

Family and Gender among American Muslims: Issues Facing Middle Eastern Immigrants and Their Descendants

Barbara C. Aswad and Barbara Bilgé (eds.), Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

Family and Gender among American Muslims presents a multitude of theoretical and empirical discussions about the issues of family and gender in various American Muslim communities.

Divided into three main sections, the first section, "Values, Structure, and Variations in Muslim Families" presents articles based on empirical research on issues such as the role of women in an Iranian ethnic economy, the self-evaluation of Palestinian women's lives, the issue of mut'a-marriage among Lebanese Shi'as, and the problems of South Asian Muslim families in the United States. The second section, "Practical Issues for Families," provides insight into health issues, the work of an Arab-American community center, care for the elderly and problems of second-generation Arabs with marriage and role conflicts. The third section presents an interesting account of five Muslim immigrants, as narrated by them.

The book is an insightful introduction into some of the problems faced by American Muslim immigrants and their children on a daily basis. The questions of how to preserve an ethnic and religious identity in a society that has different values and rules is central to the lives of these American Muslims. It is a recurring theme running throughout most articles and illustrated in different ways. Some of the authors highlight problems and make recommendations to parents, community leaders, teachers, and social workers on how to solve these problems.

The first article by Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith gives an overview of the important topics concerning Islamic values and the questions of gender, such as dating, marriage, women and work, birth control, raising of children, and the observation of American holidays. The authors present a realistic pic-

ture based on extended research dealing with conflicts and problems, without being apologetic in order to meet the expectations of the American public. The result is a rather nuanced picture of Muslim realities, instead a normative discussion of Islamic values. The main dilemma of Muslims in America is described as: "Like all immigrants to the United States, Arabs, as well as those from other areas of the Muslim world, affirm the values of their faith's tradition at the same time that they try to function as full members of American society. The majority are eager to integrate to whatever extent possible while still maintaining their Islamic identity, but some are sharply aware of the dangers that such integration may entail" (p. 19).

Most articles reflect the results of extended empirical studies or practical experiences in the field and at least four are excerpts from the dissertations of the authors. The bibliographies provide a rich collection of literature for the interested reader and show that research on the situation of American Muslim communities has been a growing field of interest and research during the last ten years.

Gender questions are a sensitive issue in the dialogue between the western and Islamic worlds. The book oscillates between sympathetic feelings toward Muslim Americans and their special problems, and critical remarks and suggestions for a better integration into mainstream American life.

Although the volume is a good collection of research results in one of the recently emerging subfields of Islamic Studies, some articles present these results in a methodologically unsatisfactory way. Out of the studies that are based on interviews and questionnaires, the presentation of quantitative results sometimes makes the individuals behind these numbers invisible. Through a more qualitative use of ethnological and microsociological research methods, these individuals could get a chance to come alive and be illustrative rather than being overly quantified and hidden behind statistics. To make Muslims visible members of American society, they must be given their own voices by providing their experiential accounts, thus bringing them closer to the reader. To some extent the editors tried to solve this problem by including, in the last section, life stories of five American Muslims and by providing photographs of American Muslims in various social situations.

The second part of the book contains articles about health issues. This section has a tendency to stereotype Arab Muslim Americans and their culture. Their culture is wrongfully projected as a monolithic tradition following overly strict rules and regulations.

The editors state in the introduction "a paucity of published research on Muslim Americans from Indonesia, Southeast Asia, China, Central Asia, or North Africa" (p. 4). Muslims from other than Arab countries of origin are

clearly underrepresented. Only four of the fifteen articles deal with non-Arab Muslims, even though in reality non-Arab Muslims outnumber Arab-Muslims in the United States. Increasing numbers of immigrants from South Asia and other parts of the Islamic world make further research on these communities and their problems an imperative.

The division of American Muslim communities into ethnically segregated groups is perhaps one of the major causes of the underrepresentation of Muslims in American politics and society.

Family and Gender among American Muslims is recommended for the general Muslim reader who is searching to identify his or her social reality through a set of common experiences. For academics and people who deal with Muslim communities in their professional lives such as health-care and medical professionals, teachers, and social workers, the book is significant in that it provides empirical data about the everyday life of American Muslims. It contributed considerably to my knowledge of Muslims in North America.

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