

Pera-Blätter

Orient-Institut Istanbul

Heft 36

2022

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Creating New Feminist Networks: *The Mapping Gender in the Near East Project.* *What's New and What's Ahead in Ottoman and Turkish Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies?*

Nikkie Keddie has called the history of Ottoman and Turkish feminism »one near-omission from the literature on women in western languages.«¹ Much of the extant scholarship on Ottoman and Turkish women has been published in Turkish, with comparatively little as yet in English. For scholars who published in Turkish, women's studies began with »archaeological« work, that is republishing, annotating, and analyzing earlier writings and biographies of important women figures. Women's history is still regarded as denoting an 'add women and stir' approach, with a tendency to minimize theory and to maximize story-telling to emphasize variability among Turkish women's experiences. Scholars who publish in English, on the other hand, usually concentrate on either the pre-modern Ottoman period or the feminist awakening of the post-1980s. Therefore, there is a century-long lacuna in the history of women's movements in Turkey, with relatively few works examining 1880-1980, and the history of Ottoman and Turkish feminism suffers from a chronological as well as a methodological gap.² Existing scholarship on the history of Otto-

1 Keddie, Nikki R. »Women in the Limelight: Some Recent Books on Middle Eastern Women's History.« *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, August 2002, p. 556.

2 Starting in the 2000s, scholars have shown a more concentrated effort to chart the evolution of the intellectual currents that produced Ottoman/Turkish feminism. Because of institutional limitations and political constraints, the progress has been slower than expected or hoped for: The title of a recent edited volume, *Inch by Inch: Studies on Feminism in Turkey at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century (Birkaç Arpa Boyu ... 21. Yüzyıla Giderken Türkiye'de Feminist Çalışmalar I - II)* reflects this rate of progress. At the

man / Turkish feminism falls considerably short of the need to address these issues and suffers from the limits of descriptive approaches. We need to bridge this gap in the literature not just by supplementing an incomplete record of the past, but by analyzing how women's movements affected changes in the ways specific groups of women came to understand and represent their past and present experiences.³

There is yet another reason for this lacuna. The study of Ottoman and Turkish feminism has generational gaps. By »generational gaps« I mean that each generation dismisses the efforts of the previous generation: Each feminist wave created its own *ancien régime* and capitalized on it, at the notable expense of alienating themselves from previous efforts. Early Republican feminists betrayed the legacy of late-Ottoman feminism, as the feminists of the post-1908 period betrayed the generation of Fatma Aliye who were mostly active in the 1890s. Post-1908 feminists devalued the previous efforts of their Ottoman sisters, and they themselves were later subjected to the same fate of outdatedness by early-Republican feminists. If our existing scholarship recognizes the early Republican feminism as a triumph of feminism and does not give enough credit to the efforts of late-Ottoman women, the early Republican feminists themselves and their efforts to disestablish the value systems of the Ottoman *ancien régime* are partially responsible for this gap and bias in the historiography. This explains why there is a century-long lacuna in the history of women's movements in Turkey, with relatively few works examining 1880 – 1980.

In reconstructing the transitions from one feminist movement to another, it is equally important to look laterally at the connections

same time, scholars and activists alike have diversified their efforts to engage in this growing field of scholarship. See Lerna Ekmekçioğlu ve Melissa Bilal's co-edited volume *Feminism in Armenian: An Interpretive Anthology* (forthcoming, Stanford University Press) and Evren Savcı's *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam* (Duke University Press, 2020) for good examples of most recent work. (*Feminism in Armenian* will also be available as a digital archive).

- 3 I address this topic in more detail in my dissertation, »A Comparative History of Feminism in Egypt and Turkey, 1880 – 1935: Dialogue and Difference,« (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2019).

that linked feminist activists and ideas across the Middle East. Comparative history has largely been neglected because of the challenge of mastering multiple research languages and of combining the data into a comprehensive analysis. My own work aspires to meet this challenge. My current book project, *Diverging Genealogies and Conflicting Trajectories of Feminism in Egypt and Turkey from the Late Ottoman Empire into the 1930s*, comparatively analyzes the role of Islam, secularism, and reform in the development of feminism in Egypt and Turkey in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By means of a comparative analysis, I highlight both the unique and the shared socio-historical configurations of each feminist movement, and aim to prevent one-dimensional narratives focusing on other issues – particularly nationalism – from dominating our reading of these feminist movements, which responded to an array of challenges. This approach counteracts the homogenization of the histories of feminists whose needs and interests differed vastly, especially during the era of colonialism. By comparing what have often been considered to be two different feminist movements, detached both regionally from each other and globally from western feminist movements, my work illuminates the interconnectedness of Middle Eastern women's movements and how their respective histories and cultures shaped their development.

With the project, I make two interventions in the existing scholarship. The interventions combine »comparative« and »integrative« approaches to study two major Middle Eastern feminist movements, which are still understood and studied in isolation from each other. First, I examine how Egyptian and Turkish feminists engaged with Islam, secularism, and modernity, by comparatively analyzing the patterns and distinct phases which defined their engagements. I argue that in societies with a strong heritage of secular liberal reform, wherein progressive tradition is engineered by intellectual and official cadres, such as in the Ottoman core regions of the Balkans and Anatolia and later in the Turkish Republic, feminism becomes a state-centric political project and an intellectual exercise in which more conservative manifestations of feminism were side-lined for the sake of a swift rate of progress. By contrast, in societies with a strong

heritage of Islamically grounded modernization and social advances, such as in Egypt, feminism was rooted in, nourished by, and highly responsive to social, cultural, and religious norms, fostering social mobilization at a broader stratum, yet at a much slower, or more gradual, rate of progress.

Second, I examine the regional interaction between the Egyptian and Ottoman (later Turkish) feminism. As the modern period began, what are now Turkey and Egypt were still parts of the multiethnic Ottoman Empire. The main center of Turkish-language cultural production was Istanbul, and the main center of Arabic-language cultural production was Cairo. The feminist movements of the region developed accordingly. My work elucidates the connections between these two cultural centers. It reveals that the discourses of the Turkophone and Arabophone women's movements did not develop in isolation from each other, but were rather created mutually and as a result of a cross-fertilization of feminist agendas. I suggest that an adequate analysis of Egyptian feminism must be grounded in the broader Ottoman world and in a detailed examination of Ottoman and Turkish feminism's role as a trailblazer for Egyptian feminism. Telling the history of Egyptian feminism in dialogue with Ottoman (and later Turkish) feminism, and examining the feminist debates in Cairo and Alexandria in conjunction with those in Istanbul, creates a more complete picture of feminism in its proper sociocultural and historical context, and, moreover, allows for a deeper analysis of the Ottoman heritage of Egypt as well as a better sense of Turkey's continued influence over the intellectual climate of post-Ottoman Egypt. These two interventions – a combination of a »comparative and integrative« approach – hold great promise for enhancing our understanding of the complexity of the development of the Middle Eastern feminisms.⁴ Rather than simply treating Egyptian feminism and Ottoman feminism as equivalent or discrete units of comparison, an integrative approach would analyze how the development of Egyptian

4 I discuss this issue more in detail in my article; Şenkol, Gülşah. »Comparative and Integrative History in Ottoman and Turkish Women's and Gender Studies.« *Journal of Middle Eastern Women's Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, November 2021, pp. 492 – 498.

feminism depended on its Ottoman counterpart. It would go beyond the scope of this brief contribution to show in detail the entangled character of Ottoman and Egyptian feminisms. But the relationship between the two centers does not simply refer to the exchange of ideas between the two centers, but rather emphasizes their »structural connectedness,« meaning that the development of feminism in the two centers is »mutually correlated« and sometimes even »structurally dependent.«⁵ The task is certainly beyond an individual researcher, but I hope that my work inspires further methodological debates about the use of comparative history through an attentiveness to interactions between the Ottoman center and its provinces, and later Turkey and its neighbors.

These two areas – filling the generational gaps in the evolution of Ottoman and Turkish feminism, and illuminating its importance in regional and comparative history – represent one possible way to advance our understanding of the development and trajectory of Middle Eastern feminisms. But there are a wealth of other approaches and other needs, from sociology to literature to gender theory, that could shed light on a major intellectual and social movement that has often received too little attention. Thanks to the collaboration we have already seen in the »*Mapping Gender in the Near East*« workshop between senior and junior scholars, theorists and area specialists, and between various institutions and centers, I hope that this is a foundational step to fill the gaps in the study of global feminism and in the study of both Ottoman and Middle Eastern history as they exist today.

Stating the Problem: Why »*Mapping Gender in the Near East*«?

As described above, my doctoral research mapped how feminists in Turkey and Egypt drew from one another's networks, language, and ideas to navigate the headwinds of very different societies, and while pursuing a postdoctoral fellowship at the Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations (ANAMED),

5 Ther, Philipp. »Beyond the Nation: The Relational Basis of a Comparative History of Germany and Europe.« *Central European History*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2003, p. 71.

I conceived of an international and interdisciplinary workshop to do the same: to connect scholars from across the academic world to discuss gender studies in a variety of disciplines, to exchange ideas and encouragement, and most of all, to discuss how best to pool our existing resources to maximize our impact. The idea received crucial support from the Orient-Institut Istanbul (OII) and Sabancı University Gender and Women's Studies Center (SU Gender), along with an institutional partnership from Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations (ANAMED) and the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul (SRII). Together we convened the »*Mapping Gender in the Near East*« workshop in December 2020 to discuss Ottoman and Turkish women's, gender, and sexuality studies across several major fields – including history, literature, and interdisciplinary studies. More than thirty scholars from nine different countries met virtually to compare their research, and to create new proposals to further their institutional and intellectual goals for advancing the study of women and gender in Turkey.⁶

I originally designed this workshop to address two problems in women's and gender studies: the lack of transnational and comparative scholarship, as well as the dearth of interdisciplinary collaboration.⁷ It responds to the fact that the scholarly literatures in women's and gender studies in the Ottoman-Turkish milieu and in the Arab and Balkan world have been, on the whole, kept strictly segregated from each other. Consequently, the four panels of the workshop were centered around key approaches that would benefit from being in dialogue with each other. The presentations addressed key topics such as: (I) the development of scholarship in women's and gender studies over the past decade, and the future directions the field might take; (II) the comparative state of the field of women's and gender studies

6 For more information about the workshop, please visit: <https://www.mappinggenderneareast.org>.

7 I discuss the major problems in the field that led to the idea for such a workshop in an article published in the Orient-Institut Blog, Torunoğlu, Gülşah, and Eren Cenk Korkmaz. »Fortuities of an online search and the complexities of Ottoman feminism.« *Orient-Institut Istanbul*, 5 December 2020, <https://www.oiist.org/en/fortuities-of-an-online-search-and-the-complexities-of-ottoman-feminism/>.

in Turkey and its neighboring countries; (III) the evolving position of women and gender in the contemporary societies of the region; and (IV) the policy changes, both past and present, that have shaped the status quo of women and gender.⁸

8 Additionally – and no less importantly – this workshop provided a platform to discuss how to compensate for the lack of an institutional infrastructure for women’s and gender studies in and around Turkey. Currently, only few major universities have established separate women’s and gender studies departments to facilitate research in this field. Instead of inaugurating a separate field of study, numerous universities have opened centers for women’s studies by offering certificate programs for students in other academic disciplines. Women’s and gender history have only recently been recognized as a thematic subfield within history departments. Therefore, women’s and gender studies frequently lack the institutional support to tackle large-scale research questions. Hence, the workshop concluded by discussing how to best use existing resources, such as collaboration among research centers, activist organizations, and other institutions more effectively as an attempt to facilitate future growth and forms of cooperation in the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies.

Furthermore, in order to document and discuss where the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies is going in Turkey at an institutional level, and in order to reach a broader body of scholars and students, I have created an online dossier which features ten interviews with the directors of centers for women’s and gender studies at Turkish universities, hosted by *K24*, a prominent Turkish and English language digital magazine. Together we discussed the problems with the lack of institutionalization of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies in Turkey; the development of their respective centers; the bureaucratic and financial challenges they have faced, especially during the last twenty years; how they balance research and teaching with public outreach and activism; their collaborations amongst themselves, between the centers and women’s non-governmental organizations, and between universities and the Women’s Library and Information Center; the politicization of the field itself; as well as the influence of the political climate in the transformation of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies in Turkey. Thus, while the »*Mapping Gender*« was designed to look at the progress, gaps, and obstacles in scholarship in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies in the Near East, the *K24* dossier represents a platform to discuss the developments in and challenges to the institutional structures that facilitate that scholarship. Together, these two projects have enabled scholars to think collectively about how to advance the study of women and gender in Turkey and across the wider Near East. This dossier is currently being curated, and the first five of these interviews is available on the online platform *K24*.

The work of gathering such a large group and of making the event possible was due to the collegial support of the Orient-Institut Istanbul, whose encouragement, funding, and technical support allowed us to gather many of the top minds in women's and gender studies, along with SU Gender. The Acting Director of the Orient-Institut, Richard Wittmann, believed in this project since I first introduced it to him, and tirelessly worked to make the event a reality. Hülya Adak, our third co-organizer, also made beneficial suggestions along the way. Our workshop would also not be possible without the institutional backing of Istanbul Policy Center, Sabancı University, and the Stiftung Mercator Initiative (IPC Mercator). I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude especially to Jannes Tessmann, the head of Stiftung Mercator's Istanbul office, whose generous support helped us bring this workshop to life.

Much credit is due also to ANAMED, where I first conceived of and designed the workshop during my postdoctoral fellowship. Christopher Roosevelt, the Director of ANAMED, backed the project unconditionally since the beginning and met with me regularly to discuss the conceptual framework of the program at Merkez Han before the pandemic, as did Buket Coşkuner, Duygu Tarkan, and Naz Uğurlu. During the pandemic they were never more than a phone or Zoom call away, ever enthusiastic to discuss the planning for the workshop. At the same time, the Director of the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul (SRII) Ingela Nilsson, and Deputy Director Olof Heilo both provided tremendous encouragement and feedback in multiple stages of the event, as well as a fellowship in Fall 2020 which allowed me the intellectual and institutional space to work on *«Mapping Gender»* until its completion.

Like many forms of academic cooperation, this workshop would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and commitment of our colleagues who graciously accepted to participate in the program, nor without their humbling array of academic expertise, creative and technical skill, and general good will.⁹ Thank you all for your en-

9 There are other people to thank for making the workshop possible. Sooyong Kim, my colleague from Koç University, generously read multiple drafts of

thusiasm and commitment in creating new proposals to further our institutional and intellectual goals for advancing the study of women and gender in Turkey.

Moving forward, I am hopeful that the collaborating institutes who made this year's workshop possible, as well as those who wish to join them, will take turns in coming years to host future iterations of the workshop. The »*Mapping Gender in the Near East*« project is grounded firmly in the idea that women's, gender, and sexuality studies need to be a collaborative endeavor, and that conversation about our disciplines, approaches, and research will play a big role in moving scholarship forward.

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the program, and provided a wealth of perceptive comments and suggestions. Later, when I sent him a draft of the poster, he came up with the idea to use the Arabic letter »*jeem*,« for »*cinsiyet*,« »gender« to use as the program's logo. The workshop would never have taken its final shape had it not been for his intellectual generosity. The incredibly talented Gökhan Pahlı designed the »*Mapping Gender*« logo and the poster for the event, and made last minute corrections without a single complaint. Cenk Korkmaz, the Orient-Institut's IT manager, provided tremendous technical support, making sure we experienced no technical issues. İlayda Ece Ova from Sabancı University proofread the transcriptions in meticulous detail. And finally, Aysun Töngür, our guest opera singer, performed a few live songs for us during the program, making this event truly memorable!

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