

Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East

Edited by Suad Joseph
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Reviewed By Lynn Maalouf

Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East is a stimulating collection of essays authored by twenty women who have addressed the concepts of gender and citizenship across the different states of the Middle East. Following a provocative theoretical introduction, the volume is structured along four regional parts: North Africa, Eastern Arab states, the Arab Gulf, and the non-Arab Middle East, each of which includes specific country cases examining the reasons why women in these countries fall short of being “full-citizens,” and offering an in-depth examination of national legislation on personal status, nationality, social security law, labor law and penal law.

The importance of this book derives from the underlying notion according to which the Middle East cannot be examined in a unified and generalized way. Thus, each essay examines the specificity of one state, or draws a comparison between two states based on “points of departure” as the editor suggests, viewed from the lens of evolving gender-state relations. Indeed, from the very beginning, the editor “cautions against essentializing the Middle East or stabilizing any aspect of these continually changing societies” (p. 4).

In the case of Algeria, Marnia Lazreg examines the historical formation of the concept of citizenship regarding women; she argues that since the country’s independence, Algerian women have been locked in between the state’s conventional interpretation of citizenship and the sharia’, which represents women as subjects primarily. Lazreg contends that this paradox has served the interests of all Algerian governments that have existed since 1962: “The extension of formal citizenship to women enabled the state to disregard the antinomy between the assertion of equality before the law, a secular requirement of (substantive) citizenship, and inequality between men and women as prescribed by the sharia’”.

Mounira Charrad draws a comparison between Tunisia and Morocco to explain how lineage and kin-based societies have impeded the individual citizenship rights of women. “Whereas in Morocco the legal discourse tends to enshrine kin privileges, in Tunisia the law provides considerably more space to a construct of self as an individual and, consequently, more rights to women”. This dif-

ference emerged from the two states’ divergent interests, and thus foundational policies: “In Tunisia, the newly formed sovereign state had an interest in transferring the allegiance of the population from particularistic loyalties to itself, and attempted to undermine traditional kin-based groups. In Morocco, the state maintained particularistic loyalties by placing them under a supra-authority”. Suad Joseph also puts emphasis on the notion of kinship, which is a widely acknowledged factor shaping citizenship in Lebanon. However, Joseph’s innovative argument is that in the context of a weak state, kinship in Lebanon has played a hegemonic role over males, females, seniors and juniors - and not only over females and juniors. She blames this shortcoming in studies about Lebanon to the “hyperfocus on the civic myth of sectarian pluralism,” which she argues, “has glossed the critical kinship dynamics that have underwritten pluralism (legal, social, and cultural), resulting in the gendering and aging of citizenship laws and practices”.

Another major case is that of the Palestinian Authority: Jad, Johnson and Giacaman explain that the fact that the state is in transition, Palestinian women have a role to play in shaping the setting of citizenship: “Whereas women activists in other contexts have often argued for inclusion in citizenship, under the particular circumstances of Palestine in transition, the women’s movement must create the conditions of citizenship. This is both an opportunity for engendering citizenship, and an enormous challenge, which the women’s movement addresses within the context of the democratic movements in Palestine”.

One common conclusion that all the authors seem to agree upon is that patriarchy, “defined as a system of social relations privileging male seniors over juniors and women, both in the public and private spheres,” is a decisive factor in the gender-citizenship equation. But they differ on the channels through which women in each country could focus their efforts to expand the scope of their rights, whether in practice or in text. Depending on the cases, some authors strongly denounce the restraints imposed on women as a result of kinship and religious forces, upholding the need to secure women’s rights as individuals (Lazreg, Charrad), while others contend that women in certain countries need to work on securing their rights through family, as the basic unit of their societies (Altorki, Al-Mughni and Tétreault).

Deniz Kandiyoti concludes that through the cases studies presented in this book, it would be possible to conclude that women’s rights “reveal the most serious fault lines in modern concepts of citizenship for the region.” This, she argues, could mark the “differencia specifica” of the Middle East.