



Expansion or Contraction? Women's Rights in the MENA Region in 2015

In Celebration of
International Women's Day
2015

Women's Voices from Around the World





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Introduction by **Haleh Esfandiari**, *Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center*

On the occasion of International Women’s Day, March 8, 2015, the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center asked a number of women in the MENA region, the United States, Asia, and Europe whether women in the MENA region will experience an expansion or a contraction of their rights in the coming year. We bring together their responses in this publication. We are pleased to have succeeded in covering a wide geographic region and to have elicited a wide range of views.

Some of our contributors chose to focus on women in one country, some on the future of women’s rights across the entire MENA region. Some chose to focus on the danger to the security of women in war zones and some on the calamity of ISIS. Some chose to look at those countries where the future of women’s rights shines more brightly.

Depending on circumstance and individual perspective, the views of our contributors reflect a sense of both hope for the future—and also of despair. But consistently, our contributors seem to share a belief that women will manage to surmount the problems they face—be it the atrocities committed in ISIS land, the immeasurable hardships of life in refugee camps, or the sad disorder and devastation women face in countries where the Arab Spring fell apart. Even in darkness, they glimpse a glimmer of hope.

Across the board, we also sense anger at the silence of much of the world in the face of the atrocities visited by ISIS on the inhabitants, particularly women, girls, children, and minorities, of territories it controls. Indeed, concern over ISIS—what it implies for women—seems to hover like an ominous cloud over every hope for the future, even among those of our contributors who are otherwise optimistic about the chances for an expansion of women’s rights in some part of the region.





Haifa Abu Ghazaleh, *Assistant Secretary General, Head of Media and Communication, League of Arab States (Jordan)*

The rebuilding of modern thought and intellectual openness regarding the issue of women's rights and the application of openness in dialogue and debate shall pave the way to build a culture of moderation in order to revisit and develop the principles of women's rights. These strategies are in contrast to the isolation and aggression that underlie radical ideas lacking religious or moral ground.

The juxtaposition of openness and isolation regarding the issue of women's rights highlights two opposite views. The first view emphasizes that human openness provides women with adequate immunity and maintains their balance in intellectual understanding. It is intended to communicate knowledge and morality and to build a life away from deviation and downfall.

The second view is closed toward women's rights because of its radical culture. It rejects openness and modernization in an unconstrained way and accelerates violence that is manifested in austerity, fanaticism, and behavioral attitudes toward women in general.

In light of the debate and dialogue on openness and isolation towards the rights of women, Egypt's Al-Azhar issued a document, "Elimination and Prevention of All Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls," which discusses the rights of women by emphasizing the human and social value of women and the legality of these rights. Overall, it is a balanced document that uses the Islamic *shari'a* as a reference.

Equality remains the cornerstone of every democratic society eager to attain social justice and human rights. Women are still subjected to inequality, which has been caused and exacerbated by the existence of discrimination in the family, in society, and at work. Such inequality exists because the status of women was historically based on specific laws and practices within different countries.

In many societies, laws and traditions have denied women the right to independent legal and social status on the basis of traditional familial values. These laws and traditions were keen to place women under male tutelage in the family and society. Discrimination against women remains widespread and supported by unchanging views, cultural practices, and traditions harmful to women.



Raya Abu Gulal, *Lawyer and Co-Founder, Women Lawyers Group-Middle East (Iraq)*

For the occasion of International Women's Day, I would like to congratulate all women around the world. I hope this day will bring us closer together to remember and help other women who are suffering around the world.

In 2015, women in the MENA region are facing both an expansion and contraction of their rights. This year we will likely see an expansion of women's rights in the Gulf region, Tunisia, and perhaps some of the Levant countries with exception to Syria. We have already seen improvements in some countries; the UAE government recently announced the formation of the Gender Balance Council, which will advance women and put them in the right leadership positions. In other countries—such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen—the rights of women continue to deteriorate, particularly in areas that are controlled by Daesh. In those countries, a contraction of women's rights will continue until at least minimum security is offered on the streets and political and economic stability are created. This is not foreseeable in the near future.

In addition to political stability and security, society and religious authorities should exert more efforts to support women's empowerment in the MENA region and avoid ideologies that lead to the belief that women have no rights. Moreover, women have to push and work harder to gain their rights by advocating for themselves and by raising a new generation that supports gender equality in the MENA region. We have already seen an example of Syrian-Kurdish women in Kobane who helped liberate their areas from Daesh and stood alongside men in the fight against extremism.



Raghda Abu-Shahla, *humanitarian worker, United Nations (Gaza)*

Despite all efforts of women's rights activists, the MENA region is going through unexpected turmoil. Everyone—including women—hoped for a better future for Arab nations through what was called the “Arab Spring.” This “spring” has resulted in massacres, instability, and conflicts as groups fight for power. Due to these conflicts women are being killed, raped, enslaved, and sold within the confines of the region. This is not an expansion of women's rights.

The situation does not help Palestinian women either; they are suffering from the occupation, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the consequences of the Palestinian political parties wrangling for authority. This year commenced with newfound levels of degradations in women's rights due to severe poverty and the man-made crisis in the country, especially in the Gaza Strip.

After the 2014 war on Gaza, during which at least 1,500 civilians were killed according to the UN, women faced a new level of challenges. In northern Gaza, a family found a way to remain intact by having the young brother, who survived the war, marry both of his sisters-in-law. These two women, 19 and 28 years old, accepted polygamy just a few months after being widowed because they do not have many other life prospects in Gaza.

The severe poverty, high unemployment, and the continuous reversal of development in the Gaza Strip give these young widows no options for self-determination. The two women who accepted to marry their brother-in-law, among many other examples, found a way to survive and do what they can to hope for a better future for their children.

Such a contraction of opportunities in Palestine does not give hope for an expansion of women's rights under the current blockade imposed on Gaza, settlements in the West Bank, and the overall deterioration occurring in the region. I fear women will face yet more obstacles during 2015.



Wajeeha Al-Baharna, President, Bahrain Women's Association (Bahrain)

It is difficult to predict what will happen to the Arab countries in light of what we are witnessing in the MENA region. Rights violations, wars, displacement, murder, torture, and captivity increase drastically on a daily basis, exceeding what has occurred in the past few years.

This tense situation, lawlessness, and the absence of justice is reflected in the state of human rights in MENA countries: freedoms have declined, freedom of expression has been restricted, repression has increased, and the basic rights of citizenship have been arbitrarily taken away from Arab citizens. When we look at women's rights, we see that they have declined as well and conditions are getting worse. Women are exposed to violations of their rights doubly, just for being women. Women have now become the targets of movements that claim they act according to Islam, but violate the humanity of women in many ways. These movements consider women to be commodities that can be bought and sold; subjected to mass rape, stoning, and displacement; forced into *jihad al-nikah* (sexual jihad); and abused in other ways that violate their rights. Under these conditions, women try to overcome the struggles of being alive and work toward minimum living standards such as shelter and security, rather than putting their efforts toward gaining their human, political, and economic rights as they did in the past.

A poll conducted by Thomson Reuters Foundation in 2013 reported that three of the five Arab Spring countries (Egypt, Yemen, and Syria) were ranked as some of the last of the Arab countries in terms of women's rights. As a result of crises and political instability, issues of women's rights fell to the bottom of the list of priorities.

Nevertheless, despite the enormity of women's losses, there is a bright side manifested in the midst of this darkness. Women are much stronger than before; the difficulties and violations of their rights made them stand steadfast in front of challenges, liberate themselves from fear, and impose their presence in the arena of change, despite being exposed to harassment and abuse. They excelled in the use of social media advocacy campaigns and claimed their rights in front of international agencies and organizations. They became more aware of their rights and more determined to claim them. Women's movements and organizations found solidarity with each other because they face the same challenges.

Women in countries such as Morocco and Tunisia benefited from the revision and development of their constitutions, which became fairer and recognized women's rights.

In conclusion, I would say that unless governments in the MENA region take the necessary measures to deter extremist movements, unfair systems, and repressive policies regarding freedoms and human rights, then 2015 will see a contraction in women's rights.



Hala Al Dosari, *health researcher and women's right advocate (Saudi Arabia)*

Saudi women have gained more ground in recent years. This progress includes gaining access to thousands of foreign educational scholarships, the appointment of women to the royal advisory council, and the easing of restrictions on employing women lawyers, saleswomen, and businesswomen. However, Saudi women's autonomy is still controlled by the guardianship system, which limits women's access to education, employment, marriage, divorce, custody of children, travel, and identification documents. Full legal recognition is a continuous battle for Saudi women. The state's unequal status of women as full citizens manifests in policies such as the ban on driving, failure to promote women to top ministerial and government positions, excluding women from transferring their nationality to non-Saudi husbands and children, and refusing to release women prisoners upon completing their sentences except to a consenting guardian.

Saudi women activists struggle to keep up with the emerging challenges of women's inequality. On the other hand, the state's aggressive persecution of activists rendered the attempts to enhance women's autonomy ineffective. Mandates and newly enacted laws are continuously used to prosecute peaceful dissidents. Women have been arrested and prosecuted for the simple demands to lift the driving ban, to challenge religious authorities, to release prisoners of consciousness, and to demand employment.

The transition of the country's leadership to the conservative King Salman is expected to spearhead the religious lobby's ascendance to power and to control any attempts to reform women's status. Prince Mohammad Bin Nayef's appointment as a third-ranked leader in the country and as the head of the newly established National Security Council sends a clear message of keeping, and rewarding, an ironfisted strategy toward reform and dissent. If there is a force to balance the conservatives' grip on power, it would be the flux of educated young Saudi women whose access to information, along with the challenge of unmet needs, may very well carve a path in the right direction.



Fahmia Al-Fotih, *Communication Analyst, the United Nations Population Fund (Yemen)*

In the wake of the so-called Arab Spring, there have been rays of hope that some aspects of life, including women's wellbeing, will improve and flourish. To pursue this dream, people in the countries of the Arab Spring have made tremendous sacrifices and have gone through painful economic and social crises. Yet, the ongoing turmoil in the region has thwarted these attempts toward the would-be civil state and its respect for human rights. Noticeably, human rights—including women's—have deteriorated more in the region, especially in the Arab Spring countries.

The persistent insecurity issue in different countries in the region has worsened the situation of women's status. For instance, now the mounting chaos and instability in Yemen endanger the gains and outcomes of a two-year national dialogue where women's rights are documented and enshrined.

People's priorities now center on safety, security, food, water, electricity, and other basic services. Women's advancement and their rights are perceived as "trivial"—a "luxury" issue to speak about amidst the current situation. Therefore, the issues of eliminating child marriage and gender-

based violence and increasing women's representation are usually overlooked and underestimated.

In the region, women are still deprived of the simplest and basic human rights. For instance, a woman does not have rights over her own body; she does not have a say in choosing her life partner or controlling her own reproductive life.

Due to ongoing conflicts, the flood of displaced people has been increasing and women constitute the majority of those in displacement settings. They become more vulnerable and are subjected to different kinds of violence, with no or limited access to education and health services.

The emergence and growth of militias and armed groups in some areas in the region is another factor that has contributed to casting a shadow on women's rights and wellbeing. In the countries where militias like ISIS or AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) take control, women are enslaved, raped, and excluded from the public sphere.

For many years, development partners like the UN have invested substantially in the region to enhance women's status and rights. Now the chaos and the instability that engulf the region may jeopardize all that investment and the achievements made thus far.

Finally, needless to say, the expansion of women's rights is vitally and inextricably tied to democratic and economic development and as long as instability remains, women's gains and rights will be in danger.



Rend Al-Rahim, *President, Iraq Foundation and former Iraq Ambassador to the United States (Iraq)*

The onslaught of ISIS in 2014 brought devastation to northern Iraq and tragedy for Iraqis. Thousands have died, murdered in cold blood or killed during conflict. Nearly 2.5 million have been internally displaced. As always in times of conflict, women have been disproportionately affected by the violence. ISIS executed women openly in town squares for their public profile: lawyers, journalists, and candidates for parliament. Among affected minority groups, Christians, Yazidis, Shabak, and Shi'ii Turkoman, abductions and rape of women by ISIS are widely reported, as are cases of suicide. ISIS considers Yazidis idolaters and devil-worshippers, and reserves for them its most barbaric treatment, killing the men and taking the women into slavery to be sold as sex slaves. Among internally displaced persons (IDPs), many displaced families are headed by women with no source of livelihood. The poverty level has risen to 30 percent, largely affecting women.

The Iraqi state, preoccupied with elections, political power struggles, and the war on ISIS, has been unable to safeguard women or attend to their needs as IDPs. Despite demands, women have been excluded from initiatives for reconciliation and peace building. They are excluded from decision making in political parties and in government. Despite calls by activists and NGOs, the Iraqi parliament has failed to discuss proposed legislation to improve the legal status of women, increase their representation in public office, and protect them from abuse.

Amid these setbacks, 2014 recorded some successes. The elections of April 2014 returned to parliament 22 women who won seats without need for the quota system. The Iraqi government adopted a national strategy to combat violence against women, and, notably, the first National Action Plan in the region to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Yet these documents remain “aspirational,” with little implementation or practical impact on the status of women. Women’s rights activists still have a long struggle.



Safia Al Souhail, *Head of Europe Department, Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and former member of Iraqi Parliament, 2005-2014 (Iraq)*

Since its occupation of Mosul in June 2014, ISIS has perpetrated many criminal acts that have no precedent or equivalent in human history. ISIS has even invented new methods that are more atrocious, shocking, and barbaric. An observer of this series of terror, violence, and barbaric crimes by this terrorist organization cannot help but find that ISIS has taken women as a target for its criminal intentions with the aim of subjugating, frightening, and humiliating communities at large.

In Mosul and other cities occupied by ISIS, women have been killed or taken captive in brutal, savage ways that are beyond the comprehension of any reasonable human being. Women’s bodies have been torn apart without any consideration, and they have been abducted in humiliating ways. Those atrocities have even included underage girls; women and girls alike are raped and used as a sex commodity for marriages of pleasure. A kidnapped woman might be raped by several terrorists in one day.

Despite being respected by all divine religions, women have become a product that is sold by ISIS at slave markets in Mosul or Syria for warlords, criminals, and those loyal to ISIS. They have become pleasure wives and entertainment tools for ISIS militants. ISIS militants rape them whenever they want and in a constant manner just to impose a life of slavery, humiliation, and subjugation upon them.

The world, especially the MENA region, is witnessing a human disaster. We might call it a man-made tsunami that has been produced by deviant individuals and constitutes a real threat to communities. Trading women and children has become one major source of financing for this terrorist organization. However, losing one’s personal freedom in ISIS-controlled territory might be a lesser crime compared to the above mentioned ones. Women have been forced to wear the hijab and live under oppressive laws and restrictions. If they fail to comply, they face severe punishments including flogging and death.

Despite all of these atrocities, Iraqi women have made great progress. This progress has been exemplified in the recent parliamentary elections, which revealed that Iraqi youths were more inclined to vote for women. Despite Iraqi women’s role in building peace and supporting the process of national reconciliation, we might have more important current priorities: to liberate our Yazidi sisters from captivity, stop the suffering of women detained by ISIS, provide healthcare for victims and their families, and develop a plan for rehabilitation and integration. Priorities of this sort may surpass all other ones.

Iraqi women, despite all the suffering and challenges, are still unwavering in their persistence and continue to struggle for their rights. They are still waiting for solidarity and support from the international community as they fight terrorism on behalf of the whole world. This would call for all international organizations and democratic entities believing in human rights and freedoms to bear their responsibilities and obligations in supporting and saving Iraqi women from ISIS's crimes.



Lamees Al Taie, *founding member of the Omani Women's Association and member of the Omani Upper House State Council (Oman)*

Historically, the MENA region bred leaders of both sexes, and the women leaders have been quite special—from Fatima Muhammad Al-Fihri, the founder of one of the first universities in the world in Morocco, to Sayyida Khadija, the merchant wife of Prophet Muhammad (who was her employee), to tribal leaders such as Sheikha Shamsa of the 17th century in my own Oman.

Both women and men got distracted by the newly found riches after the discovery of oil in the region. Some of the social consequences of the oil boom included people having less drive and striving to be more "accepted." Elders will tell you how this resulted in the evolution of a culture that showcases being rich: people cover their faces, stay at home, and do not work in the field, and so on.

Will there be an expansion or contraction of women's rights in the MENA region in 2015? I am positive that as our youth grow with better education and a more global world, they will look back to the inspirations of our ancient region. They will not copy others and will instead solidify their roots and become more comfortable with who they are. We just need stronger education that particularly nurtures debate and acceptance. Other than that, the young stars are shining.



Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, *Executive Director & Co-Founder of the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) and Recipient of the 2014 United Nations Association Perdita Huston Human Rights Award (United Kingdom/Iran)*

2014 was a tough year in the MENA and Asia region, and 2015 will not be much better. Apart from Tunisia, where women fought successfully against the rising tide of conservatism, women—especially civil society human rights and peace activists—find themselves caught in the crosshairs of both non-state extremists and heavy-handed state authoritarianism. In Libya, many activists have fled after finding themselves on militias' kill lists. In Iraq, ISIS continues to assert its authority, blatantly and grotesquely abusing women in the areas it controls. Local women's organizations are overwhelmed with the demands of displaced and fleeing populations. In Egypt, the military regime continues to persecute and jail activists and journalists. In Syria, the war goes on and on, leaving widows in its wake.

The irony is that while the international community claims to value women's rights and respect women's voices, it is the extremists who understand the power and influence of women. They

actively recruit women to spread their ideology, while targeting and seeking to silence those who challenge them and speak out for equality.

Despite the risks, many activists are remaining at the frontlines. They focus on the sources of the problems: pushing back against discriminatory legislation, challenging false representations of religion and tradition and providing alternative narratives, and still trying to hold their governments accountable to human rights provisions. Recognizing that unemployment and frustration are key drivers of extremism and militancy among young men, some women are demobilizing militias and de-radicalizing young men by offering them work and a means of serving their communities.

The activists are exhausted and overwhelmed. But they recognize this is a critical juncture in their history. They will not let the future be shaped by autocrats, extremists, or international actors pursuing their own interests. So, in 2015, they will continue to pursue a vision of their countries that is rooted in respect for human rights, pluralism, peace, and democracy. As we mark 20 years since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and 15 years since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the international community should, once and for all, listen to the women. They are leading by example.



Christina Asquith, former public policy scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; freelance foreign correspondent in Istanbul; Senior Editor, *The Solutions Journal* ; and author of *Sisters in War: A Story of Love, Family and Survival in the New Iraq (United States)*

In 2015, many Turkish women fear their rights will continue to deteriorate under the increasingly conservative government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Last year, the government removed the longstanding ban on headscarves in school for girls as young as 10, and many families now report feeling pressure to veil their daughters. The government is also increasing the number of religious schools.

Misogynistic political rhetoric also worries Turkey's women's groups. Bigoted comments made recently by politicians include that women shouldn't laugh, should stay home at night, should be protected by men, and are to blame for abuse if they wear provocative clothing. At a summit on justice for women in Istanbul in late 2014, the *Guardian* quoted President Erdoğan saying, "our religion has defined a position for women: motherhood." Women's advocates say this rhetoric is behind the recent increase in domestic violence against women and the low sentences for male offenders.

At the same time, Turkey's strong economy and social media are giving men and women an equally powerful voice. There are an increasing number of Turkish female business leaders—including Vuslat Dogan Sabanci, chairwoman of Turkey's largest newspaper, *Hurriyet*, and Güler Sabanci, chairman and managing director of Sabanci Holding—and Turkish companies have the same percentage of female board members as in Europe. Nonetheless, Turkish women still have some of the lowest economic participation rates in the economy worldwide.

Technology also empowers men and women to lead a strong, organized civil society movement promoting women's rights. Turkish men used Twitter to organize street protests where men wore

miniskirts to stand against the accusations that women's clothing invites violence and harassment. Membership in women's groups is also growing. The fierce secular, progressive culture has coexisted in Turkey for many decades, at times contentiously, alongside the ever-increasingly religious, patriarchal government and society. If the government does attempt to further strip away women's rights in 2015, it will face a fight.



Margot Badran, *Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (United States)*

In considering the question of expansion or contraction of women's right in the MENA region in 2015, I reflect on Egypt. Since we are still at the beginning of 2015 an answer will be speculative. But judging from 2014 and recent events women's rights appear to be in a condition of stasis. Speaking as a historian who has focused on women's and feminist history in Egypt, it is clear that historically advances in women's rights, both formal and practiced, have come with concerted free, open, organized activism on the part of women themselves. After women actively participated in the 1919 Revolution they went on to create the first organized feminist movement in the country demanding an array of political, social, and economic rights. It was at the beginning of the period of quasi-independence when men's attention was riveted on their own political maneuvering. With the 2011 Revolution women were once again among those who rose up, yet this time in far greater numbers, especially but not only from among the youth, and coming from all classes. Again women made demands for rights, especially concerning the free and equal exercise of political rights which met with limited success. For the first time, last year a woman was chosen to be the head of a major political party. Her nomination, it will be noted, was put forward and heavily backed by the youth of the party seeking a new kind of leadership. Women have also been appointed to ministerial positions in greater numbers than previously. But to what extent can women set the agenda for their own rights and the expanded rights of citizens in general? At a moment when the state has made it amply clear that security, as the state understands it, is a top priority, the question of expansion or contraction of rights of women, and all citizens, has to be considered in light of state power and purpose. We have to think of the correlation between rights and freedom: the freedom to set the agenda, to debate, and to publically organize. Can there be rights without freedom?



Cheryl Benard, *President of ARCH (Alliance for the Restoration of Cultural Heritage co-author of the RAND study Eurojihad, Cambridge University Press, October 2014 (United States)*

2015 is not about expansion or contraction, but about defense of terrain already held but now in dire peril. And this is best embodied by the boots-on-the-ground, frontline women of the Kurdish *peshmerga*.

ISIS challenges the basic human rights of women, the stability of the region, the voice of Islamic moderation, and civilization itself. Their revolting deeds, flaunted in psychopathic videos, are a deliberate outrage to basic morality. The world is trying to find ways to push them back, even as the real, hard fight rages on the ground. And the frontline troops are the Kurds, among them the women of the *peshmerga*.

Feminists have an uneasy relationship with all things military. We believe that women should be empowered and given a “seat at the table” because that is equitable, and also because women are more inclined to caution and compromise, and can have a pacifying effect. That is probably true in general, although the bloodthirsty ISIS women put a crimp in the argument. My personal crimp happened years ago.

At the height of the war in Bosnia, I traveled to Zagreb. Ethnic cleansing was in full sweep, accompanied by massacres and mass rape, and refugees were flooding into Croatia. I visited the Red Crescent headquarters and spoke to the director. What, I asked him, could Western women do to help their sisters in Bosnia? I was thinking along the lines of trauma counseling and medical care. His answer was instantaneous and angry. “If you want to help the women of Bosnia,” he snapped, “send guns.”

Immediately, he apologized. Of course war was not the answer, but he pointed out the window, where a stream of battered, stunned women and children trudged toward the overcrowded basement of the mosque that represented his makeshift “intake center.” Why didn’t I go out and ask them what they needed?

I did—it was the end of my formerly pristine pacifism. They told me about their husbands, fathers, and brothers who were shot to death in front of them and about being taunted and raped by the killers immediately thereafter. To propose trauma counseling seemed like a cruel joke. They didn’t want to survive what happened, they wanted it not to have happened in the first place. When barbarism came to get them, they wanted at least to go down fighting, not be taken like lambs to the slaughter.

MENA women are brave. It takes guts to stand exposed in a voting line, to demonstrate on the streets of Tehran, to camp out in Tahrir Square. But guts are not enough. ISIS is slaughtering, enslaving, burning alive, crucifying, and beheading unarmed civilians, aid workers, minorities, and children. I salute the *peshmerga* women, who combine a civilian identity and feminist solidarity with the power to do something about it.

The *peshmerga* women’s units in Iraqi Kurdistan mix grit with normalcy. They come in all sizes and ages, they wear pink nail polish and girly hair clips, they radiate camaraderie and good cheer. Their bases double as a safe harbor for girls threatened with honor killings and wives fleeing domestic violence. Their biggest desire is to find and liberate the enslaved Yazidi women.

As we attend our conferences at a safe distance, we should keep them in mind—the female ground troops who are holding the line for women in the very real battle not just for hearts and minds, but for lives and civilization.



Kahina Bouagache, *women's rights activist, and corporate and international lawyer (Algeria)*

When I look at the status of women's rights in the MENA region, I get totally confused—if not frustrated. I try to understand the logic behind discrepancies of the laws in place, but I can't.

This is a region where all women's rights are meant to be buried under religious thoughts, clerics' words, or cultural discourses. In the middle of all this chaos, I read proudly that Tunisia managed to give the world a beautiful face of freedom: in 2015 Freedom House reported that "Tunisia [is the] first 'free' Arab country in decades."¹ When I look to the east and I see a woman being beheaded for a crime for which she claimed her innocence until her last breath, two other women being arrested and spending two months in jail for driving at the border of their country. This does not include the daily victims of the war against terror in the Middle East.

Tunisia is a Muslim country that managed to find room for secularism and a way to grant its women their rights. Morocco committed to withdraw all reservations made to CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women).² Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan are considering ways to advance their women through more progressive laws, but we are not there yet.

Why these discrepancies? How can we find a balance between a peaceful religion and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—or as Eleanor Roosevelt referred to it, the "international Magna Carta for all mankind?" The declaration was adopted by the UN on December 10, 1948 and ratified by many countries in the region.³ The preamble and Article 1 unequivocally proclaim the inherent rights of all human beings: "Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind....All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

Today we witness a struggle to implement this very basic right of life because of a religious belief. This outrageous lack of respect for women—mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives—allowed the barbaric ISIS group to produce a pamphlet about how to treat female slaves, which served as a way to justify their acts of enslaving and raping women and young girls under a religion.

These atrocities continue, unfortunately, with the silence from the Arab world, its leaders, the Arab League, and individuals, because these victims are mainly female. The day the region starts valuing its women and half of its population is this day their leaders—and the world—will start to value them as well.

I hope the region will get its act together soon before these barbaric behaviors and attitudes gain control of the entire region and the rest of the world.



¹ Freedom House report <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015#.VNFVLGR4rp4>

² <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2010/morocco-western-sahara>

³ <http://indicators.ohchr.org/>

Nadereh Chamlou, *International development expert; and former Senior Advisor, The World Bank (United States)*

This February, Iranians commemorated the 36th anniversary of the Islamic Republic. The revolution's first sacrificial lamb was women's rights. After the revolution, the state took concerted and conscious steps to drive women out of the public sphere. Early on, women were fired or "cleansed" (*paksazi*) from public sector jobs or pushed to take early retirement. When these strategies failed, employers and husbands were given instructions or incentives to do what they could to stop women from working outside the home. Subsequently, gender-specific labor regulations raised the cost of hiring women.

The government's policies of marginalization worked in the job market. The official female labor force participation rate in formal and informal sectors declined after the revolution and has never gone above 17 percent. This is among the lowest rates in the world and is even lower than Saudi Arabia's.⁴

Recently, the Iranian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs announced that the number of working women had steadily declined over the last five years in absolute terms from 3.7 million to 3.145 million. This translates into an average of net 100,000 women not working per year.⁵ Doing simple math, it means that approximately for every working minute in the year, one working woman has left the labor market for good without being replaced.⁶ For those who enter or stay in the labor market, not all is rosy. Despite improved economic growth performance, the female unemployment rate rose from 16.8 percent to 19.8 percent while the male unemployment rate declined from 19.8 percent to 8.6 percent between 2009 and 2013.⁷ In a recent IMF analysis of the cost of women's low economic participation to different countries' gross domestic products (GDPs), Iran ranked third for greatest loss of potential GDP—estimated as greater than 30 percent.⁸

Is there a glimmer of hope? Yes, despite the many barriers and lack of economic prospects, women have pushed ahead throughout the past two decades to educate themselves. Women now account for 60 percent of university students⁹ (this is still a decline from 64 percent in 2008¹⁰ because President Ahmadinejad's government introduced a 40 percent quota for men in 2006).¹¹ Former President Mohammad Khatami once remarked proudly that during his tenure women began to outnumber men in universities and this phenomenon would singlehandedly transform the Iranian society toward moderation, modernity, and democracy.

⁴ World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.Z>

⁵ As reported by <http://taghato.net/article/9694> dated 1/28/2015

⁶ 100,000/year≈8,000/month≈2000/week≈400/day≈50/hour≈1 per minute

⁷ As reported by <http://taghato.net/article/9694> dated 1/28/2015

⁸ Per capita, Iran would rank the highest, ahead of Qatar and Oman, because it has a population of 77.5 million and a per capita income of \$4,700. (<http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2015/02/23/insidious-conspiracy-against-women-costs-economies-up-to-30-of-gdp-says-imf-chief/?mod=WSJBlog>)

⁹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/iran-revolution-anniversary-islamic-republic-education.html>

¹⁰ As reported by <http://muftah.org/the-iranian-womens-movement-in-the-21st-century-by-leila-mouri/#.VOydvvnF98F> dated 8/2/2010

¹¹ Sanam Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, 2011

President Hassan Rouhani defeated his conservative rivals because the majority of his voters were women. He knows that he owes his presidency to this constituency. He made firm campaign promises and delivered strong speeches afterwards criticizing the conservatives' stand on gender issues. He has strategically placed women in positions of authority and leadership, mostly appointments that are within his purview and do not need parliamentary confirmations where they could be derailed. For instance, he appointed women as governors in difficult-to-govern regions, district managers, deputy ministers, and other positions to break the stereotypical resistance to women in leadership positions. He proudly acknowledges that these women have performed well, at times even better than their male counterparts, and stresses that he needs to do more. In fact, recent statistics show a 10 percent annual increase in the number of women managers.¹² These women will certainly be role models and open doors for others. So, perhaps Iran is inching its way toward a turning point.



Umit Cizre, *Professor and Director, Center for Modern Turkish Studies, Istanbul Şehir University (Turkey)*

Although women's status, public roles, and lifestyles are not uniform in the MENA region, and many women enjoy some progressive political and social rights (like abortion and access to high public office), women's rights in the last year have increasingly been challenged by political-cultural enemies of feminism.

Not all of these enemies speak in the language of Islam. The region's attitude toward women is more complex. The ideology that denies women personal, economic, and political freedoms and rights while offering men a sense of impunity to harass and kill women because of the way they dress and act derives predominantly from conservative moralism, patriarchy, and authoritarianism.

One good contemporary example is Turkey, a country where women's rights have historically been far more advanced under a fiercely secular and Westernizing regime. The Islam-friendly ruling party, which is also strongly capitalist as well as conservative, has settled on an undemocratic path continually making anti-feminist overtures infused with moralist and traditional sensibilities under the rubric of "protecting" women. Financial incentives are offered to women to marry young, bear at least three children, withdraw from economic life, and be confined to the home. Thankfully, as elsewhere in the region, the steady expansion of awareness of women's rights has created significant moral pressure on governments to focus on the reality of stopping violence regardless of their conservative dogma.

Another factor that has some relevance to the status of women in the region in the last year is the emergence of ISIS with its unprecedented brutality. The fact that there are Muslim women jihadists who believe in and join the ranks of an organization whose policies toward women include rape, segregation, forced marriages, and enslavement (of thousands of Iraqi and Syrian women) highlights dramatically the limits of the appeal of the feminist agenda and a fundamental division

¹² <http://tehrantimes.com/society/121353-iranian-women-managers-rising-10-percent-annually-vice-president>

among Muslim women in the region. It also compels us to seriously study to understand why women are attracted to an ideology that denigrates them.



Rangita de Silva de Alwis, Associate Dean of International Affairs, University of Pennsylvania Law School and Visiting Fellow, Harvard Law School, Human Rights Program (United States)

Women's rights in the MENA region in 2015 can be inspired by the rights guaranteed by the historic Tunisian Constitution, which is an important model of constitution engineering both in its process and substance. As the supreme law of the land, constitutions are the fountainhead of all laws and policies and define the rule of law for women.

The hallmark of the Tunisian Constitution, which was promulgated in January 26, 2014, was that it unfolded under the watchful eyes of civil society through a participatory and people-driven process. Women were conspicuously present in this process. This process-driven constitution making was very different than some of the earlier post-colonial constitutions which adopted a top-down methodology akin to the Lancaster House model of constitution drafting. The Lancaster House model employed in the making of Zimbabwe's constitution saw international experts outside the country drafting provisions without the participation of the people.

The substantive provisions of the Tunisian Constitution help shape a new narrative for the state while acknowledging the historic revolution of the people:

*“Taking pride in the struggle of our people to gain independence and to build the state, to free ourselves from tyranny, to affirm its free will...
With a view to building a participatory, democratic republican regime... respect for freedoms and human rights and duties.”*

The articles of the Tunisian Constitution embody the value of negotiation and provide a good practice example of building consensus and accommodating ideological differences. For example, although Article 1 states that Islam is the state religion and the article cannot be amended, Article 2 affirms the supremacy of the law and thus this is an affirmation that the rule of law will supersede *shari'a* law. A living constitution must ensure that equal protection under law is non-negotiable.

Article 20 of the Constitution gives primacy to international agreements but maintains that the constitution is the supreme law of the land. This allows for the use of international laws as interpretive tools in clarifying ambiguities in national laws, especially in relation to women's rights.

Article 39 guarantees that education shall be mandatory until at least the age of sixteen. This provision, if implemented properly, can have a powerful impact on the girl child and can help combat early marriage. Girls' education is sometimes sacrificed at the altar of early marriage. Mandating education for all children, including the girl child, can be a powerful vaccine against early marriage and is a cardinal human right for girls and women.



Haleh Esfandiari, *Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center (United States)*

I hope that 2015 will be a year that witnesses the expansion rather than the contraction of women's rights in Iran. I anticipate that, as in previous years, Iranian women will continue to fight the battle of the hijab, for equality under the law, for freedom of speech and movement, and for broader human rights. In this effort, they will continue to utilize open defiance, as well as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

They will continue to defy the morality police in their attempt to impose the black veil and head cover on women. Let us note that in the battle of the hijab, women have basically emerged victorious. Where women's head covers are concerned, Iranian cities are a sea of color; women are showing more hair than ever; they openly wear lipstick and makeup; and tight pants underneath ever shorter cover robes are the rule, not the exception.

I also expect that women will continue their efforts to surpass men in winning admission to institutions of higher education, and women will continue their efforts to outnumber men in colleges and universities. Thanks to President Hassan Rouhani, the decision of his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to bar women from attending universities outside their home towns and to exclude them from certain fields of concentration was reversed.

I anticipate that all these educated women will push for more access to employment and push for more gender-friendly laws in the public and private sectors and will succeed.

President Rouhani came to power promising more—particularly to repair the damage to women's rights under Ahmadinejad. He has been true to his word in some instances but has failed in others. He appointed four women as vice presidents and two women as governors in small towns; the foreign ministry spokesperson is a woman. But Rouhani appointed no women as cabinet ministers or as ambassadors. He proved unable to prevent the arbitrary arrest of women activists, including lawyers and journalists, or to secure their release from jail. Despite his efforts, the morality police remain on the streets and continue to harass women.

But Mr. Rouhani's attention to the women's issue reflects the success achieved by women activists and women of all ages and classes in making women's rights and women's place in society a question which politicians, governments, and the regime must address. I feel certain that regardless of the Rouhani government's policies and activities, women in 2015 will not give up their 36-year struggle for equality.



Amal Fadlalla, *former fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center; associate professor of Women's Studies, African Studies, and Anthropology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; and author of Embodiment Honor: Fertility, Foreignness, and Regeneration in Eastern Sudan, Wisconsin University Press, 2007 (Sudan/United States)*

There is no doubt that human rights as a universal project advocates for the dignified treatment of all humans. Since the UN recognition of violence against women as a human rights violation in 1993, the focus on the dignity of human beings acquired a gendered face. This led to the

expansion of human rights in different parts of the MENA region as reflected in the work of many NGOs working on women's issues. The expansion of human rights as a new language and culture, however, tends to represent the histories and social struggles of various social groups in the MENA region (and other regions in the global south) as simple narratives of victimized children and women. The problem with such singular accounts is that they leave many histories and practices of activism, solidarities, and communal cultures of dignity and social care unexamined.

To counter such monolithic narratives of human rights, MENA scholars have contributed rich ethnographies to bring a diverse culture of rights and dignity to the attention of the public. These present and future ethnographies and accounts are important in their own right and they compete with the human rights project. They offer multiple lenses through which one can comprehend the tactful and strategic deployment of human rights language and practices, and they provide counter-narratives that challenge universality and instead claim diverse histories of struggle.

Such scholarly contributions and counter-narratives will certainly lead to the contraction of human rights as the only framework through which to imagine a meaningful transnational community in the years to come. They will challenge how the moral narratives of human rights continue to efface the structural causes of gender disparities, militarism, war, violence, and poverty in the MENA region.



Dalia Fahmy, *Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Long Island University*
Member, Egyptian Rule of Law Association (Egypt)

This year International Women's Day falls four years after the Arab Spring. Four years ago women filled Tahrir Square calling for freedom, democracy, good governance, equality before the law, and economic opportunities. Now these women find themselves caught between the old entrenched political forms of repression and an uncertain socio-political atmosphere that uses the "war on terror" to curtail women's rights.

Female students, protesters, and activists continue to take to the streets and congregate in protest on university campuses against the upsurge in the state crackdown on voices of dissent. Under the expansive new Egyptian terrorism law, many activists and protesters find themselves vulnerable to prosecution because the law defines a terrorist as any individual or group that disrupts public order. Similarly, the new Egyptian protest law severely limits public articulation of dissent by requiring protesters to provide notification three days before protesting and obtain permission from the Interior Ministry. The ministry has the right to "cancel, postpone or move" the protest if it determines that protesters will "breach... the law." In this regard, any public forms of activism leave women open to arrest and prosecution.

Once arrested, women and girls find themselves vulnerable to violence at the hands of the state, including beatings, harassment, and sexual assaults. Incarcerated women are also subjected to inhumane treatment such as prolonged periods in solitary confinement and psychological torture in

the form of threats of sexual assault to themselves and to other members of their families¹³— treatment that is contrary to international standards, including the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders. Furthermore, there are no real mechanisms for these women to file complaints confidentially without fear of retaliation. And with the curtailing of NGO activity under the new NGO law, the incarceration system is no longer monitored and subjected to independent oversight.

The lesson of the Arab Spring so far has sadly been the same lesson drawn from other areas of conflict—whatever the reasons are for the conflict, it is always women who suffer the brunt of autocracy, totalitarianism, and repression. As this regime consolidates its grip on power further, Egyptian women can expect more of their freedoms to be curtailed unless the promise of the Arab Spring returns. As we mark the 20-year anniversary of UN Women’s Beijing+20 campaign “Empowering Women, Empowering Humanity: Picture it,” Egyptian women find their rights, their future, and ultimately their voices continuing to be curtailed and undermined. And as Egypt enters into the final stages of consolidating this government, the future of its activists, especially its female activists, continue to be in question. However, if Egyptian women can overcome these political and structural constraints on their freedom, it may be that the final chapter of the story of the Arab Spring has yet to be written.



Galia Golan, *Professor of Government and Chair of the Program on Diplomacy and Conflict Studies at the School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (Israel)*

The year 2015 promises to witness a major step forward for women in Israel. In December 2014, the Israeli government decided to enact an official National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325). Under the supervision of the government’s National Authority for Gender Equality, senior representatives of government ministries (including the foreign ministry and the defense ministry) are to participate in the drawing up of the Action Plan. Working with representatives from academia and civil society, they are to complete the effort within 180 days. According to the guidelines of the Prime Minister’s office, the Action Plan shall deal with strengthening the following: representation of women from diverse public and private sectors of society in national decision making; enhancement of women’s security and defense against all forms of violence; gender mainstreaming in all decision-making efforts; and equal opportunities for women in all areas of life including business, economics, education, health, and welfare. At the same time, the government expanded the responsibilities of the National Authority for Gender Equality, adding the important stipulation that henceforth the Authority will be responsible for gender mainstreaming in all government ministries. The government’s decision was the result of a three-year effort by a coalition of some 30 civil society women’s and human rights groups that together designed an Action Plan for UNSCR 1325 and lobbied the government to use it as a model for an official Action Plan. While UNSCR 1325 was enacted into Israeli law many years ago, an official Action Plan for its implementation, along with the expansion of the mandate of the Authority for Gender Equality, promises to bring the actual

¹³ “Circles of Hell: Domestic, Public and State Violence Against women in Egypt.” (Amnesty International: London, United Kingdom, 2015) http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/mde_120042015.pdf

status and well-being of women more in line with the country's progressive gender legislation, most importantly by bringing women of diverse backgrounds into government decision making.



Kendra Heideman, *Program Associate, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center (United States)*

For women living in ISIS-controlled territories in Iraq and Syria, it seems 2015 will unfortunately bring about a continued contraction and deterioration of rights. These women live under ISIS's brutal rule and in horrific conditions: women and girls are treated as objects to be abused, raped, sold, trafficked, and forced to marry.

In ISIS territory women have no rights, only obligations. Women are expected to be obedient wives and mothers, to cover themselves in public and keep in line with *shari'a* law, and to support the terrorist organization's mission. These obligations are detailed in *Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study*, a document published by an all-female ISIS brigade in January 2015. In the publication the authors portray what life is like for women living under ISIS, detailing an idealistic experience in an effort to recruit other women from the region.

This manifesto depicts life for women as vastly different from the numerous reports of escapees who describe the atrocious exploitation and mistreatment of women. Moreover, the women of the al-Khansaa Brigade who wrote the document are responsible for actively oppressing other women for transgressions against ISIS's strict form of governance. The publication represents the difficulty of imagining how women's situation could improve in ISIS-controlled areas, let alone how women's rights could be expanded.

Elsewhere in the region the prospects for an expansion of women's rights also look unpromising. From Libya to Syria to Yemen and beyond, women live in unstable environments where they are often the first victims of such instability and regularly excluded from participation in the public sphere.

This year's International Women's Day should be used to highlight the precarious situation of women throughout the Middle East, including those who continue to suffer under the ISIS regime.



Farahnaz Ispahani, *former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center, 2013-2014; former Member of the Pakistani Parliament; 2015 Reagan-Fascell Fellow, National Endowment for Democracy (Pakistan)*

2014 was perhaps the grimmest year for women in the MENA region in decades. The emergence and consolidation of ISIS in large swathes of Syria and Iraq has had severe consequences for Muslim and non-Muslim women in the MENA region.

Forced marriages and brutal sexual violence perpetrated on both wives and women captured in war-torn areas and turned into slaves has marked a nadir for the female population of Syria, Iraq, and other areas Daesh is moving into.

Unlike al-Qaeda, Daesh does not just want to eliminate Western allies in the region and attack Western systems. They have already put down the foundations of a state alongside the old states. The imposition of *shari'a* has begun in the regions they control.

The group practices a barbaric form of warfare and control which puts all women and women belonging to minority religious groups, like Yazidis, Shi'as, and Christians, at greater risk of death or debasement.

A United Nations Spokesperson for Human Rights Ravina Shamdasani stated in January 2015 that “educated, professional women, particularly women who have run as candidates in elections for public office, seem to be particularly at risk.”

In the first two weeks of 2015, UN reports indicate that three female lawyers were executed. Large numbers of other women have also reportedly been executed recently in ISIS-controlled areas, including Mosul according to the United Nations.

The revival of the slave trade in women from areas conquered by ISIS has further heightened the numbers and violence of the physical and sexually violent crimes against girls and women.

Unless the allied nations are able to control the spread of ISIS, 2015 is going to be a continuation of unspeakable horrors perpetrated against women in the regions the group controls.

The wealthy but tiny Gulf countries have women populations with aspirations and successes in education, in the workforce, and as entrepreneurs. However, if ISIS is not crushed soon the seeds of radicalization will sprout among their citizens as we have seen in countries as far flung as France and the United Kingdom to Nigeria.



Hind Kabawat, Senior Program Officer, Syria, United States Institute of Peace (Syria)

When I met and held Khansaa in my last trip north of Jordan at the border of Syria, I felt energy and love. Khansaa from Daraa brought her family to Jordan after the loss of her husband, three sons, and three sons-in-law. She ended up in a small house with her daughter's daughters-in-law and grandchildren. Khansaa cannot cry anymore—she ran out of tears, she told me.

For the years I spent here, I made a commitment to myself to get out of my comfort zone and to get to real work by supporting gender issues, including taking care of my Syrian mothers, sisters, and daughters in refugee camps and empowering them to be the leaders of their community.

As a Syrian who believes in change, freedom, and democracy, I am witnessing the “Arab Spring” turning into a very savage, brutal winter without even turning to summer.

Last year I visited internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and refugee camps in Turkey and Jordan. There I found Syrian women assuming more expanded roles than before the Syrian revolution, despite some male interference with their daily lives. Before, these women were mainly passive housewives, employees, and professionals, but rarely vocal about freedom and justice.

Today, the Syrian prisons are full of women. Faten Rajab, a well-known scientist from Jobar, is in the Assad regime's prison. Razan Zaitouneh, a human rights lawyer documenting human rights abuses, has been kidnapped in Ghouta by a militant opposition group.

Women activists in Syria are working in civil society, publicly expressing their opinions, and becoming more involved in public life. They are active in refugee camps and their host countries by teaching children, writing articles, and trying to make a living. In Sarakeb, a village in northern Syria, for example, a lawyer by the name of Amal Naasan documented the Assad regime's chemical attack on the village.

Women before 2011 were marginalized. They could not talk about political reform; the rights they had were "cosmetic" ones. Today, with all the tragedies Syrian women are going through, they still fight in every walk of life and are more aware of what is happening.

When I left Khansaa this time, she gave me this strong hug and told me "I have to run, you take care of yourself. I need to go to bake bread and to sell it to feed the family today, and then I will go to give some support to the young widow who just lost her husband."

Khansaa is one of a million women who are expanding their rights and refusing to give up. I envision the new Syria through Khansaa. It might take a long time for all of us to go back to Syria, but when we go back it will not be the same. Syrians lost so many male citizens from both sides of the conflict. Women are taking the lead now in the host countries and are working to support their families.

When the time is right, Syria will be built by women. This is what I felt after the big hug from Khansaa while I watched her running in her black outfit to get her work done and with her eyes full of sadness and hope.



Sema Kalaycioglu, *Professor of Economics, Yildiz Technical University, and currently advisor to TASAM and Marmara Group Foundation (Turkey)*

At the legal level, Turkey displays a progressive performance regarding the provision of gender equality, universal rights, and access to opportunity in all spheres of life. The country reforms its legal frameworks to comply with requirements of international treaties. There are areas and cases where the expansion of legal rights is translated into improvements in the status of women. However, there are several problem areas where policy implementation contradicts objectives and the contraction of rights disappoints even the basic living rights for women.

The challenges are the most visible in two areas: women's workforce participation and violence against women.

- a. The participation of women in the workforce in Turkey has been in continuous decline since the beginning of the 2000s. This is partly due to the policies that encourage early marriages (e.g. the Turkish government now offers cash rewards for marrying early), and also due to religious, traditional, and economic constraints. In 2011 women's workforce participation rate in Turkey was 25.9 percent. This figure is the lowest among EU members and candidates.¹⁴ In 2013 only 9.3 percent of all high public positions were claimed by women.
- b. Another area where legal advancements fail to provide expected outcomes is violence against women. Despite Turkey's adoption of a law against [domestic violence](#) in 2012, violence against women continues to escalate. Women are victimized by their husbands, lovers, and abusive male and female relatives through brutal beatings, rape, deliberate mutilation, and murder. The police protection of women has failed to prevent the deaths of over 800 women and the rape of at least 160 women since 2012.¹⁵ The legal framework and its implementation with various measures from the provision of shelters to alarm bracelets and buttons cannot stop the brutal crimes committed against women. A number of visible and/or disguised demographic, social, cultural, traditional, religious, institutional (also the ones related to the failure of the justice system in action), political, economic (poverty and perceived deprivation), and psychological realities (including mental disorders) and constraints must also be taken into account to understand, deescalate, and eradicate violence against women in Turkey.

All those factors constitute impediments to the progress of Turkish women as we are prepared to celebrate "women's day" in 2015.

This piece is dedicated to the memory of Özgecan Aslan.



Moushira Khattab, *Chair of Women in Foreign Policy Group, Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs; former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; former Minister of Family and Population, Egypt; and former Egyptian Ambassador to South Africa and to the Czech and Slovak Republics (Egypt)*

As we celebrate International Women's Day 2015, Egyptian women continue to fight for equality. Today, Egyptian women have regained rights previously usurped during the Muslim Brotherhood's brief reign.

Women's rights suffered a tsunami of contractions at the hands of the Islamist constitution of 2012. Women's political participation witnessed an unprecedented expansion as women proved instrumental in bringing down political Islamists. Had it not been for the critical mass of Egypt's women voters, women and Christians—a few so-called "minorities"—would have forever been

¹⁴ "İşgücüne katılımda kadınların oranı erkeklerin oranının 3'te 1i "(Participation of women in the workforce is 1/3 of men). See: www.dunya.com/isgucune-katilimda-kadinlarin-orani

¹⁵ "Laws fail to stop violence against women in Turkey", See: www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/turkey-laws-fail-stop-violence-women.html#ixzz3RMcPKNK9

labeled as second-class citizens. Societal recognition and appreciation of women's role in achieving national objectives has expanded to an all-time high. However, such an expansion has yet to be translated into support for women's demands. Another area of expansion is women's constitutional rights—gains yet to be translated into tangible advancements. The extent to which constitutional references are translated into an expansion of rights will be a challenge for the upcoming parliament.

Women have proven to be a considerable voting bloc. A women's caucus needs to be put in place to consolidate this bloc and make it work for the advancement of women's rights. Women have forged expansion in the physical space provided for them, represented, for example, by the criminalization of sexual harassment and its visible prosecution. The national hype against female genital mutilation (FGM) that faded with the January 25 revolution was resuscitated with the first trial and the January 2015 conviction of both the physician who performed FGM on an 13-year-old girl who died from the procedure and the girl's father, even though the latter's sentence was suspended.

Women's activism should be credited for the fact that 2014 did not witness contractions in women's rights in Egypt. However, in light of the abolishment of the parliamentary quota, the measure provided by the 2014 electoral law will not ensure that parliamentary representation of women is commensurate with their weight in society.

Women's status is a function of education and culture. These are the only real weapons of liberation. Religion has become a part of culture, and education is no longer limited to the classroom. As we ring in another International Women's Day, I remain hopeful that an educational and cultural revolution will give women their rightful place at the forefront of the political landscape and, most importantly, at the forefront of society.



Meg King, *National Security Advisor to the Director, President, and CEO, Woodrow Wilson Center (United States)*

In 2015, women in the MENA region will be exploited both physically and virtually, and women will exploit other women more than men.

In the physical world, men will continue to subjugate women. Already this month, doctors are reporting extreme sexual injuries to the wives of ISIS members.

However, the women of ISIS are actively restricting the rights of other women. Female ISIS members run brothels of non-Muslim women and set strict standards for those in the ISIS "family." The al-Khansaa Brigade—the all-female ISIS militia—is linked to a document this year called *Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study* requiring women to stay indoors, leaving the home only under exceptional circumstances and to conceal every part of the body—even with gloves. Interestingly, the document is not officially sanctioned by the terror group, and is intended to "clarify the role of Muslim women and the life which is desired for them...including the realities of life and the hallowed existence of women in the Islamic State."

Online, women are being used as bait to steal information from adversaries and ISIS is actively expanding recruitment efforts targeting women. Cybersecurity firm FireEye discovered that the Syrian Electronic Army posed as women in chats and used pictures of women laced with malware to obtain military documents from opposition leaders. Appealing to nurturing and domestic traits, social media campaigns are being created to appeal to women seeking to belong to families rather than using violence as they do to attract men. The “Diary of a Muhajirah” written by a 26-year-old Malaysian doctor who traveled to Syria and married an ISIS fighter is a Tumblr feed providing details about what ISIS brides should expect. This girl-next-door approach applauds life with ISIS, saying “So much love that I can’t even describe by words. Indeed, Allah replaces every loss with something greater. He took away my blood-and-flesh family, and replaces it with Deen-and-Tawheed (religion and the oneness of Allah) sisters.”



Kathleen Kuehnast, *Director, Center for Gender & Peacebuilding, United States Institute of Peace (United States)*

To respond to ISIS’s violence against women and girls, we must address gender in its complete socio-cultural dimensions—gender is not simply another name for women, but men and boys are also gendered beings. The tendency among policy makers and practitioners alike is to use gender and women interchangeably. However, this leaves us with half of a solution to many of the problems that plague women and girls in conflict and fragile settings.

Why is this important? To understand the nature of this brutal and extreme violence, we must broaden our analytical lens to include the “hyper-masculinity” notions being propagated under the cry for an “Islamic State.”

We must continue to challenge not only ISIS’s human rights abuses, but also its flawed notions about Islam and gendered understandings. We need to understand not only what incentives it offers men, but also what it means to be an ISIS man. Has a sense of “failed adulthood” figured into the appeal of joining ISIS? Does this sense of failure to become a man in their own society lead to their distorted notions of power and extreme violence?

Unless we broaden our discussion to one that incorporates a true gender lens, we will continue to normalize this hyper-malehood, this violent rite of passage for a generation of young men and women who perceive this perpetration of gender and sexual violence as a normal aspect of human wars.

We must begin challenging this conception of manhood. In their propaganda videos, ISIS calls out to the young, educated, and even elite—those they say who have nothing to do but play video games. ISIS amplifies the vacuum of many young people who feel that they will never measure up and instead offers a mission, a job, and an instant community.

Where we see a fragile society, we know that the question of masculinity is pivotal to understanding the dynamics; how one becomes a man in that society and what that means for women must be a part of our overarching equation for the women, peace, and security agenda.



Lilia Labidi, *Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center, and former Minister for Women's Affairs, Tunisia (Tunisia)*

The Parity Law adopted in Tunisia in 2011, in the context of the “Arab Spring,” obliges political parties to present electoral lists with men and women in alternating positions. However, in the 2011 and 2014 parliamentary elections, the number of women who were at the heads of these lists—and would therefore have the greatest likelihood of being elected—disappointed women’s expectations. The strongest parties—Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda—and smaller parties, like the Democratic Alliance and the Constitutional Movement, behaved similarly in the 2014 elections, because less than 10 percent of the heads of their electoral lists were headed by women. Only a few parties operated differently; the Congress for the Republic and the Union for Tunisia had the highest proportion of women at the head of the lists, 21.21 percent and 39 percent respectively. Women won 68 of 217 seats in the 2014 elections, and gained 6 more seats through ministerial appointments, resulting in a total of 74 seats (34 percent), which is the highest proportion in Tunisia’s history.

Women’s voting participation in the 2014 legislative and presidential elections was very significant. Of the Tunisian citizens registered to vote in the 2014 elections, 50.5 percent were women—an impressive figure given that some 300,000 women living in rural areas are without identity cards and thus were unable to register to vote. One example of the glass ceiling being cracked was when a woman, Kalthoum Kennou, became a candidate in the 2014 presidential election. Along with Louisa Hanoune, a recurring presidential candidate in Algeria since 2004, and Lalla Mariem Mint Moulaye Idriss, a candidate for the Mauritanian presidency in 2014, Kennou made an important contribution to the political history and women’s political role in the Maghreb.

Women will now utilize the experience they gained during the 2011 and 2014 elections in the municipal elections planned for 2015. A 2013 United Nations Development Programme study in Tunisia showed that 69 percent of those questioned believed that if women held political positions, Tunisia’s situation would improve. Sixty-six percent were in favor of having a woman fill the position of mayor. These upcoming municipal elections are an opportunity for women to increase their participation in municipal councils, become mayors, prepare for the next national elections, and help citizens realize their aspirations for the general well-being of society.



Jaleh Lackner-Gohari, *Medical Doctor and Vice President, Vienna Office, innerCHANGE associates international (iCHai) (Austria)*

The contributions for last year’s International Women’s Day publication contained congratulations and positive wishes for women in the MENA region. There was confidence that 2014 would be a good year. We now know that those hopes were not fulfilled—quite the contrary.

2014 was a year of savagery for the world and its women. Atrocities committed against women by fanatic and brutal men took new forms, and dimensions and savage practices that were

forgotten, returned. A relentless competition of patriarchal disregard for humanity emerged partly through arbitrary interpretations of Islam and manhood. Societies that were gradually expanding the slim space of female presence were turned upside down.

All this was not predictable one year ago. Poverty, unemployment, and consequences increased in societies, which negatively affected women. Jobless, aggressive men brought more violence to families. “Official” slavery practices on Yazidi women, war, famine, becoming long-term refugees, lack of education for children, life under ISIS rule, and many more excruciating experiences were but a few features of 2014. In Iran, my land of origin, and in spite of remarkable female capacity to resist, 2014 witnessed blatant segregation in public workplaces, the rejection of female singers performing on stage, and random acid attacks on women on the streets of Isfahan. Women in Turkey and Egypt were suppressed and murdered. All of this is anachronistic and unprecedented backwardness.

This does not exactly herald a rosy horizon for women in 2015! Even in an imaginary best-case scenario in which conflicts and extremism are ended, the aftermath of ongoing damage will not soon provide space for civilized reforms in unequal societies. 2015 is unlikely to be different from 2014. MENA women will further sacrifice their lives and values and take the lion’s share of the burden of conflict. It is thus wise to brace against escalating atrocities that affect women most.

And yet, there must be hope. Chaos can open unexpected venues. Women will look for them and will develop long-term visions together. Women’s energies for peace and their confident resistance should be bundled.

Strategies for a better future are badly needed.



Amal Mudallali, *Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center (Lebanon)*

The status of women in the MENA region in 2015 is a mirror image of the political field: explosive, contested, undecided, and fraught with danger and the threat of the loss of past gains.

As many Arab countries descended into civil war and chaos, women were the first victims of the violence and oppression that befell these Arab societies. Not only have women had their lives shattered, lost loved ones, and been displaced from their homes, but they have also fallen prey to new savage tactics and brutality by both old regimes and new extremists alike. Women in the region have recently been subjected to unprecedented violence, including acid attacks on women in Iran, rape, and the enslavement of Yazidi women in Iraq. Atrocities are committed by the new so-called “Islamic State,” other militias in Iraq, the Bashar al-Assad regime’s militias, and others.

The rise of extremist forces throughout the Arab world threatens the gains women have made in the past decades. This extremism creates a new culture of intolerance of women and their rights and tries to impose a new conservative vision on these societies. Throughout the region, there are efforts to back-track the progress that women have achieved in public and civil life and to silence women. This was symbolically best exemplified by the “Sit down, Hind” shout by a conservative, male Jordanian parliamentarian who wanted to silence his female colleague who was expressing an opinion. He also cursed the quota policy that brought her to parliament.

Women activists in the region express fear that extremist Islamists are threatening the achievements of women politically, legally, and socially. They even complain of the rise of a new language and discourse which negatively affect society and women.

But women are mobilizing and pushing back. There are examples of bright lights for women amid this darkness that descended on them and their counties. Razan Zaitouneh is still held as a hostage in Syria for her courageous work on behalf of the Syrian people. Major Mariam Al Mansouri led UAE air strikes against ISIS. Nadia Sakkaf, the information minister of Yemen, became the voice of resistance to the Houthi coup in Yemen through her Twitter account. Women entrepreneurs in the region are standing up and are competing successfully in our interconnected world.

The future of women in the MENA region is the future of democracy, and today they are both in peril.



Musdah Mulia, *Chairperson, Indonesian Conference on Religion for Peace (ICRP) (Indonesia)*

The increasing power of Islamist groups in the MENA region over recent years has reinforced patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory legislation which strongly oppose all kinds of women's rights, especially health and reproductive rights. This viewpoint, propagated through *fatwas* issued in various MENA countries, has contributed to the interpretation among some Muslims that the concepts of reproductive rights and family planning are un-Islamic, or even pose a threat to the Muslim community.

In talking about women's rights, women have witnessed different kinds of discrimination and exploitation which occur in kinship structures, politics, economic life, and different manifestations of cultural and religious practices.

In order to achieve the betterment of life, women in the MENA region should work together to combat violence against women, illiteracy, discrimination, and under-representation in governmental and economic sectors as well as in public life. Thus, women intend to:

Firstly, address prevailing cultural traits that reinforce patriarchy and use Islam as a justification for depriving Muslim women of their rights, which are sanctioned in both the Holy Quran and in hadith (reports of the Prophet Mohammed's teachings, traditions, and sayings). It is important to support women with literacy and legal awareness to know their rights and to empower them to eliminate all forms of violence exercised against them, including rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, and child abuse.

Secondly, provide women with a minimum of education; raise the marriage age of women; put legislative limits on polygamy; ensure judicial supervision of all forms of divorce; grant eligible women the right to financial, educational, and other guardianship over their children; support women's rights in inheritance; and last, but not least, provide girls living in rural areas with education and information.



Marina Ottaway, Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center (United States)

Contradictory trends are affecting women's rights in the MENA region, with slow progress in some areas and dramatic regression in others.

In the more politically stable countries, women continue to see a consolidation or even expansion of their formal rights and opportunities. Rights that appeared to be threatened by the rise of political Islamist parties in Tunisia, Egypt, and even Morocco have been preserved. In Tunisia and Morocco, Islamists understood that they could not maintain political support without respecting the rights women had already acquired. The overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, while a step back for democracy, safeguarded existing formal rights and most importantly made the new government particularly sensitive to the issue in order to differentiate itself from the Muslim Brotherhood. Rape is finally being treated as a crime to be prosecuted rather than a well-deserved punishment that women bring down upon themselves through their behavior.

In the conservative Gulf countries, women continue making slow inroads in the job market and education. Even in Saudi Arabia, women have finally been given the right to vote in local elections and more of them have been appointed to the Shura Council. The government has made more jobs available to women, and courageous entrepreneurs find ways to circumvent the social and legal restrictions and thrive. The return of thousands of young people of both genders from American and European universities will add increasing pressure for change in the coming years. The pace of change will depend in part on the women themselves, particularly on the willingness of the educated, Westernized women who typically lead the fight for women's rights to work with rural and lower class women rather than ignoring them or, worse, despising them.

In countries racked by violence, women's rights have suffered a serious setback even when laws have not changed. In Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or Libya, today the issue for most women is not formal rights, but survival. In countries where the authority of the state has broken down, rights do not mean anything. And societies are also breaking down, removing the already limited protection even conservative ones provided.

The most dramatic setback comes from the systematic effort by extremist Islamist organizations to suppress women's rights and impose on them the strictures demanded in the most retrograde interpretation of *shari'a*. The Islamic State of Syria and al-Sham (ISIS) and the growing number of extremist movements that are affiliated with it or model themselves after it are not simply violating women's rights: they do so as a matter of principle and feel proud and virtuous as a consequence. In the parts of Syria and Iraq controlled by ISIS, even Muslim women have lost the right to work and be educated, let alone to play a public role of any type. Non-Muslim women have become fair game, bought and sold or given to ISIS fighters as rewards. The fight for women's rights in these cases becomes undistinguishable from the fight against the extremist groups in general, because only their defeat will allow the discussion of women's rights to be re-engaged.



Smadar Perry, Senior Middle East Editor in Yedioth Ahronot daily (Israel)

There is some encouraging news about women in the MENA region: newly appointed King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia ordered (a few days after Prince Charles of the United Kingdom visited the Saudi king)¹⁶ the release of two women who were caught and detained for driving.

We also read that President Abdul Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt will push for women's equal rights. Queen Rania of Jordan has also demonstrated activities for improving women's legal status in her kingdom.

What else? If one reads women bloggers around the Arab and Muslim worlds, one must conclude that there is not too much going on regarding the positive side of gender issues.

On the contrary, leaders who are pre-occupied with the sickening, dangerous phenomenon of Daesh are trying to lower the profile of women's equality; it is not the right time and it is not the hottest issue.

If President el-Sisi, for example, wants to push for empowering young, talented (and highly frustrated) women in Egypt, then he must provide real security in public places. It is the ruler's duty to make sure women are not sexually harassed in metro stations, on the streets, or in offices. If King Salman wants to see more women doctors in hospitals or more active businesswomen, those old, tough restrictions on women's movements must be removed.

Do we see change on the horizon? I doubt it. I can't find highly convincing data for optimism. On the contrary: I have been reading the manifesto on the "desired role" of women in the "Pure Islamic Society" as revealed last month in *Dabiq*, Daesh's mouthpiece. Young girls are forced to grow up and be well groomed for their real role in life: being devoted housewives (24/7 slaves) and well-prepared mothers for "the next generation of Jihadists."

Young girls' parents should opt for "the arrangement" that will lead their helpless daughter to be married at the age of 9, or 16 at the oldest. This young "bride" should not leave the house more than three times per week; she must be covered fully; and she must refrain from going to boutiques or "satanic" beauty parlors.

Looking from the outside into Muslim societies, I see two rival camps: secular vs. religious. Both are Islamists. I can hardly hear the intellectuals because they have become too frightened. But I can identify moderate voices as well as fanatic preachers and those who adopt brutality in the name of Islam.

Kings and presidents in Middle East are fighting for compromise—a third way to please and calm down the other camp. Unfortunately, this compromise will not serve the weak element of their societies. I can't see drastic change in gender opportunities in the coming future.

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¹⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31449972>

Julia Craig Romano, Program Assistant, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center (United States)

Women's rights in the Middle East will contract in 2015 in the face of continuing violence. Conflicts disproportionately affect women and girls, and in countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—where conflicts have only escalated since the year began—the human rights of civilians, particularly women, are violated daily.

Since ISIS started consolidating its power in Iraq in 2014, for example, women have been subjected to rape, kidnapping, sexual slavery, execution, and other forms of abuse. ISIS's crimes against women have continued in 2015; there have been reports that two women doctors were killed for refusing to treat ISIL fighters, three women lawyers were executed, a woman was stoned to death after being accused of committing adultery, and three women had their hands cut off in Mosul in 2015 alone.

Women and girls who have avoided living in ISIS-controlled territories end up as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs), but women in these situations are vulnerable to violence as well. Various departments of the United Nations have reported that women refugees and IDPs have been subjected to domestic violence.

Unless the various militias and coalitions intervening in Iraq and Syria stop ISIS, adequate humanitarian aid is provided to those who need it, and communities are regenerated, the rights of women will continue to be violated in Iraq.

Women in all areas of society, however, have fought back against these human rights violations. Iraqi MP Vian Dakhil, for example, has spoken out against ISIS's crimes and called upon the international community to provide military support not only to combat ISIS, but also to provide humanitarian aid. Additionally, female Kurdish fighters fight alongside their male counterparts in the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces to foil ISIS's advancements. These women, and countless others who fight against ISIL in a less visible way, are a testament to the nature of women in conflict in the MENA region and beyond.



Hanan Saab, Founder, co-owner, and CEO, Pharmamed; founding member and former president, Lebanon League for Women in Business; founding member and former vice president, MENA Businesswomen's Network; Chair of MENA jury for Cariter Women Initiative Award; and board member, Arab International Women Forum (Lebanon)

Amidst the political turmoil in the MENA region at large along with the growing terrorism, wars, and sectarianism in the Levant, concerns are mounting over the future of the region. The wars in the areas of conflict have fueled an exodus of families into neighboring countries, creating changes in the demographics and heavily burdening the economies of these countries.

The United Nations and NGOs that are active on the ground have been struggling to allocate efforts and resources to secure the health, safety, and sanity of the suffering population, where women and children constitute the majority of the refugees.

While it is understandable that in light of the severity of the conditions these issues top the list of NGOs' priorities, such circumstances should also provide an opportunity for creating awareness about human rights and in particular women's rights.

Women remain the primary pillar in the household; they carry the main burden of bringing up children. Their role is pivotal, particularly in times of conflict. They are the mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters of men who are the fuel for perpetuating the conflict and sectarian war. Women have attained gains in education, surpassing men across the MENA region, along with enlightened, empowered women in the economy, government, and other professions; all cannot afford to be inert or marginalize themselves at this especially difficult time. NGOs that are focused on women's empowerment should intensify their efforts and collaborate under an umbrella of a critical mass that creates awareness about women's rights in different walks of life. This is for the welfare of their families, future generations, and MENA societies. This is a historical moment; the clock is ticking... the question remains: will this be acted upon in a timely manner?



Fatima Sadiqi, *Senior Professor, Linguistics and Gender Studies; Co-Founder, International Institute for Languages and Cultures (INLAC); Director, Isis Center for Women and Development; UN Gender Expert; and President, National Union of Women's Organizations (Morocco)*

Women's rights in Morocco have been witnessing an ebb and flow movement since Islamists were elected to office on November 25, 2011. The first Islamist-led coalition lasted only two years, after which the latter coalition proved to be just like the other parties and failed to deliver on issues such as employment. As a result, they somehow "demystified" political Islam in Morocco, as was the case with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia. On October 10, 2013 and on the eve of parliament's new session, a cabinet shuffle resulted in the Islamists losing key positions such as the foreign affairs portfolio to the National Rally of Independents (RNI), a liberal party. The cabinet grew from 31 to 39 positions, 15 ministers were replaced, and 5 women were added in the new version of the Islamist government. Technocrats held key positions that were also taken by party members. In sum, the shuffle considerably diluted the power of the Islamists by reducing their space in decision making because they then needed to share more power with other parties.

As a result, women's rights organizations had slightly more room to maneuver, especially after the Moroccan Islamist Prime Minister, Abdelilah Benkirane, stated that the new Justice and Development Party-led coalition government was "not against the principle of parity and equality between men and women, as a constitutional right." Furthermore, in July 2013, Bassima Hakkaoui, the Islamist Minister of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development of Morocco, announced there would be 143 procedures to prevent various forms of discrimination against women. She also pledged to promote the principles of parity and equality advocated by the new Moroccan constitution, along with the development of legal and legislative texts to protect the rights of women and prevent violence against them.

However, these promises have remained on paper. The ground reality tells a different story: the bill on violence against women is still pending and does not seem to attract any attention from the government. This is despite the ongoing struggles of Moroccan women including the poignant

cases and suffering of 30,000 child housemaids, the suicide of 25-year-old Fadwa Laroui and the misery of thousands of single mothers and their children, as well as the staggering statistics of women victims of marital violence (62.8 percent according to 2011 official statistics). The moralizing discourse of Islamists is harming these categories of women who are often victims of rape, forced marriage, or incest. Even if passed, the bill addresses married and divorced women and does not include provisions relating to single mothers. There is a growing fear that women's hard-won rights are retracting amidst a growing misogynistic ideology attacking women's work and calling them to go back home, and the looming danger of new types of violence such as *jihad al-nikah* (forced prostitution of brainwashed young girls), human trafficking, and pervasive sexual harassment.



Fatima Sbaity Kassem, former Director, UN-ESCWA Centre for Women; and author, researcher, and consultant on women and gender issues in Arab countries (Lebanon)

The year 2014 turned out to be a doomsday scenario for women. Atrocities were and continue to be committed by barbaric ISIS against men and women, notably in Iraq (particularly against Yazidis) and Syria. The threat that this will spread to neighboring countries remains. Violence against women—on the basis of religious affiliation, ethnicity, or race and in traditional and new forms and guises—is rampant in other MENA countries as well. This includes beheading, burning alive, stoning for alleged adultery, trafficking of women, girl-child marriages, abductions, gang rape, *jihad al-nikah* as trophies for fighters, and kidnapping of young girls from schools (in Sudan). It also includes the more common forms of traditional violence against women like marital rape, female genital cutting or mutilation (FGM), domestic violence, incest, and honor killings.

The plight of women is deep and immeasurable. The fight for women's rights is being replaced by the fight for their lives, existence, and dignity in these conflict-stricken areas, particularly as religious extremism emerged as the currency of 2014. Hopefully this will not be the case in 2015. This comes to mind as we query whether an expansion or contraction of women's rights is perceived at the onset of 2015 and as we approach International Women's Day on March 8.

In the name of Islam, powerless women are being killed and atrocities are being committed against them with complete disdain and disregard for their rights as human beings and equal citizens. Why is it that women continue to pay such a heavy price for change?

It took the Europeans 100 years of war to achieve democracy and separate religion from politics. How long will it take countries in the Arab and Muslim worlds? Should we believe in and pursue "linear development" or jump phases by learning from other countries' mistakes? It seems to me that the path is a mixed one, and the answer to whether it is a contraction or expansion in women's rights must also be a mixed one.

Tunisia is an excellent example of jumping phases, learning from others' mistakes, and emulating success stories. Tunisia is a success story of democratization premised on a healthy mix of politics and religion in a women-friendly and enlightened setting. In other Arab countries, women's rights are taking one step forward but two steps back. Yet, some countries may have to experience 100 years of conflict in order to achieve peace, development, and gender equality. However, unless the Muslim and Arab worlds realize that religion, particularly political Islam, must be kept in the

private sphere, democracy and gender equality will remain a dream unrealized. Moreover, home-grown democracy combined with good governance and privatized religion will bring about equal citizenship and a “women’s spring” will eventually dawn on the Arab and MENA region.



Barbara Slavin, *Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council’s South Asia Center and Washington Correspondent, Al-Monitor.com (United States)*

It is hard to be optimistic about the status of women in a region blighted by authoritarianism, male chauvinism, poor governance, and violence. Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya are being torn apart by civil war, and women and children are among the least able to defend themselves. The atrocities of the group that calls itself the Islamic State—most notably the abduction and sexual enslavement of Yazidis—are only the most notorious of the abuses women face in Iraq and Syria. Refugees—predominantly women—fleeing conflict are particularly vulnerable. Many Syrian refugee families are marrying off underage daughters in an effort to afford them some protection. Education for girls has been disrupted, jeopardizing women’s advancement throughout the Levant.

In other countries, the situation is better but women’s rights still lag behind those of men. Egypt has finally [sentenced a doctor to prison for the female genital mutilation](#) of a 13-year-old girl that resulted in her death. But the practice persists particularly in rural and upper Egypt and condemns a majority of Egyptian women to lives without sexual pleasure. Saudi women still cannot drive or travel without the permission of a male guardian and face discrimination in employment. The late King Abdullah appointed women for the first time to a consultative council that has very little authority over political decision making. In Iran, women are more liberated in many respects than their Arab sisters but also suffer high levels of unemployment and second-class legal status when it comes to inheritance, divorce, and child custody. Iranian women are increasingly active in civil society and are looking to President Hassan Rouhani to keep his promises to increase their roles in Iranian institutions. However, the overall lack of full democratic rights and individual freedom constricts women’s ability to achieve their potential throughout the region and deprives societies of the contributions they could make.



Tara Sonenshine, *Distinguished Fellow, School of Media and Public Affairs, The George Washington University, and former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (United States)*

The progress of women’s rights in the MENA countries continues to be uneven—and in some areas, the outlook for 2015 speaks more of contraction than expansion. Violence throughout the region inhibits growth, prosperity, and individual freedom for women. The rise of ISIS and other extremist groups poses new challenges for women and girls whose lives are more dangerous, both physically and socially. War does not help women. Think of the educational opportunities lost by Syrian girls and women as refugees in camps throughout the region. Think of the Iraqi women who now face the imposition of *shari’a* law in places like Mosul. Think of the lawlessness in Libya and the constraints that an absence of justice imposes on women activists in that dangerous country.

Women in Egypt—despite reforms—continue to face high rates of physical and sexual abuse, violence, and harassment, according to the January 2015 Amnesty International report. The bright spot in the region is still Tunisia where new centers for women entrepreneurs are opening and business development continues for Tunisian women and girls. And yes, all over the Middle East and North Africa, there are individual stories of heroism—Arab women journalists who manage to cover the news, Syrian legal activists, Kurdish women fighters, and women champions of democracy and development. But, overall, 2015 does not bode well for the expansion of rights for the wonderful women of the MENA region.



Robin Wright, *USIP-Wilson Center Distinguished Scholar (United States)*

It's hard to see even a glimmer of light for women in the Middle East. So many places have rolled back rights or produced new crises that endanger women either physically or politically—or both. The rundown is just damned awful:

Syria: Life today is often about simple survival. Half of Syria's population—some 12 million people— have been displaced from their homes or have fled across borders because of the two wars that threaten to dismantle the country. The vast majority are women and the children they care for.

The prospects are also abysmal for girls. More than 3 million children are out of school because their schools were destroyed or they have fled their hometowns. Others live in ISIS-controlled territory where women have been forced back behind the veil and discouraged from education, work, and even leaving the home. Syria's wars imperil a whole generation, the girls most of all.

Iraq: Since last June, a third of Iraqi territory has been consumed by ISIS, so Iraqi women and girls also face rigid new restrictions on their public lives. Life is precarious for the majority Sunni women living under ISIS rule, but minority women, notably the Yazidis, face existential threats of rape and forced marriages.

Egypt: Sexual assault is still rampant, despite the return of autocratic rule under President Sisi. Women have limited means of protesting for their rights, with new restrictions on the right of assembly and the harassment or arrest of dissidents.

Libya: Life for females is worse than at any time since the 2011 uprising because the North African country is now a failed state with two rival governments and dozens of militias vying for political and territorial control.

Saudi: Women continue to be arrested for trying to attain basic rights, such as driving. Girls and women still have to get permission from a male guardian—a father, husband, son, or brother—to get advanced education, travel, or seek employment. Sometimes women are forced to rely on husbands who divorced them. Women are also subject to draconian punishment, including beheading.



Najat Zarrouk, *Former Governor, Director of Training of Administrative and Technical Staff, Ministry of the Interior, Kingdom of Morocco; Member of the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration; and Governor, Member of the Board of the Arab Women's Leadership Institute of Amman (Morocco)*

In Morocco, public service was opened to women without limits and on the same footing as men through the General Statutes of the Public Service in 1958, following independence. This law was reinforced by all Moroccan constitutions until the 2011 Constitution that entrenched and accepted the principle of gender parity. After more than half a century of women's work, contributions, and involvement in public service in education, health, housing, roads, finance, foreign affairs, and beyond, what can we observe?

Women represent more than 38.6 percent of Morocco's civil service and 16 percent in decision-making and leadership positions. Today, women are in all areas of the public sector and are promoted and appointed to leadership positions, due to the country's royal vision and good will.

But what is ironic is that while girls have the highest scores graduating from Moroccan and foreign universities, the higher up the administrative hierarchy, the fewer women there are. In reality, the presence of women in decision-making positions often do not meet the merit criteria—other considerations (including connections) also come into play. We also see women “parachuting” from other sectors and receiving decision-making positions because of similar factors, which destroys the morale of the women who work seriously on a daily basis.

Once women are in leadership positions, other problems surface:

- Women face discrimination for access to information, resources, means of work, benefits, and other advantages (bonuses, benefits in kind) which are surrounded by opacity;
- Women are placed under the microscope to see if we will call them *Madame le Directeur* vs. *Madame la Directrice*, and to see how they dress, talk, work, and solve problems. We look forward, with impatience, to see when they will make a mistake. Do we have the same behavior toward men?
- Women spend their time (sometimes to the point of exhaustion) trying to excel and to demonstrate they deserve the place that we grant them. A woman will be the first to arrive and the last one to leave the workplace, usually forgetting about her family, leading to other kinds of troubles, even divorce;
- Working hours do not accommodate the woman who, once finished with her professional duty in public service, must fulfill her duty as a wife, as a mother, or as a daughter-in-law;
- Working conditions are also problematic. Few public administration offices have thought to establish restaurants and nurseries for children of officials (like in the UN Headquarters or the City Hall of Paris), which will enable women to fulfill their professional duty while being reassured that they can see their children during their lunch break, for example. These are very simple things but have significant impact for promoting the status of women. But who wants to make it easy for women, not only in Morocco, but everywhere in the world?

We have still to struggle for credibility, respect, equality, and dignity for women. This is a global issue.



Dalia Ziada, *Director, Liberal Democracy Institute of Egypt (Egypt)*

While women are being sold as slaves by ISIS, Egyptian women have gone a long way in their quest for equal rights. For the first time in our history, three women were appointed as deputy governors, and the constitution states very clearly that “men and women are equal” without adding any provisions to this equality. The next step for proper empowerment of women as decision makers would definitely be to have the new parliament, with at least 10 percent women members, translate this constitutional text into action. However, the real challenge facing Egyptian women today is not limited to political and social empowerment. Women, like the rest of the community, are facing the serious threat of Islamist-based terrorism. ISIS territory is not that far from Egypt, and the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood—who tried to legalize female genital mutilation and child marriage while they were in power two years ago—still affect the social mindset through extremist religious rhetoric. The majority of imams, especially in rural areas, still speak against basic women’s rights and recite toxic hate speeches that give legitimacy to terrorism. Accordingly, one of the main challenges ahead is to qualify women to fight terrorism. While they cannot carry weapons or join military forces to chase terrorists in the vast Arab deserts, women still can be trained to lead the social and psychological war against terrorism. Women as mothers, community leaders, and now decision makers can play a tremendous role in changing the social mindset about the form of Islamism that ISIS and other terrorist organizations promote. It is time for Egyptian and Arab women to try taking a bigger role and address their own gender-related problems by making an effort to fix and restore the larger image of our collapsing region.



Please note that the opinions expressed herein are those of the individual authors and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.



MEP's July 10, 2013 event: "Can International Human Rights Norms Secure Women's Rights in the MENA Region?"



MEP's January 30, 2014 event: "Arab Spring or Arab Autumn: Women's Political Participation in the Arab Uprisings and Beyond"



MEP's October 18, 2013 event: "MENA Women in the Reformist Process: A Retrospective"



MEP's October 2, 2012 event: "Women after the Arab Awakening"



MEP's December 9, 2014 event: "A Conversation with Vian Dakhil"

International Women's Day Series

[Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring: Women's Voices from Around the World](#)
(March 2012)

[Challenges to Women's Security in the MENA Region](#)
(March 2013)

[MENA Women: Opportunities and Obstacles in 2014](#)
(March 2014)