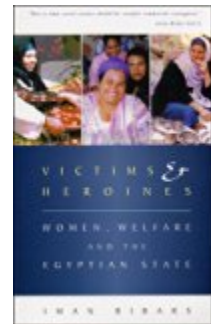


Iman Bibars. *Victims and Heroines: Women, Welfare, and the Egyptian State*. London: Zed Books, 2001. x + 330 pp. \$36.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85649-935-4; \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85649-934-7.

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## A Secondary Patriarchal Bargain

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This sensitively written and thought-provoking book is based on the author's fieldwork in seven poor neighborhoods within the Cairo-Alexandria conurbation. Even though a systematic survey was conducted in one of the research sites, the major portion of the empirical material used in the book come from in-depth informal interviews with over four hundred female heads of households. Bibars documents these women's experiences with state welfare bureaucracies and privately funded religious charity organizations. She is careful to include both Islamic and Coptic charities in her study, thus presenting the reader with a wide range of comparative cases. The author's attention to detail and unyielding scrutiny of her own theoretical positions constantly caution the reader against making facile interpretations or drawing hasty conclusions. Unfortunately for the reviewer, these very same features make this a difficult book to evaluate in a brief and concise manner. There are three main theoretical threads that run through the study, locating it at the crossroads of multiple debates. First, Bibars addresses the literature on the role of the state in reproducing gender systems. She successfully incorporates into her discussion conceptual frames formulated by scholars such as Nancy Fraser, Theda Skocpol, and Anne Orloff, making this more than just a book about Egypt. Feminist students of state formation and bureaucratic structures will find much to interest them in these pages. Second, the choice of empirical cases lo-

cates the book within the literature on poverty and welfare provision within the global capitalist system in general, and the feminization of poverty in particular. Last, but not least, the author challenges some current intellectual trends by exploring the limits of arguments about women's agency and everyday forms of resistance. To my mind, the book's most important empirical finding is the sheer pervasiveness and persistence of the classical patriarchal order within the worldviews of all the major actors of the narrative, including the poor women victimized by patriarchy and its attending mental constructs. Equally important is the finding that this order is no longer the dominant form of family/household formation in Egypt. Just as Judith Stacey argues, in the case of the American family, that the modern nuclear household has lost its dominance to a multiplicity of alternative household formations, which she describes as "post-modern," Bibars discovers that the classical patriarchal family system in Egypt has given way to its own post-modern forms. These stories of the women who are the main breadwinners of their households suggest to me that there are as many alternatives to the classical patriarchal household as there are ways for men to default on their end of the patriarchal bargain. Some of Bibars's informants are *de jure* heads of household. That is, the absence of a male provider in their lives conforms to one of the patterns easily recognized by the state: widows, spinsters, unmarried orphans, and to a lesser extent, divorcees. The religious charitable organizations in the study, be they Islamic or Coptic, make it their priority

to help orphans. To qualify for aid from these sources, women have to prove that they are widowed, and that they have dependent children. Many women in the study are what the author refers to as *de facto* household heads. That is, even though there is a man in their lives, he has either abandoned them or is otherwise unable or unwilling to deliver on his end of the patriarchal bargain. The lives of these women provide the most poignant examples of “the new patriarchy” and its social, economic, and cultural consequences. They fall through the cracks of the welfare and charity systems because, the author claims, these systems are organized around the assumption that men are providers. Consequently, as long as a single woman’s father or a married woman’s husband is alive, she has no legitimate claims to aid. Then there are the spinsters (never-married women aged forty-eight or older) who fail to provide proof of their virginity, thus failing to qualify for the state’s spinster pension. What this picture makes very clear is that the state and/or religious foundations are willing to step in to help women who have kept their end of the patriarchal bargain (as wives, mothers, or chaste and honorable single women) but are, nonetheless, manless. Here, I disagree with the author on a matter of interpretation. She argues that the *de jure* female household heads are victimized because gate-keepers of the social safety net simply refuse to believe that their husbands or fathers could fail to support them. In other words, she maintains that their patriarchal assumptions are blinding these officials to the realities of these women’s lives. I see a somewhat more sinister process underlying the tragedy of these women. This “blindness” on the part of welfare providers is evidence of a less frequently addressed aspect of patriarchal systems, namely, the fraternal ties that they establish and nourish among men. In the long run, these welfare agencies would suffer serious blows to their legitimacy if they were to put themselves in the position of judging men’s success in providing for their women, or by taking under their wings women who have shamed their men by engaging in extramarital sex (as in the case of non-virgin spinsters). In short, I think that these women are victims of a tacit understanding, a secondary patriarchal bargain, if you will, whereby men respect each other’s honor by acknowledging each others’s rights over women (daughters, sisters, wives). The welfare agencies are simply behaving like honorable men under a patriarchal order. Egypt is not alone in witnessing an unprecedented level of male default in the patriarchal bargain because there are global economic trends at play here. The decreasing bargaining power of labor and the related declines in job security and real wages have made it impossible for many

men all around the world to earn a family wage. On the other hand, deep-rooted cultural beliefs that link masculinity to the provider role and femininity to reproduction and nurturing make it difficult for the social imaginary to acknowledge and assimilate this reality. The consequences, as they play out in individual life stories, are often tragic, as Bibars’s book so eloquently demonstrates. Tragic as their lives may be, these women are not depicted as passive victims. They appear in the narrative as active agents who mobilize whatever resources are available to them in order to cope with the difficulties they face. As the author is quick to point out, these coping mechanisms have much in common with those utilized by other oppressed groups, be they slaves, industrial workers, or landless peasants. It has become fashionable to refer to these mechanisms as everyday forms of resistance or, as James Scott called them, “weapons of the weak.” However, Bibars disagrees. Using de Certeau’s distinction between opposition and resistance, she claims that these mechanisms operate within the oppressive system, acknowledging its basic assumptions, and thus reinforcing the oppression. They are acts of opposition, not resistance. The resulting picture, then, is a very pessimistic one: any coping mechanism short of organized rebellion against patriarchy only works to strengthen its hold on the lives of its victims. The author is painfully aware that this theoretical position is not exactly popular within postmodern feminism, or post-colonial cultural theory circles, and that it leaves her open to criticism for observing these women through “Western eyes,” for depicting them as victims who collude in their own victimization, and for imposing moral judgments where cultural relativism is called for. Worse, she is concerned that her analysis might feed into a neo-orientalist discourse equating Islam with oppression, especially gender oppression. I believe that her fears are unfounded. I would like to take her to task on these points, though not exactly for the reasons she anticipates criticism. I have no serious quarrels with her analysis of the reproduction of patriarchy through the actions of oppressed women. Neither do I think the book necessarily provides fuel for neo-orientalism. I do, however, find her approach to Islam lacking in appreciation of the subtleties of current debates surrounding such practices as *reveling*. For example, she writes: “Although there are several attempts to reinterpret the place of women and gender in Islam, there is no doubt that when Islam is used by states or religious groups as a form of political expression, it curtails women’s autonomy” (p. 109). This is one of the few references in the whole book to the complex issue of the role and meaning of Islamic identity in the lives of disadvan-

taged women. I believe those issues merit more attention. For example, Bibars consistently brushes aside—in the sense that she refrains from exploring the full implications of—her finding that her respondents report better experiences with Islamic charities than with state bureaucracies. In reporting these findings, she is quick to add that Islamic NGOs are as infused with patriarchal assumptions as the state, and that “[i]n the slums, six-year-old girls are veiling to gain access to the ‘orphan’s sponsorship’ programme, a clear sign of these programmes at work” (p. 107). What, then, are we to make of women’s reports that they feel more respected as human beings in the hands of religious officials than when at the mercy of state bureaucrats? Why are they systematically humiliated and stereotyped as ignorant, stupid, and incompetent by state welfare agencies but not by Islamic charity workers? Why do they not complain as bitterly about having to veil their little girls as having to wait whole days outside state offices only to be told to come back next week? I believe these findings deserve more analytic scrutiny than they receive, and hold important clues about the attraction of religious identity—and its visible symbols—to disadvantaged people who feel marginalized and dehumanized by the secular apparatuses of modern nation states. As mentioned above, the book’s narrative strategy makes it very clear that these women are far from passive dupes of an oppressive system. However, this does not necessarily imply that they are fem-

inist heroines. I see their daily struggles as combining elements of subversion and, yes, resistance, with accommodation and collusion. Unlike the author, I would argue that systems of oppression can be subverted from within, and that small, everyday defiances do occasionally accumulate into serious systemic challenges. It does not necessarily follow, however, that she is wrong in her assertion that the coping mechanisms adopted by her informants reproduce important aspects of patriarchy. In the final analysis, these tensions between collusion and resistance are bound to impose changes on existing patriarchal norms. However, the outcome will not necessarily be a feminist utopia. This leaves much room for scholarly analysis and feminist praxis. Finally, it is very clear from the empirical evidence she recounts (though less so from her analysis of it) that Islam is not at the root of women’s oppression. The gender ideology and resulting practices are extremely diffuse, and totally permeate all levels of Egyptian society, including the state, the Islamic charities, and the Coptic Church. Furthermore, examples of this tension between economic reality and gender ideology and related processes such as the feminization of poverty, and the second (and even third) shift, are global issues. Bibars provides us with insights into how these global tensions play out within a specifically Egyptian context, while at the same time remaining in touch with broader theoretical debates.

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