



MENA Women: Opportunities and Obstacles in 2014

In Celebration of
International Women's
Day 2014

Women's Voices from Around the World



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Haleh Esfandiari, *Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center*

2014 began with a number of auspicious developments for women in the region: the ratification of the Tunisian Constitution by the National Constituent Assembly in January and the approval of the amended Egyptian Constitution of 2012 by referendum. Both constitutions are gender friendly; the Tunisian Constitution is particularly specific on gender equality. It remains to be seen if these two constitutions will serve as models for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

In Yemen, the National Dialogue Conference ended in January after ten months of debate and consultation with 1,400 recommendations including an end to child marriage and 30 percent representation for women in decision-making positions and elective bodies.

Another positive development in the region is the growing access to education for girls, even though education does not necessarily lead to employment. Nevertheless, especially in the countries of the Persian Gulf, there are efforts to make more jobs accessible to women.

Many challenges and obstacles lie ahead for women in the MENA region. In Egypt and Tunisia, it will be the task of future governments to make good on the promises for women in the newly-adopted constitutions. Women will, therefore, need to take part in large numbers in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in both countries and to remain vigilant. The nomination of Hala Shukrallah as the head of the Al-Doustour Party in Egypt is a first in the Arab world and can boost the women's vote. Unfortunately, under the Egyptian Constitution, there is no requirement that reserves a specific percentage of seats for women. Ideally, there would be a quota system that reserves 50 percent of decision-making positions in both the public and private sectors and half the seats in elective bodies for women—not only in Tunisia and Egypt but in all the countries of the MENA region.

The main obstacle facing women across the region continues to be the personal status law. The law varies from country to country; but, except in Tunisia and Morocco, the personal status law is not gender friendly. Ideally, women in the MENA region should benefit from a unified personal status law based on CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women).

The region is in turbulence. The most pressing problem is posed by the civil war in Syria. Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq fear that the spillover effects of Syria's disorder will destabilize their societies. Over 1,800,000 Syrian women and children are living in refugee camps in the countries neighboring Syria. In these camps, women and girls are victimized. Women are pushed into prostitution; child marriage is on the rise; poverty is rampant; and there is little hope for an end to this crisis. The peace and stability that they need in order to prosper is an unattainable dream for these women.

As it has done in previous years, to mark International Women's Day on March 8, 2014, the Wilson Center's Middle East Program asked 42 women from the MENA region, Europe, and the United States to share with us their views on opportunities and obstacles facing women in 2014. Their responses are brought together in this publication.



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

I do not believe that the challenges currently facing Arab women are only connected to education, unemployment, illiteracy, the imbalance in equality and equal opportunities, or even the feminization of poverty. Arab women are now facing a unique challenge: the challenge of identity. Since the onset of the Arab Spring uprisings almost three years ago, the question of women's identity emerged as one of the conflict issues.

The question is not about the controversy over the components of identity but fundamentally on the functional role of identity in the process of democratic transition. This means that converting identity from a self-consciousness originating from natural belonging into an ideology imposed on women represents a genuine threat to the process of rebuilding the social, cultural, and political system. This is evident through the transitional phases that are lived by society, and women in particular, with the tides of today's clash of identities that swarm our social, cultural, and political spaces.

The passage of the Arab woman from the individual to the common framework has not only represented a problem for women but also for men and society. Women and children have been misused by extremist Islamic movements, even used as human shields in demonstrations and protests. Women and children are now being used to commit violence and suicide bombings, which was never part of the intellectual or emotional life of women and children in the Arab region at any time.

It is true that women have participated in the Arab Spring uprisings in many Arab countries—peaceful participation demanding democracy and social justice. The Arab woman was never a participant in acts of violence. Yet, some of the extremist Islamic movements have used women's passage into the common framework to make them part of their plan to destabilize society. This phenomenon is new to Arab society.

This challenge is directly linked to the process of education and culturization, whereas those extremist Islamic movements have designated a special identity for women by misusing girls' innocence and women's unawareness. Thus, they are turning women into deaf, obedient machines that only listen to and execute orders. This challenge, in particular, requires

reconsideration of the structure of education, media, and the role of clerics in spreading moderate religious awareness.

The second challenge facing Arab women, especially in the countries that have witnessed uprisings and armed conflict, is the violence perpetrated against them. This is seen in immigration, refugees, rape, and killing. Even those who have survived such crimes have no rights in negotiations after the end of conflict and fighting nor can they participate in these negotiations. This challenge requires working on women's participation in every phase of negotiations, both during and post-conflict.

And while there is a new agenda that will rule the Arab world, the current phase needs radical strategies and a review of the women's movement's approach, which imposes the inevitability of women's participation in decision making. This issue is no longer a choice for women but has become a commitment that requires strengthening and improving their skills to ensure their effective participation at all levels.



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

On the occasion of International Women's Day, I would like to congratulate all women around the MENA region and hope 2014 will be a year of peace, progress, and development.

This year could be a year of both opportunities and obstacles for women in the MENA region. We have already noticed opportunities for women in the Gulf region such as more women in the workforce, support for women entrepreneurs, and the increase in women's political participation. Nevertheless, obstacles remain in place in the Gulf region's constitutions in terms of women's status: women still face obstacles related to citizenship rights of their children, divorce, inheritance, and other related matters.

On the other hand, women in Iraq, the Levant region, and North Africa face different opportunities and obstacles. Opportunities are available for women to campaign for greater rights because governments are emerging and are not yet fully formed. However, obstacles exist—particularly in countries such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen—including security threats, the rise of extremist political groups, changes in laws regarding women's rights, and the weak presence of progressive women in decision-making positions. In summary, women in more stable countries have opportunities to push for broader rights such as improving the protection of women in constitutions and the role of women in politics and executive decision making.

In the unstable countries of the MENA region, there are opportunities for women to set up associations and form alliances to counter extremist political groups and to push for progressive

laws relating to women's rights. Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that the biggest opportunities exist with increased contributions from and cooperation with global and multilateral efforts to support brave initiatives in the MENA region's most unstable countries.



Raghda Abu-Shahla, *Assistant to the Director of Operations, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Gaza; and former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center (Gaza)*

Within the waves of change spreading across several MENA countries, the year 2014 started with much hope and disappointment for women in the region. Many Palestinian women are also aspiring for positive change to push Palestinians toward peace and development, yet many challenges face them: conflict, violence, poverty, access restrictions, and geographic isolation.

The year 2014 can be a year of hope and opportunities for Palestinian women if the current Palestinian-Israeli negotiations accomplish a just and lasting peace agreement that grants Palestinians their rights, allowing them to live in peace with their neighbors and to build their state. Also, 2014 can be a year of opportunities if the Palestinians end their internal rift and start thinking about building their country rather than fighting each other.

This brings us to the reality that few Palestinian women, including women in Gaza, are participating in Palestinian political change efforts, although it is our duty to create a better future for our generation, away from conflict and fear. Therefore, involving Palestinian women in the decision-making process will make achieving this goal feasible, as Palestinian women are the strong pillar that holds our social fabric together.

With peace and change, there will be an opportunity for Palestinian women to participate in building their country and to share in creating a promising future for the coming generations who deserve to be citizens of a democratic state, enjoy human rights, and determine their future.

Nevertheless, if the hopes for 2014 fail to be achieved and conflict continues to overshadow our lives, Palestinian women are doomed to be the ones who will suffer the most. They will be forced to keep fighting the obstacles of poverty, injustice, and a traditional society, rather than sharing in building their country.



Muna AbuSulayman, *Co-founder, Medeen.com; Partner, Directions Consultancy LLC; Co-host Kalam Nawaem; Partner, Glowork, Women Employment Opportunities (Saudi Arabia)*

To become a product of personal decision, rather than circumstance, is perhaps the thing that most women aspire to in the Arab world. But for many this goal is not quite possible, at least not yet.

The Arab world is struggling on many fronts: the economy, legal rights, governance, women's rights, unemployment, and, in some parts, education. These are the issues that continually come up when you look at challenges facing the region. These issues are all important to the development of a stable future for the MENA region. Nonetheless, I believe that sectarianism is the greatest threat that women face right now. Yet, we deal with the other issues because they are easier to work with, easier to give aid to, easier to talk about, and easier to measure. They are not messy; they are not as nuanced; they are not as complex.

In 2013 there was a continuation of increasing sectarian or political conflict in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, and Bahrain, which, along with the mini civil wars being fought in many of these countries, undermined the security, national cohesion, and unity that are the most essential ingredients for prospering stability. In many of these countries, education and economic opportunities for both genders suffered. Many of the advances that were enjoyed there, especially for women, are being rolled back due to the war-like atmosphere that has been created.

Thus, women's rights advances were mostly pushed to the back burner in many of the conflict-ridden countries despite occasional vocal opposition. The issues have become more about survival, accommodation of refugees, and building political coalitions, rather than addressing the devastating effects on women, such as early marriages.

The most stable countries, especially the oil- and gas-rich Gulf countries, have focused on increasing employment opportunities for their male and female labor forces, with Saudi Arabia being a notable example. In these countries, more women are being educated at the college-level than their male counterparts, and, due to government programs, they are now able to avail themselves of economic and entrepreneurial opportunities. Many of the essays in this special edition will focus on these advances. I applaud these advances, and I, like those writers, hope for more. However, even in these stable countries, if sectarianism or tribalism increases, those advances will be pushed back. The scenario that is happening in Syria, unfortunately, is not a far-fetched one for almost any country in the Middle East.

One of the top priorities to help stabilize the region should be large-scale, long-term, faith- and education-based solutions in the countries that already have been affected and preventative programs in the countries that could be affected. Otherwise, as has happened in Iraq and Syria, these divisions can undo most of the progress of the past few decades.



Wajeeha Albaharna, *President, Bahrain Women's Association-for Human Development (Bahrain)*

Over time, no year or even a day passes without human beings facing opportunities and challenges. Hence, 2014 must be full of both opportunities and challenges, and how we look at them is very important because it determines how we will handle and deal with them.

If we look at the challenges as big obstacles against which nothing can be done, as being beyond our ability, this will weaken our determination and faith. Instead, if we look at challenges as “opportunities,” this will bring out the best of our abilities and strengths to take advantage of them. We will discover many capabilities we did not know we had, especially for us women.

It may be difficult to see opportunities in the harsh changes the world is going through, but women have utilized some of these changes. For example:

- The transitional period in the MENA region has presented some opportunities, including the drafting of constitutions that include articles promoting gender equality and full citizenship rights for women. The experiences of Tunisia and Egypt are examples.
- Many women who maintained their silence before the Arab revolution are now contributing significantly to its success, having joined and found a place for themselves to express their views and their rights. Women are now claiming their rights to be represented in transitional councils, negotiations, and dialogue meetings.
- Despite the aggravation and increase in violence against women, and other forms of exploitation of women that were not known before (e.g., jihad marriage), women are now able to draw the world's attention to the rampant violence that was previously ignored and did not receive adequate attention, especially within Arab countries. Women have also used social media to gain support for their issues and to highlight campaigns against discrimination and violence in all its forms.
- Monitoring of countries' activities by the international community through different mechanisms—such as the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council and committees of international conventions such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women)—has put pressure on governments and urged them to introduce more legislation in favor of women.
- The increased networking among civil society institutions on the regional and global levels has given women's organizations the opportunity to gain experience, exchange ideas among themselves, and provide each other with support and advocacy.

We, the women, should not wait for opportunities. They will not come to us. Instead, we have to “make” opportunities. This requires us to be present at the center of events and to study and analyze the current situation as well as the future so that we can use such opportunities in the best way.

What we hope to achieve as women depends on how we perceive things, no matter how difficult and painful the situation is. We have to decide and choose specifically what we want from the future. What is our vision? Will we allow others to draw a map of our future? Or will we draw it according to our view and our vision, stemming from our belief in ourselves and our abilities?



Hala Al Dosari, *advocate for women's rights and health researcher (Saudi Arabia)*

With smaller steps taken in the past, the year of 2014 is expected to be a potentially promising year for Saudi women. In the October 2013 second universal periodic review of Saudi Arabia's human rights status, I submitted recommendations in the stakeholder's report¹ to the UN Human Rights Council. Out of the 12 recommendations, six of them—including amending the Nationality Act, lifting of the driving ban, and introducing steps to allow easier access for women to legal counsel and redress—are already under review by the relevant Saudi authorities.

During 2013, women lawyers were allowed to obtain permits to practice in Saudi courts, and a new anti-violence law was finally enacted. Earlier this year, the Ministry of Justice made two important decisions: to allow women to use their national photo identification cards as proof of identity in courts without the need for a male relative to verify their identity and to assign special family courts in Riyadh. These courts will expect a dramatic reduction in the number of review cases. Moreover, the Ministry of Justice has established punitive actions for judges and officials who violate the new regulations. This year also marks the first occasion of Saudi women participating in municipal elections.

While much more is still needed to empower women to realize their full rights and potential, it is important to highlight the actions of a handful of activists who strived, and continue to strive, to resist gender discrimination in all its forms. The October 26 driving campaign,² for instance, not only gained significant international exposure, but created a global and national discourse

¹ <http://saudiwomenrights.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/2013-shadow-report-pdf.pdf>

² <http://www.oct26driving.net/>

on the position of women in Saudi society as symbolized by the iconic driving ban. The simple yet powerful theory of Margaret Mead—“Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For, indeed, that's all who ever have.”—has been, again, validated.



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

I believe 2014 is going to be a year of opportunities as well as a year of continuing obstacles for women in the MENA region. Despite the political turmoil and conflict that envelops the region and despite the fact that most of the region’s countries are still listed at the bottom of international reports regarding women’s rights and freedoms, there is a ray of hope in some countries like Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya.

In Yemen, women have been actively part of the transitional period where they comprised 30 percent of most of the committees of the National Dialogue, which has just concluded this year. Now the real challenge for Yemeni women will be to make sure that the outcomes of the National Dialogue and their rights are enshrined in the upcoming constitutional reforms and subsequent legislation, which has just started to take place this year.

In Tunisia, women’s rights and gender equality have been vividly enshrined in the newly-adopted constitution. Libya also is moving forward in criminalizing gender-based violence.

The challenges, unfortunately, are still the same for women in the region in terms of literacy, justice, economic opportunities, health, and, more alarmingly, security. Lack of safety and security alone has ample negative ramifications on all aspects of people’s lives in the region, particularly affecting women, who, along with children, are the most vulnerable groups.

However, women’s progress or regression ultimately depends more on stability in the region as well as which power actors will dominate and how they perceive women and gender issues. It also depends on the strength and resistance of women’s movements in the region.

The tasks ahead for women in the region are to keep struggling for their rights and to ensure that their fight for gains will not be lost.



Sultana Al-Jeham, *Chairwoman of Women's Affairs, Civic Democratic Initiatives Support Foundation (CDF) (Yemen)*

In 2013, it seems women in the MENA region gained rights constitutionally and legally, especially in countries that experienced the so-called Arab Spring (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen). However, a new constitution and legal reform do not necessarily mean immediate implementation. In fact, there is still a long way to go for women activists and their supporters.

For example, Syrian women will continue mourning, even if the Geneva political process results in a peace agreement in 2014. The Lebanese government will have limited abilities to agree on a clear agenda for women because of the historical problem of its government structure. Women in the Palestinian territories have long struggled not only because of Israel but also because of the conflict between the Hamas and Fatah movements. Jordan's government will have to appease the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood movement in order to continue functioning and, thus, will not be able to make any significant improvement for women. In Tunisia, the newly approved constitution is revolutionary compared to other Arab countries' constitutions; there is optimism that Tunisia's example will positively influence other North African countries (Libya, Morocco, and Algeria). Experts widely believe that the Arab Spring movements neither resulted in sustainable change where they took place nor were they convincing enough to make changes in neighboring countries.

In conclusion, significant opportunities for women will not be seen in the year 2014. However, it will be a year for processing better rights, and opportunities could be seen in following years, given that women in most countries have gained constitutional and legal rights.



Eman Alnafjan, *Riyadh-based blogger at Saudiwoman's weblog (Saudi Arabia)*

The year 2014 marks the third year since the Arab Spring began in early 2011. Three years in and women in the MENA region are just now beginning to find their bearings and leave their mark. While women in the rest of the world were making strides in women's rights, women in the Arab world had but only a few victories here and there that were never generalized or widespread to all.

Fortunately, things have now changed dramatically, especially for Saudi Arabian women. Although the same obstacles, including the guardianship system and gender segregation, are still in place, the difference now is in the virtual opportunities. Grassroots movements in Saudi Arabia have finally come into their own. Saudi women have mastered social media and its tools and are now using them to organize in a country where people are imprisoned for participating in public civil societies. Saudi women are not only taking advantage of these tools for women's

rights issues but also participating in the national discussion about human rights in general and the rights of Saudi citizens.

Through the ongoing grassroots movement of the October 26 Saudi women driving campaign, Saudi women (and men) put to rest the myth that the country is made up of a backward, misogynistic people ruled by a progressive governmental elite. Now they are showing the world that Saudis are capable of peaceful civil movements regardless of whether or not the government is ready or willing to accept that they are no longer subjects but citizens. Through the use of social media, Saudi women and men are now able to gather and discuss their issues without the threat of being arrested for breaking political or gender segregation rules. They are now able to find one another and organize with others who have the same civil and human rights goals. The usual tribal, gender, and regional divisions no longer apply. And from where I am sitting, I can see that Saudi people are taking full advantage of these virtual opportunities.



Rend Al Rahim, *Executive Director, Iraq Foundation and former Iraq Ambassador to the United States (Iraq)*

The new year may bring more settled times in the Arab region, though mixed results for women. In a landmark achievement for women in the region, Tunisia adopted a liberal constitution in January that upholds the rights of women, undertakes to provide parity between men and women in the legislature, and pledges to fight gender-based violence. In Egypt, Hala Shukrallah scored an unprecedented success for all women in the region when she became the first woman to lead a political party, Al-Dostour, or Constitution Party. Most women in the MENA region will not fare as well as their Tunisian sisters or experience the success of Shukrallah in Egypt.

In the case of Iraq, 2014 presents opportunities but also dangers. As in most Arab countries, the political rhetoric about women's rights and gender equality, sonorously upheld in the constitution, is not matched by actions on the part of the state or political parties, nor is it reflected in the social culture, dominated as it is by a stifling compound of patriarchal conventions and skewed interpretations of Islam. In almost every respect, existing laws, political conduct, and social practices run counter to the constitution in terms of gender equality and women's rights.

Two cases exemplify the obstacles facing women in Iraq. In December 2013, the Ministry of Justice announced the completion of a draft *Ja'fari* (Shi'ite) Personal Status Law. This is a continuation of a battle waged by ideological parties to abolish the existing Personal Status Law of 1959, an enlightened, unifying law that is based on different elements of Islamic *shari'a* and, yet, secures important rights for women in the family. Should the draft *Ja'fari* law pass, it will

be the first step toward dismantling the existing law, thereby subjecting women to the clerical establishment and depriving them of important safeguards and protections. Meanwhile, a draft law on Protection from Family Violence, considerably weaker than hoped for, has been languishing in parliament for the past year with little prospect of being passed in the foreseeable future because of objections from members of parliament (MPs) who represent tradition-bound sectors of society. Yet according to justices in the family court system, violence against women is on the rise, both within the family and as a consequence of the political violence that has flared across the country in the past year.

On the bright side, women are becoming politically bolder. To date, few women have been active in the political arena: none lead or have prominent positions in political parties; few women MPs in the current parliament speak out on national issues. But in the coming elections in April 2014, three women-only lists and two individual women are running independently of men. In a culture where even women are reluctant to vote for women, going it alone without men is a brave move: women do not attract the funding or the allegiance that male-led lists can secure. This is an indication of increased assertiveness, self-confidence, and leadership capacity among women. If any of these women succeed in the elections, it will be an important development for all women in Iraq.

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Safia Al Souhail, *Iraqi independent liberal politician, two-term elected Member of Parliament (2005-present), and member of Foreign Relations Committee*

Women's rights issues cannot be examined in isolation from the political changes occurring in the MENA region. This process should include studying the general culture and environment in light of the expansion of political Islam's influence and the fact that Islamists have managed to assume power and control the government and society, incorporating the religious dimension into all aspects of life. Theirs is a clear attempt to Islamize the state and society into one that governs with non-civil laws. Most important among these laws is the law on personal status, which, in my opinion, is the main outlet for transforming society along religious, sectarian, and ethnic lines. That possibility is the source of great concern for us Iraqi women and one that we should endeavor to resist.

As for the MENA countries, including Iraq, I think now more than any time since the Arab Spring, it is high time to initiate an in-depth, objective analysis of women's rights under the new political regimes to find out the extent to which those countries' governments, institutions, parties, movements, and individuals respect constitutions, laws, and international conventions.

Some non-democratic political leaders and some religious leaders—individuals and groups alike—may seek to impose wrongful interpretations of Islam concerning women and their

rights. This, I think, would be the greatest challenge for us because it involves a grave encroachment on the laws and positive gains in our rights from constitutions and international conventions, including CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), that have been granted to women in the MENA region in past decades.

As for opportunities, it would be a good idea to benefit from the expertise of specialized international organizations and research centers that can help our women conduct studies and maintain dialogue on the issues that serve as pretexts for women's exclusion and discrimination. This may include, for instance, using false, misleading interpretations of religious texts to establish a connection between those texts and laws that deprive women of their basic human rights. Dialogue should be initiated between moderates from both religious and secular movements, and this process should be expanded to include equitable numbers of men and women in any gathering on women's issues. In my opinion, gender equality should be applied to all meetings, forums, and workshops, and they should not be held exclusively for women.

Undoubtedly, politics tends to treat women's issues with absolute inferiority and seeks to marginalize women with the objective of keeping them in the dark and maintaining their subordination. Unfortunately, this problem coincides with the rise of religious movements that do not believe that women's issues concern the whole society and that women are the main measure for the development of any society and democracy.

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Ferdous Ara Begum, *gender issues specialist; former member of UN CEDAW Committee and Chair, Working Group for CEDAW General Recommendation on Rights of Older Women; and Former Director General, Bangladesh Television (Bangladesh)*

I do expect that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) beyond 2015 goals will recognize the situation of "widows in conflict" in the MENA region and provide opportunities for them to uphold their rights. This is the time to fight against all harmful practices including female genital mutilation (FGM) and the stereotyped attitude toward women in the region, which is based on discriminatory social norms and practices. Harmful traditional practices that contribute to violence against women are, thus, closely linked with the concept of gender-based discrimination.

The [2000 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey](#) showed that 97 percent of surveyed married women had experienced FGM. Another study by the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population in 2003 reported that over 94 percent of married women had been exposed to FGM, and 69 percent of those women agreed to the procedure being carried out on their daughters.

Furthermore, a pilot study by the Health Insurance Organization showed that 41 percent of female students in primary, preparatory, and secondary schools had undergone FGM.³

But these harmful practices can no longer be explained, justified, or legitimized on the basis of respect for cultural diversity. The prohibition of harmful traditional practices through legislation cannot effectively promote change without adequate resources for law enforcement and for improving social indicators for women—such as access to basic health, education, and livelihood opportunities, including poverty alleviation programs—which can change the mindset of the society as a whole.

Gender differences in formal representation can be attributed in large part to both institutional and societal constraints. The latter encompasses the social norms that make it more difficult for women to leave their traditionally domestic roles for more public roles outside of the home. Institutional constraints include barriers such as political systems that operate on rigid schedules that do not take into consideration women’s domestic responsibilities. Political will and implementation of Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, which relate to women’s role in peace and security, as well as positive application of quota systems, can create real opportunities for women in the MENA region in 2014.

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Margot Badran, *Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; and Senior Fellow, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim Christian Understanding, Georgetown University (United States)*

In many MENA countries, the year 2014—like previous years since the outbreak of uprisings often called revolutions confronting oppression and demanding rights—will bring forth opportunities and obstacles for women and, indeed, all citizens. I look at Egypt, a country that experienced the fall of Muhammad Morsi as president in July 2013 and the defeat of Islamism so quickly entrenched in high places and a country that now anticipates the ascendancy of Field Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to the presidency. In the wake of a new constitution more protective of citizens’ rights—including a more explicit expansion of women’s rights, and with security and the economy as major concerns for the new presidency—how will women fare as the year unfolds?

The absence of retrogressive gender rhetoric dressed in religion, such as that hurled on the floor of parliament in 2012 and in other public “microphones,” suggests no regressive tampering with the Muslim Personal Status Laws, as threatened or feared under the Islamist

³ <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/4/07-042093/en>

ascendancy. However, any amelioration of the code in favor of gender justice and equality is also not to be expected in the near future. As with the transitional government, there will likely be more women in high official positions (albeit still minimal), and with new parliamentary elections, some (but no staggering) increase in women representatives can be anticipated.

Women will continue to maintain a presence in the streets, public squares, and public modes of transportation where harassment will also likely continue, so cavalier and widespread is it. Things might otherwise look better and sound better for women, but the patriarchal bedrock of state and society—the “deep patriarchy” (why do we talk of the deep state and not of the deep patriarchy?)—will not be significantly reduced.

Women today across the classes in these revolutionary times—and the spirit and struggle do continue—have deeper awareness (of all inequities and injustices across the board), more tools, more fighting experience, and fiercer determination than ever before. The new state coming into being in 2014 needs these women. With the intense focus on security and the concomitant limiting of free expression, to what extent (beyond using women for window dressing and adjuncts) will the newly consolidating state know this? The opportunities and obstacles the state will create for women, and all citizens, may be a combustible amalgam. Yet, if security and the economy significantly improve and women and all other segments of society are able to freely practice their full rights, the story could be different.



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

Many obstacles fill up women’s lives on a daily basis in the MENA region. Today, and more than ever, while we are witnessing since the end of 2013 and in early 2014 a series of new constitutional reforms in Egypt and Tunisia that finally recognize the principle of equality, women have to seize these opportunities.

The overall impression is that positive clauses have been included in Egypt’s and Tunisia’s constitutions based on universal human rights—the most important of which relates to understanding women’s rights as human rights, where *shari’a* is mentioned generally without any specifics that would oppose women’s rights. These clauses also do not provide room for interpretation by clerics or judges.

Another important example is Yemen where significant progress on recommendations from the National Dialogue is occurring. These dialogues must be transformed from theory into practice sooner rather than later. This can be implemented by starting to grant girls the right to access education, rather than being victims of traditions in which they can be forced to marry, raped, or killed by men.

These new constitutions, as well as the examples of the Algerian and Turkish Constitutions, are necessary as a pillar, but we should not hold onto these principles without further implementation; they would be obsolete otherwise. The next step would be to ensure the application of these laws at different levels. As an example, a Moroccan legislator amended the penal code that would have previously dropped charges against a rapist who marries his victim.

Despite new constitutions, we still need concrete implementation of the rule of law. The obligation of legislators is to represent women's issues as a necessity for the development of a full nation and to empower women as agents of change.

The winds of change are blowing. We are seeing more and more calls for equality and justice; there is an urgent need for reform. These reforms must boost job creation while reducing policy distortions that have limited private sector development. By unlocking women's potential and eliminating obstacles to their participation in economic development, these countries will reach higher levels of enrichment and achievement.



Nadereh Chamliou, *International development expert; and former Senior Advisor, The World Bank (United States)*

Helen Lewis of the *New Statesmen* writes in a *Financial Times* op-ed, "If white men had been the only voters in the 2012 US election, Mitt Romney would have won by a landslide... Mr. Romney's hopes were dented by the perception that the Republicans were old-fashioned and demographically outdated."⁴

Around the world, women voters increasingly flex their muscles to shape the views of candidates and platforms of parties. This is evident from German Chancellor Angela Merkel who "scored points with female voters" to French President François Hollande who vowed to "end the politics of sexism" to even Iranian President Hassan Rouhani who came to power by receiving a larger share of women's votes than his opponents by simply taking a less belligerent stance toward gender equality and women's empowerment in Iran.

It is, therefore, encouraging to see that women's movements and women's advocacy groups have been at the forefront in Egypt and Tunisia to craft moderate and inclusive constitutions. It is equally good to see that moderate-thinking men have joined forces and stood side-by-side

⁴ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3cc0648a-924c-11e3-8018-00144feab7de.html>

with these women in the many demonstrations and sit-ins. They have realized that women's rights and equality ultimately signify the very principles of dignity and voice that were the central motivations for the people's uprisings. In many ways, these men and intellectuals avoided the mistakes that Iranian men and intellectuals committed during the Iranian Revolution. When women demonstrated for their rights, as the first group that saw the revolution veering off its envisioned path, nearly every male political leader from the ultra-left to the center distanced themselves from the women's movement, thinking that by eliminating women from the political arena, there would be more space left for them to share. History proved once again that the exclusion of one group ultimately leads to the exclusion of many. The younger generation of Iranians today, far wiser than its parents, sees its aspirations for its country and society as a joint effort with equal engagement for men and women.

Women's movements have focused in the past on promoting women candidates to make it into the male-dominated legislatures. Having a critical mass of women in these bodies is important. But, equally important is the informed engagement of the woman voter that has a far more lasting and deep-rooted impact on the content and direction of change. Increasingly, male and female politicians have to realize that their success depends on how well they listen to women's demands.

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Ümit Cizre, *Professor and Director, Center for Modern Turkish Studies, Istanbul Şehir University (Turkey)*

Whether they are dealing with old or new establishments, Islamists, secularists, the military, police, husbands, or strangers, women in the MENA region continue to suffer from exclusion, desperation, poverty, lack of mobility, and insecurity. Political violence, power struggles, polarized societies, civil wars, the collapse of economies, and the resultant absence of law and order have brought about a worsening situation for women, whether in the streets, work places, schools, universities, or at home. Among the issues negatively affecting women, however, "sexual and bodily integrity and personhood" have acquired unparalleled prominence in the region.

Women's personal boundaries are under attack in many countries in the MENA region either due to the absence of law and order or a culture of increasing domestic and public violence, harassment, abuse, and rape. Examples of "compulsory motherhood" (exemplified by Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's vocal encouragement to have three children, which he claims is the best number for each household), governmental scorning of abortions and C-sections, harassment by men in the streets due to security breakdowns, and, worse still, husbands killing their wives for wanting a divorce have all taken a dramatic toll on women's lives and well-being.

There is a paradox and a vicious cycle in this situation: many women's rights are being rolled back simply because women have emerged as active political subjects, on par with male activists, in many countries in the MENA region during the process of regime change. This new empowerment has enabled women to dare to cross over the boundaries set by masculine traditions and start to demand a voice in politics, reproductive rights, careers, and lives not ruled by male dominance. Domestic violence can be seen as the result of the loss of emotional, sexual, and economic control over women by the "head" of the family.

However, that is where the vicious cycle sets in: overturning female powerlessness requires political will and legislation on the part of governments that are often the embodiments of male supremacy and cultural and political conservatism. Seeking protection from institutions that are deeply engaged in an unfeminist, conservative agenda results in continued subordination and powerlessness.



Isobel Coleman, *Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy, Director of the Civil Society, Markets, and Democracy Initiative, Council on Foreign Relations (United States)*

Since they began more than three years ago, the Arab uprisings have created undeniable challenges for women, but also opportunities. This year, the momentum for women in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen appears positive: women are poised to benefit from expanded legal provisions enshrined in the new Tunisian and Egyptian constitutions; and in Yemen, they have an opportunity to expand their rights by building on the favorable recommendations of the recently completed National Dialogue Conference (NDC).

Tunisia's landmark constitution, forged through a consensus-driven process, resulted in additional safeguards for women's rights. Namely, Article 20 enshrines the principle of gender equality, establishing a legal basis for challenging discriminatory legislation, such as the country's inheritance laws. Article 45 commits the state to ensure gender parity in elected councils, facilitating greater female political participation. These articles provide significant opportunities for further legal and political progress for women in Tunisia, although now comes the difficult task of implementation.

After worrying signs of potential rollbacks under the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's new constitution reaffirms women's rights. It asserts gender equality, commits to achieving parity in society and politics, and sets a 25 percent quota for women in local councils. Furthermore, it stipulates the government's commitment to ratified international conventions, empowering women to leverage the international Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to ensure the government delivers on women's rights.

In Yemen, where women are among the least empowered worldwide, the transition process holds great potential. Women made up 30 percent of the members of the National Dialogue Conference. The NDC's final report recommended codifying gender equality, prohibiting gender-based discrimination, outlawing child marriage, and implementing a political quota for women. The constitutional drafting committee is not bound by these recommendations, but they are a positive indication.

In each country, the real battle for institutionalizing such gains lies ahead, but, together, these developments are cause for cautious optimism for women in the MENA region.

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Rangita de Silva de Alwis, *Director, Women in Public Service Project, Global Women's Leadership Initiative, Woodrow Wilson Center (United States)*

International Women's Day 2014 marks recent landmark constitutional reforms in the MENA region. On January 26, Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly ratified a new constitution, and earlier in the month Egyptians approved a new constitution. In this wave of constitutionalism in the MENA region, Tunisia and Egypt have sought to honor the rule of law: no person is above the protection of the law. A constitution as the supreme law of the land is the blueprint of a nation's commitment to the rule of law, and it must safeguard gender equality and women's rights. The promise of constitution-making can be realized only so much as its guarantees are actualized.

Just as in Tunisia, women in Egypt beat back language that called for complementarity between the genders in favor of a precise equal protection clause. Article 11 of the Egyptian Constitution, which enshrines Egypt's commitment to "taking the necessary measures to ensure appropriate representation of women in the houses of parliament... grants women the right to hold public posts and high management posts in the state, and to appointment in judicial bodies and entities without discrimination," is to be lauded. Although the over-general term "appropriate" falls short of an equal number of women in political and public life, women's groups must now ensure that laws that are to be drafted play an interpretive role in clarifying constitutional guarantees and filling in the gaps.

Furthermore, the constitution guarantees Egypt's commitment to the protection of women against all forms of violence. However, the provision that "ensures women to reconcile the duties of a woman toward her family and her work requirements" reinforces gender stereotypes and assumes that women are primary rather than joint caregivers of the family. Women's and men's equal rights in public and in private can be guaranteed only if men have equal caregiving rights and opportunities and both men and women are able to reconcile their work and family obligations. Unless gender equality in this provision is guaranteed, the

playing field will not be equal for women to hold “public posts and high management posts in the state.”

Looking forward to 2015, the 58th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women is focused on “Challenges and Achievements in the Implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for Women and Girls.” Last February, at the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, said, “We believe there should be a standalone goal or goals on equality and non-discrimination that addresses all kinds of discrimination on the basis of sex.” It is important that the reformist efforts in the MENA region keep this recommendation in mind going forward: drafting laws and achieving, in practice, goals that are consistent with the equal protection clause of their constitutions and the human rights treaties that are invoked therein.



Yasmine ElSayed Hani, *World Editor, AlAkhbar daily newspaper, Cairo (Egypt)*

Three years after hundreds of thousands of Egyptians flooded the streets calling for a change that might bring them a better life, the historical uprising of 2011 has lost some of its luster. Political firestorms occurred in Egypt, fueled by continuous anger voiced across society in different forms. The anger was translated frequently into massive violence blanketed by stern political messages sent on all sides. Women have always been the ones who suffered the most, as mothers, sisters, daughters, or wives, but also as people.

After the first “revolution,” it was thought that women would rise to a better social and political status, but, later on, it turned out that almost all the political rivals were trading away women’s issues. Women were largely marginalized in the following transitional political period. Despite their promises, the then-elected Muslim Brotherhood had re-engineered women’s political role: from active sharing in decision-making to actively promoting and defending the Brotherhood in society. This became apparent after the ouster of former President Mohammed Morsi, when the role of women was very clear in the field of activism against the authorities.

While Egypt is currently embarking upon a general consensus of the July 3 movement—when the mounting anger against the then-ruling Brotherhood had authorized the army to oust them—the future prospects are still ambiguous for the whole society including women, its weakest members. As the political situation is continuing to test all sides, new actors have appeared in the form of community initiatives. Driven entirely by youth power, these initiatives, such as HarassMap (a tool for combatting sexual harassment in public spaces), could give these young activists visibility across a wide spectrum via social networks and, accordingly, boost their prospects for becoming influential future political actors. While typical challenges continue to face Egyptian women—and trigger their typical effort—the community initiatives that work in

parallel to fight for women's rights can be a good opportunity in 2014 and the years to come. Such initiatives, though still in their beginning stages, seem promising when thinking of new ways to solve old problems and counter the biased social and political culture in Egypt.



Amal Hassan Fadlalla, *fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center; associate professor of anthropology, Women's Studies, and African Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; and author of Embodying honor: Fertility, Foreignness, and Regeneration in Eastern Sudan, Wisconsin University Press, 2007 (Sudan/United States)*

Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) women have come a long way in recent years. Their participation in public life, domestically and internationally, is noticeable in the workforce and in politics. Despite the strides they have made, they still face challenges on many fronts. Of course, MENA women cannot be lumped in one single category: their life experiences differ according to their multiple social locations and are shaped by gender, race, class, religion, and political affiliation. As elite MENA women begin taking leading roles on multiple fronts and creating alliances with women (and men) in different locations around the global, their counterparts in urban, rural, and poverty-stricken areas are still facing multiple challenges related to poverty, cultural differentiation, and other structural violence attributed to war and conflict.

In many MENA locations, the increasing militarization of these states has hardened gender differentiation and unleashed new kinds of "violent masculinities" that target both urban and rural women and threaten their public participation and visibility. The challenge that faces MENA women today, with the current changes sweeping their regions, is to stand firm in defense of the rights they have gained and to continue demanding more reforms of the legal codes that still regard them as second-class citizens. The focus of political parties, human rights NGOs, civil societies, and other grassroots organizations on violence against women should take seriously that violence against women is not disconnected from structural violence committed by national and global regimes and political economies. MENA elite women have the chief role to play in highlighting these challenges in national and global platforms and also in creating alliances with women on the ground level. In their various struggles for just and humane socio-economic and political regimes, MENA women should also revisit their understanding of gender by focusing on both the plight of women and the different constructions and manipulations of masculinities.



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

As we celebrate International Women’s Day, justice for women in Egypt remains elusive.

The 17-day uprising that began on January 25, 2011 and resulted in the ouster of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has led to three years of contentious politics that have marginalized the very group instrumental to its initial success—women. Tahrir (Liberation) Square, the epicenter of the revolution, symbolized a space where women were equal to men in their struggle for justice. The increasingly visible role women played showed that the culture of fear toward the state was ending, and women’s voices were critical to call for the need for social justice and the rule of law.

Today, the role of women in this call for social justice suffers from two critical problems: the exclusion of women from the political process and a return to an authoritarian pathology in the guise of military rule. The Egyptian draft constitution, completed in early December 2013 by a 50-member committee, was far from representative, with only five women included in the drafting process. And while the constitutional draft offers improvements in enhancing women’s rights, there are not enough guarantees to protect these rights from the excesses of future governments—especially under military rule. Herein lies the second problem: because the draft constitution allows for the consolidation of the military’s role in politics, this will come at the expense of the rule of law and civilian oversight.

In any country, the rule of law reflects the degree to which the principles and values usually embodied in that state’s constitution are applied on the ground. By both excluding women from the process and placing the military above civilian oversight, Egypt’s new constitution grants the military a custodianship status above the state. In this regard, Egyptians will have to remain vigilant to ensure that laws aimed at protecting women are not sacrificed in the name of stability and that women are treated as dignified citizens rather than subjects of the state—as they historically have been.

What has become apparent in Egypt over the past three years is that the fight for democratic rights has exposed how the marginalization of women—through exclusion from both the drafting process and from the process of government oversight—leads to laws that might not necessarily protect women as equal citizens of the state. In order to overcome this, it is critical for women not only to participate in the political arena, but also to shape how this arena will affect the everyday lives of the Egyptian public. By excluding women from the process and undermining civilian control of governance, the plight of Egyptian women to attain social justice through the rule of law for both men and women will be with us for decades to come.



Hanin Ghaddar, *former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; and Managing Editor, NOW News (Lebanon)*

Violence in the Middle East is often perceived as security incidents, sectarian clashes, and suicide bombers. Lebanon has recently stepped back into all of the above. However, it is hardly reported that violence has also increased, in parallel, on the domestic level.

Domestic violence, or violence against women in particular, has reached dangerous levels, and the draft legislation to protect women from violence is still in the drawers of the parliament. Manal al-Assi, Fatima al-Nashar, Roula Yaacoub, and many other women were recently murdered by their husbands, and no one is moving a finger to stop it because the religious institutions have no interest in changing the law.

Lebanese women probably have access to education and are perceived to be more liberal than other Arab women—maybe because they speak three languages or sometimes because they can wear short skirts. However, when it comes to legislation, the Lebanese women’s rights record is very poor.

In November 2013, the Thomson Reuters Foundation published a [women’s rights poll](#) that ranked Lebanon 16 out of 22 countries, sandwiched between Sudan at 17 and the Palestinian territories at 15. Somalia comes in at 14. Lebanon also, incidentally, comes in behind countries such as Djibouti, Libya, Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Algeria.

It is not easy to lobby for better opportunities for women when the economy is crumbling and the country is on the verge of a massive civil war. The new government has only one woman and people barely noticed. Of course, bombs ripping the country apart are scarier than a government without a proper quota for women.

However, Lebanese women still have a chance to push forward if they unite, agree on common goals, and put their sectarian and political differences aside. If the religious institutions are fighting against our rights, maybe it is time for us to unite against them and use the fragmentation among them to our own advantage.

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Lina Hundaileh, *Chairman and CEO, Printing for the Manufacturing of Chocolate and Chairwoman of the Young Entrepreneurs Association (Jordan)*

Countries in the MENA region should change. Governments, the private sector, and civil society should sit together and discuss their priorities and start implementing reforms.

We cannot delay change anymore. We need a new mindset to manage the situation of constant change. We need to have stability in the economy. People are suffering; unemployment and fuel prices are rising; government budgets are squeezed; and spending is increasing. People are waiting for policymakers to solve the most pressing problems. Economic reform cannot be achieved without the presence of women in the decision-making process.

2014 could be a very challenging year. Women need to lobby and advocate for women's rights and presence. There is one powerful way that has proven successful—the quota for women. We need to imitate and duplicate what worked in other countries and learn from such experiences. 2014 should be a turning point for women's presence on boards of directors as well.

Women in business lead to diversification in the economy, which, in turn, leads to increased economic opportunities, job creation, and broad-based, private sector-led growth in the region that focuses in particular on youth and women, who are an overrepresented amount of the unemployment population.

In general, I am not optimistic about what 2014 will bring. The situation is vague; we need to prioritize and start solving the most pressing issues. Women's issues are never at the top of governments' priorities. We need to change this and make it the most important priority that leads to improving people's lives through creating more businesses, increasing employment, and fostering an environment conducive to business development.



Farahnaz Ispahani, *Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; and former Member of the Pakistani Parliament and Media Advisor to Former President Asif Ali Zardari (Pakistan)*

Many scholars and women's rights activists and advocates in the West do not grasp the essential importance of quotas, or reserved seats, for women in parliament, especially in Muslim-majority countries.

The presence of female bodies and voices in any parliament changes the dynamic of the body in essential ways. Critics often point to the fact that many upper-class, privileged women get into parliament with reserved seats. Many do, but in Pakistan and Afghanistan I have seen political

parties nominate women party workers from rural areas and the lower- and middle-classes as well. What is essential, however, for women in parliament to succeed is a non-partisan caucus. In Pakistan, we were able to pass more pro-women's laws in a five-year period than at any other time in our history. The power of having women from the Islamist religious parties and the liberal left parties coming together on the Harassment of Women in the Workplace Bill and the Acid Crimes Bill despite major resistance from male colleagues really demonstrated the power of women united under one roof.

In Egypt today, women's rights seem better protected by the new draft constitution than by previous constitutions; it contains strong affirmative language such as, "The state commits to achieving equality between women and men in all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights in accordance with the provisions of this constitution. The state commits to taking the necessary measures to ensure appropriate representation of women in the houses of parliament..." (Article 11).

This article is stronger than its counterpart in the 1971 constitution, which granted women equal status but made gender equality subject to *shari'a*. It also goes further than its 2012 counterpart, which did not mention that women's status is equal to men's.

The phrase "to ensure appropriate representation of women in the houses of parliament" came after the constitutional committee demanded that a certain number of parliamentary seats be reserved for women as a form of affirmative action. However, unfortunately, the committee decided against seat reservation for women.

Egypt's State Council, which advises the government on matters of law, reinforced this stance by recommending against quotas for women in both parliament and in judicial positions. Former President Hosni Mubarak had supported the reservation of women's seats in 2009. He set a minimum of 64 of the parliament's 518 seats for women. However, the very first parliament after the revolution struck down the clause.

I see the removal of quotas for women members of parliament and judges to be a major step backward for women. And, once space is ceded, as we have seen in the example of Iran, it takes decades to move forward an inch when you have lost a foot in a matter of seconds.



Hind Aboud Kabawat, Attorney and founder of the Syrian Centre of Dialogue (Syria)

This past year has been a difficult one for my beloved Syria. The never-ending bloodshed and the sectarian divisions made 2013 a year every Syrian wants to forget. One of the few rays of light that makes this year a little more bearable is the continued contributions of Syrian women

everywhere, contributions that have not only made the lives of Syrians easier but have also pushed other women in Syria to take the path of action instead of just being bystanders in what is happening to our country today. Umm Samir, who lost both of her hands in the violence, looked at me with a huge smile devoid of sadness and said, “I was a teacher, and once I get better I will go back to my village to build the school that was destroyed, so I can teach the young children of my country once again.”

Syrian women in Beirut have been visiting the many refugee camps there, offering clothes and moral support to women and children who have been directly affected by the Syrian civil war. Syrian women in Jordan have also been helpful and effective in not only providing shelter and food but also in creating hope for their families.

Although the situation in Syria is worsening day to day, week to week, and month to month, thankfully, the same is not true for the situation of Syrian women politically and socially. Syrian women have witnessed a certain success, showing that their involvement can make a difference.

We are all Umm Samir, a woman who has lost both of her hands but none of her hope—and none of her conviction that she will help rebuild her destroyed village, our nation, our country, and our beloved Syria.



Sema Kalaycioglu, *Professor of Economics, Yildiz Technical University, and Founder of The Middle East Studies Program at Isik University, İstanbul (Turkey)*

Despite legal obstacles, 30 percent of girls in Turkey marry before they reach the age of 16, according to the United Nations Population Fund.⁵ In rural parts of the country, girls as young as 9 or 10 are forced into marriages; abused verbally, physically, and sexually; and even murdered. Child brides continue to be one of the bleeding wounds of Turkish society, as in other countries of the Middle East, for the following deep-rooted factors:

- **Economic needs:** Poor rural or urban families with rural backgrounds give their daughters to men upon predetermined payments to the brides’ fathers in the form of “head money or Drahoma.” This roughly constitutes 15 percent of total marriages in Turkey.⁶

⁵ <http://unfpa.org/webdav/site/eeca/shared/documents/publications/Turkey%20English.pdf>

⁶ <http://yasam.bugun.com.tr/turkiyede-sasirtan-evlilik-istatistikleri-haberi/717037>

- **Social/psychological traps:** Girls in rural families tend to develop faster socially and psychologically than biologically, and much faster than their urban counterparts. Beyond their economic value of what is called “head money,” there is a social problem that often goes unmentioned. In small villages, the difficulty of protecting girls against the solicitation of young men—as well as protecting them from incest by their male siblings and relatives in crowded households—leads mothers to give consent for the marriage of their daughters. Additionally, in rural areas, girls with limited opportunities for education show interest in early marriages.
- **Traditional/folkloric norms:** Traditionally, girls in villages are often forced into early marriages with relatives to maintain the inheritance within the family. In Turkish folklore, there are even songs admiring the sexual appeal and beauty of 13- to 14-year-old girls as alluring “rose buds.”
- **Politics of populism:** The populism of ruling political parties in Turkey has prevented the enforcement of civil laws to ban child marriages.
- **Religion as an excuse:** The increasing religiosity of Turkish society encourages religious marriages. Child brides can only marry through religious ceremonies and by religious authorities to bypass the civil law. Defenders of child marriages often reference the Prophet Muhammad’s child brides and consider themselves devout Muslims.

The more conservative Turkey becomes, the faster women’s rights erode. The faster the latter happens, the more difficult it is to prevent the collective crimes committed against young girls by families, society, and civil and religious authorities. For that matter, it is the moral and civil duty of politicians to change their discourse and condemn the circumstances that allow child marriages.

As we are preparing to celebrate another International Women’s Day this year, it is important for civil and religious institutions and opinion leaders to start campaigns against this major social crime.



Moushira Khattab, *Chair of Women in Foreign Policy Group, Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs; former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; former Minister of Family and Population, Egypt; and former Egyptian Ambassador to South Africa and to the Czech and Slovak Republics (Egypt)*

2014 is a year of crossroads for Egypt as it marches toward completing steps two and three of its political roadmap, the presidential and parliamentary elections, respectively. Having voted on a new, more balanced constitution, Egyptians already have one milestone under their belts. Two constitutions, two presidents, and six governments later, Egyptians feel empowered.

Women proved to be the country's unknown soldiers throughout the journey down democracy lane. As a significant voting bloc, women made up for the election boycott by some youth, gave 2014 a good start, and gave Egypt a new constitution and a second chance at a civil state based on the rule of law. This is unsurprising coming from the "soft" half of the Egyptian population, without whom January 25 would not have been possible. They have proven their resilience and dependability when called upon. The question is how can women (activists and laypeople) continue to be a part of the political process as opposed to their current "as needed" basis. A sustainable role would resolve the challenges facing Egypt and its women, such as weak political participation, a high level of unemployment, and culturally approved forms of gender-based violence. Women's activism should focus on the implementation of the constitution and, particularly, the chapter on rights and freedoms, which some view as being stillborn. Safeguards for such rights and freedoms must conform to an internationally agreed upon irreducible minimum.

Allegations of cultural specificity should not once again stifle attempts for reform. Mediocre solutions should not dwarf women's ambitions. Women who will soon be called to weigh in on presidential and parliamentary elections must transform their numerical weight into real bargaining power.

Defenders of women's rights must overcome institutional obstacles to democracy, such as an outdated mentality and biased values system. They must unite to forge a radical transformation of the society into a truly democratic culture of inclusiveness and development. The election of Hala Shukrallah, a Coptic woman, as Mohamed ElBaradei's heir to lead the Constitution (Al-Dostour) Party could be a sign of a paradigm shift. It gives hope that change is on the way.



Lilia Labidi, *former fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center; former Minister for Women's Affairs, Tunisia; Visiting Research Professor, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore (Tunisia)*

The Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 constitute a historical turning point for the region and were an occasion for women, some individually and some collectively, to distinguish themselves in the struggle for their rights and for freedom, democracy, and dignity. Governmental reactions were complex, and it is still too early to project the eventual outcomes. But, in any case, these uprisings are drawing a new map of political forces, a map where women's contributions occupy a significant place.

Across the region, the improvement in a variety of indicators due to public policies followed

over recent decades—such as raising women’s life expectancy at birth, increasing girls’ expected years of schooling, lowering maternal mortality, increasing the number of working women, and, in most countries, expanding contraception use and lowering fertility rates—contributed to a growing awareness of the importance of women’s political activism in the struggle for their rights. On the front lines of this struggle, women in Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and so on demanded full and equal rights, freedom, and dignity. New women activists emerged, among them a growing number of women cartoonists—a field formerly dominated by men—such as Lilia Halloul in Tunisia, Doaa El Adl in Egypt, and Hana Hajjar in Saudi Arabia, who use humor to satirize and stigmatize reactionary forces.

Among the successes of women’s political actions since the events starting in late 2010, we find an increase in the number of women parliamentarians in Morocco, Algeria, and Libya. In Tunisia, women’s struggles and mobilization enabled them to achieve political parity, a victory for the term "equality" over the phrase "complementarity between man and woman" in the country's new constitution, and retractions of proposals to make *shari'a* the foundation of Tunisian law.

Also, the first Tunisian transitional government following the fall of the Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime lifted Tunisia's reservations regarding CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), which was published in the *Journal Officiel de la Republique*. However, neither of the two successive Troika governments that ran the country from the end of 2011 into early 2014, and composed of Ennahda as the leading party and two secular parties, sent the lifting of CEDAW reservations to the UN, something required for this measure to take effect. The current government, formed as a compromise between existing political forces and which is supposedly neutral, could now send notification of Tunisia’s lifting of its CEDAW reservations to the UN, but will it be willing to do so?

Enormous other challenges still face Tunisia and the region, such as protecting women war victims and refugees from political, religious, and ethnic persecution; extending social rights to women, such as equality between the sexes in inheritance; and reducing the marginalization of women in rural areas where women greatly suffer from inequalities in education, healthcare, and employment, among other things. This marginalization, which is at once political, cultural, and socio-economic, excludes the vast majority of women from an active role in creating the democratic societies the region is struggling to achieve.

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

An assessment of current opportunities and obstacles for women in MENA countries is difficult.

Is this due to a shift caused by recent developments and the subsequent alienation from value systems?

The situation of women in the MENA region who shared the burden of supporting movements for democratic change has not improved—quite to the contrary.

Mechanisms that were used earlier to discourage women's participation in the public sphere are well known. What is new is the prevailing ideology that facilitates discrimination and violence against women, intimidating women who were equally involved in the arena of change. Arguments and behavior formerly used with shame gained social acceptance: rigid application of judicial decisions, arguments regarding "female dignity," ruthless physical violence against women boosted by augmented levels of aggression, which result from uncertainties of outcomes. The lack, or absence, of attention to inflicted grievances on women is deplorable.

These above lines describe some of the obstacles that women in the MENA region have encountered and will continue to experience in 2014 and beyond.

In looking at opportunities, the good news about opportunities is that they can be created. Female leaders in the MENA region are smart and insightful. They are going to work to bring about change, despite all the unfavorable signals. They are able to gradually and patiently create *A Place of One's Own* for their future society. An indispensable question is how intellectual and visionary women can reach the "others" across gaps of education and social standing. Work is required to create a solid base for this important task.

To bring about a sense of togetherness among all strata of women is essential. It is important to include the next generation across the country, and the region, to negotiate in informal groups why the female space is required when working for democracy. It is essential to learn how to tolerate frustrations and yet maintain presence in positions that need be defended.

This roadmap is huge but not endless. Perseverance and visible presence are important qualities to this end. Such a long-term struggle must be designed with patience and create minimal losses. The individual minds of a society need to walk the long way toward change of value system, in order to assume ownership of it. Such change will persist.

Another opportunity to expand upon is the transmission of women's voices through an international network. Numerous outstanding women from MENA countries are represented in international organizations and institutions. An active and focused network, facilitated by electronic communication, could be the opportunity to voice ongoing malpractices, political abuses, injustices, and human rights violations against women. This network would provide the potential to "name and shame" undemocratic claims to the international arena through evidence and documentation.



Amal Mudallali, *Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center (Lebanon)*

The Arab Spring has not transformed the lives of Arabs, neither women nor men, but it has opened the door to a new era of empowerment for both. Taboos have been broken, and we have seen the end of fear, especially for women.

Women were at the forefront of the revolutions in the Arab world. They participated in demonstrations and organized, inspired, and paid a heavy price in many places for their activism. But the result was a mixed bag for women. Their participation, influence, and stamina in the streets did not always translate into political gains. The gains or losses for Arab women differ from one country to another depending on two important factors: the level of democracy or, rather, the setbacks to democracy during the Arab Spring; and the rise of Islamic extremism that threatened, in some Arab countries, even the rights that women had before the revolutions, as modest as they were.

In a number of Arab Spring countries, women were expected to cease their activism and go into oblivion after the end of the revolution. For example, in Libya, Rola Abdul-Latif of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems found that “women leading civil society or advocacy groups were repeatedly told to go home after the revolution.” Also, in Egypt, although women played a central role in the revolution, many Egyptians do not expect women to achieve any concrete successes in the next elections because the way that the electoral system is organized will not give them the opportunity.

In Syria, women have paid the heaviest of prices for their activism, but their participation in the Syrian National Coalition has been limited and sometimes only symbolic. Different groups have not created political space for them to play a role equivalent to their sacrifices.

Tunisia is the exception in the Arab Spring. The new Tunisian Constitution gives women total parity with men, and this is with the consent and support of Islamic forces.

In several Arab countries, there has been progress and many firsts achieved. In Egypt, Hala Shukrallah was the first woman elected as the head of a political party, Al-Dostour. In Saudi Arabia, the *Saudi Gazette* became the first newspaper to appoint a woman as editor-in-chief. There are many more examples.

Technology and social media have empowered women by giving them a voice. This has a transformational effect on the way women see themselves and view their societies and their role in it. It is no longer possible to silence women or ask them to go home.

The best answer to those who want women to go back to the status quo came from a Yemeni villager who would walk for hours every time to join demonstrations. She said, "After what I have done, no force on Earth dares to neglect me." The genie is out of the bottle for Arab women, and men, and there is no going back.

The future of the Arab world has not been defined or become clearer as a result of the Arab Spring, but it is now up to all the forces in these societies, both women and men, to define its path. When they find their way, the future for women in the Arab world will be brighter.



Musdah Mulia, *Chairperson, Indonesian Conference on Religion for Peace (ICRP) (Indonesia)*

In my opinion, 2014 will be a year of both opportunities and obstacles for women in the MENA region. I argue that women in this region still face many obstacles, and there are at least three main ones.

The first obstacle is Islamic misinterpretation that does not sufficiently promote an egalitarian spirit and is, by all measures, gender-biased. Such interpretations usually emerge because the understanding of the holy texts focuses more on textual aspects and tends to ignore the context. Most Islamic interpretations, especially those regarding women's position and gender relationships in today's Muslim societies, are based on concepts that were developed hundreds of years ago by classical jurists.

The second obstacle is gender-biased Islamic family law. The current Islamic family laws in many MENA countries still contain a large number of provisions that explicitly or implicitly discriminate against women; for example, the minimum age of marriage is lower for women than for men. In some countries, a woman, regardless of her age, can only marry with her guardian's consent, whereas a man does not need the same; a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman, but a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man; and a man may marry multiple wives (up to four), but a woman can only have a monogamous marriage, and so on.

Last but not least is the problem of a patriarchal culture. Our patriarchal society still holds firmly onto values that are not conducive to the fulfillment of human rights. Our society still adheres to beliefs that give preference according to sex. In all matters, men have the advantage over women, and boys have priority over girls. This culture is deeply interwoven in society and introduced into all aspects of life, including education, economy, and politics.

However, 2014 also could be a year of opportunity for women in the MENA region. There are at least two indicators. First is the increasingly higher educational level of women. In addition

to higher academic achievement, they also have better access to and enjoy more opportunities for participating at the university level. Second is that women are increasingly courageous and self-confident to compete for top leadership positions.



Caryle Murphy, *former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; and author of A Kingdom's Future: Saudi Arabia Through the Eyes of Its Twentysomethings (United States)*

Most women across the MENA region are likely to look back on 2014 as a year of intense struggle against an array of arduous obstacles, some of them life-threatening ones. Yet some more fortunate women will see improvement as their educational and career opportunities expand.

The surge of repression and violent conflicts in key Arab states—Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon—means that women in these countries will face increased physical danger, as well as dislocation and sexual assaults. Meanwhile, increasing sectarianism and the spread of the Salafi religious trend throughout the region will hinder women from living up to their fullest potential as citizens and employees because these trends will limit female participation in the public sphere.

Tunisia may represent the bright spot for women in 2014 because of the evolving compromises between its secular and Islamist factions, which means that Tunisian women will not face as many restrictions as their peers in neighboring states.

In the Gulf, it is a mixed picture. Women in Bahrain will continue to suffer under the tense and sometimes violent stand-off between the government and its opposition. Kuwait is relatively peaceful, but the pronounced Salafi trend there will restrain the expansion of women's liberties. And in Yemen, women will face the challenges of their country's widespread poverty and illiteracy, as well as the baleful repercussions of child marriage.

The picture is brighter in other Gulf countries, namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar. These countries enjoy a relatively high level of domestic security and financial prosperity compared to their neighbors to the north. In all four countries, career opportunities are growing for young women as they become ever more educated and more visible in the public sphere. These developments are due to efforts by the government to advance women out of a belated recognition that sound national development requires the participation of all, not just half, of their populations.



Marina Ottaway, *Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center (United States)*

The year 2014 will be one of misery for women in some Middle East countries, while allowing those in other countries to draw a sigh of relief that Islamist parties have not imposed new restrictions on their rights. But there is no reason to believe that any country will witness a significant advancement in the protection of rights for women.

Women in war-affected countries—particularly in Syria but also in Libya, Iraq, and Yemen—will continue struggling to keep themselves and their children fed, sheltered, and, above all, alive, whether they live in war zones, refugee camps, or in make-shift arrangements as internally displaced persons. For those women, advancement in women’s rights will remain a distant prospect.

At the other extreme, 2014 will probably be a good year for Tunisian women, who can rest assured knowing that the recently enacted constitution does not impose new restrictions on their rights, as they had feared while the constitutional debate was unfolding. For them, the problem will remain that of ensuring that the rights enshrined in the constitutions and the law are accepted and respected in practice, despite social traditions that do not embrace full equality for women.

Egyptian women, too, have seen the enactment of a constitution that formally recognizes their rights. In fact, even the now abrogated 2012 constitution, drafted when Muslim Brothers and Salafis dominated Egyptian politics, was not as restrictive as many claimed. But Egyptian women face an extremely hostile and indeed dangerous environment. The country is divided and unstable, with the security forces focused on suppressing dissent, not protecting citizens. As a result, there has been a significant increase in the sexual harassment of women, often with the police refusing to intervene to protect them.

In most countries, the condition of women will probably remain largely unchanged. Saudi Arabia will continue moving forward at a glacial pace. Women will be able to vote in the next municipal elections, but the elected councils will remain powerless. Also, women will now be able to use their government-issued identification cards to prove their identity in court without having to rely on male witnesses to verify who they are. Other small changes might be introduced, but by the end of the year, women will still not be allowed to drive or to hold jobs that bring them into contact with men. Even in less restrictive countries, the gap between what the law states and what the society allows will remain considerable.



Smadar Perry, *Senior Commentator on Middle East and Arab Affairs, Yediot Ahronot daily (Israel)*

Mabrouk (Congratulations), Dr. Hala Shukrallah from Egypt. You are not only a civil rights activist, a Copt, and a woman (not necessarily in this order), but the first female president of an important political party, Al-Dostour. You won your seat, replacing the founder of your party, Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, through democratic elections. Experts in your country indicate that by voting for a woman who belongs to the “official” religious minority, Al-Dostour has opted to demonstrate its liberal, secular face.

There are a few other Egyptian women who were appointed, not elected, to leading political positions in Egypt in an effort to heal the wounds of the Muslim Brotherhood’s rule, but it is not enough. My fellow Egyptian activists now are desperately looking for the implementation of a quota system to ensure that discrimination against women finally comes to an end with the promised “new era.”

Is this promise going to be fulfilled? I am not sure. Quotas for women, even in senior positions, do not offer the much-needed solution. Can Egypt under the rule of Field Marshal al-Sisi handle women's rights and women’s potential contribution to their own society and place it on top of its priority list? Will women's improved situation in the eyes of the law and new constitution become a model for other Muslim countries? For these questions, I see a big question mark.

Judging from afar, it seems that the women of Egypt must continue their hard work. It is up to the leading women’s activists to determine whether the year 2014 will be crucial and if they are ready to deploy their energies and qualifications. It is not going to be easy. Surely, it is going to be frustrating, but if they do not declare a war of attrition, no one is going to work for them. The authorities are too busy dealing with economic problems, security, tourism, and foreign investments, among other things. I would place women's issues in 9th or 10th place on the regime’s list of immediate headaches.

The year 2014 may become a turning point for Muslim women’s fight for equality. I am choosing the words “may become” as I can see only a narrow opening in this regard. The new Tunisian constitution is a promise, and Tunisia may set a precedent, if it happens. On the other hand, the new “law of terror” in Saudi Arabia is bad news for recent efforts regarding women's equality inside the kingdom. Whoever will try to push for women’s right to drive a car, to get rid of the male guardian role, or even to go out to study at university or work without family consent, will face new problems with the authorities.

It is, in fact, a year full of challenges for women throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds. I cannot see women winning the battle unless they unite forces and work hard for themselves and their rights. Women must not depend on good intentions or promises. Instead, they must

choose their best representatives who will be committed to their fight. Otherwise, they will, again, lose their chance.



Hanan Saab, *Owner and Managing Director, Pharmamed; President, Lebanese League for Women in Business; Vice President, MENA Business Women's Network (Lebanon)*

Countries that share borders with Syria have been enduring spillover from the Syrian crisis. Lebanon and Jordan are shouldering the refugee population, which has suddenly overburdened their native populations—there are around one million refugees in Lebanon and 600,000 in Jordan according to UNHCR⁷ (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). This has translated into extreme stress on the infrastructure and economy of these countries, not to mention the impact on the social fabric. From this perspective, the dynamics in these two countries differ from others in the MENA region.

In both Lebanon and Jordan, the Syrian workforce has started to compete with locals for jobs due to the lower wages they are willing to accept, thus shifting job opportunities to Syrian refugees. This situation is sowing the seeds for conflict. Furthermore, the unsafe environment that prevailed in mid-2013 still exists, threatening current businesses and discouraging startups. There is a common observation that in such an environment, women more so than men shy away from taking risks.

At this time, women are more vulnerable because of the challenge of sustaining a work-life balance and providing security for their children and families. Businesses in certain fields have developed their exit strategy—among these are some women-owned businesses.

During this difficult time of crisis, there is a role for businesswomen's organizations and mentors to rise to the occasion and provide support. In this regard, businesses that stood the test of time and grew under previously adverse conditions are in a position to provide guidance, lessons learned, and mentoring on how to adapt to change despite current conditions, which are arguably the worst ever for the region.

While I am a believer that in every difficulty there exists an opportunity, such a vision is not shared by many, particularly when one observes that difficulties linger across the MENA region, given the evolution of sectarian conflicts on the political scene. This is perpetuating a gloomy outlook for business because our economy is closely linked to political turmoil.

⁷ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

I believe there currently exists an opportunity for women, mothers, sisters, and wives to rise up across the MENA region and actively engage in subduing and counteracting this divisionary approach, hence, protesting and refusing engagement in such a conflict. There are so many lessons learned across the world that merit careful consideration to help correct this sectarian approach. Awareness should be disseminated due to the urgent need for swift action.

Above all, women cannot afford to give up on the gains they have attained in various fields—be it education, business, or human rights—and on their role in the continuous struggle for democracy. NGOs, businesswomen’s organizations, and women’s rights activists should stand firmly against all discriminatory actions, clinging to their right to be fully fledged partners with men in all fields.

2014 started not only with the challenge of maintaining women’s position and refusing to be marginalized, but with an opportunity and urgent need to assume a more progressive role in subduing a version of conflict that can destroy our values, our families, and our societies.

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Fatima Sadiqi, *Senior Professor, Linguistics and Gender Studies; Co-Founder, International Institute for Languages and Cultures (INLAC); Director, Isis Center for Women and Development; UN Gender Expert; and President, National Union of Women's Organizations (Morocco)*

The 2011 constitution opened two genuine and related opportunities for Moroccan women: the recognition of gender equality and parity (Article 19) and the unprecedented recognition of a women-related native language, *Amazigh* (Berber), as an official language (Article 5). Since women’s rights and language rights are part of human rights, the secular feminist movement and the *Amazigh* movement have been coordinating efforts and supporting each other in the last few years. This does not mean that the *Amazigh* movement is de facto feminist, but it did help create new dynamics in the Moroccan feminist discourse, especially because although Berbers are Muslim, the Berber language is secular in the sense that it is not backed by a holy book.

Pursuant to the new Moroccan Constitution, a new body called “Authority for Equality and the Fight against all Forms of Discrimination” was created to ensure that women’s rights are safeguarded. As an offshoot, the Forum on High Parity and Equality was created to follow the implementation process. Also, a new section called *Libertés et Droits Fondamentaux* (Liberties and Fundamental Rights) includes Articles 32 and 34 with statements concerning the rights of women, children, and the disabled; Article 21 prohibits sexism; Article 59 safeguards these rights and liberties during states of emergency; and, most importantly, Article 175 states that these rights cannot be retracted in future constitutional revisions.

Further, the March 2012 suicide of 16-year-old Amina Filali, who swallowed poison after being forced to marry her rapist, pushed the Equality Now organization to demand legal reforms to strengthen punishments for sexual violence and to prevent child marriage. This organization demanded the revision of Article 475 to no longer exempt a “kidnapper” from punishment if his victim, being a minor, marries him. These demands were advanced in defiance of the silence of the Islamist Minister of Solidarity, Women, Family, and Social Development, Bassima Hakkaoui. The Equality Now Act led to heated debates in the parliament, and finally in February 2014, Article 475 was revised, precluding the exemption of the “kidnapper” from punishment if he marries his victim and raising the sentence in such cases to 30 years in prison—a great victory for feminist civil society.

These opportunities are matched by serious obstacles, the most important of which is implementation. Women’s post-2011 legal gains were not, however, matched by similar advances at the social and political levels. For example, in the parliamentary elections of 2011, there were only 69 women members of parliament (MPs) elected out of 389. Admittedly, this was a step forward compared to previous elections where there had been only 30 women MPs. However, it was expected that at least one-third of the seats would be allocated to women. Likewise, there was a drastic decline in the number of women ministers from seven in 2007 to only one in 2011. This was somehow remedied by the inclusion of five more women on the October 10, 2013⁸ second version of the Islamist government. This new version reduced the space of the Islamists in decision-making as they now need to share more power with other parties. Berber activists are pushing for implementation.

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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)*

Unless the Muslim and Arab worlds realize that religion, particularly public political Islam, must remain in the private sphere, democracy and gender equality will never be achieved.

I see the cup as half full and half empty: 2014 holds opportunities and challenges for women in the MENA region. In a few countries, there is a light at the end of the tunnel as moderate rulers and enlightened Islamists take over. In Egypt, the uprising of an estimated 30 million brave

⁸ October 10 is the Moroccan National Day. Although the coincidence is welcomed by most Moroccan women MPs, the five new ministers are only Deputy Ministers and not full Ministers, which implies that women are still not judged as able to lead ministries. One MP qualified these new deputy Ministers as the “harem” of the government.

women and men, according to some sources,⁹ who took to the streets in June 2013 was unprecedented, powerful, and fruitful. The people were able to overturn the rule of the *Ikhwan* (Muslim Brotherhood) and draw a roadmap for a more promising, democratic, new Egypt. In Iran, a moderate Islamist was elected president, holding promise for a more tolerant, women-friendlier country. In Tunisia, an enlightened Islamist leader is steering the country away from extremism toward moderation in governance and women-friendlier interpretations of Islam.

However, through the lens of social and traditional media, we are witnessing a dimmer future for the MENA region as violence against women and terrorism in multiple guises and forms is escalating. Peace remains untenable and far-fetched, an unrealized dream in a conflict-stricken region. Threats of regression in women's hard-earned rights persist as these rights are either withdrawn after the Arab uprisings, or adorned with women-unfriendly interpretations and misinterpretation of Islam by religious extremists. Public political Islam becomes communal as the space between private and public religion collapses. This thwarts women's empowerment, including assumption to leadership positions and sharing in decision-making, and negatively impacts women's rights and gender equality, especially when clerics double as political leaders and rulers.

Finally, despite an emerging, active civil society and NGOs advocating for women's rights as human rights, the gap between de facto and de jure laws and legislation remains wide. Implementation of international conventions (such as CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) is stalled due to civil conflict, political instability, and, above all, misinterpretation of Islam by the clergy and male chauvinists clinging to power.

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Edit Schlaffer, *Chair and Founder, Women without Borders, SAVE (Austria)*

The Arab Spring proved that women in the MENA region already have the capacity for leadership and action. Not only did the world need to see this, but the women themselves benefited from the confidence boost. Women inhabited the squares of resistance and change, charged with optimism that their voices were being heard, and from this experience there was no going back.

What women also encountered was that the road to a more peaceful and inclusive society is not necessarily a welcoming space. Even in these hopeful times, the ugly face of discrimination,

⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-23312656>

abuse, and even rape became part of their experience. These were the first warnings that societies would not change overnight.

Nevertheless, women camped out in Turkey, earned a Nobel Peace Prize in Yemen, and stood on the streets in Cairo. Bothaina Kamel ran for the presidency in Egypt, sending a symbolic message of what was possible in an effort to ridicule the tradition of male political entitlement. In the Palestinian territories, Maysoun Qawasmi changed the outlook for many women, too, when she ran for municipal elections in Hebron, creating an all-female candidate list for the first time in Palestinian history.

What they share with their Western sisters in the early struggle for inclusion is that female candidates are seen as standing for women's rights only. This, of course, could not be further from the truth. What is closest to their hearts is the next generation.

In 2014, MENA women can feel stronger and more confident in the changes they have made and the influence they have. They need to mobilize their progressive (male) allies, particularly those with whom they marched, and demand support in their daily struggles. It is the right of women across the MENA region to realize changes in their lives, day by day, bit by bit. And it is the responsibility of those who stood side-by-side with women to accompany them on this journey to create the new society they were all dreaming of. This will continue the struggle, the necessary work on the home front.

Women are critical to achieving this goal because they are active in navigating the private sphere that shapes and influences the outlook and opinions of their communities and particularly of their children. This will be a decisive driver for how open- or close-minded mainstream society will be.

What has changed and what should give us hope is that women have realized their potential in the MENA region. It is time for female strategists to make it work.

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Tara Sonenshine, *Distinguished Fellow, George Washington University and a champion for women; former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (United States)*

2014 promises to be a period of continued positive change for the women of the MENA region with the important caveat that when it comes to this part of the world, change is often uneven and often accompanied with backsliding as well. Moreover, as is so common with the Middle East, nothing is monolithic and "change" is highly dependent upon local culture, national trends, and the global economy overall.

A sophisticated look at this issue of women in the MENA region requires a country-by-country examination.

For Egyptian women, the political turmoil in the country presents both challenges and obstacles. The women arrested at Mansoura University¹⁰ faced detention and harsh treatment. On the one hand, their plight reflects the ongoing challenges of free expression and the continued dangers of dissent. On the other hand, the three women arrested have gained public attention and support from groups like Amnesty International. Thus, it presents a measure of voice and confidence for other women fighting for their political, economic, and cultural rights in the country.

Tunisian women will continue to fare better in 2014, as signaled by the hopeful new constitution and continued reforms. There is also progress for Tunisian women on issues related to domestic violence. Steps by the judiciary and legislature, such as the creation of a new hotline for victims of domestic violence, bode well.

Most worrisome in the region is Libya, where women face horrific situations of abuse, rape, and lack of access to economic and political power. Yet Libyan women remain defiant and strong, and I think their plight can still improve in 2014 if those of us outside Libya do not forget the women and girls of a revolution that led to the overthrow of a dictator.

Finally, a sad note about Syria—a place I worry most about vis-à-vis women: Women inside the country and displaced outside throughout neighboring countries need our help. The girls of Syria need humanitarian assistance and they need to get back to school. Let's help them.

The situation for women and girls in the MENA region will be a positive story in 2014 if we, the women and girls of the world, keep working and fighting hard for universal human rights. We must turn our rhetoric into action—into laws and policies that enable half the sky to fulfill its full potential.

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Nayerh Tohidi, *Professor and Director, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, California State University, Northridge; and Research Associate, Center for Near Eastern Studies, UCLA (United States)*

Uncertainties still loom large about the trajectory of the recent uprisings and revolutions in the MENA region, especially with regard to women's rights and gender regimes in these evolving

¹⁰ <http://www.dailynewsegyp.com/2014/02/08/hearing-mansoura-university-detainees-postponed-sunday/>

societies. It is not easy to remain hopeful if we focus only on the disturbing sound bites and negative, sensational images in the news. I am old enough not to get too excited about the initial euphoria of the “Arab Spring” nor to lose hope and revert to cynical, orientalist assumptions of inherent and unchangeable despotism and violence in Arab and Muslim cultures.

The ongoing challenges and daunting hurdles of a democratic and egalitarian path should be placed in historical and comparative perspective. In the long or even medium term, the prognosis for democracy and women’s rights may not be as gloomy and disappointing as some developments compel us to feel. As I stated in my previous reflections, despair is not an option. Only by keeping hope alive can one be an agent of positive social change. Many women and men of Arab, Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, and other ethnic backgrounds living in the MENA region have, indeed, stayed resilient and hopeful. Yes, violence and repression, especially violence against women, patriarchal domination, sectarianism, fanatic extremism, poverty, and unemployment are still among the primary obstacles. Syria is still bleeding, and women and children are the primary victims of the atrocities committed by the Bashar al-Assad regime and some of the opposition forces on the ground. Yes, it takes the suicide of hundreds of women each year in many provinces—and, more recently, of Amina Filali, a 16-year-old Moroccan girl who was forced to marry her rapist—to galvanize advocates of women’s rights to bring about some positive legislative changes to protect women victims of violence and rape. Yes, women in Egypt are still being violated and sexually harassed by both governmental (be it led by the military or the Muslim Brotherhood) and non-governmental forces.

But look how in 2013 and early 2014 Tunisia once more became the harbinger of progressive change in the MENA region by achieving a compromise between its secular and religious forces in order to avoid totalitarianism and ensure pluralism and women’s rights. Look how in Egypt a woman became the first female political party leader, who at the same time represents Coptic Christians, another underrepresented minority group. Look how in Iran, despite ongoing repression and discriminatory laws, women push for a public presence in politics, arts, and culture. In Libya, the cabinet issued a law that recognizes women raped during the conflict as war victims, putting them on the same level as wounded former rebel fighters requiring medical treatment. This is contrary to the dominant norm of blaming and hiding raped women to save the “honor” of the community. In Yemen, one of the poorest and most underdeveloped parts of the MENA region, women have taken steps toward ending child marriage. In Saudi Arabia—one of the richest and economically most developed areas that, nevertheless, remains the bastion of patriarchy—many women and some members of the ruling elite are pushing for positive changes, even if still very slowly. According to a recent study, there seems to be proportionally more female technology entrepreneurs in the Middle East than anywhere else in the world. This could be due to the notion that careers in technology fit with traditional values. In the longer term, however, this trend for women may prove empowering, socio-politically as well as economically. In short, looking more deeply at the larger picture of the MENA region within the much larger globalizing geopolitical landscape of our world, I tend to believe that 2014 is a good mixture of obstacles but also more opportunities for women and their human and civil rights.



Robin Wright, *USIP-Wilson Center Distinguished Scholar (United States)*

Prospects for Arab women in 2014 are dreary. For all their bravery on the frontlines of the Arab uprisings, millions face more obstacles than opportunities three years later. Many have seen rights rolled back, either in laws or in public practices. But their plight will vary widely from country to country.

Tunisia represents the hope of a better future because of a new constitution that guarantees “All citizens, male and female alike, have equal rights and duties, and are equal before the law without any discrimination.” It also goes further than most Western constitutions in outlining a place for women in politics. “The state seeks to guarantee women’s representation in elected councils,” says Article 33 of the new constitution, which was passed in January 2014.

Syria reflects the dangers for females both young and old in 2014, as the deteriorating civil war has disrupted women’s lives in unprecedented ways. Up to 75 percent of the more than 2.3 million refugees who have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt are Syrian women or girls, according to relief groups. Females have been particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, trafficking, and child marriage as young as 11 and 12.

Egypt ranked at the bottom of 22 Arab countries on the status of women as 2013 ended, according to a Thomson Reuters Foundation poll of gender experts. Statistics collected by international groups are staggering:

- 99 percent of women and girls were subject to sexual harassment in Egypt, according to a United Nations report.
- 91 percent of females—or more than 27 million—are forced to go through female genital mutilation, a tradition still practiced by both Muslim and Christian families, UNICEF reported.
- And dozens of women were raped in Tahrir Square during protests against the Muslim Brotherhood government in June 2013, reported Human Rights Watch.

A military coup ousted the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013, and a new constitution won approval in a referendum in January 2014. But little is likely to change anytime soon.

In several countries, women face a huge gap between the laws and the realities that are not likely to change significantly in 2014. Yemen allocated a quota of 30 percent for seats in the National Dialogue to write a new constitution. But the State Department reports more than 90 percent of women have faced public harassment, while child marriage is a common practice.

And in Iraq and Libya, women face basic personal security challenges—including kidnapping, rape, random arrest, and physical abuse—in 2014 because of militias that have become a law unto themselves.



Najat Zarrouk, *Governor, Director of Training of Administrative and Technical Staff, Ministry of the Interior, Kingdom of Morocco; Member of the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration; and Governor, Member of the Board of the Arab Women’s Leadership Institute of Amman (Morocco)*

It is too early to describe and assess the impact of the “Arab Spring” on women’s rights and on equality between men and women. What we can observe is the concrete involvement and active participation of women before, during, and after the revolutions, for example in Tunisia and Egypt. We urgently need research and analysis on this topic.

First of all, we have to secure the achievements made on women’s condition and rights. It appears that in some countries, the status of women is gradually improving through efforts at the highest level of the state (in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco). We can explain this evolution by many factors: the positive pressure applied by the international community, international commitments, the evolution and modernization of societies and of mentalities and traditions, the access to education for girls, the role and strong actions of civil society, the effective use of information and communication technology and social media, networking, and so on.

However, women in the MENA region still have to face many challenges: the different interpretations of religion by both men and women; the burden of the caregiving role; relatively lower levels of education; cultural and societal challenges such as the lack of awareness of the important role women can play in society; the implementation of laws; the glass ceiling in the public and private sectors; lack of access to decision-making positions; insufficient family support; the greater impact of poverty on women; limited access to financial resources and support; external global challenges (negative perception of Muslims and Arabs, the ambivalent attitudes of donors, etc.); self - imposed challenges (lack of self-confidence or willingness to interact with the public sphere); the exact content and meaning of civil service; minimal training budgets; the difficulty of balancing personal ambitions, professional responsibilities, and the family role; the lack of statistics and studies on Arab women’s situation, and so on.

Aside from other specific difficulties and challenges for women, women have been marginalized and left out of the process of drafting new constitutions. As a result, some constitutions ignored the rights of women.

As the international community considers the post-2015 agenda and that many countries are in a phase of democratic transition and constitutional reforms, we need an enabling and empowering environment for women in the MENA region.

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Please note that the opinions expressed herein are those of the individual authors and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.