

MENA WOMEN QUARTERLY REPORT

October
December 2015

The MENA Women Quarterly Report covers women's advances and setbacks in politics, economics, conflict situations, and human rights issues throughout the MENA region. This issue includes a special feature on Fátma Mernissi, noted Moroccan sociologist and Islamic feminist

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Feature: The Life and Work of Fatema Mernissi

Fatema Mernissi, the noted Moroccan sociologist and Islamic feminist, died on [November 30, 2015](#) in Rabat. Mernissi is known globally for her numerous publications on Islamic feminism, politics, human rights, and her personal experiences, including [Beyond the Veil: Male/Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society](#). She was a faculty member for decades at Mohammed V University in Rabat, where she also completed some of her education. She received [Ph.D. in sociology](#) from Brandeis University in 1973.

“Fatema Mernissi’s work is pioneering in understanding the relationship between women’s issues and the state in the Arab/Islamic countries, as well as the relationship between these issues and West,” wrote Wilson Center Fellow [Fatima Sadiqi](#). “She was a genuine visionary in predicting that no headway could be achieved on the road of democracy without involving women as agents in decision-making. She used her vast knowledge of Islam to show that the problem is not Islam but the way this religion is instrumentalized by rulers and patriarchs. As such her legacy is transnational. Mernissi was an inspiration for me not only with regard to women’s issues but also with regard to identity and Berber issues. I know I lost a unique mentor and a special friend.”

Human Rights

Numerous articles from the last few months highlighted the prevalence of violence against women throughout the MENA region. In Turkey, the [number and brutality of violent acts against women have increased](#) in the last decade, and on December 3 three men were [sentenced to life in prison for murdering a woman](#) who resisted their attempt to rape her. A number of other reports detailed cases of rape and sexual violence: [the UAE has imprisoned victims of rape](#) as a result of laws banning extramarital sex; an Israeli court [sentenced a convicted rapist to community service](#) prompting outcry from women’s groups; and an NGO documented [20 instances of rape against female political prisoners in Egypt](#). Female prisoners in Iran have also been subjected to violence: [a juvenile offender was hanged](#) for murdering her husband and another underwent [forced “virginity test”](#) due to allegations of “illegitimate sexual relations” for shaking hands with her

[drivers, women-only buses](#) and other [progress in the fight against sexual harassment](#). Turkey introduced [individual park seats for women](#). Saudi Arabia provided [free taxi rides to women for breast cancer screenings](#). An Iranian court issued a single exit visa to football captain Niloufar Ardalan, [overruling her husband who previously prevented her from traveling](#).

Women in Public Office

Four elections in the MENA region made headlines in the past few months

Saudi Arabia's municipal election on December 12, 2015 was particularly notable because it was the first in which Saudi women were [permitted to vote and run for office](#). According to Saudi officials, [130,637 women registered](#) to vote and 979 women ran for office (comparatively [1.35 million men registered](#) to vote and 5,938 men ran for office), and [women won 21 of the 2,100 municipal council seats](#) throughout the kingdom. Women candidates were professors, [businesswomen](#), architects, and [activists](#), including Loujain Hathloul, who was jailed for 10 weeks for driving and was initially banned from running for office.

Women who ran for office in Saudi Arabia faced some challenges during their campaign. [Women candidates could not campaign face-to-face with male voters](#) and had to designate male representatives to campaign in their places. To overcome this obstacle, [women utilized social media](#) extensively to connect with their prospective constituents.

The United Arab Emirates also made history when Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi was elected on November [the President of the Federal National Council](#), a position equivalent to speaker of parliament. She is the first woman speaker in both [the UAE and the greater Arab world](#).

Egypt's elections, which took place in two phases during the last quarter, established the first parliament since President Abdul Fattah el-Sisi took office in June 2014. [Women won 73 seats](#) surpassing the [quota](#) of 70 seats. This was an increase from the [12 women elected](#) in Egypt's parliament in 2012. According to Daily News Egypt, some of the newly elected women legislators are considering [forming a bloc](#) to "to support the women's experience in the parliament." These parliamentarians have already held four meetings to "empower women" in the Egyptian legislature and discuss issues such as obtaining diplomatic passports for their husbands and accessing stipends for transportation and overnight lodgings.

On November 1 Turkey held parliamentary elections for the second time in 2015. In the June elections, women won 98 of the 550 seats in parliament, [the highest number in the country's history](#). In the November elections, the number of women elected [decreased](#) to 82. Some have criticized the gender disparity in the election's results; Filiz Kerestecioglu, a parliamentarian from the People's Democratic Party (HDP), [stated](#), "Although we tried to change the face of the parliament by increasing female representation, sadly we failed as a result of the system's male dominated policies."

Activists have also criticized Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu for "limited" women's representation and the subject matter of their portfolios. [Two of the 26](#) ministers on the Prime Minister's cabinet are women—the ministers for Family and Social Policy and Environment and Urban Planning. "Even in politics, women are placed in charge of the 'private sphere', i.e., the family, the home, the compassionate side of the state. Women have a voice and ideas beyond the

Ministry of Justice of the Czech Republic
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