

Gender in Crisis

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The protests and upheavals that erupted in the Arab world since 2010 were the starting point in 2019 to look at issues of gender in political and social crises. At the moment, since the beginning of 2020, we are facing the global coronavirus pandemic and witnessing gender imbalances in this crisis, imbalances that turn against wo*men and their role in contemporary societies. This goes for Europe as well as the Middle East and North and South America. Wo*men bear and will bear a disproportionate burden of the measures taken against the coronavirus. Mostly wo*men have been working in the nursing sector in general and with Covid-19 patients in particular. Wo*men did more unpaid work before Corona, and do so even more during the Corona epidemic. Mostly wo*men have seen their working hours reduced, stay at home, and take care of the children due to the closed childcare facilities and schools. In addition, more jobs in which predominantly wo*men work are being cut, explains the ESCWA (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia) study on the impact of Covid-19 on gender equality in the Arab region.

What does the lockdown mean for gender relations? What is being locked down and to what places? A conservative understanding of the family seems to be the

support of the society in these times. But what about the family as the site of the reproduction of patriarchal structures and the family as the site of domestic violence? Asma Shiri, Tunisian Wo*men's Affairs Minister, sounds the alarm about increased domestic violence because of the curfew (Shahatit, "Rise in Domestic Violence"). Domestic violence has risen in Germany, as well (Steinert and Evert, "The Impact of Covid-19"). The lockdown prevents access to spaces outside the family, access to educational and health services, and access to places where one can experience a social setting different from the family. Any places for non-normative bodies and sexualities are locked down, too. Moreover, how often in crisis situations are the most vulnerable people hit the hardest. The most precarious jobs are often dropped first. Parents with a low educational background can offer their children less help in homeschooling. And how should you keep your distance in a refugee camp? The authors Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh write: "Coronavirus additionally highlights issues of national, regional, and global inequality" ("The Arab World"). They refer to conflict hotspots in regions like Syria, Libya, and Yemen, as well as to refugees and internally displaced people. These aspects do not have to do directly with gender, but with how crucial intersec-

tional aspects are in the crisis in general and with regard to gender relations in particular.

Gender and Intersectional Factors in Times of Crises

Just as Covid-19 is not only a health but also a socio-economic crisis, wars, political unrest, and other crises are also multifaceted and therefore require intersectional approaches. Kimberlé Crenshaw is one of the first scholars to identify the crucial need to include the intersection of race and sex in feminist theory and antiracist politics. In her influential work for the University of Chicago, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, Crenshaw proposes intersectionality as follows:

I want to suggest further that this single-axis framework erases Black wo*men in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group (140).

Thus, intersectionality enables a move beyond dominant approaches and a rethinking of current crises for several rea-

sons. First, intersectionality questions a hierarchical arrangement of vulnerable groups by showing their different degrees of exposures to threats. Second, while many assume that experiences are universalistic within vulnerable groups, intersectionality reveals diverse experiences of individuals. Third, intersectionality exposes that the risks and consequences of a crisis are embodied in a multifaceted entanglement of interplaying factors such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity. Fourth, an intersectional approach includes the influence of power and resource structures (e.g. patriarchy, nationalism, post-colonialism, capitalism) on a crisis and on its victims and winners.

With regard to gender in times of crisis, in times of war and conflict, wo*men have always been victims of rape, kidnapping, and extreme violence due to their sex.

This becomes more than evident in this issue, which covers issues of gender in the MENA region. Although the collected essays cover a wide range of events and crises, wo*men obviously are the first to fall prey to gender-related violence. As Abouelnaga explains in this issue, however, Yazidi wo*men are oppressed and victimized additionally because they belong to a religious minority. Moreover, their bodies have become an emblem of ISIS ideology, identity, and power. So once

again, the female body is burdened with symbolic functions.

In the case of Syrian wo*men working in civil society organizations (CSOs) in Lebanon and Turkey, Al-Munajed has analyzed the social markers affecting the displaced wo*men's participation. She concluded that not only gender, but also ethnic identity and socio-economic status have a tremendous impact on wo*men's participation in CSOs. In fact, focusing only on gender skews the results, as the other factors have been proven even more responsible for discrimination and social grievances. Using an intersectional approach of African-American feminist studies, Al-Munajed convinces the reader of the multiple advantages of intersectionality.

These interdisciplinary advantages have also been recognized by the Universities of Manouba and Sousse in Tunisia, as Jamie Woitynek points out in the Anti/Thesis. Accordingly, the master programs offer perspectives of gender intersecting with history, socio-economic status, administration, law, literature, language, and identity.

As the aforementioned examples show, applying intersectionality assures a deeper understanding of and more effective solutions to any crisis, but specifically

to marginalized approaches to international security such as gender. This issue of META uses an intersectional approach not only by publishing articles using intersectional theoretical and methodological concepts, but also by choosing scholars with various degrees, of various nationalities and genders, and from various academic disciplines. However, some aspects of gender in crisis have been left unsaid and require further attention. The Egyptian actor Hashem Selim's son Nour Selim, who underwent surgery to become a man, is an interesting case of transgenderism in an Arab country. His high socio-economic status and the fact that he changed from being a woman to a man provide rough starting points for further intersectional analysis. While Nour Selim's coming out has received mostly positive reactions on social media, Sarah Hegazi's suicide as a consequence of her LGBTQ* activism has met with mixed responses. We hope that, by highlighting the importance of gendered approaches and intersectionality, we can motivate further studies to follow.

Wom*en's Representations

Since 2011, wom*en's representations in various media formats of and about the Middle East and North Africa have emerged as a unique discursive and performative subject - often (co-)produced by

Western agents. While Western mainstream media have praised the radical changes of wom*en too hastily, there has also been a smaller number of alternative media formats that added an activist documentary character to conflicting contexts. They range from linking footage of wom*en's engagement on the streets - shouting the Arabic word for *revolution*, *thawra*, which is a female noun (just like *freedom* is *ḥurriya* and *equality* is *musāwāa*) - to the movie *Commander Arian* that accompanies a female Kurdish freedom fighter in Rojava/North and East Syria against religious fundamentalist terrorism and patriarchy, and to the viral musical irony of Hwāgīs by young anonymous Saudi female artists jumping on skateboards in colored pants under their black-veiled clothes - to name just a few examples. Khadijah Hamouchi notes that this wave of feminism in Middle Eastern and North African countries is moving into a more implementational practical direction ("New Arab Feminism"). However, regarding contemporary feminist media formats, Patrice Petro draws on tensions between theory and practice, as well as activism and academia related to the marginalized role of wom*en (16-22). Moreover, due to our present *white* and often (heteronormative) male-dominated globalized media culture, wom*en's issues and repre-

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sentations of the Middle East and North Africa are still at risk of being exploited socio-economically, as Orientalist and Islamophobic narratives may be produced and reproduced by powerful agents.

Moving to an intersectional perspective, gender and race (among other oppressive factors) can affect *agency* antagonistically and erode *allyship*, as the examples of gendered migration in our contributions show. Moreover, the reluctance of Amazigh activists to march with secular wom*en in the 20FM protests in Morocco (Willis 89) and the silencing of Black Saudi female rapper Asayel Slay, who faced arrest and racist backlash for her *Bint Mecca* (Mecca Girl) YouTube video, show power and sub-hierarchical relations within the aforementioned categories. These forms of *in/visibility* are also related to queer (and non-binary identities), as they remain systematically at risk (Atia 59). Finally, Haideh Moghissi critically compares the outcome of the 2010/11 uprisings with the disappointing aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, in which revolutionary men prevented wom*en's post-order participation, and asks: *Will gender-conscious issues remain open?* ("Arab Uprisings and Wo*men's Rights"). However, this can only be achieved if marginalized issues will be heard and implemented democratically and sustainably

after the replacement of the contemporary regimes.

Comparing different transitional regimes like the one in Egypt, Nermin Allam concludes that state-sponsored feminism "does not fundamentally change deeply rooted gendered norms (...) and rights" (375). Indeed, "the authoritarian state kills two birds with one woman", as Madawi Al-Rasheed points to regimes, "which contrast [themselves] with the radical backward and conservative elements in society while appealing to dissenting liberal voices" ("Wo*men in an Authoritarian State" 11). So far, state-neoliberal reforms concerning wom*en's demands have served only the ones* who obey and help to normalize inequalities and make opponents invisible. Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, wom*en who had to flee their homes and are being forced to stay in camps in Greece remain the group most vulnerable to traffickers, smugglers, prostitution, and undignified health conditions. The political juxtaposition of the preexisting structural discrimination of marginalized groups and the ignorance of powerful political actors exacerbate inequalities and life-threatening conditions. Additionally, patriarchal gender norms at home will hinder wom*en's online transformation and representation. All in all, this edition is dedi-

cated to enhancing the capacity of authors writing about *Critical Middle East and Gender* issues.

Femininity and Masculinity

The study of gender understands *femininity* and *masculinity* as socially constructed and performative categories that bring about gender relations and gender divisions. Being a theoretical field, issues of gender have been analyzed over recent decades. Since it figures as a performative category, the construction of gender is also brought about in social relations and actions and in the multifarious communications of (audio)visual media. The editors of this issue understand gender as a dynamic concept establishing new political and discursive regimes in various historical periods. Contrary to essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity, gender is brought about by social and cultural norms that sometimes need to be deconstructed to be understood. To this effect, the sign and media systems of a specific culture create and circulate complex and sometimes conflicting images of gender. From this vantage point, the deconstructive category of gender interferes with aspects of political feminism and the general wish for female participation in social and political realms. The dis-

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courses of gender also include the constructions of masculinity, which usually mirror femininity.

Facing recent events and upheavals in the Arab World, this issue of META intends to understand the meaning of gender in the context of changing social, political, and ideological configurations. The recent collective protests from 2010 on, the second wave in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon in 2019, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis of refugees from war and persecution brought about a new visibility of wo*men in public spaces and new negotiations of femininity in general and wo*men's place in the public sphere. These events rekindled the ambiguous relation between feminism, patriarchy, and nationalism and at the same time hybridize boundaries, undermining traditional concepts of bodies and voices and their respective spaces. The stage is set for political discourses imagining new and diverse arrangements. In the context of these upheavals, violence is an important aspect to consider, as some of the contributions document. Regardless of the revolt's peaceful intentions, violence seems to have dominated a variety of situations in diverse cultures: this points to a systematized use of violence based on gender vulnerabilities. Governmental violence is not only thought to control protesting bodies in public

spaces, it also controls bodies' sexualities and sex orientations using accusations of *public indecency* and *inciting immorality*. Contrasting with the forms of state violence, we can observe the emergence of female militias and fundamentalist extremists. The victims of the abuse of wo*men include the Yazidi wo*men and children. At the same time, the masculinity of soldiers and the emerging images of patriarchal nationalism have to be considered. The essays show a broad range of discursive, symbolic, and violent strategies to control wo*men's issues and subsume them within the patriarchal order. The extent of these actions obviously displays the contextual field of the symbolic configurations of gender and their transformation into sexualized practices. In this regard, the analytical power of the category of gender is easily communicated with practices of sexualized violence. The range of the essays presented here makes this connection visible. The essays refrain from theoretical concerns in favor of pointing to the gendered and sexualized forms of violence against wo*men.

This Issue's Articles and its Entanglements

A section of META focuses on the abuse of Yazidi wo*men, referring to Arjun Appadurai's concept of their *minoritized* body, taking their reports of their enslave-

ment as one of the few visible signs of the genocide. The essay traces the transformation of the *minoritized* body into a political body or a *body politics*. This mode of argument once again underlines the close connection between the gendered and the political body – and points to the inherent dynamics of this connection: gender is a means of isolating and politicizing the female body – as we can conclude from both the symbols and songs of popular culture and the revolutionary events in Egypt and the war against the Yazidi people.

The focus section starts an inspection of the historic aspects of masculinity within the *Great Eastern Crisis* of 1875-1878 by examining the Ottoman and British correspondence and the satirical press. Taking into account the Turkish-British political exchanges, the article summarizes the shifting concepts of hegemonic masculinity according to their cultural positions. The conflict between the nations lay in the understanding of masculinity within the European nations as a basis for their imperialist adventures. Interestingly enough, the gendering of national hierarchies and political structures is also a very common trait in the Arab nations. Rim Naguib traces the gendered discourses of nationalism between the Egyptian presidents Nasser and Sisi,

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who both formulated the relationship between ruler and nation in accordance with gender relation. In this context, Egypt turned from the *humiliated nation* into the *happy bride*, a relationship that was communicated in a variety of popular songs in Nasser's time. Sisi adapts this gendered relation and uses it as a tool against the rebellious Egyptians and their wish for democratic politics. Here, Egypt figures as a *failing, shameful and lowly feminized people* that regains strength through military discipline. This contradiction parallels Klaus Theweleit's landmark research into the gendered images of the right-wing German militia fighting against the Weimar republic, who associated the democratic powers with a low, sexualized, and corporeal femininity that should be conquered by the disciplined, male soldier.

Dina Wahba's contribution deals with the negotiation of masculinity in post-revolutionary Egypt. She focuses on the reinstatement of fear by establishing the narration of the dangerous and criminal male body of the *Baltagi* (thug) in order to justify mass violence. Agosti goes on to argue that affective economies of fear and shame were responsible for the rejection of female revolutionaries, since the normative gendered framing defines these economies. Agosti's article clearly demon-

strates how the analytic concept of gender and well-formulated insights into framing curtail female participation in revolutionary activities. Her example was the photographs of El Mahdy's naked body, which were a "direct contestation of the fragmentation that the state wanted for revolutionaries" (Agosti 102). It furthermore demonstrates the complexity of gender politics, which sometimes is closely linked to power structures and social hierarchies. The next essay furthers the idea of a gendered body that is surrendered to dictatorial and military power in the Moroccan prison memoir, Hadith al-Atama. This contribution focuses on the gendered violence against wo*men in the Years of Lead from 1965-1999, in which members of left-wing groups were illegally imprisoned and tortured. Referring to the prison narratives, in Hadith al-Atama, Biondi demonstrates the transmission of bodily violence into self-inflicted violence in terms of hunger. Both forms of violence follow a highly gendered model. This contribution demonstrates how easily external violence can be internalized and acted out through the body. Affective structure and violence thus enter into a close relationship, affecting individual self-perception. Sylvia Riewendt's and Dimitra Dermizaki's considerations of the Kafāla system further explore these divisions. The Kafāla system

is an exploitative legal system that functions to suppress immigrant workers and deprive them of their legal rights. This system undercuts divisions of gender in favor of the exploitation of young wo*men in Lebanese households, and it is *interlocking migration and labour law systems*. As the Kafāla system demonstrates the blurring divisions between aspects of gender and social stratification, Dima Al Munajed's intersectional analysis of Syrian Wo*men in civil society in Turkey and Lebanon shows the methodological advantages of an intersectional approach: crossing gender with class, nationality, and socioeconomic status paints a better picture of the situation of wo*men in foreign civil societies. This approach clearly demonstrates the degree to which the category of gender has to be stretched to explain social developments. Additionally, the category displays great flexibility to be combined with diverse issues.

Finally, Radwa Elsaman turns to wo*men's rights in Egyptian law. She paints a bleak picture of a political culture in which social norms and societal practices undermine relevant laws and legislative policies. This goes especially for Islamic laws that are not understood in their historical complexity, but taken literally as contemporary legal form. Islamic law and its consequences for daily life are also addressed

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in Julia Nauth's analysis of Mehdi Ben Attia's film *L'amour des hommes*, which recounts a young photographer's experience with Tunisia's contemporary patriarchal culture. Although wo*men are granted equal rights, the female artist's creativity is restricted by patriarchal norms and sexual violence. Thus, in the context of this issue, the film underlines the theoretical aspects of gender in the form of an aesthetic commentary. Originally, an article on Kahina and her relevance to today's Amazigh movement by Cynthia Becker, an associate Professor of African art history at Boston University was planned for the close up section. Due to the constraints associated with the Corona epidemic, this article could not be published.

Finally, the institutionalization of gender studies is taken into closer consideration in Jamie Woitynek's essay on two master programs at Tunisian universities. The article uncovers the political and economic entanglements that shape the production of knowledge and conditions in gender studies.

As it has become obvious by now, this issue does not deal with the global corona epidemic, but rather with how gender and gender relations are affected in times of crisis and upheaval. However, there seem to be some constant patterns: first, the strengthening of and the return to a

conservative and highly essentialist understanding of family, accompanied by stable delineations of masculinity and femininity. Second, the negotiation of uncertainty about the female body; and third, the high relevance of intersectional expulsions. Although governments led by wo*men seem to be better at mastering the crisis, as *The International Guardian* proposed a few weeks ago, gender relations are prone to a fundamental rollback worldwide: the corona crisis has proved once again that, also when we are all facing the same virus, we are not all sitting in the same boat. Some sail on luxury cruises while others must conquer the storm in an inflatable boat.

Notes

¹ The * refers to the constructedness of an engendered category. It enables identities and self-positioning to be included in a train of thought that goes beyond the traditional, historical attributions that are still frequently made even today.

² The word *white* is written in italics and lower case to refer to the concept of *critical whiteness* to reveal the invisible structures that (re-) produce *white supremacy* and *privilege*.

³ The word *Black* is capitalized as part of the strategy of self-empowerment. It is used to indicate the symbolic capital of resistance to racism that racialized people and groups have collectively fought for and obtained.

⁴ Here you can find the previous article about Kahina from Cynthia Becker www.mizanproject.org/the-kahina-the-female-face-of-berber-history/.

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