

## Women in the Middle East: Progress or Regress?

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### WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PROGRESS OR REGRESS?

#### [Panel Discussion\\*](#)

The U.S. Department of State's International Information Programs (IIP) in Washington D.C., the Public Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Israel, and the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center jointly held an international videoconference seminar focusing on the status of women in the Middle East today. Israeli and U.S. experts examined the status of women in various Middle Eastern countries, recent electoral changes and political developments, and the role of women as policy-makers.

Brief biographies of the participants can be found at the end of the article. This seminar is part of the GLORIA Center's Experts Forum series.

**Judy Colp Rubin:** Just over 100 years ago, Qasim Amin, an Egyptian lawyer and judge who is considered the 'father of Arab feminism,' wrote, 'The evidence of history confirms and demonstrates that the status of women is inseparably tied to the status of a nation.' If that is true, then most of the nations in the Middle East are truly in bad shape.

In several countries women cannot say that they are better off than their grandmothers were. To understand how bleak the situation is for Middle Eastern women consider a May 2005 survey from Freedom House. This survey ranked 16 nations in that region on a scale between one, the lowest, and five, the highest, in several categories related to the rights of women. The categories included freedom, economic, political and social rights, and nondiscrimination. The highest overall score was given to Tunisia which received a relatively modest average rating of 3.24 while Saudi Arabia had the lowest score of 1.26.

'The Middle East is not, of course, the only region of the world where women are, in effect, relegated to the status of second-class citizens,' the Freedom House report states, pointing out that throughout the world, even in Europe and North America, women continue to face gender-based obstacles to receiving full realization of their rights as equal participants in society. 'It is, however, in these countries,' the report says, 'where the gap between the rights of men and those of women is the most visible and significant and where resistance to women's equality has been most challenging.'

So in politics, business, domestic violence, education, marriage, and divorce women in the Middle East are suffering more than in other parts of the world.

Consider the following snapshots from the past few years:

In Kuwait, a decade and a half ago, the now late emir promised women suffrage. But that measure was defeated twice by the parliament, including by some liberals, and only passed late in 2005. It will likely take several years before any women actually get elected to the government.

In Iraq, many women live in virtual terror since several women activists, businesswomen, or those simply considered to be dressed immodestly have been attacked and killed.

In Afghanistan, 51 female candidates withdrew from the last elections because of fear and harassment, while terrorists in 2005 broke into the home of an Afghan school headmaster and beheaded him while forcing his wife and eight children to watch. His crime? Educating girls, which they consider un-Islamic.

In Saudi Arabia, women are not even allowed to drive a car let alone vote. And consider this amazing story. A few years ago during a fire at a girls' middle school, religious police blocked would-be rescuers from entering the building or the students from leaving on grounds that in the scramble to escape the girls were not wearing their proper modest clothing. Fifteen girls died in that accident. Meanwhile, in 2006, a group of female high school students in Saudi Arabia interested in journalism made the grave mistake of getting their photo taken with the male editor of a newspaper they had visited. Their journalism project was promptly cancelled.

In Jordan, about 25 girls die each year in honor killings while the perpetrators, usually their relatives, receive light or no sentences. A move by the king to increase these sentences was defeated in parliament and opposed in public opinion polls. Although women's rights organizations have repeatedly raised the issue, not one country in the Middle East has a law that clearly makes domestic violence a criminal offense.

There has been some recent progress for women in the Middle East during this same period. It hasn't all been bleak.

In Morocco, a new family law makes it easier for women to get a divorce, keep custody of their children following a divorce, and puts restrictions on polygamy.

Two businesswomen in Saudi Arabia won election to the chamber of commerce.

Women hold about 20 percent of the seats in Iraq's national assembly and in Afghanistan's parliament—that's a higher percentage than in the U.S. Congress.

Some of the greatest gains have been made in education. In 2002-2003, over 50 percent of those students admitted to universities in Iran were women while women comprise two-thirds of the university-level students in Kuwait.

Another very encouraging sign is that a 2002 survey of social attitudes carried out in seven Arab countries by the U.S. company Zogby International, found that half of respondents considered the improvement of women's rights to be a high priority. Significantly, the firmest support for change came from Saudi Arabia, the country that needs it most.

Such progress is encouraging, but it is far from good enough. Much work must be done to promote even a semblance of equality for women in the Middle East.

**Eleana Gordon:** I have been working with Iraqi women since early 2003, and I have actually held two conferences with 150 Iraqi women activists—in Hilla in October 2003, and in April 2005, with pretty much the same group of women. The second time, however, we had to bring them out of Iraq and take them to Jordan which is itself indicative of some of the changes that happened in that short period so that we weren't even able to hold a conference for 150 women inside Iraq due to the security situation.

In Iraq, women's leaders and groups have been trying to shape the new political order, particularly the new constitution and the laws. If you take the question of whether the situation of women in Iraq is regressing or progressing, and you take as a measure whether women today are better off or worse off than their grandmothers, as Judith suggested, I would say it is pretty safe to say that they are worse off than their grandmothers. This is both a legacy of the Saddam Hussein era and its impact on the situation of women, and more recently, the influence of Islamists in the last three years in Iraq since Saddam was removed from power.

I think it is helpful to just touch briefly on what the situation was like under Saddam Hussein, because

sometimes you hear what I think is a misleading comparison that says, 'Women had equal rights under Saddam Hussein, so things are getting worse, because now their rights are at stake.' I would say the concept of equal rights in a tyranny where you have no rights at all is a little strange. It's true that Saddam Hussein's regime did not treat women as second-class citizens relative to men necessarily. Everyone was a second-class citizen, so the point of comparison is sort of apples and oranges.

Women did benefit from the 1959 Civil Status Law, which preceded Saddam Hussein, and which essentially was fairly progressive in 1959 and remains progressive today compared to most countries in the Middle East in the areas of marriage, custody, education, and healthcare. However, it is worth pointing out that women's literacy rates fell tremendously during the Saddam regime. So you now have a situation in Iraq where young women are less educated than their mothers.

They also, for the most part, have not known anything but Saddam's rule, so they have been closed from the rest of the world. And a great many of them have become much more religiously conservative than they were maybe 25 years ago, and that's partly because of Saddam's repression of Shi'a practices and religious practices which has created a sense of Shi'a nationalism, and also that many of these women look up to their clerics who stood up to Saddam.

They trust the clerics, seeing them as the good people, the ones who were not corrupt. There is a sense among many women that if their clerics had been ruling, they wouldn't have seen the wars, mass graves, and the massacres, which is what most of them suffered from under Saddam's rule. There are a large number of war widows in Iraq who do not have economic means of subsistence because they don't have a husband or a father to support them. So that is how they compare the Saddam era with the alternatives.

In 2003, the hopes and expectations for Iraqi women were high and that is one reason why women became incredibly active. As soon as they had the freedom to organize, to be in the media, to be activists, they took the initiative. One of the remarkable things was how many women's groups popped up in the six-month period from April 2003 onwards. Literally in every city you would easily find 20, 30, or 40 women's groups. They didn't wait for anybody to tell them what to do or how to do it. They started to figure out how to apply for funding, they pushed to have conferences, they pushed to be active, and this was in all segments—religious conservative women, as well as secular women.

This was very encouraging and I think the U.S. Administration recognized the fact that women were a force for democratic change and tried to help them organize and be more coordinated, because these little groups were not yet part of a full women's movement. They did achieve some gains, the most significant being that they campaigned for a quota of women of 40 percent in government in the new constitution. This effort achieved a partial victory with the reservation of 25 percent of seats in government for women. The interim government took that target seriously, and six cabinet posts were granted to women, roughly 25 percent of the total.

So women were visible, and then the independent Iraqi electoral commission took it upon itself to figure out how to make that quota effective, and so they mandated that every third candidate on the party list be a woman, which would therefore hopefully translate into somewhere between 25-30 percent of the seats in parliament [for women]. And in the interim parliament approximately 30 percent of seats went to women. In the new parliament it is a little lower, because not every party managed to get three seats, so a lot of the parties got the first two seats and the not the third. Still, the total is roughly at 25 percent.

So these were some of the positive trends. However, I would say that overall now the situation of women is under threat from the Islamists and is really going to be defined in the next year. Part of the reason the women's movement began to rally was actually in reaction to SCIRI, which is one of the main parties of the Shi'a coalition. In December 2003, very quietly, it tried to pass a decree that would have abolished the

1959 personal status civil law and replaced it with religious law. When this campaign was noted after a few weeks the response rallied the women's groups into a movement. They successfully pushed back that assault and in the interim constitution they were able to keep the 1959 law and equal rights for women. But SCIRI revealed what its intentions were, and that battle continues.

In the battle in 2005 to shape the constitution, there was a tension between liberals trying to bring equal rights and strong protection for women's rights and the Iranian-backed Islamist parties in the Shi'a coalition list that were trying to bring in judges enforcing shari'a law onto the supreme federal court, and to set up a system that looks a lot like Iran's system. The battle is not resolved. If you read the constitution now, you can see that the rights of women are neither abolished nor guaranteed.

Everything was pretty much left to the next assembly which will pass the laws to flesh out the meaning of the constitution. So, for example, on the critical issue of the personal status law, the article in the constitution says that members of every sect and religious group in Iraq will be free to go to the court of their choosing for personal status issues, so you could see how that might lay the groundwork to set up a system similar to what you have in Lebanon, where you basically have no civil status: you must pick a religious affiliation and your personal status issues will be determined by religious courts. On the other hand, you could also interpret that article by saying that one of the choices could be to have access to a civil court  $\frac{1}{2}$  so it is now going to be left to the enabling legislations to define this.

Women's groups in Iraq are getting ready for the next battle, which is to at least keep civil courts as one choice among choices, and ideally have it be the default option so that you are automatically under civil status law, and then may choose to opt out under certain defined conditions to a religious court. But the SCIRI and Dawa groups within the Shi'a coalition are not standing still either. They have already begun a campaign, particularly in the South, to convince women that the 1959 law is anti-Islamic.

Chances are that they will be successful because there is tremendous ignorance in Iraq as to what shari'a really would look like as they have not lived with shari'a laws. So when the debate takes place at a very abstract level, as shari'a versus civil law, most women, the majority, who are conservative, opt for shari'a. If you could bring the debate down to detailed issues like custody or divorce, you get a different response. To give one example, a prominent woman in parliament, Salama al-Hafaji, one of the women leaders in the SCIRI party, said in an interview, 'Well of course I want shari'a, because under shari'a my children will be protected in the case of divorce, I will gain custody,' which reveals her ignorance of what is actually likely to happen.

In the Iranian revolution, women were very active and then were caught by surprise by the laws that were set up. There is a similar risk in Iraq today. The other risk is that the women's movements are paying attention to their women's rights but not necessarily to their democratic rights. Some of the rights under threat are freedom of expression, association, and civil society. If they don't fight to preserve those rights, they are not only going to lose those rights [their basic rights as women], but they are going to lose their ability to continue to organize politically.

**Sima Wali:** I will be covering Afghanistan primarily. As you all know major strides have been made in establishing and building a post-Taliban government in Afghanistan. These strides are basically the promulgation of a constitution which enshrines the rights of women in this constitution, presidential election, and parliament, in which 25 percent of the seats in the lower house go to women.

Among the successes are also the facts that the Taliban are no longer in power, schools are opening, and girls are going to school. However, women are concerned about their security conditions, primarily those who live in rural areas. Human security lies at the core of rebuilding war-torn nations constituting a necessary precondition for peace. As stated in the UN development program, 'The world can never be at

peace unless people have security in their daily lives. The search for security in such a milieu lies in development, not in arms. Without security little else can be accomplished. Women will not have the mobility to attend schools, to attend training classes, or leave their homes to work in government positions.'

In Afghanistan, much remains to be accomplished despite successes in the past few years. For example, assessing the health indicators, the numbers are disturbingly dismal. Infant, child, and maternal mortality is ranked among the highest in the world. In fact, every thirty minutes a woman dies due to childbirth or childbirth complications. Women are the poorest of the poor and have joined the so-called feminization of poverty in droves. These disparities basically indicate a downward trend in women's rights.

The story of Afghanistan that I am familiar with on the ground tells a different story than we hear from the papers and the media. For example, women in Afghanistan have comparatively less access to society's resources than men. Women suffer because they are poor. There is only sporadic electricity, clean water is scarce, unemployment is on the rise, and ongoing atrocities continue against women.

The situation of women in Afghanistan ranks among the worst in the world. In fact, 300,000 children die every year and an Afghan child is 25 times more likely to die before the age of five. Eighty-five percent of women are illiterate, further limiting women's advancement. Female suicides and self-mutilation continue to plague the society and in this condition women are rapidly losing hope. They occupy the most economically disenfranchised segment of the Afghan society despite the fact that they constitute the majority of the population. It is estimated that more than 60 percent of the Afghan population is women. Unless immediate and comprehensive measures are taken to address gender equality, the Afghan society's strides towards reconstruction will be undermined and the pledge toward nation-building will be challenged domestically and internationally.

In Afghanistan, corruption reigns and the promotion of civil society is at stake. Powerful warlords occupy important positions in today's government and continue to fuel corruption and undercut the security of the Afghan person. Drugs are threatening the very existence of the country. According to a UN report, approximately 75 percent of the Afghan GDP is in illicit drugs. As for corruption, the new parliament is composed of warlords that threaten the Afghan government and of course, we can simply state that these warlords maintain one foot in terror and one foot in the government. Although the Taliban are no longer in Afghanistan, women think that improvements in their lives promised by the international community remains a hollow promise.

There is a great need for legal reform, too. For example, Afghan women who fought for their rights in the constitution today are threatened by a powerful conservative judiciary trained in the formerly Taliban-type madrasa schools. The hard-won battles that led to equality provisions in the constitution could be seriously undermined. There are also many laws still on the books that discriminate against women.

Little of the aid appropriated for Afghanistan filters down to the Afghan women. I believe that this slow pace of funding will undermine the Karzai government and people are losing hope. These are the major challenges confronting Afghan women.

**Dr. Anat Lapidot-Firilla:** Almost all possible problems and challenges women are facing in the Middle East and elsewhere have been mentioned already, issues like education, economic and personal security, feminization of poverty, shari'a law, corruption, lack of resources, and patriarchal structure. So basically, you have left me very little to add. I will therefore make three very brief comments.

First, there is a problem in generalizing with the term 'women.' We need to look at women of different ages, geographical locations, culturally, their economic status, and other differences.



Second, we need to understand the motivation behind our sympathy and compassion toward women of the Middle East. After all, there are a lot of women in the world who are in worse conditions than some women. Perhaps this is not the case of Afghanistan, but women in Jordan, Palestine, and other places are perhaps not in the worse conditions hinted earlier. Why do we hear about the need to save women suddenly? In the last fifteen years saving women of the Middle East became a serious issue and it is a reflection of Western agendas related to the new understanding of security challenges.

When a democratic process resulted in bringing religious patriarchal movements to the center of the political stage, as happened in Turkey and now in the Palestinian Authority—and these movements are often also anti-Western—the international community is looking for possible counter-forces in society. In such an analysis, there is an apparent correlation between the status and participation of women and the degree to which democracy and political stability exist. Today, not only are women seen as principle agents of democratization and cultural change but also, in the absence of other social movements, women's groups provide the main impetus for expanding citizenship rights, building civil society, and implementing progressive reforms.

Empowering women, it is believed, will therefore start a process of political stabilization and democratization. In other words, women became the West's last line of defense. Does this mean that women should not enjoy the offered support? Does it mean that the support is always negative? On the other hand, we should think carefully about the form and content of the support we offer or accept. We should also remember that the foreign actors are not feminists and are committed mainly to political stability. If the leaders of Turkey or Saudi Arabia, for example, will be seen as providing stability, the tone of support for women will be changed and limited, no doubt, camouflaged by culturally sensitive arguments.

Finally, enough was said about the oppressive mechanism women are facing. We should now concentrate on the formulation of culturally sensitive, on one hand, and, at the same time, on gender-sensitive voluntary empowerment programs and direct them at the community and personal levels. This is not an easy task, but there are examples that should be studied and further developed. We have enough proof that efforts aimed at the state level are limited and have mostly failed. We should concentrate on encouraging local individual women to be creative, to write their own stories, to become economically independent, and to take responsibility for their lives.

**Nabila Espanioly:** I would like to continue what Anat began. One of the major problems that we are facing is our perception and awareness of what we define as a problem. Are we defining as a problem the Middle East, women, the powers that exist in the Middle East or their interrelations? We should also remember the pluralistic dimension of the Middle East. There are Muslim women and also Christians, Druze, and Bahais in mainly Arab countries.

I am not an Arab woman. I am a Palestinian woman, citizen of Israel. Arab women are the Iraqis, the Lebanese, and the Moroccans. All these are Arabs, and I am not all of these. I am a Palestinian woman living in Israel as a citizen of Israel. Therefore, I would be able to speak about that, about the Palestinian women inside Israel with the difficulties and the challenges that we are facing.

I totally agree with Anat about the question of whose agenda it is of saving the women. As an activist coming from the field of women empowerment, I always have the contradictory feeling in my relation to my people, my reality, and with imposing upon us the agenda of others. Where is this limit? Sometimes it puts us in a very sensitive way in the relation between our agenda and the external agenda.

This is a big challenge for all women in the Palestinian community inside and outside Israel. As a Palestinian woman in Israel, citizen of Israel, I live in a state which defines itself as a Jewish state, but if we

are speaking about all issues relating to women's issues, then Palestinian women inside Israel are triply discriminated against. First, as part of the Palestinian national minority inside Israel, and secondly as part of the women in Israel—because women in Israel are living as a whole—Jews and Arabs—in a militaristic environment and this of course is not in favor of women's rights and not in favor of women's status. If we go further, we, as Palestinians inside the patriarchal and conservative society, have to face all the problems and challenges faced by a culture which is going into transfer. And it seems to me that to speak about societies in progress or regress is a very problematic issue, because societies don't go linear. They don't progress or regress, there is a spiral movement within societies which has a trend, and I am pleased that some of the positive trends were mentioned.

And if I am thinking about whether I live better than my grandmother, then I would say yes, not only me, but also a lot of my sisters who were struggling for democratization and feminism in the Arab world, and I am speaking about the Arab world in this concern, in the Arab countries. And I think that in the trends we have been able to speak about domestic violence within our families, as a new issue related to women, as we are speaking about violence, about femicide against women on what is called the 'honor killing.' We can speak about sexual violence. We can speak more about the democratic action and also we are participating more in our society.

As Palestinians living in Israel, we also have to face the issue that in the state of Israel, you mentioned Lebanon as a way of dealing with the personal status law. The personal status law in Israel is very similar that all the religions have to go to religious courts. There is no civil law relating to personal status law, and as an activist who worked for six years to make a change within the Israeli system for more rights of Palestinian women—Muslim and Christians—to be able to go to civil courts, to family court, we have faced the most amazing contra-coalition against our coalition as a women's organization working towards more rights for women in the personal status between the Islamic fundamentalists within our culture and the Jewish fundamentalism who are in the parliament, are represented both of them, and they made a coalition against our attempt to change the personal status law.

So from that out, I think that we are living in a very moving and challenging reality which could create more change, but at the same time, we are struggling with the fact that our agenda as feminists, as women activists, as political power, as peace power, is sometimes used—or I would say misused—by some forces that could be striking back at us as a reaction to this. And because the democratization demand is coming as if it is coming from the West, we will always have to stand up for our rights and to say 'this is our reality,' and it does not have to do with those democracies, but rather with our understanding of democracy, how we understand democracy. And I think here we need to hear more women's voices, to hear the women's narrative in the different realities of the Middle East to be able to build up a better pluralistic understanding of the situation in the Middle East and to make allies between all women who are struggling for the same situation.

As a Palestinian inside Israel, in this situation I am also prohibited to make such allies with my sisters in the Arab world, because politically what does that mean to be able to network with other feminists or other democratic forces who are beaten or put in jail by all the Arab regimes, the same regimes that are supported by leading democratic countries in the west—from the Saudi regime, to Egyptian regime, to the Jordanian regime—where we can see that women who are struggling for real democracy, real civil society, for real women's rights are actually the ones who are attacked and put in jail and imprisoned. And some of them, as you mentioned the question of women in Saudi Arabia, when they tried to drive, while in Saudi Arabia women are not allowed to drive a car, they were prohibited to act in their jobs, to act in their lives. So within that contradictory situation, the big challenge is to keep in mind that we can make a change,

women can make a change, but the only possibility for that, I think, is when women understand how to network, understand to make solidarity with each other, and to act against the hierarchy of suffering, which today is one of the major obstacles before women's solidarity and networking.

**Liora Hendelman-Baavur:** On February 3, 2006 the BBC World Service released the results of an international poll (which took place between October 2005 and January 2006) asking how several thousand people in 33 states across the globe saw various countries. Although different countries were mentioned in the poll, the headline stated 'Iran has a negative role in the world,' suggesting Iran is perceived around the world as having the most negative influence over world order. One may attribute these results to current events, most notably, Iran's firm attempts to advance its nuclear program while rejecting UN Security Council demands to reassure its nuclear program is indeed peaceful. Iran is obviously having a negative image in global public opinion at this time, but Iranian current foreign policy doesn't necessarily project major domestic transformations in terms of gender policies following the recent elections.

In 1997, Iranian women proved their crucial electoral power as the majority of them voted for the reformist candidate Muhammad Khatami for presidency. Women's support for greater social reforms was further reinforced with the following elections to the parliament in 2000 and the reelection of Muhammad Khatami the following year. It is to some degree important to note in regard to the 2000 parliamentary elections that reformist candidates won about 170 seats out of the 290 (previously 270) and left the conservatives with about 45 seats in the parliament. This new balance made it somewhat easier for reformist deputies to pursue modifications in the law, although every parliamentary resolution is ultimately subjected to the approval of the Council of Guardians, which is a twelve member council orchestrated by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i.

Under Khatami, for the first time in Iran a woman was appointed for the vice-presidency. Maasumeh Ebtekar became one of the seven vice-presidents in Khatami's Cabinet and Zahra Shojaei was appointed to serve as the president's advisor for women's affairs. During Khatami's two presidential terms there were 11 to 14 Iranian women MP's, and there are currently about 13. Thus, women comprise merely 5 percent of the Majlis deputies, which is still relatively low but higher than other neighboring countries and almost three times the representation women had till the mid 1990s. Some of these MP's, especially those who are very outspoken, together with women's organizations and strong human rights activists, such as 2003 Nobel Prize Winner Shirin Ebadi and lawyer Mahrangiz Kar, are working to promote legislative amendments concerning women's issues, including a wife's right for divorce, equal inheritance rights, child custody rights, and a woman's right to go abroad in pursuit of education. One particular success was gaining approval for mothers to request custody over their children after the age of two. Up until a few years ago, following divorce, boys were able to stay with the mother until the age of two and girls until age seven. Thereafter, they automatically moved to the custody of the father. Now the law provides for boys and girls to stay with their mothers until age seven when the case is reopened in the court of law.

Additional changes occurred in the judiciary as well. In 1979, women were banned from being judges. For example, Shirin Ebadi who was one of the first women judges in Iran until the Islamic Revolution was forced to take off her robe following the formation of the Islamic Republic. For eight years she tried to get her license to practice law. It was finally granted to her and she is now at the forefront of women reformers in Iran for human rights. Although the regime was pretty consistent in claiming that women could not serve as judges, in 2003, there were at least two women judges in the Islamic Republic Appeal Courts. Additional improvements were made on other issues as well. Nonetheless, in many other aspects of life, women in Iran are still heavily restricted and discriminated against, and that is the reason why perhaps for



someone who is looking through 'Western glasses,' these might seem like minor achievements. But these minor achievements stand for great improvements and project possible advancements in women's social and legal positions in the long-run.

Returning to the issue of the political arena, in the 2004 parliamentary election, the number of reformists dropped from 170 to about 39, while conservatives regained control in the Majlis. This political trend continued and was also manifested in the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2005. Ahmadinejad is defining himself as a hardliner and in terms of domestic policy his statements follow the line of 'We do not want Friday night Muslims, we want round-the-clock, seven-days-and-nights-a-week Muslims.' What exactly this statement means in practical terms only time will tell, but it seems he is eager to revive the public enthusiasm of the early days of the Islamic republic under Khomeini. Yet there are certain things that have begun to develop in the Iranian political arena that are probably too late to change. Ahmadinejad was elected in June, and in September he appointed Fatemeh Javadi as the vice-president. Following the example of Khatami, he also appointed another woman to be the president's advisor on women's issues.

**Judy Colp Rubin:** I wanted to pick up on a point that was made. I find myself a little troubled by this idea suggested that somehow perhaps the key issue is that outside forces are saving the women in the Middle East. I think that that is a little misleading and unfair. There is a very long tradition of feminism in the Arab region that was generated locally. As Eleana stressed, women in Iraq, of completely their own initiative, once they had the ability to do so organized women's groups. In any country that you look at in the Middle East where there is some democracy, you see women organizing on their own. In Tunisia, for example, where there are a lot of rights for women, there are a lot of women's organizations.

Talking about the politics, the top political priority for women in the Middle East must be to get more women into government. April 2005 statistics from the Interparliamentary Union ranking the representation of women in government worldwide found that Arab states were at the bottom, with a regional average of less than 7 percent representation in the parliament. That compares to 20 percent in North America and 16 percent in sub-Saharan Africa. There of course are a few good men in the Middle East who seek to promote women's rights but it is only female politicians that can really be counted upon to do it.

One of the best, and perhaps the only way we have today that has been shown to get women into government is to institute quotas, whether permanently or temporarily. Quotas for women in government mean that women must constitute a certain number or percentage of a candidate list or parliamentary assembly. It is the adoption of quotas that have enabled women to make dramatic gains across Africa, so that today, there are now more women in the parliament in Rwanda—just under fifty percent—than anywhere else in the world, even surpassing Sweden, and that is because of quotas.

Two recent successes were getting quotas imposed in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Eleana addressed, although women's activists in Iraq were hoping for a quota of 40 percent, a quarter of the seats in the parliament are reserved for women and around 20 percent will eventually be elected, still significant, though a bit below the quota. In Afghanistan and perhaps Sima will tell us if there are any changes on this, 25 percent of seats in the lower house of parliament are reserved for women and about that number were elected.

To appreciate what a difference quotas can make consider that in Morocco in 1993, less than one percent of the parliament was female, putting it 118th internationally in number of women in government. However, nine years later, that figure increased to ten percent in 2002 and that was a result of these quotas. In the Arab world it is surpassed only by Tunisia, where 14 percent of the legislators are women.

On the opposite extreme is the case of Egypt where in 1979, a presidential decree was passed reserving ten percent of the seats in parliament for women. But in the ensuing years, that system was overturned and

female candidates were left entirely on their own. As a result, the number of women in parliament plummeted. Following December 2005 elections, only two percent of the Egyptian parliament is female.

Of course getting women into public office is no guarantee that they will promote women's rights. A new phenomenon is the rise of active Islamist women and this is a challenge to women's rights activists. Two recent elections where this has occurred are in Iraq and the Palestinian Authority.

Many of the women elected in Iraq were from the Shi'a United Alliance ticket. Some of these candidates are disliked by women's activists because, among other reasons, they did not oppose Resolution 137, a controversial measure in Iraq which would have been giving religious courts jurisdiction over matters such as inheritance, marriage, and divorce. Women's activists considered the measure, which was not instituted, to be a major potential setback for women's rights.

Another interesting example with respect to this is the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in January 2006 where there were, for the first time, quotas for women. The political parties had to have at least one woman among the first three candidates on a list, at least one woman among the next four, and for the rest a woman for every fifth name. The surprise victory for Hamas means that 6 of Hamas' 74 seats in the council are held by women.

It is important to note that female supporters for Hamas were critical for their party's victory, just as they were in supporting Hamas in larger numbers than men in municipal elections. The reason is that Hamas paid attention to issues of interest to women. This includes social programs, assistance to widows of suicide bombers, health clinics, day care centers, kindergartens and preschools, and even beauty parlors and women-only gyms. Meanwhile, Fatah took women completely for granted, and that is one major reason it lost their support and ultimately the election.

How Islamicist women like her vote and what their priorities will be is something women's activists need to try to influence as well as what mainstream parties can do to attract female candidates.

**Liora Hendelman-Baavur:** I believe that, as Nabila said before, we have to understand that when we speak of democracy, we may consider the context. Nowadays democracy stands for many things that might be interpreted differently in various contexts and by different people. In order to promote democracy, perhaps the first steps should be through the education system, promoting equality, understanding that equal rights and freedoms are worth fighting for and worth sustaining. Democracy is not a slogan or a magic wand one can wave over the heads of Middle Eastern countries and anticipate immediate results according to Western agenda or perception. It must, therefore, start at the basic levels of the education system and allow the local populations to internalize and interpret their own degrees of advancements towards 'democracies.' Any social or political change should come from within the society and should not be enforced by outside powers, although some degree of pressure might turn effective at times when human rights are concerned.

**Nabila Espanioly:** I think that, first of all, to Judy, it is very important when we analyze any given situation to look at the history. As you mentioned the history of Arab women and their struggle is a long one, and in Egypt it began even long before Kasim Amin. As one feminist researcher stated, even long before Kasim Amin was standing up for women's rights, there were many women who were paying for their struggle. So I think that history is one of the elements that we should take into consideration when analyzing a specific situation or country, but also the infrastructure or content of that history.

I believe that if we look at Iraq, for example, with the process, that the history of Iraq did not begin with Saddam. It began long before that. The infrastructures for democracy in Iraq existed long before Saddam, and then Saddam came and destroyed these infrastructures, and it was supported by the West. And this is

what we were stating in regards to saving the women. When it comes with these double standards or morals that this is okay when it suits our interest, then it is okay, and when it is not in our interests, then we stand against it. It is not a constant value. That is why today I repeatedly find myself coming back to the question of value. Which values we want to have in our society, education system, and surroundings? Are we seeking the best conditions for all women, including women in poverty and those who do not have the status of privileged women such as we? Most of the activists today are women who in some way or another are privileged in their own societies. What does that make us for the rest of our society and how do we deal with it?

In regards to strategies for increased involvement of women, I do agree that quota is a very effective strategy. The question is how do we reach the quota? Are we struggling for it in a democratic system, the parties' system, or is it given from the state or the kingdom? When it is given from the kingdom, it is imposed on the people and sometimes could actually act against the issue that we want to address. That is why we hear more voices and the voice of Mariam in Gaza will be listened to more than the voice of A'ida, for example who struggles for human rights in Egypt for which she has received awards.

But we don't hear that in the media. We hear about what threatens us, what the West feels threatened by, and it is threatened by many phenomena that the Westerners do not understand. That is why I think we come back to what I was suggesting, listening more to women's voices, those of grassroots' women who are in the field struggling this struggle, acting upon these issues, and raising these issues in a different political way, means, and strategies. I think this is what we have to reorganize our thoughts about.

Lastly, when we are discussing political participation, participation in decision-making is very important, but also the democratic infrastructure for such participation begins at different levels. Where are the women at in the different levels—in the NGOs, in the different organizations of different activities and community activities, in social services, in others? It is not only the decision-making level. We can't only reach up to the decision-making level. We do have to work for quotas, but also at strengthening the political participation of women in the grassroots, in the different levels of women's participation.

**Eleana Gordon:** I would like to make three points on all the discussions so far. I would like to start with Liora's point that democracy is not a magic wand that is going to solve all the problems of the Middle East. I think that is true, in particular with what you have seen in Iraq. There have been very high expectations and misunderstandings even among the Iraqi population as to what democracy means, and many people equating democracy with prosperity and with benefits, and not necessarily with responsibilities and things they need to fight for.

Having said that, I don't think you can separate the issue of women's rights from the basic freedoms that must exist for any democracy to call itself a liberal democracy. Democracies can vary by country, but there are certain elements that make a democracy that are not in the eyes of the beholder. You either have individual rights and basic protections for liberty or you don't—freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of association. These rights are critical. Japan is an interesting example. Those rights and that structure were set up 50 years ago, but it is only today that you are starting to solve the status of women who have clearly been second class, and all these issues of education and values and culture cannot be changed overnight. But at least they have the legal structure so that when they are ready to fight for those rights, they can do so—whereas in Iran, the absence of that institutional structure [that secures political freedom] is what is holding back women today.

Liora, you didn't mention that the reason reformists are not present in Iran's parliament is because the marjas prohibited 1,000 reformer candidates from even running for elections. So you didn't have free elections, and if you had had free elections, it would have been interesting to see what would be happening

today and whether women would be moving much faster in Iran to regain their rights, and if they were able to have their newspapers and not be put in prison, and they were able to express themselves freely, and [women such as] Mehrangiz Kar didn't have to leave Iran and work in exile, whether you would find much faster progress for women's rights.

This leads me to my second point on women's representation or quotas. I actually disagree that this is critical. I think the mistake in Iraq has been that the focus has been on quotas. If you look in the next year at the battle that is going to be in place over women's rights, it is not the number of women in parliament that is going to shape whether those rights are going to be gained. It will be the alliance between Kurds, the secular forces, and the liberals. If you count women, the women's vote is going to most likely be one in which the majority will support of laws that would curtail their rights. That is why women's groups are now beginning, a little late in my view, to think about going after issues not on a women's rights basis, but on the basis of basic freedoms and forming alliances with religious minorities, with the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Kurds—who by the way under the Kurdish regional government had been able to abolish polygamy and honor killings. This is remarkable and they [Kurdish women] are at risk of losing those rights. Every law that is at stake that affects women affects basic freedoms. There is really very little that just affects women as women. To Anat's point that women as a category is a strange term, in this case, it is individual freedoms that you are looking at.

Finally, I would like to pick up on the point by Nabila and others as to the agenda of those in the West on women's issues. I think everybody has an agenda, not just the West. Women inside the Middle East are not one category and they have their own agendas. On raising the question of understanding what is important to women and listening to women in the Middle East, the problem is which women? Kurdish women who are secular;, or communist-inspired feminist, women are not saying the same things as traditionalist women in Basra. They are all different. So there is no more clarity inside [the Middle East] than there is outside.

If you look at how much politics plays into the women's movement in the West, feminist women in the States are not very happy that President George Bush has taken on the mantle of women's rights. So their support has been mixed and they were very reluctant to speak about the situation of women under Saddam Hussein because they didn't want it to look like they were supporting the war. Are these bad motives? Good motives? They are what they are, it just shows that everybody comes with a sort of complex agenda and I am not sure you can ever solve that issue. You just have to be cognizant of it. This includes the idea that women in government will necessarily be good for women.

**Sima Wali:** Let me make one point with regard to Afghanistan. The trend is such that many men voted for women in parliament, because corruption is paramount in the Afghan society and they felt that the fanatics as well as the warlords and druglords who have their own militias were holding the Afghans at bay. So it was more an issue of the people's voices not coming through, and when that choice was given to the people, they ended up voting for the women because they said that women's hands are not bloody with war or corruption compared to many of the men running for election. So it is more an issue of the corruption within Afghanistan rather than the outside forces that bring in the radicalizing factors.

**Nabila Espanioly:** I think that if we are looking at the issue as who has the power, when we are in a changing and the women are coming out and asking for their rights. The women have their agenda in the Middle East and the different Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran, when they come out and they ask for new power. They are coming out and want to take power. If we look at it as a power struggle, then of course some of the men will see it as a loss of power and for those Islamists who believe it necessary to control women's behavior, rights, and movements, then I think that for them women gaining power is a threat to their ideology. But what does that mean? Does that mean women should stand aside and wait as national

movement's say first national liberation and then women's liberation? Women have learned the hard way that there is no such two stages, that women's liberation is very connected to the other aspect and women can't sit aside for their demands. I think that the feminist women in the Palestinian situation have learned that you cannot just stand and wait. You have to struggle for your rights today and even yesterday.

**Anat Lapidot-Firilla:** I think very often, too often, radicalization is the result of some reforms in favor of women which are then used to mobilize opposition in order to prevent such reforms. It is a dangerous argument to say that because reforms for women bring more radicalization, perhaps we shouldn't do that.

**Eleana Gordon:** In Iraq, the issue of women's rights has been manipulated by different parties. Islamist parties take women's issues, and make it an issue of women's rights versus Islam. And when they present it that way, a lot of women have been pushed toward Islam. So they are reinterpreting what women's rights mean, and they will say to them, 'Look, women's rights means promiscuity, loss of moral values. It is these Western decadents who want them.' So it doesn't help when many of the feminist leaders, who are very outspoken, come from a Communist or leftist background that makes them almost adamantly anti-religious. They almost begin to personify the Islamist claim that women's rights mean extreme social change or secularism, leading people to oppose them. It has certainly been manipulated in that way.

**Sima Wali:** It is important that women be able to argue for their rights in the context of Islam and need to be trained to do so. Because illiteracy is so high in Afghanistan, women don't understand their own rights within Islam, and if we note the rights given to women within the Islamic context then women can argue their status from a strong position of Islam. This helps to counter the effort to manipulate the issue as being one of women's rights versus Islam or shari'a.

**Anat Lapidot-Firilla:** I want to comment on the relationship between human rights and women's rights. I agree with Eleana on the principle that you need to have basic rights first and if you don't have them then women as humans and individuals will suffer. But the Turkish experience shows that there is not necessarily a correlation between these two things, and, in fact, during times when there was a dictatorship in Turkey women had a lot of rights while in more liberal, open society they suffered more oppression. I would say that in general in societies with no agreement on democratic liberal basic rights, when you open up to public discussion—a good thing in itself—you may end up with a completely different result for women. So that is a danger.

How do we include more women in the political process as policymakers and what kind of female policymakers do we want to see? Statistically, the majority of women is not interested or not taking an active part in politics. However, it is also true that there are a lot of significant barriers preventing women from being involved in public life. So, even if women think that they choose not to participate, I am not sure that we can say that they do that freely and have all the options to do so.

The barrier women are facing on the way to becoming active in politics and in policymakers' status mostly have to do with religion, law, and cultural norms that prevent such mobility. Politically active women often suffer from prejudice and a lot of times from public harassment and harassment at home. We do know that even in other countries and societies very famous feminists were beaten women.

Family life and values is the second category that I will mention. Even in Turkey the vast majority of women are restricted in their mobility, subject to domesticity and violence. Turkish society is still very much based on a family structure and not on individualism. The only segment of society that enjoys the legal advantages and opportunities are of course the women of the elite and mainly the women of the previous Kemalist elite.



The third barrier is what I call economic dependency, which results in lack of confidence. Women are economically dependent, in most cases on their families. Without economic support women are less likely to be able to progress into public life and there are not enough resources and programs that invest in loans and microcredit in small businesses for women. In Turkey it is a serious issue, but it is also a serious issue in Palestinian refugee camps where around 40 percent of the families are headed by women compared to the general population where I think it is around 15 percent.

Of course the fourth category is education, although this factor can easily be misunderstood. Certainly, literacy and education are good things but their impact alone can be overestimated. For example, Morocco shows that the more educated women are the less likely they are to find a proper job or a job at all.

Of course due to lack of ability and access to information a lot of women are not aware of their rights and the legal process—both in Turkey and in other places. Some of the problems were tackled by local organizations such as Kader, the association for supporting and educating women candidates. Most activists support the quota for women parliamentarians. However, there is a strong criticism of the quota system. Note again, that it is falsely assumed that women deputies are sensitive to women issues and unfortunately this is not always true. More often, women represented a political ethnic group agenda. I am also not so impressed by the number of women political representatives in the Islamist parties, not in Turkey and not elsewhere. Women have been playing an important role in their own oppression for centuries in different cultures and this is an important thing to remember.

Based on the Turkish experience, we can say that simultaneously with or even before women access policymaking institutions at the state level, women should be involved at the local level—and here I support what you say—either through NGOs or municipal channels. I believe that there is a need to help better market women candidates, but also marketing the political sphere to women better. There have been offers in Turkey how to do it and I think they have some success. For example, the Kader group suggested that they should market a vote for women as a vote against the status quo, something very similar to what was done in the Hamas elections.

There is also a need to develop and coordinate the activities of women in local NGOs. I think the NGOs are a more effective tool than the parliamentary level. As activists and NGO women they will be able to influence the legislation process much better.

**Nabila Espanioly:** I just want to add a few points regarding the obstacles before women for political participation. One is the domestic division of rules and the double jobs that women are doing inside and outside. Politics are normally done as volunteer work after working hours and normally at night and most of the women have to take care of their children, houses, and so on, which is a burden on women.

I think that the feminization of poverty mentioned in the beginning is another obstacle before women's political participation. Education, I do agree, is not enough, but I think, and among the Palestinian women in Israel itself there was research done that stated to the same effect, that women with high education have problems getting jobs. Women in the traditional patriarchal societies had power, but they had power behind the scenes. They used their power behind the scenes and that is the model that we received from our mothers and grandmothers, and that is why I believe we should be creating new models.

That is why I do think that quotas are very important for creating such models. I don't think that quota alone can solve the problems. And of course the quota brings with it problematic issues such as that women are not all supporting women's rights in their positions. There is also the internalization of inferiority that women have and when they are in power they again use the models that exist, which is the patriarchal and hierarchal model, and not empowering models for women. But nevertheless I think the quota system is very important, has proven itself in different cases, but alone it is not enough. When we speak about political

participation, we should have in mind broad participation and not only at the decision-making level, but in the process of politics in all its aspects. When we involve women more and more in that process, I think we have more chances for women in politics.

My last remark in regards to Islam, Islam is not only one ideology, Islam is interpreted by different forces, as in the Tunisian laws which prohibit polygamy and are based on Islam. Today women who write about women in the Islamic world demonstrate how pluralistic the use of Islam is. That is why I think Islam is not the problem, but rather the political use of Islam. We have to differentiate between fundamentalists who are politically using the religion and power and I think that today there is a lot of feminist efforts within the tradition which are trying to interpret Islam differently. I am not in favor of that, but I am just bringing it to our minds.

**Eleana Gordon:** While I pointed out pretty energetically what I thought were the dangers of quotas, that isn't to say that there isn't value in trying to accelerate the process of getting women in government. I'd like to share a story that a Kurdish women leader told me. She was head of the Kurdish Women's Union and she was the first woman to hold a position in the Kurdish parliament. She was minister of public works and affairs, and when she was given that seat by Jalal Talabani, she said to him, 'But I don't know anything about public works. I can't do this,' and he said, 'Do you think my finance minister knows anything about finances? Do you think my transportation minister knows anything about transportation? Just do it.' I always remember that story and I think we have seen that even in the last three years, the women who have been in the cabinet, who were put in these positions, have become a lot savvier in a short period of time by just being exposed to the decision-making, and it improves their ability to know, even when they go back to the outside, to the NGOs, [it helps them] that they know how the political parties work, they know what's happening in government and they can work through that process.

On the issue of women in NGOs, it is interesting, I don't know whether women are more effective shaping legislation outside or inside [government] and we'll see in Iraq how that plays out. I do wonder though whether women in NGOs should be focusing more on creating a real grassroots structure, where they can have influence in the vote. But in order for that to work, I think local government is important, because one of the problems we are going to have is it is nice to say you can vote out people, but that line of accountability is very vague from Faluja to Baghdad or Basra to Baghdad. It is also blurry when you are voting for a whole party and not individual candidates. So if we could push more of the connection between elections and government and accountability at a local level, and if NGOs start training women to think of their vote as a tool [to influence] issues that they are familiar with, that may be where they can have influence over time that is meaningful.

**Judy Colp Rubin:** Certainly, there is often too much of a focus on a quota or bringing women to be able to vote or bring women into office and not much on what happens after that and really working in partnership with women on all levels so that their participation becomes institutionalized and it is not kind of a one-time effort to reach the quota.

**Sima Wali:** On that issue, when you look at the Afghan situation, we are talking about at least 25 percent of the lower house seats going to women, and in the upper house women are appointed and elected and more so we have more women in parliament than the American Congress. Of course we are dealing with the issue of quantity versus quality. None of these women know what their role is in parliament. None of them have run on gender campaigns. So most of these parliamentarians really need assistance and how to formulate strategies with NGOs to eradicate laws and practices that exist on discrimination against women, for example, forced marriages.

I firmly believe that international aid, especially from the United States coming to Afghanistan should be

tied to women and gender issues. If we leave the decision up to governments, right now we are in danger of losing civil society in Afghanistan because aid will go directly to governments and governments are not very receptive to funding the NGOs. For example, the Ministry of Women's Affairs is the least funded, least recognized cabinet office in the Afghan government. We need to make sure that civil society holds the government accountable; we need to support them and to ensure that aid has to be tied to civil society building and to gender issues.

Lastly, we are dealing with promoting indigenous NGOs. The leadership has done really good work and women are dominant in the NGO sector. We need to make sure that the small and medium sized Afghan NGOs are supported. Right now the structure is as such that these NGOs have no international or external resources given to them.

The situation of the rural Afghan women is a totally different story. They have no assistance, they are totally cut off from resources and they don't know what is going on with regard to progressive Islamic movements and legal reform issues in the capital and that is why elsewhere we need to address that issue fairly quickly.

**Liora Hendelman-Baavur:** I do agree that women do not necessarily support or advance women's issues when they are occupying political positions. An interesting common link between women who occupy high positions in the Islamic Republic of Iran nowadays is their familial affiliation. For example Faezeh Rafsanjani, the daughter of ex-president Rafsanjani; Zahra Rahnavard, the ex-prime minister's wife; and currently, Ahmadinejad's vice-president is Ayatollah Javadi Amoli's niece. Meaning we cannot necessarily view these women as 100 percent independent in their own right, because they enjoy the support of IR political/religious elite and heads of state, who are either their fathers, husbands, brothers, etc. At the same time, this does not necessarily mean, as Anat also suggested, that these women are being used merely as public relations symbols, but their role is the result of growing inside the IR political system, so maybe they feel more comfortable to be outspoken in the political arena as well.

I would like to mention one woman in particular, Zahra Eshraghi, the granddaughter of Ayatollah Khomeini and the wife of Mohammad Reza Khatami, the brother of the IR ex-president. Over the past few years she has been speaking out against the levels of veil enforcement and many other issues. Although she is not a member of the parliament, she is very outspoken and is at least trying to pronounce a voice inside Iran calling for a change within the Islamic state. Today, women in Iran continue to negotiate within the Islamic discourse in order to bring about a change. It is possible that in the long-run, the debate going on in Iran may serve as a model for discussing democracy within the context of Islam and not as separate from it.

**Sima Wali:** With regard to Afghanistan, we know that to ensure that women's status allows them to have access to society's resources and increase their mobility, we need to promote security. Security is fundamental to women who are attending schools, so that teachers can teach and children can go to schools and female doctors can practice in their areas, especially in remote areas.

We need to create an institutional framework to support women's training because of a lack of skill-building and a high illiteracy rate. We need to promote accelerated learning and eradicating legal reforms that discriminate against women. We need to focus on these issues and praise market linkages and equitable participation in economic activities, increase literacy for women and give incentives for women to go to school and to participate in these training sessions—most importantly in health areas as maternal and infant mortality is so high. We need to make sure that we address issues of maternal mortality so rural women can have access to mobile health clinics. We need to provide livelihood and unemployment reduction to decrease the number of women in poverty, and we must mainstream gender issues in all the programs that we are dealing with.

More importantly, we need to hear the voices of the Afghan people, to make sure that we win the hearts and the minds of the common Afghan person, especially Afghan women, and those voices are not coming through very forcefully.

Afghan women are not Arabs, we do not read and write Arabic. Therefore we don't understand the Koran, and as illiteracy is so high, most women rely on their mullahs and Islamic teachings from the mullahs who are either conservative or have been trained in madrasa systems.

We need to make sure Afghan women promote dialogue with progressive Afghan and other Middle Eastern countries in order to ensure that they can from their arguments with in the Islamic context. We also need to promote dialogue between women in Afghanistan and the United States. Most importantly, parliamentary women who are elected who have gone through our programs are telling us that they need training in legal reform and strategizing policies with regard to gender issues and their role in parliament as women.

Lastly, it is very important for people who are democratic-minded and are the natural bridges—these are the Afghan-Americans who live in the West who have one foot in the East and one in the West—to make sure that voices and individuals like us are supported, and unfortunately that is not happening in the case of Afghanistan.

**Nabila Espanioly:** We have two factors influencing the women's situation. These are the socioeconomic conditions, and though we are speaking about poverty about accessibility of women to work, to resources, and these are conditions that can be faced with different strategies such as the microcredit to support women, professional training, access to education, access to social resources, and so on, there is the issue that nobody has taken as very important, that is norms and traditions. I think it is norms and traditions are determining factors impacting women's status. I would argue that norms and traditions are not constant. They are influenced by the processes that society is passing.

When a society feels threatened by colonial or occupying powers in its norms and traditions are disvalued, there are different mechanisms which are activated or used depending on the individual or group-awareness level. This could vary from an obsession to keep the tradition, like in culture shock you become more conservative and more concerned with your own tradition, or total identification with the occupying or colonial power as internalizing our inferiority and the inferiority imposed upon you.

Within that there are different coping mechanisms. That is why I think all the strategies we are using, most are related to one factor, and that is, I want to say before speaking about the future, I think that we have to think in a creative way, also in a spiral thinking so that we can really accumulate the influence of our world. I was writing a lot of things brought up by the panelists like taking into consideration the pluralism that exists in the Middle East, listening more to the pluralistic voices of women—and I totally agree; supporting local groups that are challenging the patriarchal system; gender equality in all levels—in school books and children's literature, and so on; dealing with poverty and dealing with social issues of women; democratic and civil society supporting democracy values and civil society; networking and solidarity between the women against the hierarchy of suffering; cultural sensitivity—empowering projects that are relating with a creative and culturally-sensitive modes—quota plus and political participation; more economic support for women; more accessibility or support of women in NGOs; structures to strengthen women's participation like the suggestion that was made; tie the support, the international aid that is given to the governments to the support of women's issues. Thinking of women's rights as human rights is very essential and I would add to security that I would look at the issue as a triangle of security, peace, and justice. I think with out one of them we cannot have the other. If you really want to support peace, we need to look at security in larger terms, not only in military terms, but security at home and inside and outside the society. Justice means

reaching for all women, thinking of all women, and not only the decision-making women. If we can combine these strategies and support all the different efforts that are made on the grassroots and within women's organizations and within the local structure, we could create more trends for change.

**Nabila Espanioly:** One of the factors that struck us in working on women's empowerment was that especially in marginalized communities where the men are also marginalized it is very important not only to empower women, but also to empower men because since we are empowering the women, there is a gap between what the women are experiencing today and what the men are. This gap could create a lot of conflict between men and women. I think this is a big challenge for all women's organizations, how to raise and put this issue on our agenda, not only to work and empower women, but to look at it in a wider sense.

**Judy Colp Rubin:** Going back to the quote that I started out the whole discussion with by the man who is considered the father of Arab feminism who said that status of women is inseparably tied to the status of the nation, and it is making men understand that if you utilize women to their full potential that everybody gains.

**Eleana Gordon:** These are universal rights that we are talking about and women's rights are part of that. One of the issues in this region is eliminating the inequalities so that these universal rights are shared by everybody. Unfortunately the gap is larger for women in order to get to that equal level and in that way it is not solely themed as a women rights issue, but bringing the role and participation to democratic level.

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