



Venue

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient
Kirchweg 33
14129 Berlin

ZMO-Colloquium Winter Term 2018/2019

Performing Gender and Sexuality in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia

Thursday, 29 November 2018, 5 pm

Hymens, Sex, and Money: Interrogating the Economics of Virginity in the Middle East

Lecture by **Ebtihal Mahadeen** (University of Edinburgh)

If, as Lama Abu-Odeh argues, "the discourse on gender and the discourse on virginity in Arab culture overlap so broadly that they are hardly distinguishable" (Abu-Odeh, 2010, 917), then understanding the ideology of virginity and the various technologies used to maintain it is essential to understanding sexual politics in Arab patriarchies. In Jordan, the hymen is admitted as the physical marker of female virginity and its presence is of paramount importance to certifying unmarried women's chastity, adherence to socio-sexual norms, and economic value as potential wives. But it is within the context of marriage that the economy of virginity can be best understood: it is an asset to be protected by women and their families in order to secure a good marriage, a return on men's investment in mahr (dowry) and other expenses upon marriage and, finally, through restorative technologies such as hymen reconstruction surgeries and fake hymens, it is a commodity that is fixable, tradeable, and transferable. In this landscape of economised sexual politics, restorative technologies like hymen reconstruction surgery can be seen as mere survival strategies, as technologies that perpetuate inequality and cater to the hegemonic ideology of virginity, or as subversive strategies challenging and slowly chipping away at this very ideology.

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Ebtihal Mahadeen is lecturer in Gender and Media in the Arab World at the department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Edinburgh. She is interested in the intersection between gender, sexuality, and the media in the Middle East. Her work to date has focused on sexual and cultural politics in Jordan, female virginity, Arab masculinities and femininities, and the media as sites of hegemony and resistance.