

The World Humanities Report

**Case Study:**  
*Kohl: A Journal for  
Body and Gender  
Research*

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# Case Study: *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*

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*Kohl*, founded in 2015 in Lebanon, is a bilingual, “progressive, feminist journal on gender and sexuality.”<sup>1</sup> They publish short, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary essays in Arabic and English and organize conferences that showcase intersectional, queer, feminist perspectives from the Middle East, Southwest Asia, and North Africa. Their rejection of the Arab region as an organizing category stems from their efforts to move away from historically hegemonic ethnic identifications that are so repeated and privileged that they appear natural or normative.<sup>2</sup>

The journal, which is a “cultural mediator . . . in the traffic of theories and discourses,”<sup>3</sup> issues thematic calls for papers and presentations around issues as varied as reproductive justice, sex, gendered labor, and movement building, to name a few. According to Deema Kaedbey, whether the topic is “migration, representation, or the economy,” *Kohl* produces queer feminist knowledge that “focuses on disrupting the normative discourse by investigating intersecting systems and oppressions.”<sup>4</sup>

The journal’s emphasis on decolonial perspectives counters orientalist narratives and knowledge production that rely on uncritical use of buzzwords. Such work employs shallow analyses and falls back on repetitive, and therefore less effective, critiques. Relatedly, Ines Smyth argues that terms associated with gender theory, in part because of how widely and carelessly used they are, remain problematic: “Some terms are almost entirely absent, while others are used loosely and inappropriately—with the subtleties and rigour of carefully developed and much-debated concepts utterly lost, so that words are left empty of meaning.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See “About the Journal,” *Kohl*, <https://kohljournal.press/about>.

<sup>2</sup> See Nadjé Al-Ali and Ghiwa Sayegh, “Feminist and Queer Perspectives: Complicities and Tensions” in *“Queer” Asia: Decolonising and Reimagining Sexuality and Gender*, eds. J. Daniel Luther and Jennifer Ung Loh (London: Zed Books, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Claudia de Lima Costa and Sonia E. Alvarez, “Dislocating the Sign: Toward a Translocal Feminist Politics of Translation,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 3 (2014): 557–63.

<sup>4</sup> Deema Kaedbey, *On Feminist Platforms in the MENA Region: Experiments with New Terms and New Terms of Engagement* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ines Smyth, “Talking of Gender: Words and Meanings in Development Organisations,” in *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*, ed. Andrea Cornwall and Deborah Eade (Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing and Oxfam GB, 2010), 144.

*Kohl* aims to challenge the reliance on fashionable concepts as drivers of knowledge production and research agendas to connect research that is relevant to the needs of the people in the region. On the website they point out that “while particularly narrow, or ‘hot,’ topics are popularized and explored in a myriad of ways, many important positionalities and contexts are left untreated.”<sup>6</sup> In the World Humanities Report survey, they state that their aim is to “ensure that our regions and communities play a central role in determining our own intersections and challenges in research about gender and sexuality.”<sup>7</sup>

Countering the assumed divide between activism and academia, they build on a well-established feminist history of blurring the lines between scholars, nongovernmental organizations, universities, and activists. Hoda Elsadda argues that feminist scholarship in the university was enabled by feminist-led initiatives, publications, and advocacy that then made their way into departments and academic study. Indeed, she points out that “women academic-activists stood at the forefront of knowledge production in WGS [women’s and gender studies] in the region.”<sup>8</sup>

*Kohl* is one example of this knowledge production. The feminist ethos guiding the online journal structure involves nonhierarchical and collaborative editorial teams, as well as critical attention to review processes that are transactional or extractive in traditional academic publishing settings. The editors are likewise committed to free, open-access knowledge production, in contrast to other scholarly journals that can only be accessed through membership, institutions, or payment. Digital publishing ensures wider reach and access, more accessible forms of archiving, and engagement from diverse audiences. On their website they state:

Unlike most other academic journals, *Kohl* welcomes work in progress, provided the papers submitted are complete drafts. We consider promising pieces of writing and acknowledge the fact that privileged forms of academic research are not accessible to everyone. We offer the authors of the pieces accepted for inclusion the option to work closely with our team via Skype and e-mail. Not only does this process pave the way for continuous collaboration and exchange of ideas, but it strengthens the formation of horizontal and intersectional networks of solidarity across our regions and communities.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> “About the Journal.” *Kohl*.

<sup>7</sup> *Kohl*, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Hoda Elsadda, *Gender Studies in the Arab World: An NGO Phenomenon* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 4.

<sup>9</sup> “About the Journal.” *Kohl*.

In the survey they also state, “*Kohl* also encourages free and equal access to information and resources.” This acknowledges that simply being a digital platform does not guarantee access. Instead, digitization raises issues of internet accessibility and concerns as to who can really benefit. For *Kohl*, the acknowledgment of how important accessibility is also manifests itself in translation. All of their work is available in both English and Arabic (and sometimes French), and their social media content is available in English, Arabic, and French.

In the end, feminism in the region cannot be delinked from academia, and *Kohl* attempts to provide a bridge between the two in a bilingual and open-access journal that moves away from hegemonic, Orientalist discourses, instead offering a space for knowledge production from, by, for, and about the region.

**Hana Shaltout** graduated from the American University in Cairo in 2014 with a BA from the Political Science Honours Programme with a specialization in international relations. She completed her MSc in gender, media, and culture at the London School of Economics in 2015. After being a researcher at the Arab Council for Social Sciences working on the World Humanities Report, she is currently doing her PhD in cultural studies at the University of Sussex, on feminist activism in Egypt post-2011. Her research interests include alternative knowledge production, gender studies, cultural studies, and women's participation in the political arena.