

BOOK REVIEW

WOMEN, ISLAM AND EDUCATION IN IRAN

Rezai-Rashti, G. M., Mehran, G., and Abdmolaei, S. (Eds.).
(2019). *Women, Islam and Education in Iran*. Routledge.¹

Hawraa Al-Hassan
University of Cambridge, UK

Women, Islam and Education in Iran is a singular volume on many levels, for not only does it cover an impressive range of educational topics and utilize an array of methodological approaches, but it also challenges reader expectations of Iran and Muslim women. Taken as a whole, the authors of the book resist blanket assumptions and observations about Iranian women and do not treat them as a monolith, but rather represent them in the kaleidoscopic variety they invariably embody. Moreover, Iranian women in the volume are depicted as embedded in the historical moment, shaped by economic and social forces created by, but not necessarily exclusively defined by, the state.

In terms of rationale, the book does not aim at chronology (in fact, Faegheh Shirazi's historical survey of Reza Shah's forced unveiling campaign, which began with the banning of the hijab in 1936, comes at the very end of the book). Instead, the editors begin with presenting a broad conceptual framework, followed by qualitative research that centers the voices of female university students, before moving on to more specific topics, such as a methodical close reading and critique of gender biases in Iranian school textbooks, the controversial topic of gender segregation in Iranian universities, and a chapter on education in Shia women's seminaries. This structure allows for a nuanced analysis

Copyright © 2021 Hawraa Al-Hassan
<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/muslimphilanthropy>

¹ This book review has been reprinted with permission from *The Journal of Education in Muslim Societies (JEMS)*. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jems>

of the areas in which Iranian women made gains and those in which they were denied full participation and equal opportunities.

The opening chapter is key in understanding the paradox of tradition and modernity in postrevolutionary Iran and provides an excellent overview of the themes discussed in the book. According to the chapter's authors, Golnar Mehran and Fariba Adli, the state in Iran adopted a "revolutionary modernity," which it explicitly distinguished from "westernization." This involved projecting a feminine "ideal" in public discourse, which encompassed both traditional and modern perspectives of women in a contradictory hybrid that nonetheless worked to the advantage of Iranian women. Various explanations are given for the expansion of female education in Iran, such as education being espoused by the political elite as a marker of progress in the new Islamic republic. In addition, the zeal with which successive governments in Iran embraced the issue of women's education emanated from a desire to forge a new revolutionary female subject, responsible for inculcating Islamic values in the new generation, as well as being actively involved in forwarding the social and political agenda of the revolution. However, the chapter also introduces the reader to the different approaches to female education adopted by various governments in Iran. It discusses for example, the presidency of the reformist leader Mohammad Khatami, for example, who saw the education of women as valuable for its own sake, rather than necessarily being a tool toward the improvement of the family and society. In contrast, the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinajad witnessed rigorous attempts at imposing gender quotas and barring women from fields with higher salaries in order to address the so-called gender imbalance in favor of women. This period also saw the growth of gender-segregated universities, which were viewed as a remedy for both the moral "dilemma" of gender mixing and a practical solution that would prevent female students from competing with their male counterparts over coveted places at prestigious universities.

A central idea that permeates the text and simultaneously challenges Western readers' expectations of the effects of the 1979 Islamic Revolution on female education is that "Islamizing" practices such as gender segregation and forced veiling were in fact instrumental in almost completely eradicating illiteracy among women in Iran. It was because of the Islamic Revolution, the author of chapter 6, Alex Shams argues, and not in spite of it, that women, especially those from conservative families, were able to obtain an education and to establish the right to an education as a fundamental one in their social circles. Moreover, state-initiated literacy campaigns were explicitly designed to win the trust of religious families, who often formed part of the urban

poor or were rural residents. For example, instructors often gave literacy classes in mosques, and were required to wear the traditional *chador* (Mehran and Adli). The opportunity to pursue an education allowed large swathes of the female population from these backgrounds a chance at social mobility and empowerment.

On the other hand, the authors included in this volume clarify that the expansion of female education in Iran has not been even in terms of representation in some subjects and in more established higher education institutions. They contend that the state directed, and continues to direct, female students toward the study of fields of study deemed more “suitable” for women, through the imposition of quotas on the number of female/male university places, and at times, the outright barring of women (and at times also men) from some subjects at certain universities. In spite of this, there were unintended social consequences of the rise of an educated female public, which has sparked various debates in Iran. These consequences include the fear that men are being denied study opportunities due to the dominance of female students, and the moral panic among some clerics that intermixing between the sexes will exacerbate the sexual frustrations of men and lead to promiscuity.

All in all, *Women, Islam and Education in Iran* is a unique volume in the complex narrative it presents, the variety of educational contexts it explores, and in its analysis of the various stakeholders implicated in the changes to education processes in Iran. The text balances analysis of the great quantitative success of the Islamic Republic in the realm of female education with an objective critique of the curtailment of certain freedoms and career opportunities for women. Ultimately, the numeric success of Iranian women in education does not unfortunately translate into the same success in the workplace. Moreover, despite overwhelming social acceptance of women’s education, traditional views of male and female roles persist and are propagated through the school system and by state media. As such, the book is neither apologetic nor does it perpetuate exceptionalist stereotypes of Iran and Muslim women. Rather, it paints an illuminating picture of Iranian girls and women as subjects with agency but who, like the vast majority of women around the world, are neither completely empowered nor passive victims.

Hawraa Al-Hassan is an associate fellow of the Higher Education Academy, having taught Arabic and modern history of the Middle East at the University of Cambridge. Hawraa completed her PhD in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge and gained an MA in Comparative Literature at University College London. She is interested in the cultural history of the Arab world in so far as it relates to totalitarianism, propaganda and nationalism. Hawraa's research focuses on interdisciplinary approaches to the Arab novel as a conduit of group identities. Her current project explores Iraqi Ba'athist involvement in the production of literary and media discourses on gender and nation, whilst considering the potential of resistive 'counter-public' spaces, be they Islamic or secular. Her book – Women, Writing and the Iraqi Ba'athist State – is published by Edinburgh University press.