



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## **The Struggle for Progress: Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa**

U.S. Capitol Visitor's Center, Room SVC 210-212

March 3, 2010, 12:00 – 2:00 PM

**Freedom House** hosted a panel discussion at the U.S. Capitol Visitor's Center marking the publication of its new [report](#), *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, 2010 Edition*. The 600-pg. study is a five-year retrospective review of improvements or setbacks in the MENA region since the publication of its original report in 2005. This second edition analyzes the status of women from 18 countries and territories in the region "through the prism of international standards embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR)." According to some of the [findings](#), **women's rights advanced in 15 out of the 18 countries surveyed**, with progress evident in education, the job market and the political process. Nonetheless, **women in the MENA region still suffer from greater inequality than do women elsewhere.**

**Jennifer Windsor**, executive director of Freedom House, provided welcoming remarks and thanked for their financial support the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other private donors. Additionally, she expressed regret that Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) could not attend the event but thanked her for her long-standing commitment to advancing women's rights in the United States and throughout the world.

**Dalia Mogahed**, the executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, explained that the report was the culmination of two years of on-the-ground research by 40 researchers. **Ambassador Ronald Schlicher**, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, said that this report highlights the region's deficit in human rights – such as its lack of democratic institutions, independent judiciaries and freedoms of assembly – but also cites notable progress in increased economic opportunities and greater political participation. Referencing President Obama's expression of personal commitment to the enhancement of women's freedom at his June 2009 speech in Cairo, Schlicher said that one of the principle challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is ensuring that women can participate at every level of society. **"The State Department," he promised, "will continue to work until we are successful."**

**Sanja Kelly**, senior researcher and director of the project, explained that discussing the status of women is a very controversial issue in the Middle East, especially in Iraq where it is almost as contentious a topic as the country's burgeoning governmental system. The main purpose of the study therefore is to serve as a guide for NGOs, scholars, activists and government officials interested in learning about the status of women's rights.

Kelly explained that there is a one-dimensional perception in the United States that the entire MENA region suffers from the same paucity of rights as those in Saudi Arabia. In reality there is much

diversity with countries such as Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria scoring very high while others like Iran, Yemen and Saudi Arabia ranking at the bottom of the scale. Some important improvements include:

- **Education for women:** Every country in the region has seen improvement between 2003 and 2007. Female literacy rates are improving, especially in Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait with each boasting rates over 90%. Likewise, women outnumber men in university attendance. In Qatar, the female to male ratio is 287:100.
- **Growing economic empowerment:** Women are better represented in the workforce than ever before, especially in areas like Kuwait and Qatar.
- **Political participation:** Women are increasingly active in the political sphere with many gaining seats in parliament and being appointed to government positions. Women currently occupy more than 25% of the seats in the Iraqi parliament.

Despite these gains, women in the Middle East are still being discriminated against. “They are the most repressed of any region in the world,” said Kelly. Legal and societal discriminations are still widespread, most notably in personal status laws and citizenship rights. Existing laws are not enforced and complaint mechanisms are ineffective. Violence against women is rampant; many countries still have not criminalized domestic abuse and many (except for Bahrain and Jordan) refuse to develop shelters for battered women.

**Rana Hussein**, award winning journalist at the *Jordan Times* and author of the report’s section on Jordan, explained that so-called “honor killings” are still extant. The Jordanian government, however, recently established a specialized tribunal to hear cases and strengthened resulting prison term sentences from what used to be as little as three months to what is now 17 years. **“We must erase any law that excuses the killing of women,” she said.** The government also established the first government-run shelter, which they call a family reconciliation home. Laws combating human trafficking have been enacted and unheard of debates about the rights of migrant workers are being discussed. At the same time, citizenship laws greatly inhibit relationships and public gathering laws restrict basic assembly. Women in the media are also usually assigned to low ranking positions and remedial sections.

**Huda Ahmed**, former special correspondent and translator for the *Washington Post* and author of the report’s section on Iraq, argued that the escalation of violence that resulted from the war in Iraq placed a terrible burden on Iraqi women, many of whom had high hopes for freedoms of expression and basic societal rights. “The problem is that for every step forward, we go 10 steps back,” she lamented. **The unyielding levels of violence and lack of security or respect for law are the greatest problems impacting women’s rights in Iraq.** Though there is officially freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, women do not dare go out into the streets. Additionally, she explained, there are a slew of problems plaguing the country including rising cases of rape, honor killings, genital mutilation and sectarianism. At the same time, there are positive elements such as a 25% female representation in Iraq’s parliaments, the appointment of female ambassadors for the first time and a Constitution that bans domestic violence

**Dalia Ziada**, an Egyptian women’s rights activist and director of the North Africa Bureau of the American Islamic Congress, said that a patriarchal society exists in Egypt that greatly hinders female opportunities in the judicial and political realms. She cited as an example the recent [decision](#) by the Egyptian State Council to bar female justices from holding judicial positions. “Egypt is achieving progress – this is true,” she asserted. But “women’s rights in my country are only for decoration.”

**There is a disconnect between what is enacted into law and what is enforced by the authorities.** For example, there are laws criminalizing sexual harassment and female genital mutilation but it still happens and goes frequently unpunished.

In a short Q&A session, Hussein stated that education is the most important issue. “To get over extremism, conservatism,” we need to focus on education, textbooks and teachers. Ahmed believed that activists should “point out the negative traditions and habits related to religion.” Kelly agreed with Ziada’s earlier assessment that “many laws look good on paper but aren’t enforced.” More importantly, she argued that investing in literacy programs and networks of women’s rights activists because the existence of a robust “civil society is important to track and hold governments responsible.”

On the issue of international funding, Hussein admitted that NGOs in the MENA region are sensitive to foreign funding, especially from the United States. **“Support doesn’t have to be vocal from the U.S.,” she said. “Results are more important.”** Ahmed stressed that support from women around the globe “mean a lot” to the women working on these issues. Ziada, on the other hand, stated that the international community should “please stop dealing with the governments. They will not change anything, so please stop dealing with them.” Rather, she asked that those concerned should deal directly with grassroots organizations.

Lastly, **there were differing views on the issue of quotas for women participation in government,** with Hussein believing that they are a means to an end and should therefore be viewed as a temporary step to full enfranchisement. Ziada viewed it in purely negative terms. And Ahmed stressed that the issue, at least in Iraq, is not so much the quotas inasmuch as the fact that parties can control which women are chosen to run, many of whom are institutionally weak.