

Paper Presented at

**AMSS 34th Annual Conference
“Muslims and Islam in the Chaotic Modern World:
Relations of Muslims among Themselves and with Others”**

**Cosponsored by
Temple University, Philadelphia, PA
September 30 – October 2, 2005**

**“Structural Adjustment Programs as an Attack on Women,
Middle Eastern Women as an Example”**

**By: Peter Gran, Ph.D
(History Department, Temple University, PA)**

One of the disheartening features of intellectual life of the past generation is that social theory has not kept up with society's needs for it. This has often been the case when it comes to the analysis of the situation of women, in particular, when it comes to the interpretation of the impact of high level policies and programs on women workers and this is the case no place more so than in today's Middle East, in other words my point of departure here is that social theory speaks much more from a male point of view, a professional woman's point of view, a public domain point of view and a Western and I would add a somewhat Orientalist point of view more than from any other. This is not necessarily built into social theory; more likely, it is a consequence of current priorities.

In this presentation, I will use the subject of structural adjustment programs (SAPS) as my point of entrance into the discussion of social theory and its treatment of the woman worker. I am choosing to do this because there is a considerable body of writing about SAPS, much of which has something to say about women and work because SAPS impacts directly on women and work. What then do we mean by SAPS? A very short definition would be that SAPS are high-level neo-liberal economic policies, ones involving the lives of ordinary women in profound ways.

Historically speaking, SAPS appear as part and parcel of the group of policies which mark the return of liberalism or market sovereignty, policies which became quite pronounced in the early 1970's and which have been dominant since that time. Initially SAPS were not singled out by many theorists. As time went on, increasingly SAPS became the object of considerable criticism, if not for the reasons this paper will be emphasizing then for others. In many accounts these days, SAPS are, e.g., perceived to be a part of “Casino Capitalism” or disorganized capitalism, or even neo-colonialism. Here by way of contrast the emphasis is on SAPS and gender oppression.

And why not? If one is to shrink the budget of the state and expand the range of private sector activities then it may be necessary to drop health insurance, daycare, eldercare or affirmative action legislation. Women almost invariably are the ones who are expected to pick up the slack and this has been the tragedy for women worldwide over the past generation. Only the very well-off and extremely poor remain unaffected.

Why hasn't this created an uproar, at least among feminist social theorists? This is a good question. In preparing this paper, which is to concentrate on the Middle East, I searched through titles in the Index Islamicus and in some online search programs through our university library. What caught my attention was that only a very tiny handful of the articles on SAPS I saw even mentioned women as a word in the title. Doubtless some reference to the family is found in almost all of them but commonly the way women appear to be inserted into this discussion is in terms of the advantages to them of flexible part-time work. Amazingly few authors, at least few authors writing about the Middle East, use such terms as the casualization of labor or sweatshops or even the "feminization of labor". When they refer to the informal sector, they make it sound inviting. Yet, one would think, theorists should easily be able to discern who pays the price for this opening to the market. Third World Women are the first to pay and they pay the most, Middle East ones included. Yet, few writers choose to say this right out.

Then I began to look in Third World studies for articles about SAPS in social science more generally. I found that while there is a great deal written on SAPS in Third World studies on SAPS and women and there are as well articles using the terminology I had expected only a very small percent of this material appeared to draw in any sense from Middle Eastern examples leaving me in effect where I began. What I eventually deduced from reading here and there is that theorists writing from a number of countries are under the impression that women in the Middle East don't work and that the reason for this is their religion. Perhaps as a result, they tend to look at Middle Eastern women's work as something not so central to a discussion of SAPS, Middle Eastern women workers made to be understood a la Orientalism.

As this does not seem particularly helpful, I finally turned to the atypical article, one which avoids these problems, one written by Valentine Moghadam, entitled "Gender and Globalization :Female Labor and Women's mobilization" and published in a web journal ,The Journal of World Systems Research (1999). Moghadam, I happened to know, once wrote about Iranian women and then went on to become a much-published author in the area of women and development more generally.

In this article, Moghadam stated that structural adjustments have always been a controversial subject in development circles so far as women were concerned. Often it served as a disguise of what amounts to labor exploitation, SAPS being a term somewhat analogous to the term "feminization of labor". As regards working women in Tunisia and Morocco, she notes in introducing them as her first example, their work reflects a poverty-induced lack of options, one forcing them to accept casualization something they share to one degree or another even with women in public sector employment in Iran, Egypt and Turkey, a sector in which women in those countries find jobs as teachers or doctors in state hospitals. In such jobs, women tend to get locked in even though their wages are falling relative to the cost of living while the men tend to get into the better-paid private sector jobs. Proletarianization and professionalization of women seem to be becoming almost synonyms. The issue for her is why? This goes back, as she shows in her own analysis, to the structure of the neo-liberal economy; it is not an isolated issue that can be dealt with as such, as a women's problem or an Islamic problem. Social theory on the whole, however, is not making this set of connections.

Among the virtues of Moghadam's article then is that it expands the terrain authors usually choose to enter into when discussing SAPS. Thus for example, she claims that the destruction of the middle classes through proletarianization and involuntary high unemployment which we also associate with SAPS was accompanied in the Middle Eastern context by regime pressure to change women's dress, to impose veiling and spatial and functional segregation, this done in the name of religion, SAPS blending in with religion. The article's conclusion is that women in general and poor women in particular have become the shock absorbers of the new market economy and this is especially true in the Middle East.

And, of course, in making these points, Moghadam notes what others have noted as well that laws after 1970 treat women as less than equal to men worldwide in matters of pay, inheritance, legal witness, travel, divorce, marriage and child custody. As one goes down the income hierarchy, the male child gets more and more vis-a-vis the female child of whatever a family has.

Had Moghadam had more space, she could have expanded this analysis easily enough. It seems clear enough where she is heading. After 1970, the ruling classes which collaborated in imposing liberalism and the New World Order all faced the problem that secular intellectuals would not reliably cooperate in a project to re-subordinate women to get them to pick up the slack so that virtually all major politicians everywhere in the world allied themselves with conservative religionists and attempted social engineering with their help. In this country one finds an alliance of the Christian right and the neo-cons. In Europe, Asia and the Middle East, one finds different versions of the same thing. Another related point is that all the regimes in the world have apparently realized that turning to religion would have to be something done very carefully or it could backfire. In an Islamic context, if one valorized Sufism and individual piety, there might be no control mechanism. The same would be true if one allowed the introduction of history, custom and culture as one finds in the Hadith literature, as it would risk giving prestige to the Muhaddithun. This left the only useful bases of religion to be law and ritual and these have become the defining features of religion under neo-liberalism. Of course, even law is dangerous; there are many women lawyers, so the kind of law promoted is law based in literalist readings of texts, readings removing the discretionary power of judges. In other words, this conception of law works to undercut the use of the court as a way to remedy perceived injustices. If one asks why are there poor starving women in a world filled with wealth, the answer is no longer one bound up in issues of automatic legal redress of a starving individual but one bound up in the general well-being of the society. At this point, scriptural stories come to mind, stories in which the poor are a social necessity, one that gives the wealthy a chance to develop their spirituality by indulging in a bit of charity, etc.

Moghadam in sum covers a lot of ground and raises issues of general interest. From my point of view, her article is useful as it allows one to progress out of it and confront problems such as orientalism which otherwise remains embedded in the more conventional discussion of SAPS. Moghadam in effect is countering the line of argument of Nadia Hijab, an economist and others who support SAPS and more work for women in the Middle East. Hijab would argue that because of Islam the participation of women in the work force in historically Islamically-oriented countries is lower than is commonly found to be the case in the rest of the Third World, this needs to be reformed. Islam, she might also argue, explains

as well why that there is less involvement on the part of Muslim women in either Western or Third World feminist movements, etc. What would Moghadam's response to this be?

One could say-and do so I believe invoking her line of thought-that granted structural adjustments became a phenomenon in the 1970's, leading to the destruction of the middle classes and leading to a rise in the power of conservative religion-ism almost everywhere. At the same time this was happening, in some areas, one can observe a pre-history of neo-liberalism, a pre-history which makes the arrival of the general phase of neo-liberalism after 1970 an opportunity for certain ruling classes to become almost like role models for the rest.

Let me explain what I mean. Largely unrecognized, neo-liberalism as we know it today had a pre-history in what one could call the tribal-ethnic states, the ones most resistant to the idea of allowing the formation of middle classes and the ones most apprehensive about the idea of development. The rulers of such states have generally perpetuated classical liberalism which had arisen in the nineteenth century doing so even when most other countries shifted to developmentalism, doing so sometime after WW 1. A second and perhaps an even more important point concerning tribal ethnic states is that its version of stratification, as the name might suggest, is achieved by maintaining blood-line purity, this in turn maintained by gender apartheid systems and by maintaining sex-role stereotypy. In such regimes, the oppressed poor man is led to believe, it is his country because he is a man while the oppressed poor woman is told her sacred duty is to the home front. As the woman and her family can not afford life without her working and often earning more than the man, the political economy is set up to create a collision between the man and the woman, distracting both thereby from the problems they share from class oppression.

There are 70 or more such tribal-ethnic states in the world spread out over Africa, Asia and the Middle East but including some in Europe, the Americas and the Pacific. Some date back centuries, some are quite recent. There are sub-groups in many other states in addition which make use of similar techniques of stratification. As a general rule, the mass populations of such states are extremely poor although of course the rulers are not. Albania in Europe may serve as an example of a poor society. Its rulers, on the other hand, were always quite well off. However, a few such societies are very wealthy as for example is Switzerland or Belgium, and some are even international powers these including the oil-producing part of the Middle East and the drug producing areas such as Afghanistan. Economy does not explain the choice of strategy as regards political stratification but certainly societies based on rent, like oil rent, certainly are natural candidates to be tribal-ethnic states. Oil wealth, for example, requires only a limited work force. It brings about large state revenues and puts this wealth into a few hands and these are male hands. So in such countries do women work? Statistics concerning work in a number of tribal-ethnic countries defines work as work for money outside the home and the statistics suggest that men do most of the work. What women do is characterized as something they do largely from their duty to religion and to their family as for example in some family business, thus it is not counted as work. This it would seem is the position taken by the statistician, a position one might speculate adopted to minimize the friction by falsifying what is going on. Were the statistician to point out how much women really do, it would irk influential parts of the power structure as it would suggest a failure on the part of the hegemony. But would this line of reasoning explain what was happening among working women in non tribal-ethnic "Muslim Arab states", countries where more women are reported to be working but where

there is nonetheless still some kind of labor deficit? The answer appears to be in the affirmative especially if one adopts a historical approach.

When the 1970's came, the oil states had vast financial reserves and most of the rest of the Arab region was bankrupt. As a result of the imbalance in wealth, at that point, i.e., the 1970's, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were able for the first time to invade countries such as Egypt, Syria and Lebanon opening banks and dictating to the religious establishments what they should be teaching. No such development occurred in Latin America or in any other part of the Third World, regions which had not experienced a 1967 War nor tribal-ethnic state imperialism. In the case of Egypt, Gulf/Saudi money power brought about major legal changes in the late 1970's, e.g., the imposition of the Shar'iah (religious law). The then president of Egypt Anwar al-Sadat could (would) never have brought this transformation about without Saudi money. On one level then, this is how one could deal with the specificity of the Middle East. Rather than emphasizing Islam as an explanation, one could emphasize the factor of the 1967 War and the factor of the imperialism of tribal-ethnic oil states, states sufficiently strong in these particular conditions so as to impose something of their own orientation in the countries which they were exploiting doing so using religion to disguise a forced industrialization. An example of this abusive use of oil wealth power might make the clearer. An example that comes to mind is the story of how the now defunct BCCI Bank with its Pakistani and Gulf money working through the Cairo branch of the Faisal Islamic Bank managed in effect to rob Egyptians of substantial bank deposits. This was a well-known Egyptian horror story of the 1980's parallel to our S & L scandals of the same era. It led to the reining in of the Islamic banks in Egypt and eventually to the prosecution and closure of the BCCI thanks in large part to the investigation of Senator Kerry.

In many respects what Saudi Arabia did in Egypt in destroying the middle classes and undermining the woman worker however is not different in broad outline from what was happening in many other places as well. This was the case sad to say even in the U.S. While in the US one found considerable criticism of the de-industrialization of Detroit and Pittsburgh, critics appear to have failed to emphasize the gender dimension of what was being imposed on these cities very well and perhaps for this reason they could not develop a critical mass of opposition, one which would have been sufficient to halt the process, similarly, in the Egyptian case, the opposition failed as well. Thereafter, it was hard for women to resist. So as a result many Egyptian women decided they had to accept the new parameters of life and try to function within them. In the 1980's, many women veiled. It was hard to fight a market economy and to fight a regime at the same time which doesn't create jobs which pay a living wage. One risked poverty. And while Egyptian women were by no means alone in facing such a challenge, living as they did in a country flooded by money not used for any real development, they were placed in an unusually bad situation. Especially so, since even the opposition to the state, the Muslim Brothers, chose to exploit the gender issue as well. To make matters even worse, in the short term many public sectors positions were closed to veiled women.

To sum up, this paper began as a lament about the underdeveloped nature of social theory as relates to women workers and especially those in the Middle East. To illustrate this, it took up structural adjustment as a theme and attempted to show how it potentially could well serve as a key to understanding the situation of women today all over the world but that for

whatever reasons it is not used that way. The paper then went on to find out why this was not happening. It discovered that much of what was written about SAPS suffered from orientalism. This led to one of the main claims of the paper that the inability of most actually-existing social theory to overcome its orientalism has resulted in a tendency to attribute the problems of women in the Middle East to Islam as opposed to globalization and its programs such as SAPS, this allowing many well meaning people to think the solution to today's problems would be to reform Islam as opposed to reforming the prevailing political economy. I complain then that give or take the odd article by someone such as Valerie Moghadam, social theory is not doing its part here for women's well-being.