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Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy

Heather J. Sharkey

University of Pennsylvania, hsharkey@sas.upenn.edu

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At the time of publication, author Heather J. Sharkey was associated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Currently, she is a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy

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Comments
Review of *Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy* by Richard A. Lobban, Jr.

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Although Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy does not make policy recommendations, it does raise
the "servant" class) of Yemen, which considers conceptions of color and social status in the labor context.
among other things, discusses the British colonial legacy in medicine; and Dolores M. Walters' s article on the
appeal not only to scholars, but also to students, particularly in courses on gender and labor studies. Labor issues
women avoid work in the formal economy, because its lower-wage jobs are often low status and physically
away from home) erode wages. In the end, for lower-class women, working in the invisible economy is often more
demanding, and because its associated costs (e.g., transportation to the job site, professional clothing, and meals
The essays in Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy are lively and well -written. They will
flexible and more economically advantageous than formal wage labor.

Women and the Invisible Economy dispute such statistics, and argue that, far from being "economic ciphers" (p. ix),
North African and Middle Eastern women work long and hard. The problem is that statistics fail to tally much of
women's labor because it often forms part of an "invisible economy", unmonitored by tax-collectors and government
authorities, and, in the context of households and family-run enterprises, undervalued as domestic chores, rather than
as productive work.

Along with a substantial introduction by the editor, Richard A. Lobban, Jr., and a thoughtful foreword by
Elizabeth W. Fernea, Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy contains fourteen solid articles, twelve on
North Africa (Sudan, Egypt, and Tunisia), one on Lebanon, and one on Yemeni women of East African ancestry.
Together these essays show women working in diverse ways: as sellers of butter and vegetables in markets; as
midwives and fertility experts; as tour guides and textile workers; as cooks and garden weeder s; and more. In
addition to examining the labor roles of Middle Eastern and North African women in the "invisible economy", these
essays assess the import of women's income for family, if not national, economies.

Why should so much of women's work be invisible at all? In an essay on women in the Nubian village of
Gubba, near Aswan, Anne M. Jennings suggests that patriarchal attitudes, asserting breadwinner roles for males,
may be largely responsible for propagating economic stereotypes about women's labor. She points out that Middle
Eastern males have often denied that female relatives "work", that is, engage independently in remunerated or
productive labor -- a view repeated and accepted by researchers. In Gubba, Jennings observed, when women did
engage in income-generating activities, they and their families regarded female income as pin money, so to speak:
suitable for luxury purchases that would not challenge male provider roles. But in practice, women usually spent
their earnings on necessities, such as clothes or schoolbooks for children, thereby showing that women's incomes
were important to household maintenance, notwithstanding ideals to the contrary. Even the purchase of jewelry, an
apparent luxury, had economic motives. Evelyn A. Early concurs with this view in an essay on women from a
humble Cairen e neighborhood, by pointing out that "Jewelry, like stocks and bonds, ensures against divorce or other
disaster; women pawn jewelry for crises and also for investments such as renting a new flat, which requires money,
or buying furniture." (p. 134)

Although Tunisia has given more official support to women's social integration than many other Arabic-
speaking countries, patriarchal attitudes still constrain women economically. Sophie Ferchiou considers, for
example, how the subordination of women's labor to men's labor has led to the depreciation of female employment
in Tunisian agriculture. A study of 95,000 women in agriculture showed that 70%, or 65,000, were classed as
"family helpers", meaning wives, daughters, mothers, or sisters of male family heads. As mere "helpers" hired as
part of a family group, these women did not receive wages of their own, even when they worked on private or state-
run farms. Instead, earnings went to male heads of family, who alone "counted" in official statistics. As statisticians
increasingly include "family helpers" in their data, some think they detect a recent "feminization" of agricultural
work, failing to realize that women have always played a central, if unrecognized role in farm labor.

Although Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy does not make policy recommendations, it does raise
various issues and challenges facing women in the Middle East. The essays in this collection provide a rich and
diverse perspective on the economic roles of women in the region, highlighting the importance of considering
women's participation in the labor market beyond traditional formal employment.
questions with deep policy implications. Should economic surveys re-evaluate women's labor, and if so, how? Can economic surveys ever assess women's "domestic" work adequately? Should economic planners aim to integrate more women into formal sector employment? Is formal sector employment more liberating (by providing access to health plans, pensions, regular salaries, and other benefits), or does state and corporate regulation impose new restrictions and inconveniences? Finally, will education and formal sector employment empower women, and make them less susceptible to economic discrimination (e.g., in salaries and workloads)? These questions and others require further study.

Heather J. Sharkey
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
hsharkey@mit.edu
Excluding the bibliographic heading and the reviewer's name and affiliation, the text contains 976 words.