EVIDENCE: SECURITY OF WOMEN & SECURITY OF STATES

A woman and her child wait to enter a free medical clinic that is held twice weekly with up to 400-500 people on an average day. (Photo by AU/UN Abdi Dakan)

The overall level of violence against women is a better predictor of state peacefulness, compliance with international treaty obligations, and relations with neighboring countries than indicators measuring the level of democracy, level of wealth, and civilizational identity of the state.[1]

The situation of women is a key marker of whether a society is descending into chaos, morphing into a breeding ground for extremist organizations.[2]

It seems obvious that an unstable, warring nation will stress and traumatize households. But the causal arrow also points the other way. When a society normalizes violence and oppression between men and women—the two halves of humanity whether in households or communities—adverse effects will be felt nationally. An abundance of data and research show that the security of women and the security of the nation-state are integrally linked. Consider, for example, that democracies with higher levels of violence against women are as insecure and unstable as nondemocracies.[3]

That this association is so robust evinces something important: The treatment of women in a society is a barometer of the degree to which a society is capable of peace. How the two different but interdependent halves of humanity live together in a society mirrors how that society copes with difference and conflicts arising from that difference. In terms of power and control, personal value and respect, and expectations for equality and healthy interactions, the dynamics in a relationship between males and females is usually the first experience of difference in life because it is within the family and at home.

What is learned at home is carried into society. If a society's prevalent norm is that male interests trump female interests, that conflict is resolved through violence, and that such violence frequently is met with impunity, then these norms become the template for dealing with other differences—ethnic, religious, cultural, racial, and ideological. When these dynamics predominate, prejudicial discrimination, intolerance, and a propensity toward violence create a climate of insecurity ripe for instability.

According to researchers Erin Bjarnegard and Erik Melander, individuals and societies that reject norms of gender equality also demonstrate significantly more hostile attitudes toward minorities in their own country and toward other nations.[4] The ability—or inability—to live with the "first other" in equality and peace also frames prevailing attitudes toward foreign and security policy. Conversely, the lived experience of gender equality prepares individuals and society to live in harmony with others. In a very real way, it is impossible to build peace in the international system unless peace can be practiced between men and women within a society.

A constellation of discriminatory practices deepens the subordination of women while heightening societal instability. For example, nations with discriminatory family laws have higher levels of violence against women, and the practice of having more than one wife—polygyny—is a risk factor for state instability. There is also a relationship between marriage customs, systems of political governance, and indicators of state instability. For example, where a brideprice is required for marriage, terrorist groups have a much easier time recruiting young men when brideprices rise.[5]

Two decades of intensive research show that the old metaphor of the canary in the coalmine—where we assume women are the canary and state insecurity is the coalmine—is upside down. Instead, the character of male-female relations is the coalmine, and the canary that keels over in response to coalmine dysfunction is manifest in a wide variety of security issues, whether that be food insecurity, demographic imbalance, or explosive national instability.

Men and women alike have to be in this struggle together. We cannot safeguard our country just with one wing.

—Tawakkul Karman
Nobel Peace Laureate (2011)

The first political order is the sexual political order, set by male-female dynamics. The character of that first order molds the society, its governance, and its behavior, creating the conditions for state fragility and insecurity or for state security. Societies that reject impunity for violence against women and that champion equal voice and representation for women in decision-making councils—from the home to the state—can diminish and reject broader societal subordination and violence.

What affects women affects men simultaneously, and the character of male-female relations affects humanity as a whole. Therefore, the treatment of women is not a small, soft, or dismissible issue but rather is central to national and international security.

World leaders have yet to fathom and fully consider how the treatment of women influences state security. For example, foreign policy analysis of whether China can "rise peacefully" typically has not taken into account its treatment of gender nor the impact of China eliminating almost 15 percent of its daughters from the birth population through government-mandated abortions and sterilizations.

Five nations had abnormal sex ratios in their birth rates in 1990, but in 2016 there were 19: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, Fiji, Georgia, India, Kosovo, Kuwait, Lebanon, Montenegro, Philippines, South Sudan, Sudan, Taiwan, Macedonia, Vanuatu, and Vietnam.

Sex ratio alterations have real security implications. In some regions, they distort the marriage market, creating surging prices for brides in local communities. This imbalance fuels recruitment to insurgent and violent extremist groups; escalates crimes against women, including trafficking and forced prostitution; restricts women's mobility; and increases the spread of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. Sex ratio may even alter the calculus of violence deterrence, as it affects perceptions about the cost of attrition warfare based on a population consisting of significantly more young men than young women.

The first years of the 21st century have seen a resurgent patrilineality as a means of providing group security, especially evident in post–Arab uprising nations and in Central Asia and the Caucuses. Patrilineality refers to societies where the underlying structure is the extended male kinship group and where women are strictly subordinated. The foundations of patrilineality are a devaluation of female life, highly inequitable family and personal status law favoring males, and conditions that enable gender-based violence. Where patrilineality is present, there is relegalization of practices such as polygyny and a resurgence of religious sanction of crimes including rape or child marriage. High levels of violence against women worldwide in times of war and of peace buoy the tide of patrilineality, as do laws favoring males in areas such as property rights, rights in marriage, and the treatment of women as minors.

Thus it appears that trends toward gender equality are easily reversible, and when a reverse happens, it comes swiftly. Yet significant progress for women in a society usually takes 10 or more years. This timetable has important ramifications for nations seeking peace and a stable international system. To the degree that states in which women are insecure dominate the international system or its regional subsystems, these systems themselves become insecure and unstable. Diplomats and soldiers that overlook or downplay this linkage are ignoring a central means for predicting and promoting security around the world.

Efforts to increase female education, economic participation, and involvement in government and security forces are important but only go so far in stabilizing at-risk states. Without dismantling the foundations of dysfunctional, inequitable relations between women and men, the destiny of the international system is in a persistent state of fragility, instability, and insecurity. This is the new Realpolitik. The linkages are not new. What is new is that researchers, policymakers, and advocates now have the evidence to see them.

U.S. Army officer for Provincial Reconstruction Team at a key leader engagement meeting, part of a gender strategy working group meeting with the Director of Women's Affairs in Afghanistan.
(Photo by HMC Josh Ives, U.S. Navy 2013)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Acknowledge the links between improving overall security of women and state security.

Fund research to supplement the growing body of evidence showing how the security of women and the security of the nation-state are integrally linked and how violence against women causes state instability. Discriminatory practices that deepen subordination in essence normalize violations, oppression, and discrimination of women. This norm affects societal norms and increases state fragility. Where violence against women and insecurity are prevalent, conditions are ripe for violent extremism. When countries in which women are insecure dominate international or regionally focused organizations, issues relating to insecurity, instability, and terrorism also dominate the agenda.

Ensure data collection provides sex-disaggregated information on a wide variety of societal conditions that can be indicators of insecurity and unrest, including women's mobility, trends in bride price and dowries, and access to food and basic resources. Create synergies between the academic community and governmental and intergovernmental organizations charged with collecting data, and encourage exchanges about what data would be important to collect and what glaring data gaps exist. Governmental and intergovernmental organizations may be best positioned to fund the creation of datasets on the situation of women worldwide.

Understand how gender equality can reverse adverse state conditions.

Promote initiatives that cultivate gender equality, even in a context where attitudes and norms have not progressed. Start with areas around which a global consensus is building, such as the need for the elimination of child marriage.

Strengthen participation of women in all political mechanisms, including peace negotiations and constitutional reform. Start with hard targets for women's inclusion by insisting that women be in key governance and decision-making positions—as delegates, lead negotiators, mediators, and chiefs of missions. Insist that contractors and subcontractors also meet hard targets for women's inclusion. Hold contractors and subcontractors accountable to reach similar targets for women's inclusion and provide them with training to model and improve equality and peace in societies in the field.

Strictly enforce regulations prohibiting sexual misconduct by governmental personnel and contractors by writing stiff penalties for misconduct into contracts. Create staff positions that allow for unannounced monitoring of ground-level behavior. Develop real-time, crowd-sourced mechanisms for reporting sexual misconduct by those implementing programming.

Invest in a variety of objectives that can advance the rights and empowerment of women so that the treatment of women becomes an integral component of a holistic gender approach. In the design and implementation of investments and programs across sectors—whether economic development, road construction, political participation, judicial reform, security training, media development, or education programs—conduct gender analysis and consult closely with women and local leaders to determine:

- potential impact on women and girls, men and boys
- impact on safety and exposure to violence
- actions that may be necessary to reduce the risk of harm and violence
- how to enhance the equal status of women and girls with men and boys

Encourage faith leaders to teach respect, the harms of violence, and the principle of the Golden Rule (a tenet of many faiths). Develop programming that engages religious leaders on gender equality. When "respect for women" is operationalized by religious figures, the lived experience of the population will begin to shift at the household and then societal level.

Apply gender analysis to data collection and security analysis.

Prioritize the systematic collection and application of data measuring conditions for women and gender relations within a country as a central factor for assessing stability and developing diplomatic and security goals. Integrate gender analysis systematically into the design, decision making, and implementation of all initiatives. Consider the impact on women and men and actions to mitigate adverse outcomes.

Enlist experts to create an index that will allow tracking of whether gender relations are progressing or regressing within a society. Sub-indices can be tied directly to violent extremism. For example, tracking whether brideprices are rising, stable, or falling can forecast a rise in extremism. A subindex on changes in formal law as well as de facto law can help predict the security horizon for a nation-state. For example, the relegalization of polygyny and new required dress codes for women in Central Asia could signal that these societies are becoming less stable over time. Another subindex on birth sex ratios could be an important sign of rising insecurity.

Address shared root causes of gender-based violence and violent extremism.

Research the similarities and points of intersections between the recruitment and growth of violent extremist groups and gender-based violence. Underlying both are experiences of deep-seated inequality, severe adversity, or perceived injustice. These experiences may translate into a desire for domination and control to diminish the relative power or standing of a victim and to enhance the perpetrator's sense of identity and power. In both phenomena, gains can be made by ending impunity for violence, empowering women and girls, and engaging men and boys to change social norms.

Invest in addressing the root causes of gender-based violence:

- Diminish barriers and discrimination between women and men and girls and boys in economic, political, and civic arenas.
- Implement initiatives that protect human rights and raise societies' respect for all women and girls.
- Provide inclusive education, economic empowerment, and political participation.
- Insist on women's participation as equal partners in program design, decisions, and implementation.
- Examine family law and support reform efforts (where needed) and effective implementation.

Valerie M. Hudson is a professor of political science and the George H.W. Bush Chair of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. She has authored and co-authored several books, most notably, *Sex and World Peace, The Hillary Doctrine,* and *Bare Branches: Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population,* and she is a principal investigator for The WomanStats Project, a nation-by-nation database on women. A forthcoming book is entitled *The First Political Order: Sex, Governance and National Security.*

ENDNOTES

This article is adapted from the following sources, which detail this research: Valerie M. Hudson, "Secure Women, Secure States," Building Peace website (March 2014), http://buildingpeaceforum.com/2014/03/secure-women-secure-states/; Valerie Hudson, "Of Canaries and Coal Mines," 50.50 Inclusive Democracy website (December 10, 2014), https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/valerie-hudson/of-canaries-and-coal-mines; Valerie M. Hudson, presentation to Futures Without Violence and Open Square, April 27, 2016.

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2. Elizabeth Weingarten and Valerie Hudson, "Gender as a Second Language," *New America Weekly,* Edition 145 (December 8, 2016).

3. Hudson, Valerie M., Donna Lee Bowen, and Perpetua Lynne Nielsen (2015) "Clan Governance and State Stability: The Relationship Between Female Subordination and Political Order," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (August): 535-555

4. Elin Bjarnegård & Erik Melander (2017): Pacific men: how the feminist gap explains hostility, The Pacific Review, DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2016.1264456

5. Valerie Hudson and Hilary Matfess, "In Plain Sight: The Neglected Linkage between Brideprice, Raiding and Rebellion," *International Security* (2017).