



**Women's Foreign Policy Group
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Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East

Amanda Ellis: Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. It's wonderful to welcome you here to the World Bank Group. My name is Amanda Ellis. I'm the Lead Specialist, Gender and Development, here at the Bank. We're absolutely delighted on two counts to be here. First of all, the very exciting book launch. Isobel Coleman is brilliant, as you all know, and I've had the benefit of reading the manuscript in advance and think this is just an absolutely fabulous publication so I'm sure you're all going to very much enjoy reading it. And secondly, we're delighted to partner again with our good friends from the Women's Foreign Policy Group and we have with us today Patricia Ellis, who is the co-founder and the driving force behind this wonderful group. Today is Chatham House rules for the Q&A, so clearly we want to have an interesting, engaging discussion and so Isobel has agreed to answer all your questions but the rules are that what gets discussed in this room stays in this room. I would please ask everybody to turn off your cell phones in advance of us starting and just make sure that you have drinks and you get settled before we actually begin the presentation. I look forward to chatting with some of you afterwards and we give a very warm welcome here to the World Bank and to this joint presentation with the Women's Foreign Policy Group. It's now my honor to introduce Patricia, who will set the scene for today and provide introductory remarks for our guest of honor, Isobel Coleman. Thank you.

Patricia Ellis: Thank you everyone and good afternoon. Thank you so much, Amanda. It's great to be back here and to be partnering again. We had a great time the last time and this one has been a long time in coming. We were all excited when we heard about Isobel's book and so it is really great to have Isobel, who is a senior fellow for US Foreign Policy Council on Foreign Relations. As you know, her new book, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East*. Always a timely topic and we were chatting before and Isobel said that this is the fruit of so much work. She was writing it for two years but for many years gathering all kinds of material, both here and through her many trips to the region. So we're so glad you could all be with us today. It's also a special occasion for the Women's Foreign Policy Group. Right now we're celebrating our fifteenth anniversary [*Applause.*] and that's really exciting so I'm glad that we have such a great turnout today. It's a real tribute to our speaker and

to the topic. We have really a great group from across the international affairs field including a number of diplomats here with us today and so we are just super pleased.

So as Amanda said, I'm Patricia Ellis, I'm President of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We promote women's leadership, women's voices on pressing issues of the day in our international issues programs. One of our most popular series is the Author Series. Our most recent program was with Deborah Amos of NPR who had written a book about the displacement of the Sunnis from Iraq, and it was extremely interesting. And then we hold Celebrating Women Leaders luncheons and Behind the Headlines, which are benefits and big events.

It's now my great pleasure to introduce Isobel Coleman. At the Council, she focuses on the Middle East and South Asia, where she directs the Women in Foreign Policy program there. She has many areas of expertise, from democratization, civil society, economic development, education, regional gender issues, and microfinance. She is a prolific writer who has an article in *Foreign Affairs* this month. She has been published in many publications—in addition to *Foreign Affairs: Foreign Policy*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, and the Huffington Post. I just wanted to give you some highlights of her very impressive career. After Isobel speaks, we'll go into Q&A and anyone who is not sitting at this table, please come up to one of the mikes here so that you can join in the conversation and after that, Isobel will be available to sign her book. So please join me in welcoming Isobel Coleman. [*Applause.*]

Isobel Coleman: First of all, thank you all so much for coming here today for this lunch and special thanks to Amanda Ellis for hosting this event here at the World Bank and also to Pat for co-hosting this. This is really an honor and a treat for me to be here. There are many people in this room with tremendous expertise on this subject and so I thought it would be best to speak briefly for about 10 minutes just to give you a sense of what the book is about and then do more Q&A, because I'd really love to hear from all of you. I know from looking around the room that there are people here who have been working on these issues in a variety of different capacities over the years, so I think it could be a very rich conversation.

Let me just describe what this book is about. It's about the effort of women, particularly—but not only women, men too—in what I call the greater Middle East—so the book also includes Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, not just the Arab world, but the greater Middle East—to pursue their rights and to gain a higher status in society in an environment which—as all of you know—includes a very rising and strenuous form of political Islam today, which over the years has equated women's rights and women in the public sphere in a variety of different capacities as being anti-cultural, as being Western, as being feminist, as being Communist, and as being anti-Islamic. And there are very brave and courageous secular feminists who, for decades, have pushed these issues. But they have had limited success outside of a core, narrow, liberal, urban elite. Today there is a new generation of women, and men, who are saying this is an urgent issue for us, not just from a human rights perspective, not just from a social perspective, but from an economic perspective, and we have to find a way to reconcile a more public productive role for women in society with our culture and our religion. And actually, when you read the texts, it's really not hard to do. That's what they're saying and that's what they're doing.

I really need to give a little shout-out to the World Bank here because when I started—and I’m really a development economist by background, I’m not a gender person, I didn’t start out as a gender person at all, and I’ve somehow ended up writing a book on gender issues—I really came to this issue through economics. Because when you look at the Middle East and you account for wealth and income levels, the role of women in the Middle East is less than what it should be on so many different measures, be it literacy, be it political participation, or be it economic participation. It is both a cause and a symptom of many of the problems in the region, but primarily economic issues too. So while this has been seen very much in social human rights and political terms, it’s also very crucially an economic issue, and the World Bank has done tremendous research documenting and showing that. When I travel around the region, I meet with local parents and local villages and they get this issue in an economic sense, and I meet with heads of state and leaders at the cabinet level and they relate to this issue in an economic sense. Somebody was just here talking about doing a program in Tunisia and the program is really focused on an economic opportunity for women. This same program they thought about doing in Algeria and they somehow caught wind of it and thought because Vital Voices was involved that it was going to end up being about domestic abuse and didn’t want it to happen. But economics is safer ground. But at the end of the day, pushing for the economic opportunities drives so much of the other social change. What you see around the region are women and men arguing—within an Islamic framework—for those economic rights and opportunities and also, by the way, for legal rights and opportunities and political and social rights and opportunities. But they often will lead with the economics because it’s easier to get men and even conservative women on your side when you’re trying to push it from that perspective.

So what is driving the change? I’m just going to give you a couple of different drivers. One is rising female education. We know in the Middle East—the World Bank has told us all along—that the Middle East has lagged in terms of educating women. We know it has imposed an economic toll on the region. The Middle East did not close its gender gaps in education as quickly as the Far East did after World War II. In 1945, education levels for women in the Far East—Japan, Taiwan, Korea—were very similar to female educational levels in the Middle East. But that part of the world closed them very rapidly; the Middle East did not. So we know that they have lagged. But that gap is closing—slowly, maybe too slowly—but it is closing. All across the region you’ve seen gains in female literacy and higher levels of education to the point where now women outnumber men at the secondary school level in several countries and at the college level in multiple countries—in Jordan, in Iran, 70% of college graduates are women, in Saudi Arabia, 63% of college graduates are women. So the result of this is that you have a much more educated group of women today than ever before and they are saying, “What are we going to do with our education? We want to be able to have a productive life—be it civil society, be it in politics, be it in business.” They are also reading the texts for themselves; they are engaging with religion in a way that women really traditionally have not done in the past. You have always had women who have engaged in religion, but not in this broad-based way that is happening today. So you have a combination of things that are happening because of rising levels of education.

Another driver is the anachronism between the way the women and men live their life today in general and these sharia-based rules that are imposed on them legally and socially. There’s a gap

and women are questioning why that gap needs to exist and whether that interpretation of sharia is the only interpretation of sharia. So you see that happening too.

The third thing is media. I'm sure all of you have seen the reports of the very conservative extremist thinking that's on the internet and on satellite Arab television. We have the case now of Al-Awlaki, who was the American-born preacher in Yemen whose views on jihad and extremist views have inspired a whole rash of terrorist acts. But what you don't hear so much about are the other group of Muslim televangelists who are very popular in the Middle East and are—in a spectrum—actually quite progressive on a lot of these women's issues. In particular, with the rise of al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya and NBC in the Middle East, you've had a whole new genre of shows, like the Arabic version of *The View*, where you have women sitting around talking about women's issues in a very profoundly different way than had been experienced before. It's interesting because 55% of viewers are men who watch these shows because they really haven't had a chance to experience and discuss in a public way a lot of these issues that touch their lives very directly, be it because of their wives, their sisters, their mothers, or their daughters. On the show, you have things discussed like polygamy, incest, divorce and custody—very sensitive subjects that have been taboo for forever really in that part of the world. I describe in my book a very popular call-in show led by a woman named Dr. Heba Kotb, who describes herself as a “sexpert.” She talks very openly. She's very conservatively dressed—hijab, the whole bit, tied tightly—on her show, but she talks all about sex and what goes and what doesn't go. You watch it, you'd never describe her as a liberal—she condemns homosexuality, she wouldn't really fly here on American television—but she brings out into the open questions like sex in a country like Egypt, where studies show that 85% of Egyptian women have been cut with FGM so that they won't take pleasure from sex—that's the whole idea behind cutting. So you have these cross-cultural currents going on that I think we don't even begin to understand.

The last thing that I'm going to talk about is extremism and terrorism and I think that is partly a driver of this because you have leaders across the region who are making a connection in their own minds between extremist views on women and extremism in general. The King of Morocco—you know Morocco is a hotbed of extremism, a relatively liberal, progressive, North African Arab country—is a progressive king and yet it's the number one source of terrorists in Western Europe. Morocco experienced its own terrorism and after that there was sort of a full-court press: what can we do in our own country—in Morocco—to combat terrorism? One of the things that the King helped push through—which had been in the works for a while—was the idea of creating female preachers, mourchidat, who can do everything except preach Friday prayer in the mosque. Very explicitly this is seen as a way to try and combat extremism in the poor communities—in Casablanca, in Fez, in all the cities around—that are breeding a lot of the terrorist and extremist actions. Whether or not this will work I don't know, but the idea behind it is that if we have women have a more public role in society, and be able to address men and women's real-life concerns on a day-to-day basis, that it will help tamper the extremist ideology that's floating around out there. Other countries have done this too. Morocco, but now Turkey, Qatar, and Egypt—a lot of them are trying to train women as religious leaders in their local communities, so it's not just Morocco.

Last two things that I'm just going to wrap up with. What role do men play in this process? A very, very important role. Men have, for over decades and over a century, been thinking about

this issue of what is the appropriate role of women in our Islamic society and have been coming out with very different answers. But men have been very much engaged in the intellectual questions and pursuit of this topic and men are very important in terms of providing, from a religious perspective, legitimacy to the actions and to the direction that the women are pushing in. Carol Yost is at the end of the table. Carol introduced me, some years ago, to an Islamic scholar in Indonesia who is known fondly as “Gender Kyai” because he’s so beloved by the women there for his very progressive interpretations of Islam that the women use to justify why they should be allowed to do certain things in society. In the Middle East, too, and even in a place like Saudi Arabia, there are winds of change stirring. In Saudi Arabia, the King opened a university, King Abdullah University for Science and Technology, a \$10 billion university, where he allowed the co-education of men and women for the first time, side by side. One of the senior clerics on the official ulama came out with a fatwa saying that this mixing of the sexes was against Islam and issued a fatwa against it and the King fired him. So he has taken a stand on this. Other clerics have come out and issued much harsher denunciations of the mixing and they have been allowed in the press to be sort of denigrated for this extremist crazy fatwa thinking, whereas the king has now elevated the voices of more moderate clerics in society who have issued their own fatwas saying, “no, the mixing is not against Islam, it can happen, it should happen, it should proceed.”

And again, I come right back to the beginning of where I started, why are they doing this? I think they’re doing this for a number of reasons. One is they’re aware of extremist thinking in their own society, they have been a victim of it. They understand the economics of this too. Saudi Arabia is now investing a huge amount in women’s education. The biggest building project currently in the Middle East is Princess Noura University for 40,000 women, which is being built on the outskirts of Riyadh. I was just there in January. It’s astounding: every crane that used to be in Dubai is now there building this university. But what’s going to happen with all these educated women? They understand that in a way, it’s like King Canute, you can’t keep back this tide, and unless you can find a way to reconcile tradition and religious tradition and culture with this changing role for women, there are just going to be bigger and bigger problems. So I’m going to wrap up there and take your questions. Thank you.

Patricia Ellis: Thank you. I’m going to take the chair’s prerogative to open it up, and I would just ask you to reflect on a few different things. One is generational differences. There’s such variety in the vast regions that you’re talking about. Is it our generational difference that is the key variable or what are the other differences from culture to culture, country to country? And then, related to that, I wanted you to talk a little bit about the linkage amongst women’s groups across many different countries. The Sisters in Islam started in Malaysia and they decided the way to combat things is to learn their own religion and to study the Quran so they could counter laws, and then in Morocco, they were able to pass the family law and that becomes a model. So I’m wondering if you could talk about the interconnections. And then, in terms of men, what I’m interested in is in terms of these Islamic feminists, what efforts are they making to bring men into the fold? You talked about men who were supporters but how is that working in terms of the relationship between these new groups?

Ms. Coleman: First, on the generational differences. I think one of the interesting conundrums of the Middle East is that today’s young generation is more conservative than their parents and

more religious, much more religious. You see young women wearing hijab when their mothers didn't. So this young generation is growing up in a much more outwardly religious environment—outwardly pious and outwardly politically religious—much more so than their parents' generation. So this gives urgency to the question: how are women's rights going to progress in this environment? People say to me, "Islamic feminism? First of all, it's an oxymoron, and secondly, we should just have feminism, you know, Western secular feminism" and I say, "Gosh, have you been to Afghanistan? Have you been to Saudi? Have you been to Iran?" These are theocracies, and in a theocracy, secular feminism has a role, but it's a pretty limited one today and I don't really see secularism as the aspiration for this young generation. They look at secularism and they reject it for a whole variety of reasons. They want their own way. Now, some then say to me, "Oh, well, could this third way be a way for us to integrate Muslims in Canada or in Western Europe?" And I say, "No, we've got a secular system, keep it that way." But in a place like Saudi Arabia or Iran—I mean Iran is a theocracy, Saudi Arabia is a monarchy based on a theocracy. Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan have quasi-secular systems, but sharia is right there, central, in the constitution. And regardless, the public—your average guy on the street—they're very outwardly religious. So it gives a tremendous sense of urgency to this fundamentally economic question, social question, and political question about the role of women in society.

In terms of linkages, that's a really interesting question and at the end of the book, I do talk about—well all through the book—how these linkages are happening. I was in Afghanistan some years ago and I went to watch a democracy training session and I thought, "that's quite quixotic in Afghanistan today, teaching women about their rights." Actually the woman running it, Sakena Yacoobi, as some of you may have run across, she says to me, "you know we're not really teaching democracy, we're teaching Islam, we're teaching the women their rights within Islam. Because when you talk about human rights and democracy, it kind of goes over people's heads. But what we're really doing is teaching them their rights within Islam." And at the end of this, she says, "you know, I'm using a process that was developed in Washington." I said, "Really? Tell me about that." It came from the Women's Learning Partnership, which is a small NGO here in Washington. Some of you may know Mahnaz Afkhami, who started it. They take passages from the Quran and create a whole manual. When they're trying to teach different components of rights and democracy, they really base it all on passages from the Quran. They then translate it into a local language—in this case it was Dari in Afghanistan—and then the women, they use it to teach. You come out in the same place, but you're just using a different language, basically.

There are lots of other examples. Pat, when you talked about the moudouana reform in Morocco, it was very much a top-down, from a liberal king, who helped drive it, bottom-up grassroots campaign that had a whole million-signature campaign behind it that got average Moroccan men and women involved and really focused on the Islamic justifications for the changes in the family law. And when the reform of the moudouana was passed in 2004, it got a lot of press and a lot of attention. It was written up in *Zanan*, which is one of the women's magazines in Iran, and the women in Iran read it and said, "that's what we need to do" and they started their own million-signature campaign. Here we are, four years later. The women who started have all been imprisoned—they've all been in and out of prison—but they are indefatigable, these women, and they're determined. They have several hundred thousand signatures—they haven't gotten a

million, but they're operating under much more repressive circumstances—and they've had some very high-profile people sign their petition, including Ayatollah Khomeini's grandson, plus a number of senior clerics.

That brings me to my third question, which is about men and getting the men involved. Now let's just be clear on the term "Islamic feminism." I use it in the book to describe what is going on, which is using Islam to promote women's rights. But the people I describe as Islamic feminists, very few of them would actually like the term—I say that in the book—for a variety of reasons. Some of them are just feminists who are using Islam as a tactic to promote what they're doing and they don't want to be known as Islamic feminists, others are really people of deep faith and conservative piety and they don't like the feminism part, and a lot of them are men and they don't want to be called Islamic feminists, but that is really what they're doing. But interestingly, the ones who most outwardly call themselves "Islamic feminists" are men. I think it's because they feel more comfortable; they're more confident of their role in society and able to do it. The women feel very insecure and they don't use this term. But regardless, the women feel that it's very important to get men involved. In the million signature campaign in Iran, the women have really gone out to the clerics to get their support, to get their involvement. It's been slow going, but actually, I think the events of last June, where the regime really broke trust with the clerics in some respects, has caused shifts. You've seen some of the clerics become much more outspoken against the regime and for the women. There's a real nexus of issues. In Morocco, we talked about the reform of the moudowanna. The women really worked aggressively to get the clerics behind them, to issue religious edicts, to issue fatwas, that said that what they were promoting for these changes was at least not against Islam and was consistent with Islam. I give an example in Iraq about the women's groups operating in the chaotic post-conflict Iraq—really wasn't post-conflict, but post-war Iraq—and how their public space was closing dramatically with the rise of Shi'a militias and Sunni fundamentalist groups. These women were now having acid thrown on them if they weren't fully covered in abayas and people were coming around and saying, "you're not allowed out of your home, you're not allowed to work." One of the women's groups went to Ayatollah Sistani and said, "we're being told this, is that right?" and Sistani issued a fatwa in support of the women saying, "No, this is not right. You are allowed to work outside your home. You are allowed to vote, in fact it's your duty to vote." So again, men have been very important and getting the men on board has been a very important tactic for the women.

[Q&A continued off the record.]

Patricia Ellis: Isobel, thank you so much. This has been wonderful. Now Isobel will sign the book. Also, thank you again, Amanda, for having us here. It was a great partnership once again. Thank you all for coming. We look forward to seeing you soon.