

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DEBORAH K. VAN DEN HOONAARD and WILL C. VAN DEN HOONAARD, *The Equality of Women and Men: The Experience of the Baha'i Community of Canada*. Douglas, NB: Published by the authors, 2006, 240 p. + appendices + index.

This highly original and engaging book examines how Baha'is in Canada are implementing the equality of men and women, one of their most fundamental teachings. The volume is derived from a survey the authors made in 1995 at the specific behest of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada. The van den Hoonards' study – reportedly the first research of its kind undertaken by any national Baha'i community – is a richly detailed empirical work which systematically explores the equality of men and women in a national Baha'i community. In so doing, the volume serves as a welcome addition to both Baha'i studies and to social science research on gender.

To the immense credit of its authors, both scholars who have consistently produced thoughtful, original and sensitively-executed research, this book begins by acknowledging that developing valid indicators of gender equality is problematic. Rather than advancing such indicators by definitional fiat, they employed an innovative research strategy that involved twelve focus groups, from across Canada, and drawn from various communities which varied in size, location, and ethnic composition. The authors posed this question as a discussion guide: What kinds of questions do Canadian Baha'is think should be included on a questionnaire about the equality of men and women.

The results of their endeavors are a book which provides fascinating information on the diverse orientations that exist among a contemporary community which insists on establishing the equality of women and men as a collaborative effort of both sexes and upon the role of the Baha'i faith in constructions of gender and gender equality.

The van den Hoonards emphasize that their sample of Baha'is did not hold a uniform concept of equality. Consequently, they distinguish between “status quo orientations” which extolled the maintenance of family unity and a traditional, sex-linked division of labour; “orientations of the middle range” that while endorsing gender crossovers (e.g., men's performance of housework; women's participation in paid employment) did not challenge broader societal values or structures; and more “radical

orientations” which, for example, sought to valorize women’s contributions and/or championed women’s right to freedom from coercion, systematic subordination and dependency. They also direct attention to how their respondents could attempt to bolster the “rightfulness” of their preferred worldview by creatively evoking Baha’i writings on equality (e.g., insisting that the statement “Mothers are the educators of their own children” is semantically interchangeable with “All women are the primary educators of all children.”)

This book would seem to provide a useful addition to Knudson-Martin and Mahoney’s research on various types of equality talk (“Language and Processes in the Construction of Equality in New Marriages,” *Family Relations*, vol. 47, 1998). Moreover, given that the participants in the Van den Hoonaards’ focus groups gave relative prominence to discussing equality within the context of the family, this book will be of undoubted interest to family sociologists and others who wish to investigate how ideologies impact the division of family labour. For those who are unacquainted with Baha’i teachings, the book helpfully begins with a brief overview of the role of women in the Canadian Baha’i community and, more broadly, in Baha’i history.

The authors are to be commended for the painstaking way in which their method is detailed in both their text and in a concluding appendix. For example, they provide exacting profiles of the Baha’i communities from which the focus groups were drawn and, refreshingly, direct attention to the dynamics or “careers” of the focus groups on which their study is based, including a detailed examination of the patterns of interaction which emerged between men and women within these groups and a assessment of how these patterns compare with empirical research examining gender differences in verbal and non-verbal communication.

My enthusiasm for this remarkably innovative book is such that it seems almost curmudgeonly to find any fault with it. However, I did wish at times that its authors had been far more parsimonious in their selection of their respondents’ quoted remarks. Although a plethora of such comments are provided, not all of their respondents were equally articulate and the inclusion of their ostensibly unedited and sometimes garbled talk does not always make for compelling reading. For example, one of the male respondents is quoted as saying: “...I know just from working, working a lot with non-Baha’is, I can professionally that, that one thing I don’t know how non-Baha’is perceive it. Maybe, it’s just something that I must but I think they must know. Like, one thing I really notice when a lot of non-Baha’is at this point in time, there’s so much cynicism about, about the institution of marriage and about relationships and there’s often very, sometimes, pretty, a lot of times pretty really, almost, or a lot of times, whatever is considered to be offensive remarks about the role of a husband or a wife or mate, you know” (79).

The authors explicitly note that their research is based on a qualitative research design which attempts to pay “due attention to the ideas and

perspectives generated by the participants of the focus groups” (241) and carefully detail the defining qualities of their methodology. However, even though the method employed undoubtedly allowed the authors to accord pre-eminence to their respondents’ subjective experiences, one wonders if the attainment of this goal would have been in any way fettered by the insertion of an occasional ellipsis into the verbatim comments of their respondents?

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