



# Women Driving Positive Change in the Middle East

In Celebration of International Women's Day 2017



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

In celebration of International Women’s Day 2017, the Middle East Program, the Global Women’s Leadership Initiative, and Women in Public Service Project at the Wilson Center collected essays from 33 women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the United States, and elsewhere to mark the occasion. We bring together their responses – which cover a wide geographic region and a wide range of views – in this publication.

Women throughout the region, as is true in the rest of the world, face a variety of challenges: underrepresentation in the political sphere, exclusion from or barriers to the workforce, repercussions of family status laws, physical and sexual abuse, and at times the responsibility of supporting their families by themselves. Some women in the region are also faced with some of humanity’s cruelest circumstances: unending conflict, famine, and subjugation to sexual violence used as a tool of war, among others. While mindful of the reality of these difficult situations and enduring obstacles, this year for International Women’s Day, we chose the theme of “women driving positive change” to highlight the diverse work of women throughout the region who counter these challenges and make the world a better place for themselves, their families, and their communities.



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

What is the real situation for women in the Middle East and can they really be the mechanism for change?

I believe that women in the Middle East can contribute positively to country reforms and use their capacities in their professional careers to further excel in society at large and be agents of change. At the same time, is it possible for a woman living in a conflict area to contribute to country reforms?

Women are often portrayed as victims of conflict. They are of course targeted for rape, become widows, suffer most from the decay of social sectors, and are amongst the most vulnerable victims in war and conflict situations. However, they are also often the ones who trigger peace mechanisms and take on new economic roles, often as heads of household.

Therefore, there needs to be investment in the role of women in economic and social development. Promoting equality in education would play a pivotal role in bridging the gender gap between men and women, as would advocating for women’s rights so more women can pave the way for a successful future in the Middle East. This can be achieved through the support of initiatives that seek primarily to improve women’s social and legal rights in the Arab world.

Finally, there is a need for setting the stage for positive political, economic, and social changes that can pave the way for empowered women in the Middle East and turn their visions into a reality.



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

Palestinian women have historically enjoyed high levels of education compared to women in other countries in the region. Many have also engaged in social and political activism, aspiring for liberation from the Israeli occupation. Over the years, women faced increasing challenges in Palestine under the occupation, including the *intifada*, the intra-Palestinian political divide, Israel's ongoing ten-year long blockade of the Gaza Strip, and the three wars Israel launched on the Gaza Strip. This year marks several important anniversaries for the Palestinian people: 50 years of Israeli occupation and ten years since the blockade of Gaza, which has led to this manmade crisis and under-development of the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian women have been the most affected of all in the deterioration of Palestinian affairs. The more that economic, political, and security circumstances deteriorate, the tighter the social grip on women's rights, liberties, and opportunities becomes, especially in Gaza. Due to poverty, unemployment, and the blockade, we are witnessing an increase in early marriages, college dropouts, and divorce rates, all of which force women to be dependent on male family members.

However, relying on the base of strength, creativity, and resilience that Palestinian people have honed throughout the blockade, occupation, and several crises, women in Gaza are creating opportunities for themselves in a context of decreasing opportunities. For example, women have organized a "Women for Change" film festival, which tackles challenging topics such as early marriages and women's lives during wartime. Young female programmers have created mentorship initiatives to encourage women to engage in coding. Housewives have produced handmade embroidery and traditional Palestinian cuisine, marketing them over social media outlets. Additionally, women have engaged in professions and activities to break social and community barriers and taboos; now women are runners, participants in all-female football tournaments, security officers, fisherwomen, and café and restaurant owners. As simple as these positions might seem, nevertheless they are hardly acceptable in the traditional Gaza society.

Despite the severe restrictions on access for persons, materials, and goods in conjunction with the general isolation from the outside world under the blockade in Gaza, women are breaking barriers in small yet strong steps and will hopefully continue to do so in the future. However, if intra-Palestinian peace and Israeli-Palestinian peace is not achieved, I fear deterioration in women's situations and a turn for the worst will occur.



**Muna AbuSulayman**, Partner, [www.Haute-Elan.com](http://www.Haute-Elan.com), the Global Fashion Destination for Modest Lifestyle; MBC, Co-host Kalam Nawaem, Longest Running TV Show in the Arab World; UN World Humanitarian Summit- Regional Expert, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) (Saudi Arabia)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is perhaps scrutinized more than almost any other country in the world on the issue of female empowerment. Thus, it came as a shock to most people when three young Saudi women took the most senior and competitive financial positions in both the private and public sectors within days of each other during one memorable week in February 2017, with almost no controversy.

Saudi women are finally seen attaining the leadership positions they deserve. These steps also came in the wake of the appointment of several female deputy ministers and the selection of a Saudi woman, Dr. Dalal Namanqani, as the [first female president of a co-ed university in Saudi Arabia](#).

It is obvious that Saudi Arabia is quickly changing and that female leadership roles are growing and progressing both within the private and the public sectors. In the past 10 years, women in Saudi Arabia have pushed for and succeeded in implementing major reforms. They have been able to run and vote in elections; the second class of Saudi female parliamentarians, at a 20 percent quota of the appointed Saudi Parliament (the Shoura Council), has started serving its three-year term. Female tertiary education is at an all-time high, and female employment has reached 34 percent despite the major economic difficulties the country suffered due to the huge drop in oil prices in 2016 and several rounds of major layoffs.

That said, Saudi women are still fighting to lift some of the guardianship laws and to define the age of maturity (21 for most activists) as well as to have the choice to drive. The recent steps taken, and the lack of controversy surrounding them, have given hope that society is finally ready for more fundamental changes.

These recent appointments were public acts to show that Saudi women can lead. This is the key to the realization of the Saudi Vision 2030 and National Transformation Program. These sweeping plans are about diversifying the Saudi economy and ensuring sustainability. Part of that requires optimizing female leaders to better serve their country and to include women in the national march to progress.

People are still grappling with this changing Saudi Arabia and you still see some of the old stereotypes being bandied about, but they simply no longer hold true.

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**Mahnaz Afkhami**, *former Minister for Women's Affairs in Iran, Founder and President of Women's Learning Partnership (WLP), Executive Director of Foundation for Iranian Studies (Iran/United States)*

In every aspect of her life, a woman's autonomy, freedom, and opportunities are shaped by the degree to which her nation's laws uphold gender equality. Central to social and economic inequalities faced by women in the MENA region are Family Laws, which dictate power relations between spouses, parents, and children. The architecture of discriminatory Family Law systems in the MENA region confines women to economic dependence on male relatives, opening doors to physical, sexual, and psychological violence against women and children without recourse. Without the reform of Family Laws from the perspective of gender equality, as well as committed and long-term implementation of these reforms by governments, and complementary reform advocacy efforts by civil society, women's full economic empowerment will never come to fruition.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are two examples of legal systems in which domestic law trumps international agreements, allowing courts to bypass their commitments to human rights. The UAE Supreme Court Chief Justice recently ruled that men can physically beat their wives if they do not leave marks, and that wives seeking to divorce their husbands in response to physical abuse must prove that they sustained systematic beatings. Cases such as these indicate that patriarchal relations of power have not been fully destabilized by international human rights conventions.

On the front lines of Family Law reform efforts in the MENA region are women activists and civil society organizations – the lifeblood of the feminist movement. Over the past year, the civil society organizations of Women's Learning Partnership in Morocco, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey undertook extensive research efforts to elucidate the legislative histories and cultural understandings on which discriminatory Family Laws are based. Our comparative analysis will provide a greater understanding of convergences and differences in discriminatory Family Laws and how these conditions impact women's lives, and will lay the groundwork for a global campaign to reform discriminatory Family Laws. By producing this research and launching a global campaign, women's rights organizations in the MENA region are forging a powerful, transnational coalition of activists and supporters who can mobilize for real cultural change.

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**Lara Alameh**, *President and Chief Executive Officer, Safadi Foundation USA (United States)*

Ranking at 135 out of 144 countries in the 2016 World Economic Forum [Global Gender Gap report](#), Lebanon is nearly at the bottom. Despite this unfavorable measure, there is a sprouting movement of female entrepreneurs that reveals how women are mobilizing their skills to initiate new structures for influencing change, leading to a more inclusive development. Although women continue to face underrepresentation in political institutions and are subject to discriminatory statutes that undermine their equality as full citizens before the state, opportunities are made possible by the three C's: creativity, capital, and commerce – all of which are empowering a new generation of women.

Lebanese women have the knowledge base to play a greater role in their country's development. Yet, with only three percent of female-owned businesses acquiring bank loans, access to capital remains a major challenge. Lebanon's response has been a plethora of incubators and venture capital funds supporting women, resulting in more startups. One example is the We Initiative – launched in 2012 by BLC Bank that has increased the number of loans to [female-owned, small and medium-sized enterprises \(SMEs\)](#) by 82 percent. In education, the American University of Beirut has partnered with Citi [to train women entrepreneurs](#). NGOs are also playing a vital role in building the capacity of women in rural areas. The Safadi Foundation is setting women on a path to financial independence through their vocational mobile phone repair program to train and equip women.

Mentoring, training, and networking can reach urban and rural SMEs by making opportunities accessible throughout the country. Increased capital that has an equitable distribution around the country, matched by the rise of e-commerce and a growing digital economy in rural areas, will significantly broaden the impact of women involved in shaping an environment less prone to conflict and more responsive to local needs. By boosting community resilience, strengthening local economies, and reducing poverty, women can also expand their influence in local decision-making.



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

The year 2016 witnessed a dramatic economic transformation in Saudi Arabia that triggered unprecedented political changes. Vision 2030, released at the end of 2015, created a roadmap to wean Saudi Arabia off its oil-based economy. Empowering women and materializing their potentials was one of the main objectives of Vision 2030. In addition, [a state-commissioned McKinsey report](#) stressed the inclusion of women in the workforce as an essential tactic to counter the expected reduction in household income. In particular, the report encouraged the state to remove the restrictions imposed on women's access to mixed-gender work environments and on female drivers. Female workforce participation in Saudi Arabia sets as low as 18 percent and is mostly concentrated in public education and healthcare sectors. In the last few years, the Ministry of Labor adopted several initiatives to feminize certain retail sectors catering to women clients. The impact was significant – almost half a million women joined those new work opportunities. However, the restrictions on women's mobility and autonomy remain significant in that [a 2016 World Bank report](#) found the number of legal gender differences affecting women's economic participation was highest in Saudi Arabia compared to 173 other economies.

The ongoing online campaigns demanding women's rights, such as the October 23 driving campaign in 2013, the "Baladi" campaign for municipal elections in 2011, and the campaign to abolish the male guardianship system in 2016, have caught global attention. The guardianship campaign developed shortly after a Human Rights Watch report "Boxed In" was launched to document the massive restrictions on women's autonomy under this system. Thousands of women and men have signed a petition to the King to remove the necessary permission of a

male guardian for a woman to pursue education, work, obtain official identification documents, travel, receive health services, or get a release from prison. However, little has been done to address these issues. Instead the state has actively increased the number of women appointed to top positions to counter the negative reputation after the social campaigns, but even women in top positions are unable to influence gender policies. Official positions remain heavily controlled and symbolic to deliver a false image of inclusion – without the authority to change the status quo or contribute meaningfully to gender reforms. In fact, these positions are geared to reproduce the political values of patriarchy by women themselves rather than to reform women's rights.

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

According to a [report recently issued by the World Bank](#), [the Gaza Strip has the third highest poverty rate in the Arab world](#), after Sudan and Yemen. The Gaza Strip also suffers from major social and health issues: the tight Israeli siege that has been imposed for more than 10 years, the violations of basic human rights under the rule of Hamas, and the unemployment rate that has affected more than 70 percent of the population.

Half of Gaza's population is women – and they are suffering due to all the above mentioned issues, yet they are trying to see the light at the end of the tunnel regardless of the intensity of the darkness.

Despite everything that has happened, Gazan women are still working hard and taking initiative to build and develop projects, and to generate income to support their families, especially in cases where the husband or children are unemployed. Some of these women started working in occupations that a conservative society like Gaza considers limited to men; some work as mechanics, carpenters, or ambulance drivers.

Although the UN has raised questions regarding the habitability of the Gaza Strip by 2020, women are still working to make it a better place. They spread hope via their steadfastness, resilience, and participation in various positions as well as in decision-making bodies, including the Palestinian Legislative Council, ministries, media outlets, or Palestinian factions.

Furthermore, 2016 witnessed an unprecedented leap in the participation of women with disabilities who started to integrate with society in all walks of life. These women have taken part in athletic competitions, taken photos in the field, and written journalistic reports. Not only have they executed awareness-raising workshops about their rights, but they have also taken part in training courses to polish their varied skills and abilities.

Palestinian women have also announced their presence in the virtual world; Palestine holds the first place in terms of the number of women using Facebook, [as stated in a specialized report issued in Dubai](#). This reflects these women's understanding of this new media outlet, which they can use to break barriers of silence and deliver their voices to the entire world in all



languages. A number of female Gazan bloggers have already had teleworking and networking opportunities using new social media tools.

I wish all women, in Palestine and worldwide, a year full of freedom, justice, and equality.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Honey Al Sayed**, *Founder of Honey&, LLC, Creative Consultant, Producer, and Coach (Syria)*

The women and youth of the MENA region have always aspired for positive change, despite political and socioeconomic challenges and violent conflict, which has made it an evolutionary process. The region is rich in its cultural, societal, religious, political, and economic diversity, and its women and youth understand creative leadership, determination, and resilience due to their daily challenges. All of these factors have equipped them with entrepreneurial mindsets.

Unfortunately, local and international political powers and policymakers tend to ignore the power of women and youth in the MENA region, a bountiful power that has not yet been leveraged. Additionally, the constant negative stereotyping of the region – particularly that the women of the region are victims – only discounts them further. MENA women are known to be leaders at home; they are in charge of raising their children, caring for their families, and leading at work, and for the most part, all at the same time.

Take my mother for instance: she has simultaneously been a homemaker and a caretaker of four children as well as a business owner. Today, she is a grandmother to seven of my nieces and nephews and a grand-nephew. And to this day, my mother stills runs her art gallery and does so during the conflict in Syria. While there is no monetary profit, she cultivates a profit of raising the morale of artists exhibiting their art, lifting the morale of art exhibit visitors, and giving herself a purpose.

My sisters and nieces, who are Syrians, Kuwaitis, and Canadians spread out in Syria, Kuwait, the United Kingdom, and the United States, lead entrepreneurial lives and build their dreams of a Master’s degree, Ph.D., work, business, and a home. This is not to deny the vital role of the men in my immediate family who all keep an open mind, knowing it can only lead to an open future.

The women in my family are proof of the millions of women in the region striving for positive change by embracing opportunities and challenges, imagining innovative solutions, and giving birth to entrepreneurial concepts. These women are not waiting for well-deserved recognition, and regardless of their economic status, they will keep going full throttle. Look at the women of Syria escaping the dangers of war across land and sea and restarting their lives with their families, or what may remain of their families. It is the mistaken assumptions being made, the limited lens through which we see the “other” – it is the world that needs to change, allowing the sky to be our limit, as deserving people of this world.

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**Amatalalim Alsoswa**, former Yemeni Minister For Human Rights, and founder of Yemeni Women National Committee (Yemen)

Unfortunately, the United Nation's attempts to establish a ceasefire in Yemen to stop the war that began on March 26, 2015 have been unsuccessful, because of the intransigence of the involved parties.

According to the United Nations Humanitarian Response Plan, in 2017, 18.8 million people are in need of humanitarian aid, and 10.3 million people are in "acute" need of humanitarian aid. Health care, educational services, and the public treasury are collapsing, and famine has become widespread. Many people are unable to send their children to school because so many people have stopped working, there is a shortage of textbooks, and the costs of studying in government and private schools are high.

Such a bleak picture has led to the increasing burden on and responsibilities of women who have become the heads of households after the loss or absence of male breadwinners who disappeared or were detained. The underage marriage phenomenon and the increase in violence against women, including children and widows, has decreased their means of societal security and opportunities in life and work, all which were modest before the war.

Women are protecting their families and continuing to provide what they can afford in a dangerous and unsafe environment. This is in itself fairly positive, but the system is unfortunately on the verge of collapse. Humanitarian support must be directed to help women, children, and marginalized groups. Relief operations must target women as beneficiaries as much as possible, including women of different communities and backgrounds, as well as strengthen the means of preventing of violence caused by the absence of traditional structures.

There is no doubt about women's attempts to organize themselves to address these issues; women doctors, professionals working in fields of social service, and volunteers help the needy and alleviate the suffering of those living in the line of fire. Women have organized protests, run their family businesses, worked hard in agriculture, and educated others through awareness workshops on health and safety. Women have also cared for their own families under difficult circumstances. Most importantly, large numbers of women have continued to campaign to resume negotiations to end the war and advocate for the inclusion of women in all peace and post-conflict discussions, often in unfriendly environments.

What remains are the issue of famine and the significant challenge of peace for the future.

Though the current picture is bleak and the challenges are great, women will always be of help to their families and their country.

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**Margot Badran**, *Global Fellow, Wilson Center, and Senior Fellow, Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University (United States)*

Change abounds in Egypt today. Women are at the forefront in undertaking new initiatives, whether on their own as women or with men, in reshaping entrepreneurial, cultural, and social worlds. They are re/making and re/mapping urban Egypt, especially but not only, the capital. This can be seen as a post-revolutionary phenomenon or perhaps better, a version of “revolution” as the continual live-streaming of creative energy. Social and physical geographies continue to be re-scrambled, echoing cross-class, cross-generation, and cross-gender connectivities forged in the squares and streets in the days of revolution. Rechanneling the vibrancy and dynamism of the new social interactions that marked the city in revolution, Dina Abouelsoud, a young woman, with her business partner Nadia Dropkin, a New Yorker (just one example of the new cosmopolitanism born of the uprisings), opened Eish wa Malh (bread and salt), a café cum restaurant in the heart of downtown Cairo which quickly became a lively space for conversation and debate. It offers a new cultural outlet with its “dinner at the movies” screening vintage and contemporary local and foreign films curated with Cimeteque, a post-revolutionary film initiative which houses a precious film archive and organizes showings and workshops. Last year, another young woman, Aleya Hamza, opened the Gypsum Art Gallery on the edge of downtown where she curates the work of new and established artists of different generations. She recently showed Huda Lutfi’s latest work in an exhibition called Dawn Portraits. Lutfi, who produced some of the most daring art during the tumultuous days of revolution unpacking the workings of patriarchal hegemony changed her register and is now taking a conscientious pause, allowing for introspection through a series of portraits of the self. The portraits, which she would begin in that quiet hour of the dawn, ringed the gallery rooms like inscription bands. The images reveal a range of moods and inner thoughts drawing viewers into the artist’s reflective moments. Yet, another new venture, the pioneering literary agency and cultural management firm, 540 Egypt, that started last year, is the brainchild of Omar Ahmed, who honed a range of skills as a revolutionary gender activist and is now intensely active agenting young women aspiring novelists and memoirists whom he often discovers on social media or who attend the cultural events he organizes. In this post-revolutionary moment enterprising socially engaged actors, like the few mentioned above, with visions of the kind of society they want to live in, operate in independent spaces they assiduously cultivate as they redirect the energies and dreams released in the years of hope.



**Judy A. Beal**, *DNSc, RN, FNAP, FAAN, Dean & Professor, School of Nursing and Health Sciences, Simmons College (United States)*

While the nurse practitioner role is not yet well accepted in Israel, the unresolved shortage of nurses and physicians created a pressing and immediate need to educate nurses who are ready to enter the Israeli healthcare workforce to improve primary care services. In 2015, Simmons College and the EGL Charitable Foundation partnered with Meuhedet Health Services to offer a pilot program to confer Master of Science in Nursing degrees to 20 Israeli students. Through the generosity of the donor, who is a Simmons College alumna, students receive a full scholarship and access to high-quality advanced practice nursing education.

This two-year program is delivered online in an innovative learning platform that includes both synchronous and asynchronous pedagogies. Israeli students come to Boston for a hands-on immersion weekend prior to their clinical experiences. Three clinical preceptorships are conducted in Israel and provided by Meuhedet physicians. While in the program, Meuhedet employs the students as nurses and will provide employment as advanced practice nurses upon graduation. Israeli Jewish and Arab students are enrolled and sit side-by-side with students from 48 U.S. states in the virtual classroom. Israeli students are fluent in English, Hebrew, Russian, and Arabic. Despite cultural and communication challenges, the students are thriving in the program. Just as the vision of the Foundation and Simmons was to transform healthcare in Israel, undoubtedly the Israeli students are effecting changes in their American fellow students who have become colleagues and friends.

Nurses educated in this program will be able provide comprehensive primary healthcare services to individuals from infancy through adulthood. They will gain leadership roles in research and healthcare delivery that are required to improve the welfare of the people in Israel, and they will serve as shining examples of how to expand primary healthcare services throughout the Middle East.



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

When we talk about women in the Middle East, we see them as submissive, oppressed, and subject to discrimination. Therefore, we tend to put all their miseries and struggles forward.

Discrimination against women is unfortunately not a new phenomenon, particularly in the Middle East—it has roots in each country. History taught us many examples of women in the Middle East and beyond who took part in different wars and revolutions. These women fought as hard as their male colleagues, yet they were quickly left behind by both history and the political process in post-conflict decision making.

As a result, people have failed to realize that women were liberated and empowered at different stages of history. The stigma remains vivid in memories, in people's daily lives, and in many of our patriarchal societies, especially when daily lives provide us the needed elements to nurture that.

In Algeria, when women fought equally alongside men, fighting for both political independence and their personal independence, they achieved a new sense of their own identity in a highly conservative Muslim society. In the aftermath of the war, women maintained their new-found emancipation and became more actively involved in the development of the country, despite being isolated from power.

Today, 55 years after the country's independence and 17 years since its civil war, women are major players in society. Sixty percent of college graduates are women, and, thanks to the amendment of the election law in 2012, women constitute a third of elected members of

parliament, which is truly impressive given that the global average is only 20 percent. Additionally, Algerian women can travel freely, they do not need a male guardian, and they can pass their nationalities on to their children.

While considering all of the above important steps, one may think Algerian women would be among the most advanced and liberated in the MENA region. Unfortunately, this is not the case; despite advancement in the public sphere, very little advancement has been made in the private one. Locked in a misogynistic and unfair Family Code in place since 1984, women have to face many challenges that reduce them to an almost sub-human status. Growing conservatism in Algeria compounds the struggles that women confront daily.

As a friend of mine once told me, “Yes, we are progressing toward a modern society, but it’s not always obvious. We still struggle between traditional and modern values to the point that we lose direction sometimes.”



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

In most religious scriptures the prominent female role models are mothers or wives. The eminent woman in Islam is Khadija, the wife of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). She was a successful businesswoman; a leader in the tribe of Quraysh, the most powerful tribe of Mecca; and a critically influential person in the birth of Islam. She not only dedicated during her lifetime her immense political capital to advance Islam’s message, but also spent her considerable fortune to support the faith’s critical first decade. In today’s parlance, she would be called an angel investor and sponsor.

Ironically, Khadija’s daughters in Muslim countries enjoy today fewer degrees of economic freedom and less political influence than she did 1,400 years ago, and they do so even in comparison with their peers elsewhere. The Fraser Institute’s [\*Economic Freedom Report\*](#) ranks most MENA countries among the least free for women. Similarly, the International Finance Corporation’s [\*Women, Business, and Law\*](#) that reviews 173 countries in terms of gender/sex-based legal discrimination in the economic domain, places all MENA countries, and nearly all Muslim countries, among the weakest performers. This lack of economic freedom results in a substantial cost to these societies. In fact, the International Monetary Fund’s paper on [\*Fair Play: More Equal Laws Boost Female Labor Force Participation\*](#) estimates that the MENA economies could gain the most – between 20 and 40 percent greater GDP per capita – if women could use their talents and capabilities better. Advocates for reforms run quickly into a quagmire of culture and customs that is conveniently labeled as religion, despite the strong role model of a Khadija. The Arab Spring had the great promise of economic prosperity and societal transformation toward equity and equality among men and women. This promise remains unfulfilled.



**Kent Davis-Packard**, *Adjunct Professor of Middle East Studies and American Foreign Policy at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University (United States)*

This past year MENA women continued a revolutionary pattern of culture change that laws cannot keep up with and do not reflect. Despite restrictive legal and cultural norms in which a male guardian must approve a woman's right to decide her own destiny – including to travel, marry, and work – MENA women are either risking the social taboo associated with ignoring such restrictions and successfully moving on with their careers, or their families are simply no longer acting in opposition to their hopes and dreams. While countries and even cities vary widely, one of the countries in which this transformation is the most visible is the United Arab Emirates, where women have benefitted from an astounding history of female leadership. Dozens of Emirati women interviewed in 2016 declared that their families no longer used religious or cultural traditions as a pretext to control life decisions now in the hands of their daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers.

Emirati women attribute this shift in cultural values in the home to women's "quiet leadership at the top," the examples of which have enabled them to feel empowered to master their own destinies without worrying that they are breaking with their faith. In 2016, the new UAE Cabinet included eight women (27 percent of the total cabinet members). Nine women hold seats within the Federal National Council (FNC) – almost 25 percent of the FNC's membership. The United States ranks lower than the UAE in women's representation in its 114<sup>th</sup> legislative equivalents (19.3 percent in the Senate and 20 percent in the House of Representatives). In November 2015, Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi was appointed president of the FNC, making her the first woman in the Middle East to lead a national assembly. Now, more women than men complete secondary education and enroll in university and post-graduate education, and women own 50 percent of small and medium enterprises in the UAE.

This little, yet powerful, Gulf country sets a stunning example of what the presence of women in leadership can do to bring about what many political scientists deem as nearly impossible in the endless confrontation between state identity and religious norms in the region.



**Leena El-Ali**, *Managing Partner, BONA SMARTS, L.L.C. (United States)*

In the field of international development, progress is usually thought to fall into one of three fundamental categories: the economic, the social, or the political. Life being the complex experience it is, we often end up describing initiatives or results in hyphenated terms that reflect the multi-disciplinary nature of... well, life.

There is much going on across the MENA region to address this variety of needs despite exceptionally difficult circumstances. What is conspicuously absent from most of these worthy endeavors, however, is a conscious strategy to integrate religiously thoughtful approaches that can both deliver better results and begin to reshape the religious narrative at this critical time from the ground up. Despite the multi-religious and multi-denominational composition of

many of the countries in the region, the cultural framework of these societies for well over a millennium has essentially been that of Islam – even if today’s Islam bears little resemblance to that of the 1950s or 1960s or 1970s.

As the valiant and committed women and men of the region go about their work, they instinctively navigate the religious backdrop to all they do deftly and courteously. After all, it is their backdrop and not someone else’s. I have seen this skill over and over again from the Levant to North Africa to the Gulf, and it is nothing short of elegant diplomacy and conflict management in action. This specific aspect of the work of local activists is the unsung aspect that makes all the difference, but for a seismic shift to higher ground something more has to happen.

The religious backdrop does not tend to infringe upon men for the most part, but it does have serious implications for women even when it is at its most subtle. A lot has happened since the 1950s in this regard – extremism is only the most visibly harmful expression of this trend – but we now need to reach above and beyond the post-colonial era. Engaged citizens of whatever primary or hyphenated field are uniquely positioned to deploy a deeper grasp of Islam as an ally in their work. This should be of primary concern to women activists, who are uniquely positioned to influence future generations and access other women. But first, they will need to re-educate themselves to fully reclaim their religion’s rightful place as a protector of every individual’s dignity and liberty across gender, religion, and denomination within their societies.



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

In recent years, the emphasis in the Middle East concerning women’s rights has shifted to promoting women to leadership positions. This is a laudable goal for governments and women’s organizations in the region.

But it is not enough. The main problem for women in the region remains the Family Law, which is based on *shari’a* and defines the status of women in the family and in society. Although family law varies from country to country, it remains an impediment to equal rights for women region-wide. It disadvantages women among other things in matters of divorce, child custody, inheritance, the age of marriage for girls, freedom of movement, and access to education and employment.

The countries of the Middle East are not homogenous – in terms of politics, economics, or laws affecting women. In a number of countries, the issues of women in leadership positions, equality under the law, or even access to schools for girls are hardly relevant because women are struggling for basic survival. Yemen and Syria are in a state of war, and Iraq is hardly stable. In some areas of Iraq and Syria, ISIS doctrine reigns. Women are taken as slaves or added to multiple-wife households. They are raped and killed. In Syrian refugee camps, young girls are sold to older men as brides or concubines so that their families can survive.

Elsewhere, the record remains uneven. For example, in the Gulf states, where there is economic prosperity, it has been easier for women to rise into leadership positions in the government and private sector. In the UAE there is even a woman Minister of State for Tolerance and a Minister of State for Happiness. In Jordan and Lebanon, two countries grappling with tens of thousands of refugees, women continue to be represented in parliament and in cabinet positions, but the numbers are small. In Lebanon, the Minister for Women's Affairs is a 62-year-old man. In Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, women continue to be part of the decision-making process but at a modest level. In Iran, the record of women in leadership roles continues its usual pendulum swing, depending on the policies and whims of governments.

Unless countries in the Middle East decide to revise their family laws, women's rights and equality under the law will continue to be a mirage, no matter how much women and especially the younger generation pushes for change.



**Dalia F. Fahmy**, *Assistant Professor of Political Science, Long Island University and Senior Fellow, Center for Global Policy (Egypt/United States)*

On the occasion of International Women's Day 2017, and as the continued call for women's rights to be considered human rights, human rights and thus women's rights continue to be denied in Egypt. As I have written in this publication for the past few years, the clampdown on rights and the human rights movement have led to the targeting of women's rights organizations. The targeting of such organizations is a violation of Egypt's obligations under its 2014 Constitution and international human rights law.

The repression of civil society organizations, including human rights defenders and journalists of the past few years, has now led to the freezing of assets and travel bans. Such bans affect local Egyptian NGOs and women's rights defenders and cripple their work in the name of women's rights and justice. Ms. Azza Soliman, founder of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, and Dr. Aida Seif al-Dawla, co-founder of the anti-torture NGO El-Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, have been the targets of harassment and were most recently arrested. Ms. Soliman was arrested from her home on December 7, 2016 and taken for interrogation. In January 2017, Ms. Mozn Hassan and the NGO she directs, Nazra for Feminist Studies, had their assets frozen as well. On February 9, 2017, Egyptian authorities shut down the El-Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, and its founders, including al-Dawla, are among Egypt's women human rights defenders specifically targeted within this crackdown.

The NGO law adopted by Parliament in 2016 can end independent civil society altogether because of the targeting of NGOs and human rights defenders. By targeting these women and their organizations, the law thoroughly violates the constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of association and Egypt's many international commitments to uphold it. As we celebrate International Women's Day six years after the Arab Spring, women's rights and their defenders continue to be under attack.



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**Moira Goff-Taylor**, *National Security Fellow, Wilson Center (United States)*

In November 2016, women in Turkey united to protest the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) draft bill that proposed the perpetrator in cases of sexual abuse of children committed "without force or threat" could be pardoned if he married the victim. Women across political and religious spectrums spoke out against the proposal, arguing it opened the way for more abuse of children and encouraged forced marriages. Thousands of women across the country publicly protested the measure on November 19, and over three days more than 800,000 people signed a petition asking Parliament to cancel the draft.

It was heartening to see Turkish women and men take a stand against a questionable government policy in a time when many inside and outside of Turkey were questioning the state of democracy in the country. Ankara's crackdown on its opposition in light of the attempted coup in July and enactment of a State of Emergency created concerns about the rule of law in Turkey and might have worried some Turks, but people still came out to voice their objections. The government withdrew the proposal on November 22 after President Erdogan called for reconsideration of the law. It is unlikely Erdogan would have intervened if women had not spoken out, including those from groups that are seen as AKP supporters, and protested against the law.

As Turkey moves toward holding a referendum in April on a new presidential system, which will give Erdogan even greater control over the Turkish government, I hope that the Turkish public remembers the success of their efforts against the abuse law and feels free to stand up and speak out for what they believe is right for their lives and country.

*This does not constitute an official release of U.S. Government (USG) information. The author is a paid employee of the USG and conducted this research under a USG-funded fellowship at an external institution. All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of any USG agency. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying USG authentication of information or USG endorsement of the author's views. This material may reflect USG-required edits for classification and compliance with legal obligations.*

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**Leila Hanafi**, *Doctor in Law; International Lawyer, United Nations; Principal, Alliance for Rule of Law Promotion and Alternative Dispute Resolution (United States)*

With the Arab Spring and fast changing developments in the region, legal reforms regarding women's role in society have arisen; however, without meaningful *de facto* application and given the social realities, these reforms have not been sufficient to reduce the gender gaps.

Across the region, national legal frameworks refer to equal protection of the laws but do not place any distinct obligation on the state to act. While it is a positive sign, it is ineffective when not accompanied by more affirmative provisions. Many of the constitutions took a stronger

approach to non-discrimination by establishing an equal protection clause, essentially enunciating that the state must not apply its laws differently. Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco have further led the region in their constitutional provisions by establishing that the government will take an active role in working toward the realization of parity between the sexes, including establishing independent commissions for the promotion and enforcement of these rights.

Moving forward, governments across the region ought to undertake a systematic review of the legislation to eliminate all forms of discrimination in the legal system and ensure that international norms related to gender equality are fully embedded in the national legislative framework. Governments should also establish effective mechanisms to monitor the commitment to the implementation of international norms. Notably, the formal justice sector services play an important role in challenging legal inequality and overcoming obstacles linked to social norms. Justice sector institutions and the services they provide are tools for women to challenge constraining social norms and discriminatory legal frameworks. There are several concrete areas in which the judicial sector can and should improve its performance and accountability. In addition to eliminating written *de jure* barriers to equality, legislators should seek to close the gaps in the *lawmaking sphere* that permit the extensive use of discretion.

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

Women throughout the Middle East and North Africa are responsible for driving positive change, despite facing significant obstacles including political instability, economic uncertainty, legal inequality, and physical insecurity. One of the most visible – and perhaps intractable – threats in the region for all of these issues remains ISIS. Yet military advances are gradually interfering with the group’s ability to devastate, and sometimes take, the lives of those within its territory.

Women have been a significant force fighting against ISIS. Current estimates indicate that some 10,000 women are on the frontlines in Iraq and Syria. Some of the earliest fighters were Kurdish women who were part of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) from Turkey and its affiliate, the Women’s Protection Unit (YPJ) in Syria, along with the peshmerga in northern Iraq. These Kurdish groups existed before the rise of ISIS and while some tensions endure among them, they have been remarkably successful in their efforts against the terror group.

In addition to Kurdish women fighting ISIS, the number of women in Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units has reached around 3,000 total, and the YPJ has been training Arab women as well. According to reports from the past year, “women can be found not only in the ranks but also in command of guerrilla units.” Along with leading some units, women have also created all-female groups to fight against the Islamic State: the Sinjar Women’s Units (YJS), with Yazidi women and Islamic State survivors trained by the PKK; the “Daughters of the Sun,” another Yazidi group led by former popular singer Khatoon Khider; and Khansawat Souria, which is part of the Syrian government’s army.

Women in the MENA region have been on the frontlines fighting for a better future – whether at work, in the home, or on a literal battlefield – and continue to be a critical element in defeating the Islamic State and driving positive change in the region.



**Farahnaz Ispahani**, *Global Fellow, Wilson Center (Pakistan/United States)*

Tunisia embraced women’s rights with the inclusion of girls in schools in the 1920s. Since then, the French colonial regime and the secular governments that followed after independence enacted laws recognizing equality for women.

The rising influence of Islamist politics, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011, was seen by Tunisian secularists as a threat to the advances made by women over the preceding century. Tunisia’s Islamists, however, maintained political equality provisions in the country’s constitution and women’s rights continue to be enshrined in law. Society, as is often the case, still lags behind.

Today, Tunisia has one of the highest proportions of seats held by women in national parliaments compared to other countries in the region. In June 2016, the Tunisian parliament legislated, with an overwhelming majority, plans to increase female representation in local government across the country. The new law requires parties or blocks to put forward an equal number of men and women at the top of party lists of candidates. In the past, Tunisia’s election laws encouraged gender parity, but, like Egypt, the first candidate listed was almost always a man. The new law is expected to most help female politicians in the country’s interior and southern regions that have been traditionally disconnected from the capital. An increase in women’s representation in local government is expected after the March 2017 local elections.

Although Tunisia is seen as a beacon of hope in the region for democracy and the rights of women, formidable challenges remain. The Tunisian Minister of Women, Family, and Children Naziha Laabidi warned of alarming levels of violence against women and children. A research study on gender-based violence conducted by the Tunisian Centre for Research Studies, with the United Nations Human Rights body for gender equality and the empowerment of women, showed that as many as 53 percent of women in Tunisia have been subjected to some form of violence between 2011 and 2015. If greater women’s representation in parliament and local government leads to checking this trend of gender-based violence, Tunisia would advance significantly in the long-term struggle for equality and justice for women.



**Sema Kalaycioglu**, *Professor of Economics(e), Yildiz Technical University (Turkey)*

Women have not truly been the driving force behind positive substantial changes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This is partly because masses of women in the region are still not properly educated and more importantly are not morally, emotionally, and financially empowered enough to make changes in their respective societies in general.

In countries where young male unemployment is high and men are still expected to be the main providers for their families, either employment opportunities are given to men, or women voluntarily stay out of job markets in favor of men. This situation mainly leaves women with the option of the traditional role of family care. Nevertheless, in many instances, either because of their frustration, lack of motivation and knowledge, or traditional values they have to abide by, women continue to raise their children with no mission to make changes.

When seemingly given opportunities, especially in politics, women are expected to play roles designed by their party leaders, and only do what they are permitted to do. However, it is also possible to see professionally advanced women, in the MENA region in general and in Turkey in particular, who climb to the upper echelons of their occupations, and administer changes in academic and scientific institutions as well as in social and philanthropic organizations. Their numbers are limited, and often so are their effects, in establishments where personalities rather than institutions play greater roles.

Nevertheless, it is also possible to see women from the MENA region leaving their countries to go to the West, where they find more hospitable, egalitarian, motivating, and rewarding environments to exert their positive influences in science, literature, and societal, judicial, and even political orders.

Currently in Turkey there is an organization called the “Flying Broom,” which was founded in Ankara in 1996 by two feminist academics. Its objective is to improve democracy and civil society to enhance gender equality and solidarity that empowers women so their social roles can make change. I consider this an example of an institutional positive step forward to construct efficient and effective policies for solving women’s problems that stem from gender inequality.

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**Moushira Khattab**, *Candidate of African Union for the post of Director General of UNESCO; 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)*

Secretary Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election, but women who took to the streets shortly after President Donald J. Trump was sworn in made a sweeping victory. They left their mark on history – a mark that left me reminiscent of Egyptian women in 2011 and the pivotal role they played in pushing for change. The aftermath of the 2011 revolution saw women taking to the streets in protest against a variety of issues ranging from a constitutional declaration that wrote off their human rights to protesting against gender-based harassment. As a woman, I will always be exceptionally proud of this collective action.

As impressive as women were in 2011, and as proud as I will always be, I will use these lines to talk about an angle of Egyptian women that is frequently overlooked. An angle that shows real,

unsung heroes driving change in a patriarchal society. An angle from which you see widows evolving from trying to make ends meet to becoming small business owners. It is an angle in which up to 35 percent of Egyptian women find themselves in the precarious situation of heading a household – a situation they did not ask for, but which they make the most of. I want to shed light on women who Forbes has featured as being among the world's best recyclers: women who turn garbage into woven rugs and purses. And to tell you about the woman who disguised herself as a man to work as a shoe polisher for 43 years in order to provide for her daughter and granddaughter. It is these women who lend insight into what lays behind women's improving political participation.

Yes, Egyptian women today boast 189 female members of parliament, and 5 ministers, but we also boast 1,800 applicants to the Young Women Entrepreneur Development Program (YWED-P) competition held in 2015. Yes, the number of Egyptian women in the judiciary is rising, but so too is the number of quiet achievers for whom day-to-day life is about sinking or swimming – not just for themselves, but for the families they support. Women's participation in all walks of life is growing strong. In February 2017, Egypt appointed its first female governor – a crowning achievement indeed for a tough post women long fought very hard to get.

I congratulate Egyptian women for the progress they have achieved in the public domain. I particularly congratulate Egyptian woman for the progress they quietly achieve on a daily basis in their private domains, and I hope that next year we will celebrate success in their personal status laws.

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

Our aspirations to achieve the goals for which we all strive in our own different ways, year after year and day after day, are well defined. Change is gradually – almost invisibly – taking place. And it is irreversible; it will stay and grow. The definition of being a woman is gradually changing and already delivering generations of mothers who do not bring up girls and boys as different members of society. This fact will have a fundamental impact on future societies. And yet, there is an issue that increasingly feeds my mind more than before. Are women's movements paying enough attention to the somewhat different urgent needs of voiceless rural and "blue-collar" working women? Do we all have the same urgent needs?

Needs and mindsets of the above mentioned groups may differ considerably from the represented and defined collective of the women's movement. Equal rights are likely to have a different representation.

Occasional reports of those women, indeed very rarely voiced, make me wonder. The published story of a working woman I recently read touched me very strongly through a multifaceted representation: She is a hard-working cleaning woman in urban Iran and the single provider for her two-child family. She was forced into marriage at age 16. Soon, her husband, unemployed and uneducated, fell in the trap of drug dealing and addiction and started beating her, because

he was unable to work and earn an income. She found a job to feed her family, including her sick and violent husband. That is when she fought to get divorced, and to keep and raise her children.

So far the story may be a familiar one. As deplorable as her situation was, she still had to deal “decently” with her new position in the neighborhood and not reveal that she was a divorced woman. A woman without a husband, regardless the reason, is in many MENA countries a priori suspect of being an amoral individual. On top of her difficult life, the protagonist had to pretend, in order to save her reputation, that there was still a MAN in the house! She regularly addressed that issue by adding a pair of men’s shoes in front of the house, the place where everyone took off shoes before entering. There are many more disturbing and impeding accounts among varying strata of rural and working-class women in the MENA region that need to be included in the perspectives of leaders of women’s movements.



**Bessma Momani**, *Professor at University of Waterloo and Fellow at Brookings Doha Center and the Centre for International Governance and Innovation (Canada)*

One of the more interesting phenomena in the Arab world is the rise of female rates of education. Women in the Arab region, like women in many developed economies, surpass their male counterparts in attaining a university-level education. In a global context, Arab women are making the most impressive gains in attaining post-secondary education. In my research, I found that societal and family expectation that a university degree would secure a woman’s prospective future and diminish dependency on a husband or male relative was also a factor pushing women to pursue higher education. Societal norms, particularly among young people, are changing throughout the region, signaling a positive trend toward substantive change.

Although women in the Arab region are increasingly pursuing and attaining post-secondary education, they face the lowest participation rate in the labor force compared to any other region in the world. The rate of female employment in the Gulf, when factoring out foreign guest workers, is even lower than the rest of the Arab region. But I believe and have found that Arab women want to be increasingly valued for their skills and intellect, and not just to whom they are related. Young Arab women crave recognition for their intelligence and talent and yet face a formal employment system that does not provide for this satisfaction. They are not giving up on their education. Instead, university education has a new-found status value that has become universal across the region, especially for young women. This does not always mean that women expect or even seek formal employment. University degrees are not a means to attain work, but an end in themselves.

Views about women and work are changing, and as young people face the challenge of trying to provide a lifestyle for an urban family that is full of modern, expensive amenities, inhibitions about women and work are eroding. For many Arab families, a double-income has become not just a financial necessity, but also a growing societal norm that is changing the dynamics of patriarchy throughout the Middle East. Women in the Arab world face the challenges all

women face (finding good child care, flexible work, secure financing, etc.). The image of the passive or submissive Arab woman simply does not fit with the current reality.

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**Marina Ottaway**, *Middle East Fellow, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (United States)*

Saudi Arabia celebrated its first ever Women’s Day event in early February. It was a modest affair, unfolding for three days in the protected venue of the King Fahd Cultural Center, where speakers could advocate for women’s right to drive and hail their contributions to the country’s advancement without being censored – or unduly stirring public enthusiasm.

In the greater scheme of things – Saudi Arabia was ranked 141 out of 144 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2016 of the World Economic Forum – a subdued, government-orchestrated, and carefully contained celebration of Women’s Day is hardly a sign of revolutionary change. It is progress nevertheless, suggesting that the Saudi government is sufficiently embarrassed by the problem of women to take at least a symbolic step. And it is emblematic of the way change is likely to come for women in the entire Arab region: slowly and gradually, with occasional steps blessed by the leadership and prolonged efforts by women, both in public and in their personal lives.

Western women concerned about the slow pace of change in the Middle East forget about their own history. Women’s rights advanced through a few dramatic steps – the battle for women’s suffrage, for example – and through innumerable small, personal battles as women gained access to education fields and jobs previously closed to them or fought to assert their equality in family life. The dramatic steps were always largely symbolic initially. Real change came about through the protracted struggles that followed.

As we watch the slow advance for women in the Arab world, we should neither dismiss any change as purely symbolic nor hail it as the beginning of a revolution. They are all part of a long process, which will unfold over decades as the women of the Middle East fight their battles.

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**Marie A. Principe**, *Program Associate, Global Women’s Leadership Initiative and Women in Public Service Project, Wilson Center (United States)*

Before the Syrian Civil War became a civil war and the deadliest conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was a civil resistance movement calling for democratic reforms. Aside from initially releasing some political prisoners in an effort to appease the protestors, the Assad regime responded mostly with brutal violence, indiscriminately and deliberately targeting civilians. Bombings, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, and sexual violence occur regularly, and counts of the rebel groups operating in the conflict have, at their highest, been more than 1,000. Even still, Syrian women are not easily renouncing the original strategy of nonviolent resistance and are leading the peace and reconciliation efforts.

In 2016, the [Syrian Women’s Advisory Board was established](#) after three years of collaborative efforts between the Syrian Women’s Initiative for Peace and Democracy, the governments of Norway and the Netherlands, UN Women, and the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria. Comprised of 12 independent civil society representatives, the Advisory Board is the first of its kind to [meaningfully engage women](#) in efforts toward peace by advising the Special Envoy and amplifying the unified voices of Syrian women calling for peace. By bringing a gender-sensitive perspective and civil society expertise to peace talks, the Advisory Board is set to contribute to peace talks in a way never before done.

Beyond being an important step toward the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325, the Syrian conflict desperately needs a resolution and may get there with the help of the all-women Advisory Board. [Statistical analysis](#) of 40 peace processes in 35 countries over 30 years shows that when women’s groups effectively influence a peace process, an agreement is almost always reached, the agreement is more likely to be implemented, and peace is more sustainable. Examining the percentage and influence of women’s participation in [182 peace agreements from 1989 to 2011](#), an agreement is 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years if women participate in its creation.

Mounting quantitative and qualitative research tell us that women’s empowerment and gender equality are directly correlated with peace and stability of a society. In fact, gender equality is a better indicator of stability than often-cited factors such as GDP, democracy, or religion, and higher levels of female participation in parliament reduce the risk of civil war. Syrian women know that women’s leadership is critical in establishing a peaceful society, and it is time we knew that too – in Syria, in the Middle East, and globally.

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

Women throughout the region work daily to drive positive change at the local, state, regional, and international levels. On the occasion of International Women’s Day, I will highlight the work of two women – Vian Dakhil and Nadia Murad Basse – who are working at all of these levels to improve the lives of Yazidis after ISIS [committed genocide](#) in Sinjar and beyond, in which they [slaughtered, raped, tortured, trafficked, and enslaved thousands of Yazidis](#).

Shortly after ISIS invaded Sinjar, Iraqi Member of Parliament Vian Dakhil (the only woman Yazidi MP) [implored the Iraqi parliament](#) to intervene to save her people. This speech forced the world to pay attention to ISIS’s actions. Dakhil does a [tremendous amount of work on the ground](#) to help her people; she continues to work to rescue Yazidis held in captivity by ISIS, meets with survivors, and works with Yazidis in refugee camps. Additionally, Dakhil is highly engaged in raising awareness about the plight of the Yazidi people – she has spoken about the Yazidis on many international stages, including [the Wilson Center](#). She was recently awarded [the Lantos Foundation’s Human Rights Prize](#), but [nearly missed the ceremony](#) because of President’s Donald Trump travel ban on people from seven Muslim-majority countries.



Nadia Murad Bassee is an activist, a UN Goodwill Ambassador, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, and herself a survivor of the Yazidi genocide and ISIS captivity. She frequently recounts the horrors she has lived through as part of her work. She has testified for the UN Security Council, among other important audiences, and started an initiative to “help women and children victimized by genocide.” Additionally, Murad has brought the Yazidi genocide case to the International Criminal Court; her lawyer, Amal Clooney, will “seek an International Criminal Court investigation and prosecution of the crimes committed against Nadia Murad and the Yazidi community.”

Both of these women fight through personal pain to make sure that not only the Yazidi people receive help from the international community, but also that this type of genocide, systematic rape, and trafficking is not repeated.

The U.S. media’s interest, and seemingly the U.S. government’s interest, in the Yazidi people has greatly waned since 2014. On the occasion of International Women’s Day 2017, I echo Vian Dakhil’s appeal in her February 2017 op-ed in the *Washington Post*: “The United States should not abandon the Yazidi people,” including the thousands of Yazidi women still held in captivity by ISIS.

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

Women in the MENA region are encountering increasingly challenging conditions amidst the current turmoil and slow economies in most of the countries of the region. Yet, one cannot but recognize the increasing awareness of the need to achieve more gender equality and more women’s representation as a means for the betterment of societies.

This is illustrated by the active engagement of young women in organizations focused on women’s empowerment in business, civil rights, and politics in Lebanon. For example, the 2016 membership enrollment doubled in the Lebanese League for Women in Business (LLWB). Women in Front (WIF), a newly active organization aiming to increase the participation of women in politics and advocating for the allocation of quotas for women in parliamentary seats, is garnering increased media coverage. Alongside this, the media continues to cover cases of violence against women and campaigns to reform laws in this domain. A significant achievement in this regard is the initial step made to repeal Article 522, which stops the prosecution of rapists if they marry their victims.

Furthermore, the municipal elections that took place in early summer 2016 witnessed active participation from youth and women in particular throughout Lebanon. A noteworthy example is the “Beirut Madinati” campaign that ran with 50 percent women on their list and got 40 percent of the total votes in Beirut.

All of the above contributed to the governmental initiative to create a Ministry for Women's Affairs for the first time in Lebanon, despite its assignment to a male minister in a 30-member government with only one female minister.

Hence, despite myriad threats surrounding women's rights, for a country suffering from the spillover of the crisis of the war in Syria, there are encouraging signs that the fight for women's rights continues unabated.



**Fatima Sadiqi**, *Professor of Linguistics and Gender Studies, University of Fez, Morocco, and former Fellow, Middle East Program, Wilson Center (Morocco)*

In spite of a “space-based” patriarchy, conservative ideology, government and non-state obstacles, and security concerns, women are leading a spectacular struggle for sociopolitical reconfiguration in North Africa. They continue to conquer more spaces in the public spheres of authority and impose their presence through activism, politics, and intellectual means amidst actors that seek to shut down their voices through attacks on their dignity and the promotion of ideologies that either seek to maintain the status quo or roll back women's hard-won gains.

The number of women human rights leaders and groups in North Africa is on the rise. Older groups are gaining in strength and new ones are emerging. Various workshops are focusing on generational concerns and how to address them and bridge gaps. This dynamic is reinforced by the constant images of women leading mass demonstrations and creating a culture that slowly but surely reinforces the culture of women's presence and agency in public spaces.

In Tunisia, where women have achieved substantial legal right – like the ban on polygamy, and the possibility of divorce, among other rights – retrograde voices attempted to replace “equality” with “complementarity” in the 2014 post-Arab Spring constitution, but were stopped by women's tenacious and persistent street demonstrations.

In Morocco, when the post-Arab Spring Islamist-led government attempted to lower the age of marriage in 2013, hundreds of women took to the street to demand that their government maintain constitutional rights of gender equality and by so doing stopped the government from changing the law. In 2015, feminist and human rights activists called for another massive mobilization when the government arrested two women wearing summer dresses in public and were condemned and charged with “gross indecency.”

In Egypt, numerous attacks on women participating in demonstrations have been reported. For example, in 2013, HarassMap cited 80 sexual attacks on women in one day. Each time, women protested en masse against sexual violence – this led to a presidential decree criminalizing sexual harassment, a victory for women. However, the leading women human rights group Nazra for Feminist Studies was taken to court after they documented 500 cases of crimes of sexual violence and several thousands of acts of violence against women after the Arab Spring. Various national and international instances rallied to support Nazra, which continues its work in spite of the government freezing its assets.

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

Women, particularly feminists, have always been agents of change. Indeed, the ongoing Arab uprisings since 2011 in several countries are witness to the active role that women played pushing for positive change: democracy, freedom, citizenship, dignity, and equality.

Unfortunately, women's expectations and demands fell on deaf ears. Their dreams for attaining gender equality were shattered. They were disappointed when they were not included in the reconstruction and transition councils and committees on equal footing with men. They were pushed back home. To add insult to injury, violence against women escalated in all its forms and guises, including trafficking, slavery, jihadist and child marriages, use as war trophies, brutal murders, and other barbaric manifestations of violence against women.

Notwithstanding the above, women in the Middle East have not given up and continue to fight for their rights and demands for gender equality. They are agents of change with successes and failures, good stories to exchange and emulate and not so good experiences serving as lessons learned.

In countries like Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, one observes success stories that other countries can emulate. In countries like Libya, Yemen, or Syria, the situation is going from bad to worse.

In Lebanon, after lobbying for years on end, women NGOs succeeded with the Parliament to pass for the first time a bill on domestic violence (Law 293), albeit it falls short of expectations especially with respect to criminalizing marital rape. But they failed to convince Parliament to enact a law allowing Lebanese women to pass their nationality to their children from a foreign husband; thereby, forfeiting their commitment to implement CEDAW. However, there is finally hope, after over 20 years of lobbying post the Beijing Conference, that a 30 percent quota for women in Parliament may be soon adopted, as the Prime Minister declared in February 2017.

Finally, women are making their dent in society by winning small battles and making positive steps in a huge war against discrimination. Women-focused NGOs lobbied ad infinitum and demonstrated across the country with posters and video clips showing that "Bloodied brides relieve their rapists from prosecution but subject the victims to violence forever" and condemning Article 522 of the Penal Code that states if a man rapes an unmarried woman he can avoid prosecution if he marries the victim. This Article was abolished in December 2016.

Hope remains eternal and women will continue to be agents of change until democracy is consolidated, peace is restored, and gender equality dawns.

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**Marwa Shalaby**, *Fellow for the Middle East and Director, Women's Rights in the Middle East Program, Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University (United States)*

Six years after the onset of the Arab uprisings, women in the Middle East and North Africa continue to face formidable obstacles in the political realm. Despite the wide-ranging advancements for women in the education, health, and – to some extent – economic spheres, achieving gender parity in the decision-making process remains an unattainable ideal.

The past year has witnessed sluggish improvement in women's presence in the electoral process. Women's gains varied significantly in national elections held in Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait. While female politicians in Morocco obtained about 21 percent of parliamentary seats, thanks to the quota system enacted in 2002, only one woman was able to secure a seat in Kuwait's most recent elections. In Jordan, female politicians not only seized the 15 quota seats in the most recent parliamentary elections, but for the first time ever won 5 contested seats. Women's gains in local elections in 2016 were far less promising. In Lebanon, female candidates won merely 5.4 percent of municipal seats and less than 2 percent of *mukhtars* (head of villages). This dim reality makes it increasingly clear that women are not able to compete on an equal footing with men in the political arena. Dominant conservative culture and lack of organized, genuine party competition, coupled with the persistent autocratic structures, have severely curtailed women's access to power. This calls for immediate action from regional governments and decision-makers. Orchestrated efforts by civil society and international women's organizations can also play a substantive role in resolving some of the structural and cultural barriers toward establishing more equitable political systems throughout the region.

This year holds promise for female politicians in a number of countries. In Tunisia, local elections scheduled to take place this March will be conducted under a new parity law that stipulates both horizontal (i.e. zippered lists) and vertical candidates' lists (i.e. equal number of men and women at the top of electoral lists). In Lebanon, women's groups are fiercely pushing for a gender quota for the country's upcoming parliamentary elections. Moreover, Egypt will hold its first municipal elections since the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, abiding by the newly introduced constitutional 25 percent gender quota. Finally, the stage is now set for female politicians to play a more active role in promoting women's issues and push for policies that address the most critical challenges facing women on a daily basis, such as gender-based violence, obsolete personal status laws, and inequitable economic opportunities.

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

This is a special year on Egypt's calendar. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi chose 2017 to be the "Year of Women." Egyptian women from all social, religious, and educational backgrounds have been strong assets to the progress of democratization in Egypt throughout recent years. They not only helped the country take necessary steps toward liberal democratization, but also have acted as the security valve that has kept our nation sane in the center of an insane Middle East.

The intensive presence of women in all major political activities in the past years made the Egyptian leadership realize that democratization is not possible without the proper participation of women – not only as public citizens, but also as decision-makers. The new quota system enabled an unprecedented number of 89 exceptional women to be Members of Parliament. In addition, the number of women ministers increased in February of this year to one-third of the Ministerial Cabinet.

Yet, the most thrilling achievement that Egyptian women have earned is the appointment of the first woman governor this February: Nadia Abdo, an engineer. Ms. Abdo’s outstanding biography qualified her to lead as the Governor of Al-Beheira, a governorate with challenging needs and a majority population of farmers and fishermen who have limited access to education and the urban luxuries we enjoy in Cairo.

Since Ms. Abdo’s appointment, the extremist Salafi groups have been angrily protesting the decision and accusing President el-Sisi of acting against God’s Will by choosing a woman to rule over men. Daring to give such a significant blow to extremists by empowering a deserving woman is in itself a promise of a better future for Egypt and for the many young aspiring women who struggle on a daily basis with barren patriarchal social norms and extremist fatwas.



*The authors are responsible for the content of their articles. The views of the authors do not necessarily represent those of their organizations or the Wilson Center.*

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