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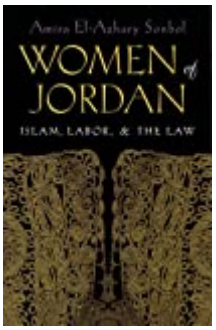

Amira El-Azhary Sonbol. *Women of Jordan: Islam, Labor and the Law.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003. xi + 300 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8156-2985-6; $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2964-1.

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The Difference between What Is Legal and What Is Real

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The central question addressed in Sonbol's review of women's employment experience in Jordan is why high rates of literacy have not translated into higher rates of university-level education and employment (specifically in business and the professions) among women. This is a fair and interesting question, given the high correlation between access to education and access to employment argued by much of the research on women in less developed, industrializing countries. Yet what macro-level analyses often cannot do, Sonbol's analysis does by linking multiple levels of legal and religious constructs regarding "women's status" with local cultural understandings of appropriate womanhood. Particularly important in this regard is the role of *'urf* (traditional law) in maintaining persistent tribal/ethnic notions of gender that shape both the opportunities and the possibilities women see for themselves. In doing so, she demonstrates how legal changes themselves are ineffective apart from the broader popular moral and cultural frameworks within which women live their lives.

The book is divided conceptually into two sets of chapters. The first deals with cultural and legal history, the second with the status of women in contemporary Jordan. Sonbol begins with an analysis of the multiple sources of contemporary family laws including premodern shari'a law, emerging syntheses of shari'a law with European legal forms during and after the Ottoman period, and contemporary legal reforms resulting from the demands of global capitalism for inexpensive female labor. Sonbol traces the shifting fortunes of women's entrepreneurship and ability to own and control personal property through an analysis of Ottoman court records, tracing the loss of a tradition of women's entrepreneurship through the emergence of the nation state. Students of women in Middle East history will find much of this story reminiscent of work on the uses of gender in national movements in Tunisia and women entrepreneurs in nineteenth-century Aleppo. Three systems of courts resulted from these multiple sources of law: national courts (for property, criminal and commercial issues); family and personal status courts (for marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, etc.); and emergency, military, and government courts (for issues

of state security). Rather than simply focusing on the law "on the books" Sonbol explores the application of the law through an analysis of court documents. In doing so, she traces the movement from the dynamic application of shari'a as *'urf* (common law) to its less flexible and more rigid application today. Following this review of the history of women's legal and employment status, Sonbol moves on to describe women's employment, guardianship of women, marriage, and honor crimes in chapters 4 through 7. Importantly here, she focuses on the application of laws that require a male relative's approval before women marry or enter the labor force. Chapter 5 examines the salience of marriage to women's identity and experience in Jordan. Central to this section is a discussion of the gap between the expectation of a woman to be the "queen" of her home, and the reality of women's subordination to mothers-in-law. Important here, as well, is the ways in which shari'a law is interpreted and applied through tribal laws, particularly those surrounding guardianship.

Chapter 6 on marriage and divorce describes the contractual basis of the institution and the responsibilities of the men and women who enter it. More specifically, Sonbol describes the responsibilities of men to provide economic support for a wife and their children, and how women's earnings are not required to be used for the support of the household. She notes as well, however, that these provisions are not consistently applied and can be self-defeating on those occasions when husbands decide their wives' earnings mean husbands should no longer be expected to support them. Combined with the ability of men to control women's property and employment decisions, women's entrepreneurial activities remain quite limited.

These themes are illustrated through an analysis of honor crimes and their consequences in chapter 7. Here again, the social construction of life expectations within extended families are more significant in preserving the social context in which male relatives kill women relatives suspected of sexual misconduct than are the laws themselves. Treated largely as crimes of passion, perpetrators of honor crimes are treated with leniency by the court judgments supported by the Jordanian parliament as a means to maintain morality, and resist Western and American cultural decay. In conclusion, Sonbol argues that three conditions are necessary in combination, for women to make meaningful progress toward fuller representation in businesses, careers, and public employment in Jordan. First, women must have both access and encouragement to enroll in higher education. Second, attitudes and expectations regarding what is possible and appropriate for women must continue to broaden. Third, the demand for highly trained professional employees must continue to grow. Given the rush of global capital to centers of lower wage labor, the "pull" side of this equation is unlikely to disappear any time soon. The question remains, however, whether or not demand for workers will be sufficient to overcome the ethnic/tribal ethos Sonbol argues continues to limit women's employment.

Because it is focused primarily on women's employment in the formal economy, Sonbol's analysis has less to say about how these legal and cultural constraints limit women's income-generating activities in the informal sector (such as home-based work), or the strategies women employ across class to mobilize economic resources. Missing also from the analysis is an extended discussion of the resources (both social and economic) women find in networks of kin. Saying this is not to point to a failure in Sonbol's work, as much as to point to additional areas research on women in the Middle East and in Islam might also address.

Finally, the book may be a bit densely written and somewhat technically detailed (particularly in the first few chapters) for those with little or no background in Islamic law or Middle East cultures. If I were assigning this as a course text, I would likely have students skim or skip the first three chapters and focus on the author's assessment of women's status in Jordan today. Graduate students, students with some familiarity with the issues, and scholars from a wide range of disciplines should read and appreciate the depth and skill with which Sonbol ties together law, legal practice, cultural expectations and practices, and globalization with the slow movement of women into professions in Jordan today.

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