Kate Seelye: Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Kate Seelye, vice-president at the Middle East Institute, and welcome back to our fourth panel of the day. I'm so excited that MEI's hosting a panel on women's activism and social change, and this is the first time in many years that we've had a conference panel devoted just to women's issues.

We've always had a lot of women from the region presenting in our panels and discussing broader issues like economics, and development, and culture. Our inclination was not to, sort of, separate out women as a distinct topic because they're so integral to so many topics we cover, but this year felt just a little bit different.

So much has happened in the area of gender rights in the past year. We've seen the overturning of rape laws across the region, from Lebanon to Jordan, to Morocco, to Tunisia. In an historic turn of affairs, Saudi women have been granted the right to drive, and in another truly historic moment, Tunisia in September lifted a 44-year ban preventing Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims.

Underpinning all of these changes has been greater activism on the part of women and men to push for reform, and that's been driven by all sorts of factors, including the fact that Arab women today are increasingly better educated, even than their male counterparts.

We felt that this year has been a very special year, and it demanded its own panel exploring the implications of these changes. So we have an amazing group of women assembled for this discussion today. I'm not going to steal our moderator's thunder and introduce them, but they come from a number of the key countries where we've seen major developments take place, like Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt, and I'm so looking forward to their stories.

Leading this discussion is someone who has herself been writing about the success of Arab women. Nafeesa Syeed is a national security reporter at Bloomberg news, where she covers issues related to the Middle East. She also served as a correspondent in Bloomberg's Dubai office.

In 2014, she co-authored the book *Arab Women Rising: 35 Entrepreneurs Making a Difference in the Arab World*, published by Wharton. We look forward to her leading a very insightful panel today.

Thank you, Nafeesa, thank you to our panelists, and we'll get started. Just one other little note, our photographer would like all of the young women activists in the room to stand up, when the panel is over, with our panelists to take a picture, so do come forward at the end. Thank you.

Nafeesa Syeed: Thank you. Thank you, Kate. It's an honor to be here. Usually, when I'm asked to, you know, look at women in the region who think of, "How can you do that in an hour and a half? There are 20 countries, 300 million people, and half of the population of all those countries."

But anytime that I think you can hear directly from women, in my own reporting and work that I try to do, I think being able to hear directly from people and their experience and voices is always something that's really important to get across, because there's enough people in Washington who will tell you they – they can tell you what's actually going on, but if you can hear directly, I think that's really important, so I was excited to get started.

So we have - starting from my right, I'll introduce briefly everyone. We have Wafa Ben Hassine, a member of Access Now, of its Middle East policy council. Then, Hind Aboud Kabawat, a member of the Syrian High Negotiations Committee and a Tanenbaum peacemaker.

Then to my left, we have Rania Al-Mashat, who formerly worked at the Central Bank of Egypt and now is an advisor at the International Monetary Fund. Last but not least, we have Fawziah al-Bakr, a professor at King Saud University and longtime activist in Saudi Arabia.

So to get started, I wanted to kind of set the stage. We'll get sort of a taste from a few different contexts, which I think will allow us to see what's unique about different situations, but also maybe see what parallels we can find.

But I wanted to do a little survey first, a few minutes from each of you, starting with in Tunisia. I wanted to ask, Wafa, if you can tell us a little bit, we've been hearing about some of the recent news, either Kate mentioned around inheritance laws, or allowing women to choose their spouses regardless of faith.

I wanted to see if these are considered wins in your eyes, what the reception to these kinds of announcements have been, and what's behind this, what kind of activism from women on the ground, and sort of what this means for Tunisia.

Wafa Ben Hassine: Great. Is this on? Great. First, it's an honor to be here with all these wonderful women who have worked so hard in their own individual contexts. I want to start by saying that each country has its own specificities, so I want to preface by that, and to really drone in on the point, hone in on the point that all of the changes that are happening in Tunisia are very much endogenous.

They're very much happening in response to internal changes that have been occurring over the past few decades, not the past few years. We all know that democratization is a long, protracted, and very, very difficult process.

Let me first run you through the four major developments that have happened this past summer in relation to women's rights specifically. Both in July, we had Article 227 of the Penal Code abrogated, which allowed a rapist to marry his victim. That was passed nearly unanimously in parliament.

Then, two days later, there was a violence against women law that also passed unanimously this time, which protected women from physical, moral, economic violence. About two months later, mid-August, the president, Beji Caid Essebsi, has made two major announcements on National Women's Day, announcing that, for one, the circular that prevented women from choosing the spouse that they can marry would be abrogated. Previously, this law is from 1973, it said that a Tunisian woman could not marry a person who is Christian, or Jewish, or simply non-

Muslim, so that was the first change.

The second announcement he did, which I would like to clarify because a lot of folks have seemed to think that there is an inheritance law that is drafted and that is being discussed in parliament.

No, the second one was actually a suggestion by the president for the parliament to look into the legality and the validity of perhaps changing the law to allow for inheritance equality between men and women.

There has been no follow up on that particular point so far. It's really important to remember that civil society has been a primary driver in helping bring forward these changes and these laws that are aimed to protect women.

You have associations like Les Femmes Democrates. They've been active for decades and decades, but you also have newer organizations that, thanks to the uprising and freedom of expression, they're actually allowed to bring these problems to the surface, to bring issues of rape and violence and domestic abuse to the fore and to be discussed openly.

This work, had it not been civil society, these changes would not have occurred, simply. The reasons, and what I said about civil society particularly, applies to the laws that were passed. As for the two announcements that were made by the president, both of them are obviously welcomed, especially for myself.

As a progressive, I think they're very, very good changes, but it's also very important to contextualize when and how these announcements were made. During the same time, around the same time this summer, a major administrative reconciliation bill was being discussed that basically forgave public officials that worked within the former regime and gave them amnesty for their economic crimes.

This was being discussed, and a lot has been – they've been protested, they have been – it's been a very contentious and controversial summer for Tunisia on this. It's also important

to remember that around the same time, people were really starting to feel the economic downturn. We're not seeing daily improvements in the "user experience," if you will, of Tunisians on the streets and in their homes.

And finally, the municipal elections have been postponed endlessly. And so, now seeing these two things by the president, yes, they're great, but it's also a way for the president to reconnect with his base that feels betrayed because of his alliance with the Islamists, and it's also a way for him to improve his ratings and be better accepted by those who voted for him.

So with that, I mean, I hope I gave a general overview. One last thing I wanted to say is passing laws is never enough. I mean, if you don't implement the laws, if there's no enforcement, then it's obviously not a priority for the government. As it stands right now, we really have to work on changing mentalities. The government has to invest in the protections that the Violence Against Women law actually articulates.

That includes training doctors, training educators, to identify signs of domestic violence and to treat it appropriately, and approves ameliorating and improving the judicial system protecting the victims, which is also articulates in the Violence Against Women draft law as well. Not draft, sorry, now it's a law passed unanimously, I have to remind myself.

There's still a lot of work to be done. It's really important that we don't think of Tunisia as a fait accompli. It's still a work in progress, and there's still a lot of work to be done for those protections to actually be realized.

Ms. Syeed: Excellent. Thank you for the context. I'd like to move to Hind, if you can explain to us – I mean, obviously activism doesn't exist in a continuum. We have the conflicts going on in the region, and I think it's really important to kind of put that as a backdrop.

When it comes to Syria, I was wondering if you can maybe give us sort of a overview, a few points around how

conflict is impacted when we're talking about either women's roles, activism, whether in politics and also socially, if there's – you were mentioning some things to me before, and I thought that was very interesting to understand how this many years of conflict has maybe reshaped or shaken things up.

Hind Kabawat: Thank you, first, for having me. It's been a great pleasure. When I got the phone call to come, I dropped everything because this is first to me. The Middle East Institute second. It is a subject very close to my heart.

Just if you allow me two minutes, one minute, you just want to add off what Robert [*Ford*] said this morning said about what's happening. Just the Russians is in control of Syria about the Syrian fights. The Iranian are boots on the ground, they're doing everything, and the Russians, they don't have the will to stay, but they are in a rush. They want this to finish.

So we get this, next week, we'll be in Riyadh again. There will be 30 people [*in the*] negotiation team including everybody, and they're going to talk about constitutions and elections, under the UN supervision.

As Robert said, it's not about the constitution, it's about the missing, the lack of rule of law in Syria. Nevertheless, the Russians' message is very clear. If you don't come to Geneva, if you don't want to discuss this, we have alternatives. Astana and Sochi, as simple as this. So it's up to you if you want start or not. If you don't want to do your constitution, we have it ready for you. We give you a draft in Astana before.

The Russians are playing very well the political games. The Iranians are on the ground. If I want just to mention about the Syrian people from both sides, and this is the difference when women – when we talk about the victims, we talk about both sides. When we talk about pain, we talk about both sides. This is the difference.

If you want to talk about the future about Syria, we need also to think about what will be happening in Syria. Both

sides are very worried about the Iranian presence in Syria, especially when you talk about, defending, protecting the minorities.

The minorities, especially Christians, are very, very concerned about the presence of the Iranians on the ground. They prefer Russians. Yes, they prefer Russian, and they say, "You know what? The Iranians is exactly the same as Nusra and ISIS. They are Islamic states in different way."

What is the role of the woman here? Just want to get to Syeed's questions. Things change. 2011, before, we had women's freedom in a way, but we are more cosmetics. We didn't have a say. We are in everywhere, but in the end, it's a dictator's country, a dictatorship country, so we don't really have a say, but we've been everywhere, and we looked good and everything.

2011, it is the call for freedoms, and women took a really good stand here. Women, they bore the brunt of the Syrian conflict. They paid a very high price in discrimination against them, violence, gender violence, women in the refugee camps. When I go to the refugee camps, there is more women than men.

And this is, the women are now in front, or front and right and center. They're everywhere in the conflict of Syria. What is the political role for us? What are we doing in Geneva? We have two from the HNC [*High Negotiations Commitee*] members, women, and two from the negotiation team, but we decided we'd want to have more women in the negotiation because we know women can get this peace, sustainable peace.

It's been a challenge, and if later my, the moderator will let me talk about the challenge a little bit, I will appreciate it, but we did work for two years. We've been from, "No quotas; we don't believe in quotas," to 30 percent quotas, from, "Why women they should be with us in this delegation?" until this morning, we're preparing a delegation to go to the Vatican for the Ghouta.

The head of this delegation, very Muslim conservative, he

told me, "There is no woman coming with us?", so this is some good change. We're there, and we know that we're not only cosmetic. We have things to say.

Also, we see now there is lots of talk about reconstructions, and about we need to have the Marshall Plan, like what Robert said today, and the early recovery, just want also to confirm. This cannot happen without any good transition, because in the end of the day, this will keep the cause root of the terrors. We'll still have the problems. We need to have solutions.

I think women, they decided, and they talked about it, and now when we talk about the reconciliations, about the future of Syria, we know that we have to have accountability, and this is we can talk about it later. Thank you.

Ms. Syeed: Yeah, thank you. To move to Saudi now, I wanted to ask Fawziah to sort of take us through – there's been a lot of news that's kept reporters busy the last few weeks, obviously, in some recent developments.

We have the ambitious crown prince now. We've had some announcements this year, obviously the lifting of the driving ban. We're moving into that into next year now, looking ahead. Also, the king ordering women no longer needing permission to have their *mahram* [*male family member escort*] to travel overseas.

I wanted to know, within that context we're hearing these latest developments, are these wins for you? I know you've been fighting for some of these things for decades now. What does it feel like now to actually have seen some of these things through, and what does that signal for what change could come in Saudi Arabia as well?

Fawziah al-Bakr: I just want start first by thanking The Middle East Institute for giving me the chance to be here and to see actually for myself what are they doing to integrate the Middle Eastern countries.

For the Saudi, it's going to be difficult because as you said,

it's been in the news all the time. Everybody in this room probably knows more than what I do, but we'll try to talk, you know, from the indigenous point of view what I feel on the ground.

Things are changing so much, to the point that sometimes you wake up in the morning and say, "Is it true? Is it true? Are we living the dream that we look for, for a long time?"

So the, of course, the national transformation plan 2030 has a lot of strategic development, economy, and then when it came, I have to tell you that I was like, "Well, that sounds like a wonderful plan, but just unrealistic because take into account all the social and religious forces that control in the situation."

You know what? It just, in no time, I think the most major decision that was taken is actually taking the religious people out of the street. I think that was the most courageous thing that anybody can do, because in such an ultra-conservative society, when you come and you tell these religious people to cool down and to control their movement, what you're doing is actually giving women a space to go out, a safe space.

Then, of course, the ban, they start also with the entertainment agency, which start a lot of events and initiatives in no time. There are so many events that include women and children and families, in a safe environment. Nobody can harass you. Nobody can touch you or take you to the prison, or get you in their car.

People felt so relaxed, and for the first time I went myself to the, which was the first time in my life, noticed that I went to the national stadium. For me as a woman, it was just unbelievable.

It was a historic moment to be there and just to watch everyone. For my surprise, I saw all these women and children, and boys and girls, and nobody cares. When the religious people were there, they'd always tell you, "Oh, watch, because this guy is going to jump to this woman," and so everybody was scared.

I didn't see any of that. People were busy with themselves, their children, enjoying their food, looking, playing. I think the atmosphere, it's very relaxed. Of course, the ban on driving, of course, when they lift and allowed us, that's a dream that we worked for a long time. In 6 of November 1990, 47 women, I was one of them, went to the street and asked for this right.

Of course, at that time, it was just unbelievable, unacceptable. Of course, the request, due to the very religious atmosphere of the Al Sahwa, which actually came out of, of course, the Khomeini in 1980s. The whole atmosphere was not ready, but I think what happened is that we shocked the society, and all the other nations started to see, "If the women of Saudi Arabia cannot drive, what else can't they do?"

Questions start, and women start anew their resistance. Of course, other groups came after us, and they signed petitions, and drove, and were imprisoned, and all that. But now, if you ask me about in the last two years with King Salman and Mohammad bin Salman, I'll tell you that we are just heading to the future.

We feel very positive. 70 percent of our nation is actually young people, and they just want to have a good education, to have good jobs, and good families. This is the most important things happen for women, but it's not only for women.

I think we are seeing a lot of value system change because you have to prepare these people to accept these kind of changes. It's not easy for a very traditional old man or woman to tell them that, "Your daughter's going to work side by side with men." You have to have the introduction and trying to change the value system of the society.

I think a lot of agencies, NGOs, and government agencies are doing the same. I mean, not as much as we like, but I think with time. Also, of course, in terms of guardianship – do you want me to tell – guardianship, of course, system is something horrible, of course, but I mean because it

requires every woman to have, I mean, a piece of paper for a male guardianship.

Now, all these things have gradually vanished, and there is nothing actually – in April 2017, King Salman issued his royal decree asking all the government offices and private offices to put on their sides all their procedures, and if there is anything you ask a woman to bring, like a paper, you have to justify it, and to bring a justification. If not, then it will be considered discriminatory against women. That's a big step forward.

We're looking, of course, to dismantle this guardianship system because it's just only left like, if you went to travel abroad, or you want to get married, or if you want to get out of prison, you have to have a male guardianship, unfortunately. These basically three other women that getting a job, get an education, training, doing your companies, anything you do, you don't need a guardianship at all.

So many things happen. I mean, little things, little things, really. Yeah, actually, on, exactly on Saturday--Monday, the Shura, they discussed these discrimination laws. If anybody discriminated for any reason, whether for your sex, or color, or region, you will be charged.

If you assaulted women, then you will be imprisoned for five years, if you, hate crime, religion, region. I think this law is definitely going to be approved by the cabinet, and we will see even more changes in Saudi Arabia.

Ms. Syeed: Good. It'll be interesting to see how those changes play out and be able to take stock of how they're implemented. I wanted to ask one quick questions since we went through the different countries, and I want to get to Rania in a second for some big picture perspective.

There's often, a question, Wafa, that people say is that Tunisia is the model for their world since the Arab Spring. I hear that very often. I wanted to kind of tease out this idea of what does it mean to be a model. Especially when it comes to, for women, it's often asked.

Either we hear Tunisia touted as a model for other countries, or I remember when I was reporting in UAE, styling itself as a model for women in the region, but I was never quite sure based on such vastly different economic, population differences, monarchies versus democracies. How do you, you can start, but just for any of you, just this idea of, is it possible to have a model, or is it that their contexts are too different to sort of square that?

Ms. Ben Hassine: The latter. I think the contexts are very, very different. I always hesitate to use the term 'model' in describing Tunisia because every country really has its own modern history, its own specificities in dealing with that modern history, including colonization and wars, as well as the availability of natural resources in every different country. I mean, that makes a big difference.

But what I can say is that it is very valuable to have the exchange and sharing of knowledge of strategies. It's important for women's groups to always be communicating with one another, because sometimes, even though the contexts are different, the very particular problems could be the same.

And so, it's important that we continue to share these experiences moving forward, but I'm one of those people that hates the term "the Arab Spring" and I don't like using Tunisia as a model, because there's just absolutely no such thing as – you can't just paint a whole region with one brush.

Just how Tunisia has a very special history in women involvement in its political affairs, Saudi has another history. The United Arab Emirates has another one, Syria has another one. So it's important to be respectful of that and learn what we can from those experiences.

Ms. Syeed: Anyone else wants to on that question? Okay.
Rania, I wanted to turn to you now in terms of kind of helping us tie some of this in, because we're talking about, like she said, very vastly different disparate contexts. If you can kind of walk us through some of the global regional

trends when it comes to indicators around gender when it comes to economic opportunity, education, workforce, and then also you were telling me about policies and how that might also – whether in certain countries, what has worked, what hasn't.

Rania Al-Mashat: Yeah. Thank you very much for The Middle East Institute for the invitation and for being among the wonderful role models, really, on this panel. I want to take us all to a macro level and say that you might have all noticed that any conference you go to these days, there's always a panel on women.

That really is very encouraging, and it's a global theme. It's a global theme that has taken place following what I would say is the global financial crisis. It's an economic need. The importance of women in the labor market is very, very important for the economic growth in countries.

It's no longer just tackling women issues for the sake of women, but it is really tackling women issues and gender equality issues for a more, I would say, national importance.

The IMF, our managing director, Christine Lagarde, has more than once used the term "women's participation is macro critical," and that has really translated in the work that the IMF does with countries.

It has also translated, if you we take a look at the United Nations with the sustainable development goals, there's a whole pillar, pillar 5, on gender equality. You see that the programs that are being formulated between international financial institutions and countries actually include a very important component that has an enabling factor for women.

I would just like to maybe focus on two gaps when it comes to gender. One is the gender gap in education. What we will see is that over many years, this gender gap has actually narrowed. More women are getting access to education. Nonetheless, there are still more women that are illiterate compared to men. That is one fact.

Then, coming out of that is the labor participation. Women in the labor market, we will find, is not as equivalent to the amount of education they have attained. Just to give a very small statistic, the highest, I would say, inequality in the labor participation comes in the Middle East. It's at the ratio 51 percent, and that's quite significant.

To give some other statistics which are quite striking, is that if we have the number of women equal to the number of men working in the labor force, that would increase GDP, if I take the case of the United States, that would increase it by 5 percent, Japan 9 percent, the UAE 14 percent, and in the case of Egypt, 34 percent.

That just shows that the ability to integrate and focus on gender issues is not only important for women's sake, but it also increases the pie, the economic pie, and therefore, both men and women do gain.

That is particularly important in a situation where we have the fallout from the global financial crises, very slow economic growth. We find monetary policy, fiscal policy, really reaching their limits in how they can help.

Then we come to the last pillar when it comes to policies, and that's structural policy. How can we formulate policies that ease these bottlenecks when it comes to women's participation in the labor force and be able to see more? That's what we see in the Saudi case, for example, allowing more women to be able to participate. That is definitely going to have positive impacts on the economy.

I mean, I can go over a list of policies that are important, but maybe I will just close my opening remarks by something which is labeled as the MENA Paradox. The MENA Paradox is really where women have gained so much in terms of education, but nonetheless, they have not gained so much in terms of participation in the labor force. Of course, if you take it a little bit further and say, participation at executive levels or leading roles, I think that is another very big challenge, and there are ways to overcome that that we can discuss in the next round of

comments.

Ms. Syeed: Sure, thanks. In terms of, from the societies each of you are talking about, I wondered if you would chime in in terms of how any kind of changes or impact you're seeing on economic and educational opportunities that Rania was just mentioning, and maybe how that's impacting women or gender roles, and even maybe social norms as well, how that's playing out. She mentioned Saudi. I wondered if maybe there was something from that you might be able to mention.

Dr. Al Bakr: Of course, the gender gap in Saudi was and still huge, but I mean, it would just – the women just, probably 7 percent of the workforce. Gradually, since actually 2004, King Abdullah came to power, and he opened the scholarship for women and men alike.

Since that, lots of policies were put in place to open more jobs in places where it was prohibited, like in supermarkets, and just trying to break the segregation between the two sexes.

And of course, they were a huge, of course, an aggressive side from the religious, and gradually, it's just melt, and now you see women everywhere. There is very strong step-by-step and follow-up by the administrators to make sure that, actually, women take their share of the different jobs available in the market, especially in the private market.

Don't forget that the government was the main employer before. I was one of those who was lucky to be allocated right away to a school, because we were concentrated and studying to be a teacher or a medical so we could serve the female population.

Gradually, of course, there were no more jobs in the government, and there is no more schools, and the unemployment just rise, and of course, families started screaming, husbands and all that. This is where the government started to think that we probably just made the wrong policies to gather all the women to the educational channel.

Nowadays, actually, women are employed in the private sector, of course, more than the government. Women are in a lot of leading positions. Is that what we want? Of course not. I mean, this is just the beginning, and the beginning, is sometimes, it's tough. It's not easy because you have – it's not about just getting the job. It's about also adjusting to all the changes that comes with it, just like the driving.

That's why they said, "Okay, we will allow the driving," but then until June 2018. That's of course, I think it's very logical because you have to provide the infrastructure for all these women. If somebody had her tire [*flat*] at 12:00 in the evening, then she needs somebody, and she has to be in a safe place with a strange man.

Things are going to take time, but at the same time, I believe that Saudi women actually have all the education, have the eagerness, and the political will is there now, which we were missing, but now there is a clear vision that women are part of the whole process, and we will go for it.

What I'm worried about, probably, is actually the not us as the women in big cities because this is where we get the big share. What I'm worried about is the rural areas where they don't have all the facilities, and they're somehow isolated from the big cake, and this is probably where we should look more.

Ms. Syeed: Okay. I'm wondering if any of that resonates in terms of the role of women in economies, or in the workforce, and sort of changes your seeing, or especially when it comes to women who may no longer be in their own countries. We were talking about some of the recent challenges in Tunisia as well. Please.

Ms. Kabawat: Definitely, when we talked about Syrian women, they don't have any other choice. They have to work because their men are all in the prisons or died or... They have to live their daily life. They have to raise their kids.

The only problems we see here, when it comes to, for us to want to have them involved in politics, and this is – we

know that, of course, and I'm going to go back to the politics a little bit, that about the women's participation, of course, in the negotiation, it's immense factor for success for this negotiation.

When we talk with our colleagues, we want to have more women, immediately they say, "Women can teach, they go to the work in hospitals. No place for them." This is how they stereotype. For us, and when we talk about quotas, and I'm going to here emphasize about the quotas because we cannot leave it for democracy. If we want people to vote, and they won't vote for a woman, and we see this in many areas in the political scene.

We need them to have rules, something in hand. When we talk about the 30 percent, they didn't want to do this, and they say, "No quotas for women." We have to fight. We have to use many of the international actors, especially women leaders from Europe and others to help us with this struggle until we get the 30 percent. Here, somebody will be telling me, "But you don't have enough women qualified to work in politics."

This is how they look at us, that we're not qualified enough. With all the respect, we have such amazing women with great CVs, and they can do amazing job. This will get me back to the woman resilience, also. It's not only they're working, they're providing food, and they're giving power to their kids, and they want to learn.

Every time we finish from the Geneva round, and we go and do some workshop to the women because we want them to know what's happening. We want them to be [*informed*] accurate[*ly*] of what's really happening in the political.

They will look at, and they say, "One day, we're going to be with you." I say, "No, one day you're going to take our place because we're the older generation. You're going to take over." This is what we want.

Women are more resilient, and they're teaching us. I'm very, very privileged to work with such great women when

we teach them about elections, about how they're going to have a political analyst. They learn, they write their notes, and they say, "Can we" – and they have the questions.

These women, they've been really, back before the conflict, they didn't have any role. Now they have a role. I just want to finish what my sentence is. It's not about the women and men. It's not about the gender equality. It's about: without the women in Syria, we're not getting anywhere.

Every time, we know that they are the multitaskers, they are the one, they do, they make things done, from photocopying in Geneva, until they do their political analyses, until they go and to negotiate. They do it all, and in some kind of – after 2011, women now, they're fighting for their place economically, socially, and politically.

Ms. Ben Hassine: Okay. Just a follow up on what Rania as well as Hind spoke about, to ease these policy bottlenecks, we need to involve women in policy making processes, and invest in structured trainings and programs that teach women all the skills, of negotiation, policy-making, elections.

One thing that is a good thing in Tunisia that we have is that these changes came along through the involvement of various, prominent figures not only from the left that are women, but also women from Islamist parties who were very much active in policy-making, whether it's through the parliament or whether through working with the presidency. For example, one of the – the spokesperson for the president is a woman, and she is a prominent leftist figure.

That, clearly you would think, has at least had some sort of influence on the president in making his announcements. I also want to say that's not enough because the women that are involved in these policy-making processes today in Tunisia usually tend to be from cities.

We're not really thinking that much about the situation of women living in rural areas who are, like Hind said, the ones that are – they're carrying the brunt of the work. They're the ones multitasking. They're the ones who have

children, and teach, and cook, and do everything all at the same time. I mean, these people are my superheroes. If they don't learn the skills that are necessary in order to participate effectively in the democracy they're building, then it all means nothing.

I think in Tunisia in particular, we have a very poor state, so the state could say a lot of things about what it prioritizes, but what's behind the promises? Is there enough funding, resources, or ability to do that?

I think that remains to be seen, and I think a lot more attention should be granted to these types of programs in rural areas, especially. Finally, the inheritance suggestion, the equality in inheritance. It's only, in my opinion, a national progression because women in Tunisia are working. They're working sometimes more than the men, and it's only natural for them to want to preserve their wealth and pass it on to their children.

And so of course, it's controversial, and of course, it requires a lot of discussion and a lot of consultation with various stakeholders, including civil society, from the whole spectrum, from left to right, center, middle, whatever you want, because religion matters to people.

If you want such a suggestion to be followed through upon and to go through parliament, and actually be voted on, and have it be approved, then you need to convince people that this is legitimized religiously.

I think, one suggestion I have is just to have the equality in inheritance be a baseline, a default, but if somebody would like to elect to have the Islamic way of dividing up inheritance, then they should do that before their time runs out, I guess. You should always leave room for pluralism and people to choose the way they want to live, and to preserve their wealth and carry on their traditions as well.

Ms. Syeed: Great.

Dr. Al-Mashat: If I can follow up on something?

Mr. Syeed: Yes, please.

Dr. Al-Mashat: Just following up on something you mentioned about the employment in the public sectors. For example, the average in the Middle East is about 35 percent. It goes up as high as 50 percent in the case of Jordan, that women work in the public sector.

Now, given all the fiscal brunt that we see in the countries, private sectors is the way, but there are many laws that need – labor mobility needs to be redefined. There needs to be venues where women can have more access to capital, the financial inclusion element.

There are some countries where in order to go and get a loan, you need to have a guardianship, collateral has to be – also, it's difficult to go and get a loan from the woman's side, so there are several elements, maybe as simple as daycare. For example, I take the case of the IMF program with Egypt, and one of the elements in that program is for the government to allow for more daycare, and also to allow for easy transportation to the workplace.

These are very subtle and small – what would seem small points, but they are very significant when it comes to how much more women can contribute to the economy. Just one – I work very much on the policy sphere, and as much as activism is important, also enablement from the government is very, very important.

When there is political will to basically push things, or to allow the civil society to work for women networks to actually engage more with women on the ground, create mentorship programs, cross country experience, exchanges, all of these are very, very important.

But again, if there is political will that allows for nourishment of these initiatives, I think that that saves a very, I would say, a lot of time, and also enables women to push ahead with these agendas.

Ms. Syeed: Are there any specific examples you could give in terms of policies? We were discussing earlier about Egypt, or other

places that you think might give an example?

[Crosstalk]

Dr. Al-Mashat: I with, maybe give, yeah, two examples. For example, in the UAE, there's the initiative that they want 30 percent of boards to be occupied by women, and we can see that there are very significant steps taken in the UAE.

In the case of Egypt, the National Council for Women has the strategy 2030 which aligns with the sustainable development goals of the country, and it includes four pillars, increasing economic participation, political participation, social participation and protection, protection from crime and other elements. The year 2017 was announced the year of women, and as we can see, there have been many senior posts occupied by women in the country.

There's actually tables with targets, where we are now and where we want to be in 2030 when it comes to participation in parliament when it comes to having judicial and executive positions occupied by women. I think political will should not be underestimated, and on the contrary, IFIs and other institutions try to push –

Ms. Syeed: IFI?

Dr. Al-Mashat: International financial institutions, trying to push for these changes are actually resonating a lot in national plans that are formulated by governments.

Ms. Syeed: Right, so it's interesting to talk about change, whether from, like you were saying, below, or how policy can help accelerate or facilitate that. One of the things I wanted to – we're going to open up for questions shortly, so there are mics, I think, on either side. You can line up in about five minutes. Oh.

Ms. Kabawat: Can I just –

Ms. Syeed: Yes, go ahead.

Ms. Kabawat: Regarding the political will, I fully understand what you're saying, but here also, the role of the lobbying, and advocacy, and the women's activism, and we can start pushing. Even though they don't have this political will, you can work on it, and it happened.

I think now, the change happened in the Middle East in the war. We'll never underestimate the power of the woman. We can use it in a good way so we can push for this will. That's what I want to say.

Dr. al-Bakr: Can I just say one more?

Ms. Syeed: Sure.

Dr. al-Bakr: Because I think just to say that, you need – I mean, now we have the political will, but at the same time, you need the will of the people, too. I do believe that all of the religious people, we are a religious country, and we want to give their approval, too because people care, as you said, about religion, and we're raised with that.

Some of the, I mean, explanation does not mean that this Islamic, the Islam or the religion that we know. Now, King Salman opened, actually, a big center to re-study the Hadith, which means that give it a new explanation so people would understand what the religion means, and it's not what would happen saying all the time.

Then also, not only the religious people, also men. Men affect, men are the ones who are in the position – they are making decisions. Unless we somehow reach to them and try to take them in, and to convince them – they probably would not allow women, even if the policy-makers – they vote for women, but unless you convince these men to go along with that.

Ms. Syeed: Okay. I wanted to sort of ask broadly, one of the themes of this panel is activism, and several of these countries have, Egypt or Tunisia, I've been hearing about Saudi Arabia, that have decades-long women's movements.

It's not something that's just happening, so not trying to

make it as though it's just a recent development, but just taking stock of where we are seven years after, yeah, six years, sorry, after uprisings and political expression – I know when I was in places like Tunisia and Egypt, and I was doing research on young women joining political parties, it was very exciting to see how passionate they were in finding their expression and a platform, for instance, in a political party.

I'm just curious as well, is it fair to say that there are more women pursuing activism, whatever it might be, where you're coming from? Are we seeing that women [*are*] working for change and new platforms, are there more outlets, or spaces, or whatever you call it, social media, whether it might be creating, sort of, new outlets for engagement within activism? Just wondering what spaces you're seeing these days in which women are engaging and the kinds of activism that you're noticing.

Ms. Kabawat: Can I?

Ms. Syeed: Sure. Yes, please.

Ms. Kabawat: Just want to add, when my colleague, Fawziah, talked about religion, and just to add for your questions, in the Syrian concept, as you know, we are a very mosaic society. We have multi-faith.

People from outside, they think, "Oh, it's sectarianism. It's about Christian, Muslim, about Alawite." When you work with the women on the ground, you don't see this. We have all those Track 2, and we work in a real dialogue. When we talk with the UN, they have this basket of constitutions, and elections, terrorism, and the political transition.

We want to add the justice and reconciliations. They look at us and they say, "This is a little bit fast." We say, "No, it's not fast." This is the platform the women they can do, and they can do it very well.

In every center, we have even Alawite trainers with us. We have Shiite, we have Christians, we have Muslim seculars and leftists. This is Syria, and we all agree, when we want

to do the identity to start, we are Syrian, and we want the best for Syria.

I see this more and more in the women platforms. We can do it more. When it comes to men, they have their ego stopping them on accepting the others. And, last year, I did see, and I witnessed so many great stories about when we want to have somebody coming with the delegation, we insist to have an Alawite lawyer with us.

We want to insist to have a Druze, and the Christian, and Muslim, and this is Syria. This is the women work because if you see the women HNC groups, and the woman consulting group, you see this diverse which is reflecting Syria. I think this is when they talk about let's start the national dialogue, the women started long time before they started.

Ms. Ben Hassine: I just want to say something.

Ms. Syeed: Mm-hmm, yes.

Ms. Ben Hassine: I think your question about what is change, and how is women's activism changing, what I've noticed about Tunisia is that it's not like women's activism in the past didn't exist. It existed in a different form, but the freedom of expression and being able to bring to light the problems that women are experiencing, whether it's social, or economic, or moral, the freedom of expression to say that is a must.

I mean, it is something that is so necessary to effectuate any changes. I don't want to dismiss other forms of activism, but when I tell you that I've seen pieces of theater, or I've watched a concert that addresses issues in such an explicit and open way, it puts the subject on the table for debate. It allows people to talk, and it brings it to the fore.

In Tunisia, we have a very strong civil society that does not shut up about things. The Article 227 that was abrogated that I told you about at the beginning that forbade a rapist to marry his victim came about after a judge in a place called el-Kef has decided that it's okay for a rapist to marry

his 13-year-old victim, and she was pregnant.

That drove everybody, obviously, up in flames. And so, the marriage was annulled, and the code – the section in the penal code was also abrogated. I think had we not have had that chance to talk about it and really express that type of discontentment and anger; I don't think that change would have happened.

I think freedom of expression, freedom of speech is really important when it comes to women's rights and any other human rights or civil liberties in general as well.

Dr. Al-Mashat: Can I just –

Ms. Syeed: Yes.

Dr. Al-Mashat: Also, the use of social media and the accessibility of that to even, we were talking about, rural areas, urban areas, people who are away from the cities, that has actually enabled to bring many of the, whether it's injustice regarding a certain topic, or actually focusing on an issue that is pending that people want change.

I think social media has really paid a significant role, particularly after 2011, where the youth, where the women, everything that is under the sun is being brought to the – and there's a sense of urgency, a sense of embarrassment to the political establishment sometimes, and so action has to be taken fast. Another venue where women are actually also bringing their issues is art.

There's so much when it comes to the space of – in the case of Egypt, there's so much when it comes to the arts, and how that has really demonstrated the issues that are very much weighing on women's minds.

Dr. al-Bakr: Yeah. I don't want to keep the people lining up for questioning, I'm sorry, but –

Ms. Syeed: We'll get to them

[Crosstalk]

Dr. al-Bakr: – we'll just talk about the feminism. Is it really in Saudi Arabia, and I do think because I wrote, actually, an article asking the same question. Of course, the feminism idea is not acceptable by a lot of scholars and Islamists because it's a Western idea that will get women out of their house, and will they destroy the family values.

When you come to the ground, people are very active. Women, especially after all these scholarships, you see them, as you said, in the social media, you get in, and you see women are fighting for the guardianship, to petition, sign a petition to the king, gathering all these names and signatures, sending fliers.

Also, in a society where cinema is not there, you see, just like mushroom – I am, I am a member of, I don't know, maybe 14 book clubs, and maybe three film clubs, and that's all happening in the houses.

Then, of course, the official places are now starting to be very active again. I mean, it was there, but it was very quiet, and there is women here, and men there, and there was a lot of complication. Then, people decided that they would do it in their houses.

Society, there is a lot of activism, and of course, don't forget that the generation of the '80s and '90s, are the product, they are our sons and daughters who got the best of education, traveling, seeing TV and social media, so of course, their ambition and their aspiration is very high.

Ms. Syeed: Yeah, this interesting for me to hear because one of the questions, or things that I've been thinking about recently, is assessing space for political activism, when a word that I hear over and over from leaders is the emphasis of stability, stability.

It's not a word that's sort of used lightly, *istikhara*. You hear that placed in a lot of the rhetoric. For me, I've been wondering, how do you create change in societies that are emphasizing stability over change? It's still happening, I guess is what you're saying. You wanted to add something,

then we need to get to questions because we have a lot of people lined up.

Ms. Ben Hassine: Yeah, so one last thing I forgot to mention earlier is, I want to really emphasize [*the*] importance of religious institutions. In Tunisia, the former president, Habib Bourguiba, shut down the Zaytuna Institute, the Zaytuna Mosque. The Zaytuna Mosque was a center of scholarly research and learning in the Islamic religion.

When that was shut down, so many people felt like they were missing – they were lacking a spiritual connection, or whether it was challenging the religion in a scholarly way, asking questions.

Of course, they're going to resort to TV channels, to radio, to other trains of thought that might not be as open or as accommodating to the local population as, for example, the Zaytuna was.

It's very important, it's critical, to encourage speech and research and religion, because some people who believe in non-equal inheritance really do believe that it's in the Quran. Is it time to rethink that? Is it time to really reconcile that with a modern dynamic of a modern relationship between a man and a woman?

I mean, these are all questions that must be addressed, and they must be really valued for their contribution and this type of activism, and that's stable. I mean, doing academic research, that's your ivory tower. It's as stable as you can get.

Encourage those, and ensure that we're not closing the ecosystems even more, that we're encouraging academic and scientific research because that's the only way that we can really advance.

Ms. Syeed: I'd like to turn to questions now from our eager audience, so –

Dr. al-Bakr: Finally.

Ms. Syeed: What's that?

Dr. al-Bakr: Finally.

Ms. Syeed: Finally, yes. I've gotten most of my questions in, but let's turn now to the audience. We'll start here. We'll start one by one and we'll see, and then maybe we'll have to take a few at a time, but go ahead, please.

Barbara Slavin: Thanks, Nafeesa. I'm Barbara Slavin. I'm from the Atlantic Council. Thank you for this great program. I have a couple of questions for Dr. al-Bakr about Saudi. The last time I was there, which was admittedly a long time ago, there were no women working in hotels anywhere. I wonder if that has changed.

Then, on the theme of reconciliation, are Saudi women able in any way to have an influence over all these terrible proxy conflicts that are going on in the region, or are you focusing more on simply expanding your own rights, and you're staying out of areas like Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Qatar, all the stresses and strains that we've also seen from your new king and from the crown prince? Thank you.

Dr. al-Bakr: Do you want to – yeah, why don't we go ahead?

Ms. Syeed: Yeah, you can take it.

Dr. al-Bakr: For women to work in hotels, now, I mean, you go to the airport, you find women everywhere, you go to the police station, you find them, so I would assume that definitely in hotels, not as much as you see them in other Arab countries, but it's coming gradually.

For the Syrian cause, the Saudi women are concerned about what happened, of course. We are very much, actually. People talking about it all the time because it's the stability of the whole area, it's their children, their daily lives. You probably cannot influence the political decision, but you could work with people around because we have about 2 million Syrians.

We have probably more than that of Yemenis. A lot of

women's groups work with any needy family. They don't care about if it's Syrian, if it's Yemeni, if it's Saudi. We have a lot of Afghans and all that. Women really, I know a lot of women groups who work day and night for all these things.

Ms. Syeed: Maybe we'll go on this side to go back and forth.

Mais Hadad: Hi, Mais Hadad. My questions are about Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, actually. Tunisia is one of the most advanced countries regarding women rights, but not all the Tunisian society is following that, which is fine, but there is part of the Tunisian society that can be described as extremist or fundamentalist.

Those came to the surface right after the fall of Ben Ali, and were evidence from the relatively high percentage of ISIS foreign fighters that are coming from Tunisia. In your opinion, what is the size of this portion of the Tunisian society, and how are you dealing with this problem?

My question about Saudi Arabia is: it seems from your presentation that even the too little, too late women's rights that are being given to Saudi women are coming directly from the prince or the king, so you woke up one day and the prince decided that it's okay for the women to drive, it's not anti-religion values or these sort of things.

It seems like you're waiting for more days to come when you wake up and the prince or the king decides further rights for women. What does the role of the society, the Saudi society, like Ms. Ben Hassine was telling us that in the result of their work, the laws have changed? What is your narrative on this issue in Saudi Arabia? Thank you.

Ms. Syeed: I think we're gonna take a couple at a time. That way, we can try to get through. Go back to this side, please.

Waal Issagray: This is Waal Issagray from Massal, Arabia. Actually, following with politics, actually, I hadn't found this an issue until I came here and I took a politics subject, and I found that I'm not able to think politically because we grew up and raised and memorizing, not analyze what's going on

and why that decision was made.

I had the chance to find that, and trying to learn, but I'm wondering what about the people who still in Saudi who don't have that chance. For me, I came here and studied, so I found that that's really an issue, but for people who live there, what's the –

Dr. al-Bakr: You mean study in politics?

Ms. Syeed: In terms of –

Ms. Issagray: Oh yeah.

Ms. Syeed: – awareness of political activism, or expression, those kinds of things.

Ms. Issagray: No, thinking politically, like in Saudi, when the decision is made, that's it. There's no, nothing to say. What we can do for people who live there, do you think education is the right solution, like for children to learn how to think and analyze?

Ms. Syeed: Okay, let's take one more, and then we'll do one round.

Female Speaker 1: Thank you. I wondered if the panelists could comment on engaging men as allies to further women's movements in empowerment so that it's long lasting and sustainable. Thank you.

Ms. Syeed: Okay, so we had a couple, a question on Tunisia in terms of the portion of the society that has "extremist" views. We'll start with that and then move to the Saudi questions. Go ahead.

Ms.. Ben Hassine: Sure. The question is very good, but I do want to say that the number of radicalized militants that go to ISIS is disputed. Some people say, "Oh, the highest percentage of ISIS recruits come from Tunisia." Some people have tried and have successfully debunked that, but I do want to say that the audience member asked me the question, it's a very good question, but you asked about the number or the proportion of individuals who have radicalized views.

I think that proportion in and of itself of people who have very conservative, radicalized views, whether political, social, or religious, is small. I think that comes from a sizable population that is at the margins, and really in a state of despair about the economic situation in Tunisia. That is a big population, and some of those people do become radicalized because they have no other exit.

The best thing that could happen to them is to be recruited by ISIS, and to just leave the country, and do something good for the religion. I mean, that's how they see it. There's economic despair. The government has been promising economic reforms, and fighting corruption, and so many lofty goals that have still yet to be effectuated and realized.

And also, just one last thing. The educational system in Tunisia is not as good as we like you to think it is. It is, yes, of course, one of the most educated populations in the Arab world, but the actual education and curricula itself does not increase the employability of students graduating.

So many students who graduate don't even know how to write a CV or a cover letter. The schools are falling apart, especially in rural areas. Literally, the buildings are falling apart, and we're not investing as much as we used to in education.

And so of course, when you're not getting a good education, you can't find a job, and you have two masters, there's going to be some radicalization. That's a big population that's in despair, and some of them do become radicalized. And that's something that can be addressed through education and economic reforms that fight unemployment.

Ms. Syeed: There were a couple questions on Saudi Arabia in terms of waiting on change to happen from above, and then another question about whether education can help inform people in terms of – about politics and expression.

Dr. al-Bakr: Of course, we cannot, you don't forget the whole picture, that you are in a royal type of government, so the space to

affect these kinds of decisions is very little. At the same time, we cannot forget that women in Saudi Arabia have been struggling for their rights for a long time.

Women put their lives, literally, on line, for the driving, for the guardianship system, for actually changing the family laws, including taking care of their children and so forth. There are so many little, actually, things.

Don't forget that we don't have NGOs as you know it in other Arab countries. We have these philanthropy societies that just care for poor people or train poor workers for certain soft skills, so we don't really have organizations that will teach you how to manage politically your interests, or to gather the different efforts in every city.

So everybody is just working on their on side, and, of course, social media helps so much to get the message, and women actually doing it now for the – just to dismantle the rest of the guardianship system.

For the education system, I cannot say more than what my friend said about Saudi education system. It's as bad as any other system, and there are boards. Yes, we are trying to fix that, but it's gonna take a very long time because this education was built on a very religious, very conservative, ideological philosophy, that it's rooted in its curriculum, and its philosophy, and its strategies.

Unless we rethink the whole picture, and we rewrite the vision, and the objectives, and go back to the roots of that, it will never fixed. Yes, it's memorization and all that.

Yes, we're trying to fix it. Now, there is a huge project that will include 1,500 schools around Saudi Arabia to get the technology in, but the technology and trained teachers, too. We hope that will help to alleviate some of the problems that our system has.

Ms. Syeed: Any quick thoughts on the last question around engaging men as allies? There was another question about engaging men as allies. Any quick thoughts before we do our next round of questions?

Dr. Al-Mashat: Well, it's definitely very important. Yeah, it's definitely very important, and probably in countries that have seen movements, it was also this very strong engagement from both genders.

Dr. al-Bakr: I myself lived the experience. I mean, these 47 women who went to the street and lost their jobs and all that, without the help of the men, I mean, there is no way we would have survived, honestly.

So the men were our supporters. That's why I totally agree that you don't talk about men or women issues. It's the human being. It's the family. It's the society. It's the country. That's how I look at it, so it definitely is.

Ms. Syeed: Okay, let's take a few more, now, please, on this side.

Male Speaker 1: You've partially answered my question. I'm very impressed what you've talked about, what women have been doing for women's rights in the Arab world. My interest would be what have you found most effective in dealing with the men, particularly in an Islamic context, to bring them along?

Ms. Syeed: Okay. On this side, please.

Male Speaker 2: Yes, the dominant news in United States is sexual harassment. I'm almost embarrassed to ask this question, but I think it's relevant to ask about sexual harassment in the Arab world.

How this phenomenon in the Arab world or Islamic world is impacting woman activism, even in progress political parties or movement? How you assess the difference of those obstacles that existed in the Western society compared to society in the Arab world?

Ms. Syeed: Okay, and let's take one more over here, please.

Lemel Jarala: Hi, Lemel Jarala. I'm a Saudi graduate student at Georgetown University. And my question is about factionalism within the Saudi female population.

Throughout the panel, and in the media, and regional specialists always refer to Saudi women as one homogenous entity, and I know that that's – I can experientially attest to the fact that that's not true, as I'm sure, Dr. al-Bakr, you can as well.

My question is how do you see that factionalism between the more conservative flow and the more progressive flow of women pan out with respect to the developments that have occurred recently with respect to women's rights?

Ms. Syeed: Okay, great. One was a follow up on more effective – what's been effective in dealing with men, and I think maybe as a continuation of that in terms of the question around the impact of sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and how this phenomenon impacts women's activism, or if anyone wants to address that.

Dr. Al-Mashat: I mean, the first question here was more on how to deal with the conservativism. I think there's this whole theme across the region about trying to modernize the interpretation of Islam, because Islam in its essence actually gives women rights and it values the participation of women, and we've seen that in the Prophet's life.

But that has been overshadowed so much by interpretation which is very conservative. There is this, whether it's in Saudi Arabia, which was mentioned, in Egypt. There's this, also, move to asking for the scripts and al-Azhar to be revised to take a closer look at what has been, I don't want to say contaminated, but sort of, over the years, overshadowed some key issues. Among them are women issues because Islam, in its essence, does not discriminate in the way that is currently, I would say, portrayed or discussed widely.

Ms. Syeed: Please, yes.

Ms. Kabawat: Just to answer your question about how to deal with the conservative Islam and others. In my last two years working in the political environment in Syria, conservative Islam, or leftist secular men both, they have the same. They don't want women to be in the front line. They think it's

competition for them. They think they're going to take their place. I always thought that maybe those old Communists, leftists; they might be taking our side. They didn't. They were fighting us exactly as the others.

When it comes to men in the Middle East, I don't see anyone who's praying five times, or he has his bottle of whiskey all day, they have the same things.

Ms. Syeed: Exactly. I met a young Egyptian journalist, Yasmeen Al Rifai. She's writing a book about a feminist revolutionary movement that would protect women during gang rape. It's called OpAntish. She has her book she's working on, so you'll be able to read that coming up specifically about that issue, sexual harassment, especially in –

Ms. Kabawat: I mean, harassment, we should actually take the Dubai example because in Dubai, there is no harassment. Nobody can harass anyone. Why? Because the laws are extremely –

Ms. Syeed: Strict.

Ms. Kabawat: – extremely strict, and you cannot do it. I think that just very simple example that we should follow. That's why we're very happy that actually, our Shura council is discussed on this harassment laws, and I'm sure it would be approved.

Ms. Syeed: I would differ a little bit. You can get harassed in a Dubai mall. It happens. Moving on, we'll take another question, please.

Basma Alloush: Hi, thanks. My name is Basma Alloush. I'm with the Norwegian Refugee Council. Just with the current rise of conflicts, it's become clear that women are carrying most of the burden. As a result, a lot of the programs that are being designed are exclusively focusing on empowering women and addressing women's issues, sometimes, in a tokenized way, or just as a way to tick the box, and sometimes that just creates a lot of backlash. My question is how can we focus on long-term gender mainstreaming to genuinely integrate women and have true and sustainable gender equality? Thanks.

Ms. Syeed: Let's take one from over here, please.

Male Speaker 3: Hi. Actually, my question is sort of related. Just in your work, both on the activist side and the policy side, in trying to marshal political will and resources to, kind of, effect the kind of training programs and integration of women in the workforce, how does the dominant narrative that I hear about job creation in the Middle East and North Africa affect that? Specifically, that the importance of job creation in the Middle East and Northern Africa right now is to counter violent extremism by creating jobs for young, unemployed men. Does that impact your efforts on the policy and activist sides to improve women's place in the workforce?

Ms. Syeed: Okay, we'll take one more, please.

Female Speaker 2: Yes, hi. This question isn't entirely within the purview of this discussion, but I think it's important to elicit. With regard to Saudi Arabia, how does the country aim to reconcile its commendable developments in the rights of Saudi women with its continued and, quite frankly, egregious treatment of migrant workers, which includes among other issues the feminist topic of the abuse and harassment of domestic laborers?

Ms. Syeed: Okay, let's go ahead and wrap up the questions, and then we'll finish up here.

Beau Wilcox: Hi, Beau Wilcox from the Osgood Center. My question pertains around how UN organizations such as UNDP or UN Women have advocated for better data gathering when it comes to the successes of gender inclusion initiatives.

My question is how are groups in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Syria collecting data on benefits of gender inclusion initiatives, and how do these countries share their information with other states through the usage of technology? Thank you.

Ms. Syeed: Okay, go ahead.

Ameini: Hi, my name is Ameini. I am Egyptian. I am economist, and I have a question. I previously worked for UN Women in Egypt, and I've seen personally some cases where women themselves, they get beaten by husbands or something like this. The problem is, they can go, they can always go to the police station, ask for some support. We have shelters, but the problem is they themselves don't want – they don't want to stand up for themselves. It's because of the social norms.

My question is how can we change the ideas, the women's ideas, that they have rights, they have to stand up for it, and they also have to practice it? Thank you.

Ms. Syeed: Okay, we just have a couple of minutes, so if there's something you want to add really quickly.

Female Speaker 3: Yeah, my question is to Hind directly. With a background at – very often when UN, in terms of constitutions and whole stabilizing process, it hasn't been felt because there hasn't been enough involvement of civil society in the communities, and that we can base those constitutions in what already exists in other countries and promote democracy, that kind of thing.

That often doesn't work with the culture, and the culture is really kind of discarded on the sites, and not – in that process, when you're talking about the meeting that's coming up, what has involvement of Syrian civil society and the population how – what emphasis does that have on the constitution building process and designing elections coming up?

Ms. Syeed: Okay. Hind, do you want to start with that? Then, there was also a question about the rise of conflict and focusing on gender mainstreaming.

Ms. Kabawat: I just want to answer also the question about the UNDP or the UN advocating for women inclusion, what is the effect on us. I know many of us, we criticize de Mistura of what he's doing as a mediator. He's making it very slow, the process, et cetera. He did something very important. He insists to have more woman at the negotiation team. He

brought this woman advisory group team, they elect ten women, to be there. This was a good push for us so we could follow. De Mistura did this, and the UN is also always pressure on having more women in every negotiation or political talk.

As for the civil society, I know it seems like very dark in Syrian history now what's happening, and it is really us as a people, as today you heard, we don't have any more influence of what's happening. Syrian people today, both sides, we have no leverage, we don't have any influential, we don't know how to--we don't know. We're just sitting there and watching.

The only thing we can do is to influence the outcome, to do something good, to bring more civil society to the table, and this is what we did. We insist to have more civil society have a say in the constitutions. We work with them. This is women. They did bridge between the civil society and the politicians. We want them always to be with us.

This helped us, and this will help us in the future, even though now you see that it's a dark future, but it's not this dark. We need to think about a long-term that there are more women mobilized, they are creating their own power, their civil society.

They're very good now, and if you think about the future, what is the role of civil society, we're going to – the civil society will be exactly like what happened in Tunisia. Tunisia survived because they have a strong civil society, and we didn't. Today after seven years, we have. This is kind of the bright side for the Syrian conflict, that we can influence the outcome through the civil society and the women.

Ms. Syeed: Rania, can you talk maybe about the question on job creation and the data collection?

Dr. Al-Mashat: Yeah. The point there is that women in the labor force do not crowd out men. On the contrary. Research has shown that women, when they enter the labor force, actually, the economy becomes more diversified. There are sectors

which are opened up which then become, actually, venues for men to participate as well.

This concept that women crowd out men and therefore it's "either or" is actually a misconception. That's why this point that if women are working equivalent to men, we have GDPs going up.

In the U.S., as I mentioned, it's around 5 percent more. The pie goes up by five percent if men and women are working equally. In Egypt, it's up to 34 percent, so that just shows that the value of women in the labor force would actually create even more jobs for men.

Ms. Syeed: Okay. There was a question about, sort of, ongoing development of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, but then other kinds of rights around the treatment of migrant workers, and sort of how do you reconcile those things.

Dr. al-Bakr: Yes, I think there are so many problems with foreign laborers in Saudi, and we're trying to solve these problems. In fact, now, they are trying to reform the laws which control these foreign laborers.

They don't come through person or families by themselves, just by companies, so all their rights would be observed clearly by the government. This is one of the reforms that is taking place. Of course, we're just starting, don't forget. Yes, of course we hope for more, for us and for others.

Ms. Syeed: We have one last question about how do you change ideas or maybe stigma of women of women reporting abuse or problems that they have, so I don't know if anyone has any examples of that to sort of close this up. Sure, go ahead.

Ms. Kabawat: I think independent economics can make a big difference, when a woman is really in charge of her economic [*situation*]. That's what we do with our women's center inside Syria and outside Syria. We teach them how to survive, how to work, how to get their act together.

I think when the woman has other options than to stay with [*a*] man who beats her, she can, because she is independent

economically. We need to think about how to empower them, not only in the politics, and also in economics. Here, we go to what my colleague said. It's important for her to be independent.

Dr. al-Bakr: Yeah, but then that's exactly what we need to do, is actually – it's not just with the law, but you have to change the mentality of the women because this is the inferior view of themselves growing through their education, the social fabric, and what they saw their mothers and grandmothers.

To change this mentality, you need a new look to the educational system, you need to look to the TV programs, to the more – to give more positive examples through the media on women who made it. That's exactly what we're doing now. I'm not sure what we do with the education, but I see that a lot of positive examples is presented to women in our media.

Ms. Syeed: I'm afraid we're out of time, but I wanted to thank all of our panelists, and really interesting to hear from. Change from within, I think, is what I walk away from this panel, and hopefully we'll be able to continue the conversation. Thank you so much.

Ms. Seelye: It's nice to end this day on a positive note, and I look forward to a Middle East run by women in the future. Thank you for staying with us, and we very much look forward to seeing you tomorrow. Thank you to all of our staff for all of their hard work last night at our banquet and today. Thank you all.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 90 minutes