

MENA WOMEN QUARTERLY REPORT

*July - September
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The MENA Women Quarterly Report covers women's advances and setbacks in politics, economics, conflict situations, and human rights issues throughout the MENA region. This issue includes a special feature on women breaking barriers in the labor force.

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Feature: Women Breaking Barriers in the Workforce

Women breaking barriers in the workforce was a dominant theme in the news during the past quarter. One of the most notable patterns in this trend was women's success in STEM fields. In July, *the National* [reported on the growing trend of Emirati women](#) pursuing careers in aeronautical engineering, nuclear energy, and space technologies. A separate article profiled Sahar Rasti, the first Emirati woman to [receive Level-2 certification from International Association of Marine Aids to Navigation and Lighthouse Authorities](#) (IALA). This certification is critical for her work in navigation services in the UAE's important shipping industry. Rashti commented, "Maritime is a sector commonly known to be dominated by men and it gives me great pride to demonstrate that women in the UAE are fully capable of not only working but excelling in any field with the support of our leadership."

Women in the MENA region are breaking barriers in other sectors as well. [The Administrative Appeals Court in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province](#) appointed Shaimaa Sadeq Al-Jibran to judge a commercial case, a first for the Kingdom, however there was an objection to her appointment on the grounds that she is a woman. In July, *Morocco World News* reported on the work of two [Moroccan women auto mechanics](#) who aim to eventually open up their own auto repair shop. One of the mechanics described her choice of profession as an opportunity "to break down barriers imposed on women in this field that is monopolized by men." In August, stories detailed the range of women's work in the security sector: [Hind Wajih is one of Egypt's first female bodyguards](#) (she previously worked as a bodybuilder and trainer), and Bahar (her nom de guerre) founded [the first women's unit in the Free Syrian Army](#).

Economics/Labor

Women throughout the MENA region have prospered and struggled in the workforce during the last few months. *Haaretz* reported in August [less than one third of Israeli Arab women are employed](#), despite ongoing government programs aimed to help Israel Arabs develop marketable skills. On the other hand, [women lead the financial sector in Israel](#): the Governor and Deputy Governor of the Bank of Israel, the Supervisor of Banks, and the CEOs of three of Israel's five banks are women.

Articles from July detailed some of the issues Saudi women face in the workforce and plans investors are undertaking which may combat them. *Al Arabiya* published a report about the experiences of Saudi women who work in gender mixed offices or professions. This article included interviews with professionals such as doctors and journalists who stated men are [unwilling to marry them because of their work](#). This story can be juxtaposed with another article *Al Arabiya* published, which reported [over 5.8 million Saudi women do not participate in the workforce](#), compared to the 1.2 million who do. However, one externality of the Kingdom's efforts to nationalize the workforce is [the establishment of a women's only telecom complex](#) in Riyadh, which will provide new job opportunities for women.

Other stories of women's success and setbacks in the workforce included a study from Abu Dhabi University College of Business that found [women have higher rates of turnover at jobs than men do](#),

meaning companies have to adjust their policies to retain women staff; Iranian Vice President of Women and Family Affairs Shahindokht Molaverdi highlighted [the valuable but overlooked ways rural women](#) contribute to society and the economy; and the Omani National Centre for Statistics and Information's (NCSI) [most recent statistical report](#) detailed women's representation [in the public and private sectors](#), which has steadily increased over the past five years.

One additional incident of note regarding women in the workforce was Iranian President Rouhani's [decision to postpone the annual civil service exam](#). According to the BBC, Rouhani "ordered a review of all 3,000 jobs on offer, and a rethink if they were found to be biased to men."

Human Rights

During the past quarter, there were numerous reports across the MENA region about violence women experience and negative discourse about such violence. According to a statement from women members of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), [violence against women in Turkey has increased](#) after the July 15 coup attempt. Another report describes the abuse of a Syrian woman in a [sex trafficking ring in Lebanon](#) uncovered a few months ago. In Tunisia, despite the presence of progressive rights, "violence against women—and [domestic violence](#) in particular—seems to be as prevalent as ever." Along with these examples, there were also instances of language used to undermine the seriousness of violence against women. In Egypt, the newspaper Al-Masry al-Youm had to apologize for a cartoon it ran that "[made light of sexual harassment](#)," and two different MPs made comments [supporting female genital mutilation](#) (FGM) and suggesting that [FGM would reduce men's "sexual weakness"](#) and women's "sexual appetites." In Israel, a report indicates a military rabbi previously made "[pro-rape](#)" comments about times of war.

There were also several articles that revealed some setbacks and some developments related to women's legal rights. In Iran, there were three women who were either sentenced or released in September. Iran's judiciary gave [Narges Mohammadi](#), a well-known Iranian women's rights activist, a 16-year sentence and [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#), an Iranian-British charity worker, a five-year sentence for various charges related to spying and conspiracy. More recently, Iran released [Homa Hoodfar](#), a Canadian-Iranian professor, who was arrested in June for unknown charges.

There were other positive developments in the region as well. Following the Saudi justice minister's statement [requiring women \(rather than a guardian\) to consent to marriage](#), thousands of Saudi women signed a petition to [end the male guardianship system](#) and to solidify advancements in their legal rights. In Egypt, the parliament is reviewing a draft law that would "ensure rightful heirs—including women—get their [inheritances](#)," and the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) has recommended changes to the country's Personal Status Law to more equitably [split assets after divorce](#).

In addition to these positive legal advancements, there were also patterns of improved human rights conditions for women throughout the region during this time period. For example, Egypt recently passed a new law [increasing the prison sentence](#) for individuals who perform FGM from two to seven years. Morocco's lower house adopted a bill to enhance measures [to address violence against women](#). In addition, women who experience [domestic violence in Israel](#) have expanded options for state assistance with a new bill under committee review, and women in the UAE have additional resources through the [Dubai Foundation for Women and Children](#) (DFWAC).

Politics and Public Service

The September 2016 parliamentary elections in Jordan marked progress for women interested in political participation. [Women won 20 seats in the 130-member legislature](#), an increase from the 2013 elections, in which women won 18 seats in a larger 150-member body. This result meant also meant five women won seats outside of the quota system. Additionally, 252 women ran for seats in the 2016 elections—the highest number in any Jordanian election. Two setbacks from the election included: a bill to increase the women’s quota in the Jordanian parliament from 15 seats to 23 seats was rejected and only [32 percent of eligible women voters](#) participated in these elections.

Other reports from the last several months detailed the way women are engaged in public service outside of legislatures. At the international level of political participation, Egypt nominated [Moushira Khattab](#) to be the next Director-General of UNESCO. Dr. Khattab, a former [Wilson Center Public Policy Scholar](#), has served in various public service roles, including Ambassador of Egypt to South Africa and to the Federal Republic of Czechoslovakia and Egyptian Minister of Family and Population. At the grass-roots level of political participation, [Ikram Ben Said](#), a Tunisian activist and founder of the organization Aswat Nissa, discussed her work in an interview with *the Atlantic*. Ben Said works to encourage women of all political leanings to engage and participate in the political process.

Women in Conflict Situations

News about women held by ISIS has continued to decline during the past few months, yet approximately [2,000 Yazidi women remain in ISIS captivity](#) according to a new UN report. An Iraqi official also said recently there are over [600 Shi’a Turkmen women and children still being held](#) by ISIS. As ISIS lost territory over the last several months, it has been “[tightening its grip](#)” on the women and girls who are held captive as sex slaves. In addition, in July ISIS [executed 12 women](#) in Mosul for protesting against the terrorist group. [ISIS fighters in Libya](#) have “enslaved, raped, sold or exchanged at least 63 captive women,” according to a Reuters interview with nine survivors; ISIS used “the same blueprint of abuse it employed on Yazidi women in Syria and Iraq.” A recent UN Population Fund report details the [ongoing struggles of women after they escape](#) ISIS captivity.

While articles about women under ISIS still dominate coverage of women in the MENA region, numerous reports from the last quarter underscore the devastating conditions for Yemeni women. The war in Yemen has led to dire humanitarian consequences, which have exacerbated problems for the [estimated 400,000 pregnant women who need “essential and sometimes urgent health services”](#) according to another UN Population Fund report. The ongoing conflict has also contributed to an [increase in child marriages](#), which is the “latest, and among the least visible, indicator of the war’s disproportionate impact on children.” Moreover, there are reports that [Houthi militia leaders have recruited women](#) to join the fight and formed a women’s militia unit. One op-ed contributor noted that Yemeni women are the [“only hope for lasting peace.”](#)

Despite such disheartening examples of women in conflict situations, there were a number of articles detailing survivor stories and other positive examples of women overcoming the challenges of a conflict environment. [Nadia Murad](#), a Yazidi woman who escaped ISIS captivity, was named a UN Goodwill Ambassador in September. Another survivor, Farida Khalaf, wrote a book, [“The Girl Who Escaped ISIS,”](#) in which she describes the horrors that she and others experienced under ISIS. Pari Ibrahim, a Yazidi woman living in the Netherlands, founded the [Free Yazidi Foundation](#) two years ago and it remains one of the main organizations dedicated to raising awareness about

Yazidis being held by ISIS. [Yanar Mohammed](#), an Iraqi journalist and activist who founded the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, received Norway's Rafto prize for human rights in September.

The MENA Women Quarterly Report will continue to report on women in conflict situations, and other news stories that affect women in the region, in the months to come.



Middle East Program Women's Publications

MENA Women Quarterly Reports

- [MENA Women Quarterly Report \(April-June 2016\)](#)
- [MENA Women Quarterly Report \(January-April 2016\)](#)
- [MENA Women Quarterly Report \(October-December 2015\)](#)
- [MENA Women Quarterly Report \(July-September 2015\)](#)
- [MENA Women Quarterly Report \(April-June 2015\)](#)
- [MENA Women Quarterly Report \(January-March 2015\)](#)

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 \(April 2012\)](#)

International Women's Day Publications

- [Five Years after the Arab Spring: What's Next for Women in the MENA Region? \(March 2016\)](#)
- [Expansion or Contraction? Women's Rights in the MENA Region in 2015 \(March 2015\)](#)
- [MENA Women: Opportunities and Obstacles in 2014 \(March 2014\)](#)
- [Challenges to Women's Security in the MENA Region \(March 2013\)](#)
- [Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring: Women's Voices from Around the World \(March 2012\)](#)

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

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