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### **Exercise and Female Sexuality in Relation to Segregation, Proximity and Exclusion** **Sertaç Sehlikoglu**

Women’s control of their bodily movements constitutes a multi-layered process of building privacy, heterosexuality, and intimacy through cultural scripts, normative spaces, and gendered acts, and this is especially so in the Islamicate contexts of the Middle East. Women’s strict management of their bodies in terms of public sexuality is of course multi-layered and multifaceted, altering and diversifying depending on the space, of the living and even non-living subjects. Nevertheless, physical exercise makes this prioritized control of public sexuality quite impossible, as it requires body movements that trouble perceptions of women’s public visibility and public sexuality. It is significant, then, that during fieldwork in Istanbul, Turkey, the central concern mentioned by women when referring to their choice for women-only gyms was the ability to exercise in a “comfortable” environment.

While the diverse range of women I talked to cited multiple reasons for choosing to exercise in women-only spaces, the main one for almost all of them was, in their terms, the *comfort* it provided. This should focus closer attention on phenomena such as the culture of gender segregation and *mahremiyet* (privacy, intimacy and forbidden-ness), on the distinctions between the familial and non-familial, insider and outsider, on female sexuality and its relationship with the male gaze, and on the way in which this relationship creates and reproduces gender and sexuality. The culture of segregation and *mahremiyet* refers to a notion of privacy and confidentiality that the insider is expected to preserve and an outsider is expected not to violate. Indeed, the insider/outsider dichotomy is central in understanding this particular culture of gender segregation, which cannot be exactly mapped onto the Western public/private dichotomy.

One of the most common references of the barriers between insider and outsider is the regulation of the *gaze*; in other words, the rules about who is allowed to see whom. Indeed, women I talked to during my fieldwork explained how they negotiated the gaze in different spaces in their daily lives in order not to attract it in certain environments. This was especially the case during exercise due to the heterosexual appeal the movements are believed to embody. Nevertheless, the gaze is particularly important in Middle Eastern contexts, not only as a physical and very visible reference, but also as a source of supernatural power, through *nazar* (the “strong eye”)<sup>1</sup>.

By regulating who can see whom, the gaze is then defined as a marker of both desire and its limits. Gaze and gazing at bodies produce a sexual script. Once it trespasses defined borders, the gaze becomes penetrating and therefore sexually active—a perspective which, according to Dror Ze’evi (2006), has existed in the Turkish understanding of sexuality for centuries. His historical account refers to such a duality in Ottoman society: “the body, by virtue of its composing substances rather than any divinely appointed soul, would have a strong or weak sexual urge, a feminine or masculine, active or passive, penetrating or penetrated type of sexuality” (p. 22). The curious and penetrating gaze is therefore a micro-level reflection of the

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<sup>1</sup> Nazar is often misunderstood as the “evil eye” but in fact it refers to a strong look at another, whether in the form of envy or of love. It is often said that mother’s *nazar* to her child is the strongest.

cultural heterosexual imagination of the masculine position.

In such a context, women's "comfort" is maintained by segregation, by the company of female friend(s), by controlled behaviour in public, and by avoidance of any activity or situation that will make them feel "uncomfortable". A comfortable place is thus one where men won't disturb them (*rahatsız etmek*), where they can feel comfortable (*rahat hissetmek*), but where they will not be perceived as a *rahat kadın*, (a complacent or literally means comfortable woman). Indeed, different levels of modesty seem to be established in the daily lives of women in the community through various techniques including veiling, segregation, and control of behaviours and posture (i.e. body language, sitting, walking, or laughing appropriately). Physical exercise, however, often combines a series of body movements associated with "bedroom movements," as Sibel, a thirty-year old participant described them. This therefore complicates women's control over their public sexuality.

In fact, women's habit of controlling their public sexuality against potential heterosexual male arousal and their conformity with detailed behavioural prescriptions are based on public opinion about the relationship between public female sexuality and the male gaze. Even though women do not do "bedroom movements" as part of their exercise routines in public, do not run, do not wear tight clothes, and do not even have a body categorised as "sexually attractive", they can still become targets of harassing ogles. With a repetitive reference to an imagined (if not actual) male gaze in public, women's sexuality is rebuilt and internalized every single day within normative boundaries. During her interview, Figen revealed how the looks of 'everyone' and 'men' are in fact interconnected in her mind with being "out in public" (*sokak ortasında* literally means in the middle of the street): "Everyone would turn and look at you. It bothers me when everyone looks at me!"

Curiously, Figen maintains the comfort she is seeking not only through segregation, but also through multiple strategies in public parks. Neighbourhood has been one of the important elements in understanding the culture of segregation in history (Zilfi 2000). It should be noted that inhabitants of different neighbourhoods have different attitudes towards public exercise in Istanbul. In neighbourhoods with wealthier and more privileged inhabitants (ie. Caddebostan, Bebek), both women and men exercise regularly, often in regular sports outfits, in public. In Fatih, a renown religious neighbourhood of Istanbul, morning exercise sessions take place in a small stadium named Vefa, which is open to public and located around 5 - 6 meters beneath the main road and the sidewalk, and not easily visible by pedestrians. In the district where I did my ethnography, however, Sultançiftliği, a suburban area where overwhelmingly migrants live, morning exercise sessions have moved from a public park to the sports centre at the request of women due to the discomfiting "male gaze" they encountered in the public sphere. In Cumhuriyet Park, close to the former morning exercise spot, women almost take over the park in every morning and exercise beginning as early as 5 AM, at the time of Morning Prayer, until 9 or 10 AM, depending on the season.

By "taking over", I not only refer to women outnumbering men, but also to the way male visitors to the park behave during their time there. In these situations, the culture of segregation starts acting against the male attendees, who suddenly feel obliged to control their public sexuality. They start worrying about how they will be perceived if they attend the park, which is ordinarily a heterosocial space. This became clear from an anecdote narrated by two interlocutors, who exercise in Cumhuriyet Park during summer for financial reasons, and is illustrated in the photo below. At the park, there are usually very few (usually two or three) male attendees

who are present to simply to watch women's bodies moving, or to try and meet women. They are very easy to spot and women speak of them with repugnance. There are also very few men present early in the morning "solely" to exercise thus feel a need to publicly demonstrate that their "intentions" are not watch women's exercising bodies, but to exercise. In the photo below, two male attendees can be seen following different strategies to make sure that they would not be misunderstood. In order to do this, they either take a female companion, a spouse or a female relative with you that shows that they are a "family man", like the man with the cap walking by the lady in black in the photo, or they walk against the stream, like the man in blue shirt. The name of the latter one is Zeki, and he does that so that women would see his face and his eyes clearly and that he is not looking at their bodies. In a way, he verifies that women should feel *comfortable* about his presence and his gaze. It is reasonable to say that one aspect of public Islamicate sexuality is limiting the body, while the other aspect is limiting the gaze.

The culture of segregation is a multi-layered process of building privacy, as well as heterosexuality through cultural scripts, structural fixations, normative spaces, and gendered acts. An interconnected perspective showing how segregation, selfhood, gender, and body are linked in particular ways can shed new light on barriers to women's ability to exercise publicly in Islamicate contexts and the ways in which public-ness and privacy is determined.

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