Islam, Women and Politics

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Question 1

I wonder if the panel could speak about male understanding, from their point of view, of women's rights in the different countries they represent. Because I think that's a challenge often that we have, that we in this room understand what we mean by women's rights, but often men don't.

Question 2

Do you think that background plays more of a role than religion in these cases? For example, Saudi Arabia comes from a tribal background whereas Malaysia is also an Islamic country but has a democracy, a ministry of women's affairs and so on.

Lindsey Hilsum

So you mean, cultural background? Okay, that's a good question. Is cultural background more of an issue than religion? Anyone else?

Question 3

Related to that question, I think Maha and Intissar mentioned this as well – could the panel potentially disentangle a little bit between the role of state and the political structures versus the actual theology of Islam, when it comes to women's rights and politics?

Question 4

I'd like to pick up on Dr Azzam's point about the emancipation of women. We haven't heard a lot about Tunisia, which is sort of apart. Tunisia is interesting because Bourguiba and then Ben Ali put women in opposition to Islamism. So do you think this is maybe one of the paths forward today, in order for women to emancipate?

Lindsey Hilsum

Thank you very much. Can I say, I chair a lot of discussions, particularly here – one of the things that really annoys me is how it's always men who ask questions, not women. The fault, in my view, lies with the women for not putting their hands up. Right. I merely put it out there. I'm not expecting everybody to take on all of those questions, but Sanam, is there any one of those that you would like to take on?

Sanam Vakil

I'll actually take the state – I'll go for the hard one, because I think Iran is a very good case study for that. Religion is important in this discussion with regards to women. It's very much tied to the institutional foundation of the Islamic Republic. But ultimately, what is the driver of the Islamic state of Iran? It's not its Islamic ideology, it's survival. Time and again since 1979, the Supreme Leader has sacrificed religion and ideology for pragmatism. This has come with, for example, before the revolution the clergy thought caviar consumption was haram, for Muslim reasons, but lo and behold after 1979 – because Iran has great access to the Caspian Sea and the best caviar in the world, as Iranians believe – suddenly caviar consumption became halal. Why? Profit, money, economic reasons. This is just a very sort of frivolous example but it happened again in the amendment of the Iranian constitution after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, where they moved away from having a religious leader as the principal arbiter of the
Iranian state and instead said that the next Supreme Leader actually has to be a pragmatic, expedient leader.

So I believe, using the case study of Iran, and I think you can apply it to other countries of the region, religion is one of these convenient ideological tools that is used and abused by political leaders – and oftentimes male political leaders – in order to perpetuate their power.

Intissar Kherigi

I would just point out I did get angry once – you said we don't get angry. But once I was not allowed to pray in a mosque and I blocked the access and I prayed in front of the door, so nobody could leave until I finished praying. So sometimes you do have to do these things.

Understanding of women's rights – I think it's for women to articulate also how they understand women's rights, because I think a lot of the time those people who are experiencing oppression are the best able to articulate what they are actually asking for or demanding. So for example, in my Islamic society at university, one issue that came up one year was whether a woman could be elected president of the society, which for me was obvious but a lot of men didn’t even think about the fact that actually a lot of structures within the student society didn’t really facilitate that for women. So some things that men are often blind to, in terms of women's access to their rights, women are better able to actually highlight those issues. So I think we have to press for our understanding of women's rights.

In terms of background, I think that obviously plays a role. I think in those Muslim countries where you have a democratic system, there is more likely to be better female participation. For example, Indonesia has 18 per cent of women in their parliament. Tunisia, as you mentioned, actually has a higher percentage than the UK, it has a third of parliamentarians whereas we have 23 per cent.

So I think it raises the issue which you mentioned, which is that in many dictatorships in the Muslim world, men and women are struggling for basic political rights. So when there's just a brutalization of the entire society, it's very difficult as women to say, hey, it's just about women's rights, because everybody is actually being excluded from expressing their opinions. So I think we have to start with the political system.

That relates to your question, which is the political structures. Often a lot of these regimes – I won’t mention any names, but I think they exploit the religion and culture card to preserve their own existing political structures.

Lindsey Hilsum

Can I ask you, because I want to bring Najah in here – can I bring you in here?

Najah Al-Osaimi

I think Saudi people today are more understanding of the concept of human rights, thanks to social media and satellite channels. Saudis are the highest users of Twitter and Facebook. I can see how people now are discussing issues which used to be taboo, like women driving or corruption or gender equality. So I think the social media are bringing a lot of change and people are starting to understand the concept. But still, the society is still traditional and they have their own values.
Lindsey Hilsum

But do you see that as the cultural background or do you see that as the religion? Or both?

Najah Al-Osaimi

Both.

Lindsey Hilsum

And do you think Saudi men understand women's rights?

Najah Al-Osaimi

I think today, yes. I can see progress. It's very positive, what I see now. Through social media I can see they are understanding women's rights and they are pressing also to see women getting more rights.

Lindsey Hilsum

It's very slow though, isn't it?

Najah Al-Osaimi

Slow? I find it very fast.

Lindsey Hilsum

You do?

Najah Al-Osaimi

Yes, because ten years ago it was completely different. Actually, the people who suggested that women have to be part of the election were two men. So I can see –

Lindsey Hilsum

I did go to Saudi in 2006 to cover the municipal election and there was a discussion about whether women should participate or not.

Najah Al-Osaimi

Actually men press for women's rights more than women.

Lindsey Hilsum

That's an interesting point. Maha, do you want to come back on any of these questions? No one's addressed the last one on Tunisia, that women, if they want political participation, it has to be in opposition to Islamism, which is what Ben Ali used to say. Maybe you can take that one?
Maha Azzam

I think that's a very difficult one to do, in terms of the Islamist struggle being at the forefront of the political struggle against dictatorship and being at the forefront of the struggle for rights. So I don't think that's true. I think if anything, it's the contrary. Whether in Tunisia with Ennahda, whether in Egypt with the Islamist movement today, in terms of the Brotherhood standing up to the military, actually you're seeing the Islamist movement at the heart of the struggle for rights. You might not agree with the whole social agenda, but in terms of the struggle for political rights, they remain the bearers of the banner for those rights. Women are very much at the forefront of that struggle. If you look at the protests that continue in the alleys of Egypt and the roads of Egypt and so on – they're not allowed to come to the squares – the number of women participants is overwhelming. The women who participate in these protests and rallies on a weekly basis are women who may be supporters of the Brotherhood, some who aren't very religious, some who are just opposed to the military. So you have a cross-section of society.

I think in a sense it also relates to the culture or religion question. In a sense, what's happening also in terms of Muslim women's participation is there is social change. It's across class. I think class is very important in our analysis of what's happening everywhere. We tend to forget it when we're dealing with anything related to Islam. It's Islam versus something that's not Islam, but it's also about class. It's about women who are becoming educated from very different backgrounds and the role that they're increasingly playing in their societies and the aspirations of their communities and so on. So I think there is overwhelming change in different parts of the world.

Again, I'll relate it back to Egypt. Many of the women that are participating in the struggle against the military are from very different backgrounds. They're not elite women. They're not women who come from a certain class or a particular class that are demanding greater rights. Many of the women want those rights within the parameters of Islam and the religious principles of Islam that they want to maintain. They don't see any contradiction.

In terms of the younger generation of men, I think their perceptions are changing. They also want to perceive women's rights in a different way, in terms of equal rights within the parameters of what they define as Islam.

Question 5

My question is more in relation to Europe. Do Muslim women in liberal democracies who want to forge a career as a politician have to reconcile their religion with certain aspects of liberalism? If so, how?

Question 6

This goes more to the example of Saudi Arabia. How much do you think that the change you're seeing in women getting involved – to a certain extent, that applies to other cases as well – how much is it actual social change and how much is it economic considerations? I draw the parallel with Shinzo Abe's Japan – you need to bring women into the economy to make the economy work, otherwise you're not going to diversify, you're going to die out as an economy. Another point, if you have any examples – it's just a curiosity that I have – on the role of Turkey and Turkish media in other Middle Eastern countries, especially the Arab ones?
Question 7

What would you like to see from Western secular feminists and feminism in their relationships with and responses to Muslim women’s concerns, both in the Muslim-majority world and in the West?

Question 8

We say that the legal and institutional framework has started to be in favour of women, but then social perceptions still have to catch up. While we mentioned that social media is playing a good role here, I’m wondering what other tools we see that are also influencing how to help women to gain social status. What are the things you want to see more to happen? What kind of tools do we want to see to have a greater impact?

Lindsey Hilsum

So, what changes do you think will have the greatest impact?

Question 8

Then also, instead of coming from the political framework, thinking more from the social impact.

Lindsey Hilsum

Because we’re running out of time, I’m going to assign questions like a schoolmistress. Intissar, very briefly, do Muslim women in liberal democracies have to reconcile their religion with the politics of liberal democracies?

Intissar Kherigi

They’re doing it every day, I think. I’ve grown up in the UK, for example. I’ve been educated in a liberal setting. I think each person makes their own accommodation. I think there are as many ways of practising Islam as there are Muslims, so each person makes their own personal accommodation. I think that it’s become more difficult when you have polarization of public discourse and you have this creation of binaries, so you have to be either with this or with that. But I think also many Muslim women politicians find it difficult that they constantly have to justify themselves or speak on behalf of the Muslim community. Women shouldn’t have to speak on behalf of all women, it should be the same thing.

Lindsey Hilsum

Okay. An interesting question about Saudi Arabia, social change or economic considerations that are driving the change that you’ve been telling us about?

Najah Al-Osaimi

You mean the government initiative to encourage women?

Lindsey Hilsum

Yeah, whether this women’s empowerment, if we can call it that, is primarily because Saudi Arabia needs your economic potential, or is it social, something different?
Najah Al-Osaimi

I think this is one of the reasons why the government now is sending a lot of women abroad to study the economy and to come back with expertise and skills to help the national development. At the moment, the country relies a lot on foreigners and they need to engage women more in the national development. We're progressing.

Lindsey Hilsum

So the economic consideration is very important.

Najah Al-Osaimi

Yeah, and I think women are doing great in business. You can see women now holding positions in banks and they have their own businesses. So it is progressing.

Lindsey Hilsum

Western feminists – what should they do? Just shut up?

Sanam Vakil

I think Middle Eastern women should engage more, on the one hand. There was the Beijing conference in 1995 that was very important in bringing international women together and many women from the Middle East participated. That was very influential and instrumental. But Western feminists and Western women shouldn’t be at the forefront of any social or political gender-oriented movements in the Middle East, because Middle Eastern governments tend to spin that as Western intervention and the Western hand trying to influence civil society. So it always turns against women. This is sort of an indigenous exercise that women from the region have to arrive at and take on the patriarchy alone.

Lindsey Hilsum

Okay, thank you. Maha, I think this was really a chicken and egg question – which comes first, social or political change?

Maha Azzam

I think the issue of rights for women has to be protected by the law. You have to have the rule of law. Women are afraid to go to a police station in a country like Egypt. They are afraid to enter a police station because of what might happen. They have no recourse to the law because the judiciary is corrupt. In many other parts of the region, women will not have any recourse to the legal system in order to protect their rights, and if they do, they will always be fearful and afraid because there isn’t the rule of law in much of the Muslim-majority countries. I’m not talking about all of them, I’m talking about the most oppressive.

So it still goes back to that. I think, yes, there is a social aspect which is very important, but we've got to guarantee rights through the law and through an accountable political system. That doesn't exist in much of the Muslim-majority countries.
Question 9
Nobody has mentioned Islamic State.

Lindsey Hilsum
No, that's a very good point.

Question 9
It appears to be – I may be quite wrong – a very male-dominated organization. I'd be interested to hear the panel's views on that, and linked with it, any views that they may have on the radicalization of women. One thinks particularly of the three young girls in England recently.

Question 10
At the [indiscernible] conference on Saturday, as Intissar mentioned, Ziba Mir-Hosseini was talking about the fact that it's not Islam that is a barrier to gender equality but patriarchal structures and authoritarian structures. I wondered what the panel's views on that were, and particularly in the European context, whether it's more about the marginalization of intersectional voices and what we could be doing to assist that.

Maha Azzam
What's interesting about the Islamic State is it has those components that have come from Europe, that were brought up in a Western liberal environment, some of the young men or young women. So that's part of the contradiction. But I think also when looking at a group like ISIL, we're looking at a cult, or some cultish characteristics. Any cult, any political cult or sect, tends to have characteristics that are extreme and do place women in a very odd position, whether it's cults in the United States or cults in Iraq and Syria today. I think we need to look at religious sects and cults in order to understand some of their behaviour. That's me putting my academic hat on.

Intissar Kherigi
I think political violence requires a political explanation. I'm not an expert on ISIS so I can't say, but I think those people – it's more an issue of area studies and also understanding why these structures have gathered the support that they have gathered. Why particular tribes and local people have joined them.

Lindsey Hilsum
But we were talking about the three girls who went out from here – radicalization has happened in Europe, that was the question.

Intissar Kherigi
Actually, a lot of people are asking the same questions. I think this requires research. We don’t have a sort of magic wand to be able to understand actually what dynamics are happening.
Lindsey Hilsum

But you represent a lot of Muslim youth, so this must be an issue.

Intissar Kherigi

I think there is an issue of religious interpretation and religious education, which is that we’re seeing in fact a vacuum in terms of religious education, because when many Muslim communities came over to Europe, they had to reconstruct their own religious educational institutions. They didn’t always do a very good job, they didn’t necessarily have the right resources. So you have a lot of people who really don’t understand religion teaching religion. You have a lot of young people also who don’t have access to religious education, who go on the internet and get all sorts of religious interpretations. Or you also have extreme religious education as well across Europe. I think this is a real issue, the issue of a vacuum in terms of authentic religious interpretation, which means you allow sort of an anarchy of religious interpretation that anybody can come along and say, this is Islam, or this is what religion says.

Lindsey Hilsum

Why does it appeal to these girls, though? I think that’s the question which many people are fascinated by.

Intissar Kherigi

I myself ask the same question. I think it is providing a kind of politico-religious language of vengeance which is able to very conveniently draw on a lot of different grievances. I think it’s becoming kind of language for explaining to a lot of young people why they are experiencing the things they are experiencing. The more polarization you have in Europe, the worse the situation becomes. Whereas before people might have understood things in terms of class structure – so you are marginalized, oppressed, excluded because you are the proletariat, etc. – now you have religious groups who are coming along and saying, you are oppressed because you are this religious background. So I think it’s drawing on a lot of those similar dynamics.

Lindsey Hilsum

Would either of you two like to come in on these?

Najah Al-Osaimi

Fortunately, I don’t think there is an impact or influence of ISIS on women in Saudi Arabia, so...

Lindsey Hilsum

Islam and patriarchy? Which is the real problem, the religion or the structures of patriarchy?

Sanam Vakil

The patriarchy, of course, 100 per cent.
Lindsey Hilsum

Of course, 100 per cent. I'm going to get into terrible trouble if I don't end it here. Thank you very much for coming and thank you very much to our excellent panel.