Theoretical Framework: A Holistic Approach to Women’s Employment

3.1 An encompassing framework

Scholars in disciplines as diverse as economics, sociology, political science, gender studies, anthropology, demography, regional studies, migration studies, and religion studies study women’s employment in Muslim countries or overarching issues. However, little communication between the fields exists and calls for a more encompassing and systematic approach on the issue go back at least three decades, but are still timely (Abu Nasr et al., 1985; Fergany et al., 2006; Hijab, 1988; Kapteijns, 1998; Miles, 2002: 413; Moghadam, 2003: 2; Pettit & Hook, 2005: 780; Syed, 2008: 136). Although this call for a broader and less discipline-focussed approach is not new, no satisfactory theoretical framework has been presented to address the issue at hand so far. Existing theories are not truly holistic in terms of how different levels are related, do not relate general ideas to the factors determining participation, and do not show how to establish whether important explanations might have been left out.

Building on frameworks that range from very broad social theories (e.g. Walby, 2009) to models focussing specifically on Arab women’s employment (e.g. Hijab, 1988) and women in the Middle East (Moghadam, 1998, 2003), I will formulate a more holistic framework for understanding women’s employment. This is done in the context of studying women from Muslim countries, but is not restricted to it. As such it also relates to and draws from the larger ‘Gender and Development’ literature. As the framework starts from two ontological premises and is aimed at explaining employment, these premises and concept will be addressed before discussing the core elements of the framework.
3.2 Diversity and complexity

In line with the discussion in the previous chapter, the framework presented here takes diversity and complexity as its starting points, but does not take a relativist or postmodern position in rejecting generalization whatsoever. It strives to reconcile two seemingly contradictory positions.

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist scholars heavily criticized the androcentric nature of generalization in many studies, especially statistical ones (e.g. Bernard, 1975; Harding, 1986; Jayaratne, 1983; Millman & Moss Kanter, 1975/1987; Oakley & Oakley, 1979). They argued convincingly that those studies either overemphasized the differences between men and women over the differences between people of one sex, or that they generalized results based on the study of males to apply to non-males as well (Millman & Moss Kanter, 1987: 33–5). Similar critiques are found later with regard to differences between black and white women (e.g. Hancock, 2007; Wekker & Lutz, 2001). Currently it seems that history is repeating itself, with Muslim countries and people (in particular women) being the subject of overgeneralization (Davis & Robinson, 2006).

Following their critiques on quantitative research, many feminist scholars have reacted by looking for new epistemological positions such as standpoint feminism and feminist postmodernism, which (to a large extent) rejected generalizations (see Harding, 1997; Spierings, 2010, 2012). Likewise, research methods were developed that were thought to be less androcentric and focused more on individual experience and social constructivism, such as ethnography, focus groups, and case studies (see Burnham et al., 2008; Harding, 1997; Reinharz, 1992).

This ‘discursive and linguistic turn’ and shift to postmodernism has led to a moral claim that diversity is the golden standard (Bottero, 2000; Reinharz, 1992: 252–8). However, as for instance McCall (2005), Harding (e.g. 1986, 1997), and Spierings (2010, 2012) argue, questioning categorizations or identities, and deconstructing stereotypes might be legitimate scientific endeavours and contribute to a better understanding of our society; but researching how power relations are linked to general and normative patterns in society are so as well. Societal structures, norms, and institutions shape the accepted, expected, and rewarded behaviour and preferences of people based on their sex (Duerst Lahti & Kelly, 1995: 18; Mackay, 2004: 110); as such women might not be a uniform group with clearly defined characteristics, but they are ‘a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects.