

Repression of Women's Rights: A Note on Islamic Culture and Oil Rents^{*}

Lasse Lykke Rørbæk[†]

Aarhus University

Abstract: In recent studies, Michael L. Ross states that oil rents and not Islamic culture is to blame for women's slow progress toward gender equality in the Muslim world. He tests and confirms this relationship concerning female labor force participation and female representation in parliament. Ross' conclusion has, however, been criticized for neglecting the pre-existing and institutionalized role of "family law" derived from Sharia, which continuously impedes the progress of women's human rights in Muslim countries. In this study, I retest Ross' argument on three aggregate indicators of women's political, economic, and social rights. Based on data from 163 countries, I conclude – contrary to Ross – that Islamic culture is consistently associated with repression of women's rights in the 21th century, and not only in the Middle East and North Africa.

1. Introduction

Women's participation in social, political, and economic life is an integral part of social progress (Drèze and Sen 2002: Ch.1). However, in most developing countries women remain vulnerable. Women's status is, in particular, known to be inferior in Muslim societies (Fish 2002), not least in the Middle East where women's empowerment is the lowest in the world (Arab Human Development Report 2011). Dire examples of suppression are found under the feudal slavery of women under Taliban such as the destruction of girl's schools and killing of working women in the Swat Valley of Pakistan from the mid-2000s (Orakzai 2011). Or under the Saudi Monarchy where 15 school girls from Mecca were killed in a fire in 2002 after clerical police forced them back inside a burning building because they were not appropriately covered (Coleman 2004: 90). Why does repression of women's rights appear to be more prevalent in Muslim societies?

According to Inglehart and Norris (2003a, 2003b, Norris 2009), there has been an expanding cultural divide between Muslim and non-Muslim societies on the issue of gender equality. Whereas the publics of non-Muslim, especially Western, countries have become increasingly acceptant of female empowerment and sexual liberation in general, Muslim publics remain impervious to such

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[†] E-mail: LLykke@ps.au.dk

changes in attitudes. In this perspective, culture matters for women's rights and "Islamic religious heritage is one of the most powerful barriers to the rising tide of gender equality" (Inglehart and Norris 2003b: 71).

Opposing such pessimistic arguments, Ross (2008, 2009, 2012) has recently claimed that it is not Islamic traditions but oil wealth that is to blame for women's slow progress toward gender equality in the Muslim countries. As he states, "The persistence of patriarchy in the Middle East has relatively little to do with Islam, but much more to do with the region's oil-based economy" (Ross 2008: 120). High levels of oil rents tend to retard women's economic, social, and political progress in developing countries because it restrains women in the household. Modernization tends to create jobs for women, typically in low-wage export-oriented industries, which, in turn, create an identity outside the household and promote women's education and political influence and participation. Yet jobs in the tradable-goods industry are more rarely created when modernization is based on oil wealth. The positive influence on women's empowerment thus has not occurred in much of the Muslim world because of the abundance of oil (see Ross 2008 for the full argumentation).

Ross' empirical analyses substantiate this theory. In answering, "How can we be sure that women in the Middle East are impeded by oil, not by Islam, or the region's distinctive culture and history?", he compares women's participation and oil income within the Middle East and uses the clear association to renounce Islamic culture as an explanatory factor (Ross 2012: 124). However, the presence of a "resource curse" within the Middle East, where Islamic culture is approximately constant, does not necessarily mean that culture is inconsequential. Even in Tunisia – a country that Ross highlights as an example of the prospects of female empowerment in the absence of oil wealth – women lag behind the average developing country in terms of labor participation (Arab Human Development Report 2011: 6). Women's second-class status in many Muslim countries might thus be more profound than what oil rents can account for.

Accordingly, Ross' conclusions have been criticized for ignoring that the influence of Islam by far predates the discovery of oil. The "family law" that favors gender hierarchy in many Muslim countries is derived from Sharia and was spread with the Ottoman rule from the 16th century (Al-Nasr 2009). The combination of Sharia's biased interpretation of the Quran and local cultural traditions thus works as an underlying safeguard against women's empowerment in the Muslim world. Pro-egalitarian forces are consequently obstructed by state and religious institutions that regard gender equality as a threat to their power and interests (Moghadam 2003). For instance, in the 2001 presidential election in Iran, some 40 women tried to run for office but all were disqualified. In the absence of democratic institutions, these "neo-patriarchal" state systems base

their legitimacy on conservative and Islamist discourses. This is also seen in Egypt where political authorities have subordinated women's issues to satisfy Islamist forces in the interest of their own security and legitimacy (Guenena and Wassef 1999 in Moghadam 2003: 71). Consequently, the road to gender equality via modernization, with or without oil, will likely be more winding in Muslim countries.

Given this debate, it is still an open question which factors hinder women's progress in Muslim countries. Is there an independent effect of Islamic culture on women's status, or is the acknowledgment of oil's hampering influence enough to answer why repression of women seemingly is more common in Muslim states? In this study, I test these competing arguments on measures of women's political, economic, and social right from the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Data Project, which thus far have not been assessed as consequences of neither Islam nor oil in a global sample. The analyses provide evidence that Ross' "resource curse" does not render the cultural understood association between Islam and women's rights obsolete. Instead, Muslim countries globally underperform concerning women's political, economic and social rights – although at different intensities – and not only in the Middle East or the Arab world. Just as Ross convincingly argues in terms of oil rents, Islamic culture might thus in itself bolster traditional patriarchal institutions against the challenges of liberal progress. Section 2 presents the empirical strategy of the study. Section 3 outlines the results. Finally, Section 4 concludes by discussing the findings and implications of the study.

2. Methods

Following Ross, I use cross-national regression to model Islamic culture because religious traditions are time-invariant in most countries. This type of analysis can show whether variables are statistically significantly correlated while potential confounding factors are controlled for. I use the mean value of each (time-varying) variable over a 10-year period to reduce measurement error by diminishing the influence of singular country-year scores. The between estimator (OLS) takes the following form,

$$\bar{Y}_i = \alpha + \beta \bar{X}_i + \epsilon_i$$

where the dependent variable, \bar{Y} , is the mean of one of CIRI's three measures of women's rights in each of 163 countries, i , from 1999-2008. The human rights indicators assess the extensiveness of laws protecting, and government practices preventing, discrimination against women (Cingranelli

and Richards 2008). The first, *women's political rights*, include the right to vote, join political parties, run for offices, and hold government positions but also the de facto representation of women in the national legislature. It does not, however, assume that women lack political rights because no formal democratic institutions exist in a given country. *Women's economic rights* cover factors such as equality in pay, hiring, and promotion and free choice of profession (without male relative's consent) including positions in the military and police force. *Women's social rights* include, among others, equality in inheritance and entering marriage and the right to travel and to take an education. It does not, however, account for factors such as the prevalence of domestic violence, prostitution, rape, and honor killings.¹ If the association between Islam and women's status indeed is spurious, this finding should be reestablished using these measures: according to Ross' theory, oil rents impede women's economic participation which, in turn, affects both political and social empowerment. Each measure is quantified on a four-point scale (0-3) where higher scores indicate greater respect for women's rights. Although the variables are ordinal, their 10-year means demonstrate approximately linearity (see Figure 1 through 3 in the appendix). The three indicators are clearly interrelated but they are far from identical: the correlation between political and economic right is only .41 in the sample, that between political and social right .45, and that between economic and social rights .78. This means that the indicators indeed touch upon different aspects of discrimination of women, which makes it possible to assess the potentially different effects of Islamic culture and oil rents (cf. Drury and Peksen 2012: 9).

The first of the series of independent variables, \bar{X} , *Islamic culture*, is, following Ross, quantified as the Muslim proportion of each country.² I use data from the Pew Research Center that estimate the 1990 Muslim population in all countries of the world.³ As it seems plausible that a potential effect would stem from Islamic *majority* culture, I retest the models with a binary measure of Muslim majority. Next, *oil rents* are measured as the mean of the total value of oil and gas production (from Ross 2012) divided by a country's population. As recommended by Ross (2012: 16), I use the natural logarithm of oil income/capita because the distribution of values is highly skewed among states.⁴ As control variables, I include the 10-year mean of variables that are likely

¹ CIRI's *women's social rights* indicator is missing in 2006 and retired as of 2008.

² As it could be objected that the skewedness of Muslim proportion might overestimate the influence of fully Muslim countries, I retest the models using the natural log of the Muslim proportion (not reported to save space). Doing so only strengthen the conclusions of the analyses.

³ <http://features.pewforum.org/muslim-population/>

⁴ In his analyses of women's participation, Ross does not log transform oil income. As he writes, "My reason is not theoretical but rather pragmatic: oil income is robustly correlated with the status of women, yet the log of oil is not" (Ross 2012: 135). Reruns of the models without the log transformation strengthen the effects of oil rents but do not change the substantial conclusion regarding Islamic culture.

to be correlated with oil rents and Islamic culture while at the same time affecting women's rights. These are,

- *income* as the (logged) level of GDP/capita (in constant prices, from the Penn World Tables). As a proxy for modernization, income is seen as an important driver of women's empowerment.⁵
- *MENA* as a binary indicator of whether a country is situated in the Middle East and North Africa or elsewhere.
- *democracy* indicating whether governmental offices are filled as a consequence of contested elections (Cheibub et al. 2010). Democratic institutions will likely safeguard women's rights.
- *communist* indicating whether a country is or used to be under communist law (La Porta et al. 1999). Communist policies might have a lasting effect on gender equality.

To test the robustness of the models, I included several additional controls, for instance, population size (logged), British legal origin, and a full set of region dummies (see also Potrafke 2012; Chaturvedi and Montoya 2013).⁶ None of these alternative specifications altered the substantial conclusions of the analyses (not reported to save space). Although cross-sectional regression might be the most suiting test when working with time-invariant factors (after all there is no within variation), I further retest the models using ordered probit time-series cross-sectional analysis (reported in Table A2 in the appendix).

3. Results

Table 1 below presents the results for women's political rights. As shown, the Muslim proportion of a country is significantly associated with worse human rights records.⁷ This virtually does not change when oil rents are included in Model 1B or democracy and communist law in Model 1C. Holding these covariates constant, the Muslim proportion of a country explains a .4 change on the 4-point scale, equaling some 10% of the variation in women's political rights. Measuring Islamic culture by Muslim majority countries (Model 1D) reduces the explained variance somewhat but the

⁵ Ross additionally includes *income squared*, but this variable is omitted here because it was not found to affect either of the dependent variables.

⁶ All control variables are based on the Quality of Government Dataset, version 15May13.

⁷ This result was also retrieved using the World Banks data on the proportion of women in parliament.

effect remains significant and substantial. However, none of these models indicate that oil rents have a significant effect on women political rights.⁸

One might worry that the exceptional human rights record of Western countries, in which the proportion of Muslims is relatively small, could bias the results. Yet, as shown in Model 1E, the effect of a large Muslim population, and that of oil rents, practically does not change when all Western countries are removed from the sample. Perhaps even more remarkable, when all MENA countries are dropped, the analysis still indicates that Islamic culture can explain a substantial proportion of the suppression of women. That is, concerning women's political rights there does not seem to be much of a Middle Eastern exceptionalism: Muslim countries in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are almost equally worse off compared to their non-Muslim neighbors.

TABLE 1: Women's Political Rights

	Model 1A <i>Islam</i>	Model 1B <i>Add oil</i>	Model 1C <i>All controls</i>	Model 1D <i>Muslim major.</i>	Model 1E <i>Non-West</i>	Model 1F <i>Non-MENA</i>
Muslim proportion	-.449*** (.117)	-.416*** (.110)	-.403*** (.104)		-.420*** (.101)	-.361*** (.116)
Muslim majority				-.316*** (.087)		
Oil rents		-.012 (.012)	-.012 (.012)	-.011 (.012)	-.013 (.012)	-.003 (.013)
Income (log)	.041 (.031)	.053* (.029)	.049 (.035)	.060* (.038)	-.023 (.037)	.082** (.037)
MENA	-.435*** (.151)	-.427*** (.151)	-.436*** (.161)	-.474*** (.161)	-.275* (.154)	
Democracy			.035 (.075)	.031 (.073)	.004 (.070)	.026 (.081)
Communist			-.063 (.053)	-.049 (.054)	.050 (.070)	-.080 (.053)
R-Squared	0.35	0.36	0.36	0.36	0.37	0.22
Observations	163	163	163	163	140	144

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01 (two-tailed tests). Unstandardized OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Time-variant variables are averaged over the 1999-2008 period. Constant terms included (not shown).

⁸ As noted above (fn. 4), oil rents do become statistically significant when it is not log transformed. This result might, however, as Ross (2012: 135) mentions himself, be driven by a small number of influential observations.

While high levels of income seem to be beneficial in some of the models (1B, 1D, 1F), neither democracy nor communist law are found to be so. It is particularly surprising that electoral democracy has no effect. Yet, as mentioned above, women's rights are not coded based on the absence of formal democratic institutions, and women are also underrepresented in many democracies such as in Mongolia and Switzerland (Cingranelli and Richards 2008: 75).

Turning to women's economic rights in Table 2, the most obvious change from Table 1 is the constantly significant influence of oil rents. A Muslim population does seem to matter as well, but the effect is clearly diminished when oil is included (Model 2A and 2B). This supports Ross' notion (2008, 2012) that oil wealth decreases the share of females in the workforce and make up for (yet only for some of) the correlation between Islam and women's economic rights.

TABLE 2: Women's Economic Rights

	Model 2A <i>Islam</i>	Model 2B <i>Oil added</i>	Model 2C <i>All controls</i>	Model 2D <i>Muslim major.</i>	Model 2E <i>Non-West</i>	Model 2F <i>Non-MENA</i>
Muslim proportion	-.318** (.126)	-.219* (.119)	-.195 (.119)		-.204* (.116)	-.180 (.129)
Muslim majority				-.163* (.089)		
Oil rents		-.036*** (.011)	-.034*** (.011)	-.034*** (.011)	-.040*** (.012)	-.029** (.028)
Income (log)	.253*** (.024)	.291*** (.023)	.278*** (.026)	.283*** (.025)	.204*** (.031)	.289*** (.028)
MENA	-.297*** (.151)	-.274** (.125)	-.245* (.133)	-.257** (.128)	-.071 (.134)	
Democracy			.087 (.078)	.083 (.078)	.048 (.076)	.050 (.083)
Communist			.011 (.088)	.019 (.090)	.136 (.088)	.003 (.089)
R-Squared	0.50	0.53	0.54	0.54	0.37	0.55
Observations	163	163	163	163	140	144

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01 (two-tailed tests). Unstandardized OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Time-variant variables are averaged over the 1999-2008 period. Constant terms included (not shown).

When democracy and communist law is included (Model 2C), the proportion of Muslims in a country even narrowly misses the level of statistical significance ($p=0.101$); however, Islamic culture is statistically significant when proxied by Muslim majority countries (Model 2D). This is also the case when the sample is restricted to non-Western countries (Model 2E), but when the MENA region is excluded, the proportion of Muslims loses significance once more. That is, contrary to women's political rights, much effect of Islamic culture on factors such as free choice of profession for women and equality in the work sphere seems to be driven by oil rents and the human rights record of countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Looking at the covariates, the level of income, as a proxy for modernization, is consistently associated with greater respect for women's economic rights but democracy and communist law seem inconsequential.

TABLE 3: Women's Social Rights

	Model 3A <i>Islam</i>	Model 3B <i>Oil added</i>	Model 3C <i>All controls</i>	Model 3D <i>Muslim major.</i>	Model 3E <i>Non-West</i>	Model 3F <i>Non-MENA</i>
Muslim proportion	-.578*** (.195)	-.441** (.189)	-.359** (.167)		-.414*** (.153)	-.316* (.174)
Muslim majority				-.275** (.129)		
Oil rents		-.051** (.020)	-.042** (.020)	-.043** (.020)	-.037* (.019)	-.036 (.021)
Income (log)	.318*** (.024)	.371*** (.046)	.318*** (.050)	.329*** (.048)	.139*** (.051)	.340*** (.053)
MENA	-.733*** (.217)	-.701*** (.204)	-.533*** (.201)	-.572*** (.194)	-.168 (.184)	
Democracy			.337*** (.112)	.334*** (.112)	.273*** (.101)	.297** (.121)
Communist			.234** (.104)	.246*** (.105)	.500*** (.102)	.222** (.104)
R-Squared	0.51	0.54	0.57	0.55	0.49	0.53
Observations	163	163	163	163	140	144

Note: * $p<0.10$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$ (two-tailed tests). Unstandardized OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Time-variant variables are averaged over the 1999-2008 period. Constant terms included (not shown).

Finally, regarding social rights, Table 3 supports the general picture of Islamic culture as an impediment for women's empowerment. Yet oil rents do have a negative independent influence on social rights and diminish the effect of having a large Muslim population somewhat (Model 3B). For the first time, electoral democracy and communist law have a robust positive effect on women's rights (Model 3C through 3F). This indicates that gender equality on issues such as marriage, inheritance, and the freedom to travel is strengthened by a communist past as well as democratic institutions. After accounting for these factors, the proportion of Muslims in the 163 country included in the sample still explain some 9% of the variance in women's social rights (Model 3C). The effect of Muslim proportion is robust to the exclusion of either Western or MENA countries. By contrast, the seemingly negative effect of oil rents on the social status of women primarily seems to be driven by the Middle East (Model 3F).

Under the alternative model specifications of ordered probit time-series cross-sectional analysis, these results are almost exactly the same (see Table A2 in the appendix). This supports the robustness of the main finding of the study: although oil wealth helps explain the status of women across countries, it does not subvert the association between Islamic culture and the repression of women.

4. Concluding remarks

Women's rights have improved significantly in the Muslim world over the last decades (Coleman 2004). This progress has nothing to do with religious traditions, which remain quite stable; rather, it shows that the association between Islamic culture and suppression of women is neither deterministic nor predetermined. Even in such conservative countries as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, women have recently won the right to vote and participate in elections (Moghadam 2003). Women's progress in these resource abundant states clearly cannot be explained by oil rents either. In Qatar, plans are even undertaking to increase female labor participation in the energy sector (Al-Nasr 2009). Hopefully, such initiatives will strengthen economic gender equality and spill over to the social and political spheres.

However, moving into the 21th century, women's rights in Muslim countries still lag significantly behind the rest of the world. The study do find evidence for a negative relationship between oil rents and women's economic and social rights, but even after oil is accounted for Muslim countries consistently fall short of the human rights level obtained by women in other developing countries. This goes to show that Ross' compelling theory only can be partial. Even if

we move beyond the Middle East – argued to have distinctive state history caused by the stronghold of the Ottoman Empire (see Hariri n.d.) – large Muslim populations are still negatively associated with women’s political and social rights. This result strongly indicates that Islamic culture in itself impedes the progress of women’s rights. Importantly though, this study presents no evidence that Islam *as a religion* is perilous to women’s rights. On the contrary, as a religion Islam is committed to tolerance, economic and social justice. Even though some disdain toward women is present in the Quran, it provides relatively favorable conditions for women. The Quran, for example, sees Eve and Adam as “of equal nature” and, contrary to the Bible, it does not hold Eve solely responsible for the original sin (Ishay 2008: 7, 35, 55). Yet the study rejects that factors such as oil rents, low levels of development, and authoritarianism fully accounts for the repression of women in Muslim countries. Even after these are controlled for there is a clear association between Islamic culture and women’s political and social rights.

How, then, can continued progress for Muslim women be promoted? Ross argues that women’s political influence will increase with labor market participation. Yet even if women’s economic or social rights are kept at their means, Muslim countries still underperform on the political rights indicator used in this study (not reported). Elsewhere it has been suggested that discrimination of women in Muslim countries can be evaded by increased female education and the introduction of democratic institutions (Charif 2010). But because these factors are at the core of the human rights deficit in the first place, focus should be directed at the factors obstructing education and egalitarian institutions. Particularly, pressure should be placed on ruling elites who accommodate Islamist demands for continued subordination of women in exchange for support as frequently seen in the Middle East (cf. Moghadam 2003). By supporting pro-egalitarian forces such as women’s organization and NGOs in their fight against patriarchal structures, an acceptable level of gender equality might be achieved in the Muslim world before the oil runs dry.

Appendix

TABLE A1: Summary statistics

	Observations	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Political rights	163	1.960	.468	0	3
Economic rights	163	1.314	.565	0	3
Social rights	163	1.266	.828	0	3
Muslim proportion	163	.258	.366	0	.999
Muslim majority	163	.245	.432	0	1
Oil rents/cap. (log)	163	2.955	3.088	0	10.367
Income/cap. (log)	163	8.570	1.367	5.308	11.179
Democracy	163	.572	.477	0	1
Communist law	163	.196	.398	0	1

Note: 10-year average, 1999-2008.

FIGURE 1: The predicted association between Muslim proportion and women's political rights when other relevant factors are held at their means (Model 1B)

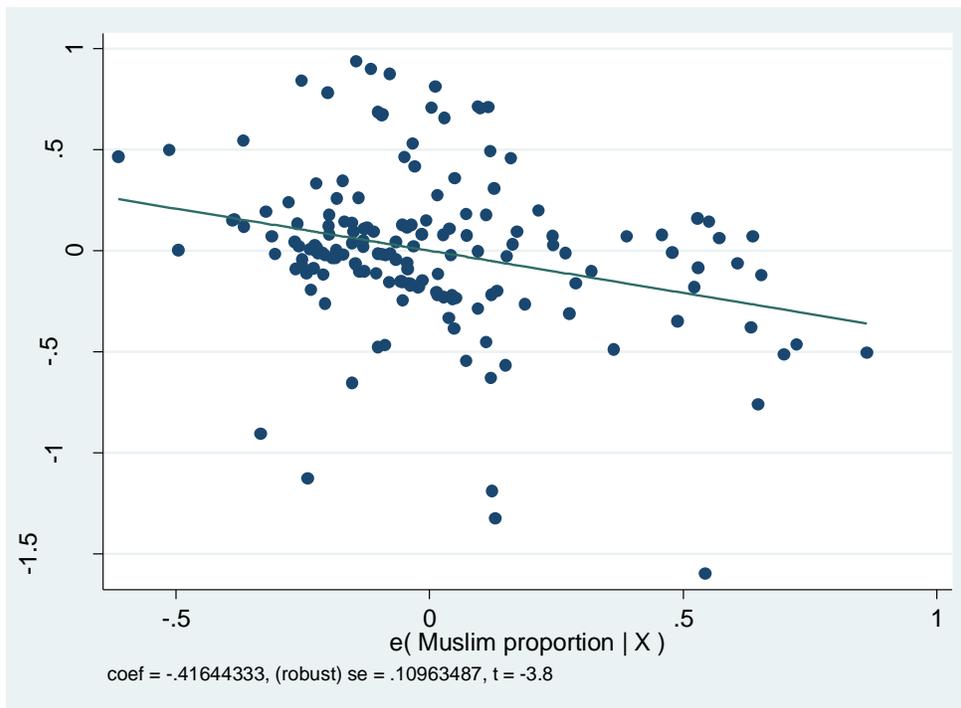


FIGURE 2: The predicted association between Muslim proportion and women’s economic rights when other relevant factors are held at their means (Model 2B)

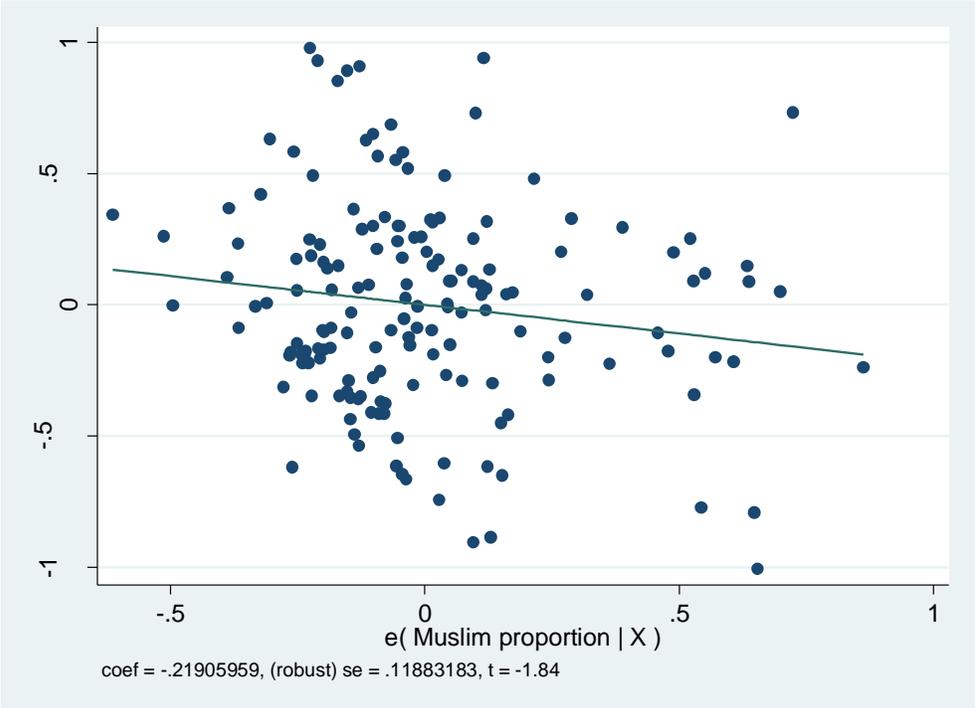


FIGURE 3: The predicted association between Muslim proportion and women’s social rights when other relevant factors are held at their means (Model 3B)

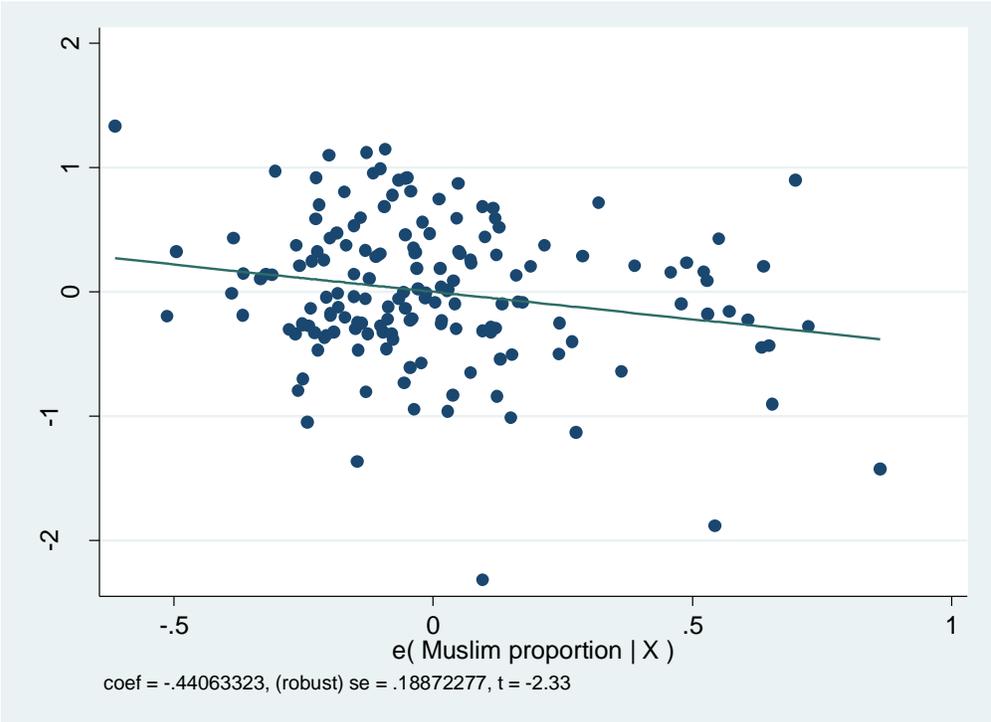


TABLE A2: Ordered probit models

	Model A2.1	Model A2.2	Model A2.3
<i>Rights:</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>Economic</i>	<i>Social</i>
Muslim proportion	-.661*** (.172)	-.513*** (.201)	-.701*** (.252)
Women's rights _(t-1)			
- Level 2	1.991*** (.265)	1.426*** (.144)	2.011*** (.167)
- Level 3	4.251*** (.316)	2.847*** (.178)	3.587*** (.224)
- Level 4	6.505*** (.450)	3.842*** (.262)	5.174*** (.322)
Oil rents/cap. _(t-1) (log)	-.005 (.019)	-.053*** (.018)	-.055** (.023)
Income/cap. _(t-1) (log)	.138** (.055)	.456*** (.051)	.459*** (.067)
MENA	-.553*** (.212)	-.386* (.230)	-.786*** (.292)
Democracy _(t-1)	-.083 (.095)	-.022 (.094)	.076 (.106)
Communist law	-.083 (.095)	.091 (.109)	.362*** (.108)
Countries	169	169	169
Observations	4029	3958	3067

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01 (two-tailed tests). Ordered-probit coefficients with robust standard errors clustered by country. Constant terms and time trend variable included (not shown). All time-varying independent variables lagged one year to minimize simultaneity bias.

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