Transcript Q&A

Women and Power in the Middle East – Closing Address

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Global United Lanterns Foundation

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Question 1:

I'd just like to know, other than educating yourself and going around Saudi Arabia talking to other women to educate yourself, what have you done with your privilege to help Saudi women?

Question 2:

During this forum today, the whole thing that came into my mind that maybe the biggest challenge for Arab Muslim women is not the lack of education, is not the economic obstacles or difficulties that you may have to overcome, it's not the political disempowerment, it is to deal with social norms that we are burdened with since the day we come to this world. I was talking to the previous British ambassador to Cairo and telling him that the very way that we are raised, and we all know about it, contributes for us to be taking away our self-confidence. As a little girl we should not express ourselves, we should not express our opinions, we should not disagree with the male, we should not embarrass them in public, our brothers, our parents, so it starts very early.

So if by a miracle we manage through education or some instinct to overcome these very real challenges that we have to deal with all our lives then in the end we have to deal with the society, which well if we decide to speak against certain rules we have to go through many dangers. If we have to be assertive, because we can, if you are not married you can end up being stereotyped as a feminist and you won't find a husband, you end up as a spinster or whatever, and if you are married your family will pressure you to make you stop talking – we all know about what we have to go through. So I think that as a Saudi woman you have a lot to contribute with in dealing with these challenges, dealing with changing social norms, because I think that's biggest challenge we all have.

Question 3:

As a student, there are many female students from Saudi Arabia with their family, and I've got many friends there from Saudi Arabia. So the problem with Saudi Arabia and many of the Gulf countries is not the education, there are many, many females studying a very high level course. My question, if I'm going to ask you as a business woman, do you think the chance you had is easily to be given to any normal woman, I mean not princess, or not a
member of a royal family? Is it easy for any Saudi woman to access to this business world?

And if I'm going to ask you about your role as moving around and talking about, on sharing your own experience, do you think that will help Saudi women, or are you talking about as a woman from Muslim and Arab world? So the question, are you representing Saudi women or are you representing me and every woman in the Arab world, and the message – to be a mother, a princess, a member of the royal family that give you more power to speak on behalf of many women – are you working with women or are you speaking on behalf of women?.

**Question 4:**

Slightly subversive question I guess, but you talked about something needs to get done ASAP. Does that mean that we would need some kind of revolution in Saudi Arabia, since some people are talking about these things? I know Chatham House has published papers on that, and also you talked about security concerns. Isn't that the oldest trick that governments have been telling people: we need greater security and it leads to human rights abuses, which is happening for 10 years now with the war on terror, for example, on many Arab and Muslim peoples all over the world?

**Question 5:**

I'm of Palestinian origin and I think that many Arab women share the same fears and the same challenges wherever they are, Saudis or Palestinians, or Lebanese or Syrian. If you can tell me, because it's very important to know about the new generation that's emerging in the Arab world, you as being a mother and as being a new voice I think that is coming out of Saudi Arabia, I think you have daughters as well as sons, so if you can tell me as a mother, how do you and which messages do you convey to your daughters, as the new generation that is going to come and that's going to take over our roles and our places in the world?

**Question 6:**

It's very impressive; I mean you talk about women emancipation and particularly being a Saudi and from a royal family. Just one question; how did
you manage to get out from the guardian – *al-wali*. How did you, you know, how did you manage to…

That’s private? Alright.

The other part of the question is that where do you stand regarding there has been a scandal which really touched everywhere in the Arab world, and we know that it does happen particularly in Saudi, because of the guardian who is, you know, who is in charge of everything. The scandal was about this religious cleric who raped and killed his four years old daughter and actually he was released, he was acquitted by the court of law in Saudi because of *la youtthough al walidu be walide* – a father is not, should be in charge with whatever he wants to do with his son or daughter or whatever – which is disgusting totally. And if it wasn’t for the interference of the king, he would have gotten away, and we know – we know as a fact, as you know, that there are many of them, they get away with it.

What do you think how you are going to try to influence while you are here and particularly – I mean obviously you are Arabian, but how you are going to try to influence the laws or the changes?

**HRH Princess Basmah Bint Saud:**

First of all, as everybody knows, I've stated my closing speech; I am not talking on behalf of anybody. I'm here as a researcher, as a humanitarian, that I've just studied in a research centre and a humanitarian organization. And through this what I did is started to write the fourth law as a constitution, as an alternative to whatever there is in the Middle East right now, as a beginning because this is where the revolutions are. A humanitarian institution that takes care of everything; economy, education, security, which is the most important thing in the Arab world, security, security, security – everything is done in the name of security, after Allah. And equality, which is also the problem of minorities, of the religious minorities which are being overtaken by the governments who are in charge, so if the area, an area there is the Shias, the Sunnis are the ones who are suffering, if the Sunnis are taking over the Shias are suffering and everybody is making war about the stability of the Middle East, whether the Shias or the Sunnis are going to be winning over so who is going to have the most power in the Middle East. And this is what all the revolutions are all about, at the bottom of the day.

So a constitution that takes over all these without touching whatever is going on up there but takes care of the rights of each and every human being, the
rights to prosecute, the security for the child, the security for women, the security of a human being, your rights to be known, to be written what would you have to do and what is not yours to do. It has to be written, we cannot say go back to the Qur’an, go back to the bible, no, this is not a joke and this is not a play and this is not a playhouse, and it’s not a doll house where we can take up religion and say go and take your things from your religion, go and take - no, this is humanity. We have learnt through our books, my book which is the Qur’an, somebody else’s book is the Torah, the other else’s book is the Bible. We have learnt through all these religions that there are wrongs and rights, and there are humanity rights and there are things which you are equal in. And Islam is one of the religions that gave women power, not taking from them, and human being power by having Bilal, the black man who was enslaved, was sitting the next day after he said he proclaimed Islam; he was sitting the next day with a prophet next to a white man.

So at the end of the day, we’re talking about human rights, we’re not talking about black women, woman, man rights, so at the end of the day what I’m doing is answering your question also, in the same question that a BBC correspondent asked me this morning: what are you doing for the women of your country other than travelling around? I said being here and talking and tweeting, and creating the fourth law for everybody. I’m doing a lot for the people in my country rather than women, because women are part of the society and women are half of the society and the other half are men, so I have to talk to both. We have to start structuring all society to be able to build on, we have to have a platform to build on, not an unsteady platform where women are somewhere and men are somewhere else.

We suffer from the same problems. We have to build a new platform in the Middle East so we can actually build a proper structure on it, a proper building, where everybody has his equal and written constitution which makes everybody equal, whether they are black, yellow, Sunni, Shia, Christians, Jews, whatever it is. They have to be equal because God has given us this. You can’t take it away. So this is what I’m calling for. I’m calling for it for everybody, for all, even if it sounds now like Einstein, at one day crazy, but it will happen if we just be one team, a killer team to make this happen. Thank you.