



**SPECIAL FOCUS: MERIP AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE  
PRODUCTION IN MENA STUDIES**

## **MERIP's 50 Years of Women and Gender**

Judith E. Tucker

Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA  
Email: [Judith.Tucker@georgetown.edu](mailto:Judith.Tucker@georgetown.edu)

### **Abstract**

Drawing on a reading of MERIP's articles related to women's and gender studies over the course of its 50-year history, this piece reflects on how MERIP's forays into this field formed part of its overarching aspiration to place scholarship in the service of progressive political projects. I explore how intellectual trends and political commitments worked together to shape the topics and approaches related to gender that appeared in MERIP's pages. The political purposes of knowledge production were omnipresent in the minds of authors and editors, and we see evidence of a conscious program of critique of past scholarship on women and gender in the region, as well as sustained attention to research and writing that could connect, or perhaps even be useful, to struggles in the Middle East region and the amelioration of U.S. policy. The framing of issues varied over time, from a focus on political economy to political action to broader cultural questions, in rhythm with shifts in scholarly paradigms and events on the ground.

**Keywords:** women's and gender studies; gendered political economy; women and politics; gender and culture; gender lens in Middle East studies

MERIP was an answer to my prayers, or should I say my discomforts? I had chosen to go to graduate school in Middle East history in the early 1970s, a choice made with considerable hesitation and second thoughts. The two years I had spent in Beirut, and then another shorter stay in Cairo, had introduced me to some of the politics of the region – the Palestinian movement and women's rights in particular – and I saw graduate school as an opportunity to explore the roots of these struggles, return to the lecture halls and libraries where I felt at home, and perhaps acquire some credentials that would allow me a voice in American public discourse on the Middle East. On the other hand, going back into the academy also felt like an exit from urgent political activities, an act of disloyalty to the people who were dedicating their lives to making a difference in the Middle East and America alike. My personal conflict was

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far from unique. I think a number of my fellow graduate students, across fields, felt very much the same way: we were contending with the challenge of how to marry our intellectual interests to our political commitments.

The Middle East Research and Information Project came to the rescue for those of us who studied the region. It was a thoroughly political project that aspired to support struggles for liberation in the region by providing the material and analysis that would equip the reader to better understand their roots and complexities, and engage in informed solidarity. Here was a home that allowed us to move our scholarly pursuits into the service of our politics.

I want to reflect on how MERIP's forays into women's and gender studies, my chosen field, were part of this intersection of scholarship and politics, and how intellectual trends and political commitments worked together to shape the topics and approaches that appeared in MERIP's pages. In many ways, the framing of MERIP articles simply reflected various turns in the academy. So what difference did MERIP's politics make in its publication of articles on women's and gender studies over the past fifty years?

*MERIP Reports* was not particularly quick to connect to the fledgling field of women's studies. It took some five years and 50 issues before it finally foregrounded women in its pages. In August 1976, the two feature articles of issue #50 explored questions about working women in Palestine and Egypt, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Over the following four decades, MERIP would continue to engage women's issues and eventually gender issues as well, at least from time to time. Its coverage certainly tracked some of the major trends in academia, but it also brought other considerations into play: the political purposes of knowledge production were omnipresent in the minds of authors and editors, and I think we can see evidence of a conscious program of critique of past scholarship on women and gender in the region, as well as sustained attention to research and writing that could connect, or perhaps even be useful, to struggles in the Middle East region and the amelioration of U.S. policy.

Initially, in the decade from 1976 to 1986, most pieces in MERIP related to women focused on the political economy of women's work. Certainly this first period of MERIP's interventions in women's studies was much in accord with the assumptions and approaches of neo-Marxist academics of the time, and quite au courant: Zillah Eisenstein's collected volume, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, which appeared on January 1, 1979, brought radical feminist thought into conversation with Marxist class analysis, largely in the context of capitalist societies in the west. MERIP's authors also pursued a thoroughly materialist method that situated women's oppression in relation to the patriarchal structures that derived from different modes of production, although they moved the discussion to a non-western setting: how women's work had been shaped by the particularities of capitalist development in a colonial context, the impact of the world market, and the differential effect of mass labor migration on women were the privileged topics. Authors pursued

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<sup>1</sup> Amal Samad, "The Proletarianization of Palestinian Women in Israel," *MERIP* 50 (Aug., 1976): 10–15, 26; Judith Tucker, "Egyptian Women in the Work Force: An Historical Survey," *MERIP Reports* 50 (Aug., 1976): 3–9, 26.

questions about women's presence and status in the labor force in Egypt,<sup>2</sup> Jordan,<sup>3</sup> Iran,<sup>4</sup> and Yemen,<sup>5</sup> past and present.

These early pieces did not simply follow the intellectual fashions of the time, however. They also entailed implicit critiques tied to a sense of political purpose. The materialist approach took on the orientalist explanations for women's oppression. The cultural and religious explanations for their plight, which had had a virtual monopoly in both scholarly and popular writing on Middle Eastern women, were shoved to the side, mentioned in passing as artifacts of a colonial past that had served to obscure the real story of women's oppression by a capitalist world market. This was a self-consciously anti-orientalist move that aimed to discredit a discourse that had served to justify imperialist policies and projects. Another implicit critique spoke to the limits of a socialist-feminist analysis made in the west that appeared to assume that women's issues in advanced industrial societies were tied to the workings of capitalism while elsewhere – the Middle East was a prime example – religion, “tradition,” and “custom” were the drivers of female oppression. The MERIP authors were firm in their conviction that, while the workings of colonial/neo-colonial capitalism had distinct features, it was the same capitalist system that shaped women's lives in the Middle East as in the “First World.” Finally, many of the authors of these pieces were responding, at the time, to the promises of the Arab socialist experiment that foregrounded women's education and participation in the labor force as key to their emancipation. While hopes for Arab socialism were fading by the late 1970s, the left in the region still focused their attention on developments in labor and the economy and opposed the rapid opening of the region to a world market with its resulting proletarianization and regional labor migration. MERIP authors stood in solidarity with these concerns and made this focus their own.

In the following near decade, from 1986 to 1994, MERIP shifted gears somewhat. The subject of women's political participation came to the fore. Women had been little visible in studies of political movements and moments in the region, and now a number of MERIP articles began to explore the roles they played in what appeared to be a compensatory undertaking to write them into political history. The opening salvo came in 1986 with issue #138, “Women and Politics in the Middle East.” This first issue foregrounded women in the Palestinian movement,<sup>6</sup> the

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Gran, “Impact of the World Market on Egyptian Women,” *MERIP* 58 (June, 1977): 3–7; Mona Hammam, “Egypt's Working Women: Textile Workers of Chubra el-Kheima,” *MERIP Reports*, 82 (Nov., 1979): 3–7; Fatma Khafagy, “Women and Labor Migration: One Village in Egypt,” *MERIP Reports*, 124 (June, 1984): 17–21; and Elizabeth Taylor, “Egyptian Migration and Peasant Wives,” *MERIP Reports* 124 (June, 1984): 3–10.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Layne, “Women in Jordan's Workforce,” *MERIP* 95 (March - April, 1981): 19–23.

<sup>4</sup> Erika Friedl, “Women and the Division of Labor in an Iranian Village,” *MERIP* 95 (March - April, 1981): 12–18, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Myntti, “Yemeni Workers Abroad: The Impact of Women,” *MERIP* 124 (June, 1984): 11–16.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Peteet, “Women and the Palestinian Movement: No Going Back?,” *MERIP* 138 (Jan. - Feb., 1986): 20–24, 44.

Iranian revolution,<sup>7</sup> and Egyptian uprisings in the nineteenth century,<sup>8</sup> all framed by Suad Joseph's introductory reflections on how women participate in states, movements, revolts, and revolutions. Occasional articles about women and politics over the next few years culminated in another full issue, #173, in 1991 on "Gender and Political Change." This was not the first use of "gender" as a concept in MERIP's pages – that honor belongs to Marilyn Booth, as far as I can determine, in an article she wrote on women's prison memoirs for an issue devoted to human rights in 1987. Issue #173 did signal a concept shift, however, or at least an expanded framing. Articles on the gendering of public political space in Yemen,<sup>9</sup> the state and its mediation of Islamic gender norms,<sup>10</sup> and the role gender imaginings played in the Gulf War when it came to Iraqi masculinity<sup>11</sup> were situated by Julie Peteet and Barbara Harlow in the context of the role gender plays in political transformations. Women, gender, and politics continued to be a hardy perennial throughout MERIP's history, although arguably the period between 1986 and 1994 marked the most intensive MERIP engagement with women's participation in political movements and state projects, at least up to the time of the Arab uprisings in 2011.

This attention to women's presence in political movements was in part a rearguard action; the 1970s and early 1980s had arguably been the highwater mark for "herstory" initiatives elsewhere that attended to the significant roles that individual women played in political events, organizations, and movements. MERIP was a bit delayed in taking up this compensatory project in the Middle East context, although these articles represented novel contributions to the field of Middle East studies. The pivot from herstory to studies of how gender inflected political discourses, so evident in #173, was in step with intellectual trends of the moment, in particular the favoring of the cultural and discursive over the social and experiential.

I would hasten to add, however, that MERIP never abandoned its commitment to tracking and documenting women as political actors. Events in the region continued to draw attention to women's engagements. MERIP followed the Iranian Revolution over the years, and consistently covered female participation and ongoing struggles over women's issues. The Palestinian movement was also a signal focus and a number of articles provided information and analysis that could not be found elsewhere. During the period of the first *intifada* (1987–93) in particular, MERIP published strong pieces that documented the

<sup>7</sup> Mary Hegland, "Political Roles of Iranian Village Women," *MERIP* 138 (Jan. - Feb., 1986): 14–19, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Tucker, "Women and State in 19th Century Egypt: Insurrectionary Women," *MERIP* 138 (Jan. - Feb., 1986): 8–13, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Sheila Carapico, "Women and Public Participation in Yemen," *MERIP* 173 (Nov. - Dec., 1991): 15.

<sup>10</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam and the State," *MERIP* 173 (Nov. - Dec., 1991): 9–14.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Norton, "Gender, Sexuality and the Iraq of Our Imagination," *MERIP* 173 (Nov. - Dec., 1991): 26–28.

central role women played in organizing grass roots resistance,<sup>12</sup> the challenges women faced in achieving social liberation despite their political participation,<sup>13</sup> and the range of new social tensions they had to negotiate post-Oslo.<sup>14</sup> This coverage celebrated women as the key players they were in the intifada while also making a measured assessment of what was gained and lost as a result.

As we moved into another decade (1994–2003), MERIP issues came to be characterized by a proliferation of sites for the study of women's and gender issues. Population policies and demographic trends, and the implications for women's roles in family and society, were featured in issue #190 with articles on official uses of Islamic ideology in Iran,<sup>15</sup> Egyptian state policies,<sup>16</sup> and overall patterns of demographic change in the region.<sup>17</sup> Issue #198 took a close look at the gendering of the rights and entitlements of citizenship – in Kuwait,<sup>18</sup> Palestine,<sup>19</sup> Israel,<sup>20</sup> Turkey,<sup>21</sup> and Algeria,<sup>22</sup> with Suad Joseph providing an overall introduction. LGBTQ issues moved to the fore in 1998 with issue #206, "Power and Sexuality in the Middle East," and articles on sexuality in Egyptian film,<sup>23</sup> honor killings in Palestine,<sup>24</sup> and tensions of Zionism and lesbianism in Israel,<sup>25</sup> all introduced by a programmatic piece on queering the study of the Middle East by Bruce Dunne. In 2001, issue #219 on "Culture and Politics" included two gender pieces, one on Iranian cinema and its

<sup>12</sup> Joost Hiltermann, "Trade Unions and Women's Committees: Sustaining Movement, Creating Space," *MERIP* 164/165 (May - Aug., 1990): 32–36, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Rema Hammami, "Women, the Hijab and the Intifada," *Middle East Report* 164/165 (May - Aug., 1990): 24–28, 71, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson, "Searching for Strategies: The Palestinian Women's Movement in the New Era," *Middle East Report* 186 (Jan. - Feb., 1994): 22–25.

<sup>15</sup> Homa Hoodfar, "Devices and Desires: Population Policy and Gender Roles in the Islamic Republic," *MERIP* 190 (Sep. - Oct., 1994): 11–17.

<sup>16</sup> Laila Nawar, Cynthia B. Lloyd and Barbara Ibrahim, "Autonomy and Gender in Egyptian Families," *MERIP* 190 (Sep. - Oct., 1994): 18.

<sup>17</sup> Youssef Courbage, "Demographic Change in the Arab World: The Impact of Migration, Education and Taxes in Egypt and Morocco," *MERIP* 190 (Sep. - Oct., 1994): 19–22.

<sup>18</sup> Haya al-Mughni, "Women's Organizations in Kuwait," *MERIP* (Jan. - March, 1996): 32–35.

<sup>19</sup> Rita Giacaman, Islah Jad and Penny Johnson, "For the Common Good? Gender and Social Citizenship in Palestine," *MERIP* 198 (Jan. - March, 1996): 11–16.

<sup>20</sup> Nitza Berkovitch, "Women and the Women's Equal Rights Law in Israel," *MERIP* 198 (Jan. - March, 1996): 19–21.

<sup>21</sup> Yesim Arat, "On Gender and Citizenship in Turkey," *MERIP* 198 (Jan. - March, 1996): 28–31.

<sup>22</sup> Boutheina Cheriet, "Gender, Civil Society and Citizenship in Algeria," *Middle East Report* 198 (Jan. - March, 1996): 22–26.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Armbrust, "Sexuality and Film: Transgressing Patriarchy: Sex and Marriage in Egyptian Film," *MERIP* 206 (Spring, 1998): 29–31; Garay Menicucci, "Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Film," *MERIP* 206 (Spring, 1998): 32–36.

<sup>24</sup> Suzanne Ruggi, "Commodifying Honor in Female Sexuality: Honor Killings in Palestine," *MERIP* 206 (Spring, 1998): 12–15.

<sup>25</sup> Yael Ben-zvi, "Zionist Lesbianism and Transsexual Transgression: Two Representations of Queer Israel," *MERIP* 206 (Spring, 1998): 26–28, 37.

contestation of *fiqh*-based gender relations,<sup>26</sup> and the other on how “downveiling” reflected cultural contests in Cairo streets.<sup>27</sup>

In part, this greater diversity of material was no doubt related to the ways in which MERIP was expanding beyond the former boundaries of the political and socioeconomic to embrace a wider array of subjects: sociological, cultural, artistic, sexual, etc. MERIP was also coming to terms with the ubiquity of the gender lens in the academy across research fields, and the articles it published on political economy and politics, society, and culture had often come to include gender analysis of some kind. We might also ask whether the doldrums of the period – the seemingly uncontested grip of authoritarian regimes, the failures of Oslo, the economic stasis exacerbated by sanctions, the fracturing of regional unity and solidarity – helped to shift attention to arenas where glimmers of hope, in the form of popular initiatives and imaginings of a better future, were to be found.

Then the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked an aggressive upturn in U.S. involvement in the region, ushering in a fourth period in which empire and its effects moved to the fore, and the political snapped back into focus. Issue #239 (2006), “Dispatches from the War Zone: Iraq and Afghanistan,” featured two articles that studied the ways in which the new “democratic” political system in Iraq had disappointed women<sup>28</sup> and, indeed, almost totally disempowered them.<sup>29</sup> Al-Ali and Pratt would revisit this topic in early 2011, with a disturbing piece on escalating violence against Iraqi women.<sup>30</sup> Farzaneh Milani followed up on the gender and empire theme with a piece on the imperial discourse of “captive women” who needed to be saved and freed in issue #246 in 2008.<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting to note that, overall, the rhythm of coverage of women and gender issues slowed between 2003 and 2013: every second or third issue might contain a single piece related to women and gender, but we had to wait until 2013 for a dedicated issue to appear. I can only speculate that the high level of violence, displacement, death, and other costs of invasion and occupation resulted in the prioritization of the study of empire, and crowded out other topics such as the close study of women and gender in relation to grassroots movements or popular culture, for example. There was a political imperative to make the atrocities of modern empire crystal clear, even if women were presented primarily as victims in the telling. And we should not forget as well that the research climate deteriorated fairly steadily during this period, especially for American scholars whose government bore so much responsibility for local upheavals.

<sup>26</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and the State,” *MERIP* 219 (Summer, 2001): 26–29.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Herrera, “Downveiling: Gender and the Contest over Culture in Cairo,” *MERIP* 219 (Summer, 2001): 16–19.

<sup>28</sup> Huda Ahmed, “Women in the Shadows of Democracy,” *MERIP* 239 (Summer, 2006): 24–26.

<sup>29</sup> Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, “Women in Iraq: Beyond the Rhetoric,” *MERIP* 239 (Summer, 2006): 18–23.

<sup>30</sup> Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, “Conspiracy of Near Silence: Violence Against Iraqi Women,” *MERIP* 258 (Spring 2011): 34–37, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Farzaneh Milani, “On Women’s Captivity in the Islamic World,” *MERIP* 246 (Spring, 2008): 40–46.

Popular uprisings across the region in 2011 inaugurated what we can think of as the latest phase in MERIP's coverage. The role of women and gender in revolutions and popular uprisings came predictably to the fore post-2011 as we all grappled with the import of uprisings in the region and the counterrevolutions that followed. MERIP did not disappoint. Issue #268, published in 2013, "Gender Front Lines: Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey," brought together five strong pieces that honored the role of women in the uprisings, and addressed the complexities of gender and masculinities as well as femininities, as they played out in Egypt,<sup>32</sup> Syria,<sup>33</sup> Turkey,<sup>34</sup> and Tunisia.<sup>35</sup>

I have assigned this issue to undergraduate students repeatedly as one of the best ways to acquaint them with the roles women played and the obstacles they faced, as well as how gender can work to destabilize power or be used to reinvigorate it. I think it represents how MERIP has engaged women's and gender studies on its best days, bringing together key scholars to cut through obfuscations and offer analysis that engages and empowers its readers. Now that we are over ten years from the uprisings, the time may be ripe for another in-depth look at how the manipulation of gender differences and identities continues to buttress reactionary projects, while at the same time resistance movements are drawing strength from the inclusion of women and demands for change in gendered rights and relations.

Looking back over the history of MERIP's publishing, I think we can see how the interplay of political purpose and scholarly research informed the issues and articles on women and gender. The political concerns of the day generally set the agenda in terms of topics, and intellectual trends shaped the analytical approaches. MERIP was a bit slow to engage, perhaps, in its very early years, but then it came to provide fairly sustained coverage and reflection on the gendered aspects of political struggle at all levels, at least up to 2003 or so. The fall-off in issues and articles dedicated to women and gender since then may well be a reflection of success rather than failure: many MERIP authors now routinely consider the gendered aspects of any subjects they take up. MERIP played a critical role in drawing the attention of the left to the importance of women's and gender issues in the Middle East; they were, and are, essential to MERIP's goals of providing the information and analysis we need to lay bare U.S. imperial rhetoric on women and gender, and support struggles for peace, justice, and equity in the region.

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<sup>32</sup> Mervat F. Hatem, "Gender and Counterrevolution in Egypt," *MERIP* 268 (Fall 2013): 10-17; Vickie Langohr, "This Is Our Square": Fighting Sexual Assault at Cairo Protests," *MERIP* 268 (Fall 2013): 18-25.

<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Joubin, "Syrian Drama and the Politics of Dignity," *MERIP* 268 (Fall 2013): 26-29.

<sup>34</sup> Neslihan Sen, "Turkey's Woman in the Red Dress," *MERIP* 268 (Fall 2013): 38-39, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Norma Claire Moruzzi, "Gender and the Revolutions: Critique Interrupted," *MERIP* 268 (Fall 2013): 2-9.