



CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES INTRODUCTION

## Perilous Pedagogy: Teaching Gender and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa

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Teaching gender politics has been an increasingly contentious topic in established democracies, with instructors encountering a myriad of pedagogical, institutional, and ideological challenges (Butler 2021; Evans 2019).<sup>1</sup> Challenges to teaching gender politics are exacerbated in nondemocratic contexts, where academic institutions operate under close regime scrutiny and surveillance, and where patterns of autocratic power structures are prevalent in society and often reproduced in the classroom. While extant studies have shed important light on some of the trends and issues associated with teaching gender politics in established democracies (Bayes 2012; Han and Heldman 2019; Lyle-Gonga 2013), our knowledge remains limited when it comes to teaching gender and politics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in Western institutions as well as within the MENA region. Understanding these challenges is particularly relevant given that the MENA region is diverse and has long been “othered,” “racialized,” and “orientalized” in Western discourse (Ahmed 1992; Said 1978), with direct implications for teaching gender and politics of the Middle East in local academic institutions as well as in the West.

Bringing together scholars from U.S. and MENA-based academic institutions, these Critical Perspectives identify the challenges of teaching gender and politics of the MENA and share some of the best pedagogical strategies to mitigate them. The short essays contribute to extant debates on pedagogical feminist theory and offer invaluable comparative insights on the topic in two important ways. First, the contributions to this Critical Perspectives section add to a collective global feminist effort to understand and come to terms with the growing global backlash against gender and feminist studies. From the United States to Hungary, and from Brazil to Qatar, the backlash against critical race and gender studies is

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pervasive and spreading (Gimson 2019; Pető 2016). Many of the pieces in this Critical Perspectives section point toward the institutional, ideological, and neoliberal origins of this backlash (see, for example, the essays by Shereen Abou El-Naga and Huda Alsahi). Second, the contributions emphasize the richness of local feminist scholarship and the importance of centering them in feminist pedagogy. From local feminist voices critiquing patriarchal traditions in the Middle East and beyond (El-Sadawi 1983; Mernissi 1987) to feminist scholars analyzing constructions of gender within Islamic societies (Abu Lughod 2015; Ahmed 1992), feminist pedagogy is a way to celebrate and reclaim the diversity and richness of the feminist knowledge tradition (see the essays in this section by Shereen Abou El-Naga and Katja Žvan Elliott).

### Students' Biases in the Classroom

Research on gender courses in political science has shed light on students' biases toward studying gender politics broadly (Bayes 2012; Cassese, Bos, and Duncan 2012; Han and Heldman 2019). Such biases are grounded in and fueled by anti-gender sentiments voiced by incumbent governments, as well as by conservative political, social, and religious actors. They have sometimes led to the discontinuation of gender studies programs and courses, thus further devaluing feminist knowledge and solidifying students' biases. Instructors teaching gender and politics of the MENA in Western-based institutions face a distinct set of challenges related to biases in the classroom and misconceptions about women in the Middle East. Influenced by the events of September 11, 2001, and the U.S. global war on terror, the "culture of misery" has dominated Western discourse and produced biased views about the region in general, and gender relations in particular. While we continue to experience the adverse effects of these major events in the classroom, no work has systematically explored these attitudes and (mis)perceptions and/or offered solutions to remedy them. The first contribution to this section, by Gamze Çavdar, offers important insights into the structure of such attitudes using original time-series survey data measuring students' views on MENA politics and gender relations. The survey reveals that students' biases and misconceptions about gender relations in the MENA region persisted even after intervention through lectures, readings, and in-class exercises.

Students based at MENA universities have also expressed biased opinions and little knowledge about gender politics generally, but also a special "apprehension" about studying Middle East gender politics in their societies (Quawas 2020, 26). In her essay on Egypt, Shereen Abou El-Naga recalls how a female student shared her parents' concern that a course on gender politics would introduce her to "unwelcomed ideas" and "confuse" her. These gendered attitudes and misconceptions further fuel students' biases and stereotypes. For example, in 2016, Qatar University canceled a lecture on women in Islam by the feminist scholar and Saudi activist Hatoon Al-Fassi following a student-led campaign against her. Some students feared Al-Fassi's views on male guardianship and women's rights and viewed them as threats to "traditional Qatari values" (Lindsey 2017).

The observations offered by the contributors on students' ingrained biases in the classroom confirm insights from feminist scholars of gender in the MENA on the dangers of studying the politics of gender in isolation from broader contexts of race, empire, and authoritarian politics (Abu Lughod 2015, 2020; Ahmed 1992; Mohanty 1988; Shohat 2001). Tackling students' biases calls for an encompassing definition of feminism that is intersectional and relational and—as we discuss later—often entails disrupting patterns of knowledge production.

### **Intersectionality, Positionality, and Subjectivity**

Through what bell hooks (1994) and other feminist theorists describe as an “engaged classroom,” our contributors invoke a feminist-conscious learning and an engaged classroom experience to encourage students to question rigid hierarchies of power and the logic underpinning them in academia, in politics, and in their own lives. Such an approach centers on and promotes critical reflection of one's positionality, subjectivity, and its place at the intersection of power dynamics and hierarchies. For example, Gamze Çavdar's contribution to this section brings forward the voices of women writers and intellectuals, as well as singers, activists, and directors from the MENA region to the course material. By introducing students to the diverse voices and experiences of Middle Eastern women, students begin to reflect and rethink the lenses through which they see—or, more accurately, gaze at—other societies and cultures.

Contributors from the MENA region face further challenges related to repressive state policies, academic hierarchies, and restricted freedom of expression that make such reflexive exercises all too important but also incredibly challenging. By focusing on in-class pedagogical strategies and syllabus design, the contributors challenge the paradigms of patriarchy, precarity, and authoritarianism. For example, in the context of Morocco, Katja Žvan Elliott underscores the significance of combining critical pedagogy and positionality in the classroom to challenge the repressive state. The author argues that positionality is particularly important in such settings as “students turn the gaze onto themselves to see the oppressed and the disempowered within their societies.” Such exercises and pedagogical practices may not always escape precarity in academia and in politics. For example, the late Dr. Rula Quawas was removed from her position as dean of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Jordan because of a video assignment that encouraged students to document sexual harassment on campus.

### **Institutionalization and the Politics of Teaching Gender**

A new field or department is institutionalized once it gains autonomy, recognition, and stable sources of funding (Stromquist 2001). Fueled by the 1960s civil rights and feminist movement, women's and gender studies (GWS) emerged in the United States and continued to gain momentum during the antiwar movement (Badran 1988). While the earliest gender studies courses began in the late 1960s, the institutionalization of gender studies remained uneven, nonlinear, and context

specific (Griffin 2005). Scholars have highlighted different factors that may affect the institutionalization process—mainly, the degree of university autonomy and ability to develop new programs, the availability of funding, student demand, and political context. Additionally, academic institutions in the United States continue to place low priority on women/gender and politics courses, as they are often taught as electives rather than core or major requirements (Han and Heldman 2019).

Institutionalizing GWS in the MENA region is fraught with additional challenges. Academic institutions in the MENA are highly gendered, they are unwelcoming to women professors (Karam and Afiouni 2014; Sabour 1996), and they mirror the prevailing sociopolitical norms, with reluctance to embrace gender-nonconformist ideas (Ibrahim 2012). On the one hand, the societal and political backlash against the concept of gender and/or feminism sabotages efforts to institutionalize GWS and/or to promote feminist knowledge at both the individual and institutional levels (Alsahi 2018). On the other hand, there are only a handful of political science departments in the MENA region that are often subject to many institutional constraints and close regime scrutiny. As a result, political science and GWS departments lag in most parts of the region with scholars specialized in gender and politics teaching in other departments such as sociology, literature, law, and anthropology.

Currently, there are few GWS programs and courses, mainly in Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Palestine, and Sudan (Asfari Institute 2019). In Egypt, GWS courses are only offered as electives in the Language Department. Moreover, GWS graduate degrees were, until recently, mainly offered at private universities such as the American University in Cairo and the University of Fez in Morocco. Over the past few years, Sultan Moulay Slimane University in Beni Mellal and Ibnou Zohr University in Agadir—both public universities in Morocco—established a GWS graduate program. In Egypt, the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at the public Cairo University created a professional master's degree program in gender and development in 2016.

In the Arab Gulf, there is no single university that offers a stand-alone degree in GWS (Almazidi 2019). As Huda Alsahi explains in her contribution on the Arab Gulf, academic institutions have focused on developing women and family-oriented courses and programs instead of establishing more dedicated GWS departments and programs with sustainable funding and institutional support. This contribution sheds a specific light on the pedagogical, institutional, and sociocultural challenges facing developing and institutionalizing GWS in the Arab Gulf and clearly demonstrates that the internationalization of higher education in the region has marginally contributed to the advancement of liberal ideas and fields of study, and/or challenging the political and social status quo.

Notwithstanding the diverse challenges of teaching gender politics of the Middle East, the essays in this Critical Perspectives section demonstrate how resourceful feminist teachers have become to counter the unique challenges they face with the rising nationalism, neoliberalism, homophobia, and, more recently, the global pandemic. The contributors share some of the best feminist pedagogical practices, such as designing class surveys to effectively tackle students' biases about the Middle East and North Africa, integrating gender

education across different disciplines, centering difference rather than uniformity as a feminist practice, and reclaiming and asserting the everyday experiences of their students as tools for pedagogy through journaling and reflections. The variations in pedagogy showcase different examples of feminist pedagogy in action and elucidate the effects of the social and political context on the feasibility of some of these pedagogical tools. These essays demonstrate that there is no one-size-fits-all feminist pedagogy, but a continuous evolution of feminist praxis that occurs in highly dynamic classrooms.

## Note

1. This essay adopts Judith Butler's (1990, 19–20) definition of gender as the “stylized repetition of acts, an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender.” By gender politics, we refer to the contestations, struggles, and contentions that occur around gender in the Middle East at large, and of the way in which gender serves as a theoretical lens to understanding the larger MENA politics.

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