Transcript

Women and Power in the Middle East – Closing Address

HRH Princess Basmah Bint Saud
Global United Lanterns Foundation

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Claire Spencer:

We are extremely privileged to have Her Royal Highness Princess Basmah Bint Saud, who has agreed to give the closing address this afternoon. Normally what would happen is I would present her from the podium and she would speak from the podium. I would also give her I think a very flowery introduction, but we've decided to change the rules. This is a women's event and so we should break the ice. So I think what's wonderful about a closing address is that I think we haven't given you any instructions at all, and if you need an introduction to Princess Basmah, I suggest rather than me reading it, you read the biography in your pack because I think we are going to be far more interested in what she has to say. I don't know whether you intend to summarise things or whether to enlighten us. Please, the floor is yours for your reflections on our subjects today.

HRH Princess Basmah Bint Saud:

Thank you, thank you Claire. And Claire is a friend of mine, I've been a member of Chatham House for the past year, and I'm a journalist, I'm a business women, and I'm a mother of five. I belong to nobody, I'm speaking to, on behalf of nobody, and I don't behold the position of being in charge or have a seat of somebody's government or something, I'm a freelancer. So you can ask whatever you want, and I can answer to whatever you want without being responsible about this country or that country, so I'm in a very good position.

Now, I hate to break the serious theme of the day, and I am going to be a little bit of a maybe innovator and just talk with Claire a little bit of what if, and get out of the theme, the whole theme of the woman and power and Middle East and politicians and democracy, and all the serious stuff that has been grounding our systems for such a long time, including all these problems and wars and revolutions, and say maybe if we have something different we would have been better human beings on this earth and we would have been enjoying all these beautiful beaches and lovely countrysides, and all this wealth that God has given us on this earth, instead of making revolutions and wars in the name of religions – that we're supposed to be the message of mercy to this earth, rather than wars.

I thought that maybe today I can just come out of the shell of all this politics and countries and belonging to a place to or another and just be a simple human being before being a woman. And since I'm not actually a speaker, I can speak whatever I want. So I think personally, and I will maybe just
discuss with Claire a little bit of what I have been talking about for the past maybe two years since I came to England. I decided to bring my children, the new generation, and explore the world. And then I thought that everything was changing so rapidly in the Arab world. Four years ago I started my first conferences at Yildiz University, on Turkish soil, and then I found out that I could speak.

For the past 25, 30 years of my life I was raising children and I was just simply a woman on a trip of education. I was travelling all around the world and I didn't have any sort of academic training to be a speaker or a journalist or a politician, or even a humanitarian or an activist, I had no, I have no background whatsoever in all these things. But one day I just woke up and I said I should use my name and I should use my privilege to do something to draw attention to the miseries of other women in the world, and then I found out that not only women are miserable, but men also. So I said I'm going to begin a journey and I'm going to go down the streets and I'm going to talk to people and I'm going to take out the veil and start really talking to the day to day people.

Instead of making politics, I left the people making politics and I went down the street and I said I'm going to be one of them. I took my children, put them in a car, started going all around Saudi Arabia talking to day to day people, going to villages, exploring my country, which I didn't know before and I didn't even know the people, but I did that after I was 40 and after I had five children and I had them all grown up. It was a crazy idea for everybody, even for my children, and they declined at the beginning but then they said fine, we'll go with you, but that was after actually a big discussion, it took us one week to get them in the car. So I would like to share with you my trip since then until now.

I've travelled a long way from being just a day-to-day woman who was taking care of her children, though I have a title, but I was a woman in my home in Saudi Arabia. I was, even if had 20 servants or castles, whatever it is that they think we have – everybody has in Saudi Arabia which they don't, by the way – I decided that I'm going to be a businesswoman because my children decided that I am good in cooking. So I started a restaurant, and then another, and then another, and then I had four brands in the first two years. I went to the States and I started writing a story and then it became like an article, and then it became a career, and now I'm doing conferences all around the world about my fourth law which I have started a year ago, and I've done my conferences in Cambridge, Oxford, European Parliament, St
Andrews… you name it, I did it, and this year I've done most of the world, and I'm going now to the Middle East.

Now through all the sessions that have been since the morning – I came with white paper and now it's filled with scribbles and things that I have learnt through the whole day. And one thing I have learned, that woman is equal to Martians and power is equal to power always – but instead of the Middle East is on Planet Earth. So it sounds like Martians on Planet Earth, it doesn't seem like women in the Middle East. Because every time I heard somebody saying something, it was a long, it's going to take a long time and it's going to take a long time to get there, it's at the beginning of the trip, it's the beginning of this – and last year everybody predicted that it's going to be the end of the world, 2013, and I thought it's going to be the end of the world so why are we beginning at the end and we were taking such a long time in getting there. So we're getting nowhere, if it's going to take a long time to get anywhere.

So I think it's an ASAP call. It's that we have no more time. We have no more time to say women, men, gender, politics, democracy, all this has been recycled over all these centuries for a long time and it's about time that we have a fresh breath of air. A friend of mine knew that I'm coming to Chatham today and she said me this: 'You must learn a new way to think before you can master a new way to be.' And that was by Marianne Williamson. If nobody knows, Marianne Williamson is a spiritual teacher, she's an author and a lecturer, and she's a co-founder of, very interesting, the Peace Alliance, a grassroots company in supporting legislation to establish a United States Department of Peace. That's interesting. So this is where the change comes. This is where the change begins, by thinking in a different way than the way we that we have been thinking for all these centuries.

The new generation don't need our democracy any more, they hate it. Every time I talk about democracy my children go somewhere, and every time I talk about politics their friends go somewhere else. So I found out that even politics is not very actually nourishing to the new generations. While they're tweeting we're talking. So they're tweeting and we're talking, so we're not going to be following them up if we're going to still be talking tomorrow and the next day. And governments will fly away by the time the other next week will land somewhere else. Tweet is a bird, so tweeting is really travelling like a bird, flying in the air, so this is the time of change. This is the time of the shift; this is the time where I can say I want my fourth law. What is the fourth law?

The fourth law is built on four pillars. First is security, second is freedom, third is equality and the fourth is education, and vice versa. I think if this platform is
established in the world, a lot of problems will diminish. Equality – you can
name it equality of gender, equality of minorities, equalities in education,
equalities in sectors, equalities in regions, equalities between nations, so it's a
broad spectrum. And then freedom, what does freedom mean? Very
essential, which is the freedom of thought, freedom of travelling, freedom of
decision without really stepping on the toes of the other one. We have a
saying, and everybody knows, that your freedom stops when other people's
freedom begins. So it's simple logistics. It doesn't take a genius to think about
it.

The Bill of Rights of the United Nations has covered everything, but it has
been built on for so many years that we don’t even see the core any more.
What are the liberties of human beings, what are the human rights of human
beings? It doesn’t exist anymore, it’s just a word that is being played on by
this community, this organisation, that government and the other government,
and at the end of the day, the man of the street and the woman down in her
home has no humanitarian right whatsoever. They have of course right, there
are minimal, there are percentages everywhere, but at the bottom of the day,
if we share our humanities with other people it will actually spread like a flu,
and I would like maybe just to pinpoint a view words that I have actually
written for today.

Where better than in Chatham House to bring up William Pitt, first earl of
Chatham, who said, ‘Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who
possesses it and this is, I know my lords, there here laws end and tyranny
begins.’ I think that says a lot. Tyranny is tyranny, wherever it is. And ultimate
power to anybody, woman or man, will become tyranny. So it’s a new way of
thinking, a new way to be, and a new way to the future, and this is how we
should be looking at the future of our children and the next generations. There
must be laws that protect them universally and globally, since actually now
behind the scenes we don’t know who is tweeting and who’s actually being
anonymous. Is it a woman or a man – who is making the revolutions, is it a
man or a woman?

So this is at the end of the day the power. The power doesn’t lie in the hands
of a woman or the hands of a man, now it’s lying in the hands of technology,
and if we don’t actually, as women and men, try to regulate this technology,
this power will become destructive, and if we don’t put laws and if we present
a new way of thinking to the next generations, all will be lost, because we
would be lost within that dimension, not only one but 10 dimensions to come.
Power is a delicate thing to deal with. In my life as a daughter of the first king of Saudi Arabia and the founder, granddaughter of the founder, I've seen power. And – but I had no hand in it. And I feel somehow marginal to which. While you may say that is the nature of Saudi Arabia, I might add it's not just us in Saudi, it is also a statement about the position of women in many societies. Here there has recently been mourning for the passing of an iron lady, but no one has even come close to achieving her stature since. And I hope Claire does.

**Claire Spencer:**

I'm not seeking it.

**Princess Basmah Bint Saud:**

I know, but I want you. And it's just Claire or her daughter or her friend, or, it's not actually only Claire but I would like to see the wisdom of a woman there, because men for such a long time have made a disaster of the globe. It's about time that women be part of that decision making, and when I said that at the Democratic Club party in New York, and I said I think women should be taking over right now because men have done disaster of the globe so far, and Arabia was covering it. And because I said that word they didn't publish it in the Middle East. They declined and they said no, we're not going to publish this because it says that women have to rule. So here's a goal for you, Arabia. I'm sorry to say it but this is what happened. So it's serious, when a woman says I'm going to rule everybody feels threatened, so this is nice to know.

True equality is not just about reaching quotas, it's about changing attitudes and I think as women still have far to go on both counts, wherever we may be. Insecurities, both psychological and physical, hold us back and, of course, our societies are dominated by men, there are over 100 countries in the world and only 17 of them are led by women. But you must also take responsibility ourselves for improving our own situation. This is why I think leadership is crucial to showing the path forward, and leadership is an equation that must balance men and women together. If we can help women to become better communicators, more confident negotiators and leaders, then engagement with men is likely to yield better results for the improvement of the condition of all women, all around the world. And this can only be achieved by collaboration.
I was interested recently to follow the debate that was stirred by Sheryl Sandberg, as they have actually just mentioned, the chief operating officer of Facebook, and her book *Lean In* about women becoming more assertive in the workplace to achieve things, and most of us were believing but actually doing all this confidence. So I think leaning in is not the solution, because everybody is leaning in, men and women, it’s just actually being part of the whole equation and not taking the place of somebody. We have our place already. It’s not women position is not to be given or taken, it has to be there as a nature, as something recognised. It’s like a human right being yellow or blue or red – in the United States they’re still actually voting for the 15th Amendment, and I was shocked. So humanitarian rights are not anybody’s to give and take. It’s God’s gift to humanity, and I don’t think anybody should be playing with that. And who would leave the politicians actually the job, to put agendas to rule the countries and let us worry about the day to day people, men and women together.

I understand there is some controversy provoked by this: should women reaching those high points be dependent on men helping them get there, or should it be sheer force of a woman’s skill and capability, in spite of what a man does or doesn’t do? To me it is not about leaning in or leaning out but leaning together. A sermon from the Arab world which is very clear to me that it is easy to divide ourselves into groups, to fragment ourselves along various lines, but it is much harder to maintain a unity of purpose, which is invariably the better thing, to join forces, to make every day to day people’s lives easier and better quality for everybody.

The news beamed around the world, particularly using social media, social media didn’t care whether you were a man or a woman, it simply conveyed the struggle that people were undertaking, men and women alike. If, as the Earl of Chatham observed, we want the tyranny to end, and for the laws to exert their influence, then we must as one, men and women, join forces to change the attitudes in society, guided by equality of leadership that is equal to the task itself. And I think the only way to the future is a new way, is the fourth way, the fourth law.