

Book Review:
Modernizing Women
Gender and Social Change
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Modernizing women: Gender and Social Change by Valentine Moghadam is a book that deals with the issues of social change in the MENA Countries (Middle East and North Africa) and Afghanistan. It thoughtfully considers the political social and economic issues and their impact on the gender during the process of state building and economic development. The author has adeptly documented a decade of changes that have occurred in the strategies adopted by MENA countries for economic development, with corresponding political changes and changes in the family structure, in the wake of global process of political and economic development. The book is about social change in the Middle East, North Africa and Afghanistan, and its impact on women's position and legal status in those societies. The main argument of the author is based on the premise that women's lives in these societies are not only shaped by Islam and culture rather affected by various interrelated process of economic development, globalization, internal policies and international politics, like rise and fall of Taliban in Afghanistan and reform movements in Iran, to name a few.

Most of the publications on the process of social change have dealt with the issues related to modernization, revolutions and social movements but hardly ever touched upon the dynamics of gender in the midst of social change. Moghadam work is unique in the context, as she has skillfully linked the role and status of women and changes in the family structures within MENA countries to the effect of regional and global changes on local politics and development processes. Moghadam further expanded the argument of various scholars who have discussed the role of globalization and structural adjustment program on the pace of female labor force participation and their access to economic resources, and has linked the economic status of women in MENA countries with class location, state policies, development strategies and changes in world market system. In the book the author has skillfully made the comparison among and between the women of MENA and other underdeveloped countries. Women with in and across the societies are stratified on the basis of class, ethnicity, education, age as well as ideologically and politically.

Discussing the literature on status of women in Muslim societies she has pointed out the different opinions among scholars indicating that critics and advocates of Islam hold divergent views about the role of Islam in determining the status of women. The countries discussed in the book are predominantly Muslim; it is generally argued, in the literature related to social sciences, that social positions and legal status of women in Muslim countries is worse than any where else in the world. She further points out the fact that women's lack of civil and legal rights is related to their reproductive function and religious norms. Which are generally used to justify their non visibility in public space and consequently their confinement to the domestic sphere. The argument is based on the prevalence of high fertility/mortality rate as well as distinct gender disparity in literacy level, and low female labor force participation. All these factors are considered to be the main reason, for the low status of women in any society. The author is critical of the literature on the status of women in Muslim countries which categorize them as different being and in author's words ..."*different* often meaning *inferior* in legal status and right" (p 4).

In fact according to Moghadam attributing Muslim women status to "*presumed intrinsic properties of Islam*" is not only simplistic way of dealing with a very complex issue rather it is more like adopting a reductionist approach and ignoring other socio-economic and political factors which along with religious norm play a crucial role in determining the status of women in different societies. Gender asymmetry and status of women in the Muslim societies cannot be attributed just to Islam as there is a huge variation in the application of Islamic legal codes, as well as Islam is implemented and practiced differently across time and region. The author has made an attempt to refute the argument that religion is the main force behind the low status of women in Muslim societies. She is of the opinion that religious based law are not exclusive to Muslim societies of the Middle East, rather they are also present in the state of Israel and has stated that sexual division of labor in home and in the society is governed by Jewish Law (Halache) and norms which are discriminatory to women. She further extended her argument and stated that, the example of non-Muslim society like India and China where female feticide, gender disparities in delivery of health care and access to food has been well documented. She also documented that in 2002 the male/female sex ration in China and India was 94:100, respectively.

Apart from the variation in the implementation and interpretation of Islamic legal codes in the Muslim societies, the difference within and between these societies is also reflected in the class division, educational disparities, economic development and level of their integration into global economic system. The work of Moghadam is exceptional in the sense as she has successfully utilize the strategy of comparative analysis in order to understand the different and variable position and status of women in the Middle Eastern countries. Her analysis is based on the fact, which is well documented, that women around the world cannot be categorized as a homogenous group. She has discussed various socio-economic and political factors that have a profound effect on the status of

women across region and overtime. Discussing the issue of diversity the author has also emphasized the need to recognize the diversity within Middle East and among the women of the region. There is no second opinion about the diversity within Middle East, the region is diverse based on geography, history, level of economic development, access to resources, and the form of power structure. The power structure within the region ranges from theocratic monarchy (Saudi Arab) to secular republic (Turkey). Moghadam has used the term “neo-patriarchal states” as an umbrella term which encompasses a wide array of state types in which religion and state authority has a key role to play and where family, instead of individuals, is the building blocks of the community.

She presented an overview of the literature on the status of women in the light of what one scholar has specified as “misery research” or dignity research” in her words former focuses on oppressive aspects of Muslim women lives. While the latter seeks to show the strength of women’s position in their families and communities. In the opinion of secular feminist it is the prevalence of Islamic laws and norms that restrict women advancement and there is a consensus among them that Islam regards women as weak. On the other hand the proponents of ‘dignity research’ or Muslim feminists have based their argument on the concept of “complementarities of Sexes” in Islam. Their argument is specifically based on the content of Quran that is egalitarian and emancipator with respect to women.

The author in her analysis has competently integrated different structural determinants like sex /gender system, class, the state policies, and level of economic development to understand women status in a particular society and how these factors in turn have an affect on women’s status. Gender refers to asymmetrical power relations between the sexes, which is manifested not only in their unequal access to political power and economic resources but also in the educational institution, legal system and labor market. Author has explained, quite persuasively, the interconnection between the gender system, class, state policies and economic development. She has tried to demonstrate that ignoring these factors will not provide us with comprehensive understanding about the gender dynamics of social change.

The book covers topics that are important to discuss with respect to gender dimension of social change. It has tried to explore the causes, nature and direction of social change in the Middle East and Afghanistan with its corresponding effect on the status and position of women. State is a major player which, through its policies in the present era of globalization, not only affects women’s labor force participation, employment and their access to market but also their economic status. There may be unexpected changes with respect to status of women as a result of revolutions, political upheavals, and wars. The changes may be in the form of increase employment and educational opportunities for women or vice versa. The changes at the political front may also result in diverse range of strategies adopted by women of those societies to express their political ideologies. The chapter *Islamists Movements and women’s responses* discuss the issue of veiling as a symbol of response to changing socio-economic and political factors. In the wake of all these changes along with the process of globalization it will be overly simplistic to

assume that women in these societies are passive recipients of the effects of social change rather the author has documented that women are also the agents of change and have been actively involved in the movements of social change.

The credit goes to the authors that the book has applicability to a wider audience from a student of gender and social change to development practitioners and policy makers. Although the author has reiterated the fact over and over again that women in general and women of MENA countries in particular are not a homogenous category, yet her emphasis is mainly focused on urban middle class women, leaving aside a wide spectrum of rural and nomadic women who may have experienced all these changes in totally different manner.