

XV Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale

22-24 giugno 2022



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Negotiating Gender and Resisting Precarity in the Middle East and North Africa

[Closed Panel in English]

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S: Sepideh Atter Motlagh, Matthew Heinrichs, Seréna Nilsson Rabia, Şefika Özer

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Studies in the Orientalist and white feminist traditions often homogenize and essentialize women from the Middle East and North Africa, stripping them of their narratives and agency. Post-colonial feminists challenge narratives of these academic traditions, criticizing the recurring use of women's situations in the Middle East region to justify foreign interference and invasion (Abu-Lughod 2013). Indeed, histories of colonialism, eurocentrism, and westernization contribute to women's current experiences of oppression (Elsadda 2019, 53). While the oppression of women at the hands of authoritarian and patriarchal structures is rampant throughout the MENA region, as well as globally, post-colonial feminists including Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003[1988]) argue for the necessity of centering women's agency, resistance, and social resilience in academic debates. Additionally, they highlight gender differences and the construction of women and women's roles in post-conflict and post-colonial societies.

This panel seeks to explore the various ways women relate to precarious situations in their daily lives, stemming from patriarchal and authoritarian structures. Judith Butler describes precarity as the "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (2015, 33). Gender norms, written and unwritten, are central to the ways in which individuals embody and perform their gender and agency. However, these norms are often instrumentalized in favor of sexual politics through the pathologization and criminalization of women based on their public appearances. Laws and reforms play a central role in that they discriminate against specific embodiments of gender norms and appearances (Butler 2015, 35). Using this framing of precarity and gender, we enable the understanding of individuals' own interests concerning the power of norms, traditions, religion, and laws that shape how women exhibit various forms of agency, resistance, and social resilience in their negotiation of patriarchal and authoritarian structures both individually and collectively (Mahmood 2005, 8). Through a bottom-up approach, interviews, and observations with women from the region, we deconstruct the binary division between resistance and subordination in relation to women performing their agency. Additionally, by focusing on women's personal narratives and experiences we enable the deconstruction of women's role and status in society through various tactics of negotiation. Below is a brief overview of each panelists' presentation.

Everyday Gender Norms: Tehrani Female University Students' Lived Experiences with the Phenomenon of Patriarchal Gender Norms in Iran

Existing patriarchal gender norms for women in Iran are linked to the ideal image of an honorable and respectable woman. From women's appearance and comportment to ascribed

family roles, gender norms are largely present and important in the Iranian society and culture, influencing and regulating women's daily lives privately and publicly (Shahidian 2002). I carried out a hermeneutic phenomenologically informed narrative analysis based on seven individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews I conducted in November 2019 in Tehran. Through narratives of lived experiences, I analyzed how female university students in Tehran understand patriarchal gender norms concerning the aspects of appearance, comportment, and family life. I found that my participants generally understand these aspects as limiting and frustrating. This is because, as I argue, social policing and judgment eventually make them conform to the gender norms, regardless of their various efforts to challenge and change the existing gender norms. In daily, precarious situations, the existing gender norms are thus structurally limiting and oppressing my participants, despite their negotiations and resistance. Consequently, the researched aspects of gender norms manifest and appear to my participants in problematic ways, partly because they try to individually solve what is ultimately a collective problem for women, namely structural patriarchy.

Subverting Sectarian Citizenship – A Study of Subversive Tactics in Lebanon

Lebanon's complex system of personal status laws (PSLs), the product of Decree No. 60 L.R., of 1936, induces a form of what Maya Mikdashi calls "sectarian citizenship" through the biopolitical markers of sex and sect (2018). This system leaves many Lebanese, particularly women, in a state of induced precarity as a result of various systems of oppression, including but not limited to patriarchy, classism and xenophobia. Numerous studies and media reports have recorded the effects of sectarian citizenship as well as Lebanon's political and religious elites' positions on the implementation of a civil PSL that treats men and women equally, regardless of sectarian affiliation. Often lacking from these discussions are the myriad ways in which regular people accommodate and resist sectarian citizenship in their everyday lives. I argue that while some Lebanese engage in overt forms of resistance to sectarian citizenship, many also engage in a sectarian bargain in which they both accommodate and push the boundaries of sectarian citizenship. Drawing on desk review of literature and semi-structured interviews with university students in Lebanon conducted in Beirut in November-December 2019 and virtually in October-November 2020, I explore the ways in which ordinary Lebanese subvert their sectarian citizenship and the system of PSLs.

Women and the Algerian *Hirak*: Resistance and Negotiation of Authoritarian and Patriarchal Structures

In February 2019, Algerians took to the streets to demand the fall of the authoritarian military-led state, neopatrimonial networks and the corruption of the oil revenues in what is popularly referred to as the *Hirak*. The *Hirak* is the first protest since the war of liberation from the French involving such an active presence and participation of women contesting and protesting the country's status-quo and political structures. Using an intersectional and post-colonial feminist perspective, I conducted twenty-five interviews with women of different social dimensions in the region of Kabylia in Algeria. Through an extensive narrative analysis, I identified that the collective assembly of women in the *Hirak* allows for women to be less subordinate in public spheres and enables women's collective performativity of their agency. The space becomes a collective realization of women's interests and agency through tactics of negotiation and resistance to precarity. Women are negotiating and accommodating their participation and demands in the *Hirak* by enacting the discourse of the protest and making demands against the patriarchy in their everyday lives alongside other women. At the same time women enable their oppression and subordination in the public and private spheres by internalizing precarious gender norms shaped around Islamic morality. These paradoxical tactics and demands of women demonstrate the internalization of the regime's cooptation of

women, shaped by the colonial discourse, that contribute to women's experiences of oppression.

Antifeminist movement in contemporary Turkey: State, Media and Civil Society

In the past decade, mobilization around antifeminist ideology has become more prominent in Turkey. Civil society actors and media became more vocal in their antifeminist agendas. Also, President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have made crucial changes in policies and laws regarding gender equality such as the Istanbul Convention withdrawal (Cerami 2021). These changes directly affect marginalized groups, particularly women's and LGBTQIA+ individuals' embodiment of gender performativity in Turkey. Through a critical feminist discourse analysis (Lazar 2007) and a social network analysis (Scott 1988), I deconstruct the relation between the antifeminist discourses, civil society, media, and the Turkish government. This presentation is based on ten in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of NGOs that work against gender-equal policies as well as antifeminist discourses held by three politicians and five journalists. I argue that there is a relationship between civil society, media and the Turkish government's anti-feminist discourses, which enables the enactment of new gendered laws and policies.

Keywords: Gender, Protest, Post-colonialism, Resistance, Personal Narratives

Citations

Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013

Butler, Judith. *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Harvard university Press, 2015.

Cerami, Carola. "Turkey, Europe and Women's Rights: The Controversial Debate on the Istanbul Convention." *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie: Diritto, Istituzioni, Società (NAD-DIS)* 3, no. 1 (2021).

Elsadda, Hoda. "Against All Odds: A Legacy of Appropriation, Contestation, and Negotiation of Arab Feminism in Post-colonial States." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 16, no. 16 (2019): 53-64.

Lazar, Michelle M. "Feminist critical discourse analysis: Articulating a feminist discourse praxis." *Critical discourse studies* 4, no. 2 (2007): 141-164.

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press. (2005).

Mikdash, Maya. "Sextarianism: Notes on Studying the Lebanese State." *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History*. Edited by Amal Ghazal and Jens Hanssen. (June 2018).

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Scott, John. "Social network analysis." *Sociology* 22, no. 1 (1988): 109-127.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the subaltern speak?." *Die Philosophin* 14, no.27. (2003[1988]): 42-58.

Shahidian, Hammed. 2002. *Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic*. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Sepideh Atter Motlagh graduated from Lund University with a Master's of Art in Middle Eastern Studies in 2021. In her thesis project she explored Tehrani female university students' lived experiences with the phenomenon of patriarchal gender norms in Iran. She is continuing to study this topic more in-depth as well as ethnographically studying how young Muslims in Iran perceive and practice Islam in relation to the concept of community.

In August 2020, Matthew Heinrichs graduated with a master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, Sweden. His thesis project, *Social Change through Daily Life – An Exploratory Study on University Student Opinions on Personal Status Laws in Lebanon*, explores how university students perceive the system of religious personal status laws in Lebanon and the lack of a civil personal status law for all citizens. His current research focuses on how Lebanese citizens interact with and negotiate Lebanon's system of personal status laws.

Seréna Nilsson Rabia is currently a student at the department for Gender Studies at Lund University, Sweden, and graduated with a master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies in August 2020 from Lund University, Sweden. She wrote her master's thesis project on women in the Algerian *Hirak*, it explored how authoritarian and patriarchal structures in Algeria shape women's demands and participation in the *Hirak*. Her current research focuses on female parliamentarians' political practices and experiences of violence in the French-speaking Maghreb.

Şefika Özer is a feminist activist from Turkey and is currently a master's student at the department for Gender Studies at Lund University, Sweden and is expected to graduate in August 2022. Her current research focuses on nonconforming sexualities of young Muslim women in Turkey, which explores the secular and religious dichotomy in Turkey and its effects on women. She is also researching antifeminist movements in contemporary Turkey and exploring the relation between antifeminist discourses, civil society, and the Turkish government.

INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES:

Sepideh Atter Motlagh: sepi.mot@gmail.com

Matthew Heinrichs: matthew.heinrichs314@gmail.com

Seréna Nilsson Rabia: serena.nilsson.rabia@gmail.com

Şefika Özer: ozersefika@gmail.com