

Title—Women, Islam, and the State (Women in the Political Economy)

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Year—1991

Categories: Islam, Gender, Women, Politics, Economy

Place: The 'Muslim World'

Time: 1890-Present

Argument Synopsis:

This essay collection is focused on the complex relations between the position of women and the political projects of Muslim nation states. In her introduction, Kandiyoti suggests that the post-independence trajectories of modern states and variations in the deployment of Islam in relation to different nationalisms, state ideologies and oppositional social movements are of central relevance for understanding the conditions of women. A key guiding question for the collection is why it is that contemporary political ideologies and state practices are so clearly revealed through their treatment of women's issues. The essays demonstrate the complexities of the different discourses on Islamic women and attempts at recapturing a utopian Islamic past within the anti-imperialist, idealized populist polemics. Overall, this collection seeks to problematize the assumption that Islam is the root of the subordination of Muslim women—arguing that it cannot be fully understood by looking only at Islamic ideology and practice nor exclusively from global processes of socio-economic transformation.

With regard to tensions between pro-Western modernism and the rejection of Western values, women have become the symbol of the Islamic faith. This collection offers a series of detailed case studies of the complex relation between the political projects of different nation states and the position of women. The authors argue that the question of the position of Muslim women cannot be addressed if women are treated as a monolithic category—analysis of their circumstances must be done in terms of particular national histories and specific interpretations of Islam. The chapters are geographically focused across the Muslim world, covering Iran, Egypt, Bangladesh, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Each chapter is concerned with the tensions in these various nation states between the issues of modernity and women's modesty. Temporally, the case studies begin with the end of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century.

Islam is consistently interpreted as taking over state agendas and Middle Eastern nationalisms are portrayed as singularly preoccupied with their Islamic component. Even when Islam appears to be a secondary element in secular state ideologies, such as Nasserist Arab socialism, it is often initially understood through the Islamic prism. This collection expands the definition of Islam to include not only the religion, the social practices and the law, but also cultural nationalism and state ideology. Islam is a central concept of a modernization perspective that sees the history of Middle Eastern societies and states as part of a struggle between the forces of tradition and Islamism and the forces of modernity and Westernization.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Choices that women make differ according to the specificities of their socio-economic and historical conditions
- In the process of the creation of modern nation states, cultural nationalisms have achieved a spectrum of distinct and shifting syntheses with Islam
- States that adopt the agenda of Islamism and tradition are assumed to be regressive and states who adopt the agenda of modernity and Westernization are assumed to be progressive