

## REGIONAL MEETING ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST

### WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS



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## **International Workshop**

# **Regional Meeting on “Women’s Empowerment in the Economic, Social and Political Transformation of the Middle East”**

## **Workshop Proceedings**

*Edited by*

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# INTRODUCTION

The Regional Meeting on Women's Empowerment in the Economic, Social and Political Transformation of the Middle East, jointly organized by the Turkish office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the Women Entrepreneurs Association of Turkey, was held on December 21, 2011 in Istanbul. A panel of 21 female experts from the Arab world, Turkey and Europe participated in this workshop.

The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia was sparked off by the self-immolation of Bouazzi on December 18, 2010. The revolution in Tunisia led to a regional wave of uprisings spreading rapidly to Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Jordan and Syria. These uprisings culminated in revolutions in three countries and marked one of the turning points in the recent political history of the world.

While these Arab revolutions nurtured hopes of equality, freedom and justice, they also gave rise to many questions that are yet unanswered. Large-scale discussions have been held regarding the motivations behind the powerful wave of uprisings that overthrew some long entrenched dictatorships in the Arab world and created deep concerns of legitimacy in others. When organizing this workshop, our primary

aim was to be a party to these discussions. In other words, one of the two main aims of this event was to listen to firsthand observations and analyses from the women of the region regarding the conditions and material framework of the revolution, namely the ways in which a diversity of social groups united under the three-word slogan 'bread, freedom and social justice'. This workshop also seeks to share these women's observations and analyses with the public. By consulting the witnesses of history and the people of the region, we are better able to make sense of the rapid and radical social movements in the Arab world.

On the other hand, a close examination of the stages of all the uprisings and revolutions reveals that the demand for 'bread, freedom and social justice' has had a profound meaning for the women of the region in particular. Women have been beaten, detained and arrested together with men in many places, especially Tahrir Square, and have thus become the new heroines of history. One of the most critical questions regarding this large social movement has emerged from this very context, namely whether the undeniable contributions of these women, both before and during the revolution, will be matched in the post-revolution structuring phase. This is a pertinent question because the status granted to women in the new regimes will tell us a great deal about the future and nature of this large social transformation in the Arab world. The second aim of this workshop is to facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences so as to encourage modes of cooperation that will empower the women of the region and improve their human rights.

The creation of this international workshop has been a valuable and enlightening experience for us, as organizers. Accordingly, we hope to share the workshop's proceedings with the public through this publication.

## OPENING REMARKS BY DR. COLIN DÜRKOP

Dr. Gülden Türktan, president of KAGIDER (Women's Entrepreneurs Association of Turkey), distinguished participants, distinguished representatives of the media, a very good morning to all of you who have come from near and far. It is my pleasure and honour to welcome you on behalf of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) and KAGIDER to our regional meeting today on women's empowerment in the economic, social and political transformation of the Middle East. At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation to the prestigious and renowned association of KAGIDER, which is not only well-known in Turkey but well beyond it. In fact, KAGIDER, which sent a delegation to Germany last year and met the Federal President, left an extremely good impression on Germany. Since then, KAGIDER has established very good relationships in Germany. It is, therefore, KAS's privilege to work together with KAGIDER in Turkey.

Please allow me to introduce myself very briefly. I am the new country representative of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Turkey. I lived in Turkey 40 years ago, and I speak the language. Now that I am here again after 17 years in the Far East, I find Turkey to be very different from the country I knew in my childhood. Turkey today is very dynamic coun-



try, and a source of inspiration for its Arab neighbours. I have returned to this fantastic new setting, and I am very grateful to be able to work together with a very good and well-engaged team at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. KAS and KAGIDER have worked hard to setup today's workshop and I am really grateful for that.

Last year, we witnessed a crucial development in the world's political history. Starting with the so called "Arab Spring", we have seen the birth and rapid spread of a new culture of protest. The protests of Tahrir Square in Egypt have also become a source of inspiration for the recent mass protests in the United States and Europe.

We sincerely hope that this turning point, which started in the Arab world and which spilled over to the West, will eventually lead to the development of a culture of democracy. It is also hoped that this culture of democracy will eventually bridge the divide between the rulers and the ruled. New economically and politically sustainable social policies and projects have to be implemented so as to add legitimacy to the ongoing democratic restructuring in the region.

The most outstanding result of the Arab Spring has been the emergence of new actors and new rulership in the region. Yet the changing of rulers brings to light many unresolved issues regarding democracy, human rights and the future of the rights of women in the region.

Deep rooted political transformations shaping the history of modernization does not necessarily lead to similar pronounced improvements in the conditions of women. Therefore, we hope women's rights advocates in the Arab Spring will remain as vigilant as they were at the start of the Arab Spring. To achieve "women's empowerment" and the improvement of "women's human rights", the current political transformation must be supported with social and cultural transformation. This is a particularly long

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lasting endeavour because it is very difficult to change the cultural and social views of people.

In the Arab Spring, the women's movement in the region has gained new actors. The world watched these women activists with much admiration and respect. The 2011 Nobel Peace Prizes

were an expression of this acknowledgement and encouragement. In Tunisia, Arab women were on the streets protesting the long dictatorship of Ben Ali. Although they cooked and served meals to the demonstrators to keep up the pace of the resistance in the squares and streets, they declared to Lina Ben Mhenni, a widely recognized blogger of the Jasmine Revolution, that they did not wish to go back to their kitchens after the revolution. Subsequently, Tunisian women took part in the first democratic elections in their country as both voters and as candidates. Similarly, women in Egypt engaged in a serious effort for representation in the long marathon to the elections. The United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) coordinator in Egypt, Ms. Maya Morsy is unable to attend the seminar today because of the work she does everyday in support of the female candidates in the elections.

However, there are also great challenges and obstacles towards which women should pay attention in this transformation process. For example, the constitution committee formed by the military government in Egypt after the downfall of Mubarak does not have a single woman member. It is likewise thought provoking that some of the women who took part in the demonstrations throughout March 2011 in Tahrir Square were arrested, tried in military courts and even forced to undergo virginity tests. Indeed, the recent force and humiliation meted out to female protestors at Saturday's demonstrations at Tahrir Square are both terrible and distressing.

Given this backdrop, discussion of the future evolution of the women's rights effort in the region is vital. Some salient points vis-à-vis the growth of women's rights in the region include a study as to the methodological and strategic openings for success in the post-Arab Spring context, the ways in which institutions and actors in the international community could support the movement, as well as an exploration as to means of building solidarity within the movement at the regional and international levels. The seminar today is a small mosaic stone in this effort, and we hope it will contribute to an improvement of the situation in the future. The formation of a new network of women engaged in the fight for women's rights in the region is only a starting point. We sincerely hope that the initiative formulated by KAGIDER and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation will be able to flourish, and that it will result in a fuller seminar next year.

So as to encourage interest the discussion today, we intend to compile a transcript of the day's proceeding. A publication might even result if good

papers arise from our deliberations and discussions today. Thus, I hope we will have a day of fruitful discussions, and that our network will continue to exist in the future, and that we will continue to gather for many other discussions in the future. Thank you very much, Şükran, Dankeschön and all the best to you. Thank you.

## OPENING REMARKS BY DR. GÜLDEN TÜRKÜTAN

Good Morning, Dr. Dürkop, distinguished guests and participants. Dear women of the Mediterranean Sea and distinguished friends from the media, welcome.

On behalf of KAGIDER, the Women Entrepreneurs Association of Turkey, I would like to extend my warm regards and thanks to Dr. Dürkop and his team for cooperating in this valuable initiative, which we consider to be the first such initiative in the region. I also cordially congratulate him and his team for making this workshop a reality. It is a pleasure and great honour to be alongside such distinguished guests from the Mediterranean Sea, Middle East, North Africa and Turkey. We want you to share your views, expertise and experiences with us so as to go ahead one step further in promoting women's rights in the region.

Ladies, I know each and every one of you in this room shares the vision of female empowerment. It is a very powerful feeling shaping our understanding and reflection of the world around us. We are experiencing a great wave of change all around the world. This change has been felt not only in the Arab world, but in Los Angeles and other regions far removed from us as well. Civil activism is starting to

There is a huge window of opportunity in the new elections, and we hope that they will provide a platform for change. However, it will never be enough and we have a long road ahead. This is because the struggle for equality will continue until women have parity with men on all levels.

be a recognized way of governance. The Time Magazine person of the year of 2011 is a sign of this change, for it is not a known hero but the ordinary protestor on the street. This marks the first time that people on the street were acknowledged as the real power of the world. This is something to be taken seriously. This is also

especially encouraging for us because the protestor in the Time Magazine picture is female.

Furthermore, as Dr. Dürkop mentioned, the escalation of the protests in the region also saw women in the forefront of the protesting crowds. The first question that comes to mind is this -- will the democracy and equality wrought by the Arab Spring consequently influence women empowerment in the region and in the world? I sincerely hope the answer is yes.

Our experience in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has taught us that rather than relying on a single or unitary way forward, diverse experiences and local conditions have to be taken into consideration. Thus a method for creating awareness of women's rights in Istanbul would probably work only for Istanbul. Other countries may adapt the method applied in Istanbul to their own societies, but they ultimately have to find a methodology that works within their local context.

We strongly believe that we need to listen to the experiences and perspectives of the women in the region before formulating any method of promoting women's rights. This will enlighten us and provide us with alternative ways of empowering women in every country of the region.

While we are hopeful vis-à-vis the lot of women in the region, we also know that we have to be cautious. The political and the social environments of the region are still very fragile. The women of the region must be determined and insistent if they are to gain the equal status they deserve. In this situation, regional and international solidarity among women can be a viable solution. There is a huge window of opportunity in the new elections, and we hope that they will provide a platform for change. However, it will never be enough and we have a long road ahead. This is because the struggle for equality will continue until women have parity with men on all levels.

In Turkey, the status of women is not very satisfactory. Women's employment is around 24% in the country and females make up 13% of parliamentarians. We have a bionic woman, but only one woman in the cabinet.

Despite the laws currently in place, there are numerous problems in their application. Given the experience of Turkish women thus far, I conclude that political will and commitment are the most effective ways of sustaining gender equality in our country and the region.

KAGIDER, founded in 2002, has since become a reputable women's NGO in Turkey and in the region. We have established valuable partnerships because we value solidarity and hard work highly.

I will now share with you the three ways in which KAGIDER pressed forward and achieved success:

- 1- We seek to identify the real underlying issues behind every problem and specify the factors causing it.
- 2- Properly analyzing the problem and its underlying issues enables us to come up with a clear solution for it. In short, we not only have to identify and understand the problem but resolve it as well.
- 3- Through insistence and commitment, we lobbied government officials, politicians, ministers, influential members of society and so on to follow up the problems and solutions we bring to their attention

These are the keys to KAGIDER's success. There are many other methods of forwarding women's rights that may be drawn from your experiences. Regardless as to the method developed, the course is clear. In order to walk strategically on this long road, we have to specify our problems, establish partnerships, provide solutions and be insistent with our demands for women's rights. The partnership we will forge today is one that will continue over the course of many years.

To conclude, let me just say that this struggle for equality and freedom is essential for women as it is an investment in the futures of women all over the world. Any change in parity between the sexes will affect not only women, but the future of our countries as well.

A world where women have truly equal status with men at every level of society, including the business sphere, would be a peaceful and prosperous

one. I hope these changes will come sooner rather than later, and that the gender equality will gradually come to spread throughout the whole world.

Thank you for listening to me. I wish that you will all have a fruitful meeting today. Thank you again.

## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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# TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS IN SESSION I

## **Political Empowerment of Women in the Arab Spring**

### **Time to See More Women in the Political Arena of the Middle East**

- Is a feminist reading of the Arab Spring possible?
- Will the Arab Spring's quest for democracy and equality influence women's participation in the politics of the region?
- As women activists, how can we use this wave of change to our advantage?

**Speakers:** Khadija Arfaoui, Lina Shabeeb, Elif Ekin Akşit, Arzu Celalifer Ekinci, Claudia Derichs, Çiğdem Aydın, Ceren Kenar

**Moderator:** Prof. Dr. Claudia Derichs

### **Opening remarks by Claudia Derichs**

My thanks go out to the organizers, representatives from KAGIDER and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for bringing us together today so that we might share our thoughts. I would like to start by wishing everyone a very good morning, guten Morgen, günaydın and sabaha hayır. Welcome to the first session. Our topic for discussion today touches on politics, as may be seen in the title, "Political empowerment

of women in the Arab Spring - Time to see more women in the political arena of the Middle East.”

As suggested by the title, there is much hope and expectations for the role of women in the political arena. Before our distinguished panellists share their thoughts on this topic, let me introduce them in alphabetical order. At this point, I would like to remind everyone here that we celebrated Bouazizi Day a few days ago. There was an e-mail list expressing a wish that the world will change in the way Bouazizi had hoped. I hope that we will be likewise inspired by the calls for change that Bouazizi indirectly incited with his self-immolation in Tunisia one year ago.

Without further ado, I shall now introduce our distinguished speakers in alphabetical order. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elif Ekin Akşit, seated on my left, is a political scientist with Ankara University. Professor Dr. Khadija Arfaoui from Tunisia is also here on my left. She is a professor of women's studies and human rights at the Higher Institute of Languages in Tunis. We also have with us, Çiğdem Aydın, president of the Association for the Support and Training of Women Candidates, KA-DER, which is based here in Turkey. My poor command of Turkish notwithstanding, let me continue. Dr. Arzu Celalifer Ekinci is an expert in Middle East and Iranian Affairs at the International Strategic Research Organization in Turkey, and Ceren Kenar from Lebanon is the Director of the NAHDA network. To my right, you see Dr. Lina Shabeeb, Deputy Dean of Students Affairs at the University of Jordan and professor of public law. In addition to lecturing, she is also directly responsible for anything affecting female students at her university.

I hope I have not forgotten any speaker. There is myself, of course, but I am not that important. I am from Germany, and currently with the University of Marburg. I am also a political scientist. As I only learnt that I would be moderating this session this morning, bear with me as I improvise a little.

Each speaker has about 10 minutes. Although I am known to be a very strict moderator, I am told we have enough time today to allow each speaker 11.5 minutes. I will call on our speakers in the order that they are listed in the programme. To start the ball rolling, let us begin with Dr. Khadija Arfaoui's presentation. Dr. Arfaoui, please.

## **Khadija Arfaoui's presentation**

Thank you, Dr. Dürkop and Dr. Türktan, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues. I am deeply honoured to be here today and I would like to thank the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for inviting me to represent Tunisia in my own modest way at this meeting.

As had been previously mentioned, on Saturday, 17 December 2011, Tunisia celebrated the first anniversary of the Arab Spring. It started in a village in the centre of Tunisia with the self-immolation of 26 year old Bouazizi. The resultant revolution it sparked throughout the Arab world eventually ousted three dictators. The winners of this revolution so far are the Islamists in the region. Many of us are still bewildered because this revolution had no leader and had no political party behind it. Surprisingly, the Islamists are all described as moderate Islamists. We hope they really are moderate Islamists.

For over half a century, Tunisia had a dictatorial regime with a single powerful political party. Incidentally, I was sentenced to 8 months in jail. I never was in jail but I had to stay in front of the court four times for forwarding a message I had received about children who had – you can find my story at the internet –had been kidnapped for organ trafficking. This message had been sent to me by the daughter of a friend. Moreover, such rumours had been circulating in the country. I do not know whether it was a trap because I belong to the human rights movement and am affiliated to several groups such as Amnesty International, the Human Rights League and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women. This gives you an idea about the state of the country at the time. After I was sentenced for forwarding that message, I knew I had the sword of Damocles hanging over my head. Everybody told me to be silent because I would find myself in jail at the smallest mistake.

On 14 January 2011, Tunisia went through a revolution. It was a grass-roots movement launched in the privileged region of Western Tunisia by educated, qualified youths unable to find work in the system set up by Ben Ali. They called for an end to the regime, but they did not believe it would ever fall.

The slogan that the youths used to call for the end of the regime can still be heard today. Three or four days ago, I went for a walk and was amused to hear a 10 year old boy shout, "Arapça cümle", which translates into "The people want the fall of the regime". Except for this slogan, the revolution had no leader and no name. Never, in post-independent Tunisia had the Tunisian people felt as united as they did during the revolution. However, Tunisians are not feeling so united today. Despite the intensity and momentum of the revolution, it had started from a strictly social origin. Indeed Bouazizi had immolated himself out of despair for not being able to sell fruit and vegetables to provide for his family. The revolt then became political when people denounced corruption and despotism, and called for an equal distribution of the revenues of development. This non-violent revolution launched a deep democratic movement that had a domino effect on the Arab World and the world at large.

The movement protesting for a better quality of life and global change culminated into objections to the power of banks. Thus, on 15 October 2011, a global mass protest unravelled in several important world capitals from Wall Street in New York, to Spain, Italy, and even in Russia.

Even people who had never taken part in marches were on the streets worldwide, demanding drastic changes. Like their counterparts in Libya, Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere, Tunisian women were present everywhere in what later came to be known as the Jasmine Revolution. Tunisians, however, preferred to call it a revolution for dignity.

Just look how Tunisian women stood side by side with Tunisian men during the revolution. They came out to the streets to protest in headscarves and mini skirts. It did not matter how they dressed, for they came out to protest anyway. Tunisian women are pioneers in terms of women's rights. They have been granted significant rights on a tray, as some like to say, ever since the country's independence in 1956. The autonomous feminist movement emerging in the 1970s consolidated into two organizations. In 1989, the feminist movement increasingly disassociated itself from the state feminism endorsed by the National Union of Tunisian Women. I will try to speed up now because 10 minutes will not be enough to cover all I have to say.

Women had to work in tough conditions during Ben Ali's dictatorial regime because being spied upon constantly was a reality. There were many

times when the police followed me as I left feminist movement meetings. A young colleague of mine, originally desirous of integrating a women's movement, became so scared when she saw the police driving behind us, that she never came back. We also did not have access to the media under Ben Ali's regime. Given all this then, it was a miracle we were able to get everything done through word of mouth alone. Of course, it helped that these women were also very courageous. The state-run media often issued slanderous reports of women in these feminist movements, and the nature of the slander was no different from the slander women would get in America and the West for opposing male opinion.

The code of personal status in Tunisia had given women significant rights through the abolition of polygamy, the right of divorce, equality in terms of education and work outside the home. Women had also been encouraged to get rid of the veil and they did. As a result, the sefsari or the Tunisian veil, which I think is much nicer than what they are wearing today, gradually disappeared from the Tunisian landscape. I have written something. I have an old article. It's not here because I left it in my room. There was an old news report about women in Tunisia swapping their veils for bikinis. Today, however, the reverse is true.

As U.S. President Obama stated in his speech last May, history shows that countries are more prosperous and more peaceful when women are empowered. He added and I quote, "[We must] insist that universal rights applies to women as well as to men by standing up for the right of women to have their voices heard and to run for office." That had been our first president, Bourguiba's philosophy that there can be no development without the emancipation of women. He spared no effort to grant women the same facilities as men. Sadly, he was prevented from going any further by religious scholars who opposed his attempt to change the inheritance law to allow women to inherit the same as men.

Habib Bourguiba was president of Tunisia from 1956 to 1987. The liberator of the country instituted the code of personal status to protect women's rights by looking to the enlightened Islamic scholars' interpretations of the Koran. For example, he justified the end of polygamy by using the Koran. Although the Koran states a man can have four wives so long as he treats them equally, Bourguiba argues that it is impossible for a man to do so. Thus, a man was only allowed to have one wife. Right now, Tunisian women are afraid that polygamy will be legalized again.

Although Bourguiba was an enlightened president, he was also a dictator. Ben Ali followed in his footsteps and was more dictatorial. Bourguiba was not interested in material things, and this is evinced from the fact that he died owning nothing. Ben Ali and his clan, on the other hand, were very keen on material things.

The Jasmine Revolution put an end to Ben Ali's dictatorship. Although some politicians wish for the old regime to return, many political parties and organizations were formed in the aftermath of the revolution. The formation of numerous new political parties was not initially well received because there was a chance that Tunisia could end up like its neighbour, Algeria. Algeria had so many political parties that when elections took place, the Islamists won and it did not turn out well for women. Since everyone assumed they had the solutions to their country's problems, they formed their own political parties. The presence of too many political organizations breeds chaos, as they would each have trouble getting their platform across to the voters.

The revolutionary state prevailing in the country did not meet expectations. While women's place in Tunisian society remains the most enviable in the Arab World, Tunisia's transition to democracy was still dominated by men. Curiously, even Ennahda (an Islamic political party strongly opposed to the CPS in the 1980s and openly declaring that women's place was at home) announced it was in favour of the principle of parity. Out of the 49 women elected in the Tunisian parliament, 42 of them are Ennahda members.

Tunisia now has a new democratically elected government. Many are not pleased with the results because they are doubtful of the Islamic parties' promises to respect women's rights and are fearful of the strong religious impacts these parties could have on the secular population. The country has experienced nothing but censorship for more 60 years. Yet, when a female Tunisian filmmaker's movie titled, "Neither Allah nor Master", was screened at the cinema, Salafists were outraged and enacted much violence to the theatre. Likewise, the house belonging to the director of a local TV station that had broadcast the Iranian film, *Persepolis*, was burned down by Salafists. Such actions led to panic. The University of Manouba is closed now because the Salafists came and insisted that the female students had to have their faces veiled. The university refused to accede to

these demands on grounds that its academic staff cannot teach students without looking them in the face. Because the university did not accede to the Salafists' demands, the university has since been closed. The students at the time were due to have their examinations. But owing to the closure of the university, examinations have yet to take place.

One of the slogans in the marches that men and women chanted against the strong Islamic stance of the present is, "In the past, before the revolution, everything was forbidden. Now, everything is haram."

Tunisia has led the way to the Arab Spring. It is hoped that it will continue to do so. However, the current climate in Tunisia is one of turmoil. The wave of hard line Islamists in Tunisia is frightening both the secular population and ordinary citizens. It has come to the point where Islamists are harassing women and artists for being "haram" or sinful for not veiling themselves and not staying home. I would like to continue, but I think my time is almost up.

One of the slogans in the marches that men and women chanted against the strong Islamic stance of the present is, "In the past, before the revolution, everything was forbidden. Now, everything is haram."

Before the elections took place, Tunisian historian and Islamic scholar, Mohammed Alawi, says, "My Islam is in the Koran, nothing else." He added that Muslims had lived for two centuries without Sharia Law. To support his statement, he pointed out that the Medina Constitution had been negotiated by the prophet in the first year of Hijrah between all the social components of the state city, namely, Polytheists, Jews and Muslims. There is no question of the religion of the state in any of the Medina Constitution's 47 articles.

Although Mohammed Alawi pointed out the historical reasons for a secular constitution, his opinion is only shared by modernist thinkers. Hard line Islamists remind blind to this argument. Tunisia has a rich heritage and the people of the country are working on preserving it. Although there are people who disapprove of it, the code of personal status is an accepted fact. The code of personal status contributes to the positive image of Tunisia. The importance of the code of personal status is enshrined in a national pact. That pact has 6643 signatures as of 18 April 2011. The signatories of that pact have stated their commitment to the preservation and defence of the gains of the revolution in Tunisia on 14 January 2011.



Tunisia's achievements are historic indeed. A few months ago, few could have imagined this moment. Even on 14 January 2011, many Tunisians did not believe they had the power to topple the regime. They had only called for change without expecting that it could really happen. With that, I shall end here. Thank you.

### **Claudia Derichs' remarks**

Thank you very much, Dr. Arfaoui. Sorry for being so strict with the time. While you did raise several important issues and while it is important for us to listen to one another, I wish to facilitate discussion. I did not know about the feminist movement and the dissociation between the feminist movement and state feminism in Tunisia. This is something we might pick up in the discussion. What does it mean when the state tries to support the women's movement and make use of the women's movement? The question of the exploitation of religion in political power games is likewise an important one that we will raise in the discussion later.

For now, without further ado we will move on to our colleague, Dr. Lina Shabeeb from University of Jordan. What do you have to tell us, Dr. Lina?

### **Lina Shabeeb's presentation**

First, I would like to thank the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and KAGIDER for giving me this chance to meet you, and to exchange opinions and ideas with you. Thank you very much for this honour. I hope this will be a very progressive and fruitful session. Without further ado, I go directly to our topic of discussion. I know Jordan is not one of the countries that has participated in or had a revolution. By that, I mean Jordanians did not revolt against their reality. We do not intend to. We revolt against corruption because a lot of it is going on in the Middle East now.

This brings us to the second question -- Will the Arab Spring's quest for democracy and equality influence women's participation in politics? More importantly, is there really a quest for democracy and equality? What is the Arab Spring really about? It is understood that the Arab Spring started in Tunisia and spread all over the world. It is also an accepted fact that the revolution started in Tunisia before moving to Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria. But is it really a quest for democracy and equality? People wanted to get rid of tyranny. Yet, when the dictatorial government is toppled, they do not know what comes next. In other words, the Arab Spring was not

organized and it was not well established. This is why we have chaos now. This is why the political situation in Egypt remains unclear. We are really worried about that which is to come in Egypt. I agree with Dr. Khadija that the only parties benefitting from the Arab Spring are the Islamists. In short, we are worried about political Islam. Did the Islamists organize this? They definitely helped it, but it was not their plan. This revolution happened and the Islamists either banked on it or manipulated it to suit them. Regardless as to that which they did, it is clear that the revolution was started spontaneously by people who were tired of corruption and greed. I will give you a very simple example from Palestine. This is the simplest example I can give because I am Palestinian and have friends in Gaza. The Palestinian state does not exist because the Palestinians are fighting among themselves in the form of Fatah and Hamas. Hamas came to power in a state dying for international recognition, and yet the people of Gaza are known to be non-religious. Why did the people in Gaza, who barely pray, bring a fundamentalist Islamist party to power? This is because Fatah is very corrupted and the people want nothing to do with it. An ordinary Palestinian's child will be walking school, while the child of a major Fatah leader would be driven to school in a limousine. Given this then, the people felt that the Fatah leaders had no right to call themselves revolutionists. Due to this corruption, the people abandoned Fatah. This, in turn, gave power to the Islamists.

Moreover, Fatah was in power for a long time. Recall that Qaddafi was in power for 42 years, Ben Ali had been in power for nearly 30 years, Hosni Mubarak held on to power for 30 years. Even though Morocco and Jordan have monarchies, their rulers do not disrespect the people. In monarchies, the throne is hereditary. But in the other ostensibly Arab republics, power is hereditarily held too. This is especially so in Syria. The Syrians are fed up with this, the corruption, the bad distribution of power and the poor economy. They want a change in regime. However, their clamours for change remain unorganized. Thus, we can see that there is difference between getting rid of tyranny, and seeking democracy and equality. While it is very clear that the people are protesting out of a wish to be free from tyranny, it does not necessarily mean they are asking for democracy and equality. It seems that the people calling for democracy and equality are not very well educated.

It is true that long periods of tyranny create a very bad imbalance between the ruling power and the ruled, as it does not allow for democracy. Western

forms of democracy were curtailed in these tyrannical Arab countries so much so that the only organized party existing in the whole Arab region is the Muslim Brotherhood.

Now, I will talk about the elections in the University of Jordan. Ironically, I am able to come here and participate in this seminar because the University is having elections. These elections are only for men. Even so, my time here is limited because I have to be in class tomorrow and oversee the elections in my capacity as Deputy Dean.

Who are competing in the elections at the University of Jordan? It is basically a fight between the Tribalists and the Muslim Brotherhood. There are no political parties. The government, rather our governments, has killed all other parties so that they do not exist anymore. As a result, the only party in the political arena of the Arab world is the Islamists. There are two groups of Islamists. The first group is the Muslim Brotherhood, who are radicals exploiting Islam for their own aims while claiming to be moderate Muslims. The second group consists of the Salafists. The Salafists are extreme radicalists who are coming into power now. It amused me to hear the opinion of an Egyptian dancer vis-à-vis the Salafists. She declared, "I don't care about the Salafists. I will still dance." It is a very nice political view, in my opinion.

Because of our governments' constant outlawing of other political parties, we have a dearth of other organized political parties. The only party that exists or has survived so far is the Muslim Brotherhood. I do not have empirical evidence for this, but some scholars speculate that the Muslim Brotherhood is financially supported by Iran in some way. Regardless as to the veracity of this speculation, the Muslim Brotherhood is the only existing party. What other political party do we have, other than the Muslim Brotherhood? What other options are open to a Muslim in Jordan

What other political party do we have, other than the Muslim Brotherhood? What other options are open to a Muslim in Jordan who does not want to choose the Muslim Brotherhood or the backwardness of Tribalism? In Jordan, a Muslim does not have any other options.

who does not want to choose the Muslim Brotherhood or the backwardness of Tribalism? In Jordan, a Muslim does not have any other options. In Egypt and Tunisia, things are more optimistic because tribalism either does not exist or is fairly mild compared to the Jordanian version.

Let us return to the topic of the Arab Spring. Is a feminist reading of the Arab Spring possible? We have

such a reading because women make up half of the society. It is natural that they went out to protest against oppression and tyranny. It should be noted that the women did not protest because they were female. They protested because they were members of the society affected by that which was going on in their countries. Did they protest and participate in the revolution because they wanted equal rights as women? No, some of them did it because they believed it was the traditional role of a mother. Such women saw society as a big family; and consequently, as a mother, she had to have a say on that which was going on. Thus, many of the women who participated in the protest against tyranny saw it as a fulfillment of their sense of responsibility, as a mother of society. Not all of them were seeking equal rights. Some of these women were reacting to the social movement around them and felt that they had a responsibility to sort things out. Of course, some women wanted equal rights. But more importantly, women need to first realize that they are not treated equally. Some of them do not actually know that. Some of my students, who are better educated than their mothers, also do not realize this. When you talk to them about the political empowerment and political rights, they do not know why they would want those things. Indeed, you would be shocked by their ignorance as to their rights and the benefits that these rights would bring them.

As women activists, how can we use this wave of change to our advantage? I do not want to sound pessimistic, but I will echo that which Khadija has already said. I think more power will go to the Islamic parties. As a Muslim woman, this scares me. We have a problem in our region, namely, Islam and tradition are so entangled in our countries that local cultural traditions have become a part of Islam itself. Let me give you an example. Before I came here, one of my brothers, who is very well educated and very open minded told me: "Are you going with all those crazy women seeking to empower crazy women? You are married and you have a child. They [the other women at this seminar] are not married. They don't have anything else to do in life. They are Anti-Islam." That is his view of women's rights and female empowerment. What does Islam have to do with our discussion today?

Islam, if understood properly, empowers women really well. I encountered this debate between Islam and female empowerment 20 years ago when I was running to become the first female judge in Jordan. Our women are al-

lowed to have “hesba”, which is the right to rule or judge or lead. If you are well educated in Sharia Law, you will definitely analyze it and judge wisely. But, if like most Muslims, you are not educated well in Islam, you will think, “Yeah, this Islam, let’s not go there.” It offends me when Islamists talk about their knowledge of Islam and Sharia Law because I know they will not empower women. The Islamists will not empower women because they have politically manipulated Islam. However, their interpretation of Islam does not make the religion bad. After all, these Islamists are not the only representatives of the Islam. Furthermore, the women’s rights are not really centred on polygamy and the right to equal inheritance. As this can be potentially offensive, let me move on to another point.

The population’s view of Islam also affects who they bring to power. For example, I have a student with tattoos and gold rings. That is not anti-Islamic, in my opinion. He does not pray and he does not have anything to do with Islam. However, if you tell him, “Islam is not good for female rights”, he will attack you. This is because he believes Muslims (even non-practising ones) are not supposed to criticize Islam in any way. Due to this point of view, he will feel passionate about defending Islam. Thus, it is imprudent to equate Islam with tradition. It would be better to mobilize well educated Muslims who know that Islam is not as bad as the Islamic parties have portrayed. Islam is, in fact, good. There are so many passages in the Koran and Hadis that could help empower women; and political aware Muslims could use it for good. To that end, well educated Muslims in society with the means to defend Islam should show that real Islam is completely different from the kind advocated by the Islamic parties. In this way, women can really participate in politics and can have a say.

Although I agree the polygamy is allowed in Islam, I will not touch on polygamy. There are so many conditions for polygamy that cannot be applied practically. We have a bad idea of polygamy only because men have disseminated their view of it. The same case could be made for the right to

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equal inheritance. Muslim men argue that they should get double of that which women do because they consider it their duty to provide for women. However, if the woman can provide for herself, it is a completely different issue. To properly defend Islam, show the ordinary people other credible versions of Islam, and prove that the Islamists are not the only Muslims ca-

pable of interpreting Islam politically, good educated Muslims who understand Islam well need to come together. In so doing, they will prove that Islamists are not good representatives of Islam and are, in fact, tarnishing the religion.

It grieves me to say it, but the revolution in Libya knocked women's rights back a few centuries because the Islamists reinstated polygamy. Gaddafi had female bodyguards at least, but he was accused of raping some of them. Was that a way of "empowering" women? It is a misconception that tyrants truly empower women through legal methods. If anyone espouses this view, detractors will argue: "You are only defending tyrants now because we going backwards in terms of human rights under the Islamists." Thus, it is more accurate to say, Islamists are now overturning the institutionalized women's rights endorsed by some former tyrants. While I have not said half of that which I planned to say, the main ideas are there. I hope we will talk more about these issues during the discussions. Thank you very much.

#### **Claudia Derichs' remarks**

Thank you very much, Lina. I think we really have learnt a lot from your presentation. You made a very strong case for the importance of education that we will hopefully discuss later. You also reminded us of the important distinction between the quest for democracy and equality and the quest to get rid of a dictator. I think these have been two strong points in your presentation. I think it fits perfectly with that which Khadija has told us. We will have a slight change in the sequence now. We will first give the floor to Arzu Celalifer Ekinci first, and then to Professor Akşit. If we are all in agreement, that is the order we will follow. Arzu, over to you.

#### **Arzu Celalifer Ekinci's presentation**

Thank you. First of all, thank you, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and KAGIDER for your kind invitation and for the sensitivity you have demonstrated vis-à-vis these issues.

In this session, we discuss the possible future effects of the Arab Spring and women's political participation in the region. Before addressing the question as to whether the quest for democracy and equality in the Arab Spring will influence women's political participation, I think we should recall the general, social and cultural positions of Arab women in their societies.

Gender inequality is the first thing that comes to mind when we talk about women in the Arab world. I do not mean to say that women face discrimination in all aspects of life, from the social to the political. I am merely pointing out the reasons for which there is perceived gender inequality in Arab countries. For example, the average female employment rate in the Arab world makes up a third of the male employment rate. There are also many restrictions in place that limit their involvement in the workforce.

Furthermore, Arab women are brought up to think their place is not in the public sphere, and that men are their social and economic superiors in everything.

Despite the fact that these rigid prejudices and mindsets have dominated Arab women's life to the present, there are promising developments which might be the catalysts for change.

Today's generation of Arab women have experienced vast advances in education and have exhibited proficiency in many fields of employment. The appearance of articulate women anchors on satellite TV networks such as Al-Jazeera, the rise of the internet, the trend of social media and so on have forced countries like Tunisia to respect women's rights. This is highly encouraging for women in the Arab world because it heralds a general wind of change that began with the Arab Spring.

However, we have to bear in mind that gender norms are very rigid in the Arab world and that any possible change might be slow moving. Similarly, any extension of the women's rights in the Arab countries cannot be taken for granted.

While the conditions for change in Arab women's rights are promising, the rigid gender norms, narrow mindsets and resistance of male dominant societies have to be demolished one by one over time.

Although several Arab countries have taken many measures to enhance women's representation in the decision making positions, women's participation in public life and women achieving a position of power have not been achieved at the desired level. Further effort is needed on the part of governments, civil society and the private sector. Even in Arab countries where women display strong political will, cultural constraints against

women dominate and women only make up a small percentage of the total number of elected legislators and officials. In other words, female political participation in the Arab world is limited by cultural factors, a stereotypical view of women as less capable than men, women's low self-confidence, lack of coordination among women's organizations, the ineffectiveness of women empowerment programmes, shortcomings in the institutional and legal framework, the practices of political parties, the election process, scepticism about the agenda of women seeking empowerment, and the process of developing strategies to empower women. Today, the culture in Arab countries is still very much a male dominated one. It is driven by tribal customs and traditions that are not conducive to female participation in politics.

One of the most notable features of the Arab Spring is the large numbers of women taking part in the protests. This is especially noticeable in Tunisia and Egypt. As a result, this active participation of women in the protests raised hope that they would enjoy more freedoms for women and equality between the sexes. However, when the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt collapsed, it emerged that equality and elimination of gender discrimination were not on the new governments' agenda of reforms. In other words, it might be easy to bring down a political system, but it is a lot harder to bring down a system of entrenched patriarchy.

Many Arab countries now stand at crossroads. Either the revolutions will make them move forward, or they will return to the positions they were in before the revolutions. In other words, the way ahead for Arab women is still very rocky. However, this does not mean they cannot fight to retain the rights they have. In fact, it is only in doing so that they are able to fight for more rights in the future.

To illustrate my point, we will now compare the situation of women in Tunisia and Egypt after the Arab Spring. Women in both countries were very much involved in the protests and social media networks during the uprisings, yet their situations today are very different.

Tunisian women now make up close to 27% of the new constituent assembly, reflecting the current government's support for women's participation in politics. In contrast, the commission assigned to draft the constitutional amendments in Egypt noted no female parliamentary members. A promi-



nant Egyptian newscaster, Buthaina Kemal, has taken up the challenge by announcing her candidacy for the presidential elections. Even if this is just a symbolic step, it is an encouraging move for Egyptian women. Of course, her decision to run for president has been opposed by the Muslim Brotherhood. But it still reinforces the notion that we need more women to step up to the challenge of entering the political sphere.

The nature of the post-revolutionary governments will be the main determinant factor in shaping the future socio-political empowerment of Arab women.

The most striking and visible effect of the Arab Spring may be seen in Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah's decision to allow women the right to vote and sit in the Shura Council is testament to the change that is slowly making its way through the Arab world. Although membership in the Shura Council and the right to vote are symbolic in a monarchy and in a system based on Sharia Law, it is an important step forward in a country where women are forbidden from driving. At least girls in Saudi Arabia will grow up with the idea that they can be a part of something. This will go some way into reducing women's low self-confidence. It may also branch out into other rights for women in the future.

The Arab Spring provides a new opportunity for Arab women. This is the time where it is possible for the whole political system to change. Many changes will have to be implemented in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and female empowerment is one of them. However, any change vis-à-vis the rights of women lies not with a new political system but in a change of mindsets.

All the Arab Spring countries face a long road ahead. Throughout the region, there are opportunities for women to be part of an institution that will shape legal frameworks for decades to come. If democracy takes root in these transitory countries, it might be possible to see women holding cabinet portfolios in a couple of years.

The nature of the post-revolutionary governments will be the main determinant factor in shaping the future socio-political empowerment of Arab women. This is because the call for democracy in many Arab countries could be hijacked by the radical Islamists movements. Due to rise of radical Islamic movements in Egypt and Syria, their political future remains uncertain.

The degree of local support has to be taken into consideration in the democratization process. Strong local support is needed before effective and sustainable reforms vis-à-vis political and socio-economic empowerment for women can be implemented. One of the biggest obstacles is a tendency to link pro-women reforms with the Westernization of Arab societies. Because of this link, there is much resistance to such reforms within society from both men and women.

A group of women have been raised to think that they are inferior to men. Some of these women also accept the "fact" that they are meant to deal with housework and that men are meant to with politics and business.

Another group of women favouring change in their status lacks motivation and self-confidence. Thus, steps have to be taken to motivate and awaken the hidden self-confidence of the Arab women in order for them to increase local support.

International support is an important factor as well. But this support has to be given in such a way as not to increase the conspiracy theories within the Arab societies. This support must also be given in a manner that does not legitimize Arab prejudices about Western interference in their culture.

In conclusion, the future direction of political and social empowerment of women in Arab countries will be closely interlinked with the nature of post-revolution governments. The degree of local support given to female empowerment in the region is, in turn, contingent on media and civil society initiatives. Similarly, increasing education and economic participation of women will also serve as contributing factors. Finally, I want to say that the exclusion of women in politics is not the only reason explaining the lack of democracy in Arab countries. Rather, the lack of real democracy in the Arab world lies in the fact that elected institutions have very little power and impose no effective change on monarchs and authoritarian presidents.

On that note, I am sometimes uncertain as to whether the promotion of women's rights will lead to democracy or whether the emergence of checks and balances in institutions will automatically grant women equality. Maybe we can discuss this later. Thank you for your attention.

### **Claudia Derichs' remark**

Thank you very much, Arzu, for staying perfectly in time. I do not know how you did, but that was perfect. Thank you also for giving us a bunch of important keywords. Your presentation matched Lina's in that you referred to the rigid gender norms and the male interpretation of these norms. Lina spoke of the Islamists' and Salafists' usage of Islam for political propaganda, whereas you highlighted the importance of improving the coordination between women's rights activists as well as changing the mindset and the legal framework. You also reminded us of the danger of equating the democratization process and equality with Westernization. Thank you for raising that point. I would now like to welcome Elif Ekin Akşit. We are all looking forward to what you have to share with us.

### **Elif Ekin Akşit's presentation**

Thanks very much. I am sorry Professor Berktaş could not make it today because I was looking forward to her presentation. I do not think I can deliver a paper in ten minutes, but Professor Ekinci has done so perfectly, and I admire her for that.

First of all, I am going to pose some questions and some remarks. I think it is okay for me to do this because I asked Güzin about it on receiving the invitation for this seminar. I am really thrilled to be here as a participant. I hope that we will have opportunities to collaborate in the future. Before I pose my questions, I would like to stress that I am not an expert on the Middle East. I am an Ottomanist and historian of the early Turkish Republic, and I am also a political scientist. Thus, I examine both the world today and history. I like history as a tool, and as such, my analysis of the approaches that women employ in political participation is of a broader scope than a mere understanding of political participation and its ends. In so doing, I hope to go beyond the definition of the public sphere by examining how these definitions end up alienating women. In short, women are not a part of these definitions and they are often not included in our understanding of political participation. My understanding of the term "public sphere" is both philosophical and historical. I conducted archival and ethnographic work to go around these definitions and come with ways of political participation that were hitherto unseen.

These autobiographical tidbits explain my approach to the issue, so I hope you were not bored with my introduction. I like to think that I am here

more to listen than talk, and I am eager to hear what everyone has to say because the issues raised today are very important to me. I have followed the developments of the Arab Spring like everybody else. Like everyone else, I want to understand what it is about. I want to join in your enthusiasm for the changes that could take place in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and share in your reservations over the same issues. There are several points I want to raise, but the most important of which is to look at the Arab Spring in conjunction with the 99% Movement. 99% of the Occupy Wall Street movement consider the Arab Spring as its inspiration. Time magazine was of a similar mindset, for it dubbed both the protestor in the Arab Spring and the protestor of the 99% Movement persons of the year in 2011. In this sense, Professor Shabeeb is right to suggest that the people are fed up with corruption and growing economic inequality. The 99% Movement protested against those very things. I think it is a good starting point for our discussion today because it is very reason we are here. Like Professor Shabeeb, I am a Muslim. The Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamists and the Tribalists claim to be Muslims, but are actually more interested in using Islam to forward their own political ends than being good Muslims. Because Muslims who do not want to leave Islam behind in politics have very few options in terms of political parties, I am left without options. In this case, a person has to create their own options. We all are fed up with corruption and growing economic inequality; these are problems we all face in the Arab world and in the world at large. We have to create alternative options for ourselves if we are to reject the radical Islamists and maintain our identity as politically aware Muslim women.

As it has been previously stated, a dictator can ban polygamy and yet be an autocrat. While it is a step forward to ban polygamy, it might not be turn out to be a positive thing when done by a dictator. This is because others can say that the banning of polygamy was part of a dictator's corrupt policies and that it should be brought back when the dictator is toppled. As a feminist, I find state endorsed feminism problematic. As in the debate surrounding polygamy, state feminism might be seen to be forwarding feminist goals on the surface, but it could hinder real feminist movements when the regime is toppled.

In Turkey, the polygamy debate started at the end of the 19th century. Muslim women in Turkey objected to polygamy as a part of their new political system. The people, who later formed a new political group op-

posed to the “one man, one wife” idea, claimed polygamy was an integral part of Islam. Following the birth of the Turkish Republic, opponents of the feminists claimed that polygamy was useful because it would lead to more babies and these babies would replace the members of the population who perished in wars. This mindset was prevalent for a while. Then, suddenly, polygamy was banned. It was as if there were no objections to the feminists’ call for monogamy. Women’s issues are not just about polygamy and inheritance. There are many other aspects in women’s issues worth discussing. But each of these aspects has its own bigger story that ties us together and defines who we are as feminists.

In defining ourselves as feminists when we talk about the Arab Spring, do we also define ourselves as good Muslims opposed to the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood? State feminism is one thing, but there is another kind of feminism separate from the kind endorsed by the state. This kind of feminism exists here, as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States might claim that there are no women’s rights there and that they must restore them. But is that really the case? The way in which feminists define themselves is important because it defines their subjectivities and aims. This is the main point I wish to raise. Thanks for listening, and thanks for all the presentations so far. Thanks also to future presentations. Thanks.

### **Claudia Derichs’ remarks**

Thank you very much. I think we are at a point where we have to admit that questions are as important as the answers. We have talked much about various things today, but the question of who “we” are as feminists is an important one. I do not know whether we will agree that the way we identify ourselves as feminists is a universal one. We could also define ourselves as feminists in a way that is both universal yet unique to our own cultural background. Let us see what comes out of it when we discuss the issue later. Thank you for raising the interesting point that the Arab Spring is connected to the Occupy Wall Street movement. According to the programme, it would be my turn now. But I am most happy to step back and give Dr. Aydin the floor. She will speak now, followed by Dr Kenar. I will then be the last speaker. Dr. Aydin, over to you. Thank you.

### **Çiğdem Aydın’s presentation**

Distinguished colleagues and guests, thank you for inviting us to this in-

spiring conference. My organization, the Association for the Support and Training of Women Candidates (KA-DER) works on women politics. Our aim is to increase the number, proportion and percentage of women in all decision making bodies. For this purpose, we actively lobby and organize meetings with politicians and political schools for women. We also carry out publicity work and try to intervene in legislative operations. Women's equality and right to participation in all spheres of public life, and the achievement of gender equalities are our main missions.

The Arab Spring provides a great opportunity for women to take their rightful and just positions in the construction of a new regime in their respective countries. In times of political transition, people (mostly men) who have power and want power are all ears whether they are Islamists, liberals, socialists or democrats. They will, in fact, listen to everybody. They will also begin to make promises and political commitments. It is, therefore, the most convenient time for women to negotiate for their rights and demands. It may seem far fetched, but it is true. I have stories from the Balkan states proving my point. This is the time for women in the Arab Spring countries to bargain for rights. So, Arab women don't miss it! Arab women have played an important role in the uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East ever since protests began in Tunisia last December. Hundreds and thousands of unnamed women have shattered the traditional gender norms, assumed public leadership roles and suffered beatings, arrests and gunshots. These women were at the forefront of their nations and the revolutions in them. As a result, several women, including Tawakul Karman, a Yemeni protest leader, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on 3 October 2011. The Nobel Peace Prize thus honoured women's role as revolutionaries, peacemakers and leaders.

According to Melanne Verveer, the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, new constitutions will come from the assemblies constructed in these elections and it is vital that gender equality is enshrined in the constitutions at the very beginning. But after the uprisings, there are hardly any women in the constitutional assemblies or in the preparatory committees for the upcoming elections. It was as if all these women had vaporized. Of course, they did not evaporate into thin air. But it looked as though they did because they were excluded from men's playground in the political arena.

Governments should also sign international conventions like the UN Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women so as to prohibit gender discrimination on all fronts.

There is no single factor driving the exclusion of women in the post-revolutionary state building efforts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. It is a result of and social factors. One of the main problems is the speed at which these transitions are happening. The rapid pace of these transitions favours groups which are already organized and seasoned in politics, and these established groups are usually run by men.

From our experience as women's rights activists, we know that women's groups require significant strengthening and need help in positioning themselves. Women's groups have to be properly informed and given opportunities to engage in political debates. This is especially difficult to achieve because politics is often perceived as men's area. Accordingly, men have traditionally been the ones to set the rules and the order of the play. But the good news is, women can learn these things and set up new rules. They can also play politics better than men.

If women leave the area blank, they will lose out to other better organized groups that may not have gender equality on the top of their agenda.

At KA-DER, we are ready to share our experiences and show solidarity to our female friends. We are hopeful about the future. The important thing is not to give up the fight. Women should ask for their rights continuously because gender equality is a long and a hard struggle.

Global and international awareness campaigns, training workshops for women interested in assuming leadership roles, and the vigilance and determination of both individual women and the media are the key factors in the struggle. It is also particularly important to provide political and economical support networks for women.

Having a strong legislative framework is also very important for the promotion of women's participation in politics. The enforcement of laws such as the prohibition of discrimination against women, and laws ensuring female political participation like quotas would encourage more women to take part in politics. Laws positively affirming women's roles in politics should be put in place until gender equality is achieved. Governments should also sign international conventions like the UN Convention on the

elimination of all forms of discrimination against women so as to prohibit gender discrimination on all fronts.

National mechanisms dealing with women's problems like ministries of women's issues, and general directories or commissions promoting equality between the sexes in the parliament are building blocks that ensure women are able to participate equally in the public sphere.

When a country does not advance women's rights, it is not only holding women back but also holding back a woman's household and the whole society. To conclude, I would like to quote the keynote address given by Iranian Nobel Prize recipient, Shirin Ebadi, at the Women's Forum for the Economy and Society in October 2011. She vocalizes the fears of human rights activists by stressing that women, who do not fight to regain leadership roles during these months of rapid and profound transition following their countries' revolutions, will have the carpet pulled from under their feet. During the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iranian women pushed for change but failed to set any concrete goals to change women's rights. As a result, the status of women in Iran quickly deteriorated. Ebadi's words are a warning to women in the wake of the Arab Spring. Women should push for women's rights now, alongside their calls for democracy. Women should not wait for democracy to be implemented first, because the issue of women's rights would have fallen to the wayside then. It is a long and hard struggle, and as women, we must show our solidarity. Thank you.

### **Claudia Derichs' remarks**

Thank you, Çiğdem. You more than kept within the time limit. There are a few minutes left of the time allocated to you. Hopefully, I am right in interpreting your presentation. I think you wish to impress on us that there is a difference between the socio-political situation before transition and after it. I also think you are saying the difference lies in the fact that women tend to be very active in revolutions but come to play no role in formal politics after the revolutions. Perhaps this has something to do with the societal mindset that politics is men's playground. It will be something we can discuss later. For now, let us move on to Ceren Kenar.

### **Ceren Kenar's presentation**

Hi, all. I would like to thank the organizers for such a lovely conference. I am a pro-democracy activist based in Beirut right now, and am direc-



tor of the Nahda Network. Nahda has nothing to do with the Ennahda of Tunisia. Let me tell you the story of my organization. What does the name Nahda mean? Why is that the name of my organization? Nahda means "awakening" in Arabic. I think it is an amazing and lovely word. Nahda is not only an "awakening", because it also implies a renaissance or a revival. The Nahda Network is more than that, because it refers to the intellectual movement popular among Arab intellectuals in the 19th century. At the time, different people with different ideological dispositions, such as the Islamists, liberals, nationalists and socialists, came together to deliberate on the reasons behind the decline of society (as they knew it then) and discuss the means of rescuing society. I love the great variety of thought in the Nahda of the 19th century. It was more than a heterogeneous intellectual movement. It marked a time period that was full of hope. In that sense, it is not very different from the current socio-political situation in the Arab world today.

Although many observers think the Arab Spring started when people took to the streets in Tunisia in 2011, I do not think that was the actual starting point of the movement. I also do not like the term, "Arab Spring". I will, instead, use the term, "Arab Revolution". In my opinion, the seeds of the Arab Revolution were sown in 2005 when millions of people took streets in Lebanon, calling for an end to Syrian influence in Lebanese politics. In 2008 and 2009, people took to the streets in Iran to protest against the results of the election. The Arab Revolution did not spring from Arab intellectuals who suddenly decided that they no longer wished to discuss issues in the salon and would instead take to the streets in violent protest. The Revolution was not like that at all. The roots of the Arab Revolution can be traced back to the citizens' protests against the ruling classes in Lebanon and Iran in 2005 and 2009.

The Arab Revolution is not the first revolution in the region. There have been many others in our long history. Some of these revolutions were supported by the masses. At the end of the 19th century, people began to take to the streets for constitutional rights or for a proper constitution in their countries. However, with the beginning of the 20th century, the region saw a new top-down approach in revolutions.

Thus, in the early 20th century, the region witnessed the Kemalist Revolution in Turkey, the Pahlavi takeover in Iran, the Free Officers Movement in

Egypt, and Bourguiba's rise to power in Tunisia following independence. These revolutions placed modern, secular enlightened dictators or autocrats in power. These leaders then took power and establishing modern secular laws throughout their respective nations. Women played important roles in these revolutions and were accorded many rights in the new regimes. An oversimplified rationale of the time was that the new governments and dictators saw their treatment of women as a way to differentiate them from the previous regime. As a result, women were granted access to education at all levels and so on. This resulted in the enlightened Egyptian women and unveiled Iranian women of the mid 20th century. These new governments knew that granting more rights and freedoms to women was not only a way of placating Western public opinion, but also a way to building their own national identity. The problem, however, is that in unveiling women in an authoritarian way, much bargaining as to be done with the masses. The masses, who might be extremely conservative, would not agree to let women go about unveiled unless their chastity was guaranteed. In order to ensure to placate the conservative masses that women would behave decently once unveiled, these new governments had to promote modesty amongst women as well as conduct virginity tests. This eventually led to a form of state controlled feminism where the premise is that women must look Westernized and modern on the surface but be possessed of a traditional, conservative and chaste mindset. However, state feminism does not work.

Now that the Islamists parties are major political players in the region following the Arab Revolution, it can be argued that they are doing a disservice to their countries and their people. In a democracy, people have a say in choosing the persons they want to represent them in parliament. If the people believe the Islamist parties will best represent them, then that is their opinion and we should respect that. While speculation is rife that Islamic political parties in Tunisia and Egypt might be secretly funded by the Gulf countries, it does not change how much more organized the Islamist parties are. They have also been in existence far longer than most other secular political parties formed in the aftermath of the Arab Revolution and have had experience in the game of politics. We must admit that the Islamist political parties have the advantage of experience over the secular political parties. Failure to acknowledge this is tantamount to failure in forwarding the cause of women's rights in the region.

Pro-democracy activists have many peers in Lebanon, Egypt and Tunisia. Pro-democracy activists also have the erroneous assumption that they have the ideological upper hand because they are liberal and secular. Due to this belief in their liberal and secular ideological superiority, many pro-democracy activists believe they have the moral right to rule after any revolution. Unfortunately, democracy does not work that way. A person can be ideologically brilliant and have a very charming disposition. But if this same person cannot touch or sway the people, then he or she will not be put in a position of power. As women's rights activists in the region, we must be in touch with the position and thoughts of the ordinary Arab woman. To that end, women's rights activists have to work with the Islamist women in power in order to promote women's rights.

Another factor we have to yet to realize is the fact that both Islamism and Secularism can pose threats to women's rights.

The Egyptian government came under fire for performing a humiliating virginity test on women who were arrested during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. The organization that the government ordered to check the women's virginity was not the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists. The government ordered the secular Egyptian military, which had been trained in warfare by America, to conduct these tests. Some allegations of rape by the military officials performing the test later arose.

In Syria, Assad's Mukhabarat or Military Intelligence Directorate was also accused of killing and raping women. Assad is not a fundamental Muslim. In fact, he belongs to a heterodox sect. As such, he represents a minority. Thus, from these examples, it is clear that both Secularism and Islamism can pose a threat to women's rights in the region. It will not be easy to minimize these threats without the cooperation of the Islamist women. While it is inevitable that the Islamist women and women's rights activists will not agree on everything, I believe we would find points of agreements. Thank you very much.

### **Claudia Derichs' presentation**

Thank you, Ceren, for reminding us that both Secularism and Islamism are threats to women's rights. You also raised an interesting idea by suggesting that women's rights activists engage with Islamist women.

As women's rights activists in the region, we must be in touch with the position and thoughts of the ordinary Arab woman. To that end, women's rights activists have to work with the Islamist women in power in order to promote women's rights.

As we are due for our coffee break soon and I am due to speak, I will keep this short. Khadija will keep an eye on the watch and stop me if I go on for more than seven or eight minutes.

The question with which I hope we begin and end our session today is, "what would I contribute to the discussion?" I also worry whether I will fit in with the discussion today because I am a German woman, not an Arab woman. I am a Catholic, not a Muslim. However, I am a woman and I am also interested in women's rights. When you say "we" in your presentations, are you really including me (a non-Muslim, non-Arab woman) in your definition of women fighting for women's rights in the Arab world? Am I really part of the "we" frequently mentioned? I would like to think so because I believe we are united in our wish to do something for women's rights in the Arab World.

There are three points I would like to raise. I will speak more eloquently on them if I had my notes. Since I seem to have misplaced them, please bear with me. I approach the issue of women's political participation in the post-Arab Spring MENA region from a comparative prospective because I am a political scientist.

The events unfolding in the Arab world today reminded me instantly of that which happened in Indonesia in 1998. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Indonesia also had a revolution resulting in the toppling of a dictator in 1998. Hence, given the similarities that Indonesia shares with the Arab Spring countries, I believe it would behoove us to look at Indonesian women and the women's movement in Indonesia. So doing could enable us to find some commonalities between the situation of Indonesian women and that of women in the Arab world before and after their respective revolutions.

When I look at countries where revolutions have taken place, I always ask: "Where are the women in parliament?" In order to answer this question, we have to look beyond the surface and examine the quota systems in place. Quota systems, though seemly fair in theory, can be very problematic.

First of all, there are different kinds of quota systems. The quota system should compliment the constitution, not violate it. Each political party can

also have its own quota system, whereby parties amenable to the idea of female politicians could allocate 30% (for example) of their candidate lists to women. While this seems very high minded of the party, female candidates are only mentioned towards the end of the list as though they are an afterthought. This type of quota system in political parties is not very useful. A truly solid quota system would have some kind of guiding principle bringing female candidates to more prominent positions in the candidate lists.

Another option available is to follow the quota system used by Pakistan. In Pakistan, 33% of the parliamentary seats are reserved for women. Male politicians, however, take the opportunity to sneer at this idea, going so far as to say that their female counterparts cannot be said to be "elected" since they are in "reserved" seats. Thus, the male members of parliament treat their female counterparts in women reserved seats lightly and do not bother to pay attention to any issue they raise.

In my opinion, I think the quality of women's voices is more important than the number of women in parliament. Many research papers claim that it is important to have a critical mass of 30% of women in parliament if women are to be heard in politics. I believe it is irrelevant whether 30% or 70% of parliament is made of women. The number of women is irrelevant to the real issue as to whether the voices of these women in parliament are heard and respected. If the women are not united or if the women in parliament have different platforms and issues they want to forward, they will not be able to speak as one. When they are not able to speak as one, their voices will be small and male members of parliament will not take them seriously. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has a quota system in place where women must make up at least 25% of the members of parliament. However, there

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is no cooperation amongst the women of the different tribes and parties. As a result, women's voices in parliament are not heard and these women are unable to enact political change in Afghanistan.

In most countries, active cooperation between female members of parliament, women-centric NGOs, local women's movements

and feminist movements has yielded positive results for women's rights. Countries with a lot of reforms in women's rights have tended to be ones with vocal female politicians working in conjunction with the local women's movements. For three years, I conducted a research project on female political leaders (prime ministers, presidents, opposition leaders etc) in Asia. Although there have been female heads of state, it often does not translate into improved women's rights in their respective countries. This was clearly evident during Benazir Bhutto's tenure as Prime Minister of Pakistan, an Islamic country. Her status as the leader of the country did not translate into Pakistani women having more rights. This is because she neither connected with the women's movement nor sought support from the women's movement. When there is no cooperation between the women's movement and women in political power, there will be no real push for women's rights in that country.

The final factor to consider in female political participation has already been raised by my colleagues. In times of revolt, it is crucial to compare the degree to which women are involved in socio-political activity during and after the transition period. Women tend to be very active in informal organizations, while the real political decisions are made by men. It is only in Rwanda where women hold 50% of the parliamentary seats. In most other countries making the transition between revolution and the establishment of a new government, women have been consistently seen to be very active in the movement toppling the previous regime. However, they have next to no say in matters of politics when a new government is set up. Thus, I believe it is important for women's rights to be represented in formal politics during the transition period between revolution and the establishment of a new government. So doing will acknowledge the women's contributions to the toppling of the previous regime and the establishment of the new one, as well as to society at large.

These, then, are the three key factors that feminist scholars have to consider when analyzing female participation in politics. These factors are: the quota system, the cooperation between the women's movement and female politicians, and the role of women in the transition period between revolution and the establishment of a new government. This recap thus ends my presentation. I would like to thank the presenters of the first session for their insightful observations. I hope we will have a fruitful discussion after the coffee break. Thank you.

## **Discussion of the presentations in Session I**

### **Claudia Derichs' opening remarks**

Welcome back, everybody. Now, we come to the most important part of this first session -- a discussion of the issues raised by the presenters. As we have had a lot of input so far, I will not summarize the theses of each speaker's presentation. Since many salient points were raised, I hope we will have a solid discussion. The floor is now open to questions and comments. Viola Raheb will go first.

### **Viola Raheb's observations on the presentations**

Thank you. I have a few points to raise. Firstly, it is a real pity that there are very few Arab women present at this conference. It is a real shame because I know the organizers have tried their best to include Arab women in this workshop. This limits the scope of female Arab voices and opinions today. The dearth of Arab women at conferences like these is something we should keep in mind so as not to fall into the trap of male dominated discourse on women. If anything, the small numbers of Arab women at conferences like these should encourage us to actively engage with other women.

Secondly, we have fallen into some traps in the presentations so far and I would like to name some of them. I do this because I think it will better help us to understand that which ongoing in the Arab world. Many speakers seem to treat the Arab world as one single entity. That cannot be further from the truth. Each Arab country experiences and interprets events, culture, history and politics differently. Once we understand that, we will realize that the Arab Spring is not a single, uniform movement. The Arab Spring movement in Tunisia is different from the Arab Spring movement in Egypt, Libya and so on. We must remind ourselves of this, if we are not to lose the different socio-political contexts in which women of these different countries are living. Therefore, the temptation to see the Arab Spring as a uniform movement across all the Arab countries should be avoid, as should the temptation to view the Arab world as a single entity.

While the comparative perspective is interesting, I think it is inadvisable to compare that which has happened in other parts of the world and in different Arab states to one another. This is because that which is applicable

to one Arab state might not be applicable to another. Comparativists must be aware of this difference. To highlight the importance of this difference, I will use the example of Tunisia. It is not by chance that nearly 30% of the Tunisian parliament is made up of women. Women have a high degree of political representation in Tunisia because Tunisian women took to the streets to change the election laws prior to the election. The election law was also altered because the Minister for Women's Affairs in the transitional government, Lilia Labidi, is a long time women's rights activist in Tunisia. She led the way to the alteration of the election laws. This occurrence is unique to the post-Arab Spring Tunisian political landscape. The same thing has not happened in Egypt because female political activists have not pushed for a change in election law, legislation or called for a quota system. We must all bear the contexts of the different countries in mind in our discussion.

Thirdly, we should not fall into the trap of believing that female political activism in the Arab world is an invention of the Arab Spring. This is a myth. For a long time in Arab history, women have been politically engaged, and fighting for democracy and women's rights issues. Since the beginning of the 20th century, politically aware women have been taking this one step further. Hoda Shaarawi (1879-1947) of Egypt mobilized women's rights activists and abandoned the veil at the beginning of the 20th century. From this alone, it is clear that the women's right movement is a new innovation of the Arab Spring. Female activists have always been active in Arab world, and "we", as women's rights activists in the Arab world should use our history to our advantage.

Fourthly, we also need to be aware of the terminology we are using now. It is very well to use terms like "secular" and "religious". But what is our definition of "secular"? Who are the secularists? Dictatorial regimes are not secular. They claim to have a secular agenda, but their political vision and programmes are not secular. Moreover, it is erroneous to say that there is no secular movement in the Arab world. There have always been secular movements in Arab nationalism. However, it is only because they have failed that the religious groups have come into prominence. In fact the Islamic political parties are powerful now because a secular Pan-Arab programme has failed.

The last point I would like make is a personal one. I am a Palestinian Arab woman but I am a Christian. I am actually a Lutheran theologian. I often



feel as though I belong to a minority group that is often overlooked by commentators and observers. It is tragic that women are buying into the male discourse of Islam is political, and it is political because it deals with the issue of polygamy. I do not think the polygamy issue is on the table by pure chance. Prominent male figures in the Arab Spring have shaped the discourse so that it appears as though the revolution and politics revolve around Islam. For example, the first thing that Abdul Jalil said when he declared the ended of Gaddafi's dictatorship in Libya was: "We will abolish all laws that are not in conformity with Islamic law." To that end, he insinuated that polygamy was in line with Islamic law and reinstated it. As a Christian, I am offended that he reduced Islamic law to the issue of polygamy. I believe male Islamists, like Abdul Jalil put polygamy at the forefront of their political discourse so as to divert women's attention away from issues such as political and human rights for women. This is why I believe we should be cautious of the existing discourse.

#### **Claudia Derichs' comment**

Thank you. Does anybody want to comment?

#### **Ceren Kenar's address of the issues raised by Viola Raheb**

I know that Tunisia and Egypt are different. In my presentation, I said that the Tunisian women's movement is successful because women themselves push for their own rights. Because Tunisian women are able to successfully secure rights for themselves, they are an encouraging model for the other Arab countries. When one country is successful at something, it will have a spill over effect and other countries will try to emulate it. This does not mean that other countries will copy the actions of the successful country to the letter. The other countries will change and adapt the methods of the successful country into their own cultural and socio-political contexts. While Iran admires Tunisia's achievements, it still acknowledges that it is different. This may be seen in a slogan chanted on the Iranian streets in the aftermath of the revolution in Tunisia. The slogan was, "Tunis, Tunis, manta Tunis", meaning "Tunisia did, but we didn't." This shows the spill over effects of the Arab Spring revolutions.

You are right to say that the feminist movements in the Arab World began before the Arab Spring and that these movements were already in the existence since the 20th century. But the feminist movement is more pronounced today than it was at the beginning of the 20th century. This is

because of women's education. In the early 20th century, literacy rate was at 40%. Today, literacy rate is at approximately 70%. The actual literacy rate might vary across the Arab countries, but it does not change the fact that women are more literate now than they were in the early 20th century. The literacy of women in the present means they are more aware of their rights, activism for different social causes, the existence of the NGOs, and the existence of cooperation among different organizations.

It should also be noted that polygamy is not the important indicator of the Islamization of politics in the region. The demand that women should don the veil again is another feature highlighting the rise of the Islamists in the political scene of the region. There are many factors at play, and conditions vary across countries. Even so, the experience of one country can provide a valuable lesson for another country. Likewise, something that happened in one country can have spill over effects in another. Let me give you a humorous example of this spill over effect. There was a very funny article in the Turkish newspapers claiming that the divorce rates of Saudi Arabia had increased because Saudi women were influenced by a Turkish soap opera. It was claimed that the Saudi women saw their own menfolk behave in the same disrespectful way as one of the male characters in the soap opera and consequently divorced their husbands. This is the kind of unexpected spill over that I want to draw to your attention. Thank you.

### **Basant Ashraf Montaser's Query**

My name is Basant Montaser and I am from Egypt. In Egypt, female activists and women's movements used to fall under the patronage of the former First Lady. In this respect, the Egyptian women's right movement cannot be compared to the model in Tunisia. This is because the Tunisian women's movement stems from the people at the community level, whereas the Egyptian women's movement is sponsored by the former First Lady. Thus, I think these two different models of feminist activism cannot be compared.

I want to talk about the Islamic parties coming into power now. In Egypt and perhaps also in Tunisia, a person is always being classified. A person is not classified by the labels of Islamist or Salafist. Instead, a more detailed classification is present. A person can be classified as Pro-Islam, non-practicing Muslim, disbeliever, liberal Muslim and so on. All these classifications exist because there are many types of Muslims who interpret Islam

differently. The Muslim Brotherhood has been around for the past 80 years and has been doing much charity work in Egypt. They are seen to be doing good deeds on behalf of society, while the secular parties have been doing nothing but talk. In fact, I do not know of any secular political parties, let alone secular parties actively involved in charity or community work. This is why the Islamic parties like the Muslim Brotherhood are prominent in politics today. The Muslim Brother will have a lot to do if they come into government. They will have to fix the economy and the high unemployment rates. I think we should give them a chance to see what they can do. I think it is wrong of us to be afraid of them. Thank you.

### **Claudia Derichs' comment**

Thank you. Anybody else? Yes, of course, Lina.

### **Lina Shabeeb's reply**

I would like to add to Basant's observations. Some of you will be intrigued by the political analysts' remarks as to that which is going on in the Arab world. Some of it is true, and some of it is mistaken. Some analysts argue that Arabs are conspiracy theorists because they [Arabs] believe America's main aim is to support Israel. These same analysts claim that Arabs believe Americans want the Islamists to come to power and fail so as to launch their troops into the Arab world and remove the Islamists from power. These analysts also believe that America thinks the Islamist parties will fail because they lack the experience to tackle difficult issues like the economy, unemployment, corruption and so on. Because citizens in the Arab countries believe this conspiracy theory, they want to prove America wrong by putting the Islamists in power and making sure they stay in power. The irony of this is further compounded in the fact that the analyst who shared this anecdote with me is a Muslim. This is one of the craziest things I have ever heard.

However, such conspiracy theories do exist. There is something similar in Jordan. Jordan is not like the other Arab countries because the two most powerful groups are the Islamists and the very conservative Tribalists. There is no middle ground between them. I will give you an example from the University of Jordan. I am in charge of the curricular activities of 1,400 students in the School of Law. When there is any big event, the university will ask the top students to participate. In my experience, the top students, that is, the students who consistently perform their academic best

and achieve high grades, are always female. The Minister of Foreign Affairs once approached me, saying that he needed three top students who were fluent in English for an event. I brought him three girls and he immediately told me off, saying that he wanted a man. I looked over the 1,400 students in my faculty and I could not find a single male student who met the Minister's requirements. The same could be said of the current student union elections in the University of Jordan right now. There are supposed to be 25 candidates in all, and my faculty had to have 3 representatives. However, the only 3 representatives who came forward were males and Tribalists. When I pressed female students to share their reasons for not participating in the elections, they told me they did not trust the system. They believed that elections and politics are part of a man's playground. According to the females, politics (and elections) is a male dominated playground where men fight, shout at each other and throw rocks at each other. My female students even said that the men could continue to play in their playground for all they cared because they [the women] did not want to be a part of it. It is disturbing that they associate politics and elections with men fighting one another, shouting at one another and so on. Given that their impression of the system is a violent one, it is no wonder females do not want to be a part of it. However, this deep rooted female mistrust of the system works against democracy. The end result is that people are afraid of being assassinated by the Tribalists and the Muslim Brotherhood, if they so much as rock the political boat. It is a very confusing state of affairs, politically.

Jordan, fortunately, has a good track record where the economic empowerment of women is concerned. I have been working on this issue at the University of Jordan for four years and I think we are doing very well. The literacy rate is high, and many women enjoy a high level of education. We even empower female students from rural areas in Jordan through education. However, women are still not allowed any inroads in politics or the decision making process. There are many reasons for this and I hope we will be given a chance to discuss this later.

### **Ceren Kenar's additional remark**

Nothing is simple in Middle East. Everything is complicated and interrelated that one has to think twice about each and every concept one conceives. To prove this, I will now share a brief story where my colleagues used the concepts of "Secularists" and "Islamists".

Three or four years ago, Turkey had a presidential election. The current president, Abdullah Gül, was nominated by the ruling government. But Abdullah Gül's nomination was controversial because his wife wears a headscarf. There is nothing wrong with that, since she was not running for office. In my opinion, it is all right for a veiled woman to run for office. However, the public was outraged by Abdullah Gül's veiled wife because they perceived it to be a sign that he was challenging the country's republican values and demonstrating his opposition to the staunch secularists and staunch Kemalists. The staunch Kemalists thus took to the streets in protest and were joined by members of the public. This eventually came to be known as the Republic Protests. This incident is very telling because it brings out the Turkish stereotypes of being secular and opposed to anyone who is not secular. Instead of discussing the type of president they would like to have, Abdullah Gül's credentials, his political and social background, his policies and campaign platform, the masses were seething in outrage over the possibility of having a veiled First Lady.

During this time, *Hürriyet*, one of the major newspapers in Turkey with a very high circulation rate, published an article about Asma Assad (wife of the Syrian President Bashar Assad) and Queen Rania of Jordan. Please bear in mind that I do not mean to be disrespectful to them. I think they have exquisite taste and I love their chic Parisian clothes. The newspaper article in *Hürriyet* claimed that if backward Arabs had a First Lady and queen who were unveiled, then Turkey should not have a veiled First Lady at all.

This is very telling of the mindset of the Turkish people at the time. Instead of concentrating on the fact that Asma Assad remained silent over her husband's atrocities, the Turkish people were admiring her for being well dressed and not wearing a veil. They could have emphasized the fact that she is well educated and fluent in English, but they did not. There is nothing wrong in admiring her because she is well dressed. I too admire her sartorial style and wish I could afford a Christian Dior outfit like hers. But the Turkish people protesting against a veiled First Lady missed the point – secularism does not necessarily mean abandoning the veil, it means not letting religion rule every aspect of one's life and having the sense to do good for society for the sake of common man.

Therefore, it would be behove to us to be more cautious when we talk about secularism and how it is different from Islamism. However, many people cannot make the distinction between being Muslim in one's own

way without imposing one's beliefs on others and being an Islamist. The people I knew were very vigilant during the run up to Abdullah Gül's presidential campaign. My mother even participated in the Republic Protests. But now that Abdullah Gül' is president, her personal style has not changed. There was no attempt to force all women to veil their heads. I do not see Islam creeping into daily life in Turkey now that Abdullah Gül is in power. Given this then, I think it is time we cease using the terms Secularist and Islamist so carelessly.

Merve Alici's query and commentary

Hello, everyone. I am Merve Alici, from the Nahda Network and a pro-democracy organization called Young Civilians operating in Turkey. I would like to comment on the session and the issue Ceren brought up.

I would like to give another example of something that has happened in Turkey. In her speech she said that women should not be cast as the symbol of modernity or a sign of progress. I think this is very true. This is because of the importance of women's struggles in a post-revolutionary period. Women's emancipation and their access to rights are important, but they should not be used as parameters to determine the success or failure of a revolution. When women's emancipation and women's rights are used as indicator of an uprising's success, the situation Ceren described vis-à-vis a presidential candidate's veiled wife would occur. When Ataturk took over the country, women were given access to higher education and allowed to unveil. It was a great step forward for women and progressive for the time. Women at the time embraced these new freedoms and eagerly discarded their veils. These freedoms eventually culminated in women's right to vote. Turkish people have always been proud that Turkey granted women universal suffrage before France. It is a cliché to say this, but I believe when women and their rights are used as indicators of modernity or the success of a regime, polarization takes place afterwards. Thus, Turkey was polarized in the 2007 debate over Abdullah Gül's veiled wife. At the end of 1990s, further polarization occurred, as evinced from the memorandum on the military's treatment of women, the manner in which a member of the parliament was kicked out of parliament, the outcry of thousands of students when they were banned from universities, and the humiliation these female students in front of their friends when their headscarves were forcibly removed. These incidents occurred because of the depersonalization of the social terrain. It has got to the point where women are not seen to be donning the veil because they choose to do so

for personal reasons. These occurrences in Turkey have unfolded because women have put their gender and everything their gender does publicly as the yardstick of progress, success and modernity. This is so much so that if a woman chooses to act differently from the commonly held view of a modern, successful and progressive Turkish woman, she is accused of being an Islamist opposed to a secular republic. The contrary is also a cliché. It is nonsense to suppose that just because a woman is veiled and chooses to stay at home, she is dominated, oppressed and at the mercy of men. It may not necessarily be true that women have been brainwashed by men to think that they must veil themselves, stay oppressed and keep themselves ignorant. It is also horrible to say that such women should not be socially or politically active because they would not know what to do.

I do not like the use of the words "ignorant", "oppressed" or "brainwashed". Yet these words are used frequently in Turkish politics. These words are dangerous because they create hierarchies. For example, the radical Kemalists in Turkey have openly opined that women in headscarves do not do so of their own free will, that these women are oppressed by men, that they ignorantly think it is all right not to be "modern and progressive". These radical Kemalists also consider it their duty to emancipate these women in headscarves and educate them. They go so far as to propagate the view that women without headscarves are truly secular and hence superior to women who wear them. Thus, they seek to free veiled women from their headscarves. This is unwanted intervention. It infringes on a woman's personal right to wear a headscarf if she wants to. I am opposed to this.

While education is important for modernization, I do not think education should concentrate on teaching the "correct" interpretations of Islam or equate secularism with modernity and progress. Instead, education should emphasize the importance of social contacts with one another, respecting each other's opinions, beliefs and personal boundaries without imposing one's view on each other. It is only through such social contracts that we will live in peace with one another. To promote such accord amongst people, NGOs will have to work together with schools to promote such mindsets in the post-revolutionary period.

**Claudia Derichs' remark**

Thank you. We will now have a quick word from Ekin before we take a quick break and summarize the main points of our discussion today.

### **Elif Ekin Akşit's reflections on the queries raised so far**

I think we need to redefine secularism. The concept of secularism is a little like liberalism, in that they go together. The trouble with liberalism and secularism is that they both cater to small, specific groups of people.

I am not only referring to the dictators who claimed to be secularists. Everyone who claims to be a secularist believes in a certain political ideology and a certain way of practising religion, and believes in manipulating religion to suit their purposes and vindicate their decisions. Before we can discuss secularist leaders, we need to first define secularism. We must clarify our understanding of secularism before attempting to transform it. Perhaps NGOs active at the grassroots level in any given nation state might be considered secularist. Those of us who identify ourselves with the protestors of the Arab Spring might be secularists too, since we subscribe to similar ideas and have similar hopes for these countries. While we and the protestors might identify ourselves as secularists, we are still no closer to understanding the nature of secularism.

Therefore, I think it is imperative that we explore the following questions: How should we define secularism?

Did the protestors of the Arab Spring call for political change because they had a new interpretation of secularism?

If so, how are we to define the protestors' new brand of secularism?

### **Claudia Derichs' remarks**

Thanks for raising this question. In our discussion thus far, there are two main schools of thought. The first believes the uprisings in each country are due to socio-political conditions and historical or cultural contexts unique to that country alone. Thus, they think it is illogical to compare different case studies. Proponents of the second school of thought believe that comparative studies should be made. The differences of each case study notwithstanding, common themes and hopes are always present every country. By focusing on factors that are similar, remedies that worked in one country (such as education and laws) might be tweaked to work in another. So doing would enable countries in the midst of transition to re-establish order and to forward the lots of women.

### **Viola Raheb's interjection**

I see you have put me into the first camp. I do not think it is a clear cut "either or" situation when it comes to the issue as to whether comparative



studies should be carried out. The insistence that similar occurrences in different countries should not be compared due to different cultural and socio-political contexts could be interpreted as a sign of arrogance. This is because it seems to imply that one country cannot learn from another's experience. While the situation in each country is indeed unique, and while it is true that a successful policy in country X may not work in country Y, the different countries could still learn from each other's experiences and histories. I strongly believe we should avoid pigeonholing arguments, experiences and histories so as to better learn from one another.

### **Claudia Derichs' reply**

Sorry to interrupt, but I must clarify something. I did not mean to say that proponents opposed to comparative studies do not think they have anything to learn from countries with similar experiences. I do not believe proponents opposed to comparative studies feel that the unique context of each country prevents them from appreciating both the similarities and differences in the different countries. I am only curious as to why some people seem to concentrate on the differences between their countries' experience and situation, and why some people choose to focus on the similarities in these different countries. I apologize for speaking out of turn. Let us now continue to another facet of our discussion.

The concept of an ideology, especially that of secularism, is an issue repeatedly mentioned today. I think the distinction between secularism and religiosity is something that is beyond the scope of our discussion today. Historically, no one in the Western world has thought of differentiating the secular from the religious. A person can belong to one religion and yet be secular in his or her everyday life. For instance, I am a practising Christian, but my religion does not affect how I view politics or society or the economy. This means I am secular as well as a Christian. I do not see any contradiction between being secular and being a Christian at the same time. This is only my personal opinion, and some of you might disagree with it. However, I like to think that we can understand another person's point of view when it is different from our own. With that in, let us resume the discussion.

### **Lina Shabeeb's comment**

While it is true that secularism is a Western concept, we are looking at it within the context of the Arab region today. Secularism began to be a

political trend in the Arab world with the rise of Arab nationalism. Arab nationalism was developed by young people trained according to Western agendas and in Western schools in the orient. In this regional context, secularism emerged as a political idea. This political secularism is completely different from that of the West. In the Arab world, secular carries a different meaning because it is assumed that a secular person is a non-believer of Islam. Therefore it is very difficult for Muslims in the Arab world right now. They do not want to give up their faith and be thought of as secular (i.e. non-believers); and they do not want to be bought over by the Islamic parties. A person who claims to be secular will automatically be seen to be a non-believer of the faith and could become a target for the Islamist political parties. In Egypt, in particular, the word "secular" is politically charged. Since a secular person in Egypt is perceived to be no different from a non-believer of Islam, this leaves the person open to attack by the public, staunch Muslims and radical Islamists.

Consequently, European and North American NGOs and INGOs are greeted with incredulity when they stress their wish to support and help only "secular" political parties. In the current climate, that is inconceivable for any political party to be "secular". This, in turn, renders the foreign (i.e. Western) agenda for the Arab Spring countries at variance with the local situation in those same countries.

At the moment, there are three or four competing ideologies in the Arab world. There is the traditional Muslim Brotherhood that hails from Egypt. From the Christian missionaries in Egypt's colonial past, they learnt the importance of winning the hearts and minds of people through social services and charity work. Thus, they are primarily active in those spheres and are seen to be doing good for society. In fact, Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, was a student of a missionary school in his early days. His biography also states that many of the Muslim Brotherhood's activities mirrored that of the Christian missionaries. The Salafists are another political group that must be contended with. They are believed to be funded by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, and their agenda is completely different from the Muslim Brotherhood's. The Muslim Brotherhood is wary of the Salafists and considers them to be very radical. In fact, people expected the Muslim Brotherhood to come into power. But commentators and the public were shocked when the Salafists won 30% of the popular vote. A year ago, in 2010-2011, the Western countries (such as

America) considered the Muslim Brotherhood to be a threat to democracy. The situation could not be further from the truth today. Even America, which had staunchly been opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood prior to early 2012, has suddenly changed its tune. Hillary Clinton now claims that America views the Salafists as threats to democracy rather than Muslim Brotherhood. This is because America claims to believe members of the Muslim Brotherhood are not as intransigent as the Salafists, and can be re-trained and re-educated. A third political ideology in the region is the Iranian concept of Islamism. This ideology is especially prominent in Lebanon and in Syria now. It is also one of the reasons why the Assad regime in Syria did not fall. This form of Islamism is funded by an Iranian Shia political programme and a Sunni financed Saudi Arabian programme. The last political ideology in the region is the system practiced by Turkey. Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited some time ago and suggested that Egypt adopt the Turkish system of government. It was a semi-prophetic speech because it seems Turkey is now exporting its "political Islam" to the Arab region.

These, then, are the four main ideologies in the Arab world today. Each of these ideologies, it should be noted, uses women for their own political agenda.

### **Merve Alici's query**

I would like to ask the speakers – how do they define "we"? There are many different women's movements at the local and international level. Do the speakers today include these different women's movements in the "we" they use to describe feminists fighting for women's rights in the Arab Spring countries, or are the speakers referring to all women? I ask this question because some women's movements are interested in women's rights in the Arab world and some of them are only interested in furthering women's rights in their own countries. There are some women who are not feminists. I think we must define who "we" are first, and who are a part of "us" and our movement to campaign for women's rights in the Arab world. If we do not define who "we" are, we will never get anything done.

### **Çiğdem Aydın's answer to Merve Alici**

It must be borne in mind that we are not talking about women as a collective group. We are talking about women as individuals and as a part of society. They have the right to vote. They can choose the candidate for

whom they want to vote. They do not have to vote for candidate X because their father or husband likes candidate X. They can vote for candidate X because they want to. Or they can vote for candidate Y. They have choices that only they can make for themselves. Likewise, a woman can choose her own career. She can choose to be a housewife or a teacher. She can go to school and she can be a useful member of society in her own way. This is my NGO seeks to do. Feminism seeks to do this for women too. Feminism empowers women by letting them know that they have choices and that they are responsible for their choices. It is not entirely accurate to say women are excluded from political life. It is also inaccurate to say that women want nothing to do with politics because they see it as a men's playground or an activity where men fight each other. Women are included in the political process as voters. They have the right to vote, just as they have to right to stand for election. As voters, women play a part in choosing their country's leader and their own member of parliament. It is important that we help women realize that they have many options open to them, more than they think.

### **Lina Shabeeb's asseveration**

While I mostly agree with you, I would like you to bear in mind that Jordan is a very unique case study. The problem in Jordan is twofold. On the one hand, men in Jordan have admitted that women are strong, intelligent and capable. On the other, women in the country have to fight for their own rights because women's movements from the West are not allowed entry into Jordan. While women in Jordan are intelligent and capable, they are also apathetic towards politics and mistrustful of the traditional structure of society. Jordan has no history of pro-democracy movements, and political parties are non-existent. As a result, women are wary of the government and the decision making process. While the women respect and trust the king, they do not trust his government or his ministers. Many young people believe that same system will continue to be in place regardless as to who comes into power. Thus, they are apathetic towards politics. The Tribalists and Islamists therefore step forward and fight amongst themselves for political power. If a strong woman attempts to enter politics and be a part of the decision making process, the Islamists will categorize her as a heretic for exhibiting non-Muslim behaviour and the Tribalists will declare her a harlot for trying to enter a male sphere. The irony is that men acknowledge the fact that Jordanian women have lived through times of war and respect them for it. However, these women will only continue to

receive male respect so long as they continue to behave in ways that are set down by men.

I believe that women in Jordan are strong enough to overcome such prejudices, but the fact is women will not be respected by men unless they behave in a way sanctioned by men. Since Jordan is a male dominated society, the lack of respect from men can end up breaking a woman's career. Men set down the social rules for women because they are afraid of capable and intelligent women overshadowing them. This is also evident in the University of Jordan. The university itself will not admit it, but 70% of its students are female and 90% of its high achievers are women. However, this does not translate into women flooding the workforce. There are not that many women in the workforce, and even fewer women in decision making positions at the workplace. To remedy this, Jordan has implemented the quota system. Palestine has a similar quota system in place too, I think. Even so, women who speak up are looked down on by men. As such, women continue to mistrust the system. Since women are heavily penalized for speaking up, they are not mobilized as a cohesive unit. There are some women who suggest that perhaps they should attempt to control the men and make men their mouthpieces.

Arzu Celalifer Ekinci's clarification

As I have been to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Iran, I can compare women's situations in these countries. Jordanian women are ten steps ahead of their Saudi Arabian and Egyptian sisters. They have the platform, the legislation, acknowledgement from men and highly qualified women, yet they are unable to have a cohesive voice vis-à-vis women's rights. I think it is imperative that Jordanian women find the missing link that will let them rise to occasion and take their places alongside men in public life. Jordan is far more progressive than Saudi Arabia because women are allowed on streets. I walked for an hour and a half on a street in Saudi Arabia and did not see any women. I later learnt that this is because the women must stay indoors either at home or in women-only shopping malls. Saudi women cannot even drive cars and must hire drivers from Singaporean or East Asia. Saudi women must first come out of their shells to alert the public to their presence before they can do anything, but Jordanian women are already in the public sphere. Thus, Jordanian women must do something to bridge the gap between themselves and men in public life.

At this juncture, I would also like to add to a comment Dr. Aydin had raised earlier. In times of transition between revolution and the establishment of a new regime, politicians are more likely to take public opinion into account. Now is the time to make waves and be heard.

### **Viola Raheb's interpolation**

I am sorry to say this, but I think this is an overgeneralization of Saudi Arabia. It may be very conservative, but it is not a complete backwater when it comes to religion and women. Although there is segregation of the sexes in almost every aspect of public life in Saudi Arabia, widespread protests occurred at the suggestion that the sexes should be separated by a wall at the Kaaba in Mecca. This is because there is no historical precedent for women and men having separate prayer areas at the Kaaba. Women and men have been able to pray together at the Kaaba since the dawn of Islam. The Saudi government would have built a wall to separate men and women at the Kaaba, if Saudi women had not started a campaign on the internet to alert Muslim women all over the world to this proposed change. Due to pressure from Muslim women all over the world, this plan did not come to pass.

Moreover, it was due to the campaign of a Saudi woman that a business law unfair to women was abolished two years ago. Prior to the abolishment of the law, a female entrepreneur had to have a male custodian before she could set up a business. Due to the efforts of this Saudi woman, women can now set up their own business in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia also has a higher percentage of educated women than some ostensibly democratic Arab countries. One has to look beyond the clichéd view that has been propagated about Saudi Arabia thus far. Once this is done, it will be evident that the dynamics of the public and private spheres are very clearly differentiated in Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia has many strong, educated and influential women who want equality with men. However, they are not calling for change in a way that would lead to a breakdown of the whole socio-political system. They are trying to change the system in small ways from within. This is, perhaps, something unique to the Saudi Arabia case. It is an overgeneralization to say women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia because women have tried to drive as a form of protest and were willingly jailed for it. There are also several respected university professors who are Saudi

women. Therefore, we should not reduce our impression of Saudi Arabia to a mere caricature.

### **Arzu Celalifer Ekinci's response to Viola Raheb**

I think I was misunderstood. I did not mean to suggest that Saudi women are not educated or not concerned with women's rights. I am aware that some Saudi women and female lawyers in Saudi Arabia are slowly trying to obtain more rights for women. I was merely pointing out that several other Arab countries are more democratic than Saudi Arabia and openly accord women more rights. Saudi women might achieve the same recognition as their sisters in other Arab states in the future.

### **Claudia Derichs' closing remarks**

We have to formally end the session now, as it is lunch time. As we are still in the midst of our discussion, let us carry on talking about it over lunch. I am very happy to have heard everyone's presentations and opinions because I have learnt so much from all of you. While our opinions and outlooks might differ, we are united in our aims. The same could be said for the women's rights movement in the different Arab Spring countries. Thank you, one and all, for the interesting discussions we have had today.

# TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS IN SESSION II

## **Economic and Social Empowerment of Women in the Arab Spring**

### **Women for Economic and Social Transformation**

- Will the Arab Spring be a catalyst for increasing gender equality in the job market, entrepreneurship spheres and social life in the region?
- What are the diverse experiences and proposed solution for economic and social empowerment of women in the region?

**Speakers:** İpek İlkkaracan, Khalida Azbane, Basant Ashraf Montaser, Viola Raheb, Selcan Yılmaz

**Moderator:** Assoc. Prof. Dr. İpek İlkkaracan

### **Opening Remarks by İpek İlkkaracan**

Hello, everybody. I would first like to apologize for my inability to attend the session in the morning. I am very sorry to have missed it and the several interesting threads of discussion that were brought up. Unfortunately, I had a class to teach at the university and am only joining you at this late hour. My moderation of this session might suffer somewhat from my lack of knowledge as to the nature of the discussion in the previous session, but I will do my best. We have four speakers for this second session on the economic and



social perspective of the transformations in the Arab region. Each speaker will have 10 minutes to present their papers before we open the floor for discussion. We will first begin with Viola Raheb from Palestine. She is a consultant on development cooperation and adult education, and is quite a specialist on the Arab world.

### **Viola Raheb's presentation**

Thank you. According to the United Nations' Arab Human Development Report of 2005, the situation of women in the Arab world has changed substantially in recent decades. Improvement in women's working life in the Arab world, however, is very limited. From 1999 to 2003, women's share in economic activity in the Arab region increased by 19%, the sharpest rise in the world. Nevertheless, Arab women's economic participation remained the lowest in the world, with just a third of women aged over 15 in gainful employment. The Arab world may attempt to improve its public image in the international community by emphasizing its increased female economic involvement. In reality however, the prospects for women remain very modest. In many Arab countries, women are also less educated than men. Certainly, women have made great progress in recent years and achieved a better standard of education. For example in the Arab world, female literacy rose from 35% in 1990 to 50% in 2000.

Over the same period however, male literacy improved 63.5% to 71%. These figures clearly document the inequality of opportunity of men and women across the Arab world. Huge differences also exist between the Arab countries in terms of education, employment, legislation and cultural environment. To make my case, I will cite the example of Palestine.

Education is held in high regard by Palestinians because they believe it paves the way for change. Accordingly, Palestinian women tend to be well educated. In current academic year, girls accounted for nearly half the students enrolled in Palestinian schools, making up 49.5% of students at the primary level and 54.2% of students at the secondary level.

For the university academic year of 2008-2009, females accounted for some 60% of graduates. This is in line with something Lina mentioned this morning, when she spoke on the high percentage of high achieving female university graduates in Jordan. These figures suggest that the percentage of female students rise with each level of education. However, this is very

misleading, especially in Palestine. While women attend local universities, men mostly attend university abroad. This, then, is one of the reasons for the high percentage of women in tertiary education in Palestine. Hence we have to be suspicious of the official statistics. Male and female students also choose different subjects of study at university. Although more Palestinian women have had university education, they focus on teaching, the humanities, and the social sciences. These subjects are traditionally considered appropriate for women. Female students' selection of these areas of studies further exacerbates the gender-based split already evident in the Palestinian school system.

Development professionals like to emphasize the economic importance of women's education, and this was something we discussed this morning. Interestingly, this does not apply to Palestine. Although Palestinian women perform better at school and at universities, men outnumbered them at the workplace by more than 4 to 1. In 2010, a poll was conducted on 41% of those over the age of 15 in gainful employment across the Palestinian territory. It was discovered that 67% of these employed individuals were men and only 15% were women. Paradoxically, unemployment among Palestinian women increases with the level of their education. A woman with only basic education is more likely to be employed than a highly educated one. In 2010, 36.3% of women with more than 13 years of education were registered as unemployed. In contrast, only 1.5% of uneducated women were unemployed. Thus, it may be seen that in Palestine, a woman's job prospects are greatly reduced by education and training.

As a result, many women with higher education and university degrees accept jobs that are below the level of their qualifications. Female university graduates in Gaza today are digging wells for farmers. These talented young women file away their certificates and go to work in the fields at the crack of dawn. They know they have no chance of working as academicians, but they can contribute to their household income by working as unskilled daily rated labourers. Women, who do manage to succeed in the job market, are mostly in traditionally female occupations like education, farming, forestry, hunting, fishing and healthcare. This is the situation in Palestine.

Inequality is also reflected in the salary of workers in the service sector, public sector and private sector. Men always receive higher wages than their female colleagues, even when they both have the same qualifica-

tion and the same academic grades. This situation is not unique to Palestine and the Arab world. Women's prospects in the Palestinian workforce are not rosy. Despite this, it must be acknowledged that Palestinian women have achieved great changes in recent years. For one, the efforts of Palestinian women have helped influence legislation. Article 25 of the Basic Law of Palestine was adopted by all parties. This article, enshrined in the national constitution, includes a formal guarantee of equality in job opportunities for men and women. However, as evinced from all that I have said so far, theory and practice are worlds apart.

But more important than the question of who comes into power (i.e. the Islamists, secularists or liberals), is the legal framework for the government and the place of women's rights in the country's constitution. This is something which has been addressed in Tunisia, but not in the other countries with the Arab Spring.

Women, who enter the workforce, face some very fundamental cultural hurdles as well. Society persists in viewing female employment as a financial necessity (i.e. the women must do so to support their families), whereas the majority of women see employment as a form of self-fulfilment. Other subtle and disguised cultural barriers, which are not immediately apparent, also prevent women from seeking gainful employment. Of these, the most noticeable is the threat of violence. Violence against women has been noted in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In Palestine, the situation is slightly different because its people are not so much fighting for rights as they are fighting for recognition as sovereign people who deserve the right to have rights. In that sense, Palestine is a step ahead of other Arab Spring countries.

Will the Arab Spring be a catalyst for greater gender equality in the workforce? It depends on the following factors. Firstly, it is dependent on the nature of the post-revolution governments. We see some inkling as to the future governments of Tunisia and Egypt. But more important than the question of who comes into power (i.e. the Islamists, secularists or liberals), is the legal framework for the government and the place of women's rights in the country's constitution. This is something which has been addressed in Tunisia, but not in the other countries with the Arab Spring.

The second factor is the effective implementation of this legal framework. As seen in the Palestinian example I outlined earlier, the institution of women's rights in the legal framework does not equate to its implementation throughout society.

The third factor has to do with raising women's awareness as to the im-

portance of having their rights enshrined in the legal framework. I recently conducted a comparative study on three generations of Palestinian women to determine their political awareness and political values. The women in my study were born between 1930 and 1990. Astoundingly, I discovered that women in the younger generation are frustrated with both the political system and women's movements. Their frustrations with the women's movement stems from their belief that these groups are no longer interested in campaigning for the enshrinement of women's rights in a legal framework.

The fourth factor is the commitment of the government, political parties and women's movement in ensuring that the rights accorded to women in the constitution are implemented. The women's movement should hold the government and political parties accountable by insisting that women's rights (as outlined in the constitution) are honoured in society. To this end, women can use civil society, which had been the same driving force behind the Arab Spring, to gain support for the enactment of change in their post-revolution countries' constitutions and legal frameworks. Thank you.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's remarks**

Thank you. Now, we will move on to Basant Ashraf from Egypt.

### **Basant Ashraf Montaser's presentation**

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers for bringing together women from different backgrounds for this seminar. I would also like to thank all the participants for sharing their experiences and knowledge. We have certainly had some very interesting discussions as to the different ways women can forward their rights.

To provide you with a better picture as to the subject of my talk, I will briefly describe my work in the women's rights movement. I work with civil society through a local NGO that seeks to empower girls and women in rural areas in Upper Egypt. Our programme is called "Ishraq", which means radiance or illumination in Arabic. It provides opportunities for rural adolescent girls through sports and the imparting of literacy and life skills. We also provide some economic opportunities for these female participants and their mothers.

The provision of economic opportunities is especially important, given the

situation of the economy and the labour market in Egypt. A recent study on female participation in the workforce conducted by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2008 ranks Egypt 128 out of 140 countries. Egypt is ranked very low on that study because its female economic participation rate is one of the lowest in the world. This may be attributed to the fact that women in rural Upper Egypt lack access to financial opportunities. These women have no collateral, and even lack supporting legal documents such as birth certificates. Since they have nothing with which to prove their identities, they are treated as though they do not exist. Indeed, they are not even on the government's map.

Unfortunately, this is still prevalent today. Egypt's illiteracy rate is almost at 40%, and women make up two thirds of that number. This clearly highlights the inequalities faced by Egyptian women (especially in the rural areas). These women are denied the right to education and basic health services. Sadder still, many of these women do not even know they have these rights.

My NGO seeks to literacy, life skills, and economic opportunities for women. We recognize the important roles that women play in social communities and in strengthening the political system. Many of the women with whom we work do not have the same opportunities as men in occupation, salaries, and experience. Most the women we try to help also hold traditional jobs. They need a lot more education and training before they can start up basic entrepreneurial micro-businesses on their own. Accordingly, my NGO tries to provide women with these skills in the form of basic vocational training, basic entrepreneurial skills and financial literacy. Women in the rural areas, who are mostly confined to housekeeping and childrearing at home, also need more mobility. However, much more has to be done before gender and social inequalities are addressed. For instance, men have to be re-educated to see that a woman's work at home is also worthy of recognition and a way through which she is able to contribute to society.

Other social issues such as early marriage also burdens girls and women at a young age. Since they marry and have children at a young age, they do not know how to handle issues pertaining to childrearing and household maintenance. When women are not seen to be managing these things with ease, this results in much domestic violence. Therefore, it is clear that many cultural issues must be addressed before it can be determined if the

The revolution in Egypt saw people calling for three things: bread, freedom and social justice. Bearing this in mind, I think women should add social justice to their rallying cry so as to bring societal awareness to their positions.

Arab Spring is a catalyst for greater female participation in the workforce.

To that end, we have to raise women's awareness of their rights, the roles they play in the community and how they can contribute to the economy. We also have to recognize the importance of micro and small enterprises, and help these women by introducing technology that will facilitate their start-ups and render them more competitive for the job market. These women also have to be educated not just on the day-to-day management of their small businesses, but also in the ways through which their businesses can alter in the current political landscape.

The revolution in Egypt saw people calling for three things: bread, freedom and social justice. Bearing this in mind, I think women should add social justice to their rallying cry so as to bring societal awareness to their positions. Revision of legislative articles in the new constitution could also go a long way into bringing women one step forward in gaining economic and social equality with men. Before I came here, I watched CNN on television and saw that female activists in Egypt are calling for a march at 4 o'clock to condemn the severe beating of a woman activist in a protest on Friday or Saturday. The beating was justified by the ones who meted out the punishment on grounds that she had "exposed" herself in a public place. The news of this proposed march by Egyptian female activists has led me to be optimistic about women's rights in Egypt. For many years, the Egyptian women's rights movement was simply thought of as one of the First Lady's charities. This view seems to have changed since the revolution and the women's rights movement is getting more attention now. I think this is a positive sign indicating that Egyptian women are trying to be seen, heard and recognized. Thank you.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's remarks**

Before I give the floor to Selcan Yilmaz, I would like to thank the speakers for keeping within the time limit. Selcan Yilmaz, who is an entrepreneur, an economist in the banking sector and a member of KAGIDER, will now address us.

### **Selcan Yilmaz's presentation**

Hello, everyone. I am very pleased to be here with you, ladies and gentlemen. Given that the Arab Spring heralds an inspiring era for the 21st cen-

tury, the discussion of its events and its impact on women in the region is a timely one. To facilitate our discussion, I have drafted some questions that could help us to understand the Arab Spring and the changes it will bring. Before that, however, let me tell you something about myself.

As my professional background is a financial one, I will focus on the macro-economic issues in my presentation. The macro-economic issues are highly important because they have the potential to shape social and political changes. Without further ado, I will now list the questions that will help us to better understand the Arab Spring.

For centuries, most notably 750 CE -- 1257 CE, the Islamic world was considered open, enlightened, creative and powerful. This changed in the modern era. Why and how did this change in perception come about? Why is Islamic civilization vilified now as backward, unenlightened and ultra-conservative when it was previously lauded for being creative, open and enlightened? Modern observers in the West often claim that Islam is an obstacle to freedom, science and economic development. Yet, Muslim societies were once considered pioneers in science, medicine and philosophy. While this may not be the most original question to pose, it is something many people in our region have been pondering. Perhaps this change in perception is due to the unwitting import of corrupt economies in our quest for prosperity. This quest for increasing prosperity has led to calls for external aid and creates an unhealthy dependence on a single source, oil. The quest for freedom has left a string of traditional autocracies in some countries. The dictatorships that have been formed are only modern in name, for they still carried out repression and indoctrination. Remedies for these dictatorships, such as weapons, factories, schools and parliaments, have been suggested and tried. As yet, none of them has achieved the desired results. As a result, Islamic countries in the Middle East countries have been seen to be less successful than their Western counterparts since the 20th century.

In late 2010, the wheels of change gradually turned in the region with the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. This was quickly followed by the Libyan revolt and unrest in Syria. Due to these uprisings, Arab Spring became the new name of Middle East's political game. The general consensus seems to be that liberal democracy goes hand in hand with globalization.

At this juncture, I would like to posit a theory that I call the rentier state. I

believe this will be helpful in our understanding of the future of the Arab Spring states.

Globalization can be a force for good because it spreads ideas about democracy and civil society that can positively affect the lives of millions of people and bring about a higher standard of living for many societies.

Rentier state theory describes how the state becomes relatively autonomous from the society. In a rentier economy, the state controls and distributes the revenue from the one primary commodity (e.g. oil) that is sold on the world markets. There is no separation between political and economic power in rentier states. The rentier state therefore embodies economic wealth, while pursuing other functions such as domestic security and foreign relations.

Regardless as to the largeness of the rentier state's export volume, it is not a truly globalized state. Globalization can be a force for good because it spreads ideas about democracy and civil society that can positively affect the lives of millions of people and bring about a higher standard of living for many societies. Countries can take advantage of a globalized macro-economy by seeking new markets for their exports and by welcoming foreign investments.

On the other hand, the effects of globalization have led to much discontent in developing countries. Globalization has not worked for millions of people in the developing world because it led to the destruction of their jobs, increasing insecurity vis-à-vis daily bread-and-butter issues, and a sense of overwhelming powerlessness against forces beyond their control. There are solutions for the developing countries experiencing these ill effects. First of all, governments of developing countries must realize that they are responsible for the well-being of their countries and their people. Strong regulations have to be put into place to protect their country from speculators and unsavoury corporate dealings within and without their borders. Developing countries also need effective governments with strong and independent judiciaries. More importantly, these governments must be open, transparent and democratically accountable to their people. Freedom from corruption is also essential if the public sector is to be truly effective and private sector growth is to flourish.

A question we should ourselves at this point is whether Arab countries will have a lease of life after the Arab Spring. I personally believe these countries will establish new liberal democracies so as to deal with key priorities such as job creation. This is not an easy task, as there are thousands of



unemployed youths and women. Women, especially, face more obstacles than men when it comes to gaining employment and keeping their positions. The new democratic governments formed in the Arab Spring countries must also encourage investment from within and without their countries. In my opinion, there is much potential for true political reform in the Arab Spring countries, and much potential for foreign investment.

If done correctly, these factors will help the region to develop. However, the current global economic climate is not a stable one. A globalized world is also an interconnected world, and market volatility in Europe, for instance, could lead to economic instability in the Middle East and Far East.

To draw capital into their countries, the future leaders of the region have to develop projects to woo investors and sponsors. Countries in the region can also attract the attention of investors and sponsors by being politically stable. Political stability would be very helpful in economic development and smoothing over investor disputes. Moreover, current research has shown that investor disputes are most likely to be resolved by democratically elected governments rather than non-democratic regimes.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that women have a rocky road ahead because they face more prejudice than men and will have to work doubly hard to overcome them. However, in a democratic state, women will definitely have more rights and will more likely succeed in the socio-economic sphere. Thank you very much for listening.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's remarks**

Thank you for introducing the macro-economic perspective. Now, we go to our final presenter, Khalida Azbane, Vice President of the Moroccan Women Business Owners Association.

### **Khalida Azbane's presentation**

Good evening and thank you. I am sorry that I did not prepare any speech. But am I here today because I wish to highlight the present situation in Morocco. This morning, we talked a lot about the Arab Spring. In Morocco, we have the four seasons rather the Arab Spring. The Moroccan situation is unique and I hope it stays this way, because several years ago, the Islamic party tried and failed to form the government. Although they appear to have won now, they are very moderate. The Prime Minister is from this

Rather than concentrate on the differences between the sexes, women should be more concerned with the state of the economy and the ways in which they can contribute to it.

party, and no one in the country has yet to express any problems with him. I apologize in advance for my English because I am used to speaking only Arabic and French. If you do not understand me, feel free to stop me.

The current Moroccan Prime Minister mentioned an important thing in his first speech. He said, and I paraphrase: "Do you think I have the time to sit in front of a bar or go to the beach and tell the women I see to cover their heads and bodies properly and to stop going to the beach? I don't have time for that. I have a lot of things to do, like building the economy and discussing state matters with my ministers. My job is politics, not religion." This clearly demonstrates that religion and politics are separate in Morocco. I think other Arab countries should acknowledge the separation of politics and religion as a good thing, rather than seeking to politicize religion. In Morocco, the issues of women covering themselves and polygamy do not come into play because the government is merely concerned with political and economic matters.

It is often said, a country that voids its women's contribution loses half of its potential to move forward and improve its development. In short, it is imperative that women be allowed to improve themselves because they make up half of society. Ironically, however, women inadvertently stress the differences between the sexes and make it seem as though they are at a disadvantage. In this sense, women are not doing themselves any favours by harping on the gender differences. This indirectly leads to men ignoring women who continually claim they deserve special treatment because they are disadvantaged by their gender. Rather than concentrate on the differences between the sexes, women should be more concerned with the state of the economy and the ways in which they can contribute to it.

In Morocco, there are no laws forbidding women from seeking education, employment, joining a political party or running for elections. The government encourages women to participate in politics and to do something for their country. Women must have courage and take the plunge when it comes to politics because men will not specially invite women to work alongside them unless women seize the initiative themselves.

In my opinion and the opinion of many Moroccans, the problem lies with the mindset of women rather than religion or a country's cultural traditions.

Moroccan women are not interested in the implementation of a quota system in parliament because it means women are there as a token to make up the numbers, nothing more. Like Dr Claudia, who raised this issue in the morning with her presentation, I believe having a preset percentage reserved for women only leads men to assume that the female members of parliament did not work as hard as they did during the elections. This, in turn, provides men with a valid excuse for being disgruntled and for ignoring their female counterparts. Moroccan women are aware of this potential pitfall of the quota system, and have no wish for such a system.

A human being, man or woman, has to demonstrate competency. That is all. Once gender and religion are taken out of the equation, it will be seen that men and women are equally competent at the workplace. Gender is irrelevant when it comes to job performance and aptitude. That is all I want to say.

Finally, I would like to close my speech with a question. Why are Turkish people interested in Arab women's opinions of the Arab Spring? The Arab Spring occurred in each country because of each country's individual problems, not because of some problem plaguing the Arab world in its entirety. Interestingly, the very people who invited us to this conference, the president of KAGIDER and the regional representative of KAS, are not here at this session. Why did they invite all of us here today to discuss the Arab Spring in conjunction with women's issues? Why is the opinion of other Arab women on the Arab Spring so important?

I do not deny this is a good initiative. I do not deny that it is very interesting to hear other Arab women's opinions on women's rights. But I do not understand why Turkey is so interested in the Arab Spring, the countries affected by it, and the women of those countries. I would have understood it if a Tunisian NGO had organized this conference in Tunisia and invited speakers from Arab Spring countries to discuss the impact of the Arab Spring in the region. But I do not understand why Turkey, that had not undergone any Arab Spring revolution, should be interested in it. Unlike Tunisia, Turkey did not have an Arab Spring uprising. Turkish women did not undergo the experiences of the Tunisian women before, during and after the Arab Spring. Turkey is relatively peaceful and stable, unlike the Arab Spring countries. Given that Turkey and its women did not experience any of these things, why are the Turkish people so interested in it that we

are gathered here today to talk about it? I am not asking this to offend anybody. I am genuinely curious. Thank you.

## **Discussion of the presentations in Session II**

### **İpek İlkkaracan's opening remarks**

Thank you, Khalida. Now, we will move on to the question and answer session. Perhaps we can prevail upon the representatives of KAGIDER and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung to tell us their reasons for hosting such a workshop in due course. But right now, I would like to summarize the main points of the session so far and add some of my own thoughts on the issues raised. I can address some questions from my perspective as a moderator and as a member of the women's movement in Turkey. Before I launch into my summary, I would like to thank all four panellists for their very interesting presentations.

Viola discussed women's status in Palestine and in the Arab world, while Basant talked about Egypt. They both made several resonating points, and I will highlight them. One of these points, which was also touched upon in the presentation on Morocco, emphasizes that which is at the crux of this session on women's roles in the economic sphere of the Middle East, namely, women in most of the countries in this region have been documented in international studies to be the most economically disadvantaged. As was previously mentioned, Egypt is in the bottom of WEF ranking for female rights in the workplace. Generally speaking, most of the countries in the MENA region are in the bottom of that WEF ranking. The UN has a similar ranking system of 200 countries. Although female literacy rates are increasing and education for girls is a growing trend, gender gaps in the economic sphere continue to persist.

So, Khalida, one reason for this conference is economic gender gap in the MENA region. This is something that most of the MENA countries have in common. Although Turkey has a much higher GDP per capita and is much more industrialized and integrated into the global economy, its gender gap in female and male economic participation is one of the worst in the world. This is an interesting dichotomy because Turkey is one of the largest economies in the world, and yet, it has so much gender inequality in the economic sphere.

...the Arab Spring seems to have positive connotations and is believed to be a stepping stone to the establishment of liberal democracies in the region. It is questionable whether the Arab Spring will bring positive changes in gender issues, just as it is questionable whether liberal democracies will be established in the region.

The second point that resonated in the presentations was the fact that the legal and constitutional framework of many MENA countries enshrines women's rights by granting them the right to education, employment, equal pay and so on. Women are also actively encouraged to pursue equality in all walks of life, as Khalida mentioned in her presentation. However, in many MENA countries, the institution of women's rights in the constitutional and legal framework does not translate into actual implementation on the ground. This is not unique to Egypt or Palestine. It is also present in Turkey because many women are unaware that they have these rights. Rather than have the government implement these rights at every level of society, women should be educated as to their rights so that they are in a better position to exercise them. Once people are aware of their rights and start to actively exercise them, things will start to change.

Turkey is a case in point. The women's organizations of the present actually grew out of the women's movement of the 1980s. The women's movement of the 1980s, in turn, grew out of the economic liberalization of the country. These women's movements have been steadily growing and are presently enjoying a second wave. They are predominantly active in legal literacy or women's human rights education. The organization to which I am affiliated, Kadının İnsan Hakları Yeni Çözümler Derneği, or Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) in English, is one of the leading organizations in implementing and promoting the spread of legal literacy training programmes. It is also very active in promoting and implementing women's human rights training programmes. WWHR, in conjunction with government community centres throughout the country, have been organizing such training programmes in 52 Turkish provinces. So far, over 10,000 women have participated, and many women's organizations have emerged from these women-centric human rights training programmes. The wide expansion of these training programmes is paying off, as it educates women of their rights. If you are interested, we can discuss this later.

A third point raised in the presentations is the fact that the Arab Spring seems to have positive connotations and is believed to be a stepping stone to the establishment of liberal democracies in the region. It is question-

able whether the Arab Spring will bring positive changes in gender issues, just as it is questionable whether liberal democracies will be established in the region.

Now that I have recapped the points that the presentations had in common, I want to go over Selcan's presentation in greater detail. The macro-economic perspective she brought to the discussion is especially germane to this question of women and gender equality in the economic sphere.

When the progression of female participation in the workforce in Western nations is examined, two patterns are discernible. The first pattern began with World War II, when women worked at the factories. This trend continued in the post-war years with the rapid growth of their respective economies so much so that the number of women in the workforce almost equalled the number of men. As women became better integrated into the labour market, the other gaps in the workplace such as the gender wage gap, occupational and industrial segregation also started to close. These gaps still exist, but they are slowly diminishing.

This trend is easily understood from supply-side type of growth model. Whenever there is a lot of technological innovation, competitive firms achieve economies of scale through export advantages to the rest of the world. In a free market, these innovative firms with increased productivity and established performance records soon become global firms. The countries in which these firms are located will enjoy high growth rates, and many of these countries thrived through the wobbly markets of the 1980s and 1990s. During this time of economic growth, unemployment rates were relatively low. This period of robust growth is known in economic history as the golden age of capitalism. In this golden age of capitalism, the growth rates were very high and there was a lot of demand for goods. To keep up with demand and the rapid growth, factories had to hire more women. Although most European women were homemakers in the 1950s, they eventually joined the labour force. This led to increased productivity in their countries. Eventually, these countries developed into mature free market economies.

The second economic model marking women's integration into the workforce can be seen in the late 1980s. This is especially so in the developing economies with export-led growth models. By exporting goods to coun-

tries, these developing economies integrated themselves into the global export market. Once integrated into the global export market, these developing economies will enjoy better economies of scale. In turn, this will lead to greater demand for domestic labour. Women, therefore, joined the workforce to meet the demand for labour that arose from the increasing production of goods. There is a lot of debate as whether this is a good method of integrating women into the economy. Were women really contributing to the economy, or were they exploited as a source of cheap labour like they are in Latin America, Asia and China? Does employing women in these fields really empower them? Do these working women feel that they have been integrated into the economic sphere?

The MENA region, of which Turkey is a part, experienced economic liberalization and economic globalization in the late 1980s. The MENA countries might not have high export performance percentages like South Korea, Thailand, or some of the Latin American countries, but it has led to more women entering the workforce. Tunisia, for instance, enjoys high female economic activity rates within the MENA region. But, as Selcan indicated in her presentation, the MENA region is heavily dependent on oil as its major source of export revenues and foreign exchange earnings.

As the MENA countries are already earning foreign exchange through their oil revenues, they do not need to perform well in terms of export production. This phenomenon is known in economic literature as the curse of natural resources. Such an economy gifted with very good natural resources is able to compete with the global markets without going through the economic transformation of the other countries. Where other countries' economies have to evolve from a dependence on agriculture to industry and thence to sophisticated services, the MENA countries remain as they are and continue to gather their revenues from oil.

A number of MENA countries do not have oil. Due to the existence of Arabic as a common language, however, there is a great deal of migration between the oil exporting countries. There is also much remittance of money where workers employed in an oil producing country send the bulk of their income to their families in non-oil producing countries. For example, a Tunisian working in Egypt is able to earn money working at the Suez Canal and remit his money back home to his family in Tunisia.

Now, Turkey is not one of these countries. Thus, it is paradoxical for it to confirm the MENA trend. In my upcoming paper due for publication in the January issue of *Feminist Economics*, I address this exact question and postulate several reasons for Turkey's failure to bring its export performance up to the level of the East Asian and Latin American countries.

In other words, the dynamic, macro-economic growth model based on supply-side economics that occurred in the West throughout the 1950s-1970 and the Asian and Latin American countries in the 1980s did not happen in the MENA region to a large extent. Given the resultant meagre macro-economic growth, there was less demand for labour and women could not make up sizeable numbers in the economic sphere. Some feminist economics literature goes even further, suggesting that the lack of macro-economic demand is in effect a lack of challenge to the patriarchal family and traditional gender norms in the MENA region. As a result, women are more confined than ever to the domestic sphere and to their roles as care givers to the young, elderly and infirm. This form of gender based division of labour exists in most societies around the world, including European societies. But in those other countries, the notion of the traditional patriarchal family has been challenged through rapid economic growth. In the MENA region however, it has not been challenged to the same extent. If this reason is coupled with the cultural pretexts of the Islamists, then the traditional roles of women are going to be further entrenched in society.

This is just my interpretation. Further discussion is needed before we can conclude the extent to which culture plays in defining women's roles. With no macro-economic growth model pulling women into labour market, current cultural norms are not going to undergo changes.

Let me end here by saying that I agree with the facts raised by the speakers. There have indeed been many polls conducted on the transformation of the MENA region. Viola succinctly sums up the relationship between women's rights and the legal framework in the questions she sought to answer, namely:

- (1) Will women be recognized to have rights when said rights are enshrined in the constitution?
- (2) Will the institution of women's legal rights in a legal framework result in an implementation of those rights at all levels of society?
- (3) Will women have the opportunities to become aware of their rights and



demand them for themselves?

(4) To what extent should women's rights be institutionalized by the government in a legal and constitutional framework?

These are questions that we have to think about when looking at the case studies of the various MENA countries. In my opinion, I believe that the lack of substantial female participation in the workforce has to do with an over-dependence on oil revenues and the lack of macro-economic policies.

It remains to be seen whether the current transformation of the Arab Spring countries will lead to democracy, and whether these resultant democratic systems will implement sophisticated macro-economic policies. Macro-economic policy does not only result in market liberalization, more international trade and integration with the global markets. Successful implementation of macro-economic policies will also yield robust economic growth domestically. It will not do for any new government in the MENA region to assume that so as long as they liberalize trade and have a competitive market, foreign capital will automatically trickle in. A strong and peaceful state is also needed. The examples of the Asian tiger economies have proven that both stable governments and liberalized trade are needed for foreign investment. It is this foreign investment that will lead to economic growth and the closing of the economic gap between men and women. If the MENA governments were to adopt a sophisticated macro-economic policy, and be involved with the private sector in a non-corrupt and transparent manner, much value added and cross-cutting industries will develop. This would, in turn, yield very robust economic growth. This is all I want to say. Since I think I have gone on for too long, we will now open the floor to discussions. Yes, Khalida, you wish to speak?

### **Khalida Azbane's interjection**

I want to say something about the way NGOs are treated in Morocco. When my NGO went to Tunisia and told the authorities that we were invited to give a seminar in Tunisia. We were promptly told that we were forbidden from speaking in public places. In contrast, the king and the government in Morocco respect the work of NGOs. In fact, NGOs are sometimes invited to meetings with Moroccan politicians. But in Tunisia, we were treated very shabbily. Morocco is tolerant of NGOs because our king has always cared for the work at the grassroots level and had started reforms in the country long before the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions. Morocco's immediate neighbour, Algeria, on the other hand, lost about 150,000 people

over the course of 10 years of violence.

All NGOs have important things to do in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. My NGO has suggested several things to Ennahda in Tunisia, in the hope that they would implement them in government policies. However, they are determined to press ahead with policies like lowering the legal age for marriage. At present, the legal age for marriage is 17. My NGO does not think that a 17 year old girl is too old to be married; my NGO does not think there is any need to lower the legal age of marriage in Tunisia. We told Ennahda this, but our opposition fell on deaf ears. Likewise, Ennahda also announced that they would continue some of Ben Ali's policies regarding women and the workforce. Under Ben Ali's time in power, women could work part-time, get three-quarters the salary, and then get full retirement. My NGO does not think this is good for women because it means women will not be promoted at work. Ennahda are planning to launch a similar policy, even though they have said the time is not ripe for its implementation. According to Ennahda, an employed woman can have 4 months leave, and she can have 4 years leave after the delivery of her first child. What does that mean with full or half salary? It means that when she has a second child, she will have 8 years leave and that will put her out of the job market.

The overriding problems in the MENA region are poverty and unemployment. Jobs have to be created. Now is not the time to promote tourism in the MENA region; now is the time to consolidate governments and implement policies to address the economy. If a MENA country wants to promote tourism, then it should promote itself to other MENA countries. For example, Tunisia will benefit from Iranian tourists and Pakistani tourists. Our countries are not economically and politically stable to play hosts to European tourists just yet.

Things may change in Tunisia, or it may not. It is as yet unknown. It is known, however, that oil and gas has been found in Tunisia. This could change the Tunisian socio-economic and political landscapes. It could also possibly lead the Islamists to take these natural resources for granted and result in their complacency when they form the government. They have to be seen that making a fuss about not taking a woman away from her "rightful" place at home and kicking up a fuss about enforcing the niqab on all women is pointless. The Islamists should be solving their country's eco-

conomic problems and growing unemployment, instead of trying to implement policies on religious based issues. This is all I have to say, thank you.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's remark**

Any other comments or questions? Yes?

### **Merve Alici's query**

I have some questions for Basant and Viola. Has the Arab Spring changed your NGOs' policies? What are the implications of the Arab Spring for your NGOs? What is the position of your NGOs vis-à-vis the changes wrought in the Arab Spring countries? Viola, could you please provide a detailed explanation as to your project? I am referring to your project on the views held by women of different generations vis-à-vis the women's movement and women's rights.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's interpolation**

We will have a round of questions before the speakers address your queries. If you have additional questions or comments, please go ahead.

### **Query from Unknown Speaker 1**

Thank you. I am curious about the economic platforms of the Islamic parties in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. Do the Islamic parties in these countries have different economic platforms? How are they different? Can you give us some examples? How will the economic platforms of the Islamic parties affect the women's movements in those countries? For example, how will Ennahda's economic platform affect the women's movement in Tunisia?

I also want to know how the women supporters and female members of Islamic parties like Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood feel about their parties' gender sensitive economic platform.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's remark**

Presenters, you may now address the questions from the floor, Lina, did you have your hand up? Would you like to go first?

### **Lina Shabeeb's interposition**

This is a very short comment on something that three of the presenters have outlined. I agree with three of you, in that I do not think we should be too optimistic as to the rights women have gained in the Arab world so

far. Most of the rights accorded to women in the Arab world are imposed by the state. Jordan is a good example of that. Because I am not in Jordan right now, I can freely give voice to my opinions as to the situation there. Conferences like these provide women with an opportunity to an outlet to give voice to their true opinions and grant them the freedom to say things which are otherwise forbidden at home. I did not mention it in my presentation earlier, but I will tell you now – some women in Jordan are in local state-sponsored women’s movements for selfish reasons. These women are not in the state-run women’s movements to forward women’s rights; they are involved with the movement because they want to be government ministers. When it is known that a state-run women’s movement has such females, the movement immediately loses its credibility and women are not taken seriously. This, in effect, is that which is happening in Jordan today.

A state may have many reasons for imposing its brand of feminism on the female populace. Jordan’s reason for doing so is highly ironic, for it only endorsed a form of state “feminism” because the country underwent a huge ratification and reform movement. As part of this reform movement, Jordan started to fight corruption and ratify its constitution. One of the country’s foreign experts has suggested that Article 6 of the Jordanian constitution (which touches on equality) ought to be ratified. The Jordanian government tried to impose equality amongst different groups and tribes, but gender equality never took off in Jordanian society. As you can see from this example, state imposed female rights are severely limited. There are political reasons behind the state’s implementation of women’s rights, but the state controls the way in which these rights may be manifested. The World Bank has a striking report on the states with women’s rights enshrined in their constitutions. This report lists all the states that do not actively implement the rights of women as outlined in their constitutions. The report clearly indicates that Jordan, for instance, has equal rights for men and women on paper, but not in reality. Jordanian women have always felt that they were treated unequally because they do not inherit property at all and they cannot pass on their nationality to their children due to some finer points on Palestinian-Jordanian demography. The limited rights accorded to Jordanian women are very politicized.

Right now, many activists in the Arab Spring countries fear the time when the Islamists will come to power and take away women’s rights. But the irony is that women did not really fight for these rights in the first place;

these rights were given by the state in accordance with the state's political reasons. Perhaps women will fight for those same rights when they are taken away, or perhaps they will not. On the one hand, women might fight for their rights when they are deprived of them. On other hand, women would not fight for these rights if they do not know they had those rights to begin with.

The Jordanian example I gave earlier about the ratification of Article 6 in the constitution is a fine case in point. Article 6 lays down equality for all under the law. The proposal to ratify it provoked much opposition from the men who felt that fighting corruption and reforming the government was more than enough. Women, especially those in the state-run women's movements had a chance to speak up and call for the ratification for Article 6. But they did not speak up because they did not want to be seen as pro-Palestinian or anti-government. A woman who wants to be a government minister in Jordan has to be careful not to offend the men and not to appear unpatriotic. There are many such instances of hypocrisy in Jordan. Although the anti-corruption movement in Jordan is ostensibly good, closer examination will reveal that it is a scheme. Feminists can use the anti-corruption campaign to gain recognition and to promote female ministers. After all, no female minister in Jordan has been proven to be corrupt, unlike the men. Instead of playing up this fact, the so-called feminists in Jordan have remained silent. When female judges were appointed in Jordan, there was a massive outcry against these women. However, the government stood firm and the female judges turned out to be good and impartial. The public seemed appeased after a while when it saw that female judges were impartial and uninfluenced by the Tribalists. However, no feminist group has seized on the success of female judges to promote women's rights and equality for women in other walks of life because they know they will get nowhere unless the state endorses it.

Thus, it may be seen that the Jordanian government is very "hands on" when it comes to state-run feminism. It does not help that we have a few prominent, well educated and respected female judges favoured by the government openly saying that they would rather be at home breastfeeding their sons than adjudicating a case in court. It seems so farcical and hypocritical, and I am worried as to state of women's rights if this is the form of feminism endorsed by the state.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's interpolation**

Thank you, yes.

### **Claudia Derichs' comments**

I think the discussions in this session were very much in line with the discussions we had in the morning. I have learned a lot about the macro-economic dimension of female empowerment. However, I have picked up something from Lina's explanation of the women's rights being enshrined in the legal framework but not enacted in reality. Instead of looking at numbers, theories and concepts, we should be looking at women's rights and the way in which they might be enacted in small ways in a local context.

Malaysia is a good case in point because Malaysian women are active in the labour force. They are also active in fighting and gaining women's rights. But that is only applicable to Malaysian women who are ethnically Malay. Ethnically Indian or Chinese women who are Malaysian citizens do not have the same rights because Malaysia has a pro-Malay policy, which prioritises the rights of ethnic Malays above everyone else. In fact, there are quotas favouring ethnic Malays in many aspects of Malaysian public life, such as in university enrolment and jobs. For example, a high percentage of university seats are reserved for ethnic Malays. A person applying for a job in a Malaysian company will discover that a high percentage of jobs are already reserved for ethnic Malays and so on. Thus, a Malaysian female citizen who is an ethnic Indian or ethnic Chinese will tell you that she has fewer rights than her ethnic Malay sister. Discrimination can come in many guises. A person can be discriminated because of her ethnicity, religion and so on. Even quota systems can be used in discriminatory fashions. Thus, we should not blindly trust the statistics. Sometimes, it is worth looking beyond the numbers and examining the local context. This is just my humble opinion. Thank you for hearing me out.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's remark**

The organizers have just reminded me that we are supposed to have a coffee break at 4.15pm. We will adjourn for a break shortly so that people go and get their tea. After which, we shall return and start the round of answers. If we have time, we might attempt a second round of questions. If there are no objections to this, we will have a five minute break and return for the answer session soon.

Welcome back. While we wait for Selcan to return, let us hear Viola out

as she addresses the questions raised before the break. Viola, over to you. You do not have to answer all the questions, just the ones that were directed at you.

### **Viola Raheb's response to the queries**

I was asked about the study I conducted on the differing opinions possessed by different generations of women vis-à-vis women's rights. The study is more in line with the issues discussed this morning, but I will give you a brief explanation of it now. I sought to address the way in which different generations of women saw the issue of political awareness and political participation. For instance, a grandmother would see the issue differently from her daughter and granddaughter. The women in my study were born between 1930 and 1990. My youngest respondents are 20 years old, and my oldest respondents are 80 years old. Interestingly, I discovered that 72% of the first generation of women (i.e. the grandmothers) were interested in political participation and were politically aware. 54% of the second generation of women were politically aware and conscious of female political participation. 60% of the third generation of women (i.e. the granddaughters of the first generation), were politically aware and interested in female political participation. It was certainly unexpected to see the eldest generation, the grandmothers, most interested in women's political participation.

I also discovered that the different generations' views on female political participation and political interest stemmed from different influences. The first generation of women were influenced by their own histories and their families. The second generation were influenced by political parties, women's groups and women's movements. The third generation cited the media as their main influencing agent. It was very interesting to see how these women's views developed. Also of note was the way in which values had changed the political values of the women in my study. The youngest generation did not think gender equality was as important as freedom of speech. In the course of my study, I discovered that I belonged to the middle generation and shared their mindset.

Since I did not say about my own background earlier, let me do so briefly now. I was born in Palestine two years after the start of the Israeli occupation. I was born and raised in Palestine under Israeli occupation. Then, I

studied in Germany and returned to work in Palestine. I was in charge of the Lutheran school system in Jordan and Palestine for 7 years. I moved to Austria ten years ago, so that is my home now. Ever since I made Austria my home, I realize I am in the position of an outsider looking in whenever I go to Palestine and move amongst other Palestinians.

As I was saying, I belong to the middle generation in my study because I am mostly influenced by the women's political movement. This middle generation is less interested in female political participation, less engaged with political goings-on, and had no real wish to change the gender status quo. I think this has to do with the fact that they had put all their hope on the women's political movement and ended up disappointed when the Palestinian Authority struck a deal with the women's activists and dropped women's issues completely from the political agenda. I can understand how the middle generation of women must feel. They have spent nearly twenty years of their lives fighting for equality, women's rights and so on. Then suddenly, members of women's movements, who had been hitherto behind the women's movement in Palestine, were fighting for parliamentary seats instead of calling for rights and equality for all women in Palestine. It must have been very disappointing for the middle generation of women in my study.

As part of my study, I also asked my respondents to name some Palestinian women whom they thought were role models. I was amazed that the first generation of women (i.e. the grandmothers) cited the names of all the important Palestinian female figures. The women named were freedom fighters and women's rights activists of my grandmother's generations, but they were inspiring figures nonetheless. The majority of the youngest generation claimed that there were no inspiring Palestinian women. The few who named women drew on the women who appeared in the mass media but had no connection with women's issues at all.

This is very interesting because it shows the importance of implementing women's rights on the ground after enshrining these same rights in a legal framework. The Palestinian women's movement has been able to accomplish a lot in legal frameworks within the constitution and the quota systems. For example, there is a relatively high quota for women in the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian Legislative Council. Palestine also has many female cabinet ministers and members of parliament. There



are likewise many women in the second and third levels of administration within the political groups, and many women in Palestinian political parties. However, the large numbers of women in these positions do not equate to the enhancement of women's rights. This is because these women in positions of power do not implement policies to assist young females in becoming entrepreneurs and so on. If anything, the high number of women in these notable positions has led to an ironic stagnation of women's rights in the country. Some women's organizations have looked into strategies to counteract this development. They recommended the inclusion of women's rights issues in the curricula and continued female access to education. That covers the main gist of my study.

Before I end, I want to comment on the issue of natural resources (specifically, oil) in the Arab world. It is important for analysts and Arab governments to realize that their dependency on oil hinders the social, political and economic development of their countries. While oil makes the Gulf region very rich, it has also resulted in them buying the intellectuals from the other Arab countries and moving them to the Gulf states. In so doing, they are silencing these intellectuals. Let us say a Gulf state buys someone who has been fighting for equal rights and places him or her in Al-Jazeera as a political commentator. This effectively silences that person for the next 20 years.

Although the Arab World has much in the way of natural resources, some of its countries have had developments in women's rights. This is evident in Tunisia and in Libya. However, it is curious that there are no women in the demonstrations in Syria. Can we assume that the Arab Spring has led to improved awareness of women's rights if women are protesting in Tunisia and Egypt but not in Syria? I do not think we can. Perhaps that might be a matter for research for someone else.

### **Comment from Unknown Speaker 2**

At the Egyptian demonstration that began in Tahrir Square, the value of a woman's participation in the protest was recognized. However, the opposite is true now. Should an Egyptian person on the street or an Egyptian taxi driver be pressed for their views on women protestors now, they would question the motivations of these female demonstrators and come to the conclusion that the current climate is too violent and unsafe for women to be on the streets. During the revolution, women had every right

to be protesting on the streets alongside men because it was a sign of community solidarity. But now, it is seen as something negative. I think this change in public mindset vis-à-vis female protestors could be part of the political agenda of the Islamist parties.

I believe the NGOs face much uncertainty after the turbulent revolutions in the different Arab Spring countries. Prior to the revolutions and uprisings, there were laws regulating civil society work. These laws and the work of NGOs were monitored by the Ministry of Social Solidarity. In the aftermath of the revolution, however, the people are questioning the allocation of foreign funds. For example, Egyptians are offended when the USA tried to dictate how and where Egypt should use American grants. What right do these foreign powers have to dictate how aid money is spent so long as it helps the people or the infrastructure of the country? More importantly, is a country supposed to view a foreign nation's grants as a form of civil engagement or economic development? NGOs face similar questions when it comes to their funds, for they are under a lot of scrutiny as to how they intend to use their funds for the good of society. To determine how these funds are to be used, NGOs are being investigated by the interim government. It does not matter whether an NGO is Christian or Islamic, they are all being investigated as to how they spend their funds. Likewise, youth parties involved in civil projects, like the April 6 Youth Movement, are also under investigation because of claims that Freedom House has sponsored some of its members. As is plain to see, NGOs are in a precarious position in the post-revolution Arab Spring countries. While the society and community acknowledge the work NGOs have done at the civil society level, they are now held as politically suspicious.

### **Selcan Yılmaz's interjection**

I have a question to Viola about her intriguing speech. You mentioned the power of oil revenue in silencing an individual by buying them and using them as political commentators on Al-Jazeera. I do not think a person can be silenced that way. The mass media is very powerful and viewed by millions of people. It can be used to make a person bolder and more powerful. By that, I mean a person will be more easily heard by the masses. This will go a long way in helping that person to share their views and bring awareness to human rights and whatnot. If possible, can you explain how employing an activist and intellectual on Al-Jazeera is tantamount to silencing them? I would like to comment again after your explanation, if that

is all right with you.

### **Viola Raheb's response to Selcan Yılmaz**

I do not mind. I like being questioned at conferences; maybe this is due to my German education. I think we cannot underestimate the role of media in the Arab Spring. But I also think the media was used as a tool in the Arab Spring. I think it is important to realize that the first films and documentations of these protests and uprisings were by lay people. Al-Jazeera was not there to film Bouazizi when he set himself on fire. The person who recorded Bouazizi's self-immolation was a lay person trying to communicate the despair of the ordinary Tunisians to the world. The same could be said about the initial records of the uprisings in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria and other parts of the Arab world. However, the media actors in the Arab world have seized upon these videos recorded by lay persons and bought them so as to show that they were "socially aware". Thus, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, the two major media agents in the Arab world, bought these videos from the lay persons and put them up on their official news websites as tools for their coverage of the events.

There has been a shift in the way people receive and transmit news nowadays too. Where the public previously reacted spontaneously to that which unfolded around them, they now want to alert the world to that which is unfolding and they do this without any political agenda. The reason for this shift lies in the fact that the common man no longer wishes to be silent in the face of events affecting him. The media giants, however, have their own political agendas. Whenever these media giants transmit the news, they imbue it with their own political views. It would be naïve to assume that Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya do not have their own political agendas. They are certainly not neutral media agencies in the region. There was a recent study proving this. I am not sure if you are familiar with this study, so bear with me as I describe it to you.

This study was conducted by a group of women. These women monitored the issue of women in the media for one whole day in May. Their aim was to see who and what made the news on that single day. In other words, they watched the media for one whole day to see if women's issues were presented, whether women were interviewed and so on. After watching Al-Jazeera for one full day, it was discovered that no women were asked to present their story and no woman was asked to be an expert panellist on

shows. While some programmes had female moderators, no female professional was invited to any of the shows to share her opinion or her expert analyses. All the guests and experts were men, and all these male guests and experts were from the same ideological school of thought. There was no variation in views at all. Therefore, I am wary of Gulf media giants buying intellectuals and placing them in their media networks. For instance, one of these Gulf media giants bought Azmi Bishara from Palestine and assigned him to their Doha office. The irony was that this same media network declared him to be "Al Muvakkir Arabi", an intellectual thinker but yet expected him to merely comment on something every few minutes without allowing him time for critical thinking. I think, as women, we have to be very critical of the Gulf media giants' buying of intellectuals. More importantly, we should ask the following questions: Why do they insist on holding specific meetings in specific countries? What is happening at those meetings? Are we told expunged accounts of these meetings on their news networks? What is the cost that we will have to pay in the future for their silencing of these intellectuals?

### **İpek İlkkaracan's remark**

Selcan, do have anything to add?

### **Selcan Yılmaz's reply**

The media is also part of the socio-political capital of a country. The media works hand in hand with factors like strong regulations, good governance and so on. Anti-corruption methods have to be used to ensure that the media is non-partisan. That is all I have to add. We can now move forward to the next issue.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's comment**

I would like to quickly address two issues that have been raised by the floor. Lina has explained that women's rights in Jordan are mostly state imposed, and that this creates a general lack of awareness among women as to their rights. She also feared that this would mean women would not fight for their rights if they were taken away. Turkey, fortunately, has an improved track record in the issue of gender equality in the legal framework.

In the past three decades, the women's movement and women's rights NGOs in Turkey have called for and successfully spearheaded most of the legislative changes related to gender equality. To this day, the leaders

of Turkish political parties, various members of Turkish political parties, and members of parliament acknowledged the important contribution of the women's movement in pushing for legal reforms in matters of gender equality. This definitely provides a much stronger grounding for women's rights in Turkey. While women's rights in Turkey are imposed by the state, the women themselves had fought for these rights. I also personally think that it is better to have the state imposing some rights than to have no rights at all. This is because enterprising women's movements can take the state's legal endorsement of women's right one step further by pushing the feminist agenda forward. Therefore, I do not think we should completely downplay the value of state imposed feminism.

My second point has to do actually with Khalida. Although she has left, I still want to address the questions she raised. One of her questions had to do with business. Business is a social undertaking and is often contextualized in society and its mores. Thus, society and human beings will continue to have a certain way of thinking when it comes to gender and religion. These views will, in turn, colour their views of the marketplace. It is often said that market competition is characterized by profit rather than religion or sex. But I do not think this is completely true. A woman in business will be treated differently from the way a businessman is treated. A country's cultural traditions are very much integrated into its economic sphere and will affect how the different genders and different businesses are treated. Since women are traditionally thought of as people who will be absent for a long time in the workforce once they are married, get pregnant and give birth, bosses discriminate against them for not being able to be at their jobs all the time like men. Women consequently get branded as bad workers, uncompetitive workers and ineffective workers.

That is how gender discrimination works in the workplace. Unless laws are institutionalized to enable both male and female parents to equally share the responsibility of childrearing and work at the office, women will continue to be thought of as people who only want to look after babies. Men, on the other hand, will be thought of as good workers who do not let their wives, babies or families get in the way of their jobs. Any attempt to equalize the burden of childrearing is a difficult one because men automatically assume that women are the best "natural" care givers. Men make this assumption because women produce breast milk and women give birth, while they (the men) do not do any of those things. Since those things are

not “natural” to men, they do not think childrearing is their responsibility. An institutionalization of equal parental responsibility of childrearing, the provision of childcare services to both fathers and mothers, subsidized childcare, and subsidized elderly care will go a long way into changing the mindset of men.

Khalida also said that her NGO looked at the extension of maternity leave in Tunisia to four months and eventually four years with some suspicion. On the one hand you are right, it is right to be suspicious as this will make it more difficult for mothers to return to the workforce when their children are old enough. It is also unclear whether the four years of maternity leave will be on a paid basis, and it is unclear whether they will be allowed back into their old jobs once their maternity leave is over. Unless this extended maternity leave is implemented with a lot of restrictions in place to prevent discrimination against women, especially pregnant women, it could leave to a severe decrement in the number of women trying to enter the labour market. It is very hard to reconcile this issue, as a measure that works in one country might not work in another.

Khalida also wanted to know why Turkey issued this invitation and was interested in the Arab Spring when it did not have any uprisings of its own. Turkey is part of the MENA region. Every country in this region shares an interconnected relationship. The women’s movement in Turkey is very interested in the position and activities of women and women’s movements in the region. I am sure KAGİDER and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung have other comments to make. We will let Nuray from KAGİDER respond first. This will be followed by a comment from a representative from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, and we will take a question from Ceren.

### **Nuray Özbay’s response on behalf of KAGİDER**

Thank you for giving us a chance to explain ourselves, even though Khalida is not here to hear us out. She wished to know why we are here in Turkey, and why KAGİDER and KAS are interested in this topic. As Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ilkkaracan rightly pointed out, Turkey is part of the MENA region. Turkey is also the democratic model for the region. Indeed, Turkish leadership is admired and much lauded for being both secular and Muslim at the same time. However, Turkey is not a role model for the region where women’s rights are concerned. This is because much gender inequality still exists in the country and the conditions enhancing the status of women

are not very well developed. Thus, other countries in the region have to think hard before taking Turkish democracy and its leadership style as models. KAGIDER as well as other Turkish women's NGO's have doubts and criticisms as to conservative undercurrents inherent in the policies of the current government. This is just KAGIDER's opinion on the matter. Perhaps you have other interpretations as to the situation.

KAGIDER is a civil society organization dedicated to democratization and women's empowerment. As evinced in recent developments in the region, the idea of governance is also rapidly changing. KAGIDER, like other civil society organizations, is curious as to the ways in which NGOs (women's NGOs in particular) can be more active in the current socio-political climate. Like other countries of the region, Turkey's female employment rate is quite low. As a strong advocate of solidarity amongst women, KAGIDER is committed to empowering women economically through entrepreneurship and raising female employment rates. As part of this show of solidarity amongst women, we have organized this conference today, calling together several distinguished ladies in the spirit of enquiry and feminism. It is through this regional solidarity amongst women that we are better able to examine and resolve the economic and political problems of the region. Moreover, our different cultural backgrounds also provide a vibrant diversity through which we can better learn from each other. That is what we hope to achieve through this conference.

Now that I am done explaining KAGIDER's stance on this conference, I want to thank all of you for your valuable contributions today.

### **Güzin Aydemir's response on behalf of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung**

Thanks a lot for the question regarding our motivations for organizing this workshop. Nuray from KAGİDER has said that KAGİDER wished to organize this meeting as an NGO from a country of the region. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung shares this view. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is a political foundation established after World War II and currently has offices in 70 countries, including Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Palestine. It is also carrying out 125 projects. The foundation describes its vision and *raison d'être* as strengthening universal values and supporting the human rights' struggle in its many dimensions. Thus, it can be said that the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung supports efforts increasing democratic standards all over

the world. By extension, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung also supports the struggle for women's rights as it is a sub-category of human rights. Since the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is convinced of this and regards the Arab Spring as a critical threshold in world politics, it decided to jointly organize this event with KAGIDER.

I would also like to voice my own opinion about the Arab Spring. I believe that this is an important historical development equivalent to the French Revolution. At this stage in the Arab Spring revolutions, the cards are being reshuffled. Discussions should be held on the current structure of women's struggle, the ways in which this structure can be renewed, as well as the strategic and methodological questions on women's struggles in the region. Moreover, discussions and workshops may be organized with ease in today's globalized world due to improved networking activities. Due to the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's awareness of the importance of networking activities, we are keen to do everything we can to strengthen international solidarity, and facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences among women. It is no coincidence that most of the women from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung helped to organize this workshop.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung also feels privileged to be working together with KAGIDER. We believe that international exchange, especially exchange between actors is important. Therefore, we wish to create financial opportunities for the organization of a second workshop similar to this one, but in a more professional way and with wider outreach. We are also listening to these discussions with a rapporteur because we hope to publish these proceedings in two languages, English and Turkish. Furthermore, participants who wish to contribute articles to this publication are most welcome to do so. We hope that the proceedings today will be compiled into a free publication in English and Turkish. We are also making preparations to convey the reports to all interested academic institutions and civil initiatives.

I thank you very much for coming. It is very meaningful to have you here. I am glad to have had the opportunity to be a part of these discussions. I thank you very much once again for the insightful discussions today.

A final note for those who wish to contribute their papers to this publication: Your paper does not have to be in English or Turkish, it can also be in Arabic. We will translate it for you when we are preparing our report and



compiling the papers. Please be assured that all your contributions are very welcomed.

### **İpek İlkaracan's interjection**

Now that we have heard from the representatives from the two co-organizing institutions, let us move on to Ceren's question.

### **Ceren Kenar's comment**

Actually, I would like to make a very short remark regarding the earlier discussion on Al-Jazeera. I feel ashamed to admit this, but unfortunately, Al-Jazeera is Turkey's main source of information on the Arab world. As a result, Al-Jazeera also shapes Turkish public opinion of the Arab World. I am not blaming Al-Jazeera or the Turkish for this. I am merely pointing out this fact.

While it is true that Al-Jazeera shapes Turkish public opinion on the Arab world, it also did a very job reporting the Iraqi War. Al-Jazeera emphasized the importance of the Palestinian peace process. Even so, we should always take its regional news reports (i.e. its news on the Middle East) with a pinch of salt. My organization, the Nahda Network, has a motto saying that we do not have favourite autocracies or favourite dictatorships because every political group in the region is striving to undermine each other. People who are anxious as to the situation in Syria are not that enthusiastic when it comes to Bahrain, and vice versa. From this, we can see that everybody who took part in the uprisings and protests has an agenda. I do not say this to undermine the power of the people. I am neither suggesting that this is a conspiracy, nor saying the people took to the streets on the instigation of the more powerful nations. I am merely informing you of the fact that some foreign powers are very happy with some aspects of the different uprisings in the region and dissatisfied with some other aspects. We have to be aware that there is a lot of hypocrisy in the region. NGOs can play a valuable role in the region by choosing not to ally with any one national interest. Instead, NGOs should echo the voice of the people. This is especially crucial where Turkish public opinion is concerned. Thank you for hearing me out.

### **İpek İlkaracan's comment**

I see Claudia wants to say something. Before I hand you over to her, I want to raise a question that nobody has addressed so far. Someone posed

a question as to the different Islamic parties' economic platforms. Perhaps someone will comment as to how the gender sensitive economic platforms of Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood differ.

### **Claudia Derichs' query**

While we wait for answers on that question, I want to return to the issue of the media. Many of us have colleagues teaching or working in the MENA region. Very often their views of the situation on the ground differ vastly from that reported in the media. For instance, I was very disappointed with the media and its coverage of the uprising in Bahrain in February 2011. I was at home in Germany, when I suddenly received an SMS from a friend and colleague who is a women's activist in Bahrain. This SMS read: "SOS Claudia, they are slaughtering my students." I know she was not exaggerating and that she had meant what she said. However, no news network picked up on this. There were no reports of this on Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, the BBC or the German media. To date, I still have no explanation for this. Why did the media of the world remain silent on this massacre in Bahrain?

### **Lina Shabeeb's response**

I will try to cover some of the issues raised about Al-Jazeera. You have not heard about the massacre in Bahrain because the government propagated the notion that the uprisings were due to Irani and Shia efforts at seizing control of the country. This, in turn, brings us back to the issue of hypocrisy in the region. The Arab revolutionists in the other Arab Spring countries were very pleased at toppling their own tyrants. However, they do not care for Bahrain at all because the majority of their people are Sunni. While it is unfortunate that human nature is predisposed to occasional prejudice against others, this is also true of the media. The media chose not to mention the massacre in Bahrain because they agree with the Bahrain government's position on oppressing Shias. The media and the other countries tacitly condone the violence in Bahrain because they do not want Iran to take control of Bahrain.

This is another feature of the region that brooks no interference. Iraq and Iran have long been fighting to be dominant power in the region. All the governments in the region are aware of this, and they have all tacitly agreed not to interfere. The uprising in Bahrain and the clamp down on the protests are part of this regional power struggle between Iraq and Iran. The same can be said for the Syrian situation, for Iran and God-knows-

which-power is fighting for dominance in Syria. Because it is a regional power struggle between two powerful nations in the region, all its neighbouring states turn a blind eye to it. It is very hypocritical and negative, but that is the political reality in the region.

While it does look very bleak, we must bear in mind that the different Arab Spring countries have already accomplished a great deal so far. Moreover, Saddam Hussein is gone now and there is slightly more freedom of speech. In the 1990s, one cannot even question his power. I remember being kicked out and hauled up for questioning in my younger days when I merely asked, "What is Saddam Hussein doing in Kuwait?" The global political situation has changed a lot since the 1990s. Now, it is acceptable for one European country to invade another. The invading country was possibly influenced by America and believed American backing justified its invasion. It turned out to be a mess in the end. The same thing could be said of Bahrain.

I think the media should have broadcasted news on the massacre and the uprising and allowed the people to judge the situation for themselves. Perhaps the people will sympathize with the majority Shia. In case you do not know, Shias make up the majority in Bahrain and the Sunnis are in the minority. The government, however, seeks to nationalize Sunnis from abroad to increase the numbers of Sunnis in the country. The majority of Shias in Bahrain are not pro-Iran. Yet, the media chooses to report the regional fight for dominance between Iraq and Iran as the underlying cause of the Bahrain Uprising. More importantly, why is the media trying to hide the fact that the Shia majority in Bahrain are not pro-Iran? Why are the news agencies hiding this fact instead of presenting it to the people and letting them judge the situation for themselves? It is sheer hypocrisy.

This is the same reason why I question Al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera did something no other news network dared to do. They interviewed some leaders of the Israeli army. This gave Al-Jazeera a credibility that the other news networks lacked. Many people praised Al-Jazeera for it. But I am wary. I will tell you why in simple terms. Imagine you are an Al-Jazeera reporter. You interview an Israeli officer and hear his opinion. Then you report the news and say that you are only transmitting this Israeli officer's opinion, not your own. But this is not true. As a reporter transmitting this Israeli officer's opinion, you are saying he, his country and his country's

army have the legitimate right to do that which they have done. In other words, you are legitimizing the actions and opinions of a country that the Arab region is wary of. This is certainly not "objective" news reporting.

Funnily enough, Al-Jazeera International is much better than Al-Jazeera's Arabic version. The news reported on Al-Jazeera International is more moderate and more objective. It is also more in line with the news reported by other international news agencies. When I was younger, the Jordanian State Media covered a particular international news event. The international media like BBC and CNN also covered it. But when we compared the BBC and CNN coverage with the Jordanian State Media's, we discovered that the Jordanian State Media relayed that event like a dramatic soap opera. The Jordanian State Media does this because it seeks to manipulate public opinion.

It remains to be seen whether the events in Syria are manipulated for good or for ill. This does not mean I support Bashar Al-Assad. I do not. I am simply advising you not to be so naïve as to think he is actually ruling Syria. He is just a puppet there. There are many puppet masters in Syria like Al-Assad's brother, his uncle and even his wife. He has started to distance himself from his puppet masters, but it is already too late for that. The state media of Syria claims its reports of the uprisings and violence in the country captures the injustice that is happening to people. However, the Syrian state media and Al-Jazeera do so to cover up the fact that they have constantly failed to report the injustice faced by the Kurds in Syria.

As Viola pointed out earlier, there are many female activists in the Arab region and they are still actively fighting for women's rights. However, Al-Jazeera does not pay attention to these women's movements. Al-Jazeera also praises Iraq as a state thriving on a Western form of democracy, but the actual situation in Iraq is very different. Iraq is no different from a cake that is sliced up by many different powers. Instead of highlighting the current socio-political plight of Iraq, Al-Jazeera's Arabic news chooses to report the violence in some other part of the region. Al-Jazeera International might be slightly better than Al-Jazeera Arabic, but not very much. For example, Al-Jazeera is trying to sway public opinion into believing the Qatari Prince is the leader of the Arabs. That is quite untrue, I tell you. I think Al-Jazeera waxes lyrical on the Qatari Prince so as to completely sideline the state of women's rights in Qatar. Women in Qatar are very

oppressed and treated as nonentities, but Al-Jazeera does not report this. The system of tacit hypocrisy practised by the governments of the region means that Al-Jazeera cannot criticize the system in Qatar or the form of democracy there.

### **İpek İlkkaracan's closing remarks**

It is now time to call the proceedings to a close. I suggest we continue this fascinating discussion outside. There is a reception waiting for us, I think. Thank you, KAGIDER and KAS for organizing this workshop. Thank you, participants, for your invaluable contributions. We obviously need to network more so as to foster better exchanges. We also need an independent media network run by women. But we will talk more about this outside.

## CONCLUSION

As the organizers of the Regional Meeting on Women's Empowerment in the Economic, Social and Political Transformation of the Middle East, we have learnt much from the insightful contributions of our esteemed panellists and their in-depth discussions as to the strategic manoeuvres for women's empowerment in the social transformation of the region. We conclude that the period following the series of uprisings, collectively known as the Arab Spring, is a crucial one for new governments and women's organizations alike due to the burgeoning influence of Islamic circles.

As may be seen from the proceedings of the workshop, the current process is one where concerns are voiced without the implementation of any definitive judgement. This condition of 'indefiniteness' holds a lot of potential opportunities for both new governments and women's organizations. The concerns voiced can create a positive roadmap of change for the new governments and the women of the region. There are also many opportunities for Islamic governments because conditions are ripe for them to dispel all previous suspicions against them regarding democracy, freedom, human rights and women's rights. Likewise, women's organizations must seize the initiative to prove that the revolutionary fer-

four of women in the Arab world is not temporary and that the women of the region can bring about institutionalized change.

The first step forward for women's empowerment in the region involves a clear definition of the regional, local and subjective problems of women, as well as the acceptance and recognition of these problems by the decision makers of the new governments. As political institutions must be actively engaged at this initial stage in order for women's issues to be taken seriously, women's organizations should not keep a distance from the decision making processes and legal structuring. From Serbia's and India's struggle for women's rights, we can see that open cooperation with the state and its institutions is as essential as women actively addressing their concerns to traditional and religious actors. Women's movements, therefore, have to be very flexible, for they have to deal with the state and its instruments on the one hand, and their societies' traditionalist and religious actors on the other.

Furthermore, a sine qua non for creating an effective pro-woman lobby in legal and political processes is the strengthening of dialogue among women's organizations. The poor relationship between women activists, who define themselves as Islamist, Muslim, secular, unreligious, Christian, feminist etc., is the most serious potential obstacle to the development of a common strategy for women's empowerment and the continued progress of change in the post-revolution period. Thus, the most significant conclusion of this workshop is as follows: The more women talk amongst themselves, the more concepts become common; and when these concepts are rendered common, identities will gradually be open to transformation. For instance, the different visions and identities of the experts and academicians in this workshop did not prevent them from agreeing that reducing women's rights in the Arab region to issues like polygamy, the veil and the right to inheritance only attenuates the struggle for women's equality. Likewise, the panellists and discussants agree that the media has displayed an enormous selectivity against women when covering news of women's situation and their standing in the Arab Spring.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that the Arab world's post-revolutionary transformation is dependent on a strong and unifying policy recognizing the differences and diversities of the people as well as the differences and diversities of its women. Unifying strategies that do not overlook pluralism

must be followed at the level of the state, political parties and women's organizations respectively. This is the only ways through which 'spring' may truly be brought to the Arab region.



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