

Religion and gender inequality: The status of women in the societies of world religions

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Abstract

The status of women in society is very diverse worldwide. Among many important traits associated with the differentiation of gender inequality is religion, which itself must be regarded as a fluid concept with interpretations and practices 'embedded' and thus varying with respect to cultural and historical relations. Admitting the complexity of the issues, some religious norms and traditions can contribute to the formation of gender inequalities and to subordinate the role of women in society. Using an exploratory quantitative analysis, the influence of religiosity on gender inequality in social, economic and political spheres is examined. Three categories of states have emerged from the analysis: (a) states where the majority of inhabitants are without religious affiliation, which display the lowest levels of gender inequality; (b) Christian and Buddhist societies, with average levels of gender inequality; and (c) states with the highest levels of gender inequality across the observed variables, whose inhabitants adhere to Islam and Hinduism.

Keywords: *gender inequality, geography of religion, status of women, world religions*

1. Introduction

Gender inequality¹ belongs among the most prevalent forms of social inequality and exists all over the world, with different effects in different regions. These differences are primarily due to cultural legacies, historical development, geographic location, and, last but not least, the religious norms which predominate in society (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Religion² plays a vital role in the cultural life of different spaces. It is deeply rooted in peoples' experiences and influences the socioeconomic and political direction of societies (Stump, 2008). On a similar note, Peach (2006) asserts that for social geographic investigation, religion may now be a more important variable than race or ethnicity.

The status of women in society is an outcome of the interpretation of religious texts and of the cultural and institutional set-up of religious communities (Klingorová, 2015). The role of religion is, obviously, complex and it varies across time and space. We accept the premise that everyone benefits from gender equality (Verveer, 2011). Throughout this research project, we approach the topic of gender equality from a "post-Christian" standpoint, a predominantly secular perspective. We consider gender equality and the emancipation of women as important factors for the economic, social, and democratic progress of the world's regions and for the development of human society. This process is influenced by institutional norms, as well as culture and tradition, which are both largely determined by religion. As the relationship between religion and culture is reciprocal, religious systems are locked in a circle of mutual influence with social norms and patterns of social organisation (Sinclair, 1986). It is apparent that the

study of the status of women in religion also reflects the status of women in society as a whole (King, 1995), while considering the cultural, political and geographic factors.

Of course, at least two key questions remain to be asked: (1) *How significant is the influence of world religions on gender inequality and the social status of women?* Unlike previous studies, which predominantly focused on explanation using social surveys (e.g. Seguino, 2011), this research attempts to find answers through a statistical analysis of data reflecting the status of women in groups of selected states, organized by the predominance of world religions in their territory.

Every religion promotes somewhat different norms, creates different institutions, and builds on different cultural and historical foundations. The influence the individual world religions have on the status of women is very differentiated (Klingorová, 2013, 2015), and we should then ask: (2) *To what extent do religions determine the status of women and the level of gender inequality in the four largest religious societies studied at the level of states?*

Through an analysis of diversification of the selected religions, as part of this assumption, we would like to expand on the study by Seguino (2011), which primarily concerned itself with the influence of religiosity on gender inequality within a set of socioeconomic parameters of the selected states. Furthermore, we accept the statement that the level of gender inequality is also influenced by a state's level of economic development (Dollar and Gatti, 1999; Seguino, 2011), and this will be taken into account in the analyses.

This study attempts to contribute to the multidisciplinary debate on the influence of the four key world religions (and secularity) on gender inequality in 50 selected states. We

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¹ Gender inequalities can be defined as culturally and socially created differences between men and women when both sexes do not have the same share in the decision making and wealth of a society (Ridgeway, 2004).

² We understand religion as an ideology which affects the socio-political practices of a society and as a complex cultural system of meanings, symbols and behaviours in communities (Stump, 2008).

consider quantitative analysis to be a suitable method for analysing the influence of religiosity on the status of women at the level of national states, even if this method is not frequently used in feminist geographies (England, 2006). Furthermore, it seeks to contribute to the field of the new geography of religion (Kong, 2001), whose study of the world religions and gender equality is still in its early stages.

2. World religions, women and their social status

This article reflects the increasingly more lively debates on the relationship between religion (religiosity) and gender (Hopkins, 2009; Seguino, 2011; Moghadam, 1991; Chaudhuri, 2013). It builds primarily on theoretical concepts provided by feminist geographies and the geography of religion, both of which have recently increased their presence in the academic sphere (Massey, 1994; Rose, 1993; Havlíček and Hupková, 2008, 2013; Kong, 2001, 2010; Sharp, 2009; Del Casino, 2009). Furthermore, questions of gender continue to make their way into religious studies. A significant part of such recent research is based on the assumption that gender roles are primarily constructed through religion, culture, lifestyle and upbringing (King, 1995). The status of women within individual religions, most significantly in Islam, has become a research topic for a number of geographers (see Hopkins, 2009; Falah and Nagel 2005; Moghadam, 1991; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Aitchison, 2007). Feminist geographies of religion (Hopkins, 2009) mostly focus on gender identities and gender relations in the context of religion. It is even possible to speak of the existence of a new paradigm in religious studies, which is tied to the entry of women researchers into the study of religions (Kong, 2010).

All world religions today maintain male social dominance within societal structures (Young, 1987). On the other hand, women are more inclined to participate in religious life (Hamplová, 2013, 2011; Renzetti and Curran, 1999). Empirical research on developments in the individual religions, especially in the case of Islam, indicate a negative shift in society towards a decreased status of women with the emergence of the so-called advanced religions (Holm, 1994; Krejčí, 2009). Also, religious norms and prejudices may reflect patriarchal values (Nešpor, 2008), which are characteristic of all societies of the world religions (Seguino, 2011). The role of God, or a creator of a religion, is always taken by a male and the woman is primarily valued as a mother, especially as a mother to a son. Her place is in the household, less so at religious ceremonies or in public positions. The real status of a woman in a religion is more complicated, however, as in some religions certain women have acquired significant posts (Holm, 1994).

In the histories of religions, the voice of women is rarely heard, due to the patriarchal dispositions of societies in which these religions emerged, and which eventually stifled some of the changes in the status of women triggered by these new religions. The world religions all agree on the respect for women and their crucial role in family life, especially with emphasis on women as mothers and wives. They do not, however, advocate emancipation in the sense of total equality with men. According to Holm (1994), the most severe restrictions apply to women during their periods of menstruation and pregnancy, when, for example, they cannot enter the temple or touch the Quran.

Male and female roles are therefore much differentiated and also unbalanced in the world religions. The influence of women on the formation of religious norms and traditions is small, even though in certain doctrines, we can find women who succeeded in having their normative views accepted, or men who advocated equal integration of women into religious ceremonies. It needs to be stated that there exists a certain discrepancy between normative conditionality, which refers to what the given religion proclaims (equality of men and women before God) and practical conditionality, which involves the role of women in religious communities and state societies in terms of everyday life (Holm, 1994). In addition, the heterogeneity of the global categories ('Islam', 'Hindu', etc.) must be emphasized, such that general conclusions must be tempered by admitting such variability in religious affiliation – otherwise we would tend to stereotype religious affiliation, which is certainly not intended here.

3. Methodology and data

3.1 Data used in the analysis

The quantitative analysis aims to explore the extent of the influence of selected world religions on the indicators of gender inequality and the social status of women. States with a majority share of inhabitants without religious affiliation³ have also been included for comparison.

Overall, 50 'states' have been chosen as the cases for this analysis. The selection criterion was religiosity. States with the highest share of religious (self-identified) people in the world were selected, as well as states with the highest share of people "without religious affiliation" (Zuckerman, 2007, who takes into account so-called 'lived religiosity'). These include 30 states in which one of three the most common religions (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam – ten of each) are dominant. Note that differences between Christian denominations have not been given attention in this analysis. Furthermore, the dataset includes ten federal states of India with the highest share of adherents to Hinduism, since no nation states (aside from India, Nepal, and Mauritius) have a high enough percentage of adherents to Hinduism to lend themselves to meaningful analysis. Therefore, the article uses the ten federal states of India which fulfil this requirement. All federal states of India have their own government, yet remain part of the State of India and defer to its legislature. They cannot be considered as fully independent in all areas, which must be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

States from each religious group (Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu states) have the first to the tenth highest share of the religion's believers in the world. This method allows the possibility of finding a relationship between religiosity and indicators of gender inequality at the state level. Of course, the results cannot be generalized to the entire societies of selected states. Similarly, ten states with the highest share of inhabitants who declare themselves as without religious affiliation were selected (Zuckerman, 2007). Vietnam was excluded from the analysis and replaced with Belgium since Vietnam is not a democratic country, which may affect official statistics. This method of selecting the units of analysis allows for a

³ This term applies to persons indifferent to organised religion or even rejecting religion in general, who can subscribe to some other philosophical attitude (e.g. agnosticism, atheism, laicism, etc.): see Zuckerman (2007).

comparison of predominantly religious and non-religious states. Furthermore, the analysis has been limited to states exceeding 100,000 inhabitants, in order to secure a possibly higher informative value of the results.

The statistical analysis uses a set of variables reflecting the state of gender inequality in social (sex ratio, literacy, and tertiary education), political (share of women in parliament) and economic (women in the labour force) spheres, as well as a complementary variable expressing the share of inhabitants adhering to the specified religion and the Gender Inequality Index. The following factors are used in the analysis:

- *'Adherents'* (adherents) signifies the share of the inhabitants following the dominant religion, or the share of inhabitants without religious affiliation;
- *'Sex ratio'* (sex ratio): On average, men slightly outnumber women in the world (World Factbook, 2013). One of the principal reasons for this occurrence can be traced back to culturally determined social norms in predominantly Muslim and Hindu areas, where the life of male offspring is considered more valuable. On the opposite side of the spectrum, women outnumber men in secular and Western Christian states (Huntington, 1996), because no gender is preferred by social norms or state policy. For this reason, we consider a higher share of women in society to be a sign of greater gender equality;
- *'Difference in male and female literacy'* (literacy): The ability to read and write improves women's lives and allows them to more actively participate in the economic sphere. Better-educated women are also more likely to take part in public life and the economic development of their state. Women have a better status in societies which grant them equal access to education with men. Literacy makes women overall less dependent on men and gives them enhanced freedom;
- *'The share of women enrolled in universities'* (university): The chance to pursue higher education helps women to achieve economic independence and is indicative of an equal access to education in general. Women educated at universities are more than able to fulfil leadership roles, be they managerial, educational or governmental. In the developed countries, more women tend to attend university programs than men (United Nations Statistics Division, 2011);
- *'The share of women in parliament'* (parliament): Women parliamentarians can have a direct influence of political decision making within a state. A higher share of women in parliament is indicative of a society that is mature and in favour of gender parity, and has dealt with the kinds of prejudice which would see only men as capable of holding political office (and other positions of leadership);
- *'Percentage of women in the adult labour force'* (labour force): The higher the percentage of women in the adult labour force, the more independence women have to conduct their economic affairs and to contribute to the development of their countries;
- *'Gender Inequality Index'* (GII) directly provides a measure of the given state's level of gender equality. This index has been selected because it is one of the most commonly-used indicators of the status of women and addresses gender inequality in the economic, the political, and also the social sphere (Chaudhuri, 2013). It values range from 1 and 0, where 0 represents the ideal type of absolute equality, whereas close proximity to 1 indicates severe inequality. The index is composed from three key factors: fertility,

women's share of power, and women's share of the labour market. The index represents the extent to which a state's progress, in terms of human development, is disrupted by gender inequality (United Nations Development Programme, 2013). We are aware of the criticism of this measure on conceptual grounds, however; and

- *'Gross Domestic Product per capita'* (GDP) expresses the economic power of a state's economy, which needs to be considered throughout the analysis of gender inequality. The level of economic development is at least as important in determining gender inequality in society as levels of religiosity (Seguino, 2011); however, this paper is focused on religiosity as a factor determining gender relations in selected states. The influence of economic development is included in the analysis.

The factors used in the analysis are summarised in Table 1.

3.2 Methodology

The method chosen for this analysis is simple correlation (Pearson's r), to examine whether religiosity affects the status of women in society and gender inequality, as reflected in the relations between the chosen variables. A correlation analysis was carried out for religiosity in a state, regardless of the specific religions, and the variables of gender inequality in selected social spheres. For the Pearson's correlation coefficient, values of r are tested at a significance level of $p < 0.01$. All calculations were carried out using SPSS.

In the evaluation of the results, it is necessary to keep in mind some of the limitations of Pearson's correlation coefficient, such as its susceptibility to distortion by outlying values. A certain degree of autocorrelation must be expected in the data, since it includes 50 geographically unevenly distributed states.

4. Outputs of the statistical analysis and their discussion

4.1 Correlation analysis

As outlined above, some authors (e.g. King, 1995; Krejčí, 2009; Seguino, 2011) associate religiosity with gender inequality in most aspects of social, political, and even religious life. "Religious people are more intolerant and have more conservative views of the role of women in society" according to Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales (2003, p. 280). Religiously-minded people also tend to patriarchy. Of course, this statement does not apply to all religions to the same extent (Klingorová, 2013), nor does it uniformly apply to all believers. Generally speaking, however, it can be asserted that adherents to the world religions display more conservative and more patriarchal attitudes towards women and their role in society (Seguino, 2011; Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales, 2003; Dollar and Gatti, 1999). The aforementioned studies indicate that religious women are less publically and economically active. This study endeavours to test this assertion by correlation analysis of empirical data.

The analysis correlated the variables representing gender equality with religiosity, which represents the intensity of the country's religious life, while controlling for GDP per capita. The influence of economic development on gender inequality was therefore controlled statistically and the results indicate the relation between religiosity and gender inequality factors given such adjustments. The greatest emphasis needs to be put on the relationship

Variable	Description	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Period	Source
Adherents	Percentage of adherents/non religious people	83	19	42	100	2001–2013	World Factbook, 2013; Zuckerman, 2007; Census of India, 2001
Sex ratio	Share of men and women	1.001	0.060	0.840	1.210	2011–2013	World Factbook, 2013; Census of India, 2011
Literacy	Difference between literacy of men and women	8	10	– 26	31	2011–2013	World Factbook, 2013; Census of India, 2011
University	Percentage of women at university	48	10	18	65	2011	UN Statistics Division, 2011
Parliament	Share of women in parliament	0.237	0.200	0.000	0.808	2012	Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012; Women in Indian Parliaments, 2013
Labour force	Percentage of women in adult labour force	37	10	15	50	2001–2011	International Labour Office, 2011; Census of India, 2011
GII	Gender Inequality Index	0.401	0.212	0.049	0.707	2013	UN Development Programme, 2013
GDP	Gross Domestic Product per capita in USD	31,529	16,499	1,000	60,900	2011–2013	World Factbook, 2013; UN Development Programme, 2013

Tab. 1: Summary of the variables used in the statistical analyses. Source: authors

Note: the values of the variables adherents, literacy, labour force are measured in %. GII values range from 1 and 0, where 0 represents the ideal type of absolute equality. The index comprises three key factors: fertility, women's share of power, and women's share of the labour market. From the variable adherents is calculated the variable religiosity, used for correlation analysis. The GII and university values of the federal states of India are represented by an average value for all of India

		Correlations					
		Sex ratio	Literacy	University	Parliament	Labour force	GII
Religiosity	Pearson Correlation	.251**	.465**	– .315**	– .634**	– .678**	.794**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	759,706	759,706	721,206	718,532	721,206	702,806
Sex ratio	Pearson Correlation		.380**	– .330**	– .295**	– .638**	.477**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N		759,706	721,206	718,532	721,206	702,806
Literacy	Pearson Correlation			– .415**	– .250**	– .585**	.540**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N			721,206	718,532	721,206	702,806
University	Pearson Correlation				.444**	.301**	– .337**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				0.000	0.000	0.000
	N				718,532	721,206	702,806
Parliament	Pearson Correlation					.527**	– .669**
	Sig. (2-tailed)					0.000	0.000
	N					718,532	700,132
Labour force	Pearson Correlation						– .729**
	Sig. (2-tailed)						0.000
	N						702,806

Tab. 2: Correlation analysis weighted by GDP per capita.

Sources: Adherents, 2013; Zuckerman, 2007; Census of India, 2011, 2001, 1991; World Factbook, 2013; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012; International Labour Office, 2011; United Nations Development Programme, 2013; United Nations Statistics Division, 2011; Women in Indian Parliaments, 2013. Processed by the SPSS software.

Note: N represents the amount of values. A correlation coefficient (r) of 0–0.3 is considered weak correlation, a value of 0.3–0.6 represents an average correlation and strong correlation is attributed to the values of 0.6–1. The analysis is weighted by the GDP per capita; ** Correlation is significant at the level $P < 0.01$.

between religiosity and the Gender Inequality Index. The table of correlations (Tab. 2) indicates that the religiosity variable has an average correlation with all of the included variables, with the exception of sex ratio (with which it correlates weakly), and it is strongly correlated with the GII ($r = 0.794$), parliament ($r = 0.634$) and labour force ($r = 0.678$) variables. All r -values are significant at $p < 0.01$.

It can be asserted that the religiosity of a state is statistically significantly related to the selected variables of gender inequality (with Sig. values lower than 0.01; the selected level of probability). The strong correlation between religiosity and GII ($r = 0.794$) can be generally stated as follows: the level of gender equality has an overlap of 79% with the trend in religiosity, almost the same as with the share of women in parliament and with the share of women in the labour force. It is a positive correlation, so that gender inequality is higher in the selected states with higher religiosity. The argument, that religiosity increases gender inequality in society (Seguino, 2011), can be therefore confirmed. The intensity of religious life within selected states thus seems to have a significant impact on the level

of gender inequality in their society in social and, most significantly, in political and economic ways. Nevertheless, this correlation could be largely fuelled the very high values of religiosity in many Muslim states and their corresponding high levels of gender inequality.

4.2 Comparison of the status of women in the selected religions

Through the statistical analysis, we have confirmed that religion has a significant impact on the status of women in society (Tab. 2). The analysis does not, however, allow us to identify in which religious groups the levels of gender inequality are the highest or lowest, or what the situation is in the individual selected states.

On the basis of an Analysis of Variance between the groups of states by religion (Klingorová, 2013: testing for mean differences) and the different norms and traditions in selected religions (Klingorová, 2015), it can be stated that the influence of selected religions on gender inequality in society is quite differentiated. This proposition is examined further here by an analysis of variables expressing different aspects of gender

State	Adherents	Sex ratio	Literacy	University	Parliament	Labour force	GI	
Non-religious								
Czechia	58%	0.950	0.00	56	0.282	43	0.136	
Belgium	43%	0.960	0.00	55	0.653	45	0.068	
Denmark	62%	0.970	0.00	58	0.642	47	0.060	
Estonia	49%	0.840	0.00	62	0.263	50	0.194	
Finland	44%	0.960	0.00	54	0.739	48	0.075	
France	49%	0.960	0.00	55	0.367	47	0.106	
South Korea	46%	1.000	2.40	39	0.186	41	0.111	
Germany	45%	0.970	0.00	50	0.490	46	0.085	
Norway	52%	0.980	0.00	61	0.657	47	0.075	
Sweden	66%	0.980	0.00	59	0.808	47	0.049	
Mean		0.957	0.24	55	0.509	46	0.096	
Order		1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
Christianity								
Armenia	98%	0.890	0.30	56	0.120	46	0.343	
Honduras	97%	1.010	- 0.40	60	0.243	34	0.511	
Malta	98%	0.990	- 2.20	56	0.095	35	0.272	
Moldova	98%	0.940	0.90	56	0.247	49	0.298	
Papua New Guinea	96%	1.050	12.50	35	0.028	48	0.674	
Romania	99%	0.950	1.20	56	0.154	45	0.333	
Greece	98%	0.960	3.60	50	0.266	42	0.162	
Samoa	84%	1.050	- 0.10	44	0.043	34	-	
Venezuela	98%	0.980	0.60	62	0.204	40	0.447	
East Timor	98%	1.030	16.00	40	0.625	33	-	
Mean		0.985	3.24	52	0.202	41	0.380	
Order		2	3	2	3	3	3	2.67

Tab. 3: Analysis of the differences in the status of women between groups of states organised by religion

Sources: Adherents, 2013; Zuckerman, 2007; Census of India, 2011, 2001, 1991; World Factbook, 2013; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012; International Labour Office, 2011; United Nations Development Programme, 2013; United Nations Statistics Division, 2011; Women in Indian Parliaments, 2013

Note: States are organised into groups according to their predominant religion. The analysed variables are averaged for each group and subsequently compared. The average rank in all variables (at the right side of the table) serves as the output of this process; “-“ Data not available

State	Adherents	Sex ratio	Literacy	University	Parliament	Labour force	GII	
Buddhism								
Myanmar	89%	0.990	- 7.50	58	0.064	49	-	
Bhutan	75%	1.100	- 26.00	40	0.093	42	0.495	
Japan	71%	0.940	0.00	46	0.086	42	0.123	
Cambodia	96%	0.940	20.60	34	0.255	50	0.500	
Laos	67%	0.980	20.00	43	0.333	50	0.513	
Mongolia	50%	1.000	- 1.00	60	0.175	46	0.410	
Singapore	42%	1.070	8.00	50	0.320	42	0.086	
Sri Lanka	69%	0.960	2.60	65	0.061	32	0.419	
Tchaj-wan	93%	1.010	4.40	-	-	-	-	
Thailand	94%	0.980	2.80	56	0.188	46	0.382	
<i>Mean</i>		<i>0.997</i>	<i>2.39</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>0.175</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>0.366</i>	
<i>Order</i>		<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2.67</i>
Hinduism								
Andhra Pradesh	89%	1.008	15.82	40	0.122	38	0.617	
Chhattisgarh	94%	1.009	20.86	40	0.122	43	0.617	
Gujarat	89%	1.082	16.50	40	0.088	32	0.617	
Haryana	88%	1.123	18.61	40	0.111	32	0.617	
Himachal Pradesh	95%	1.026	14.23	40	0.044	44	0.617	
Madhya Pradesh	91%	1.070	20.51	40	-	37	0.617	
Rajasthan	88%	1.074	27.85	40	0.145	38	0.617	
Tamil Nadu	88%	1.010	12.95	40	0.060	35	0.617	
Tripura	85%	1.040	9.00	40	0.050	28	0.617	
Odisha	94%	1.022	18.04	40	0.034	31	0.617	
<i>Mean</i>		<i>1.046</i>	<i>17.44</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>0.086</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>0.617</i>	
<i>Order</i>		<i>5</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>4.83</i>
Islam								
Afghanistan	99%	1.030	30.50	18	0.383	15	0.707	
Algeria	99%	1.010	19.50	58	0.462	17	0.412	
Iraq	97%	1.030	15.40	36	0.337	18	0.579	
Iran	98%	1.030	13.10	49	0.032	18	0.485	
Comoros	98%	0.940	10.50	42	0.031	30	-	
Morocco	99%	0.970	25.00	47	0.204	27	0.543	
Mauritania	100%	0.930	13.70	28	0.284	27	0.605	
Saudi Arabia	100%	1.210	9.10	52	0.000	15	0.646	
Tunisia	98%	0.990	18.10	60	0.365	27	0.293	
Turkey	99%	1.020	15.70	44	0.165	29	0.443	
<i>Mean</i>		<i>1.016</i>	<i>17.06</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>0.226</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>0.524</i>	
<i>Order</i>		<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>3.83</i>

Tab. 3 continuing

inequality in selected states. We compared states belonging to the five groups organised by predominant religious affiliations: see Table 3. A state that is 'ideal' in terms of gender equality should have: a higher ratio of women to men; women enjoy equal levels of literacy; a high share of women attends universities; a high share of women participates in parliament; and a high share engages in economic activity. Such a state is also expected to score favourably in the GII.

The religious groups of states were classified according to the average rank of their mean values across all variables (in

Table 3). The final ranking is as follows: without religious affiliation (mean value of 1), Christianity and Buddhism (each 2.67), Islam (3.83), Hinduism (4.83). Three distinct categories emerge from this comparison: (a) a group of states without religious affiliation, with the first ranked value in all of the studied variables; (b) a second group comprising Christian and Buddhist states with average values; and (c) the third group which includes Muslim and Hindu states with very high measures of gender inequality in the observed social parameters.

There is a clear distinction between the states with the majority of inhabitants without religious affiliation (mean = 1) and the states dominated by Christianity (2.67) and Buddhism (2.67). These states have the most favourable means of all of the studied variables with respect to gender equality. One only needs to take into account their average GII value of 0.096 (when compared to the world average of 0.492, United Nations Development Program, 2013) to recognise that the society in these states is the most equal. This is largely due to the presence of some states which have some of the world's lowest values of the GII: Sweden, the world's lowest value (GII = 0.049), and Denmark, which ranks third (GII = 0.060) (United Nations Development Programme, 2013). The level of economic development was not included in this secondary analysis, which may influence the results, in particular within this first group of states.

The world's Buddhist states occupy the second position together with the group of Christian states. They had the largest share of economically active women (50% in Cambodia and Laos), and the second lowest discrepancy between male and female literacy (2.39%). Since they reach second position in the GII variable (0.366), which is considered as most significant for the study of gender inequality in society, we place them at the second place overall. The possible explanation is that Buddhist tradition seems to afford equality to women (Cabezón, 1992), traditionally. On the other hand, they have only the fourth highest share of women in parliament (0.175). It appears that political participation of women is not very significant in this group of Buddhist states (lowest in Sri Lanka at 0.061 and Burma at 0.064). Economic participation and membership in parliament are two important components comprising the GII (United Nations Development Program, 2013). In this case, one of these indicators improves the GII score of the Buddhist states, while the other does the opposite. The GII of the Buddhist states therefore probably supersedes the result of the Christian states because of significantly higher female labour participation.

The Christian states scored second in the sex ratio and university indicators. They register as third in literacy, parliament, labour force and GII. The Christian group of states has a slightly higher value of the index of gender inequality, but this difference is very marginal (0.014). With emphasis placed on this important indicator, which most comprehensively evaluates the state of gender inequality, we place the group of Christian states in the third place behind Buddhist states (their statistics are adversely affected by the presence of the states of Papua New Guinea, GII = 0.674 and Honduras, GII = 0.511). In the Christian states, in contrast to their Buddhist counterparts, women are less likely to work (as part of the labour force) but more likely to participate in political decisions. Generally, Christianity does not tend to be profoundly discriminating against women. The Christian view of women is based on varying interpretations of Biblical sources (see Drury, 1994; Bilezikian, 2006); nevertheless, it is not uncommon within Christianity to find stereotypical expectations of gender roles.

The Muslim states have a high share of women in their respective parliaments (0.226), which bring them to second place on this characteristic, even though their differences in rank compared to the Christian and the Buddhist states are small. Considering the generally complicated public presence of women in many Muslim states (Nasir, 2009; Knotková-Čapková, 2008), it was expected their participation in politics would reflect that. Levels of discrimination vary across the Muslim countries (Moghadam, 1991), however, and the

selected Muslim states are relatively modernised in this respect, so women can often effectively participate in public life (especially in Algeria and Tunisia). It is also necessary to evaluate the real political power of these women. In this group of states, women have the worst status attributed to them in the area of labour participation. The smallest share of women economically active is found in Afghanistan (15% of women), Saudi Arabia (15%), and Algeria (17%), therefore geographic differentiation is obvious in Muslim states in the role of women in society.

According to the available data for the selected states, the status of women seems to be problematic in the world of Hinduism (see more in Sugirtharajah, 1994; Chaudhuri, 2013). Yet, their engagement in the labour market is better than in the case of the Muslim states (women take up 36% of the labour force, compared to 22% in the group of selected Muslim states). Hinduism prohibits a woman's economic independence (Sugirtharajah, 1994), which is probably the cause of the highest levels of inequality between genders. These data may be determined by the fact that all of the analysed Hindu federal states are affected by the policies of one federal government. They have similar cultural, political and economic points of departure, and the data for GII and university do not offer information pertinent to the individual federal states. These statistics are also considerably affected by the low level of overall economic development of the Indian states.

On the basis of this analysis, we can assert that there is the highest level of gender equality based on GII and other selected variables in selected states without a dominant religious affiliation, followed by Buddhist and Christian, and finally Muslim and Hindu states. In order to validate these findings, further research is necessary. Such research would more thoroughly differentiate the state of gender inequality within and across the world religions, and would likely be more qualitative in nature.

5. Conclusions

Religious studies tends to be a rather androcentric discipline and in both geography and the sociology of religion, women as researchers and subjects of research had long been in the minority up until the last couple of decades (King, 1995), even though Hopkins (2009) tried to open up the discussion about feminist geographies of religion. Yet, it represents a creative and stimulating research approach in the social sciences, and its neglect is tied with the status of women in religious norms and traditions as much as in society in general.

Within this selected sample of 50 world states, the study tried to confirm that religion significantly affects the status of women and the state of gender inequality, since it seeks to regulate the role of women in certain aspects of social and political life in a given society. The analysis confirmed the relation between religiosity and gender inequality factors, while the strong influence of economic development on gender inequality was controlled statistically. We have tested this proposition through the use of a correlation analysis of variables representing gender inequality in selected states: the results indicate that gender inequality is higher in those selected states with a higher religiosity. A strong correlation exists between religiosity and the Gender Inequality Index ($r = 0.794$) for the 50 selected states. We are aware of possible errors in this analysis, as the influence of education, age, income, etc. have not been included; however, the influence of economic development (Seguino, 2011) was incorporated into the analysis.

The relation between religion and gender equality can be explained by the assertion that societies with higher religiosity accept the authority of religious teachers, who advocate a patriarchal organisation of society (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). We assume that those women who adhere to the dominant religions, might also not be inclined to take part in their society's public life, due to their upbringing and the social traditions surrounding them. Nevertheless, many religious institutions are always helpful for women in economic and social distress.

Higher levels of religiosity in these selected states tend to magnify gender inequality; however, every religious doctrine has a slightly different attitude towards the public participation of women, which we have, contrary to Seguino's polemics (2011) and in accordance with Dollar and Gatti (1999), discussed the selected world religions by an analytical application. In terms of the individual religious traditions and their contribution to gender inequality, three categories of states have emerged from the analysis: (a) states where the majority of inhabitants is without religious affiliation, which display the lowest levels of gender inequality across the observed variables; (b) Christian and Buddhist states with average levels of gender inequality; and (c) states with the highest levels of gender inequality across the observed variables, whose inhabitants adhere to Islam and Hinduism, respectively.

Simultaneously, we have confirmed that the most visible women's public presence can be found in the selected states where the majority of inhabitants are the most secular. In these societies, patriarchal religious traditions, which predominate within the states with higher religiosity, do not seem to be well engrained. Buddhist states selected for the analysis exhibit a higher involvement of women in economic life, with small differences between men and women in literacy and education. The Buddhist society seems to be more equal in terms of gender than the Christian, Muslim, and Hindu societies (Cabezón, 1992; Gross, 1994). Christian structures betray a traditional patriarchal system, which has not been sufficiently disrupted even by feminist critique, and women participate in public life tangibly less than men (Drury, 1994). Fewer gender inequalities have been identified within the Muslim states than those adhering to Hinduism. The selected Muslim states have higher shares of women in parliament and provide women with better access to education. Hinduism's traditional disavowal of women's economic independence (Sugirtharajah, 1994) might be a significant factor affecting their status in society. In contemporary democratic India, as in most of other selected states, the equality of men and women has been normatively included in the country's legislation. Traditions and customs, however, are still powerfully entrenched in society and may represent obstacles to practical implementation of these norms.

Following these analytical procedures, we believe that we have answered the two key questions raised at the outset in the Introduction, in an affirmative manner. Even so, we do acknowledge that the situation we have examined is extremely complex, such that these conclusions should be taken in the exploratory manner in which they have been presented.

If we take into consideration the strengthening modernisation and liberalisation of the world as part of the processes of globalisation and their associated "westernisation" (Gunewardene, Huon and Zheng, 2001), it can be expected that religious societies will eventually become more accommodating to gender equality, because

traditional patriarchal structures will start to wane. Despite this, women should take more interest in religious doctrines and participate in the formulation of new interpretations. Under such influences, religious institutions might undergo reforms more favourable to gender equality (Gross, 1994). Muslim and Hindu societies are expected to undergo the most significant changes in order to achieve this. But changes can occur in the opposite direction as well, due to the rise of religious fundamentalism and post-secularism (Sturm, 2013). Even in the more liberal Christian and Buddhist societies, progress towards absolute gender equality has not reached its final destination. Civil societies and governments should support gender equality and economic emancipation, provide equal access to education, and strive for an increased participation of women in politics. This might strengthen democratic principles in relation to gender equality, to the benefit of society as a whole.

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