

FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education

Volume 2 | Issue 3

Article 3


2015

BOOK REVIEW: Ridge, Natasha. (2014). Education and the Reverse Gender Divide in the Gulf States: Embracing the Global, Ignoring the Local. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 216 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8077-5561-7.

Fawziah Al-bakr

King Saud University, Saudi Arabia, fawziah2009@live.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://preserve.lehigh.edu/fire>

 Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Al-bakr, F. (2016). BOOK REVIEW: Ridge, Natasha. (2014). Education and the Reverse Gender Divide in the Gulf States: Embracing the Global, Ignoring the Local. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 216 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8077-5561-7.. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*, 2(3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.18275/fire201502031088>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education by an authorized editor of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.

BOOK REVIEW: Ridge, Natasha. (2014). Education and the Reverse Gender Divide in the Gulf States: Embracing the Global, Ignoring the Local. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 216 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8077-5561-7.

Abstract

BOOK REVIEW: Ridge, Natasha. (2014). *Education and the reverse gender divide in the Gulf States: Embracing the global, ignoring the local.* **New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 216 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8077-5561-7.**

Keywords

Middle Eastern Studies, Educational Achievement, Gender, Social Change

Cover Page Footnote

Fawziah Al-Bakr, College of Education, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Email: falbaker@ksu.edu.sa

BOOK REVIEW: Ridge, Natasha. (2014). *Education and the Reverse Gender Divide in the Gulf States: Embracing the Global, Ignoring the Local*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 216 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8077-5561-7.

Fawziah Al-Bakr¹

King Saud University, Saudi Arabia

This book is the culmination of five years of research and experience that started in September 2011 when the author, Dr. Natasha Ridge, moved to the United Arab Emirates to head the Sheikh Saud Bin Saqer Al Qasimi Foundation for policy research. The author writes, “As I worked with Emirati students and read the Western newspapers and reports about the Gulf, I could not help but notice the vast gap between daily realities lived out by the people of the region and the way they were portrayed by the Western academics and the foreign press. In particular, the narrative of the oppressed Gulf female and the corresponding oppressive Gulf male rang increasingly hollow” (p. vii).

The author notes that gender as a unit of analysis seems to be of increasingly less interest to the West. In universities across the United States, Australia and Europe, women’s studies courses are in decline. As girls continue to surpass boys, discussions about girls’ education become passé and the academic rise of females, vis-à-vis males, is now common knowledge in the West. What is less known is that this rise is no longer confined only to these countries. Women and girls are outperforming their male counterparts in academic achievement and attainment across the globe, from Latin America to China to Eastern Europe. Nowhere, however, do gender gaps more greatly favor females than in the resource-rich countries of the Arabian Gulf (Fryer & Levitt, 2010; World Bank, 2013).

The rise of female attainment in the Gulf is a reality that does not resonate well with the Western narrative of the oppressed and disadvantaged Arab female. As such, this phenomenon is scarcely mentioned in academic articles and international agencies’ reports or in local policy documents of Ministries of Education (MOE). The author argues here in favor of expanding the definition of gender to encompass both men and women. She states, “The current framing of gender, as limited to women, obscures big-picture trends in gender dynamics and prevents policymakers and educationalists from being able to examine the wider range of issues now relating to gender” (p. 5). As we see girls becoming increasingly educated across the globe, we

¹*Correspondence:* College of Education, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Email: falbaker@ksu.edu.sa

are also seeing stagnation and in some countries a decline, in both relative and real terms, in boys' educational attainment and employment figures (Autor & Wasserman, 2013; Baker & LeTende, 2005).

This book aims to address the issues of gender and education in the context of resource-rich monarchies of the Arabian Gulf. The book focuses on Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Yemen is excluded as it does not share the same history and resources. These resource-rich Gulf States, while having different levels of natural resources, have all built impressive physical and social infrastructure using revenue derived from natural resources. All are struggling with the issue of low male participation in higher education and poor performance of males on international and national assessments.

The book begins with an overview of the development of mass education in each of the Gulf States, providing important historical, political, and cultural context. Chapter 2 examines the rise of girls in the region and their quantitative and qualitative success. Chapter 3 considers the role that the pursuit of modernity plays in perpetuating the current gender divide. Chapter 4 considers boys and their very different educational journeys since the discovery of oil. Complicating both the modernization and gender agenda, however, is the nationalization agenda that has come into a greater force in the last ten years. Chapter 5, therefore, examines how efforts to create jobs for nationals have created further disincentive for males in education. Chapter 6 examines the private pecuniary, nonpecuniary and social returns to education and explores how there are very real returns to education at all levels, making a strong case for males (and females) to continue their education. Chapter 7 concludes with a discussion about the continuing relevance of gender in the region in regards to education and the labor market in particular.

In Chapter 2, the author goes into detail to examine the root of the distorted image of women in the Gulf, portrayed as being veiled, submissive, of a luxurious harem, speechless, or oppressed with no identity. She shows how this occurs in academia, not just the daily press (p. 41), leading readers to believe that Muslim women everywhere are similar. This failure to distinguish between Muslim Arabs and non-Arab Muslims, as well as distinguish between Muslim Arab groups, can result in the creation of either dangerously inaccurate stereotypes (Bullock, 2002) or the call for cultural relativism wherein human rights violations are ignored in the name of culture and religion. Some of this is evidenced in the recently established Sharia courts of the United Kingdom (Waters, 2013). The Arab woman is framed as being oppressed by male-dominated societies with religious laws and (cultural) values that position her as less than a "full person, unable to make decisions about anything from marriage to public participation" (p. 41). However, conservative interpretation of Islam within the traditional Ulama discourse reflects only one interpretation of Islam and its views on women. Different interpretations of Islam are not accounted for in many international development reports, nor do these documents present the possibility that given the choice, some women may not desire a life aligned with Western projected preferences for female development (Sidani, 2005).

In her discussion of gender, education and modernity in Chapter 3 (pp. 61-79), Ridge points out that constant desire to be seen as the biggest or the best by governments in the region, as a whole and within, hinders substantive development across the region. This refusal to acknowledge any flaws or weaknesses in these countries prevents nations from addressing real issues such as the poor attainment and persistence of males in education. Although boys and men are a casualty of international and regional modernity and development discourse, it is important to note that girls and women are also negatively impacted by the same discourse. The neo-liberal view of development propagated by inter-governmental organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, and the World Economic Forum (WEF) (Scholte, 2005) does not allow for nuanced examinations of issues

surrounding gender. As the chief concern of these organizations is to enhance economic activities and GDP, there is little concern for the very real structural and social inequalities that women face across the region (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013; Stromquist, 2012). By reducing education to merely an input for growth and gender equity to enrollment rates or other easily quantitative measures, governments across the region are empowered to declare great success and gender parity (or greater) for women at all levels of education. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are incentivized to make much of the fact that women are working in a mixed-sex environment, studying for whatever they are qualified, traveling without a male companion, and inheriting more than an eighth of their husband's estate, among other issues deeply embedded in Gulf societal structure.

As described by the author, the ruling elite of the Gulf are savvy politicians (p. 78). They know the language the West wants to hear regarding women and modernization, and they use this to their own advantage. At the 2013 bid in Paris for Dubai to host the World Expo, the committee was surprised by an address given by HRH Princess Haya, the wife of the ruler of Dubai. It was a shrewd and calculated move on the part of the government of Dubai to send a powerful message of modernity through using a woman. I would argue with the author, however, that Princess Haya was used because she was not a local Emirate girl. She is the daughter of King Hussein of Jordan, exempting her (somehow) from the GCC's conservative values and traditions for women. I also would argue with the author on the extent to which the descriptions of the foreign press and others reports do not really represent the reality of a huge sector of women who live in the largest country of the GCC, Saudi Arabia (KSA). In KSA, women are under the power of male guardianship and cannot in real terms make any decisions without male consent.

Women in the GCC, including KSA have made good use of the advantages access to education has provided them, however. Restrictions on women working, especially in the early years after the discovery of oil, meant that many bright and talented women, who in a different time or place might have been something else, became teachers. This has supported girls' academic success nationally since many studies indicate that students do better when taught by teachers from their own community (Hannum & Park, 2002; Shediak & Samman, 2010). I would add, however, that social control of the women's movement within local communities in the GCC prevents them from enjoying all that this success offers. This leaves them with lots of time but fewer choices in how to spend it besides studying. Boys, in contrast, are supported by cultural values to go out and explore things, leaving them with little time and energy to study! Also, as stated by the author, because men had far more employment options nationally from the beginning, very few went into teaching (p. 79).

In Chapter 4, entitled "Leaving the Boys Behind," the author outlines the globally shared phenomenon of females around the world (including the GCC) out-performing males in attainment and achievement. In Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, girls both outperform and outlast boys across all levels of education. Boys also performed worse on all international assessments tests (PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS) and country-level examinations (pp. 82-84). Different reasons are discussed: poor quality foreign teachers, the availability of quality private education attended by children of powerful people who no longer attend public schools (p. 161), and the work of international organizations, focusing on women and girls, portrayed as deprived of education and employment and held back by traditional, dominated societies. As a result, boys and men are neglected, marginalized, and primarily portrayed as hindrances and obstacles to be overcome, rather than people with their own unique set of problems. I would also add that some cultural elements, such as men's mistakes being tolerated and excused by parents and tribal leaders may strongly influence this phenomenon. As a result, boys are less interested in hard work.

In Chapters 6 and 7, pecuniary and non-pecuniary returns to education are discussed and research-based strategies to improve boys' education are outlined. Examples include improving the quality of teaching in preparatory and secondary boys' schools, introducing practical curricular subjects, and holding schools accountable for identifying and engaging at-risk students.

With 132 pages of references and years of searching, the author clearly invested so much in this valuable book that discusses issues hardly touched by local academics or local authorities. Dr. Ridge presents serious issues facing the educational systems in the GCC countries. Due to the nature of cultural issues discussed, however, some indigenous, home-grown causes may not be apparent. In addition certain generalizations that the author makes to the GCC countries may not apply to Saudi Arabia, the most conservative of all GCC countries.

References

- Autor, D., & Wasserman, M. (2013). *Wayward Sons: The Emerging Gender Gap in Labor Markets and Education*. Washington, DC: Third Way. Retrieved from economics.mit.edu/files/8754.
- Baker, D., & LeTendre, G. (2005). *National Differences, Global Similarities: Current and Future World Institutional Trends in Schooling*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bullock, K. (2002). *Rethinking Muslim women and the veil: Challenging historical and modern stereotypes*. Surrey, UK: The International Institute of Islamic Thought. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1558/imre.v16i4.512>.
- Fryer, R., & Levitt, S.D. (2010). An Empirical Analysis of the Gender Gap in Mathematics. *American Economics Journal: Applied Economics*, 2(2), 210-240. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1257/app.2.2.210>.
- Hannum, E., & Park, A. (2002). *Children's Educational Engagement in Rural China* (Draft). Retrieved from economics.ouls.ox.ac.uk/15132/1/engagement.pdf.
- Monkman, K., & Hoffman, L. (2013). Girls' Education: The Power of Policy Discourse. *Theory and Research in Education*, March 2013, 11(1), 63-84. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1477878512468384>.
- Scholte, J.A. (2005). *The Sources of Neoliberal Globalization*. Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. Retrieved from <http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/search/9E1C54CEEB19A314C12570B4004D0881?OpenDocument>.
- Shediak, R., & Samman, H. (2010). *Meeting the Employment Challenge in the GCC: The Need for a Holistic Strategy*. Abu Dhabi & Dubai: Booz & Company. Retrieved from http://www.strategyand.pwc.com/media/file/Meeting_the_Employment_Challenge_in_the_GCC.pdf.
- Sidani, Y. (2005). Women, Work, and Islam in Arab Societies. *Women in Management Review*, 20(7), 498-512. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09649420510624738>.
- Stromquist, N. (2012). Theory and Ideology in the Gender Proposals of the World Bank's education strategy 2020. *Education Strategy in the Developing World: Revising the World Bank's Education Policy. International Perspectives on Education and Society*, 16, 133-149. DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/s1479-3679\(2012\)0000016011](http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/s1479-3679(2012)0000016011).
- Waters, A.M. (2013, December 21). Sharia Law: Extremism the Government Ignores. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/anne-marie-waters/sharia-law-extremism-the-b_2668212.html.

World Bank. (2013). *Opening doors: Gender equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa*. Washington, DC: The World Bank. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-9763-3>.

About the Author

Fawziah Al Bakr is a professor of the Sociology of Education at the Department of Educational Policies at the College of Education, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She received her Ph.D. from the Institute of Education, University of London. Her thesis discussed the role of education in the mobility of Saudi women in the labor market. In 2002-2003, Dr. Al-Bakr served as a visiting scholar at Georgetown University where she carried out a project to explore the latest trends in the sociology of education. She is working on her fourth book *Sociology of Education in the 21st Century: Questions of Globalization, Democracy and Human Rights*. Her major foci are women, education and gender equality. Dr. Al-Bakr currently serves as the head of two research projects funded by King Saud University.