

## ***Sexuality in Muslim Contexts: Restrictions and Resistance***

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*Reviewed by Iman Al-Ghafari*

Despite the fact that the realm of sexuality is either a debated or even controlled concept in Islamic contexts, this book offers a range of insights that attempt to highlight some of the “emerging trends that affect women’s sexuality with a particular focus on Asia and the Middle East” (Helie, 2012: 1). The essays collected and edited by Anissa Helie and Homa Hoodfar reveal the various ways that people in Muslim contexts confront the challenges towards the expressions of sexuality within Islamic societies in which the very notion of “Muslim world” remains obscure. Since the discourse of “muslimness” “ignores diversities that exist and operate across and within Muslim communities”. (Helie, 2012: 2), the book tries to illustrate the need to deconstruct ‘muslimness’ as unified, especially when Islam is seen by many as an identity that shapes the “sense of self and the collective code of conduct” (Helie 2012: 3). The book relies on the premise that Islam as all “major religious traditions... can promote either emancipatory or conservative standpoints”, but “religious identity is not its main focus”. (Helie 2012: 3, 5). The forms of resistance in some Muslim societies and the struggle of women’s and LGBTT people are made visible within the context of this volume.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, ‘Tools of Policing: The Politics of History, Community, Law’, combines chapters pertaining to different political contexts in Muslim states. In Vivienne Wee’s chapter “The Politicization of Women’s bodies in Indonesia: Sexual Scripts as Charters for Action”, Wee discusses how women’s bodies in Indonesia have been politicized over time by both Dutch colonization and Wahhabi-influenced interpretation of Islam. The author sheds light on how “Dutch colonial policies regulated indigenous women’s bodies according to different agendas”. (Wee 2012: 21). Meanwhile, the chapter reveals how rewriting of sexual scripts becomes “alternative charters of action” (Wee 41). The chapter also reveals some of the views of Siti Musdah Mulia, a religious scholar who promotes gender equality and who considers “homosexuality as God-given and therefore ‘natural’” (41). Aware of the need of rewriting of sexual scripts that reduce women to bodies, the chapter asserts the importance of the growing resistance to power structures, “despite enormous dangers.” (42)

Claudia Yaghoobi's chapter on "Iranian Women and Shifting Sexual Ideologies, 1850–2010" considers sexuality in pre-modernity urban Iran 1850–1925, and the impact of historical changes on sexuality discourse and practices. It also analyzes the effects of the Western model of modernity on Iran and the changes on sexual ideology between 1900 and 1979 and how that led to establishing "hetero-sociability and heterosexuality as the norm" (54). This study illustrates how women found ways to resist sexual oppression and to break the silences imposed on them. For example, women's veil is projected as a means of resisting "their exclusion from public life" (56) and "to exercise a degree of sexual freedom". (57). In addition to that, the author treats women's sexual relations with other women as a strategy for resistance of patriarchy. Yaghoobi suggests that even 'the bonds of sisterhood' that tend to be established within religious avenues may often include homoerotic relations. (57). Thus, Yaghoobi's chapter treats Sufi circles as a means of expressing women's "non-compliance with male dominance" (58). It also shows how sexual mores in Iran have transformed, especially after the establishment of the Islamic republic in 1979 that introduced restrictive dress codes for women, imposed gender segregation in public spaces and championed male heterosexuality and polygamy. (53). The negative effects of the family laws on women in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the stigmatization of sexual minorities are major issues that are discussed in this chapter.

In "Moral Panic: the Criminalization of Sexuality in Pakistan", Hooria Hayat Khan starts by narrating a horrific incident in a tribal province in Pakistan in which women were slayed for daring to choose their life partners or for "transgressing normative sexual behavior" (79). Though this brutal crime provoked protests by activists, the police were reluctant to intervene in tribal 'justice' and after several years only "four of the twenty individuals accused were sentenced to life imprisonment." (80–81). One of the key questions that the chapter raises is why "women's decisions regarding their own bodies and sexuality lead to such moral panic?" (81). This chapter criticizes the cultural notions of control that relate men's honor and the honor of the family to women's bodies, and the legal notions of control that seem to be "disadvantageous to women" (86), as they tend to regulate sexuality in accordance with the moral and cultural norms and the penal code that Pakistan inherited from the "British colonial government" (89). Khan shows how "misogynist interpretation of shari'a and cultural biases affect court proceedings and verdicts." (93).

In "The Promise and Pitfalls of Women challenging Muslim Family Laws in India and Israel", Yuksel Sezgin states that in "both Israel and India, marriage and divorce are regulated according to the family laws of ethno-religious communities", (98). But in Israel, religious family laws are applied directly by communal judges at religious courts, whereas in India they are implemented by civil judges at secular courts. (99). The chapter suggests that "all religiously based personal status systems, whether Muslim, Jewish or Hindu, have been constructed through androcentric readings of sacred texts." (100). By contrasting the status of women under Muslim family law in Israel and India, Sezgin demonstrates that the civil family courts in Israel still determine some cases in accordance with 1917 Ottoman law. However, the Muslim personal Law in India is seen as more of a "hybrid system incorporating principles of English common law, local customs and Islamic law." (104). Hence, the chapter tries to show that both Israel and India "have proved unable or unwill-

ing to reform personal status systems to protect women against encroachments of so-called religious norms and authorities." (105). In this context, it discusses the internal reform in Israel's *shari'a* courts and the problems that Muslim women can face in Israeli family courts in which proceedings are held in Hebrew. By discussing the role of Islamic feminism in India that relied on "a hermeneutic approach – like the Palestinian Muslim women in Israel – to empower themselves" (113), the chapter reaches the conclusion that this approach that relies on "deconstructing the meaning of texts" is the "most promising approach" (117) and "an invaluable approach to expanding Muslim women's rights in the long term." (118).

In "Sexuality and Inequality: the marriage contract and Muslim legal traditions", Ziba Mir-Hosseini examines the relationship between inequality in Muslim legal tradition and the pre-modern interpretation of the sacred textual sources. The chapter reveals the tensions in sacred texts between 'ethical egalitarianism' and other patriarchal concepts that stem from people speaking in the name of Islam. It examines the link between sexuality and inequality in classical laws/texts about marriage contract and Hijab "in a world in which patriarchy and slavery were part of the fabric of society" (131), and the twentieth century modifications by the emerging feminist scholarship in Islam. Mir-Husseini concludes that the "theory of 'the naturalness of shari'a law'" (140) that attempts to justify the disparity between men and women can be attributed to the rise of political Islam in the second part of the twentieth century. Hence, the paper shows the need for a new understanding of "legal systems and jurisprudential theories" that stems from "the cultural, political and social contexts in which they operate" (143).

The second part of the book includes chapters that revolve around "Sites of Contestation: reclaiming public spaces". In a chapter entitled "Purity, Sexuality and faith: Chinese women *ahong* and women's mosques as shelter and strength", Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun shed light on the situation of women in "the highly diverse Muslim minority populations in China." (152). They suggest that even though Chinese Muslim women belong to what the "Chinese State classifies as an 'ethnic' religion" (153), they all see themselves as distinctively Chinese". (152). Their "study looks at sexuality from the perspective of the unique tradition of women's mosques, which has a history of more than 300 years" (154), and "the educational texts that continue to be taught in women's mosques to this day." (161). Regarding the concept of sexual morality, the chapter highlights "the intersection of Confucian and Islamic norms." (158) and how women *ahong* are "influential role models and exemplary leaders" (161), as they "provide education at the mosque", and present "ideal templates for the conduct of Muslim daughters, wives and mothers" (162). They conclude that "mosque congregation" and the daily interaction of women "in the intimacy of a shared space" challenge "the norms of domesticated sexuality as women's private, isolated or ordained experience." (178).

In "Veiled transcripts: the Private debate on public veiling in Iran", Shadi Sadr states that "no other law in the Islamic Republic of Iran has faced such stiff resistance as compulsory *hijab*." (182). The chapter starts by exposing the severe punishment that the Iranian regime imposed on women who do not wear *hijab*, and how it devoted resources to develop 'morality' police. Sadr reflects her view as an attorney who "was astonished by the incredible volumes of laws issued, starting just days

after the revolution in 1979”(186). Sadr observes that weblog debates convey “a multiplicity of complex views that do not concord with the official discourse.” (205). The paper cites various comments that either treat the veil as a “burden” and criticize the imposition of it on women to “prevent men from sinning” (200), or that question the male gaze itself, by suggesting that “only men with sick minds are excited by seeing a woman without a veil” (201). Several comments asserted “the right to choose and self-determination” (202), while other comments put “collective rights over individuality”(204). Sadr reaches the conclusion that “the absence of public discourse on compulsory veiling and the dominance of the official discourse force individuals to comply and maintain a pretense of content or acceptance” (205). She also proclaims that “as long as unveiling is a criminal act punishable by law” (206), it will be difficult for Iranian women to unveil or to have individual rights over their bodies and beliefs.

In “Kicking back: the sports arena and sexual politics in Iran”, Homa Hoodfar discusses the exclusion of Iranian women from public life and their strategies to resist the “regime’s efforts to control their sexuality” (208) through “seemingly non-political avenues” (209). The paper shows how “women’s sport, has emerged as an important site of women’s...activism” (209) and how it came to be “Islamized” by the Iranian government through “imposing restrictive dress requirements” (209). Based on data collected from 1991 to 2001 and from 2005 to 2009, the chapter “presents the various ways that woman of diverse backgrounds.... have made sport a vibrant venue of heightened public discourse.” (209–210). According to an interviewed Iranian student, “football is a political space and scene” that enables women “to push for [their] rights without ever talking about politics.” (219). Hoofdar analyzes president Ahmadinejad’s controversial “sectioning off of an area for women in the stadium for international matches” (223), and how it was perceived as “a tactic to reach the youth and the middle class” (224). The chapter criticizes the restrictions on female spectators by the regime that justifies the ban on the assumption that “it is erotic on women to see male players in shorts” (228). Within the context of this chapter, one can see how the Iranian regime controlled women both as players and as spectators, and how Iranian women managed to challenge it in “a socially and legally valid way.” (229).

In a chapter, entitled “Morality Policing and the Public Sphere: Women reclaiming their bodies and their rights”, Homa Hoodfar and Ana Ghoreishian start by discussing the machinery of control through the institution of ‘morality police’ in religious fundamentalist states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, and in other countries such as Indonesia, Egypt and Algeria in which “Islamist fundamentalists have adopted a combination of indirect control of the state structure as well as mobilization of non-state actors (local mullah and vigilantes)” to ensure the conformity of women and men to their “visions of dress code” (235). The chapter reviews the “historical evolution of the institution of morality police” (235) and how it was conducted in various social and political contexts. The main focus is on “Saudi Arabia, Iran, Malaysia and Algeria as key contexts where the dynamics and display of fundamentalisms are on full display” (236). The authors show that an “obstacle to women’s public participation [in Saudi Arabia]... is the allegedly Islamic-based ban on women driving” (244) that “made women more vulnerable to violence” (245) and

abuse by male family members. However, women continue to protest against "their exclusion from public life." (247). Iranian women's exclusion is seen as similar to Saudi women with regard to the "imposed compulsory hijab" (248). Though they get "fined and even jailed for ...wearing make-up, for speaking with unrelated males and more" (251), they continue to resist. Moreover, Malaysian women who live in a multi-religious country continue to struggle against religious *fatwas* that control women's behavior and sexuality and their rights. However, Algerian women continue to struggle against fundamentalists within and without the state that "issued a decree that allowed male heads of household to vote on behalf of their wives and daughters." (258). The chapter reaches the conclusion that contemporary religious fundamentalism revived "patriarchal hierarchy" (260), and imposed "their gender ideology in the context of everyday life" (262) that is challenged by the "small actions" of "numerous individual women" (262).

In a chapter on "Living Sexualities": non-hetero female sexuality in urban middle-class Bangladesh, Shuchi Karim concentrates on "non-heterosexuality among women in Dhaka and a few other cities" (269) and reveals the "scope for ambiguity, plural identities, and varied performances of gender and sexuality" that exist within the "Bengali hetero-patriarchal family-household structure" (269). The chapter shows that the "code of conduct that shapes female sexuality is based on concepts of shame and modesty" (271), and that the activities of girls are restricted to "walks in groups" (272), especially in urban areas in which "the threat of violence against women in real" (272). Taking into consideration that there is a sort of "social tolerance of close same-sex bonds and denial of non-normative sexualities" (274), Karim attempts to show how some of the middle-class Bengali women in her research employed "various strategies in their expression of non-heteronormativity sexuality" (275) in the household. The narratives of some women show their "quest for similar 'others'" (227), and their need to understand their desires that they themselves sometimes see as "unnatural" (278). The chapter also shows that "a few interviewees used the term 'lesbian' to describe their sexual identities" (281–282). It reveals women's strategies of resistance and their "making use of the homo-sociability" that provides some of them with "safe intimacy" (285). Based on her interviews, Karim concludes that the 'sexual spaces' that exist within Bengali middle-class family households are "multiple, ambiguous and paradoxical" (288).

In the last chapter which is entitled, "Risky Rights? Gender Equality and Sexual Diversity in Muslim Context", Anissa Helie reveals the "diversity that exists across and within Muslim societies" (294). Informed by the discourses of power in both 'the West and the Muslim world', Helie contrasts "Western homogenizing views with the vibrant strategies developed by advocates in diverse Muslim societies" (294–295), and shows the need to challenge "monolithic representations on both fronts" (295). The politicization of 'gay Muslims' and 'Muslim women', and the depiction of Muslim societies as "inherently anti-gay" (297) are major issues that are analyzed within a section of this paper that tries to illustrate that "Western colonial and contemporary mainstream discourses remain centered on ...positing Western and Muslim societies as oppositional" (298). The paper reflects the effects of stereotyping on "diaspora Muslims, and especially migrant populations in the West" (301) that equates "'gay' with the white and 'ethnic minority' with heterosexual" (301).

Such a discourse “leads to defining both feminist aspirations and sexual agency as primarily Western” (301). Taking into account the “variables that affect ...the ability ...to enjoy sexual rights”, Helie shows “the need to go beyond Western/Islam dichotomies.” (302). Even though the chapter adopted the anti-colonial perspective, it remained focused on the politics of homophobia and the strategies of resistance among gay Muslims in various cultural contexts, not on a trans-cultural or global context.

Thus, I can say that this volume provides a diverse and enriching background about how sexuality and morality are perceived in various Muslim contexts. Most of the chapters remained focused on the locality of restrictions and the strategies of resistance which are portrayed within a localized socio-religious context. Though the last chapter, which summarizes many of the concepts that are raised in this review, the book remained confined within the specificity of Muslim cultures and the practices that seem to be more similar than different. The strategies that are perceived as ‘resistance strategies’ do not seem to be empowering enough to Muslim women. Rather, they seem to be strategies of obedience that avoid annoying religious authorities, authoritarian states, or the presumed public opinion. Though the book exposes some positive attempts to transcend restrictions in several Muslim societies, the chapters do not seem to deconstruct Islam or “muslimness” as it was stated in the introduction. Rather, many of the chapters seem to portray Islam as having a powerful and domineering authority on the lives of women and gay and lesbian minorities whose identities are projected as ‘constructed’ by suppression.

The issue at stake, in my opinion, is that using Islam as a means of obtaining rights for women or gays and lesbians, whether on the parts of Islamic feminists or other scholars will only give more authority to the hegemonic rule of the ‘Islamic’ way of thinking. In other words, the discourse that attempts to prove the multiplicity of Islamic interpretations can also demolish any tendency to exist freely and get all rights, without relying on the religious interpretations of sexuality. Ironically, the ‘hermeneutic approach’ that is praised and the feminist tendency to modernize Islam will only assert the political rule of the past over the present in the name of re-reading history or re-reading Islam. Gaining rights through Islam can also lead to losing more rights in the name of Islam. The politicization of Islam to serve any group or authority, whether ‘liberal’, ‘feminist’, or ‘conservative’, will put minorities at the mercy of various and conflicting discourses of men or women of religion who claim to know the ‘truth’ of Islam. Though the mission of this ‘informative’ book was to transcend ‘Muslimness’, it eventually fell in the trap of essentializing Islam and Muslimness as indispensable tools for resistance and liberation.