

NEW PUBLICATION SERIES

MENA WOMEN QUARTERLY REPORT

*January – March
2015*

The MENA Women Quarterly Report covers women's advances and setbacks in politics, economics, conflict situations, and human rights issues throughout the MENA region.

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International Women's Day—March 8, 2015

The United Nations celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action during International Women's Day 2015. The UN Women report "The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action turns 20," stated that urgent action is needed in five areas to improve the lives of women globally: political participation, investments in gender equality, gender norms and stereotypes, the economy, and governmental accountability for the realization of women's rights.

A Gallup report also released for International Women's Day found that 74 percent of women worldwide rate themselves as "suffering" or "struggling." Egypt had the 9th highest percentage of women who are "suffering" internationally (32 percent). Five of the ten countries in which women experience the highest rates of negative experiences daily—including stress, physical pain, and sadness—are in the MENA region (Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon). The report stated that these statistics are affected by the ongoing conflicts in the region.

Women in Conflict Situations

The plight of women in conflict situations throughout the region continues to cause concern, particularly in ISIS-controlled territories in Iraq and Syria. In January 2015 the UN warned that ISIS was targeting "educated women" for executions and said the group showed a "monstrous disregard for human life." It is not just ISIS, however, that women in the region have to contend with—al-Nusra Front, Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate, executed a woman accused of adultery in January. Moreover, women and children in refugee camps remain some of the most vulnerable populations. The International Rescue Committee reports a trend of "sexual exploitation and harassment, domestic violence, and early and forced marriage" for women in refugee camps.

Some women in the region contribute to these conflict situations by perpetuating violence against other women. The all-female al-Khansaa Brigade of ISIS, which actively oppresses other women, published *Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study* in January that details women's roles and obligations, emphasizing the importance of being wives and mothers. In February, two British women were arrested for their involvement in "terror offenses" related to planned terrorism activities in Syria.

In the past few months, there have also been reports of women helping those in conflict zones. In Syria, women of the Female Commando Battalion are trained for military combat duties. In addition, more and more women have recently joined the White Helmets, a search and rescue unit of first responders in the Syria Civil Defense.

Economic Issues

Women living in these conflict areas in the Middle East also face economic stresses that war has placed upon them and their families. For example, single women are the head of 25 percent of Syrian refugee households according to a recent UNHCR report; many of the women interviewed for the report did not work when they lived in Syria. The report also states that because of the work

permit restrictions in host countries, refugee women typically engage in work in the informal sector and are not protected by the same rights they would have in the formal sector.

Women in Government

Outside of these conflict areas women made significant steps in politics in the first few months of 2015. Women won 29 of the 120 seats (24 percent) in the Knesset in the March Israeli parliamentary elections; this is the largest representation of women in the Knesset since its establishment in 1949. This election was also groundbreaking because of the participation of B'Zhutan, the first Israeli Ultra-Orthodox women's party. B'Zhutan, however, did not win any seats.

The upcoming municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, the Shura Council elections in Oman, and the parliamentary elections in Egypt will also provide opportunities for women to participate more robustly in politics. The 2015 Saudi elections will be the first time that Saudi women will be allowed to vote, and the Saudi Gazette reported that at least 30 women are expected to run for these offices. Conversely, the Egyptian elections have already been criticized; the National Council for Women in Egypt called the female representation on various parties' lists "weak."

Women have also been appointed to high-level positions in governments throughout the region. In February, Zekra Alwach was named the first woman mayor of Baghdad. Additionally, Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid appointed eight women to his cabinet, three of whom serve as ministers.

Human Rights Issues

Human rights issues have overshadowed many of these advances in politics—issues that remain problematic for women across the region. In the past few months, women protesters have been killed in Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere. Shaimaa el-Sabbagh, an activist, was killed during a protest in Cairo in January by a police officer, who Egyptian authorities have referred to trial. Intissar al-Hasaari, an activist, was shot in Tripoli in February.

Women also face continued discrimination in the MENA region. The UN's special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, said in March that human rights violations, including the oppression of women, are worse under President Hassan Rouhani. According to Amnesty International, Iranian women could face limited access to contraceptives if Iran's parliament approves a pending law regarding family planning. In Lebanon, Human Rights Watch reported that personal status laws discriminate against women and do not "guarantee their basic rights."

Throughout the region, women are fighting back against such human rights violations. Egyptian women are exposing harassers on social media to advocate for themselves and to encourage other women to do the same. Women have protested for a variety of causes: in Egypt women rallied to demand an investigation into protester deaths, including that of el-Sabbagh, and in Lebanon women protested for the right to pass on citizenship to their children. Bahraini activist Maryam al-Khawaja, who was arrested and imprisoned for visiting her father in prison in 2014, spoke at the Commission on the Status of Women in March and requested the UN to protect women activists.

During the past few months there have also been positive developments in a number of countries in the region. In Egypt a doctor was convicted of manslaughter in January for his role in the death of a

13-year-old girl undergoing female genital mutilation. It was announced in February that children of Iranian women with foreign spouses would receive Iranian identification cards once they turn 18. In January the Omani government opened its first shelter for women who have suffered from domestic violence. In February, the Saudi government released two women drivers from jail.

Every three months the MENA Women Quarterly Report will cover women’s advances and setbacks in politics, economics, conflict situations, and human rights issues throughout the MENA region.



Middle East Program Women's Publications

Occasional Paper Series

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- [Can International Human Rights Norms Secure Women's Rights in the MENA Region? \(Fall 2013\)](#)
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- [Is the Arab Awakening Marginalizing Women? \(Summer 2012\)](#)
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- [Vanguard: Women in the Iranian Election Campaign and Protest \(Fall 2009\)](#)
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- [Women's Rights Under Egypt's Constitutional Disarray \(January 2013\)](#)
- [Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation \(January 2013\)](#)
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International Women's Day Publications

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- [MENA Women: Opportunities and Obstacles in 2014 \(March 2014\)](#)
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- [Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring: Women's Voices from Around the World \(March 2012\)](#)

Building a New Iraq Series

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- [Building a New Iraq: Ensuring Women's Rights \(October 2005, with the Conflict Prevention Project\)](#)
- [Building a New Iraq: Women's Role in Reconstruction \(November 2003\), with Women Waging Peace and the Conflict Prevention Project\)](#)
- [Winning the Peace: Women's Role in Post-Conflict Iraq \(April 2003, with Women Waging Peace and the Conflict Prevention Project\)](#)

Other publications

- [Beijing+20: Looking Back and the Road Ahead \(December 2014, with the Women in Public Service Project\)](#)
- [Best Practices: Progressive Family Laws in Muslim Countries \(August 2005, with RAND Corporation\)](#)
- [Women, Muslim Laws and Human Rights in Nigeria \(February 2004, with Africa Program\)](#)
- [More Than Victims: The Role of Women in Conflict Prevention \(September 2002, with Women Waging Peace\)](#)
- [Women in Central Asia: A Turn of the Century Assessment \(May 2000\)](#)

Books

- [Middle Eastern Women on the Move \(2003\)](#)

Read the Middle East Program's bi-weekly **MENA Women's News Brief** for the latest news about women in the region.