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Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund, (Eds.). *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*. New York: Routledge. 2011.

Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries is a collection of articles by sociologists who seek to break down stereotypes about Iranian women. The material has been arranged thematically (p. 4), with the first three of the eleven chapters analyzing discourses around gender within the spheres of law, politics, and religion. The next three chapters examine education and public discourses. The subsequent two essays examine youth in specific settings, and the last three essays address economic issues relating to women. Yet, if there is a weakness in the collection as a whole, it might be that reading eleven essays, all of which decry stereotyping, leads one to wonder if any of the people who are doing the stereotyping will ever read it. Two of the best of the theoretical works are Louise Harper's "Authority, Modernity and Gender-Relevant Legislation in Iran" and Azadeh Kian's "Gendering Shi'ism in Post-Revolutionary Iran," which are the first two chapters of the book. Although the titles make the two essays seem as if they examine different material, they utilize much of the same material through differing secondary source. This is not to say the essays are repetitious; in fact, they might readily be used side-by-side for advanced students to learn about how different thinkers shape similar material, and the chapters are enjoyable if not new for a specialist on Iran as well. Harper's article in particular is brilliantly written, with careful contextualizations of terms like "feminism" and "Islamist women," which need to be considered in an Iranian context. Each of these articles looks at marriage and how marriage and divorce have been affected by women's activism and the government since the 1979 Iranian Revolution; Kian's essay is more argumentative, one might even say polemical, but she locates agency squarely in women. The discussion of women arguing for more equitable solutions to resolve problems around women's financial inputs into family finances demonstrates well that (male) clerics in Iran are influenced by the religiously based arguments that Iranian women are becoming more adept at making. Although other authors, such as Leila Ahmed in *A Quiet Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2011), make the point that "Islamist" women are socially active, the religious basis of the Iranian government means that everyone who wants to implement change needs to work within this paradigm, in many ways making Iran far more dynamic religiously in the post-revolutionary period (and especially in the post-Khomeini period) than it was in the fifty years before this period. Fatemah Etemad Moghadam's article, "Women and Social Protest in the Islamic Republic of Iran," the third in this section as the editors organized it, is a highly condensed historical survey, perhaps useful for providing context; the article's sources include conversations with government ministers and lawyers working in Iran.

In contrast, some of the book's later essays appear naïve. Goli M. Rezai-Rashi's "Exploring Women's Experience of Higher Education and the Changing Nature of Gender Relations in Iran" sets out "to show the participation of women in higher education and to examine women's views of their interests and desires in obtaining a university education and how this increasing access to higher education is affecting the dynamics of gender relations" (p. 45), a broad topic for an essay. She discusses how the Iranian government "removed the secular discourse" concerning gender relations (p. 48); problematically, however, while discourse might be supplanted, it is difficult to "remove." Government agencies are said to "lay out roles" for women (p. 49), without any discussion of how those roles might have changed, even from the government's position, using a book chapter published in 1994 as a source. One might have

wished for a discussion closer to the original sources, looking for evolution (or lack thereof) over time. The charts in this chapter are also at times confusing. Table 4.2, for instance, gives the number of students in universities for three periods: 1979-80, 1991-2, 2001-2, and then gives the “% of increase” comparing 1979 to 1991 and 1991 to 2001, yet while there were 52,353 students in 1991 and 127,117 in 2001, this is given as an 8.4% increase, the math for which this reader cannot determine. In addition, these numbers are nearly meaningless without an idea of the growth of the population, particularly the population between the ages of 17 and 25, which would likely be the bulk of these students; perhaps the original source factored that in. The table is used, apparently without change, from an Iranian source; tracing it might be difficult, since the citation given is incomplete, and the source is not listed in the volume’s collected bibliography. Another example of problematic work is Jaleh Taheri’s “Areas of Iranian Women’s Voice and Influence.” This article is perhaps too general, and its backhanded compliments may almost be read as a lack of understanding on the part of the author, who says, “This incredible increase [in women’s literacy] illustrated not only the government’s commitment to female literacy, but also the willingness of women to participate actively in their education” (p. 84). All sources in this article come from secondary literature. Elsewhere, the author compares the money derived as a result of revised divorce laws in Iran (which allow for women to be paid wages for housework and child care) to the lack of any such “compensation” to divorced women in the United States, where, the author points out, no such compensation “exist[s] ... because domestic work is not counted as real labor, since it is not paid” (p. 87). These anti-“West” polemics, which continue with “Yet, in the West, the veil has never been portrayed as anything more than a tool for the oppression of women” (p. 96) detract with their hyperbole.

Other articles are dense with comparative material. Elhum Haghghat-Sordellini’s “Iran within a Regional Context: Socio-demographic Transformations and Effects on Women’s Status” includes abundant charts interspersed in the article; in some cases, the points about Iran are not clearly made, but as a summary it provides readers with preliminary comparative data and references to additional sources. As with Harper’s article, Haghghat-Sodellini is careful with her terminology, including a long footnote on the definition of patriarchy (p. 163, n. 1). Although her definition does not include some of the recent works on patriarchy and gender in the Islamic world, it helps her readers locate her thinking. Another example of work that provides the reader with abundant data from across Iran is Roksana Bahramitash and Zohreh Fanni’s “Extralegal/informal Settlements: Does Gender Matter?”; the idea of homelessness comes up repeatedly in Iranian cinema, but along with drug abuse and other “social ills” is rarely addressed in Anglophone literature on Iran, making this piece timely and needed.

The two works on education, Farhad Khosrokhavar’s “Post-revolutionary Iranian Youth: the Case of Qom and the New Culture of Ambivalence” and Eric Hooglund’s “Changing Attitudes among Women in Rural Iran” are near opposites in terms of approach. Hooglund’s article is anecdotal, and he is therefore cautious in his conclusions, despite their being based on extensive research experience in Iran and elsewhere. Khosrokhavar’s work, based on interviews, seems intent to push its interviewees into characterizing music as “sin”; Khosrokhavar seems at odds with himself in his presentation of modernity and post-modernity (pp. 109-110), where “the quest for a holistic identity based on a monolithic view of Islam is alien to the evolution of the post-modern world” (p. 110). Given that other articles in this collection argue against a “monolithic” Islam even within Iran itself, the “manipulating” of “religion” by ignoring problematic edicts of “traditional Islam” (p. 111) might even suggest that the interviewees in Qom

are not untraditional. Given that Khosrokhavar traces the “decline of Iranian political thought” to the “eleventh and twelfth centuries” (110)—three to four centuries before the establishment of the first Shi‘i state there—diversity of Islamic understandings on the land of present-day Iran might be more traditional *and* modern than he is suggesting. Still, these articles are interesting in the access they give to the voices of youth in contemporary Iran. One might also include in this group Niki Ahavan’s article, “Exclusionary Cartographies: Gender Liberation and the Iranian Blogosphere.” Although it, too, is highly anecdotal, she covers individual idiosyncratic presentations, contradictions and all. Research through blogs needs better methodologies, as seen in the recent problems with faked blogs in Beirut. Akhavan’s thesis is that the bloggers’ online activities correspond to their offline activities, an untestable thesis. Nonetheless, she presents a range of hitherto unheard voices.

In sum, this is a collection with interesting articles, which one hopes will reach a wider audience. Most of the articles included in this collection will be appropriate for upper level undergraduates and graduate students.

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