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sexuality in muslim contexts: restrictions and resistance

Edited by Anissa Hélié and Homa Hoodfar, Zed Books, London and New York, 2012, 346 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78032-285-8 £19.99/£75.00 (Hbk/Pbk)

This is an important book that closely interrelates feminist theory and practice and monitors courageous acts of feminist resistance across a wide range of countries, mainly in the South. It refuses to fall into the trap that many feminists and especially anti-racists fall into, in which any critique of Muslim practice is considered racist, without the realisation that the very act of homogenising all Muslims and Islamic discourses is a racist reification in itself.

The book grew out of discussions among feminists associated with the Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts research project during their conferences between 2000 and 2009 in Tehran, Hong Kong and Montreal. They felt uncomfortable with the trend of feminist scholarship that has been narrowing the field of 'sexuality', focusing mostly on issues of sexual orientation rather than linking them to wider issues of the relationships between women and their bodies, reproduction and the importance of women's right to enjoy and have only consensual sex. They argued that this increased focus on sexual orientation actually disadvantages LGBTTI groups in the Muslim world, whose issues are seen to be separate and autonomous from, for example, discussions on forced marriage, the veil and so on. Anissa Hélié and Homa Hoodfar, a feminist historian and a feminist social anthropologist, respectively, and long-time activists in the groundbreaking feminist international organisation Women Living Under Muslim Laws, got together to edit this book, which includes a series of contributions on different aspects of these issues from Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Israel, China, Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Malaysia. The introductory chapter by Anissa Hélié outlines a broader conceptual framework on sexuality in Muslim countries, exploring various dimensions of sexuality, 'Muslimness' and women's lives, without reducing and homogenising them.

As Anissa Hélié points out, the 'Muslim world' is not monolithic and the discourse of 'Muslimness' purposely ignores diversities that exist and operate across and within Muslim communities and projects, creating a diasporic identity centred on imaginary transnational Muslim culture. Islam is being

transformed from a religious belief into individual and collective identities, and countries with Muslim majority populations are being transformed into 'Muslim countries'. This discourse of 'Muslimness' is driven by specific conservative and authoritarian political agendas where the current policing of sexuality is often justified through discourses of moral codes, cultural 'authenticity' and religion.

In contrast, the premise of this book is that all major religious traditions, as understood and practised in today's world, are diverse cultural resources that can promote either emancipatory or conservative standpoints. Moreover, Islam is far from being the only parameter impacting the politics of sexuality and gender empowerment, even in societies in which pervasive claims posit Islam as the main marker of identity.

The various case studies in the book highlight the connection between compulsory heterosexuality and other forms of control over women's sexuality, and notions of modesty or promiscuity. A central idea of the book is the ways women analyse, address and resist the mechanisms of sexual control, and the ways women and LGBTTI people contest gender ideologies promoted by states or customary traditions. However, different case studies vary in the ways in which they focus on the social and political context and on the strategies for resistance. Therefore, the book is divided into two main parts. Part I focuses on 'Tools of policing: the politics of history, community, law', while Part II includes case studies focusing on 'Sites of contestation: reclaiming public spaces'.

There is no space in this review to describe in detail the different fascinating case studies included in both parts of the book, and as should be clear from what I have written so far, I urge the readers of *Feminist Review* to read it all. Especially important, in Part I, is the ways some contributors, for example Wee and Yaghoobi, outline how in post-colonial countries the policing of sexuality in the name of Islam is actually often drawn from earlier colonial practices. Meanwhile, in Sezgin's chapter, the author shows how the policing of the sexuality of Muslim women in countries where Muslims are a minority (Israel and India) is entangled with identity politics in contexts where women are trying to increase their autonomy, while demonstrating allegiance to their communities. In Part II there are fascinating chapters like that of Jaschok and Jingjun on women's mosques in China, and Hoodfar on the sports arena and sexual politics in Iran. In the last chapter of the book, Hélié deconstructs the false dichotomy between an 'enlightened West' and 'Oppressive Muslim contexts'. She contrasts the emphasis on victimisation of both 'Muslim women' and 'gay Muslims' in mainstream western discourse with actual strategies designed by advocates of gender equality and sexual rights in South Africa, Indonesia, Lebanon, Turkey and Morocco.

At a time when feminists, anti-racists and other emancipatory and human rights advocates are intimidated by dichotomous 'choices' between being accused

of 'Islamophobia' and supporting equal rights and autonomy to all people, *Sexuality in Muslim Contexts* offers crucially important insights and political guidance.

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