Women’s Education and World Peace: A Feminist Dream Comes True

Comment on “The Pill Is Mightier Than the Sword”

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Abstract
This commentary on Potts et al provides a critical view on their thesis that increasing the level of education among women is likely to reduce terrorism. Presence of a strong family planning program enables women to control family size resulting in women’s public participation more likely and facilitating the emergence of small birth cohorts who are less likely to become unemployed. In spite of the several theoretical insights their paper offers, they have not adequately described the multiple social and economic linkages that may exist between fertility rates and lowering frequency of wars, terrorism, etc.

Keywords: Youth Bulge, Family Planning, Terrorism

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Almost a century ago a well-known Ghanaian educator, Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey declared ‘If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family’ (nation). This theme occupies a central role in the paper by Potts et al. They extend the idea further to suggest that presenting women with opportunities to pursue education while providing them with easily available and accessible birth control methods may not only improve population health, but also reduce the incidence of wars and terrorism globally. Figure presents the youth bulge theory of war. Population health along with reduction in large scale conflicts is seen as an outcome of lowering fertility rates, a proximate determinant of population health and less intensive conflicts. The moderating variable in this causal chain initiated by interventions to improve women’s education to reduce fertility rates with the goal of reducing incidence of wars is the presence of a well-coordinated family planning program.

The multiple social and economic linkages that may exist between fertility rates and lowering frequency of wars have not been adequately elucidated. Potts et al focus on two significant and perhaps necessary conditions for population health and peace, high levels of women’s education, small family size, and a reduction in the all pervasive male aggression. Though Potts et al attribute male aggression to high levels of testosterone among men, they do not conceptually map the association between male aggression and war. In this regard, several anthropological studies suggest that the stated association may be spurious. There is no dearth of cultures that socialize young men into non-aggressive socially acceptable, sometimes passive behaviors. Though war involves channeling of human aggression through military organizations, it is not true that soldiers enroll in the military to express their aggression. In addition, in an age of technological warfare, both men and women may train their weapon against enemy targets even as these targets remain invisible.

High fertility rates according to Potts et al produce a large number of men, prone to violence increasing the likelihood of war. This assumes that women by nature are passive and that they neither participate in any significant way in war time activities nor do they belong to the male bastions of military organizations. This assumption does not bode well for the intended outcome of population health and world peace seldom achieved in the presence of gender inequality and discrimination.

The youth bulge created by high fertility rates is perceived as a clicking time bomb unleashing diseases and wars in the presence of high unemployment rates. It appears that the biological explanation per se may be inadequate for predicting war and population ill health, unless the role of male hormones is linked to war outcomes with contextual variables at higher levels of aggregation such as peer groups. More specifically, to the extent behaviors are socially learned, the effect of male hormones on behaviors is likely to depend upon what they learn in social groups they belong to. After all peers may model behaviors within groups that may influence the levels of testosterone production. Potts et al present a selective and one sided story of the consequences of the ‘youth bulge.’ In most developing countries, fertility rates have fallen resulting in a reduction

[Diagrammatic Presentation: Youth Bulge Theory of War]
As women gain education, the proportion of women who have done so within the confines of the household. Traditionally imposed social and economic constraints on women's education. As women become more literate and conscious of their social and economic environment, they raise conceptual issues with respect to the essential role of biological determinants on likelihood of war at all levels of inquiry, from assumptions to propositions. Detractions of the ill-developed biological correlates of war thesis in this paper should not diffuse the main suggestions with respect to the role of women's education. Modeling the causal chain from women's education to low incidence of war involving family planning access as a moderator is indeed a useful contribution conceptually. It perhaps positions many contradictory conjectures, Potts et al raise conceptual issues with respect to the essential role of biological determinants on likelihood of war at all levels of inquiry, from assumptions to propositions.

On the other hand, some have, however, argued that within marriage women enjoy more power because of the phenomenon of “too many men” compared to women. These young women may enjoy more power in the household enabling them to more actively participate in household decision-making at all levels including the number of children expected, and the use of family planning methods. Given such contradictory conjectures, Potts et al raise conceptual issues with respect to the essential role of biological determinants on likelihood of war at all levels of inquiry, from assumptions to propositions.

References