Preliminary Exam in Women and Gender History

Fall 2011

Answer one question from each section. You must do a total of three (3) questions. Be sure each essay has a clear line of argument, addresses as many dimensions of the question as possible, and offers relevant, persuasive evidence from specific secondary sources wherever appropriate. Good luck!

Section A

1. Historically, scholars have regarded women of the Islamic world as lacking agency. Please explain how this view has changed from the middle of the 20th-century to the present. Begin with an explanation of the term “agency,” explaining how the idea of agency itself may have changed. From there, explain some of the major changes that have caused historians to revise the old idea of women lacking agency. It is not necessary to explain all the changes that have occurred in scholarship – just point to those major works and major changes that you think have caused scholars in the 21st century to view women differently from the way they were viewed in middle of the 20th.

2. If it’s true that the vast majority of historical work on women, gender and Islam deals with the modern period, what are the challenges that studies of early/pre-modern history offer to the emerging claims and contentions of that body of scholarship? What categories and methods are portable across time and space and which are not? And how would you periodize the field of “gender and Islam” in chronological terms?

Section B

1. In the Islamic context, is the realm of women a private or a public space? What do these terms mean, in the ways that they are generally used, and how have scholars of Islamic history interrogated the terms in order to examine the place of women in society? What are the major works on this subject? Please consider public and private in terms of visibility, voice, social impact, and political agency.

2. Is the view from gender history different if you are an area studies Middle East historian and not scholar of empire or the global per se? If so, how? And in the face of such dichotomies, what advantages does a polycentric approach (as per Masjid) offer when it comes to historicizing the relationship between gender and Islam, and/or gender and the Middle East?

Section C

1. For an encyclopedia of Middle East premodern history (think of the period 7th-century up to and including the Mongols but not great Safavid/Ottoman/Mughal trio), you have been asked to write a 6-8-page entry simply titled “Women.” How would you frame such an overview? What key concepts would
you explore? Can you even justify “women” as a category of analysis, or is it simply an opportunity to reveal difference (like race, sexuality, or religious belief)?

2. You are a new faculty member in a Midwest public university who has been hired as the Middle East historian in an Islamic Studies program. One of your course assignments is an introductory level class on law, religion and the Middle East – but your unit head is unconvinced that gender and sexuality should be afforded a central place on the syllabus. Develop a 4 page rationale for the course that addresses gender and its cognate subjects as a thread through the course. Divide the syllabus into three broad sections and provide 1-2 page abstracts of what each will cover and what readings will be used as well. Finally, describe an assignment, whether written, oral or digital, that advances your pedagogical aims for the course (1-2 pages).