

## Review Essay

# Gender, Identity, and Islam: An Overview

**Books Reviewed:** Valentine M. Moghadam, ed., *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007; Ida Lichter, *Muslim Women Reformers: Inspiring Voices against Oppression*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009; Wahida Shaffi, ed., *Our Stories, Our Lives: Inspiring Muslim Women's Voices*. Bristol, UK: The Policy Press for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2009.

The realm of gender studies is rife with potential research foci: to comprise the geographical, political, and ethical breadth that spans North Africa to South Asia, war novels and Iranian cinema to dowries and *hudud* is, then, a veritable feat. Assuming the concept of patriarchy as the nexus from which to assess the multidimensional subjugation of women within the political, socioeconomic, and ethnic spheres, Valentine M. Moghadam affords a sweeping, yet insightful, collection of nineteen articles originating from the “Women in the Global Community” conference hosted in Istanbul by the Fulbright Commission in September 2002.

Divided into three parts, namely, “Political Processes and Women’s Participation,” “Economic, Social, and Cultural Participation,” and “Violence, Peace, and Women’s Human Rights,” the study is guided by a variant of the 1977 framework by Janet Giele that gauges women’s empowerment through political expression, work and mobility, family, education, health, and cultural expression.<sup>1</sup> In turn, questions such as “Can women form independent organizations?,” “What policies exist to enable women to balance work and family?,” “Do family laws empower or disempower women?,” and “What laws exist to prevent or punish violence against women?” are addressed through the course of the book.

Opening with an analysis of Palestinian women’s involvement in the national liberation struggle, Deborah Gerner traces their roles as mothers,

teachers, social workers, and political activists during the primary Intifada through “Mobilizing Women for Nationalist Agendas: Palestinian Women, Civil Society, and the State-Building Process.” For her, the challenge of expressing opposition to their own government is one shared by men and women alike; nevertheless, quandaries associated with nationalism, citizenship, state-building, and democratization are inherently linked to the position and perception of women in society, and the feasibility of realizing positive progress in the context of gender and legal concerns remains unresolved for the foreseeable future.

While women in Palestine strive to vocalize gender issues, Abla Amawi looks back on the 1997 elections in Jordan, “Against All Odds: Women Candidates in Jordan’s 1997 Elections,” as a pivotal moment in women’s political expression, candidacy, and participation. Confronting a plethora of impediments – including the dominance of the tribal structure, patriarchy within both the family and the state, and legal frameworks that impose second-class citizenship on women – Jordanian women have on the one hand succeeded in the realms of politics, albeit to varying degrees, yet equally observed the rise of further hindrances. For example, honor crimes can be linked to “a broader trend among males who are resistant to changing patterns of social behaviour owing to women’s increasing exposure to and involvement in public life and the changing power relationships between the genders” (p. 54), and “even more ominous is that the elected women candidates have joined forces with those individuals opposed to the progressive laws. They seemed to have agreed with Member of Parliament Mahmoud Kharbashesh who noted during the session, ‘if it was up to men, women would be at home raising their children’” (p. 57).<sup>2</sup> Thus, emerging trends indicate that for every step of progress an element of regression lurks close by.

Looking toward North Africa, Sarah Gilman and Loubna Skalli consider “Feminist Organizing in Tunisia: Negotiating Transnational Linkages and the State” and “Women, Communications, and Democratization in Morocco,” respectively. Guided by the question of how feminist groups and female political actors relate to a patriarchal or authoritarian state, Gilman focuses on the endeavors of the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates, a feminist organization that epitomizes not only a unique example of autonomous organizing, but also mild dissent in Tunisia. Skalli’s exploration of the utilization of new technologies by women in Morocco affords a particularly compelling account of transnational communication to raise awareness and encourage empowerment. As feminist organizations harness the Internet for lobbying, advocacy, and research, they build upon

such existing successes as the 2003-04 reform of the family law after a ten-year campaign. Her analysis of the obstacles confronting women's groups represents an invaluable insight into a pertinent aspect of contemporary women's political mobilization.

Introducing part 2, Ahmad Shamshad traces the evolution of government policy vis-à-vis women and development through "Women's Empowerment in India: Rhetoric and Reality." Having focused on the need for women's economic empowerment and proffered a clutch of recommendations, the article wanes under the author's predilection to focus on the status quo rather than identify the latent causes behind the diminutive figures of female participation. For example, his statement: "There still exists a wide gap between the enunciated goals and the situational reality of the status of women in India" ingenuously neglects to elaborate whether this gap is a result of religion, law, or general ignorance.

The section is revived swiftly, however, as M. Laetitia Cairolis presents an enthralling insight into the socio-demographic and cultural politics of the female labor force in Fez through "Girl But Not Woman: Garment Factory Workers in Fez, Morocco." An exploration of the comparative autonomy of unmarried and married female workers, the author utilizes participant observation conducted while employed within a garment factory to construct a paper that is superbly researched and constructed to provide an absorbing understanding of a wholly unique subject matter.

Through "The Status of Rural Women in Turkey: What Is the Role of Regional Difference?," Ayse Gündüz-Hosgör and Jeroen Smits contend that while living in a town could prove conducive to enhanced restrictions on women, it also presents an advantage in the form of educational and economic opportunities via employment. Although the paper provides an insight into the intricacies of Southeastern society, the deduction that women in the countryside and in the East accept the traditional gender-role attitudes more readily than their town and Western counterparts merely confirms preconceptions. Thus, while fascinating, the chapter yields scant revelations.

Shifting the focus to Israel, Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder explores the factors behind the high dropout rates of Bedouin girls in her "Education, Tradition, and Modernization: Bedouin Girls in Israel." In the midst of fervent modernization wrought by the Israeli state and the traditional patriarchic influence of their own community, Bedouin girls are succumbing to a phenomenon that Abu-Rabia Queder views as Israel's colonialist and patronizing approaches. To counter this, she recommends programs that promote the

Bedouins' cultural resources through increased financial resources to the Negev region – deplorably, out of a budget of 61 million New Israeli Shekels (NIS), only 337,000 NIS is allocated to the Negev. The author provides a convincing argument for cultural sensitivity to be demonstrated by the Israeli state, yet nevertheless prompts the question of whether subtle steps toward women's equality within the Negev should be taken simultaneously, rather than tentatively sustaining a male-centric milieu.

Addressing the physical and health problems, including domestic violence and depression, experienced by Nepalese women, Dana Jack and Mark van Ommeren open part 3 with “Depression in Nepalese Women: Tradition, Changing Roles, and Public Health Policy.” A unique feature of the paper is the inclusion not only of the accounts of the women abused, but also of the abusers. Harrowing, and at times flinchingly ghastly, one almost wishes the accounts were not included; that they are is not to the detriment of the chapter – rather, it emphasizes the plight of the women involved and the impetus behind the prevalence of “silencing the self.”

On dowries, Poonam Saxena debates “The Menace of Dowry: Laws, Interpretation, and Implementation” and emphasizes the failure of parliamentarians and courts to address the issue. As Saxena notes,

the most rampant practice of dowry is among the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) probationers (“IAS Officers” 1987). These young officers, who at the very start of their careers violate the government's laws are subsequently entrusted with the job of implementing anticorruption laws and enforcing policies for advancement of the status of women. (p. 274)

In Egypt and Tunisia women fare little better, as Lilia Labidi charts through “Islamic Law, Feminism, and Family: The Reformulation of *Hudud* in Egypt and Tunisia.” Encompassing the Islamic practices of *al-ijbar* (a father's capacity to oblige his daughter to marry and thereby achieve adult status), *mahr* (the sum given to the bride by the groom, which also becomes her personal property), and *diyah* (the compensation for murder as a substitute for the law of private vengeance), Labidi touches upon the appalling aspects of legislation pertaining to rape and the limitations placed upon women. Nevertheless, as many years have since lapsed, a post-analysis of any social and legal amendments would have brought the chapter to a perfected conclusion. Succinct, profound, and perceptive, the book concludes with a sagacious round-up comprising valid criticism and recommendations that render *From Patriarchy to Empowerment* an invaluable contribution to the field of gender studies.

For Ida Lichter, a Sydney-based psychiatrist, the implications of patriarchal interpretations of Islamic tenets provide the crux of *Muslim Women Reformers: Inspiring Voices against Oppression*. Spanning twenty-seven countries, from Morocco to Malaysia via Canada and the United States, each country section is further divided into an overview of women's rights in that particular country, a review of reforms – or lack thereof – and a series of biographies focusing on notable female activists. The penultimate and final chapters, “Male Muslim Activists” and “Transnational Organizations that Support Muslim Women's Rights” venture toward the alternative dimensions of gender activism in Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Bangladesh, Tunisia, and Israel, as well as LGBTIQQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and questioning sexual orientation) rights, respectively. The work of activists Suliman Al-Salman, Raid Qusti, and Sleiman Al-Sleiman (all from Saudi Arabia), Bashir Goth (Somalia), Abul Kasem (Bangladesh/Australia), Lafif Lakhdar (Tunisia), and Salman Masalha (Israel) are briefly discussed, as are Women Living under Muslim Laws ([www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org)), Assisting Women's Participation in the Economy, Against Honor Killings and the International Campaign Against Honor Killings ([www.stophonourkillings.com/index.php](http://www.stophonourkillings.com/index.php)), LAHA (For Her), Al Fatiha, and the Safra Project.

Commencing with Afghanistan, Lichter traces the Taliban's rise and corresponding decline of women's rights as honor killings, rape, and abduction became commonplace occurrences that often passed unpunished. With 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births, Afghanistan has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world<sup>3</sup> – a point exacerbated by the patriarchal power structure that governs a society rent by political and social upheaval and conflict. Despite pledges to contain gender inequality, little or no action has been taken. Indeed, as opposed to making progress, Afghanistan is actually regressing. For example, on 8 March 2005, President Hamid Karzai acknowledged International Women's Day through the quip: “Girls are married in their childhood or married off to resolve disputes. These practices are cruel, against our religion and no longer acceptable” (p. 25).<sup>4</sup>

It was to prove an empty gesture, however, for in February 2009 new family laws explicitly sanctioning marital rape were passed for the country's Shi'a minority. Under Article 132 sexual intercourse is legally enforceable on wives; Article 133 prohibits a woman from leaving the house without her husband's permission; and Article 27 condones marriage for girls from the commencement of their first period. It can be contended, however, that the new Shi'a Family Law holds its roots less in religion and more in ram-

pant “electioneering,” for Karzai sought Shi`a allies during the election campaign and thus utterly disregarded the humanitarian dimension. In the haste to garner votes, the bill was neither declared nor debated in the Upper House prior to being passed to the Supreme Court.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, as a legislation and an abrogation of women’s rights, the Shi`a Family Law must be regarded within the context that is endemic as much within the West as in the East – Machiavellianism, opportunism, and sheer political desperation at the expense of human rights, as opposed to a callous facet of the faith in question.

Although a substantial flaw resides in the negligible coverage of Islam as a force for good rather than ill, Lichter nevertheless comprises an unusual foray through chapter 28, “Muslim Male Activists.” Bengali author Abul Kasem selects Qur’anic verses, hadiths, and Imam al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’ `Ulum al-Din* that are relevant to women and women’s rights. Seemingly, the purpose of the extracts within *Muslim Women Reformers* is to illustrate the inherently patriarchal nuances within Islamic texts. However, to merely accept verses such as “Wives are tithes: sow in them in whatever manner you like” (4:34) (p. 374) without further analysis or heed to the plethora of interpretations is folly. One could, for example, counter that particular verse with 33:35, which denotes the equal standing of men and women.<sup>6</sup>

And it is here that the major deficiency of Lichter’s work resides. Rather than exploring the positive and negative aspects of interpretations – for this is also a crucial error, since Islam is open to multitudinous interpretations, all too often by men – of Islam, it commences with a view that is inherently subject to generalization, often to the detriment of the faith. While the curtailment of women’s rights remains undeniable in the countries discussed – and in this she excels in incorporating the breadth and urgency of issues – the author offers scant theological insight to substantiate the assertion that Islam is as wholly unpleasant a force as presented.

As such, the tendency to use terms such as *Islam* and *political Islam* interchangeably with little or no analytical delineation between the two is bewildering at best – a point illustrated from the outset by the synopsis: “[T]hese heroic women expose political Islam, characterized by a malevolent intent toward progressive Muslim states and the West that manifests itself in violence, misogyny, and theocratic ambition.” That *political Islam* is a complex and exhaustive political and legal mechanism with cogent as well as destructive elements subject to interpretation on a country-by-country basis passes without acknowledgement. In contrast, the West is portrayed as the shunned valiant, as

many women who promote reform within Islam shun overt alliances with Western organizations for fear of becoming identified with occidental values and feminism, viewed by traditional Islamic society as subversive to Muslim culture, identity, and religion. (p. 19)

This, in turn, raises questions concerning the definition of “occidental values”; whether feminism is inherently incompatible with Islamic society, for Islamic feminists would contend that it is not; and whether feminism should be juxtaposed with the unidentified “occidental values” in one breath.

Depth, then, is lacking. Although the biographies provide compelling insights, the author’s inability to explore Islam beyond controversial fatwas and discover alternative, feminist interpretations of the tenets undermines the publication’s objective. Ironically, the salience of this point is observable in the entry for Amina Wadud, the first woman to lead men and women in the congregational Friday prayer on 18 March 2005 on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. For Wadud, equality is attainable by returning to the texts rather than distancing:

In the period immediately following the death of the Prophet, women were active participants at all levels of community affairs – religious, political, social, educational, intellectual. [...] By going back to the primary sources and interpreting them afresh, women scholars are endeavoring to remove the fetters imposed by centuries of patriarchal interpretation and practice. (p. 365)<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the Qur’an becomes a source of inspiration for emancipation, rather than a source of oppression rendered through patriarchal interpretations. There is little doubt that the activists comprised within *Muslim Women Reformers* are sources of inspiration and when coupled with the plethora of cartoons – which, derived from Middle Eastern newspapers such as *Syria News*, *Al-Gumhouriyya*, *Al-Riyadh*, *Al-Watan*, *Ad-Dustour*, and *Al-Quds*, prove invaluable in their topical symbolism – result in an elucidative introduction to women’s rights in the Islamic context that heightens awareness of a movement consistently meriting support and recognition.

Moving from the global to the local, Shaffi offers a gentle journey through the lives of twenty Muslim women, aged between fourteen and eighty, residing in second largest faith-based community in the United Kingdom: Bradford, Yorkshire. Stemming from a project entitled “Women Working Towards Excellence: Our Lives,” which comprised accounts from over a hundred women in the city, *Our Stories, Our Lives: Inspiring Muslim Women’s Voices* utilizes oral history to gain a pan-generational insight. Thus,

with each woman given an individual subtitle – for example, Arshad Begum Ajeeb “*The Mayoress*,” Fatima Ayub “*The Pioneer*,” and Zohra J. Rashid “*The Visionary*” – their stories incorporate the struggles encountered in the public and private realms of society, the sacrifices enacted, and the multiple identities nurtured. Using participatory video, documentary film, audio, oral history/narratives, the Internet, seminars, and conferences, the accounts are conveyed via a first-person narrative with seemingly minimal editing to enable idiomatic traits to lend a familiar, accessible tone and, as the editor notes, to remain “pivotal [and] unobscured by over-much analysis and interpretation” (p. 8).

The events of 9/11 and 7/7 irrevocably altered the manner in which Muslims are viewed – in the aftermath of 7/7 human rights groups recorded an increase in racist and Islamophobic sentiments – and, despite moves toward intercommunal cohesion, “growing polarizations between Islam and the West continued to be assumed by the press and concerns of ‘home-grown terrorism’ escalated” (p. 9). This, in turn, raises the questions of whether the age of “multiculturalism” has reached its demise and whether “community cohesion” has become the best that a fractured society can aspire to in terms of easing the tensions.

Pertinently, Shaffi touches upon the very point that renders Lichter’s publication problematic:

In the midst of all these dramatic events, Muslim women in Britain began to take centre stage [...] Much of this coverage portrayed Muslim women as the subjugated victims of oppressive patriarchal cultures, with a widespread assumption that they are one large homogenous group [...] the experiences of women [in] these countries, is unique to them – just as it is for women in the UK or US. (p. 9)

The result of such scrutiny has, on a local level, resulted in the Muslim community assuming a role at the center of innumerable issues, many of which bear critical nuances. From security to marriage, from integration to economics, the debates have “continued to homogenise Muslim men and women, and failed to represent the rich diversity of opinion within Islam and between people” (p. 10). The need to shirk the imposed mantle of homogeneity impelled the OurLives Project into being and, insofar as the endeavor of the book is to recognize, celebrate, and facilitate understanding and critical openness, so too does it succeed as the case studies demonstrate Islam’s inherent ability to empower women, when interpreted in an affirmative manner. In contrast, as Lichter illustrates, Islam can also be used to the detriment



of the rights of women. Although both *Muslim Women Reformers* and *Our Stories, Our Lives* lack analytical and theoretical frameworks, they nevertheless provide engaging introductions to the multifarious dimensions of women in Islam within the context of human rights and grassroots society.

## Endnotes

1. Janet Z. Giele, "Introduction: The Status of Women in Comparative Perspective," *Women: Roles and Status in Eight Countries*, ed. Janet Z. Giele and Audrey C. Smock (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), 3-31.
2. Associated Press, 2003.
3. United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), July 1, Afghanistan. Online at [www.beta.wfp.org/countries/afghanistan](http://www.beta.wfp.org/countries/afghanistan) (accessed by Ida Lichter: 4 Feb. 2009).
4. "President Karzai Congratulates Women on International Women's Day – Excerpts from President's Speech," press release from the office of the spokesman to the president, 8 Mar. 2005, *Amnesty International*, 30 May 2005. Online at [www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA11/007/2005](http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA11/007/2005) (accessed by Ida Lichter: 4 Feb. 2009).
5. Starkey, Jerome. "Afghan leader accused of bid to 'legalise rape,'" *The Independent*, 31 Mar. 2009.
6. Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so – for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.
7. Amina Wadud, "A'ishah's Legacy," *New Internationalist* 345 (May 2002). Online at [www.newint.org/features/2002/05/01/aishahs-legacy/](http://www.newint.org/features/2002/05/01/aishahs-legacy/) (accessed by Ida Lichter: 12 Feb. 2009).

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