

Richard A. Lobban, Jr., ed. *Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998. xviii + 302 pages. Photographs. Tables. Appendices. Index. \$49.95. Cloth.

According to United Nations surveys, North African and Middle Eastern women, relative to women worldwide, have a strikingly low representation in the formal economic sector. Country-based statistics present low estimates as well. In an extreme case, for example, a census of 1986 reported that only 1.8% of rural women in Egypt's Beni Suef district were economically active, compared to 39.6% of men. Contributors to *Middle Eastern 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 weeders; 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 Cairene 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.

Analysts have occasionally postulated Islam as a restraining factor in women's formal sector employment. In an essay on Cairene women, Homa Hoodfar considers and dismisses this idea, and concludes that religion is largely irrelevant in determining women's participation in the formal economy. Instead, education is decisive: women with more than ten years of education are likely to be employed in the formal economy, whereas women with little education are likely to hold low-income jobs in the invisible economy. As Hoodfar points out, many poor women avoid work in the formal economy, because its lower-wage jobs are often low status and physically demanding, and because its associated costs (e.g., transportation to the job site, professional clothing, and meals away from home) erode wages. In the end, for lower-class women, working in the invisible economy is often more flexible and more economically advantageous than formal wage labor.

The essays in *Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy* are lively and well-written. They will appeal not only to scholars, but also to students, particularly in courses on gender and labor studies. Labor issues aside, Africanists will also appreciate Marcia C. Inhorn's article on urban Egyptian women in health care, which among other things, discusses the British colonial legacy in medicine; and Dolores M. Walters's article on the akhdam ("servant" class) of Yemen, which considers conceptions of color and social status in the labor context. Although *Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy* does not make policy recommendations, it does raise

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.

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