



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.¹ 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 al¹ 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 al¹ 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.² There is no dearth of cultures that socialize young men into non-aggressive socially acceptable, sometimes passive behaviors.³ 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 al¹ produce a large number of men, prone to violence increasing the likelihood of war.⁴ 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 ticking 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 al¹ 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

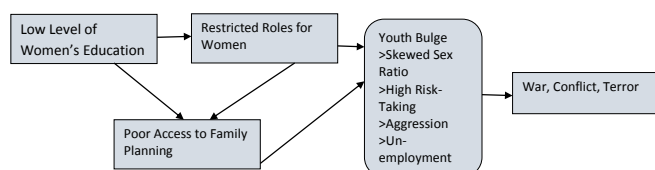


Figure. Diagrammatic Presentation: Youth Bulge Theory of War.

of dependency ratios. In the absence of employment opportunities in the formal labor markets, there is likely to be several demographic responses including migration to foreign countries, and to the informal labor markets of the urban metropolitan areas. Many Asian countries such as India and Bangladesh now depend on the remittances from their youth employed in the Gulf region.

We certainly do not intend to dismiss Potts et al¹ argument that testosterone levels are significantly associated with male violence, an association cited frequently in the literature on son preference. There is an empirical association between sex ratios in favor of males and the frequencies and intensity of violence at all levels.⁵ This argument has been frequently echoed by scholars who have conducted extensive research on the phenomenon of son preference across various cultures, mostly in South and South-East Asia. Skewed sex ratio resulting from selective abortion of female fetuses has resulted in birth cohorts with highly skewed sex ratios in favor of men. Many men in several states in India, a country known for the phenomenon of son preference, find it hard to enter into marriage because of inadequate numbers of younger marriageable women.⁶ On the one hand, many have argued that unmarried men are likely to contribute to a spike in the number of violent crimes across towns and cities in states with skewed sex ratios.

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 al¹ 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 researchers interested in the study of conflicts and wars to fill in the gaps in a causal chain from women’s education to frequency of wars and population health incorporating variables at multilevel, from the hormonal at the individual to nation states at the macro level.

Potts et al¹ lay the pillars of world peace on the bedrock of women’s education. As women become more literate and conscious of their social and economic environment, they are more likely to participate in decision-making at all levels within their household. Patriarchal institutions which have traditionally imposed social and economic constraints on women have done so within the confines of the household. As women gain education, the proportion of women who are not only aware of household constraints, but also challenge

them is likely to increase. Awareness and availability of family planning methods are likely to generate a large number of available choices with respect to timing and stopping of birth. As small size families become the norm, women are more likely to participate in the labor force during the course of family formation as well as when they have achieved desired family size.⁷ Increasing women’s capacity to gain access to resources they need to fulfill their needs and ambitions while challenging social barriers that restrict their choices have been at the core feminist approach to gender equality and social justice for women. Women’s participation in military organizations and related activities at all levels is likely to become more acceptable and more mainstream⁸ as patriarchal institutional forces are challenged through the development of women’s agency. With women in commanding positions in the military, males’ biological propensity to engage in war is more likely to be challenged and checked, and perhaps then world peace may have a chance. This is, however, an empirical question. If it does, it will be a feminist dream coming true.

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Vijayan K. Pillai with Guang-Zhen are the authors of “Women’s Reproductive Rights in Developing Countries.”

Authors’ contributions

VKP and YCW independently wrote the manuscript. The two versions were combined and edited by VKP.

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