
Despite its subtitle, Maya Shatzmiller’s book reaches far beyond the territorial and chronological confines of 15th-century Granada. Her focus is not so much on Granada itself as on using the example of this region as an entry point for examination of the broader topic of women’s property rights in the pre-modern Islamic world and beyond. She includes a comparative dimension that stretches back into the classical Mediterranean past, to pre-modern Europe, to the Ottoman empire, and even into the modern day. Granada thus becomes a test case for examining a wide range of issues having to do with female property holding in Islamic law. Shatzmiller is comprehensive in her definition of property rights. She discusses not only tangible assets like real estate and money, but also includes an innovative analysis of women's control over their own bodies, reproduction, breastfeeding, and labor. She gains access to these topics through a close reading of legal discussions of marriage, conversion, inheritance, guardianship, sales, rents, and other contractual matters. The book is methodically organized. Each chapter begins with a close examination of 15th-century Granadan documents which provide case studies that demonstrate particular problems relevant to property. After this micro-analysis, Shatzmiller expands the discussion to include comparative materials related to the issues being considered. She ends each chapter with a formal conclusion in which she sums up her analysis of the Granadan and comparative data, and often reflects on the modern relevance of her findings.

Throughout, Shatzmiller emphasizes the strength of support for female property rights in Islamic law, and she reiterates this support in the conclusion to every chapter. She argues that women’s property rights were real, enforceable and enforced, not merely a legal fiction as some have contended. Alongside the basic right to hold property, Shatzmiller identifies a trio of related female property rights: the right to give and to receive gifts, the right to inherit and to bequeath, and the right to receive a ṣadāq. She shows that many aspects of Islamic law supported female property. For example, absence of the concept of conjugal co-mingling of property gave mature Muslim wives (women old enough to be released from guardianship) independent control of their property. They retained ownership of their property, separately from their husbands, creating situations in which a husband might pay rent to his wife for living with her in her house, or pay his wife to suckle their child. Shatzmiller likewise finds that Islamic laws of inheritance, gift giving, and guardianship favored female property holding, by encouraging the transfer of land and other forms of wealth into the hands of women. The lengthy period of paternal guardianship, which often extended for a number of years even after a young woman was married, encouraged gifts of property to girls. It meant that a father could continue to enjoy the use and profits of the gifted property...
for the long period during which his daughter remained under his guardianship. When she reached maturity, however, the property would become hers to control and to pass on to her own heirs, perhaps again as a gift in order to avoid the divisions inheritance law required.

Shatzmiller takes as her inspiration a collection of ninety-five 15th-century Granadan court documents, mainly dating from the 1480s. She notes that these records show a strikingly high degree of women's involvement, since “ninety-five percent of the documents refer to a female either transacting family and business deals in some capacity, or exercising one or several of her legal entitlements to property” (1). One suspects, of course, that these documents may not reflect the legal transactions of a normal Muslim society, but instead of a people suffering the pressure of an advancing Christian frontier and the stresses of prolonged warfare. Nevertheless, the data presented in these cases are fascinating in their intimate details and legal niceties. They show Granadan women as active players in control of their own property and financial affairs. Shatzmiller’s investigation benefits from the fact that, as she describes it, the population of al-Andalus was “judicially obsessed and litigiously minded” (5), thereby producing plenty of legal materials to consult. As well as the court documents, she also draws data from a wide range of other Andalusi legal sources, many earlier than the 15th century, including books of fiqh, collections of fatāwā and wathāʾiq, ħisba manuals, and records of waqf (or ḥubus) endowments.

The book is structured in three parts. The first, “Rights and Their Acquisition” deals with traditional matters associated with the holding and transfer of real property. It is divided into four chapters, covering respectively the ṣadāq, gifts given between the living (inter vivos), inheritance, and delayed acquisition (postponement until a woman was freed from guardianship). The second section takes on the more adventurous subject of “Body and Soul,” looking in one chapter at the body as property, and in another, at the question of property rights in cases of conversion. The final section addresses “Economy and Class,” with two chapters, one on labor and wages, and the other on sales and loans.

As noted above, after a discussion of Granadan evidence, each chapter turns to comparative material relating to its particular topic. This section is often the longest part of the chapter, and the discussion can be both enlightening and yet methodologically problematic. The jump from micro-analysis of the situation in Granada in the 1480s to the wider world (Shatzmiller draws on studies of women in ancient Greece, imperial Rome, pre-modern Europe, Renaissance Italy, Mamluk Egypt, Ottoman Syria, the modern Arab world, and elsewhere) can be too abrupt. The value and integrity of the comparisons are easily lost in the vast gaps of time, space, and context between the examples. Yet the comparative dimension is often instructive, even didactic, as when Shatzmiller argues for the contemporary relevance of her findings: “the historical experience of the Granadan community offers a model of the strength of women’s property rights and their positive effect on women’s social status and economic progress. The historical evidence demonstrates