Transcript

Women and Power in the Middle East – Women at the Top

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Jane Kinninmont:
I think we’ve heard a wide variety of perspectives from women from different countries in the Middle East about the ongoing struggles in the countries of the Arab Spring over the role of women and about how women in younger generation youth and social movements perceive their struggles from different points of view, different perspectives on the relations between women and religious movements for instance, between women and education, women and the media and, if anything, the discussions have highlighted the diversity of perspectives that do exist between women in terms of what women’s aspirations and rights do and should entail.

We’ve heard also, I think, very different levels of optimism and pessimism from our different speakers and I’m happy that we’ll be ending the panel discussions on a high note, by introducing you to some very high achieving women who are working in the Middle East. It’s my great pleasure to be introducing the only female minister in the Turkish cabinet, Her Excellency Fatma Şahin, the minister of family and social policies, and I will invite each speaker to come and join me on the stage as I announce them. Her Excellency Fatma was elected to parliament in 2002 and re-elected in 2007. She has been the vice chairman of the Justice and Development Party, the AK Party, the ruling party of Turkey and a member of its Central Executive Committee. She’s also been the chairwoman of the women’s branch of the AK Party and she’s a graduate in chemical engineering who before her time in politics worked as a plant engineer and plant manager.

I am also delighted to introduce Her Excellency Assia Bensalah Alaoui, ambassador at large of the King of Morocco. Dr Assia has a master’s degree in English and a PhD in law from the University of Paris. She has co-chaired a European Union high-level panel on dialogue between cultures and peoples in the Euro-Mediterranean area.

And I’d like to introduce Farmida Bi, a partner and European head of Islamic finance at the international legal practice Norton Rose, based here in London and working extensively across the Middle East region. Farmida is the only female to be named as a key individual for Islamic finance by the legal industry guide Chambers UK and will speak to us about women in business and the workplace in the region.

Fatma Şahin (translation from Turkish):
As the minister of family and social policies, I welcome you all with respect and love on behalf of my country and myself. I would like to say that it's an
absolute pleasure for me to present a speech on such a fragile topic that is women in the Middle East and power, and so I would like to also say what a happiness it is to do it at this historical venue.

Turkey and England are two countries with many commonalities in their history and they have many shared historical events. In the 16th century for the first time England and the Ottomans sent their ambassadors to each other. We have a very powerful history together and I'm delighted that we seek peace for the Middle East and the world on this occasion by incorporating women's opinion, perspective and emotional intelligence.

Of course, it is essential to first understand the world in order to understand the Middle East, Middle Eastern women, and their power. It is also essential to analyse very closely the change and difficulties along with opportunities in the world. Especially, modern and contemporary world experiments most of all.

While on some sides of the world, the national income is under $1 per person, it can be $40,000 per person on some other sides of the world and this presents two extreme sides of the story. We are referring to a world where such democracy – like advanced human rights and freedom being internalized, for example in the UK – and on the other hand it can be struggle for the individuals to have the same opportunity in other parts of the world.

When we look at the world's recent past we can see that if there's an election system it is easier to stimulate democracy and if there's not, then it can turn into an inner war like how it occurred in Syria. Perhaps we should ask this question to ourselves: what should we do for world peace? To start with, we should seek equity and justice. We should assimilate the idea that we cannot be happy unless everyone is happy and/or we cannot be powerful unless everyone is powerful. We should also reject discrimination. If a country and population in the country are being valued according to its petrol, gas or mine then this brings unfairness to the world. Therefore, our perspective is that humans should be equal and there should be equal opportunities for anyone in the world. This can only happen when individuals question themselves, when communities question their views and the politics question itself.

We look at the Middle East's Islamic geography, 'Islam and women' and 'Islam and democracy' are the topics continuously discussed. There seems huge miscommunication and prejudice such as thinking that patriarchal families and very strict customs and traditions are a part of Islam. However, 1,400 years ago when the word 'Islam', which also means 'peace', was first originated, the purpose behind the belief was to support women and
children's rights and elder people's rights along with lowering poverty. And the Prophet also mentioned women's rights in his Farewell Sermon.

Therefore, Turkey has an important standing because of its population that's majority Muslim. We have a community and women that grasped this fact and the country has extremely important and functional non-government organisations. Also as a country, we hurdle continuously and make our own laws, and fight terror in order to develop our country better. On the other side we make our economic sources much stronger and try to lower poverty. Turkey is one of the OECD countries in the world that improves income distribution very quickly.

The subject is the Middle East, world peace, starvation, and the women in the Middle East, of course here it is women who come forward. Especially via social media women have to protect their rights and freedom. When we look at history in fact revolutions and ideologies have happened via women's efforts and struggles. And whenever women adopted these revolutions and ideologies it always ended with success. Today, during the changes and developments in the Middle East, women have adopted them easily in order to make use of them in their favour. Therefore, the leader cannot do much towards this development.

Today if we all complain about terror and want world peace and wish to end it in the world, perhaps we should consider defining it in one common language. If one calls it terror but the other calls it freedom war/warrior then this double standard may bring confusion and unfairness. What should we all do then? It is essential to support individuals without discriminating them by looking at their ethnicity, language, religion and background. This principle applies to countries. Turkey has welcomed 300,000 Syrian refugees and 80 per cent of these are children and women. We are doing whatever can be done in order to support and look after these people and end the inner war in Syria.

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's saying, 'peace in the country, peace in the world', applies to this situation perfectly. We are doing our best to support Somalia and Palestine in the leadership of our prime minister. We also think that international foundations can also support the idea of being with the underdeveloped and help them to become powerful.

Lastly, bias and lack of communication are the two weapons that are more dangerous than the biggest war or weapons. The world needs compassion, tolerance and empathy and therefore women need to unite in order to decrease bias and lack of communication. I would like to say that we will be
supportive of peace in Middle East and be a bridge between the Middle East and western society. Thank you for listening to me.

HE Assia Bensalah Alaoui:

Allow me first to thank Chatham House for this invitation and I must say that I really appreciate the British humour at large and my friend’s, Claire, in particular because she invited me to talk about women at the top. All my life I have known only women struggling just to exist and some others trying desperately to break the glass ceiling. However, since she wanted as well, she wanted me to say a few things about my personal experience, allow me to say that I have been extremely lucky and I am sometimes a bit ashamed to say that, because I probably as well made the right choices, and my right choices were university. University gave me the independence and responsibility I was craving for, and among other things I chose English which, in an Arabic country and a Francophone country, allowed me to reach out to the world and know tremendously from various persons.

I did make another choice which really determined the rest of my life. I switched from English to law and political science and wrote my dissertation about world food security at a moment where it wasn’t a fashionable topic, so it allowed me to be picked up on some board of trustees of prestigious research centres and ultimately to be co-opted on the MENA Council of Advisors of the World Bank. This, of course, gave me some visibility and allowed me as well to go deeper in a field which is male-dominated, or I should say even more male-dominated, which is security at large. And security allowed me to lecture across the world and namely in the NATO Defence College, to be picked up as well in track two diplomacy, NGOs and institutes and to work there heavily on peace in the Middle East and, of course, this was extremely inspiring and gave me a lot of visibility.

Another asset I should probably thank is probably my first literary background and Moroccan identity. My Moroccan identity, thanks to its diversity – very strong identity but very open on the rest of the world – allowed me to navigate among different cultures, different languages and, above all, allowed Romano Prodi to pick me up to co-chair the high level panel on dialogue between cultures and peoples in the Euro-Mediterranean area. Somehow this international visibility gave me more legitimacy back at home and probably allowed His Majesty to appoint me as ambassador at large.

So, we see in Morocco women gaining a high circle of power and visibility despite the very depressing low figures of women at the top. And really to
start with only one woman minister in the present government down from seven in the previous, for some very prestigious and technical portfolios like energy and development, and despite the existing expertise at home – because in Morocco the old multiparty system had favoured the mushrooming of… expertise of women in the political arena, and despite that we are only with one minister woman today. Although in the parliament they have been increasing thanks to positive action and the national list of 60, so there are 63 out of 395.

They have as well some visibility in high circles. We have one woman adviser of His Majesty the King and we have many ambassadors, 11 or 12, which really has been increasing. In the private sector the women in posts of responsibility varies tremendously from only three per cent in the Ministry of Handicraft for instance, to 52 in the Ministry of General Affairs, so you see a great variety. About the fifth of the judges are women in Morocco, and this is extremely important because it is a highly symbolic sphere when you have judges, women, in a Muslim country.

In the private sector as well we have made a kind of breakthrough because the president of the business council is a woman despite the fact that only 10 per cent of entrepreneurs are women, mainly engaged in middle – small and medium and small firms and still facing a lot of constraints, namely access to credit. So these figures are really depressing, as well in the media, in the soft power we have very, very few women in the high circles, contrary to what was said this morning by the woman from Al Arabiya. And only one woman chairing a TV channel, two head of information and five responsible for radio station out of 11. However, I think that the seeds of change have been sown and hope is permitted for improvement, and I would like here very briefly… please don’t misunderstand me, I am not saying – and this has been said by the minister of Turkey – that of course the road to women in parliament is still extremely long and we still have to fight illiteracy, poverty, exclusion and of course to stand firm on the principle and to work hard in order to improve empowerment.

However, I would like here to mention what is part of what is now known in the region as the global Moroccan exception. I would like to say that while we are seeing extremely difficult transitions and upheavals across the region, especially in the countries where there has been a regime change, Morocco is leading its tranquil drive towards global democracy and modernization and the way it is empowering women or at least, as I say, building the road for that is, I think, illustrative of this whole approach.
We have indeed the meeting of two strong legitimacies. The grassroots work which is carried out by NGOs led by extraordinary women; since 25 years we have a woman who probably created the first NGO to fight AIDS and has broken a taboo in a Muslim region. We have a collective of lawyers who since a quarter of a century are defending raped women. We have NGOs as well headed by a woman who hosts and protect single mothers and so forth, and I can give you a lot of examples. These militants of human rights and activists have really paved the way for the society to upgrade somehow the minded, although this is the biggest challenge we are facing in the region. And what is interesting is that this grassroots work has been met by a top down approach and the determination of the King to proceed to the empowerment of women and the improvement of women’s conditions and rights.

And I would like to give you just the example of the flagship reform of the Family Code which has been carried out in 2005, despite the terrorists’ attack, the King giving a very strong signal and saying nothing will derail us from building democracy. And as you know of course the women field and women example is extremely important for the sphere of symbols. But beyond symbols, this reform was a real cultural revolution because it paved the way for larger literacy making, namely in the mosques and the use of the mosques for enlightenment, contrary to what normally is happening sometimes, and as well to upgrade the level of the judges to make sure that they are not going to be prejudiced when they really have to implement the new law and so forth.

And much more than that, the new constitution which has been adopted on 1 July has raised the principle of equality and gender equality to a constitutional principle while, as you know, the struggle across the region is about what type of constitution each country is going to have.

So we are now really working to the law enforcement and preparing and making sure that the implementation is going to be carried out correctly. We are endeavouring as well to devise policies which are gender friendly across the sectors and in the whole approach of development, and a high authority for gender equality and struggle against all types of discrimination is being set up. What does that mean? It means that the debate – and this is to answer your question, Claire – has been around real legislation that is taking place and the debate was in the street. While you had a demonstration of Islamist backers reining in the democratization process and the problem of women rights, you had in front of that another march of one million in Rabat for women who really wanted to democratize more. So you see this is a real drive where you have the plurality and the possibility to express all kind of opinions.
What is interesting as well is that we see now the member of parliament from the very party of the prime minister which is the Islamist, albeit moderate, and in the Turkish example it is still a conservative party, and the MP from this party are really putting extremely harsh questions to the prime minister claiming the implementation of the new constitution which gives him a right to nominate to high positions in the civil servants and claiming that he has not been doing his work and that he has to behave now. So, it's interesting because across the political spectrum you see women rising to defend their rights and make sure that the breakthrough and flagship reforms which have been done can be implemented.

I would like you not to misunderstand me, as I said, I would like to insist that we still have a very, very long road but the only thing is that there are some signs which are extremely encouraging because we see now in Morocco across the sectors, across the different strata, huge training programmes which are devised to allow women to get more expertise, more knowledge, to be eligible to better positions, to senior position across the sectors, public, private, governance in very high bodies of firms and across the spectrum as I had said.

So I would like – allow me very briefly to make a few remarks in order to close. I would like simply that we who are privileged somehow and in some certain position and who can influence our counterparts, I would like us to reckon with a principle of reality which is on threefold. First of all, to know, to be aware that we have an obligation of result, which is much higher than our male counterparts. We have to deliver in order to build our own credibility and exemplarity and sometimes it is even higher when you are, like I happen to be, the daughter of someone or the wife of someone and you still have to struggle because the demand on adjustments in your daily life between personal family status and job’s requirement are extremely demanding.

Second remark: we have really the necessity to seek emancipation, freedom, power, but without provocation. We have to make sure that we get this legitimacy in a tranquil serene society and above all to avoid confrontation. What we are in the need of across the region is of dialogue because social unrest is looming and the divide in a polarized society is dangerously increasing. I am just back from Egypt and we have unfortunately this trend of Ikhwanization of the society and we have to make sure that the divide is not going to kill the necessary social cohesion and, above all, the strong consensus that we need in order to carry out the very bold reforms that we still need.
And to finish, I would like just a very brief message to my friends here in the West, just to tell them that they should not give me the kiss of death because sometimes they want to support women’s rights and they do delegitimize our own endeavours. They have really to fall into our own effort to get this power, our own strategies and powers in order to make sure that we are not going to lose this contact with the grassroots legitimacy.

Farmida Bi:

I think I’m probably a little bit unusual compared to the other two speakers because I live in London, I work in the Middle East and also in southeast Asia, I specialize in Islamic finance and debt capital markets, and so what I want to talk to you about is basically women in business and how they’re progressing and what I see. And I too have the privilege, I think, of seeing a number of different cultures and comparing how the culture in the Middle East, and for me that’s primarily the Gulf countries at the moment, how that particular culture is responding to the broader environment.

As someone who works in Islamic finance I’m often asked how I cope as a woman in what is perceived to be a very male industry, but I’m basically a banking lawyer and the last time I looked that wasn’t overwhelmingly full of women either, and so whether I’m going into a general bond meeting in London or into a Sukuk meeting in Dubai it tends to be a pretty male filled room, and that’s fine. I’ve also been very interested and encouraged that when I am at an Islamic finance conference, and occasionally I’ve been talking about the role of women and generally speaking the room is nearly always full of only men, there’s a lot of shutting down, people feel they have to listen to me when I bang on about this and then when I start talking about their daughters and what they want for their daughters they suddenly open up and they do want a different and better world for their daughters, although they might not want that world for me – and I think that is deeply, deeply encouraging and I think that’s the way forward. If all those fathers out there want to create a world in which their daughters are not held back because of their gender then the world is going to improve no matter what, and I think that is the way forward.

In terms of, and I’m going to concentrate initially on the Gulf which for me tends to mean the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain I guess. I see very few women acting as lawyers, as bankers, as people representing government entities at the day to day level that I deal with. You occasionally come across a very senior woman, someone like Fatima Al Jaber who runs a
large consortium in Abu Dhabi, a family firm in the Al Jaber Group, of course someone like Sheikha Mozah is very well known internationally, the minister for labour in the UAE has been a very prominent woman, a member of the royal family there, so you see these exceptional women. But I think in a way what is much more interesting is what is happening to middle class women who want to enter the workforce and what I am seeing is that increasingly young women want to go to university, they want to study serious subjects and they want to enter the workforce.

So we have women from the UAE, from Bahrain, working as lawyers in our firm and they are very serious about their careers and they are progressing marvellously well and we’re seeing that with our clients as well. Some of our clients have very conscious strategies to try and encourage women to come and work for them, so in Saudi Arabia for example, western banks that have set up offices there have separate floors for women traders, separate lifts that they will go into; there’s a real attempt to try and accommodate the cultural needs of their female employees and what they’re finding is that those women are performing extremely well.

I’m also hearing from government entities, for example in Saudi Arabia, that there is a requirement from the state for a third of new graduate entrants to be women and so you see women coming into the workforce. One of the things that I’ve done for the last three or four years at the World Islamic Economic Forum is to run a women-only tea. So this has been in the past a very big conference with people attending from all over the world, typically 2,000 or 3,000 delegates attending, of which maybe a couple of hundred are women from across the world who are focusing on Islamic finance. And I don’t want to take away anybody’s time to network with colleagues generally but we run a little tea where at four o’clock the women come in and we close the door, no men are allowed, and we have tea and cake and we talk about the issues that are of interest to women. And there are events like this in London all the time, it’s a really big issue. In any given month you’ll find women’s networking events, but I think in the Middle East it’s more rare, and what I hear is fascinating.

What I’m hearing from these women is that they face much more obvious sexism than you would do working in London. It’s hard for them to get the credit for the work that they do. They tend to do the work, then the boss takes it and goes and presents it to the board or goes to the conference and speaks about it and they think they can’t complain because that’s just the price they have to pay. There is no recognition of the double burden that they bear. So the reality that they’re working in a competitive male-dominated environment
in which they have to excel, but also they are wives, mothers, daughters and they have to keep homes going; there’s no recognition or flexible working or extended maternity leave to accommodate all of that.

So these are women who are facing serious issues but they are determined, they’re growing in numbers, they’re positive about their future and I think if you look at how the world is moving it’s moving very much in their favour, whether you look at the changes that have been introduced in Saudi Arabia to allow women into the parliament or if you look at the ‘Emiratization’ policies in the UAE more women are entering the legislatures, they’re entering the workforces and over time they will take their place.

Now, one of the things that I do is compare this to southeast Asia, to Malaysia and to a lesser extent to Indonesia, where these are also Muslim countries but here I see women all the time. As you probably all know, the governor of the Central Bank of Malaysia and the chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission are very impressive, highly dominant women who are respected globally but again, on a day-to-day basis, the people who are there representing my clients are women, the people who are representing the local banks are women, the people in the ministries that you go and work with are women and it’s not anything to be remarked upon. It’s much more a way of life and I think that is incredibly encouraging and something that isn’t remarked upon enough.

Now, I think if you compare that again to London we had the Davies Report a couple of weeks ago which was talking about how senior women are performing in the top FTSE 100, 250 companies and there is still a very, very long way to go and the threat of quotas hangs over all of us. I am, in my firm, involved very much in trying to retain women lawyers because more than 50 per cent of our junior intake are female but when you look at the partnership level – so as the triangle forms – less than 20 per cent are female. And so there is this massive loss of talent from the point at which women start their careers to when they should be peaking at their careers.

So, I think there is this lazy assumption that the West has got it right and poor women in the Middle East are massively oppressed and there is no recognition at all of the progress that women are making in Asia, and I think some of those lazy assumptions should be taken away. Women in the Middle East are making huge strides over a very short period of time. The West still has a very long way to go but, of course, people can’t be overtly sexist to me in the workplace, it’s against the law and people have policies in place to stop that. So, there is a lot of very positive movement that’s going on and I think
women will be reaching the top. They haven’t got there yet in large numbers but they will be, and what’s driving that is globalization, the desires of fathers now to treat their daughters equally with their sons, which perhaps wasn’t the case a generation or two ago, and the relentless march of a world that we can all see and interact with which means that our individual cultures are being diluted. So, I’m very positive about the future of women in business in the Middle East and yet I accept that there is quite a lot of work still to do.