Transcript

Women and Power in the Middle East – Grassroots Initiatives and Everyday Challenges

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Claire Spencer:

My name for those who don’t me is Claire Spencer, I’m head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme here. I just want to say what a pleasure it is for us as a programme here to be running – because for those who know the programme you’ll know that we well have traditionally over the last few years been fairly female-dominated – but I’m pleased to say we have recently doubled our quota of men in the programme, so we now have two. So we may or may not continue this, but it’s just to say that in terms of parity we take an approach which is entirely based on merit. We interview the best person for the job and usually we have some very fine candidates, and the best person usually comes out on top, and predominantly over recent years that’s been women.

So I applaud particularly the expertise in this country on the Middle East and North Africa, because we have such a rich pool of expertise to draw on and I believe there are one or two, if not more, examples of that on the panel, which I am chairing now on grassroots initiatives and everyday challenges. I think somebody may have to define what an everyday challenge is, but I think it’s really the focus is now on the impact of bottom up activities on equality, rights and access to power.

Now some of this obviously was raised in the first session, the exclusion of rural and poorer women from education and other advantages and access, if you like, to power but I would invite the panel also to reflect on what is the nature of power; is power in the future in the region really going to be as centralized as it’s been in the past and actually could grassroots activities redesign a different type of power structure where devolution of power to regions, to provinces outside capital cities where even with education women and others who wish to influence policy may not have – they live far away from the capital of countries, in this country as in Europe, and this is a much larger set of issues.

Anyway, we will introduce the speakers who have I believe seven to 10 minutes, if you can calculate that when you’re speaking, to introduce the topic and then we’ll go onto a discussion. And I’m introducing them in the order in which they are on the programme. First of all we have Dina Wahba, who’s a graduate of the faculty of economic and political science at Cairo University and a master’s degree in gender studies at SOAS. So she is a women’s right activist, she’s been promoting women’s rights in Egypt and is also the coordinator of the women’s committee in the newly formed Egyptian Social Democratic Party and she, if you like, is engaged at all levels of these issues.
Next up will be Myrna Atalla, who's a graduate of Brown University in the States in international relations. She also has a joint master of public administration from the LSE and Columbia University. She, until 2008, worked with the National Democratic Institute in Beirut working a lot on promoting women's roles in civil societies, for example through women's candidate programmes, and she is now managing director of Alfanar, about which I hope we will hear more when she intervenes.

Next to me, Carina Kamel I think will be well-known to media watchers here as the senior correspondent and presenter based in London for Al Arabiya Television and she is responsible for all their international business news coverage and I know has a particular interest in the Egyptian economy, so I'd love to hear some updates on that particularly as it impinges on prospects for women. She is an Arab American by background with a master's in business journalism for Columbia and a BA from the University of California at Berkeley.

Last but not least Ala'a Shehabi who is a British-born Bahraini lecturer, writer and pro-democracy activist in Bahrain and a founding member of Bahrain Watch and the Bahrain Rehabilitation and Anti-Violence Organization, which has the wonderful acronym of BRAVO, with a PhD in economics from the Imperial College, London. So you see the prevalence of London education here. She is a frequent commentator in the media both written and on television. More details can be found in your information packs, but over to Dina first of all.

**Dina Wahba:**

Before I start I have a confession to make, I am one of the 78 per cent; I’m addicted to Turkish drama. I blame my mum. Every time I promise myself I’m not going to watch it but then I find myself hooked, so I don’t know if this will influence my credibility and the credibility of my speech but I hope not. I took the questions that are being introduced in the papers that we have in our packs as a guideline for my talk. The first question I believe is what obstacles are set in the way of ordinary women gaining access to power and in what way these obstacles are being overcome. I just very recently finished my MA in gender studies at SOAS and my thesis was about gender in the Egyptian revolution, and part of my thesis was to see how women engaged in politics prior to the revolution.
Now I argue that they have three characteristics. The first one is that it was largely informal politics that they were engaged in, like Jane mentioned in her speech about how women are being engaged more in informal sector rather than the formal politics, but I would argue that their participation in formal politics challenged the definition or now even challenges the definition of politics and redefine what's politics. They worked through informal challenges to promote their agendas and I believe a lot of professors like Diane Singerman and Asef Bayat wrote a lot about the urban poor and how the urban poor are engaged in informal politics, but none were written about how women participated in formal politics. So the first thing is that they were engaged in informal politics.

The second thing is that a term that Nancy Fraser has coined, which is ‘subaltern counterpublics’ – it’s a fancy complicated feminist term, but it means that feminists who are engaged in public life whether it’s civil society or journalists did foster alternative narratives that were essential to toppling patriarchy and define patriarchy and toppling the regime.

The third thing is that the participation of women in the pro-democracy movement was necessary to legitimize the pro-democracy movement and to make it look more inclusive, not necessarily Islamist, and it produced an important image for domestic use and for international use.

So prior to the revolution engagement has been informal, produces alternative narratives and was necessary to legitimize the pro-democracy movement. However, after the revolution we’re being faced with another set of challenges, the challenges that we’re facing because of political Islam being in power. I think Fatemah made a great point about the kind of struggle we’re having, but the other one I would say is that formal politics is now open to women and this brings about another set of challenges and opportunities.

Now I’m not interested in the kind of formal politics present in the political Islam wing. I would talk about the fact that in the ‘progressive wing’ quote unquote we’re facing new kinds of challenges. Now let’s say that women have limited experience in engaging in formal politics; we have amazing women in the civil society, amazing women journalists, amazing women participating in public life, but not in formal politics, as we’re all new to formal politics. So we have little experience whether men or women. So within party politics is very important. And just a correction; I am not currently the woman coordinator of the women committee in the newly established party – I used to be. So when I was when the women coordinator we were faced with many challenges and we still face many challenges, such as trying to convince our parties of a
gender quota, such as a gender-sensitive party programme. So I think within party politics something that was overlooked or within the progressive wing politics about how to promote gender equality – it’s a new set of challenge. So there are new sets of challenges, whether the Muslim Brotherhood brings about or the engagement with formal politics.

Now the second question is about how strategies differ between generations. I would say a friend of mine used to say the older feminists are no longer the gatekeepers. There are newcomers, there are new agendas – again this presents different kinds of challenges and opportunities. It will be too simplistic if we just celebrate the fact that there are newcomers. The challenges they present is that they don’t necessarily have a feminist discourse. Margot Badran went as far as to say there is a new kind of feminism that’s coming to Egypt that doesn’t go by the name of feminism, even though we know as feminists that labels and names are everything and are very important. However, the fact that they don’t go with the feminist discourse might jeopardize the cause and some of their actions might actually jeopardize some of the gains, but it also brings opportunities, because it revitalizes the movement, their discourse might be easier to the general public to relate to than the classic feminist discourse. It makes the movement look more inclusive.

The third question is about whether engagement of women in local initiatives promotes the women’s agenda and creates real change or not. For example we take sexual harassment: sexual harassment is now on the national agenda, which could be a good thing or a bad thing, it’s debatable. It could be a good thing, because we finally manage to get one of the women’s issues as an issue of the whole country, but it could be very bad, because it’s a very narrow vision of violence against women and very restrictive and mostly leads to protectionist discourses. I will speak very briefly about three grassroots initiatives that I believe very promising, like Bahiya ya Masr, which is an initiative that started after the revolution and they had been trying to create a lobby to influence policy. They work with the graffiti artists, they work on the commentary movies and they organize protests.

Imprint Movement is about sexual harassment; it’s a movement that combats sexual harassment, and what’s interesting about this movement it’s mostly men and, like Professor Kandiyoti said, the role of men is so essential now in Egypt. And as I understood one of your readings, that I hope that I understood right, is that some men defy patriarchy through trying to prove their solidarity to the women’s movement. So we find a lot of those men who
are really disenfranchised or marginalized because of patriarchy and the way they defy it is through supporting other women. HarassMap is another initiative that started before the revolution again just talking about sexual harassment, but it’s very promising, because it was one of the first grassroots initiatives to speak about sexual harassment.

Now, just to bring us back to the title of our panel session, which is I would argue everyday challenges are being redefined very rapidly – this is why we need flexible strategies to overcome them very quickly. Grassroots initiatives are being established, a lot of them, but this brings about challenges and opportunities and we shouldn’t be too simplistic to celebrate them. Thank you.

Myrna Atalla:

I’d like to shift the focus a little bit more to perhaps economic development and speak more specifically about stories really that come from our work. Just as a sort of given premise I think that we can all agree and possibly I’m already preaching to the choir that one of the smartest investments in long-term growth and development is women’s empowerment and increased economic engagement of women. Women control $20 trillion in annual consumers’ spending. Their decisions have a measurable impact on local businesses and regional economies, yet, on average, only 28 per cent of women in the Arab world are actually engaged in the labour force.

So I’d like to take the sort of overarching kind of statistic to then talk about what we at Alfanar do at a very, very local level and have been doing since 2005. We are the Arab region’s first venture philanthropy organization and I like to throw it out there, because then it begs the question: what is venture philanthropy? Essentially our mission is to improve the lives of disadvantaged women and children by fostering the growth of effective, innovative and sustainable grassroots organizations that are serving these communities.

Just to really give you sort of the overarching approach, our investments teams – specifically in Egypt, which you just spoke wonderfully about and Libya and Lebanon this year, very excited – are always on the hunt for social entrepreneurs promising initiatives that are serving these two communities. And after a thorough due diligence process, if they’ve passed then we begin to invest in them. So there’s a risk or venture part to really look for the innovators at the local level, to make sure that we’re not coming in with top-down approaches, but really listening to what’s coming up from the ground
from women or from male leaders of civil society organizations that feel very strongly about women's economic empowerment for example.

Following that sort of risk we then take almost a private equity approach, so we don’t talk about these just as projects, but as actual investments. We want to take a three-to-five-year horizon or investment in these organizations. We provide them with a grant, which is possibly the sort of necessary step to getting the project going, but it isn’t really the sufficient one, and so most important in venture philanthropy is the glue or the management guidance, the technical assistance, the sort of unsexy back work that you do on strategic planning, on marketing, on budgeting and making sure that these organizations which, unlike for-profit companies that maybe benefit from constant access to Deloitte and Booz & Co and etc… but that these organizations have the absorptive capacity and can grow not only to impact more lives over time, but to become financially sustainable.

I think sometimes with or around the word ‘financially sustainable’; why is it important for such organizations to be as such? But it really is about independence. When a civil society organization that is working to improve the lives of women is constantly running around and shifting its priorities based on the donor agenda it is no longer independent, but if an organization has a diversified stream of income and some income generation – let’s say it covers 40 per cent, 50 per cent, 70 per cent of its cost – it can then set its goals in a bolder, more focused manner. So this is sort of the overarching story if you will.

I’d like to focus on a few stories, concrete examples from our investments on the ground. In 2007 we began investing in a small organization called the Helwan Association for Community Development, which is also known as Bashayer. What was interesting about them is that they have a sewing and tricot production unit, which employs anywhere from 100 to 360 women at a given time. But despite the ability, the expertise and the willingness of these women to work, the sales were just really in the ground, things weren't happening for them, and so what we found was there was obviously a promise for income generation but there were problems in the back systems that we could then be involved in.

I’ll start from the front then go back. When I first went into Bashayer I didn’t exactly understand how does this work, because obviously coming from a sort of venture philanthropy point of view we’re going to look at budgets, we want to look at income statements, how are you working things out. And really what’s very important is to think of this as both an income generator and a
safe space, a place for community. So one of the first women I met, I mean she sparkled, she began to talk about this place and how it had changed her life. I thought well yes, you’re developing an income, but actually when you look back and you talk to her a little bit more you find out actually that she had been in a relationship which was abusive to her but that through coming to Bashayer, being in the community of other women, women who paid attention to her, asked where she is, when she’s sick, how are your children, etc., that she was able to develop a steady stream of income on one hand, but also access to legal support and literacy programming, etc., because of course any profits in this social enterprise are reinvested in the women and the social programming that’s coming out of it. So this woman becomes then the force, the sort of unintended consequence of such a space.

Then our work, which is sort of the unsexy work of helping them develop an income statement, analysing the revenues, looking back now we’re working with a cost accountant with them to really understand why is it that when revenue goes up profits still aren’t increasing, then our work becomes justified and we become more galvanized about it. I think probably if we return to a second example it’ll be ever more evident. And I think there’s one question about rural versus urban spaces. I mean Helwan is an extremely urban space, but what’s very interesting about Bashayer is that even in an urban slum area what is the vector for empowerment is not only the sustainable space that can provide the constant employment, but is a sense of community, the community that allows women to feel the confidence to also take control of other parts of their own lives.

Moving to a rural space, Minya, which is four hours to the south of Cairo, we began focusing and being sensitized to the issue of widows, women whose husbands are deceased or perhaps imprisoned – we try and define it as widely as possible, female heads of households – and I find it very interesting that 20 per cent to 40 per cent of households in Egypt are female-led, and the number goes up to 57 per cent in slum areas.

So often really, I think of a woman who came into our Al Amal investment projects – means ‘hope’ in Arabic. Besma has four children, her husband passed away and then she had severe depression, she didn’t know how to do things, she didn’t know how to stand on her own feet. What Amal does through our investee, as we say, the Future Eve Foundation, is provide Besma with the vocational training and the financial literacy training skills that she didn’t have in order to think of a possible microenterprise that she might
want to undertake. This is coupled with financial literacy training and then, furthermore, there needs to be access to capital.

On the one hand there are groups who are slightly more advanced who have access to microloans. Besma was not in the more advanced group, she was part of something called microsocial capital, almost like village savings and loan schemes, where women come together and on a weekly basis put a very small amount of money into a pool and gather together the amount needed to either loan out possibly – for her project, for example, she received a loan – or be there to provide support in a case of emergency. Let’s say somebody passes away and the widow needs to cover the funeral costs. Once again it’s the sort of community that helped Besma get the loan she needed to set up a grocery store and I mean she’s a transformed woman. Instead of depending on charity, she is able to depend on herself, has grown from just selling foodstuffs to also adding cattle feed and soaps to her sales.

These are just some of the examples. We’re very excited, because in June our World Widows’ Day had the first cohort of 223 widows and now we are working to expand it to 4,000 widows will take an oath, a public oath, acknowledging their rights. We do help them, with the support of the ministry, to understand what their entitlements are and have access to ID cards – these are important parts of the programme, but also making a pledge that when they succeed they will also turn to other widows, female heads of households and help them succeed. Thus returning to the idea of community as well.

**Carina Kamel:**

I just wanted to give you a little bit of background about where I’m coming from to this. I grew in Cairo and I spent most of my life there and although I’m based here at the moment for Al Arabiya, I cover Egypt regularly, I report on what’s happening there and I travel to the region often. So I’m a reporter at heart, and I’m here to report to you today that women are very well represented in the Arab media industry. Now whether they are leading it is a slightly different question, but we are very, very well represented and that is perhaps not something everybody knows. Just to give you an example where I work at Al Arabiya, we have 44 presenters on air, 24 of them are women, so that’s more than half of our on air talent is women. In the business department where I work all of our female presenters are women, so you have women speaking in Arabic on Arabic television telling men about their business world. In our newsroom overall we have many women in leadership
positions and in very senior roles like the head of our assignment desk is a woman, the head of our operations is a woman, our Cairo bureau chief, which is one of our most important bureaus is also a woman.

In Egypt, which is the country I’m most familiar with, we have a lot of women in the independent media in particular and many of the English language newspapers are headed by women, and in fact women outnumber men. Even in Egyptian state media according to official statistics women actually outnumber men, for example, in state radio and 40 per cent of senior roles in state television are held by women. It doesn’t mean there’s not a glass ceiling, there’s still a dearth of women in editorial boards – for example, especially if you look at the official figures in Egypt for example, I think it’s only nine per cent of editors at state newspapers are actually women. So there is definitely still a glass ceiling, but we’re very well represented.

Now what this means is that women in the media have a very important, very potent soft power. It’s not a coercive power, but it’s a very, very effective soft power. Just to give you a few examples, for example someone like Mona el-Shazly who many of you may know is an Egyptian talk show host who even before the revolution started was questioning authority, was shaping the public debate through her show, and her show was and still is must-see television. Another woman like Lamis Elhadidy for example, also I’m sure many of you will be very familiar with her, she has a show on a privately owned satellite channel and she has decided especially since the revolution – and I actually spoke to her before I came here today and she said that she would be very happy for me to share her thoughts on this – but she’s decided that she wants to take a very, very open stand about some of the women’s issues that are being discussed in Egypt. And, as Dina mentioned, thankfully the issue of sexual harassment is now finally on the public agenda and people Mona el-Shazly and Lamis Elhadidy are hosting Egyptian women on their shows who are getting over the stigma of having to talk about this kind of thing and speaking about it openly it’s finally being talked about in a very open way.

Now these kinds of powerful women in the media are themselves subjected to attacks, they are subjected to legal complaints and they are constantly being attacked because, or by those, I suppose, who fear their power and their influence. It’s also really important to mention when we talk about the media in the Middle East, in particular the idea of social media, and how it’s really given women an additional space to speak out, an additional platform to speak out, perhaps a safer space than it is reporting out on the field, which
can be dangerous at times. Many of the bloggers and activists who were reporting on the uprisings were and still are women. They’re no longer limited to the traditional forms of media and perhaps may not have gotten the chance to rise to prominence as they have had if not for the access to power that social media has given them.

So what’s it like working in the media as a woman, what are the challenges we face? Well firstly we’re working against a number of built-in biases in society. Perhaps most obviously is the perception of unseriousness or lack of seriousness. We can be seen as softer or less serious than our male colleagues, especially if you’re a TV presenter, you’re wearing a dress, high heels, your hair and makeup is done you may be seen as less tough, but let me assure you that is not the case. As I mentioned in our business department, we are women, we talk every single day live on television about extremely serious, extremely complex topics and our audience is predominantly male in fact.

In addition to the perhaps lack of seriousness that we are sometimes perceived with we’re also having to deal with a certain degree of sexism. Some people argue that the sexism that women journalists are at the receiving end of has actually increased after the revolutions. For example, if you’re interviewing a male politician in Egypt, a conservative male politician in Egypt, you can be treated in a very condescending, very patronising manner as if you don’t know what you’re doing or as if that person, that man is going to teach you the ways of the world – and that is quite literally what Egypt’s information minister has told a number of women journalists just in the past few weeks. The minister has in fact made a habit of making wholly inappropriate comments to female journalists, but thanks to the media he has been taken to task and thanks to campaigns like Bahiya ya Masr, which Dina mentioned, there’s been campaigns organized against him, and in fact I think on Sunday there was a protest outside his office in response to these comments that he has been making. So we are there and we are trying to work for change, but it doesn’t mean that women reporters in the field don’t experience intimidation and harassment and sometimes even actual physical assault.

This is becoming a very serious issue for women reporters out in the field in Egypt in particular, but I want to talk in general also about how journalists in general are being targeted, both men and women. Just a couple of weeks ago to give you an example, our camera and our cameraman were attacked. Our camera was broken and our cameraman’s arm was broken by protesters,
by very angry protestors, I should mention, on the Friday calling for the purging of the judiciary in Egypt. I’ve thought about this a lot and I’ve talked to a lot of colleagues about why this is, but we seem to feel that in the context of the extreme polarization that’s taking place in Egyptian society right now all sides are blaming the media for fanning the flames and for deepening the divisions and, whether this is true or not, I’m not here to argue that, but women are bearing the brunt of the backlash against the media in Egypt because they are seen as easy targets and because they are seen as more vulnerable.

There is deliberate organized harassment of women at protests in order to discourage women journalists and women protesters from taking to the streets. In some cases the harassment can become full-blown assault, and I’m sure you’ve all heard the various cases in the media about a very regrettable incidence occurring in Egypt. Especially if you’re carrying TV equipment you’re more visible and therefore you’re more vulnerable and, as I said, this is also the case for men but obviously women are much more vulnerable, because the attacks can obviously become sexual assault and not just physical violence.

It’s not all bad news though, there is some good news. If you’re a women working in the media you are by default a role model, and it’s a huge responsibility to be a role model. It’s even more true if you’re appearing on television as well. If you’re visible you’re in the public eye, other women will look at you and will say ‘if she can do that, if she can be on TV then I can do that too’. And the fact, just the simple fact – whether women have yet to or regardless of the fact that women have yet to perhaps reach the very, very, very top roles – the fact that there’s so many of us in the media means that the younger generation of women have way more role models to look up to. And if you look at media courses throughout the region you see a large number of women actually still trying to become journalists and join media courses.

So the trend for female dominated media, I hope, is set to continue, and personally I remember very well when I was a student and I knew I wanted to be a journalist and I would look up to see who I wanted to be like. I didn’t really have many Arab women or figures in the Arabic media that I thought when I grow up I want to be like her, I had to look to western media. That is most certainly not the case today and I think that that’s a really, really encouraging sign.
Just finally, to draw a connection with what we’re talking about today in terms of empowerment and the role of the media and how it’s connected to political life, I think that Myrna made a really good point about the kind of economic empowerment of women in the participation of women and the economy. It’s also really important to note that what Fatemah mentioned earlier as well about the strength in numbers. We have strength in numbers in the media and women in general in a country like Egypt we have strength in numbers, because women can be a very potent political force. We saw a huge turnout for women in the elections across the Arab world, I personally witnessed first-hand the queues of women in Egypt snaking around the block women waiting five, six hours to cast their vote – it’s the women in Egypt who’ve organized the marches against sexual violence, they’ve bravely spoken out on television despite the stigma, they have organized groups like Tahrir Bodyguard to protect women protesters.

As was mentioned by Myrna as well, I think the large number of female-headed households is a very important point to make. I think it’s about a quarter per cent [sic] – there’s varying degrees of percentages depending on who you talk to, but the fact that you have a very large percentage of households in a country like Egypt headed by women that means that those women are making the decisions in the household and that means that the more those women have positive female role models to look up to the more that is going to affect their decisions.

Now the statistics are still really disappointing; we only have 23 per cent rate of women’s participation in the economy and Egypt versus 73 per cent for men. Unemployment amongst women is four times higher than it is amongst men. So there’s a really long way to go.

Hoda Badran who is a doyenne of women’s rights in Egypt and currently the president of the Arab Alliance for Women, she described the Arab Spring as a giant leap backwards for women, which is unfortunate. Which is why us women in the media have a huge responsibility to stem the tide of conservatism that is sweeping across our region and to stand up to the kind of ideology that sees women as a threat that want to reverse decades of progress and take us back to the dark ages. We all know about the crossover between media and politics, we’ve seen it here in the west and perhaps we will start seeing the next generation of women leaders rising up from the media industry or perhaps from civil society, which is also very closely connected to the media.
Ala’a Shehabi:

I haven’t prepared anything in particular that I want to talk about other than the main headlines of the topic of the discussion, but I just want to assure my co-speaker that if she came to Bahrain you might not be very welcome, not because you’re not a woman but just because Al Arabiya’s editorial line is not as progressive as your recruitment of women, because I mean it must be very difficult to belong to kind of a specific Saudi outlet that’s been so counterrevolutionary across the Arab world. I mean I just wanted to highlight that, because I was offered to meet with an Al Arabiya correspondent and I didn’t accept the offer, but it wasn’t because she was a woman, it was just because of who she worked for.

I come from Bahrain, I’ve been in Bahrain for the last three years, and if you talk about revolution by its very definition it’s a grassroots thing, so grassroots for me is another word for what revolution means to the individual. My friend from Egypt says in times of revolution you don’t listen to the political analysts or you don’t read the policy reports that everyone writes elsewhere, you listen to the poets, you speak to the people and you hear about personal experiences that people go through. As a woman I’ve seen the personal transformation within myself as well as among my compatriots in Bahrain – I can talk about Bahrain at least, and this is a time in which when there were calls for a revolution you begin at the very start from an equal basis. The calls for revolution – no one sets the obstacles, no one had set the obstacles up against women from day one. People joined the revolution not because they were a woman or because they were a man, it was because they were trying to change the system which they lived in.

So you started off in the revolution at an equal footing. What will happen after that, as we’re seeing across the Arab world, means that the turn for women might take a different course and that’s something we should be aware of in the Arab world and it’s something I think, speaking from Bahrain, is not articulated enough along gender lines and along challenges that face women in particular. But from talking about the personal and the practice of revolution means that young teenagers – 19, 20, 21-year-old women – are seeing their world through a completely different lens than their mothers. But then I’m also seeing change within the mothers and within society.

So the three main obstacles to women in the Arab world, the family, society and the state, they’re breaking down, if not have already broken down. So you no longer – my cousin went to propose to someone he’d met and during the marriage proceedings the girl stated explicitly, ‘I want this written in my
marriage contract that he will not prevent me from attending any protest.’ That was her only condition. And I was shocked, this was a cousin of mine, and I was like ‘I want to see this, I can’t believe that this was her only condition, this is how important the politics and protesting and being on the street is there’. I mean my cousin was just like, ‘he hadn’t realized he’d married a revolutionary’ and that’s what these women are; they see themselves as revolutionaries and their priority is first to change the system in which they live then they will try to protect their rights as women. And this is from the individual from the women’s perspective.

On the other hand, a couple of weeks ago the police raid another cousin – obviously you can tell from what background I come from – the police raid another house of a cousin of mine, they arrest one of my young male cousins and they take him to the police and they interrogate him for six hours about there is someone from this address that’s running a media account, a Twitter account, an anonymous Twitter account from this address. And he said, ‘You can question me from now on till next year, it is not me.’ And he came and he said it was his sister in the house that was doing this subversive activity and got him into trouble, but then I came to discover that another one of my cousins running the local media network that reports on arrests and protests and other things that the state does. But from the state’s perspective, they did not assume that the girls in the household – they then summoned his younger brother, and so the women were not even on the state’s list, that the women are the ones who are actually doing this.

So from my point of view I am seeing women not just being equal partners in the revolution – they are dominating, they’re leading, whether it’s by having a few kind of highly interlinked visible activists on the scene, human rights activists too, the ones who are anonymous that you don’t know about, that you don’t hear about, they’re really the ones who are like in filming, pushing, they’re doing the stuff as well as the visible. So we also have women who are leading protests on the streets, who are facing the police, who are getting arrested, and the articulation of that role isn’t written anywhere. I mean it’s protected legally under the constitution but it’s not in the general discourse or the narrative within the country, it’s not like we as women have protected our rights.

But the point I kind of just want to make about these local initiatives, again I just wanted to say okay, this is for me, I see the revolution as a generational thing, it’s the youth – the two main actors of change in these revolutions are women and youth in general, but there’s also a shift between how the middle
generation, my parents’ generation and the older generation see things. They still remain quite conservative, yet they realize they’re helpless in the face of a huge surge in people who are being politicized within the country.

Last week I decide to attend a conference on women’s rights led by a conservative political Islamic society in Bahrain, so this was literally three days ago before I arrived here. I saw the same issues being perpetuated about – thankfully, this revolution, this is one of the leading women within the opposition society says ‘look, the head of our society at least has promised to give us one chair in parliament if we win this uprising, we decide to go back to the parliament, and take part in the political process’. I was kind of shocked by this, like to them that was a development that we’d be lucky to get one seat in parliament out of 40 seats. And I said don’t you think you should be maybe aiming for 20 at least, half the seats in parliament? And she said ‘we don’t think about that’ and I thought that seems pretty obvious to me like maybe you want to put down your agenda, what are the women’s rights that you want to be articulated in broader general issues that you want in the future system, in a future political system that’s more democratic?

And what about your position on the personal status laws, codification, personal rights, all of these kinds of issues? And within that particular circle – I don’t take them to be representative but I’m still feeling that there is still much more development that needs to be done – but in practice, revolution as practice, the role of women within most of the new NGOs – most of the new local groupings, most of the new local initiatives are being led by women, not even having equal share of women involved. So I mean for me it’s not at the top of the agenda, when you’re living in revolutionary times – it’s there, it’s changing. The table of revolution is a completely different one than the one that used to exist and women have their place at that table thankfully and those are the main points I wanted to raise with everyone.