

2017

Women, Rights and Power: Review of Alice Kang,  
*Bargaining for Women's Lives: Activism in an Aspiring  
Muslim Democracy.*

Jill Vickers

Carleton University, [jill.vickers@sympatico.ca](mailto:jill.vickers@sympatico.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/poliscifacpub>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

Vickers, Jill, "Women, Rights and Power: Review of Alice Kang, *Bargaining for Women's Lives: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy.*" (2017). *Faculty Publications: Political Science*. 85.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/poliscifacpub/85>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications: Political Science by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

In: "The Personal is Indeed Political: Sex, Gender and the State," by Jill Vickers, *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* 50:2 (June / juin 2017) 621-623.  
doi:10.1017/S0008423917000245  
Copyright © 2017 Canadian Political Science Association (l'Association canadienne de science politique) and/et la Société québécoise de science politique.

## Women, Rights and Power

Feryal M. Cherif, *Myths About Women's Rights: How, Where and Why Rights Advance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Alice Kang, *Bargaining for Women's Lives: Activism in an Aspiring Muslim Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Ali Mari Tripp, *Women and Power in Post-conflict Africa*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

A key project of gender scholars is identifying mechanisms and opportunity structures that help women achieve freedom, rights and equality. In this, texts that theorize developments in the global south have been especially valuable. Ali Mari Tripp's *Women and Power in Postconflict Africa* explores why some postconflict countries have higher rates of women's political representation and gender-equality reforms than those that didn't undergo conflict or in which conflict continues. Tripp theorizes that in the leading countries (Angola, Liberia and Uganda), traditional gender relations were disrupted by intense conflict, by activism by strong women's movements that emerged during conflict, and by international agencies' promotion of women's advancement. Historically and in other contexts, positive changes achieved during war or revolution often were reversed by backlash that renewed gender repression and re-privatized women's lives. But in Tripp's leading countries, change persists.

Tripp undertakes cross-national empirical analysis of the opportunities and obstacles provided by postconflict peace negotiations and constitution-making *after 1990*. She highlights their value as venues and processes for challenging the gender status quo, advancing women's political leadership and domesticating international gender norms. She also addresses counterarguments carefully, setting gains against challenges. Tripp doesn't glorify war, but she does maintain that intense conflict disrupts and transforms traditional gender relations, altering women's economic status and fostering a new political voice that empowers "symbolic changes in what...[becomes] imaginable to women in their aspirations" (236). Tripp's analysis and findings challenge the long-held belief that any gains women make during conflicts

are reversed in post-conflict backlash. Her challenge succeeds because she carefully estimates how factors vary in different contexts and in their impact on opportunity structures. Her systematic use of process tracing provides scientific validity for previously speculative claims, solidifying her important theoretical and methodological contributions to the field and the discipline.

Feryal Cherif's *Myths about Women's Rights* challenges the field's "conventional wisdom" about why women's rights are advanced in some countries but not in others. Noting that these "myths" rarely can be substantiated empirically, she describes the field's theoretical impasse between exponents of cultural explanations and those who attribute positive change to the influence of international norms. Cherif's original framework was developed through theoretical modeling, statistical analysis and case studies. Her thesis is that advances in women's education and paid work ("core rights") are needed for women to be empowered enough to form political constituencies that can challenge cultural barriers or make politicians exploit opportunities to advance equality rights when international agencies promote new gender norms. Cherif tests her thesis with a rigorous, comparative analysis across four policy fields: nationality law, political, property and reproductive rights. Her theory of how change occurs overcomes the impasse and makes a valuable contribution both to the field and to political science.

Five books submitted for the 2015 APSA prize dealt with gender and Islam but, as noted, research on Muslim women's experiences with Western states and on gender and politics in Muslim-majority states or states with large Muslim minorities is not yet well developed. However, one promising collection edited by Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, is *Contesting Feminisms: Gender and Islam in Asia*. Although it lacks a unifying theme or theory, it includes strong chapters on Muslim women's leadership in Uzbekistan, the politics of the headscarf ban in Turkey, gender and nationalism in the Philippines and Islamic feminism in Malaysia.

Another exception is Alice Kang's *Bargaining for Women's Lives* which is an impressive study of the competition between women activists and religious conservatives in Muslim-majority, francophone Niger. In this emerging democracy, Kang focuses on debates about women's rights at the time when freedom of speech and assembly were being established. She explores how Niger handles women's issues: who puts them on the national agenda, how they get framed and who decides. In a chapter discussing (unsuccessful) efforts to reform family law, Kang identifies the inability of colonial and post-colonial rulers to create central state structures as the problem since it left traditional Muslim authorities (sultans, emirs) administering family law with the power to block "women-friendly" reforms. Moreover, they accepted pressure from international donors (Saudi Arabia, Libya) not to base reforms on the more "women-friendly" legal traditions, for example the Maliki school of Koranic interpretation. Kang makes valuable contributions to

the gender and politics field by normalizing women's relations with the state in a Muslim-majority society.

The books reviewed in this essay should inform and inspire both feminist and mainstream political scientists. It should no longer be possible to discuss politics in Putin's Russia or Trump's America without considering their gender dynamics. Nor can we presume to understand the violence Indigenous women and girls endure without acknowledging that sexual violence as a tool of colonization remains embedded in the institutions of Canada and the United States. Feminist theorists' exploration of the bias in liberal ideas regarding capacity also highlights the discipline's failure to deal with diversity effectively. Hopefully these reviews have made these and other insights about sex, gender, power and politics from a very talented group of political scientists accessible to a broader readership.

Jill Vickers  
Carleton University