The Third Gender: Western Female Researchers in the Middle East

Field research on politics in the Middle East poses far less problems for Western female researchers than many Westerners assume. The questions most commonly asked of me by colleagues include whether anyone will speak to an American woman (yes, and whether I need to wear a veil (no, but see below). Female researchers do face many challenges, but most have less to do with gender than with examining sensitive political issues in highly repressive environments. Of those that do concern gender, many vary by degree rather than type from the issues faced by female scholars conducting field research elsewhere. I draw heavily on my own overwhelmingly positive experiences with ethnographic research in Jordan and Yemen totaling more than four years over the past decade, including nearly a year of research conducted post-September 11—and those of many friends in outlining the following issues facing Western female political scientists conducting field research in the Middle East.

General Research Access

The first assumption that needs to be deflated is that female researchers are routinely denied access to those they wish to interview. In reality, government officials, local elites, business leaders, Islamist activists, and all manner of opposition actors routinely agree to be interviewed by female scholars. There are, of course, exceptions, but these are generally (though not always) overcome by dropping a few names of prominent individuals who have already granted the researcher access or interviews. Yet the entire Middle Eastern region despite extraordinary religious, ethnic, regional, class, and social differences is frequently caricatured as a monolithic, traditional, and patriarchal culture that would intuitively pose near-insurmountable challenges for Western female researchers.

While dimensions of these characteristics are certainly at work in parts of the Middle East, the region as a whole is overwhelming modern in its political structures, and even so-called traditional social structures (such as tribe and patriarchy) vary dramatically throughout the region and bear little resemblance today to their cousins of even 50 years ago. Save for perhaps a few remote villages, virtually every part of the region has become familiar with the coming and going of foreign researchers studying various aspects of state, economy, and society. Indeed, as the extensive and expanding literature illustrates, a large number of female political scientists have gained access and conducted sustained field research throughout the Middle East (Anderson 1987; Bellin 2003; Brand 1993; 1998; Browers 2006; Carapico 1998; Chaudhry 1997; Crystal 1995; Lust-Okar 2005; Posusney 1997; Singerman 1996; Tétreault 2000; Wedeen 1999), including on moderate as well as radical Islamist movements (Clark 2003; Langohr 2001; Schwedler 2006; Wickham 2002). In most cases, the cost of entry is the same for female and male scholars: advanced language skills, extensive knowledge of the subject and region under examination, and, at least, minimal social skills.

What is often surprising, however, is that many female scholars actually enjoy more access than male researchers, because the latter are usually unable to meet privately with women in the region, particularly in the informal and casual settings that are essential for ethnographic research. But whereas one might expect female researchers to also have less access to male domains, in practice this is often not the case. Officials and other prominent individuals quite readily meet with female scholars for one-on-one interviews, and in most cases accord the researcher with the respect she deserves. Formal interviews often take place in offices or places of business, but many meetings occur in more informal settings such as in coffee shops, homes, cafes, and restaurants. Certainly there is a wide degree of variation in access, but I have found as much access in highly conservative Yemen as I have in affluent Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Even in states as highly researched as Egypt, access often depends more on political climate and the subject of the research than on the gender of the researcher. Of course, there are limitations to access related to gender, notably with radical or conservative Islamist leaders and, in particular, to the rank-and-file male members of radical and conservative Islamist movements. But even Western male researchers often have difficulty gaining access to this demographic, so the difficulties for women are greater than for men, rather than unique to women. And as Janine Clark and I have discovered in our individual research on Islamist groups, our additional access to female activists within Islamist...
Access to Islamists

As suggested, Western female researchers do not necessarily encounter more problems in studying Islamist movements than do male researchers. Indeed, topics related to security or state repression are often more politically sensitive than political Islam. Islamist groups in general complain that they are misunderstood by foreigners and are thus eager to present a positive image when approached by researchers. This research is not without its travails, however. One frustration of mine is that many Islamists assume that female researchers are interested in studying gender per se, and are thus eager to arrange interviews and outings with female Islamists so as to counter any negative impressions a Western woman might hold. These engagements with Islamist women can be fascinating, but it can sometimes be difficult to convince Islamist leaders that my research interests lie elsewhere. Another irritating but equally trivial problem is that upon meeting Western female researchers for the first time, many Islamists (male and female alike) feel compelled to lecture about the greater respect accorded to women by Islam as compared to the exploitative environment in the West, or about how the Prophet Muhammad’s wives fought at his side as equals and, on occasion, even led troops into battle. I have learned ways to try to cut these conversations short—though not always successfully—but once that particular ground has been covered I have found it quite easy to direct the conversation toward my own research topic.

In fact, many female researchers find Islamist political parties offer rather extraordinarily easy access. Party leaders tend to be very generous with their time in discussing the research, often providing home or cell phone numbers to answer future questions.2 My office is cramped with boxes of Islamist party publications and internal documents, many copied for me by the parties themselves (“Just leave the items you want on the desk and we will have them ready for you tomorrow morning.”). During my field research on Islamist political parties in Jordan and Yemen (2006), I was permitted to work for hours daily in each party’s library or archive. Once people became accustomed to seeing me there, I was able to both observe comings and goings as well as engage in numerous informal discussions that significantly enriched my research.

One exception in terms of access of female researchers to Islamist groups, however, concerns interviewing rank-and-file members, particularly in informal settings. These interviews are not impossible, but the insights that would typically emerge through participant observation may be far more difficult for female researchers because they cannot “hang out” inconspicuously with the predominantly male party members. Overall, however, I have found Islamist activists among the most respectful of Western female researchers; my conversations with other female researchers confirm this experience. Their respectful behavior toward us may, of course, say little about how they treat their wives and sisters, and I have personal knowledge of treatment ranging from truly progressive equality to mental and physical abuse. Nevertheless, research on Islamist movements poses few obstacles for Western female researchers as long as they have advanced language abilities and are equally respectful in their encounters with their interviewees.

Harassment and Dress: To Cover or Not to Cover?

Where many female researchers frequently do face harassment, however, is in daily encounters with taxi drivers, in markets, while driving, or when generally moving around alone. These experiences range from the truly unsettling—being followed, verbally harassed, and even sometimes groped (the latter almost exclusively in crowded markets)—to more benign practices such as stares and unwelcome conversations. Even such mild harassment, however, can take its mental toll over the course of months in the field. One all-too-familiar and exhausting conversation with taxi drivers, for example, typically entails the following sequence of questions: “Where are you from? Are you married? Do you have children? (You speak Arabic very well!) Do you want to marry my cousin/brother/me? Can you get me a visa to America?” I have developed two techniques for dealing with this situation. First, in taxis I am always on my way to see my husband and children, and I am prepared to offer names and other details if necessary. Second, I frequently use the shared transportation available in many urban centers, which are licensed cars or minibuses that travel along established routes, picking up and discharging passengers along the way. While this method of transport often entails sitting in close proximity to other passengers, women are given the front seat if they ask (and thus sit alone or with other women). But more importantly, there is no risk of a taxi driver diverting from the appropriate route, and no one will dare ask you personal questions in the presence of other passengers. As a bonus, you can listen to other conversations for a cost (usually 5–10 cents) that is a tiny fraction of that of private taxis.

Another method of diverting unwanted attention in public is to wear some sort of head covering. While my U.S. colleagues often ask if I have to wear a “veil” when I do field work, in practice most female scholars who adopt a head covering wear only a scarf loosely covering the head and tossed over one shoulder.3 This has the effect of a gesture toward conservatism and sign of respect, but avoids the “going native” (and sometimes mocking) look of a tightly pinned Islamic-style hijab or a full-face veil. Western female scholars have strong and divergent views about whether to wear a head covering during their field research. The choice may largely depend on local practices, as dress in general varies not only between countries but also according to gender in a single city. In highly conservative East Amman, for example, women almost universally wear head coverings and seldom travel alone; in parts of West Amman—where all diplomats, the vast majority of foreigners, and the upper classes all reside—dress is more Western. Indeed, in the
Professional-Personal Boundaries

Among the most difficult gender-specific issues for Western female researchers is how to negotiate personal relations and meetings in more intimate settings. Research on Islamist movements is among the least problematic in this regard, as Islamist leaders are typically interviewed at the party headquarters. Many male Islamist leaders have also invited me to their homes, either for a formal interview in a sitting room or to meet their families and have an opportunity to interact with their wives, sisters, and daughters. For my current research on protest and policing (2005), however, I cannot meet activists at their primary places of work and thus interviews often take place over dinner and, frequently, many glasses of beer or whiskey. This poses obstacles not only in terms of effective note-taking—written notes and tape recordings pose too many risks for the interviewees, while alcohol clouds the memory—but in terms of negotiating the boundary between professional and personal space.

All researchers face the problem of becoming friends with research subjects, particularly in ethnographic work or when one shares normative commitments, such as advancing political freedoms and protecting human rights. But female researchers need to be particularly sensitive to negotiating the boundary between professional, personal, and intimate relations. To be sure, male researchers may encounter these problems, and they are not limited to (men or women) encounters with the opposite sex. But women need to be particularly careful about what kind of signal they send by behavior that might be understood differently than intended. For example, if for my research on political protests I meet an activist and drink late into the evening during a particularly interesting exchange, am I signaling a level of closeness I do not wish to convey? If I express empathy when someone is sharing traumatic personal experiences, might I invite intimate advances? If someone takes my hand as they are tearfully sharing a painful moment, should I pull my hand away and end the interview to avoid any confusion, even if it would terminate the exchange and possibly destroy any future access? Should I accept a ride home late at night, or should I insist on taking a taxi even though it is not a good option for a foreign woman who has been drinking? Should I accept an invitation for a drink in the first place? These situations are difficult in large part because one might not understand what sort of signal is being sent by such seemingly harmless practices as meeting someone for a drink.

Many women I know have also been haunted by the perception that Western female researchers are promiscuous and welcoming of casual sexual encounters. Some female as well as male researchers do, of course, engage in intimate relations with people they meet during their field research stays. While these may not be common (I have no reliable empirical data on the subject), we need to recognize that at least part of the reason for the perception of Western female promiscuity is based on empirical reality. These stories—however embellished or even untrue—circulate widely and, combined with the wildly popular American television shows that are near ubiquitous in the Middle East, lead to periodic unwanted advances. But the core problem is not one of a clash between American and Middle Eastern or Muslim cultures on the issue of sexual liberation. As anyone who has been to a posh dance club or bar in Cairo, Amman, or Beirut knows, to the extent that a “cultural” clash exists concerning promiscuity, it has little to do with religion or ethnicity and everything to do with class and the divergent practices of the privileged and the dispossessed.

Indeed, the signals and space that female researchers must carefully negotiate during field research in the Middle East are not entirely unlike those encountered when conducting research elsewhere or, for that matter, when in one’s home town or even academic institution. A few years ago, I met a U.S. official for an off-the-record discussion regarding Washington’s role in training various policing agencies in the Middle East. He asked me to suggest a restaurant outside of the usual government circuit so he could speak openly, and I suggested Utopia, a lovely Moroccan-themed restaurant on U Street. The dinner went fine until my interviewee ordered a second bottle of wine without asking my thought on the matter, after which he tried to turn the conversation toward more personal topics. While I was less concerned about ending the evening on an awkward note than I would have been while conducting research in the Middle East, my larger point is that female scholars need to negotiate this sort of space continuously, and not only while working in foreign countries. While field research in the Middle East can raise additional complications, the core issue has nothing to do with “Arab” or “Muslim” culture. Indeed, class and, particularly, race can pose far more problematic obstacles for researchers than gender.

Conclusion

Conducting field research in the Middle East can be challenging, but the potential and exciting advances to our
understanding of complex political phenomena has drawn many female researchers into the field with minimal difficulties. In certain contexts one may need to modify practices such as hand-shaking or public hugging, though in much of the region these are completely normal. Personal relations may sometimes be tricky to negotiate in terms of professional-personal boundaries as well as practices that might inadvertently signal more intimacy than intended. But most of these issues are specific neither to women nor to research in the Middle East. Female scholars even in the United States may unexpectedly find an innocent comment or encounter is misinterpreted as an advance. This is space that always needs to be negotiated, and mistakes are not uncommon particularly early in the learning curve. But as a Western female researcher who does ethnographic research in the Middle East—and I should mention that I have fair skin and red hair, so I usually don’t blend in—I have faced more “cultural” obstacles in trying to explain my atheism (“Ok, but what are you?”) than I have encountered as a result of my gender, or as a member of the “third sex.”

Notes
1. This illustrative rather than exhaustive list focuses on book-length works based on extensive field research; a review of journals would produce dozens if not hundreds of articles that could be cited. Book-length works are also forthcoming from Michele Penner Angrist, Melani Cammett, Amaney Jamal, Agnieszka Paczyńska, and Julie Taylor, among others. Also excluded here are dozens of female doctoral students currently in the field as well as hundreds of female anthropologists, sociologists, and historians who have undertaken extensive field research in the region.

2. The practice of sharing home and cell phone numbers is very common in the Middle East and does not represent the sort of personal boundary that it does in the United States, where a secretary would never hand out a government official’s cell phone number to a stranger on the phone. While this practice can at first be disconcerting, it is perfectly acceptable for you to dial up the prime minister on his cell phone to introduce yourself and ask for an interview. An exception is Iran, where women are required to cover in public. Even in Saudi Arabia, however, modest clothing is often sufficient.

3. In particular, researchers of color often encounter considerable prejudice during their field work in the Middle East, sometimes so much that the research is not possible.

References