

Family, Gender, and Population in the Middle East: Policies in Context

By *Carla Makhlof Obermeyer, editor. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995, 257 pp.*

Obermeyer has edited a volume of essays originally delivered at an international symposium, "Family, Gender, and Population Policy: International Debates and Middle Eastern Realities," held in Cairo in early 1994. Organized by the Population Council, the symposium invited scholars to evaluate contemporary issues of population planning in light of current economic, political, cultural, and demographic forces influencing the region. Hoping to assist the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Population Council asked scholars from various disciplines to bring together empirical research and theoretical analysis in order to facilitate and inform the discussion that would follow at the ICPD.

The results of this research and discussion proved to be of great value to the participants at the ICPD; and subsequently the contributors framed their findings in the essays that form the chapters of this volume. Of the seventeen contributors, thirteen work in Middle Eastern countries; three reside in North America and one in Europe, but they have close ties to the Middle East by virtue of family background or extensive study. Their disciplines include economics, demography, and sociology, as well as epidemiology, biostatistics, obstetrics, and gynecology. An associate professor of anthropology and population in the Department of Population and International Health at Harvard University, Carla Makhlof Obermeyer, as editor, brings these varied disciplines together within an integrated framework provided by her own interdisciplinary work.

In the Foreword by Carolyn Makinson, program officer of the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the significant contribution made by these researchers is underscored as she places these essays within the larger context of the ICPD:

The papers in this book go to press in a climate very different from the one prevailing when they were solicited and presented [i.e. before the ICPD]. Now, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) is behind us. Its Programme of Action—which calls for population policies to address social development beyond family planning, and for family planning to be placed in a broader reproductive health framework—met with approval from widely differing constituencies in the population and development fields, and was adopted by the official delegations of 179 states. . . . Two years ago, such a consensus seemed improbable . . . (p. xi)

As well as contributing substantive data to inform policy-making discussions, the writers offer current research that challenges the more superficial discussions of population planning issues which are based on stereotypic understandings of the diverse cultural and religious differences among the various countries and regions of the Middle East. Several major themes emerge: the need to understand family planning within the larger context of women's health services, "the need to better define and measure widely used but little understood concepts such as women's status and autonomy" (p. xii), and the need to examine "women's rights" within the context of traditional Islam as it is practiced in specific cultural and geographic areas.

Organized under three broad categories: "The Family, the State, and the Law: Politics and Population"; "Women in Families: Cultural Constraints and

Opportunities”; “Health and Family Planning Services: Focusing on Women,” the eleven essays address specific conditions in Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, and Iran, while the authors use comparative data from a range of Middle Eastern countries including Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. In order to include a number of countries that share common historical ties and cultural traits, the editor states that a conscious decision was made “to use a broader definition of the Middle East, includ[ing] the Maghrib, the Nile Valley, Western Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and Turkey” (p. 3).

In Obermeyer’s Introduction, she challenges the “simplistic view” that has prevailed among even “comparatively well-informed observers” in international circles that the Middle East and North Africa have been “lagging behind the rest of the developing world,” in terms of “the apparent persistence of high fertility and mortality [due] to the influence of Islam and the low status of women” (p. 1). Obermeyer points out that

the acceleration of mortality decline and the continuing drop in fertility [in the last few years] have considerably changed the demographic profile of the region, and underscored the diversity in the paths taken by different countries. At the same time, a growing body of research has begun to clarify the multiple dimensions of the demographic transition, and has uncovered unexpected patterns which call into question easy generalizations about the region. (p. 1)

Such unexpected patterns include (p. 6):

- a significant drop in fertility rates throughout the region
- an increase in women’s life expectancies to an average of three years beyond that of men
- female school enrollment ratios close to 100 percent in thirteen out of eighteen countries (for which school statistics are available)
- high fertility rates in some of the wealthiest countries (Oman, Libya, Saudi Arabia), in contrast to rapid fertility declines in several of the poorer nations (Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco)

Laying out the bipolar dimension of the discussion as it has been conducted between the Middle East and the West in international forums, Obermeyer focuses on the difficulty of attempting to define reproductive rights as a subset of international human rights in a way that is satisfactory to all cultures involved.

One key issue on the international agenda is the extent to which definitions of human rights can be transposed to non-Western cultures in ways that avoid both “homogenizing universalism” and “paralyzing relativism” (Cook, 1993a). The purpose of this chapter is to explore the commonalities that can be found between notions of reproductive rights as they developed in the Western tradition and the principles that define gender rights in Islam. (p. 16)

Obermeyer rightly points out that the subject of women’s status (as another subset of international human rights) as a part of the discussion of reproductive rights is, likewise, a complex subject which does not easily lend itself to international comparisons outside the context of individual cultures. While the ideal of complete equality between the sexes is central to international human rights documents, “complete gender equality is nowhere a reality” (p. 19) and “not all cultures subscribe to the idea of complete equality as it is spelled out in human rights documents” (p. 19). Yet because Islamic countries stress complementarity over equality in gender roles,

the old predicament of anthropologists [arises]: how to deal with the fact that the values that seem central to one culture, in this case the group of cultures referred to as Western, are in contradiction with those of another group of societies, those referred to as Muslim. (p. 20)

Locating the tension of the discussion precisely at this point of disagreement, Obermeyer correctly pulls back from this all too easy trap of creating, and then analyzing, homogenous cultural monoliths. Adding the necessary corrective, she states that these constructs, Western and Islamic, are "overly general in that they ignore the diversity that exists within each broadly defined culture from the point of view of both ideology and practice" (p. 20). The ideals of any religious tradition or national identity must always be distinguished from the many ways that this tradition is expressed and practiced within the particular cultural, social, and historical contexts.

Obermeyer goes on to discuss the perspectives of women from different Islamic and Western constituencies, concluding that

further comparative studies of the ethical and legal bases of reproductive rights in each of these traditions are likely to uncover even greater possibilities for common themes to emerge. . . . How men and women perceive reproductive rights and to what extent their decisions and behavior reflect a concern over such rights are questions that require multidisciplinary research. . . . Only when we can comprehend local notions of rights can we begin the two-way process of translation, and develop culturally relevant definitions and policies. (p. 29)

For example, even within the bounds of Islamic jurisprudence, a number of interpretations exist of the religious texts on which marriage laws are based. Using these ambiguities, women in Islamic countries have pushed for reforms that acknowledge their rights while still maintaining the observance of the religious tradition. As an example, Obermeyer describes the strategy adopted in Tunisia to "abolish *talaq* (repudiation at the husband's request) and replace it with an egalitarian set of divorce procedures; to outlaw polygyny as contrary to the true intent of the scriptures; and also to decrease the claim of male relatives to inheritance, thus weakening links to the extended family and strengthening the conjugal bond" (p. 28).

Obermeyer's beginning chapter, "Reproductive Rights in the West and in the Middle East," sets the tone for reading the other chapters with a conscious openness to the research which documents changing demographic patterns—on the level of individual choices as well as regional and state policies. As editor of the volume, Obermeyer correctly places the discussion of family planning policies and demographic trends within the larger context of the complexities and pitfalls encountered when one culture (whether from the West or from another Islamic country) attempts to evaluate and influence the goals and policies of a second culture. At the same time, Obermeyer also makes clear her own sentiments, advocating legal and social reforms that will ensure and protect human (i.e., reproductive) rights.

In the chapter titled "Women, Uncertainty, and Reproduction in Morocco," Rahma Bourqia writes that in Morocco the issue of fertility is closely bound up with other issues, including the status and physical needs of women in the society. The author points out that although the fertility rate in Morocco has dropped during the last decade, this drop has occurred primarily in the urban areas where both women and men have greater access to education. In rural areas, where the majority of women live, high fertility rates continue, and Bourqia roots this phe-

nomenon in the strong cultural value that “defines womanhood as dependent on the reproductive function” (p. 136).

it should be noted that the correlation between women’s status and fertility is a complex phenomenon. The economic and social costs and benefits of children need to be examined in the context of the household and the community and in light of women’s position in the family. (p. 137)

Without the care and protection of a husband, women in Moroccan society face uncertainty as they lose status and viability within the society; divorce, death of a husband, adultery, and polygyny all constitute threats to their security. As a result, children are perceived as a tangible form of investment in terms of solidifying their marriage in the present and ensuring some form of security in old age. “Having children is perceived by the woman as the best way to keep the husband, as expressed in the Moroccan saying, ‘Children break the wings of the husband’” (p. 141). Issues of family planning are clearly intertwined with the socioeconomic factors which influence how women see their lives.

In “Women’s Autonomy and Gender Roles in Egyptian Families,” authors Laila Nawar, Cynthia B. Lloyd, and Barbara Ibrahim address these socioeconomic factors more directly with research which documents that women

are able to gain stronger influence within the family and greater personal independence when they have more education, when they make a greater economic contribution to the family, and when they live in a more urban or modern environment. (p. 174)

Levels of autonomy among married women are positively associated with age, education, urban residence, and more affluent living conditions. . . . Women’s autonomy is linked to slightly lower family-size preferences, but more significantly to an increased ability to achieve their family-size goals. (p. 175)

These authors recommend attention to female education, female employment, and programs to reduce underage marriage—specifically programs that should operate alongside family planning in order to increase its effectiveness.

The authors of each of the chapters argues in some way for a broader definition of reproductive healthcare issues and for a deeper understanding of the roles and positions of women within the family and within the social structures in which they function. The authors push too for more multidisciplinary research into social conditions as functions of particular political and cultural contexts. Sweeping categorizations of the Middle East or Muslim societies must be abandoned for serious research into specific situations existing in specific areas.

Having worked with UNICEF programs in India in the mid-1970s, I have a great appreciation for the type of research presented in *Family, Gender, and Population in the Middle East: Policies in Context* because the authors have delineated the problems as far as possible from the perspectives of the women and men who face these issues as part of their everyday lives. Governmental policymakers as well international aid organizations necessarily operate from a different perspective as they allocate funds and evaluate success and failure based on the interests of their funding sources. But these policy-makers need to hear the voices of the people who such funds are meant to assist, the voices expressed through this body of research.

By presenting excellent research based on the needs and concerns articulated on the local level, *Family, Gender, and Population in the Middle East: Policies in Context* brings to the attention of policymakers the issues that are, and are not, being addressed by the large programs. This research brings into focus the complexities that result when various factors push and pull on individual women,

men, and family systems as they cope with the realities of more or fewer children. While the pressures of Islamic law and custom are addressed, none of the authors offers easy scapegoats from the arena of religious teachings—issues of family planning inevitably involve a host of inter-related variables.

One of the strengths of the work presented in this volume is that the writers themselves represent a spectrum of academic disciplines working on both the macro and micro level, from directing a center for development studies to advising graduate students working with village projects in Morocco. As a result, the data they present are current and allows the development issues to speak for themselves. Although the intended audience for the research and presentations were the participants to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the information presented is valuable for anyone involved in development work in the Middle East including both governmental policymakers and grass-roots development project advisors.

As we understand more about the complexities of population issues from the perspectives of both rural and urban women, as well as men, we will be in a better position to incorporate these points of view into the discussion and ultimately to facilitate the emergence of more creative and effective solutions.

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