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### Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East. 3rd ed, Valentine M. Moghadam (Review)

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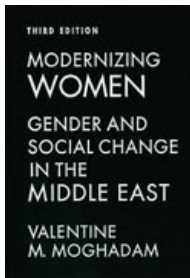
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#### Recommended Citation

Campbell, Ian, "Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East. 3rd ed, Valentine M. Moghadam (Review)" (2013). *World Languages and Cultures Faculty Publications*. 35.  
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## ***Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East***

**By:** Valentine M. Moghadam

*Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013. 332pp. \$26.50. ISBN: 9781588269331.

Volume: 1 Issue: 6  
October 2013

### ***Review by***

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This is a new edition of the author's work, updated to include events of the Arab Spring and subsequent revolts. Its comprehensiveness, its use of reams of real-world data to illustrate and support its conclusions, and its willingness to look at gender issues from a wide range of highly-critical perspectives all combine with a limpid prose style to make this an invaluable resource for scholars in all manner of fields touching on gender studies and the MENA region.

Moghadam begins by emphasizing that the comparative lack of gender equality in the region, especially with respect to political and legal rights and participation is, contrary to stereotypes, not a result solely of Islam or of traditions dressed up as Islamic. She argues that "why Muslim women lag behind Western women in legal rights, mobility, autonomy, and so forth as more to do with modernization and development—the extent of urbanization, industrialization, and proletarianization, as well as the political ploys of political elites—than with religious and cultural factors (p. 8).

The starting point for the book's analysis is "world-polity" or "world-systems" theory, a variant of modernization theory wherein a hegemonic (here, Western) order spreads at an unequal rate its own institutions, standards and organizations to other parts of the world. The spread of these institutions, which affect gender relations for better or worse (often both, but in the aggregate, generally better), in combination with regional and local material and cultural peculiarities, create differentials in the spread of more equal relations. Development, at least in the mid-20th century, often comes from the top down: the stronger the state and the greater its degree of Westernization, the generally higher is the level of improvement for women. It is notable that the book argues this point without in any meaningful way diminishing the importance of grass-roots women's activism; rather, the point it makes at convincing length and in detail is that strong and modern state institutions enable such activism to flourish and change societal patterns.

The second chapter provides an overview of late-20th century developments across the region. In brief, the expansionary postwar period provided much more meaningful advances for gender equity than did the contractions of the 1980s and beyond, especially when challenges to Westernization arose, e.g., political movements using a concern with Islamic "legitimacy" in the form of an obsession with (re-)controlling women. In many ways, this significantly slowed women's progress in the region, all while most of the rest of the developing world surged ahead.

The third chapter addresses the changes in employment patterns that are part and parcel of changes in women's empowerment. The book goes into detail on choices in industrial economies that lead to differential outcomes for women: notable among them is the idea that "rentier" economies—those that rely primarily on tourism or resource exploitation—result for complex reasons relating to patterns of employment in much smaller advances for women than those countries that choose to develop domestic manufacturing industries. The argument also brings in the issue of Muslim family law: "Traditional gender norms codified in [Muslim family law] may discourage the adoption of policies and arrangements favorable to broad-based maternal employment, such as paid maternity leaves and childcare centers" (p. 99).

This leads to an analysis of what might be necessary for *women's economic citizenship*, i.e., as autonomous agents rather than as dependents on, and subjects to a larger, usually patriarchal, family unit. The fourth chapter continues this analysis, focusing on statistics relating to marriage, childbearing and education.

>p>Chapter 5 addresses the effect of war and conflict on women's progress in Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq, where in each case armed conflict has weakened strong states and thus exposed women to both economic and personal insecurity. Such conflicts are typically "hypermasculine" affairs, and thus reduce women's economic as well as political citizenship. The bellicosity of the United States in the last decade comes off almost as badly as it ought to—both resistance movements and newly-formed governments in the latter two countries were all too willing to trade away women's rights for a sort of stability. This leads Moghadam to a larger argument about how including women in official peace talks and reconciliation movements cannot help but make things better: "Without idealizing women, one may plausibly postulate that an enhanced role for

women in reconstruction could minimize corruption and cronyism—if only because women's absence from economic and political domains of power has prevented their involvement in patronage and clientelism” (p. 169).

The next chapter addresses Iran, where as political winds and demographics changed in the Islamic Republic, things grew worse, then better, for women, until growing much worse under Ahmadinejad. In all three periods, women's paid employment has remained well below that of comparable countries. The book teases out the overlap among cultural factors and choices and industrialization to elucidate this difference.

Chapter 7, the most relevant to the distinction between this new third edition and its predecessors, addresses feminism, women's issues and female participation in the Arab Spring of 2011 and subsequent protests and movements. The chapter begins by establishing the conditions necessary for democracy or pro-democracy movements to establish themselves: peaceful protests, already-strong women's movements, quotas for political representation. Moghadam goes into detail on the specifics of levels of involvement of women's groups in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco and how they influenced the comparative peacefulness of the protests and movements. The final chapter clears up what had, until then, been the book's only notable defect—its tendency to accept the existence of a formal women's group or meetings among women's groups as proof of their causing positive social change.

This book is an excellent resource for scholars in a wide variety of disciplines. It is very well organized, very well sourced and very well written, and its extensive bibliography provides scholars the opportunity to follow up on a host of different issues. Moghadam should be commended, not only for maintaining, but also for expanding the scope and quality of her work.

