

Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism, and the state

Sondra Hale

Westview Press, 1996

Reviewed by Lynn Maalouf, Georgetown U.

Gender Politics in Sudan is a pioneering study about gender and state interaction in Northern Sudan today. A gifted anthropologist, Sondra Hale brilliantly combines significant theoretical material with the everyday realities of Northern Sudanese women based on extensive interviews spread over thirty-five years thereby raising questions pertaining to issues such as gender, ethnicity, class and religion. Her work mainly aims to show how the state and the political parties use traditional culture to re-create identity politics in order to achieve political and cultural hegemony, and this, through the maintenance of gender alignments. The author's tour de force, however, lies in her study of women as actors and not as mere receptacles of these state maneuvers. Therein rests her thesis, which contends that through the state strategies that aim at creating a model woman according to their ideology, women are given a position which holds the potential for generating real change in their society.

The contemporary status of women in Sudan is ambiguous; for example, the country has one of the highest rates of female doctors in the Third World but also one of the highest rates of female circumcision in the world. Although women are active in the social and political process, they have failed to advance their own gender ideology and invent a 'culture of resistance.' Through the study of two seemingly opposite parties, the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) and the National Islamic Front (NIF), the author persuasively demonstrates how both attempt to position women in such a way as to solely serve the aims of their movements. Women activists in both groups have been handling the organizational aspects very efficiently but did not move into an autonomous force capable of mobilizing 'women as women.' That is why Hale strongly doubts whether state- and party-sponsored feminism has actually altered the realities of women in their everyday lives. This negative impact on women is further reinforced by the work of Western international agencies. These foreign organizations have aimed at providing income-generating activities but have not taken into account an equal distribution within families, thereby increasing the discrepancy between male and female employment. International capital, she writes, is the prime external force in state-gender relations. Hale convincingly deconstructs the concept of Western liberalism applied to foreign countries. This process is not specific to Sudan, because each Third World

country faces the same challenges of development, capitalism, and, at a general level, neocolonialism.

Hale's study reveals the dynamic forces behind the changing nature of state-gender relations, within a context of political turmoil and economic dislocation. To a large extent, the debate of the book concerns the degree of interaction between the state and political parties and the gender alignments. How does the political apparatus mold women's behavior and their self representation? And how do women react in retaliation? The author insists on this second component: self-identity and self-representation are not the result of external dynamic solely, they are the products of this state-gender interaction. Women react and may create their changes, their own dynamics. But Sudanese women have not gained sufficient autonomy to instill these changes. Hale suggested that this is due only to the fact that women see themselves as gaining from the situation. That is, women from the middle-to upper-classes. But she fails to delve into the other women's reasons for inaction.

Political parties and other state apparatuses have succeeded in placing the woman and the family at the core of the culture. The woman has come to embody the culture which the hegemonic powers want to promote. This development contributes to dislocate her from the material world, thereby hindering her economic power. The author implicitly blames the Sudanese woman for not having reacted efficiently enough. She writes: "A woman's movement emanating from, but radically transforming indigenous formation (pre figurative political forms) and conflicts (e.g., woman's popular culture and networks and their struggles as workers in the home and neighborhood), and emanating from strategic and practical gender interests, might have enabled Sudanese women to invent their own forms of resistance." She completes this thought by suggesting four areas which may have held the potential for the mobilization of women for their own interests:

- women workers (in the formal networks);
- women merchants;
- the networks;
- women's culture: the *zar* [a trance-inducing method of drumming leading to a healing dance]

Although this last point may appear controversial, Hale demonstrates her idea quite successfully. However, she clearly states that Sudanese women have disagreed with her views. And by her suggestions, she is unintentionally slipping into the penetrative attitude of neocolonialism, although she acknowledges her position.

Women are at the heart of any socio-economic change. This provocative book accuses all women who have not acted upon this realization. Impressive in its breadth, it simultaneously challenges, pushes forth, and provokes women's status as actors. Hale's work is well-written and extensively researched. It is of particular interest to students and researchers of Political Science, Political Economy, Anthropology, and Marxist feminism.