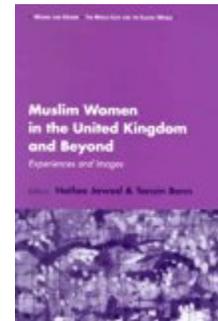




Haifaa Jawad, Tansin Benn, eds. *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003. xxv + 178 pp. \$69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-12581-0.

Reviewed by Gunther Dietz (Department of Anthropology, Universidad de Granada)
Published on H-Gender-MidEast (June, 2003)



Beyond Victimization: Muslim Women's Life Worlds in Non-Muslim Societies

Beyond Victimization: Muslim Women's Life Worlds in Non-Muslim Societies

Islamophobia is not a product of the September 11, 2001, attacks. Although perceived and problematized since the 1997 Runnymede Trust report in the United Kingdom, its origins possibly date back to the "invention" of "the West" as a distinctive cultural and civilizational unit, which in the course of this process utilized the stereotyped topos of the Orient as a delimited counterpart for its identity purposes, as shown by Edward Said. For several centuries, not only Islam as such, but above all Muslim women, have been perceived, used, and mis-interpreted as an opposite frontispiece of the West's self-portrait as a modern, secularized, and inclusive civilization. After September 11, the Western imagination tends to visualize even more the supposed "distinctiveness" of Muslims in both ethno-religious and gender-related terms.

In this contemporary context of increased media "awareness," daily stereotyping, and social discrimination, the book *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*, recently edited by Haifaa Jawad and Tansin Benn, contributes by contrasting these external perceptions of Muslim women with their own views and experiences gained in Western countries. The editors aim to "re-dress the balance, to increase knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences of these women" (p. xiv). On the one hand, this emic perspective, focused on the actors themselves, who are

all too often merely victimized, provides new paths for understanding inter-religious processes in contemporary urban "multicultural" settings in countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, the United States, and Australia (the countries from which the book's case studies are taken). On the other hand, this actor-centered perspective helps to explain the why's and how's of contemporary community formation processes among Muslim minorities in Western countries and of the role played by women in these processes.

After a brief preface in which the editors sketch the basic thematic setting of the book, Haifaa Jawad (University of Birmingham) identifies the continuities in the Western perception of Muslim women and discusses different historical, political, and socio-economic factors which explain the "predominantly negative life experiences of Muslim women living in Britain" (p. 15). Impressively combining personal and narrated experiences of discrimination with analyses of historical and contemporary documents, Jawad succeeds in drawing a complex landscape of "ghettoization" and isolation. In the second chapter, Irene Donohoue Clyne (University of Melbourne) deconstructs the recurrent elements in the Western images of Muslim women. Empirically based on the "corpus" of the so-called "airport literature," she analyzes the exoticist and orientalist view of veiling and of Muslim women in general, which persists in feminist discourses on the oppression of Muslim women.

After these broader, introductory chapters, several

case studies are presented which illustrate the Muslim women's different experiences with the West in different national contexts. In chapter 3, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (Georgetown University) and Jane I. Smith (Iliff School of Theology) focus on the life worlds of Muslim women in the United States both before and after September 11. Through their comprehensive and detailed account, a highly complex scenario of tensions and conflicts both within the Muslim communities as well as between them and the non-Muslim environment emerges. The authors particularly highlight inter-generational changes and tensions, changing gender and family roles, and public participation of Muslim women. Since September 11, "racial profiling" along with the general climate of suspicion and islamophobia are preventing Muslim women from deepening inter-community relations and political participation. These experiences are contrasted in the following chapter with those gained by Muslim women in Sweden; in her contribution, Anne-Sofie Roald (Malmo University) illustrates the effects that both cultural homogenization pressures and gender equality policies have on the lives of Muslim women, immigrants as well as new Muslims. In contrast to Anglo-Saxon multiculturalist policies, Swedish integrationism and particularly the measures of equal opportunities seem to promote the active participation of Muslim women in female organizations, in which immigrant and "convert" Muslim women are initiating innovative processes of "cross-cultural fertilisation" (p. 88). The contribution of new Muslim women to inter-community relations is also illustrated by the case of Britain; in chapter 5, Harfiyah Abdel Haleem (IQRA Trust, London) narrates the process of conversion and of community formation, in the course of which she highlights the new Muslims' potential role as "bridge-builders between the cultures and peoples of East and West."

The last three chapters focus entirely on Muslim women's experiences with education, training, and professional accomplishment in the sphere of teaching. In chapter 6, Barrie A. Irving, Vivienne Barker (both at College of Guidance Studies, Kent), Marie Parker-Jenkins, and Dimitra Hartas (both at the University of Derby) empirically analyze the impact of career guidance on young Muslim women finishing their compulsory education period. These measures, carried out by particular companies in the framework of equal opportunities policies, often lack an understanding of the socio-cultural and religious settings of their "clients" and a clear recognition of the "racist divisions" segregating the labor market (p. 127). Chapters 7 and 8 analyze Muslim women's profes-

sional experiences as teachers in British schools. Tansin Benn (University of Birmingham) provides a detailed description of the process of career choice, first in-service experiences, and networking at the work place in relation to non-Muslim colleagues and pupils. This process is then analyzed in terms of personal, professional, and religious identification, discrimination, and power relations both inside and outside British schools. Finally, in her contribution, Audrey Osler (University of Leicester) traces the life histories of three Muslim women teachers and relates them to the main findings of the above mentioned Runnymede Trust report on islamophobia, particularly to the report's distinctions of closed and open views of Islam, as narrated and reflected by the interviewed Muslim teachers.

The book concludes with a brief summary of the editors' aims of visualizing Muslim women as emerging social actors and their particular life worlds in non-Muslim, Western societies. The final policy recommendations emphasize the need for further increasing the presence of Muslim women in the discourses on Islam and islamophobia, and the importance of "coalitions" and solidarities between Muslim and non-Muslim women. Throughout the large variety of experiences, voices, and analyses provided by the authors, this book's main contribution resides precisely in this exchange between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, which visualizes the huge variety and heterogeneity of experiences of discrimination, negotiation, and resistance through different strategies of community formation, enclosure, and/or participation.

Two shortcomings, however, have not been solved in this publication: first, the editors as well as the contributors disregard any theoretical or comparative approaches to explain their empirical findings. Although the "diagnosis" of islamophobia is always mentioned, the particular link between Western collective ideologies and identities such as ethnocentrism, nationalism, or pan-Europeanism with orientalist perceptions of "other-ness" along with patriarchal and sexist views on non-Western gender-relations is never theorized. This would have been fruitful precisely because of the implicitly comparative approach underlying the book.

This empirical orientation, which is vaguely centered on "the United Kingdom and beyond," reveals a second shortcoming. The geographic or "geo-political" scope of the book remains rather imprecise. It is not clear under which criteria the non-British case studies have been chosen: the editors briefly portray the situation of Muslims in Western Europe, but only Sweden

is included, which is not the most representative example of the emerging “European Islam.” Yet the statistically significant cases of Maghrebien Muslim communities in France and Turkish communities in Germany or the rapidly growing presence of Muslim women as transmigrants in circum-Mediterranean and historically Muslim contexts such as Spain and Italy are not analyzed at all.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-gender-mideast>

Citation: Gunther Dietz. Review of Jawad, Haifaa; Benn, Tansin, eds., *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7736>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.