Transcript Q&A

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

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Chair: Jane Kinninmont
Chatham House

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Question 1:

You presented a very good optimistic picture about what’s coming up and I sincerely hope and wish if I can share what you’re saying. My question directly to Miss Bensalah; you mentioned democracy in Morocco which the King has taken some steps towards that and the first important step in democracy is the legislation to be fair and just and to change something about it. I think in the past year we have heard about a few cases of young girls killing themselves, committing suicide, because they were forced to marry their own rapists. I’m sure you are aware of that. If the King is in – well of course he is in a position to shift right, left and centre and of course he is the big role model, what do you think; has there been any action taken against such a law that allow the rapist to get away from the crime by marrying the girl and then or otherwise running away or getting away with his crime? Thank you.

Question 2:

The question is pointed at Farmida Bi. You mention about how we all know how Saudi is trying to encourage separate business life for women, banks, etcetera, shopping, and you also mentioned what happens in south[east] Asia especially in Indonesia and Malaysia which are predominantly Islamic states. Don’t you think that the Saudis can learn lessons from the south Asians? My second point is you mentioned about fathers are more keen to see changes in their daughters: what about the wives? Because the wives, women are the agents of change, not men. I do agree we have to empower men as well but women have also a big role to play and I think it’s about engaging with the mothers to create that change for daughters. Thank you.

Question 3:

First of all, thank you so much for the cases you presented and thanks a lot for the comparison you made, Farmida. I wanted to ask if you have any information comparing to Scandinavian countries. The second question is directed to the whole panel: it seems that most women’s talents and ambitions get lost between the time they graduate from university to the time they can reach top management which is usually during career breaks for maternity breaks and stuff like that. Is there a way to share information, share experiences between the southern Mediterranean and the northern
Question 4:

Isn’t the greatest obstacle to women reaching the top the fact that they bear children and if so, if you agree – which I’m sure you will – how do you see the future?

Question 5:

I was interested in Farmida talking about women getting to the top both in business but also I was thinking in politics and my reflection is, is it perhaps related to the fact that women – and I’m talking in very general terms here – both in the Middle East but also in Europe, in the West, don’t much like the look of the top. There are very unattractive features, I have to say, and you’ll know this well, being in the banking and finance sector as well as the political field, for women to get involved. If they need to enter and gain positions and status and salaries in these areas they have to play by a set of rules of the game that have already been set. And as you’ll know, in this country we’ve been looking back lengthily at the career of Margaret Thatcher in this respect and I think the consensus has been that she accepted explicitly to play the rules of the game set by men in order to get there. So this is a question for the whole panel: how do women firstly get attracted to a system they don’t particularly like or can they in some way transform by sheer dint of numbers, the nature of that system on the way up, and do you see any sign of that happening both here but particularly in the Middle East?

Fatma Şahin (translated from Turkish):

Well, what disables women to come out on the top? How are we going to make women join in the decision-making mechanism in economy and politics? It has to be constituted by remarkable politics. There are two main points. First, it is really difficult to increase their economical participation and to get them involved in the decision-making mechanism, if you don’t provide equal opportunities for women and men, on the subject of health and education.

In the state of law, even if you structure all you laws and regulation in this direction, you must raise people’s standards of living and infuse people with
the equality of women and men. You must set this issue as an agenda topic. In our country, we feature positive discriminations so that women can become powerful economically. In 2008, we carried out some works aimed at increasing the number of women in employment. Today there are 1.5 million women out of 4.5 million new employments. Even though I might have seem as if I am the only women in the parliament, the percentage of women in decision making mechanisms reached up to 14 per cent from four per cent for the first time in the history of the republic of Turkey. All the parties, considered this issue in the primer elections. Now, there are human recourses, civil associations over 25–35 per cent.

Maternity and career; now this is the most important question and the world must take forward with this issue. Because if we don’t bring these two into balance, an ageing world loses its human capital and the youth population decreases. In this regard, we are carrying out very important work in our country now. We want to make women’s potential in education part of the development, to bring women to business life, powerfully. And qualified manpower... We want to conduct these two in parallel. What should we do? We should come up with serious politics, we should offer significant support. The social state should provide maternity breaks, breastfeeding breaks, social security to part-time workers just to support each women to organise their own life with the ability of managing both sides; maternity and career.

Otherwise, so long as you keep saying ‘maternity is a huge obstacle for women’s careers’ we will come up against an ageing population. But the main source of development is the person. Who will utilize this technology, these machines; who is it for? Therefore, these two have to have a good balance and move in parallel.

We should set this power which belongs to women, as our president who gave a speech on behalf of Chatham House said. What are we going to do? Actually, this issue has to be considered as a nonpartisan matter. By approaching this ‘matter of women’ with women’s emotional intelligence, rather than a man’s point of view, we should smooth the diplomacy with love, mercy, sympathy and toleration. Otherwise, why do we need female politicians if there are women who act like men? I think we should strengthen the decision mechanisms which equally includes both women and men. And on this subject, we have shown a marked improvement. We would like to make women a part of active and sustainable development in all respects as soon as possible. We believe that we can make it happen by providing equal opportunities for women and men.
HE Assia Bensalah Alaoui:

Well, I would like first to answer the question which has been asked about this problem of the law which obliges the man raper to marry the victim. You know of course the origin of this type of approach; it’s the problem of the honour code across the region. Although in Morocco we are very happy not to have the honour crimes as exist in the Middle East. But now people stood against this law and it has been changed and it’s going to be implemented and incorporated into the larger legislation which is once again very, very women-friendly. The problem we are facing is the correct implementation because it’s been probably too ambitious and you can’t give the society much more that it can digest, so now we are doing step by step and, as I said, we are trying to upgrade to improve legal literacy among women because most of the time they don’t know their own rights so how they can put them into exercise, and improve men’s knowledge of women to make sure once again not to have this confrontation and have men not supporting the emancipation of women.

Strangely enough there has been a survey after the adoption of this law, just three months before it was totally implemented – because in the new law we have the faculty just like in California, we gave the possibility for women to claim half of the assets that men has been building during marriage and we thought that the rate of divorce was going really to explode. But no, there was absolutely not much change. So, the most important is that we have to make sure that men do not feel threatened by the emancipation of women and that’s why we really have to make consensus about whatever progress for the whole society, because democracy is about the advancement of the society at large and that’s why when I hear how to bring women to more positions, we have a problem with democracy.

Why? Because democracy is living a crisis in Europe. I mean this is not a new idea. At the very moment where we in the region, we have the ambition to access more democracy, so we have no model in Europe, we have no exemplarity across the West because there is a lot of negative perceptions linked to money and democracy, to just name it, all kind of things that we are reading every day, and the representative system does not comply with the expectations of society now. That’s why you have the explosion of participative democracy.

So we are living this discrepancy and paradox and we still have to make the position and the eligibility attractive to women. We need more women in politics, you cannot change things from outside; you really need to be in the arena to make sure that you are going to improve. So we are trying – and this is probably to answer very quickly the other question, how to make politics
more appealing – it is extremely difficult because in our region there is a huge jealousy of your own privacy, and when you become a public person your life is scrutinized, a sort of striptease, everybody is looking and everybody feels entitled to know everything about you, and women shun from this sort of being shown from within, and I think that this is a real refrain, real check for women to enter politics, they really prefer to.

As to answer your question, sir, on the contrary, I don’t think that bearing children is a handicap. I made most of my study in being pregnant, I have two children, and for both careers in university I really sat for my – I was even sometimes vexed because I had a balloon like this and the teacher will call me ‘miss’, so you see, I say, he’s not even taking some compassion with my state of a future mother! So, I don’t think so, on the contrary, sometimes… of course I am privileged, that’s why it’s different, but people who have to struggle to be pregnant, to work very hard, to make two hours’ transportation or whatever to get to the job and to have nobody to help for the care of the children, it’s of course extremely demanding but I think it’s the type of trade-offs that we have to do. This is our problem.

We have to have a dialogue in progress, we are a marching dialogue and we have trade-offs to do across the day between the different appeals. That’s why I said that perhaps women in the Middle East – and I am talking particularly about Moroccan – have this huge capacity of mediation and dialogue. You make dialogue the universal and the specific on an everyday basis and this teaches you compromise and that’s why sometimes in politics they can be very good because they have the sense of dialogue and of negotiations and they know where are the priorities most of the time, even if I don’t share all the type of magnificent things that sometimes are given to women that they are better at doing this or better, it’s extremely dangerous to generalize. I think that each person has virtues and shortages and that we have to live with that and know how to do this.

Another thing I wanted to address or I was asked to – what was it, how do we support women who get lost? This is an extremely important question and that’s why I think that again, education, permanent training is the cornerstone to start a real life and your first job and afterwards to change jobs because now nobody is sticking to the same job all his life. We sometimes need to change and to switch from one job to another and that is the hope precisely in Morocco. We have a lot of initiative, as I have mentioned, to provide with the right education and with the right training to allow people to choose. This is the luxury nowadays to be able to choose your career, what you want to do, how you want to live and whom you want to live with and so forth.
So, and I would like here just to mention because Chatham House is part of it and the British Council just made me the honour to ask me to patron the whole process. As you will know, Claire, it is the process of how you train future political analysts and I am extremely happy and I accepted too this mission because most of the participants are young women that we have already in the foreign ministry or in different, or in private firms and so forth and they are being taught how to become political analysts, because this is another problem. You need really to create an interesting debate. You need real people who can analyse and not just criticism which is not really with good argumentation, and it’s important because you learn how to nourish the opposition because the democracy is as well the status of opposition and of minorities and you have to learn how to express the different views and make sure you can defend them.

Farmida Bi:

There are a lot of questions and each one of them can take many hours but I’m going to try, because I’m fascinated in all of them, but I’ll try and whizz through them. On the rapist marrying the victims, I mean that’s not limited to Morocco, that happens right across the world. I’m originally from Pakistan, it’s not unknown at all and it’s cultural. In terms of Saudis learning from the south Asians for me what’s interesting is that it shows how diverse Islam is in practice, how the same text is taken and interpreted in so many different ways and the reality, of course, is that each of those ways has validity. I don’t think it’s appropriate for me to say that one is better than another, but it’s fascinating that there are so many different variations. The sense I get is that each country is moving towards, I suppose, a greater recognition of women’s rights, but I don’t think it’s taking from one model, I think it’s an evolution that’s developing in each country, it’s just fascinating that Malaysia in particular is sort of so well developed as far as that’s concerned.

I was very interested in what she said about mothers. I’m involved in Mosaic, which is a charity set up by the Prince of Wales – it’s global, but it started in the UK – and it’s about trying to raise aspirations for young British Muslims and there’s a programme for junior school girls where the girls and the mothers have a term of going through a programme where the mothers are basically taught to support their daughters and their aspirations and their education and their future careers, and I went to one graduation ceremony and it felt very much like a journey, particularly for the mothers but also for the daughters, and you see value there, but in the cultures that I know the power lies with the male members of the family and I think it’s the men who give
legitimacy to the ambitions of their daughters. If my father hadn't agreed to me going to university it sort of wouldn't have mattered what my mother had wanted. My father had to agree that I was going and then I could go and I think the reality is that in many Muslim societies the power still lies with the fathers, and I do sort of find it encouraging that for them I feel that the jump is in some ways bigger, but in other places of course you hear that oppression comes primarily from women, from generation to generation, and in Britain we're seeing it particularly in the debate on female genital mutilation, which is something that women do to their daughters and granddaughters.

On Scandinavian countries, what I found fascinating about Scandinavian countries and what's happening there is the difference between the statistics and what I'm being told is the reality. So the statistics are wonderful; huge numbers of female participation, 30 per cent, 40 per cent women on boards, fantastic childcare and a real sort of parity on parenting, but what I'm being told – and I don't know it first hand – is that it's the same hundred women who are on every board resulting in 30 per cent or 40 per cent membership. I'm being told that women are not progressing through organisations as quickly as the men are. So what I hear is that despite all the childcare, despite the family-friendly policies, women are not in the workforce achieving parity, although these are societies that are trying to create gender parity and I need to look more into the reality behind the surface. But I like the surface; I think the surface is a starting point.

In terms of the point on women – is having children the main barrier? It's probably the main barrier in the UK. I'm very conscious that in countries like Morocco, in Turkey and in other places people still live in extended families. So if you have a baby your mother-in-law is quite likely to look after it – a friend of mine is Moroccan and her mother-in-law lives with her – and you get support in the way that you don't get in Britain. In Britain it really is you, your husband and your baby and not much of anything else. But the reason I think it may be the main barrier it sort of goes to the point that Claire made, which is that you do have another focus to your life, but at the senior levels of business, of politics, of professions it's a very male process, it's a very male environment and not every woman is attracted by it.

So I have had female associates coming to me and resigning to get a job in-house at a bank or a company where your hours are more certain, your demands in some ways are more defined. Certainly one of them said, 'I don't want your life.' That makes you sad on the one hand, but on the other hand I can understand. I have two children. I see them in the mornings, I don't see them in the evenings, when I travel I don't see them at all, and trying to sort
out birthday parties and dealing with the complaints when you’re not at the football match that you should be at it tears you in a way that it doesn’t my male colleagues.

There is a part of your brain that is forever not on the job and yet, especially now I think when our working environment is so deeply competitive because of the economic crisis, if you’re not entirely committed it becomes less and less attractive and you become less and less attractive, because your male colleagues may not have those issues. There’s a great likelihood that they don’t – none of the other partners in my group has a wife that works. They all, they come to work, that’s all that they’re thinking about, they don’t have to worry about the plumber or all the other stuff that needs to get done, and I think I have a very equal marriage and yet I am the one who’s worrying about getting to the football match on time and worrying about whether we replied to a birthday party invitation, that kind of thing. It does kind of fall to you and there is a part of your brain that never does stop focusing on the children, and so I think certainly when I look at friends who have been very successful some of them don’t have children and so you think well, are they exactly like the men and the reality is although they’re extremely successful they’re not exactly like the men, they’re not looking for the same rewards. Their identity is not so closely tied up in their title and their salary in the way that it is for men.

Now what are we going to do to make it more attractive? I think that the Labour Party position you have to have at least three women on a board, or 30 per cent, I think is probably right, you need to achieve a certain minimum level – it can’t be one because that’s not going to change the culture. My personal view is that we need short term quotas, it’s not at all attractive or popular in some ways, but I think if we had quotas for the next whatever it is, ten years or maybe less if we can move faster, we will change our culture and if ever there was an amenable time to do it I guess there would be greater acceptance of it now than there has been in the past, but I think a forced change is the only way forward.

**Question 6:**

I wanted to pick up on three things quickly. One is you mentioned mind over matter about ignorance and misconceptions are very, very dangerous. Surely by splitting women off from men or splitting whichever minority off from a majority is going to create misconceptions, ignorance, a lot of scare tactics and it’s counterproductive and things like sexism, it doesn’t just happen to women, it happens to men as well. Claiming credit for something else that I
did that my boss claimed credit for is not something that just happens to women and by saying ‘oh it’s a women issue’, not ‘it’s a reality of the workplace issue’ that creates misconceptions and ignorance and a space that really isn’t helpful.

Secondly, I wanted to look on the cultural thing and particularly in cultures in the Middle East of many religions. There’s for women if you’re not married with two kids by 30 you’re called – and I’m not going to finish this sentence – whatever name under the sun you want to be called, and also if you’re not a CEO in the UK you’re not successful – it’s not a reality and if you’re middle management or if you have a secure career that’s successful of an expectation and its unrealistic expectations to say I’m going to be a CEO. Also, can I pick up on the quota thing? Surely we need more female executives, not just non-executives.

**Question 7:**

I wanted to ask a question of the minister, if I may, and we’re talking about women at the top, women in decision-making and women in decision-making at peace tables. And you spoke so eloquently about the need for women to be in these positions, and at the very moment in Turkey you are, we hope, really progressing on the peace negotiations between your prime minister and the Kurdish leader, but there are maybe over five million Kurdish women, Kurdish girls who are denied education because they cannot use their own mother tongue, they cannot go to school. They’re not really benefitting from the great economic boom and all the wonderful things that Turkey is doing generally for women, and I’m just going to ask you what prospects do you think – what weight do you put on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which was a wonderful thing. When was it? It’s 13 years old nearly, 2000, in which you really had to have all the people at the peace table. You talked about dialogue, you talked how important it was to talk and to actually support the women’s peace effort, do you think that Turkey will at last implement 1325 and develop a national action plan so that Kurdish women can be part of the negotiations, be consulted on the new constitution and actually access sort of justice, law reform and everything that goes in the transition from conflict to peace?
Question 8:

It’s very impressive to hear the positive views and opportunities that are emerging for women throughout the Middle East and, indeed, the success that each of you have benefitted from. I wondered if you could all comment on what obligation you think you have and women like you have to help less advantaged women as we mentioned those that don’t even recognize for example what their fundamental human rights are. So what is the role of the women at the top to help the women at the bottom?

Question 9:

My question is to their Excellencies the ambassador from Morocco and the minister from Turkey. I wonder the debate that we’re seeing in the global kind of discourse about women that was raised by the recent book by Sheryl Sandberg, *Leaning In*, about how women really need to kind of clear the way so they can get to the top so that they can establish an environment that’s easier for them to have a work life balance and lift other women up with them along the way hopefully or make it easier for those coming behind them. I wonder: do you think that those arguments that are being discussed in the West have resonance in the Middle East? Can they be carried over or is there a cultural barrier that prevents that kind of being attributed and how would you potentially see a path towards that that would be applicable within an Arab context? Thank you.

Farmida Bi:

I’m going to deal with David’s point on sexism and why everyone has to be a CEO. I completely agree with you that horrible people exist in all workplaces and men suffer from it as much as women do, but the reason I mentioned that was that the strong impression I got from the women that I talk to year in year out was that they felt their perception was that it happened to them disproportionately because they were women and they were not in a position to object because they needed to be grateful to have their job. So that was why I thought it was relevant, that they feel that in a way that I probably don’t, because I think the stuff that happens to me is far more subtle because we live in a different environment. So that was the point of that.

In terms of why can’t we be satisfied with being middle management, my understanding was that we were talking about women reaching the top. I think most people are perfectly happy for us to be middle management. They have
a real problem when we try and reach the top and that's what I want to deal with.

Then in terms of an obligation to help other women, I think I do have an obligation to help other women and I do that through individual mentoring and by participating in broad discussions and by being involved in programmes like Mosaic. But I'm not sure that I have an obligation, it's something that all successful women have an obligation, it's something I feel personally and I feel it in other ways too. So as a British Pakistani Muslim, which is a community that is really not doing very well, I feel a great obligation to give back to that community as well but I think that's personal. I wouldn't say to every woman you're successful, it's your job to help somebody else because that's not an obligation that's placed on men. The fact that women are succeeding creates an atmosphere which allows other women to succeed and I think we shouldn't impose anything more on them.

I'm fascinated about your question on Sheryl Sandberg because I mentor a young woman in her early 30s, I gave her that book and she loved it, she was at just the right age for it. A year ago I was telling the women in Bahrain at my tea about why Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office. Do you remember that book? They were very excited about that and many of them had read it and so I'll be fascinated to hear whether you think Sheryl Sandberg is having the same impact.

HE Assia Bensalah Alaoui

Well I think that you're right; all the people find it very difficult to start a company or to start a project. What I'm saying is that discrimination towards women is certainly higher and especially in rural areas. I work a lot, I'm a rural lawyer, because of my specialty and it's much more difficult to access credit and some kind of input, etc., when you are a woman but what we are trying to do is now we have set programmes to help actually young entrepreneurs, whether they are men or women, because it's always difficult to start a new thing.

As for the peace I would like very brief comment on what you've said about peace, which is extraordinarily important in the Mediterranean. Given the number of conflicts, Morocco and Spain have taken a new joint initiative to improve mediation and support the efforts of the secretary general and we have friends of mediation like Turkey and Finland have set to start with, and we have made proposals precisely to train women so they can be eligible to be picked up as principal mediator by the secretary general of United Nations
or by national authorities. So we are moving towards this direction, but of course everything takes time.

What obligation to help the less disadvantaged women? I don’t think you have an obligation per se, but there is a very strong principle in Islam which is solidarity, and I can tell you that I don’t know a well off family in Morocco who has not set up a sort of NGO either to help the children in the streets or the orphans or whatever. So you have this solidarity principle for charity, but what we would like is to try to bring in more rights to this. That’s why we are really striving to do this. Just another way whether, for different ways to do things in the Middle East, I think that the more you get developed the higher you go in the social ladder. You find the same difficulties, the same fierce competition for rare posts.

As I have said, exactly like for instance in coalition governments, we have fewer women, only one, because there are fewer portfolios for ministers and the rare portfolio which are there are first for men and not for women, despite the extreme competence of the women that were there. So I think that things are going to get more banal as we go and I was really surprised, because I made a lecture for some congressmen and people from the Bundestag who were visiting Morocco and they were complaining of this discrimination. And a lady was representing Minnesota actually said, ‘But it’s exactly the same as well in America’, and the MP from the Bundestag who was actually from the Green Party, she said, ‘We are still phasing.’

So I don’t think there is a real difference of major – it’s a difference of degree but, of course, the main challenge that we have is really to defeat the cultural misperceptions, and do not let people put everything on cultural background or on Islam which are really wrong. Sometimes it boils down to political competition and competition for power per se and it has not to be justified by any kind of cultural or religious arguments.

**Fatma Şahin (translated from Turkish):**

First of all, I would like to correct the terminology the question that our friend asked. She asked her question about the relationship between our prime minister and İmralı with [a wrong] description. The executive organs of the state are in communication with İmralı. After these communications, the resolution process with BDP (Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi – Democracy and Peace Party) has begun. I mean, I find it so wrong to describe this situation as a leaders meeting in both the same position and I say that it means ‘disapproving the country’.
This is our standing; we want to dry these tears, we want this terrorism to be over and end, and put a stop to this especially for the women and children who suffered most from all these. Because we would like to solve this problem, and afterwards we want to move towards our other goals faster. Besides, our dear friend has made racial discrimination as she was asking her question. There is no ethnical racism, regional racism or religious racism in our country, at all levels and in our government policy. In connection with this, we stand against the mentality which splits off women from men in an ethnical way. So, what did we do? We featured positive discrimination to improve the standards of living for women especially in the southeast region. We organised big campaigns to let their daughters have an opportunity of education. We supported three million mothers. We gave more financial support to girls than the boys. In that region, we supplied more hospitals, more water, more roads and so we removed the interregional imbalance. Now the number of schooling rate for girls and boys is 98.5 per cent.

We improve our politics on humanism without any regional, ethnical, sexual discrimination. For example, I mentioned that the budget for the social politics has increased by sixteen times. In our latest work, we started to make a payment of 250 Turkish lira to the widow women – 250,000 women, especially those who live in the southeast region, has taken advantage of this. Therefore, we don’t accept this segregationist expression. We can clearly see that everyone, in 74 million population, is a first-class citizen and each language, each race, each gender is a part of the richness. We are in the process of the counter terrorism and the society adopts it. And a group of people which we call ‘Wise People’ are visiting all the cities in our country.

Mrs. Arzuhan Dogan Yalcin works so influentially as a part of this committee. She takes an active role in the resolution process for peace and for improving women’s standards of living in our country. She works with a very busy schedule and she travels all around the region. I would like to express my sincere thanks to every single member of ‘Wise People’ group and to Mrs. Arzuhan Dogan Yalcin and I would like also say that I am most grateful for their effort for my women in my country.

I want to answer the question about women at the top. Well, of course the life of one woman is important but we have to develop powerful politics for all women. We are the resolution authority. We have to solve some problems in terms of legislation first but more importantly we are going to touch the life. We are going to develop some projects and strategies which touch the life. In this case, we are going to subsidize and set up a substructure. When you provide all these, there are many women who will benefit from these
opportunities straight away and this is where the equality starts. Therefore, we think we have a very important responsibility. We try to be successful by combining the forces of the parliament, civil society, private sector and the community and I think we set up a good example. Thank you.