
Those keeping up with the growing body of literature on women and gender in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) will find the essays collected in this volume a refreshing break from traditional approaches. Written and edited by scholars working within various subfields of geography, this work aims to present “specifically geographical perspectives on the experiences of Muslim women” (4). That is, unlike much of the current literature, these essays place notions of “space and place” at the heart of their analyses. The title and the introduction to the volume also promise analyses that “explore the ways in which religious beliefs, institutions, practices, and discourses” shape the spatial experiences of women in the MENA (13). Yet, as we will see below, the collection as a whole fails to deliver on this promise.

The book is divided into three parts, beginning with a section entitled, “Gender, Development, and Religion” (17). Broadly speaking, the four essays in this portion of the text argue that globalization and western development initiatives have contributed to significant shifts in the spatial experiences of women in the MENA. Sarah Halvorson argues that the increasingly market-oriented economy of Northern Pakistan has forced young girls and women to take more responsibility for household work and local farming. This trend is then reinforced by an increasingly conservative religious discourse that limits the mobility of girls to private spaces. Noting a similar response to globalization in Eastern Morocco, Susanne Steinmann suggests that the increased responsibility of women in the home and on the farm provides greater spatial mobility for women by granting access to the previously restricted spaces of agricultural production.

Essays by Naheed Aaftaab and Diana Davis highlight the unintended consequences of western development initiatives that fail to attend to local norms governing gender and space. Drawing on fieldwork from Afghanistan, Aaftaab argues that liberal development theories which encourage the education of females by the state unintentionally create educational institutions that reinforce traditional gender roles. Also reporting from Afghanistan, Diana Davis notes that western-led development initiatives have denied women the opportunity to participate in projects for which they are well qualified on the basis of inaccurate assumptions about norms governing women’s mobility in these communities.

The second section of the text, entitled “Geographies of Mobility” (125), includes three essays that explore the spatial experiences of women migrants from the MENA insofar as they intersect with cultural and religious norms governing mobility. In what is perhaps the best essay of the volume, Rachel Silvey explores the multivalent influence of Islam on the mobility experiences of Indonesian women migrants in Saudi Arabia. Turning to the discourses of Moroccan women migrants in France, Amy Freeman argues that the constructed “moral geographies” of Moroccan culture help us to understand the mobility experience of Moroccan women and their consequent conceptions of freedom. Finally, Robina Mohammad argues that Pakistani women migrants in Britain are the victims of a “conservative, radical, religious nationalism” that “legitimizes the imposition of physical and
spatial constraints” on women in the name of preserving the collective identity of the migrant community (196).

The third and final section of this volume is entitled “Discourse, Representation, and the Contestation of Space” (201). The five essays that make up this portion of the text do not hang together as well as the essays within the previous groupings. The first three essays chronicle the way in which women from the MENA have contested traditional limits on their spatial mobility, while the last two essays interpret and critique the textual and visual representation of these women within literary and print media.

Anna Secor describes the competing discourses of democracy and Islamism in modern day Turkey and argues that veiling, as an “embodied spatial practice,” has become a “site of politics” in this context (204). Abdi Samatar turns our attention to a remarkable community of women in Northern Somalia who contested traditional norms governing gender and space by building a women’s mosque. Likewise, Malek Abisaab chronicles the ways in which a group of Lebanese workingwomen contested traditional norms governing female mobility through labor strikes and protests.

In the penultimate essay of this volume, Marc Brosseau and Leila Ayari engage in a “cultural and geographical interpretation” of contemporary French novels written by Tunisian women, focusing on the literary representation of gender, space, and place. Ghazi-Walid Falah then ends the book with an examination of the visual representation of women from the MENA in the print media of the United States. She argues that the images selected reinforce stereotypes of Muslim women as either passive victims without normal experiences or active and irrationally violent political agents.

The essays collected in this volume contribute a great deal to the contemporary scholarship on gender in the Middle East and North Africa. One need not be well versed in contemporary geographical theory to realize that analyses of “space and place” are particularly relevant additions to this scholarship. When gender norms are constructed and reinforced by spatial segregation, as is the case in much of the MENA, the geographical analyses presented in these essays are of central importance. Readers will also benefit from the careful fieldwork of many of the authors. Of particular note are the essays of Davis, Steinmann, and Abisaab which reveal that there are important disconnects between official discourse on women’s role in “public” (as opposed to “private”) spaces and the actual empirical realities. The data collected in these essays can also contribute to contemporary discussions about the relationship between collective identity formation and the spatial restrictions placed on women and their bodies.

Despite these strengths, this text may be a disappointment to those (myself included) who are interested in understanding the specific function of religion in the construction and experience of gendered space in the MENA. With the notable exception of Rachel Silvey’s work, the essays in this volume give scant attention to the complicated role Islamic discourse plays in shaping the religious identities and spatial experiences of women in the MENA. If Islam is mentioned, it is only as a monolithic force that mysteriously imposes norms of space and place on women who have no personal connection to that force. Falah and Nagel are absolutely right to warn against reducing the experiences of these women to religious experience alone. Yet, some of these essays stumble into the opposite problem of collapsing the significant religious experiences of these women into their experiences of social, political, and cultural norms.
These criticisms should not detract from the overall value of the book as a resource for those interested in the relationship between gender and space in the MENA. It simply suggests that a more appropriate title might have been, *Geographies of Women in the Middle East and North Africa*. Readers looking for a further analysis of the intersections between “gender, religion, and space”, will have to wait for another volume.

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