

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Donahue, Melissa (2007) "Transitioning from Patriarchal Society: Women's Rights and Gender Equality," *ESSAI*: Vol. 5, Article 18.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol5/iss1/18>

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Transitioning from Patriarchal Society: Women's Rights and Gender Equality

by Melissa Donahue

(Adult Fast Track Sociology 2220 and English 1102)

A patriarchal society is a social system in which the male governs a clan or family; he controls all aspects of family from overseeing the women and children in his care to calculating inheritance through the male lines within his family (Moghadam 141). As regions transition to a more western model of society with more freedoms for women, the end result varies by case since the examples presented are at different stages in their metamorphosis with roots in political, economic, social, or religious causes (Moghadam 140). In Turkmenistan, Bulgaria, South Africa, South Korea and Arab countries in the Middle East, the transformation of women's rights and gender roles is at an impasse; either it is beginning very slowly or it is not happening at all due to similarities that lie in customary laws conflicting with new ideals and policies.

Turkmenistan and Bulgaria are both former Communist countries that maintained similar policies regarding the female role in society and boasted equality for men and women. However, there were "contradictions between Communist ideology and practice" (Heinen as qtd. by Ådnanes 26). Under Soviet rule, employment outside the home was available to women, but these positions were usually paid less and were inconsequential in contrast to their male co-workers. Women were also working in much more hazardous conditions despite laws designed to protect them. Representation in government was a civil liberty enjoyed by women under Communist rule, but in most instances these were nominal positions with little political importance. The importance of family was mainly to reproduce and raise children to later contribute to the labor force in society (Ådnanes 28).

Turkmenistan was classified as a traditionally Muslim nation before Soviet rule began. Women had no significant role in this model of society except that they were the properties of their fathers and husbands, with gross inequality regarding legal matters, property inheritance, and marriage rights. Bride-price, polygamy, and early marriage of children to sustain property rights were common practices. The right to water was available to only the men in the community; often, these land and water rights were the basis for infant marriage. A woman could also inherit property, but this was symbolic in nature because she was not expected to accept it and instead relinquish it to other male relatives (Moghadam 142).

In the early 20th century, Soviet rule was instituted in Turkmenistan. Soviets recognized that the implementation of their policies and laws would yield difficulty, so they instituted them in phases. First policies in the quest to transition from Muslim rule to Soviet standards were passed in 1917. Civil marriages became the only unions recognized by the government; religious ones did not matter. Women and men were stated to be equal in all aspects according to the Soviet Constitution. Bride-price was outlawed and the marriage age was raised to 16 for women and 18 for men (Liczek 572).

The next wave of policy changes in Turkmenistan was instituted between 1919 and 1920 and focused on promoting equality. Women's groups worked to promote literacy and hygiene through propaganda and distribution of educational items and a network of public institutions for child rearing were also developed. The importance of women's roles in society grew as these changes spread (Liczek 573).

Another phase of implementation was focused on attempted on attempting to further implement laws enforcing policy change, specifically those forbidding bride-price and polygamy,

and to address the resistance to change in Turkmenistan. Landowner's rights were reduced; land was redistributed to peasants and farm laborers to boost equality and production. Women were given rights to water and land, which had never been done in Turkmenistan and in doing so, the Communist government increased female confidence in the Communist party while attempting to create gender equality (Liczek 574).

Even with attempting change in phases, using propaganda, and other measures taken to educate the people, Soviets still faced issues trying to indoctrinate Turkmenistan with the new laws. "Customs, traditions, and the regulations deriving from Muslim religion were prohibited; yet in spite of enormous efforts at enforcement, most of them maintained unaltered within the private sphere" (Liczek 576). Gender equality was not achieved because the Muslim customs were still practiced and women remained subordinate according to patriarchal practices. In the end, they only gained additional tasks that deepened their social inequality (Liczek 576). What rights women appeared to gain at the inception of Communist rule were not all they were presented to be and when the former Soviet Union collapsed, the policies changed yet again.

In Turkmenistan, the transition from Soviet rule to a more democratic society is also meeting challenges along the way. The new constitution was ratified in 1991 after the fall of Soviet rule, guaranteeing rights and equality to all people in Turkmenistan. This included prohibiting discrimination based on sex; this was a condition of membership to the United Nations (Liczek 578). Women's organizations were founded to aid in educating women and developing an understanding of women's roles and gender equality, however, there was a regime change in the Women's Union that disbanded some of the women's groups (Liczek 581). Lack of financial support from international organizations has also resulted in stagnation for women's rights and U.N. attempts to help with the transition have not yielded any successful results. Some of the Soviet laws regarding gender in Turkmenistan are still considered valid, yet the old traditions are still adhered to in many rural areas and this is problematic for advancement of gender equality in Turkmenistan. Customary law appears to be stronger than written law and further progress in Turkmenistan's transition will depend on whether or not the country's government considers gender equality a priority.

In Bulgaria, the changes in educational trends, employment, and attitudes toward gender equality are progressing, but not without barriers. The ratio of women in higher education has shifted; there are now 153 women to every 100 men. Highly educated women are working, yet this does not equate to salaries that match the work they are performing. Also, women are concentrated in positions that are considered "female professions". Attitudes toward family have shifted and female students in Bulgaria stated that "they had ambitions for both a professional career and a family, but many of them emphasized that a career had to be established first and family next" (Ådnanes 34). Studies also show "that women were significantly more focused on pursuing a career than were men" (Ådnanes 31). As a result, more young women are putting off marriage and family due to educational opportunities. "Barriers are to be found not just in the economic and social situation of the country" (Ådnanes 37). The main obstacle has been the male acceptance of change within society as men are still holding with traditional values in Bulgaria, which in turn, has also led the Bulgarian women to desire marriage with foreign men.

South African women are still oppressed, especially black women. "Clearly the demise of apartheid has not ended the difficulties [in South Africa]" (Leeder 157). Men are considered "powerful and above household duties" (van der Merwe 1273) yet black women are considered inferior and insignificant. In the meantime, the men had their freedom and were respected while they controlled women to the extent of determining usage and consumption of resources, from the food offered to women at mealtime to participation in recreational activities. Even male children have more rights than women. All of these factors have resulted in esteem issues and women feel empowered or powerless in their jobs and at home, distanced from life in their culture (van der Merwe 1276).

In examining South Africa further, South African nurses are oppressed as a result of ethnicity, class, race, and gender despite changes triggered by the disintegration of apartheid rule and the first democratic elections in their country. In South Africa, there are two groups of nurses – registered and enrolled. Enrolled nurses did not have the same training opportunities as other classes of nurses in South Africa and were “clearly identifiable to colleagues and the public in terms of symbols that had to be worn” (van der Merwe 1276). The remnants of apartheid and its separatist mindset segregated the South African nurses further by dividing them into classes within the enrolled category. The lower class of nurses report lower salaries and no voting rights. Considered inferior to white nurses, they are suppressed by laws and also had to travel farther to work than the registered white nurses.

Enrolled black nurses experience many forced shortcomings in the quality of care they can provide. These women worked in segregated facilities and were ill-equipped to provide proper care to patients; they had to work with whatever resources were available and were also misused by service providers to provide lower-cost care. Health care suffered in rural regions and black nurses of the area maintained health care facilities as their training allowed, without presence or availability of other registered nurses and doctors there (van der Merwe 1274).

The South African Nursing Council could assist in furthering change to match government goals by “removing negative connotations attached to the enrolled category by striving for a united cadre of nurses” (van der Merwe 1278). If the senior category of nurses was regulated and no longer abused the enrolled category, then change would progress. The council could help create opportunities, incorporate men, and empower women so that women in the rural setting can acquire skills not currently available. Without their involvement, however, advancement of the issue will not proceed.

Transitioning from a mostly agricultural country to an industrialized economy was the impetus for many changes in South Korea, even though it also struggles with gender equality issues. “During the first half of the 20th century, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world, with few natural resources and a rapidly growing population” (Chun et al. 576). To achieve their economic goals, the South Korean government instituted a family planning policy that would promote smaller families within the country and fertility decreased in a very short time, as did family size. Fertility rates per person went from 6.0 per person in 1960 to 1.47 in 2000. The birth rate saw a decrease as well, sliding from 4.21% in 1960 to 1.34% in 2000. An increase in lifespan also resulted; the nation saw an increase from 2.9% of the population aged 65 and older in 1960 to 7.3% in the year 2000 (Chun et al. 578).

Population changes and shifting ideals saw an increase in opportunities for women. Women’s educational levels are on the rise and as a result, more women are working as a part of the labor force with changes in wage. There was a noted increase in female employment of 12% from the years 1963 to 2000 and an increase in the number of women obtaining higher education from 2.4% in 1975 to 18% in the year 2000. Also improving gradually, women’s wages rose from 42.5% of men’s wages to 64.5% between 1971 and 2001 (Chun et al. 578).

Effects of South Korea’s booming economy growing at such a quick pace when compared to other industrialized nations have surfaced quickly yet even with the advances, there are still negative effects present. Declining good health and a rise in cases of mental illness and depression in women were observed and policies in South Korea are still very one-sided; women are more likely to be poor with less access to health care. “Reproductive services in South Korea are often more concerned with social and economic requirements than with the needs and desires of individual women” (Chun et al. 584). Female selective abortions are still a problem and causing an imbalance in gender demographics of the South Korean population. The government estimates that “at least 15,000 female fetuses are killed each year” (Chun et al. 586). Pre-screening during pregnancy to determine gender was outlawed in 1987, but “legal restrictions [are] not effective against discriminatory

cultural practices” (Chun et al. 586).

The U.N. Human Development Report scores gender discrimination. “South Korea scores relatively well on the Gender-adjusted Human Development Index (GDI), at 29th place (of 144 countries). However, it places much lower on the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), at 68th (of 78 countries [included]). [To explain this, the authors write] that it has made great strides in improving the well-being of both men and women but has made little progress in the promotion of gender equality” (Chun et al. 585). So, even though there have been some changes in empowerment for women in South Korea, there has not been the same progress for equality.

Evolution in Middle Eastern Arab countries from traditional patriarchy to more democratic government models are experiencing challenges in their transition as well (Moghadam 137). When specifically examining United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Palestine, Kuwait, and Iraq, hesitation to accept change in gender roles and equality within the nations is present.

Management opportunities for women in the United Arab Emirates rarely arise as women’s roles are still very traditional. “Gender roles commonly lead to the discouragement of women’s employment outside the home in non-traditional jobs” (Heilman as qtd. by Mostafa 523). A trend of increasing acceptance of more equal roles for women is present yet families still hold that household activities and domestic work are suitable for women and that educating males is a greater investment. There is a reluctance to hire women in key managerial positions. Females are not promoted into positions of great importance; instead, they are offered lesser non-executive positions or traditional jobs such as nurses, teachers, and secretaries. Women are not permitted to participate in the political processes of their country, either.

The Islamic faith is given as the main reason for their exclusion since the religion is restrictive on women’s roles as a whole and men are still considered head of household, maintaining the family structure in any way they see fit. Even though women in some transitioning countries are given rights, “men maintain advantages in the areas of marriage, divorce, maintenance and inheritance laws, and political participation based on various interpretations of Islam” (Faqir as qtd. by Rizzo, Meyer, and Ali 641). Unfortunately, for more success in gender equality, the UAE’s organizations need the active involvement of all employees, regardless of gender (Mostafa 533).

Turkey’s educational system demonstrated gender inequality within the system despite the fact that “the expansion of a secular, Western-oriented mass educational system has been central to the modernization efforts of the Turkish state” (Rankin and Aytaç 26). “Mandatory primary schooling was established by the mid-1920s, and educational reform included a commitment to the education of women, a progressive goal that places Turkey well ahead of other developing countries” (Rankin and Aytaç 26).

When Turkey gained independence from the Ottoman Empire, the country “adopted the Swiss Civil Code and became the first secular Muslim country. A series of reforms were instituted to modernize Turkey using the more developed Western societies as their model” (Bozdoğan et al. as cited by Rankin and Aytaç 28). Education was deemed one of the most important items and public education was available to everyone, not just the upper class of Turkey’s citizens. All children were required to attend primary school; by the 1980s, all villages had primary schools. Literacy increased from 1935 to 1990; men experienced an increase from 30% to 90% and women from 10% to 71%. Urban women saw the implementation of equal rights in divorce matters, inheritance, and voting. Rural women, however, did not benefit as much from this due to lack of government presence and resistance to reforms in favor of cultural beliefs.

Despite government policies that dictate school attendance and control distribution of resources, weaknesses exist in Turkey’s governmental policies that could improve equality for females. As the countries become more industrialized, jobs require more education yet parents do not educate their daughters. Because job opportunity is restricted, they are left to the unskilled and low-paying jobs (Buchmann et al. as cited by Rankin and Aytaç 27) if working outside the home in any

capacity.

Family dynamics such as birth order, income level, gender, and family size also have an impact on whether children attend school past the required primary schooling in Turkey. Cultural beliefs and attitudes toward educating females significantly determine whether females are educated or not. Some children are sent off to school while others are staying home to take care of the home or work outside the home to help support the family (Rankin and Aytaç 28). This phenomenon is seen in more rural areas whose main source of income is agriculture because they use child labor to maintain the homestead; there are also fewer secondary schools in these regions.

Progress cannot be made unless the government makes larger strides to “change perceptions of women’s roles and to remove the remaining barriers to women’s advancement in society” (Rankin and Aytaç 38). “The ideology of patriarchy is an obstacle to the construction of female identities other than wife and mother” (Özyeğin as qtd. by Rankin and Aytaç 30). Joining the European Union has helped the cause since Turkey is required to focus on improvement of gender equality policy as a condition of membership. More traditional Islamic cultural ideologies will continue to interfere with gender equality until common ground is reached.

The Palestine Authority also shows “signs of increased democratization...such as initiated or expanded competitive elections for national legislatures” (Rizzo et al. 639) yet still shows signs of struggle within its justice system on the topic of honor killings; current legislation in this country’s criminal justice system is very gender-biased. Women are still being murdered because of their gender “despite the emergence of increased tolerance and sociopolitical and legal changes” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 577).

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian at the Institute of Criminology at Hebrew University in Jerusalem relates that “the preservation of women’s purity and honor is one of the most important cornerstones that shapes and constructs the social profile of the Arab Family” (al-Saddawi et al. as cited by Shalhoub-Kevorkian 579). Any actions that detract from this image of purity result in violence against women such as being killed for not bleeding on their wedding nights and punished, stoned, or murdered for dishonoring the family. Offenses that lead to this practice include adultery, rumors of impurity within the community, and even pregnancy out of wedlock. The victim is usually murdered by close male relatives with little action in bringing the offender to justice.

The Palestinian justice system is corrupt and in need of reform. Under current legislation, the accused receives reduced sentences in crimes of honor and even more leniency if they make amends with the victim’s family. Discrimination and lack of proper evidence handling are also common in the investigation of honor killings. Often, the prosecutor or district attorney do not collect enough evidence so the court case is dismissed (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 593). The alleged offenders cited certain laws to claim the case called for mitigating circumstances which resulted in reduced sentences, if any at all. No proper advocacy is present for the female victim and is “conveying a message that it is easy to kill women and get away with it” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 595). Courts believe that there is “no smoke without fire; she must have done something wrong to get killed” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 594). “Unless a new political, social, and legal order is constructed to help society find alternate methods of dealing with such crimes, women will continue to be killed and held responsible for their own abuse and deaths” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 602).

In Kuwait, the rights of citizenship are not afforded to women as a result of religious ideals and social status. The power to vote in an election is a right extended to both men and women, but women cannot run for a parliamentary office. Despite the women’s groups that were pushing to expand women’s voting rights in Kuwait and other Islamic nations, significant progress has not been made. “Mass-based support was critical to expanding civil rights during the 20th century and served as a social resource for people throughout the world seeking to achieve equality” (Rizzo et al. 640). Traditional ‘orthodox’ Islamic definitions of the women’s role in culture hinder the evolution of the female role in conjunction with her society’s transition to the more Western model.

Support from organizations both within and outside their nation would help the Middle Eastern nations achieve more gender equality. Social networks, women's groups, and professional organizations exist in Kuwait, but there are two conflicting mindsets: those who agree with extending rights and those who do not. Women's groups feel that change in their citizenship status would threaten their social identities as wives and mothers (Rizzo et al. 646), "Lack of support for some feminists' issues comes from religious women's perception that these issues devalue or threaten their identities" (Somerville as qtd by Rizzo et al. 644). Unless more broad support is developed and women are not indecisive and indifferent to their situation as they live in these regions, the conditions will not change and women will remain second-class citizens.

Iraq has been changing its stand on women's rights and roles throughout much of modern history. Freedom has been given, only to be taken away or it was only symbolic in nature to begin with. In the 1920s and 1930s, the role of Iraqi women in society was considered important; they were a key to the rebellion against British Rule as they helped in gathering resources to aid in the cause. In 1959, the Personal Status Law was enacted to shift issues relating to divorce, inheritance, and even custody of children to the court system as a civil matter. Laws further defined rights and boundaries within child support matters and limited the practice of polygamy, which changed family life for many women.

In the late 1960s, when the Ba'ath Party seized power in Iraq, some of these changes were reversed and inheritances that were once equal between genders was once again altered so that females only received half the inheritance percentage of males. In contrast, education was made a priority; the government wanted to boost literacy levels of its citizens. By doing so, it was hoped that focus on education would boost labor levels in the country and have a positive effect on the economy.

As the economy prospered in Iraq, so did female rights and societal roles. After Saddam Hussein came into power in the early 1980s, women were given the right to hold public office and vote, which appeared to promote gender equality, but these were only symbolic positions as exemplified in other examples of patriarchal society. Lower level officials in Hussein's government were sent "to paint women's legs black if they were showing too much skin" (Rath as qtd. by Brown and Romano 53). Hussein's government also used women against their families as instruments in getting information from revolutionaries and advocated putting pressure on those who opposed his rule by threatening, molesting, and even killing women and sending the videotapes to their families (Brown and Romano 54).

The Eight Year War with Iran during the later 1980s left many households with only working mothers to support their family and a lack of marriage options. After U.N. sanctions were dispensed, the Iraqi people suffered as poverty rose and gender inequality resurfaced. Female illiteracy rose by 50% from 1987 to 2000 and women were relegated to the home and child-rearing duties so men could be employed where jobs were available. For the families where the mother had been the sole breadwinner as a result of the war with Iran, they were poverty-stricken and had no viable alternatives (Brown and Romano 55).

Rights under Hussein's rule were handed to women and revoked as it suited his regime's needs and, as the economy began to decline, he looked to neighboring countries for assistance. Iraq adopted Islam as a source of morals for its people and women's rights were reduced once again. Polygamy was reinstated and women lost their divorce rights. Honor killings were practiced once again and with little to no punishment for the action, advocating this behavior. Women were homeless or could not return to their former residences without males to protect their properties and they were unable to support families (Brown and Romano 55). Women's rights had taken a step backward and, when the Iraq war began in 2003, women maintained hope that these practices would end.

In 2003, the Iraq war gave hope for restoration of equality to women in Iraq, but Saddam

Hussein's removal from office has affected Iraq in both positive and negative ways. "A majority of the women expected the American removal of Saddam's regime to deliver them greater freedom from both government tyranny and the discrimination they faced in the home, society, and in the workforce" (Brown and Romano 56). Rather than their immediate liberation, this event resulted in the legitimization of many inhumane acts against women such as beheadings, rape, molestation, and abuse and "50% [of families surveyed in Basra] reported abuse in their household either in the form of beatings, torture, or murder" (RIN as qtd. by Brown and Romano 62).

Pro-female policies have emerged in their new government, such as voting rights and government representation, but transformation is not moving quickly in Iraq. The constitution adopted on March 8, 2004 "guaranteed women 25% of seats in the National Assembly [yet is worded to give Islam power by stating that] parliament may not pass legislation that contradicts established provisions of Islam" (Brown and Romano 63). Therefore, accepted interpretations of Islam are in direct conflict with the portion of their constitution that instills democracy and Western ideals. A second factor is the acceptance of interim legislation by all Muslim factions within Iraq – they must agree on the changes and assist in implementing them. Non-government organizations, the U.N., and other authorities must be willing to help the transitioning country progress. Brown and Romano state that "the current lack of security in Iraq as well as resurgent Islamic, tribal, and generally conservative forces in the country bodes ill for women there (66). The rights of the female in Iraq, if put on hold long enough, will not improve or progress.

War, disintegration of current government structure, and evolution from an agriculture-based economy to an industrialized model can be the impetus for changes in gender roles and strides toward equality in a nation. However, religious and cultural ideologies can hinder a state's progress. "The patriarchy is being challenged to deal with the growing demands of women...[and] some institutions, including some religions, are not eager to make these changes" (Leeder 267). As women's roles evolve in society and more demands arise, society will also need to evolve and break down the barriers of traditional women's roles in employment, educational availability, and government policy. "Clearly, there is a dynamic tension between the forces for social change and those desiring maintenance of the status quo" (Leeder 269). It is this conflict that determines whether transition from a pre-industrialized society to a more modern one occurs; the assistance of outside organizations, the agreement of all factions within a nation on a course of action, and a full government commitment to gender equality issues are crucial in progressing from a patriarchal, male-centered society to a new structure.

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