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CEDEJ Tuesday Seminar

The Medicalization of Maternity in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt: State Politics and Women's Healthcare

Laure Pesquet

April 28, 2026, at 2pm

Laure Pesquet's presentation discusses the links between the medicalization and the politicization of maternity in Egypt, from the British occupation (1882-1922) to the Nasser era (1954-1970). She argues that the medicalization of maternity, i.e. pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and childcare, in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt resulted from the politicization of nationhood and public health and failed to extend better healthcare for women. Private correspondence of British doctors and midwives, found in the Wellcome Institute in London as well as in the Sudan Archives held by Durham University, reveal the attempts of the colonial authorities to control and to help Egyptian women by educating local midwives. Egyptian public health reports and the autobiographies of Egyptian doctors and midwives who collaborated and continued the professionalization of midwifery until the Nasser era, show the ruptures and the continuities of this reform which failed to extend good healthcare for women, as well as the ambiguous reactions of Egyptian women to it, from the colonial era to the emergence of a welfare state after the Free Officers coup of 1952. Among all the colonial powers around the world, public health and women's bodies were among key issues of concern in the handling of local administration for both colonial regimes and the medical community. Much has been written in recent years about the link between women's reproductive agency and colonialism, recognizing the tension that existed between Western and local medicine as an important dimension of the history of colonialism. The researcher considers Egypt as a singular case since public health and women's bodies became key issues to the state before colonization started in 1882.

Laure Pesquet's research focuses on the social history of Egypt and the Middle East in the modern era, with a particular interest in the professionalization of midwives and nurses, the production of knowledge about women's bodies, childbirth, and care for mothers and children, as well as the circulation and uses of this knowledge between the Middle East and the West during the 19th and 20th centuries.

*Her interest in the history of the Arab world spans many fields, but she is particularly passionate about the production of norms regarding motherhood, childbirth, and care work. She aims to study the interactions between actors and institutions that produce knowledge about women's bodies, and the evolution of this knowledge as a source of conflict, drawing on archives of reproductive policies and intimacies in the modern Middle East. Her current research project is entitled: "*The War of the Wombs: Doctors, Midwives, Nurses, and Volunteers in the Face of Birth Control in Egypt, Turkey, and Western Institutions (19th–20th Centuries)*"*

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