Transcript Q&A

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

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Claire Spencer:

Well thanks to the brevity of our speakers we still have I believe until half past one for a discussion, but I’m sitting here wondering what the common theme coming out of this is, and one reflection I’m having is how well prepared are women for what you’ve described as being active in the revolution, that I think as Maha said in the previous session, the revolution is not over, it’s ongoing, how long a duration we’re talking about here and how mentally and economically are women within these movements prepared for the long haul? Because in any revolution there’s always the counterrevolution, the backlash as we’re seeing, and I think, Carina, you picked up on the fact that women’s rights have gone into reverse, or at least a colleague you were citing. And then this brings onto your mentioning of the role of men and how important it is to find some way of making common cause.

So perhaps by pulling the threads of those issues together we might actually try and envisage where things are going, because without economic support I can’t see how the counter-dictatorship or the revolutionary activities can continue. I mean it could be a question of attrition as more people are detained and prevented from being active across the region. So I think it’s difficult to put a context on this, but this is why I enjoyed your local example because you can see things changing in a locality, but I think if we’re looking at grassroots activism my initial questions of how you make this joined up to perhaps existing or even a new conception of power centres, in other words do you have to influence capital cities or can you actually as a process of this devise new ways of organising societies? Big questions which I’ll let you reflect on and see whether anybody has had hopefully something more precise.

Question 1:

The question is dedicated to Ala’a, the last speaker. As you know, Bahrain was very much in the media in the last few weeks, what does disturb me is that you’re talking about grassroots activism but what are you, at the grassroots level and as an NGO, doing about the dictatorship, the dictators where they have women in the police force that violate women? I mean how sad is that and what are you doing as a grassroots level?
Question 2:

My question actually is directed or follows on from what Myrna was talking about in helping widows, which is a great cause. I’m originally from Iraq and obviously Iraq has a very big issue and a very big problem with widows following the succession of wars that the country has been ravaged by. My question is that we now have generations of children growing up without a male lead in the household and is it time now to empower these women and emancipate them so that they can bring up children who believe in gender equality going forward? Can we see this now as an opportunity for women to come forward and to find their place in society?

Unfortunately, there was a recent report, a very good one I would recommend in the BBC on women’s rights in Iraq, and they mentioned that Iraq was very progressive obviously, and was one of the first countries in the Middle East in 1950s to have a woman judge. And they also mentioned when looking at the widows in Iraq that concept or perception in society that women’s lives are not worth living unless they’re under a protection of men. How can this be changed and how can it help women going forward and will they be able to change perception of their children and gender equality?

Question 3:

I’d like to just ask a question to the lady from Al Arabiya. As Ala’a has touched on it, I mean she’s talking here about female empowerment and women being represented yet your party line is very counterrevolutionary. If you look at headlines even on Twitter and everything with regards to Al Arabiya, not only are you really critical of what’s going on in Tunisia, Egypt and even Bahrain, but they’re very sensationalist headlines and also unrepresentative of what’s going on. You’re kind of giving this image of ‘since the dictators have left, look what’s happened here’.

And we all know who heads Al Arabiya, we all know they weren’t exactly very pleased about the revolutions and we all know one of the first few things that they’ve said in conferences is ‘please don’t import your revolutions here’. So, with all that being said, seeing women on news channels really I think most people are quite used to that. What is Al Arabiya doing about empowering women especially in these revolutionary countries?
Question 4:

I would be interested in hearing the panel’s reaction to picking up Ala’a’s point about youth and women in the revolution, to focus on the youth bit and the impact on progress on women’s rights and the role that they will play, the progress that is blocked by some of the more conservative Islamist thinking. Amongst the youth on the Brotherhood side is a dialogue, a discourse that is going on between women and the younger elements of the Ikhwan, so that when the younger elements of Ikhwan become old they will be more open to the woman’s role in their societies.

Myrna Atalla:

I mean the question and definitely the example of Iraq is a very relevant one when it does come to female headed households and the issue of widows. Can we envision a more equal future or a place where our children see each other as equal? I think I can’t necessary comment on that exactly, but what I can say is judging from the unintended consequences sometimes of empowerment and of taking very clear and concrete steps that support locally driven requested interventions, that as long as that local desire is there then what happens then over time is that with sufficient training, sufficient awareness building and sufficient access to capital I mean it’s a very big deal. Yes, one of the big barriers to women’s empowerment is lack of access to finance and financial instruments that they understand and the understanding to use them. At that point when Besma, for example, runs her grocery store and her children can look to their mother and say okay, this is how it’s done and Besma can explain it to her children, this becomes sort of organic development or evolution of where we understand perhaps a woman’s role to be.

So I would just say going back to sort of locally generated and motivated initiatives and supporting them with the necessary tools in order to achieve success and effectiveness and by that I have to say it really is about working at a grassroots level with civil society organizations and this has existed long before the revolutions. These are entities that have been fearless heroes that continue to work day to day and especially in a country like Egypt, in countries like Iraq where the disadvantage – I think it’s really important, we were talking actually earlier about equal footing, I’m not really sure that that’s fair to say that there is equal footing. There are truly disadvantaged communities that we must pay attention to and that there are voices that
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speak on behalf of everyone else, but it’s really about going to the local level, empowering the local level that any change which is desired from the local level will occur.

**Ala’a Shehabi:**

About women on the other side or women in the counterrevolution, it’s a fascinating point, because we see the mirroring of women taking their new positions, their well-deserved and well-placed positions in society, but on the other side we also see women being promoted, like we have the most vile government spokesperson who’s a woman called Samira Rajab, like you just need to say her name in Bahrain and she does us a great cause, because I mean she is something else on TV. And then we have – for example, the most notorious police torturer is a woman called Noura Al-Khalifa from the royal family. The Times and so on have taken testimonies of people who say this woman – she has tortured people I know personally. So we do have women in the police force and there actually is a protocol like a man cannot arrest a woman in a protest. He keeps her to the side, you wait there and you wait for the police force to arrive, the female police force, and they take you to a separate police station and you’re dealt with that way.

So I mean what do I do? I mean I’m seeing my women who arrest you, interrogate you and, you know, it doesn’t really make a difference to me, I mean, whether they’re men or women – they’re both as vile. But again that we do see the states using women – and I’ve raised this before in articles that I’ve written about the role of state feminism historically in women’s rights movements in the Arab world. So the use of, whether it’s Suzanne Mubarak in Egypt, whether it’s Ben Ali’s wife in Tunisia, whether it’s Queen Rania of Jordan, they always raise the flag of women’s rights. They’re praised and celebrated in the West as being reformers for being allowed to launch these women initiatives under their names and patronage, and what actually happens is they undermine real grassroots through women activism because they’re associated with a corrupt and illegitimate regime.

So they’re of no use to women’s rights activists because they’re being undermined. And then all of the western donors and NGOs and multinational organizations only do work on women’s rights through the body set up by state feminists and so if you’re a local you have to cooperate with them; it undermines it. Women’s rights have always been used as a bargaining chip by corrupt governments, with the conservatives as well on the other hand. So
for example, the issue of women the right to drive in Saudi is done as a bargaining tool with the conservatives. It’s an issue between the states and the religious organization, women’s rights where the women are used as a bargaining chip.

Now as women – if you speak to Saudi women activists they say driving isn’t our main concern people. Like it’s horrible that we don’t have rights but don’t use us in your battles between the conservatives and the corrupt states, and that’s unfortunately what’s been happening. The same in Bahrain, the same that was happening in Egypt, Suzanne… actually our rights have been rescinded in certain countries because of this conflation, the conflation between women’s rights and corrupt governments. So they haven’t been useful, and so state feminists and the use of women by these corrupt have undermined women’s rights movements yet they continue to be celebrated. As I see today people are confused.

So those are the two main issues. Again, I know he raised it about the brotherhood but in the conference I went to last week organized by the main Islamic party in Bahrain there was hardly anyone under the age of 30 in the conference; they just don’t see that. You can be born into those circles but many people in the revolution have chosen to leave, and they’re behind the curve as well as the governments. So like I said, it’s a generational thing; traditional conservatives that belong to a particular generation are not leading the path and they’re losing the ground among youth and particularly women youth activists as well.

**Carina Kamel:**

Just to address some of the questions that have been raised, I don’t know how many people know that Al Arabiya’s part of the MBC Group, which is the first independent satellite network in all of the Middle East, founded in 1992 here in London actually, and we’re part of a very large network of channels. I also forgot to mention earlier that we are actually one of the main channels in the Middle East that bring the Turkish soap operas to the millions of Arab women viewers around the region, and in fact they’re very popular on our channel. MBC4 in fact, MBC4 is a totally women-geared channel, so most of the programming on that channel is for women and we have a lot of soap operas on that channel from Turkey and from other countries.

On one of our other MBC channels we have a programme called *Kalam Nawaem*, which is kind of like a version of *The View* and it’s hosted by an all-
female panel and it tackles a lot of issues that throws a lot of debate, a range of issues that women face in Arab society and that’s a daily show and it’s one of the very popular shows also on MBC1. On MBC Egypt we have Mona el-Shazly who I mentioned, I didn’t mention earlier that she’s on MBC Masr, and I know because I watch the show that Mona pretty much deals with controversy every single day of the week and she hosts people on her channel from all sides of the political spectrum. And oftentimes the people who appear on her shows and are making headlines in the newspaper the next day. So I know that Mona is someone that isn’t afraid of stirring up controversy and hosting all sides.

Especially on Al Arabiya as well, as far as the news is concerned, whenever we’re talking about politics, for example, in Egypt we make a really concerned effort to make sure that we host people from all sides of the debate to give their viewpoint at least two people. I mean you may have seen some of the kind of clashes that appear on screen, so we really try very hard to make sure that we give everybody a chance to speak their mind and when you get negative comments or when a media channel is getting attacked, I think I’d like to just point out that we get attacked from all sides and everybody is going to take an issue with something that we’re doing and I think that you know that you’re doing something right if you’re getting attacked from all sides. And our reporters on the street in Cairo – I was there, and I talk to them regularly, when we’re at protest whether it’s a pro or anti protest there’s always someone who’s trying to stop us from broadcasting or someone who’s angry with us. So we just do the best we can and try to report the news.

**Dina Wahba:**

I have several comments. I’m going to make them very quickly and I’ll use my place in the panel. About women in the media from – I’m talking about Egypt – I think there is a difference between having women’s pretty faces on TV and versus women issues being presented. With all respect to Mona el-Shazly and Lamees al-Hadidi, they do not bring about women issues, they are highly reactionary only when sexual harassment has become the thing that everyone is talking about, like driving in Saudi. At that moment when it became news and a good media thing they brought it into attention. And most of the women’s issues whether on newspapers or on TV are cooking shows. I remember in *Kalam Nawaem*, especially my mom – she’s the average Egyptian mom if there is something like this – where she was watching them tackling – they were actually talking about violence against women I have to
say, and she said I’m waiting for them to finish their blah blah in order to see the cooking part. So even when they address certain important issues it is so boring that no one listens to them.

So I don’t know, about counterrevolution I like Claire’s point about counterrevolution and I would say that anyone – my definition of counterrevolution is not only state-oriented; it’s everyone who wants to maintain the status quo. And this goes for people who were with the revolution but now want to maintain the patriarchal political culture. And I know everyone is interested in Islamists and their politics because it’s like the sexy topic now but, like Professor Deniz said, there’s no Islamist and secular, there’s people who are pro-democracy and people against democracy. And within the camp that is so-called progressive you have people who are counterrevolutionaries themselves and who want to maintain the patriarchal status quo and who are against women’s rights and who really stand in the case of women.

Ala’a is a friend and I really like her, and I have to extend my solidarity with Bahraini people, I really want to do that, and Bahrain is a different case because you are still within the peak, you’re lucky and – I don’t know you’re lucky or unlucky, I don’t know, but you are within the peak of revolutionary process and this why you see women all strong and women on the streets and we have experienced that only for a short 18 days. You are still experiencing that, so it’s a different case, I can’t compare Bahrain to Egypt.

Whether the dialogue with youth of Ikhwan, I am maybe different from other secular feminists if I may label them so, I am with the dialogue whether with the youth or with the Muslim sisters and I have been trying, I have been thinking about how to approach this, and I have been trying to think of ways on how to do something that’s away from the media that is not a media stunt in order for women from both sides to sit together or from the youth. I have personally met – and it was one of the Chatham House dialogues – I’ve met a young Ikhwani woman who approached me because she was interested in gender and she knows I was doing gender studies, and she was telling me how now that Mubarak is gone they have the right to call for women to be on the top, front leaders.

So I’m not saying that all the Muslim sisters are like this, far from it, but there could be a wing that we can talk to. So I hope that we can create some form of dialogue whether from the progressive wing of Ikhwan or whether women or youth.
Question 5:

My question's about Egypt. There's a, what looks like a very bad NGO law in front of the Shura Council at the moment that the forum of human rights NGOs has said would stifle civil society. On the other hand some members of those organizations also say the genie of civil society is out of the bottle and the authorities are not going to put us back into it, but I was wondering is there anything specific of concern for women and women's rights organizations? Are the authorities going to attempt to stifle them particularly through these laws or the genie out of the bottle there as well?

Question 6:

My question is for the entire panel. We are working in the region and very aware of all the press freedom violations that are taking place, so I've got two questions and I'll keep them very brief. My first question is does your work, your activism, does it extend to confronting the press freedom violations that are taking place in your countries? And also could you please speak about the role of local media and social media being used as a platform for projects to help women participate more in the public space. Thank you.

Question 7:

I want to bring up two things. Firstly Ala'a, did your cousin sign the request from his bride to allow this? And second, I want to bring up the issue of role models that Carina mentioned; there's been some discourse about whether models are good or bad. In the West a lot of people that are stopping women's equality and rights are actually women, at the top of society whether in the business world or in politics, that are doing as much as they can to say they're more masculine and they're better and they're harder than they are and therefore they deserve to be there. Are there enough women that are good role models and what can be done to improve that?

Question 8:

My question is – I think you're right when you say that these are youth and women-led revolutions but so was the first Palestinian intifada, and what are we learning from the ways in which women have been completely repressed not only by the state of Israel but also by the Palestinian Authority by the
ways in which donors have swooped in and completely depoliticized the work that women are doing in Palestine through their financial agendas. And the point about raising women’s economic wellbeing – I think I have a problem with it because it lets the state off the hook. It’s one of the things that we’re doing where we’re NGOizing women by making them responsible for their own economic wellbeing when in truth the state should be delivering economic prosperity to its citizens. So are we not creating a kind of dual system in which, you know, women are then forced to take on responsibilities? So if people would be willing to talk to that issue please.

**Question 9:**

My question to Myrna is that we are trying to give grants to Arab women in the Arab world to try to help them in promoting their businesses and become financially independent. However, we keep facing huge challenges from the governments themselves, from the ministries of labour, even from the civil society sometimes and the representatives of the civil society who really want to work locally with the local people and excluding the internationals to come from within. So I think what you are speaking about Alfanar is very important for me and for us back in Geneva so we can maybe bypass the government and bypass the system and come and work directly with you. Maybe if you can speak a little bit more about that.

**Question 10:**

My question is: what should the role of outsiders be? I’m wondering as westerners, speaking as one myself, is there a risk that we can damage indigenous feminism by our mere association with them? So should we just keep out or is there a constructive role that I as a western male for example can play?

**Question 11:**

Dina, thank you for highlighting that these programmes in the media – they just concentrate on cooking and keeping the stereotype thing about women. My question is to the panellists in general: we know that the worst part of women’s grievances in the Arab world, in the Muslim world is through the legal system in particular when it comes to family law. A couple of months
ago I was invited to Brighton to attend some small conference and there was a show you must be aware about, Monologues Bussy. It’s kind of a spontaneous acting, theatrical acting about certain issues that they receive it from the public. I’ve seen five pieces of the show. But the most important thing which was shocking is that one of these shows showed precisely a religious guy doing a marriage, incest marriage, about a brother and a sister. Now my question is – alright, I mean it’s horrible, I know exactly – my question is considering that Lebanon in particular, is calling for the civil marriage where would you stand as an activist to prevent such underage marriages and incest marriages and in the name of whatever? How would you stand about civil marriages in the whole area as well to be prior to the religious marriage?

**Dina Wahba:**

You’re talking about incest? I’m sorry. Underage?

**Question 11:**

I’m talking about generally that the legal system does not stand with women and it’s about time, you know, that we do something about it including calling for civil marriage before the religious marriage to prevent such cases.

**Question 12:**

I’d like to ask the panel, in particular Ala’a, whether the codification of the sharia might make some difference to family law and improve the level of social justice, which in my view is pretty poor. And I find my Saudi friends – I know they’re privileged but they’re less interested in the driving issue than they are in the inequalities of family law.

**Dina Wahba:**

About the NGO law in Egypt, it is a disaster, but whenever we talk to them about it they say it’s just a draft. ‘What are you talking about, why are you going crazy over it? It’s only a draft, we’re still talking about it.’ But whether it’s going to pass or not, I hope not, but there is resistance. They’re stifling all the NGOs, not only the women’s rights NGOs – of course you know about the
raid that happened to the NGOs before, and then they are stifling them on funding – some women’s rights NGOs are really suffering. It’s not easy to establish a new NGO or almost impossible to establish a new NGO. So all the organizations are suffering and women’s rights organizations are suffering as well. I don’t know if Fatemah would like to raise any other points about NGOs, women’s rights NGOs in Egypt later on.

About social media I’m always worried that social media is being overrated and its role and calling it the ‘Facebook revolution’ as if everyone hasn’t been working so many years in the build-up and people sacrifice their whole lives against dictatorship and people were imprisoned. So I don’t know if social media is a tool – it’s just a tool, it’s another space. It can be used for good things and bad things; there is also sort of hatred on social media, hatred speeches against women and pages against women, so I don’t know, but I’m always worried about being overrated.

About role models thank you for raising this point, because I don’t know if we can call ourselves role models just like that or who can be a role model. What is a role model? But what I personally experience in a political party is that what I try to do – not calling myself a role model but what I try to do is when we have people in first-year political science at Cairo University, I try to support them and extend my support and solidarity as much as I can in order to make them even more involved in the party. So it’s not mentoring in any way, I’m not trying to mentor them. I have to say I was personally mentored by many of the women who were in my political party, but seeing that there are women, the political party and engaging with them and having their support and solidarity is really important and I think this is the role of the role model.

The role of outsiders – there are two points in the role of outsiders. First I’m always afraid of the cultural relativism approach of ‘this is your culture, this is your Islam, let’s not talk about anything, let’s leave them as they are’. This is offensive to Islam and offensive to our culture and this is not our culture. I believe – I’m part of a network called Women Living Under Muslim Laws and we had a campaign called Violence is Not Our Culture. So no, don’t be scared to speak up about violence anywhere, and what we need is solidarity rather than being criticized or questioned all the time. What we need is support and solidarity and solidarity makes all the difference in the world though. I remember when the telephones were cut off in Egypt, the first phone call I got after they came back was from a German professor of mine, and it touched me beyond belief that she cares, that she calls and all of our friends
whether in Germany or other countries were posting things on Facebook to support us and this meant a lot.

About incest they did a baseline survey in Minya and they found out that one of the main problems facing women is incest, but we cannot really bring it to the public; it's not a topic. We did some baseline survey in young women, but we can't open incest to public debate. It's just not there, no one can bring it up.

The legal system and the family law – I agree with you, it's one of the drawbacks, but again with all that's happening in Egypt it's becoming impossible to talk about civil marriage or about a new law. We're already fighting to keep the things as they are. So talking about advancing them is just – I'm sorry. Changing or advancing, we can't.

**Carina Kamel:**

I'll try to address some of the points I managed to jot down. As far as press freedom is concerned, someone raised an issue about that. The media's under unprecedented attack right now in Egypt, everybody's vilifying the media in a way we've really never seen before and the attacks and in some cases physical. We've had people camping out outside the Egyptian Media Production City, my own fellow producers and colleagues had their cars shaken and couldn't even get home on various occasions because of the kind of physical attack, because various groups are upset with how the media's behaving. And this is not even going to mention the kind of actual legal complaints and the sort of volume of legal complaints filed by the state or people affiliated with the state or lawyers or individuals against journalists, it's very well documented and they're just never-ending it seems in terms of trying to curb freedom of expression in general happening all over. I think Egypt, I can't speak for other countries, but I know it's certainly happening in Egypt.

As far as the role of local media's concerned and social media I think it's really important to remember the role of local media. I work for a pan-Arab channel and obviously there are lots of many different global media organizations and I think that one of the issues we're talking about here is access to power. And I think local media is one of the ways that women can actually access power a lot easier because perhaps it's slightly easier to access those media organizations than it is to kind of get hired by the BBC for example. So local newspapers, local websites can actually provide a platform
or a stepping stone for women who want to access the media industry and access the power that you get by being in the media industry and social media's sort of an offshoot of that. I mentioned how important really social media has been so transformational in giving so many different journalists, whether men or women, an additional voice and therefore access to power.

As far as being a role model is concerned and how some of the women themselves are the ones who perhaps are constrained to other women, I think that that’s a really important point. I’m speaking obviously about the media industry; I don’t think it’s restricted to the media industry and we see it everywhere when you see sort of assertive, confident, ambitious women they’re often portrayed in a very negative light by their own colleagues and this is a constraint in the west and in the east. Just I think a few days ago, I don’t know how many of you follow this kind of thing, but Jill Abramson, the editor and chief of the New York Times was described using certain comments that if those exact same comments were used to describe a man they would have been compliments, so it just sort of reinforces the idea that the more successful you become as a woman the least or the less liked you become, which – it’s a global issue, and I mean I don’t know how we can even begin to address it but I think that we can just sort of chip away at it.

And the other thing, just to address Dina’s point, yes I agree it’s obviously not enough to have women on TV, it’s not going to fix the problem but it’s sure a really good start. And when I talk about access to power, I think that it’s really important to remember that the reason women are well represented in the media industry in the Middle East, because the media industry has less barriers to enter it for women than other industries do. So this is an area where women can go, it can flourish and they can get ahead. There are a vast number of other sectors where women can’t do that. So take advantage of that. If women want to access power that is a route, it’s a clear route; it’s right there and it’s something that should be noted basically, it’s an access to power when you talk about access to power.

And then just finally the media’s being cited as having a really important role, a number of people mentioned it in the earlier session, an important role in increasing women’s access to power, highlighting women’s issues and then the very same breath the media’s being accused of sensationalizing women’s issues. So it’s like the media can’t win and I just think it’s super easy to blame the media for everything. It happens all the time, we’re used to it and it’s what’s happening. It’s just really easy to blame the media, but the point I’m trying to make basically is in this polarized environment there’s a lot of
controversy, there’s people on opposing end of the spectrum. In Egypt the media is being vilified, rightly or wrongly, I’m not going to sit here and defend Egyptian media, but what I’m saying is that rightly or wrongly the women are bearing the brunt of that backlash of the media being vilified.

Claire Spencer:
Okay. Since I’m passing the word over, can I put in a good word for cookery shows, which actually seem to have as many men on them if not more in the UK than they do women? So I mean if you change the market you change the assumptions.

Ala’a Shehabi:
I’m very comforted that pretty women have a place to go to in Al Arabiya and I’m sorry about that. Actually I’ve got five points that I want to address really quickly about social media. Something happened to me very strange last year, I got four very weird emails that were designed as if they were from either colleagues or from Al Jazeera journalists, and I noticed they were really suspicious and they had attachments so I sent them straight away, you know, the government sent them to the wrong person, because I’m a person that has some contacts in places where I need. So I forwarded these emails. They were the first specimens of spying technology that fell into the hands of Google security experts and they spent two months investigating what these things do. So these were basically spying technologies that were sent to my email and we found out that they were sent to about 20 people. We couldn’t identify them.

Claire Spencer:
How do they work? What do they look like?

Ala’a Shehabi:
This is a whole other panel, it’s a whole other thing, but not only did they discover what they do – I mean other than recording every single thing you write, copying your inbox everything, they also found a signature of the company that supplies that spy technology and it’s a British–German company called Gamma International who are currently being sued on my
behalf in Germany, and I’m also suing the British government because they failed to investigate and to stop the exports to governments like Bahrain, so they can identify that. So we’re in the process of privacy internationals doing that.

**Claire Spencer:**
Your anti-spyware wasn’t good enough to stop it getting through.

**Ala’a Shehabi:**
I don’t need anti-spy, I could tell, it was obvious. I mean I could see the typos that were in the thing and it wasn’t really from the Al Jazeera. Like actually I tried to open the first one, that tricked me, but then I forwarded it onto a friend, so I was actually very stupid in the beginning. I was trying to open it on my phone in the car and I was like they’re sending me the agenda from the king the next week or something, and then I forwarded it to an IT guy who’s like ‘you just sent me malware, like why are you doing that for?’ I normally do not fall for these things. So then I kept being on full alert.

But that was just one thing that we’re doing at Bahrain, which is monitoring the use of surveillance technology, and it’s opened the eyes of many people about the exports of these technologies to activists across the world. But most recently, two days ago I was in Bahrain interviewing about two to three lawyers, about people who have clicked on links that have then identified people using anonymous accounts in social media. So people have been empowered through social media as a new space that’s opened for them, and I agree that it’s not this utopian view, it definitely is a catalyst, but what’s now happening is that lots of people use anonymous accounts. As I say, especially in Bahrain, where people had Facebook they removed their faces because they could be identified and you could be punished for your public opinions, so people removed their photos and removed all political forms on their public profiles on Facebook, but they also feel empowered when they use anonymous accounts.

Over the last six months my colleagues have been monitoring how governments are trying to disclose the identities of people running anonymous accounts. So one link literally sends you to prison for three to four months and you get tortured and punished because you then disclose which account you’re running that’s insulting the king, and that’s something that we
hope the report will be published soon on that specific new form of how the governments use counter-tactics to use social media against you. So that's just one thing I want to raise on that issue.

On the issue of role models, again last week in my trip to Bahrain I was sitting in a room with a female head of a private equity unit at one of the biggest investment banks in Bahrain, she's sitting at home, I was sitting with the dean of the business school in the national university – she's sitting at home. These are people that you'd normally think are role models. There are people who have been again persecuted and punished by the state for having political opinions or just on a sectarian basis and they were persecuted. So to us now to be a feminist or to promote women's rights is really to look at the big problem in the country, to solve the key structural political issues and to support people, show solidarity with people who are fighting to change the government. Not to be like, for example, to depoliticize the cause of women's rights and say well, you know, let's talk about minor issues that concern women.

For me for example, I'm British; I'm torn, because I'm a British and I'm Bahraini. I have one government supporting the other government and they're both working against me, so like I don't know who my enemy is. So I kind of feel very torn when I come back to the UK and I avoided coming to the UK for about over a year and a half because I couldn't come to realize that I've got the British establishment who are allies with the Bahraini government and working against a pro-democracy movement. I just couldn't deal with that, and you realize that you've got a huge, huge obstacle ahead of you. I don't need to be a woman to know that.

Family law's again a very contentious issue in Bahrain – this was huge, before the revolution in 2005, this was proposed. It was rejected. One of the biggest marches in the history of the country around 100,000–200,000 went to the streets to reject a personal family law that was supposed to empower them. I couldn't believe that, and these were mostly women in that protest against family law. This is a very kind of complicated issue again, because it was completed with a corrupt government, but this was a government trying to pretend it's for women's rights but it's really to attack the religious establishment. But then I've also come to realize that you're also fighting against the very conservative religious establishment that did indeed want to protect its powers against its only remaining constituency which was women. So that's how that worked out, but that needs to be worked out.
Finally, who to support as an outsider and speaking to women… I always say this, I’m privileged I’m invited to speak today to you guys. We again don’t represent Arab women; we don’t speak for Arab women in our countries we’re a selection, we’re a sample of western-educated English-speaking highly networked individuals. We don’t represent the women who do need your help. Again we can help you from our own perspective to show you who, for example, what different groups stand for in the countries, what kind of help they need, whether it’s financial economic, political, but overall we’re all fighting these bigger battles in our countries and it shouldn’t be difficult for you guys to recognize right from wrong and especially when it comes to even at the minimal level basic human rights for everyone and equality, that shouldn’t be complex or colour your view about which side you should be on and who to help.

**Myrna Atalla:**

I really appreciate your comment, which is that we aren’t necessarily representative, and I think that the question on social media really should be calibrated to the communities that you’re discussing. If there’s no internet penetration in a community that is highly disadvantaged, marginalized and completely forgotten by the government then what are we exactly talking about? So I mean let us contextualize. I’m going to just focus on the questions that I can answer quickly and allow everybody to actually eat. On the issue of creating a dual-based system, it’s a really excellent point and probably speaks also to the question of should political rights be in place before economic rights or political development before economic development or vice versa. I do think that, I mean in my comments I focus more on economic empowerment but the organization that’s sort of spearheading Amman and who we support and who we’re working hand in hand with is very much aware of the political side of things. So I didn’t necessarily focus on it.

It’s not enough of course to just provide vocational training and financial literacy and access to capital, these are widows who are often at home and have no idea that actually they have government pensions and have entitlements. So we bring in the Ministry of Social Affairs for better, for worse, to come and make them aware of it. We help them get access to their ID card so that they can begin to be part of the system. That said, should we wait necessarily for the government to wake up to its obligation, if widows don’t know their rights, part of it is a very organic process of rights awareness and
then enough independence from the shackles of poverty to be able to then come and take a seat at the table. And I think this is very clear, unless it is grassroots driven no campaign, no pressure, no lobbying, no advocacy will be necessarily effective.

That said, what’s interesting in this project is that it was begun with some support from the Global Fund for Widows, so an international organization that had a particular interest in this plight, and what’s happening now is that the oath that is being taken there is an element of it pledging and making public their awareness of their own rights and their willingness to support others, but the Global Fund for Widows is now directly involved with this. They’re now campaigning to add to the International Declaration of Human Rights a widows’ bill of rights. So the local and the global do need to be connected, but I daresay that one just must be very, very aware of sort of how one designs the intervention to prevent a dual system from occurring but allow for enough empowerment such that one could envision potentially a locally home-grown push to improve the rights of widows let’s say in this particular case.

In terms of how to bypass the government to support entities, probably we can talk about this later. I mean we are registered in Egypt and that is a long arduous process, but certainly the NGO law – we’re all holding our breath, because whether you’re registered locally or as a branch there will certainly be implications. I would agree that I don’t think it’s any more onerous on organizations fighting for women’s issues as such, but I think at some level the genie is out of the bottle. I mean I think that their necessity is a virtue and what’s remarkable whether we’re at the most local level and going up there’s innovation whether it’s within legal structures, whether it’s in financial instruments, I think that the fact that we’re all sitting here today is case in point, and I’m happy to talk more directly later.