

Going Transnational: On Mainstreaming Middle East Gender Studies

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Middle East gender studies is a lively and fascinating field. With two very different journals (*Hawwa* and *Journal of Middle East Women Studies*) and dozens of panels at the Middle East Studies Association Annual Conference and the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies, we have come a long way over the last two decades. Women's, queer, and masculinity studies are now part of how we understand gender studies in the region. Middle East gender studies does, however, remain marginal in two fields—Middle East studies *and* gender studies. It is normally assigned to the end of a Middle East studies conference (“and gender”), or, conversely, to the end of a gender studies conference or edited volume (“and elsewhere”). But can a discussion of technology or World War I in the modern Middle East weave in insights gained from gender or queer studies? And can a discussion of women's movements or women's labor incorporate what we know about the Middle East? I believe that more can be done to mainstream gender in Middle East studies, and to mainstream the Middle East in gender studies. Transnational history is a particularly promising direction for this endeavor.

In the last two decades, gender studies has shifted toward the mainstream of Middle East historiography. If in the mid-1990s, new works by Margot Badran and Beth Baron seemed extremely cutting edge and innovative (in many ways, they still do),¹ today gender is central to our understanding of the Egyptian *effendiyya* and nation-building, Iranian modernity, and the *nahḍa*.² Our narrative of colonial and semicolonial encounters now takes into account, for example, how notions of homoerotic desire shifted in Iran, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire. We now integrate into our studies on national modernity the question of how Middle Eastern men thought about their bodies and desires; how they refashioned what they ate and what they wore; how they thought about marital life and fatherhood.³ We now know that the *nahḍa* was not merely a male enterprise and that women did not discover their rights only through Qasim Amin.⁴ Our challenge from here is to further mainstream gender in Middle East studies. What I would like to see is for research that does not take gender as its main category of analysis to integrate these kinds of insights. How did the fact that women debated their rights in the late 19th-century Lebanese and Egyptian press affect political thinking and processes? How did changing understandings of male sexuality affect the construction of public space or understandings of democracy?

This is what I am trying to accomplish in my own work on the League of Nations. Studying the League of Nations Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children, I realized that the question of whether to regulate prostitution was one layer in the interaction between the Middle East and the League—when Syrian petitioners demanded that French Mandate authorities be held accountable for the network of regulated brothels operating in the Levant; when the Advisory Committee labeled Egypt a hub for traffic in women and forced the Egyptian police into action; or when a League investigator

searched Middle East ports for underage traffic victims. Similarly, integrating race and colonialism in their Middle East and North African contexts into our analysis of the Advisory Committee highlights the limitation of interwar transnational feminist activism. Here, the focus on gender and sexuality enables me to examine how the Middle East was seen from Geneva and how the League appeared from Homs, Haifa, and Beirut—issues that can be taken up by historians of the Mandate periods for other aspects as well, whether labor, drugs, or arms trafficking.⁵

The second challenge is to provincialize Europe in the study of women and gender.⁶ One way of doing so is through transnational history. By transnational history, I mean a history of the formation of networks of exchange and influence that transcend national or imperial boundaries, and one that, unlike *international* history, involves nonstate actors. I find this conceptual framework particularly useful for understanding why similar ideas are discussed in different places at around the same time (very often with different outcomes). It also enables us to shift away from Western Europe as a starting point (first Europe and then elsewhere, as Chakrabarty puts it)⁷ and toward the notion of global transformations of, for example, understandings of sexuality, regulated prostitution, and romantic love.

Western understandings and norms undoubtedly came to be hegemonic due to colonial political and military power. However, juxtaposing them with non-European understandings and norms provides us with a more global and complete vision of historical change: can we understand suffrage in Britain without understanding the claim of British feminists to humanize the empire by uplifting their Indian sisters and banning satee?⁸ Can we historicize the French movement to abolish regulated prostitution without considering this movement's criticism of French-regulated brothels in Morocco and the Levant?⁹ Can we tell the story of international women's congresses without incorporating the experiences and critique of Middle Eastern feminists, before and after they were invited to take part?¹⁰ Of course we can, and historians have done just that. In an interconnected global world, which our planet increasingly became starting in the mid-19th century, however, what it meant to be a feminist, or how World War I transformed modern masculinity,¹¹ was not bounded to national or imperial borders. For the first time in human history, Arabic-, Turkish-, and Persian-speaking women could read texts produced outside of the region and have their thoughts and ideas read thousands of kilometers away, be it in Paris, Boston, or São Paulo. Taking the Ottoman Empire or the Levant as our unit of analysis is no longer sufficient.

My interest in transnational history led me to focus on the mobility of people, objects, and ideas to, from, and through the Middle East in the first era of modern globalization, roughly from 1880 to 1940.¹² One of my projects concentrated on the translation of early sexology into Arabic in this period. I was interested in how Arab authors translated and authored scientific texts about sex, what they chose to discuss and omit, and how debates about masturbation, heterosexual desire, and prostitution featured in question and answer columns in the press.¹³ In 2012, I was invited to a fascinating symposium in Birkbeck titled "Sexology and Translation: Scientific and Cultural Encounters in the Modern World 1860–1930," which compared and contrasted readings of German sexology, mainly in Europe. The book that came out of this symposium, and the event that celebrated it at Birkbeck in May 2016, are much more comprehensive—with articles on China, Japan, and Peru, and talks on Indian and Taiwanese readings of sexology.¹⁴

Another project I am involved in is a forthcoming edited volume on the global history of prostitution. The book includes chapters on thirty cities worldwide (including Casablanca, Cairo, Tel Aviv, and Istanbul) and is truly decentralized, incorporating European, Latin American, East and West Asian, African, and Australian case studies. Its six introductory chapters bring together common themes discussed in several chapters—and the editors' choice to include an introductory chapter on colonial relations attests to the significance of such a global approach in acknowledging the role of the colonial and postcolonial worlds in shaping this global industry, migratory patterns, and the experiences and life choices of sex workers. Thus, the editors do not content themselves with juxtaposing multiple case studies, but rather allow historians of different societies to note commonalities and differences. Alongside my chapter on Casablanca, I was invited to write on colonial relations, and Mark Wyers was invited to write a chapter on Istanbul and another on coercion and voluntarism—clearly the Middle East was incorporated into the core of the volume.¹⁵ What the editors of both books have done is to bring non-European societies to the center of the discussion. By allowing Middle East scholars to write the introductory chapters, the editors of the book on the global history of prostitution allowed the conceptualization of the colonial and postcolonial world frame the discussion of key theoretical concepts. More can be done in this direction, and it is our responsibility as Middle East scholars to actively participate in such comparative, global, and transnational projects.

It has long been argued that historians of the Middle East always read European history, whereas historians of Europe rarely read histories of the Middle East. A transnational approach can help portray a richer picture of the European and Middle East history of gender. Does exploring models of Iranian masculinity, for example, tell us about the multiplicity of French or Japanese masculinities? What happens to the history of masculinity when all of these models are brought together? Can we draw networks of influence, with some thick and some thin arrows, as well as some north–south vectors and other south–south vectors?

This dual challenge of mainstreaming gender in Middle East studies and mainstreaming the Middle East in gender studies will help us formulate a viable alternative to the Eurocentric perspective that still dominates our historical thinking and that we cannot completely avoid. If Egyptian feminists inherited some of their understanding of women's rights from Lebanese authors who had already discussed the same issues two decades before, and if Ottoman feminists published magazines in Paris,¹⁶ for example, we can trace vectors of influence more complex than the ones we have become accustomed to drawing. One of the things that we can do (and that I have done, not without pleasure) is to sit in Middle East studies panels and complain that, once again, the panelists forgot to talk about gender, and/or to sit in gender studies conferences and complain about Eurocentrism or murmur “but colonialism” out loud. Or, we can step outside our comfort zone and create frameworks that bridge area studies divisions, create and participate in more forums focused on the global south, and invite, for example, historians of French feminism to attend our North Africa and French East Asia conference, or historians of gay New York to our conference on *ghilmān* in late Ottoman and Qajar histories.¹⁷ Now, that would be interesting.

NOTES

¹Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994); Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

²Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011); Sivan Blaslev, “Dressed for Success: Hegemonic Masculinity, Elite Men, and Westernisation in Iran, c. 1900–1940,” *Gender & History* 26 (2014): 545–64; Fruma Zachs and Sharon Halevy, *Gendering Culture in Greater Syria: Intellectuals and Ideology in the Late Ottoman Period* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015).

³Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire In Contemporary Iran* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014); Jacob, *Working Out Egypt*.

⁴Zachs and Halevy, *Gendering Culture in Greater Syria*; Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*; Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*.

⁵Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

⁶Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷*Ibid.*, 7.

⁸Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁹Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870–1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); Julia Christine Scriven Miller, “The ‘Romance of Regulation’: The Movement against State-Regulated Prostitution in France, 1871–1946” (PhD diss., New York University, 2000); Elisa Camiscio, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009); Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

¹⁰Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Nova Robinson, “‘Sisters of Men’: Syrian and Lebanese Women's Transnational Campaigns for Arab Independence and Women's Rights, 1910–1949” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2015).

¹¹Yücel Yanıkdağ, *Healing the Nation: Prisoners of War, Medicine and Nationalism in Turkey, 1914–1939* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

¹²Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh, and Avner Wishnitzer, eds., *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880–1940* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); James Gelvin and Nile Green, eds., *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2013).

¹³Liat Kozma, “‘We, the Sexologists . . .’: Arabic Medical Writing on Sexuality, 1879–1943,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22 (2013): 426–45.

¹⁴Heike Bauer, ed., *Sexology and Translation: Cultural and Scientific Encounters across the Modern World* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2015).

¹⁵Magaly Rodriguez, Elise Nederveen Meerkerk, and Lex Heerma van Voss, eds., *Sex Sold in World Cities* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

¹⁶Fruma Zachs, “Cross-Glocalization: Syrian Women Immigrants and the Founding of Women's Magazines in Egypt,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 50 (2014), 353–69; Elife Biçer-Deveci, “The Movement of Feminist Ideas: The Case of Kadınlar Dünyası,” in *A Global Middle East*, 347–52.

¹⁷See, for example, Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); and Walter G. Andrews, *The Age of the Beloved: Love and Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).