

Editorial

Sexuality, Culture and Public Politics in the Middle East

The role of sexuality in the construction of various social institutions and in the maintenance of power hierarchies has long been a significant focus of anthropological research (Leacock and Safa 1986; MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Wolkowitz et al. 1981). Indeed anthropologists and sociologists have been mindful of the extent to which sexuality constitutes a highly contested terrain that is tightly patrolled by religious forces, morality codes and state institutions in all societies (Gole 1996; Hélie and Hoodfar 2012; Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997; Lee 2011; White 2002). However, in recent decades, the fragmenting of sexuality studies into studies of gender roles, reproductive rights, sexual orientation, studies in masculinities, and even honour killing and violence against women, has resulted in depoliticising sexuality: without clearly linking the various aspects and arenas in which sexuality is salient, the centrality and complexity of politics of sexuality to power structures are easily lost. This fragmentation makes it harder for engaged citizens to mobilise for changes in policy and discourses around various aspects of sexuality. Thus, many scholars of the Middle East are adamant that the study of sexuality must adopt a holistic approach within the wider concerns of bodily rights, such that linkages between the various forms of sexual oppression, including those of sexual minorities, becomes clear. Hence the editorial board tried to be mindful of these concerns as they finalised the call for papers for this issue.

With increased globalisation and a greater transnational flow of both ideas and population competing and ideologically opposing readings and interpretations of historical and contemporary accounts, discourses around sexuality have increased significantly. Public contestations have intensified in an unprecedented manner in the Middle East (and in Muslim contexts generally), with particular implications for women and sexual minorities, given that sexuality is at the core of how they are judged, sanctioned and frequently evicted from public spaces, political realms and economic domains.



Indeed the legitimisation of sexual control of women (and men) is embedded in larger processes that mobilise culture, religion and moral codes, and tradition, and employ state apparatus – including laws and coercive forces – to regulate the bodies and sexualities of citizens. The ever increasing preoccupation of both the modern states and non-state actors in defining and controlling sexuality, as citizens – increasingly aware of the array of possibilities – concurrently navigate the various ideologies and restrictions as they seek to define their own identities and behaviours. This environment has led to ever more politicisation of discourses of sexuality, as citizens contest and subvert ideological and fundamentalist parameters. A fruitful exploration of the transformation and evolution of cultural and political discourses on sexuality in the Middle East requires contextualisation and historicisation, as well as careful attention to the multiplicity of actors and perspectives. And while it is certainly true that discrepancies between the discourses promoted by religious leaders and the actual practices of believers can lead to dynamic tensions and negotiations, religion is far from the only parameter impacting the politics of sexuality and gender empowerment.

Though all societies to various degrees police women's (and citizens') sexuality (Hélie and Hoodfar 2012; Lee 2011), recent political and social upheaval in the Middle East, technological innovation and globalisation have all contributed to both increased policing of citizens (in general and concerning sexuality) and increased contestation of this by citizens (Derichs and Fleschenberg 2010; Freedman 1997; Lee 2011). Despite its very real fluidity, sexuality remains one of the cornerstones for both asserting and enforcing citizenship, respectability and social ranking, and the ongoing emphasis on the regulation of women's bodies and behaviours relative to men suggests that women bear the greater burden in the struggle to define and occupy the spaces and identities of their choosing.

The articles in this issue speak to various ways that moral codes, religion and laws intersect with citizens' challenges and initiatives in writing their realities and sexualities into current and evolving scripts. They explore infringements on expressions of sexuality and on bodily rights, and outline how social actors accommodate, contest and subvert limitations on their sexualities through reframing and reinterpretation, and through common actions and collective organising.

Whether these heightened contestations of sexuality are framed in terms of equality and human rights, identity politics or more innocuously as gender studies, they speak to the need for and relevance of scholarly studies of sexuality, particularly in light of recent political developments in the region. Revolution and heightened political and social upheavals often offer opportunities to revisit and question established moral and legal codes, including those governing sexuality, and to introduce new ones. (Though we should also note, as the cases of Iran, Indonesia and Tunisia indicate, revolution and social and political transformation have in fact led to more

restrictive perspectives on sexuality propagated by Islamists, a reminder that revisiting these codes does not necessarily lead to a broadening and more pluralistic perspectives and options particularly regarding sexuality.)

Contestation around sexuality, especially in contexts where freedom of expression is limited, does not necessarily manifest through large-scale public mobilisation. As some of the articles in this issue point out, it is instead often through the common actions of countless individuals in the course of their mundane daily acts, such as refusing to observe the prevalent dress code, choosing work and professions considered unacceptable, or articulating desire for sexual satisfaction. Contributing authors thus identify public spaces as sites of both negotiation and contestation around sexuality. They outline how individuals, engaged in daily 'public' practices, are as crucial to the resistance to politico-religious curtailing of sexual rights as those who more overtly resist specific policing practices. Indeed many of the contributions suggest that transformation of cultures and sexual discourses take place through a multiplicity of strategies, with the daily actions of individuals playing no small part.

In Egypt and Tunisia the desire for political change that precipitated revolution has also unleashed hopes for greater freedom in personal life and sexual expression. El Feki, Aghazarian and Sarras analyse the desires, questions and conversations that have occurred on the website 'Love Is Culture', which came into being in response to heated public discourse over issues of sexuality since the Egyptian uprising in January 2011. These debates have been framed very differently and from various perspectives ranging from those concerning reproductive rights to diverse ways that state and public policing of individual bodily rights concerning sexuality. The launch of the website in 2013 created a safe forum for unfettered discussion of love, pleasure and bodily rights. The unprecedented traffic on the site suggests it is fulfilling a significant need of Egyptians and other Middle Easterners to question the restrictive ideology and moral codes around sexual pleasure. The posts call into question the assumption of the Middle East as constituted by inherently normative and socially conservative cultures.

For the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, Pardis Mahdavi's article examines the confluence of love, labour and the law, looking at the regulation of migrant women's sexualities and how *zina* laws are used to imprison pregnant migrants, criminalise their parenting, take away their children and deport them. The price of free love, emotional attachment and challenging sexual norms in these tightly controlled societies where regulated sexuality and blood ties are the cornerstones of social and political organisation, are paid differently by men and women. Migrant women, who have negligible social or legal status and little power to challenge formal institutions pay even more dearly, though attempts are ongoing to challenge this treatment through national and transnational organising.

Body and bodily representation remain at the heart of sexuality in all societies; bodily attire is thus one of the oldest and most potentially potent

political manifestations available to rulers and ruled. As symbolic socio-political resources, dress codes have been utilised by both modern-secular as well as theocratic states visually to communicate their ideologies. Thus secular modernists regimes in the Middle East have at various times banned or discouraged certain articles of clothing, including the turban and the Muslim veil, in attempts both to distance themselves from colonial orientalist images and to construct images of so-called modernity. Others states, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, made veiling mandatory for all women regardless of faith or ethnicity, in order to emphasise Islamic values and distance themselves from European culture and values. Dress codes are also a powerful mechanism for control over women's bodies and sexualities, particularly in the modern Middle East. However, as the articles by both Abdmolaei and Tajali discuss, citizens/women are not passive objects of policy, and thus find ways to mould these requirements to their own needs and vision. Abdmolaei analyses the responses of young, urban Iranian women to mandatory veiling and subsequent punishment and social stigmatisation for non-compliance with the regime's dress code. She documents the rise of 'alternative fashion', which incorporates ethnic and nineteenth-century Iranian fashion with aspects of European style and design, resulting in brilliantly coloured but still modest headgear that is a far cry from the black and drab colour veil envisioned by the regime. Indeed the wearers of these colourful scarves and clothing demonstrate little trace of the sexual submissiveness and docility the regime has been trying to instil among young women born and raised under the Islamic regime. Such subversion can be seen as a version of 'accommodating protest', to use Arlene Macleod's phrase, and the regime has responded by attempting to curb alternative fashion. It remains to be seen whether such everyday forms of resistance, as women attempt to reclaim their femininity and sexuality, will lead to an opening for the recognition of basic individual women's rights over their bodies.

Tajali's article looks at dress code and discourse on the veil in Turkey, where women's demands are different but share a theme similar to that of Iranian women: bodily agency and the right to choose. Drawing from her field data Tajali questions the representation of pious women as pawns of Islamic male political leaders and the ruling Islamist parties over the last decades. Through a close analysis of pious women's activism in 2011 around women's access to public institutions including universities and parliament, she outlines their challenge to the headscarf ban as a discriminatory act by male party leaders and a violation of their basic human and citizenry rights. What is significant is that pious women in Turkey have employed secular and human rights discourse in this debate, a significant shift in the public discussion around the headscarf in Turkey which generated greater support for their demand and did pave the way for removing not only the ban on veiling in parliament and public institutions but also other dress codes, including the ban on women wearing pant-suits in parliament.

Courchesne's article looks at the intersection of sexuality and the arts with regards to the changing status of women musicians and performers in Turkey. Prevailing sexual norms have often been used to deny women access to certain economic and artistic arenas. Following the removal of a ban on ethnic music in Turkey, Courchesne outlines how women from various ethnic communities have carved out a new niche on the public stage and expanded their repertoire of artistic and economic possibilities while gaining social respectability in the arts. This effort has come at a cost, however, especially for the first wave of contemporary women performers, who had to underplay their sexuality consciously. Her data suggest that the precedent is such that the next generation may not have to compromise in the same manner.

The final article in this issue, though not as explicitly concerned with the politics of sexuality as the rest of the contributions, considers the arena of football in Egypt, where, perhaps surprisingly, national pride, social justice demands and sexual politics converge. Through the 1970s and 1980s, in many of the authoritarian societies of the Middle East, football was encouraged by the authorities as a means of distracting youth from oppositional political activity (Alon and Khalidi 2014; Hoodfar 2012; Montague and Bradley 2013). In Egypt this tactic had unintended consequences as youth increasingly used football gatherings as opportunities to form loosely organised collectives which came to be referred to as Ultras. Despite the popularity of football among Egyptian women in Egypt, the Ultras are male collectives. The Ultras were increasingly viewed as subversive by the past and present Egyptian governments, which subsequently instituted various regulations in an attempt to depoliticise and fragment Ultras and football fans in general. Nonetheless, these Ultras came to play a significant role in the Egyptian uprising, particularly in protecting demonstrators from the police; many paid for this with their lives. The article by Hamzeh and Sykes explores how this process reinforced solidarity among the Ultras participants, but also engendered what the authors refer to as 'melancholic masculinity' around demands for justice and retribution for their fallen comrades. Despite concurrent heated debates around social and political democratisation and gender relations – as illustrated in the article by El-Feki et al. in this issue – thus far the Ultras have not tried to reach across the other social groups and build coalitions and incorporate more of the demand for democratisation of political culture into their mandate. Indeed they seem to reproduce the same exclusionary masculinities as those of the counter-revolutionary forces. The authors conclude that without greater reflexivity and the cultivation of a more gender-inclusive vision, the widespread demand by youth for the democratisation of public culture may not be realised, despite the opportunity for change afforded by the revolutionary and post-revolutionary environment.

Adding more nuance to the differential positions of men and women, Batmanghelichi's report explores the lives of HIV-positive Iranian women, a rapidly expanding population. Her research shows that conformity to prevail-

ing moral codes does not necessarily protect those – namely women – who are unable to exercise choice or bodily rights under those codes. Her interlocutors discuss intimacy, modesty and motherhood, and how they negotiate the stigmatisation they face as a result of being infected in the course of fulfilling their legal and religious obligation to be sexually available to their HIV-positive husbands – the case for most. The narratives of a group of HIV-positive mothers and widows in Tehran demonstrate that conformity to hegemonic moral codes and laws provides no guarantees of state or societal support. Yet Batmanghelichi finds narratives of hope, not anger and victimisation, as her interviewees share their anguish and their coping strategies, helping each other to imagine and plan a better future. While we witness their resilience and strength, we see little in their actions that questions the enduring moral and legal codes which precipitated their vulnerability and infection. Through their active participation in the author's research group as well as in support groups the women clearly dispel any notion that they are passive victims, but their acceptance and navigation of their circumstances should not be used to absolve society and the state from the responsibility of protecting individuals.

The texts in this issue highlight the various ways in which sexuality has become a new frontier for public politics, as well as the role of citizens in challenging oppressive state regulation and cultural norms, and in reshaping values around sexuality and the most intimate aspects of daily life. Of course, the challenges and thus the strategies are variable and context specific – ranging from common mundane individual actions to rigorous re-interpretations of religious codes to the politicisation of formerly apolitical spaces for collective actions. What is significant is the contestation and incremental transformation of oppressive sexual regulations, both state scripted and social, as individuals and collectives assert new notions of rights at the intersection of sexuality and citizenship. Such creativity, subversions and contestations generate public discourses, leading to the transformation and evolution of perspectives on sexuality in a given society. It is the mapping of the complex confluence of various social forces and structural opportunities that leads to a deeper understanding of the evolution of perspectives on sexuality.

– Homa Hoodfar

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