

ROUNDTABLE

Gendering Middle East History

Introduction

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doi:[10.1017/S0020743816000489](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743816000489)

Women's history emerged as a branch of social history in the 1970s, parallel to the feminist movement. Scholars of the Arab world, Iran, and Turkey began producing studies in numbers in the 1980s. The trickle of scholarship became a stream in the 1990s, developing greater theoretical complexity with the incorporation of gender as a category of analysis. The taking up of gender coincided with the cultural turn in historical studies, and gender history built on, or encompassed, women's history, as questions about whether "women" was a category at all were raised. The interest in gender was quickly followed by attention to sexuality, masculinity, and related topics.

In the past two decades, gender history has been, in the words of one of our contributors, "one of the most dynamic and theoretically productive branches of the field." As the essays in this roundtable demonstrate, it is where some of the most innovative work in history today is being done. Crossing disciplinary and geographical boundaries, the authors here visit or revisit a number of theoretical concerns. Among them are the depoliticizing of development, the coupling of agency and resistance, the public/private dichotomy, and power and sovereignty. Gender history can be the history of gender. But, as these essays show, it can be much more. In the roundtable, gender history intersects with more established fields such as labor, legal, and family history, as well as with some newer fields, such as environmental, development, and transnational history.

These essays point us forward in dealing with some of the problems that plague gender history in particular and Middle East history in general. One of the most obvious obstacles is that of accessing sources at a time of unprecedented violence in the Middle East. This challenge is dire for historians of the Arab world, in which country after country has become inhospitable to researchers or inaccessible, and increasingly fraught for historians of Iran and the Ottoman Empire/Turkey. The historians writing here have been creative, turning to international archives, such as those of the League of Nations (Liat Kozma, Nova Robinson) or the United Nations (Sara Pursley), working in state archives (Algeria) once considered off limits (Sarah Ghabrial), and using the body itself as a historical text (Marie Grace Brown). While research trips in or to the region are becoming increasingly impractical or impossible for many scholars, great potential exists for accessing, saving, and sharing archival and other records digitally. Yet using relocated or replicated archives while the people whose histories and stories

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we purport to tell remain entrapped by violence raises some ethical issues that should be addressed.

Another problem that has marked the field is that the rapid turn from women's to gender history, and social to cultural history, has meant an emphasis on urban middle-class discourses. Sara Pursley reminds us that "critical gender history (as opposed to women's or family history) has hardly touched on the realm of the 'economic.'" Most of the roundtable authors have attempted to fill this gap, looking at materiality and corporeality in past and present work: Iraqi peasant families (Sara Pursley), lower-class Algerian petitioners (Sarah Ghabrial), Sudanese women's bodies (Marie Grace Brown), prostitutes and slaves (Liat Kozma), Egyptian male athletes (Wilson Chacko Jacob), and Lebanese factory workers (Malek Abisaab).

Sara Pursley puts gender history into conversation with environmental and development history. Challenging the framing of development projects as "rendered technical," she uses gender as a category of analysis to show that these projects were also rendered social and feminine. The new international development organizations, she tells us, identified the family—and women in particular—as the target of their programs. Focusing on a land settlement project in Dujayla, Iraq, she explores the creation of "a modern 'independent' farmer not only through his acquisition of a new and truly individual title to land but also—and just as importantly—through his legally consolidated and socially constructed authority over a woman and children in an often newly defined 'family.'" The rural housewife thus becomes the access point for state officials and development planners promoting reform projects. At the same time, the nuclear-family type worked as a grid that "makes certain kinds of 'family' relationships legible so that they can be worked on by technologies of governmentality and development, while simultaneously making other relationships illegible."

Sarah Ghabrial, in her contribution to the roundtable, focuses on agency and its "seeming synonymization with women." If power was gendered masculine and agency feminine, agency became equated with resistance to local forms of patriarchy or colonial rule in the Muslim world. Borrowing from anthropological critiques of agency and resistance, in particular their "challenges to the hegemony of 'freedom,'" Ghabrial explores the limits of the model of liberal resistance in her work on women's use of the colonial court system—both qadi courts and French tribunals—in French Algeria. She found that "Algerian women were faced with a 'double bind' in which resistance to one system (their natal or marital families) often entailed 'complicity' with another (the colonial state), and vice versa." Their legal steps served both to "consolidate and subvert patriarchal/paternalistic norms simultaneously." Uncoupling agency from resistance, and attending to the power of the regulatory state, Ghabrial takes us on a journey that raises many provocative questions about theory and archival practice.

In her contribution, Marie Grace Brown discusses the body—"our first and primary site of identity formation"—as a subject and source of historical analysis, in the process helping to dismantle the dichotomy of public/private that characterized so much earlier work in the field. "While scholars across fields have analyzed the body as a social or cultural category, we have paid scant attention to its sensory nature: its physical markings of existence." In her work on northern Sudanese women under British imperialism, Brown studies not only their movement "*across* space and time, but also women's experience of existing *within* a moving body." She argues in her essay for interpreting "body

marks, modifications, and movements as an archive: a tangible, collective accounting of existence.” Sudanese women used these rites to construct their own understandings of moral womanhood, remaking and self-fashioning their bodies. Brown sees agency in these acts: “The body stands as the physical geography on which the negotiations between individual desires and social obligation play out.” Yet she admits there are challenges in finding the proper vocabulary to convey the intertwining of physical pain and pleasure associated with materiality and sensory experiences.

Malek Abisaab provides a blueprint for gendering Middle Eastern labor history, which has not received the scholarly attention that it deserves. Noting that “it is possible to write a gendered history of labor on the basis of less-than-ideal sources,” he points to the need to “start gathering the basic quantitative data on workingmen and workingwomen alike,” at the same time integrating a feminist perspective “that probes into the male-dominant production and shaping of data by states and international agencies.” Labor, Abisaab reminds us, is often unorganized and in informal sectors, and not necessarily “class conscious.” He points to female domestic laborers, notably migrant and poor refugee women who supply unregulated labor throughout the Middle East. In closing, he notes, “The hierarchies of masculinities and femininities that emerge from the intersection of foreign labor, race, and nation can open up a rich and important field of inquiry.”

Liat Kozma’s essay tries to map a way out of the marginalization of Middle East gender studies by mainstreaming gender in Middle East studies and the Middle East in gender studies. Showing how this might work in practice, she draws on League of Nations archives to study regulated prostitution, placing it in a transnational frame. For her transnational history is “a history of the formation of networks of exchange and influence that transcend national or imperial boundaries, and one that, unlike *international* history, involves nonstate actors.” Transnationality has led her to focus on people, objects, and ideas moving to and through the Middle East, particularly early scientific texts on sex and sex workers. Seeking to create an alternative to the paradigm of Westernization, she maps multidirectional vectors of influence and moves out of a comfort zone to bridge area studies divides.

Nova Robinson, like Liat Kozma, looks beyond national borders, in her case focusing on “Arab internationalism” and Syrian women’s Pan-Arab activism in the first half of the 20th century. She argues that applying a gender lens to the international sphere “yields new insights into the relationship between the national and the international in the Middle East,” as well as about the process of rights claiming in postcolonial nation-states. Those activists making claims on the international system understood that “a strong international standard of women’s rights, even if flawed, would aid their attempt to obtain more rights from, or to enforce those already promised by, the Lebanese state.” Robinson places Middle Eastern actors front and center in the articulation of international women’s rights norms, decentering feminist histories privileging Western women.

Wilson Chacko Jacob starts his essay with a return to his book, *Working Out Egypt*, one of the few histories of masculinity in our field. In his telling, he “tracked two forms of power, which normally make for different kinds of gender history,” as part of his “inquiry into the place of masculinity in the (inter)national order emerging between the late 19th century and the end of the interwar period.” Connecting gender histories of the nation and of the international order made clear “the global lines along which the

sovereign subject of politics was elaborated in terms of masculinity.” Gender shaped the internal/domestic and external/foreign spaces “of a new world ordered” by what he calls “colonial modernity.” In his current project, which also takes up questions about sovereignty, he initially found that gender disappeared. Yet in time he discovered, once again, that gender truly mattered “to the politics of advancing colonial rule . . . and to the propagation of Islam.”

Middle East gender history is thriving. Yet I would be lying if I did not confess to a great unease, not so much with the work that is being done—that work is stellar, as the essays here show—but with the work that is not being done. There seems to be a sense that now that the feminist battle has been fought (and presumably won), gender blindness is acceptable, and a small rearguard can be left to define and defend the field. Yet gender, like class and race, was never meant to be the domain of a few specialists. It was meant to be a category that concerned all historians as a productive way to explore intimate and not so intimate power relations. Instead, many scholars and students ignore the rich body of literature on gender, showing little to no familiarity with it even when their own work clearly has a gender component. Neglecting to raise gendered questions—whether the topic is colonialism, Islamism, law, identity, sovereignty, science, the state, transnationalism, and so on—leads to the production of work that generalizes from incomplete documentation, reflects gross inaccuracies, and shows a partial or skewed picture. Too often certain humans—laborers, peasants, migrants, intellectuals—are unreflexively gendered male in the same way that most bodies are raced white. And sadly masculinity itself—much like whiteness—remains underexplored and -theorized. Let us hope that the following essays convince readers of the bounties, rewards, and riches of gender history.