

# Islam, Gender, and Social Change

Edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito  
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About the editors:

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As the title suggests, this book is an insightful study on how "Islam, Gender, and Social Change" interact in the contemporary Arab world, as well as other Muslim societies, such as Pakistan, Iran and the Philippines. The first part offers different perspectives on this issue, combining thorough historical and scholarly reviews, along with analysis of the current state of women in the region in general. The second part introduces case studies of India, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and the Philippines.

The debate involving the impact of political, economic and social changes on women's roles and status has been a heavily charged one, nurtured by the "challenge of contemporary Islamic activism" (Esposito) of the last decades. This debate has taken different forms, in accordance with the specific conditions prevailing in each country. According to Nadia Hijab, (p.48)

The debate on women's roles in the Arab world is not only a debate about women's roles within the family. It is also linked to the debate on the role of Islam in the state, and is closely bound with the Arab search for political independence, economic self-reliance, and an authentic identity. These are some of the reasons why the debate has remained fixed within the Islamic framework, like an old-fashioned phonograph needle stuck in a groove, etching the contradictions even deeper.

However, even this Islamic framework has evolved into a plurality of patterns, which according to Stowasser (p.42) is representative of contemporary Islamic thought. Basing her work on a crucial verse from the Quran, Sura 4:34, she offers an overview of the different interpretations of this verse and its effect on women, reflecting the diverse national, geographical, social and historical conditions specific to each of the Muslim societies. She discusses the stance of the reformers, such as the Egyptian Islamic modernist, Muhammad Abduh, as well as the traditional religious establishment, and the Islamists, pointing out the various Islamic discourses that may arise from the same verse.

As for Haddad, she delves into an overview of modern Arab history, and the corresponding role of women during this period. She draws a perceptive sketch of the conflicting expectations placed on women by nationalist and Islamic movements, and the changes and divergences brought about by the processes of westernization and Islamic revival. Speaking about improvement in women's education, she states: "It is clear that modernization in the Arab world has served to sharpen the conflict between traditional expectations of women and their role and the real demands of daily life in a developing society." (p.8). She concludes:

Debates over social and cultural values during this century have focused on the legitimate source of universal values. [] Muslims increasingly challenge the assumption that the Western experience is the only legitimate analytical framework for assessing the role of women, or that the Western family must serve as the universal model. Many have decided that Western values are to be avoided at any cost. Can the West, they ask, allow for other cultures and traditions to posit universals? (p.23).

This attack on the West, which has been conditioning the search for an authentic Arab identity, is blatantly apparent on the women's role demanded by their societies. They "are regarded as the primary culture bearers...the hijab has become not only a sign of modesty but also the symbol for the defense of Islam, for the preservation of the family, and thus the Islamic identity of Muslim societies." (Esposito).

As for the case studies, each is taken from a different perspective. For example, in "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth", Najmadi presents an extensive overview of the editorial women's press, in an effort to explain the sustenance of women in the public sphere, despite the social and legal restrictions that have arisen since 1979. Speaking of Zanan, one women's journals, she declares that "the authors not only assume the position of Quran commentators, but they do so in a different social space: in the printed pages of women's journal, that is, a public space, as opposed to the private chambers of a religious scholar." (p.71). The subsequent case studies of the countries mentioned above are concomitant with the debate discussed in the first part, and the status of women in the context of societal, economic and political and ideological changes that have taken place over the years and across the countries.