

sectors, increasing demand for female workers and reducing the negative gender gap in educational attainment that contributes to wage discrimination. Particularly in Gulf countries, subsidy structures should be altered to benefit both sexes equally and support childcare for families with two working parents. Further, laws ensuring equal pay, abolishing existing legal structures that exclude women from certain jobs, and banning employment discrimination based on gender or other group identities are essential.

The results are therefore encouraging because they suggest the potential for profound intergenerational change in attitudes as women's labor force participation increases. This suggests specific mechanisms by which the Middle East may develop different social attitudes in the decades to come.

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A CASE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGED RESEARCH IN GENDER STUDIES AND THE MIDDLE EAST*

By Nermin Allam

Why is a community engaged research approach important in the field of gender politics and the Middle East? As I looked over my half-filled lecture notebook from the spring of 2020, I was overwhelmed with a sense of grief and reminded of the value of a community engaged research approach that embraces reciprocity between academic research and community needs. For the past two years, I have designed my gender politics and the Middle East course in partnership with a domestic violence organization which serves women from Middle Eastern

communities in the United States. Through volunteering at the organization, students identify the diverse structures that enable gender inequalities, and how as members of society they can challenge them. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, the carefully planned community engagement course had to be remodeled, and its community engaged component had to be dropped all together. The organization had to close its doors and moved to remotely delivering some of its services due to the ongoing health crisis. While I grieved the lost opportunity to introduce students to a meaningful experience, more intensely I grieved what the move meant for women who relied on the organization for shelter, refuge, and safety. The women are victims and survivors of domestic violence, some are undocumented and many face language and cultural barriers.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, governments and organizations have been reporting an increase in the number of domestic violence cases. The National Domestic Violence Hotline in the United States reported a 9% increase in calls between March 16 to May 16, 2020.¹⁹⁶ France reported a 30% increase in domestic violence reports and/or calls as of April 2020;¹⁹⁷ and the United Kingdom experienced a 65% rise in calls to the national abuse hotlines over a single weekend in March 2020.¹⁹⁸ In the Middle East, the systematic tracking of domestic violence cases is largely absent in many countries, however women's rights groups and domestic violence hotlines reported an increase in the number of domestic violence reports and calls in Egypt,¹⁹⁹ Iraq,²⁰⁰ Iran,²⁰¹ Lebanon,²⁰² Palestine,²⁰³ Saudi Arabia,²⁰⁴ Tunisia,²⁰⁵ and Turkey.²⁰⁶ The rise in domestic violence cases is not simply an unfortunate consequence of the pandemic. It reflects the failure to take into account how race, gender

and class shape the experiences of different groups. A community engaged research approach is necessary to understanding some of these gendered implications of the pandemic on our societies. It promises to identify silences in our data, contributes to envisioning a new aesthetic for engaged research, and centers a feminist engaged consciousness in our study and knowledge production.

Community Engaged Research and the Field of Gender Politics and the Middle East

Community engaged research is an approach to research and learning that emphasizes the need to respond to “community-identified needs,”²⁰⁷ to democratize knowledge production,²⁰⁸ and to embrace self-reflexivity in the research process.²⁰⁹ Ernest Boyer’s criticism to academic work and its growing detached character from the wider community contributed to the recent rise in community engaged research among researchers and in universities.²¹⁰ While community engaged research takes on different names and forms, at the heart of community engaged research is the recognition that the “knowledge acquired in the academic setting is strengthened and enhanced by the real-world experience found in communities.”²¹¹ This approach to research and learning contributes to identifying significant research questions and ensuring not only scholarly rigor but also the validity of outputs for communities.²¹² It offers important opportunities for locating spaces of social change and in so doing aligns with feminist ontology and translates feminists’ epistemology into the research design.

Indeed, the field of gender studies is founded upon a feminist epistemology of

collaborative, community-based and engaged approach.²¹³ In articulating a feminist engaged pedagogy and scholarship, Leeray M. Costa and Karen J. Leong rightly points out that integrating a community-based component in our work underscores and reiterates feminist commitments to self-reflexivity, the analysis of power, and active participation to accomplish social equality.²¹⁴ As Catherine Orr states in the Teagle White Paper, “Women’s Studies has dedicated itself not just to critical thinking *about* practice but to critical thinking *in* practice.”²¹⁵ Integrating community engaged research in studying gender politics and the Middle East allows us to critically employ the language of intersectionality while thoughtfully contesting it. Intersectionality will not simply be a theoretical tokenism that is neatly discussed in our theory section; intersectionality, diversity, and heterogeneity will be at the heart of our research and analysis, thus challenging essentialist hegemonic narratives about women from and in the region.

Moving beyond “the binary of agency/victimhood”

In our community engaged research, we utilized participant observation, interviews with leaders and members of community organizations, as well as conducted review of case files to identify reasons and factors that stop survivors from seeking help. While domestic violence can occur across all ethnic backgrounds, economic levels, age ranges, and sexual orientations; immigrant victims of domestic violence were in a further vulnerable situation. Survivors’ new homes were often far from family, friends, and safety networks that they might have had prior to immigration. For victims of domestic violence who recently immigrated to the United States they had to navigate a system that they are unfamiliar with and abusive partners further

fed their victims misinformation such as threatening to get them deported. Some survivors who lived in the United States for a long time and had extended family described how their abusers would claim that the victim is deviating from religion and from her family obligation and threatened to tarnish her reputation in the community. Women's diverse identities and positions, not surprisingly, shaped their experiences, structured their access to services, and their responses—either internalizing or challenging the abusers' claims.

Community engaged research contributes to not only identifying silences in our data, but it also allows us to transcend the “the binary of agency/victimhood”²¹⁶ in our analysis of women from the Middle East. For example, in my research on domestic violence, our community partner is a community organization led by women from the Middle East. In their work and activism, female leaders from the community often denounce traditions and practices that perpetuate gender inequalities by using phrases from the Quran and engaging with historical reading of the sacred text. In so doing, they not only challenge the system from within, but also challenge what Asma Lamrabet, an Islamic feminist writer, rightly describes as the narrative of “liberating the poor Muslim women who are victims of Islam.”²¹⁷ Women, their experiences, and activism are thus understood and studied with an eye to the complex and interdependent systems of social inequalities, political symbolism, cultural traditions, and biased historical readings.

New and Emerging Limitations to Community Engaged Research

Notwithstanding the value and significance of community engaged research in highlighting the diverse experiences of women,

researchers face significant challenges in adopting it. Within the United States academe, community engaged research and learning are frequently branded as a form of “activism” and thus delegitimized in the broader higher education debates.²¹⁸ In the Middle East and North Africa, researchers face a similar dilemma as community research is perceived as too political and thus censored and suppressed by autocratic regimes in power.

Community research also brings to the front a classical dilemma frequently evoked in social movements literature; that is: the question of how to define ‘a community’ and who represents and speaks on behalf of ‘the community.’ The ways in which we define a community in our research and the decisions we make in partnering with some organizations and not others are not objective. The decisions we make inevitably result in amplifying certain voices and silencing others. For example, in researching domestic violence among Muslim diaspora in the West, do we partner with women's groups and associations only; or should we include voices from community mosques? What about Muslim associations that are dominated by men, and community male leaders who are viewed as interlocutors by governmental entities?²¹⁹

The challenge of defining a community is further exacerbated as women's groups who call out gendered practices in their own diaspora communities often find themselves caught between what scholars describe as “community domination” and in the case of Muslim diaspora “wider society's orientalist tendencies.”²²⁰ For example, the groups can become ostracized and their community credentials challenged by their diaspora community. Members in some women's groups also face the challenge of how to call out gender inequalities in their own diaspora

communities without feeding orientalist tropes of the weak Muslim women that need to be saved from the violent Muslim men.²²¹

Furthermore, partnering with community organization does not guarantee that the research will be inclusive; researchers thus need to reflect and acknowledge the limitations of their study. For example, men who are victims of domestic violence are often less inclined to share their stories and seek help from community organizations due to certain toxic understandings of masculinity. Researchers thus need to actively identify gaps in their community engaged research and acknowledge their research limitation.

The outbreak of COVID exacerbates these ethical and logistical challenges facing community research. Researchers have an ethical and moral responsibility to minimize undue risk to their participants, community partners, and themselves throughout their research especially as traveling to local and/or international communities risk transmitting the disease. While moving our research online is increasingly viewed as the answer, it is not a universal solution.²²² Some communities have limited or no access to the internet, thus moving our research online can risk skewing our analysis and limiting the voices in our research to participants who enjoy higher socioeconomic status in the community. Research in gender and women's studies often engages with experiences of trauma, inequalities, but also agency and activism. Some of these topics are incredibly challenging to study online and require establishing relations of trust, empathy, and compassion with our participants.

For example, in my coauthored study on the gendered effects of COVID on academia²²³, an interviewee studying the piety movement in Egypt explained to me how “[Y]ou cannot

really go to people you don't know and without them seeing you and you ask them questions about their lives as women.”²²⁴ Another interviewee underscored the difficulties of establishing trust online, her research investigates sex trafficking in refugee camps and thus she described how “...the question of doing zoom as opposed to interviews, it's crazy...[a]m I supposed to get someone's trust that we see in refugee camp in Jordan to talk to me online about what happened? I mean, it's not going to happen.”²²⁵ Questions around safety, security, and trust in carrying out research are further complicated in the context of the Middle East as digital technologies often become a medium for state surveillance. Scholars observe how autocracies in the Middle East and North Africa have been recently further expanding their surveillance power under the pretext of the pandemic health crisis.²²⁶ I by no means intend to minimize the value of moving our research online as one possible strategy to mitigate the effects of COVID on our research. Rather, my objective is to contribute to unpacking the opportunities offered by online research design but also to underscore the moral and ethical challenges facing researchers who embrace it in their community research.

In conclusion, a community engaged research approach is significant to the field of gender politics and the Middle East as it underscores and reiterates feminist commitments to self-reflexivity, the analysis of power, and conscious engagement to accomplish social equality. While the outbreak of COVID-19 has created new ethical and logistical challenges to conducting community research and exacerbated existing ones, the answer is not to abandon our commitment to community research. Rather, our research and methodological debates should address how to mitigate these dilemmas to ensure that our research challenges rather than reproduces

inequalities in communities and in the
knowledge produced about them.

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