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Transforming Female Identities: Women's Organizational Forms  
in West Africa (review)

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admonished her to "stop blaming the Islamic Republic for all our problems" (277). I would like here to reiterate that admonition. Nafisi seems to forget that many of the problems her students encountered were products of a deeply traditional, patriarchal society coming abruptly face-to-face with modernity and all that it implies. She tends to overstate the pre-revolutionary status of women as one when women lived "under laws that were among the most progressive in the world regarding women" (27). In fact, family law under the rule of the Shah remained governed by *Shari'a* (Islamic law), with only slight modifications brought about by the Family Protection Act. Laws governing divorce, alimony, child custody, payment of "blood money," testimony in a court of law, and other issues were all governed by *Shari'a* then as they are now, although under the Islamic Republic they have been admittedly carried out in more draconian ways.

Nafisi similarly overlooks the fact that in pre-revolutionary days the women who enjoyed the benefits of pursuing educations and professions were a relatively small number of women, mostly from the elite, upper and middle-classes. One would never guess from reading this book that Iranian women's educational opportunities have expanded, that they today enjoy an exceptionally high rate of literacy, are the beneficiaries of one of the most successful family planning programs in the world, and constitute sixty-three per cent of university entrants and roughly fifteen per cent of university faculty members. Nor would one guess that Iran has a female vice-president, a female advisor to the president and thirteen female members of parliament, and that women are at the forefront of a nascent, widespread democratic movement in Iran. So little is known in the West about these advances of Iranian women that it is small wonder that Shirin Ebadi's winning of the Nobel Peace Prize was met by a worldwide "Shirin who?"

Given the stereotyping of Iranian women in the West, especially in the United States, it would have been far more instructive for Western readers if Nafisi had placed her *personal* story within the much wider and more profound context of the long history of the Iranian people's struggle for democracy and human rights, a struggle that has reached an unprecedented pitch in face of increasingly repressive governance by the powerful conservative players in Iranian social and political life. As true as Nafisi's personal story might be, her personal setbacks in no way negate the irreversible progress that the democratic reform movement, led so significantly by women, has made in modern Iranian history.

**Nesta Ramazani**

**Eva E. Rosander.** *Transforming Female Identities: Women's Organizational Forms in West Africa.* Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1997. Pp. 229.

*Transforming Female Identities: Women's Organizational Forms in West Africa* is an analysis of women's organizational forms outside the domestic space in West Africa. At the heart of this study is the premise that African women, especially West African women, are subjugated to male power and authority which stifle and dominate women's political, economic, religious, and social spheres. These women are thus relegated to the realms of marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. Consequently, the authors are of the opinion that African women can only rise out of the ashes of male domination if women's associations really serve the needs of all women. Through these organizations, the authors argue, marginalized and neglected women can achieve empowerment, unity of purpose, and ultimately attain political power in their communities. The collection raises important issues about the contribution of women's associations to the development of female identity and enlarged space for women in a predominantly patriarchal society.

The book is divided into four sections. The first section deals with the contributions of formal associations such as factory workers' unions in urban Nigeria and women's organizations in rural Ghana. Prudence Woodford-Berger examines collective identities and political ideology in Ghana. She contends that despite the importance and status of women in the matrilineal Akan society in various capacities, such as queen mothers, and traders, Akan women, and indeed Ghanaian women at large, are still under the yoke of male oppression and relegated to the doldrums of political institutions. Woodford-Berger chastises the 31 December Women's Movement as an organization that sought to amass support for the ruling government rather than cater to the specific problems of women. She also negates the monumental role that the 31 December Movement played in ensuring legislative changes affecting women's rights in marriage and inheritance. Woodford-Berger also poses a major question: whether sex-related or gender-ascribed similarities or difference are or could be converted into a more or less conscious and motivating unity of purpose for women to bring about strategic change in the feminist sense (48).

In the subsequent articles, Hussaina Abdullah and Gunilla Andrae reply to Woodford-Berger. Although Abdullah compares unionized and non-unionized factory workers in Kano and Andrae focuses on a female factory worker who is an active feminist in Lagos, both authors point out that women exhibit multiple identities according to their current priorities and the specific problem that confronts them. Consequently, the issue of gender mobilization as a common platform for women to fight for social equality is unrealistic. The role of other variables such as class, marital status, age, and religion must be taken into account.

The second section deals with the material and immaterial resources that women's informal associations can provide their members. Anastasie Mckounde gives an account of the establishment of a women's group (Nsaw Mboum) in Cameroon. Mekounde argues that Nsaw Mboum has benefited Ngaoundere women by enlarging their physical space beyond the confines of their homes and teaching them some income-generating activities. The importance of reaching outside the home is also stressed in Ndeye Coumba's comparative study of women in the Diourbel region of Senegal and female fishmongers in Dakar. She observes that women fish sellers who spend more time working outside the home are independent and able to earn more money than rural women who remain inconspicuous inside their homes. Nevertheless, these enterprising fishmongers face a huge obstacle to total empowerment namely, illiteracy. Thus, Ndeye's case studies highlight the impossibilities of generalizing about female conditions and gender relations. Ndeye's work is buttressed by Jasmine Jessen's case study in Mali, where the intervention of urban healthcare authorities has resulted in changes in female ideas about themselves as midwives and mothers-to-be.

The third section concentrates on women's religious associations in Nigeria and Senegal. Sister Esther Shebi and Ulrika Erlandsson focus on the Fatima Sisters, who live a life of celibacy, devoting their time and energy to the spiritual and social needs of their community. The Fatima Sisters face a major obstacle: their celibacy. In a society where women are viewed as mothers and child bearers, the renouncement of motherhood by this association is interpreted as their subtle means of declaring that they do not need men. Yet, Sister Shebi also states that the nuns have chosen Jesus (a man) as their master. Why? Does this choice make women in this community feel any better? The other side of the religious spectrum is examined in the works of Penda Mbow and Eva Rosander. Both authors deliberate on women's participation in Sufi associations. Although these organizations provide a platform for women's social and spiritual activities, they also perpetuate the subjugation of women by excluding them from rituals, such as singing of religious songs and the pronouncement of the vow of obedience to the marabout. Nonetheless, Mbow still advocates female participation in religious associations. She believes that these organizations could serve as a possible forum for the development of other political and religious activities which could ultimately lead to the transformation of female identities from the domestic space to a wider arena.

The perspectives of Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Lisbet Holtedahl, and Mamoudou Djingui conclude this book. Ampofo investigates how young girls in Ghana find complementary ways to provide for themselves and solve their economic problems. These young women

become mistresses of men who pay for their services in cash, food, or clothes. Through this study, the author draws attention to the irresponsibility, idleness, and dominance of Ghanaian men. Holtedahl expands on the issue of male domination in Cameroon. The young women described in Holtedahl's article do not commercialize sexuality, rather they try to find new fields of income-generating activities and new female spaces which will enable them reach outside their local female community. This miracle is to be made possible through western education. Mamoudou Djingui's contribution ends this book. He concentrates on how the organization of new economic, social, and religious spaces among the Islamic Fulbe people of north Cameroon have resulted in the restriction of women's mobility, as their daily life is confined to the home. Consequently, they have to abstain from their earlier economic activities. Each of these authors grapples with the strategies that some women choose as individuals, outside the collective framework of women's associations. Ultimately, these authors realize that women's informal and formal associations are not spaces for change but reflect the power structure of the society. In a bid to rectify this situation, it is advocated that women find courage and strength in the self-willing of a changing identity as depicted in Holtedahl's account of Muslim and Christian girls in Cameroon.

This collection raises important issues including the centrality of women's organizations to the creation of female identity and women's solidarity. At the same time, there are contradictions. The reader is left wondering whether women's associations are there to sharpen the antagonistic attitude of women toward men or to assist women to realize their potential irrespective of their political, social, religious, or economic circumstances.

**Cyrelene Amoah-Boampong**

**Ellen L. Fleischmann.** *The Nation and its "New" Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement 1920-1948.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. Pp. 335.

Ellen Fleischmann's book, based on her dissertation, is an excellent and timely addition to the growing field of Palestinian social history. Fleischmann's study of the women's movement in Palestine aims to fill a gap in the existing literature on the mandate period in Palestine, from which women are almost completely absent. The surprised response wherever Fleischmann presented her work—that there *was* a Palestinian women's movement and that women were active in the national struggle—indicates just how necessary and relevant this book is (220, note 3).

Focusing on 1920-1948, Fleischmann aims to "bring the women back in," while analyzing their role in the