Transcript

Women and Power in the Middle East – Social Justice, Democracy and Gender Equality

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Good morning. My name is Alan Philps, I'll be chairing the first session of today's conference on women and power in the Middle East. Let me introduce myself. I'm the editor of *The World Today*, the Chatham House magazine. That makes me a journalist surrounded by professors and doctorates, but also I think it makes me the only man to be involved on this podium in the course of the day, which is a great honour.

The topic of this session is social justice, democracy and gender equality. I think it's very timely. If you cast your minds back two years ago, during the revolutions which swept away Ben Ali and Mubarak from power in Tunisia and Egypt, one of the lessons that we in the West learned, or seemed to learn, was that women could now appear and express themselves in a public space without fear of harassment and abuse. It seemed a golden age was opening. Of course, two years on we know that what we saw on our television screens was only a very partial snapshot of reality and tinged with some wishful thinking perhaps, so a reassessment of the role of women in revolution is required.

It's no exaggeration to say the place of women both in the family and in the public sphere of political, economic life is a central feature of post-revolutionary arguments, which are raging to this day. We hear terrible reports of harassment and sexual abuse of women on the streets and at the hands of security forces. Some people say that this is just a fact of life which people have to live with, while others see something more sinister, a masculine revenge with the aim of keeping women in their place under the guise of resisting western colonial imported values. So during this session we'll be asking how the revolutions are impacting the lives of women: are perceptions of gender changing, and if so how, and what role will women play in the future?

To discuss this we have a very distinguished panel. I'll start with Deniz Kandiyoti on my left here. Emeritus professor of development studies at SOAS, London University, she's a powerful voice in favour of pluralism and gender equality throughout the region. Next to her is Maha Azzam, expert on Middle Eastern politics and in particular political Islam. She is an associate fellow of the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa programme. Beyond my chair is Fatemah Khafagy, who got a PhD in development planning from University College in London but she's best known for her advocacy of gender equality in Egypt since the 1980s. Since the revolution she has founded the Arab Forum for Equal Citizenship, and is a founder
member of an Egyptian party, the People’s Socialist Alliance. And on my far left is Mehrezia Labidi from Tunisia. She’s an expert translator and interpreter who teaches at the European Institute of Human Sciences near Paris. She is also prominent in a number of faith-based organizations, including the Global Women of Faith Network. In 2011 she was elected vice president of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly for the ruling Ennahda party.

I will ask each of the panellists to speak for about eight minutes, I’ll be timing you, so that we can have plenty of time for questions when everyone has spoken, which is the point of the exercise. So Deniz, would you like to come to the podium first?

**Deniz Kandiyoti:**

Good morning, and thank you for having an academic among so many activists, politicians, people who’ve been working in NGOs. So I will try to contribute what I think we do best, which is a proposal for a framework that attempts to explain the very complicated challenges that we face in the domain of gender equality and, unlike the speakers who went before me, who concentrated on internal, cultural causality, I will argue that some of the most severe challenges come because of the interaction of certain global forces with the local and that these impact negatively on prospects for gender equality. I call these perverse associations, and I will be talking about three types of perverse associations.

But before I get there, very briefly, when you look at the Global Gender Gap Index, which the World Economic Forum puts out, you can see the problem quite starkly, because this index, which has four sub-indices – economic participation, educational attainment, health and political empowerment – shows that the MENA countries are clustered at the bottom of the league table in a group of 134 countries, and that what accounts for this poor performance is two sub-indices – those of political empowerment and participation, and economic participation and opportunity. In fact, one of the chief economists of the World Bank stated that we’re witnessing a gender paradox in the MENA region – that by investing in women’s education, the MENA countries have increased aspirations and ability to earn incomes, but the low levels of female participation mean the region is not reaping the returns of this investment, and economist after economist have been calculating the costs in terms of growth prospects.
Now that the region is convulsed by important upheavals and changes, we have to put the question of the so-called democratic paradox. When you look worldwide at post-authoritarian transitions, you see a mixed picture: a rather disappointing one in the post-Soviet states, where initial market transition created a lot of welfare losses for women, a much more bright picture emerging out of Latin America, and a very confusing and downbeat one at the moment coming out of the MENA region. So this brings me to the question of what has been the conjuncture at this point in time that is facilitating the marginalization, if not the outright discrediting, of platforms for gender equality. And I think there are three.

The first is the way in which the global agenda for gender equality and the standard-setting instruments it uses, such as CEDAW, the UN conferences on women, the platforms for action, are imported and implemented in the MENA region. We know that the national machineries which have been created under authoritarian conditions were actually appendages of authoritarian regimes, and this has created what an Egyptian colleague has called ‘first lady syndrome’, that the gender equality platforms were almost identified with the ruling elite, and this of course created the possibility after regime change of clawing back some of those rights in the name of getting rid of the remnants of the previous regime.

In addition, the encounter of the democratization agenda of the Greater Middle East Initiative with the gender equality platforms has been disastrous. Women’s rights have been hijacked quite opportunistically by regimes that had absolutely no intention of democratizing. It would be fair to say that in most countries of the Middle East with single party or dynastic regimes, the women’s equality platform had become the democratic façade of non-democratic regimes, a fig leaf if you like. So we have the quotas in Saudi Arabia – I mean I could give examples but I know our chair will be severe with me. So I can elaborate on this paradigm but this is the unhappy marriage of democratization and gender equality.

There is yet another unhappy marriage, or rather a divorce, and this is the divorce between women’s rights platforms and social justice platforms. What I see is that these platforms – since the Reagan/Thatcher era or neoliberalization – these two platforms have been gradually drifting apart. Whereas initially many women’s movements were deeply committed to social justice and redistributive goals, their incorporation into donor-funded machineries has produced both an NGOization of political movements, where NGOs are frequently acting as contractors to donors, and also it created a
situation where gender equality was being implemented as a technocratic fix, which had little to do with social justice – when in fact gender justice should not be separated from social justice.

The result of this was that this platform that was vacated was taken up by players with very conservative gender agendas. This we see, for example, in the role of the Catholic Church in Latin America, where while they were fighting for the cancellation of the odious debts of the South, they were at the same time backing organizations that were putting severe restrictions on women’s rights and especially their reproductive rights. The case is exactly the same in the Middle East. We have seen populist and religious movements claiming to speak on behalf of the poor and the marginalized and the powerless increasing their appeal regardless of the often authoritarian overtones and misogynistic messages that they were putting across. So this is the second perverse association.

The final and very devastating one is the connection between geopolitics and the issue of gender equality. And there I will argue that the normative ideal of gender equality was transformed into a debased currency after the events of 9/11 in the United States and the following operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, where the invocation of oppressed Muslim women as part of the rationale for military action in Afghanistan and Iraq provoked a very understandable reaction on the part, incidentally, of feminists of the north who decried the obverse naked instrumentalism behind the agendas of the Bush and indeed Blair administrations. The result of this is now there is a veritable cottage industry of critiques of liberalism and imperialism with women’s rights issues being a tool of the arsenal of this global oppression, and the very unfortunate side effect of this is that attempts posing as progressive attempts to unmask and expose hypocritical designs of imperial power, including gender equality agendas, is that it delegitimizes the tireless struggles of women in the region itself, who have been struggling to expand their rights and to better their life options.

So I conclude – quite negatively, I apologize for this – by saying that to the extent that the gender equality platform became tainted with the political opportunism of the powerful. What has happened is that those who suffer most are the women in the region who are looking for an emancipatory voice and are being disallowed the full range of discursive possibilities that they should be benefitting from, which is why at the moment the only area where this type of articulation seems to be possible is in Muslim women’s feminist movements, where they are fighting for more progressive interpretations of
what the various Islamic sources offer them. I think that this is a restricted
discursive, feel that they should have the full range of possibilities open to
them, but I think that’s the best that can be done at the moment.

**Maha Azzam:**

Thank you very much. Good morning to you all. I’d like to place this a little bit
in the context of Egypt, and in a political context as well. I think in order to
discuss the position of women today in the context of the change that has
happened in Egypt and Tunisia and Yemen, we need to look a little bit at the
legacy of the political systems that have existed, and to see the break with the
past as very much an opportunity for both men and women. Clearly there has
been a great deal of hope that arose from the fall of the various dictators in
the region, a belief that there would be political participation for all, that
women’s rights and hopes and dreams would be for once heard more clearly
and responded to. But what we have is a period of transition, post-
authoritarian regimes that have survived for decades in much of the region.

In Egypt what we see is a political system that has been shaken but not
altogether removed. By that I mean you have the need for security sector
reform, you have a situation where activists, both men and women, still face
police brutality, where there is a lack of the rule of law, where you have a
regime that has been removed and replaced by an elected Islamist-oriented
government that is still engaged in something of a political power struggle
with opponents and with the old regime, that is still trying to control the police
force, that doesn’t have full control over its police force, that is in a battle with
the judiciary – some of which are honourable and some of which are
remnants of the old regime. You have a military that in the early period after
Mubarak was involved in human rights abuses, not only military trials but
virginity tests for women protestors, and which has come to some kind of
accommodation with the present government partly because the present
government saw it fit to achieve some kind of *modus vivendi* in order to bring
about the democratic process slowly and gradually, but ultimately knowing
that the issue of military–civil relations will have to be resolved over the
medium to long term.

So in reality, the issue of women’s struggle today is very much part and
parcel of the political process that is altogether unresolved and is in turmoil in
Egypt. It’s in turmoil because – partly because of a legacy of dictatorship and
partly because although we speak of revolution, the revolution is ultimately
not secured and the changes are ongoing – what we have today is a window of opportunity. There is greater debate than there ever was before; there is activism at very many levels, both in terms of civil society, political parties. You have official political parties, Islamist and non-Islamist, trying to put forward different ideas of women’s rights. You have an Islamist agenda that is seen as regressive by some but seen by its participants as a means and a channel to further women’s participation in politics. So you have women members of the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt feeling that this is an opportunity for them to engage and to participate in politics, while others see this just as a cosmetic sign of participation that is promoted by the Brotherhood and by Islamists. But, nevertheless, in reality you have women engaged in one form of political activity or other across the board.

The polarization is very much ideological, and nowhere more so than in terms of gender politics. And the polarization between the secularists and leftist liberals, if you like, and all their variety on one side, and the Islamists in all their variety on the other, in a sense needs to be worked out and will take time to do so, and may never actually be resolved over the next decade or two. But what one hopes for in the context of Egypt and elsewhere in the region is that there is a greater degree of inclusivity that what eventually is established as a parliamentary political system, in which different groups can lobby for their rights, and can participate, no less so than the different women’s groups with all their different agendas and, in that, we mustn’t forget also the rural women with their rights and their needs.

At this particular juncture I think there is a need today in Egypt, as perhaps elsewhere in the region, to create the possibility of some kind of consensus between government and civil society and NGOs to see where there are areas of possibility for collaboration, whether it be over the issue of education, the raising of literacy among women, particularly rural women. Another area would perhaps be health and another area would be perhaps the promotion of the economic area where small businesses among women can be of mutual benefit both for the economic well-being of the country and also women’s financial independence.

So there may be areas of consensus where both government and civil society can come together to promote women’s rights, perhaps in areas that are less ideological, if you like. I think also there is room – in an area where there is a great deal of conflict today – to find room perhaps for religion… and men of religion and women of religion to perhaps speak more openly about the need for reinterpreting the position of women in politics and women’s participation
in the public space, so that women as victims of harassment and violence are not seen as in any way responsible for that victimization and violence. There is room within the Islamic discourse to do so. There is room I think for both religion to play a role in this and for religious institutions to come up with solutions, which they are starting to do – and there needs to be obviously a political initiative on the part of government to push forward with this, because political will I think is at the core of this.

I think it's very difficult to presume in a society like Egypt that you are going to engage on women’s issues outside the religious discourse. The religious discourse is key and is central, and therefore religious institutions and government, especially in Islamist-oriented government, can take the lead in this – even though that discourse may be one that is resented by some liberal and secular forces, it is one that may have the greatest clout, particularly today in Egypt. The media has a great, a very big role to play in this, and can be used beneficially, again across the very different independent satellite channels, both religious and non-religious, to promote the idea of non-violence towards women, I think is a very important starting point, particularly today, in today's climate in Egypt, where women, despite the very substantial work that's being done on the ground, feel in a sense threatened in terms of their own physical safety and in terms of the public space.

Now this whole issue of the public space is so key because in a sense the revolution was very much started in the context of people coming out for the first time into a public space, into various public spaces across the country, in order to express their call for freedom, social justice and dignity. That desire was very much part and parcel of the aspirations of both men and women. And the reason I stress this, in a sense, united call is that it hasn't been resolved and the demands for both have not been resolved or taken much further beyond the fact that an old regime has been brought down – but the remnants of that regime still exist and the barriers to political progress for both men and women are still enormous. And the struggle, I think, is just beginning. Thank you very much.

Fatemah Khafagy:

Good morning, everybody. In the few coming minutes I would like to talk about the tactics that the present regime in Egypt is following to push women away from the political arena and then looking at what strategies are women
using and implementing in order to avoid or to overcome the challenges and the tactics being used.

Actually, one important thing is that pushing and excluding women from the political arena and pushing them away from the decision-making powers and positions in Egypt – and the ideology that is being used by the existing regime is the gender role ideology, which is being used to place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives – and this public/private dichotomy in traditional definition of politics is used to exclude women from the political, public political sphere.

Just to give a few examples; we can look what has been happening since the regime has taken over. Only three women were in the advisory council, versus 30 men. Also there were four women in the committee that drafted the constitution; the total number was 100. The gender quota was removed, and now the result is that there are 13 women only in the Shura Council that has a total membership of 264 and we only have two ministers in the cabinet, and also women were not able to be governors, something that Egyptian women have fought for before the revolution. And lately a female mayor, the only one we had, a mayor of a village, was sacked a few weeks back, or actually removed by someone from the existing Islamic political party.

If we look at the constitution also, it raises lots of concerns, because it hardly mentions women’s rights or gender equality. It also does not guarantee any representation, political representation of women in elected councils, and above all it restricts women’s rights to only those compatible with the rules of Islamic jurisprudence and which can result in depriving women from many rights. It also gives the state the right to make sure that families are conforming with good morals and values, and this actually is a threat to women’s personal rights. The regime also encourages that in order to reconfirm the reproductive role of women and women as mothers and wives, that they are the most important role. It encourages early marriage, polygamy, early and frequent pregnancy and has actually stopped all family planning plans and activities that were within the Ministry of Health in Egypt. In using also this strategy of exclusion, the regime is using tradition, customs, religion and the division of labour to determine what women should be doing or not be doing.

The other kind of tactics being used is the gender-based violence exercise on women now, in different forms, especially women who are active in the political arena and women who are in the protest and demonstrations – and lots of new forms like systematic harassment done by groups of young men
so that the victim of violence could not really recognize who has done it and who are the witnesses and so on. Beside the impunity actually is very noticeable – the police have also refused to make good records that can lead to good investigation of the incidents of violence. And there is also an intimidation of victims of violence so that they cannot really report what happens to them and they’ve been advised that this can protect their reputation. And impunity of course encourages repetitive incidents of sexual assault. However, the number of women who are really sort of, of recording their incidents of violence is fortunately increasing in Egypt, but not yet, not serious things have been done actually in order to stop that.

We can see also what happened at the UN with the commission of status of women on the conclusion document on violence against women – and there was a split because the Egyptian government and the presidency has actually not been in favour that Egypt would accept such a document, whereas the Egyptian delegation was cleared because there were others who are not coming from the presidency but from the National Council for Women who were for agreeing on the document.

There is also a draft law on violence against women that has been prepared by the National Council for Women and presented on the request of the prime minister, who wanted to show that he wants to do something about the repetitive incidents of violence happening in the public space – but nothing actually has been done yet and it is severely criticized by the ruling political party. One vivid example of pushing women from the political arena, and also by using violence against them, where the women voters who were trying to vote during the referendum on the constitution – and there were so many complaints actually reported from women voters on harassment happened to them. These women were the ones who were expected not to agree on the constitution, to also the extent that in some villages that had a Christian population that were also intimidated not to leave their homes at all and vote because they were expected to also vote against the constitution.

Now what are the strategies that Egyptian women are adopting in order to face these challenges? Egyptian women are really sort of agreed that being in numbers and great numbers make a difference in Egypt. And because we have many women NGOs and people activists but they were working actually separately – but they have recognized that coming together is one of the things that they can use also to have an influence and a higher voice. The second thing being organized – they’ve also realized that they have to be organized, and there’s so many instances of NGOs coming together in
coalitions, also where young women and young men movements working together on things like harassment, for instance, and being on the street and so on. The other thing is just also because the Egyptian revolution was not truly an urban revolution that happened in the squares, in Cairo and Alexandria. Now women are realizing that they have to reach out to rural, remote areas and that is an example of feminist unions that are also working through membership of small NGOs all over Egypt.

Egyptian women also have to join the important institutions that are also working now to have a say in the transition period, like the Salvation Front, for instance, that is composed of the opposition parties – so there was no actual addressing of women’s issues and there were no membership of women there. Now Egyptian women activists have forced the Salvation Front that they would be there, that they also may stream women’s issues and gender issues within their different committees and their different work, like the committee on security, on political issues, on economic issues and so on – and also have formed from the different women’s committees in the opposition party a women’s committee inside the Salvation Front. So they’re also mainstreaming the gender issues and also working on their own rights.

The last thing also – that they are bringing more men to be with them in their struggle for keeping their rights and asking for their participation in the political arena, and actually more men now are joining. So there is I mean a… the Egyptian women are really struggling, are facing the challenges; it’s not an easy thing to do but I think they are very much determined – as much as they participated in the revolution, they want to be part of the transition period. Thank you.

**Alan Philps:**

Thank you very much for that Fatemah, giving an activist’s view. I must admit the first part of your talk seemed to be unremittingly depressing, but there does seem to be hope. Mehrezia, would you like to give us some experiences from Tunisia, where the whole thing kicked off, of course, the start of the revolutions?

**Mehrezia Labidi:**

I speak as a politician.
Alan Philps:
You speak as a politician, is that good or bad?

Mehrezia Labidi:
And contributing now to the constitution well.

Alan Philps:
About the constitution.

Mehrezia Labidi:
Yes.

Alan Philps:
Well there have been many angry debates about the Tunisian constitution. Okay, Mehrezia, please.

Mehrezia Labidi:
Thank you, Alan. Dear panellists, I am so honoured to be with you today and, mesdames, messieurs, participants, it's really a privilege for me to speak here in Chatham House, I think for the second time. So I hope that the other conversation will lead us to advance in human rights in general and women's rights especially in our region. I'll try to deal with four points. Is there really a Tunisian exception concerning women rights? And what happened during the revolution, what about the constitution and future?

So briefly: is there a Tunisian exception? A brief glimpse to history confirms that, yes, in issues linked to women's rights and women's status, there is a Tunisian exception. First of all, we have a shared memory in Tunisia, memory of history of our people in which women's place is really valorized. Women have a specific place. The political genius is female: Dido or Alyssa. She secured territory, she secured peace and she secured prosperity for her people. The symbol of resistance and of reconciliation is a woman, al-Kāhina. She resisted Arab conquerors, then she reconciled with them in the best way.
The symbols of welfare and of culture are women, women from Kairouan. They were so educated, highly educated and they even contributed to a new reading of theology, of Islam and of Islamic law – and probably you’ve heard about the Kairouan contract of marriage which forces men not to be polygamous, to have only one wife.

Also you have heard maybe of Aziza Othmana, a princess of Tunisia, Ottoman princess, and she was a builder of mosques, of schools and hospitals. We still have a hospital in her name in Tunisia. And for sure you have heard of Habib Bourguiba, the political leader, the founder of the modern state, and maybe you don't know that it’s a woman, Madame Bashira Ben Mrad who introduced him in Tunisia in 1930s as a leader.

So there is no surprise that one of the first acts of building the modern state in Tunisia is the promulgation of the personal status code. It was by political will of Bourguiba but many scholars like Ben Achour, like Sheikh Zayed, Sheikh Bu Hajib and Sheikh Hanabi, who are Sheikhs from Zaytuna, already have prepared the project, how to enhance the status of Muslim women in Tunisia.

So we have a shared memory in Tunisia, in which woman is valorized, and I think this is very important but it was not sufficient. It was not sufficient because it’s not sufficient to have rights, to have a status, to be beneficial for all women. Poverty, illiteracy prevented many Tunisian women in a rural area from excess to their rights.

Besides during especially the era of Ben Ali, the dictatorship, women, some women were celebrated and some others were excluded. Excluded from scholarship, from studies, from work, and even they were considered as second-class citizens. But there was some positive effect or impact of this celebration, and exclusion. The celebrated women benefitted from the celebration, the elite, the educated women to work with, for example, United Nations agencies working with women within FPA to develop a feminist movement etc. – and everybody knows the organization Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates.

But the excluded ones benefitted also from they were transformed in a way, they were obliged to become human rights activists, and they resisted dictatorship. Journalists like Sihem Bensedrine, lawyers like Radhia Nasraoui and Saida Akrimi, and many, many other women, hundreds of women who were sisters, mothers, daughters of political prisoners who worked together to fight dictatorship and to implement a new culture, the culture of human rights in Tunisia.
I think this was very positive – these women prepared the revolution. This is why I can say that Tunisian women participated in this revolution actively. They formed, they educated the youth who made this revolution, and I realized personally when I was following the revolution from Paris, that there is something changing in Tunisia when young girls in Gafsa faced police forces. And they obliged them to go back to their *caserne*. And when the mother of one of the first martyrs of our revolution, the mother of Shoki Hederi from Regueb or I think Bouzaiane in Sidi Bouzid – she was asked, first of all she refused to cry in front of the dictator when he tried to give her money, maybe to pay her son’s life, she refused to cry. She is a noble woman, she cannot let the persecutor see her crying, and she said, ‘My son was not killed out of hunger, lack of bread, but lack of dignity.’ And this is very important. So we have made this revolution together with men, and after the revolution we said well, we made the revolution together, let's make the country new together. And this is very important. This leads us to speak about of our work now as women, in civil society and in the parliament or in this National Constituent Assembly.

I think one of the main achievements is enforcing this parity in the electoral court. This brings about 30 per cent of the MPs are women, are female deputies in our assembly, so Tunisian women now are effectively contributing to the drafting of the new constitution, and this is very important. This is why the debates are very, sometimes very tense and very hard on issues linked to human rights and to women’s also rights.

And so far in our constitution, in this project, the official project of the constitution, we have four articles linked to women’s rights, and this is really important. First, equality between citizenship on the level of citizenship – women are citizens having equal rights like men, and in Arabic we can say *muah tinoon*, it encompasses women and men, but we insist to say *muah tinoon* and *muah tinat* – male and female citizens. This is very important.

The second article is the article that says that men and women – not citizens, female and male citizen – men and women are partners in the building of the country. And the other article is about – it’s more comprehensive, it first of all calls the state to guarantee women’s rights and the enhancement of these rights. It also mentions the equality of opportunity, to access to responsibilities and decision-making positions as also an obligation for the state, and I think it something very important is also it obliges the state to eradicate all forms of violence against women.
I think these articles are really important. We are still ambitious, we want also to involve parity in our constitution. I hope that we will succeed, but this is not sufficient. I think now the main step is how to make all Tunisian women the elite, the educated ones, those who live in poor urban areas and also in rural poor areas, how to make them appropriate this constitution, understand these rights and ask for them. Because it’s not sufficient to give a status, the more important thing is to give accessibility to the rights which are mentioned in women’s states. And I think this is the challenge.

The other challenge is that now after the revolution there is what I call a euphoria of liberties, an explosion of liberties. It is wonderful, but sometimes it’s dangerous for women. It’s dangerous because some acts of violence against women, like for example rape – and maybe you have heard about the case of rape in Tunisia, but what is really positive is that for the first time media are speaking of this case of rape.

Justice, women organizations and my – let’s say, now my wish is that we will, now with Tunisian women and in the frame of transition justice, we will speak about rape, women who were raped under the dictatorship, and who were not empowered to speak about what happened. They were raped because they were wives, sisters, mothers of political prisoners, and I hope that we will speak of them in this transitional justice. And you know that even the minister of women was questioned in our parliament about these cases of rape, and sometimes the debate, the discussion on women’s rights and the fear of some Tunisian women of the regressions of their rights, is in a way tense in Tunisia, but I prefer to have a very difficult debate, to have moments of tension to silence. And to this silence that may also bring us back as Tunisian women and make us lose our rights.

But the guarantee of not losing our rights as Tunisian women first of all is that the personal status code is not only considered as something very important to women but to Tunisian society. Let me remind you that in October 2005, when all parties of opposition made a social pact, one main element of this pact is enhancing women’s status in Tunisia and protecting their rights. And it is still one main element of our social pact.

We have to be alert on this fact, yet I want also to listen to other fears, the fears of women who were persecuted under the dictatorship. They’re also very frightened. What if persecution is back? How to secure them in the future… and securing them in the future is by setting the rule of the law. And I think this is how by education, awareness and a constitution, enforcing a constitution mentioning women’s rights, that we can keep this Tunisian
exception. I hope that we will keep it, and I will work with other Tunisian women, whatever is their choice, to keep it.