

Book Reviews

Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Volume 4: Economics, Education, Mobility and Space

Suad Joseph, general editor
Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2007. 587 pages.

An encyclopedia is popularly thought of as presenting the sum of all knowledge, whether it be universal or on a specific topic. A moment's reflection reveals, of course, that such an understanding does not quite get at the real concept, for there is no such thing as "all knowledge." The historical moment will always define the extent of the knowledge that is available. The structural terms within which that knowledge is constructed – its headings and subheadings – are historically bound as well. One of the features – both admirable and disconcerting – of the *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures* is how the work makes the reader aware of these factors: that this encyclopedia is, in fact, by its very act of being produced, defining a previously non-existent area of encyclopaedic knowledge and that the gaps in knowledge of the subject area, even after the production of the work, are substantial. Volume 4, "Economics, Education, Mobility and Space," illustrates this point vividly.

As can be seen by the volume's heading, the overall encyclopedia is organized at the top level in themes. Within each volume, though, entries are organized alphabetically. The main topics covered are "Cities," "Development," "Economics," "Education," "Environment," "Information Technologies," "Migration," "Poverty," "Slavery," "Space," and "Tourism." Since the ordering of the next level of headings is alphabetical as well, there is no particular organizational logic to the sequence of presentation. Under "Cities," for example, the subheadings are, in order: "Colonial Cities," "Homelessness," "Informal Settlement," "Islamic Cities," "Urban Built Environments," "Urban Identities," and "Urban Movements." It is difficult to ascertain whether any theoretical structure has dictated these subheadings.

This absence of editorial control is even more telling when one considers the next level of headings. Under "Education: Premodern, Pre-

Nineteenth Century,” for example, there are only entries on Afghanistan, Central Asia, Morocco, and Sub-Saharan Africa. What this apparent spotty coverage indicates, however, is not the editors’ failure to design a cohesive work nor their lack of energy in finding contributors; rather, it is indicative of the state of current knowledge. The history of education has been a topic of investigation across the Muslim world, but the focus of those studies has rarely reflected gender difference, except to the extent that the male experience has been presumed to speak for the female experience also. This truly is an encyclopedia that is in the act of inventing a discipline. And without a doubt, it is a fascinating one to observe.

Another characteristic of the entries is their diversity. No overarching methodological stance has been taken, and no ideological commonality exists among the writers. The range of topics and the significant number of authors involved may well have made that impossible – there are 263 entries and almost 300 writers in this volume alone. There is definitely a social science approach in most articles, often anthropological or statistical, but textually based studies are certainly not absent. Especially impressive are the bibliographies in each essay, which gather material from a truly impressive range of disciplinary sources and, in some cases, languages.

Inevitably, too, the entries themselves vary in depth and perceptiveness. The single article that appears under the theme heading “Information Technologies” points out how difficult it is to understand the impact of IT on women in the Islamic world because the available data is not disaggregated for gender. Add to that the significant discrepancy between countries as regards Internet access (2000-02 data: Bahrain, 40% of the population uses the Internet; Egypt and Pakistan, 0.85%), and it is difficult for any researcher to say much beyond vast generalizations and impressionistic sketches. Articles such as “Education: Vocational: North America” tend to be more specific because of the data available, although even there the impact of being specifically a Muslim woman on one’s ability to secure vocational training is stated to be open to conjecture. Another example is seen in “Education: (Early through Late) Modern: Great Britain” which starts off with: “Muslim women and girls are largely invisible in the vast research literature on schooling in Western Europe” [p. 297] (although the article’s bibliography does list a number of apparently relevant titles). None of this should be taken as a criticism of the encyclopedia or the authors of these entries: this is a brave undertaking, venturing into uncharted and unresearched territory.

In sum, this encyclopedia will prove to be a valuable resource for those looking for detailed summaries on the particular topics that are covered. Its

significance for the future perhaps lies in the gaps, all those areas and topics where scholarly questions have not yet been framed in terms of gender. Each of those absent entries represents the potential for a new dissertation, article, or book.

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