

# Exercising in Comfort

## Islamicate Culture of *Mahremiyet* in Everyday Istanbul



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**ABSTRACT** Women's control of their bodily movements, especially in the Islamicate contexts of the Middle East, constitutes a multilayered process of building privacy, heterosexuality, and intimacy. Physical exercise, however, with the extensive body movements it requires, problematizes women's ability to control their public sexualities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2011 and 2012 in Istanbul, this article explores the everyday concerns of Istanbulite women who seek *rahatlık* (comfort) during exercise. The interviewees frequently used the word *rahatlık* when referring to women-only spaces in the culture of *mahremiyet* (intimacy, privacy). This article furthers the scholarship on Muslim sexualities by examining the diversity of women's concerns regarding their public sexualities and the boundary-making dynamics in the culture of *mahremiyet*. I argue that *mahremiyet* operates as an institution of intimacy that provides a metacultural intelligibility for heteronormativity based on sexual scripts, normative spaces, and gendered acts.

**KEYWORDS** intimacy, sexuality, Turkey, public sphere, Islam

Referring to the choice of women-only gyms, the diverse body of interlocutors I met during my ethnographic fieldwork in 2011 and 2012 in Istanbul cited exercising in a *rahat* (comfortable) environment as the central concern. Depending on the context, *rahat* may refer to a place where men do not disturb women (*rahatsız etmek*) or a state in which women feel comfortable (*rahat hissetmek*) and do not fear being perceived as *rahat kadın* (lit. "comfortable woman," a Turkish expression referring to a seductive or promiscuous woman). The women I interviewed achieved *rahatlık* (comfort), which is directly linked to their ideas of self-control of their public sexualities, through multiple techniques in everyday life: gender segregation, the company of female friend(s), controlling bodily movements

in public, and avoiding anything that makes them feel *rahatsız* (uncomfortable). Physical exercise in public spaces presents a challenge to women's pursuit of comfort by making their bodily movements visible. Sibel, one of my interlocutors, articulated the possible immodesty and sexualization of the movements involved in aerobics, for example, as "bedroom movements" (interview, January 27, 2012). What are the specificities of exercise that trouble women's concerns about their modesty in public?

This article is concerned with women's recurrent use of the word *rahat* to describe their feelings behind their choices of men-free environments in which to exercise. As this article suggests, women's demand for segregated exercise is linked to their control of (unruly) public sexuality, and their concerns are best explored in relation to the larger institution of intimacy and sexuality that I refer to as the culture of *mahremiyet* in Turkey. *Mahremiyet* is the Islamic notion of privacy and intimacy and acts as a boundary-making mechanism. I explore the culture of *mahremiyet* that is constituted through cultural scripts, normative spaces, and gendered acts in the Islamicate contexts of the Middle East. In their edited volume *Islamicate Sexualities*, Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (2008, ix) suggest the term *Islamicate* "to highlight a complex of attitudes and practices that pertain to cultures and societies that live by various versions of the religion Islam." When studying the culture of *mahremiyet*, understanding Istanbul as an Islamicate context fits well with the diverse Muslimhoods of my interlocutors.

This article is based on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork involving interviews with forty-two exercising Istanbulite women and participant observations in which women, including many who did not become interviewees, shared moments of joy, excitement, and frustration with me as we sweated side by side. These women were from upper-, middle-, and lower-class backgrounds and were between the ages of eighteen and sixty-two during the time of this research (2011–12).<sup>1</sup> Some of them were devout Kemalists, while a few others were Islamist activists.<sup>2</sup> However, they all shared similar concerns about public sexuality that led them to seek modesty and women-only spaces in which to exercise.<sup>3</sup> I further investigated the daily techniques women used to meet certain social expectations in relation to public sexuality and institutions of intimacy that are overshadowed by contemporary political debates on the head scarf.

I use the term *public sexuality* not to designate an act of sex in public but to refer to the making and remaking of (hetero)sexed bodies of women and men in public (and inevitably in private). The daily techniques I refer to are embedded not only in gender relations and gender constructions but also in the multiple ways women implement their subjectivities. Such an approach seeks to address the broad question of which mechanisms enable, define, and differentiate particular forms of "comfort" in homosocial settings for women and the particularities of what these women mean by "comfort" when explaining their choices of women-only gyms.

What is particular about segregation in an Islamicate context from the perspective of women? How do women shape, reshape, and negotiate with the culture of *mahremiyet* in their everyday lives when they exercise? These questions also compel me to ask how the historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic particularities of Turkey, as well as global visual interactions enabled by media tools, influence and shape women's privacy, specifically, the interaction between women's bodies and public space. In this perspective and analysis, it is crucial to disentangle women's dynamic and multiple gendered subjectivities. By "multiple," among other dimensions of subjecthood, I refer to the work of Asma Afsaruddin (1999, 4–5) and her call to "re-examine the notion of one grand paradigm of gender relations and gender exclusivity in cultures dominated by what are generally perceived to be Islamic/ate values."

To address the proposed questions, it is crucial to pay attention to language, history, and culture as constructing forces of sex and sexuality (Moore 1994). The analysis of *mahremiyet* revolves around women's own conceptualization and imagination. Therefore it may not necessarily involve a theological or legal analysis per se. In other words, instead of centralizing the rules that contemporary popular figures of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence in Turkey (Islamic clerics such as Mustafa İslamoğlu, Nihat Hatipoğlu, or Hayrettin Karaman) explain or which the Quran and the Hadith lay out, I pay attention to how Islamic/ate culture informs the everyday lives of individuals. I aim to understand the relational mechanisms used to maintain the limits and boundaries between gendered bodies, construct femininity and womanhood through space making, and regulate the relationship between the sexes. I argue that the "discomfort" women refer to leads them to choose segregation and to use multiple strategies to establish distance from the opposite sex. This is related not only to normality and (hetero)sexuality in Turkey as an Islamicate context but also to the ways women need to deal with the fragility of their privacy in public in an era when the institution of intimacy (Berlant 1998) is undergoing change.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Mahremiyet* as an Institution of Intimacy**

Intimacy, in this article, is not necessarily tied to romantic coupling but involves boundaries and borders of the gendered female body and the ways female heterosexuality and femininity are built and rebuilt, made and remade in everyday life, producing gendered knowledge and meaning (Moore 1988; Strathern 1990; Yanagisako and Collier 1987). I consider the culture of *mahremiyet* an institution of intimacy (Berlant and Warner 1998). Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (ibid., 553) discuss sex and sexuality as always "mediated by publics" and argue that heterosexual culture creates privacy to preserve its own coherency: "Heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy." Berlant (1998, 286, 288) defines the institution of intimacy as something "created to stabilize" and "normalize particular forms of

knowledge and practice and to create compliant subjects.” Such an approach illuminates the roles of unspoken assumptions, techniques, expectations, and nonverbal cues drawing the lines of intimacy observed in the multiple heterosocial and homosocial settings in which women engage in an activity — such as exercise — loaded with sexual appeal, as explained in the following pages. In other words, in this framework segregation and the culture of *mahremiyet* are inherently public.

The word *mahremiyet* is not translatable into English. It suggests multiple words, including privacy, secrecy, and domesticity. Derived from the Arabic root *h-r-m*, *mahremiyet* literally refers to forbiddenness and sacredness simultaneously. *Mahremiyet* relates to a notion of privacy and confidentiality, which the insider is expected to preserve and an outsider is expected not to violate. This insider-outsider dichotomy, however, is complex and multilayered. It does not neatly fit into the public-private dichotomy (Göle 1996). *Mahremiyet* is a mechanism that creates boundaries between spaces and individuals and within the body of the individual. The question of *mahremiyet* and the prerogatives to infringe such boundaries is the focal point of this article.

*Mahremiyet*, as a boundary-making mechanism, marks *mahrems* (“forbidden,” such as same-sex individuals and opposite-sex relatives) as *insiders* and non-*mahrems* as *outsiders*. The regulatory and boundary-making nature of *mahremiyet* is embedded in Islamic jurisprudence that regulates marital relationships, a core part of culture entangled in everyday life. According to Islamic marital law, it is forbidden for two relatives of the opposite sex to marry, and the word *mahrem* refers to this ban on an intimate heterosexual relationship. The proximity of these two individuals of the opposite sex is formed either by blood (i.e., father and daughter), by marriage (father-in-law and daughter-in-law), or by breast-feeding or milk (i.e., a woman and a man breast-fed by the same woman).<sup>5</sup> Although they are forbidden to marry, they are *mahrems* to each other and thus have fewer boundaries. In other words, forbiddenness denotes and creates proximity and a familial intimacy.

In this vein, two non-*mahrems* of opposite sexes are expected to establish distance and follow codes of invisible boundaries, such as segregation, veiling, a limited gaze, and controlled behavior. By delineating basic principles of marriage, *mahremiyet* creates heterosexual barriers and regulates proximity and gendered intimacy at multiple levels. In this way, Islamicate sexualities are created and normalized in the everyday lives of individuals, including nonobservant Muslims (Sehlikoglu 2015c).

### Gazing Produces Sexual Scripts

The boundaries created in the culture of *mahremiyet* are signified primarily by regulating *seeing*, or who can see whom and how.<sup>6</sup> In their everyday lives, women become aware of their sexed bodies in relation to different types of gazes: the male gaze, the female gaze, the foreign (non-*mahrem* or *namahrem*) gaze, the gaze of

envy, and so on. *Mahrem* boundaries are regulated in order not to attract a foreign gaze, which produces sexual scripts in public settings.

The gaze as a producer of a sexual script is an expansion of the psychoanalytic approach that considers gaze a love object, which Sigmund Freud first argued and Jacques Lacan (1981) later expanded. To Freud's list of partial objects (breast, face, phallus) Lacan adds two other objects: voice and gaze. It is therefore by no means accidental that gaze and voice are love objects par excellence — not in the sense that we fall in love with a voice or a gaze but rather in the sense that they are a medium, a catalyst that sets off love.<sup>7</sup>

In the culture of *mahremiyet*, however, the gaze produces a sexual script that is more than a mere medium. As the term *sexual script* suggests (Simon and Gagnon 1986), gazing is entangled with larger cultural meanings enabled by historical makings and maintained by intersubjective displays. Furthermore, the gaze has a clear and almost physical embodiment in the everyday life of the Middle East. In Turkey the gaze has nonhuman agency with the capacity to bring misfortune or illness through *nazar* (strong eye), which is able to touch people (*nazar deęmesi*).<sup>8</sup> The significance of the gaze we witness here is not fully reflected in Western theories, such as Lacanian *le regard* (translated into English as “gaze” almost exclusively). Lacanian *le regard* refers to looking or staring, often with desire, yet it does not encapsulate the physicality of gaze in this particular context. In the following pages I revisit the ways my interlocutors negotiate different types of gazing in various spaces in daily life. Since gaze is imagined to be physical and concrete, powerful and ambient rules, emotions, and beliefs are created around it.<sup>9</sup> As such, in everyday life the sensation of the gaze is experienced as tactile rather than visual.

In a culture that envisages (and regulates) gaze as a physical object, the one who is looked at feels a “discomfort,” since the *mahrem* boundaries have been crossed, violated, and even *penetrated*. Looking, in this context, embodies more than curiosity, as it becomes an active, masculine, penetrating act against the passive, feminine, and penetrated position, as Dror Ze'evi (2006) lays out when he points out the duality embedded in the heterosexual culture of Ottoman society. The curious, penetrating gaze is therefore an intrapsychic reflection of the heterosexual active male. Aside from the sensorial dimension of intimacy, as I discuss below, the female is also positioned as penetrable, marking women's privacies with fragility.

### **Harem: A *Mahrem* Space for Leisure**

The culture of *mahremiyet* has adapted to new habits as particular leisure practices have become established in Turkey. To stay within the boundaries of the complex social rules regarding the gaze that *mahremiyet* demands, various space regulations emerged and were adapted as the solution to that complexity. Although androgenic fantasies predominantly stimulated colonial interest in the harem (Alloula 1986; Yeęenoęlu 1998), it has in fact been one of the main ways of regulating *mahrem* boundaries.

As opposed to the common misunderstanding, the harem is a socialization zone of the *mahrem*s, of those who remain inside the borders created by the culture of *mahremiyet*. Thus if the place in question is a household, the insiders who have access to the harem are not only women (as the common stereotype suggests) but also male relatives, such as fathers, sons, and brothers. The households with harems were predominantly of the upper and ruling classes during Ottoman rule (Booth 2010; Brown 2011; Peirce 1993), and the uses of those spaces were aimed at regulating the gaze (Lad 2010). A harem was often situated where one could see other parts of the house (garden, main room) or outside but outsiders could not see inside. In sum, as Marilyn Booth (2010) brilliantly points out, the idea of the harem was in fact the *result* of a border-making mechanism that still exists in Islamic contexts.

I agree with the call in Booth's edited collection for closer attention to the ways those borders are established, maintained, and threatened. "Islamic" rules are not enough to understand the culture of *mahremiyet* fully, as its historical, temporal, spatial, and sociable dimensions complicate individuals' (and in this case women's) relationships with it. Moreover, even when individuals have the interest and ability to apply particular Islamic interpretations regarding *mahremiyet* and its regulations, there are times they choose to ignore them. For instance, it is permissible for women to breast-feed in the presence of women and male relatives (i.e., brothers or fathers), yet it is a highly unusual practice. On the contrary, despite the prohibition against women seeing other women's genitalia, this does often occur, as when women visit a waxing salon. The ways women regulate their bodies cannot be understood outside the culture of *mahremiyet*, since their sexed bodies have been constructed through it. However, there are ways they also negotiate these regulations, as I demonstrate in the following.

### The Living Borders of *Mahremiyet*

Do you know what *mahrem* is? It is a secret and a seal. It is private.

—Ferah, interview, May 22, 2012

Sibel was a single woman in her late twenties who was working toward a doctoral degree in dentistry during the time of this research. As a young single woman with a respectable job in higher education who lived in a suburban area of Istanbul (Beşyüzevler), she considered herself a more *aydın* (enlightened) woman compared to her family members and her neighbors. Indeed, Sibel was the "perfect" modern Turkish woman: she was tall and skinny with natural-looking blonde hair, often wore tight pants and miniskirts, and had an academic career. She was by no means a traditional or religious woman, according to her own accounts and circulating stereotypes in Istanbul.

The way Sibel explained her choice of a women-only space for her aerobics-fitness class is worth examining as a whole:

Well, in the end, you stretch your legs, spread your legs, lie down, and raise your feet. Your body may be revealed. In the end, you would be surrounded by people you don't know, which is discomforting in my opinion. I mean, I wouldn't feel comfortable. For instance, your trainer tells you to spread your legs, and I wouldn't want to do that, I would be uncomfortable. Or, for instance, you wear sweatpants and do the cycling movement with your feet up and you will have to worry about your T-shirt coming off, and you will have to worry about your sweatpants coming off, and you will try to stuff it into your socks. Why should I have to have all these concerns? . . . I don't feel comfortable at all. I don't want to do aerobics movements when I am with people I don't know. . . . Why would I do such bedroom movements? I don't want to. (interview, January 27, 2012)

Sibel's example elaborates on the shared aspect of the culture of *mahremiyet*. Her words reflect three layers of *mahremiyet*. The first, most obvious level corresponds with the bodily movements she avoids in the presence of foreign (non-*mahrem*) men. Her concern is not about all men or just any men but about men that she does not know. What she refers to as "bedroom movements" is the resemblance between the body movements of a woman during an act of sexual intercourse and those of a woman exercising. Her lack of desire to exercise with people she does not know is based on this resemblance and the way it may appear to a foreign man. She wants to be safe from anyone imagining or fantasizing about her body; therefore, to avoid the heteroerotics of the movements, she avoids exercising in public.

On another level she depicts aerobics as "bedroom movements." She does not directly say that the movements are sexual. Instead, she refers to the closed-door space of the bedroom in which such movements should or could occur. She uses what Najmabadi (1993, 489) calls an "invisible metaphoric veiled" language of the "newly produced woman" of modernity. Unlike the cases Najmabadi shares in her work, however, Sibel is not trying to establish a physically removed veil with her language. Instead, she uses a legitimized symbolic language to refer to the heteroerotics of her body through which she maintains everyday control of her public sexuality.

Sibel reveals a third *mahrem* layer when she explains, very vividly, that what pushes the boundaries of sexuality is not limited to the content of the bodily movement. Despite proper clothing, through movement the outfit can become less controllable and reveal the body. Sibel complains about her uncontrollable sweatpants. This third layer highlights the possibility of losing control through movement, which for Sibel is exemplified through clothing, and she explains how in exercise loss of control of clothing could expose sexualized body parts.

Gül, another interlocutor, also provided a detailed description of controlling her outfit when exercising and how women-only gyms saved her from having



to make these calculations. She was a forty-one-year-old married woman with two children who worked as a manager in an international corporation. Gül was a member of two gyms, a women-only one and a mixed one. In the gated community where she lived at the time, she had access to a gym (Yeşilvadi, YV) with separate hours for women and men. During the hours YV was open for men only, Gül went to a mixed gym not far from her home. When I asked her to compare the two gyms, she first compared their services, such as towel provision and swimsuit drying machines. She then described levels of “comfort” and discomfort:

There is an advantage here [YV], which, of course, is a disadvantage for some others: men and women are segregated. You are more comfortable. For instance, when you need to exercise, you don't go all, “Oh, have my underpants gone between my hips? Oh, has my underwear appeared over the top [of my sweatpants]? Oh, did the neck of my top show my breasts when I bent over?” You have to check each and every one of these things [in a mixed gym]. “Oh I'm sweating, is my shirt sticking to my body too much?” So yes, you need to have a certain level of *mahremiyet* between men and women. You don't have to worry about these when there aren't any men around. (interview, December 21, 2011)

Gül did not wear a head scarf, and, as part of her professional life, she usually preferred sleeveless shirts under jackets and skirt lengths just above her knees. Yet her body's movements during exercise made her clothing uncontrollable and thus uncomfortable. She then felt obliged to pay attention to whether her bunched-up T-shirt exposed her back and tummy.

Neither Gül nor Sibel wore a head scarf; both considered themselves modern, secular Turkish women. Yet the culture of *mahremiyet* goes beyond covering and segregation. It is, more broadly, a multilayered boundary-making mechanism of privacy and sexuality that women live through and in and with which they negotiate. Women in several Euro-American contexts may have similar concerns. However, the particularity of the Istanbul context is not only about the different ways the link between the public and the intimate is constructed through sociality and relationality but also about the significance of the *gaze*. What both Gül and Sibel avoid is *frikik*, referring to the “free kick” movement in football, a highly masculine zone. In football a free kick allows the player the chance to score directly. But when a woman performs the movement, she loses control of her outfit and reveals parts of her body that she normally tries to keep concealed (i.e., her legs). She also loses control of her (guarded) sexuality, leaving her with a feeling of shame, of unwanted public nudity. This movement allows a potential (foreign, non-*mahrem*) male gaze to see something he was not supposed to see. So, figuratively, he “scores” against the woman who was trying to guard (part of) her body. By avoiding this movement, both Gül and Sibel disallow victory to the opposite sex. While Sibel wears knee-length skirts often and is not necessarily concerned with men seeing her legs, the



avoidance of these kinds of movements in non-sex-segregated exercise spaces causes her to worry about control.

During this research my informants were often unable to describe their discomfort. In fact, unlike Gül and Sibel, very few women were able to describe how they control their sexuality in public. Thirty-year-old Elif had taken her Islamic head scarf off four years prior to our interviews after wearing it for more than a decade. This experience allowed her to compare her concerns during her head scarf-wearing years with her subsequent concerns. She said: “Many women, veiled or not, already prefer to cover their private parts and protect them from men’s eyes. When you are running, you do not want your tits to be jumping around in front of men. This is also a cultural thing” (interview, September 16, 2011). Because it is a “cultural thing,” the content of the “comfort” was often inexplicable for many of the women I interviewed. This sense of comfort is so deeply embedded in their lives that explaining their discomfort often sounded unnecessary to them. Seval was another nonscarved young career woman. She was in her early thirties and single. She came from, in her words, “a traditional family” (interview, January 8, 2012), reflecting the way traditional discourse is tied to religion and rural culture, and referred to herself as “progressive modern” (*çağdaş modern*). “It’s something you learn from your family, and on the streets,” she said about her discomfort in exposing herself through certain bodily movements and dressing in a particular way in the presence of men. Seval’s reference to “the streets” concerns highly intersubjective relations in the public sphere, where interactions are built through multiple means but overwhelmingly through the gaze. This is what Alev Çınar (2005, 34) terms the “public gaze,” arguing that since public space is loaded with meanings, interactions, debates, contestations, identities, and subjectivities, the public gaze dominates that sphere at multiple levels of encroachment.

I asked Seval to explain her discomfort in relation to gaze:

Sertaç: Do you restrain yourself because men look at you? Or because you are used to it?

Seval: That can be a reason too. I mean we are raised to behave properly as women and girls in the presence of men, like subconsciously. It doesn’t really matter if you look *açık* [open, uncovered] and comfortable, you are careful because it’s engrained in your culture. That’s why I am content to exercise with women. (interview, January 8, 2012)

Head scarf-wearing women in Turkey are sometimes called *kapalı*, which signifies both covered and closed. *Kapalı* also refers to being modest or closed to flirtation and seduction. Women who do not wear a head scarf are called *açık*, meaning both uncovered and open. Seval does not say “if you are *açık*,” she says “if you look

*açık*,” because she does not believe that she is made less modest by not wearing a head scarf.

Seval’s awareness of regulating her sexuality in public echoes Najmabadi’s (1993, 513) analysis of the transformation of Iranian women from all-female homosocial to heterosocial spaces. During Reza Shah Pahlavi’s mandate for compulsory unveiling in 1930, women began to develop strategies to discipline their sexuality by other means to maintain cross sex barriers. Najmabadi (ibid.) provides the example of “walk[ing] to work facing the walls” as one of these strategies. Thus she argues that “in its movement from a homosocial female-bounded world into a heterosocial public space, the female body was itself transformed,” including women’s voluntary adaptation of an “invisible metaphoric veil, *hijab-i iffat* [veil of chastity], not as some object, a piece of cloth, external to the female body, but . . . a disciplined modern body that obscured the woman’s sexuality, obliterated its bodily presence” (ibid., 489).

Unveiled and yet pure, the new Turkish women of the early republican period were also expected to be “modern” in appearance and intellect but were still required to preserve the “traditional” virtue of chastity and to affirm it constantly (Durakbaşa 1988; Parla 2001). Seval’s everyday negotiations and strategies reflect how she maneuvers through the demands of patriarchal mechanisms. She states that despite her looks, she in fact maintains the norms of public sexuality.

Other women, regardless of whether or not they wore a head scarf, echoed Seval’s concern. This suggests that in Turkey’s cultural expectations of public sexuality, women need to learn how not to look accessible or, in their words, *açık* or *rahat*. The following example is from Mübeccel, a head scarf-wearing woman who was single and a freshman at a local university. I met Mübeccel at the municipally run Hamza Yerlikaya Sports Center. She was one of the many respondents who shared long lists of details regarding how they regulated their bodies and attitudes *dışarıda* (out in public). During our conversation Mübeccel pointed out these limits:

Mübeccel: In the end, I am covered [head scarved] and should know where to draw the line. . . .

Sertaç: So how do you know where to draw your line? How do you do that?

Mübeccel: With my attitudes and behaviors. . . . Sure, I do everything when I’m with women. I mean, everything, like I wear low necklines and do this and that. But when I go out, I pay attention to my behavior, for instance. When I walk or talk, for instance, I don’t laugh *dışarıda*. There’s this thing, like my character. I am never too close to men for instance. [*Thinks for a moment.*] Actually, I have a tough character *dışarıda*, did you know that? People who see me *dışarıda* usually think “what a tough girl” about me. (interview, December 30, 2011)

*Dışarıda* refers to the nondomestic sphere that is both nonfamilial and heterosocial. *Dışarıda* indicates mixed-gender public spheres, such as streets, public transportation, and school campuses, perhaps with the exception of special occasions, such as weddings, where people are known and familiar to a certain extent.

Mübeccel was from a lower-class background, and *dışarıda* refers to the neighborhoods of her class, where she encountered, in various proximities, foreign males all the time. Her experience differed from that of women I talked to from the upper-middle and upper classes. Mübeccel took public transportation to school and walked on the streets in lower-class suburbs of Istanbul, while women from the upper-middle and upper classes told me that they walked only in “sterilized” public spaces, such as upper-class neighborhoods or shopping malls. Thus to rebuild the boundaries she needs in a heterosocial public space (of predominantly lower-middle-class people), Mübeccel has developed a body language and a series of attitudes. Her *dışarıda* lines are invisible boundaries. She avoids looking easy or *rahat* and expresses a “tough” look. These lines are there to prevent complications. She explained: “I am not tough in my real life. . . . I need to appear as serious [*ciddi*], that’s how it’s supposed to be. Time and environment are corrupted [referring to rising sexual harassment]. I mean, what would they think if I laugh? They could derive multiple meanings from that laughter” (interview, December 30, 2011). Mübeccel knows not only what kind of message she needs to give through her public appearance and performance but also how to manifest it. Mübeccel’s control of her behavior in public is shaped with reference to an imagined gaze that not only monitors but also judges, evaluates, criticizes, and approves. It is also worth mentioning that Mübeccel’s head scarf, or her *kapalı* look, does not save her from any of these calculations.<sup>10</sup> She still calculates the effects of her acts and her looks, which demands that she continuously and self-consciously evaluate her appropriateness and potential threats or misunderstandings. Thus the culture of *mahremiyet* works almost exclusively against women’s privacies. Therefore women feel obliged to ensure that their boundaries are not broken.

### **Morning Exercises in the Parks: Public by Nature, Private by Culture**

Even if a ten-week gym membership at ten Turkish liras (less than US\$3.50) was financially feasible, open-air exercise with no fee was still compelling for several women I talked to both for financial reasons and because they enjoyed outdoor exercise. If women’s privacies were so fragile, then what sort of strategies did they use to guard their boundaries and to establish *comfort* while they exercised in a public park, I wondered. How does the culture of *mahremiyet* take shape in mixed and public spaces?

Middle-aged and senior women walking in sneakers and exercising in outdoor gyms in public parks in the early hours of the day are a familiar scene to most residents and even visitors in Istanbul. The trend has become mainstream.



**Figure 1.** Women walking in a public park in loose outfits.  
Photo: Sertaç Sehlükoglu

Sports Inc., a subsidiary of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality established to “strengthen the physical and mental health of Istanbulites” through outdoor exercise in public parks, has initiated early bird training sessions.<sup>11</sup> The (immediate) difference between women’s outdoor exercise in North America, the United Kingdom, or Continental Europe and that in Istanbul is in appearance. Rather than tight-fitting athletic clothing, women in Istanbul exercis-

ing outdoors often dress in casual, loose-fitting clothing and sometimes wear robes or even black veils that cover the whole body and sneakers (fig. 1). But there are less visible differences as well.

Sports Inc.’s early bird training sessions are part of a project called Morning Sports in thirty-one locations across the city, with multiple sessions for some of these spots. For instance, in Fatih, a majority-Islamic neighborhood of Istanbul, there are two outdoor exercise sessions — at 7:00 a.m. and at 8:00 a.m. — due to high demand from women (Selim Terzi, interview, July 22, 2011). Sports Inc. employs and sends (predominantly female) trainers who are graduates of sports academies to sports centers in various neighborhoods. Terzi, vice president of Sports Inc., told me that the sessions were offered “upon demand” (interview, May 18, 2012).

The early bird exercise sessions require bodily movements that immediately trigger issues related to heteroerotics. These movements include running that involves the movement of hips and breasts, stretching that may emphasize the contour of the body, and leg movements that draw attention to the genitalia. As such, my informants often considered them highly sexual, even erotic. The eroticization of exercising female bodies can be observed in Turkish popular culture. Women’s volleyball has long been perceived as a “leg show,” for example. In the 1970s all-male audiences regularly harassed female volleyball players on national teams (Harani 2001; Sehlükoglu 2015a). In the early 1990s, when private television broadcasting emerged, the nighttime erotic show by Yasemin Evcim was popularly referred to as *gece jimnastiği* (night gymnastics). Even today the Turkish pilates guru Ebru Şallı’s videos on YouTube are subject to the sexualized comments of male viewers. Indeed, in Sultançiftliği, where I conducted my ethnography, at the request



**Figure 2.** Women using outdoor gym equipment in Cumhuriyet Park. Faces are not exposed to honor their request. Photo: Sertaç Sehlíkoglu

of women participants, morning exercise sessions were eventually moved to an indoor facility due to the gazes of men. In other words, the discomfort caused by the foreign male gaze resulted in a demand for a segregated indoor space.<sup>12</sup> Given Mübeccel's everyday calculations in a nearby (equally lower-middle-class) neighborhood, women's demands for indoor spaces for exercise come as no surprise.<sup>13</sup>

Besides the sessions Sports Inc. offers, women walk and do light exercise in small groups in public parks. This is an emergent trend and not a privately initiated project. The practice has become so popular in recent years that municipal governments have redesigned many public parks, installing walking paths and outdoor gym equipment (fig. 2).

Outdoor gym equipment in these public parks include cross trainers; leg, shoulder, and chest presses; benches; and equipment to work arms and shoulders, like hand bikes and shoulder wheels.<sup>14</sup> In a park near the Hamza Yerlikaya Sports Center, women almost take over the park as early as sunrise — the time of morning prayer — until 9:00 or 10:00 a.m., depending on the season. By “taking over,” I mean that they not only outnumber men but also that they determine the ways male patrons of the park behave during that time.

Even though women avoid “bedroom movements” during their exercise in public and do not stretch, run, or (for the most part) dress in tight clothes, they can still be targets of harassing oglers, albeit in limited numbers. Responding to an imagined (if not actual) foreign male gaze in public, women's sexuality is rebuilt and internalized daily to reproduce normative boundaries.

Figen, a woman in her forties who regularly exercised in this park, revealed in an interview that in her mind the looks of “everyone” and “men” were in fact interconnected:

Sertaç: What bothers you in a mixed [gender] environment?

Figen: [*Slightly surprised with the question, almost finding it irrelevant and the answer too obvious.*] To be out in the open [*öyle açıkta olmak!*] I don't know, I would be spreading my legs and raising my arms while men are passing by, out in public [*dışarıda*], in the middle of the street [*sokak ortasında*]. Everyone would turn and look at you. It would bother me if everybody were to look at me!

Sertaç: When you say “everybody,” do you mean men?

Figen: Yes, men. (interview, February 13, 2012)

Figen's few sentences are haunted by boundaries, outsiders, discomfort, and openness. Her reference to “everybody” as a source of discomfiting gazes is not hollow. On the contrary, when Figen says “everybody,” she refers to the possibility of a male gaze evaluating her public acts. Evaluation and judgment of this kind are independent from the gender of the looker, as it marks Figen as a woman. In other words, the gaze, whether by a man or a woman, places judgment on the person who is its object, making her a woman who exercises in the (potential) presence of an actual foreign male gaze. Like Mübeccel, she refers to the opinions and judgments about herself that lie behind the gaze. Figen feels *uncomfortable* exercising outside of her *mahrem* zone, in her words, “out in the public, in the middle of the street,” sites loaded with unpredictable, foreign, and violating interventions.

Likewise, Kamile, a thirty-six-year-old lower-class housewife and mother of two, decided to become a member of a women-only gym a couple of weeks after she began to exercise in her neighborhood. She lived in Cumhuriyet Mahallesi, a suburban part of Istanbul that is home to primarily middle- and lower-income families, most of whom are first-generation migrants from other parts of Turkey. The park there is very small, about twenty square meters, with five outdoor exercise machines. It has no trees and no rubber walking paths, so Kamile needed to walk on the streets circling the park and use the equipment where any passerby could see her. In Kamile's experience, she was visible in public and therefore more vulnerable. She complained about the actual male gaze staring at her moving body.

Kamile: We used to start and continue for one or two months and then take a break. And maybe we would start again. One naturally hesitates when there's no one else [to accompany her when she exercises]. Also, Sultançiftliği [her



old neighborhood] is more rural [*kırsal*, referring to the area's mostly rural immigrant population] compared to here [Cumhuriyet Mahallesi].

Sertaç: How so?

Kamile: You go out to exercise alone in the morning and everybody gawks at you like a moron [*bön bön bakmak*], men and all. You cannot do it alone. There's nobody [doing sports] there. It's not like here.

Sertaç: Yes, you are right, you need to have someone to accompany you.

Kamile: Exactly!

I asked her to further describe her discomfort:

At the beginning, I did not feel comfortable while I was walking in the park. Your hips move, and there are men around you. I especially cannot be free with the equipment where you should open and close your legs [referring to the inner-legs trainer]. Men look especially when we are on the trainers in the park. I hate them! Women have to argue with men who sit on purpose right across women to watch women. Actually, security deals with them, but they return again after an hour. (interview, January 10, 2012)

The aforementioned segregation draws a boundary between women's bodies and male strangers and regulates verbal and nonverbal (i.e., the gaze) cues. These same limits also turn women's bodies into strange objects in the public sphere. Particular types of exercises—in Kamile's case, opening and closing legs in the sitting position—include bodily movements that cannot be performed without concern in the presence of the non-*mahrem* male gaze, as these movements resemble acts of sexual intimacy. The “penetrating” aspect of the gaze is a result of a combination of factors, including the looker's attitude and the tactility of the gaze. Therefore the discomfort caused by the penetrating foreign male gaze parallels the feeling of harassment. Moreover, this gaze, unlike physical or verbal harassment, is not a concrete act of violence and cannot be prevented, stopped, or reported despite the disturbance it causes. So Kamile needed to develop strategies to negotiate it.

Kamile's discomfort and initial impotence in the face of street harassment (by gazing) exposes how easily and randomly women's bodies can be turned into public matters and the fragility of their privacies. Because of the power dynamics embedded in the very fabric of heterosexual duality in Turkey, women's privacies are always more fragile than men's (Sehlikoglu 2013, 2015c). For women, the fact that at any moment their bodies can be made public is experienced as risk. This in fact is the nexus of the problem for women when it comes to exercising in public. Whether they are followers of the Islamic faith or are veiled or not, self-identify as modern or



traditional does not necessarily change this experience of risk. This problem cannot be reduced to being subjected to the male gaze or patriarchal control. While these may be aspects of the larger felt problem, what women really worry about on a day-to-day basis is the instability of what may occur at any moment during exercise because of the fragility of their privacies. A woman can be at any moment caught by that instability and troubled by it through violation of her privacy. A word, an insistent gaze that touches, or in some cases a physical touch leaves room for potential instability and thus harm.

Like those of Elif, Seval, and Sibel, Kamile's experience also draws attention to the bodily movements or *bedroom* movements. But due to her limited financial income and the fees at a women-only gym, Kamile exercises outdoors from time to time, and her "bedroom movements" encounter the (non-*mahrem*) male gaze in the public, heterosocial sphere. A man sits across from Kamile to watch her as she opens and closes her legs. She performs a *mahrem* act, meant to be private, and the man takes advantage of its public performance. As Kamile described this incident, all three adult women present had a clear idea about the look in the harasser's eyes. Kamile mimicked the erotic pleasure of his gaze. "When it first happened, I felt so angry. . . . I was ashamed. I couldn't do anything," she explained. She initially tried to confront the situation by calling security, yet this did not seem to provide a solution. She shrugged her shoulders and added: "Then I learned to ignore it. . . . Now, I think that we do not know each other, so never mind!" (interview, January 10, 2012).

These words reveal a process in which she agentively unlearns the *mahrem* borders and the feeling of privacy that comes with them. Instead of maintaining and guarding her *mahrem* borders, she begins to ignore them. In the culture of *mahremiyet*—which situates males as active and penetrating, females as passive and penetrated—ignoring this penetrating foreign male gaze is not a simple act, but the ability to do so enables the woman to steal the power of penetration away from her harasser (Sehlikoglu 2015b).

Kamile underwent a personal transformation evinced by her ability to ignore a significant and powerful male gaze. As she moved from Sultançiftliği, a more suburban (rural, in her words) neighborhood, to a less suburban, more city-like and "progressive" neighborhood, she changed her attitudes, her body movements, and her exercise routine. By using the gaze as a gauge, she evaluated her new environment and coordinated her body accordingly. She was aware of the pedagogic aspect of her environment but also the stakes of the "ethico-aesthetics of a body's capacity for becoming" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 14). What I would like to highlight here is not how she evaluates the conditions in her new neighborhood or how she negotiates them. Rather, what is important here is her creative use of all of the possibilities and options as part of her transformation and her self-formation without *directly* challenging the culture of *mahremiyet* and while indirectly blurring the borders within it.



**Figure 3.** Women’s exercise often begins with a fast walk followed by a workout on the equipment. There are only two men in this photo: one is walking against the stream (Zeki, in the front, facing away from the camera), and another comes with his spouse. Cumhuriyet Park. Photo: Sertaç Şehlikoglu

### Exercising in Public Parks

When women take over a park, however, the situation changes, and the culture of *mahremiyet* starts acting against male patrons, who thereby feel obliged to control their own public sexualities. They start worrying about how they will be perceived if they visit the park, ordinarily a heterosocial space. In Cumhuriyet Park, for example, which two of my interlocutors frequented during in the summer because it was financially difficult to access an indoor gym, a curious spectacle took place. The photo in figure 3 was taken in the Cumhuriyet Park in Sultanciftliği. As it illustrates, very few male patrons come to the park simply to watch women’s moving bodies or to meet women. More often, men come to exercise either with their wives or by themselves, but this is also quite rare. Thus it is easy to spot men who are there for gazing, a frequent subject of women’s disdainful conversations. As such, there is a public consensus about the “intentions” of male patrons present in the park early in the morning. Women refer to the males who are in the park only to exercise — not to watch or harass women — as those with “pure, untainted intentions [*saf, temiz niyet*]” (Sinem, Feray, and Esra, focus group interview, May 11, 2012). Yet those with “untainted intentions” need to demonstrate this in a public manner. I observed two strategies that a small number of men use to display their “untainted intentions,” that they are in the park solely to exercise and not to watch women’s moving bodies. In the photo, the gentleman with the cap walking with the lady in black has come to the park with a female relative, and Zeki, facing away from the camera, walks

against the stream so that women can see where he is looking. That is to say, Zeki feels obliged to prove that he is not there to stare at women's moving bodies (from behind), and to do so he has adopted this practice of facing them. In a way, he proves that women are "safe" from his gaze. One aspect of performing proper public Islamicate sexuality necessitates limiting the *mahrem* body. Another, however, necessitates limiting the penetrating gaze. This is what Zeki, a retired high school teacher, was doing in Cumhuriyet Park.

### Conclusion

The daily techniques women use to build boundaries between themselves and the "foreign" opposite sex are pivotal elements of public sexuality and its culture of segregation. The call for a feminist investigation of women's daily gendered negotiations with respect to cross sex relations fits nicely into Afsaruddin's attention to the gap in feminist studies. Afsaruddin (1999, 14) calls for a more diligent study, "a dispassionate, nuanced look" that does not overfocus on women's attire, which inevitably overlooks the ways women "appropriate public space and assert their presence." Afsaruddin's call for a nonessentialist gender analysis is partly influenced by Lois McNay's (1992, 64) interrogation of Foucauldian theory and feminism's nondifferentiated remarks that neglect cultural, historical, temporal, and geographic shades, leaving women's experiences "either not understood in their full complexity, . . . devalued or . . . obscured altogether." This problem exists in scholarship on Turkey, which includes an impressive number of studies on the issue of veiling, the head scarf, and visible Islam. Although there are significant and groundbreaking works among them, this dominant interest and obsession has obfuscated alternative probes on Islamicate gender practices in the public sphere and women's appropriation of public space.

Multiple factors lie behind the ways women organize their bodily movements in multiple spaces, which constitutes a multilayered process of building privacy, heterosexuality, and intimacy. These layers are established through cultural scripts (heteroerotics), structural fixations (class and religion), normative spaces, and gendered acts (Ze'evi 2006). Through analyzing women's management of their bodies in relation to public sexuality and public visibility, I have aimed to shed light on the ways selfhood, gender, and body are linked in Islamicate contexts.

I have connected women's strict management of their bodies to larger schemes, such as the culture of *mahremiyet* as it operates in various aspects of life. Women's relationships with this culture, as *mahrem* bodies in it, involves several layers of calculation and risk due to the instability and fragility of women's privacies. In this context of "approachability," women employ various techniques to avoid the instability of *mahrem* zones, often also avoiding the foreign male gaze altogether and sometimes intervening with confrontation. Thus women reimagine, re-create,

and negotiate their privacies through everyday forms of contestation. In any moment their privacy risks becoming public, which can result in a feeling of violation. Sexual harassment is just one of the many moments that signify this risk of private becoming public. In other words, the culture of *mahremiyet* concerns the very fabric that produces normalcy, or “comfort,” defining the boundaries between private and public and illustrating the penetrability of those borders.

However, women are far from docile objects in the culture of *mahremiyet*, no matter how fragile their privacy is in that culture. As Kamile’s case demonstrates, by taking arbitrary risks women exhibit agentive responses and often create ruptures in this culture. The rupture is even more visible in the case of Cumhuriyet Park, where women have reversed the power dynamics of *mahremiyet* by “taking over” the park. As such, *mahremiyet* operates in their favor. While women may not be taking bold risks or directly challenging or resisting existing systems as they avoid random violations of their privacies, they nevertheless test the limits of the culture of *mahremiyet* and negotiate these boundaries.<sup>15</sup> They indirectly change the dynamics when they ignore the power of the male gaze or take over a park.<sup>16</sup>

This article has also examined Istanbulite women’s control of their bodily movements in public spaces, analyzing these movements as parts of a multilayered process of building privacy, heterosexuality, and intimacy. I have argued that the demand for privacy (*mahremiyet*) has created regulated spaces and institutions of intimacy. At one level, Istanbulite women’s concerns and demands for segregation shed light on discussions in social studies about Muslim women’s visibilities, modesty concerns, dress codes, and public sexuality. Different forms of modesty are established in the community through various techniques (Antoun 1968; Werbner 2007), including veiling, segregation, language, and behaviors such as body language, sitting, walking, laughing appropriately, and posture. These techniques are related to the ways *mahremiyet* is defined, made, and remade in daily life as part of what Berlant (1998, 281) terms “institutions of intimacy.” Such perspective is particularly crucial in developing conceptual tools to identify the ways normalcies are created and reinforced through institutions of intimacy, which extend beyond female bodied persons (Zengin 2011) and may also include young or gay men (Korkman 2015; Özbay 2010). It also contributes to an important recognition of similarities with other, non-Islamicate institutions of intimacy (Agathangelou 2004; Lazaridis 1995).

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### Notes

1. None of my interlocutors was living below poverty. Class differences are not as sharp in Turkey as they are in the United Kingdom, for instance. I define class based on income, occupation, and lifestyle. Lower-class refers to blue-collar workers and their wives. Middle-class refers to owners of small and medium enterprises and to white-collar workers, including doctors and engineers, and their wives. Upper-class refers to the employers of white-collar workers and their wives. For an extensive study on class formation in Turkey, see Keyder 1987.
2. Kemalism is the official secular and nationalist ideology of Turkey promoting the principles of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic.
3. Muslim women-only spaces have both parallels with and differences from women-only gyms and leisure spaces in the non-Muslim world. As I elaborate in this article, women-only gyms are spaces freed from the male gaze—suggesting the centrality of the gaze to privacy concerns—which is not necessarily the case in Western gyms, where there are male janitors, trainers, or security guards.
4. For other work examining changing forms of sexuality in Islamic contexts, see Ozyegin 2009; Smith-Hefner 2006.
5. For further information and anthropological analysis of forms of milk kinship and *mahrem* relationships in Muslim societies, see Altorki 1986; Clarke 2007; Parkes 2005; and vom Bruck 1997.
6. The regulations on seeing in relation to sexuality in Islamic contexts mostly discuss illicit gazing at beardless boys by adult men (see Babayan 2008, 266–67; Najmabadi 2005, 17–19; Ze'evi 2006, 97).
7. In a similar vein, a feminist literature of performance studies examines the relationship between sexual pleasure and the gaze (Mulvey 1975).
8. *Nazar* is often misunderstood and mistranslated into English as the “evil eye.” In fact, it refers to a strong look conveying envy as well as love.
9. The Middle Eastern and eastern Mediterranean concept *nazar* originates from Arabic but also exists in Turkish, Urdu, and Farsi and their wider cultures. The rituals surrounding it have only minor variations in different ethnic and geographic contexts. According to Timothy Mitchell (1991), in Egypt *nazar* refers to a certain kind of power that makes the object of the gaze more vulnerable. This belief system is referred to as “superstition” in early sociological and ethnographic works (Johnson 1924). In one of the earliest works that connects beliefs about the eye and gazing and the eye's power, a psychologist suggests that the overall evil eye culture stems from particular cultural behaviors regarding staring and gazing (Coss 1974). After the mid-1980s closer examinations of *nazar* emerged in ethnographic works (Brav 1992).
10. Several women who donned a head scarf told me that they needed to be more careful, as they are still exposed to the gaze even with a headscarf, which, they highlighted, was not the case twenty years ago. Recent work suggests that the culture of sexuality in Turkey is changing (Ozyegin 2015; Sehlkloglu 2015b), and this change should be considered when evaluating women's everyday worries.

11. İstanbul'da Sabah Sporları, www.sporas.com.tr/media/286354/sabah-sporlari-raporu/html (accessed June 3, 2013).
12. For a good overview of sexual harassment in Turkey, see Ilkkaracan 2000.
13. In some İstanbul neighborhoods where more privileged residents live (i.e., Cadebostan, Bebek), both women and men exercise regularly and often in typical sports outfits.
14. Different from indoor gym equipment, these machines are heavier, water-resistant, and less sophisticated. These spaces look like playgrounds for adults, seesaws and swing sets replaced by adult-size exercise equipment.
15. Although my informants were not activist feminists, their everyday negotiations with the fragility of their privacies spoke to the frequent antiharassment campaigns. One example is the recent dispute over *müsaid* (available), translated in the official Turkish-language dictionary as “[the woman] who readily goes out or flirts.”
16. A similar transformative power is observed in women-only parks in Iran, which Nazanin Shahrokni (2014) has analyzed.

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