

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Trespassing and Transgression: Arab Masculinities and Gender Equality Research

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** The engagement of men in academic research on gender and education has been explored by some theorists (Hearn, 2014, Shepherd, 1997). However, the involvement of Arab men in gender research remains an under-developed area of academic research in the globalised neoliberal knowledge economy. In this paper, I reflect on my positionality as a postgraduate and post-binary Egyptian male researcher investigating international education experiences from a gender perspective. This paper is based on 18 interviews with Egyptian female postgraduates from UK universities. I explore Arab men's relationship to feminist gender equality research, and the concepts of vulnerability, ethical risks and post-gender universities. I also reflect on my journey in developing feminist consciousness in relation to: choice of research methods, negotiating access, power dynamics and location (meeting participants in person) or remotely via teleconference technologies in cross-gendered research. This paper aims to open up discussions on southern masculinities and gender equality research.

**Paper:**

This paper explores the complex relationship between gender, power and positionality in researching internationalisation in higher education. From the early stages of my PhD study I was often asked about my gender identity in relation to the gender of my study sample and the applications of feminist ethics in cross-gendered research. The decision to limit the focus of my study to the experiences of Egyptian women postgraduates stems from my curiosity in applying an intersectional approach to gender research on the internationalization of higher education. Research on internationalization in neoliberal knowledge economy often approaches the question of gender from a binary perspective in exploring the sex differences between male and female dichotomy as opposite categories and often ignores the intersectional differences among the same group. [Rydstrom and Hearn \(2017:146\)](#) stress the importance of this approach as "a queer way of looking at things where you don't take for granted the categories of analysis." Furthermore, higher education homogenization of international students' identities proliferate the problem by continuing to ignore the effects of

gender identity, gender regimes, nationality, social class, age, geographical location, religion and on the rationale and outcomes of international academic mobility. Limiting the research sample to Egyptian women has made the question of gender and intersectionality at the forefront, and as an integral part of this research rather than an add on. It has also led me to explore paths of research to the question of power dynamics and southern masculinities in relation to conducting feminist research on gender equality in higher education.

In conducting the research, I became aware of the multifaceted challenges pertaining to my gender identity as a male from the Global South in trespassing gendered spaces in the neoliberal global knowledge economy. For example, I am frequently asked about my positionality as a man interviewing Egyptian women, and whether this is appropriate and advisable? In this construction, my gender identity is perceived to be a threat and imposes risk to vulnerable women from the Global South. This interpretation relies on a troubling binary understanding of gender, and overlooks other factors contributing to women's oppression such as the disadvantaged economic and political position of the Global South (Ray, 2018). I have interviewed 18 Egyptian women postgraduates (PGR & PGT) across 9 UK universities with the objective of exploring the intersectional gendered aspect of their transnational mobility from Egypt to the UK. I am drawing on the theoretical framework of queer feminist theories in neoliberalism of Sarah Ahmed (Ahmed 2004, 2012), Judith Butler (Butler 1990) and Jeff Hearn (Hearn 2014) postcolonial feminist theory of Chandra Mohanty (Mohanty 2005) and Mona Eltahawi (Eltahawi 2016). My research questions investigate the impact of gender on the rationale and destinations of international mobility. I have asked participants about their motivations to study in UK, the relationships they formed between home and host environments in light of different gender regimes, and the outcomes of their experiences in UK. Some of my preliminary findings suggest that social class plays an undisputed role in gaining access to UK higher education, especially in light of limited funding opportunities. The duration of the study (1 year PGT and 3+ years PGR) is a determinate factor for Egyptian women and the social expectations and perceptions of independent women living abroad.

Two important themes have emerged: 1. the perceptions of Southern masculinity and male identity among women from the Global South and, 2. the gendered imagery of Southern masculinity in the Global North. Regarding these two points, I am well-aware of the contextual understanding of male identity in the eyes of Egypt's strictly gender binary society as a representation of patriarchy and dominance. Overview of the gender regime in Egypt, which rank 135 out of 149 countries on the global gender gap index of 2018 (WEF 2018), shows the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity and male dominance in public life. Hearn (2004:59) however, suggests that we must see "the double complexity that men are both a social category formed by the gender system and collective and individual agents, often dominant agents, of social practices." In reflection on my background as a first generation university graduate from a single-income working-class family, who does not conform with gender binary identities, growing up in a strictly conservative community in the north of Egypt and living as part of the BAME community in UK, while interviewing Egyptian women from elite backgrounds abroad, as part of this research, has required me to understand the imposition of my presence in women's spaces, the impact of the counter gaze and the importance of context and

location in gaining and negotiations of access.

Disrupting narratives of hegemonic masculinity in the neoliberal academy during the course of this research required developing a feminist consciousness. Understanding feminism(s) was the most important step in this direction. bell hooks (2018:9) defines feminism as a “movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression”. I chose this definition to enlighten my research as it opens the doors for everybody to engage in feminism beyond biological determinism. It is also equally important to make this point clear as to emphasize on the importance of feminism for the lives of men and the impact of gender equality on their lives. In my experience, working on gender equality in the Middle East, I often hear men who engage in feminism and gender equality research justifying their engagement on account that it will benefit someone else (daughter, sisters, mothers). This sort of chivalrous engagement with gender equality often ends when discussions of equality threaten the male privilege. Unless men are aware of the impact of feminism on their lives, engagement of men in feminism may not only be reductive but can be regressive too.

Developing feminist consciousness also meant anchoring my research inquiry around the duties of ethical responsibility, or as depicted by feminist researchers, “double responsibility” which is explored in (Preissle and Han 2012:594) where the researchers are made “responsible both to their women participants and to the broader world of women whose lives we hope to improve”. This required considerable efforts in terms of framing research questions, selecting research methods, developing interview schedules, recruitment of participants suggesting research spaces where I meet participants, analysis of the data and later the responsibility of representation.

The research process has also generated considerable researcher reflexivity about my positionality. Going beyond the discussions of biological determination of men’s ability to conduct feminist research, it has also allowed me to reflect on the challenges, barriers, and feminist ethical considerations for men interviewing women from the Global South. It also contributed to my understanding of southern gendered identities in the imaginary of UK academia.

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