

**GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**  
Department of History

Summer 2025

**HIST 1099 Women & Gender in the Middle East**



The Persian princess Ismat al-Dawla (b. 1855)

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**Office:** TBA

**Office Hours:** TBA

**Class time:** 01:00 - 02:55 PM MTWR, ICC 234

### **Course description**

For centuries, societies in Europe and the United States have looked at Middle Eastern women as voiceless objects of male oppression. These are the ideas behind the French obsession with regulating the *hijab* and the United States' arguments for invading the region as a means of liberating women. This course will challenge these hegemonic preconceptions by introducing students to the history of gender and sexuality in the Middle East. Readings and discussions will place women's experiences in specific historical contexts and highlight the diversity of past women's voices, lives, and actions. It will also explore the lives of queer men and women who, by the Middle Ages, were largely celebrated by Arabic and Persian poetry. The course starts at the birth of Islam in the seventh century. It moves through the twentieth century, discussing continuities—and, most importantly, disruptions in regional conceptions of gender and sexuality.

As a HIST 1099 course, “Women and Gender in the Middle East” aims to introduce students to the fundamentals of historical thinking and the discipline of history. This is done through a critical reading of primary documents. Students will take part in weekly lab activities, in which they will analyze sources like Quranic verses, women's speeches, short stories, poems, photographs, and cartoons. They will learn to use them to base and support their arguments. This will include a careful reflection on the particularities of each document in terms of *who* produced them, *how*, and with *what* intent. They will also investigate why that document, in particular, survived the centuries and reached us nowadays—and what it means that many others did not.

Lab activities will serve as a ladder for students to write a history research paper. This course also aims to assist students in developing analytical skills. They will be encouraged to find ways to incorporate the conversations they have in class into their field of study and career. The course will insist, in particular, on the importance of critical writing in an age of artificial intelligence.

### **Learning goals**

The primary goal of this course is to provide an overview of the history of gender and sexuality in the Middle East. I expect you to be comfortable with most of the events, dates, and names by the end of the semester. In the meantime, you will develop the basic skills of a historian's toolkit:

#### **Thinking**

Every week, you will be encouraged to think as a historian. This means that you will critically interpret the past based on the analysis of evidence. You will also understand that our ideas about the past are not final or even stable—instead, they constantly change.

#### **Reading**

Throughout the course, you will read primary sources, including Quranic verses, poetry, photographs, and speeches. You will learn to read these sources beyond the surface to uncover details about how people in the Middle East thought of gender and sexuality.

### **Writing**

I will provide extensive feedback to help you write clear, informative, and compelling history papers. I will also insist that you respect the word limit; concision is an essential skill to acquire. Lastly, we will discuss artificial intelligence's use, misuse, and abuse.

### **Attendance policy**

Your first two absences are excused. Any absence after that will impact your participation grade. For an absence connected to illness to count as excused, see the Student Health Center and acquire documentation the same day. Any other absence must go through your dean to be counted as excused. Note that you will—automatically fail—this course if you miss five classes.

### **Requirements**

We will discuss all assignments in detail once we meet. For now, please get acquainted with this:

#### **Participation: 30%**

I will evaluate your engagement in class. Not everyone is used to speaking up, and some students come from foreign educational systems that discourage them. If you need help with this issue, please talk to me at the start of the semester. I can offer you my guidance.

#### **Weekly reflection papers: 15%**

You are required to write 5 reflection papers—one per week. Choose any of that week's secondary readings and write 250-300 words. Think of this as a way of preparing for discussion. Your paper should address one or more of the following questions: How does the author support their argument? What kind of sources do they use, and how? What are the limitations of the author's argument? What did you learn about gender and sexuality?

Due before we meet to discuss the reading you chose

#### **Short written assignments: 30%**

You are also required to write 4 short written assignments (1 page, double-spaced). This exercise—which I will detail in class—aims to prepare you to write your final paper. Each assignment will explore one of the fundamental skills we use in the field of history.

Due every Friday at midnight.

#### **Term paper: 25%**

You will write 1 research paper (5 pages, double-spaced). It should include primary and secondary sources not assigned to the class. I will guide you through the whole process.

300-word proposal due on August 1 at midnight

Paper due on August 8 at midnight

### Grading scale:

A-: 90-93	A: 94-100	
B-: 80-82	B: 83-86	B+: 87-89
C-: 70-72	C: 73-76	C+: 77-78
F: below 60	D: 60-66	D+: 67-69

### Instructional continuity

Unforeseeable circumstances may force us to cancel face-to-face classes. In that case, we will meet online for synchronous learning. We will meet on the same days and times—but on Zoom.

### Honor code

All students must familiarize themselves with and abide by the University Honor Code. Plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and will be reported to the Honor Council for due process. Any work found to have unattributed sources will receive an automatic zero. During class, we will do a short exercise to discuss how to cite sources correctly.

### A note on the readings

All readings will be available online through Canvas, except for Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*. You will need to either buy a copy or [access a digital version through JSTOR](#).

### Schedule of classes

We will meet four times a week for 105-minute sections. Each section will consist of a combination of lectures, labs, and discussions. Please finish the day's readings before we meet.

### Week 1: Gender Theory, History & Early Islam

#### July 7: History & Sources

Lila Abu Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?: Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 783-790

Alifa Rifaat, *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories*, Chapter 1 (1-4)

Lab: Reading primary and secondary sources

#### July 8: Gender Theory & History

Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075

**July 9: Women/Gender Pre-Islam**

Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, Chapters 1 & 2 (pp. 11-37)

Lab: Sculptures of Ancient Egypt

**July 10: Early Islam, the Quran and Gender**

Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, Chapter 3 (pp. 41-63)

Lab: Quranic verse translations

**Week 2: Defining Debates of Gender & Sexuality**

**July 14: Foundational Debates in Women & Gender in the Abbasid Period**

Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, Chapter 5 (pp. 79-101)

Lab: Poetry by female poets

**July 15: Ottoman Dynasty & Imperial Femininity and Masculinity**

Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, Preface & Introduction (pp. vii-x, 3-12)

Optional: Ottoman History Podcast with [Leslie Peirce](#).

Lab: Analytical writing

**July 16: Islamic Jurisprudence, Sharia Court and Gender**

Sara Scalenghe, *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World*, Chapter 4 "Intersex" (pp. 124-162)

Lab: Fatwas

**July 17: Sexual Desire & Sexuality**

Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, Introduction & Chapter 1 (pp. 1-25)

Lab: Same-sex love poetry

**Week 3: Orientalism and Civilizational Anxieties in the 19th Century**

**July 21: Masculinity, Body & Disease**

Secil Yilmaz, "Threats to Public Order and Health: Mobile Men as Syphilis Vectors in Late Ottoman Medical Discourse and Practice," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 2 (July 2017): 222-243

Lab: Ottoman 'sportsman' photographs

**July 22: The *Nahda* & the "Woman Question"**

No reading

Lab: Qasim Amin's writing

**July 23: Orientalism & Colonialism**

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, introduction (pp. 1-28)

Lab: Orientalist writing and photography

**July 22: Gendered Colonialism**

Yael Simpson Fletcher, “‘Irresistible Seductions’: Gendered Representations of Colonial Algeria around 1930,” in Clancy-Smith and Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire* (pp. 193-210)

Lab: Writing a thesis statement

**Week 4: Mothers of/in the Nation in the Early 20th Century****July 28: Mass Migration & the “Factory Girl”**

Akram Fouad Khater, “House to Goddess of the House: Gender, Class, and Silk in 19th-Century Mount Lebanon,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 3 (1996): 325-348

Lab: Arab-American newspaper excerpts

**July 29: The Rise of Women’s Movements & Charities**

Ellen Fleischmann, “The Emergence of the Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1929-39,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29 (3): pp. 16-32

Lab: Speech by Huda Sha’rawi

**July 30: Backlash & Anxieties**

Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, Chapter 11 (pp. 184-196)

Lab: Cartoons

**July 31: Gender & Race in Egypt**

Nefertiti Takla, “Barbaric Women: Race and the Colonization of Gender in Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 3 (August 2021): 387-405

Lab: Workshop research proposals

**Week 5: Voices & Experiences of the Mid-20th Century****August 4: Society, Culture & Women’s Voices**

Layla Baalbeki, “A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon”

Lab: “Health & Beauty” in women’s magazines

**August 5: Islam, Anti-Colonialism & Feminism**

Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, chapter 3 (pp. 49-61)

Lab: Bring a primary source from your term paper to class along with an analysis

**August 6: Sexuality & Contemporary Colonial Legacies**

Joseph Massad, “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World,” in *Desiring Arabs* (pp. 160-190).

Paul Amar and Omnia El Shakry, “Curiosities of Middle East Studies in Queer Times,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (May 2013): 331-335

Lab: BCC’s “Gay, trans, and illegal in Lebanon”

**August 7: Today’s MENA & Final Thoughts**

Asli Zengin, "The Afterlife of Gender? Sovereignty, Intimacy, and Muslim Funerals of Transgender People in Turkey," *Cultural Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2019): 78-102  
Lab: Bring your paper's introduction + thesis statement + layout