

Challenging Inequality

OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES TOWARDS WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

By Sameena Nazir

As the societies of the Arab Middle East and North Africa (MENA) confront the process of democratic change, no issue offers a more formidable challenge than the unequal status of women. This survey presents detailed reports on the state of women's rights in 16 countries and one territory—Palestine—of the MENA region, including countries from North Africa, the Levant, the Gulf, and the Arabian Peninsula. Although the survey provides evidence of progress toward gender equality in a number of countries, its principal findings reflect a pervasive, gender-based gap in rights and freedoms. A substantial deficit in women's rights exists in every country reviewed in this study and is reflected in practically every institution of society: the law, the criminal justice system, the economy, education, health care, and the media.

The Middle East is not, of course, the only region of the world where women are, in effect, relegated to the status of second-class citizens. In Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and North America, women continue to face gender-based obstacles to full realization of their rights as equal participants in society. Indeed, the modern revolution in the status of women in the United States and Europe that began roughly 40 years ago remains incomplete even today. In the United States, the right of women to compete on equal footing with men in the workplace was enshrined in law in 1964, while sexual harassment in the workplace was made a matter of national concern only in the

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1980s. While women are active participants in U.S. political life, even today their representation in the Congress remains relatively low.

It is, however, in the MENA countries where the gap between the rights of men and those of women is the most visible and significant and where resistance to women's equality has been most challenging. Some of the reforms adopted in recent years, such as the new family code passed into law in Morocco in 2004, have the potential to trigger wide-ranging gains for women's rights. But as this survey repeatedly demonstrates, the passage of laws that putatively guarantee equal rights for women and men means little if those guarantees are not enforced. Most countries examined in this survey have guarantees of equal rights written into the constitution or national legislation, but in no case are these guarantees effectively enforced by state authorities.

The need for change in women's status will grow increasingly urgent as the demands for broad-based democratic reform are felt throughout the Middle East. Democratic change in Arab nations is long overdue. According to *Freedom in the World*, the global assessment of political rights and civil liberties issued annually by Freedom House, none of the countries or territories included in this survey has earned a rating of "Free," and none qualifies as a democracy. But there are growing and encouraging signs of democratic ferment that could have a significant impact on the region's political future. However, a meaningful breakthrough for freedom will require major progress toward women's equality.

The comprehensive reports presented in this survey detail how women in MENA countries face systematic discrimination in both laws and social customs. As a consequence, women do not enjoy equal rights as citizens, nor do they have a full, independent legal identity. In most countries under survey, women do not have legal recourse in cases of domestic violence. Although women's rights organizations have repeatedly raised the issue, not one country in the region has a law that clearly makes domestic violence a criminal offense. Arab women are significantly underrepresented in senior or executive positions in politics, government, the judiciary, and the private sector. The participation of women in political life in MENA countries is the lowest in the world. Women are not allowed to vote in Saudi Arabia. In some countries, women are barred from certain professions, and many women face social pressures to remain at home and eschew a career. Although some countries under review have enacted laws prohibiting gender discrimination, few offer women the practical mechanisms to bring complaints of bias.

In addition to the obstacles to change that women confront in their societies, their status is affected by national, regional, and global political developments. The emergence of extremist Islamic forces stands as a threat to gains women have achieved as well as to future possibilities of reform.

Even where radical forces are not influential, the politicization of Islam seriously complicates the challenge of advocating for equal rights. The years of strife involving Israelis and Palestinians have had a ripple effect on women's rights, as has the war in Iraq and the earlier civil conflicts in Algeria and Lebanon. The absence of democratic institutions and processes, an independent judiciary, and a lack of good governance in many countries in the region also presents some major roadblocks to women's access to justice. In addition, a large number of migrant and refugee women living in the Middle East region, particularly in the Gulf, face gender-specific obstacles such as discrimination in employment and domestic violence. Migrant women in the MENA region are often more vulnerable to abuse by private employers due to barriers of language, lack of education about their rights, and lack of protections under domestic labor policies. Trafficking of women is also an emerging problem in the region.

This survey has been undertaken to provide an independent, thorough, and comparative analysis of the state of women's rights in the MENA region. Over the past three decades, Freedom House has established a reputation for rigorous and accurate assessment of the state of freedom around the world. *Freedom in the World*, which was launched in 1973, is an authoritative index of global political rights and civil liberties that is widely cited by policymakers and scholars. Freedom House also publishes annual surveys of global press freedom, the state of democratization in East Central Europe and Eurasia, and governance and transparency, and has published surveys of economic freedom and religious liberties worldwide.

Methodology and Approach

This survey is the product of a 20-month-long research effort that involved a team of 40 analysts and advisers, a series of consultations with women's rights leaders in the Middle East, and focus groups on women's issues conducted in three Middle Eastern countries. Consultations with women's advocates were conducted in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Authority, Syria, and the UAE. Freedom House staff also consulted with women's rights advocates from Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Focus groups were conducted in Morocco, Kuwait, and Egypt. At the core of the survey is a series of narrative reports that describe the challenges, deficiencies, and progress on women's rights in 16 Arab MENA countries and one territory: **Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine (Palestinian Authority and Israeli-Occupied Territories), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.** The survey methodology and the full list of questions are attached as an appendix at the end of this survey.

The reports were prepared by scholars and women's rights specialists with country or regional expertise who have written widely on political, human rights, and women's rights themes. A number of the analysts live in the countries under evaluation; others are international scholars with expertise in their report country who travel frequently to the region. The methodology was formulated by a committee of specialists on Islam and on human rights, legal, social, political, and women's rights issues in the Middle East and a team of Freedom House staff analysts. The country reports and country ratings were assessed by a team of academic advisers who specialize in social science statistics, Middle East political developments, and women's rights issues.

The survey is comparative from a global perspective; each country or territory receives a numerical rating for each of five broad categories of women's rights. The ratings will be helpful in assessing where in a particular country attention should be focused in order to advance women's equality. The five categories are:

- I. Nondiscrimination and Access to Justice
- II. Autonomy, Security, and Freedom of the Person
- III. Economic Rights and Equal Opportunity
- IV. Political Rights and Civic Voice
- V. Social and Cultural Rights

In rating country performance, Freedom House employed a universal standard of comparability based in part on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The survey measures both the *de jure* and the *de facto* status of women's rights in all areas under evaluation. Although the major focus of the study is government policy, it also looks at the role of non-state actors in impeding women's rights or in advancing them. The survey reviews the conditions of women in all social groups, residents of urban and rural areas, and both citizens and noncitizens. While the survey is restricted to Arab MENA countries, a country's rating is based on a global standard. Thus readers can ascertain a country's performance both in the region and globally. Ratings are expressed on a five-point scale (1–5), with 1 signifying the weakest performance and 5 reflecting the strongest performance. The survey covers developments up through the end of the year 2003; developments in years prior to 2003 are frequently cited to assist in placing the state of women's rights in its proper context. Significant developments in the year 2004 were cited in rare cases, such as the adoption of a new family code in Morocco.

Findings

The survey identified a complex series of obstacles that prevent women from enjoying the full range of social, political, civil, and legal rights. The survey authors placed special emphasis on the following issues:

Inferior Status Due to Legal Discrimination

The constitutions of most Middle Eastern countries include a clause that guarantees the equality of all citizens. Constitutions that declare, “All citizens are equal and there shall be no discrimination among citizens on the basis of sex,” have been adopted in Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Libya, Oman, Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Syria, and Tunisia. While Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Morocco, the UAE, and Yemen do not include a gender-based nondiscrimination clause in their constitutions, they do declare that “all citizens are equal under the law.” Only in Saudi Arabia does the constitution not include a clause or statement committing the government to a policy of nondiscrimination.

Yet even though 16 of the 17 countries and territories examined here enshrine the concept of equal rights in their constitutions or in the body of national legislation, women throughout the region face legal forms of discrimination that are systematic and pervade every aspect of life. In no country in the region are women given equal status in the citizenship laws. In the majority of countries, by law, women are susceptible to harsher penalties than are men charged with the same crime, especially in cases of so-called moral crimes. The legal codes provide no serious protection for women against violence within the family and treat a woman’s testimony as worth less than a man’s in cases in which rape or domestic violence is brought before the legal authorities. In many countries, the family codes extend to the husband the status of head of household. This confers on the husband the responsibility of providing financially for his family but also gives him social and in some cases legal authority over his wife and the right to demand obedience from her. Several MENA countries still retain the concept of the House of Obedience, under which a wife can be sentenced to a form of house arrest for refusing to “obey” her husband. Police and court officials in many countries often use this law to refuse women means to file complaints of abuse against their husbands. Women are also subject to unequal treatment in the labor laws of most countries in the region, can legally be denied employment in certain occupations, and are discriminated against in labor benefits and pension laws.

Discrimination in Nationality and Citizenship Laws

Women do not enjoy the same citizenship and nationality rights as do men in MENA countries. This particular form of inequality can have a serious effect on the choice of marriage partner. Under the citizenship laws of MENA countries, a man can marry a woman from outside the country with the knowledge that his spouse can take on the citizenship and nationality rights he enjoys. By contrast, a woman who marries a foreigner cannot pass on her citizenship and nationality to her male spouse. Furthermore, with the exception of Tunisia and Egypt, a woman who marries a foreigner cannot pass on her citizenship and nationality rights to her children. Such children must ac-

quire special residency permits, renewable annually, in order to attend public school, qualify for university scholarships, and find employment. In the UAE, the law requires a woman to surrender her UAE citizenship if she marries a man who is not a citizen of a Gulf state.

These restrictions affect millions of women in the region, as it is common practice in many countries for marriages to take place within tribes or extended families that are scattered across the region. Also contributing to transnational marriages are armed conflicts and poverty, which trigger mass movements across borders for security or employment. Limits on citizenship rights are a particular problem for Palestinian women, especially in countries with a large Palestinian diaspora such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt.

In recent years, modest progress has taken place toward reform of the citizenship/nationality laws in MENA countries. Jordan, Bahrain, and Morocco have adopted measures to allow children from a citizen mother and a non-citizen father to receive more services and benefits if the family decides to reside in the mother's country. But this problem persists and remains a high priority for Arab women's rights advocates.

Domestic Violence

All country reports highlight domestic violence as a serious problem in the Middle East. Contributing factors include lack of legislation criminalizing domestic violence, lack of government accountability and protections for women's rights inside the home, and social stigmas associated with women victims instead of social disapproval of the perpetrators of domestic violence.

Domestic violence can range from wife-beating and marital rape to the brutal battering of female family members by male family members. Gender-based violence such as practices that force women and girls to have virginity tests or undergo female genital mutilation (FGM), as well as the severe physical violence or murder inflicted on women by male family members in the name of family honor also present problems in the region. While domestic violence is widespread, no country in the region has adopted a law that clearly outlaws all its forms and ensures that those guilty of domestic abuse be punished. The authors of the country reports in this study were unanimous in recommending that MENA governments enact strict laws to protect women from all forms of violence, especially domestic violence, and provide punishment for those who commit rape or acts of violence, including violence in the home.

Violence against women within the family is a serious and complex global problem. While no part of the world is immune from the stain of spousal abuse, the Middle East is unique in the array of laws, practices, and customs that pose major obstacles to the protection of women or the punishment of abusers. The problem is intensified by a legal structure that places the burden of proof entirely on the female victim in cases of gender-based violence,

something that discourages women from reporting acts of violence or demanding legal redress.

In many countries, laws exist that actually condone domestic violence. Particularly troubling here is the practice, widespread in the region, of legally encouraging men who rape women to marry their victims. Women are often coerced by social pressure to marry their rapists in order to avoid the social stigma associated with being raped. The countries under review are also notable for the absence of support networks or shelters for victims of abuse. Likewise, few government-supported services exist to provide counseling or legal or financial assistance to help victims reintegrate into society with dignity. All country report writers have recommended public education campaigns on domestic violence and urged governments to allocate funds for victim services and the training of police and court officials.

Lack of Information; Absence of Voice

A major problem for women in the region is a lack of information about women's rights, women's leadership, and women's global achievements. They also lack knowledge of and access to the work of women's advocacy organizations. Overwhelmingly, women in the region are unaware of their rights under the constitution or the laws of their countries. This is due in part to educational weaknesses: Students, especially girls, are simply not taught about their rights as citizens. Governments do not feel obliged to inform their female populations of the available laws and policies that women could use to empower themselves. The media also largely fails to cover the injustices women suffer and problems specific to women. In addition to a lack of information, cultural attitudes, predominant throughout the region, treat women's demands and protests as being in violation of women's traditional, subservient role.

Women's advocacy organizations exist in most countries in the region. In some countries, such as Morocco, women's organizations are free to advocate for any cause, while in other countries, groups must exercise caution when challenging the political status quo. Some women's groups are directly or indirectly tied to the government or political leadership; others are completely independent. Independent women's groups advocating for women's legal equality are not permitted to openly operate in the UAE or Saudi Arabia. Women's organizations have made significant headway in certain areas despite the impediments of law and custom. But some countries use licensing and registration requirements to discourage the proliferation of independent advocacy organizations and often prevent nongovernmental organizations from receiving financial assistance from independent sources or from outside the country. Even in the more liberal environments, women's rights advocates do not have easy access to government officials, transparent processes, data on women's issues, national budgets, or state media.

Women's Inferior Status in Family Laws

Throughout the region, legal matters pertaining to family relationships are adjudicated under the Shari'a systems based on Islamic laws. Despite the diversity of legal systems and the diverging interpretations of Shari'a employed in the MENA region, in most countries, all legal matters related to marriage, divorce, custody, and women's legal status are dealt with under what is commonly referred to as the family code or Personal Status Law.

In almost all MENA countries women face gender-based discrimination in the family codes. Among the countries with the most liberal family codes are Tunisia, which has had a relatively liberal family code for many years, and Morocco, which enacted a family code that substantially expanded women's rights in 2004. Egypt has also made recent changes in the family code to give women expanded divorce rights. However, while progressive steps have been taken, women are still treated unequally even under the more liberal family codes.

Reform of the family code has been a high-priority objective of women's rights advocates, as well as liberal-minded lawyers, judges, and Islamic scholars. The Morocco reform has had an important regional impact, as it has strengthened the argument of those who say that equal status within marriage is compatible with Shari'a law. The reforms adopted in Morocco and Egypt are also seen as small but important victories for civil society movements in their ongoing struggle against patriarchal and extremist Islamic forces, for whom the subservient position of women in marriage has been a key political issue.

Outside of Morocco and Tunisia, the existing family laws of MENA countries relegate women to an inferior position within marriage and within the family. Family laws in these countries declare that the husband is the head of the family, require the wife to obey her husband, and give the husband power over his wife's right to work and travel, among other rights. The reports in this study cite specific articles that enshrine a condition of legal inequality for women. The reports further explain how courts have interpreted these laws to deny legal protection to women whose husbands have forbidden them to accept certain jobs. The reports also detail how, in many countries, the law allows a husband to divorce his wife at any time without stated reason and without going to court but requires a wife to meet specific conditions in order to initiate a divorce in a court of law.

Under the family code of most MENA countries, women are not permitted to interpret the religious texts that are the basis for Shari'a or to serve as family court judges. In this way, women are effectively excluded from those aspects of the legal system that have the most intimate and powerful impact on their lives. The patriarchal attitudes, prejudices, and traditionalist leanings of male judges, lawyers, and court officials often contribute to a denial

of due process for women, particularly through these functionaries' selective interpretations of what is "Islamic."

Even in Algeria, a relatively secular country with a tradition of more expansive rights for women, the concept of women's unequal status can be found in a number of laws. Although the constitution allows freedom of movement of all citizens, Article 39 of Algeria's family code stipulates, "The duty of the wife is to obey her husband." Consequently, policemen and court officials in Algeria, and in many other countries in the region, consider it an acceptable practice for a husband to forbid his wife to travel without his permission. In Saudi Arabia, women are legally forbidden to travel alone in public transportation or on airplanes. In many cases, a woman is required to seek the authorization of her father, brother, or husband in order to leave the home, and upon failing to do so can expect to face physical violence at the hands of family members or be confined to the home. Most often, governments consider such cases to be strictly family matters. In the absence of proper mechanisms, women often rely on either their educational or social status, or on open-minded government officials, to help ease restrictions on their freedoms. Women can go to the courts to file a complaint against such restrictions in some countries, but in most cases it is unusual for a woman to seek official redress due to the expected social pressure for her to obey her husband.

Many women suffer from a lack of awareness of their legal rights under the country's family law. For example, under Muslim family law, the marriage contract generally contains a section that allows each spouse to stipulate in writing his or her specific rights in the marriage. This feature gives women the theoretical ability to achieve equal rights within the marriage. In practice, however, this feature of the marriage contract is seldom utilized, either due to illiteracy or lack of familiarity with the available legal options or due to patriarchal social traditions under which it is the prerogative of the bride's male guardians to finalize the conditions of the marriage contract. Governments in most countries do not engage in public education campaigns on women's rights in the marriage.

Inheritance laws, which are also included in the family code, are another source of inequality for women. Sisters get half of the share of their brothers, and women generally get a smaller share of family inheritance than do their male relatives. But in most countries, women do not even get their half share of the inheritance because of their lack of access to the legal system. This is a particular problem in countries with large rural populations, such as Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. In these societies, women's access to inheritance, housing, and property is also affected by their educational level, family support systems, economic status, and access to legal information and legal mechanisms. The governments do not take aggressive steps to enforce women's inheritance and property rights and often allow abuses to go unpunished.

Lack of Complaint Mechanisms

With the exception of Egypt, the governments in the countries under review do not provide mechanisms for women to file complaints against gender discrimination. Women who are discriminated against in the legal system, denied job promotions or benefits, or are excluded from participation in institutions such as the judiciary, do not have access to channels through which they can make confidential complaints or seek redress under the constitution. The absence of special commissions or legal entities to enforce legal protections against gender discrimination reflects a lack of interest in women's rights on the part of government officials. It also reinforces women's inferior status in society and allows violations of women's rights to take place with impunity.

Education

Education has been a prime area of progress for women in the region and is an important avenue for their overall advancement toward equality. Over the past 10 years, women in all MENA countries except Yemen have made gains in access to education, literacy, university enrollment, and the variety of subjects open to study. In several countries, women have a university enrollment rate higher than that of men. There has also been an increase in the availability of vocational training schools and business colleges for female students.

Although women are generally still encouraged to study in such traditionally female disciplines as education and medicine, in many countries women's numbers have increased in the fields of science and engineering. Particular progress has been visible in the Gulf states, where women are now joining new professions in substantial numbers and are increasingly going abroad on government scholarships. There has, however, been something of a backlash in a few MENA countries against women's involvement in non-traditional study areas. In Kuwait, women who want to study in certain traditionally male fields, such as engineering, must achieve a higher grade-point average for admission than men. In Oman, women students often must postpone university study for one year, a limitation not applied to men.

Country Ratings

Although all but two of the countries reviewed in this report, Oman and Saudi Arabia, have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a major international agreement on women's equality, none of the countries evaluated can claim to meet internationally recognized standards for women's rights. According to the survey's 1-to-5 rating scale, a score of 3 in any category reflects an imperfect adherence to universally accepted rights standards. In this study, countries seldom receive a score of 3.0 in any of the five broad categories, and

some countries receive ratings in the range of the lowest possible score, 1.0. A rating of 3.0 represents conditions in which a woman's ability to exercise her rights is sometimes restricted by the government or by non-state actors, in which some laws that provide adequate protection for women are in place but are poorly implemented, and in which women suffer discrimination in some areas of political, economic, or social life.

Two countries consistently earn the highest scores for the region: Tunisia and Morocco. However, Tunisia scores low in the Political Rights and Civic Voice category due to the country's overall political repression. In all other categories, Tunisia scores highest in the region. The country with the lowest scores in all categories is Saudi Arabia. Its scores ranged from 1.0 for Political Rights and Civic Voice to 1.6 for Social and Cultural Rights.

Among countries with higher ratings, all three—Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria—are in North Africa. Other countries with comparatively high performances are Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan. Several of the countries that, according to the survey, score comparatively well on rights issues, such as Algeria and Tunisia, have more secular traditions by the standards of the region and have had periods of socialist government. Yet a secular background is no guarantee of women's freedoms, as evidenced by the relatively low scores the survey found for Syria and Libya. In most categories, the lowest ratings were earned by Saudi Arabia and its fellow monarchical states of the Persian Gulf: Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE. Yemen, although the poorest country in the Arabian Gulf Peninsula, performed better in the political rights section due to Yemeni women's ability to participate fully in all levels of the electoral process and women's NGOs' scope to work freely. While the Gulf states score particularly poorly on issues pertaining to women's legal rights and women's freedom to advocate for their rights and participate in civic and political life, these countries had somewhat better records on providing educational opportunities and access to health care for women. Nevertheless, despite the availability of higher quality schools and health services in the richer Gulf areas, women still lack the freedom to exercise their rights to healthcare and education independently. In some Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, a woman will not be treated in a hospital without a male's permission.

The category of Nondiscrimination and Access to Justice assessed women's equality under the constitution, protection from gender-based discrimination, citizenship rights, equality in the penal code and criminal laws, and women's legal identity. Four countries—Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia—registered scores between 3.0 and 3.6. A second group of countries scored between 2.5 and 2.9: Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, along with Palestine. The countries with the lowest scores, those below 2.0, were Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

The category of Autonomy, Security, and Freedom of the Person examined family laws and equality within marriage, freedom of religion, freedom of move-

ment, and freedom from torture and gender-based violence. Only Morocco and Tunisia scored higher than 3.0. Those in the range of 2.5 to 2.9 were Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. Only Saudi Arabia registered a score below 2.0.

The category of Economic Rights and Equal Opportunity reviewed women's land, property, and inheritance rights, rights to education and employment, and labor protections. Only Morocco and Tunisia received scores above the 3.0 threshold. Countries that scored between 2.5 and 2.9 were Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE, along with Palestine. Only Saudi Arabia received a score below 2.0.

The category of Political Rights and Civic Voice examined women's rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, participation in the judiciary and high-level decision making posts, roles in political processes, and visibility in civic rights issues. Algeria and Morocco were the only countries to register a score of 3.0 or better. Scores between 2.5 and 2.9 were accorded to Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Palestine. Countries scoring at the low end of the scale, under 2.0, were Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Libya. Kuwait, UAE, and Saudi Arabia received the lowest scores in this section due to the denial of suffrage rights for women citizens.

The category of Social and Cultural Rights assessed women's health and reproductive rights issues, protection from harmful traditional practices, housing rights and participation in community life, and women's influence in the media. Scores of 3.0 or better were registered by Morocco and Tunisia. Countries receiving scores between 2.5 and 2.9 were Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, and Algeria, along with Palestine. Saudi Arabia and Libya scored below 2.0.

An overall chart of regional comparative ratings for each of the five sections is presented in this survey. Ratings for each country are also presented on the first page of each report along with key country statistics.

Recommendations

The core purpose of this survey is to facilitate local and global efforts to expand the rights of women in the Middle East and North Africa. Each of the five main categories of each country report includes a series of recommendations for reform addressed to the country's government. Although some of the recommendations deal with problems that are specific to the particular society, many deal with issues that affect all, or most, of the countries under survey. These recommendations have been jointly made by the report authors and Freedom House. Among the major recommendations of the survey are:

1. Women should enjoy equal status under the law in all aspects of life. As this survey demonstrates, women face legal discrimination in practically

all countries in the region. Of particular concern are laws on citizenship/nationality, women's legal standing in the judicial system, and discrimination against women within the criminal justice system. Gender discrimination in the name of Islam should not be allowed by the governments. There is thus an urgent need for governments to review and revise national laws and implementation mechanisms so that discriminatory provisions can be removed and women's equal status can be ensured. Governments should also institute public education campaigns to promote women's equal rights as citizens.

2. Family laws should be revised to ensure equal rights within marriage and the family. To ensure nondiscriminatory implementation of family laws, governments should institute significant reforms within the family court system and provide women's rights training to court officials. Islamic Shari'a interpretations that result in a denial of women's equal rights should be revised to ensure women are not discriminated against. Women scholars should be encouraged to work as court experts, and governments should prioritize the appointments of women as lawyers and judges in the family courts.
3. Domestic violence should be considered a serious crime in all instances. This applies to all forms of violence, including torture, rape, marital rape, spouse battering, and violence against women in the name of honor. Court and law enforcement agencies should consider the prevention of domestic violence a major priority. The state should take leadership in and also facilitate NGOs' role in creating awareness of the impact of domestic violence on women and society. Governments should also provide counseling and support services for victims. The international community can help in this process by providing technical assistance and resources to MENA governments.
4. Legal and traditional barriers to women's participation in politics, government, and the private sector should be removed. Governments should take concrete steps to promote women's leadership in politics and business, including various forms of affirmative action and complaint mechanisms for victims of bias. The governments of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE should allow all citizens the right to vote.
5. Governments should increase spending for education, ensure that women in all parts of the country have access to education, and eliminate laws and practices that discriminate against women in education. Education has been an important instrument in promoting the advancement of women in recent years. The reforms that made progress possible should be expanded, and particular attention should be paid to the lack of education in rural

sections of some countries in the region. The international community should increase its assistance to countries that request help.

6. Governments should take aggressive steps to eliminate legal and social obstacles to women's economic equality. In particular, labor laws should ensure that women are not denied equal access to jobs or employment benefits at any level. Governments should facilitate the social needs of women workers, such as transportation and daycare facilities, in order to decrease the social pressures that discourage women from working. Labor laws that mandate equal opportunity should be enforced.
7. Governments should institute reforms in the status of migrant workers. They should take steps to ensure that women migrant domestic workers are not the victims of exploitation or discrimination. Given the large number of female migrant workers in some countries in the region, it is imperative that these workers have access to social services, find protection against violence and abuse, and enjoy the protection of national labor laws. The governments should establish and advertise hotlines for women and allow women's rights groups to work openly as advocates for the rights of migrant women workers.
8. Governments should review all legislation and work to eliminate social traditions that require a woman to seek a male's permission in order to receive medical treatment for her general or reproductive health. The government should work in cooperation with women's NGOs to increase women's access to information on women's health and reproductive health options, with particular focus on diseases affecting women such as breast cancer.

The overarching purpose of this survey is to facilitate and support national and international efforts to empower women in the Middle East and North Africa. It is our hope that the findings of this survey will prove useful to those working for women's equality in the region, whether inside or outside the government, to help to identify priority areas for reform, institute best practices for women's equality, and catalyze further actions.