

INTRODUCTION

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For this special issue of the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, we set out to review and reflect upon the status of sexuality in Middle East studies. In the process we began to realize that gender is an inescapable part of this discussion and that the distinctions we inherit from feminist and queer theory conceived within the North/South divide must be transformed when considering the Middle East or the global South more broadly. We must consider gender, then, within the entanglements of sex and sex endowed with gender. This realignment along the political and epistemological axes of our material examples is perfectly consistent with the insights of Michel Foucault (1980), who, in a 1977 interview, recalled that Western feminism had in the nineteenth century recentered its political claims on labor, rights, and the political economy of gender rather than on sexuality, feeling, and the sentimentality of the private sphere, which had been the localities of femininity. Likewise, gay rights were born out of a hyper visibility of the sexual—not for an essential reason but because the social taboo on representing gay male sexuality was the modality of power. To change this, sexual visibility became the crux of social justice claims in the gay rights movement, but, as we have seen within our lifetimes, the tactics, issues, and modalities of sexual dissent have shifted from a focus on visibility and representation into a host of overlapping projects of freedom that have disseminated gay rights into kinship, citizenship, and property that are entangled with gender and that complicate traditional conceptions of human rights by challenging the prevailing power to define the human and its relations.

In the pathbreaking study *Women with Moustaches, Men without Beards*, Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) exposes the interconnections between modernist projects of nation making in the Middle East and gendered conceptions of sexuality to argue that modern gender and sexuality have

a common origin in national imaginations of the norm and its deviance. The modern nation state comes into being in part through its cultivation of gender and sexuality—both as a repressed cost of modernity and as a newly activated homophobia. Najmabadi's work probes the question of feminist lineages within sexuality studies especially where influenced by queer theory. In this issue, we review *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900*, Dror Ze'evi's (2006) equally pioneering study of the Ottoman construction of sexuality and gender through a diverse set of discourses from medicine to literature; this work covers three centuries of the discursive production of modern gender and sexuality by means of scientific, cultural, and juridical knowledges. Both these histories clarify a multivalent conversation between East and West, North and South that cannot be reduced to mere influence or importation of Western science and social attitudes. Rather, these discourses emerge coevally to affect subject constitution, notions of desire and communitarian practice; works like Najmabadi's and Ze'evi's corroborate the dissemination of the discourse of sexuality in the development of the modern biopolitical state in the Middle East. In doing so, they contest the view, popular even among some scholars, that contemporary forms of sexual identity are inherently alien to the Middle East by demonstrating a wide array of evidence indicating that biopolitics is a global affair. Their work heightens our conviction that we need more material studies to discover the specificities of Middle East subjective constitution under the modern state form.

Ghassan Makarem's contribution exemplifies the complex negotiation between local and global discourses traced by the feminist historiographies of Najmabadi and Ze'evi. Makarem's narrative of the rise of HELEM, a Lebanese lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights organization, is deeply inflected by the theoretical debates both past and present that are now standard fare in transnational queer studies; however, his account dissolves imaginary boundaries between activist and scholarly writing to show that HELEM does not flatly import an alien theory to a local context but that subjects in action rework identities, concepts, and theoretical models in situ and as a direct response to specific juridical, historical, and theological exigencies of the present. We single out the social movement around civil marriage in Lebanon as a salient example of the unexpected ways that gender, sexuality, creed, and

economic realities forge new political alliances that demand complex contrapuntal—not intersectional—analysis. Makarem’s work theorizes this complexity from the specificity of the local scene.

The three research articles collected here showcase young scholars and highlight work related to a dissertation-in-progress and two forthcoming books. In line with the demand for contrapuntal and detailed analysis, Paul Amar argues for broadening “the imagination of Middle East masculinity studies by creating a larger map of discourses that constitutes the objects of a more critical expanded field.” Amar’s contribution exhibits this expanded field by tracking the ways that international human rights discourse has given rise to new instrumentalities of the security state; in this, his work shows once again the entanglement of gender and sexuality in modern biopolitical definition. Pardis Mahdavi and Christine Sargent draw on ethnographic research in the United Arab Emirates to provide a critique of global rhetoric on human trafficking and an analysis of the ways in which the assumptions of that rhetoric are taken up by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) directed to assist trafficked women, particularly in the context of the United Arab Emirates. They highlight the simultaneous association of trafficked persons with female sexual victims and the erasure of the impacts of trafficking and structures of inequality related to labor migration on men. In so doing, Mahdavi and Sargent call into question the ways in which assumptions about femininity and masculinity hinder a broader understanding of both the impact of trafficking and of labor dynamics in the Gulf state. Finally, Jared McCormick provides an ethnographic investigation into the figure of the bear in Lebanon and Syria in order to analyze the ways in which hypermasculinity is deployed by various actors in relation to a growing gay tourism industry. Complementing this set of articles, the issue also includes book reviews of recent works that have emerged in the field and collectively demonstrate the growing importance of sexuality studies.

One of the challenges posed by Middle East sexuality studies is a return to concepts and debates seemingly put to rest by critical consensus; to arrive at more robust descriptions of contemporary contexts and nuanced analyses of sexuality this return becomes necessary. Two of the articles collected here take up questions of gender primarily through the lens of masculinity, yet they do so in ways significantly different from

earlier moments in masculinity studies. Amar pays close attention to institutional networks and global discourses of masculinity. McCormick highlights the imbrication of sex, gender, and sexuality as he explores the relationship between identification and constructs of “gay” and “bear” in the Lebanese context, and analyzes the implications of this embrace of hypermasculinity for our understandings of both sexuality and gender. Mahdavi and Sargent address assumptions about both femininity and masculinity in global rhetoric and policy on trafficking in their analytic and ethnographic intervention into discourses that assume that female bodies and never male ones can be trafficked.

All three authors are also positioned against racist discourses about Middle East gender configurations. Amar consistently returns to pathological masculinity as a default response in the West when social justice claims are made on behalf of social movements or in the name of the people. His refreshing opening moves provide an incisive reminder of the salience of gender as a discursive tool in the global politics of North/South relations. Mahdavi and Sargent raise the question of race in the transnational and local scenes of trafficking and argue that gender and race act as blinders, preventing an accurate understanding of migrant labor and trafficking. The tradition of Orientalism in U.S. geopolitical interests and manipulation of the region has always worked through a set of gendered and eroticized metaphors that have real-world effects and cast a long shadow that cannot be ignored by scholarly work that aims to read the material realities of the region. This shadow affects NGOs, economic policies, and the emergence of what Amar calls the “human security state,” which invokes the Orientalist civilizational mission to instrumentalize the rescue of “secularized human subjects, particularly those of sexualized gender and racialized class” as a new form of legitimacy; according to Amar, international humanitarian agendas now serve as moral cover for the brutality of the modern security state. This is another reason why work in sexuality studies in the Middle East cannot do away with gender. McCormick’s piece likewise takes up the global and notions of race and gender in relation to tourism and consumption, exploring the commodification of particular forms of masculinity and their deliberate associations with the Middle East as well as with neo-imperialist fantasies of danger in the exotic East fueling tourist desires.

These articles also represent new ethnographies of sexuality and

gender in the Middle East, emerging from a moment when the opening of an area of inquiry via queer theory and postcolonial studies has converged with a new perception that ethnographic research on sexuality is indeed possible in the region. In this sense, the pieces represent informed area studies scholarship that describes its objects richly while maintaining theoretical links to various innovative waves of postcolonial theorizing within the authors' disciplinary homes. This is not an empiricism that attempts to explain regional "problems" in relation to either demography or simplified notions of cultural practice. Rather, here we find rich description informed by scholarly choices grounded in personal experience and field research; in other words, a critically informed ethnography. It is our hope that the kind of work we feature here, which combines theoretically inflected attention to material specificity with an awareness of the long and geographically diverse discursive genealogies of our shared concepts, can inspire further detailed readings of local contexts and contestations in ongoing research into Middle East sexuality studies.

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