

Book Reviews

Women and the Family in the Middle East

by Elizabeth W. Fernea

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For anyone interested in the Middle East, *Women and the Family in the Middle East* provides a fascinating study of the lives of present day Arab women. Ten countries – Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya are represented here, and two contributions deal with the women of Palestine.

The book is in part a progress report – statements by women and men about their lives and their experiences. These statements, previously unpublished, are offered in different forms: short stories, essays, interviews, poems, social analyses, and life histories.

Throughout the book there is an underlying sense of urgency, anxiety about the future, disappointment that many of the revolutionary promises have not been kept. But above all, there is hope, because these women and men wish to survive with honor.

One important shift evident in the book is that these people are no longer looking to the West for answers to their problems. They are trying to improve their lives through indigenous traditions and customs; through the dominant religion of the area, Islam, and through their own kinship and family patterns.

There is continued emphasis on women and men as elements of a group, rather than as individuals. Middle Eastern women see the existing problems not only as their own but also as conditions involving men, the family, and the wider society. Self-identity for them is rooted in other sets of relationships.

Fernea has divided the book into 8 parts. There is also a preface, an introduction, and notes on the contributors.

Part 1 is the Introduction which also includes a discussion by Algerian women on the need for change.

Part 2 deals with the Family. The Arab family is the basic unit of social organization. It constitutes the basic social institution through which persons and groups inherit their religious, social class, and cultural identities. It also provides security and support in times of stress. However, the patriarchal tradition, and the hierarchical structure of the Arab family is now being increasingly challenged. Sharabi in his study of the Arab family concludes that “the

most repressed elements of Arab society are the poor, the women, and the children." Hence, change toward the emancipation of women must begin by transforming the socioeconomic structures in the context of eliminating all forms of exploitation and domination.

Also covered in Part 2, are Marriage and Divorce, and The Family and Society.

Health and Education are discussed in Part 3. In the Middle East a woman is highly valued for bearing and raising children and her fertility and sexuality are seen as the concern of all the members of a family. Thus, issues such as family planning or female circumcision that touch on female fertility or sex become political and religious issues within the society. Family planning, though not in conflict with the Qur'an, is still not widely practised and determined efforts by Middle Eastern governments have not shown encouraging results.

Female circumcision, from clitoridectomy to radical labial or Pharaonic, predates Islam and is not mentioned in the Qur'an. Also, it is forbidden in most Islamic countries, but in both Islamic and non-Islamic countries, along the Nile, it continues to be performed by women upon other women. Female circumcision, unlike male circumcision, is an act of ablating the sensory organs of a woman's genitals. This removes her sexuality while retaining her reproductive functions. Efforts are in progress for the eradication of this abominable tradition.

Until the early decades of the 19th century, formal education for women in the modern sense was unknown in the Arab world. Only after independence, compulsory education laws affecting the two sexes were passed in most countries. In several countries, education was made free of charge from primary through tertiary level.

Remarkable progress has been made in improving the access of girls and women to all levels and types of education. Women are now enrolled in vocational, scientific, medical, and professional education. A growing number of Arab women are studying engineering because of its high status and employment prospects in an increasingly industrialized Arab world.

"Conflict—local, national, or international has characterized the Middle East for the past 50 years," writes Fernea. In Part 4 she covers War, Politics, and Revolution. All segments of society are affected by war. Where warfare has not destroyed and disrupted, it has blunted aspirations and ideals, shifted personal goals, and ruptured traditional family patterns. "What is happening to me? Who is responsible? What are we doing with our lives?" The situation may differ but the questions are the same. Young women and men are asking such questions daily. The answers are not yet forthcoming.

In Lebanon, war has permitted women to be more independent, for they were needed in the war. Women and men fought side by side.

In spite of various types of war pressures, the politicization of Palestinian women is increasing rather than decreasing. They are in the forefront of charitable and social work. They are also an important element in intellectual and productive work. Each town and village has its own local women leaders. "If there is any good to be found in the long-drawn-out nature of the Palestinian struggle it is that mass and women's participation may have irreversibly changed sex and class relations."

Part 5 is dedicated to Religion and Law. According to John Williams, "religion in the Middle East is not part of the social structure, it *is* the structure." For millions of women and men, Islam is the only common bond that predates colonialism. Islam is also the basis for most of the laws in a majority of Middle Eastern countries. While legal reform is in progress, it may seem contradictory that simultaneously the need to assert Muslim identity seems to be growing in the area. But again, confirmation of Islamic values and the assertion of Islamic identity in the face of outside challenges are recurring themes throughout Muslim history.

Eric Mueller states, "the Islamic world is heir to one of the most sophisticated legal systems." By the 20th century, the stage was set for reformist legislation that has modified or replaced traditional law. Recent family laws from Iraq, Egypt, and the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemem provide good examples of this new trend.

Despite differing viewpoints, however, the majority seem to agree that whatever the future, it should reflect Islamic tradition, and the flexible legacy of the Shar'ia (Islamic law) is clear and powerful. An indication of the enduring vitality of Islamic law, which in different interpretations can continue to fulfill various social functions depending on the perspective of the interpreter.

In Iran, the Shia position on women is interpreted by three prominent ulama or mumtahids. These scholars base their interpretations of the Qur'an. Basically, all three men have the same idea concerning the place of women in an Islamic society. The primary assumption is that women and men are not equal because they are biologically different. These differences affect both sexual needs and mental ability. Also, they defend polygamy and muta (temporary marriage), giving various reasons for the importance of their presence in Islamic law.

A basic shift has occurred in the lives of Middle Eastern women in the past generation. Changing economic conditions find a rapidly growing number of women going outside the house to work for wages. In Part 6, Fernea talks about work and how it is transforming these homebound women to face the challenges of the work world.

Women are campaigning for more state support to facilitate wage labor day-care centers in the factories and provide better bus service and more labor-saving appliances.

Some view the employment of women as having certain negative aspects:

women are taken away from their true responsibilities in the home, work threatens the husband's sense of masculine pride, and it may compromise the women's reputations.

Cairo's factory women say, "work strengthens a woman's position. . . We are a tight group. We keep together and on most subjects we think alike. We defend each other's rights. . . All of us work hard, we have earned these rights. You see us all with strong personalities. Aren't our eyes opened wider than housewives?"

For Part 7 the chosen topic is Identity. The poems, stories, and essays in this section reflect a new mode in the Islamic Middle East. Middle Eastern women have never had any doubts about their own identities and so the contributors here see themselves not as isolated individuals in an alien wilderness, but as women forming new connections with their groups, with their origins discovering themselves in new relationships to the past, the present, to men, and to other women.

Part 8 or the Postscript is an excerpt from Assia Djebar's 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment'.

Thus we see that most Middle Eastern governments are working towards the betterment of women, but as the Algerian women say, "change must also come through the efforts of women themselves." The final message to the Middle Eastern women comes to them from an Egyptian feminist and doctor. "Fear leads only to defeat" she says, "and victory can only be won through courage."

Feroza Allee