

CONTESTING BOUNDARIES AND PRODUCING THE NORM: GENDER-RELATED ISSUES IN ISLAMIC THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Particularly in the last decades, due to the rapid development of theoretical perspectives across disciplines, the notion of gender has evolved into an umbrella term that today refers to a broad array of themes: from gender-defined social behaviour to sexual and reproductive rights and to matters related to control over one's body. Following major trends in the humanities and social sciences, also the field of Islamic studies has been contributing to the ongoing scholarly discussion on gender. Two recent volumes that focus specifically on gender issues in Muslim societies (Duderija et al., 2020; Howe, 2020) have marked the expansion of the field, away from dealing primarily with topics related to Muslim women and femininity to a cautious but firm engagement with a broader spectrum of gender-related themes.

The goal of the present issue of *Islamology* is to contribute to this advancement. Thereby, we do not aim to test the limits of scholarly and popular debates, as this is challenging to implement under the present conditions. However, we hope to draw the attention of our readers to several case studies selected for this issue in order to demonstrate the potential of a gender-based approach within Islamic studies to provide novel and valuable insights. All of these cases, albeit in various ways, contribute to established debates about gender relations in Muslim/Islamology scholarship. In particular, this special issue sheds light on Muslim debates about the political role of women (Tineke Melkebeek), heteronormative sexual ethics (Pernilla Myrne), and the negotiation of gender identities beyond man/woman categories in traditional Muslim societies (Sara Kuehn), in addition to questions of *balal* fertility services (Maria Vyatchina). The papers are complemented by a book review that, through an analysis of a recently published monograph on homosexuality in Islam, offers an introduction to the current academic debates on the topic (Laurance Janssen Lok). Two of our papers explore discourses of late antiquity and the early medieval period (Myrne; Melkebeek); one is bringing contemporary biographies into connection with practices of the early modern era (Kuehn); and two contributions discuss contemporary debates and practices (Vyatchina; Janssen Lok).

While the contributions cover vastly different topics, genres, eras, and regional contexts, several common themes resurface across all papers and bind them together, sometimes in surprising ways. First, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate that debates about gender relations are deeply ingrained in Islamic history. It would be a misconception to assume that the movement for Muslim women's social and sexual emancipation, as well as the liberalisation of public discourses on gender, is only a relatively new phenomenon, one stimulated or produced by Western debates. While patriarchal dispositions have been dominant in many Muslim societies, outstanding men like Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) also had the courage to challenge them. As Tineke Melkebeek shows in her contribution, when discussing the "ideal state", Ibn Rushd clearly condemned the exclusion of women from public life. It is true that when making statements in this direction, he was hiding behind Plato's *Republic* (the work he was commenting upon). However, he did not posit that the position of women should

be improved in increments, under the benevolent protection of men; rather, he asserted that women were, by nature, capable of being *rulers* of the polity, and to serve as its guardians. This claim was linked to a call for making education, in all its breadth, truly accessible to women. For Ibn Rushd, as long as women were restricted to breeding and housekeeping tasks, the city-state wasted its human resources. The pragmatic aspect of this emancipation agenda will probably remind the post-Soviet reader of more recent campaigns to draw women into the labour force, with the goal of increasing the nation's GDP.

As Tineke Melkebeek demonstrates, Ibn Rushd also held radical views about the most irreplaceable social function of women, namely that of giving birth to children. This topic, inherently linked to strict practices of regulation and control, reoccurs in several papers presented in this special issue. For instance, Maria Vyatchina, in her work, provides an analysis of how *halal* birth-giving procedures are commodified and gendered in present-day Tatarstan, an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation. On the one hand, her analysis shows that contemporary Muslim women claim increasingly more agency to obtain the comfort and support they need during labour; on the other, Vyatchina's contribution demonstrates that women's vulnerability throughout pregnancy contributes to their overall stigmatisation as the "weak" sex, a process that reduces their social and sexual roles to femininity, as caregivers and submissive partners.

But here again, the Muslim heritage is equivocal. Pernilla Myrne, in her paper about sexual etiquette in the Abbasid period, emphasises female vulnerability in the face of an Islamic law consensus that clearly privileges the male; at the same time Myrne's work demonstrates the complexity of attitudes towards female sexuality in Islamic works on ethics and health (some of which were modelled on books of originally Greek and Indian provenance). Myrne argues that although Abbasid society was clearly patriarchal, women's sexual pleasure and satisfaction were considered essential in medical and ethics literature, even if only for ensuring a strong family and the health of the offspring. Importantly, this debate was not marginal: some of the more women-friendly ideas on sexuality drew on inclusive interpretations of *hadith* material, and influenced, in turn, orthodox Islamic mainstream literature.

Sensitivities linked to the notions of "man" and "woman" have been cemented, challenged, and negotiated for centuries, and present-day debates seem to represent just another swirl. The multi-layered character of gender identities and their socially conditioned (if not constructed) nature become most visible when one looks at the margins or the marginalised. Those who do not identify with any of the two genders but, instead, put forth alternative conceptions that escape easy qualifications, straddle the conventional boundaries and simultaneously blur them. Sara Kuehn, in her paper, offers an in-depth inquiry into how in India, people of the "third sex" — *hijras* — negotiate their belonging to Islam as well as their roles within Muslim society. Hijras are a small group that nevertheless dares to be visible. As Kuehn demonstrates, in their "liminality", hijras occupy important roles as mediators and as providers of blessing, including for women to attain fertility. Their liminality is close to that of Sufi *faqirs*, who, in contact with hijras, equally embrace gender transformations (metaphorically and through clothing, as "Allah's brides"). During the yearly Sufi feasts of the Chishtiyya brotherhood, hijras occupy a central and respected role in the ritual. Kuehn's contribution skillfully intertwines her own fieldwork observations with historical models and the hijra theme in a very prominent Indian novel.

Like almost everywhere in the world, persons who accept gender identities beyond the conventional binary are an easy target for social ostracism and outright violence. The topic of both physical and mental violence, inevitably connected to pain, suffering, and trauma, reappears in all conversations initiated by the authors. In India, Muslim transgender persons are defenceless against police brutality, including rape, but they also engage in forms of self-humiliation and harm, in particular by undergoing castration. Pain, for some of the hijras, is a necessary stage in the path towards redemption, and is reflected upon in a Muslim language that is open to broader religious contexts on the Subcontinent.

A French-Algerian imam, Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, in a book reviewed in the present issue by Laurance Janssen Lok, discusses findings of his longitudinal participant observation in communities of gay and transgender Muslims in France. These persons suffer not only from ethnic and religious discrimination by the larger French society but also from being excluded by their own minority communities — communities that meet any “non-traditional” sexual orientation with hostility. As a result, many gay Muslims either leave the fold of Islam, unable to maintain their religious and sexual identities simultaneously, or they are forced to silence themselves in order to evade a condemnation that often borders with rage. Needless to say, also the position of cis-gender women — whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth — continues to be precarious, as recent social movements, such as #MeToo, have vividly demonstrated. The problem of violence, harassment, and discrimination goes beyond Muslim communities, but it surely concerns them too, regardless of whether Muslims are a minority group, like in Russia, or constitute the dominant population.

Discussions on gender, unfortunately, have become one of the polarising factors that divide societies across multiple junction lines. In Russia and the Muslim world, challenging conventional gender norms is usually seen as a pernicious practice from “the West”, the latter being imagined as a space of unlimited hedonism, individualism, and exaggerated emancipation of all kinds; at the same time progressive scholars and activists in Western Europe experience a post-socialist backlash of conservative thought from regimes in Eastern Europe but also at home. We hope that this special issue, while touching upon sensitive topics and evoking a number of loaded concepts, still succeeds in showing the beauty of cultural diversity.

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