



"Off the Straight Path": Illicit Sex, Law, and Community in Ottoman Aleppo (Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East)

Elyse Semerdijan

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The subject of sexuality and law remains an area that receives little scholarly attention in the field of Middle East women's studies. Important questions about the relationships between, sexuality, law, and the societies that experience and create them are rarely addressed in the current literature. Elyse Semerdjian's "Off the Straight Path" takes a bold step toward filling that gap, offering a fascinating look at the historical progression of Islamic law's treatment of illicit sex.

Semerdjian provides a comprehensive review of the concept of zina, sexual indiscretion, exploring the various meanings of the word as presented in a variety of sources from the Qur'an and Hadith to medieval literature. She then delves into the history of legal practice dealing with zina, focusing on the locale of Aleppo, Syria. Drawing upon a wealth of shari'a court records, Semerdjian brings Syrian society during the Ottoman period to life. With vivid detail, she describes the women's lives and their experiences as their cases are presented before the court. Semerdjian argues that the treatment of zina crimes in the courts differ substantially from sentences provided by Islamic jurisprudence. In contrast to the violent corporeal punishments advocated by Islamic law, the courts often treated crimes of sexual indiscretion with a non-violent form of punishment such as removal from the community. Employing exceptional insight, "Off the Beaten Path" presents a powerful challenge to the traditional view of Islamic law, enabling a richer understanding of Islamic society.

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