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Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Issues for Congress

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SUMMARY

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Many experts have found that women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) fare worse than those in other parts of the world on a range of social, economic, legal and political measures. Some attribute this underperformance to prevailing gender roles and perspectives (including discriminatory laws and beliefs), as well as challenges facing the region overall (such as a preponderance of undemocratic governments, poor economic growth, wars, and mass displacement, which often disproportionately affect women). Some key issues facing many women in the region include the following:

- **Unequal Legal Rights**. Women in the MENA region face greater legal discrimination than women elsewhere, with differential laws on issues such as marriage, freedom of movement, and inheritance, as well as limited to no legal protection from domestic violence.
- **Constraints on Economic Participation and Opportunity**. Regional conditions, in addition to gender-based discrimination, contribute to a significant difference between men and women's participation in MENA economies. For example, women do not participate in the labor force to the same degree as women in other regions, and those who do participate face on average nearly twice the levels of unemployment than men.
- **Underrepresentation in Political Processes**. Women—particularly in Yemen, Kuwait and Lebanon—are poorly represented in legislative bodies compared to the global average.
- **Conflict and Displacement**. Women and girls constitute the majority of displaced civilian populations and are at a higher risk of exploitation and abuse in conflict and displacement settings. Experts are particularly concerned about displaced populations in Syria and Yemen.
- **Lack of Representation in Conflict Resolution and Peace Negotiations**. Women have been sidelined in most formal efforts to resolve the MENA region's three largest ongoing wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, despite attempts by some international actors to involve women in these processes.
- **Susceptibility to Radicalization, Terrorism, and Violent Extremism**. Women, like men, are susceptible to radicalization by extremist groups like the Islamic State. Some extremists target women for support and recruitment, though experts have noted that women also may be uniquely positioned to counter violent extremist ideology. In Egypt and Algeria, for example, governments have trained women clerics to counter radicalization.
- **Disproportionate Vulnerability to Possible Impacts of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic**. Women in the MENA region are experiencing unique and particularly dire effects from the COVID-19 pandemic, though the full effects remain to be seen.

Over the years, many Members of Congress have supported U.S. efforts to bolster gender equality in the MENA region in the context of advocating for women's rights and well-being globally. Some also have argued that supporting women's rights may advance broader U.S. national security interests in the region. To support these positions, proponents sometimes cite research suggesting that the relative status of women in society appears to be linked to greater political stability, security, and prosperity, as well as to better governance.

Congress has addressed issues related to women through foreign assistance appropriations and authorizations, resolutions, statements and letters, and oversight activities. Some of these measures have been global in scope, while others have been region-specific. Going forward, Members may consider whether improvements in the status of women may contribute to other U.S. policy goals, and debate the appropriate level and types of U.S. engagement on the particular challenges facing women in different MENA countries.

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Introduction

Congressional efforts to improve conditions for women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have garnered widespread support since at least the early 2000s. The broad appeal may reflect a convergence of goals for those advocating positive change for women as an end-goal in itself, and those supporting such change primarily as a potential means to advance broader U.S. interests in the region, such as peace and stability, countering terrorism, increasing prosperity, and fostering good governance and human rights—goals that have been assigned unequal priority for decades. Such support reflects a growing body of research suggesting that improving opportunities and conditions for women in a society may promote such outcomes both globally and in the region.

This report provides background and data on key issues regarding women in the MENA region and describes selected ways in which Congress has engaged on issues such as women's legal rights, economic participation, and political representation; the humanitarian impact of conflict and displacement on women; women's inclusion in conflict resolution and peace processes; violence against women; and women's roles in perpetuating and combatting violent extremism. Many Members of Congress have demonstrated an interest in women's issues, both within the MENA region and globally, through legislation (see **Appendix**), statements and letters, direct engagement with regional leaders, and oversight.

For the purposes of this report, the MENA region comprises the areas defined as "Near East" by the State Department: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen.[1]

Current Status of Women in the MENA Region

The World Economic Forum's (WEF's) 2020 Global Gender Gap Report ranked the Arab states of the MENA region the lowest in the world for achieving gender equality, with MENA states comprising 13 of the 25 worst-performing countries globally.[2] The region also performed poorly in the 2019 Women Peace and Security (WPS) Index, in which MENA states comprise 7 of the 25 worst-performing countries.[3] Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen—all countries sustaining significant levels of violent conflict at the time of survey—were among the 10 worst performers on the WPS Index. The gender gap in the region (as measured by WEF) narrowed by 0.5 percentage points since 2018 and 3.6 points since 2006: before the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which is expected to widen the global gender gap, it would have taken

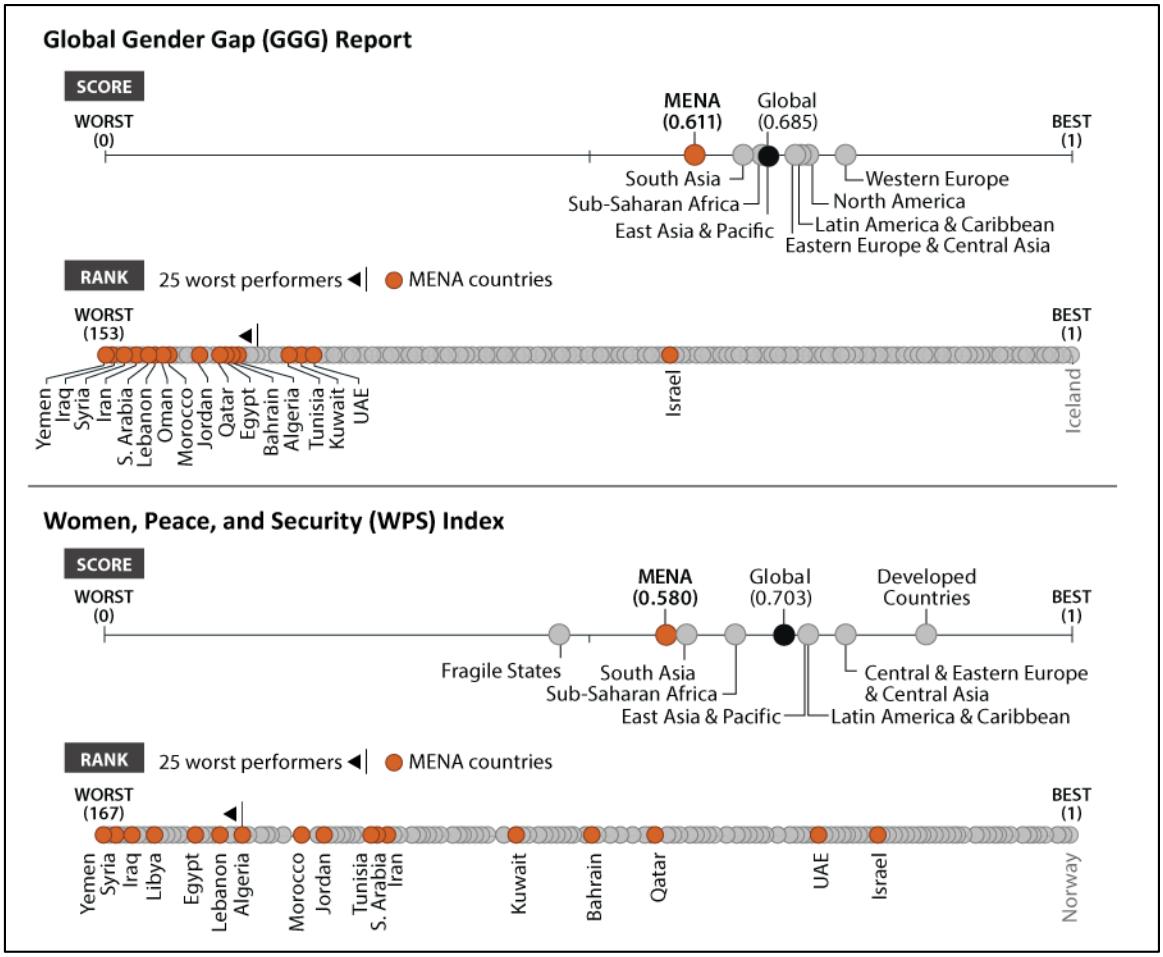
[1] This report does not include data on the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. Some of the key sources on which this report relies do not provide data for the West Bank and Gaza. For information on the status of women in the West Bank and Gaza, see for example: U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women and Girls (July 2016 – June 2018)," E/ESCWA/ECW/2019/Technical Paper 2, January 9, 2019.

[2] The WEF index "benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, education, health and political criteria, and provides country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions and income groups." The 13 countries are: Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Oman, Morocco, Jordan, Qatar, Egypt, Bahrain, and Algeria. WEF, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, December 2019.

[3] The WPS Index measures performance across three dimensions of a woman's wellbeing: inclusion (economic, social, and political), justice (formal laws and informal discrimination), and security (at the family, community, and societal levels). Countries in the bottom 25 are: Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, and Algeria. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) and Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women*, October 2019.

approximately 150 years to close the MENA region's gender gap.[4] Not all MENA countries perform equally poorly, as **Figure 1** below illustrates. For example, Israel scores higher than other MENA states in both rankings.

Figure 1. MENA Performance on Global Measures of Women's Equality



Sources: Created by CRS with data from World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, December 2019; Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20*, October 2019.

Key Trends and Challenges

Explanations for the region's underperformance on most measures of gender equality are subject to debate, but generally fall into two overlapping categories: *prevailing gender roles and perspectives,* and *challenges facing the MENA region overall.* The 2019 WPS Index posits that the region's poor performance is "traceable largely to high levels of organized violence and discriminatory laws that disempower women, often coupled with low rates of inclusion,

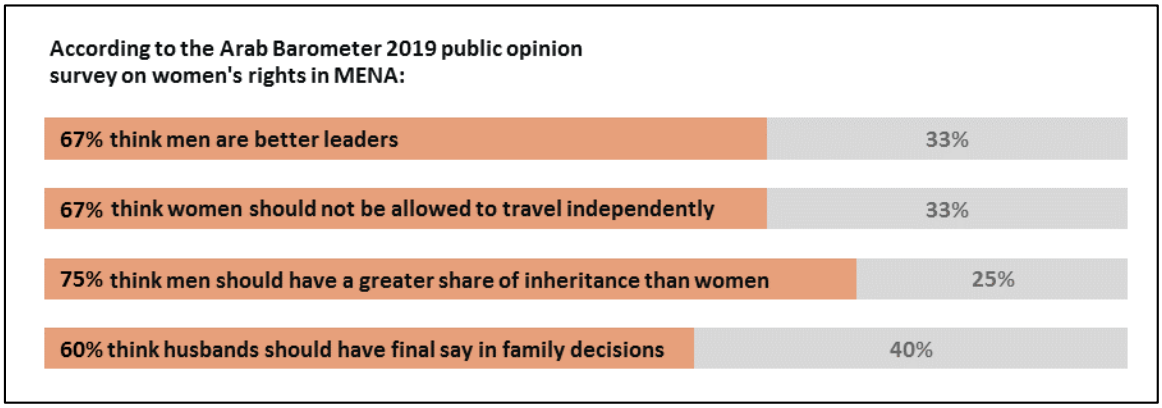
[4] WEF, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*. This is the same amount of time as WEF predicts will take North America to close its gap, given a slower projected rate of change. For more on the impact of COVID-19 on the gender gap, see Johnny Wood, "COVID-19 has worsened gender inequality," World Economic Forum, September 4, 2020.

especially in paid employment."[5] Since the early 2000s, some experts and policymakers have increasingly related these issues to research examining possible links between the well-being of women and the overall stability of societies (see "Research on Women, Prosperity, Good Governance, and Security").

Discriminatory Laws and Beliefs

Many experts postulate that some combination of institutionalized legal discrimination, cultural practices, and religious beliefs about women contribute to gender inequality in the MENA region. Legal discrimination (discussed in "Legal Rights") and cultural views relegating women to a lower standing in many regional countries appear to be pervasive, despite some signs of change. Public opinion surveys in predominantly Arab countries, which make up most but not all of the MENA region, suggest that certain cultural beliefs against women's equality are prevalent. For example, Arab Barometer's 2019 survey on women's rights in 12 Arab countries found that the majority of survey respondents believed that men are better leaders and should have greater say in family decision making, and that women should not be allowed to travel independently or have an equal share in inheritance (see **Figure 2**).[6]

Figure 2. Public Opinion on Women's Rights in Select MENA Countries



Source: Created by CRS with data from Kathrin Thomas, "Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa," Arab Barometer, August 2019. The Arab Barometer survey included 10 countries within the scope of this report—Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen—as well as Sudan and Palestine.

Regional Dynamics

Experts also point to challenges facing the region as a whole to explain why women in the MENA region fare worse than women in most other regions in terms of a broad range of political, legal, and socioeconomic indicators. Most MENA states have shown improvement on these indicators over the last few generations.[7] However, decades of civil and inter-state wars, a lack of effective

[5] GIWPS and PRIO, *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20*, p. 1.

[6] One 2019 study found that people who agree that men are better political leaders than women, regardless of their gender, are more likely to state that corruption is justifiable. See Ortrun Merkle and Pui-Hang Wong, "It Is All about Power: Corruption, Patriarchy and the Political Participation of Women," in *Women and Sustainable Development: Empowering Women in Africa*, ed. Maty Konte and Nyasha Tirivayi (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 353-368.

[7] For a historical look at the status of women in the MENA region, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* (Princeton University Press, 2007); and, Freedom House, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and*

governing institutions, and a lag in developing robust, diversified economies arguably have inhibited this progress. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the wave of unrest that followed the "Arab Spring" in 2011 led to the fall of longstanding leaders in some countries, and political conflict and sectarian violence in others. Those changes and the rise of the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) in 2014 produced a general deterioration in human development indicators across the region.[8]

A majority of countries in the region are currently experiencing some combination of war, political instability, terrorism, economic challenges, and/or poor governance. The COVID-19 pandemic has layered on additional challenges to those preexisting conditions. These phenomena have had negative impacts on societies as a whole, including some effects that are unique to, or worse for, women (see below). In Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen women have faced wars and/or terrorist/insurgent violence that have eroded central governance and produced large-scale humanitarian crises. Some have warned that Lebanon is nearing state collapse after a series of failed governments, an economic crisis, and an explosion in August 2020 that left hundreds of thousands displaced from the capital city, Beirut.[9] Algeria and Egypt, after facing protests in 2019 and 2020, doubled down on authoritarian responses, imprisoning those speaking out against the government. Freedom House noted in 2020 that region-wide, "credible elections remain exceedingly rare."[10] Tunisia remains the sole MENA country to have made a seemingly durable transition to democracy as a result of the 2011 uprisings, but it continues to struggle to build strong government institutions and overcome political polarization.

Research on Women, Prosperity, Good Governance, and Security

During the past two decades, research linking the well-being of women and the economic, social, and political stability and security of societies has gained prominence.[11] Some U.S. policymakers have sought to examine these links in the context of the MENA region, suggesting that improvements to women's status have the potential to contribute to other U.S. regional policy objectives by improving outcomes for the region as a whole. Below is a summary of some of the research as it pertains to U.S. policy objectives in the region, such as promoting peace and stability, countering terrorism, increasing prosperity, and fostering good governance.

- **Women's equality appears to foster increased socioeconomic development and political stability**.[12] Studies have demonstrated a correlation between the

North Africa, 2010.

[8] Since the Arab Spring, all but two MENA countries have witnessed a decline in Human Development Indicators: in 2009, only Yemen met 'low human development' criteria, but by 2018 Egypt, Morocco, and Syria had joined Yemen in that category. Within the region, only Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia saw improvements in their global rankings.

[9] "Preventing State Collapse in Lebanon," International Crisis Group, October 1, 2020.

[10] While the number of flawed democracies in the region doubled from one in 2009 (Israel) to two in 2019 (Israel and Tunisia), five countries experienced decreases in democracy scores over the last decade (Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait, Syria, and Yemen). Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020*: *A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*.

[11] Increased international awareness of this issue led to the adoption of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security in October 2000 and nine subsequent resolutions, the most recent being Resolution 2493 (2019). Resolution 1325 called on U.N. member states to increase women's participation at all decision-making levels, ensure the protection of and respect for human rights of women, support local women's peace initiatives, provide suitable women candidates as U.N. special representatives and envoys, and create special measures to protect women and girls from violence in situations of armed conflict.

[12] This report generally accepts these prevailing conclusions that improvements in social conditions for women and increased participation by women are responsible for improvements in other areas, but acknowledges that other interpretations of these positive correlations are possible. For a discussion on causation see for example Arjan de Haan,

extent to which women are involved and empowered in a country's economy and politics and better outcomes for the overall society in terms of economic growth and stability.[13] The World Bank has argued that "gender equality is smart economics," asserting that gender equality enhances productivity and improves other development outcomes, including prospects for the next generation and for the quality of societal policies and institutions.[14]

- **Women's political participation may be critical to developing good governance and sustaining lasting democratic transitions**. Various studies have found that women's empowerment as political leaders is correlated with greater government responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, decreased levels of corruption, lower levels of civil conflict, and a reduced risk of civil war relapse.[15]
- **Women's and girls' experiences in conflict and displacement settings may have long-term impacts on a country's economic and social development.** Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and girls tends to increase during conflict and humanitarian crises due to the sudden breakdown of family and social structures and security deterioration amid forced displacement.[16] Gaps in education, combined with war-related trauma and SGBV, may have long-term implications for the region's economic growth; rates of child, early, and forced marriage and fertility; and maternal and child health.[17] A World Bank study estimates that ending childhood marriage globally would have significant socioeconomic benefits.[18]
- **Women's participation in peace processes may enhance post-conflict stability**. Studies have shown that the inclusion of women in peace processes can help to reduce conflict and improve long-term prospects for peace.[19] A 2015

"The Win-Win Case for Women's Economic Empowerment and Growth: Review of the Literature," International Development Research Centre, *GrOW Working Paper Series*, March 2017.

[13] See, for example, Esther Duflo, "Women Empowerment and Economic Development," *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2012), pp. 1051-79.

[14] The World Bank, *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*, 2012; The World Bank, *Opening Doors: Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2013.

[15] See, for example, David Dollar et al., "Are Women Really the 'Fairer' Sex? Corruption and Women in Government," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, vol. 49 (2001), pp. 423-9; Georgina Waylen, "Gender and Transitions: What do We Know?" *Democratization*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2003), pp. 157-78; Erik Melander, "Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict," *International Studies International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2005), pp. 695–714; Jacqueline Demeritt et al., "Female Participation and Civil War Relapse," *Civil Wars*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2014).

[16] See, for example, U.N. Population Fund, *Humanitarian Action: 2019 Overview*, December 2018; and U.N. Security Council, *Conflict-related Sexual Violence: Report of the United Nations Secretary-General*, S/2019/280, March 29, 2019. The WPS Index 2019 also posits that intimate partner violence is correlated with security in a country at large, finding that "a 1 percentage point increase in the share of women experiencing current intimate partner violence is associated with a 1.4 percent increase in organized violence." GIWPS and PRIO, *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20*, p. 5.

[17] See, for example, Oxfam, "Factsheet: Women, Peace and Security in the Middle East and North Africa Region," February 2016; UNHCR, "Turn the Tide: Refugee Education in Crisis," August 2018.

[18] The study estimated the welfare benefits from lower population growth due to ending child marriage globally would be $22 billion in 2015 and $566 billion in 2030 (for 106 countries). Quent in Wodon et al., "Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report," The World Bank, June 2017.

[19] For a review of the literature on women's involvement in peace processes and the positive correlation with success and durability, see Maxwell Adjei, "Women's participation in peace processes: a review of literature," *Journal of*

study estimated that the participation of women and civil society groups in a peace negotiation makes a peace agreement 64% less likely to fail and 35% more likely to last at least 15 years.[20]

- **Women's status and roles may be tied to relative terrorism outcomes**. Some studies have linked the status of women at the household level to the resilience of a state and community to violence and violent extremism.[21] Terrorist groups have tasked female members with concealing explosive devices, relaying communications, ferrying funds, and the like, assuming that women are less likely to be searched or otherwise draw attention from security forces.[22] At the same time, some research found that women may be uniquely positioned as "mitigators" of terrorism, both as "predictors" and "preventers."[23]

Overview of U.S. Policy

Successive U.S. Administrations at least since the George W. Bush presidency have expressed an interest in improving women's conditions in the MENA region, and have established or supported programs aimed at pursuing that goal. Successive Congresses have authorized initiatives and appropriated funds to enable these efforts. At the same time, because of the complex nature of broader U.S. policy, activities that specifically address the well-being of women often compete with other regional policy priorities.

The primary U.S. government agencies that address women in the region are the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Bilateral aid funded by the State Department and USAID-funded democracy and governance activities routinely incorporate the promotion of women's equality.[24] The Trump Administration requested approximately $75 million and $83 million in FY2019 and FY2020 respectively for State Department and USAID gender-focused programs in the region.[25] Broader U.S. foreign affairs

Peace Education, vol. 16, no. 2 (2019), pp. 133-154.

[20] Marie O'Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, *Re-Imagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes*, International Peace Institute, June 2015.

[21] Krista Couture, "A Gendered Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned From Women in Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Applied Successfully in Bangladesh and Morocco," Brookings Institution, *Policy Paper*, July 2014; Testimony of Dr. Valerie Hudson, in House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, *Women's Role in Countering Terrorism*, hearing 115th Cong., 2nd sess., February 27, 2018 (Washington DC: GPO, 2018); Valerie Hudson et. al., *The First Political Order: How Sex Shapes Governance and National Security Worldwide* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020).

[22] Jamille Bigio and Rebecca Turkington, "U.S. Counterterrorism's Big Blindspot: Women," *The New Republic*, March 27, 2019. For an in-depth look at one terrorist organization that has utilized this tactic to unprecedented levels, see Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (Zed Books, 2017).

[23] For a discussion of the range of roles women play in perpetrating and mitigating terrorism, see Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein, "Women and Terrorism: Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners," Council on Foreign Relations, Discussion Paper, May 2019.

[24] USAID's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy seeks to "advance gender equality through integrated approaches as well as specific programming that dives deeper into the gender disparities across the region." See USAID, "Middle East Regional: Democracy and Governance," last updated May 4, 2018.

[25] FY2019 and FY2020 Congressional Budget Justification supplementary tables for the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs. The MENA region accounted for 8% and 11% of the FY2019 and FY2020 regional funding requests for gender programs. The FY2021 Congressional Budget Justification does not similarly specify how much funding is requested for gender programs in the region.

and security assistance programs addressing cross-cutting issues such as global health, humanitarian activities, defense, and legal and political rights may also address women's issues.

It is unclear how much money the United States spends annually on programs that address the status of women in the MENA region: the executive branch does not consistently or comprehensively track the number or cost of relevant programs, and Congress has not mandated such accounting. Capturing this information is complicated by the varying degree to which programs focus on women, and the extent to which they focus on the region or are part of broader global initiatives. Despite a lack of government-wide accounting, some U.S. agencies have provided potentially useful snapshots of their activities. For example, USAID estimates that in FY2018, it spent over $30 million on projects or activities in the region in which gender equality or women's and girls' empowerment was the primary or secondary goal; an additional $3.4 million was spent by USAID on projects targeting gender-based violence and trafficking in persons.[26]

Selected MENA-Specific Congressional Actions

In recent Congresses, legislation introduced and/or enacted aims to address issues of women's rights and well-being in the MENA region. Some examples are described below. (See **Appendix** for additional legislation.)

- **FY2020 Appropriations**. Section 7041(a) of P.L. 116-94 includes a provision that withholds $300 million of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funds to Egypt until the Secretary of State certifies that the Government of Egypt is taking effective steps to advance democracy and human rights, among other things, to include protecting religious minorities and the rights of women.[27] Section 7041 (l) provides $40 million for stabilization assistance for Yemen, including a contribution for United Nations (U.N.) stabilization and governance facilities, and to meet the needs of vulnerable populations, including women and girls.[28]
- **Saudi Arabia**. In the 116th Congress, two resolutions have been introduced to condemn the government of Saudi Arabia's detention and alleged abuse of women's rights activists (H.Res. 129, passed in the House on July 15, 2019, and S.Res. 73). The Saudi Arabia Human Rights and Accountability Act of 2019 (H.R. 2037) passed in the House on July 25, 2019 and would impose sanctions related to the killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, which could be suspended if, among other criteria, "the Government of Saudi Arabia has taken verifiable steps to repeal any law or regulation that requires Saudi women to obtain approval from a male guardian in order to leave the country."[29]

[26] CRS communication with USAID officials on October 28, 2019. CRS has requested information on FY2019 and FY2020 funding levels and will provide such information when it becomes available.

[27] The FMF certification requirement for Egypt in P.L. 116-94 does not apply to funds appropriated for counterterrorism, border security, and nonproliferation programs for Egypt. This provision has been in annual appropriations bills since FY2012.

[28] Joint Explanatory Statement for Division G – Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-94).

[29] The act was incorporated as amendment 475 to the House-passed National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (H.R. 2500), but only parts of the act (reporting requirements on Saudi Arabia's human rights record and on the killing of Jamal Khashoggi) were incorporated into the final version (Sect. 1276 and 1277, P.L. 116-92). Shortly after the NDAA passed the House, the Saudi government eased some restrictions on women's movement, however several prominent women activists remain in jail. See Anya van Wagtendonk "Saudi Arabia changed its guardianship laws, but

- **Sexual and Gender-based Violence**. The Accountability for Sexual and Gender-based Violence as a Tool in Conflict Act of 2019 (S. 1777 and H.R. 3212) would provide for sanctions against foreign persons responsible for conflict-related acts of sexual and gender-based violence, and finds that "rape and sexual assault have been used as tactics of war and terror in conflict zones including Iraq and Syria."[30]

Congress also has conducted some oversight on the status of women in the region. In the 116th Congress, at least five hearings were held in which some Members asked about the status of women in the region.[31] Some Members also have publicized meetings with senior women serving in the region's governments, and during official travel for oversight purposes have expressed concerns related to the status of women.[32] Some Senators have raised questions regarding U.S. efforts to advance the status of women and sought related commitments from executive branch nominees for ambassadorships to the region and Assistant Secretary positions within the State Department.[33]

Selected Global Congressional Actions

In recent years, legislation has been enacted or introduced to address women's issues worldwide, including on women, peace, and security; economic empowerment; and gender-based violence. Although these pieces of legislation are global in scope, they have the potential to apply to the MENA region given prevailing political, economic and security conditions. Three examples are described below.

- **The Women Peace and Security Act of 2017** (P.L. 115-68) states it is the policy of the United States "to promote the meaningful participation of women in overseas conflict prevention, management and resolution, and post-conflict relief and recovery efforts" and calls for the creation of a new Women, Peace and Security strategy to detail the operationalization of the WPS Act.[34] It also

activists who fought them remain imprisoned," Vox.com, August 3, 2019, and Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Unrelenting Repression: Positive Reforms for Women Tainted by Ongoing Arrests of Activists, Dissidents," News Release, January 14, 2020.

[30] Both bills were introduced in June 2019, but have not received votes.

[31] Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues, *Women in Conflict: Advancing Women's Role in Peace and Security*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., June 13, 2019; Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism, *Iraq: A Crossroads of U.S. Policy*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., July 16, 2020; House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism, *The FY20 Budget: State Department Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism Bureau*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., July 24, 2019; Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism *The Path Forward: Key Findings from the Syria Study Group Report*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., September 24, 2019; House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism, *Egypt: Trends in Politics, Economics, and Human Rights*, hearing, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., September 9, 2020..

[32] For example, Senators Young and King met with female activists during a congressional delegation to Saudi Arabia in September 2019 to discuss women's rights in the Middle East. Sen. Todd Young and Sen. Angus King, "Public actions, not private assurances, will help repair US-Saudi relations," *Defense News*, September 20, 2019.

[33] See, for example, questions raised about Saudi Arabia's detention of women's rights activists during the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on Ambassadorial Nominations for Saudi Arabia and Iraq, March 6, 2019, on Pending Nomination for Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, March 27, 2019, and on Pending Nomination for Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, And Human Rights, September 22, 2020.

[34] The Trump Administration delivered its strategy on Women Peace and Security on June 11, 2019. Available at

requires training for selected U.S. government employees, consultation and collaboration between State Department and USAID to increase the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, as well as a reporting requirement on the WPS strategy two years after enactment.

- **The Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act of 2018** (P.L. 115-428) modifies USAID programs to provide targeted assistance for women and authorizes the President to provide programs in developing countries for micro, small, and medium-sized businesses, particularly those owned, managed, and controlled by women.
- **The Women and Countering Violent Extremism Act of 2019** (H.R. 1653) would find that the Islamic State benefited strategically and financially from the subjugation of women, and would authorize assistance to women-led and women's empowerment organizations in foreign countries working on countering violent extremism and terrorism. Section 1047 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2020 (P.L. 116-92) incorporates a similar provision contained in H.R. 1653 that requires an independent assessment of the relationship between gender and violent extremism (see **Appendix**).

Over the years, several Members also have introduced various versions of the International Violence Against Women Act, and Congress has enacted legislation on a range of women's issues in annual appropriations acts (see **text box** below). Some Members also have sought to codify the executive branch positions and offices related to global women's issues.[35]

https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/WPS_Strategy_10_October2019.pdf.

[35] For example, selected legislative vehicles that have sought to codify the State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues and the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's issues over the years included versions of the International Violence Against Women Act; some proposed Senate State and Foreign Operations appropriations bills; and proposed State Department authorization bills.

FY2020 Foreign Aid Appropriations for Global Women's Issues

Section 7059 of the FY2020 State and Foreign Operations (SFOPS) appropriations (Division G, **P.L. 116-94**) provides up to $330 million to promote gender equality and women's empowerment globally. It is unclear to what extent, if any, such funding might impact women in the MENA region.

- **Women's Economic Empowerment**—Up to $100 million in bilateral economic assistance (Title III) funds for the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Fund.
- **Women's Leadership**—Not less than $50 million in Title III funds for programs "specifically designed to increase leadership opportunities for women in countries where women and girls suffer discrimination due to law, policy, or practice, by strengthening protections for women's political status, expanding women's participation in political parties and elections, and increasing women's opportunities for leadership positions in the public and private sectors at the local, provincial, and national levels."
- **Gender-based Violence**—Not less than $165 million in Title III and IV (international security assistance) funds to implement a multi-year strategy to prevent and respond to a variety of forms of gender-based violence including child, early, and forced marriage, rape, female genital cutting and mutilation, and domestic violence, in conflict and non-conflict settings.
- **Women, Peace and Security**—Unspecified level of funds from various accounts to support a multi-year strategy to expand, and improve coordination of U.S. government efforts to empower women as equal partners in conflict prevention, peace building, transitional processes, and reconstruction efforts in countries affected by conflict or in political transition, and to ensure the equitable provision of relief and recovery assistance to women and girls.
- **Women and Girls at Risk from Extremism and Conflict**—Not less than $15 million in Economic Support Fund monies "to support women and girls who are at risk from extremism and conflict."

Policy Issues

The following sections describe several issues policymakers and lawmakers may take into account when considering whether and how to improve the status of women in the MENA region, including women's legal rights and protections, economic participation, political representation, and the impact of conflict, displacement, and the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls. Each section examines both the gender perspectives and regional dynamics that affect women in the region.

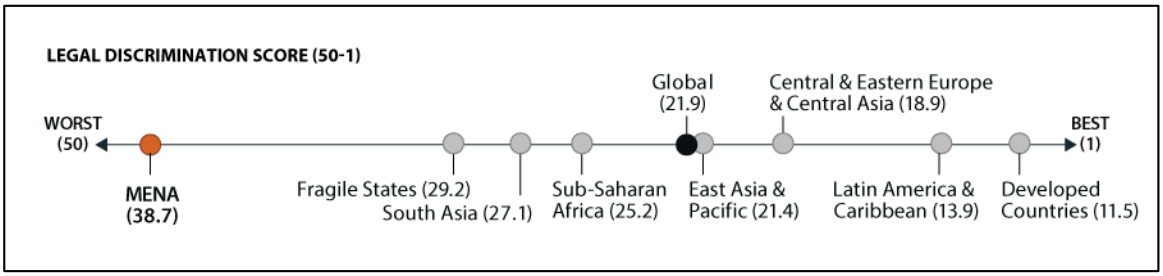
Legal Rights

One challenge facing many women in the MENA region is a lack of legal recognition of fundamental rights. The region exhibits high levels of gender-based legal discrimination (see **Figure 3**): according to the aforementioned 2019 WPS Index, all 18 MENA countries except Israel are below the global average and 10 countries are among the world's bottom 12 performers.[36] Saudi Arabia ranked the lowest globally for legal discrimination against women, followed closely by Yemen, the UAE, and Syria. (These findings pre-date legal and administrative changes undertaken by Saudi Arabia in 2019 regarding guardianship laws.)

[36] This measure captures both legal discrimination and discriminatory norms. GIWPS and PRIO, *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20*.

Figure 3. Legal Discrimination Score by World Region

2019 WPS Index



Sources: Created by CRS with data from GIWPS and PRIO, *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20*. The Index calculates the legal discrimination score by aggregating and weighting scores of 78 laws and regulations that limit women's ability to participate in society or the economy or that differentiate between men and women, as measured by The World Bank, *Women, Business, and the Law 2019: A Decade of Reform*, February 2019.

Note: The WPS index "Fragile States" classification is based on The World Bank "Harmonized List of Fragile Situations," 2019.

The constitutions of some MENA countries nominally guarantee legal equality between men and women (see **Figure 4**).[37] However, in practice, rules governing matters of family law apply differently to women in nearly all MENA countries, as they are often based on religious jurisprudence. On issues related to family matters, all of the Arab countries and Iran apply Islamic law, which is not gender-neutral on marriage, divorce, child custody and guardianship, and inheritance. Israel's legal system places status issues of marriage and divorce under the jurisdiction of religious courts, which include Jewish Rabbinical Religious Courts, as well as Muslim, Druze, and Christian courts, none of which are gender-neutral.[38] In general, constitutional provisions and laws mandating gender equality cannot be effective if judicial institutions are not independent and if executive institutions are unwilling or unable to implement the laws, or hold law-breakers accountable.[39]

As illustrated in **Figure 4**, no MENA countries treat women fully equally under the law. Specifically, women are treated differently under

- **Gender equality and discrimination laws**. Half of MENA countries (9 of 18) include a constitutional provision enshrining the principle of gender equality. The other half either have an equality provision that does not specifically mention the term "gender," or they provide for equality based on Islamic legal criteria, which treat women and men differently.
- **Domestic violence laws**. Half of MENA countries have laws addressing domestic violence. In three of these countries, legal provisions address some acts of domestic violence but do not address marital rape.

[37] Additionally, every MENA country, with the exception of Iran, has ratified the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), though almost every country ratified with conditions. (The United States has not ratified CEDAW.)

[38] In Israel, laws regulating inheritance, transmission of citizenship, and age of marriage do not differentiate between persons based on their gender. The Law Library of Congress, "Legal Provisions on Gender Equality: Arab Countries, Israel, Iran," LL File No. 2020-018615, February 2020. See also Ruth Levush, "Israel: Spousal Agreements for Couples Not Belonging to Any Religion—A Civil Marriage Option?" Law Library of Congress, September 2015.

[39] For example, the State Department noted that in Morocco, "the judiciary lacked willingness to enforce [family law reforms enacted in 2004], as many judges did not agree with their provisions" and where "corruption among working-level court clerks and lack of knowledge about its provisions among lawyers were also obstacles to enforcing the law." U.S. Department of State, "Morocco 2019 Human Rights Report," March 2020.

- **Age of marriage laws**. More than half of MENA countries (11 of 18) have set a minimum age for marriage of 18 or older for both girls and boys. Nevertheless, 13 countries (including Israel) have a provision in their family law allowing a religious court to marry women younger than the legal age of marriage. Iran has the lowest legal age of marriage for girls at 13 years old, and Yemen has no minimum age for marriage.

Figure 4. Selected Measures of Legal Discrimination Against MENA Women

	Legal Discrimination Score (Higher = worse)	Constitutional provision ensuring gender equality	Legal provisions addressing domestic violence	Legal age of marriage: Female	Legal age of marriage: Male	Legal age of marriage: Earlier w/ approval? [d]
Saudi Arabia	54	NO	YES	17	17	YES
Yemen	50	NO	NO	No minimum		
Oman	48	NO	NO	18	18	YES
Syria	48	YES [a]	NO	18	18	YES
UAE	48	NO	YES	18	18	YES
Iraq	46	YES	NO	18	18	YES
Jordan	46	NO	YES [c]	18	18	YES
Qatar	45	YES	NO	16	18	YES
Kuwait	44	NO	NO	15	17	NO
Bahrain	42	YES	YES	16	18	YES
Iran	41	NO [b]	NO	13	15	YES
Libya	39	NO	NO	20	20	NO
Egypt	37	YES	NO	16	18	NO
Lebanon	33	NO	YES [c]	Varies by religion [e]		
Algeria	29	YES	YES	19	19	YES
Tunisia	29	YES [a]	YES	18	18	YES
Morocco	26	YES	YES [c]	18	18	YES
Israel	18	YES [a]	YES	18	18	YES

a. Israel does not have a one-document constitution but its Proclamation of Independence guarantees "complete equality... irrespective of religion, race, or sex." Tunisia's constitution refers to equality between "all citizens, male and female" and Syria's constitution does not discriminate "on grounds of sex."
b. The Constitution of Iran references "equal rights and protection under the law" for men and women, but the rights it affords are circumscribed by the requirement that they "conform to Islamic criteria" that themselves do not give women equal status with men.
c. Addresses some acts of domestic violence but does not address marital rape.
d. A male guardian's permission to marry is required in some circumstances.
e. Lebanon recognizes different ages—from puberty (9 to 13) to 17 for girls and 15 to 18 for boys—according to a person's religious sect (Catholic Christian, Orthodox Christian, Protestant Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shi'a Muslim, or Druze).

Source: Created by CRS with data from the GIWPS and PRIO, *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20* (legal discrimination score, reflecting country conditions as of 2019) and The Law Library of Congress, "Legal Provisions on Gender Equality: Arab Countries, Israel, Iran," LL File No. 2020-018615, February 2020.

Legal Spotlight: Violence Against Women and Sexual Harassment

Violence against women, sexual harassment and gender discrimination are longstanding and pervasive problems in the MENA region, with perpetrators often not held accountable by local or national governments.[40] In recent years, there has been increased public awareness of these issues through media reporting and social media movements. Some governments in the region have recently passed legislation addressing violence against women and protecting victims of sexual harassment, but implementation of the laws remains spotty. Members of Congress have engaged on two of these legal efforts in Tunisia and Egypt.

Tunisia. Some 60% of Tunisian women have experienced domestic violence, according to the Ministry of Women, Family and Children.[41] In 2017, parliament passed a law to prevent and address violence against women, though there have been challenges to implementation.[42] In late 2019, Tunisian women began to share testimonies of sexual harassment under the hashtag #EnaZeda, ("MeToo" in Tunisian dialect).[43] In the explanatory statement accompanying the FY2018 aid appropriations measure (Division K, P.L. 115-141), Congress directed some funds "to support implementation of Tunisia's Law on Eliminating Violence Against Women." Similar directives were not included in FY2019 or FY2020 appropriations.

Egypt. Harassment of women in Egypt is widespread: a 2013 U.N. survey found that 99% of respondents had been subjected to some form of sexual harassment.[44] The government passed a law in 2014 criminalizing sexual harassment, but abuses continue, including some by the government. For example, human rights advocates have expressed concern over recent government arrests of multiple young women for "offending public morals" and "undermining family values" in their social media videos.[45] Violence against women is also an issue: U.N. Women reports that roughly 25% of women experience Lifetime Physical and/or Sexual Intimate Partner Violence and 87% of girls and women aged 15 to 49 years have undergone Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C).[46] Accusations of sexual harassment and assault have increasingly surfaced in the media, and in early July 2020, hundreds of accounts of rape and sexual harassment published on social media with the hashtag #MeToo led to the arrest of six men accused of rape.[47] On August 16, 2020, the Egyptian parliament passed a new law to protect the identity of victims reporting incidences of sexual harassment and assault.[48]

In a September 2020 hearing on Egypt, House Foreign Affairs Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee Chairman Ted Deutch raised the issue: "[T]he Egyptian government has claimed that it's taking sexual assault and—and harassment seriously. But efforts to go after victims as well as the LGBT community show otherwise—suggest otherwise." He then asked, " ... what additional legal mechanisms could Egypt put in place to protect women from sexual harassment and gender-based violence and to support and protect the LGBT community?"

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[40] The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." U.N. General Assembly, "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women," A/RES/48/104, February 1994.

[41] Lilia Blaise, "'I Can Finally Dream': Tunisia Expands Protection for Battered Women," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2018.

[42] See, e.g., Rihab Boukhayatia, "Tunisia's Violence against Women Law Seemed Perfect on Paper. In Practice, It Hasn't Been.," *HuffPost*, December 13, 2018; Charlotte Bailey, "One Year Ago, Tunisia Passed a Groundbreaking Law to Protect Women. Has It Worked?" *Time*, July 26, 2018.

[43] Mohamed Haddad, "#EnaZeda, le #metoo tunisien est né," *Le Monde*, October 15, 2019. Makhlouf resigned from the Qalb Tounes party on May 14, 2020 but remains a member of parliament.

[44] Bouthiana El Deeb, "Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt," United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (U.N. Women), May 23, 2013.

[45] Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Spate of 'Morality' Prosecutions of Women," August 17, 2020.

[46] U.N. Women, "Global Database on Violence against Women: Egypt," 2016.

[47] "Egypt #MeToo: Arrests over Alleged Gang Rape after Instagram Campaign," BBC News, August 26, 2020.

[48] Menna A. Farouk, "Egypt Approves Law to Protect Identities of Women Reporting Sex Abuse," *Reuters*, August 16, 2020.

Economic Participation and Opportunity[49]

Regional conditions, in addition to gender-based discrimination, contribute to a significant difference between men and women's economic participation. With the partial exception of major oil- and gas-producing countries, the MENA region has long lagged on economic development indicators when compared with other regions. Some have argued that the limits in women's economic participation may be among many factors that have contributed to regional shortfalls: in 2016, the OECD estimated that gender-based discrimination in laws and social norms costs the MENA region $575 billion a year.[50] Development indicators have declined further in some countries as a result of violent unrest since 2011, and in 2020 the "dual shocks" of the COVID-19 pandemic and the oil price decline have presented daunting economic challenges.[51] Before the pandemic, women were arguably experiencing these national and regional disadvantages more severely than men, and the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate these inequalities.

Within the region, states have significant differences with regard to income level. To some extent, women in states that have achieved more economic success overall have had higher participation in the labor force and lower unemployment rates than women in the lower-income, less developed countries (see **Figure 5**). This is not uniformly true, however; in Saudi Arabia, where the legal system and culture traditionally have discouraged women's participation in the economy, many fewer women work despite relative national wealth. Saudi authorities have begun encouraging women's participation in the workforce in recent years as a component of broader national economic development and transformation initiatives.[52]

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MENA region had the lowest rates of female labor force participation (i.e., the percentage of women who work or are actively seeking employment) in the world. The regional average female labor force participation rate (28.3%) was 19 percentage points below the global average for women (47.7%), ranging from 5.8% in Yemen to 59.2% in Israel.[53] On average, women participated in the labor force at less than half the rate of men in the region (76.2%). Women's unpaid domestic and agricultural labor is seldom quantified and not measured in official statistics. The greatest gaps between male and female participation in the labor force were found in Yemen, Iraq and Syria—countries that face severe instability and conflict in addition to economic woes—and in Gulf monarchies (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Oman).

Experts expect more women to leave the labor force due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[54] A U.N. report from April 2020 reported that 700,000 women in the region faced income insecurity, with women's jobs accounting for around 40% of the 1.7 million jobs expected to be lost. That is

[49] Much of the economic data used for this section predates the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus will not reflect changes and trends related to the pandemic. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has noted major disruptions to data collection for statistical estimates of the labor market. "COVID-19 impact on the collection of labour market statistics," ILO, May 10, 2020.

[50] Gaëlle Ferrant and Alexandre Kolev, "The economic cost of gender-based discrimination in social institutions," OECD Development Centre, *Issues Paper*, June 2016.

[51] Rabah Arezki and Ha Nguyen, "Coping with a Dual Shock: COVID-19 and Oil Prices," The World Bank, April 14, 2020. See also, Larry Luxnor, "COVID-19 could set back Mideast Economies for Years," New Atlanticist, July 14, 2020.

[52] The World Bank, "Saudi women rising up in business in line with Vision 2030," March 11, 2020.

[53] ILO modeled estimates retrieved December 2019. For a discussion of why women's economic participation is so low in Yemen specifically, see Fawziah Al-Ammar and Hannah Patchett, "The Repercussions of War on Women in the Yemeni Workforce," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 23, 2019.

[54] Anu Madgavkar et al., "COVID-19 and Gender Equality: Countering the Regressive Effects," McKinsey Global Institute, July 15, 2020.

despite women in the region constituting a much smaller percentage of the workforce.[55] For example, data from Israel—one of the countries in the region in which women's participation in the economy is highest—show that women accounted for 56% of jobs lost from March to May; during a second lockdown in September, women made up 62.7% of the newly unemployed in September.[56] The prevalence of women in the informal sector, where basic protections such as unemployment insurance and health benefits are generally lacking, add to their economic vulnerability.

The "MENA Paradox"

In what has been referred to as the "MENA paradox," female labor force participation remains low across the region despite rapidly rising female education attainment (see **Figure 5**).[57] The World Bank argues that the region's conservative gender norms, legal and institutional barriers, and incentives and opportunities generated by local economic structures drive low rates of women's participation in the public sphere.[58] Some observers have posited that the mismatch is demand-side driven, as young women have increasingly entered the workforce at a time when job opportunities happen to have stagnated for both men and women.[59] Others argue that the paradox can be explained by a trifecta of constraints on supply-side factors, namely discriminatory gender norms, attitudes and regulations; a lack of financial and business services for women; and limited access to skills, knowledge, markets and networks.[60]

Even before the pandemic, the World Bank had noted that a failure to address the high unemployment rates among youth and women could "deter economic recovery and hamper long-term growth prospects in the region."[61] High rates of unemployment and under-employment (reflecting those who are actively seeking work), particularly among young people, continue to challenge MENA governments (see **Figure 5**). The average unemployment rate for women in the region (14.7%) was more than twice the regional average for men (6.6%).[62] Youth unemployment, while a challenge for men as well as women, was worse for young women in all the MENA countries except Israel: on average, female youth unemployment was nearly 14 percentage points higher than male youth unemployment (31.6% compared to 18%).[63] Economic frustration was arguably one of the driving forces behind the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, and

[55] UN Women and UN ESCWA, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region," E/ESCWA/2020/Policy Brief.4, April 2020. The World Bank has forecasted significant macroeconomic losses to the region's Gross Domestic Product, and predicts an increase in poverty, especially for those who are self-employed, work in informal sector lacking social protection, and those who work in sectors directly hit by the COVID-19 crisis. The World Bank "MENA Crisis Tracker," October 14, 2020.

[56] Lee Yaron, "Almost Twice as Many Women as Men Lost Jobs in Israel's Second Lockdown," *Haaretz*, October 18, 2020.

[57] ILO, "High female education and low labour participation rates: IFAD and ILO tackle the 'MENA gender paradox,'" ILO News, July 19, 2017.

[58] The World Bank, *Opening Doors: Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2013.

[59] Ragui Assaad et al., "Explaining the MENA Paradox: Rising Educational Attainment, Yet Stagnant Female Labor Force Participation," IZA Institute of Labor Economics, *Discussion Paper* No. 11385, March 2018.

[60] Drew Gardiner, "Attitudes and Norms on Women's Employment in the MENA region," ILO, March 2018.

[61] Rabah Arezki et al., "A New Economy for the Middle East and North Africa," The World Bank, *Middle East and North Africa Economic Monitor*, October 2018.

[62] The ILO defines unemployment as the share of the labor force that is without work but available for and seeking employment. Twelve of the world's 14 worst performing countries on female employment are Yemen, Syria, Algeria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Lebanon. ILOSTAT data, 2018, presented in GIWPS and PRIO, *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20*.

[63] CRS calculations using ILO-modeled estimates last updated April 9, 2020.

renewed protests in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon in 2019 and 2020 again brought the issue to the fore.[64]

The picture has not been uniformly negative: between 2000 and 2018, over nine million women entered the region's labor force.[65] Some observers also point to increased female entrepreneurship in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar as positive economic developments for women. In 2019, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were found to have more women entrepreneurs than men, an increase from 2017 when there were around eight women for every 10 male entrepreneurs.[66]

Figure 5. Selected Economic Indicators for Women in the MENA region

	GDP per capita, '000 (current U.S. $)	Labor Force Participation Rate (%)		Unemployment Rate (%)		Mean Years of Schooling	
		Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Global	**$11.3**	**47.1**	**74.2**	**5.6**	**5.3**	**7.9**	**9.0**
		If Rate < Global		If Rate > Global		If Years < Global	
MENA Average	**$16.6**	**28.8**	**76.0**	**15.7**	**6.7**	**8.1**	**8.5**
Qatar	$68.8	56.8	94.7	0.4	0.0	10.8	9.5
U.A.E.	$43.0	52.4	93.4	6.0	1.6	11.9	9.7
Israel	$41.7	59.7	68.5	3.9	3.8	13.0	13.0
Kuwait	$34.0	49.7	87.5	5.5	1.1	8.0	6.9
Bahrain	$24.1	45.0	87.2	3.0	0.2	9.3	9.5
Saudi Arabia	$23.3	22.1	78.4	22.1	2.9	8.8	9.9
Oman	$16.4	31.0	89.9	11.9	1.3	10.4	9.2
Lebanon	$8.3	22.9	71.4	9.9	5.0	8.5	8.9
Libya	$7.2	33.9	65.3	24.6	15.5	7.7	7.0
Iraq	$5.8	11.6	74.2	30.4	10.1	5.4	7.8
Iran	$5.6	17.5	71.5	18.6	9.6	9.7	9.9
Jordan	$4.2	14.4	63.7	23.3	12.8	10.1	10.6
Algeria	$4.1	14.6	67.4	21.1	9.7	7.6	8.6
Tunisia	$3.4	23.8	69.4	23.4	13.4	6.4	7.9
Morocco	$3.2	21.5	70.1	10.4	8.6	4.5	6.5
Egypt	$2.5	21.9	70.9	22.1	7.2	6.5	7.9
Syria	$2.0	14.4	74.1	20.8	5.9	4.6	5.6
Yemen	$0.9	5.8	70.2	24.9	11.9	1.9	4.2

Source: Labor force participation rate and unemployment rate are International Labor Organization (ILO)-modeled estimates for 2019, downloaded from the World Bank data portal on May 28, 2020. GDP data are also available from the World Bank for 2018. Mean years of schooling data are from the UN Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2019*, Gender Development Index, July 15, 2019.

[64] See for example Jeremy Bowen, "Is a new Arab Spring unfolding in the Middle East?" BBC News, October 29, 2019; "Ten Years of Pan-Arab Protests: Understanding the New Dynamics of Change," Wilson Center Event, October 7, 2020.

[65] Saadia Zahidi, *Fifty Million Rising: The New Generation of Working Women Transforming the Muslim World*, (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2018), p. 7.

[66] Ayman Ismail, "Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Middle East and North Africa," Global Entrepreneurship Research Association, London Business School, November 2017; Niels Bosma et al., "Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2019/2020 Global Report," Global Entrepreneurship Research Association, London Business School, 2020. While promising, these gains for women are not universal across the region: the 2019 study found there are more than two male entrepreneurs for every female entrepreneur in Egypt.

Notes: UNDP defines mean years of schooling as "the average number of years of education received by people ages 25 and older, converted from educational attainment levels using official durations of each level." The most recent GDP per capita data for Syria is from 2010 and from 2017 for Iran.

Political Representation

On a population share basis, women are underrepresented in political positions and institutions in the MENA region to a greater extent than they are in most of the world.[67] For example, MENA countries perform poorly as compared to the world average when it comes to the percentage of seats held by women in legislative bodies: 10.4% of seats are held by women compared to 24.3% globally and 23.6% in the United States (see **Figure 6**). Moreover, no country in the region is classified by Freedom House as a full democracy.[68] Monarchies and authoritarian or hybrid political systems may create some opportunities for women to participate in legislative bodies, but ultimately may not be responsive to elected representatives. For example, the Saudi monarchy recognized women's right to vote in 2011 and expanded women's participation in the advisory, appointed Shura Council. Saudi Arabia has recognized some additional women's rights (such as the right to drive) since 2017, but the government continues to detain women activists and maintain some "guardianship" limits on women's behavior.[69] Some observers argue that authoritarian leaders rhetorically uphold initiatives on women's rights to appear more inclusive and divert attention away from repressive behavior or to bolster their legitimacy abroad.[70]

Some governments and political parties have attempted to improve women's representation in legislative bodies by implementing gender quotas. Eight countries in the region have some form of quota to ensure women's representation, and those countries have more women seated in lower houses of the legislature than the MENA average (see **Figure 6**). Arab Barometer findings indicate that more than two-thirds of those surveyed support women's quotas.[71] One recent example of quota implementation is in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, also known as Rojava, where "each administrative institution is co-led by a woman and, in addition to all-female councils, a 40 per cent quota reinforces female representation and participation in economic initiatives and civil society organizations."[72]

In 2019, women won fewer parliamentary seats than in the past in both Tunisia and Israel, the region's two most democratic countries. In Tunisia, where the electoral law requires that

[67] See CRS Report R45483, *Women in National Governments Around the Globe: Fact Sheet*, by Susan G. Chesser.

[68] In order of descending democracy scores, Freedom House ranks Israel and Tunisia as flawed democracies; Morocco, Lebanon, and Algeria as hybrid regimes; and Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Qatar, Egypt, Oman, UAE, Bahrain, Iran, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Syria as authoritarian regimes. Sarah Repucci, *Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*.

[69] See Eman Alhussein, "Saudi Changes to Guardianship System Ease Restrictions on Women," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, August 7, 2019, and Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: Women's rights campaigner Loujain al-Hathloul due in court," March 9, 2020.

[70] See for example: Gabrielle Bardall, "Autocrats use feminism to undermine democracy," Policy Options, October 30, 2019; Hind Ahmed Zaki, "El-Sissi's Women? Shifting gender discourses and the limits of state feminism," *Égypte/Monde Arabe*, vol. 13 (2015), pp. 39-53.

[71] Kathrin Thomas, "Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa," Arab Barometer, August 2019. Thomas notes that "Many MENA publics express a preference for greater female political participation, including acceptance of a female head of state and the implementation of women's quotas for elected office. However, the belief that men are better political leaders prevails."

[72] U.N. Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/43/57, January 28, 2020. See also, Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, "Inside the World's Most Radical Experiment in Women's Rights," Defense One, February 6, 2018.

parliamentary candidate lists alternate between men and women (meaning that any party that wins more than one seat in a given district will send at least one woman to parliament), women lost 25 seats in the 2019 parliamentary elections compared to 2014.[73] In Israel, where some political parties have voluntarily instituted gender quotas, women held 35 seats in the 120-seat 20th Knesset (elected in 2015), compared to 29 elected in April 2019, 28 in the September 2019 re-run of elections, and 30 in the third electoral re-run, in March 2020.[74]

Where women are elected to political bodies, they may encounter additional barriers to political participation. For example, a 2015 study found that even though women held 16% of seats in the Libyan parliament (due in part to gender quotas), female members of parliament were challenged by practices such as holding meetings late at night when it is not socially acceptable for women to be out or in places considered unsafe for women to attend. They have also been subject to verbal intimidation by their male counterparts.[75]

Obstacles to women's representation may also include cultural beliefs about a woman's place in politics, though there appears to be a range of views within the region. A 2016 public opinion poll in Arab countries indicated that men, and to a lesser extent women, view men as superior political leaders. At the same time, the poll also found that a majority of men and a larger majority of women in each country except Algeria agreed that an Arab woman could become the head of state of a Muslim-majority country.[76]

Furthermore, as women gain greater representation in political bodies, they may still hold less power than men, a distinction that is sometimes lost in quantitative measures of participation. An index developed by the U.S. government's Wilson Center to measure women's leadership in the MENA region found in 2020 that when women led top government departments there, they were four times more likely to be found in what are considered traditionally "feminized" sectors focused on various forms of caretaking, such as socio-cultural ministries, rather than sectors with large budgets and greater influence over policy areas such as defense, finance, energy or justice.[77]

Selected Milestones for Women's Political Representation

- **In 1969,** Israelis elected Golda Meir as Prime Minister. From 2006-2009, Dalia Itzik served as the first female speaker of the Israeli Knesset.
- **In 2011,** Bothaina Kamel became the first woman to run for president in Egypt.
- **In 2011,** Saudi Arabia became the last country in the world (besides the Vatican) to recognize women's right to vote following Oman (2003), Qatar (2003), Kuwait (2005), and the UAE (2006).[78]

[73] This may be attributed, in part, to the election of a more fractious parliament in 2019, in which relatively few parties won more than one seat. Composition of the 2019 parliament available at https://majles.marsad.tn/2019/fr/assemblee/.

[74] The 22nd Knesset was dissolved in December 2019 after PM Netanyahu was unable to form a coalition. Allison Kaplan Sommer, "Israel Election Results: Fewer Women and LGBT People – But Lots of Ex-Generals – in New Knesset," *Haaretz,* September 24, 2019; Greer Fay Cashman, "There are fewer Israeli women in politics than it may seem," *The Jerusalem Post,* February 25, 2020.

[75] U.N. Development Program Libya, "Women, Peace and Security in Libya: Comparative Summary of the WPS Baseline Study, Phase I and Phase II," 2015.

[76] Arab Barometer, "Views of Arab Women as Political Leaders," February 11, 2019.

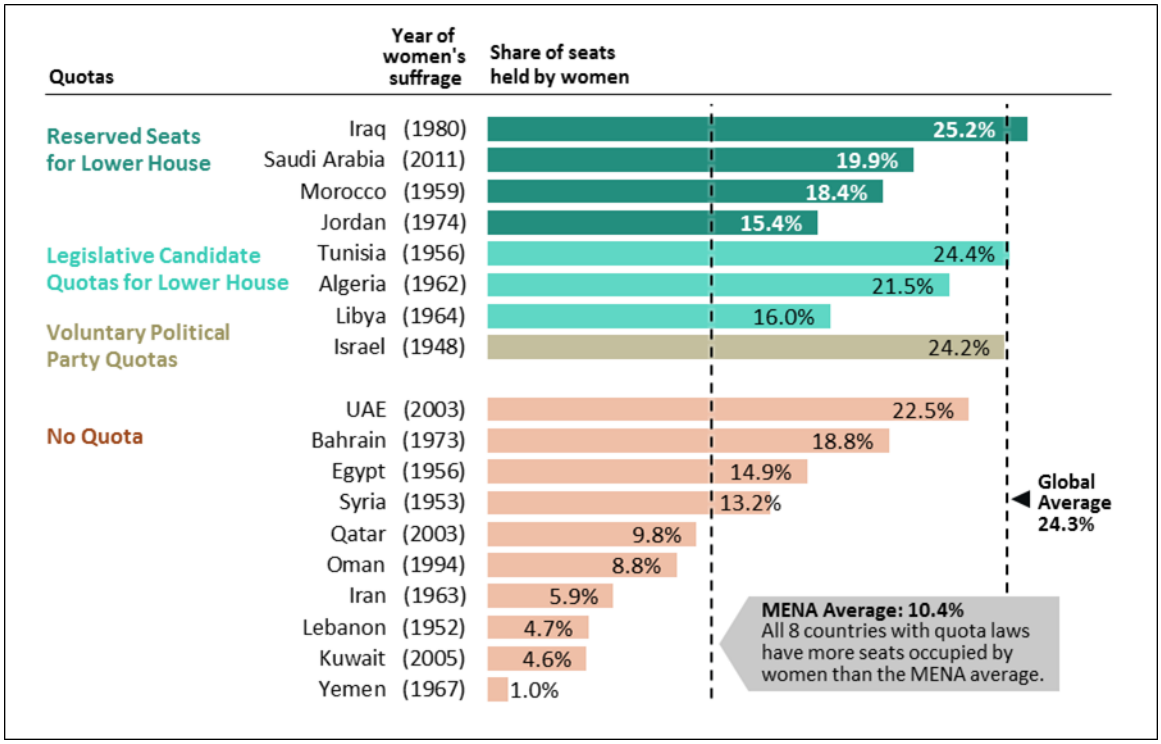
[77] Merissa Khurma et al., "Ready to Lead: Understanding Women's Public Leadership in the Middle East and North Africa," The Wilson Center, March 2020, p. 20.

[78] CRS Report R45483, *Women in National Governments Around the Globe: Fact Sheet,* by Susan G. Chesser. Saudi women did not actually vote until the 2015 municipal elections.

- **In 2014,** Iraq adopted the region's first National Action Plan in support of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security, followed by Jordan (2017), Tunisia (2018), Lebanon (2019), and Yemen (2019).
- **In 2015,** the UAE elected Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi Speaker of the Federal National Council, the first woman to serve as speaker of a legislative body in the Arab world.
- **In 2018,** Sarwa Abdul Wahid became the first woman to run for president in Iraq.
- **In January 2019,** Lebanon's Raya Al-Hassan was appointed the first female interior minister in the Arab world.
- **In February 2019,** Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud became the first female ambassador to represent Saudi Arabia.
- **In September 2019,** two women, Selma Elloumi Rekik and Abir Moussi, ran in Tunisia's presidential elections.
- **In January 2020,** Lebanon's Zeina Akar Adra became the first female Minister of Defense in the Arab world.
- **In March 2020,** Israelis elected 33 women to the Knesset, including "the first Ethiopian-born Knesset member to become a government minister, the first female ultra-Orthodox Jewish lawmaker and minister, the first female Knesset member from the Druze religious community, and the first to wear a Muslim hijab."[79]

Figure 6. Political Representation of Women

Percentage of seats held by women in parliament/consultative body and date of women's suffrage



Sources: Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Gender Quotas Database published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and UN Women: Women in Politics 2019.

[79] Ruth Eglash, "Four Israeli women who've broken new political ground," *The Washington Post,* August 7, 2020.

Conflict and Displacement[80]

Compared with most of the rest of the world, the MENA region experienced a disproportionate share of conflict and population displacement from 2009 to 2018.[81] The United Nations estimates that women and children make up the majority of displaced civilian populations from Syria and Yemen.[82] Prolonged situations of conflict and displacement have specific implications for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), girls' access to education, and rates of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM).[83] As **Figure 7** illustrates, the countries suffering from conflict and humanitarian crises (Iraq, Syria) also have some of the highest rates of intimate partner violence in the region.[84] In some cases, SGBV may even be used as a weapon of war. For example, conflict-related sexual violence has been documented in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Some examples of instances of SGBV in countries affected by conflict and humanitarian crises follow.

- At the height of its power, the **Islamic State** (which seized power across areas of Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2019) "discriminated against women, girls, and sexual minorities as a matter of policy."[85] The group was notably implicated in genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against the Yazidis, an ethnic group indigenous to Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Yazidi women and girls as young as nine were sold into sexual slavery by IS fighters.[86] Abuses against women

[80] For background on global humanitarian issues, see CRS In Focus IF10568, *Overview of the Global Humanitarian and Displacement Crisis*, by Rhoda Margesson.

[81] Data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program suggests that 58% of the world's battle deaths took place in the MENA region from 2009-2019 (available through the World Bank data portal). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 29% of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons in 2019 originated in the MENA region. The region accounts for 6% of the total global population. UNHCR, "Mid-Year Trends 2019—Annex Tables," February 2020; U.N. Population Division, "World Population Prospects 2019," data as of July 1 2019.

[82] After eight years of war in Syria, at least 5.6 million people have fled the country as refugees, 6.2 million are internally displaced, and an estimated 12 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance. In March 2020, the U.N. Population Fund estimated that women and children make up 80% of those displaced in Syria since December 2019. The International Rescue Committee estimates that women and girls account for 75% of those displaced in Yemen since 2015. UNHCR, "Syria Emergency," April 19, 2018; "UN Population Fund sounds alarm over dire situation facing women and girls in Syria, as 10th year of war begins," UN News, March 16, 2020; Delphine Valette, *Protection, Participation and Potential: Women and Girls in Yemen's War,* International Rescue Committee, January 2019.

[83] The United Nations offers the following definition of CEFM: "Child marriage, or early marriage, is any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age. Forced marriages are marriages in which one and/or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union. A child marriage is considered to be a form of forced marriage, given that one and/or both parties have not expressed full, free and informed consent." This naming convention has not been universally adopted, so this report uses the term "child marriage" when reflecting the conventions of the underlying sourcing. U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Child, early and forced marriage, including in humanitarian settings," last updated 2020.

[84] Overall rates of sexual and gender-based violence are not universally available: a USAID context analysis of six MENA countries in 2016 remarked that "existing GBV studies focus on IPV [intimate partner violence] or early and forced marriage—and, in the case of Egypt, on female genital mutilation (FGM); as a result, numerous other forms of GBV are not well studied or understood." Banyan Global, International Center for Research on Women, Center of Arab Women for Training and Research, *Gender-Based Violence in the MENA Region: Context Analysis,* USAID Countering Gender-Based Violence Initiative – MENA Task Order, May 2016.

[85] U.N. Human Rights Council, "'I lost my dignity': Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/37/CRP.3, March 2018.

[86] U.N. Human Rights Council, "'They Came to Destroy': ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis," A/HRC/32/CRP.2, June 15, 2016.

attributed to IS combatants also included stonings, executions, forced marriages, restrictions on movement, and strict dress codes enforced by lashings.

- Parties to the **Syrian conflict** have allegedly used sexual violence as a tool to "instill fear, humiliate and punish or, in the case of terrorist groups, as part of their enforced social order."[87] The United Nations has alleged that rapes and other acts of sexual violence carried out by government forces have "formed part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population, and amount to crimes against humanity."[88] Syrian refugee women have also noted that intimate partner violence has intensified as the lack of employment opportunities for men have increased frustration, tension, and violence in the home."[R]ampant child marriage" was explained, particularly by widows, as a way to alleviate financial burdens and protect the reputation of the family.[89]
- In **Yemen**, the United Nations recorded increased reporting of sexual violence in 2018, including cases of physical or sexual assault, rape, and sexual slavery, noting that "while a few cases are directly attributable to parties to the conflict, most are the result of increased risks that women and children face, against a backdrop of pre-existing gender inequality, exacerbated by the chronic incapacity of Government institutions to protect civilians."[90]
- In 2019, then-head of U.N. Support Mission in **Libya** (UNSMIL) Ghassan Salamé spoke of a "pattern of violence against women across the country," highlighting the abduction of Seham Serghewa, a member of the Libyan House of Representatives, and other instances of killing and forced disappearances. Salamé also noted that "women migrants and refugees in Libya are at risk of rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and forced prostitution in detention and at large."[91]

[87] U.N. Human Rights Council, "'I lost my dignity."

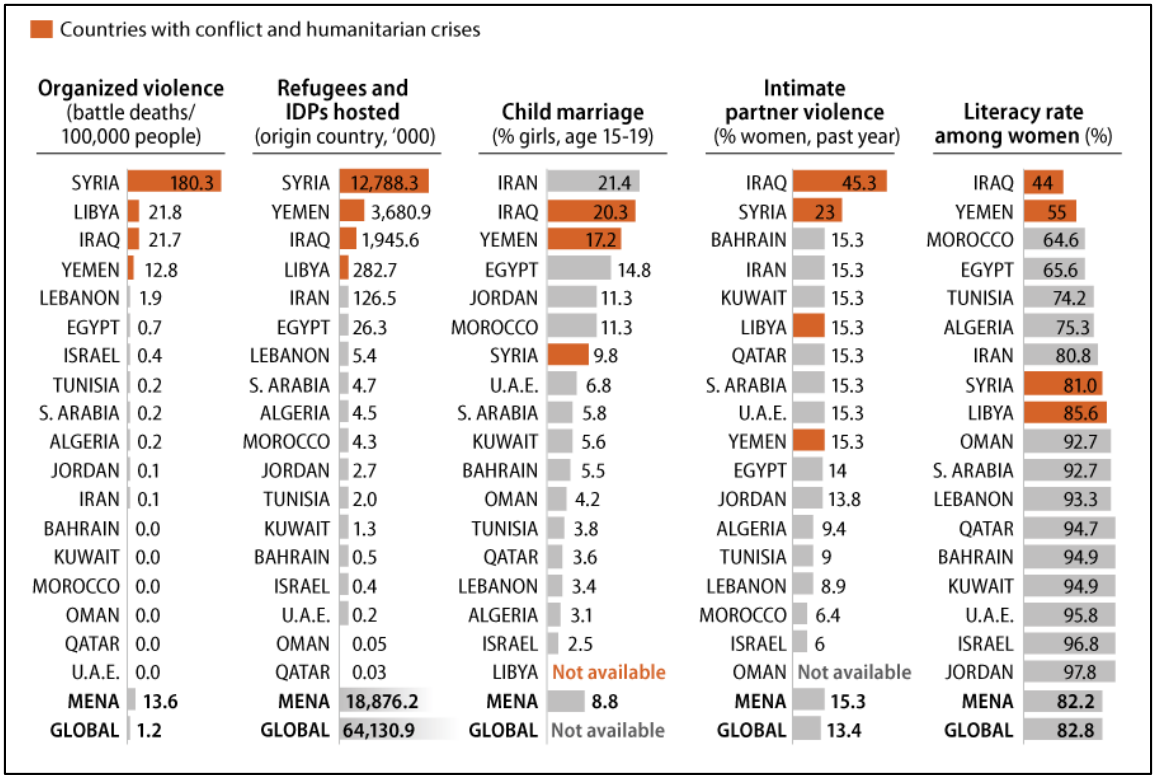
[88] Ibid, p. 1.

[89] UNHCR, "Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response in Refugee Situations in the Middle East and North Africa," 2015; U.N. Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/42/51, August 15, 2019.

[90] U.N. Security Council, "Conflict Related Sexual Violence: Report of the United Nations Secretary-General," S/2019/280, March 29, 2019.

[91] UNSMIL, "SRSG Ghassan Salamé Briefing to the Security Council," November 18, 2019.

Figure 7. Conflict, Displacement, and Gender-based Violence



Source: Created by CRS using battle death and intimate partner violence data from GIWPS and PRIO, *WPS Index 2019/20;* displacement data from UNHCR, "Mid-Year Trends 2019—Annex Tables," February 2020; and child marriage data from WEF, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*. Literacy rates are from CIA World Factbook, accessed June 2020.

Notes: The WPS Index measures intimate partner violence by the percentage of women who experienced physical or sexual violence committed by their intimate partner in the previous 12 months. The Global Gender Gap Report measures child marriage by the percentage of girls aged 15–19 years who are or have ever been married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union in 2017.

Years of conflict and prolonged displacement, are expected to have a detrimental effect on an entire generation of girls' (and boys') education, particularly in Syria and Yemen, where two million children were already out of school due to conflict.[92] The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates these trends. Yemeni women historically have had the highest rate of illiteracy in the region,[93] and the ongoing conflict, as well as school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, are likely to lead to a rise in that rate as girls drop out of school. Facing the economic and social burdens that emerge during protracted conflict and humanitarian crises, families may resort to harmful practices such as child, early, and forced marriage and child labor that may further impact girls' access to education and increase the risk of gender-based violence (see **text box**).[94] Gaps in education, combined with war-related trauma, may have long-term

[92] UNICEF, "If Not In School: The Paths Children Cross in Yemen," March 2018.

[93] UNICEF data last updated October 2015 https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/literacy/.

[94] Joud Monla-Hassan and Mona Yacoubian, "COVID Will Lead to More Child Marriage—What Can Be Done?" United States Institute of Peace, August 12, 2020.

implications for the region's economic growth, rates of child, early, and forced marriage and fertility, and maternal and child health.[95]

Child, Early, and Forced Marriages in Conflict and Displacement Settings

UNICEF estimated in April 2019 that 17% of girls in the MENA region were married before their 18th birthdays, with 700,000 new child brides each year.[96] Rates of child, early and forced marriages (CEFM) had decreased between 1990 and 2010, but progress reportedly has stalled since then. Studies suggest that CEFM generally rises in conflict-affected countries and protracted displacement conditions. Civil society organization *Girls Not Brides* explains the increase in child marriage in humanitarian crises by noting that parents may see child marriage as a way to relieve economic difficulties by transferring the cost of supporting a girl to another family or through dowry payments, and may believe that marriage will protect girls from violence.[97] Negative trends for girls in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, illustrate this increased vulnerability. Experts are now concerned about the effect the COVID-19 pandemic may have on efforts to reduce child marriage, both in terms of the ability to implement interventions due to social distancing measures, and in terms of increased poverty in vulnerable communities, a key driver of CEFM.[98]

- **In Iraq,** CEFM increased from 15% in 1997 to 24% by 2016, including 5% of marriages involving children younger than 15;[99]
- **In Syria,** child marriage rates are reportedly four times higher among displaced Syrian refugees than among Syrians before the crisis;[100]
- **In Libya,** previously ranked among the region's lowest rates of child marriage (2%), the number of child brides has risen, and rose particularly rapidly in areas that were controlled or influenced by the Islamic State;[101] and
- **In Yemen,** child marriage rates may be as high as two-thirds of girls under the age of 18. A September 2016 study found that in governorates with high numbers of internally displaced persons, 44% of marriages reportedly involved girls under the age of 15.[102]

Conflict Resolution and Peace Negotiations

Women have been sidelined in most formal efforts to resolve the MENA region's three largest ongoing wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, despite attempts by some international actors to involve women in these processes. Women have nevertheless continued peacebuilding efforts through civil society and grassroots organizations. In May 2020, over 90 Arab women's civil society organizations joined the U.N. Secretary General in calling for a global ceasefire to address

[95] UNHCR, "Turn the Tide: Refugee Education in Crisis," August 2018.

[96] UNICEF, "A Profile of Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa," April 2019.

[97] Girls Not Brides, "Why Does Child Marriage Happen?" last updated 2020.

[98] UNFPA, "Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage," Interim Technical Note Information, April 27, 2020.

[99] Gilgamesh Nabeel and Jacob Wirtschafter, "Early marriage figures for Iraq are startling. Child advocates worry it could rise even more," Public Radio International, August 13, 2018.

[100] U.N. Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/42/51, August 15, 2019.

[101] Omer Karasapan and Sajjad Shah, "Forced Displacement and Child Marriage: A Growing Challenge in the MENA Region," Brookings Institution, Future Development blog post, June 19, 2019; Umberto Bacchi, "ISIS in Libya: Child Brides Boom in Derna as Record Number of Girls Married Off to Jihadi Fighters," *International Business Times*, May 11, 2015.

[102] UNICEF, "Falling Through the Cracks: The Children of Yemen," March 2017.

the COVID-19 pandemic.[103] Women's peacebuilding organizations also have mobilized to stop the spread of the virus and assist affected communities.

In **Libya**, peace efforts to date have not been inclusive of Libyan women.[104] Despite the active involvement of nearly one in five women in the 2011 revolution and repeated calls from the U.N. Security Council for the "the full, equal and effective participation of women in all activities relating to the democratic transition, conflict resolution and peacebuilding," formal peace talks have not included Libyan women.[105] Women peacebuilders are active in the country, however. For example, the Libyan Women's Network for Peacebuilding (Network), created with support from UN Women in July 2019, has been convening virtually to press for a ceasefire, advocate for imprisoned activists, and condemn violence against women in politics. After the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Network members repurposed their networks to spread information, collect personal protective equipment (such as masks) for healthcare workers, and advocate for the humanitarian needs of vulnerable groups.[106]

In **Syria**, throughout six rounds of peace talks between 2012 and 2017 to resolve the Syrian war, Syrian women were sidelined from the process, despite repeated calls by the international community for women to be included in government and opposition delegations. Four years into the U.N.-sponsored talks in 2016, the then-U.N. Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, created a Syrian Women's Advisory Board to support women's participation in the peace process; the Board sent a delegation of 12 women as third party observers to negotiations in Geneva.[107] In 2017, women comprised 15% of negotiators of the U.N.-sponsored peace talks.[108] That same year, Syrian women politicians and activists formed the Syrian Women Political Movement to develop a shared vision for a peace process inclusive of women and grassroots activists. The group has advocated that all decision-making processes include at least 30% women, among other demands.[109] Women hold about 30% of seats in the 150-member Constitutional Committee, created in late 2019 with 50 participants each nominated from the government, opposition, and civil society, and 13 of 45 seats in the constitution drafting committee.[110]

In **Yemen**, women had been making progress towards greater representation in decision-making, but since the outbreak of war in 2014, have largely been excluded from formal peace negotiations. Women held 30% of seats and chaired three of the nine committees on the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) called to broker a transition from the longtime rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh to President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in 2011. A new draft constitution that built on NDC recommendations would have secured the recognition of women as equal citizens and

[103] UN Women, "Women's organizations in the Arab States region join UN Secretary-General António Guterres's call for ceasefire in the face of COVID-19," Press Release, May 29, 2020.

[104] Emily Burchfield, "How the exclusion of women has cost Libya," The Atlantic Council, November 26, 2019.

[105] Rola Abdul-Latif, "Libya Status of Women Survey 2013," International Foundation for Electoral Systems, September 2013; U.N. Security Resolution 2273 (2016); U.N. Security Council Resolution 2376 (2017); U.N. Security Resolution 2434, (2018); U.N. Security Resolution 2486 (2019); U.N. Security Council Resolution 2542, (2020).

[106] UN Women, "Connected by their phones, women peacebuilders lead COVID-19 prevention efforts across Libya," June 19, 2020.

[107] Council on Foreign Relations, "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Syria," January 30, 2019.

[108] Bela Kapur, "Syrian Women in Political Processes: Literature Review," The Kvinna till Kvinnna Foundation, May 2017.

[109] Sheila Goishabib, "Syrian Women's Political Movement Releases Three Policy Papers," Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, July 1, 2019.

[110] Remarks by Jomana Qaddour at Middle East Institute event, "The Role of Women in Syria's Future," November 21, 2019.

independent individuals, a 30% quota in decision-making positions, and a legal minimum marriage age of marriage of 18. The constitution was never ratified, however, and rebel Houthi leaders' rejection of the draft constitution was one of the triggers of the current crisis.

Women have been minimally involved in subsequent peace negotiations to resolve the conflict with the Houthis, which has drawn in multiple neighboring states.[111] U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths reportedly invited eight women to join the peace talks in Sweden in 2018, though only one woman was present at the negotiation table.[112] In December 2019, the Prime Minister of the Hadi government approved Yemen's National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security. The plan reportedly states that women's participation should be set at no less than 30% in all stages of the peace process, though critics have raised concerns that the plan lacks specifics on "budgets, resource allocation, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms or accountability measures" and ignores the outcomes of the NDC as a national point of reference.[113]

Radicalization, Terrorism and Violent Extremism

The recruitment of women by the Islamic State and other armed Islamist groups, and the uncertain status of many of those women after the Islamic State lost control of territory in Syria and Iraq, brought increased attention to the roles women play within violent extremist organizations. From its inception, the Islamic State used women as recruiters and fundraisers, and to provide support and companionship to male fighters. As the group lost territory it reportedly loosened gender role distinctions to use women in traditional military operational roles as well.[114] One estimate suggested that women accounted for up to 13% (4,761) of the total 41,490 foreigners who were recorded to have traveled to, or were born inside, territory under the control of the Islamic State from 2014 to 2019.[115] According to a journalist who covered the fighting in Iraq, IS territorial losses elevated the role of women within the group, as some were driven by "revenge, need, or both" to retaliate against coalition and Iraqi military operations.[116]

Experts and U.S. government officials repeatedly have expressed concern about the potential radicalization of women residing in camps for people displaced from territory formerly held by the Islamic State (see **Appendix** for more detail).[117] In August 2019, the United Nations reported that vulnerable populations in these camps were at risk of further radicalization:

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[111] Neha Wadekar, "Women Want to Put Yemen Back Together Again," *Foreign Policy*, November 27, 2018.

[112] Valette, *Protection, Participation and Potential*, January 2019.

[113] Maha Awadh, "Unfulfilled Ambition: Yemen's National Action Plan for Women Leaves Much to be Desired," Enheduanna Blog, Wilson Center, April 9, 2020. The plan has not been officially published and CRS has not reviewed a translated draft.

[114] Vera Mironova, "Is the Future of ISIS Female?" *New York Times*, February 20, 2019.

[115] Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors after the Fall of the Caliphate," U.S. Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 6, July 2019.

[116] For example, Iraqi security forces reportedly raped and harassed women and stole from them in rampages after expelling IS fighters. This reportedly left some women wanting to get revenge, and others seeing no other way to survive after being left without incomes and in terrible living conditions. Mironova, "Is the Future of ISIS Female?"

[117] See, for example, Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism, *Iraq: A Crossroads of U.S. Policy*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., July 16, 2020; House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism, *The FY20 Budget: State Department Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism Bureau*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., July 24, 2019; House Homeland Security Committee, *Global Terrorism: Threats to the Homeland, Part I and II*, hearings, 116th Cong., 1st sess., September 10, 2019 and October 30, 2019; Julia Hurley, "Coronavirus and ISIS: The Challenge of Repatriation from Al-Hol," United States Institute of Peace, May 28, 2020.

> As many of their countries of origin initially refused to repatriate them, most families of foreign ISIL fighters, including children, are being held in limbo by SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces]. Subsequently, women and children remain at higher risk of further radicalization, especially given the absence of age- and gender-sensitive rehabilitation programmes.[118]

A U.N. assessment in October 2020 estimated that 94% of the more than 64,000 then-inhabitants of Al Hol displacement camp in Syria were women and children.[119] An unknown number of the women remaining in Al Hol and similar camps are family members and/or former supporters of IS combatants, or are former IS combatants themselves.[120]

Experts have argued that in order to be effective, efforts to counter terrorism need to recognize the potential roles women can play in recruitment, messaging, administration, and operations (as the extremist groups do).[121] Several MENA governments have taken steps in this direction. For example, the State Department's 2019 Country Reports on Terrorism noted that Algeria recognizes the "crucial role" of women in Algeria's efforts to counter extremism, highlighting the female clerics who work with young girls, mothers, and prisoners.[122] The report also noted that in Jordan, "officials regularly engage experts on topics such as the role of women and girls in terrorism prevention."

Case Study: USAID Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism in Morocco[123]

USAID's Favorable Opportunities to Reinforce the Self Advancement of Today's Youth (FORSATY, or "my opportunity" in Arabic) program, active from 2012 to 2019, worked with vulnerable youth in nine marginalized communities in northern Morocco where extremist recruitment cells have been active. FORSATY partnered with local community members to encourage greater female participation in school, the workforce, and extracurricular activities. In FY2018, FORSATY served 3,699 at-risk youth through community activities, including 817 young women (22 percent), an increase from FY2015 when 15 women participated. FORSATY's education component served almost equal numbers of female and male at-risk students: of 2,011 at-risk students who were served, 976 were men and 1,035 were women. USAID noted that "based on the success of the model, FORSATY has leveraged funds from other donors and the private sector, which have contributed to expanding the program to other cities and its overall sustainability."[124]

Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic[125]

Early data indicates that women in the MENA region are experiencing unique and particularly dire effects from the COVID-19 pandemic, though the pandemic is ongoing and the full impact remains to be seen.[126] Women in many MENA countries generally face greater exposure to

[118] U.N. Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/42/51, August 15, 2019.

[119] "Syria: Humanitarians 'very concerned' for thousands still living in Al Hol camp," U.N. News, October 16, 2020.

[120] In October 2020, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council announced preparations to begin releasing Syrians held at Al Hol camp, including family members of IS fighters. Louisa Loveluck, "Kurdish-led zone vows to release Syrians from detention camp for ISIS families," *The Washington Post*, October 5, 2020.

[121] See, for example, Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein, *Women and Terrorism: Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners*, Council on Foreign Relations, May 2019.

[122] U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019," June 24, 2020.

[123] CRS communication with USAID officials on October 28, 2019.

[124] USAID, "Favorable Opportunities to Reinforce Self-Advancement for Today's Youth (FORSATY)," *Factsheet*, last updated June 27, 2018.

[125] Sara M. Tharakan, CRS Analyst in Global Health and International Development, co-authored this section.

[126] Most countries in the region are not reporting cases with sex-disaggregated data. CRS analysis found that 18% of all

COVID-19 because they constitute the majority of healthcare workers and home caregivers for sick family members.[127] Some research has found that women in the region are less likely to have access to quality health care, and those who contract COVID-19 may face greater long-term consequences to their health, due in part to existing gender disparities in access to health care throughout the region.[128] The humanitarian crises and conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen have weakened health systems and destroyed medical facilities, and refugees and displaced populations tend to have higher rates of underlying health issues due to the impacts of war, a lack of access to healthcare, and food insecurity; COVID-19 may compound all of these issues.[129]

While the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic downturn are not clear yet, the U.N. Secretary General has warned that COVID-19 is deepening gender inequality globally that might take years to recover from: "Already we are seeing a reversal in decades of limited and fragile progress on gender equality and women's rights. And without a concerned response, we risk losing a generation or more of gains."[130] Some reports indicate that government measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the MENA region are limiting women's access to education and humanitarian aid, increasing unpaid domestic and care work for women, and contributing to increased domestic violence.[131] As with other issues discussed in this report, a combination of challenging underlying circumstances and prevailing attitudes about gender make the ongoing pandemic a particular risk for women in the MENA region, at the same time that the pandemic increases competition for U.S. and global resources and attention.

Considerations for Congress

Looking ahead, Members may take into account the following issues and questions as they conduct oversight of and consider U.S. policy addressing both the status of women in MENA countries and broader security and policy priorities in the region.

- **Resources and priorities**. In a context of competing domestic and foreign policy priorities and finite resources, to what extent, if any, should U.S. foreign policy, foreign assistance, and military cooperation be directed to address gender imbalances in the MENA region? If so, how can this be done most effectively? Are there specific countries or lines of effort that should be prioritized over others, and, if so, for what reasons?

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reported cases in the region were disaggregated by sex. Data available from "The COVID-19 Sex-Disaggregated Data Tracker," Global Health 50/50, the African Population and Health Research Center, and the International Center for Research on Women, updated September 21, 2020.

[127] For example, women outnumber men 10 to 1 among nursing staff in Egypt. See U.N. Women and U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region," E/ESCWA/2020/Policy Brief.4, April 2020.

[128] Global Health 5050, International Center for Research on Women, African Population and Health Research Center, "The COVID-19 Sex-Disaggregated Data Tracker," September 21, 2020; N.M. Kronfol, "Access and barriers to health care delivery in Arab countries: a review," *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, 18 (12), 1239-1246, 2012.

[129] For example, nearly a decade of war in Syria has destroyed many hospitals, with one source documenting 34 regime attacks between 2014 and 2017 on facilities specializing in women's or children's healthcare. See Yasmeen Al-Dimashqi and Florence Massena, "For Many Syrian Women, Healthcare is a Matter of Geography," *Syria Deeply*, August 16, 2017.

[130] United Nations Secretary General, "Secretary-General's remarks at Town Hall with Young Women from Civil Society Organizations," August 31, 2020.

[131] World Food Program, "Impact of COVID-19 in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe," Update #5, September 2020; Hafsa Halawa, "The Gendered Impact of COVID-19 in the Middle East," Middle East Institute, June 11, 2020.

- **Level of aid**. How might the level of U.S. political, military, and economic engagement and assistance, given possible changes over time, affect how MENA countries address women's roles and well-being?
- **Effectiveness**. Which types of policy approaches and foreign assistance programs appear to have been the most effective in improving conditions for women? What have been the effects of U.S. programs in specific MENA countries? Could such programs be expanded to other MENA states?
- **Congressional mandates**. What are the pros and cons of using legislation to mandate the incorporation of gender elements into broader foreign policy initiatives, foreign assistance programs, and military cooperation activities?
- **Conditionality**. What are the pros and cons of conditioning U.S. financial support for and security cooperation with authoritarian states on respect for women's rights and gender equality? What metrics would be appropriate for gauging progress?
- **Best practices**. To what extent, if any, are elements of the U.S. government sharing best practices among themselves and with other international actors? Would efforts such as congressional advocacy encouraging women's participation in peace negotiations in Afghanistan be applicable to MENA conflicts such as those in Syria, Yemen, and Libya?
- **Cultural sensitivities and resistance to change**. How can U.S. and international assistance and programs be structured to maximize local ownership of initiatives for women and girls and minimize the perception of outside interference?
- **Other international efforts**. What programs and initiatives do other governments and regional and multilateral organizations have for addressing gender issues in the MENA region? How well coordinated are global efforts, and what opportunities are there for greater coordination and/or burden-sharing?
- **COVID-19.** In what ways might the COVID-19 pandemic worsen the status and conditions of women in the region, and are there ways to target U.S. policy and/or assistance that might help mitigate those trends?

Appendix. Legislation in the 116th Congress

In recent Congresses, Members have introduced and passed a number of bills and resolutions related to the status of women's rights globally, some of which may directly or indirectly address gender inequality in the MENA region. Some Members also have raised the issue in oversight hearings. Selected hearings and relevant legislation introduced during the 116th Congress related to legal rights, economic empowerment, political representation, girls' education, sexual and gender-based violence, and conflict resolution are catalogued in further detail below.

Legal Rights

The 116th Congress has engaged on the topic of global legal protections for women, in particular those related to preventing and addressing gender-based violence. Harmful practices that occur in several MENA countries, such as female genital mutilation/cutting (e.g., H.Res. 106), and child, early, and forced marriage (discussed below in "Sexual and Gender-based Violence"), have been of particular interest. Some Members also have voiced concerns about the detention of women's rights advocates in Saudi Arabia (S.Res. 73 and H.Res. 129).[132]

H.Res. 106, passed in the House, and S.Res. 494 denounce the practice of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) as a "violation of the human rights of women and girls" and urges the State Department and USAID to incorporate coordinated efforts to eliminate FGM/C in their gender programming.[133] This mirrors language incorporated into appropriations bills or accompanying explanatory statements since FY2014, which states that State Department and USAID "gender programs shall incorporate coordinated efforts to combat a variety of forms of gender-based violence, including child marriage, rape, female genital cutting and mutilation, and domestic violence, among other forms of gender-based violence in conflict and non-conflict settings."[134] The Trump Administration requested bilateral economic assistance in FY2019 and FY2020 specifically to combat FGM/C in Egypt, where the practice is reported to be most prevalent in the region; the FY2021 request did not make the same request.[135]

Economic Empowerment

Introduced in the 116th Congress, the *Women's Global Empowerment, Development and Prosperity Act of 2020* (S. 3301 and H.R. 6117) would require the Secretary of State to establish within the Office of Women's Empowerment an office for the Women's Global Development and

[132] Other legislation on Saudi Arabia includes the Saudi Arabia Human Rights and Accountability Act of 2019 (H.R. 2037), which would allow the President to suspend sanctions on Saudi Arabia if, among other criteria, "the Government of Saudi Arabia has taken verifiable steps to repeal any law or regulation that requires Saudi women to obtain approval from a male guardian in order to leave the country." This provision was included in the House version of the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 2500), but was not incorporated into P.L. 116-92.

[133] H.Res. 106 defines FGM/C as "all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for nonmedical reasons."

[134] Final FY2020 SFOPS appropriations (Division G, P.L. 116-94) does not contain this language, however the explanatory statement accompanying the act states that "gender programs should incorporate coordinated efforts to combat a variety of forms of gender-based violence, including child, early, and forced marriage, rape, female genital cutting and mutilation, and domestic violence, in conflict and non-conflict settings." For prior year appropriations see FY2019 (P.L. 116-6), FY2018 (P.L. 115-141), FY2017 (P.L. 115-31), FY2016 (P.L. 114-113), FY2015 (P.L. 113-235), FY2014 (P.L. 113-76).

[135] UNICEF estimates that 87% of girls aged 15 to 49 have undergone FGM/C in Egypt, as compared to 7% in Iraq and 19% in Yemen. UNICEF, "Female genital mutilation (FGM)," updated February 2020.

Prosperity Initiative (W–GDP). Congress authorized the use of up to $100 million for the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Fund in final FY2020 SFOPS appropriations (Section 7059, Division G, P.L. 116-94). The W-GDP annual report 2019/2020 notes that USAID W-GDP funding in FY2018 was used for programs in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan.[136]

Political Representation

Congress in FY2020 appropriated not less than $50 million for global programs designed to strengthen protections for women's political status, and to expand women's participation in political parties and elections in countries where women and girls suffer discrimination due to law, policy or practice (Section 7059, Division G, P.L. 116-94). Congress also continues to fund gender and women's empowerment projects through the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), created in 2002 to promote political, economic and educational reform in the Middle East.[137] MEPI works "in partnership with local leaders and indigenous organizations to increase women's political and economic participation, support women visionaries, provide training to enhance women's capabilities to contribute to their countries' development, and build the capacity of civil society to secure equal rights and economic prosperity for women and their families."[138] Funding for MEPI, Near East Regional Democracy, and Multinational Force and Observers is included in the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Regional FY2019 allocation ($118 million) and the FY2021 request ($121 million). Congress funded MEPI at $51 million in FY2017 and $31.6 million in FY2018.[139]

Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Conflict and Displacement

The *Preventing Child Marriage in Displaced Populations Act* (H.R. 2140, passed in the House, incorporated as Title IV, Section J in P.L. 116-94) finds that displaced populations are particularly vulnerable to child marriage. The act calls for the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations to call for an agreed-upon definition of "child marriage" across U.N. agencies and for a comprehensive strategy to address child marriage in refugee settlements administered by the United Nations. The act finds that rates of child marriage are particularly high in Syria and Yemen.

The *Accountability for Sexual and Gender-based Violence as a Tool in Conflict Act of 2019* (H.R. 3212 and S. 1777) would "amend the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to include in the Annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices a section on conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence" and "amend the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act [22 U.S.C. § 2656] to authorize the President to impose economic sanctions and a visa ban on the leader of an organization that commits sexual or gender-based violence." The bill would find that rape and sexual assault have been used as tactics of war and terror in conflict zones including Iraq and Syria.

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[136] The White House, "Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative Annual Report 2019-2020," February 2020, p. 22-23.

[137] See out of print CRS Report RS21457, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview*, by Jeremy M. Sharp, available to congressional clients on request

[138] U.S. Department of State, "Gender and Women's Empowerment," The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), available at https://mepi.state.gov/about-mepi/gender-womens-empowerment/.

[139] The Trump Administration has requested $14.5 million for MEPI in FY2021, consistent with the FY2020 request. Funding for MEPI is included in the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Regional FY2019 allocation ($118 million) and the FY2021 request ($121 million).

The *Safe from the Start Act of 2019* (H.R. 4092) and *Keeping Women and Girls Safe from the Start Act of 2020* (S. 4003) seek to improve United States consideration of, and strategic support for, programs to prevent and respond to gender-based violence from the onset of humanitarian emergencies and build the capacity of humanitarian assistance to address the immediate and long-term challenges resulting from such violence, and for other purposes.

The *International Violence Against Women Act of 2019* (H.R. 5267 and S. 3037) would find that rape and sexual assault are used as tools of war in conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria, and would authorize existing appropriations to be used to develop a U.S. strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally.

Girls' Education

The *Keeping Girls in School Act* (S. 1071, H.R. 2153, passed in the House) aims to support empowerment, economic security, and educational opportunities for adolescent girls around the world. It expresses the sense of Congress that "achieving gender parity in both access to and quality of educational opportunity contributes significantly to economic growth and development, thereby lowering the risk for violence and instability" and that achieving gender equality "should be a priority goal of United States foreign policy." The act would authorize USAID activities that address barriers facing adolescent girls in accessing secondary education, including but not limited to, child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation. The act would build on the *Protecting Girls' Access to Education in Vulnerable Settings Act* (P.L. 115-442) enacted in December 2018, which authorizes the State Department and USAID to prioritize programs that protect displaced children, particularly displaced girls. H.Res. 277 (introduced April 2019) and S.Res. 360 (introduced in October 2019) would affirm the importance of access to safe, quality education, including protection from attacks on education, for children in conflict settings.

Conflict Resolution

Some Members of the 116th Congress have cited the *Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017* (WPS Act or P.L. 115-68) to call for greater participation of Afghan women in the negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban, but have been less vocal about pushing for women's participation in recent peace negotiations to resolve the ongoing wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.[140] Senator Jeanne Shaheen raised the issue with regard to Syria in a June 2019 Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, asserting that, "as we look at stability in Syria, women need to be significant part of any resolution to the conflict there."[141] To date, none of the legislation introduced in the 116th Congress regarding the conflict in Yemen has discussed the meaningful participation of women in managing or resolving the crisis.[142] Legislation supporting a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Libya (H.R. 4644 and S. 2934) introduced in November 2019 does not mention women's participation, nor does H.Res. 1061, introduced in July 2020, which calls for a political solution to the Syrian civil war.

[140] Congressional support for women's inclusion in Afghan peace negotiations was codified in FY2020 appropriations and authorization bills. See Sect. 7044 (a) of Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-94) and Sect. 1216 of the National Defense Authorization Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-92).

[141] Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues, *Women in Conflict: Advancing Women's Role in Peace and Security*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., June 13, 2019.

[142] See CRS Report R45046, *Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015-2020*, by Jeremy M. Sharp, Christopher M. Blanchard, and Sarah R. Collins.

Congress previously funded efforts in line with the WPS Act in Syria. Appropriations measures for FY2016-FY2018 explicitly made funds available for programs in Syria that sought to "empower women through political and economic programs, and address the psychosocial needs of women and their families in Syria and neighboring countries" and "expand the role of women in negotiations to end the violence and in any political transition in Syria."[143] The *Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020* (Section 7059, Division G, P.L. 116-94) does not specify funds for WPS implementation in Syria, although it does provide that funds should be made available to support a multi-year strategy to expand and improve coordination of U.S. government efforts to "empower women as equal partners in conflict prevention, peace building, transitional processes, and reconstruction efforts in countries affected by conflict or in political transition, and to provide the equitable provision of relief and recovery assistance to women and girls."

Congress also has used appropriations legislation to improve the participation and effectiveness of women in foreign partner security forces. The *Enhancing Military and Police Operations through Women's Engagement and Recruitment Act of 2016* (S. 3377), which was introduced during the 114th Congress, cited that approximately 7% of foreign participants in the U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) program were women. Recent appropriations measures have directed international security assistance and cooperation funds to be used to support the integration of women into foreign security forces.[144] For example, the *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020* (P.L. 116-92) mandated that, of funds made available for training and equipping Afghan security forces, $10 million be used to support recruitment, training, and treatment of Afghan women.

Countering Violent Extremism

Some Members have sought to highlight the nexus of gender and countering violent extremism as it relates to the MENA region through various hearings. In a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on the State Department counterterrorism budget in July 2019, two Members asked what efforts the Trump Administration was making to engage women in the prevention of terrorism and raised specific concerns about the potential radicalization of women and children held in displacement camps in Syria.[145] At a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Syria in September 2019, Senator Jeanne Shaheen asserted that Iraqi partners were concerned "not just with any fighters who may be in the [displacement] camp but with all of the women and children who are being radicalized."[146] In response, one of the witnesses, Syria Study Group Co-Chair Michael Singh, stated that the U.S. government had not yet come up with durable solutions: "You have the 70,000 mostly women and children, mostly children frankly, in the [Al Hol] camp who have grown up in the worst possible conditions and the fact is that we don't really know how to

[143] See P.L. 115-141, P.L. 115-31, P.L. 114-113. Appropriations acts for FY2016 (P.L. 114-113) and FY2015 (P.L. 113-235) included the same clause on expanding the role of women in negotiations.

[144] H.Rept. 116-78, accompanying the House-reported FY2020 SFOPS bill states: "The Committee directs that funds made available to train foreign police, judicial, and military personnel, including for international peacekeeping, address prevention and response to gender-based violence and trafficking in persons, and support integration of women into security forces. The Committee encourages the Secretary of State to ensure women's participation is increased in peacekeeping operations and other security assistance programs, as appropriate."

[145] House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, *The FY20 Budget: State Department Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism Bureau*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., July 24, 2019.

[146] Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, *The Path Forward: Key Findings from the Syria Study Group Report*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., September 24, 2019.

conduct this process of de-radicalization and that's, again, I think something that is—that behooves us, to get on top of."[147]

Two pieces of legislation (one introduced, one passed) in the 116th Congress have called for greater research on the nexus of gender and countering violent extremism and terrorism. The *Women and Countering Violent Extremism Act of 2019* (H.R. 1653) would find that the Islamic State benefited strategically and financially from the subjugation of women, and seeks to "ensure that the United States recognizes women's varied roles in all aspects of violent extremism and promote their meaningful participation as full partners in all efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism and terrorism." The bill would, among other things, require the Secretaries of Defense and State, in conjunction with the Administrator of USAID, to conduct research on gender and countering violent extremism and report their findings back to Congress. The act would also authorize assistance to women-led and women's empowerment organizations in foreign countries working on countering violent extremism, and would increase training for U.S. government officials and for those receiving training under the State Department's Anti-Terrorism Assistance programs.

In addition, Section 1047 of the *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020* (P.L. 116-92) required an independent assessment on gender and countering violent extremism, with a report due to Congress not later than September 15, 2020. Specifically, the assessment was required to consider:

- the probable causes and historical trends of women's participation in violent extremist organizations, and ways in which that participation is likely to change;
- the relationship between violent extremism and each of the following: gender-based violence, the perceived role or value of women at the community level, community opinions of killing or harming women, and violations of girls' rights (such as child, early and forced marriage and access to education); and
- ways the Department of Defense may engage and support women and girls who are vulnerable to extremist behavior.

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Section 233 of the *COVID–19 International Response and Recovery Act of 2020* (S. 3669) introduced on May 7, 2020, would express the sense of Congress that "credible research indicates that the COVID–19 pandemic has increased exposure to domestic violence, child marriage, trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence and abuse, and has increased and compounded the risks displaced women and girls face in emergencies;" and that the pandemic is disrupting access to sexual and reproductive health care. It also would authorize the State Department and USAID to "carry out activities to prevent, mitigate, and respond to gender-based violence during and following the COVID–19 pandemic," and would authorize assistance to the U.N. Population Fund for activities such as the "coordination and delivery of information and services to prevent child marriage and female genital mutilation, the incidence of which has increased during the COVID–19 pandemic."

The *Global Learning Loss Assessment Act of 2020* (H.R. 7911, H.R. 8220, and S. 4548) would require the USAID to report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and global

[147] Testimony of Michael Singh, in Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, *The Path Forward: Key Findings from the Syria Study Group Report*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., September 24, 2019.

basic education programs, including identifying any gaps in reaching marginalized populations, such as girls, children with disabilities, or children affected by conflict and crisis.

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