



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 10 | Issue 2

Article 22

Nov-2008

Book Review: The Cairo Consensus: Demographics Surveys, Women's Empowerment, and Regime

Lisa Ho

Recommended Citation

Ho, Lisa (2008). Book Review: The Cairo Consensus: Demographics Surveys, Women's Empowerment, and Regime. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(2), 243-244.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss2/22>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

The Cairo Consensus: Demographics Surveys, Women's Empowerment, and Regime Change in Population Policy. Saul Halfon. 2007. Lanham: Lexington Books. 223 pp. (+xix, Index). \$60.00 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Lisa Ho¹

Saul Halfon's *The Cairo Consensus* is an investigatory narrative focused on regime change within international population policy, a change initiated at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo. The rhetoric of international population policy was changed from one focused on demographic targets to one embodying the concept of women's empowerment. The purpose of Halfon's *Consensus* is to uncover the purpose of this change in rhetoric and to demonstrate how this transition has only reached the surface. Halfon seems to suggest that the change in rhetoric within international population policy was prompted by the loss of legitimacy experienced by institutions dealing with population concerns prior to the 1994 Cairo conference. The framework that guided the conference was based upon the concept of "women's empowerment," a framework that focused upon the needs of the individual instead of the fulfillment of demographic goals. Additionally, Halfon indicates that the significance of this change in rhetoric lies in the fact that it has been characterized as a consensus – a consensus that had been made possible through discourses, technical practices, and institutional practices. More specifically, Halfon concludes that these practices are part of a network he labels the "socio-technical" network. The "socio-technical" network introduced in this discussion of population policy is articulated as a process that utilizes scientific research to act as the driving force behind social policies such as those that focus on population.

Halfon's *Consensus* is divided into two significant sections on population discourses and technical practices in the population network. Within these two divisions, Halfon goes into detail about relevant subtopics such as "Re-Configuring Women's Empowerment: From Politics to Planning" within the population discourses section and "Standardizing Surveys: Building Consensus through Technical Practice" within the technical practices section. In his analysis, Halfon presents a mixture of figures, tables, and portions of surveys that were derived from information from various institutions that deal with population issues, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and research programs like the World Fertility Survey (WFS). Halfon also includes brief discussions of philosophical concepts such as Judith's Butler's theory of gender as a performance and Michel Foucault's work on systems of power.

One of the most intriguing arguments that Halfon makes in *Consensus* is how, even though Cairo conference was regarded as a consensus agreement among international actors in the realm of population policy, there was still much discontent circulating below the surface. For example, within the "socio-technical" network there were measures taken to have a singular notion about what "women's empowerment"

¹ Lisa Ho is an Undergraduate Ethnic Studies Major with a concentration in Asian American Studies and Women's Studies Major at California State University-Fullerton.

meant especially within the context of population policy. Halfon dedicates a great deal of attention to this attempt and to how international organizations have used scientific research on reproductive health to create a singular notion within the international community of what was needed in to improve reproductive health.

One of my main concerns with Halfon's *Consensus* is that although he offers a rich discussion about the conceptualization of women's empowerment in the context of international relations, he does not complete this discussion, particularly at the end where such a conclusion is necessary. For example, although Halfon does offer some possible future inquires about woman's empowerment within population policy, he leaves the reader unfulfilled in this area of his analysis. The problem is that he does not bring this discussion full circle, which allows the book to end on an unfulfilled note. Another concern with the book is that there are moments where Halfon is not entirely clear in his use of some concepts, such as the "socio-technical network" which is never explicitly defined but is discussed rather gradually. In addition, Halfon's utilization of Foucault is varied and not focused; it is not clear what part of Foucault's work is being used for his analysis. Halfon's goals are ambitious, which works to his favor especially in his rich discussion of the conceptualization of woman's empowerment and its history within the international community. However, his ambition also bombards the reader with an array of political and philosophical theories that can overwhelm.

What is effective about Halfon's *Consensus* is that it takes a concentrated focus on how Third World women have been marginalized by institutions that promote reproductive health in order to align themselves with international values – values that have been largely influenced by Western culture. This influence then takes precedence over the cultural norms, values, and practices that inform the lives of women across the globe. Halfon's book is a critique of international institutions that dictate population policies that are put into use within the global community, policies that do not take into consideration the different circumstances that women inhabit around the world. Halfon reminds us that we need to be critical of institutions that try to impose a universal rhetoric and uncover the purpose of such a universal policy adoption. Halfon's work acts as another significant contribution to the study of postcolonialism because of his ability to carefully dissect population policies that have placed women around the world at a disadvantage during institutions' attempts to achieve reproductive health. This dissection exposes the supposed "neutrality" of international governmental institutions.

Halfon is purposeful with his rhetoric when he frames the consensus brought forth in Cairo as a metaphor, in order to illustrate his critique of international population policy planning processes. This encourages the reader to carefully consider the purpose of Halfon's analysis, including how it strives to expose the conflicts hidden behind the "consensus" of the 1994 Cairo population conference.

The Cairo Consensus can be utilized in Women's Studies courses that focus on reproductive policies and feminism within the international community. Also, Halfon's work would be helpful to those international relations scholars whose work is centered upon women in the context of reproductive health. Individuals who are interested in public policy planning with regard to women's issues may also find Halfon's book helpful.