Occasional Papers

Research Cultures in Local and Global Contexts: The Case of Middle East Gender Studies

Zeinab Abul-Magd
Aurelie Evangeline Perrier

Edited by Judith Tucker
Based on workshop co-sponsored by Georgetown University's National Resource Center on the Middle East and the American University in Cairo's Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

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DEDICATION

Professor Cynthia Nelson was the moving force behind the collaboration between the American University in Cairo and Georgetown University that led to this workshop and the one that preceded it in 2004. An accomplished scholar in her own right whose research and writing ranged across the fields of women's and gender studies in anthropology and history, Professor Nelson was also a source of inspiration to countless students and colleagues. She sparked interest and enthusiasm, encouraged critical research, and patiently and selflessly engaged in the often tedious work of building institutions and links among scholars that would further the cause of research on women and gender. Many of us who participated in this workshop were her students, colleagues, and friends. We all mourn her untimely death in January of 2006 and dedicate the modest efforts reflected in this publication to her memory.

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This paper, "Research Cultures in Local and Global Contexts: the Case of Middle East Gender Studies" is based on a workshop, "Middle East Gender And Women's Studies: A Critical Dialogue" that took place March, 11-12, 2005, in Cairo, Egypt. The workshop co-sponsored by the Institute for Gender and Women's Studies at the American University of Cairo and Georgetown University's National Resource Center on the Middle East.

It brought together a group of fourteen scholars who work on gender issues in the Arabic speaking Middle East. The purpose of the two-day event was to facilitate discussion on academic Middle Eastern gender research between scholars at Georgetown University and scholars in Middle Eastern universities. This workshop was part of the AUC Institute for Gender and Women's Studies (IGWS) ongoing Transnational/Local workshop series. Within this series the workshop is furthermore a continuation of a discussion on the state of Middle East gender studies between Georgetown University's NRCME and IGWS.

The first workshop organized between the two centers, held at Georgetown February 27, 2004, focused on an assessment of the present strengths and weaknesses of gender and women's studies across sub-regions and disciplines with an emphasis on approach and methodology. Presentations and discussions centered in particular around the state of Middle East gender studies at large and new directions in research.

The second workshop focused on research cultures in which Middle East gender research is taking place. In particular the workshop explored the differences between and challenges to Middle East gender research in the US academy and in the academies of the Middle East. Through the presentation of research papers the workshop assessed research trends, questions and challenges to the study of Middle East gender issues.

Introduction

Through a critical dialogue, this workshop aimed to trace the various changes, shifts in intellectual paradigms, and transformations in both global and local contexts that have affected the growing field of Middle East Gender and Women's studies in the US and the Middle East. It sought to understand how the particularity of a researcher's milieu—made up of sociological, intellectual, political and cultural components interacting with one another to form what we term "a research culture"- have informed the approaches, agendas, and conclusions of scholars on gender-related issues. In particular the workshop explored the differences between and challenges to Middle East gender research in the US academy and in the academies of the Middle East.

The aim of the workshop was two-fold. It intended to describe and analyze the research cultures in which academic work on Middle East gender takes place, while it also meant to improve the field by locating areas of research in need of exploration and by suggesting new methodologies and sources for the study of gender that would deepen, reinvigorate or even transform our understanding of relations between men and women

in the Middle East. The workshop was divided in two sections: Judith Tucker, Cynthia Nelson, Yvonne Haddad, Fakhri Haghani, and Zeinab Abul-Magd dealt more explicitly with the state of research in the field, while Mostafa Abdalla, Lilia Labidi, Barbara Stowasser, Amira Ahmad and Jacqueline Armijo-Hussein introduced new topics and sources.

The presenters and discussants applied various methodologies to their critical assessment of the field, and approaches from disciplines of history, anthropology, sociology, political science, Islamic studies and comparative literature found a voice in this dialogue. Despite this great diversity, a number of overarching themes were identified. First, the issue of knowledge production in both the US and the Middle East, and how this process defines who can participate and what can be said on gender scholarship was a theme that was strongly echoed in the various presentations and discussions. Insights from feminist, postcolonial and postmodern theories informed the arguments of many participants, and discourse analysis was commonly used as a tool to treat the material under scrutiny. Finally, identifying indigenous versus Western (or Western-influenced) knowledge and the ways in which globalization and the rapid flow of information is transforming perceptions of identity—therefore also perceptions of gender relations—received special attention

The discussants, Hala Kamal, Cynthia Nelson, Hoda Elsadda and Omaima Abou-Bakr commented on these presentations and initiated discussions around them. Finally, all the participants suggested new topics for future research, expressed their concerns about the funding issue, and suggested holding the workshop again next year.

The State of the Field: 1960s until Today

Judith Tucker and Cynthia Nelson began the workshop by exploring the nature of the intellectual, political and economic changes that have influenced the research agenda and approaches of gender studies. Research done in US schools and AUC has experienced essential changes over the last few decades or so, which Tucker traced in the field of history and Nelson identified in the field of anthropology and sociology.

Judith Tucker's presentation entitled, "Studying Arab Women and Gender in the West: a Discussion of some Recent Trends", explored how western scholars have approached the study of women and gender in the Arab World over the past two decades. Tucker attempted to understand how the feminist agenda in the West and the evolving discourse on global human rights have shaped the body of literature produced in the field of history on Arab women. She pointed to the way in which heightened attention to the positionality of scholars and the critique of first world feminism contributed to change the approach, method and focus with which Western scholars addressed the history of women and gender in other parts of the globe. Similarly, she questioned the success of feminist scholars in the West who have tried to take a critical stance in the context of a current revitalization of the clash of civilizations discourse. Tucker asked why some topics are privileged and particular questions are posed. Despite the critical stance of most scholars vis-à-vis public discourse in the West today, it is difficult to remain entirely free of some of the assumptions of the current discussion on civilizations and individual rights.

Therefore, Tucker looked at dimensions of women and gender history which have received privileged attention from historians in recent years. She identified three foci of research: 1) politics and citizenship—and more specifically the politics of colonialism and anti-colonialism, nationalism, and women's movements; 2) religion and religious law in its institutional and textual aspects; and 3) family as a legal, economic and ideational phenomenon. Then, she mentioned some neglected areas, areas of considerable interest to women and gender historians in general but which receive short shrift among those studying the Arab World.

Regarding the first main area of research, Tucker counted a number of recent studies which concentrate on the politics of the colonial state, the anti-colonial and nationalist movements and related women's movements. Most of these works seem to pose a similar problematic: what is the backdrop to the limited citizenship rights of women today? What explains the persistence of patriarchy and family control blocking the exercise of rights as a full and equal citizen? She mentioned examples of research in this area, such as Elizabeth Thompson's *Colonial Citizens* on Syria and Lebanon, Selma Botman's summary history of Egypt in *Gendering Citizenship in Egypt*, Omnia Shakry's work on nationalism and modern motherhood, and Marilyn Booth's study of biography and gender politics in Egypt in *May her Likes be Multiplied*. Tucker affirmed that this research on the making of the modern nation in the Arab world helps us understand why it has proven difficult to make citizenship claims for women as individuals, with equal claims to rights. As long as notions of state paternalism and female domesticity are ascendant, differentiated citizenship is the result. This line of research has been very helpful, but does remain largely at a level of formal power; it is a ruling elite that seems to determine the outcome.

Another trend found in historical works on gender focuses on what Islam has to "say" about gender questions by turning to the study of religious texts and religious law and practices. A number of different approaches are applied here. Re-reading the texts, exploring the evolution of legal doctrines and practice, concentrating on case studies of women as spiritual authorities, and investigating gendered religious practice are all fairly common. Underlying all these approaches is a shared concern with the issues of access and authority: who is allowed to interpret? With regard to the literature interested in re-reading the text, Tucker mentioned the works of Amina Wadud, Barbara Stowasser, and Denise Spellberg as main illustrations of this trend. She also named many other examples of scholars who worked on the evolution of legal doctrines and practices, such as Margaret Meriwether, Amira Sonbol and Judith Tucker. They basically used court records to reveal how Islamic law has functioned as a dynamic system in which there were doctrinal developments and a record of differentiated practices. She also referred to interesting research on current issues of interpretation, including that of Yvonne Haddad and Khaled Abou El Fadl. In addition, she mentioned some recent research on women as spiritual authorities, such as Julia Clancy-Smith's work on an Algerian female leader of a prominent sufi *tariqa* that resisted French colonialism.

In terms of the study of "Arab family," Tucker noted that it is not as developed as one might expect in comparison with other areas of the world. There is very little work of a quantitative nature, though we do have studies that treat the family as an economic and social unit and describe family strategies to increase their economic and social capital. Some

historians have recently paid special attention to the study of Arab family, most prominent are Beshara Doumani who focused on Nablus and Tripoli families, and Kenneth Cuno who worked on the nineteenth-century Egyptian family. Family has also been studied in the colonial and anti-colonial context, a trend illustrated by Lisa Pollard's work on Egypt.

Finally, Tucker referred to some neglected areas of research. In comparison with the work found on other regions, she pointed to two areas in great need of further investigation: labor history and the history of the body and sexuality. Women as workers, and the wider topic of gendering the workplace, have received almost no attention from historians. Although there is considerable interest in the current conditions of female labor, particularly in export zones and in domestic service, this topic has yet to inspire detailed historical study. Likewise, the history of the body and sexuality in the Middle East remains virtually untouched though it is just engaging as a more popular topic.

Focusing on local scholarship in Egypt, Cynthia Nelson reflected on forty years of academic work by local master's candidates at AUC in the Departments of Sociology and Anthropology. In her presentation titled "Gender Thought/ Gender Taught: Reflections on Knowledge Construction at AUC," Cynthia Nelson sought to understand the elaboration and evolution of a scholarly discourse on gender in the forty years between 1964 and 2004. How did the master's theses engage with questions related to women and/or gender over the years, and what concerns guided their work? Moreover, how were the local identities and personal challenges of scholars reflected in the theses produced? Exploring the shifting nature of research questions posed over the years, Professor Nelson showed how the knowledge generated reflected the dual affiliation of students, as both subjective individuals personally implicated in the topics discussed, and as academics concerned with "objective" issues of social and cultural structure. Another theme explored was the relationship between the local and the global in the construction of knowledge. Relating her analysis of MA theses to the general academic climate that prevailed at the time of their writing, Dr. Nelson demonstrated how, not only personal experience and identity, but also regional and global trends in social sciences impacted the emerging scholars of AUC.

Nelson established a detailed overview of the topics surveyed by the master's candidates. Initially, some of the foci of interest included studies on the *hakima*, family planning, and Nubia, while later on in the 1990s, a shift in discourse appeared to bring to the forefront concerns with social stratification as well as development and the way they relate to gender, the relation between discourse and power, and refugee problems. Attentiveness to the ways in which women are affected by micro-credit projects, or by depression, as well as their involvement in politics characterize the most recent works of MA students at AUC in the years since 2000.

Out of the 217 MA theses produced in anthropology and sociology over the past forty years, more than half discussed gender-related questions. Overall, the interest in gender-related topics increased with the years, though not steadily so: from 1960-1969, only eight of the twenty theses were related to gender, whereas for all three following decades and for the 2000-2004 period, at least half the works concentrated on women and gender (respectively 32/40, 18/36, 40/75 and 24/46. This amplified interest was mirrored in the choice of titles and the manipulation of a new jargon; notably, the term "gender" appeared in the title of a thesis for the first time in 1993, reflecting both the influence of

western thought on local scholarship as well as the need for the introduction of adequate vocabulary as gender consciousness was gaining importance in the AUC setting. Furthermore, the majority of MA theses were written by females (whether the main theme centered on women and/or gender or not). For instance, from 1960-1969, thirteen of the total twenty theses were completed by women, while in the 1980s all thirty six compositions were the work of women.

More than simply mining a new source and analyzing an original body of literature, Nelson's presentation served to raise more general questions concerning the specificity of the AUC local research culture and the way it interacts with cultural and political factors, as well as with other research cultures, notably that found in the West. Understanding how personal challenges in the local setting are linked to public issues of social structure and how globalization is transforming local research cultures was an important question raised by Nelson. Furthermore, Nelson invited us to question what we mean by research culture in the local academy, and suggested the need to distinguish "local" from "indigenous" knowledge.

Within the context of the state of gender research on Arab women in the US, Yvonne Haddad complemented Tucker's presentation very well. Her contribution was a survey of the growing literature on Muslim women published in the United States by Muslim women. She began by elaborating on the political scene that influences knowledge production and then proceeded to contextualize and analyze the targeted literature. Americans tend to think of all Muslim women as veiled and submissive. This, of course, is a stereotype to which there are very many exceptions. Among them is a sizable and very articulate body of Muslim women scholars who generally represent a very different understanding of Islam. They see themselves as Muslims who may or may not observe all ritual requirements, and who do research and writing on women's issues in Islam in a way that is not biased by the doctrinal formulations articulated by medieval jurists. They may identify themselves as "modernist," "feminist," or sometimes even "progressive," working to challenge the patriarchy that they see as dominant in most Muslim societies through the centuries and to help bring about reform both from within the religion of Islam and in the secular structures of states in which Islam is dominant. The Qur'an for these scholars, while always a mercy to "humanity," is not rigid and unchanging, but flexible and open to change in different times and different circumstances.

Haddad indicated that a survey of the growing literature on Muslim women published in the United States by Muslim women could be analyzed in a variety of ways. On the one hand, it is possible to analyze their intellectual production within their different national cultures. This helps identify the variety of historical experience they bring with them which is inexorably tied to their identity. It will also help to understand the influences of the nation state and the policies it instituted regarding women and what has been embedded in them as their primary identity, whether we are dealing with Iranians, Mashriqis (from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria or the Gulf), Maghribis (from Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria), people from the Indian sub-Continent (Bangladesh, India, or Pakistan) or the smattering of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. A few are Iranians tempered by the events that spawned the emigration of the educated secularized Iranian women fleeing that Shah's regime. Another method of negotiating the numerous writings

on Muslim women in North America is to look at the differences between the "indigenous," generally referring to African-American Muslims, and immigrants with special emphasis on the differences between the various generations of scholars, whether they were born in the United States or overseas, whether they grew up in a tightly-knit Muslim environment in the United States or were integrated early in life, and whether they took up the writing on Muslim women as a means of defending their own identity or as a quest into self discovery.

Haddad then presented another way of looking at the material by looking at the discourse and the impact of various events on their writings. (1) Those who believe in modernization theory, whether nationalists or socialists. They believe that religious traditions are an impediment to women's progress, hence they seek the liberation of women from the shackles of tradition. They are represented by all nationalities. Some of them became secular American feminists when feminism became fashionable. Examples include Mahnaz Afkhami, Afaf Marsot and Leila Ahmed. (2) Traditionalists who reiterate the traditions and provide apologetics, such as Lamya Faruqi. (3) Fundamentalists such as Maryam Jameelah. (4) Muslim feminists. (5) Muslim progressives, such as Kecia Ali.

Similar to Nelson who investigated the state of gender scholarship in Egypt in relation to the political and cultural climate, Fakhri Haghani explored the connection that has existed between activism and scholarship in Iran since the Islamic revolution. Her paper entitled, "The Culture of Revolution: Iranian Feminism(s): Moving from the Margins into Center," traced the impact of political and cultural developments in post-revolutionary Iran on women's research culture (research by and about women). Identifying two trends that characterized women's research culture respectively in the 1980s and 1990s, she showed how this research culture eventually led to the transformation of women's reality on the ground. The first stage was the emergence of a "feminist notion" of historical and literary writings that generated an Iranian popular feminist consciousness in the 1980s; the second phase saw the rise of the necessity of a culture of "empirical research" in the 1990s, through which many aspects of a fluid, growing, and dynamic dialogue between secularists, Islamic, and liberal feminists could be examined.

Haghani started by interrogating the notion of "research culture" and its meaning, in a context where women are largely absent from the formal sphere of academia. Noting that the very gendered nature of the new Islamic regime excluded females from participating in the reformulation of the "woman question," and more generally from academia and formal locales of production of knowledge, Haghani wondered what it means to study women's research culture in this context. She argued for a more inclusive definition of research culture that would make room for genres of literature other than academic.

In particular, Haghani examined fiction as an important site for the discussion, contestation and reconstruction of gender discourse(s). While Iranian women were formally banned from expressing political views and assuming religious roles related to Islamic law, they did use their writings to propagate their ideas. Biography, autobiography and fiction were genres in which women were actively engaged. Interestingly, Haghani noted that this represented a new development, as women prior to the revolution seldom busied themselves with fiction writing. Political views on women were incorporated and feminist debates were starting to get mention, leading the way for the emergence of a

"feminist notion." Western feminist thought even reverberated in the reflections of some Iranian women. In particular, debate about the applicability of the concept of feminism to the Iranian context was articulated.

In novels and biographies, women also debated contentious issues that bore directly on their everyday lives, such as sexuality, marriage and divorce. Thus, the novel served as a forum where controversial questions could be broached in society, and issues of concern to women pressed into the public discursive space through this new medium. Fiction, however, was not the only kind of writing by women: revisionist history works aimed at re-writing the past with a female consciousness started to appear and biographies of the great women of Islam were composed with a new sensitivity to gender issues. This proliferation of writings slowly led to the promulgation of journals and periodicals. In addition, as awareness of women's issues was mounting due to these new writings, the establishment of women research centers and of NGOs preoccupied with female concerns was becoming a progressively more visible phenomenon in the 1990s. The questions being brought into public space by both writers and activists put pressure to change policies: women's professional domain was expanded, they were allowed to enter parliament, and they become judges. Contraception was also authorized and quotas for females in specialized medical fields were introduced. Especially in the late 1990s, the success of women's activism was due to the support they received from the reform movement, which pressed for the improvement of women's rights within an Islamic context.

Zeinab Abul-Magd's presentation complemented the former ones on the state of the field through focusing on a narrower topic, that is, research on women and Islamic law in the US and Egypt today. Her critical survey, titled "Approaches to Women and Islamic Law," tried to apply discourse analysis with its post-colonial insights to the current literature, paying attention to how "modern" institutions—such as centralized states, codified law, mass media, and a globalized economy—mediate the reconstruction of current discourses on women and Islamic law. In general, she referred to the apologetic trend that dominates the US side of the field. She also noted that male researchers and elite women dominate the Arabic side of the field, as they claim to represent middle and low class women. In addition, she indicated that the international political and economic environment dictate the agenda of research in the field, especially with regard to human and women's rights international organizations that fund research in the Arab world, at times for political reasons.

As for recent Western research done on contemporary Egyptian Islamic law and women over the last decade or so, Abul-Magd claimed that it tends to be apologetic in order to reverse the biases of orientalist literature. Western, as well as Arab/Muslim scholars alike, contribute to this apologetic discourse. She distinguished three trends in Western scholarship: specialized textual analysis of personal status codes; cultural and social analysis done by Arabists and scholars of Islamic studies that care more about un-codified Islamic law as appears in *fiqh* and *ahkam* treatises and *fatawa*; and the works done by social historians and political scientists or anthropologists that investigate the relationship between the state and society on one hand and the state and its official '*ulama* on the other hand, seeking to understand how this influences change in the *fiqh* discourse, and also how "modernization" leaves its impact on contemporary *fiqh* and *fatawa*.

After treating Western literature, Abul-Magd surveyed the Arabic literature pro-

duced in Egypt on women and Islamic law. She also categorized it into three types according to the approach: literature written by *fuqaha'* trained in al-Azhar and its different institutions, which is known as ahkam and fatawa al-nisa', such as the works of 'Ali Jum'a, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, Su'ad al-Salih and 'Abla al-Kahlawi; literature written by lawyers and judges trained in modern codes and addressing issues in both Islamic law and the personal status codes, such as the works of Muhhamad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi and Muhammad Nur Farahat; and literature published by human and women's rights research and activism centers, whose authors could be lawyers or social scientists addressing issues pertaining to applying human and women's rights conventions, such as the works of Mona Zulficar and the publications of some women's rights centers in Cairo.

Abul-Magd concluded her critical survey by stating that the study of Arab women in Islamic law still needed much work. To begin with, she asserted the need to go beyond the apologetic vision, as well as the need to end the monopoly of male researchers and elite women. Political international intervention also often obscures the search for true understanding and valid solutions and should be pushed aside. Addressing these issues would enable us to raise new questions and seek new answers to the daily life problems that women experience. Furthermore, it would encourage us to treat these questions in connection with others, namely the problem of poor women living under an oppressive state, an impoverished economy, and unjust laws.

New Venues for Gender Research

In addition to the aforementioned critical survey of the state of gender studies in the US, Egypt, and Iran in the last few decades, other presenters tried to introduce some nuanced topics, sources, methodologies, and approaches to the field of gender studies as a whole. They also raised concerns about the future of gender studies in Arab academia.

Mustafa Abdalla handled a case study in which he introduced a topic new to gender studies in the Arab world, that is, the study of men. His presentation, titled "Local 'Fun' in a Global Economy: Gender and Sexuality in the South Sinai." was informed by an anthropological approach that addressed the issue of globalization as a political, economic, and cultural determinant in sexual relations in the era of post-colonialism. Through researching the interactions between foreign women tourists and working class Egyptian men in South Sinai, he revealed that the colonizer is still exercising power over the colonized. But this time it is white female power that is asserted over men who are viewed as the exotic other. Concerned with incorporating the much neglected study of men and masculinity in gender studies, Abdalla's research underlined the multi-layered character of power relations among men and women in South Sinai. Thus, he situated the study of gender and sexuality within the context of tourism and material circumstances, and within cross-border gender struggles in an era of globalization.

Abdalla investigated constructions of masculinity and femininity in Dahab, South Sinai. He focused on the different gender expectations among the local men in Da-

hab and foreign female tourists. He argued that in the specific context of Dahab, people negotiate what gender means and attempt to create new conceptions of gender, subverting traditional notions of gender roles. White women, for instance, negotiate their sexuality as simultaneously class privileged tourists who consume, and sometimes, buy male sexuality, and as targets of overt and occasionally harassing male attention.

Abdalla examined the growth of *`urfi* marriage and described it as a post-colonial sexual relationship. It is both a way for men to respond to the demands of the police who will ask for marriage certificates when they see Egyptian men with foreign tourists, as well as a way to hope for economic gains in the case that this marriage will allow them to leave the country. *'Urfi* marriage however, is widely criticized in Egyptian society and often they contract such marriages at their expense. On the other hand, foreign women enjoy femininity but also economic and racialized power as they can determine the terms of the relationship. They also reproduce western narratives of desire and the perceptions of the Orient as a hypersexual, masculine, exotic locale. Therefore, in these *'urfi* marriages, western women and Egyptian men both seek what they cannot find in their own countries.

Lilia Labidi discussed the use of photography as a new source for the study of women and politics in Tunisia between the years 1935-1960. Advocating for the need to construct a "decolonized" version of history, which includes women and is written from a local perspective, Labidi argues that pictorial sources form a powerful source for the elaboration of precisely this type of history. By situating photographs of women's organizations with regards to the cultural trends, tensions and debates that have marked Tunisia during this quarter of a century, Labidi presented a pictorial record of women's engagement in their struggle for national and social liberation. This accomplished the twin aims of using indigenous sources and of including women in the process of reconstructing history. She affirms that displaying photographs of their involvement was indeed often perceived by these women as an empowering act, which enabled them to tell their stories.

The photographs under discussion showed the evolution and activities of four women's groups: the Tunisian Union of Muslim Women, the Tunisian Women's Union (CP), women's section of the Young Muslim Movement, and Women's Section of the New Destour. The four organizations were involved in a variety of activities that ranged from raising funds to sending students abroad, organizing more general educational missions, advocating for Arabic as the national language of education, fighting for citizen's rights, to fulfilling the social needs of the lower classes by establishing soup kitchens and helping the poor meet their needs. Most of these activities do not appear to concern themselves with so called "women's issues." There was some debate and disagreement among the associations as to what role Islam should play in the project of national and social construction, a debate which was echoed in society at large. Similarly, divergences along class lines were pronounced, and the critique that some groups operated outside the reality and concerns of most Tunisians because of their elitist standpoint was a strongly divisive issue for the four groups. The diversity of viewpoints of these organizations on a woman's proper role in society was reflected in the photographs themselves.

Most photographs studied by Labidi were pictures taken by professionals, with the obvious implication that the subjects, conscious of the image they were seeking to

project, were "posing" and the pictures were often to an extent "staged." However, this very awareness of the self-reflective character of images provides a window through which the social historian can access the local, mental and historical universe which these women inhabited. How were women choosing to represent themselves and why? What did this reveal concerning the social context and the strategies they were devising to create a niche for themselves within this quickly changing political and social reality? And how did women's self perception and self-representation evolve through time as seen in these photographs? These were some of the questions raised by Labidi.

That the pictures available to us are largely the work of professionals and represent women's participation in official events or organized activities means that the record of spontaneous and impromptu deeds on the part of these women can easily be forgotten or ignored—a point which Labidi argues we must be aware of. This once again, serves as a reminder that official history involves a process of selective construction, but a process, in this instance, to which women themselves were contributing. By choosing what scenes merited to be transmitted to posterity, women were involved in constructing their own hegemonic version of women's activism. However, Labidi remarked that photographs of women's activities were rarely shown in public and seldom left the confines of the private homes where they were being kept, which explains why they have been marginalized in the construction of official (male) history. This point speaks to the need to study pictorial sources as a way to validate women's experiences.

Labidi further discussed the significance of these photographs within the larger national pictorial narrative. She underlined that women's images began to appear more frequently in public space with the promulgation of the personal status laws in the mid 1950's. Yet, while photographs of women were more widely circulated in the open, few women made live appearances in public space, even in political and diplomatic circles. Finally, these pictures which display women working together towards the achievement of a common goal raise the question of the meaning of this solidarity among women and how, if at all, this solidarity can constitute a form of political action.

Barbara Stowasser introduced another new source for gender studies. She explored the relevance of the traditional and modern *tafsir*, as a specific genre of religious literature for contemporary Arab and Muslim women's studies. Stowasser's presentation, titled "the Peculiarities of *Tafsir* as Socio-political Discourse," began by focusing on the premodern interpretations of Qur'an 4:34. On this verse, the medieval scholars of theology and law consistently expressed a series of consensus-based opinions that stipulated an abstract, ahistorical relationship between gender questions and moral society. Therefore, and even though the classical *tafsir* texts are clearly historical documents, they do not provide social history data. For these we have to look elsewhere by way of collaborative projects across disciplinary lines.

Stowasser used *tafsir* collections that cover scholars who belong to various schools of law and theology. She began with al-Tabari from the 3rd/10th century and examined his interpretation of 4:34 which deals with why men are in charge of women in private but also public matters. While the theme that men are superior to women was a minor issue in Tabari, it became a major one 200 years later in the *tafsir* of other authorities such as al-Zamakhshari, al-Razi, and al-Baydawi. The latter for example, confirmed that men are

endowed with mind, strength, and management skills, while women are mentally deficient and defective. A caste was established based on mental, spiritual and sociological differences. Stowasser argued that traditional *tafsir* was motivated by a desire to formulate a general moral vision independently of historical realities; it was thus subordinated to an ideological project. Medieval *mufassirin* generalized the specific instead of historicizing it; they did not attempt to problematize the relationship between history and revelation.

Stowasser then moved on to modern *tafsir*. By contrast with medieval or current traditionalist exegesis, modernist *tafsir* in the 19th and 20th centuries introduced the thorny issue of the "historicity" of both scripture and interpretation; social realities on the ground were used to establish connections between a theological discourse and a given historical environment, as shown by modern interpretations of 4:34. Modern *tafsir* began with Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida, who argued for the complementarity of the sexes. They saw men and women as equal but different creatures of God. Men still retained their advantage over women since they were deemed more complete and stronger in character. The modernists also noted that the *mu'amalat* verses in the Qur'an require constant attention and adjustment to ensure that they suit the current Muslim community which is bound to change over time. This raised the crucial issue of the relationship between revelation and history and opened up the possibility of re-interpreting Qur'anic rules in light of modern times.

Stowasser next turned to contemporary interpretations. She observed that Muslim women have recently started to be involved in the process of interpreting the Holy Text in order to confront misogynist readings. Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas are pioneers in this approach. A strong influence of Fazlur Rahman can be noticed in the way they look at the totality of the text and study the language of revelation. Much in his footsteps, they define *ijtihad* as an intellectual process whereby one distinguishes between the literal laws of the Qur'an and those that are time-bound and metaphorical. They also look at the Qur'an as an indivisible whole, applying the egalitarian message of the text to the verses on gender relations.

After exploring traditional and modernist *tafsir*, Stowasser mentioned other emerging venues more inclusive of women which allow them to step into the sphere of Qur'anic exegesis. The Muslim women's websites and chat rooms present a significant forum for constant (re)interpretation of the Qur'anic rules. Stowasser gave many examples of these web pages. Stowasser argued that it is, perhaps, in its most recent incarnation as "the people's" reading of the Holy Qur'an that the *tafsir* genre emerging in bits and pieces on various electronic sites may yield ever more valuable data for the study of gender in the Islamic world. Women also deal with the Qur'an in Cairo government mosques; they are mostly al-Azhar female graduates and teachers. In addition, women from non-religious backgrounds, such as engineering or medicine, etc., practice *tafsir* in private mosques.

Amira Ahmed's paper critically assessed the state of gender scholarship in Sudan in relation to the women's movement. Much like Haghani, she sought to elucidate the connections that exist between the conceptualization or theorization of gender issues in Sudanese scholarship, and the activism of the women's movement as grounded in practice. How do these two spheres—scholarship and activism- serve to reinforce one another, if at all? Ahmad distinguished several phases in her characterization of this relationship. In an initial stage—which she dates from female access to education to the installation of the 1989 Islamist regime—Ahmed argues that there existed a positive and

relatively symbiotic relationship between education and activism: education in fact served as a major road to equality between men and women. Integrated into the primary school system as early as 1907, female Sudanese students joined the university for the first time in 1945, paving the way for women to contribute to scholarship and research in areas of concern to their sex. In 1989, a PhD in women's studies was inaugurated which aimed at instilling radical change in society. Equipped with education and having participated in the national struggle, women were demanding political, social and economic rights; they obtained considerable gains as a result of their activism.

The establishment of the new Islamic regime in 1989 was accompanied by a call for the Islamization of society and a move towards the re-traditionalization of the social order- two phenomena which hindered women's initial gains. Ironically, just as a gender studies program was initiated and as women were participating in scholarship more actively on these issues, their status in society seemed to deteriorate. Amira Ahmed blames the lack of conceptualization of gender scholarship in Sudan as one of the reasons why they were unable to counteract the backlash against women. The academic work often heavily emphasized activity and immediacy, to the detriment of more theoretical explorations. This is illustrated by the fact that most energies for gender research go into NGOs, the UN, or government agencies. Additionally, the scholarship was a local phenomenon, which took place in isolation from global women's movements.

Several other obstacles and limitations afflict women's activism in Sudan. First, the women's cause is often subordinated to and manipulated for political purposes. In the current Islamic regime, there is still a desire to mobilize women, but only for certain political issues, and not for the genuine sake of their emancipation. Second, there are several foci which excessively occupy the agenda of feminist researchers: FGM (female genital mutiliation), *zar* and political participation receive almost the entire attention of academics. Finally, cultural barriers often stand in the way because of the perceived tension between traditional tribal values and feminism. Feminism is understood as a concept that describes a third sex, rendering the term "Muslim feminists" noxious to some observers.

Jacqueline Armijo-Hussein came to the workshop with her academic concerns about how to make gender studies part of the research and teaching agenda in the Gulf. Her contribution was mostly a brainstorming session where she related her experience trying to set up a women and gender studies program at Zayed University, and in which she invited suggestions on how to change inherited Western assumptions about gender relations in the Gulf—which she sees as a major obstacle to the establishment of such a program. Because Gulf women are a group conventionally excluded from research on Arab women, it is easy to understand why so many false preconceptions about them remain in the Western mind. This situation not only misleads potential research (and what actual research does exist), but it presents one of the staunchest obstacles to the establishment of women's schools and Women and Gender Studies departments in the Gulf.

Armijo-Hussein discussed the challenges that scholars at Zayed University face to make gender studies an integrated part of the university's research agenda. Zayed University was established in 1998 with a clear mandate to educate female Emiratis as future leaders. Although originally planned as a teaching university, over the last two years the university has begun to focus on research. The challenge they face now is how to most

effectively incorporate gender issues into the research mandate of the university. In the past, although the university has supported feminist ideals, it has not identified them as such. Recently, the government has also shown its commitment to gender equity by appointing Shaykha Lubna al-Qasimi as Minister of Economy and Planning. And the university hosted a conference on Women as Global Leaders.

Zayed University is trying to benefit from the experiences of other universities in the region that have tapped into feminist notions present within societies to institutionalize these ideals within the academy. However, the brainstorming among Armijo-Hussein and the attendants revealed some issues that still hinder Western scholars from contributing as hoped to this. The most important issue is the problem of how the exotic other is treated. Irrespective of a reality far more complex, Gulf fathers are largely viewed as the oppressors of their daughters and wives.

Towards an Agenda for Future Research

Discussants Dr. Hala Kamal, Dr. Hoda Elsadda, Dr. Cynthia Nelson, and Dr. Omaima Abu Bakr offered comments on the various papers and also contributed to general discussion. By way of conclusion, the workshop participants handled some issues and presented suggestions for a future research agenda in order to improve the state of research and teaching Middle Eastern gender and women's studies. Suggestions included:

(1) Considering the varied sites of production of knowledge and the importance of positionality in defining the terms of research and writing. Local knowledge both differs from and is influenced by knowledge produced in Western sites. This might require establishing institutionalized links between indigenous and foreign academic research to assure mutual exchange. The problem of language and translation might present a significant challenge in this regard.

(2) Dealing with some neglected topics, such as labor history—particularly female labor and immigration to cities to work in the modern period, and the history of the body and sexuality.

(3) Revising the relationship between academia and activism, or the blurred borders that exist between feminist-oriented scholars and female NGO and political movement activists, in the US and the Arab world alike. This might entail studying the impact of academic research on activism, social space, and general consciousness, and vice versa. This might also stress more engagement by the academics in the discourses of local NGOs and female activists for the sake of interaction and support.

(4) Giving some attention to self-reflexive activity, i.e., how individual research projects and cultures are constructed.

(5) Incorporating the study of men and masculinity in gender studies in the Arab world.

(6) Paying more attention to the question of Islam and empowerment, i.e., how knowledge of Islamic traditional texts is used as a source of empowerment by some Muslim women in the Middle East and the US.

Participants

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Mostafa Abdalla, Freie University in Berlin (Presenter)
Hala Kamal, Cairo University (Discussant)
Zeinab Abul-Magd, Georgetown University, Washington, DC (Presenter)
Jacqueline Armijo-Hussein, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi (Presenter)
Lilia Labidi, American University in Cairo, (Presenter)
Fakhri Hagani, Georgia State University (Presenter)
Huda Elsadda, Cairo University (Discussant)
Barbara Stowasser, Georgetown University, Washington, DC (Presenter)
Yvonne Haddad, Georgetown University, Washington, DC (Presenter)
Amira Ahmad, University of East London, UK (Presenter)
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