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

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SUMMARY

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

The status of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has garnered widespread interest among many Members of Congress. Many experts have found that women in this region 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 gender roles and perspectives (including discriminatory laws and beliefs), and challenges facing the region overall (such as a preponderance of undemocratic governments, poor economic growth, civil 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 in any other region, with differential laws on issues such as marriage and divorce, 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 countries like 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**. Despite international efforts to improve women's participation in peace negotiations, women have not played significant roles in efforts to resolve the region's three largest ongoing wars in Libya, Syria, or Yemen.
- **Susceptibility to Radicalization, Terrorism, and Violent Extremism**. Women are susceptible to radicalization by extremist groups like the Islamic State, which have targeted them for support and recruitment, though experts have noted that women may also be uniquely positioned to counter violent extremist ideology. In Egypt and Algeria, for example, the governments have trained women clerics to counter radicalization.
- **Disproportionate Vulnerability to Possible Impacts of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)**. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women have yet to be fully realized. However, previous pandemics and infectious disease outbreaks suggest that women will be differentially affected by the COVID-19 outbreak relative to men, particularly in the areas of employment, access to education, and sexual and gender-based violence.

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 have also emphasized 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. In the 116th Congress and beyond, 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 changes for women as an end-goal in itself, and those supporting such changes 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. Such support reflects a growing body of research suggesting that improving opportunities and conditions for women in a society may support 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 MENA 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—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: assuming the same rate of progress into the future, it would take approximately

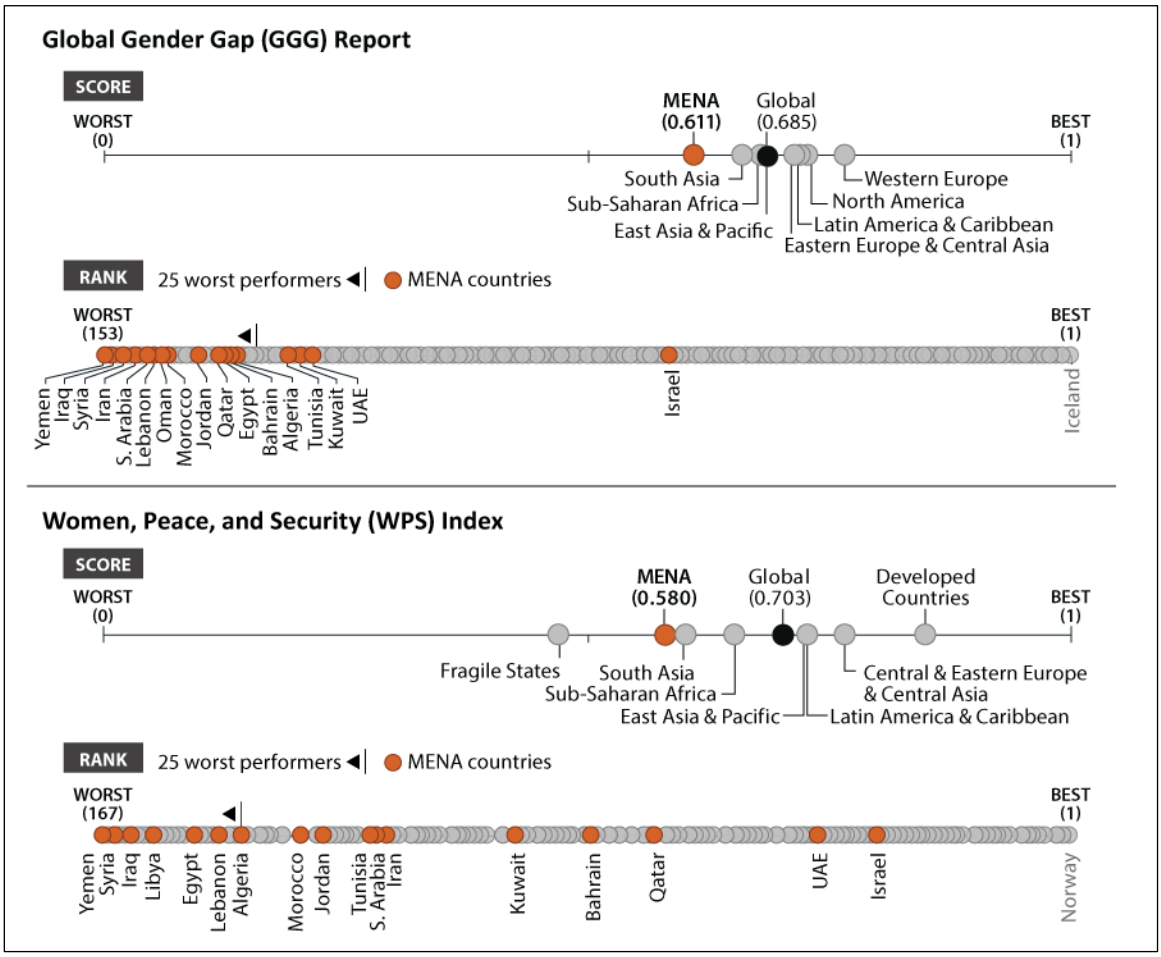
[1] This report does not include data on the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. CRS does not take a position on the political status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Some of the key sources on which this report relies do not provide data for the West Bank and Gaza. For information on the status of women in 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.

150 years to close the 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: *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, 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

[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.

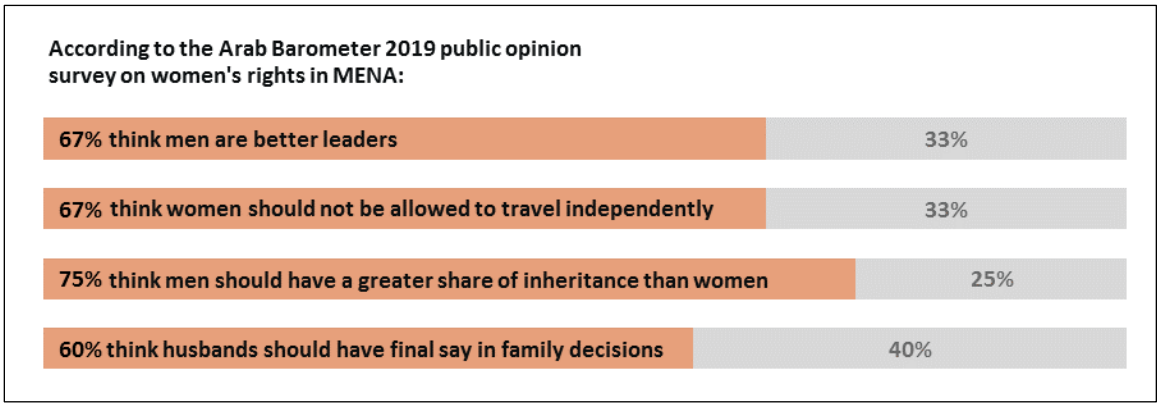
[5] GIWPS and PRIO, *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20*, p. 1.

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 15 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 14 countries within the scope of this report: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, Qatar, and Yemen.

## 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 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 known as the

[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); Freedom House, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2010.

"Arab Spring" that started 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. These phenomena have had negative impacts on the whole society, including some effects that are unique to, or worse for, women (see below). Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen face wars and/or terrorist/insurgent violence that are eroding central governance in each country and producing large-scale humanitarian crises. Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon experienced significant popular protests in 2019. Freedom House noted in 2020 that region-wide, "credible elections remain exceedingly rare."[9] 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.[10] 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 achieve 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 peace and stability, countering terrorism, increasing prosperity, and fostering good governance.

- **Women's equality appears to foster increased socioeconomic development and political stability**.[11] Studies have demonstrated a correlation between the 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.[12] The World Bank has argued that "gender equality is smart

[8] Since the Arab Spring, all but two MENA countries have witnessed a decline in Human Development Indicators: in 2009, only Yemen was categorized as low human development, but by 2018 Egypt, Morocco, and Syria had joined Yemen in that category. Only Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia saw improvements in their global rankings. 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). Sarah Repucci, *Freedom in the World 2020*: *A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*, Freedom House, February 2020.

[9] Sarah Repucci, *Freedom in the World 2020*: *A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*, Freedom House, February 2020.

[10] 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 eight subsequent resolutions. 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.

[11] 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, "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.

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

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.[13]

- **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 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.[14]
- **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 after forced displacement.[15] 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.[16] A World Bank study estimates that ending childhood marriage globally would have significant socioeconomic benefits.[17]
- **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.[18] A recent 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.[19]

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[13] 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.

[14] 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).

[15] 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.

[16] 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.

[17] 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). Quentin Wodon et al., "Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report," The World Bank, June 2017.

[18] 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 Peace Education*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2019), pp. 133-154.

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

- **Women's status in the household may be linked to levels of extremism in a community**. 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.[20] Terrorist groups have tasked female members with concealing explosive devices, relaying communications, ferrying funds, and the like, leveraging that women are less likely to be searched or otherwise draw attention from security forces.[21] At the same time, some research found that women may be uniquely positioned as "mitigators" of terrorism, both as "predictors" and "preventers."[22]

# 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. 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.[23] The Trump Administration requested approximately $75 million and $83 million in FY2019 and FY2020 respectively for State Department and USAID gender programs in the region.[24] Broader U.S. foreign affairs and security assistance programs addressing cross-cutting issues such as global health, humanitarian activities, defense, and legal and political rights may also address issues related to women.

The U.S. government does not consistently or comprehensively track the number or cost of programs that address the status of women in the MENA region. Therefore, it is unclear how much money the United States spends annually on such programs. 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-

[20] 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). Dr. Hudson's study, drawing data on foreign fighters from the Soufan Center, found that the status of women at the household level is correlated with a reduction in the incidence of a country producing foreign fighters.

[21] 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).

[22] 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.

[23] 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.

[24] 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.

wide information, some U.S. agencies have provided potentially useful snapshots of their activities. For example, USAID estimates that in FY2018 (the most recent year for which comprehensive data are available), 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 on projects targeting gender-based violence and trafficking in persons.[25]

## Selected MENA-Specific Congressional Actions

In recent Congresses, legislation introduced and/or enacted aims to address issues of women's rights and wellbeing in the MENA region. Some examples are described below. (See **Appendix A** 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.[26] Section 7041 (*l*) provides $40 million under 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.[27]
- **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), which passed in the House on July 25, 2019, 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."[28]
- **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

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

[26] 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.

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

[28] 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 restrictions on women's movement, however several prominent women activists remain in jail. See Anya van Wagtendonk "Saudi Arabia changed its guardianship laws, but 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.

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."

Congress has also conducted some oversight on the status of women in the region. In 2019, Congress held at least four hearings in which Members asked about the status of women in the region.[29] Members have also publicized meetings with senior women serving in the region's governments, and have expressed concerns related to the status of women during official travel for oversight purposes.[30] 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.[31]

## 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 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.[32] It also 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.

[29] 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.

[30] 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.

[31] 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 and on Pending Nomination for Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, March 27, 2019.

[32] The Trump Administration delivered its strategy on Women Peace and Security on June 11, 2019 available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/WPS_Strategy_10_October2019.pdf.

- **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 (for more detail see **Appendix**).

Over the years, several Members have also 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**). Some Members have also sought to codify the executive branch positions and offices related to global women's issues.[33]

**FY2020 Foreign Aid Appropriations for Global Women's Issues**

Section 7059 of the final FY2020 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 nonconflict 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 how to improve the status of women in the MENA region, including legal rights and protections for women, women's economic participation, women's political representation, and the impact of conflict and displacement on women and girls. Each section examines both the gender perspectives and regional dynamics that affect women in the region.

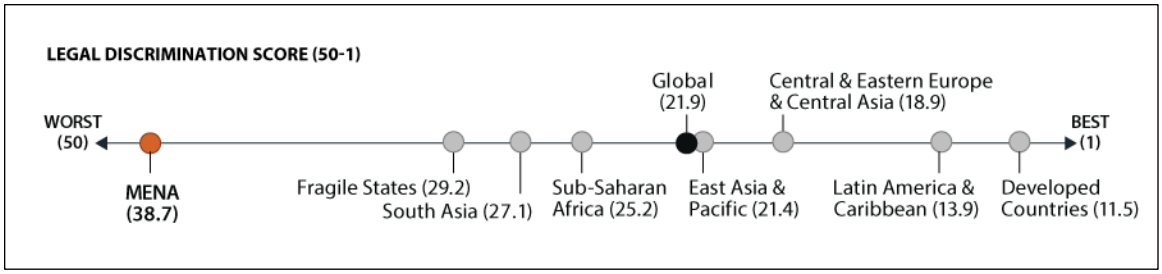
[33] For example, selected legislative vehicles that have sought to codify the State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues and the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's issues over the years included versions of the International Violence Against Women Act; some proposed Senate State/Foreign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

## Legal Rights

A challenge facing many women in the MENA region is a lack of legal 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.[34] 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.)

**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 equality between men and women (see **Figure 4**).[35] 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.[36] 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 perpetrators accountable.[37]

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

[35] 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.)

[36] In Israel, laws regulating inheritance, transmission of citizenship, and age of marriage in Israel 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.

[37] 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.

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.
- **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.

### Case Study: USAID Efforts to Address the Justice System and Gender-based Violence (GBV) in Jordan[38]

In FY2018, USAID aimed to improve the ability of the judicial system in Jordan to respond to cases of violence against women by developing and securing approval from the Ministry of Justice to promulgate and enforce guidelines for judicial handling procedures for victims of domestic violence. USAID trained 210 justice sector personnel across Jordan on how to use the guidelines. As part of its efforts to strengthen advocacy for female empowerment, USAID also worked with the Jordanian National Commission for Women to advocate for legal safeguards to prevent or respond to GBV by helping to draft recommendations for amendments to the Personal Status Law and lobby members of Parliament. The law offers the legal framework that governs marriage, divorce, paternity, and inheritance, and provides guardianship provisions that shape gender relationships within families. The proposed amendments safeguard nondiscrimination based on social status, sex, and religion, and promote gender equality and the rights of children in line with international treaties. USAID partnered with national stakeholders and convened a two-day workshop bringing advocates and experts to further examine the Personal Status Law. An assessment published by USAID in January 2020 notes that the law has still not incorporated these amendments, despite increased debate on the issues.[39]

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

[39] USAID, "Final Report: USAID/Jordan Gender Analysis and Assessment," January 10, 2020.

**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.

## Economic Participation and Opportunity

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. Development indicators have declined further in some countries as a result of violent unrest since 2011. All but one MENA country (Algeria) fell

in the ranking of Human Development Indicators (HDI) between 2009 and 2019.[40] Women arguably have experienced these national and regional disadvantages more severely than men: the average unemployment rate for women in the region (14.7%) is more than twice the regional average for men (6.6%).[41] Conversely, 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.[42]

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 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 have traditionally discouraged women's participation in the economy, few 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.[43]

The MENA region has the lowest rates of female labor force participation (i.e., the percentage of women who work or are actively seeking employment) in the world.[44] The regional average female labor force participation rate (28.3%) is 19 percentage points below the global average for women (47.7%), ranging from 5.8% in Yemen to 59.2% in Israel.[45] On average, women participate in the labor force at less than half the rate of men in the region (76.2%). The greatest gaps between male and female participation in the labor force are found in Yemen, Iraq and Syria—countries that face severe instability and conflict in addition to economic woes—and in several Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Oman).

### 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**).[46] 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.[47] Some observers have posited that the mismatch is demand-side driven, as young women have increasingly entered the workforce at a

[40] With the exception of five countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Yemen), all of the MENA countries improved their HDI scores over the 10-year period. The HDI is a statistic composite index of life expectancy, education, and per capita income indicators compiled by the U.N. Development Program.

[41] 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*.

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

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

[44] International Labor Organization (ILO) modeled estimates retrieved December 2019. The ILO statistics on labor force participation and unemployment do not count unpaid domestic or agricultural work that many women do.

[45] 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.

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

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

time when job opportunities happen to have stagnated for both men and women.[48] 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.[49]

The World Bank has 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."[50] 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**). Youth unemployment, while a challenge for men as well as women, is worse for young women in all the MENA countries except Israel: on average, female youth unemployment is nearly 14 percentage points higher than male youth unemployment (31.6% compared to 18%).[51] Economic frustration was arguably one of the driving forces behind the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, and renewed protests in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon in 2019 again brought the issue to the fore.[52]

The picture is not uniformly negative: since 2000, over nine million women have entered the region's labor force.[53] 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.[54]

### Case Study: USAID Efforts to Promote Women's Entrepreneurship in Egypt[55]

Through its Strengthening Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development (SEED) activity, USAID launched a women entrepreneurs' network (WEN) in 2018 with representatives from eight women-focused organizations.[56] This network aims to secure financial and nonfinancial services for women entrepreneurs and business owners and articulate policy needs to the Government of Egypt. In FY2018, USAID reached out to 5,720 women beneficiaries, and 776 women entrepreneurs were trained to become leaders through USAID's SEED capacity building programs and events. SEED activities in FY2018 also supported female entrepreneurs in developing their businesses and generating revenues of $64,211, with revenue growth of 366%.

[48] 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.

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

[50] 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.

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

[52] See for example Jeremy Bowen, "Is a new Arab Spring unfolding in the Middle East?" BBC News, October 29, 2019.

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

[54] 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.

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

[56] U.S. Embassy in Egypt, "USAID Supports the Launch of Egypt's First Women Entrepreneurs Network," Press Release, November 18, 2018.

**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.

**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

Women are underrepresented in political positions and institutions in the MENA region to a greater extent than they are in most of the world.[57] 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.[58] 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 granted women the right

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

[58] 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*.

to vote in 2011 and has granted women some additional 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.[59] 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.[60]

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.[61] 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."[62]

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 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.[63] 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.[64]

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.[65]

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[59] 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.

[60] 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.

[61] 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."

[62] 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," DefenseOne, February 6, 2018.

[63] 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/.

[64] 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.

[65] U.N. Development Program Libya, "Women, Peace and Security in Libya: Comparative Summary of the WPS

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.[66]

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" roles that focused on various forms of caretaking, primarily in socio-cultural ministries.[67]

**Selected Milestones for Women's Political Representation**

- **In 1969,** Golda Meir was elected Prime Minister of Israel. 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 give women the right to vote following Oman (2003), Qatar (2003), Kuwait (2005), and the UAE (2006).[1]
- **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.[1]
- **In February 2019,** Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud became the first female ambassador to represent Saudi Arabia.[1]
- **In September 2019,** two women, Selma Elloumi Rekik and Abir Moussi, ran in Tunisia's presidential elections.[1]

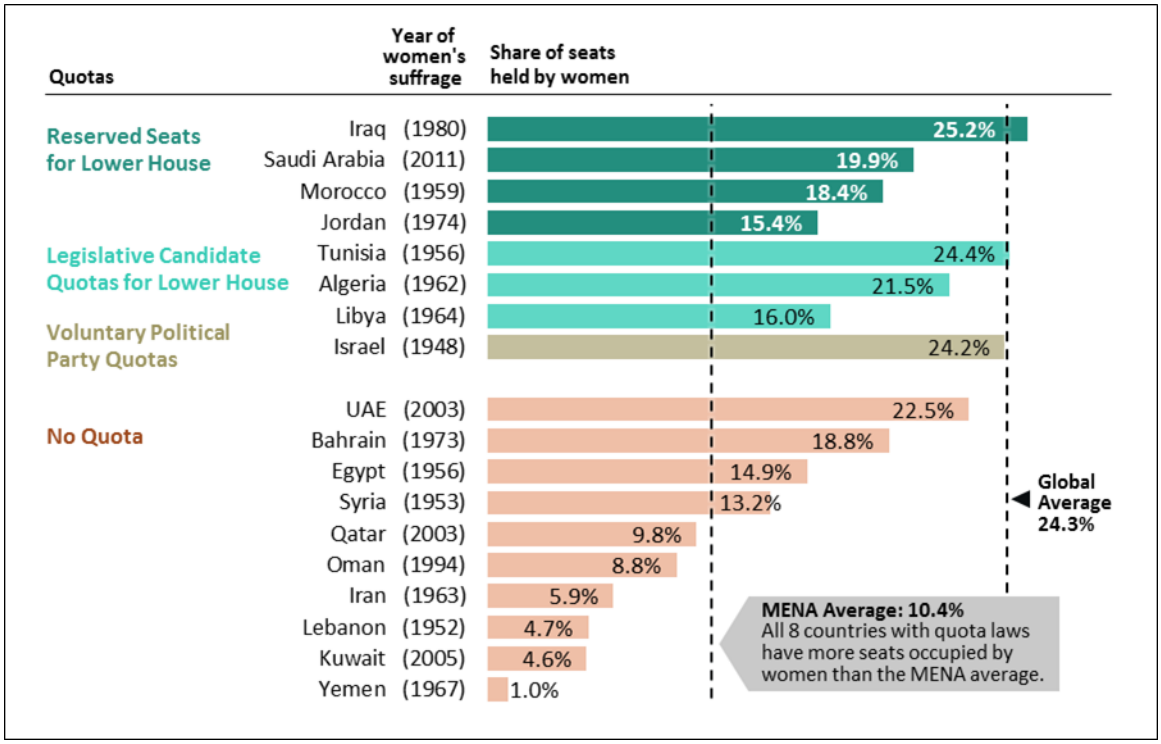
Baseline Study, Phase I and Phase II," 2015.

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

[67] 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.

**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.

## Conflict and Displacement

Compared with most of the rest of the world, the MENA region has experienced a disproportionate share of conflict and population displacement in the last decade.[68] Women and children make up the majority of displaced civilian populations in the region.[69] 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).[70] As **Figure 7** illustrates, the countries suffering from conflict and humanitarian crises

[68] 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.

[69] 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.

[70] The United Nations offers the following definition of CEFM: "Child marriage, or early marriage, is any marriage

also have some of the highest rates of intimate partner violence in the region.[71] 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 assumed power across Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2019) "discriminated against women, girls, and sexual minorities as a matter of policy."[72] 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.[73] Abuses against women 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."[74] 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."[75] 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.[76]
- 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

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.

[71] 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.

[72] 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.

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

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

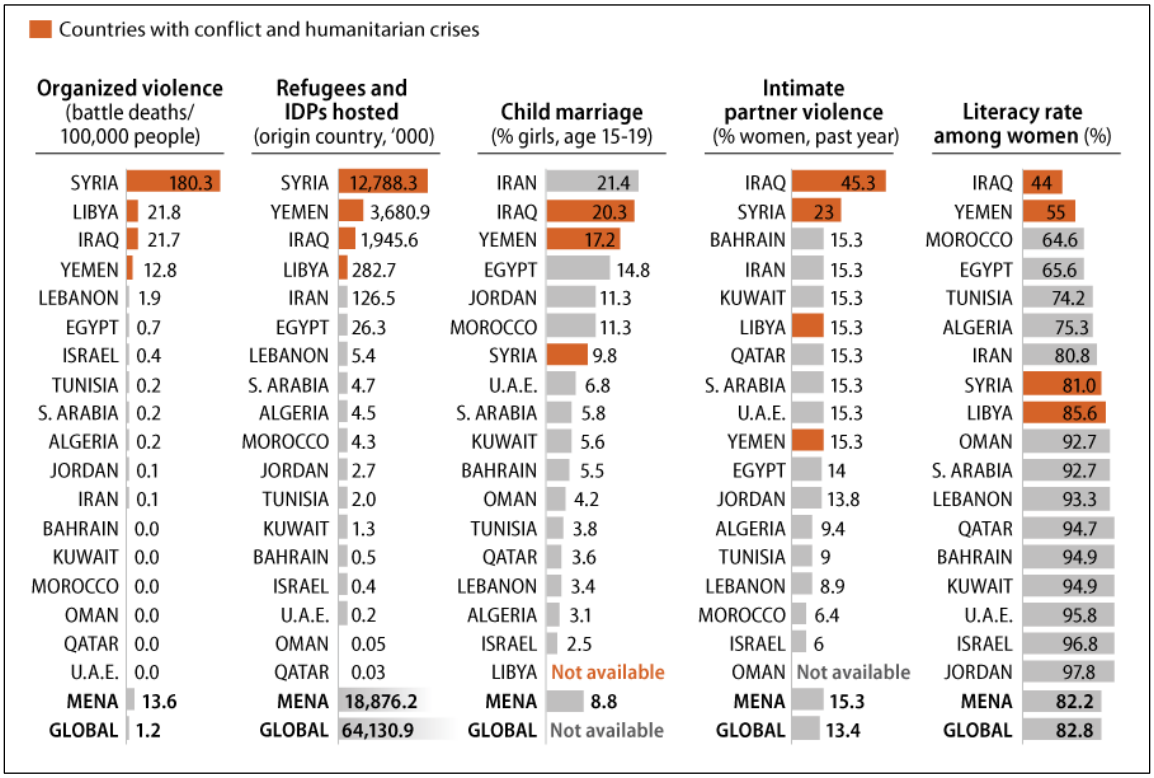
[75] Ibid, p. 1.

[76] 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.

backdrop of pre-existing gender inequality, exacerbated by the chronic incapacity of Government institutions to protect civilians."[77]

- 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."[78]

**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' education, particularly in Syria and Yemen, where schools have closed

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

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

due to conflict. Two million children are out of school in both Syria and Yemen.[79] Yemeni women historically have the highest rate of illiteracy in the region,[80] and the ongoing conflict is likely to lead to a rise in that rate as girls drop out of school.[81] 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**).[82] Gaps in education, combined with war-related trauma, 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.[83]

### 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.[84] Rates of child, early and forced marriages (CEFM) had decreased between 1990 and 2010, but progress has reportedly 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.[85] Negative trends for girls in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, illustrate this increased vulnerability.

- **In Iraq,** CEFM increased from 15% in 1997 to 24% by 2016, including 5% of marriages involving children younger than 15;[86]
- **In Syria,** child marriage rates are reportedly four times higher among displaced Syrian refugees than among Syrians before the crisis;[87]
- **In Libya,** previously ranked among the region's lowest rates of child marriage (2%), the number of child brides is rising, and rose particularly rapidly in areas that were controlled or influenced by the Islamic State;[88] and
- **In Yemen,** child marriage rates may be as high as two thirds of girls under the age of 18; in governorates with high numbers of internally displaced persons, 44% of marriages reportedly involved girls under the age of 15.[89]

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

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

[81] See, for example, Louise Wetheridge, "Girls' and women's literacy with a lifelong learning perspective: issues, trends and implications for the Sustainable Development Goals," U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016.

[82] See, for example, UNHCR, "Woman Alone: The Fight for Survival by Syria's Refugee Women," July 2014.

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

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

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

[86] 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.

[87] 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.

[88] 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.

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

## Conflict Resolution and Peace Negotiations

Women have not largely not been involved in formal efforts to resolve the MENA region's three largest ongoing wars in Libya, Syria, or Yemen, despite attempts by some international players to involve women in these processes. For example, in **Libya**, despite the active involvement of nearly one in five women in the 2011 Libyan revolution, peace efforts to date have not been fully inclusive of women.[90] Since 2016, the U.N. Security Council Resolutions extending the mandate of U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) have called for the "the full, equal and effective participation of women in all activities relating to the democratic transition, conflict resolution and peacebuilding."[91] No women were invited to participate in the International Conference on Libya that took place in Paris on May 29, 2018.[92] The consultative phase of the Libyan National Conference Process that ended in July 2018, coordinated by then-head of UNSMIL Ghassan Salamé to organize elections and a peace process in Libya, solicited submissions from 7,000 Libyans, a quarter of whom were women.[93]

In **Syria**, throughout six rounds of peace talks between 2012 and 2017 to resolve the Syrian war, 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 U.N. Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, created a Syrian Women's Advisory Board to support women's participation in the peace process, which sent a delegation of 12 women as third party observers to negotiations in Geneva.[94] In 2017, women comprised 15% of negotiators of the U.N.-sponsored peace talks.[95] 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.[96] Women hold about 30% of seats in the 150-member Constitutional Committee, created in late 2019, and 13 of 45 seats in the constitution drafting committee.[97]

**Yemen** was on track to increase political representation of women before the outbreak of conflict in 2015. In 2009, Yemen ranked at the bottom for women's political participation (135th of 136 countries assessed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union); there was one woman serving in the lower house of parliament and two in the upper house.[98] After protests broke out in 2011, however, a

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[90] Rola Abdul-Latif, "Libya Status of Women Survey 2013," IFES, September 2013.

[91] U.N. Security Resolution 2273, March 12, 2016; U.N. Security Council Resolution 2376, September 14, 2017; U.N. Security Resolution 2434, September 13, 2018; U.N. Security Resolution 2486, September 12, 2019.

[92] Scheherazade Khan, "Libyan Women Break the Silence," Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, October 10, 2018.

[93] UNSMIL, "Remarks of SRSG Ghassan Salamé to the United Nations Security Council," July 16, 2018.

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

[95] Bela Kapur, "Syrian Women in Political Processes: Literature Review," The Kvinna Till Kvinnna Foundation, May 2017; Testimony of Jamille Bigio in 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.

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

[97] Remarks by Jomana Qaddour at Middle East Institute event, "The Role of Women in Syria's Future," November 21, 2019. The U.N.-facilitated Constitutional Committee is comprised of 150 delegates equally split between the Syrian government, opposition and civil society.

[98] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in National Parliaments," September 30, 2009, available at http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif300909.htm.

National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was called to broker a transition from the longtime rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh to President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. Women held 30% of seats and chaired three of the nine committees at the NDC. A new draft constitution that built on recommendations from the NDC would have secured the recognition of women as equal citizens and independent individuals, a 30% quota in decision making positions, and a legal minimum age of marriage. 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.[99] Eight women were reportedly invited by U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths to join the peace talks in Sweden in 2018, though only one woman was present at the negotiation table.[100] There are three women currently serving as members of the 26-member presidential body of the separatist Southern Transitional Council.[101]

## 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.[102] 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.[103] 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 military operations.[104]

Experts and U.S. government officials have repeatedly expressed concern about the potential radicalization of women residing in camps for people displaced from territory formerly held by the Islamic State.[105] In August 2019, the United Nations reported that vulnerable populations in these camps were at risk of further radicalization:

> 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

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

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

[101] Afrah Nasser, "Southern Yemeni women enter storm of politics, war," Al Monitor, August 23, 2019.

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

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

[104] 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?"

[105] 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.

> radicalization, especially given the absence of age- and gender-sensitive rehabilitation programmes.[106]

A U.N. assessment in early 2020 estimated that 96% of the 66,100 inhabitants of Al Hol displacement camp in Syria were women and children.[107] An unknown number of these women are family members and/or former supporters of IS combatants, or are former IS combatants themselves.

Experts have argued that in order to be effective, efforts to counter terrorism need to recognize the role women can play (as the extremist groups do).[108] Several MENA governments have taken steps in this direction. For example, the State Department's 2018 Country Reports on Terrorism noted that the Algerian foreign minister had lauded the "crucial role" of women in Algeria's efforts to counter extremism, highlighting the female clerics who work with young girls, mothers, and prisoners.[109] The report also noted that in Egypt, the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf) had trained up to 250 female preachers as part of its outreach program to women who might be susceptible to recruitment by extremist organizations.

**Case Study: USAID Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism in Morocco[110]**

USAID's Favorable Opportunities to Reinforce the Self Advancement of Today's Youth (FORSATY) 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."[111]

## Implications of COVID-19

The effects of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on the MENA region, or on women in the region specifically, have yet to be fully realized. Previous pandemics and infectious disease outbreaks suggest that women may be uniquely affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.[112] Women are likely to face greater exposure to the virus in many countries, as they constitute the majority of healthcare workers and disproportionately care for sick family members at home. Women's preexisting vulnerabilities detailed in this report are likely to be exacerbated by the virus and by government responses in the following areas.

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[106] 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.

[107] U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syrian Arab Republic: North East Syria: Al Hol Camp," Humanitarian Snapshot, January 16, 2020.

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

[109] U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2018."

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

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

[112] Helen Lewis, "The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism: Pandemics affect men and women differently," *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2020.

- **Economic Opportunities**. Economic opportunities are likely to decrease, especially for women who work as foreign domestic workers or in service industries impacted by travel limitations. The United Nations estimates that 700,000 women in the MENA region will lose their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.[113] Women, who make up 68% of workers in the informal sector, will be particularly impacted, as they often lack access to protections such as unemployment insurance and health benefits.[114] Unpaid domestic work is likely to increase as health systems are weakened and women have to care for children and sick relatives at home.[115]
- **Education**. With schools closed, girls and boys are missing educational opportunities and women are taking on added responsibilities of homeschooling children. While some schools and universities turn to virtual classes, access to high-speed internet and computers or tablets varies across the region, and may be gendered within the household.[116]
- **Humanitarian Crises**. The humanitarian crises and conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen have weakened health systems and destroyed medical facilities, and refugees and displaced populations have higher rates of underlying health issues due to the impacts of war, disease, and famine. Already vulnerable women and girls appear likely to have a harder time accessing aid as the virus makes delivery of goods and services more difficult for humanitarian organizations, and limits the activities of their personnel on the ground.[117]
- **Sexual and Gender-based Violence**. Rates of domestic violence may rise as families are asked to shelter in place and face heightened anxiety over physical and financial insecurity.[118] Furthermore, access to domestic violence assistance services, where available, will likely be reduced due to physical distancing measures, and as healthcare systems become overloaded in the crisis.[119]

# Considerations for Congress

Given the linkages between overall societal prosperity and the specific status of women, it is likely that improvements in either of those would promote positive change in the other. Looking ahead, Members of the 116th Congress and beyond may take into account the following issues and

[113] UN Women and U.N. ESCWA, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region," E/ESCWA/2020/Policy Brief.4, April 2020.

[114] Ibid.

[115] David Evans, "How Will COVID-19 Affect Women and Girls in Low- and Middle-Income Countries?" Center for Global Development, March 16, 2020.

[116] Rasha Faek and Tarek Abd El-Galil, "The Shift to Online Education in the Arab World Is Intensifying Inequality," El Fanar Media, April 30, 2020; U.N. Women and U.N. ESCWA, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region."

[117] See for example, International Rescue Committee, "How the IRC responds to COVID-19 in Syria and other conflict zones," March 25, 2020; U.N. Population Fund, "Regional Situation Report for the Syria Crisis," no. 91, March 1-31, 2020.

[118] For example, Tunisian Minister of Women's Affairs, Asma Shiri Laabidi, stated there had been a five-fold rise in the number of domestic abuse cases reported between March 23 and 29 compared with the same period in 2019. "Tunisia Offers Free Helpline as Lockdown Sees Abuse Spike," Asharq Al-Awsat, April 3, 2020.

[119] Mélissa Godin, "As Cities Around the World Go on Lockdown, Victims of Domestic Violence Look for a Way Out," *TIME*, March 18, 2020.

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, where might U.S. foreign policy, foreign assistance, and military cooperation be most usefully directed to address gender imbalances in the MENA region? What is the history of performance of U.S. efforts to date? Are there specific countries or lines of effort that should be prioritized over others, and for what reasons?
- **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 policies, and particularly foreign assistance programs, appear to have been the most effective in improving conditions for women? What has been the impact of U.S. programs in specific MENA countries, such as the aforementioned USAID programs described in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco? Could such programs be expanded to other MENA states?
- **Whole of government approach**. 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?
- **Funding conditions**. What are the pros and cons of conditioning U.S. financial support to authoritarian states on respect for women's rights and gender equality? What metrics would be appropriate for gauging the latter?
- **Best practices**. To what extent, if any, is the United States sharing best practices within the U.S. government and among other international actors? Would efforts such as the congressional steps to encourage 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 multilateral organizations have for addressing gender issues in the MENA region? How well coordinated are international efforts, and what opportunities are there for greater coordination and/or burden-sharing?

# 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 have also 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 have also voiced concerns about the detention of women's rights advocates in Saudi Arabia (S.Res. 73 and H.Res. 129).[120]

H.Res. 106, passed in the House, denounces 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.[121] 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."[122] 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.[123]

## Economic Empowerment

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

[120] 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 the final law (P.L. 116-92).

[121] 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."

[122] 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).

[123] 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.

within the Office of Women's Empowerment an office for the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative (W–GDP). Congress funded 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.[124]

## 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.[125] 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."[126] 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.[127]

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

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

[126] 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/.

[127] 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) seeks 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), which would find that rape and sexual assault are used as tools of war in conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria, 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.

## 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.[128] 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."[129] 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.[130] 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.

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

[128] 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).

[129] 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.

[130] 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.

in negotiations to end the violence and in any political transition in Syria."[131] 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 has also 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.[132] 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 women.

## Countering Violent Extremism

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.[133] 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."[134] 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 conduct this process of de-radicalization and that's, again, I think something that is—that behooves us, to get on top of."[135]

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[131] 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.

[132] 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."

[133] 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.

[134] 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.

[135] 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.

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) which would find that the Islamic State benefited strategically and financially from the subjugation of women, would "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*)* requires an independent assessment on gender and countering violent extremism, with a report due to Congress not later than September 15, 2020. Specifically, the assessment "shall 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.

## 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."

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