

## Development, Change, and Gender in Cairo: A View from the Household

*Edited by Diane Singerman and Homa Hoodfar. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, 192 pp.*

Since the late 1980s, the literature on women living in the Middle East has shown an uneven but progressive sophistication in its approach. The view of backward, oppressed, submissive women is gradually being replaced by an understanding that women in the Middle East, like women anywhere, are "rational" actors, fully cognizant of their environment and situations. Books such as *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*,<sup>1</sup> and *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality*<sup>2</sup> are examples of this welcome trend. *Development, Change, and Gender in Cairo: A View from the Household*, edited by Diane Singerman and Homa Hoodfar, is a fine contribution to this new genre. The essays in this book not only show that Cairene women are intelligent and comprehending observers of Egyptian society, but that they are also active participants in their society—acting upon it, as well as being acted upon. We would hardly need a scholarly book to tell us this, if it were not for the strength and prevalence of the negative stereotype of the "oppressed/silenced/submissive Muslim woman," contributed to in no small measure by previous scholarly books!

*Development, Change, and Gender in Cairo: A View from the Household* contains seven essays detailing various aspects of low-income Cairene women's lives, plus an introduction by the editors which sets the more focused empirical essays into broader theoretical context. The volume is an interdisciplinary work, with contributions from sociologists, anthropologists, communications special-

ists, political scientists, and economists: Homa Hoodfar, "Survival Strategies and the Political Economy of Low Income Households in Cairo;" Arlene Elowe MacLeod, "Transforming Women's Identity: The Intersection of Household and Workplace in Cairo;" Homa Hoodfar, "Egyptian Male Migration and Urban Families Left Behind: "Feminization of the Egyptian Family or a Reaffirmation of Traditional Gender Roles?;" K. R. Kamphoefner, "What's the Use? The Household, Low-Income Women, and Literacy;" Nadia Khouri-Dagher, "The State, Urban Households, and Management of Daily Life: Food Riots and Social Order in Cairo;" Nawal Mahmoud Hassan, "Beyond Paradigms of Development: A Pragmatic Response to Housing Needs in Cairo's Inner City;" and Diane Singerman, "The Family and Community as Politics: The Popular Sector in Cairo."

The concept of the "household" is the unifying element in these essays. Hoodfar and Singerman argue that the "household" is a "very significant institution, mediating the relationships between individuals, local communities, markets, and the state. It is this institution which encourages the interdependence of formal and informal socioeconomic structures" (p. xi). The contributions to this book demonstrate convincingly that understanding the household is indeed a crucial component of understanding the "complexity of economic and political development in Egypt" (p. xi); see for instance, Khouri-Dagher's chapter on the daily strategies households adopt to procure food and the important and growing black market, which supplements, competes with, and complicates the state's attempt to provide subsidized food, and Singerman's chapter on the direct and indirect methods people use to enlist the help of family or neighbors in resolving familial disputes as the preferred alternative to the state's formal court procedures. These are perspectives "largely missing from social science research on contemporary Cairo" (p. xi). Additionally, neglect of the household, still the arena in which the majority of women live out most of their lives, has led to gender-blind development analysis and policies (p. xx).

The editors are quick to point out that understanding how the household impacts upon and is affected by state policy is not a substitute for studying formal state institutions and other sources of power in Egyptian society. They argue that "structural forces such as the ideology of the state, industrialization, changing labor market conditions, the state's distribution of public goods, and patterns of income distribution clearly influence individuals, gender roles, and the Egyptian economy and polity" (p. xii).

One of the positive features of new literature on women in the Middle East is the attention to empirical detail and the understanding that institutions, be they formal or informal, are not ahistorical entities exerting a predetermined influence over helpless human subjects. The authors in this book recognize this, and the editors made a wise decision to limit the collection to a "specific period (1984-1994), economic stratum (low income), and geographic area (Cairo)" (p. xii). This limitation certainly aids the reader, especially those who have never visited Cairo, in acquiring cumulative knowledge while reading the essays. By the end of the volume, one feels that one has grasped, even if only in broad outline, what life, in all its various aspects, is like for the Cairene people who are the subjects of the research.

Celebrating the representation of Cairene in this book as vivid, complex, hence truer to life, "rational" actors is not to downplay the hardships that low-income people are obviously facing under Egypt's entry into global capitalism and the move away from socialist goals of providing basic goods and services

to all citizens. Like other low-income members of societies under IMF structural adjustment programs, Cairenes of this book are facing immiseration. Economic liberalization reduces government subsidies on food, housing, and education, crucial aspects which dramatically affect living conditions. Kamphoefner's chapter on education shows a depressing outcome of economic liberalization policies: Given the negative impact of the growing population, and strained state finances on Egypt's education system, together with the fact that employment is no longer guaranteed for those with higher education, young men and young women are leaving school early. The illiteracy rate for 1986 was 37.85% for males and 62.2% for females (p. 83). The women Kamphoefner interviewed were mostly illiterate and had not felt any need to be literate either.

Greater attention to two areas would have rounded out the book more fully: Copt/Muslim differences/similarities, and the repressive political climate under which Egyptians live. Given the ferment generated by Islamist groups in Egypt (an aspect which has framed the authors' empirical studies, even if peripherally) and Western ignorance that non-Muslims live in Egypt, it would have been helpful for the Copt/Muslim divide to be more specifically outlined. Are there any significant differences or similarities between Copt and Muslim household responses to such changes? How relevant is Islam or Christianity as an explanatory variable in household responses to global change?

Mubarak has been in power for fifteen years, and under his rule, peaceful opposition is "hampered, harassed, jailed, tortured and deprived of any opportunity to express its views, [nor to have] the opportunity to share political power."<sup>3</sup> True enough, the authors declared they were not investigating the formal state institutions of political power; however, these empirical essays leave the reader unaware of the repressive nature of the Egyptian political system that surely has had an impact on all Cairene households.

These considerations notwithstanding, *Development, Change, and Gender in Cairo: A View from the Household* is an engaging, accessible book that students of development, urban planning, gender, and Middle East studies will find interesting.

#### Notes:

1. Edited by Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early and published by Indiana University Press (Bloomington) in 1993.
2. Edited by Camillia Fawzi El-Sohl and Judy Mabro and published by Berg Publications (Oxford) in 1994.
3. Mumtaz Ahmad, "Political Islam: Can It Become a Loyal Opposition?" *Islamic Horizons*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January/February 1997): 32.

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