Scholarship on Gender Politics in the Muslim World

Some Critical Reflections

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1 Introduction

What do we mean by “gender politics”? What is the political in “gender” and in what ways are politics and policies “gendered”? How do these terms relate to feminist politics? Whose feminist politics are we talking about, in a contemporary era in which scholarly research and activism is conducted through increasingly transnational networks? Can we still assume the existence of a single, feminist project that guides research on gender politics in the Muslim world?

As a first step towards addressing these questions, this essay traces important developments in social science gender studies and feminist scholarship that shaped debates among scholars located in the US and UK academe. In a second step, I will reflect on how these different paradigms of research on gender and gender politics have affected scholarship on and from the Middle East. Next, I will offer some critical reflections on key points and limitations of the debates raised by this scholarship in and on the Middle East, by addressing them from “the margins,” that is, from the vantage point of Africanist anthropological scholarship on gender. Drawing on this perspective – and this is the fourth step – I will propose certain perspectives that might benefit social science research on gender – both with respect to the Middle East and to Muslim societies that have not been granted similar canonical status in the literature.

2 Social Science Research on Gender Studies and Feminist Theory: A Short Overview

Developments within gender studies and feminist theorising since, roughly, the 1960s manifested themselves in several significant paradigm shifts. These shifts need to be related not only to dominant trends within the social sciences, but also to reconfigurations in the institutional arrangements of
higher education and academic research (see Vincent 1990; Kandiyoti 1996; also see Guyer 2004).

2.1 Transcending the “Male Bias”: Women’s Studies

Early studies that applied a gender-specific perspective to the study of society were informed by the effort to correct the “male bias” characteristic of much classical scholarship in sociology and anthropology. Yet during this early phase of gender-relevant theorising and empirical inquiry, the main category of investigation was “woman,” rather than “gender.”

The historical context for the emergence of the women’s studies paradigm were the (late) 1960s, when in the US and in Britain, a growing number of women were gaining access to institutions of higher learning and were granted the possibility to earn a graduate degree which prepared them for a career as teacher or researcher. Along with the stronger representation of women in different academic positions and functions emerged the call to “give women back their voice,” which formed the primary rationale of the emergence of women’s studies. As noted by key representatives of this scholarly impetus, classical social science scholarship that was based on empirical research had been characterised by a double male bias. Scholarly research and writing had been conducted predominantly by male scholars who, for purposes of data collection, had preferentially worked with male informants and interview partners. As a result, the collected data had necessarily been skewed. The questions posed by male researchers reflected on their own idiosyncratic viewpoints and presuppositions, and thereby in part anticipated the answers given. Male scholars tended to collect information about realms of social, economic, political, and legal life that very often corresponded to domains to which scholars as men had privileged access in their societies of origin. Other important aspects of social and political organisation, that is, those in which women potentially played a prominent role, remained outside their field of vision and were not accounted for. Second, the information offered by male informants, although mirroring their own subjective viewpoints, interests, and positionality, had been taken as disinterested and objective representations of a society’s organisation and power relations. This “skewing” of empirical research and data through the selection of interview partners had momentous consequences, particularly in societies where the segregation of women and men prevents male researchers from approaching women or from verifying the information they elicited from conversations with men.
Against this backdrop, the first step in the development of gender studies was marked by the effort on the part of female scholars to readjust this bias, by exploring various domains of female practice and hence by accounting for women's historical agency. Yet as momentous as this adjustment was in analytical and methodological terms, it also led to scholarly research dominated by what was sometimes described as the “great women approach.” That is, the motivation to account for the important role and agency of women, past and present, prompted some scholars to pay primary attention to important women in history and politics (passing over the everyday experience and practices of the majority of women) and to address the situation of women as the outcome of abstract, macro-structures of power, rather than of daily interactions and negotiations between men and women.

2.2 Gender Studies: The Beginnings

Starting in the early 1970s, scholars amended the former focus on women by directing attention to gender relations and the ways they were integrated into and constitutive of patriarchal systems of power. The now-classical collection of essays edited by Lamphere and Rosaldo addressed what they considered the universal subordination of women, and presented different explanatory frameworks to account for this universal “fact” (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Reiter 1979). Contributors to the volume located women's subjugation in the organisation of economic activities and in the sexual division of labour. Others proposed to understand women's subjugation as the result of women's and men's relegation to different areas of social life, exemplified in studies operating with the dichotomies public versus private/domestic (e.g. Rosaldo 1974; Rogers 1975) and nature versus culture (e.g. Ortner 1974). Yet others located women's subordination in their emotional-psychological constitution that, as Chodorow (1974) surmised, was closely related to women's child-rearing activities. Common to these approaches was the tendency to apply conceptual frameworks on which culturally and historically determinate nature they did not adequately reflect. An important departure from this a-historical perspective was marked by scholars who addressed the subordination of women as a product of concrete historical processes, such as the integration of local economies into the colonial market economy (Etienne and Leacock 1980), the uneven effects of “modernisation” (Boserup 1970) or, in the case of scholars working with a Marxian framework, as part and parcel of a capitalist organisation of the economy and family life (Von Werlhof et al. 1991).
Although proposing very discrepant conceptual and theoretical frameworks for the study of gender relations, these authors shared a common feminist agenda characterised by two main assumptions. They posited firstly, the existence of a clearly defined female subject of politics; and secondly, that patriarchy is the power system that needs to be overcome by female empowerment.

2.3 Accounting for the Cultural Construction of Gender

A third phase in the development of gender-related research started in the mid-1980s, prompted by a shift away from a scholarly preoccupation with explaining “women’s subordination” and towards exploring culturally specific constructions of “gender” roles (with a strong empirical bias towards studying female gender roles). Studies informed by this paradigm called for closer analysis of culturally variable constructions and evaluations of gender roles (Strathern 1980; MacCormack and Strathern 1980) and for the intertwining of these roles with other social identities (e.g. Collier and Yanagisako 1987). Their work helped refute earlier, sweeping assumptions about the universal subordination of women, by demonstrating that female and male responsibilities and agencies vary substantially in the social, political, economic, and religious domains. At the same time, by stressing the variability of “gender” across cultures, these scholars took for granted the distinction between on one side, gender as the constructed and therefore malleable and changing part of individual identity, and, on the other, “sex” as the biologically determined and therefore given and unchanging aspect of women’s and men’s identities.

2.4 Probing the Category “Woman”: Challenging the Classical Feminist Project

A fourth development of gender-related research, which occurred in the 1990s, was to problematise the assumption that “woman” constitutes a uniform category of actors who share certain core characteristics. This deconstruction of woman as an analytical category implied that the political project of feminism, defined by the shared concern to fight male oppression as the dominant principle of power inequality, lost its basic reference point and was thus called into question. This paradigm shift occurred against the backdrop of important institutional transformations. More and more women of different ethnic backgrounds (and later, sexual orientations [e.g. De Lauretis 1994]) moved from a position of relative marginality to the higher
echelons of the academic hierarchy in research and teaching institutions in (mainly) the US and UK. These women increasingly disputed the assertion by (white middle class) women who so far had filled the ranks of academia to speak in the name of “the women” (Mohanty 1988). The challenge these women posed to established gender analysis and scholars was reinforced by feminist appropriations of diverse strands of post-structuralist thought represented by Foucault and Lacan, by Lyotard’s postmodernism, and by Derrida’s deconstructionism. These post-structuralist critics similarly aimed to deconstruct the category “woman” as the uniform category of gender analysis and thereby reformulated the central purpose and terms of feminist/gender analysis. Rather than taking for granted the markers of womanhood, post-structuralist critics called for an analysis of the processes, discourses, practices, and institutions through which the category woman and notions of sexual difference become naturalised and subordination is reproduced. Post-structural critique thus not only posed a major challenge to key concepts of earlier feminist research and gender politics, such as patriarchal oppression and sexual difference. The critique also generated substantial controversy about the relationship between post-structuralism and feminism, and about the political locations of those whose dismissal of the earlier feminist project was informed by post-structuralist theory.

Another difficulty demonstrated by this controversy relates to the indeterminate ways in which the notion of gender had been conventionally used in feminist analysis. That is, in conventional analysis, gender had been used in two different senses. Gender was used in contrast to sex to refer to culturally and socially specific constructions of masculinity and femininity, thereby implicitly positing that a person’s sex is an unalterable, biological fact. At the same time, scholars increasingly used gender to refer to any social construction that rests on a male/female contrast. Used in this way, the term gender incorporates social constructions in which “female” and “male” bodily features serve as criteria of distinction. Here sex becomes an element of gender, because constructions of the body are themselves the product of social interpretation. Over time, the second, more inclusive use of gender as an expression of difference that, based on perceived differences between the sexes, is always embedded within a field of power relations (Kandiyoti 1996, 6; see Scott 1999) gradually established itself as the dominant one. This development was reinforced by the concomitant emergence of comparative masculinity studies as a distinct field of inquiry. Masculinity studies generated considerable debate about the motivations and agendas of those labouring to making men (once again, this time explicitly) the exclusive object of empirical inquiry. Still, important proponents of masculinity
studies, most notably Cornell, also offered important new inspiration for scholars of gender, by stressing the coexistence of different, hegemonic, subordinate, and marginal masculinities (Cornell 1995; see Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Kandiyoti 1994) and by favouring an approach that related gender as one specific construction of power relations to other mechanisms and institutions of power inequality, such as capitalism and the state.

2.5 Using Gender as an Analytical Category

I want to conclude my historical outline of key developments in gender studies with three suggestions. First, rather than explain gender inequalities and their reproduction over time, we should favour investigations that address, from a social science perspective, contextually specific formations of gender and power inequalities (Nicholson 2004). The question of how gender operates as a structure establishing and reproducing power relations needs to be addressed both at the macro-sociological level and at the level of interpersonal relations.

Secondly, because of the proliferating, partly overlapping, or inconsistent use of the term “gender” in the social science research on gender, scholars of gender and gender politics in Muslim societies would be well advised to specify what meanings and goals they associate with their individual research projects. It seems to be of little heuristic value to reduce or collapse the variety of these understandings of gender (in)to a single one. Still, it is important to keep in mind that the different conceptualisations of gender employed by and underlying the vast body of literature on gender in Muslim societies are sometimes incompatible. Hence, while using gender as an analytical category, one should be careful to reflect on the epistemological and philosophical foundations.

Finally, for the sake of clarity, I propose a working definition of gender that allows scholars to make gender a key category of social science research on Muslim societies. Following Risman’s distinction between three different dimensions of gender as a social structure, that is, between “gendered selves, the normative expectations that help explain interactional patterns, and institutional regulations” (Risman 2004, 433, 436), I propose to view gender as a structure constitutive of different forms of inequality. The culturally and historically specific working and effects of this structure can be explored by studying the interconnection between these three dimensions of gender.

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1 Risman’s “gender structure theory” is strongly indebted to Giddens’ (1984) view of the recursive (that is, mutually constitutive) relationship between action and structure. Risman
3 Gender Politics-Related Research on and in the Middle East

The research agendas that have shaped gender-related scholarship in and on the Middle East since the turn of the twentieth century reveal particular institutional, social, and historical circumstances within which this kind of research could be effected. These circumstances were decisive for creating locally and regionally very specific conditions for the appropriation of gender-related research paradigms that circulated, at some historical moments more than in other times, at an increasingly global level. The particular ways in which these research agendas were appropriated and adapted to regional and national contexts of debate and research in the Middle East demonstrate that it is impossible to clearly distinguish between research paradigms that were produced in the Middle East on one side, and those generated in academic institutions in Europe and North America.

3.1 Early Writings on “Women’s Position”

Early reflection and writings on the status of women and on gender relations in Muslim societies in the Middle East were a by-product of the spirit of modernisation and social reform that animated postcolonial state formation in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernist thinkers reflected on the “woman question” as a stepping stone and a main symbol of a modern, postcolonial society. As several authors have pointed out, nationalist discourse was the dominant idiom within which questions relating to the position of women, but also other questions relating to the creation of a modern society and citizenry were addressed (Kandiyoti 1996, 8; Abu-Lughod 1998, 22ff.; Göle 2002). There thus existed, from the outset, a close connection between feminism and a nationalist critique of Western cultural imperialism that tended to foreclose a methodical and coherent analysis of the political and social processes and structures constitutive of power relations and gender hierarchies in the societies under question. Nationalist discourse, in turn, rested importantly on a strong association of notions of cultural authenticity with Islam. So tightly interwoven were writings on women’s "status and points out that authors coming from very different theoretical traditions have each tended to privilege one of these different dimensions of gender in their studies. See also Nicholson (2004).

2 The following historical overview is indebted to Kandiyoti’s (1996) remarkable sketch of the development of feminist scholarship on the Middle East.
role in society” with a nationalist discourse on one side, and with “Islam” as the source of cultural authenticity on the other, that those aiming to improve the situation of women could only choose one of two options for action and theorising. The legacy of these two options is still evident in contemporary scholarship on Muslim societies. On one side were – and are – those who refuted the inherently oppressive character of Muslim practices and Islamic normative prescriptions. Scholars who subscribed to this view posited a contrast between the dignity of the protected Muslim woman on one side, and the commodified and sexually exploited Western woman on the other. These scholars sought to demonstrate that women pursued meaningful and dignified lives “behind the apparent limitations set by segregation” (Kandiyoti 1996, 9; see Abu-Lughod 1989). The second position on the relationship between Islam and the position of women was to argue that an original, non-discriminatory Islam that had granted important rights to women in the early centuries of Islamic history had been subsequently corrupted by discriminatory practices and institutions and legal interpretation. Protagonists of this line of argument challenged patriarchal interpretations of Islam by proposing alternative readings of the Islamic written traditions. The two lines of argument, formulated early on in the history of writings about the “woman question” in Middle Eastern societies, re-emerged in the 1980s. The two approaches offer opposite ways of conceiving of the relationship between Islam and women’s status, yet, as Kandiyoti points out, they both occupy “the same discursive space” (Kandiyoti 1996, 10).

Both perspectives were challenged by authors who instead proposed to explore early writings about the “woman question” in Middle Eastern societies as a project of modernity intricately tied to the colonial moment and impetus of “modernising” its uncivilised subjects, and subsequently to the postcolonial state-building project (see Abu-Lughod 1998). Still, an important implication of these early attempts to think about the relationship between Islam, the “woman question,” and the project of decolonisation was that they prepared the grounds for articulating understandings of feminism that claimed a relative autonomy from Western feminist agendas. Notably, these forerunners of (diverse) contemporary articulations of Islamic feminisms challenged Western feminism with regard to its foundational principles of (negative) liberty (defined by the actor’s freedom from

3 The re-emergence of these lines of reasoning in the 1980s was demonstrated forcefully by Mernissi’s Women and Islam (1991) and Leila Ahmed’s Women and Gender in Islam (1992), both of them outstanding pieces of scholarship that have generated considerable scholarly debate.
constraints), agency, and gender equality (as opposed to a view of gender complementarity promoted by certain Islamic feminists).

3.2 The Institutionalisation of Social Science Research: “Developmentalist” Approaches

Along with the growing institutionalisation of social science research on and in the Middle East, two paradigms emerged as dominant. The two paradigms according to which scholars preferably addressed questions of women’s status and position in society were modernisation theory and Marxist approaches. These studies shared a tendency to equate Middle Eastern societies with Muslim societies, and not to sufficiently take account of the presence of non-Muslims in these societies. Moreover, most of these studies rested on a slippage between “Muslim society” and “Middle Eastern society”; they left out from their conceptual reflection the range of Muslim societies located outside the Middle East.

Studies in the 1950s and 1960s, following the then dominant modernisation paradigm, explored gender-specific power inequalities in society and within the family as a function of the extent to which the society under study had undergone a modernisation process. Following the Parsonian ideal type of a modern society, modernisation was envisaged to occur through the transformation of a society founded principally on the rural, traditional, and patriarchal family structure into a society organised mainly around the urban, educated family and a modern version of a marital relationship. Because modernisation theory treated a wide range of societies as “traditional” without paying attention to cultural variety and historical variation, it failed to acknowledge, or treated as factors of secondary importance, the historically and regionally specific modes of generating and reproducing gender inequality. That is, modernisation scholars assumed that gender-specific power inequalities were to lose their significance with the gradual transformation of a “traditional” society into a modern, urban, and socio-economically more developed society.

Marxist approaches to women’s position in society similarly treated gender inequalities as epiphenomena and hence as a Marxian Nebenwiderspruch (secondary antinomy) produced by the capitalist mode of production. They considered the establishment of greater gender equity to be secondary in importance to the socio-economic development of society and the creation of a more equitable political and economic order.

Starting in the 1970s, modernisation theory became the target of feminist critique. Critics took particular issue with the tenet that the modernising
effects of development would trickle down to women. Based on empirical evidence that was often drawn from development aid projects, critics demonstrated instead that in many cases, the “modernising” of social and political structures of society led to a further disempowerment of women because they were deprived of their traditional sources of wealth and influence within the family. The 1975 UN International Women’s Year provided a turning point in this respect. However, because much of the criticism of modernisation theory was addressed within the confined framework of development policy and projects, it did not generate a systematic body of comparative literature accounting for the diversity of situations and historical data on regionally specific institutional and material conditions for women’s livelihoods. As a result, the predominant tendency in international scholarly debate was to lump together women of very diverse class, social and cultural backgrounds by subsuming them under the label “Third World Women” (Mohanty 1988).

3.3 New Debates on the Subject of Feminist Politics

A subsequent phase of social science research on gender in Middle Eastern Muslim societies was characterised by a diversification of feminist agendas. Depending on the institutional context in which these agendas emerged, they entered into dialogue with each other or developed without significant overlaps or mutual exchange. An important condition for this emergent dialogue between different feminisms was the integration of ideas of Western feminist scholarship into Middle Eastern scholarship, an integration effected by Middle Eastern scholars located in the Western academic system and in Middle Eastern institutions, and also by other scholars working on the Middle East. The integration of concepts and theoretical currents of scholarship produced at academic institutions in the West into Middle Eastern scholarship was rather uneven because some concepts and conceptual distinctions, more than others, resonated with regional patterns of organising social and political life. For instance, conceptual dichotomies introduced by early representatives of the anthropology of gender/women, such as the private/public dichotomy posited by Rosaldo in her 1974 hallmark essay, was broadly applied to local investigations of gender-specific realms of social and political and economic organisation.

As a corollary of the different feminist agendas and attendant analytical perspectives, investigations of gender relations in Middle Eastern societies in that period came to very different conclusions about the nature
of gender-specific power inequalities in these societies. Whereas some scholars tended to conceive of the situation of women in Middle Eastern societies as one of oppression or patriarchal subjugation, others tended to highlight the empowering effects of female kin and solidarity networks that helped to overcome or bypass the restrictions imposed on women in these patriarchal societies. The work of some Middle Eastern scholars who were initially trained in Western academic institutions and were now located in the Middle East, reflected the extent to which they felt accountable to the concerns and preoccupations of local audiences. This sense of accountability showed notably in their orientation towards producing scholarship relevant to the improvement of living conditions for women. Another group of scholars who worked at institutions in the Middle East produced scholarship that, written mainly in the national languages, showed relatively little interest in integrating new concepts and debates developed by feminist scholars at Western academic institutions. These scholars continued to highlight in their studies issues of women’s rights and nationalism in the context of societies shaped by Islamic normative traditions.

In the different regions of the Middle East, two broad currents of Western-inspired feminist projects informed empirical research and theorising on gender and gender relations. On one side were scholars who, informed by a liberal, “revisionist” agenda, were concerned with removing what they considered to be obstacles to gender equality. Their work thus focused on the question of how to improve the situation of women, through legal change and through improved access to education and employment, and by fostering reforms to overcome sexual prejudices and institutionalised forms of sex discrimination. The “revisionist” agenda of feminist scholarship in the Middle East was characteristic of the modernisation paradigm-informed studies of the 1960s and 1970s, and the later studies that geared towards “women and development”-related issues, also focused on the question of how to close the gender gap in education, legal status, and in the access to material resources. The agenda is still evident in macro-sociological research on gender relations conducted since the 1990s (e.g. Moghadam 2003).

Scholars whose work can be subsumed under the second main current of feminist scholarship in the Middle East were inspired by a Marxian agenda. Whether working within the framework of world systems theory, dependency theory, or other neo-Marxist approaches to issues of development and underdevelopment, these authors’ distinctive contribution was to foreground a Marxist analytical terminology and perspective.
Due to this scholarship, concepts of production, reproduction, class, and patriarchy became important elements of a mainstream analytical framework.\(^4\)

Scholarly analyses affected by European multiculturalist debates and by different post-structuralist approaches also made their inroads into gender-related research on and in the Middle East. Also strongly represented was post-Orientalist scholarship that, drawing on Said’s and Foucault’s work, provided trenchant, mostly textual analysis-based critiques of exoticising representations of “the Oriental woman.” Although this work marked an important step in probing the epistemological foundations of classical Orientalist scholarship, this post-Orientalist work attributed exclusive discursive agency to “the West.” It also reproduced some of its key dichotomies, such as the distinction between Orient and Occident, between Western Self vs Native Other, and between Islam and Christianity, thereby blurring the messy social and cultural realities, and substantial (ethnic, religious) heterogeneity of Middle Eastern societies.\(^5\)

### 3.4 Gender Politics-Related Research: New Directions

Since the mid-1980s, gender-related scholarship on the Middle East has been characterised by four important trends. Firstly, a vast array of studies addressed the different institutional realms through which gender differences are reproduced. They demonstrated different institutions, such as educational institutions, law, market, state, and the military as key sites for the making and remaking of gender as structure of social difference. This work reveals that social institutions in Middle Eastern societies should not

\(^4\) Other strands of gender-related theorising formulated at Western academic institutions, such as those informed by psychoanalysis, did not find much resonance in gender-related research on and in the Middle East. Some scholars located at Middle Eastern institutions categorically denied the applicability of Western feminist theory to Middle Eastern societies, denouncing it as a culturally alien project at variance with what they identified as the core values and principles of social organisation in Middle Eastern societies, such as a stronger collective orientation. This argument bears strong resonances with critiques of the global applicability of Western feminist thought that have been formulated by representatives of other world regions, such as by African feminist scholars. Yet, as Kandiyoti points out, this critique is based on a distorted representation and conflation of the different strands of feminist theory produced at Western academic institutions (Kandiyoti 1996, 15).

\(^5\) The problematic implications of these dichotomous depictions are illustrated by recent Islamist writings that draw on this post-Orientalist work and contrast the imperial project of post-Enlightenment thought to an Islamic universalism based on principles of an immutable divine order (Kandiyoti 1996, 16).
be seen as products of one coherent patriarchal logic; rather, they constitute sites of power relations and processes through which gender relations are constituted and challenged, and that result in complex, partly contradictory cultural constructions of gender. These studies also illustrated the need to further explore how key institutions for the production of gender and gender difference, such as the family and different household types change over time, as they are increasingly integrated into transnational fields of influence and change.

A second development in gender-related research on Middle Eastern societies has been effected by studies on the micro-politics of gender relations that moved away from the conventional patriarchy paradigm that frames gender relations in terms of male domination and female subordination. Notable examples of this approach are Kandiyoti’s reflections on the validity and limitations of the notion of “patriarchal bargain” (1988) and Abu-Lughod’s (1990) reflections on the concept of “resistance” as a way to analyse the specific workings of social power.

A third body of scholarship has addressed the historical specificity of gender relations by relating them to the history of colonial and postcolonial state-building projects (e.g. Kandiyoti 1991b). Authors working in this framework explored the changing position of women against the backdrop of the different political projects of nation-states and their respective historical trajectories, colonial experiences, nationalist struggles, class politics, and ideological uses of an Islamic idiom (Kandiyoti 1991a; Moghadam 1994a, b). Particularly insightful have been studies that related state-orchestrated family law reforms (and the reform of “women’s rights”) to the efforts by the state, or by elites closely associated with the state-building project, to break up the autonomy of local kin groups for the purpose of labour force mobilisation or other political projects.

Another line of research was pursued by political economy-oriented studies of the changing position of women in Middle Eastern societies. These studies did not signal a new strand of research on gender relations and gender politics in the Middle East, but rather a refinement of earlier approaches. Yet very often, the legacies of modernisation theory and of “revisionist” liberal approaches are still notable in these studies, especially in those that relate the improvement of women’s situation to their stronger integration into the educational sector and wage labour market (e.g. Moghadam’s 2003). Regardless of whether one subscribes to the understanding of female empowerment and status enhancement that these studies promote, they should prompt scholars to critically reflect on whether women’s access to and integration into state education
may initiate “new coercive norms” and subject women to “new forms of control and discipline” (Abu-Lughod 1998, 25), even if they simultaneously undermine other forms of patriarchy.

Another important development in gender-related scholarship on Middle Eastern societies has been signalled by the growing body of literature on Islamic revivalist trends and on women’s participation in these movements.

Nilüfer Göle detected parallels between women’s active and self-assertive participation in Islamist movements and the similarly central role attributed to women in the state-orchestrated modernisation projects in Iran, Egypt, and Turkey in the early twentieth century. She addressed the highly visible public prominence of a feminised symbolics of Islamic piety as a matter of articulating “alternative modernities” and as a form of identity politics (e.g. Göle 1996, 2002; see also Navaro-Yashin 2002). Saba Mahmood, in contrast, highlighted the analytical and challenges posed by these movements and their – if judged from a Western feminist perspective – conservative gender ideologies as a way to reflect on the normative presuppositions and limitations of Western liberal political thought and on the contradictions (dilemmas) deriving from the “dual character of feminism both as an analytical and a political project” (Mahmood 2001, 201). According to this line of reasoning, scholars need to address these movements from within particular Islamic traditions (e.g. Mahmood 2005; see Deeb 2006) and to foreground women’s subjective experiences and personal motivations to support these movements. Both perspectives offered significant advantages over earlier studies on political Islam and on women in nationalist projects or other forms of community making, studies that, if they addressed women’s implications in these movements at all, had tended to offer little insight into the personal motivations and understandings articulated by individual actors and participants. Still, both approaches to Islamic revival, by portraying women’s participation in Islamist movements either by focusing on the context of identity politics, or by studying how individual projects of ethical self-making, relate to specific appropriations of particular religious traditions, created a certain socio-economic (and political) “limbo.” That is, they often did not clarify how subjective concerns and attempts of ethical reform related to these actors’ everyday struggles and negotiations, and their differential positions in a socio-economic field on one side; and to the dynamics taking place in the surrounding religious and political fields, where competing groups of Muslims (and their different visions of “proper Muslimhood”) confront, engage and interact with state institutions and representatives, on the
other. The challenge is therefore to think both perspectives together, that is, to account for both the subjective meanings of Islamic moral renewal for individual female activists and the broader political and social ramifications of their activism (Schulz 2011). Other scholars continue to dismiss Islamist movements as patriarchal and repressive for women; they are thus unable to account for the leading roles women often assume in these movements.

Taken together, these different scholarly perspectives on female Muslim reform activism have reignited but also reframed earlier controversies about the normative presuppositions of Western feminist thought, and about whether these religious revivalist endeavours can be understood as “political” projects if they do not endorse the liberating and emancipatory goals formulated by liberal Western feminist thought. This controversy has reiterated the divide between, on one side, those who seek to formulate a joint feminist project of improving women’s status and living conditions; and, on the other side, those who emphasise that the plurality of women’s viewpoints and positionalities undercuts a joint feminist, political project.

These issues and positions became evident in responses to Mahmood’s critique of Western liberal understandings of agency and religion, and of the preoccupation with resistance and subordination in social science scholarship on women and gender.6 Mahmood’s critique has in turn generated debate about the implicit model of mind and self on which her own understanding of agency is based. Still, Mahmood’s intervention marked an important step towards recognising the variety and complexity of notions of agency, and the normative liberal understandings of agency that animate many feminist projects. Yet, whereas the debate over the normative presuppositions of notions of “agency” prompted by Mahmood’s critique was waged with particular force in academic institutions in Europe and North America, Mahmood’s critique of Western liberal thought and secularism seems to have gained less salience among scholars who engage in gender-related political struggles from their locations at academic institutions in the MENA region.

Ultimately, the debate triggered by Mahmood put into relief conflicting and by times incompatible conceptions of “politics.” Mahmood and like-minded scholars draw on a Foucauldian notion of subjectivation and

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6 Mahmood critiqued the normative liberal assumptions about freedom and agency, yet also stressed that Judith Butler’s (1990) Foucauldian view of agency as the capacity to subvert norms revealed a culturally and historically specific understanding of “agency.”
conceive of the “politics of piety” as a project of personal self-making – one that is less interested in studying either micro-politics or macro-politics, but the individual subject as the product of power and self-disciplinary practices. Other authors (exemplified by Kandiyoti), while not necessarily drawing on the notion of agency, study gender relations and power inequalities by combining a consideration of political economic processes with an attention to the socially (culturally) and historically specific parameters set by state institutions and policies. These authors were less interested in subject formation as an instantiation of the productive effects of power and discourse, but explored “power” dynamics between men and women at the interpersonal level or the macro-sociological and institutional level.

Several insights emerge from this sketch of the different trajectories of integration of gender-related and feminist scholarly research into studies on Middle Eastern societies. The first is the partial and selective way in which gender theory and analytical frameworks produced at Western academic institutions have been integrated into gender-related studies on the Middle East. This process of uneven integration reflects the agendas of specific groups of scholars and the particular concerns and preoccupations of local audiences whom they addressed with their scholarship.

Secondly, the selective integration and adaption of feminist analysis in/to scholarship on the Middle East helps us move beyond the debate on the cultural and epistemological foundations of feminist theory and on its validity for non-Western societies. We can conceive feminism as a project that originated in specific, Western ideas about politics, law, rights, personhood, and community that are – to quote Abu-Lughod – “part of a modernity that is both related to Europe and developed in particular ways in the Middle East” (1998, 22). To explore feminist scholarship on and in the Middle East from this perspective implies that we critically examine the different political and scholarly projects that centre on women’s issues and on gender-related reforms, by recognising their intricate ties to colonial projects of civilising or modernising societies and to postcolonial state-building projects.

Thirdly, even if feminism always relates to historically and socially specific contexts, we should be careful not to celebrate any political struggle around women as an instance of a “local feminism.” Rather, and this is my fourth point, what is needed are micro-sociological analyses and explanatory frameworks that provide the basis for methodological and conceptual critique and refinement, within but also beyond scholarship on Middle Eastern societies.
Gender Politics in Muslim Societies: Towards a Trans-Regional Perspective

What are the challenges of social science research on gender politics, in the Middle East and with regard to other Muslim societies? Rather than offer a comprehensive answer, let me outline a few points that invite further critical reflection.

Firstly, studies on gender as a structure of social difference in Muslim societies are still concentrated on the Middle East; and within the Middle East, there has been a strong concentration of scholarly studies on certain countries, such as Egypt, leading to an internal “skewing” of ethnographic accounts of “typical” features of social life that draw strongly on specific societies and regions (Bodman 1998, 2-4).

Secondly, the fact that a range of societies fall into the rubric of “Muslim societies,” raises questions as to the presumed unity and coherence of the “Muslim world” that expressions such as “gender relations in the Muslim world” presuppose. Scholars should pay sustained attention to the different processes, institutions, and traditions that shape the ways in which gender operates as a structure of difference in various Muslim societies; these factors include, but are not limited to, Islam as a religious tradition. We may even question whether or when it makes sense to frame our exploration as one that focuses on “gender (politics) in Muslim societies.” Although being a Muslim certainly confers some sense of unity on the women (and men) whose lifeworlds we explore, the unity does not hold in view of the highly divergent material, social conditions and histories that shape Muslims’ daily experiences and struggles. Conducting gender-related research in Muslim societies therefore calls for a closer attention to Muslims’ diverse social and economic life circumstances, across and within societies.

I suggest that such an exploration could benefit enormously from a heightened dialogue between scholars who work on different regions of the Muslim world. Their trans-regional exchange would bridge the boundaries currently drawn and reproduced by area studies-oriented research conventions and institutions. I shall substantiate this point with regard to scholarly research on gender and Islam in Africa. Addressing my earlier questions from the vantage point of the “margins” (see Das and Poole 2004) promises new insights into how the study of gender may refine our conceptual framework for an exploration of Muslim societies, politics, and gender politics in particular. I understand Africa’s “marginality” in scholarship on Islam in an at once geographical and theoretical sense. Geographical, because of the persistent tendency to treat Muslim social and religious
life in Africa as “peripheral” within the Muslim world; and theoretically marginal because Islam in Africa has occupied a fairly marginal position within anthropological and sociological scholarship on Islam.

4.1 Gender and Gender Relations in Muslim Societies in Africa

Paradigms that dominated social science research on gender have informed scholarship on Muslim societies in Africa in ways that contrast with those adopted by scholars working on and in the Middle East.

Anthropological and sociological studies of Muslim societies in Sub-Saharan Africa had to engage a legacy of colonial thought that, in spite of certain commonalities, differed substantially from the text- and language-oriented, Orientalist paradigm from which social scientists working on the Middle East struggled to disengage. Whereas, in the words of political scientist Chaudry (1994, quoted in Guyer 2004, 516-517), “Middle East studies charted a Spartan path from the Orientalism of the 1960s to the postmodernism of the 1990s,” with the result that political economy approaches were “deconstructed before taking shape,” African studies were to rid themselves from a different legacy: from the colonial category of race and related categories.

The principal way of countering the image of Africa as the “dark continent,” as a place without history and civilisation, and the alter ego of Western modernity, was to bring in “history” – and to rewrite “history” as global history. Starting in the 1980s, Africanist scholarship sought to show the deep relationality of Africa, both as a “discursive construct” and a complex material reality, by demonstrating the implication of African economies and societies in the making of Western modernity.

At the same time, Africanist anthropology played an important role for scholarly understandings of intra-family dynamics through the study of kinship, and political and social organisation was important for cross-cultural and comparative theorising in economic, legal, and political anthropology.

Because of this comparatively well-established “tradition” of political economic analysis, it was easier to integrate an analytics of the changing political and moral economy of gender relations into Africanist scholarship, when, in the course of the 1980s, “gender” was established as a viable subject of social science investigation. This trend was supported by studies that placed the analysis of religious practice in the context of the colonial “encounter.” Many of these studies favoured practice- and actor-oriented approaches to the study of religion and of gender relations, with all the room this perspective created for the contingency of practices, norms,
concepts, and power relations. There thus existed a new potential to study the politics of gender relations through an analytical framework that departed from a focus on “veiling” and other practices that supposedly illustrate the subordination of women in Muslim societies. Yet, notably, the anthropological study of Islam and of Muslim societies in Africa does not have a strong tradition in Africanist scholarship. While numerous studies were conducted in Muslim societies, these were only sometimes framed as studies on a Muslim society. Scholarly studies also revealed a certain penchant for paradigms and concepts such as patriarchy, men’s dominance, and women’s resistance that dominated Middle Eastern scholarship at that time (e.g. Callaway and Creevey 1994).

Studies with an explicit focus on Islam paid primary, if not exclusive, attention to the leaders of “brotherhoods” and Muslim movements, and their texts and doctrinal disputes. If women were mentioned at all, they were mostly women who played a role in the social and religious practices associated with the mystical traditions of Islam. Variations in the organisation of gender and gender relations, within one country or across socio-economic divides, did not receive sustained scholarly attention.

Scholars working on gender in African Muslim societies face yet another dilemma, especially when they study domains of social and ritual life in which women play a dominant role: they run the risk of contributing to a tendency to classify – and dismiss – women’s religious practices as representative of a “popular,” syncretistic, unorthodox Islam.

Although anthropological studies on similar domains of female religiosity in the Middle East face the same danger, I would argue that, in the case of scholarship on African Islam, there is a double marginalisation at work: women are not only represented as marginal because they engage in “marginal” practice. They are also marginal in the sense of being Muslims who are Africans and live in Africa. I will return to this point below, when I reflect on the marginal position of Africanist scholarship within the broader anthropological literature on Muslim societies. This is illustrated by Africanist scholarship on spirit possession in Muslim societies which has made a substantial contribution to theorising spirit possession in relation to its gender-specific dimensions and its articulations with processes and institutions of global modernity. At the same time, the scholarship has tended to reinforce a common view, articulated in the popular press, yet also shared by many scholars, of African Islam as not fully belonging to the realm of “Islam proper.”

At stake, here, is an othering of “African Islam” performed through the double othering of Muslim women: they are considered “others” first,
because their practices – allegedly – diverge from the (purportedly) orthodox (and male) standards of proper Muslim religious practice; and second, because they practice an African Islam that, by definition, is hybrid and syncretistic. The tendency to consider African Muslim women as the “other” of “Islam proper” is further compounded by the lopsided way in which social science scholarly research and debate on Muslim societies is conducted. While the – comparatively few – scholars working on gender in Muslim societies in Sub-Saharan Africa need to draw strongly on the ethnographic and theoretical literature on the Middle East and, though to varying extents, on other areas of the Muslim world, the reverse is less often the case. The perception still seems to be strong and alive that Muslim practices and debates in Sub-Saharan Africa are not quite so relevant or representative of developments in and beyond the Muslim world; and that the “core” discursive traditions of Islam are located somewhere else, for instance, in the Middle East, Turkey, or Iran.

Among the consequences of these multiply layered, colonial and postcolonial, legacies for the study of gender in African Muslim societies, I want to single out three. The first result is the relatively limited number of nuanced studies of Muslim societies in Africa that address issues of “gender” beyond the all-too-popular focus on Muslim women who “resist” the “dominant” patriarchal order, or, for that matter, who “liberate” themselves from the yoke of “conservative” gender ideologies articulated by Islamic revivalist groups.

Second, important insights from recent theoretical debates on gender and feminism have not been integrated sufficiently into mainstream Africanist scholarship on Islam. As a consequence, contributions that claim to address gender most often content themselves with what one could call the “cake mix version” of gender studies: add women to conventional analyses of Islam and stir. Typical of the “cake mix” approach is that it treats gender as being reducible to “women,” and therefore fails to engage gender analytically as a mode of generating and reflecting social inequality.

Third, and closely related to the “cake mix” approach to the study of gender, notions of “the political” remain under-theorised in existing Africanist scholarship on Islam. Most studies of “politics” in Muslim societies content themselves with demonstrating that “Islam” does not necessarily challenge the secular order, but engages it in historically and regionally diverse

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7 This view of African Islam, and of Muslim women as the epitomy of its marginal, non-representative nature, reiterates the colonial paradigm of framing “African Islam” as the opposite of “true” (if radical) “Arab Islam” (e.g. Harrison 1988; Brenner 2001).
ways (e.g. Soares and Otayek 2007). This scholarship would benefit from an analytical framework that links a macro-sociological study of politics to accounts of the micro-politics of gender and changing intergenerational relations (e.g. Schulz 2011).

5 Outlook

How can we move beyond these trends of conceptual and geographical compartmentalisation in scholarship on gender in Muslim societies? What could be gained from a closer dialogue across conventional area studies boundaries? And could a sustained, cross-regional dialogue look like one that could benefit scholarship on societies in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, or in another core region of the Muslim world?

As a preliminary response, I highlight two lines of inquiry that productively complicate conventional research preoccupations, agendas, and concepts that have shaped gender-related research on Muslim societies.

Studies that take “gender” as one point of entry to address power relations in Muslim societies would benefit considerably if they integrated more consistently accounts of changing notions, norms, and social practices of masculinity. Drawing on insights from the “new men’s studies,” we should pay attention to the existence of heterogeneous, coexisting and changing “masculinities” – and study them in their interlocking with shifting notions and politics of femininity. Closer investigation of the field of coexistent, dominant, submerged, and subaltern ideals of masculinity and femininity allows us to understand them in their mutually constitutive, malleable, and dynamic relationship – and to avoid any form of “add and stir” version of “gender” that, ultimately, results in an impoverished form of “women’s” or “men’s” studies.

Another way of “refining” gender as a conceptual framework for the study of interpersonal politics is to pay attention to the ways “gender” is complicated by “generation.” Attention to differences in age and status may substantially enlarge our understandings of how competing masculinities and femininities rest on, and, in turn, define power differentials within the family and the society at large. Here, new insights gained by recent scholarship on youth in Muslim societies (e.g. Herrera and Bayat 2010) could be significantly expanded if similar attention was paid to cultures of aging and death – and to the ambivalences and commonalities emerging from women’s and men’s advanced age status. So far, very little empirically grounded research has been done on these issues and on the changing relations between generations; although they have gained in salience in the contemporary era.
of increased violent confrontations, rising HIV infection rates, and various forms of socio-ecological disasters that affect Muslims worldwide.

The second perspective I propose concerns the ways scholars study and conceive of the points of articulation between changing interpersonal relations and broader societal transformations. This focus would enhance scholarly understanding of the powerful religious movements and idioms that presently inhabit the field of politics and social life throughout the Muslim world (e.g. Masquelier 2009; McIntosh 2009). Zoning in on the points of articulation between the micro-politics of gender and generation and broader social and political processes would allow scholars to move beyond a focus on personal understandings and ethical projects, and on interpersonal dynamics, while simultaneously avoiding interpretations that reduce personal motivation to a function of a politics of recognition.

Here again, “gender” needs to be used in an analytical way to show how religious renewal and attendant politics of recognition play out at the macro-political level, and feed back into interpersonal relations. This perspective thus sheds light, firstly, on the complex intertwining of revivalist actors and idioms with state politics and institutions, and, secondly, on the changing moral economies of gender relations on which these idioms of Islamic reform or renewal reflect.

One area in which this combined perspective has already been productively engaged is the domain of law and gender. Recent scholarship in this domain shows that the dynamics and struggles around family draft laws can only be understood by addressing the interface between interpersonal and broader political and social processes and struggles (e.g. Molyneux 1991; Moors 1996, 2003; Buskens 2003; Schulz 2003; also see Hirsch 1998). These analyses call out for more cross-regional dialogue and reception of scholarship to live up to the demands imposed by a world of intense transnational connections and interrelatedness and of an increasingly global regime of human rights advocacy and activism.

Bibliography


