

RETHINKING THE REGION:

New Approaches to 9-12 U.S. Curriculum on the Middle East and North Africa

UNIT: WOMEN AND GENDER

Our review of the most commonly utilized World History textbooks in the United States found that the active role of Middle Eastern and North African women in society, politics, education, nation-building, and cultural formations is largely absent. Despite their enormous contributions throughout the modern historical period, women are largely portrayed in textbooks as passive, recipients of freedom, victims of oppression, or silenced behind veils. The lessons on gender and women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) seek to disrupt these false portrayals in order to offer educators and students a more complex picture of gender relations in the MENA region from the 5th century to the present day.

The objectives of these lessons are multifold. The lessons (1) explore the multiple roles women in MENA have played historically and through to the present; (2) challenge common misconceptions about women and men in MENA; (3) discuss the diverse ways in which gender relations have been shaped by the different histories, politics, religions and cultures of the region; (4) examine how notions of gender and sexuality have shifted (and continue to shift) over time; and (5) explore the active role women have had in nation-building, social movements, the arts, and other forms of active citizenship.

Through these lessons, educators and students can engage in conversations that challenge biased media images about gender relations – and how they impact both women and men – in MENA. By providing dynamic and complex images, narratives, and facts, the multi-dimensional nature of women in MENA humanizes their experiences rather than reducing them to flattened stereotypes and clichés. Gender in the MENA region is as diverse and complicated as anywhere else – some experiences are empowering, others are oppressive, and many more realities fall somewhere in between these dichotomies. The present day offers a nuanced picture of sociopolitical conditions that present learners a chance to engage with many formations of gender and many diverse societies within MENA; these lessons offer a starting point for conversations that explore our shared past and our shared humanity as fellow citizens of the planet.