

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

Intern Perspectives

Introduction by **Julia Craig Romano**, *Program Assistant, Middle East Program, Wilson Center*

In celebration of International Women's Day 2016, the Middle East Program asked our four Spring 2016 interns to provide their visions for what is next for women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region five years after the Arab Spring. These four women are students of political science, Middle Eastern studies, peace and conflict studies, foreign service, and government. They have studied and traveled in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the West Bank. These experiences and their academic research contributed to the pieces below.



Veronica Baker, *Recent Graduate, University of Colorado Boulder*

In countries throughout the Middle East, women face inequality and legislative mistreatment. Laws not written within the framework of protecting women routinely fail to address sexual violence, underage marriage, restrictions on economic autonomy, and other gender-based issues. In the Maghreb, though, 2015 saw small but important steps toward addressing women's issues.

In Tunisia, victories included the [passing of a law](#) allowing women to travel with their children without the father's permission. However, a law combating violence against women, in the works for years, [has again been delayed](#).

Algerian lawmakers [succeeded in passing a law](#) criminalizing violence against women and sexual harassment. This represented a huge victory for women's groups that had fought for years for the legislation.

A decade after Morocco's family law reform, Moroccan women are still subject to [discrimination and demoted personal status](#). The drafting of a [law against human trafficking](#) showed positive improvements, though its adoption appears to have stalled. Calls for additional reforms, including those of the [inheritance law](#), are underway, and the government has shown openness to discussions on some women's issues, including [abortion](#).

The expansion of women's rights, however, does not extend to the fringes of the Maghreb. Western Saharans are consistently deprived of rights and [subjected to violence](#); many Mauritanian women and children are forced into [labor and sex trafficking](#); and Libyans continue to face [sexual violence](#) and other challenges in the context of political instability.

Despite legislative accomplishments, it is important to recognize that legal victories do not always translate into real change. Corrupt judiciaries, ineffective governance, and deep-seated sexism threaten each of these laws' implementation. They also run the risk of disproportionately benefitting upper-class women while leaving disenfranchised groups – the poor, minorities, and immigrant laborers – behind. The benefits of 2015 will rest upon the government's commitment to reform in each of these countries, as well as a society-wide reconceptualization of the role of women in society. Only then will a true shift toward women's rights in the Maghreb find traction.

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Elena Scott-Kakures, *Recent Graduate, Wellesley College*

This next year could be one in which we see economic downturn mean positive change for women.

Many studies have identified the link between resource wealth and gender inequality, which has been dubbed a resource "curse." In oil-rich countries, such as Saudi Arabia, women tend to be less involved in the labor force and political activities. But with the recent dramatic drop in oil prices, the role of women could be utilized to lead the country to economic recovery.

In 2011, when many countries in the Arab world saw revolutions and demands for greater social and political reforms, former Saudi King Abdullah used the country's immense oil subsidies to increase the country's fund that helps its citizens overcome unemployment, buy homes, and start businesses. But this past year, we have seen the largest downturn in oil prices in over a decade. Because 73 percent of Saudi Arabia's revenue is from oil, the drop from \$100 per barrel to below \$30 this year is significant. This crisis threatens the unwritten social contract that Saudi Arabia has created: limited political freedoms in exchange for economic benefits. But these benefits are shrinking, as taxes are slowly implemented, and many young Saudis have already seen their jobs vanish (two-thirds of the Saudi population is under 30 years old). Now, with the government keen to maintain stability, it will be important to look to women as sources of change.

The year 2015 was a step in the right direction for women in Saudi Arabia. Despite low female registration in the 2015 municipal elections, 21 women were elected to office. This was still an important step toward improving political inclusion and lifting restrictions on women's rights. Economic diversification beyond the oil market has already led to an increase in jobs for women and could mean a focus on educating girls to be more productive members of the workforce.

It is clear that without capitalizing on the strengths of women in Saudi Arabia, the country will likely face economic instability and social unrest.

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Nishaat Shaik, *Senior, Georgetown University*

Despite being disproportionately impacted by the long-standing civil war, as well as the presence of ISIS in their country, the women remaining in Syria have assumed incredible leadership – often in untraditional roles. The war has required Syrian women to face the crisis head-on and become leaders in their families, communities, and country at large.

Ordinary women have increasingly joined organizations to rescue and defend the civilian population. For example, some women serve as emergency medics, a role previously restricted to men. Syrian women manage restaurants, stores, and cabs, and take up any other unfulfilled responsibilities. Many women in Syria have also been forced to become the sole providers and caretakers of their families following the loss of their husbands. The uptake of these duties has been relatively seamless, with little to no discourse or hesitation.

By assuming these positions, Syrian women exhibit resilience, bravery, and leadership, and contribute to shifting traditional gender dynamics in their communities. Since the beginning of the crisis, the valuable role of Syrian women has become even more apparent. These new leaders in Syria have presented their skill and unwavering commitment to guide the country in its time of need.

Over five years of civil war have passed with no apparent solution. It is difficult to be optimistic about the future of women in Syria; however, my hope this International Women’s Day is that the leadership of women in Syria be acknowledged and appreciated. It is also important to recognize these women will likely be championing the process of rebuilding Syria by repairing the social fabric of their local communities. I hope the same women who have risked their lives for their country will have the opportunity to share their invaluable on-the-ground perspectives at the negotiating table of the Syrian peace talks. To have a chance at ending the war, the international community must understand the critical role women can play in the negotiation process.

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Sherin Zadah, *Junior, Claremont McKenna College*

In the summer of 2014, I traveled to Amman, Jordan to work at a Syrian NGO called Souriyat Across Borders. This was a center run by five Syrian women who came together at the beginning of the Syrian crisis to create an organization that provided women with entrepreneurial training. The center was built to advance Syrian women’s social and economic independence, and it teaches sewing and business marketing skills to classes of 35-40 Syrian women. After the training, these women design and create their own clothing, which they sell in markets in Amman.

I soon learned that these women were most often the sole breadwinner of their families, and what they earned would need to sustain the whole family for the rest of the month. Every one of these women had a heart-wrenching story: a brother killed, a husband arrested, a son lost fighting for the Free Syrian Army. Before the war, most of these women were caretakers of their

homes, and their husbands and sons worked on their local land. The Syrian conflict plummeted Syrians, specifically women and children, into a state of social and financial insecurity. With just limited assistance from NGOs, Syrian women not only survive but thrive by creating and managing successful businesses.

The Syrian refugee crisis is at its peak – 4.7 million refugees – with about 600,000 of them settling in Jordan. While Jordan has been generous, particularly if you consider its limited resources, the Jordanian government needs to increase its funding for female entrepreneurship. Most likely, these Syrian women will not be able to return to their homeland, and if they are, it will not be remotely similar to what they knew. I believe in the upcoming years, both the Jordanian government and local NGOs should invest in female entrepreneurial training and startups. Consequently, the international community needs to ensure that there are solid foundations for Syrian women to begin rebuilding their lives and to achieve stability again.

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MEP Publications on Women

International Women's Day Publications

- [Expansion or Contraction? Women's Rights in the MENA Region in 2015](#)
- [MENA Women: Opportunities and Obstacles in 2014](#)
- [Challenges to Women's Security in the MENA Region](#) (2013)
- [Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring: Women's Voices from Around the World](#) (2012)

Occasional Paper Series

- [MENA Women in the Reformist Process: A Retrospective](#) (Spring 2014)
- [Can International Human Rights Norms Secure Women's Rights in the MENA Region?](#) (Fall 2013)
- [Women after the Arab Awakening](#) (Winter 2012)
- [Is the Arab Awakening Marginalizing Women?](#) (Summer 2012)
- [Islamic Feminism and Beyond: The New Frontier](#) (Fall 2010)
- [Vanguard: Women in the Iranian Election Campaign and Protest](#) (Fall 2009)
- [Reformist Women Thinkers in the Islamic World](#) (Spring 2009)
- [The Status of Women in the Middle East](#) (Winter 2005)

Viewpoint Series

- [Saudi Women Go to the Polls – Finally](#) (December 2015)
- [Why is the Idea of Female Western Jihadists a Mystery?](#) (December 2015)
- [Egypt's Fight Against FGM: Is There Hope After All?](#) (January 2015)
- [The Coming Tunisian Elections: What Will be the Role of Women?](#) (October 2014)
- [Barbarians: ISIS's Mortal Threat to Women](#) (August 2014)
- [Women's Rights Under Egypt's Constitutional Disarray](#) (January 2013)
- [Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation](#) (January 2013)
- [Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women](#) (October 2012)
- [Fostering the Next Generation](#) (April 2012)

MENA Women Quarterly Reports

- [October-December 2015](#)
By Kendra Heideman and Julia Craig Romano
- [July-September 2015](#)
By Kendra Heideman and Julia Craig Romano
- [April-June 2015](#)
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