



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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“Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East”
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
1300 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Washington
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On Wednesday **Isobel Coleman**, Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, presented her new book *“Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East”* at an event sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Middle East and Environmental Change and Security Programs. **Haleh Esfandiari**, Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Middle East Program, moderated the event.

After a brief introduction from **Esfandiari**, **Coleman** began by explaining that after studying the Middle East for years through the prism of development economics she came to realize that the expansion of women’s rights and role in society is critical to economic growth and political stability in the region. **Women have a much lower rate of literacy and in many countries are not allowed to join the work force, effectively eliminating half of the population from being productive parts of the economy.** If the region is to develop economically, these issues must be addressed, Coleman said. The question is how. In many Middle Eastern countries, women’s rights are viewed as a byproduct of Western influence or colonialism. Additionally, religious hardliners in many countries have attempted to paint women’s rights as fundamentally anti-Islamic.

Traditionally, women’s organization in the region tended to be secular and elite-oriented. Today, many groups are trying to break this mold by engaging religion and working at the grassroots level. Some have made the shift because they are themselves are religious while others have adjusted for tactical reasons (i.e. to promote moderate Islam over more extreme manifestations). Coleman said that over the course of interviewing women for her book she identified three reasons for hope:

1. Today, women have much greater access to education. From Iran to Egypt to Saudi Arabia, women are enrolling and studying in greater numbers than ever before. **In Iran, where women represent a significant majority of college graduates, the government is deeply threatened by this shift. After the election protests in 2009, authorities took steps to reduce women’s enrollment.** “We are beginning to see some very real transitions, transitions that will be led by women,” Coleman said.
2. Women have been a large part of the rapid expansion of media across the region. **Female journalists are at the forefront of investigative reporting, Coleman said, citing examples in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan.**
3. There is increasing acknowledgement that the repression of women is closely tied with religious extremism. In Morocco, for example, the government decided to train women as preachers in the hope that they will temper extreme expressions of Islam, especially in rural areas. According to Coleman, there have been similar programs in Turkey, Qatar and even Iran.

While researching the book, Coleman said she met so many amazing women that it was extremely hard to decide which ones to feature. She then gave two examples, first an American-educated Afghan woman who works in the border regions opening schools for girls and reproductive health clinics; second, a Saudi woman who is the dean of a new university that trains women to be computer scientists and engineers. Women like these give her reason to be “cautiously optimistic” about the future.

Across the region, women are learning from each other. In Morocco, a coalition of women’s organizations was able to reform the family law. Groups in Iran saw this and are currently attempting to do the same. In addition, women are supporting each other and using new media to draw attention to their causes. **Coleman concluded that when there is positive change in the region, more often than not it is driven by women.**

Esfandiari then opened the floor for questions. The first questioner asked what sorts of women are allowed to become religious leaders. Coleman responded that it varies from country to country. The important thing is that across the region women are becoming more educated about what the Qur’an does and does not say. Another questioner asked about the role U.S. foreign aid can play in supporting women’s groups. **Coleman said that it is important for international donors to first “do no harm;” overt support often has unintended negative consequences.** That said, when done well, U.S.-backed education and technical assistance programs have been extremely important tools for activists. **It is important to let the women in the region take the lead. They are smart and best understand the effect U.S. money will have.** A third questioner asked how leaders across the region respond to arguments that expanding women’s rights will be good for economic development. According to Coleman, some countries are able to reject this argument out of hand because they have accumulated great wealth from selling natural resources. Others argue that allowing women to participate in the economy will only deepen the unemployment crisis, which according to Coleman is clearly not true. Women-owned and operated businesses are huge drivers of economic growth, she said.