Transcript Q&A

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

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Alan Philps:

I think I’m going to ask the first question, if you will forgive me, and that is to pick up something from our keynote speaker. We heard the terrible effect of Western policy on the gender agenda in the Middle East. I wonder if Turkey where, as we now know, 78 per cent of Arab women watch Turkish dramas, whether Turkey can provide a better model. So I’m going to ask each of you in turn just to say something rather briefly. Could I start with you Deniz: is Turkey a model, very briefly?

Deniz Kandiyoti:

Well I think we should ask one of our speakers this afternoon who is tasked with the status of women in Turkey. I’m not evading the question but I think that Turkey was one of the countries that played on the external and the internal and rather opportunistic ways, myself. Because they led the Greater Middle East Initiative and they were participating and leading the gender equality. They came into full compliance with CEDAW, the convention for the elimination – such a mouthful – of all forms of discrimination against women. So Turkey made huge strides in legislative terms, and what was happening is that there was a giving with one hand and taking back with the other, because at the same time as Turkey was still getting into full legal compliance, women’s NGOs were being told that the prime minister didn’t believe in the equality of women publicly, that women should have at least three children, that abortion was murder – which incidentally were not topics that were discussed in Turkey, these were very Catholic topics, that was never on the Turkish. So this created a great deal of confusion and a great deal of distress among the community of women’s NGOs.

But one very good thing about Turkey, which I have to say from my own experience, is that the parts of the state that were involved in pushing for women’s issues. The Directorate of Women’s Affairs, whatever party was in power has been consistently doing its job and consistently talking to women with a human rights agenda. Another very good thing about Turkey is that there is a serious dialogue between a platform of Islamist and secular women who recognize that they can unite around a common agenda. So I would say that in terms of resisting attempts to claw back on women’s rights, probably civil society in Turkey is somewhat better equipped than the other countries in the Middle East.
Maha Azzam:

I think Turkey’s obviously further down the line in terms of having had a parliamentary democracy for longer. I think it is an example in a general sense because it’s been able to balance and sometimes cause confusion, as you’ve rightly suggested, between Islamist agendas and non-Islamist ones. But I think it’s the space that was provided for the different agendas to be expressed and debated, whichever one eventually managed to succeed or take the lead. And I think that is key as an example for the region.

Alan Philps:

So it’s a result of having parliamentary –

Maha Azzam:

Yes, having a parliamentary system, and also saying that although you have an Islamist orientation at the helm, nevertheless other agendas and views were included and sometimes took the lead, and sometimes there was consensus, and I think that is a very good example.

Fatemah Khafagy:

I think, as our key speaker said this morning, the media is playing a very important role in Egypt because after the revolution I mean there has not been investment in the Egyptian soap operas that were very famous in the region, but the Turkish ones are really shown in Egypt every now and then. And some of them are really raising gender issues, and also showing, as she said, that Islam does not contradict with so many rights of women. I think Egyptians of all sort of social classes are looking and watching this carefully, so I think in the long run maybe this could also influence – but on the other hand, pessimistic one, because also the political relationship with countries like Iran, Hamas and Turkey, which the present government is really very keen on establishing, but with no transparency whatsoever… so I think it’s also raising lots of concerns of Egyptians of what sort of relationship would it be.
Alan Philps:

Is Turkey a long way from Tunisia?

Mehrezia Labidi:

Not really, we are not long way from Turkey. And I think that Bourguiba has already taken Turkey as an example, and we feel very close to the Turkish example, from the culture also, and I think that yes we can take them as example. But sometimes we want them also to look to Tunisia an example to address atrocity.

Question 1:

I wanted to ask about Turkey and about how women have multiple identities, including often identity of a minority, and we were at the CSW this year and the Turkey minister for women gave one of the very, very good speeches. On the other hand, I work a lot for Kurdish women and I am constantly going to Istanbul and other places in southeast to monitor the trials and try to work for all of those many, many political prisoners, including heads of women’s NGOs. Can you please say something about how do we all deal with women who are also both discriminated because they’re women, discriminated also because they are part of minorities in their countries, and often discriminated because they are widows or wives of the missing, and Turkey has not even begun to develop a national action plan to implement 1325.

Deniz Kandiyoti:

I think it is true that Turkey is in the throes of a major transformation in terms of accommodating that more diverse citizenry with diverse claims. But I personally feel that the women’s movement has probably – I mean I am impressed by the women’s movement in Turkey because among civil society organizations they have reached out, there has been dialogue. One of the interesting parts of the dialogue, there has been dialogue between Islamist women’s NGOs and Kurdish women’s NGOs, secular women’s NGOs, and what is interesting about this is that the Kurdish women who are able to transcend narrowly ethnic nationalist identities, and recognize commonalities on a gender platform, who exist. I personally think basically, to cut a long
story short, that the women’s right movement and agenda is the best hope of democratization in Turkey briefly.

**Question 2:**

It’s rather an intervention not a question very quickly, because I feel the urge to speak because I hear some alarming statements coming from the panel. I’m often myself being seen as not authentic and not Egyptian like most secular feminists, we’re seen as westernized, even though I’m from Shoubra and, for those of you know Egypt, you know this is as Egyptian as it gets. We’re often seen as we do not work with rural areas, even though I personally work with a project in Minya, and I know Fatemah also has been going everywhere in governorates, and other secular feminists as well have been working in all the governorates. We’ve been accused of being elitist; we’ve been accused of being friends of the first lady.

My point is that our work is being delegitimized by internationals often, and restrictive religious discourse is often being suggested as the only authentic discourse or the only authentic framework to work with. I believe that seculars should engage with religion, and I believe that this has many perspectives to revive the Islamic religion especially from the country of Azhar. But I refuse that instead of getting solidarity from internationals or from people from other countries where we’re having a very strong struggle, we are being delegitimized and our work is being severely criticized, as secular feminists in Egypt.

**Question 3:**

I’d like to comment on that. I think the idea that any group of women working in Egypt today or elsewhere in any of the so-called Arab Spring countries should be delegitimized because of their ideology is reprehensible, I don’t think that should be the case at all. The work being done by Islamists, non-Islamists, Copts, communists, whatever, in terms of women’s rights is work being done for women. I think that the key point here, and it’s one that I tried to make earlier on, where now there is a centrality in terms of the political debate that revolves if you like around Islam, and where you have a leading political party such as the FJP gaining the majority of votes, for instance in the last dissolved parliament, or the leading political party – I’m saying that perhaps it would be a good idea for both that party and religious institutions to
take the lead in re-educating, through the media, through the pulpit, their congregations and their communities about a more liberal, a more open-minded idea about what Islam is about, greater tolerance, a greater understanding of the need to include others. And I think that is key. Again we could take a leaf out of the Turkish book, it’s what you were saying in terms of again something I suggested, suggested earlier, a kind of consensus building if there were at all room between those that are more religiously oriented and have great variety, and those that perhaps want a more secular approach to women’s issues.

Mehrezia Labidi:

In Tunisia also we have both let’s say restrictive discourses from such an extreme religious people, but also from layik or secularist people. And I received many, many women’s organizations in the assembly when we were drafting the first copy of the constitution and I listened to them. But I was surprised that on the 13th August is the festival of women. In Tunisia there is a slogan in the street, almar’a Tunisiya mish Mahazirya, Tunisian women are not Mahazirya. And I replied with humour, well but we made a revolution to escape to one model, and I will never introduce myself as the unique example, and even with the song yes, I said okay, I’m not, maybe all Tunisian women are not me but I am certainly Tunisian woman. And I provoked again dialogue, dialogue, dialogue, within women who are recognized as with Islamic reference, with my party and with our supporters telling them that you are not only the Tunisian, Tunisian women are not you only but all Tunisian women, but also with others, telling them that we are Tunisian women. So restrictive discourse of speech is not exclusively used by religious people, but it may be also used by secularist, and we have to be against both let’s say exclusivists or restrictivists.

Question 4:

I am totally against waiting for the political or the people in power to empower women. We’ve waited for people in power to do things for years and years and years, and without the revolution that was started on the street nobody would have taken this power. So I think specially in women’s issues we need to focus on grass root work or media, and media challenging the power, not working with power because we cannot wait for that any longer. And just this week a new initiative called ‘sit al-hayta’, the women on the wall, a graffiti, a
group of graffiti artists who are calling for women’s rights in Egypt. I’m starting ‘itkaleme’, which is an online portal channel, video, audio about women, so I think that we need to take that in our hands, we cannot wait for the government to do that for us.

**Question 5:**

What has not been mentioned by any of the speakers this morning is the role of women in their nations’ armed forces and police, and yet we know that the power in these countries resolves in those two bodies. Mao Zedong said all power comes from the barrel of a gun. While we follow the doctrine that the pen is mightier than the sword, I put it to you that you will never achieve full equality unless you wield the sword as well as the pen, would you comment?

**Fatemah Khafagy:**

In Egypt there are few women actually but mostly in clerical work now in the police, but it’s also bubble thing because some of the NGOs on women’s movements that are working against sexual harassment on the street, they’ve reported that some of the women in the police are also harassers. So it does not mean having women that this is also good for the women who are active politically, so we have to be also very clear what kind of women are there.

**Mehrezia Labidi:**

I will speak again about the Tunisian exception. Our army protected the revolution, and many times it had the opportunity to take power and they refused, so not all the countries have the same situation. And the presence of Tunisian women in the army is not very important but quite considerable, and with the police I do agree with my colleague, is that we have to change mentalities and not only to change the male or female policemen, we have to rehabilitate the image of the public and police force, what does it mean? I contributed to many meetings with the police force working on this theme, and I think I’m really convinced that it’s a changing mentality and not only men and women.
Question 6:

I would just like to make a quick criticism to the so-called international intelligentsia composed of so-called experts living in the West with very little connection with the reality on the ground in Egypt, which has propagated in the past six months a very inaccurate idea of what’s taking place in our country. What we saw, and of course I mean there were wrong predictions saying that the Muslim Brotherhood had genuinely democratic platform and it was going to respect it. That was said and sworn by experts living in the West and not in Egypt against the will of many.

I don’t have a question, just my point to say how the members of this group still dare to present an idea of the reality on the ground as the opposition of two groups, one being Islamists and the others of seculars. I mean there is not such a thing as secularism against Islamism in Egypt or anywhere else. There is a big majority of democrats, Muslim democrats, Copts, a very diverse majority which wants just the elected government to defend the platform on which it was elected. It is totally misleading.

Question 7:

Miss Mehrezia, you have been painting a very colourful picture about Tunisia. I mean we know very well that Majalla law which was issued by Habib Bourguiba in 1956 have given women a lot of rights including no polygamy as well as the joint ownership in case of divorce and all of this. Now the new Islamist government are coming – how do you compare all of these rights to what is happening now, because as far as I read or follow is that the new government wants to implement parts of sharia law including especially in inheritance as well as polygamy as well as custody. In fact the latest fatwa about Jihad al Nikah is a fantastic one, so how could you create such balance? You give a beautiful picture as if you have no problems, while we know better.

Mehrezia Labidi:

First of all let’s start with nikah fatwa please. If you found this text give it to me. And you’ll see I’ll be the first woman in Tunisia to go the Mufti and indeed have –
Alan Philps:

What does this fatwa say?

Mehrezia Labidi:

Everybody? There is no fatwa, no believe me, there is no scholar in Tunisia that delivered such a fatwa. The fatwa is supposed to say that some girls from Tunisia have to go to Syria to be spouses of those who are fighting... for jihadists.

Please give it to me, give me the text and who said it please, and who said it. So it is not in Tunisia. No I'm sorry. We were the first group of women, the Nahadwe women, to bring back some girls who were indeed in a way attracted to go to Turkey to, to Syria via Turkey. As a mother I will never let a single Tunisian girl go for such an aim. And we are trying to get them back and to punish even those who provoked this.

Now let's come to about polygamy and inheritance. Let me just remind you that Bourguiba, when he was asked why haven't you changed the inheritance law or the successor law, and you let it conform to Islamic sharia, he answered, ‘There is a clear text in the Koran stating it, and I think that our society is not ready to change inheritance law.’ What I suggest to all of those who speak about equality in heritage, let's discuss it with the nation, and let's forget about law and sharia, but let's discuss it with the nation and see what about this idea in our society.

Let's speak about Tunisian women who are not even having their share now, they are excluded completely from inheritance. So for me it's not only a problem of law, it's also a problem of society. But about polygamy, there is no single politician in Tunisia, whether he is from Ennahda or any other party, who suggested to review polygamy, I'm sorry.

We have a commitment and we are respecting it in our party. As I told you the personal status code is a main element of our social pact and there is never, never a revision of polygamy. Certainly not.
Question 8:

I would like to ask all the speakers – it’s a general question – and I would like to ask has the Arab Spring so-called revolutions opened the door to women to go forward or have they closed the door for women and we went backwards?

Deniz Kandiyoti:

I think we don’t know yet, but I think that one thing is sure, and that is when you have an order that is non-democratic, non-pluralistic, you shake it up. A post-authoritarian transition may eventuate, as did in Latin America, or it may not, as there are now signs because this is not – be quite clear, and this goes back to what this, what we’re witnessing is a power grab basically let’s be absolutely clear about that. We’re talking about everywhere, we’re talking about the power grab and a power grab with a degree of revanchism, of people who have been oppressed, want to settle scores. Now, whether the score-settling and this bitter rivalry which is affecting everything, rent-seeking, *Kulturkampf*, everything… Now the way this is going to fall and whether it’s going to turn into an even more oppressive regime, where you don’t even have benevolent governments like King Hassan who did the *mudawanah*, and whether this will have disastrous consequences we don’t know yet. But what is certain is that the only way you can test the proposition is by having a post-authoritarian transition, which may turn disastrously wrong.

Maha Azzam:

I think the verdict is out, but I would tend to be more optimistic. I look at Tunisia, I look at a situation in Egypt which perhaps is not as evolved because we’re still waiting for parliamentary elections, but I am a strong believer that there are ideological differences. When it comes to issues such as women the starting point may be different, there are different world views, but I think one of the best guarantees and checks on one group being dominant over another is to establish and maintain this democratic process, to move forward with parliamentary elections, even though there are those that oppose the constitution as it is now. So we gain greater guarantees, we go further down the road of step by step towards a democratic system that will allow greater inclusion of different voices to be heard, and yes, maybe that is similar to the Turkish model, maybe it will take its own shape but I think
it's the only route we have now, and we've taken enough steps going down that path.

I don't see the picture as bleak as some, that this is an authoritarian power grab. I think those that are viewed as authoritarian, and I know who they are pointing to, and there's no need not to name them, people are looking at the Muslim Brotherhood, but primarily Morsi and the FJP in Egypt, have been committed to a civil society, to elections, to electoral politics, let the electoral process take place. There are abuses in terms of human rights undoubtedly, there is a security sector that needs reforming, there are all sides, Islamists and non-Islamists know that there is a political system and state that has not been reformed yet and needs reforming, and I think that is something that both we use it for shorthand secular political parties, the National Celebration Front, various parties across the board know that reform is needed in Egypt, but I don't think that the Islamist parties in Egypt, particularly the FJP are ones that are not aware of this. On the contrary, they are committed to political reform and reform of the security services and some kind of parliamentary system that eventually deals with the whole issue of military—civil society in a more transparent way. So I think there's a lot of area for consensus.

Alan Philps:

Thank you, which is better, authoritarian power grab or benevolent dictator?

Fatemah Khafagy:

I don't like both but I think, I mean no matter what the regime is I'm very optimistic because women of Egypt, I have never seen them as active as they are now actually. Active in the public domain, they're not afraid anymore. They're there, they will never go back, I mean I'm sure they will not, and they've started being in the public space but also hopefully like they will be also asking for better family life by changing the family law in Egypt and so on. The one thing that I think we bring them forceful even much more than they are now if the economic crisis is being addressed, because that's what they really care about. Also they will become in great numbers, and Egypt is like 90 million now and women are half of this and half their voters, and they really have power in numbers. Since they've started also being organized I
think they will be much more powerful. It’s not easy, it’s not going to happen now but I think the future is promising.

**Mehrezia Labidi:**

I give the answer I got before yesterday from 500 women I met in Sidi Bouzid, the cradle of our revolution. Some of them said that we are freed of going back, and many other answered we will never go back because doors, closed doors by dictators we have opened them with force, with debt our sons, and with debt even our daughters died for, so for this revolution. So this question is very biased, it tries to make us disgusted from our revolution and doubting that we are capable of going to democracy.

It’s not easy to go to democracy. I depicted a Tunisia, hopeful Tunisia, but not a Tunisia without any problems. We have, as I said, many tensions and many tense debates but we will go the rule of the law, we will go to democracy and if we reach this shore we will secure men and women. And women in Tunisia are not waiting and they have not waited for men to open doors for them, they have opened doors for men, and this is the difference is that we think that we are empowered by ourselves. And I think this is the solution; the solution is to feel that we are actors of our destiny and not victims of any dictator, even if he is benevolent. There is no benevolent dictator, there are simply dictators.

**Question 9:**

Just to Professor Kandiyoti; you said that women’s rights have sometimes been used as naked instrumentalism for interventions, whether it’s Afghanistan, Iraq, and I’m just wondering in a way what’s wrong with that, or if there is a counterterrorism agenda or a democratization agenda or a stabilization agenda and women’s rights becomes part of that in promoting women’s rights, what’s wrong with that, why isn’t that worthwhile, and isn’t it good to do the right thing even if it’s for the wrong reasons?

**Deniz Kandiyoti:**

Well I think that the assumption on which these interventions were based, especially in Iraq, were blatantly false because they created a situation of poor oppressed Iraqi women who were going to be saved by the US intervention, when in fact it turns out that Iraq had one of the most
progressive family laws in the whole of the Middle East, the highest participation rate of women, and that the intervention has Balkanized the country, made women afraid to go out, taken them out of the labour force and generally brutalized them. So it seems to me, and indeed in Afghanistan, and I can talk about, I was myself in Afghanistan in 2002 working for UNIFEM so I was in a very front seat position to look at the way in which the gender equality agenda was being deployed.

It was absolutely going about it totally the wrong way, and indeed when quite opportunistically talking with the Taliban came on the agenda, those same women that had been funded by foreign donors were being told, on Radio 4 mind you, ‘Are you sure the Taliban oppressed you? Maybe it’s your culture.’

Which goes back – yes, that was in the morning Radio 4, I shall never forget it. Which goes back to the despair felt by my Egyptian colleague here, it is more of the same. Now anyone who’s going to buy the IMF rules and respect the Camp David accord will be called pragmatic – fear that word. Fear that word. The minute you hear pragmatic it means we’re selling out on everything else and especially on women because we’re told they’re different, and this is why, I think this whole discourse about Islam and secularism is obfuscatory. There is no distinction, it is not about Islam and secularism; it is about authoritarianism and democracy, that’s what it is about.

**Maha Azzam:**

I don’t think I’m here to defend that dichotomy by any means, on the contrary, as I said on many occasions it is very, it is a shortcut. But I think that the key is the legacy and the crimes of dictatorship and that is what was witnessed in Iraq – that is what has been witnessed in Tunisia and Egypt. It’s a legacy that’s going to take a long time to roll back, and that is my key message, that it’s not going to be resolved overnight, whatever the nature of government in power.

But the key to that government is that it is committed to the rule of law and to respect of human rights and women’s rights. In that I don’t think they’re enough, when it comes to that issue it’s not about ideological politics but the reality on the ground, and we can’t have it both ways. On the one hand we can’t oppose Morsi and his supporters for having a family agenda or Ennahda for appearing more Islamist and then say ‘oh no, but there is no difference between that and the liberal secular camp’. There are obviously some differences. Either we find room to reach some kind of consensus and
agreement over those differences in order to move forward – and one way of moving forward again is that there’s perhaps this consensus that a democratic process of government is the best guarantee for these societies to move forward. I can’t see an alternative at this stage.

**Question 10:**

I’d like to ask about the parity system in Tunisia which has led to 30 per cent of women in the assembly, which is great and higher than many European countries. But does that mean that they have any leading positions in the assembly itself, and also how long will we need this quota? I know there are different views on quotas, how long will we need this in Tunisia, will we need it forever, and is there a complete consensus on it?

**Question 11:**

What are the roles played by men in the women’s movement, what are they doing to sort of move things forward and support you, if they are of course?

**Question 12:**

What do you mean by democracy? Is it sharing power or people taking the power because they’ve got the majority of people with them?

**Mehrezia Labidi:**

First of all in the electoral law, electoral code that led to the election of 2011, October 2011 the parity was imposed by women, by also the demand of the women, and all political parties accepted. It led us to 30 per cent, among this 30 per cent of female deputies we have four committees, two constitutional committees and two legislative committees which are chaired by women. And what we want is to continue on to ask, we imposed parity in the creation of all these what we call the instances, regulating instances like the election, justice, media, we imposed parity also in the membership.

**Alan Philps:**

And how long will this be necessary do you think?
**Mehrezia Labidi:**

I think we will need it for some years, maybe for the 10 coming years to meet, to change the mentalities and make it part of the culture. I am vice chair of the assembly and I've been always challenged by men when I was chairing sessions. And I had to make them understand that that they have to respect the chairperson whether she is a man or woman.

And we had – the fact is still wrong. Just briefly, I've never used now Islamist and secularist, I don't believe in this. And earlier I used it so that there are extremes in both sides. First of all I always speak about Tunisian – I cannot exclude any other woman who is not practising her religion like me from Islam. I can't – this is not fair, and I cannot accept that any other exclude me from democracy because democracy is practice and democracy is sharing – definitely sharing power and not getting it and then keeping it – no, sharing.

**Fatemah Khafagy:**

I think there was a question about men, and I think this is probably the most encouraging part of the story. For the first time because a lot of people have realized that it is about dictatorship and democracy, men recognize that forms of violence against women which are clearly political targets them as well, and now there are men's groups mobilizing, men's anti-harassment groups in the Middle East, men's protest groups, and in Turkey groups that are quite extraordinary calling themselves troubled men, men who are against militarism, men who are against the oppression of sexual minorities. There is for now for the first time a real prospect of broad-based cross gender alliances in the Middle East, no question, because people are desperate.