

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Teaching about Gender and Politics of the MENA: Undermining Bias and Introducing a Framework

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As instructors, we are quite familiar with students coming to our classes loaded with preconceived notions. For instance, some believe that male instructors are better at math, while others think that markets, if left on their own, will produce wealth for everyone. Teaching about gender and politics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region at an American college is no different. Students come to class rarely knowing the basic facts, history, or culture of the region, mostly because the K–12 educational curriculum in the United States does not typically cover the MENA region. However, students' lack of formal education on the MENA region does not mean they are unexposed to its issues, which are frequent topics in American media. Unfortunately, students often hold misconceptions and deep biases about women, culture, and politics in the region, and these misconceptions impair the learning process by acting as a “psychological block” for the students. As Haddad and Schwedler (2013, 211) put it, “our years of teaching undergraduates have taught us how images of harems, pyramids, and desert warriors wielding sabers on camelback still shape many Americans' perceptions of the region.” This essay discusses some of the challenges that instructors teaching gender and politics in the MENA region face in an American college classroom. No single course can eradicate old paradigms and prejudices. However, this piece proposes some strategies for effective teaching about gender and politics of the MENA region.

Scholars have studied the negative impacts of these biases on students' abilities to learn course material. Pace and Middendorf (2004), for instance, examine sociocultural and political biases and argue that these biases, which they call “bottlenecks,” disrupt the learning process and prevent the instructor from meeting their learning objectives. To overcome the challenges of these bottlenecks and broaden the student learning experience, Meyer and Land (2003) introduce “threshold concepts,” which they define as a new way of thinking

about a subject. Han and Heldman (2019) find that teaching gender in American politics has become part of the curriculum in universities; however, instructors still face resistance from students, especially female instructors.

Those who teach gender within the MENA context have written about further challenges in teaching MENA-related issues in American colleges (Abu Lughod 2020; Caplan et al. 2012; El-Shakry 2020; Haddad and Schwedler 2013; Kazemzadeh 1998; Stover 2007; Tetrault 1996). Scholars have offered a variety of approaches to the study of gender in the MENA. Some have emphasized the significance of a historical approach (Ahmed 1993; El-Shakry 2020), while others have focused on feminist interpretations of the Quran and Sharia (Ali 2006; Mernissi 1991; Wadud 2006); more recently, an intersectional approach has been advocated and advanced in measuring the different forms of patriarchal relations in the region (Benstead 2021). Inspired by Edward Said's (1978) critique of Western cultural representations of the East in general, and the MENA region in particular, scholars have noted that these biases are not innocent, but rather politically motivated and even highly gendered (Abu Lughod 2020; Badran 1988). Placing the discussion of politics at the center of this essay, my research builds on this body of literature and provides empirical support by demonstrating that college students hold strong biases toward the region and that these biases are highly resistant to change.

The fact that students come into the classroom with preconceived notions about the region especially drew my attention when I introduced Egypt as a case study for popular pro-democracy uprisings in my introductory-level government and politics course. During the semester, I covered six cases—the United Kingdom, Mexico, Russia, China, Nigeria, and Egypt—each of which was used to examine a specific topic. In covering the first five cases and their respective topics, I noticed nothing unusual: students listened to my lectures, completed the readings, and took the exams. However, this pattern did not occur when we turned to Egypt. I lectured, and students completed the readings. Yet in the exams, their responses reflected neither the substance of my lectures nor the content of the readings. After having the same pedagogical experience two years in a row, I consulted with my teaching assistant, who said, “[s]tudents might have been confused because what they had in mind about Egypt did not match with your lectures.” Wondering whether that was the case, I gave my students a series of open-ended questions asking what came to mind when they heard words such as “the Middle East,” “Arab,” and “Islam.”

Interestingly, their responses covered many topics, ranging from religious minorities and the climate to oil resources. I noticed that the topic of women often came up—many referred to “women’s oppression” as one of the most enduring problems in the region. Since their responses were much more detailed and interesting than I had expected, I decided to systematically study their biases. I coded their answers and prepared a survey with 25 questions for the next step of my research.

This three-year research project that I led (one year for the pilot study and two years for the actual research) included 141 students in the three sections of my Introduction to Government and Politics course, taught at Colorado State

University (Çavdar, Yaşar, and Fisk 2019). For two years, before I lectured on anything relating to Egypt, I administered a survey that aimed to identify what the students knew and thought about the region, and what perceptions and biases they might have. The survey questions included some basic facts about the region, such as ethnicity and religion, and sought to understand what students thought about diversity in the region and change over time, and whether they thought the region was different from the rest of the world. The survey also included some questions specifically about women.

I then shaped my lectures to specifically challenge the students' misconceptions and biases. After the final lecture, I gave the students the same survey to identify which biases were particularly resistant to change: comparison of their pre-lecture and post-lecture responses indicated whether the lectures and readings had reduced the biases. Gratifyingly, the results demonstrated that students' biases and misconceptions about the MENA region were indeed responsive to intervention through lectures. However, as some scholars have argued, some biases, such as attitudes toward women's status in the region, were particularly resistant to change. For instance, the pre-lecture surveys showed that 68% of the students agreed with the statement "Muslim women are all oppressed." After my lecture, which directly challenged the statement with evidence such as numbers and visuals, the percentage dropped to 32%. Disappointingly, despite the decrease, the percentage of students who still held a negative view remained quite high.

Those who teach these topics in an American class are probably not surprised by the research findings—students' deeply held beliefs are created by a variety of sources, such as the media, peers, and religious institutions, and instructors cannot single-handedly undermine them in the classroom. Furthermore, the research did not look at the long-term impacts of these classroom "interventions." Surveys were given right after the lectures, and the impacts of the lectures may have faded over time, with students possibly forgetting the facts they had learned.

Despite the limitations of approaching bias through lectures, we as instructors can engage in a number of strategies to teach the topic of gender in MENA politics in a more effective way and thereby increase student learning. I have found three strategies to be particularly effective.

Introduce a Theoretical Framework

Efforts to undermine bias would be incomplete without a theoretical framework based on political economy that allows the introduction of the course material in a systematic fashion and enables students to comprehend the course material as a whole (Benstead 2021). To provide students with an alternative to the portrayal of women through the media, I use the framework introduced by Valentine Moghadam (2013) in *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Moghadam offers four variables to explain the change in women's status over time as well as diversity in their status at any given time. These variables are gender, class, the state, and the level of economic development (Moghadam 2013, 14–19). The use of such a framework is crucial for helping students comprehend

the complexity of women's status in the region and understand that change takes place over time. The framework also highlights that women of the MENA region are not fundamentally different from women in other parts of the world, and that we cannot explain all differences through references to Islam or Islamic law. This is particularly important as it allows the instructor to teach the course comparatively within and across regions. Such a comparative approach significantly undermines the common perception that the region is unique and enables students to identify similarities with other regions. While students may forget most of the details they learn throughout the semester, theoretical frameworks like Moghadam's are likely to stay with them in the years ahead.

Problematicize the Media

The most impactful sources of misinformation that students are exposed to on a daily basis are the many forms of media. Effectively questioning their misconceptions therefore requires helping students develop a critical view of the media, which can be done in many innovative ways. My approach is to start by showing excerpts from Simon Shaheen's movie *Reel Bad Arabs*, which reveals how Hollywood vilifies Arabs. After discussing these examples, students divide into small groups, and each group chooses a type of media, such as a news article, video game, TV series, or movie, and then identifies and discusses examples of biases that are reflected in that media type. Teams work outside the class for some hours to complete their projects. Then, each group presents its findings during the class. This activity requires students to be active thinkers and keen observers and helps them develop a critical perspective of the media. This activity also takes advantage of their familiarity with American popular culture, something I cannot fully keep up with as an instructor.

During discussions of the news coverage of women and gender in the MENA region, it is important for the instructor to highlight the significance of contextualization and give students some in-class examples that they can work on in small groups. These general exercises demonstrate the significance of contextualizing the knowledge by paying close attention to the questions of *how*, *who*, *where*, *when*, and *why*. The exercises also demonstrate how information that is not contextualized can become misleading. These seemingly simple exercises help students understand that they should regard media coverage with caution and that they need to be careful about making sweeping generalizations about the region.

Give Voice to Women

My experience has been that most students have neither traveled to the MENA region nor met anybody from the region. Thus, presenting information about actual women from the region is crucial to challenging the images offered by the media. Documentaries, short videos, music videos, and movies highlight real women's lives in terms of their achievements as well as their struggles. Visuals must be selected carefully because they provide only a snapshot of the

actual phenomenon and sometimes dramatize a situation to highlight a point and might give the wrong impression. In those cases, providing additional context through lectures might be necessary.

In looking for examples, instructors might consider the work of female directors such as Nadine Labaki, Haifaa Al-Mansour, Maryam Saley, Işıl Özgen-türk, Yeşim Ustaoglu, and Ceyda Torun. Documentaries such as *The Life of an Arab Feminist*, *Bird of Dawn: The Composer from Tehran*, *The Seed of Queen of Palestine*, and *Behind the Wheel: Egypt's Women Drivers* or recordings of singers such as Shadia Mansour, known as the first lady of Arabic hip-hop, and Emel Mothlouthi, who became famous for her song “Kelmti Horra” for the Tunisian uprising, would show the diversity among women’s aspirations and daily struggles. As Abu Lughod (2020) mentions, these accounts are also biased and political. Nevertheless, “in important ways, they are different and provide another way to question the representations.”

In conclusion, undoubtedly, century-old prejudices will not be erased in a semester. However, hopefully, the collective efforts of instructors and their ability to learn from each other can help students get out of the “bottlenecks” of sociocultural and political bias and enhance their understanding of women and gender in MENA politics.

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