

## **Breaking Down Stereotypes in the American Classroom: Coeducation at the American University of Beirut (AUB) as a model for understanding the diversity of Middle Eastern women's lives**

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In my experience, the single hardest topic to discuss in an American university classroom is the status of women in the Middle East. I have students read passages of the Quran alongside analyses of the development of Islamic law; students write in their papers how appalled they are that women did not have equality in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. I assign articles on the types of jobs women have historically held in the region; students repeatedly raise their hands and say, “but they don’t let women work”, without clarifying who “they” are or why that statement contradicts everything they just read. In the last couple of years, I have achieved moderate success in breaking down stereotypes about Middle Eastern women; my studies of coeducation at AUB have guided the way. The key is to frame the discussion within an historical paradigm; the students have to understand that gender definitions are not static, with the “West” having always allowed equality for women and the “East” having always done the opposite. In the last 200 years alone, new economic and social realities dramatically reconfigured gender dynamics throughout the world by, first, sacralizing the concept of separate spheres and, later, by purposely breaking down such divisions. Modernity for women could mean, in different eras, achieving success within the domestic realm or by fighting for equality with men within a career. When women began arriving at AUB in the 1920s, they took on the task of defining women’s roles in a new and ever-changing Middle Eastern modernity, focusing for years on how their education was designed to make them better mothers in the domestic realm and more modern nurturers for their communities; later, they explained why modernity allowed women to break into the public sphere as equal members in the professions.