

Lost in translation? Home economics at Sidon Girls' School

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The American Protestant Syria Mission, founded in Lebanon in 1821, was involved from its inception in female education in the Levant. Targeting young women and girls, the mothers and wives of the future, was crucial to missionary aims to spread the Gospel. The Mission thus founded numerous schools for girls. One institution which played a significant role in female education was the Sidon Girls' School, founded in 1860. In the 1920s, however, the school began to experience increased competition from schools run by "natives," among other problems. In response, the Mission initiated a "revolutionary" plan for the school by instituting the first home economics program in the Middle East, which put the school back on the map of the educational landscape. The school hosted the first home economics conference in the Middle East; sent its graduates to help the young Iraqi state start its own program in home economics in the 1930s; and distinguished itself for bringing this relatively new field and profession to the region.

This paper deals with the legacy of the home economics program at Sidon Girls' School, raising broader issues about American-style education. Missionaries enthused about the "progressive," modern training they offered in their schools. Their discourse about the "backwardness" of their charges is well-known. In this paper I investigate how the "new" education in home economics offered in Sidon reflected trends in, and attempted to transfer concepts adapted from, American female education. I argue that an American missionary education reinforced domesticity by merely modernizing it. I explore how and why the missionary message was lost in translation, and how women graduates subverted it by utilizing their educations to enter the professions instead of becoming perfect housewives.