they marry, by strong social traditions in patriarchal societies. Women are also harmed by certain cultural customs, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage and child pregnancies and lack of sexual education. These issues have been addressed in Africa by both women's activism and international organizations. For example the SAUTI Project in Tanzania works to protect adolescent girls from early marriage and pregnancies. There have also been serious efforts to reduce the practice of FGM, which is now officially illegal in some countries (though this does not guarantee it is not still practised). The BMJ Global Health study in 2018 found that the prevalence of FGM has dropped significantly in both East Africa (from 71.4% in 1995 to 8% in 2016 among girls of 14 and under), in West Africa (from 73.6% in 1996 to 25.4% in 2017), and also in North Africa (from 57.7% in 1990 to 14.1% in 2015). But there is caution about the figures. Amref Health Africa, which works to reduce FGM, responded positively, but noted that FGM still occurs among girls over 14, and that there are wide variations within countries, with some communities having rates of 80-90%.

Social pressure restricting women's rights is often reinforced by conservative or extremist interpretation of religious doctrine. Therefore, whilst economic modernization and social change tends to promote women's freedom, this can be counteracted by a rise in dogmatic religious control of politics. In Islamic countries the political power of extreme movements among both Shia and Sunni Muslims has had devastating effects on women's rights, as in Iran since the Revolution of 1979, in Afghanistan under the Taliban, and - most extreme of all - under the brief rule of ISIS in parts of Iraq/Syria. Women have however mounted resistance. In Iran, for example, there has been a growing campaign against compulsory wearing of the hijab in public since 2013, resulting in the arrest of at least 35 women; and in Teheran in March 2018 women engaged in a series of actions in which they very publicly removed their head scarves and waved them. In Afghanistan, under the Taliban women's defiance was mostly organized in secret, but since the end of Taliban rule in 2001 they have campaigned for inclusion in public sphere, including politics, despite ongoing violence, threats, and the killing of several of their leaders. In the light of US peace negotiations with the Taliban, a coalition of Afghan women and young people launched an appeal for women (and other excluded groups in society) to be included in the negotiations, which has also been signed by prominent international figures and Nobel Laureates, including Margaret Atwood (author of the *Handmaid's Tale*) and Arundhati Roy (novelist and political activist). They called in February 2019 for 'global solidarity to keep women's voices alive'.

Saudi Arabia has long been one of the countries where women are least free. Women have campaigned since 1990 for the right to drive (they were initially prosecuted or socially ostracized) and also protested against 'guardianship' laws that give men in the family control over women's actions. When the Crown Prince ended the driving ban in September 2017 (as part of his campaign for economic and social reform), with support from religious authorities, women rejoiced. However, the regime, though prepared to initiate limited reform from above, will not tolerate independent protest, and over a dozen women activists were arrested in May 2018. Amnesty International reported they had faced sexual harassment and torture during interrogation. Saudi women's lack of protection against abuse was highlighted at the end of 2018, when 18 year old Rahah Mohammed as-Qunun was granted asylum by the Canadian government, after she barricaded herself in a Thai hotel room after fleeing abuse. She has publicized her story on Twitter to encourage other Saudi women.

Other religions also promote discrimination and penalize women, as dramatically illustrated in Kerala in January 2019, when an estimated 3 million women formed a 620km human chain to challenge a ban on (menstruating) women under 50 entering the Hindu Sabarimala Temple, one of Hinduism's holiest sites. Although India's Supreme Court overturned the ban in 2018, some women who then tried to enter were attacked by mobs, and women were still officially denied access by the Temple with the support of many conservative men. The 'women's wall' was initiated by the leftwing government of Kerala, and the demonstration was backed by some men.



F.5.c. Women Resist Religious and Social Discrimination

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