Transcript

Women and Power in the Middle East – Keynote Address

Mrs Arzuhan Doğan Yalçındağ
Doğan TV Holding

30 April 2013
Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I'm delighted to be here at this exciting event. It's my pleasure and honour to speak to you, and I would like to thank Chatham House for launching this panel and inviting me.

Dear participants, there have been enormous improvements in gender equalities since the International Women’s Day was first observed in 1911. Since then we had a long history of struggle for gender equality. There is a rising recognition that more sustainable, more democratic and more peaceful societies can only be achieved through the full participation of women. Many significant steps are taken all over the world – women participate increasingly in the labour force, social life and politics. Most of the differences between men and women in the health figures, educational achievements, participation in the labour force, job advancement and wages have reduced. Even the share of women in parliaments has doubled.

But all that aside, we still have problems. Men and women rarely have the same opportunities; differences in opportunities imply differences in income, health and power in decision-making mechanisms. Whether they are workers, farmers or entrepreneurs, women earn less than men – especially poor women have less say over decisions, not only in society but within the households as well. Women’s representation in society, business and politics is significantly lower than men’s.

These are almost universal problems, from the least-developed countries to the most-developed countries, but gender disparities are even more pronounced in the Middle East. A whole set of economic, legal and cultural hurdles have kept the region’s women out of the economic and public life. I believe to eliminate gender gaps we need changes and achievements in four main spheres. These are education, economy, social norms and politics.

Let’s start with social norms. Gender inequality usually starts with traditional and social norms and they are carried from one generation to another. Many norms are learned at an early age. If the mothers are not well educated, traditional norms of gender discrimination can easily be transmitted across generations; even women themselves may carry the norms that favour boys.

We have to keep in mind that we’re coming from a society where a woman had no place but her husband’s home. Let me share with you one of my personal experiences. Some time ago, I came across a family of four, a man, his wife, their son and daughter. The man slapped the little girl. The young
woman was watching the son unconcerned. When I intervened, the woman told me that this is the proper way to teach the little one to obey the man. ‘One day she will get married,’ the lady told me; that is just one of the many examples of how gender discrimination is transmitted to new generations.

We shouldn’t forget that the cultural barriers are not just confined to the Middle East and North Africa. They are everywhere. This means that we already know what will work. Theory and empirical evidence highlights the importance of education and economic development for changing the unfair social norms. So to overcome the mindset against women, we have to educate the women and increase their contribution to economic and social life. Educating and empowering women to use their talents and skills will help women to diversify their time beyond housework and childcare. Everywhere in the world, educated women join the labour markets. Joining economic life will narrow the gender gap; as women become breadwinners, their roles in the society will start to change.

But there is a two-way relationship between education and economic development. Economic backwardness may pose barriers to girls’ education. Poor families consider the girls as labour force within the family. If the family can afford the cost of education for one child, boys are preferred to girls.

Economic and social impediments keep working after school as well. Most women face a hard choice when they find a job. The care for children and the elderly are very expensive. Transportation is not only expensive but exhausting as well. Working days are too long, the informal economy is widespread and wages are too low. These reduce the incentive of employment for women. Those are the problems mostly associated with an effective social state. Most Middle East and North African countries suffer such problems, where economic backwardness can be an obstacle for girls to get education and women to join the labour market.

This is a vicious circle, but we can transform the vicious circle to a virtuous one. Equal opportunity in education is itself an improvement of gender inequality. Education enables women to join the labour force. Then, as women start to earn their livings, traditional norms weaken. When the traditional norms weaken in the society, more women get education and jobs – that also opens the way for political representation.

The real improvement in women’s participation to social and economic life can be achieved only when gender equality becomes a norm in political life. We know that social norms shape women’s statues in the society, and that
changes in social norms take place very slowly. Changes in social norms can only be accelerated through politics.

From my personal experience, I think about two types of efforts that are important to produce meaningful results in reducing the gender gap, those promoting greater knowledge and those promoting the coordination of individual efforts. Both open the avenue of NGOs as well as the media. Better education and more information on the achievements of women can facilitate the changes in minds.

Secondly, lack of education of women’s ability as political leaders can lead the misperception on the role of women in politics. If there are so few women in politics, the society will think that politics is a man’s job. That will reduce women’s ambition to political power. Information on powerful women as politicians, hiring officials, successful entrepreneurs or leaders of NGOs can affect perceptions. These role models can induce change in the society. And I believe that TÜSİAD, the leading present organization in Turkey, like CBI, the Confederation of British Industry in England, had played an important role to change the perception of women in Turkey. As it’s been mentioned, I was the first female president of the association; my successor was a woman as well. Moreover, I was the second female president among the business associations in Europe.

At TÜSİAD we started a report on the state of gender equality in Turkey. That report was important because it was the first time that the business community acknowledged the importance of gender equality. The report also helped to change the mind-set of the male members of TÜSİAD. Later on, we carried out projects that focused on identifying the obstacles to gender equality, and developing workable solutions. In Turkey, as knowledge on women’s ability as leaders increased, misperceptions on the role of women began to dissolve. My terms in TÜSİAD constitute an example. In those days I frequently heard that my assertive voice does not fit with my ladylike image. I may argue that the NGOs have been influential in Turkey to break up the misperception that the feminine look does not fit with strong leadership.

Media undertook a similar role as well. Media disseminates informational role models, and numerous options available for women. Permit me to remind that I am in the media business. The interaction between media and values is a two-way relation. Media slowly influences how the way people think and behave in the long term, but it cannot entirely deny the present values. I will give you two examples.
The first one is the case of *Star Trek* – the science fiction series created a multimillion-dollar industry. After subsequent films and series, the franchise has become a cult phenomenon. *Star Trek* is one of the most culturally influential television shows and perhaps the most influential science fiction TV series in history. Related to our subject, the writer assumed the first officer as a woman on the original series, however the producer thought that it was unbelievable for a woman to hold the chief commander role. So the series had been casted again for a man, for an actor. But this shouldn’t mask the idea behind – that *Star Trek* envisages a future on Earth in which there is gender and racial equality. The show’s writers frequently addressed moral and social issues in the episodes by tackling topics such as slavery, warfare and discrimination, and I believe that these values deeply shaped its followers. I gave the *Star Trek* example because I wanted to recall to all of us that gender disparity is not an issue only in the Middle East, but a big issue in western countries, and also it took years to overcome the obstacles.

The second one is the case of Turkish dramas. The dramas are very powerful vehicles in Turkey and within the region. They slowly influence the way people think and behave in the long term. The impact reaches well beyond Turkey. Our dramas reach more than 100 million viewers in 73 countries in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Eurasia. Once a public survey in Arab countries revealed that 78 per cent of the respondents watched a Turkish drama. These dramas have a sole message to Arab women: that is Islam is not the reason why they were ill-treated by their own husbands. Islam could happen together with a modern life, high living standards, and equality between a man and a woman. So it can be the case for Arab women as well. These dramas help to raise taboo subjects and challenge their mindset.

Furthermore, there is a two-way relationship, why these dramas change the perceptions on the role of women in the society. Women as the main consumer of these dramas demand greater gender equality in the stories.

Dear participants, before concluding, let me highlight one popular saying. Recently it has become very much in fashion to call women the emerging market of the emerging market. I wholeheartedly share this view. The emerging world, including the Middle East, was the driving force behind the world demand in the past decade. As the role of women changes, women become the driving force of demand in these emerging markets. The best way to serve that market is of course to encourage the engagement of more and more women in social, economic and political life.
I believe that the Middle East is at the doorstep of new opportunities on every front. The region has huge potential, but the Middle East can only achieve the economic and social welfare with the participation of women in all sorts of life. The entire place between education, economics, politics and culture transforms the societies we live in – and we have achieved a lot, but there is still quite a long way to go.

For prosperity and equality in the world as whole, struggle with gender discrimination is a responsibility on our shoulders. Participation of women in economic, social and political life will make our world a much better place. A better world is possible if we join our efforts. Thank you very much for listening to me.