

Five Years after the Arab Spring: What's Next for Women in the MENA Region?

THE WOMEN IN
PUBLIC SERVICE PROJECT



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In Celebration of International
Women's Day 2016

Five Years after the Arab Spring: What's Next for Women in the MENA Region?

March 8, 2016

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Introduction by Kendra Heideman, Program Associate, Middle East Program, Wilson Center

On the occasion of International Women's Day 2016, the Middle East Program and Women in Public Service Project at the Wilson Center asked a number of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the United States what they hope the status of women in the region will be in the next year and what needs to happen for women to get there. We bring together their responses – which cover a wide geographic region and a wide range of views – in this publication.

We would like to dedicate this year's International Women's Day publication to Haleh Esfandiari, the founder and former director of the Middle East Program, who is an inspiration to women throughout the MENA region and the world. It was Dr. Esfandiari's idea to launch the International Women's Day publication series in 2012, and we are pleased to continue this annual publication series in her name in 2016 and beyond.



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

Five years have elapsed since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. What did Arab women gain from these uprisings? Did these years indeed turn from a fruitful spring to a frightful autumn?

Women in most Arab Spring countries were a part of an “awkward equation” in modern democracies. Part of this issue was not only the need to recognize the importance of their political rights, but also the reluctance of some parties to embrace serious positions concerning women's issues.

The status of women has not improved in most Arab Spring countries. Their social, economic, and political demands have not been fulfilled; they have instead been dragged by terrorist groups into battlefields in several countries, thus becoming enslaved, widowed, or bereaved.

In some Arab Spring countries, women are subjected to a reality that is unlike anything that has existed except in mythology. They are overwhelmed by the surrounding circumstances, because the region has fallen into the abyss of political and military conflicts. Women have paid the price of these conflicts in two ways. First, religious discourse in many parts of the Arab world has turned against women; some cowardly personalities who call themselves religious men have begun to spout haram-halal fatwas which restrict women's rights and roles. Second, girls are forced into marriage, being offered as sacrifices to men for pleasure, or sold as slaves and war loot in “markets.” These violations of women's and children's bodies are sanctioned by the laws of these terrorist groups. Arab women shall always consider this time in history as “the Dark Ages.”

However, observers of Arab women's affairs, in general, may note bold measures taken by some countries to improve their conditions, most of which have been extraordinary. These measures include the enactment of quotas, which gave a greater number of women access to

political life and participation in the decision-making process, in addition to assuming leadership positions across public and private sectors.

The disappointing outcome for women during the five years after the Arab Spring has meant that it cannot be characterized as “the women’s spring,” despite the prominent role they have played in its development. The least Arab women deserve is equality, human dignity, democracy, and justice.



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

Women continue to face growing security challenges in Iraq due to structural changes within the country, a general shift toward extremism, civil war, and political uncertainty. Iraqi women face both threats to their personal security on a daily basis and the continued deterioration of general security conditions.

Several examples must be considered to better understand the nature of security threats to women. In recent events, 3,500 women and children from the city of Sinjar were held as slaves according to a UN report. Thousands of women have survived rape, enslavement, torture, and forced “marriages.” In the city of Ramadi, Iraqi authorities recently discovered many mass graves of women who were executed by extremist groups.

Moreover, women continue to face similar threats across the country. These include random attacks by extremist groups, domestic violence, and honor crimes. Various reports also showed that many Iraqi women who wish to participate in the political and economic process are facing threats and kidnappings in some parts of Iraq. Lack of security, in conjunction with initiatives from extremist groups, has proven to be the main obstacle in preventing women’s empowerment and advancement in the country.

Security issues for women have a serious impact on society as a whole, in addition to affecting any country’s international relations and human rights records. Such security concerns have also led to an increase in women suffering from mental and physical problems and other acute illnesses, which further impact society, families, and the country’s economy.

Efforts should be made to offer more security for women, particularly in areas affected by war. Policymakers on the national and international levels – including religious figures – should recognize the importance of security for women by increasing the participation of women in decision-making positions and in Iraq’s economy, and by implementing actions to rewrite the civil and penal codes to add language related to gender violence, honor crimes, threat definitions, and tougher punishments.



Areej Abuqudairi, *Visiting Arab Journalist, Wilson Center, and regular contributor, Al Jazeera English (Jordan)*

The steps to improve the status of women in Jordan are more complicated than they would appear. It is impossible to address gender equality in the country without also addressing the needs of its women refugees.

Five years into the Syrian conflict, [Jordan is now home to 1.3 million Syrian refugees](#), the majority of whom are women and children. [More than one quarter of Syrian households are headed by women](#). Many Syrian refugees in Jordan live in poverty, exacerbating domestic violence, child marriage, and child labor in the community.

Jordan's support system for gender-based violence survivors was already inefficient before the Syrians' arrival. The mass influx of refugees has overwhelmed the system, which has made it even harder for women and girls—both Syrian and Jordanian—to receive the support and help they need.

Finding an immediate and durable solution to the Syrian refugee crisis is key to ending the suffering of women and girls in Jordan and beyond. This requires a genuine commitment from the international community to resettle Syrian refugees in countries where the support system is more robust, to ensure women and girls receive the protection and education they deserve.

Meanwhile, Jordanian women continue to struggle with gender stereotypes and discriminatory laws that inhibit their participation in political and public life. One immediate step forward is including them in the workforce. Jordan has shown remarkable gender equality in terms of access to education and health. Women outnumber men pursuing university education, yet, [more than 64 percent of Jordanian women with a university degree remain unemployed](#).

Currently, [22 percent of Jordanian women participate in the labor force](#), compared to 88 percent of men. In order to bring women into the labor force, decision makers must realize that women's employment is crucial not only for elevating their status in society, but also for Jordan's development.

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

Despite still being under blockade in Gaza, facing unrest in the West Bank, and dealing with tremendous challenges while living in geographic isolation, women in Palestine still take the lead in their societies, as women do throughout the region. It is impressive how women cope with all the havoc spreading throughout the region and find within themselves the creativity, resilience, and strength to carry on, and when possible, develop successful lives, whatever this concept might mean in their societies.

It is fascinating to see young girls in the Gaza Strip actively engaged and involved in students' assemblies and successfully formulating school parliaments where they seek to serve and

represent their fellow students in issues that matter to all of them. Through these organizations, they also aim to spread international principles of human rights, equality, dialogue, and tolerance in their communities. Such young women leaders will be part of the future of their families, communities, and Palestine.

However, this potential will also be subjected to tremendous pressure by community traditions, increasing poverty, and negative consequences of the successive conflicts. As a result, many of these young leaders will have to give up and follow the decisions life throws in their paths to survive. Therefore, it is of great importance to set mechanisms of support for young girls, as well as boys, over the coming years to find a future away from war and extremism. This is also crucial to find peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis, which will only be possible if we provide children with the possibility to dream of a future and the opportunity to work successfully toward it.

Political will – where all of us bear responsibility – and political decisions are required to find peace and security for the generations to come.



Hala Al-Dosari, *visiting scholar, Arab Gulf States Institute (Saudi Arabia)*

The year of 2015 revealed to women in Saudi Arabia the limits of the state's tolerance for women's rights. Women's participation for the first time in the December municipal election was clogged with restrictions. "Baladi," a civil campaign to engage women in the democratic process, was ordered shut shortly before the election. Many women could not register as voters because of technicalities. Women candidates were banned from showing their pictures or engaging directly in campaign promotions with men in their constituencies. Some successful candidates were disqualified by the Ministry of Interior due to their critical opinions and advocacy work. The resulting one percent proportion of women elected testifies to the symbolic empowerment of women citizens in Saudi Arabia.

In 2015, authorities sent two women drivers to prison and tried them for the terror-related crime of inciting public opinion against the state. As a champion of the national transformation plan, the deputy crown prince, Mohammad Bin Salman, declined to comment on the driving ban and falsely claimed that women were able to travel freely – a sign of the state's embarrassment of its own policies. Women's participation in the labor force persistently remained below 20 percent because of the challenges of commuting, the difficulty of finding jobs that satisfy gender segregation laws, and the unavailability of daycare facilities. The state relegated the legal status of Saudi women to the religious lobby. As a result, personal status codes are non-codified, protection from abuse is poorly implemented, and anti-harassment laws are absent.

The Saudi state continues to enforce a severely limited identity on its women citizens: one that does not recognize their full potential or equality. Women's public advocacy campaigns may have placed many women at risk, yet it transformed their own identity to fully engaged

political citizens far beyond the goals of the state's transformational plans. Their voices are stronger, their presence is felt, and their determination defies state's restrictions.



Samar Al-Dreamly, *freelance journalist and feminist activist (Gaza)*

As women around the world are busy picking flowers and enjoying the fragrance of beautiful spring jasmines, the women of Palestine are also busy, as they have been for the past 68 years, mourning the loss of years of their lives to occupation, siege, division, and continuous community and authoritative violence. Every day is a new Arab Spring for women in Palestine. Each day they resist; some are injured or killed, and others give birth at checkpoints.

Despite all of this, Palestinian women, especially those in the Gaza Strip where a siege has been imposed for nine consecutive years, refuse to accept their circumstances. They fight to improve their existence and to achieve justice and equality between them and men, in all walks of life. After their houses were destroyed in the last assault, these women still suffer from hunger and the cold on the one hand, and from poor conditions in the caravans and shelters they must live in on the other hand.

A thousand women who sustained injuries during the Israeli aggression still run their own small and simple businesses, and they manage their lives and the lives of their family members despite their agonizing pain. Gaza still produces young and creative women leaders and role models. They all applaud and say, "despite the siege and destruction, long live March 8."



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

The so-called "Arab Spring" has thrown the region – including Yemen – into a miasma of pandemonium and civil unrest. Yemen has been facing unrest for the past five years, and the two-year efforts toward peaceful political transition, on which Yemenis pinned much hope, have failed. In March 2015, a war broke out in Yemen forcing more than two million Yemenis – the majority of whom are vulnerable women and girls – to flee their homes. Moreover, thousands tragically lost their lives and countless others were maimed or injured. Conflict and armed violence greatly disrupt daily life, destroy country infrastructure, and scar families, communities, and societies. According to the United Nations, 82 percent of the Yemeni population is now in need of humanitarian assistance. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, Johannes van der Klaauw, described the situations as "catastrophic."

The current deadly conflict has affected everyone, but it has remarkably worsened the lives of women, who have to bear more of the brunt of the war's ramifications. With many men and even boys joining the fighting, women and girls are left at home or are displaced. Now across the county, many women, who are usually educationally and economically underprivileged, become the heads of households struggling to support their families.

Alarming, Yemen's crisis has worsened because of emerging armed and extremist groups that have added extra burden to the list of endemic problems from which Yemen is suffering. The current war, the absence of laws, and the strong presence of al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) all pose a threat not only for Yemen but also for the region and the world, as well as for development work. The progress that has been made in previous years has been significantly and negatively impacted as the humanitarian conditions are governing the situation on the ground.

On this particular occasion, Yemeni women have only this wish: to regain peace, end this senseless war, and see all Yemenis pulling themselves together to rebuild their country. At the moment Yemeni women have faith that one day their brothers will come back to the table of dialogue and peace talks. Therefore, Yemeni women are now working hard and preparing themselves to be part of the coming peacebuilding process.



Honey Al Sayed, *Creative Consultant, Development Manager at El Hibri Foundation, and Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University (Syria)*

During the past decade, women of the MENA region, particularly in the Gulf states, have seen some economic and political gains. However, they have not achieved equality across the range of political, social, and economic activity. Where war and the absence of human security prevail, human rights – let alone women's rights – are non-existent. Therefore, the road to gender equality and positive change in status is long and difficult.

How can the status of women positively change in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and Sudan? In these countries, women have been subjected to mass displacement, abuse, rape, forced marriage, and prostitution. Syrian women, in particular, have despaired to the point where mothers prefer to place their babies in rafts to cross oceans, to unknown fates, than to keep them under the showers of barrel bombs.

In war-ravaged countries, it is unrealistic to expect real change and equal opportunity in the next year. We need long-term, positive change. A change of mindset among policymakers and patriarchs is needed to create cultures of peace and security, where women and men alike can live in dignity and equality; where meaningful inclusion of women at all levels, including at the peace table, become the cultural norm rather than a struggle. With this change, collaborative media platforms can empower women media professionals and provide women of the region a voice and a presence.

My goals for women of the region are:

- 1) Political will for overall human security and legal, socioeconomic, and political equality;
- 2) Free enterprise to develop economic independence;
- 3) Greater participation in the national political discourse;

- 4) Gender champions, such as the [International Geneva Gender Champions](#) network launched in Geneva in 2015;
- 5) Media platforms that cast women media professionals in non-stereotypical roles.

At a time when more creative and strategic use of the media is possible, we see that media plays a role equal to that of policymakers in changing mindsets and creating cultures of peace and human security, in which equal gender status is a norm and not an exception.

MENA's women have waged an exhausting struggle for equal social, economic, and political status. They have been stereotyped into submissive roles; yet their resilience, courage, and strength have transcended social taboos, traditions of patriarchy, economic inequality, lack of political participation, and even war. Women scientists, politicians, engineers, entrepreneurs, scholars, educators, doctors, and warriors all exist in the region and in the diaspora. Here are some examples:

***Dr. Anoud Al Sharekh**, researcher on youth and gender demographics, GCC security, and bi-cultural trends, and a specialist on Arab feminism*

"The biggest impediment to empowerment is the persistence of guardianship; Arab women are incomplete citizens because the insidious nature of male authority permeates social and institutional structures. The only solution would be real political will to dismantle guardianship systems, like in post-apartheid South Africa."

***Kinda Haddad**, Founder of [Bulbula.co.uk](#) (a directory of women experts from MENA and South Asia)*

"There is an incredible generation of women coming up from the region. They're exceptionally eloquent and motivated but all too often we don't seem to want to hear them unless their stories fit a template stereotype. We only need to scratch the surface a tiny bit to see how outdated our stereotypes are. It is vital that we raise their voices and empower them to lead the change."

***Rafif Jouejati**, Director, [Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria](#)*

"Women have been at the forefront of the Syrian revolution for freedom, dignity, and democracy, from engaging in civil disobedience to leading humanitarian efforts. They have also been victims of war: gang rape, displacement, and other forms of humiliation and degradation. It is imperative that women be an integral part of any peace negotiations, and not merely as 'advisors' to negotiating committees. Attention, male-dominated, misogynistic Middle East: women represent more than half of society and therefore are well within their right to make up at least half of decision-making authorities. Hear us roar."

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***Amat AlSoswa**, Former Yemeni Minister For Human Rights, and founder of Yemeni Women National Committee (Yemen)*

Women and girls were significantly engaged in the popular demonstrations against the regime of former Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Saleh in 2011. They even participated in the leadership of the revolution. The world recognized the efforts of young Yemeni activist

Tawakkol Abdel-Salam Karman when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. She is the first Yemeni and first woman in the Arab world to receive this honor.

This momentum forced Yemeni politicians and regional and international actors in the transitional period to accept the involvement of Yemeni women in all the processes that followed the signing of the GCC initiative, which transferred power to President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Women were represented in the technical and preparatory committees for the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) and occupied 30 percent of the NDC seats. Women headed three out of the nine NDC teams and served as deputy presidents in the six remaining groups. Women participated remarkably in these NDC discussions regarding national issues and women rights issues.

After the National Dialogue Conference, which lasted from March 2013 until January 2014, four women were appointed to the commission charged with preparing a new draft constitution. The women members were instrumental in keeping the committee's focus on gender equality and equal citizenship; creating a 30 percent quota for women in all legislative, executive, and judicial authorities; and establishing 18 as the minimum age of marriage, an accomplishment after nearly 50 years of controversy.

When the transition stalled, worsening living conditions and weakening government capacity created an opening for Ansar Allah, the official name for the Houthis movement. The Houthis surrounded the capital, put President Hadi and his government under house arrest, and issued a constitutional declaration in January 2015. After President Hadi fled to Aden, skirmishes began in the city. The Houthis took over the Yemeni air force – which fell into the hands of former President Saleh because of his alliance with the Houthis – and attacked the presidential palace in Aden, forcing President Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia.

On March 26, 2015, Arab coalition forces led by Saudi Arabia launched a military operation against the alliance of former President Saleh's forces and the Houthis, which continues to this day, resulting in civilian casualties. This made the majority of Yemenis worse off in terms of poverty, malnutrition, and access to food and water – which has brought the country to the brink of famine and disaster, leading to an unprecedented human catastrophe. Women and children suffer the largest burden of this conflict and have been particularly vulnerable in areas where al-Qaeda or other armed groups have influence. Women are banned from attending public universities or places of work under the pretext of mixing, and they cannot travel in public without a male companion. Several airstrikes have also hit weddings, economic establishments, and private homes. Many of the victims were women and children.

In February 2016, large sections of the Yemeni youth celebrated a youth revolution in the shadow of war and disruption. What is surely unfortunate now is the distance between the hopes for and achievements of women and youth since February 2011. It seems the war will not stop, and dispersed armed groups in control of large areas of the country do not project much hope on the subject of women's rights and equality. It will take Yemenis a very long time to get back to the level they were at prior to 2011.



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

International Women's Day of 2016 must adopt a global plan for women to fight terrorism, extremism, and hatred.

My country – Iraq – is at war with one of the most evil and barbaric terrorist groups in history: the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). They carry out tremendous crimes and cruelty against all communities of Iraq, women, our common identity, collective memory, and cultural heritage. All of their crimes are well documented and widely seen through videos and photos on social media and other digital media outlets.

Despite their losses in several provinces of Iraq (Diyala, Salahaddin, Kirkuk) and Iraqi Kurdistan, ISIS has had major territorial gains in two areas: al-Anbar province and Mosul. We have seen their more recent barbaric strikes in Jordan, Kuwait, Tunisia, and France and earlier in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and others. They are seeking to permanently widen their territory of their so-called state, which they call the caliphate.

If we women worldwide and regionally want to eliminate this cancer of ISIS from our body, the following must occur:

- 1) We need to intensify our cooperation and act more rapidly and timely to eradicate them.
- 2) We need to address the root causes of ISIS. We must create a holistic approach to combatting terrorism and address the intellectual, cultural, religious, educational, economic, social, financial, and technological dimensions of this war in addition to military, security, and intelligence aspects. Because ISIS terrorists are interdependent, we too should develop cooperation on all levels.
- 3) Parliaments globally need to enact legislation in accordance with human rights principles, freedom of expression, and other fundamental freedoms and rights. Parliaments must also issue anti-terror legislation that better monitors terrorists' use of social media to recruit terrorists, spread hate speech, encourage violence, and deny the rights of others. Women need to fight terrorists with one hand and Islamophobia, xenophobia, hatred, and racism with the other hand. ISIS is a key actor in the flourishing of extremist movements worldwide.
- 4) We all need to concentrate more on educating our communities about peacebuilding – including the role for women in peacebuilding, which is often neglected; tolerance; respect; the celebration of diversity; nonviolent methods of solving conflicts; reconciliation; social harmony; and cohesion. Peacebuilding and nonviolent methods of conflict resolution should be taught more at our schools, universities, and mosques and other religious institutions, and should be better portrayed in the media.

Besides military and security measures, education is the most important way to win this fight in both the Islamic world and globally. A stronger emphasis on the principles of good governance, social justice, rule of law, inclusiveness, citizenship, diversity, and knowledge are the best remedies to ISIS's terror.

Women are dying, others are captive and terrified in ISIS-controlled territories, and millions of internationally displaced persons (IDPs) are subjected to harsh conditions in their camps. The people of Iraq are resilient but need more international support and cooperation to win this fight against ISIS.

We have no other choices. Iraqi women are extending their hands to all of you to enhance cooperation against ISIS and their crimes against humanity.

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Margot Badran, *Senior Scholar, Wilson Center (United States)*

We have been asked what we hope for women in the region over the next year. One hopes that women, along with men, of all classes and circumstances will be able to live more secure and productively prosperous lives. One hopes that there will be increased free space for women – and men – to articulate how they can help build new societies through the activation of their rights as citizens and human beings. All hands need to be on deck. Women from different quarters are doing their part. Their importance is being recognized by states in their appointments to the highest official positions, especially ministerial positions, in the MENA region. Is the presence of demonstratively able women in higher official echelons more than symbolic? If so how? To the question what’s next for women in the MENA region, an answer is more slogging for some time to come.

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

Until 1984, women and men in Algeria were treated equally because the Constitution granted the same rights to both sexes. The Constitution, however, also stated that “Islam is the religion of the state,” which led to an important turning point in Algeria’s legal system: the Algerian Family Code of 1984. This code failed to protect girls’ and women’s rights, and it was challenged for over two decades. The 2005 battle against this code led to a few amendments, but the war is not over yet.

In 2014, Algerian authorities took long overdue steps to address sexual and gender-based violence. On February 1, 2014, Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal signed Decree 14-26, which established that women who were raped by members of armed groups during the internal conflict in the 1990s would be entitled to financial compensation. While the decree was adopted to provide such compensation for victims of sexual violence during the civil war, the victims of daily abuse were unprotected until June 2014, when a draft law was introduced to ban both physical and psychological violence by a spouse as well as sexual harassment in public spaces.

Despite the draft law’s controversy, members of the National Council unanimously adopted the text on December 10, 2015. This law supplanted the Criminal Code with new procedures aimed

at protecting women against all forms of violence. The new law came as a victory for feminist groups that had fought for years for its implementation. Additionally, the law's text has the potential to be extremely robust in handing down heavy penalties for domestic violence and street harassment of women.

While celebrating this step forward, we should also remember that the Senate blocked this law for eight months amid resistance from conservative Muslims who viewed this project, which intends to end violence against women and to improve safety and security, as interference in family affairs. Moreover, despite the excitement caused by this new law, Amnesty International called for an amendment that would drop a clause allowing the survivor of domestic violence to pardon the perpetrator, warning that it was "a dangerous precedent" and that "forgiveness ends the prosecution."

Another step Algeria took to support women's rights was in 1996 when it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Now – 20 years later – it should strive to implement the convention's principles. Algeria should focus on promoting women's rights and equality because in doing so, the country will also promote its own image by showing how it values all of its citizens.

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Nadereh Chamlou, *International Development Advisor; and former Senior Advisor, The World Bank (Iran/United States)*

The recent Iranian parliamentary elections will be a game changer for women in three ways. First, a record number of women will enter parliament. Second, women candidates were seen as critical members of coalition lists to signal to Iranian moderates to get out and vote. Therefore, the large turnout of women voters was critical to sway the pendulum in favor of moderates and reformists. Third, a campaign was underway to elect candidates with more gender egalitarian views. The significance of these three factors is that the drive for improving women's rights is broad-based, includes men and women as change agents, and puts women's demands at the center of a desire for moderation and rejection of extremism. To underscore the importance of women's participation, President Hassan Rouhani appealed to them to vote, leading to a large turnout despite the sweeping elimination of qualified reformist candidates.

Iran was initially not a pioneer of women's rights in the Muslim world. Women in many Muslim countries obtained the right to vote sooner than women in Iran. But after Iranian women obtained the right to vote in 1963, they progressed quickly on many fronts mainly because gender equality was integrated effectively into the country's economic development planning. The widely used economic models of the 1960s and 1970s saw growth as a function of increases in capital and labor. Since men participate roughly around the same percentage across countries, a marked increase in the size of the labor force over the medium to long term that would result in growth could only come from women's participation. Thus, Iran set out to increase women's capabilities and remove legal and institutional barriers that impeded their access to opportunities. From 1963 to 1979, Iranian women were as close to equal with men as was possible for that period.

From the onset, however, women's liberation was met with strong conservative clerical opposition, and by the time of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the changes seemed quite entrenched. Few people—not even women—remembered the obstacles that had been overcome, and even fewer fathomed that it would be even possible to turn the clock back on two important hallmarks of women's rights: the choice to veil or not, and the family law that, for instance, gave them the right of divorce and forbade polygamy. Sadly, these were the very first changes that the incoming authorities introduced. In shock, women staged a widespread demonstration to protest against the changes. Even sadder, secular intellectuals from left, right, and center, who had advocated for democracy and human rights for decades, joined those who condemned the women.

Nearly every law changed, but the right to vote remained. Despite setbacks, Iranian women had tasted equality, and that taste lingered. Women embarked on a quiet revolution to change the Iranian mindset, to transform the society from within. One of the ways women began to exert their views was to infiltrate in greater numbers professions that were previously (and still are in most countries) male-dominated. Among the many examples, it is noteworthy to mention women's involvement in publishing, film, and arts—professions that influenced culture, opinions, and identity. The number of women novelists in Iran soared; women publishers became numerous and could now decide what society should read; and women movie directors and artists visualized the injustices of the society. A visit to any Tehran bookstore would surprise anyone, because shelf after shelf is filled with fiction written or translated by Iranian women. Thus, the youth of today is well-read, moderate, and far more open to gender equality than his or her parents 40 to 50 years ago. They will pressure the state from the bottom up for a more open society that values every member.

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Kent Davis-Packard, *Co-Executive Director, Women's Learning Partnership (United States)*

We believe that women's status in the MENA region can most effectively be raised by imposing new policies for quotas, publishing sharp analyses on best practices for increasing political participation, and holding conferences on women's empowerment. However, it has been and always will be a change in consciousness on the ground that leads to the elevation of status for both women and men.

It was not until my host sister in Morocco realized the freedom she lacked by observing my life's path that she moved out of her house to obtain a job—breaking tradition in her conservative community—even though she was not yet married. In Yemen, I watched the Women's Union and other organizations fight—at times in competition with each other—for a parliamentary quota, and fail, only to stand up again the next round, only to fail again. But their efforts united them and raised the consciousness of all they encountered. When they are not fighting, they come together quietly to read the Quran, rather than have it read to them, inspired by an inward conviction that they have as much a right to interpret their holy texts as any man. They rail against the Saudi-sponsored madrasas throughout Yemen that give their children negative views of women's roles at home and in public life.

In Egypt, I witnessed women leading interfaith community groups while the state-controlled media waged a war against this kind of social cohesiveness that threatened to produce a unified democratic movement, claiming Egyptians had no choice between a military-backed regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. As a diplomat in Syria, I noted it was only when women came out into the streets in early 2011 that the revolution spread like wildfire across the country, and the regime worked harder than ever to suppress it.

I have come to believe that it is women in the MENA region who best represent a new mode of being and who dare to walk in the vanguard. Could their strength originate in the unspeakable abuses they have suffered? We deny, belittle, and ignore the valuable attributes of women – their compassion, understanding, and ability to collaborate for the common good – because these are “feminine” traits. But disempowerment empowers. It is no wonder it is women’s freedom of expression that ISIS targets first.

Five years after the Arab Spring, what do I “hope” for women in the MENA region? I only seek to acknowledge the ongoing transformation they are constantly inspiring, and the new consciousness they carry.

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Rangita de Silva de Alwis, *Associate Dean of International Affairs, University of Pennsylvania Law School (United States)*

The participation of women in the constitution drafting in Tunisia was built on twin pillars: women in the constituent assembly and an active, organized coalition of women’s groups. As founding mothers of a landmark constitution, women were energized and empowered like never before and had significant influence on raising constitutive and normative aspects of constitution drafting. However, if the process is to be truly transformative, women must continue to participate beyond the initial promulgation of the Constitution.

Advancing a Culture of Constitutional Rights

While the adoption of the rights and freedoms in the Tunisian Constitution is important, it is equally important to educate citizens about these rights and about ways of safeguarding them, especially by vindicating these rights in courts. As set out in Article 102 of the Constitution, “The judiciary is an independent authority that ensures the prevalence of justice, the supremacy of the Constitution, the sovereignty of law, and the protection of rights and freedoms.” This article, emphasizing the independence of the judiciary from legislative and executive interference, is a bedrock principle of the rule of law.

Implementation of a constitution is predicated upon strengthening or setting up new institutions provided for by the constitution, allocating powers and responsibilities, jurisdiction, resources including finances and staff, and monitoring mechanisms. At the same time, the state must remain accountable to civil society. The Constitution created three ministries of civil

society, one under each branch of government: executive, parliamentary, and judiciary. The strength of these ministries, however, remains to be seen.

Developing Enabling Legislation

Enabling legislation plays a crucial role in securing legal equality. Though there is consensus that enabling legislation is crucial to securing legal equality, such a task requires the reform of old laws as well as the passage of new laws that provide assistance to pressing public concerns.

Well-established civil society groups in Tunisia are involved in reforming the electoral law to mandate horizontal and vertical parity. The draft law on violence against women has likewise gained relevance as an issue tied to universal security concerns.

Other issues including the *mirath* (inheritance laws), wage disparities, and benefits for mothers in the workplace such as maternity leave are discussed but have not been fully addressed in legislation thus far. Some have pushed for increased maternity leave as a part of reforming the country's public services law. Currently, Tunisia has the shortest maternity leave – at 30 days – of all countries in the MENA region.

Note: This is an excerpt from an article to be published by the Berkeley Journal of International Law.



Haleh Esfandiari, *Public Policy Fellow and Founding Director, Middle East Program, Wilson Center (United States)*

On the eve of International Women's Day 2016, 14 women were elected to the Iranian parliament. Eight more have made it to the second round in April, holding out the possibility that their number will increase. Among the 14 already elected, 11 were members of the "List of Hope," endorsed by President Hassan Rouhani, an indication of their likely moderate leanings. Three ran as independents. The majority of the new women deputies are professional women in their forties and fifties.

It remains to be seen whether these women will push for legislation on issues important to women, but Iranian women needed this good news after a difficult year. Iranian women did not fare as well as expected in 2015. President Rouhani and his vice president for women and family affairs, Shahindokht Mollaverdi, an outspoken critic of discrimination against women, tried but were met with little success in improving the status of women in Iran in the past year. They were stonewalled by conservative resistance.

Nothing changed in the Family Law. The age of marriage remained at 13 for girls, and instances in which girls were married off at a younger age were not uncommon. Polygamy and temporary marriage continue to be permitted under law. Divorce is still the prerogative of men.

The employment rate of women went up slightly, and more women rose through the ranks in the civil service. The first Iranian female ambassador, Marzieh Afkham, was sent to Malaysia.

Marzieh Shahdaii was the first woman ever to be appointed as the director general of the National Iranian Petrochemical Company. However, female unemployment remains twice as high as for men.

The government successfully blocked efforts to bar women from a number of fields of study in higher education, but the number of women entering universities has dropped to under 60 percent of entering classes.

The Rouhani government also failed to curb the excesses of the security agencies. Women's rights and human rights continued to be routinely violated. The morals police, officially sanctioned vigilantes, and security forces targeted women from all walks of life including women activists. There were cases of acid attacks on women, harassment on the streets, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, trafficking of young girls, and execution of minors. The authorities imprisoned women activists, artists including poets and even cartoonists, as well as lawyers defending activists.

Yet Iranian women have learned for over three and a half decades to look ahead and, like soccer players, to continue to deftly dribble the ball until they score a goal. The year 2016 might well prove to be a year when they score several.



Dalia Fikry Fahmy, *Assistant Professor of Political Science at Long Island University, and member of the Egyptian Rule of Law Association (Egypt)*

Five years ago, women were at the forefront of the protests that erupted in and swept much of the MENA region calling for freedom, dignity, and political and economic reform. In the case of Egypt, the faces the world saw emerging to confront the repressive regime of the past were overwhelmingly female – women in the Middle East emerged as the voices for democratic change in the region.

However, since the historical events of early 2011, the region has seen an increase in repression and an unprecedented level of authoritarianism that has resulted in both the physical and symbolic erasure of women from public and political life. Since 2013, the Egyptian state has detained over 2,000 women, and [92 have been killed](#). Female human rights defenders face intimidation, judicial harassment, arbitrary arrest, harsh sentences, and imprisonment. Rape has increasingly become a part of [the state's protocol for silencing women](#). As the number of political prisoners continues to rise, currently estimated at over 40,000, so has the number of reports regarding the rape of women at the hands of the state. Watchdog non-governmental organizations that monitor, report, and assist these women have become the latest to be [shut down by the state](#).

As we celebrate International Women's Day, women must continue to function as the agents of change they established themselves to be during the start of the Arab Spring, without fear of state repression. This includes protesting without fear of arrest, detention, and sexual intimidation; being free to publish and speak without fear of being silenced; and establishing

and running NGOs that both monitor the political establishment and advocate for society without the fear of being shut down. These social and political activities must be protected by the government rather than suppressed by the state. But most importantly, women need to be an integral part of the political process. And in the case of Egypt, as the first parliament begins its work in legislating the new constitution, female voices of change must be included. However, many of these voices are either in exile, in prison, or silenced by fear.

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Leila Hanafi, *Lawyer, World Bank Group, and President of ARPA (Alliance for Rule of Law Promotion and Alternative Dispute Resolution) (Morocco/United States)*

As the world celebrates International Women’s Day, it is essential to emphasize the importance of protecting the rights of women and girls, notably in the MENA region where they redefine their roles and forge new pathways of participation and leadership.

Across the region, there are blatant shortcomings in terms of how the law is written and how the law is applied in practice. In Morocco, where women constitute over 50 percent of the population, my recently concluded field research has demonstrated that any possible discussion of women’s access to justice should deal with two primary issues: how formal justice is defined for women and what context has to exist in order for justice to be realized. There is a complicated interaction of different layers that contribute to providing access to justice to women in the country. The most fundamental layer beyond the law involves empowerment; being disadvantaged in terms of legal awareness and legal aid hinders the ability to seek justice. Another essential layer is linked with how the Moroccan justice system works (process), how it has been developed so far (progress), and the fairness of judicial outcomes brought to women by the judiciary. Last, but not least, is the “unseen” layer or social context, whereby any equal protection by the legal system might fail to protect the rights of women because of a discriminatory culture and customary practices.

Capacity needs to be built to support the implementation of formal justice service delivery through simplifying administrative procedures and ensuring availability of services in areas outside of major urban centers. Legal aid services – information, counseling, and legal representation – also need to be developed consistently with the discussion on the draft legal aid law. Women are more dependent on such services due to a combination of limited financial resources and scarce legal aid services.

These shortfalls in accessing justice sector services are catapulting to the center of the reforms in the “Charter for the Reform of the Judicial System,” which is a positive step for Morocco, but it remains to be seen how the government will revamp the formal justice machinery to improve access to justice for women.

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

In the five years since the start of the Arab uprisings, women in the MENA region have realized notable political accomplishments because the number of women parliamentarians (MPs) has increased in many countries throughout the region. For the most part, countries that have parliamentary quotas or gender parity in nominations – such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia – have seen the largest rise in women MPs. Women have increased their share of seats in recent elections in Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia as well.

While expanding the number of women MPs is essential, the following three factors may be even more important to advancing women’s rights in the MENA region: increasing the number of women in leadership positions, establishing women’s caucuses or parliamentary blocs, and implementing consequential and sustainable legislation. Three recent examples across the region exemplify why these actions are so significant.

The UAE made history when Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi was elected President of the Federal National Council in November 2015 as the [first woman speaker in the UAE and the Arab world](#). Because so few women hold leadership positions in parliaments and governments worldwide, women are often excluded from legislative processes. Developing leadership capacity and providing women with greater access to leadership positions are essential steps toward empowering women and improving the status of women in the MENA region.

[Women MPs in Egypt are planning to create a parliamentary bloc](#) (or caucus) to support each other and work more collaboratively. Women in caucuses have greater power to propose legislation, exert pressure, and implement change. Women’s parliamentary blocs that reach across party lines are perhaps one of the best mechanisms to support women MPs and enhance women’s rights. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, other [women’s caucuses](#) currently exist in Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Morocco.

The Algerian parliament recently introduced a [new law that punishes violence against women](#), including domestic violence and sexual harassment. Algeria has the highest proportion of women MPs in the MENA region, and while this is an undoubtedly a positive development for the country, the next vital step is creating measures to ensure this law is properly implemented and enforced.

For this year’s International Women’s Day, it is essential to highlight the work of women MPs and to foster progress beyond increasing the number of women MPs to improve the status of women throughout the MENA region.

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

In reality, the Arab Spring never made any special promise to women in the Middle East, although it ignited high expectations for better lives and new opportunities for everyone before exhausting all hopes. Five years after its start, women are increasingly losing their lives, homes, lands, relatives, and families in parts of the Middle East where sectarian wars continue. Overwhelming numbers of refugees are reported to be women and children under 12 (including 67 percent of those referred to the U.S. by the UN), who are leaving their home countries, particularly Syria, to escape atrocities and poverty.

Although conflicts have taken a high toll on women and children throughout the world and throughout history, wars and revolutions are known to elevate the role of women by giving them the opportunity to rule their lives and their societies in the absence of men. In many instances we see women in history contribute to war efforts by taking part in combat, raising funds, providing supplies for soldiers, and taking over positions men leave behind in farms and small businesses. Jobs in small businesses are particularly known to endow women with skills and self-confidence, because they give women the opportunity to overcome hardship, help change political discourse, and make stronger claims for expanded civil rights.

However, the current situation for women refugees in the Middle East is different than it was before for the following reasons:

- 1) Women and girls face specific risks once they leave their hometowns, more frequently than men and boys do.
- 2) Due to their gender roles and position in societies, women have to endure discrimination as well as sexual and gender-based violence in societies in which they take refuge.
- 3) Those who continue to travel long distances face numerous challenges and dangers with no hope to enhance their social status in their new societies.
- 4) The shift in gender-specific roles during conflict no longer applies to women in refugee camps today, because they are highly dependent on resources allocated to them. Women continue to suffer and struggle without necessarily developing self-incentives. Food distribution systems in refugee camps replace regular family functions. Women simply accept what is offered to them without being productive.
- 5) Education programs aim to increase girls' and boys' enrollment and retention in school to prepare them for a future with fewer economic and cultural barriers, but they often fail to offer options for skill-building and developing professional aspirations.
- 6) Appropriate support mechanisms in camps are important for women refugees, especially to protect them from engaging in forced survival sex and street begging to provide for their families. These programs still fail, however, to empower and elevate women's roles and status for the future.

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Moushira Khattab, *Chair of Women in Foreign Policy Group, Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs; former Public Policy Scholar, Wilson Center; expert and vice chair of UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2002-2010); former Minister of Family and Population, Egypt; and former Egyptian Ambassador to South Africa and to the Czech and Slovak Republics (Egypt)*

Five years after what was hoped to be an Arab Spring, Egyptian women have fared well contrary to common misconception. Despite the 2014 constitution not specifying a parliamentary quota, women's representation is at an unprecedented 89 members of parliament, which is 14.59 percent of the legislature. Their representation at local councils is expected to be even higher; the constitution clearly allocates 25 percent.

There is also more recognition of women's contributions. For the first time, Egypt has a female Assistant Minister of Justice. She is in charge of the sector of women and family. It is quite significant that a woman is in charge of one of the remaining bastions of discrimination against women for the first time. Notwithstanding the adamant refusal of the administrative judiciary to appoint female judges, the number of female judges in all other branches of the judiciary continues to rise. The civil status law still discriminates against women despite milestone amendments granting them the right to child custody and unilateral divorce.

The future carries more challenges for Egyptian women, but it looks brighter than ever. Egyptian women are backed by a constitution that criminalizes discrimination and violence. Women need to continue their struggle to ensure that the constitution which commits Egypt to international human rights conventions does not remain aspirational. Women need to cement their efforts to mobilize society toward ensuring adequate support for the 89 female parliamentarians to adopt legislation that implements constitutional laws. These parliamentarians need societal support to educate the entire nation that everyone stands to benefit from gender equality. This is necessary not only to empower women but also to put a nation with 7,000 years of civilization on the right track to sustainable development. I am very confident that the daughters of the Nile will transform the Arab Spring from an illusion into a reality.

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Marina Ottaway, *Middle East Fellow, Wilson Center (United States)*

The uprisings of 2011 have made conditions for women much worse in most countries. In war-torn countries, the issues by which progress for women is usually measured have become irrelevant: voting rights, quotas for women in parliaments and executive leadership positions, the right to divorce or transmit citizenship to children, are issues that do not relate to the reality women live daily as internally displaced people and refugees or those besieged in their own homes. Unfortunately, progress on this kind of issue requires a country at peace.

But war-torn societies provide different avenues for women's empowerment. When men are away at war, have lost their lives in the fighting, or have sought refuge in other countries, women take on roles and responsibilities beyond what is normal in peacetime. This is not just a phenomenon of the 21st century Middle East, but a universal pattern. In the United States,

World War II opened to women jobs for which would never had been considered previously – as “Rosie the Riveter” posters publicized. For women, these opportunities are the small silver lining in the very black cloud of suffering war imposes.

Historically, once war is over women are forced back into traditional roles. Rosie the Riveter returned to her kitchen, and it took almost three decades before a women’s movement arose in the United States. Algerian women smuggled bombs through military checkpoint during the Algerian war for independence, but when they tried to remove the veil after the war was over, men pushed back.

People concerned about women’s empowerment in the Middle East today should make it a priority to ensure that history does not repeat itself and that once peace returns, women’s contributions during the years of conflict are acknowledged and that what they have gained is not taken away.



Smadar Perry, *Senior Middle East Editor, Yediot Ahronot Daily (Israel)*

"A Girl in the River," the documentary movie that won its Pakistani director, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, her second Academy Award, tells a heartbreaking story.

Heartbreaking is the best word to describe the shocking and true story of a young woman, 18-year-old Saba Qaiser, who insisted on marrying for love. She was dragged to a river in Punjab by her father and uncle who shot her in the head and then threw her – while she was still alive – into the river. Both the father and uncle blamed her for bringing shame to their family. Luckily, Saba Qaiser survived to tell her story.

Honor killings exist throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds and in other countries where there are large communities of non-Christian refugees. In some countries the authorities prefer to turn a blind eye to this problem, while in others governments blame and punish women for trying to shape their personal lives. In the case of Saba Qaiser, Pakistani officials arrested her father and uncle and then the family started pushing her, the victim, to forgive them. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif hosted a special screening of this movie and gave a speech full of promises, calling for a war on this ugly tradition, which kills thousands of innocent young women every year in Pakistan. It remains to be seen whether there will be serious follow-up to such promises.

While thinking about my contribution to the issue of women's situations, hopes, and frustrations vis-à-vis the reality on the ground five years after the Arab Spring, I considered the extremes of women’s circumstances throughout the region. In Tunisia, for example, that status of women has improved, at least in the eyes of the law and the new constitution. Elsewhere, there is an ongoing deterioration of rights. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the status quo remains and there is much to improve on regarding women’s rights. For Saudi women, the future certainly does not look promising.

The latest positive news for women in the MENA region comes from Iran where at least 20 women were elected to the new parliament. It is an impressive and historic record. On the other hand, there has been a significant rise in the number of women jailed and executed in the country.

Am I optimistic about women's situation improving in the coming year or two? As for now, I am not. Decision makers are preoccupied with security and economic problems. Women's issues are low on their list of priorities. But in our troubled neighborhood, one should not stick to old traditions. Women should push more. Issues must be worked out, and efforts should be exerted. Women must keep on fighting.

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

The [McKinsey Global Institute recently released a report](#) estimating the MENA region could realize \$2.7 billion of economic gains by 2025 if gender parity is achieved. If GCC states want to [combat the consequences of plunging oil prices](#), women must have the same opportunities to contribute to their economies as men do. GCC states must enact new or enforce existing anti-gender discrimination legislation, and enforce these policies consistently. Governments must continue to be self-critical and prioritize gender equality.

Saudi Arabia: The government has taken steps to give women more job opportunities while adhering to Saudi social norms: the Ministry of Labor announced a forthcoming [“work from home”](#) program, removed a self-imposed clause in an international labor law restricting women from jobs deemed [“dangerous or risky,”](#) and [shuttered 90 bridal shops](#) violating labor laws by not employing women. Additionally, a government agency will build [four women-only industrial cities](#). Discrimination, however, still impacts women’s labor force participation. For example, the Saudi national airline [does not allow Saudi women to work as flight attendants](#), and although the number of women who have joined the workforce increased by [48 percent since 2010](#), [60.3 percent of unemployed Saudis are women](#), and [16.4 percent of employed Saudis are women](#).

Kuwait: Much like in the rest of the GCC, Kuwaiti women are not the only women in the labor force – thousands of foreign nationals work in various sectors, but mostly as domestic workers. In April 2015, the *Guardian* reported that [women from Sierra Leone were “sold like slaves”](#) to work in Kuwait City homes. In July 2015, [Kuwait passed a new law that better protected domestic workers' rights](#).

Oman: The number of women in the private sector [rose from 13,385 to 47,441](#) from 2003 to 2015. However, the Undersecretary of the Tourism Ministry asserted [not enough of the ministry’s employees](#) were women, adding “government initiatives are underway” to change this. A new draft law mandating [60-day paid maternity leave](#) in both the private and public sectors may help to attract more women workers, for whom inadequate maternity leave could be a deterrent from joining or reentering the workforce.

UAE: Sixty-six percent of public sector employees are women. The ratio between men and women workers is nearly equal in small and medium-sized enterprises. However, Emirati women still contend with short maternity leave and receive 85 percent of the salaries of their male counterparts (although this is higher than the world average).

Despite setbacks, I am optimistic for women’s participation in the GCC labor force. Change in the GCC is conservative and incremental, but I believe that over time and with the help of growing numbers of women in politics, GCC women will achieve their workforce ambitions and GCC economies will expand.



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)*

Lebanon continues to carry the heavy burden of a dysfunctional government, highlighted by the to-date failure to resolve the massive garbage crisis. The country also suffers from a deteriorating economy exacerbated by the region’s wars, the spillover of the Syrian crisis, and the influx of refugees, whom currently constitute approximately 25 percent of Lebanon’s population.

Demonstrations by civil society activists calling for both urgent solutions to the garbage problem and the adoption of accountability practices occurred across the country. Women were present and active in these demonstrations, which helped increase the pressure on politicians to come up with solutions.

Women cannot afford to be marginalized, uninvolved, and underrepresented in the management of the country’s problems. A good opportunity presents itself in the country’s upcoming municipality elections. Because better representation of different groups in society should translate into better governance, there is a need for women’s active involvement, nomination, and participation in these elections.

Furthermore, women need to pursue and increase their involvement in civil society groups in campaigning for better governance, including more effective and ethical ways of managing the refugee crisis, while soliciting assistance from the international community. Finally, women should continue working toward women’s involvement and presence on boards of all types of institutions throughout Lebanon – whether public or private. It is the combination of all these actions that will lead to the betterment of our economy and society.



Fatima Sadiqi, *Fellow, Middle East Program, Wilson Center (Morocco)*

The year 2015 was one of contradictions in matters of women's rights in the countries of the Maghreb (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania). One substantial development is that women's rights are instigating genuine public engagement and interest; conversations, whether in print or social media, are expanding. And an increasing number of young men are both defending women's rights and addressing new topics such as sexuality, fasting, and single mothers. However, big challenges loom ahead; some issues are country specific, but spillover will affect the whole region if serious action is not taken.

The biggest challenge is Libya, where the breakdown of law and order opened the door to ideological extremism that, among other things, bans gender mixing and women's travel without a male guardian, and pressures female university students to wear the veil. In neighboring Tunisia – the country where women's rights are most advanced – discrimination against women in matters of inheritance and the right of husbands to unilaterally divorce their wives continue to be problematic. As for Algeria, the 2005 amended Family Code still discriminates against women with regard to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. In parallel, Islamist lawyers have fiercely resisted the new law criminalizing violence against women. In Morocco, despite laws prohibiting the employment of children under the age of 15, hordes of minors – most of whom are girls – still work as “maids.” Polygamy and spousal rape, as well as inheritance, are still challenging issues. Finally, in Mauritania, the caste system and slavery reinforce discrimination against the Haratin and Afro-Mauritanians in matters of legal protection and equity in pay, as well as in female genital mutilation (FGM).

Policymaking is urgently needed in the following areas: combating extremist ideology, implementing family codes, and securing more legal and social protection for women (e.g. centers for women victims of violence).



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

Five years have passed since the 2011 Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and its spillover into Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. To call this an Arab Spring is a gross misnomer. I see two categories of women in the Arab countries: the fearless and the fearful.

The first group of women stood side by side with men in the revolutions against dictatorships and despotic regimes. They demanded freedom, dignity, equal citizenship, accountability, inclusiveness, and jobs. They witnessed and felt the destruction of the wall of fear.

The second group of women increasingly faces threats to their lives and freedoms. For this group, these past five years have been the fight for the “right to life.” For these women, the fight for their lives supersedes all other rights and concerns. This is simply a fight for existence.

In the recent past, disappointment in what the revolts and popular movements in some Arab countries brought created a vacuum in governance. This gave rise to religious extremism, particularly in Islam. The re-surfacing of Salafism in all its forms and guises – as al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, and other offshoots – took the world by surprise, and took from the frustrated and vulnerable Arab populace, especially women, what hurts most: their lives and livelihoods.

As the Arab uprisings succeeded in getting rid of life-long dictators and despots, people's expectations rose. They hoped for a better quality of life and had faith that their countries would swiftly transition to democracy, equality, and development with dignity. This was, however, not to be. There was no smooth shift to democracy; the transition was not accompanied by more equitable distribution of income, job creation, or poverty alleviation.

Not only did these extremist religious movements take hold of the older population, but they also brainwashed the dismayed and disappointed youth – both men and women. This took place as poverty and unemployment grew, frustrating the Arab youth. Chaos reigned. Women suffered disproportionately from their male brethren and their male partners.

Women's rights and religious rights, overall, are inherently contradictory despite the talk that religious rights embrace women's rights, particularly within the warped interpretation of Islam that we are witnessing. This became associated with various forms of violence against women. Atrocities were and continue to be committed by barbaric ISIS against men and women in Iraq (notably against the 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, in traditional and new forms, is rampant in other MENA countries as well. This includes beheading, stoning as a punishment for adultery, burning people alive, trafficking of women, kidnapping young girls, girl-child marriages, abductions, group and gang rape, and *jihad al-nikah* (or sexual jihad) where women are trophies for fighters. It also includes the more common forms of traditional violence against women like marital rape, female genital mutilation (FGM), wife battering, incest, and honor killings.

Unless the fearless succeed in protecting the fearful, the plight of women and women's rights continues.



Tara Sonenshine, former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and board member, Women's Foreign Policy Group (United States)

Over the next year, my hope is that women become true agents of change in the Middle East – to push back on the ISIS narrative and to assert themselves in ways that enhance their stature in the region. From Yazidi women and girls victimized by terrorism to women political leaders speaking up at the United Nations, women are showing that their voices can be heard and echoed if the political space and information space is opened to them and for them.

ISIS is violating international norms and rules of war with their use of rape, slavery, forced marriage, and brutality. It is time for the world to speak up and speak out, and it is time for women within the Muslim and non-Muslim world to voice their frustration and anger at the violence that is hijacking a religion.

Despite the condemnations of many countries, ISIS continues its barbaric behavior, including using women as sex slaves, and few global resources have been dedicated to ending the practice. At the same time, stereotypes about the subservience of Muslim women, particularly those from Muslim-majority countries, must end.

Women must be seen not only as victims but as leaders, recognized and encouraged by UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Women have to be part of the solution to ISIS and extremism. Radical movements are adept at exploiting women. But women are also adept at utilizing their power within families and communities to challenge the status quo if economic, political, and social norms shift and if women can battle extremist ideologies. Let's embolden half the sky.



Gwen K. Young, *Director, Global Women's Leadership Initiative and Women in Public Service Project, Wilson Center (United States)*

The question of "what is next for women in the MENA region" goes beyond what is happening with women in 2016, but what is happening that impacts the future women leaders of the region. As outlined in this publication and beyond, there are various issues at play across the MENA region post-Arab Spring: women's political participation; women's economic empowerment; women's empowerment and human rights; the escalation of violence and extremism, which has disproportionately impacted women; security issues; and the need for social, judicial, and economic reforms.

At the same time that violence, conflict, and instability ravage the region, the issue of women's empowerment has emerged as a parallel movement in the MENA region. In this light, women led the Tunisian team who received the Nobel Peace Prize last year for using their mediation and negotiating skills to bring about peaceful change, and the first ever woman speaker of an Arab parliament was elected last year. Educational reform is being talked about across the Gulf states, and according to the World Economic Forum there are six times more women in university in Qatar than men. While this is not translating into increased participation in the labor force in Qatar, it is translating into studies and conferences across the region to discuss women's economic power, women's leadership, and a women's forum in Dubai. Further, legislative, judicial, and constitutional reform is being talked about across the region.

While it is important to look at the impact and to measure the successes and failures in terms of women's empowerment, it is also critical to look beyond this to the women who are leading the charge. Women political leaders, women activists, and women taking care of their families and communities in war-ravaged Syria are creating what is next. They are building the foundations, championing the change, and acting as role models for their communities.

These women today are the champions of change and the role models for the next generation, the under-29 population that comprises 30 percent of the population in the MENA region. Their struggle to lead for socio, judicial, and economic reforms cannot be measured on a year-by-year basis but rather on what changes are taking place and what groundwork these women are laying for future women leaders and their societies.



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

In 2015, Egypt set a new record of empowering women to reach decision-making positions with 87 women members of parliament, 73 of whom were elected. In addition, there are a growing number of women leading small businesses and achieving international athletic championships without being thwarted by the patriarchal mindset of society, which always limited women to stereotypical maternal roles. Apparently, the persistent presence of women in the various political events that occurred since the Arab Spring, coupled with the sincere interest of the current regime in re-empowering women, is causing a positive change in the perception of women in Egyptian society.

Nonetheless, it is not enough for the state to be interested in empowering women, or for women to be willing to achieve beyond what has been previously accomplished. It is essential for women to be shown how to do this. Egyptian women need to be properly prepared to undertake the roles they are summoned to play in the future of their country. Out of nearly 40 million female citizens, only a few hundred are appropriately educated and qualified to lead as pillars of support to a liberal democratic state. Civil society and the state should work together to design proper educational programs to build the skills essential for women, especially young women, to guarantee a better future not only for the status of women but for the status of the whole nation.



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