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CONCLUSION

Sexual Emergence in the Middle East and North Africa

Ten Insights from the Ethnography

MARCIA C. INHORN

More than forty years have passed since the Egyptian physician and feminist activist Nawal El Saadawi published her critical memoir, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. First published in Arabic in 1977, and then in English in 1980, this book documented El Saadawi's own experience of female circumcision (*tahara*) as a girl in Upper Egypt, a practice that she would later come to condemn as one of the "hidden faces" of Middle Eastern women's oppression. Since then, multiple books, academic articles, documentary films, and activist campaigns have been devoted to this topic, with major initiatives to eliminate "female genital mutilation" (FGM) supported by the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and UNICEF. Although "female genital cutting" (FGC)—a less sensationalist term promoted by some indigenous advocacy organizations such as Tostan International—has never been practiced in most parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), it has become synonymous with Middle Eastern women's sexual oppression.

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It took nearly forty years for the next book on sex in the MENA region to be written by another Egyptian-born journalist and public health activist, Shereen El Feki. Called *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World* (2013), the book describes the Arab world as a citadel, with a fortress mentality surrounding sex that leads to lack of sex education and, hence, knowledge of both sexual pleasure and safety. More recently, the award-winning French novelist Leila Slimani has published a journalistic account called *Sex and Lies: True Stories of Women's Intimate Lives in the Arab World* (2010). Through return to her home country of Morocco and interviews with women there, she has produced a story of Arab women's sex lives advertised as "harrowing" to Western readers.

On the one hand, it is extremely important that Middle Eastern–born women themselves have opened up a conversation about sex, including attitudes and practices that they deem harmful to women across the region. On the other hand, such accounts may fuel Western Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women as painfully oppressed, including in the sexual realm. In her critically acclaimed book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013), Columbia University anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod questions this constant negative reinforcement of Muslim women's oppression. In particular, she takes issue with the genre of writing that she calls "pulp nonfiction," in which "pornographies of pain" highlight women's abuse in an imagined place that Abu-Lughod calls "IslamLand." A prime example of this genre of pulp nonfiction would be Somali émigré Ayaan Hirsi Ali's book, *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* (2004). In it, Ali decries the treatment of women in Islam, arguing that the religion's demands of premarital chastity turn Muslim women into "caged virgins." This image, and the book itself, have played well with Western audiences who are prone to Islamophobia.

Arguing for a much-needed corrective, Abu-Lughod turns to her own discipline, anthropology, as a scholarly path to redemption. In her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Abu-Lughod gives precedence to the voices and stories of women who she has come to know through more than three decades of anthropological immersion in communities in both rural and urban Egypt (see, for instance, Abu-Lughod 1986, 1993), as well as among her own Palestinian female family members.

Abu-Lughod advocates for anthropology as the most humanistic form of social inquiry. Through anthropology's unique method of ethnography, scholars learn local languages, live with communities for extended periods

of time, engage in both participant observation and in-depth interviewing, and attempt to represent the life worlds of interlocutors through writing that is "thick" with ethnographic description. The ultimate object of this research is to produce "ethnographies"—usually book-length accounts that render nuanced portrayals of lives as lived, giving voice to those whose stories would otherwise remain unaccounted for or otherwise muted.

Since the mid-twentieth century, nearly six hundred book-length Middle East ethnographies have been published in English, constituting a remarkable anthropological corpus (Inhorn and Isidoros 2021). Yet, remarkably, only ten of these ethnographies are devoted to sex. Sexual studies are what I have described as a "road less traveled" in Middle East anthropology:

> We know very little about what we might call "lived sexuality," including between men and women as married and unmarried couples. Fortunately, some younger-generation scholars are beginning to open the path of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies in the Middle East. . . . [But] Middle East anthropologists are far behind in scholarship on sexuality. This is especially egregious in the era of HIV/AIDS. . . . There is not a single ethnography on HIV/AIDS or its impact in the Middle East. It is time for Middle East anthropologists to be bold and bring sexuality into focus. (Inhorn 2014, 72–73)

One of the first bold scholars to do so was the Iranian-American anthropologist Pardis Mahdavi (2008), who published a path-breaking ethnography on young people's sex lives in Tehran. Her next book (2011) was an ethnographic study of labor migrants and sex workers in the United Arab Emirates, in which she argued that some Middle Eastern women actually *choose* to engage in sex work, thereby challenging human rights discourses of "sex trafficking," with all women sex workers in need of "saving."

Since then, a new focus on queer sexuality in the Middle East has emerged, perhaps inspired by Princeton University anthropologist John Bornemann's 2007 auto-ethnography of his own gay desires and encounters in the Syrian city of Aleppo (prior to the 2011 civil war). Over the past decade, mostly younger scholars have begun to study queer life and sex, particularly among men in some of the Middle East's major cities, including Beirut, Lebanon (Merabet 2015; Moussawi 2020), Istanbul, Turkey (Özbay 2017), and Tehran, Iran (Kjaran 2019; Najmabadi 2013). These

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books chart the ways Middle Eastern gay men are navigating urban, and sometimes transnational spaces and activist circles (Atshan 2020), in order to express same-sex desires and enjoy relationships with other men. Yet, all of these ethnographies also focus on gay men's struggles in their own societies against inequalities and discrimination, homophobia, religious condemnation, threats of violence and detention, and human rights violations. Although the threat of HIV/AIDS is a reality for men who have sex with men across the MENA region, few of these ethnographies pay attention to this topic. As of 2020, there is still not a single ethnography devoted to people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in the region.

This Volume and Its Ethnographic Insights

Given these scholarly openings and omissions, it is important to bring together the work of anthropologists who have made sex in the MENA region a topic of their ethnographic inquiries. The present volume is groundbreaking in this regard—the first to focus explicitly on sex in multiple settings across the region. The editors, Lisa L. Wynn and Angel M. Foster, are among the first anthropologists to devote their own research to MENA sexuality studies. Together, they have documented the rise of emergency contraception in the region (Foster and Wynn 2012), as well as the introduction of a number of other sexual and reproductive health technologies (Wynn and Foster 2017). Wynn, who is a past president of the Australian Anthropological Association, is a long-term ethnographer of Egypt. She has published two ethnographies documenting the lives and loves of her interlocutors, including their sexual relationships and challenges (Wynn 2007, 2018).

In this volume organized by Wynn and Foster, most of the contributors are younger-generation anthropologists, both men and women, whose research covers a wide swath of the Middle East, ranging from Morocco in the west to Iran in the east. Through their work, we meet multiple categories of sexual subjects, including married and unmarried people, gay men and women, pregnant women, sex workers, prisoners, virgins, pornography users, and masturbators.

Through this multi-sited, richly peopled anthropological approach, we learn much about *sexual emergence* in the MENA region. Based on the definition of "emergence" forwarded by Marxist scholar Raymond

Williams—namely, "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship [that] are continually being created" (Williams 1978, 123)—we might think of sexual emergence as the new knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, practices, and social mores around sex that are in constant creation in the MENA region.

This volume is replete with examples of sexual emergence. In what follows, I summarize ten facets of sexual emergence that are clear in this volume's ethnographic accounts.

1. THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF SEX

As noted above, the disciplinary hallmark of anthropology is ethnography, a process of research and writing that is unique as a form of social inquiry. Participant observation and interviewing are how most anthropologists come to know about the lives of their interlocutors. However, in the realm of sex, "observing" is generally impossible—although some ethnographers have pushed the ethical boundaries of the discipline by providing auto-ethnographic descriptions of their own sexual encounters in the field (e.g., Merabet 2015). Still, asking questions and hearing answers about sex can be done sensitively and with proper consent. In this book, we see the results of this kind of sexual inquiry. The book provides numerous sexual narratives and stories, particularly from Middle Eastern women. Through their willingness to "sexually self-report," we learn about sexual desires and gratifications, as well as sexual disappointments and struggles. Overall, the ethnographic message is clear. In the MENA region, people are attempting to pursue meaningful sex lives within the constraints of their local social worlds.

2. THE MORALITY OF SEX

Harvard anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1992) was the first to forward the concept of "local moral worlds," which he defined as the "particular local patterns of recreating *what is most at stake* for us, what we most fear, what we most aspire to" (129, italics in original). In the realm of sex in the MENA region, local moral worlds do matter. From an orthodox Islamic religious standpoint, heterosexual conjugal sex is the only permitted form of sex, with all other forms—including premarital sex, extramarital sex, homosexual sex, and, according to most religious scholars,

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masturbation—strictly forbidden. Furthermore, acts of *zina* (illicit sexual relations) are punishable religiously and by law in most MENA countries (see Hayes, this volume). Thus, enacting sex that is *zina* can lead to moral approbation, as well as legal risk and criminal punishment. Having said that, as seen throughout this volume, *zina* is widespread, especially among the younger generation. In various chapters in this volume, we read about young men and women masturbating to porn, meeting up through dating apps, hooking up in furnished rental apartments and family homes, establishing sexual partnerships through "secret" marriages, and for gay men and women, finding each other through gay sex apps and clubs catering to a queer clientele. In short, in today's Middle East, young people are not only questioning the local social mores surrounding chastity and heterosexuality, they are doing so in ways that literally mitigate the power of *zina* as a local moral discourse.

3. THE DELAY OF SEX

Changing moral discourses are, in part, a reflection of changing political-economic realities across the region. As noted in several chapters, the age of marriage for both men and women is increasing across the MENA region as a result of changing marriage laws, women's increasing education, and the burdensome costs of marriage for both men and women. Middle East political scientist Diane Singerman (2007, 2013) coined the term "waithood" to describe this widespread pattern of marriage delay (see also Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2020). In countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, it may take years, even decades, for young men to accrue sufficient material resources to marry and establish a household. While still residing in their parents' homes, with little opportunity for sex, these young men—and the women they cannot yet marry—may feel frustrated and blocked in their passage to full adulthood. This "marriage crisis" or "celibacy crisis," as some in the MENA region have called it, redounds throughout the chapters of this volume. Yet, we also learn about the many ways young people are pursuing their sexual desires without "waiting" for marriage to happen—at least "official" marriage, performed before friends and family. *'Urfi*, or customary, marriages are becoming frequent among young couples (see Salem, this volume), allowing those who are dating to have sex with their partners while hidden in a state of "secret" matrimony. In addition, women who are tired of

"waiting" and have had sex before marriage are turning to hymenoplasty, or hymen repair, to "renew" their virginity if and when the time comes to marry. In short, young Middle Easterners are becoming increasingly savvy in finding ways to date, have sex, and have fun, even when economic realities make marriage and the transition to full adulthood beyond their individual control.

4. THE MEDIATIZATION OF SEX

Young people's ability to pursue relationships before marriage has been profoundly enhanced through the massive expansion of media technologies in the MENA region, including computers, cell phones, the Internet, and a wide variety of social media platforms and applications. The chapters in this volume provide numerous examples of what might best be described as the "mediatization of sex," from the use of "hookup apps" such as Tinder and Bumble (see El-Mowafi and Foster, this volume), or Grindr and Scruff for gay men (see Gagné, this volume), to the widespread dissemination and use of pornography, even among the most religiously observant (see Saramifar, this volume). These forms of new media have allowed young people to connect, to meet, and to find safe zones for sex. They have also become fruitful sites for cultivating new forms of sexual desire and pleasure. And, from a reproductive and sexual health standpoint, they have provided crucial forms of knowledge and information, for example, about sexually transmitted infections, contraception, and safe abortion.

5. THE REPRODUCTIVITY OF SEX

This volume also reminds readers that sex can lead to reproduction. As we see in some chapters, pregnancies are planned by Middle Eastern couples, leading to desired births, for fathers as well as mothers (see Chalmiers, this volume). But pregnancies can also happen by mistake, leading to desperate decision-making, safe and unsafe abortions, and in some cases, impoverished single motherhood (see Michalak, this volume). Overall, sexual and reproductive health services are unevenly distributed across the MENA region, with problems of access for unmarried young people, who are assumed, by default, to be sexually inactive. Acquiring access to contraception can thus be very difficult (see MacFarlane, this volume). And

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because abortion is legally restricted in most countries across the region (Hessini 2007), abortions are performed in secrecy, often unsafely. But as shown in this volume, emergency contraception pills (so-called "morning after" pills) are making their way to the Middle East, even if the market is unregulated. Furthermore, in many Middle Eastern countries, the majority of reproductive-aged women can name at least one—and often many—forms of contraception (Inhorn 2018a). Sexual and reproductive technologies—from intrauterine devices (IUDs) to in vitro fertilization (IVF) (Inhorn 2003, 2012, 2015) to vibrators (Wynn and Foster 2017)—have made their way across the Middle East, serving to further disassociate sex from reproduction. This is perhaps especially true in the case of Palestinian couples, who find ways to make babies through "sperm smuggling," even when husbands are incarcerated for years in Israeli prisons (see Ferrero, this volume).

6. THE CONJUGALITY OF SEX

The case of these imprisoned Palestinians' "marriage by proxy" demonstrates how highly marriage is valued across the MENA region. Marriage for Muslims is said to be "half of the religion," and Middle Easterners are among the "most married" people in the world (Omran and Roudi 1993; Rashad, Osman, and Roudi-Fahimi 2005). This "marriage imperative" can be difficult, not only because of the aforementioned economic constraints, but also for individuals in the Middle East who do not identify as heterosexual (Atshan 2020; Najmabadi 2013). In short, marriage, though valorized, can be multiply problematic. Yet, as shown throughout this volume, young people who want to marry are finding creative ways to do so, particularly through *'urfi* marriages among Sunni Muslim youth (see Salem, this volume), and temporary *mut'a* marriages among the Shi'a (Haeri 1989). Whether these marriages are customary, temporary, or "official," conjugal sex *is* being enjoyed, partly through the help of sex manuals, online sex therapists, and a booming marketplace of internet porn, which even the Islamic Republic of Iran is unable to completely censor (see Saramifar, this volume). Although we know far too little about how married couples in the Middle East experience their sex lives together, new forms of "marital ethnography" (Inhorn 2012, 2014) are beginning to emerge, revealing what marriage means to both men and women, as well as their hopes for romance and their desires for sexual fulfillment.

7. THE QUEERING OF SEX

Until about five years ago, we knew almost nothing about the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) people in the MENA region. But through the work of young queer-identified anthropologists, the life worlds of gay men (see Gagné, this volume), lesbians (Le Renard 2014, and transgender people (Najmabadi 2013) are beginning to be revealed. In several chapters in this volume, we see the ways LGBTQ identities and communities are beginning to take shape, partly through the gay sex apps that have become prevalent in countries like Lebanon (see Gagné, this volume) and social media and dance clubs in places like Dubai (see Hassanein and Wynn, this volume). An increasing openness to the LGBTQ community is apparent in places like Beirut, Casablanca, Dubai, Istanbul, and Tehran, where commercial venues such as bars and nightclubs cater exclusively to a gay clientele. In short, the queering of sex in the MENA region is coming out into the open, at least in some of the region's more cosmopolitan centers. Still, as shown in this volume, compulsory heterosexuality and masculinity norms continue to haunt queer spaces, leading to what University of Texas anthropologist Sofian Merabet (2015) has called "internalized homophobia." This is apparent in the chapter by Matthew Gagné, where more effeminate Lebanese men who do not conform to desired Arab "bear" masculinity (i.e., muscular and hairy) experience bodily objectification and discrimination. In other words, the queering of sex in the Middle East has opened new possibilities for some men but not for others, thereby suggesting that norms of masculinity require further unseating and transgression (Inhorn and Isidoros 2021).

8. THE TRANSACTION OF SEX

Sex, whether straight or gay, can also be transactional in nature. The final section of this volume includes contributions devoted to transactional sex, which can be difficult to define in the Middle East, where not all transactions fall within the realm of legal or illegal sex work (see Wynn, this volume). Prostitution has existed in the Middle East for centuries, with Islamic court records documenting the regulation of the sex trade during the Ottoman period (Baldwin 2012). In the contemporary period, some MENA countries such as Tunisia have allowed and regulated legal

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sex work, although it has been challenged by Islamist political parties (see Michalak, this volume). Although knowledge may not yet be widespread, "transactional safe sex" has come to the Middle East, thereby reducing the risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

9. The Risks of Sex

Remarkably, the rate of HIV/AIDS infections in the MENA region is among the lowest in the world, at a current prevalence rate of just 0.1 percent (Gökengin et al. 2016). Still, there has been a 31 percent increase in new infections since 2001, most of them sexually transmitted. Beyond the risk of HIV/AIDS and other STIs, the risk of sex in the MENA region takes on a much broader meaning, as shown throughout multiple chapters in this volume. Women who decide to have sex outside of "conjugal confines" (Gürtin 2016) face many risks, among them the loss of virginity, reputation, and honor, as well as partners' abandonment, and, in worst-case scenarios, death at the hands of family members (see El-Mowafi and Foster, this volume). Stories of sex are also replete with fear—fear of discovery, stigma, shame, dishonor, and moral punishment (see Ibrahim, this volume). Furthermore, for women, sex can bring the risky physical embodiment of unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, maternal mortality, or single motherhood (see Hayes, this volume). Sex, especially for young Middle Eastern women, can be very costly (see Feather, this volume). Thus, despite the new sexual freedoms and mores that are shown to be emerging across the MENA region, this volume also reminds us that sex is often a high-stakes affair, especially for Middle Eastern women.

10. THE POLITICS OF SEX

Finally, this volume demonstrates that sex is political—from the most intimate realm of the sexual body and its desires, to the highly gendered negotiations surrounding sex and reproduction, to the nation-state and its efforts to criminalize sex, sex work, homosexuality, and abortion (see El-Mowafi and Foster, this volume). Furthermore, the politics of sex become apparent in the lacunae—for example, missing sex education, inadequate sexual and reproductive health services, and lack of sexual-harm reduction efforts. But perhaps the most striking example of sexual politics is found in the aforementioned chapter on Palestinian sperm smuggling. As shown in Laura Ferrero's poignant ethnography, thousands of Palestinian men spend decades of their lives in Israeli prisons, making impossible their chances for ordinary marriage and conjugal sex. Yet, in a most creative move—supported by Palestinian women, their families, local IVF clinics, and political parties—Palestinian prisoners are being "married by proxy" to women who are willing to become their wives and the mothers of their children. So-called sperm smuggling out of Israeli prisons, accompanied by conceptions in Palestinian IVF clinics, are enabling the birth of Palestinian children, including by women who are otherwise sexual virgins.

This story is a haunting one. But it also speaks to political agency among one group of people in the Middle East whose lives have been profoundly constrained by settler-colonialism and its violent effects. Such stories are vitally important, and need to be pursued by anthropologists in other parts of the MENA region. In the midst of the world's worst refugee crisis—with the majority of refugees coming from the Middle Eastern countries of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and with millions of internally displaced persons in Libya and Yemen (Inhorn 2018b; Inhorn and Volk 2021)—it is important to understand how sex and reproduction are being thwarted by conflict and forced displacement, experienced by refugees in bleak camps scattered across the MENA region, and questioned in Euro-American communities where refugees are ultimately resettled (see Chalmiers, this volume). In other words, anthropologists must begin to explore sex both *in* and *out* of the MENA region. This is another road barely traveled in Middle East anthropology, but one that is critical for a region with the world's highest rates of forced displacement.

In short, there is still much more to be done. But this volume is a critical beginning.

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