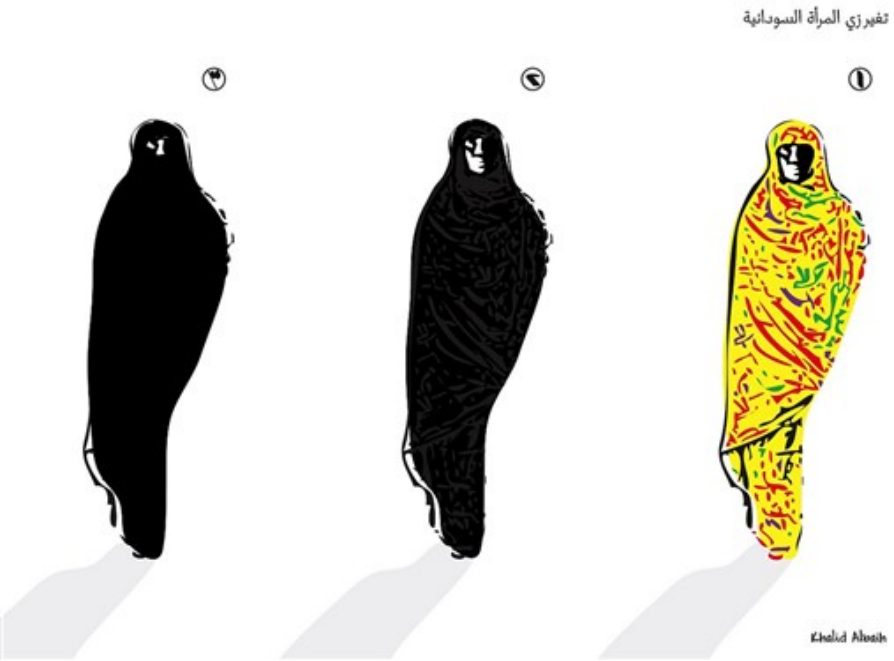


[Changes in traditional Sudanese dress. Image by Khaled Albaih]

How Not to Study Gender in the Middle East

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One: Gender is not the study of what is evident, it is an analysis of how what is evident came to be.

Two: Before resolving to write about gender, sexuality, or any other practice or aspect of subjectivity in the Middle East, one must first define what exactly the object of study is. Be specific. What country, region, and time period forms the background picture of your study? Furthermore, the terms “Middle East,” “the Islamic World” and the “Arab world” do not refer to the same place, peoples, or histories, but the linkages between them are crucial. Moreover, the “state” is a relatively new phenomenon in the Middle East. In order to study gendered political economy in Syria, for example, one must be aware of the Ottoman and regional history that has produced this gendered political economy in the area that we now call “Syria.”

Three: A study of gender must take into account sexuality. Likewise studies of sexuality cannot be disarticulated from gender analysis. To do so would be akin to studying the politics and history of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) without reference to the role of idealogy or the socio-economic policies of the Iraqi state.

Four: Gender is one aspect of individual and group subjectivity. It is also just one technology of governmentality—the production and regulation of ties between the individual body, populations, and structures of power and quantification. Moreover, studies of politics, history, and law must take into account

gender and sex, just as such studies must be attentive to class, race, political economy and-crucially- how all of these factors interact.

Five: The ungendered body does not exist, just as the unclassed body does not exist. Such disarticulation reproduces the false tropes of the ungendered body and of ungendered politics and the unclassed body and unclassed politics. These in turn reaffirm the positioning of normative male political practices as somehow "unmarked" and universal. Such an equation hides that gender is not something one can be outside of. It is not an analytic lens that can be withheld and deployed according to genitalia and/or sexual practices of the people being studied. When an attention to gender is limited to female and/or LGBTQ people in the Middle East, it reproduces the study of gender as the study of how (other) men treat "their" women and gays.

Six: Avoid tokenism and broad generalizations. Sometimes a *hijab* is just a *hijab*, and sometimes it is not.

Seven: Do not assume that gender politics or feminist concerns come in neat and familiar packages. Instead, allow your research to expand your view of what a "feminist politics" may be. It could be, for example, that protests against neoliberal market restructuring in Egypt are understood within a broad political framework that includes notions of gender justice. As Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu Lughod have taught us, liberal feminism`s assumptions as to what constitute "feminist politics" or "feminist causes" are at best flawed. At worst they are exercises in epistemological hegemony and the violent remaking of the world according to secular and neoliberal rights frameworks. Furthermore, do not assume that what we call the "feminist canon" is exhaustive or that it is *not* constituted through a series of exclusions, hierarchies, and imperial histories. After all Simone de Beauvoir, who taught us all that a woman is not born but made, also wrote in terms we now recognize as "Islamophobic" about women "under" Islam in Algeria at the time when Algeria was a French settler colony. This does not mean we should dismiss de Beauvoir, just as it would be too easy to condemn Hegel or Marx for their "views" on Africa. Rather, it is crucial to critically inhabit and navigate the reality that the western canon was, and is constituted through producing a series of "selves" and "others."

Eight: I know this is hard to believe, but Islam may not be the most important factor, or even a particularly important factor, when studying gender in Muslim majority countries or communities. For example, I have studied the Lebanese legal system, focusing on personal status, criminal and civil law, for years now. Despite the intricate ways that these interconnected bodies of law produce citizenship in Lebanon, whenever I discuss my work my interlocutors invariably want to know more about *shar'ia* and its assumed "oppression" of women. These questions always come after I have carefully explained that in Lebanon certain Christian and Jewish personal status laws are much more stringent in their production and regulation of normative gender roles than codified Islamic personal status laws (which are not the same as *shar'ia*, historically speaking). In addition, civil laws have more wide reaching "gender effects" than any religious personal status law. More broadly, Islam is not the only religion in the region, although it often seems to be in mainstream media coverage. When an action such as the hitting of women by men for not conforming to "proper" gender roles in ultra orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem or in conservative neighborhoods of Riyadh is scripted in radically different terms the reader should pause. At these moments you are not reading about Islam, you are reading *within a discourse about Islam.*

Nine: Questions of gender rights and gender justice are not new to the Middle East, and neither are struggles that we now read under the sign of “feminism.” In fact, a large portion of the laws that are often regarded as oppressive to women and LGBTQ Arabs and/or Muslims are relatively new. They were introduced to the region via the Napoleonic code and the codification and the severe hollowing out of the *shar'ia* in modern history. For example abortion, long considered a question of women`s rights in the Western world due its twinned history with Catholicism and Christianity more broadly, was not illegal across the Arab world until the rise of the nation state. Some traditions of *fiqh* continue take a position on abortion that American feminists might wish could be extended to the United States today. In addition, jurists have and do struggle to understand and promote “progressive” notions of male and female relations and to make room for nonconforming gender persons in the region. In fact, scholars such as Paula Sanders have shown us that several centuries ago Islamic jurists were developing a system of accommodation for hermaphrodites and nonbinary gendered peoples in Islamic communities.

Ten: Do not assume that you know the actors and factors affecting gender in the Middle East, or the productive role your scholarship might play in this dynamic. Institutions such as the IMF and Human Rights Watch have long been engaged in the production of normative heterosexuality and heterosexual families, for example. The Israeli settlement of historical Palestine also intervenes into the gendered and sexual fabric of indigenous Palestinians, as pinkwatcing activists have recently reminded us. Similarly, the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan function in part through the construction of interventionist platforms in the name of women`s and LGBTQ rights. Other factors affecting the practice of gender and sexuality in the Middle East include technological innovations such as in vitiro fertilization, viagra, and reconstructive hymen surgery in addition to pop culture, the rapid tranformation of the global economy, and the international circulation of people, discourses and goods.