

Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, Agency

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Abstract

The scholarship on gender in the Middle East takes two objectives as its mandate: first, to dismantle the stereotype of passive and powerless Muslim women and, second, to challenge the notion that Islam shapes women's condition in the same way in all places. The urgency of this endeavor is heightened by the fact that gender has come to demarcate battle lines in geopolitical struggles since September 11, 2001, and to occupy a central place in the discourse of international relations in regard to Muslim countries. To reflect the major developments in the field, I offer a critical analysis of the scholarship on issues that constitute the core of the intellectual discourse on gender in the Middle East. These include the critique of Orientalism past and present; the exploration of the diversity within Islam; the study of states and gender with respect to symbolic representations, institutions, and kin-based solidarities; the analysis of women's agency; and the debates surrounding feminism and the veil.

INTRODUCTION

“Gaze lowered, wrapped in a veil, walking ten steps behind a man, walking in his shadow and in doing so becoming a shadow herself.” This is what one of my students wrote in describing images of Muslim women in popular culture in the United States. The scholarship on gender in the Middle East has overwhelmingly taken two objectives as its mandate: first, to dismantle the stereotype of the silent, passive, subordinate, victimized, and powerless Muslim woman and, second, to challenge the exceptionalism of Islam as a monolithic entity shaping women’s condition in the same way in all places. The urgency of the tasks involved in this endeavor has been heightened by the fact that gender has come to demarcate battle lines in geopolitical struggles since September 11, 2001, and to occupy a central place in the discourse of international relations in regard to the Middle East.

Reflecting major developments in the field, this article offers a critical analysis of the scholarship on issues that constitute the core of the intellectual discourse on gender in the Middle East. These include the critique of Orientalism past and present; the exploration of the diversity within Islam; the study of states and gender with respect to symbolic representations, institutions, and kin-based politics; the analysis of women’s agency; and the debates surrounding feminism and the veil.

Most scholars explicitly or implicitly criticize Orientalism (Said 1978), a perspective that sees the Orient, Middle East, or Islamic world as exotic, erotic, bound to tradition, and inferior to the West. There is a voice of unison on this. In questioning stereotypes about Islam and women, some scholars have underscored the diversity of interpretations within the Islamic tradition by examining how the interpretations have varied over time and vary today from country to country. They have documented considerable differences on the basis of time and place. In arguing that Islam alone is not the culprit of gender inequality, other scholars have shifted the focus to the prominent role of states in defining gender ideology and enacting

policies that affect women. They have also shown in the process that Middle Eastern states exhibit considerable variations. Another line of inquiry, looking from the bottom up and recognizing the weight of patriarchy, has paid particular attention to women’s agency either in organized forms such as movements and associations or in resistance expressed in everyday life. Most recently, a debate has preoccupied scholars in regard to the form of feminism that is most appropriate in the Muslim context of the Middle East. Another debate has centered on the veil and its meanings.

BIRTH OF A FIELD

Before moving on to substantive issues, I give a brief overview of the field. The literature on women in the Middle East has exploded over the past four decades and especially since 2000. As an illustration, a search on several databases produced only 5 books and 10 journal articles published on the topic during 1960–1969 compared with 170 books and 670 articles during 2000–2009. Egypt and Turkey have taken the lion’s share of attention for a long time. Because interest in Middle Eastern countries has been driven in part by dramatic political developments, some countries such as Iran and the Palestinian territories have received more coverage lately. The study of gender in the Middle East has been dominated by anthropologists and historians, followed by women’s studies scholars, political scientists, and sociologists who represent a minority, albeit one that is growing. As a result, we have a rich array of ethnographies, analyses of symbolism and representations, and studies of particular countries and time periods by historians drawing on primary sources. Fewer are comparative studies in the style of political science and sociology. Most authors write as country specialists. The field has seen numerous edited collections, often bringing together articles on several countries. Many of these edited collections are cited elsewhere in this article, but others also of note include those by

Saliba et al. (2002), Moghissi (2005), Yount & Rashad (2008), Nourai-Simone (2005), and Roded (2008). Even with the large number of books and articles I consider, a much larger number had to be omitted owing to space constraints.

In discussions of the Middle East, issues of definition, boundaries, and geographies have generated their own controversies because of their political implications. I focus on gender in relation to Muslim women in the Middle East, which I define as bounded by Morocco on the west, Iran on the east, Turkey on the north, and Yemen on the south. I realize that the term Middle East itself is problematic given that it was coined by Western powers to refer to the region (Joseph 2000, Nashat & Tucker 1999). However, until a new term becomes broadly recognizable, it is too useful to be abandoned, if only because of how widely understood it is in scholarly and public discourse.

The field of gender in the Middle East emerged in earnest in American academia with two pioneering edited collections published in the late 1970s, Fernea & Bezirgan (1977) and Beck & Keddie (1978), following Fernea's (1965) ethnography of an Iraqi village, *Guests of the Sheik*. The collections, released one year apart, started the process of debunking the myth of the passive woman by bringing women's voices from the Middle East and presenting evidence of women's agency. They resonated with the work of feminist writers from the region such as Mernissi (1987 [1975], 1991) from Morocco and El Saadawi (2007 [1980]) from Egypt, whose respective writings on gender injustice had a major impact in and out of the academy. A sign of the exponential growth of the field was the creation of two peer-reviewed journals dedicated to the subject, the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* in 2005 and *Hawwa: Journal of Women in the Middle East and the Islamic World* in 2003. The *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Culture*, a major endeavor now standing at six volumes, saw the light in 2003 (Joseph et al. 2003–2007). The issue of gender in the Middle East came to the forefront of international

attention when the 2003 Nobel Prize for Peace went to Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer and activist working for the rights of women and children.

AT THE CORE: CRITIQUE OF ORIENTALISM

If one theme constitutes the core of the field in unifying scholars of gender in the Middle East, it is a critique of Orientalism and its legacy. Propagated by writers, travelers, missionaries, and colonial officials, Orientalist representations depicted the Orient as locked in an unchanging and mysterious culture (Said 1978). These representations served to assert Western superiority and legitimize all forms of European domination and ultimately colonialism. They included essentialist and binary categories dividing the East and West such as irrational/rational, traditional/modern, secular/sectarian, universalistic/particularistic, and active/passive. Central to the binaries were Muslim women who became the focal point of the colonialist projects of Western powers. Using the example of Egypt, Ahmed (1992, p. 151) illustrates how the British colonial discourse fused the issues of “oppressed” women and the “otherness” of colonized men to claim the cultural superiority of Britain and a moral justification for its control over the Egyptian population.

Scholars have convincingly shown the gendered underpinnings of colonial rule and how the colonizers used colonized women as potent symbols of cultural separateness in several countries (see, for example, Thompson 2000 on Syria and Lebanon; Clancy Smith & Gouda 1998 on French and Dutch colonialism; and Boddy 2007 on Sudan). Most countries of the Middle East were colonies or mandates of Europe, and even those that were neither were still subject to European influence and thus to Orientalist thinking, as with Turkey and Iran. Although it does not focus specifically on women but on images of the Middle East as a whole—and on how the images became

a part of a project of domination—Said’s (1978) critique has nevertheless heavily influenced the scholarship on gender since its publication in 1978. Not only has it served as a basis for the rejection of binaries and the exploration of complexities in women’s lives, but it has also highlighted the unavoidable intersection of scholarship and political engagement.

Continuing today, the concern with assumptions akin to Orientalist thinking expresses itself in reaction to Western involvement in the region and its discourse about the liberation of women, as in Iraq and Afghanistan (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009). Cooke (2008) has coined the term “Muslimwoman” to evoke a singular identity used to obscure differences by country, class, or ethnicity and imposed on women whose individuality and self-expression are then denied. Other scholars have shown the ongoing rigidity of conceptions about Muslim women in the popular imagination in the West (Williams 2009, Lorber 2002, Sonbol 2005). The 2005 *Arab Human Development Report* published by the UN Development Programme (2006) to measure needs, capabilities, and opportunities has been read as ascribing women’s negative lot to Arab and Muslim cultural values. Echoing the critique of Orientalist conceptions prevalent in colonial times, Abu Lughod (2009, p. 86) blames the report for attributing shortcomings in women’s lives primarily to culture and religion and thus for producing an image of “an Arab world that is the negative foil for an enlightened and allegedly noncultural modern West.”

DIVERSITY WITHIN ISLAM: HISTORY AND LAW

In comparing countries with majority Muslim populations such as Morocco and Indonesia, Geertz (1971) notes that Islamic ideals and practices took different forms despite a common theology. I find it useful to think of Islam as an “umbrella identity,” an idiom of cultural unity that goes together with considerable variations according to time and place. In

contesting the notion of a single Islam, gender scholars focus on the changing position of women in Islamic history. They reexamine the history of Islam from a gendered perspective, restoring women to the historical narrative and pointing out their exclusion by male commentators and religious scholars. Nashat & Tucker (1999), Keddie & Baron (1991), Meriwether & Tucker (1999), Tucker (1985), and Keddie (2007) track the development of women’s status throughout history and chronicle women’s active social, political, economic, and religious involvement from pre-Islamic times to the present. Stowasser (1994) examines the place of important female figures in Islamic sacred texts. Spellberg (1994) studies the life and political legacy of A’isha bint Abi Bakr, perhaps the most prominent wife of the Prophet, and Sonbol’s (2005) edited collection provides a historiography of women’s place in Islamic scripture, church records, legal materials, textbooks, art, and popular culture.

Islamic law, especially family law, has been at the core of the Islamic tradition. Defining the rights and obligations of men and women in the family and by extension in the community and society at large, Islamic law regulates marriage (for example, whether polygamy is practiced with or without restrictions), divorce (how easily a wife can obtain a divorce or compensation if the divorce is initiated by the husband), custody of children, and inheritance rights. These matters have led to a wide range of legal interpretations and practices. The Shari’a, meaning Islamic law, specifies principles to be followed in regard to the family, but it is not a legal manual lending itself to a single interpretation or application. It is better thought of as a set of ethical imperatives that can translate into various rules and behaviors. It stems from the Qur’an and the Sunna or model behavior of the Prophet as recorded in compendia called the Hadith. As such, it is open to different readings, as is evinced by the range of existing interpretations. On the whole, it was not codified and thus was left to the interpretation of judges or religious leaders in communities until the emergence of sovereign nation-states in

the Middle East (Keddie 2007, Ahmed 1992, Charrad 2001, Esposito & Delong-Bas 2001, Tucker 1998).

Gender scholars have convincingly made two major assertions concerning Islamic family law: that there is wide legal diversity over time and place throughout the Muslim world and that there is a marked disparity between normative law and lived experience (Esposito & Delong-Bas 2001, Kelly & Breslin 2010, and Rizzo et al. 2007 offer country and regional comparisons of women's status under the law). The diversity within Islamic law stems from multiple legal systems on the one hand and a history of active legal interpretation on the other. The Shari'a has interacted with 'urf, or common law, tribal law, and secular law imported from European systems, as well as community norms and behavioral codes, and thus bears the mark of particular environments. Sonbol (2003) and Stowasser & Abul-Magd (2008) examine the process by which national ideologies regarding the family have been incorporated into religious rulings (on variations in legal interpretations and practices, see also Mir-Hosseini 1999, 2001; Haeri 1989).

The codification of Islamic law that occurred with the development of nation-states in the Middle East has had mixed results for women. I have shown how the codification resulted in expanding women's rights in Tunisia (Charrad 2001, 2007), but not in Algeria and Morocco following the end of French colonial rule. Sonbol (1996), Tucker (1998), and Kholoussy (2010, p. 125) note that codification often puts an end to the flexibility that typically characterized Shari'a courts. As Sonbol (1996, pp. 10–11) argues, the interpretations adopted and codified by modern nation states are designed to "favor the new hegemonic order coming to power as part of the nation-state structure." Tucker (1998, pp. 185–86) similarly argues that although codification may provide a more equitable legal framework, it simultaneously restricts the ability of the courts to "modify gendered rights and privileges in specific cases" as a way to achieve fairness and the community's well-being.

Women as actors in courts represent a force that has shaped the law. Historians have indicated how, by using the court system, women could pursue their interests and protect their rights despite discriminatory normative law (see Rapoport 2005 on the cities of Cairo, Damascus, and Jerusalem during Mamluk rule from 1250 to 1517 before the Ottomans; see Peirce 2003, Semerdijan 2008, Tucker 1998 on Ottoman courts). Peirce's (2003) study of sixteenth-century court records from the Ottoman city of Aintab indicates that the courtroom setting "gave voice to those of marginal status in the community, enabling them to speak in defense of their conduct and to assert their honor and moral integrity" (pp. 5–6). The open forum was especially important for women who could defend their actions publicly. This leads Peirce to conclude that "law as a process was considerably less sharply gendered than normative law" (Peirce 2003, p. 382). Even when punishment was meted out, as detailed in Semerdijan's (2008) study of fornication prosecution in Ottoman Aleppo, Islamic judges accommodated the needs of the community by rejecting the most severe punishments sanctioned by texts (p. 159). Although the texts of law privileged men and in some cases sanctioned differential treatment of men and women, women's use of the courts gave them a platform to defend their rights and seek justice, which in turn kept those rights present within the legal discourse (Tucker 2008, p. 34).

The solid scholarship of historians of early Islam has given us invaluable insights into the role of courts and into women's ability to negotiate the court system. The notion of an ideal of equality and justice in original Islam is now widely shared in the field. Women's active part in their communities at different periods of Islamic history has been documented. Not all communities availed women of a voice in court, however, and understanding these variations requires further exploration. In regard to the contemporary period, future research should consider the implications of different codifications of the law and how they have affected women's lives in different countries.

THE STATE: REPRESENTATIONS, INSTITUTIONS, AND KIN-BASED SOLIDARITIES

In arguing that Islam in and by itself is not the cause of gender inequality, scholars have turned to the role of the state in shaping gender in the Middle East, historically and today. Contemporary Middle Eastern states are heirs to several legacies, including colonialism, nationalism, independence, and entrance into global capital markets, all of which have left their imprint on the relationship between state and gender. Alternatively framed as symbols of the nation, as markers of cultural authenticity, or as new citizens, women—or rather, the symbolic “woman”—have occupied center stage in the crafting of national identities and in state efforts to further political and economic agendas. Like the colonial powers against which they struggled, nationalists regularly invoked women as markers of difference between the colonizer and the colonized. In other words, “Our culture is different from yours” often translates into “Our women are different from yours” (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009, p. 167).

A frequent theme has been for states to cultivate the metaphor of the nation as family and women as mothers of the nation, thus drawing on cultural ideals of family honor and using honor rhetoric on a national scale (see Baron 2005, Pollard 2005, Botman 1999 on Egypt; Mundy 1995 on Yemen; Najmabadi 2005 on Iran). The imagery, however, has varied over time in the same country as the struggle for the definition of national identity has unfolded. For example, drawing on a variety of visual media, including sculpture, painting, photography, and cartoon, Baron (2005, p. 69) notes diverse portrayals of the symbolically “female Egypt”: she may be a *fallaba*, or peasant woman, a Pharaonic queen, a pious Islamic woman, or a fair-skinned “new woman” at the wheel of a car. Baron argues that the “multiplicity of images reflects the struggle for power on behalf of different parties and their debates over Egyptian culture. . . . In short, if Egyptians agreed that the

nation was to be represented as a woman, they disagreed as to which ‘woman’ should be chosen and what being a ‘woman’ meant” (Baron 2005, p. 81). In a similar vein, Paidar (1997, pp. 356–57) indicates how changing attitudes toward modernity have produced a variety of female images in Iran: from the modern woman symbolizing national progress during the first three quarters of the twentieth century to the Muslim militant woman of the late twentieth century symbolizing cultural authenticity and rejection of the West.

Focusing on the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), Najmabadi (2005) shows how, once Iran as the homeland was crystallized in female terms in a patriarchal rhetoric, Iran and its women became “subject to man’s possession and protection” (p. 207). In her study of sexuality in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Moallem (2005) shows a similar process as Iran is defined in terms of the concept of the Islamic *umma* or Islamic community. As the Revolution is staged as a battlefield for the protection of the *umma*, citizenship is constructed in terms of the warrior, an identity available only to men, who are defined once again as the protectors of women, children, and community. This gendered imagery relegates women to the status of adjuncts to men or second class citizens and helps ward off women’s challenges to masculine dominance in the new regime (for more studies on sexuality and politics in Iran, see Afary 2009, Sedghi 2007).

In the Middle East as elsewhere, women’s bodies become the site of discourses on nation building and patriotic duty when issues of fertility and reproduction are openly politicized. Focusing on Palestinian women in Israel, Kanaaneh (2002) examines how both Israeli and Palestinian leaders attempt to mold reproductive patterns to bolster their respective national narratives. Israelis promote birth control among Palestinian women. Palestinians are divided, with the pronatalists arguing for large families as a form of resistance to Israel and those in favor of reduced family size claiming that a few educated professional Palestinians pose a greater challenge than large numbers

of uneducated poor. In the region as a whole, individual women face complex challenges in regard to reproduction because of tensions between social norms and state policies. In her study of Egypt, Inhorn (1996) shows how, because women's status is linked to fertility and motherhood, women who are unable to conceive may be ostracized by other women as "abnormal and even dangerous" (p. 219), in addition to facing fears of familial and economic insecurity (pp. 256-57; see also Inhorn 2003). Yet, as Ali (2002) has argued, the participation of the Egyptian state in global markets has led it to cut social services, to define high fertility as an obstacle to development, and to encourage women to adopt family planning on a "voluntary and noncoercive" basis for the common good. The definition of reduced fertility primarily as each woman's individual responsibility for the well-being of the country once again figuratively anchors the future of the nation in the female body.

There is another major trend in the scholarship on state and gender in the Middle East in addition to the analysis of representations and symbols. Scholars who consider the state and its development from an institutionalist perspective have focused on how states have either curtailed or expanded women's legal rights. The latter often occurred in the context of states consolidating their own power in the absence of organized women's movements which developed in earnest in the 1980s in several Middle Eastern countries, even though individual feminist voices were heard much earlier, as is discussed in the next section on agency. Pointing out that the predominance of state-led development models in the post-colonial era gave Middle Eastern states close to free rein over women's issues (as on many other issues), Hatem (1994, 2005) argues that Islamist and secular discourses agreed on the importance of domesticity for women and that modernizing states strove to preempt or silence women's demands for greater rights. Several studies offer a broad overview of state policies on women's issues by considering different countries and historical periods (for example,

Esposito & Delong-Bas 2001, Joseph 2000, Joseph & Slyomovics 2001, Kandiyoti 1991, Keddie 2007, Welchman 2007). Others have shown how gender issues took a back seat to the state's economic and political goals (Lazreg 1994 on Algeria; Hale 1996 on Sudan; Brand 1998 on Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia). Still others have concentrated on how women's rights become entangled in political strategies and power struggles (see Tetreault 2001 on Kuwait; Joseph 2000 on Lebanon; Molyneux 1995 on Yemen; Hale 1996 on Sudan; Al-Ali & Pratt 2009 on Iraq; Charrad 2001 on Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco).

Because family law is the keystone of Islamic identity and a major determinant of women's legal status, the emphasis in the scholarship has been on how states have handled women's rights in family law (also called personal status codes), in addition to other matters such as voting or economic rights. Women throughout the region formally have voting rights, although they are sometimes restricted from using them (as in Saudi Arabia). Reforms of family law have been more varied. The range goes from Tunisia and Turkey with the most significant reforms to Saudi Arabia with little change in the system of law (see Kelly & Breslin 2010 for detailed information on several countries). The central issue at the core of family law reforms is the place of the extended patrilineal kinship system in the fabric of the law and the extent to which the law allows women to gain autonomy from patriarchal networks (Charrad 2001, pp. 5-6). Joseph (2000) shows how Lebanon has maintained the authority of kinship networks in regard to the law along with sectarian pluralism in politics, thus privileging men and seniors at the expense of women and youth. She writes that by delegating family law to religious and sectarian institutions, the state has ensured "the sanctification of kinship in the political order" (Joseph 2000, p. 129), thus limiting legal rights for women. In a similar vein, Sonbol (2003) indicates that the state in Jordan has left family law to religious courts, which have tended to favor kinship norms.

The significance of kinship in the history of state development in many parts of the Middle East cannot be overstated. My own work starts from the conceptualization that kin-based solidarities have been central to the development of most Middle Eastern societies (Charrad 2001, pp. 17–27; 2007; 2011). Patriarchal networks built around extended patrilineal kin groups historically enjoyed relative autonomy in local communities during the precolonial and colonial periods. I show how nation building and state formation involved a contest for power between these networks and centralizing postcolonial states. The analysis highlights the dynamics of kin-based solidarities in struggles for power in the building of new states. I have argued that, in the aftermath of colonial rule, the degree of reliance of powerholders on kin-based patriarchal networks affected the policies on Islamic family law and women’s rights.

When the state developed in opposition to these networks, powerholders tended to consolidate their influence in newly formed national institutions by further weakening kin-based groups, placing legislation in the hands of civil rather than religious courts, and favoring a law that challenged the control of women by extended kin (Charrad 2001, pp. 145–241). This was the case, for example, in Tunisia in 1956—where family law changes occurred as reforms from above in the absence of organized feminism. The Tunisian reforms contrasted with developments in Algeria and Morocco immediately following colonial rule, in 1962 and 1956, respectively. In Algeria and Morocco at that time, the newly formed national states, allied with forces anchored in kin-based solidarities, opted for conservative interpretations of the law. The place of patriarchal networks in national politics is most significant when central states are weak or in formation. It has receded in the past half century, and some countries have made reforms of family law in recent years, often in response to the growth of women’s demands since the early 1980s combined with international pressures, as in Morocco in 2004.

If state formation in the absence of organized feminism brought about more rights

for women only some of the time, war and conflicts have intensified the need to define group boundaries, leading to the increased essentialization of women as markers of sectarian identity, the strengthening of patriarchal structures, and the continuation of gender inequality (Shaloub-Kevorkian 2009; see also Shirazi 2010). Al-Ali & Pratt’s (2009, p. 174) study on Iraq chronicles how coalition forces and the nascent Iraqi government have repeatedly sacrificed women’s rights to “sectarian and ethnic political agendas,” and Kandiyoti (2007, pp. 506–8) indicates how claims of “cultural authenticity” allow for religious and sectarian control over personal status law. Efrati (2005) argues that this has negative consequences for women who try their best to resist and whose battles come with hidden costs, chiefly the diversion of energy into preserving, rather than advancing, women’s rights. Caught between “the hammer and the anvil” (Kandiyoti 2007), Iraqi women have to fight for their formal *de jure* rights and at the same time for their rights to security. According to Efrati (2005, p. 595), Iraqi “women have found themselves running just to stay in place.”

The scholarship on state and gender has made major contributions in shedding light on symbolic representations of women and on how states have incorporated or sacrificed women’s rights in their strategies for power consolidation. Although we have learned about a range of cases that exhibit similarities and differences, we still need to understand better the sources of the variations. Starting from the rich studies of particular countries and time periods, we may soon be able to draw further theoretical propositions as to some of the reasons for the range of imageries and policies.

AGENCY IN ORGANIZATIONS AND DAILY LIFE

Scholars in the social sciences have considered women’s collective agency in organizations and individual agency in everyday life. A rich literature on creative expressions such as biography, poetry, and essays from the perspective of

literary criticism and comparative literature is beyond the scope of this article (see, for example, Badran & Cooke 2004, Cooke 2001, Booth 2001, Malti-Douglas 1992), as is the literature on Arab American and diasporic feminism (see, for example, Abdulhadi et al. 2010). Given the colonial history of most countries in the region, women's agency in organizations developed in a close yet complicated relationship with nationalist struggles. Some women, often from upper-class backgrounds (Baron 1994, Mariscotti 2008), made their voices heard and found a form of collective solidarity, especially in Egypt (see, for example, Al-Ali 2000; Badran 1995, 2009; Baron 1994). Generally, however, nationalism relegated women's issues to the back burner on the grounds that nothing should fracture the unity essential to the anticolonial struggle, as for example in Algeria (Lazreg 1994). Women nevertheless developed programs and discourses of their own in specific areas, such as charity or social work, under the rhetorical umbrella of anticolonial struggle. Fleischmann (2003), Hasso (2005), and Peteet (1991) show how Palestinian women managed to participate in a new form of associational life and to discover a "language of refusal and militancy" (Fleischmann 2003, p. 11), which gave them a chance to question gender norms. Even then, their activism was predominantly within nationalist organizations.

Since the 1980s in most of the region, in part due to the expansion of mass education following the end of colonialism, women's associations, organizations, and movements have developed, covering a range of discourses and ideological orientations (for example, see Rizzo 2005 and Meyer et al. 2005 on Kuwait; Sadiqi & Ennaji 2006 on Morocco; Charrad 2010a on Tunisia; Hasso 2001 on Palestine; Moghadam 2005 on transnational feminist networks). Although some may come close to it, most groups differentiate themselves from Western feminism, which has been perceived in the region as a legacy of colonialism and Western hegemony, having little relevance to the Middle East (Badran 2009, p. 309; Ahmed 1992, p. 167; Treacher & Shukrallah 2001, p. 13). Their discourses

range from open secularism, to human rights advocacy, to democracy, to a language that blends Islam and modernity, and to Islamism.

Political parties with a declared Islamist identity include women in their ranks. In their study of the rise of women in *Islah*, the dominant Islamist party in Yemen, and in Jordan's Islamic Action Front, Clark & Schwedler (2003) show how intra-party fissures on questions unrelated to gender created spaces for women to organize and increase their representation, in the absence of any program for the promotion of women (on Yemen's *Islah* party, see also Yadav 2010). Arat (2005) examines how Islamist women in the Turkish *Refah* party succeeded in garnering female support by using personalized modes of interaction and incorporating women's concerns into the party's overall agenda. Women displayed remarkable solidarity as a representative block within the party but still faced major gender barriers. As Arat (2005, p. 10) explains, the *Refah* women's "success was a result of crossing boundaries between the private and political, secular and religious, democratic and authoritarian, and individualistic and communitarian. Their failures were defined by the boundaries they were unable to cross, such as the glass ceiling separating themselves from the men in their party."

Women's activism in the region can only be understood in localized, contextualized terms in that it often brings several notions of rights together (see Abu-Lughod 1998, Tohidi 2003, Sadiqi & Ennaji 2010). Osanloo (2009, p. 206) illustrates the point in arguing that women's articulations of their rights in postrevolutionary Iran "are born of the complexities of their specific circumstances and incorporate multiple ideologies of rights...[including] liberal notions of individual rights, Islamic ideals, and pre-Islamic Iranian ideals" (on women's activism in Iran, see also Hoodfar & Sadeghi 2009). In a similar vein, given the centrality of kinship in the region, how it is negotiated by women activists is an important question. For example, some of the most innovative research has shown how women activists in Lebanon have used extended kinship ties to

their advantage to expand the range of their contacts and gain leverage in local or national politics (Stephan 2009).

Although not all women participate in movements, all can exert agency in daily life in dealing with family, religion, the state, and the economy, sometimes in maintaining and subverting gender roles at the same time. Paramount in the literature is attention to the family, nuclear and extended, as shaping women's lives (see Droeber 2005 on Jordan; Yount 2005 on Egypt; Altorki 1986 on Saudi Arabia; Meriwether 1999 on Ottoman Aleppo; Mundy 1995 on Yemen; on several countries, see Bowen & Early 2002, Kandiyoti 1988, Tillion 1983). Scholars have examined the space between the ideal kinship structure—most commonly defined as the extended patrilineal network—and the reality of daily life. Singerman (1996) and Abu-Lughod (1993, 1999) offer analyses of this in-between space, wherein women (and men) purposefully flout normative expectations to accomplish their ends. According to Singerman (1996), these ideal patterns set parameters on behavior but, rather than explaining reality, are consciously invoked to alter it, for example when women appeal to the duty of powerful men in their families to protect the womenfolk as a way of getting what they want. Abu-Lughod (1993) makes a similar argument about Bedouin women whose behavior does not transgress social norms sanctioned by kinship networks but whose poetry provides a socially acceptable avenue to express sentiments that violate the strict parameters of moral codes without subverting the family and kinship structures they inhabit.

In the religious sphere, women have carved out spaces for themselves in rituals and by bringing religion to daily living. Drawing on accounts of women's unique practices, Aghaie (2005) and Doumato (2000) show how some women (in Iran and Saudi Arabia, respectively) actively create a type of counter-orthodoxy and thus challenge the male-dominated orthodoxy by adopting marginal types of worship such as exclusively female performances, healing sessions, and saint worship. A recent phe-

nomenon is the increasing number of women who "live Islam" (Saktanber 2002, p. xvi) by consciously folding religious meaning into every aspect of their daily lives, including work, family, and community politics (see also Zuhur 1992, Saktanber 2002, Deeb 2006, Mahmood 2005). Deeb's (2006) study of Lebanese Shi'i communities examines public piety, conceived as "conscious and conscientious commitment" (p. 5). This religiosity lies at the heart of Saktanber's (2002) study of Ankaran women who self-identify as "conscious Muslims" (p. 24). By "living Islam," these women have turned what is usually considered an obstacle to women's agency—their frequent exclusion from public spaces—into an avenue for it. They tend to meet in homes where they search for answers to basic questions such as "How should we live?" which first and foremost entail "the control and regulation of the private space organized by women" (Saktanber 2002, p. 237).

Arat (2005) explains how women in Turkey's Refah Islamist party had their own understandings and interpretations of Islam and Islamist politics that stood in contrast to secular outsiders' understandings of the party's ideology. The women wanted headscarves but not polygamy, and they wanted an Islamic state because they associated it with a moral state. In the same vein, central to the Cairo piety movement studied by Mahmood (2005) is women's active attempt to mold their own lives in accordance with their understanding of their faith. These studies suggest that we cannot simply deem women's behaviors as instances of "false consciousness or the internalization of patriarchal norms through socialization" (Mahmood 2005, p. 6) and that women's agency is more complex than often assumed.

In the sphere of work and the economy, women's resourcefulness has allowed them to withstand the hardships of low wages, poor prospects for employment, and the effects of neoliberal globalization. The region as a whole has exhibited the lowest rate of female participation in the paid labor force compared with other world regions (Doumato & Posusney 2003, pp. 13, 61). This is so even though the

gap in education and fertility between the Middle East and other parts of the world has been narrowing rapidly (Olmsted 2005, p. 132; Adely 2009, p. 112). Scholars consider that the effect of neoliberal globalization on women's employment in the region has been uneven (Moghadam 2009, p. 68; see also Moghadam 2005) or negative (Doumato & Posusney 2003, p. 17). Feminist economists have pointed out the issues involved in collecting data on labor force participation, formal and informal, and in assuming that any paid employment is a panacea for women (Olmsted 2005). Ross (2008) and Moghadam (2009, p. 48) have attributed the low rates of female labor force participation to oil as the basis of the economy in several countries, arguing that oil-rich countries with their emphasis on nontraded sectors such as construction tend to lack light manufacturing industries usually more favorable to women's employment. This, however, overlooks variations in women's employment and representation in politics among oil-rich countries. It also ignores the extent to which states have maintained patriarchal networks (Charrad 2009) that might discourage women from working outside the home or, in the case of middle-class women, provide enough basic economic security to keep them away from poorly paid jobs.

As Bospinar (2010) has argued in focusing on Turkey, women make complex opportunity-cost calculations in deciding when and how to work. Considering low-income households in Cairo, Hoodfar (1997) shows that socioeconomic factors and labor market conditions play a greater role than ideology in this regard. Once again, women have found a way to exert agency when faced with adversity. With limited economic opportunities or resources from the state, underprivileged women have formed strong informal networks at the local level, creating alternative channels that provide help with finding jobs, banking services, food distribution, education, and negotiation with the state bureaucracy (Singerman 1995, pp. 132–72, and Hoodfar 1997, p. 21, on Egypt; White 1994 on Turkey; Abisaab 2010 on Lebanon; Taraki 2006 and Moors 1995 on Palestine).

These informal systems offer women alternate avenues for economic, social, and political participation in their communities, they open up the possibility of female control over part of the household finances, and they call into question the submissive role of women. Taking a somewhat different perspective on agency and its constraints, Inhorn (2003) has examined how Egyptian middle-class women reshape the use and meanings of in vitro fertilization, thus bringing together the global and the local in new ways.

Running through the studies on women's agency are two related themes: the persistence of patriarchal structures in family, work, politics, and religion, and at the same time the notion that women constantly push the boundaries by creating realities beyond strict moral codes and developing alternate institutions and practices either collectively or individually in their daily lives. Women not only bend the rules but over time construct new social realities and, by so doing, in effect change the rules altogether (Droeber 2005, p. 306; Mahmood 2005; Charrad 2010b).

ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND THE VEIL: TWO DEBATES

Whereas the scholarship on diversity in Islam, states, and most forms of agency has achieved relative consensus, debate continues—among scholars as well as activists—regarding Islamic feminism and veiling (Badran 2009, p. 232). Appearing in the 1990s (Badran 2009, p. 221; Mojab 2001, p. 124), the expression Islamic feminism refers to women who specifically and consciously try to achieve their goals within the framework of Islam by seeking change through a reinterpretation of the Qur'an and other fundamental religious texts of Islam (Moghadam 2002, p. 1147; for an example of textual reinterpretation, see Barlas 2002). Islamic feminists are an increasingly significant voice among women fighting for greater gender equality and can be found across the region and across social groups (Fernea 1998, pp. 420–21; Arat 2005, p. 23; see Cooke

2001 for a discussion of the work of feminist scholar-activists such as Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El Saadawi, and Zaynab al-Ghazali). Islamic feminists come together in branches of Islamic parties, in separate organizations, or in informal associations. The emphasis in this section is on the substantive themes of the movement rather than on organizational forms.

In the eyes of Islamic feminists, Islam itself was not originally the source of gender inequalities in the Middle East. They read the Qur'an as affirming "the principle of equality of all human beings" (Badran 2009, p. 224). They echo the work of earlier feminist scholars who have argued that early Islam favored equality between the sexes and that androcentric readings of original scriptures developed later in the course of time. Mernissi (1987, p. 19) writes that Islam "affirms the potential equality between the sexes" (see also Mernissi 1991). Ahmed (1992, p. 63) shares this position in stating that Islam's ethical vision was "stubbornly egalitarian," only to be subverted by men in power who promoted a vision subordinating women. In a somewhat different vein and focusing on sexuality, other scholars have shown that, far from being suppressed, women's sexuality was actually recognized in the Islamic tradition (Bouhdiba 1985; see also Ze'evi 2006).

The earlier scholarship created a foundation for a new generation of women actively engaged in rereading the Qur'an and challenging patriarchal interpretations. The very act of rereading represents empowerment. It gives women an opportunity to deploy religious texts in defense of their rights. It allows them to derive agency and strength from within the Islamic tradition. Expressing the position of Islamic feminists, Majid (1998, p. 323) writes: "Islam evolved from an initial phase of tolerance to the gradual marginalization of women and their enclosure in the dark world of a theologically illegitimate patriarchy." Majid and Islamic feminists believe that the *'ulama* (religious scholars) interpreted the Qur'an in a way that abandoned the egalitarian message of early Islam, disadvantaged women, excluded them from the public sphere, and inscribed prejudices against women into

Islamic law (Majid 1998, p. 335). As a female physician in Yemen explains: "My husband used to say it was very dangerous to marry a woman who knew her religion because I knew my rights. . . . I went back to reading the Quran to find out more about women's rights and understood that there is a huge gap between women's rights in our religion and the experience of most women's lives" (quoted in Yadav 2010, p. 11).

Scholars have debated the advantages and appeals of Islamic feminism. A proponent of Islamic feminism, Majid (1998) sees it as a powerful alternative to secularist feminism and as the form of feminism most likely to succeed in the region. She believes that "the recovery of an Islamic past, thoroughly cleansed of the residue of centuries of male-dominated interpretations, can be useful to women fighting for freedom in the Islamic world" (Majid 1998, p. 332). Also arguing for Islamic feminism, Badran (2009, p. 219) suggests that it can reach the greatest number of women in Muslim-majority countries and is the only form of feminism that women who practice Islam will and can embrace. By contrast, Mojab (2001, p. 132) claims that, in focusing on religious texts, Islamic feminism does not accurately address patriarchy as a culmination of religion, state, law, class, culture, language, media, and other social forces and is thus "extremely limited in both theory and practice" (p. 139). In the same vein, Moghissi (1999, p. 142) argues that fundamentalist political groups have appropriated the discourse of Islamic feminists and that the only way left to Islamic feminists to reconcile Islam and feminism is to reduce Muslim affiliation to the spiritual, thus ignoring the political implications of religious identities in today's world. Disputing Moghissi's position, Cooke (2001, p. 58) contends that Moghissi "confounds Islam and Islamic fundamentalism," which are in fact quite different, and that this is what leads Moghissi to conclude that Islam is incompatible with feminism.

Another major debate concerns the practice of veiling. As the most visible and contested marker of women in Islam, the veil occupies a large place in the popular imagination of

Western commentators and conservative Islamic forces alike: Oppression, liberation, piety, cultural authenticity, heresy, and opposition to Westernization all compete to define the veil. Scholars tend to agree that the veil predates Islam, is not exclusive to it, and has existed among different communities throughout history, thus exposing Orientalist assumptions attached to the veil as a uniquely Muslim practice. El Guindi (1999) examines the veil as a symbol of gender complementarity in Sumeria, of class exclusivity in Assyria and Persia, of gender hierarchy in Hellenic Greece, and of seclusion in Byzantine society. Surveying a wide variety of cultures and contexts, the articles in Heath's (2008) volume consider Christian and Jewish veiling, veiling patterns throughout India and the Middle East, and male veiling in Bolivia. Making a similar argument and identifying the veil as a sign of social status among Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Assyrians, Ahmed (1992) indicates that Muslim women may have adopted veiling after coming in contact with these cultures as a way to mark their own status. Available historical evidence suggests that most women did not veil in early Islam in the seventh century, and that only the Prophet's wives did so as a symbol of their elite status (Keddie 2007, p. 22). Resonating with the argument about the hardening of interpretations over time, Keddie (2007, p. 32) points out that Qur'anic readings requiring strict veiling of all women were formulated in the ninth century and reflected "the restrictive view of women of the time" as part of the trend toward greater gender stratification.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the veil became a marker of personal and collective identity, its meaning shifting with political circumstances. Unveiling constituted a political statement during anticolonial struggles as well as among proponents of women's rights in the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1919, Turkish nationalist Halide Edip unveiled publicly to rally Turks to resist the Greek invasion (Nashat & Tucker 1999, p. 90). In 1929 in Tunisia, Habiba al-Mansari unveiled and urged other Tunisian women to do the same as part of the nationalist struggle (Charrad 2001, p. 218).

Unveiling in Algeria had been popularized by female anticolonial fighters, but revealing gained new political significance after a public demonstration in 1958 in which French women pressed Algerian women to unveil (Lazreg 1994, p. 135; see also Keddie 2007, p. 67). Among proponents of women's rights in the early twentieth century, some Egyptian feminist nationalists advocated removing the traditional face veil, though not the religious hijab or shoulder length head scarf (El Guindi 1999, p. 179). The expansion of women's citizenship rights during the Kemalist reforms in Turkey in the 1920s was accompanied by pressure on women to unveil in public (Göle 1997, p. 14).

Veiling did not reignite widespread debate until the 1970s and 1980s during the rise of Islamist movements, Islamic nationalism, and the Iranian Revolution in particular (see Göle 1997, p. 84). El Guindi (1999, p. 184) puts the distinction succinctly: "The early feminist lifting of the face-veil was about emancipation from exclusion; the voluntary wearing of the hijab since the mid-seventies is about liberation from imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviors, and an increasingly materialist culture." Many authors see the veil not in terms of revivalism of tradition, but rather as a distinctly modern phenomenon. Göle (1997, p. 4) considers it a "political statement of women, an active reappropriation on their behalf of Islamic religiosity and way of life rather than its reproduction by established traditions." Ahmed (2005, p. 163) sees Islamist discourses on the veil as affirming "a way of embracing modernity and feminism—but within the framework and limits set by what was understood to be a divinely ordained order of male dominance." Macleod (1991, p. xiv) analyzes working women's adoption of the veil in Cairo in terms of "accommodating protest," wherein women "struggle in a conscious and active way against their inequality, yet . . . also seem to accept, and even support their own subordination." She treats the veil as a defiant symbolic assertion of women's right to work outside the home and a protest against male dominance of the public sphere and at the same time as an acquiescence that women must

somehow alter their behavior or mode of dress to “accommodate to the norm” (Macleod 1991, p. 139).

Some scholars ask whether the agency implied by women’s voluntary adoption of the veil might not be merely illusory. Examining the emergence of the veil in Turkey in recent years, Saktanber & Corbacioglu (2008) note the irony in the fact that Islamist groups in Turkey justify women’s choice to veil in terms of freedom of religious expression and human rights when these same groups are otherwise “extremely critical towards the democratic ideals of western modernity” (p. 531). Also addressing developments in Turkey, Çinar (2008, p. 910) is skeptical of the assumed liberation as long as women “cannot find any agency or even recognition as subjects other than as veiled women” (on the veiled woman as a symbol for asserting group identity, see also Cooke 2008). Taking an openly critical stand, Lazreg (2009) argues that the veil, despite all claims about individual women’s agency, essentializes women as a category, distinct from and necessarily inferior to men. She contends that veiling and “the pictorial representation of women for political propaganda objectif[y] women just like advertising in Western societies does: one by covering, and the other by exposing women’s bodies” (Lazreg 2009, pp. 108–9).

There can be no consensus on the meaning of the veil. The meanings are so varied, shifting, and at times contradictory for both the wearer and the observer that they cannot be reduced to any single statement. Veils come in many forms from those covering the entire body such as the *burqa* (mostly Afghanistan) and the *niqab* (mostly the Gulf countries), to the widespread *hijab* which covers head and shoulders, to a colorful scarf loosely wrapped around the head and worn over tight jeans, as I saw recently in the streets of Tunis, with many other variations throughout the region. Some women are forced to veil, and others choose to do it and make that choice for multiple reasons. Some wear a veil only on some occasions and not on others. Behind each veil there is a different story, and no generalization holds for all.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH: BEYOND ORIENTALISM?

This article has selectively reviewed the fast growing literature on gender in the Middle East with a focus on Muslim women. Reflecting the characteristics of the field, I have crossed the boundaries of disciplines, although I have placed sociological issues at the forefront. Engaged in a critique of Orientalism and of the legacy of colonialism in the region, scholars have effectively exploded the binaries of Islam/West and challenged powerful narratives about the passive, victimized woman. Where do we go from here? In suggesting some directions for research and future promise, I address empirical and theoretical questions to which sociologists are likely to be particularly attentive, although some questions may be of concern to scholars of other disciplines as well.

Because the public discourse of the media and international politics has tended to reinscribe the old story about Islam and passivity, scholars have continued to address it, as they should. The field has shown a high level of consensus and solidarity as we have been unified by the common project to overturn stereotypes and show complexities. Except for those on Islamic feminism and the veil, the scholarship exhibits few academic debates. The field may now be ripe for more debates among scholars about paradigms, methodologies, and their implications for understanding gender in the Middle East. The kinds of debate we observe on Islamic feminism and the veil could be extended to other issues. We also need more conversations on the advantages and shortcomings of different theoretical approaches and methods of inquiry. We may open more dialogue among ourselves in addition to continuing to address images prevalent in the media, as such a dialogue is likely to lead to fruitful developments in what is a burgeoning and vibrant field.

The theoretical level is an avenue for especially promising work in sociology. Now that we have an array of rich ethnographies and

meticulous historical studies, we can raise comparative questions that are at the core of sociological theory. In no way is this a call for a return to grand narratives about Islam or the Middle East or the Muslim woman; far from it. Rather, I suggest that we engage in the kind of systematic and careful comparisons of cases on which much sociological theorizing is built. For example, in the case of issues related to state and gender, the feminist ethnographic and historical research reviewed in this article shows how every policy is gendered and how it affects women in different times and places in the Middle East. Because this solid research exists, it is now conceivable to make broader comparisons, asking why some states pursue more patriarchal policies than others, thus examining questions central to sociological theories of the state. Without ignoring the centralized character of several Middle Eastern states, we can consider fractures within states and the layering of factions with different gender agendas, thus paying more attention to the implications of multiple state discourses and sites of power for women.

In regard to agency, a key task for future sociological work is to address issues at the core of the study of social movements. Once again, in this case as in regard to states, the existing research opens the door to further inquiries. One way for research to advance is to discern what kind of movement develops and when and where one type of movement rather than another emerges. For example, where do we witness Islamic feminism on a broader scale and how do we explain it? Another issue in sociological theory concerns what constitutes a movement. As sociologists, we like to make a distinction between the writings of individual feminist pioneers and the development of a collective voice in the form of an organization.

When can we start speaking of women's movements in the Middle East? How will we analyze the success or failure of a movement? Social movement theorists also want to hear about the relationship between structure and agency and how social structural conditions create opportunities for mobilization.

My last point concerns the production of knowledge in the field. The critique of Orientalism has moved the discussion on gender in the Middle East away from reified, essentialist, and ahistorical understandings and in so doing has unveiled the connections between hegemony and the discourse on women. Building on that solid base, we now need to reflect on where our collective reliance on Said's (1978) notions has taken us. In many ways, scholars of gender in the Middle East are still caught in the discourse of Orientalism and have yet to find a way to move beyond it. If they criticize local patriarchal practices in a Middle Eastern context, they can be seen as making an Orientalist and Western attack on Middle Eastern culture or Islam rather than as making a feminist critique. The same applies to the advocacy of women's rights in the region. The dilemma is even sharper for scholars in the diaspora who represent most authors writing in English and who are easily identified with the West. These ambiguities are part and parcel of the history of the region and of the field. I have suggested questions and directions for future research that should contribute to bringing sociological theory and the study of gender in the Middle East closer together. At the most general level, a promising avenue is to overcome the Middle Eastern tradition/Western modernity false binary once again, to open a dialogue among scholars across countries in the region, and to be aware of the complex ground we tread at this particular historical time.

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