

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

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WHAT'S NEXT

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE BUSH INSTITUTE



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ADVANCING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND THE WORLD

by Natalie Gonnella-Platts and Farhat Popal

Our recommendations:

- CONGRESS SHOULD FULLY IMPLEMENT THE WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY ACT AND OTHER RELEVANT POLICIES THAT PROMOTE WOMEN'S INCLUSION IN SECURITY EFFORTS
- CONGRESS, CORPORATIONS, AND NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD INVEST IN PROGRAMS THAT ADVANCE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN
- THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTORS NEED TO ENSURE FOREIGN ASSISTANCE AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PROGRAMS ARE REFLECTIVE OF LOCAL NEEDS AND PRIORITIES

It has been proven that women drive education, economic growth, and self-reliance in their communities. They help build societies based on social connections, trust, and inclusion, and participate in peace-building at all levels. This is as true in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as it is all over the world.

Yet, women and girls are still denied full access to and inclusion in society due to factors like institutionalized bias, insecurity, poverty, and gender-based discrimination.

Only 25 percent of women in the MENA region are in the workforce despite higher rates of education. In many MENA countries women do not have equal rights to property or inheritance. They can be locked out of crucial business conversations due to segregation and social taboos, and are subject to "protective" labor laws that limit their professional opportunities.

Equality and inclusion matter. The [International Monetary Fund estimates](https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/MECA/Issues/2017/01/07/Regional-Economic-Outlook-Middle-East-and-Central-Asia6)¹ that from 2000 to 2011, \$1 trillion in cumulative output could have been realized across MENA economies had the gender gap been narrowed.

One of the most influential ways we can support the growth of peaceful, prosperous societies is through direct investment in women leaders. When we treat women's rights

¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/MECA/Issues/2017/01/07/Regional-Economic-Outlook-Middle-East-and-Central-Asia6>

as a niche and independent issue, we undermine every other aspect of those strategies. To achieve lasting prosperity, all citizens must have equal opportunities to fulfill and maximize their potential.

Research shows that women [improve conflict resolution efforts](#)² by promoting dialogue and trust, mobilizing coalitions, raising issues vital for peace, and prioritizing gender equality. [A study](#)³ of 40 peace processes in 35 countries over the last three decades found that women's inclusion in peace processes resulted in the greater likelihood of an agreement, implementation of the accord, and sustainability over the long term.

The United States and the international community must do a better job of championing policies and programs that integrate women's empowerment into foreign policy and defense strategies.

CONGRESS SHOULD FULLY IMPLEMENT THE WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY ACT AND OTHER RELEVANT POLICIES THAT PROMOTE WOMEN'S INCLUSION IN SECURITY EFFORTS

Congress' passage of the 2017 bipartisan Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Act is an important milestone. However, the WPS legislation has yet to be fully implemented. The legislation requires a government-wide strategy and training for diplomats, development professionals, and security personnel to support these efforts. Unfortunately, it is unclear whether any funding has actually been allocated for these purposes. And though the Act requires reports to Congress on the financial contributions of each department or agency, there are limited resources available to do so adequately. Without additional support and accountability, agencies are forced to either redirect funds from other vital initiatives or delay implementation entirely.

Congress should allocate funds more directly for the implementation of this law, ensure proper oversight, and work to fully implement the WPS Act.

CONGRESS, CORPORATIONS, AND NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD INVEST IN PROGRAMS THAT ADVANCE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN

Women make significant contributions to the economies of the MENA region, whether as business owners, academics, economic development practitioners, or bearers of the burden of household labor. Still, women are disproportionately affected by poverty, discrimination, and exploitation in the global economy. In addition, women's economic opportunity is tied to other outcomes such as gender equality, the well-being of children, and inclusive growth and prosperity.

Women must have an environment that removes physical and social barriers to their

² <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/publication/why-women-inclusive-security-and-peaceful-societies/>

³ <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/IPI-E-pub-Reimagining-Peacemaking.pdf>

participation so they may realize their full potential in the market. Programs enabling these outcomes include, but are not limited to:

1. Training and mentorship to ensure qualified women rise to positions of leadership and decision-making
2. Advancing human resource policies to better support women's participation in the workforce
3. Ensuring access to capital and finance to promote entrepreneurship and the full participation of women in the formal economy

Public, private, and nonprofit sector leaders should increase investment and prioritize efforts that aid the economic empowerment of women in the MENA region. The [George W. Bush Institute's WE Lead program⁴](https://www.bushcenter.org/explore-our-work/developing-leaders/we-lead.html), which equips women from the MENA region and Afghanistan with the skills to become more-effective leaders, is an example of such a program.

THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTORS NEED TO ENSURE FOREIGN ASSISTANCE AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PROGRAMS ARE REFLECTIVE OF LOCAL NEEDS AND PRIORITIES

Sustainable change requires the engagement of stakeholders at all levels. But when it comes to international engagement, local perspectives are too often overlooked to the detriment of effectiveness and sustainability.

Working toward a common goal in collaboration with local innovators affords an unparalleled opportunity to cascade knowledge, build affinity, and ensure that solutions are adequately serving the populations they aim to engage. This is vital for women and girls — their voices matter. In the MENA region and beyond, we must do a better job of embracing their viewpoints and the long-term value of their participation.

When women hold equal and active roles in society, societies are more prosperous and stable. The United States has a vital role to play. By investing in women, we are investing in peace and stability across these regions and the wider world, we are undermining extremist narratives, and we are championing future generations of leaders that will help their countries thrive.

Uprooting poverty, violence, and injustice, gender empowerment is a proven force for transformation. Women in the Middle East and North Africa deserve our support now more than ever.

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⁴ <https://www.bushcenter.org/explore-our-work/developing-leaders/we-lead.html>



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