



**Beyond the Headlines Panel  
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May Kosba, Atlas Corp Civic Health Fellow  
Sanja Kelly, Senior Researcher and Managing Editor, Freedom House  
Charles Dunne (Moderator), Senior Program Manager for MENA, Freedom House

***Women's Political Participation in the Middle East: The Changing Political Landscape***

**Diana Villiers Negroponte:** I want to welcome you all to Freedom House and to the Women's Foreign Policy Group, two organizations which share so much in common, but this is the first meeting in which the two organizations come together on an issue which affects directly both the role of women and the turbulence of Middle East, North Africa. We have a wonderful panel today, but I do want to just let you know of other events which are occurring next week—a meeting of the Women's Foreign Policy Group with the Ambassador of Pakistan. I want you to bring your sharpest, most discerning questions to that meeting. And then on July 13<sup>th</sup>, a big meeting on Africa, investment, trade at the Embassy of Zambia. So, please, lots of events happening there.

And Lisa, you're going to share with us perhaps events which are also happening with Freedom House. And of course, this is our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary and October 26, we have a gala dinner at the Newseum in which we want to launch new initiatives for Freedom House and sustain our ongoing commitment for freedom of the press, freedom of association, and democratic principles throughout the realm. I'm very pleased that you're all here today. I believe that this is a critical issue, because if we do not support the women going forward, post the first revolutions in Tahrir Square, into the drafting of the Constitutions and the provisional governments, we are letting important people down. So I'm looking forward to it and Lisa, I know you want to say a few words.

**Lisa Davis:** On behalf of Freedom House, let me welcome you here. I see many new faces that I haven't met before, so I hope you'll have a chance to get to know Freedom House and our staff. And I want to thank the Women's Foreign Policy Group, and Diana Negroponte in particular, for inviting us to participate and develop the ideas for this important discussion. So thank you so much. Diana is also a member of Freedom House's Board of Trustees, and she's quite dedicated and very engaged in our work. Not only has she helped as a Board member define our strategic vision here at Freedom House and to extend our relationships here in the US and abroad, but she's kept a keen interest on the issues in our mandate at Freedom House, which is to promote democracy and fundamental freedoms. And Diana's been very supportive in meeting and engaging with the very activists that we work with around the world by traveling to some of our project sites and also hosting activists here in the US. And so I want to thank you Diana for all the many years and very keen support that you've given to Freedom House, and thanks for this opportunity to work together.

As Diana mentioned, we're celebrating our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and what I wanted to celebrate here today are some of our key women founders of Freedom House, starting with Eleanor Roosevelt. Many of you know her for many reasons, but she was the drafter and the initiator of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But we also had some other great women founders, Helen Hayes being one of them—a very renowned actress, stage actress and movie actress, but also a great activist in the 1940s and beyond. As well, Virginia Gildersleeve. She was the president of Barnard College. She was one of our founders. And Dorothy Thompson, syndicated columnist, and she was Freedom House's president back in 1944. We've also, along with these female founders, we've had some great women leaders

throughout history working with Freedom House. Our Freedom House president in the 1970s, President of our Board was Senator Margaret Chase Smith, a very liberal Republican and such a vocal opponent of McCarthyism that Senator McCarthy dubbed her “Moscow Maggie.” [*Laughter.*] But she was a very powerful force within Freedom House. These women along with the men that founded and led Freedom House, all have been strong and vocal activists for our mandate, supporting our mandate and mission, which is: expanding democracy around the world and supporting those front-line democracy activists who are doing so.

In today’s event, we hope to share with you a fundamental aspect of promoting democracy in the Middle East and North Africa, and that is the role of women in these movements, and we’re going to look at what women have to gain in these transitions and what they risk as possible losses in these changing times. Freedom House has tracked and analyzed the state of political rights and civil liberties throughout the world for the last 39 years, through our “Freedom in the World” report. And within that report, we look at the state of gender equality as one of the key factors. For the Middle East and North Africa, we produced a much more focused analytical survey called “Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa.” We produced it in 2005, and then we’ve updated it recently and published that analysis last year in March of 2010. One of our panelists, Sanja Kelly, is the managing editor of that and she’s going to share with you some of those key findings to give us some context. Along with our research, we’re advocating for women’s rights and women’s roles—most recently, a year ago at the UN General Assembly, where we launched our report and we remained active in the region as well as the UN on these issues.

But also we have a number of programs throughout the Middle East and North Africa that support democracy activists, and among those activists are women, and one of the speakers today, May Kosba, is part of this community and a part of the community we’ve been engaging with our training and support. We also have specific programs in the Gulf and in Jordan that have looked at how to change women’s legal rights through their personal status code and domestic violence legislation and the rest. But without further delay, let me turn it over to one of our newest members of the Freedom House staff, Charles Dunne. Charles Dunne comes to us with a career focused on the Middle East, not only Egypt, Israel as well as Iraq, but he has worked with a number of government agencies as well as most recently at a think-tank. So we’re fortunate to have Charles join us and give us new leadership on the Middle East team. And I’ll turn it over to you, Charles.

**Charles Dunne:** Thank you very much Lisa, and thank you too, Diana. Again, I would like to reiterate my personal thanks for the Women’s Foreign Policy [Group] co-hosting this very interesting event on an aspect of the political upheavals in the region that I don’t think has gotten really quite enough attention, especially in its implications kind of for the political future of the region. Again, my name is Charles Dunne. I’m the new Senior Program Manager for the Middle East and North Africa here. I did spend 24 years in the State Department, so now I have a wonderful opportunity to see how these issues are viewed and worked by the NGO community. And I’m very, very happy to be here.

Let me start by talking a little bit, very briefly, about the Arab Spring and what is at stake. And this is a big question here in the foreign policy commentariat and among US policy-makers, and certainly in Congress. And for many in the Washington conversation, the Arab Spring is all about regional stability. It’s about US-Arab relations. It’s about the future of the Middle East peace process. It’s about how we can possibly maintain a united front against Iraq. In other words, it’s broad questions of international relations. But in my view, that’s not what’s at stake for peoples of the region. What it really means for them is that their countries are finally coming to terms with the kind of future they want to have and the kind of societies they want to be. Justice, dignity, political empowerment—all of these are at play in a variety of ways. Now some countries are experiencing relatively peaceful transitions as they try to grapple with these issues in the context of politically re-making their countries. Others face violence and repression. But for the Arab people, all of these revolutions are first and foremost about the nature of the social order. Now, one of the more fascinating aspects in all of this is the extent to which women have played a very important, and even a galvanizing, political role. Now, while it’s difficult to quantify,

women took to the streets in Egypt and Tunisia in unprecedented numbers, sharing the same physical and political space as men, largely without fear for their personal safety. Prominent women's voices are being heard elsewhere too, from human rights bloggers in Bahrain to demonstrators in Yemen to motorists in Saudi Arabia. Women have been asserting their right to sit at the same table with men as political efforts to re-shape their countries have been hashed out. Now in Tunisia for example, the commission responsible for planning the elections has voted for parity between men and women on the candidate lists, a decision that was welcomed by all the parties, including Ennahda, the leading Islamic political party. All of this has raised hopes that women may benefit from the upheaval by extending their personal and political rights through laws and constitutions as well as, and even more importantly, through lasting changes in social attitudes.

But women have also paid the price for this new political freedom, through gender-based violence and repressive reactions from governments. This has taken many forms. And in Libya and in Egypt for example, you've seen incidents of so-called "virginity tests" of female protestors. You've had mob attacks on female protestors in both Egypt and Tunisia, including one on International Women's Day. The Syrian government has really clamped down on female activists that have come within their grip. And Bahrain, an otherwise friendly state to the United States, is accused of clamping down on female protestors and going a bit farther, arresting members of their families to put additional political pressure on them to stay silent. In addition, in the transition to democracy, many women fear not only a failure to extend their rights and their protections but actually losing the rights that they once enjoyed. Here, the fear of Islamist movements coming to power in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia and elsewhere is very much prevalent, but not only among women, I should point out. Of course, it's among many members, men as well, and many members of the political classes. Legal protections for women, such as Tunisia's 1957 Code of Personal Status, are now up for debate. This particular code is widely renowned, both in the region and in the West, for being very secular and very modern. And in Egypt there's concern that legal protections for women could be eroded as debates over the constitution and other legal reforms take shape. One example here is that Egypt has now formally dropped the quota for the number of women legislators who must be present in the lower house of parliament. Now this could be re-instated but it is no longer there—something of concern, I'm sure, for many people.

So, many challenges clearly lie ahead and where will all this lead? Well, fortunately I don't have to answer these questions for you. [Laughter.] We have some very renowned experts to do that for us. Sanja Kelly is a senior researcher and managing editor at Freedom House. She specializes in women's rights in the Arab world and in Internet freedom. She served as the project director for the Survey of Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa. And to my left, May Kosba is an Egyptian activist and freelance writer who specializes in women's rights and bridging cultural gaps. During the revolution, she was focused on online activism and support of the demonstrators in Tahrir Square. She currently works as a Civic Health Fellow at the National Conference on Citizenship with Atlas Corp, an international network of non-profit leaders and organizations. So I would like to turn this over now, first to Sanja for her remarks and then we'll turn to May for focusing a bit on the situation in Egypt, and then we will open it to questions and discussion. Thank you.

**Sanja Kelly:** Thank you, Charles. As we have all witnessed in recent months, political change and turmoil have engulfed the Arab world. Regimes were toppled in places like Tunisia and Egypt, and protests have surfaced in places ranging from Iraq and Algeria to Bahrain and Kuwait. So as different stakeholders in these different countries start to discuss how their societies can embrace democracy and freedom, one thing needs to be clear; no country can be a democracy if it mistreats half of its population. No country can be a democracy if its women suffer from discrimination in most aspects of life.

So in order to provide a detailed look at some of the main challenges and conditions faced by women in the Middle East, as well as to provide some context on how to best support the women's rights movement as we go forward, I was asked to present the key findings of the study of women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa that Freedom House published last year. This study was truly

extraordinary because it was a collaborative effort of over 40 researchers, all of them from the region. They were researchers, scholars, journalists, front-line activists who very often put themselves in danger by doing research, interviewing government officials and really being there on the front line when it came to these issues. The final output of the project is actually this 600-page book, which provides the trajectory in terms of women's rights, particularly over the last five years since the first edition of this project was published. What it contains is, in addition to the summary chapter, it actually has chapters for every country in the region. So a person who reads it can really get the trajectory as well as the main conditions in terms of women's rights throughout the region.

Something that Freedom House is very [well] known for, in addition to analysis, are the country ratings. So what we have done is that we have scored each country based on a set of indicators ranging from political rights and political representation to economic rights. We have evaluated and then coded family laws and so forth in order to be able to really demonstrate the diversity that women's rights across the region face. Something that is very important to understand at the outset is that there is so much diversity in terms of how women experience life throughout the region. And I know when I speak to a lot of different audiences, whether that be policy-makers or journalists or others here in the United States, very often there's this perception that women throughout the region are uniformly under-educated, they're very isolated and so forth, and I think that perception has been changing a little bit since the beginning of this year. Nevertheless, I think there's this general perception, which is actually true in some places, but really not the case in others. So, based on our research and based on these indicators we had collected, this is the very snapshot in terms of how countries compare to one another.

So as you will see on one end of the spectrum are countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, which are the most progressive in terms of women's rights, and then on the other end of the spectrum are places such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iran, which are the most oppressive when it comes to gender issues. In Tunisia for example, women have gained rights which other women in the region are still struggling, and they had gained those rights decades ago. So for example, women in Tunisia had gained the right to vote in 1957, which is actually several years before some European countries granted female suffrage. Also, in 1958, women in Tunisia obtained the right for free education on par with boys. And this really stepped up women's education and progress that happened through the decades. Unlike is the case in most of the other countries in the region, actually polygamy is prohibited in Tunisia. So this is something where really Tunisia is set apart. But then with that said, women still suffer from discrimination because Tunisia is still a very patriarchal country, and there are still many laws that clearly disadvantage women and this is where we actually see the future of the women's rights movement going. For example, when it comes to inheritance laws, women in Tunisia still inherit half of what men inherit, even though they might be, or they are, of equal relations to the deceased.

On the other end of the spectrum is a place like Saudi Arabia. Gender segregation in Saudi Arabia is very strictly enforced. So Saudi Arabia is the only country in the region that prohibits women from driving—in fact, it's the only country in the world where women are not allowed to drive. Saudi Arabia also is the only country in the region where women are not allowed to vote, and also if you're a woman in Saudi Arabia, you cannot travel either internally or abroad if you don't have explicit and written permission from your male guardian. If you attempt to do that, you will actually be returned from the border in the same fashion, for example, that you and I would be returned if there was something wrong with our passport. With that said actually when we compared women's rights in 2004 and 2009, you will see that there is a slight change there. There has been slight improvement, and that's in part because of a very strong and emerging women's rights movement in Saudi Arabia that we've seen strengthening in recent years. So because of their efforts, we've seen several regulations or policies reformed in recent years. For example, women are now able to study law—that wasn't the case before. Also, women now are able to open up businesses without having to present evidence that they had hired a male manager. Again, that was a requirement before. We've seen actually in recent years a flurry of effort and publicity when it comes to the Saudi campaign for the right for women to drive. And it is actually because of these efforts and because women are becoming more clever and more

innovative when it comes to using new technologies that some of these successes are becoming more evident. Our project has identified a very complex set of issues that have to do with the conditions facing women in the region. And, of course, it's not going to come as a surprise to many that women are discriminated [against] in most aspects of life. But with that said, it's also important to acknowledge that there have been several very important improvements. And it is actually in part because of these improvements that we're seeing now more women on the streets, more women demonstrating, and really pushing for their agenda. One thing is that there are more women obtaining education now than ever before. In fact, when we looked at the data and when we compared 2003 and the year 2008, we actually saw increased female literacy rates in every country in the region. And these literacy rates actually represent the entire population. If you particularly looked at girls' literacy rates, many countries have about 90% to 95% girls' literacy rates, which is actually quite promising. One of the big surprises actually comes at the University level. We're seeing in more and more countries, women actually outnumbering men at universities. In some cases they're extreme. For example, in Qatar and in the UAE, women outnumber men almost 2:1 or 3:1, which is actually quite remarkable. For that reason it is not surprising that we're seeing more and more women participating and initiating protests at universities, which we know later on will actually carry in demanding for more rights once they graduate and start working careers.

Another aspect that we saw has to do with increased economic participation. More and more women are obtaining jobs, and that's in part because they're becoming more educated. When we looked at labor force participation rates, we also saw that women's labor force participation has increased over the past decade in 15 out of 18 countries, and this is actually also quite noticeable achievement. The third area actually has to do with political participation. And not only in Saudi Arabia but in other countries, we've seen that women's rights NGOs have started successfully pushing for their agenda. They have started becoming more organized and as a result, good things have started happening. In some of the countries, women's rights organizations were able to push, for example, for gender quota. So for example, what we've seen in Iraq for example is 25% gender quota in the Parliament on the national level and what we've also seen recently in Jordan on local level is also 20% gender quota. With that said, women remain severely underrepresented in formal institutions, and this is something that we will see more in the future as the women's rights movement mobilizes to increase their numbers in this particular aspect.

So with that said, I will briefly outline the key challenges which are particularly important because as women are gaining voice and as they are trying to find their place in these post-revolutionary settings, these issues will really come at the forefront. Number one is that legal and societal discrimination remains widespread. And [the] number one issue when it comes to legal discrimination, it actually has to do with personal status laws, or family laws. So these are the laws that govern family life, so we are here talking about laws that cover marriage, divorce, child custody and so forth. So just to demonstrate the level of discrimination that women face, I think we can look at the worst rules. For example, for men it's extremely easy to get a divorce. In fact, throughout most of the region, a man can just verbally declare three times "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you," and this divorce will be valid. Very often, he doesn't even have to go to court to register this, whereas for a woman it's extremely difficult to obtain a divorce, even in cases of severe domestic violence. Another issue has to do with the worth of women's testimony. Depending on the country, the worth of testimony of two women is actually equal to one man. So in some countries, this is only applicable to Sharia courts; in other countries, more conservative countries, this actually extends to some other civil or perhaps criminal cases, the best example being Saudi Arabia. And obviously this is a huge problem. Although in many aspects, women have been able to achieve some important victories, even with new laws, when they're passed, because the judicial systems and mechanisms that already exist are not working properly, women are not able to enforce those new laws so very often they're not as useful to them. In addition, the culture is such that it really discourages women from seeking justice in courts, so what happens is that most grievances that women have are actually resolved through family members and so forth. So when I spoke to a number of women in the UAE and Jordan, they will say, "Well, you know what, if I actually

even try to complain about domestic violence, this is something that will go through the court system for a number of years and very often it's just not going to get resolved, so what's the point?"

The final issue I want to stress before I turn the mic to my colleague here has to do with domestic violence, which is actually a huge problem. With that said, domestic violence is a problem in most of the world, including here in the US. But something that is very prevalent in the Middle East is the lack of laws protecting women from domestic violence. So apart from Tunisia and Jordan, no country in the region actually has specific laws that criminalize domestic violence, so this is a huge problem. When a woman who's battered actually goes to the police station to complain and to file some sort of charges, very often she's returned to her home because the police will say, "We don't want to get involved" in what is perceived to be a domestic matter. Finally, the issue of so-called "honor killings," which are the most extreme example of violence against women, they still occur, although some countries such as Jordan and Syria have implemented new measures that would actually stiffen the penalties against the perpetrators of such crimes. But honor killings still occur and in fact, according to our research, they are on the rise in places such as the Palestinian territories and Iraq.

With that said, I think women across the region acknowledge that [the] Arab Spring was not about women's rights, but considering that they have participated and voiced their opinions and they rightfully demand their place in the society, and they're hoping that they're not going to be set aside now that, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, the revolution has formally ended. Thank you. [*Applause.*]

**Mr. Dunne:** Okay, thank you very much Sanja, excellent presentation. And now we'll turn to May Kosba.

**May Kosba:** Hello, everyone. This is overwhelming. I really agree with most, if not all, of the things that she said. It's hard to live all of this, but it's even harder to hear it all at once; it's really frustrating. Coming from a background, hearing all of these stories, with too little support from the male community in our societies, I'd like to say something about it because unfortunately our societies, our communities in the region, they claim to be oppressive and their argument is usually we're being religious, we're trying to protect women. It's very important for me to say, as a Muslim right now, I'm telling you, this is totally against religion. I mean, religion does not even encourage to suppress, or oppress women that way. Like for example, when a woman doesn't have a right to own a business, I mean it's even mentioned literally in the Qur'an that women have so many rights granted by religion. If they claim to be religious, this is not religious. In talking about issues of domestic violence, sexual harassment, I remember one time there was a woman who came on television, she complained about one of the guys in the neighborhood. He kept constantly sexually harassing her, and when she went to the police station to report that, the police guy literally said, "I cannot protect you, actually you should seek this guy's protection." Because [of] this guy, I mean, I think they're friends or whatever, I don't know. She had to go back home, and the guy ended up harassing [her] even more and her family. And that's in Egypt, so it's pretty sad.

Today I'm asked to talk about the role of women in the revolution, the upcoming elections, and the importance of the ongoing political reforms and the gains and the losses. These are great questions and overwhelming. Sometimes it's hard to envision what's going to happen in the future but I have to tell you that Egyptian women specifically, they have been fighting for their rights for so long. And it's challenging because when you belong in a masculine society, men are always seeking to be motivated, doing all the work and women just do the simple work, so stay home and get married.

Unfortunately in the past, I think in the past 30 years ago, even 50 years ago, men were more open-minded about women seeking being motivated and being educated we can go out on the street and do whatever we want to do. They were more open-minded in the past than they are today. I believe today there's a rising movement to arranged marriages, for example. People think that arranged marriages are even more secure. They believe that, I think my mother is one of those; she's a firm believer in arranged marriages. She thinks, oh, a lot of failures now, you know, if you find the person by yourself you'll end up divorced. And she brings up examples of failures. And this is a rising movement and

everybody's doing that, which is a challenge for women to seek any progression in the future because now you have to think about your social status. If I'm successful and more intelligent now this means that I can't make a family, because there's a male frustration now with how smart you are, you make money, even more than they do, you travel, you get to manage people, sometimes not a lot of men can get the same opportunities, so now we're talking about a huge gap between men and women, and that's a problem. I think that's one of the main reasons why a lot of the divorces are happening in Egypt. I believe there was a statistic, I think about a couple of years ago, that every five minutes there's a divorce in Egypt and I think it's increasing now. I claim to say that's one of the main reasons is because of the huge, I think, educational gap between men and women or they could be co-educated, they could be doing well, they could be doctors and married to each other, but there's like they're competitive. Men don't like the fact that she's successful, that she can have her own life going on and not giving him or her house enough attention that he expects her to do. So that's one of the challenges.

And one of the best things about the revolution is that women broke a lot of barriers and a lot of taboos. One of them is social curfew. Curfews in Egypt, like for women, for example, if I go out with my friends, hang out with my friends, I have to be back by 11:00. Not because the streets are [un]safe; Egypt is so safe, for the people who've actually been to Egypt before the revolution, it's a very safe place to be. But it's actually not appropriate for a good woman to be outside of the house until 12:00 in the morning, because if you do that, it's easy for me to pick up a reputation, not being a well-behaved woman, young woman. To be out on the street in the revolution, yelling, screaming, doing all the crazy stuff that you've seen on TV, it's so not Egyptian, especially for women. [*Laughter.*] I mean that in a way that this is breaking a barrier. This is, like, taking things to their furthest miles. And I like it because a lot of women have been able to speak out.

The examples that I can remember off the top of my head right now is Nawara Negm, I don't if a lot of you know about her, but she's been aggressive on the television. She's been very blunt about her demands as a woman in wanting—she's been a true Egyptian, a true woman, taking things to the extra mile. I don't know maybe if it's because she has the background. She's the daughter of one of the greatest poet-activists in Egypt, Ahmed Fouad Negm—he's been one of those blunt activists for so long. But she, as a woman, when I listen to her and I see her tweets all the time, I'm amazed by the amount of energy she has and the amount of motivation that she keeps pursuing her demands and her rights to the extra mile.

I have to bring another example. She's a person that I worked with for just a little amount of time—I didn't even work with her, I left the organization and she came after me—she's a pharmacist, a young pharmacist. She actually, I believe she believes in the Muslim Brotherhood, like she's very conservative and everything. She was on the streets all the time. She was involved in the medical units, helping all the injured and the people wounded during the protests to take them to the hospitals. She has a lot of horrific stories about how the police targeted protestors and how they really targeted them and wanted to kill them in fatal places in the body. She didn't even do that when the violence happened in Libya; she went over to Libya to help the Libyans. To me, she's even younger than me. I'm 31, she's like 27. She did that on her own responsibility, going to Libya to help Libyans, not even Egyptians. So that was pretty brave and I can tell this woman has a lot of heart, and she's not the only one.

There are a lot of women out there who protested in different ways. I don't claim to be half as courageous as they are, because during the revolution I was at home. But for the most of you who know that houses were attacked by thugs during the revolution, so we had gunshots constantly in the neighborhoods. I had to stay home. If I go, it's the same situation in Tahrir. Tahrir was surrounded by thugs also, so it was like every entrance you seek, it's like danger lurking in every corner. Before the Internet was cutoff, and on the January 25<sup>th</sup> night, I was like okay that sounds good, you know, people are taking their protests to Tahrir, but you know we usually did that. I never really believed that this was going to turn out to what we were witnessing today, which is amazing. But then when the violence started and people were persistent about it, I was like "Okay, this is going somewhere." And immediately I realized that my role is to keep pushing for this and whoever, because this is my strength.

If I can mobilize people, if I can be a mobilizer, maybe that's my job. And I kept pushing this on Twitter, on Facebook extensively, before the Internet was cut off and after that.

The importance of the ongoing political movement evolution, I think we're—She just said a powerful statement. “No country can be a democracy if it mistreats half of its population.” I think this is important. I mean, women are half of the population. If I cannot speak out, if it's still inappropriate when I'm sexually harassed and I'm too shy to look him in the eye and tell him that this is so wrong and he can't do this, and I can take it to the extra level. If this is inappropriate, I think I cannot talk about political, I cannot talk about freedom, I cannot talk about so many things or equality if I cannot speak out about the simple violations to my very simple human rights and even religion and the tradition are totally against. And what women have to gain, I think, women need to gain respect because the problem is the more you get advanced, the less respectful men are to you because now they give you that look, “Okay you are smart, but I still know your weakness and I can still get to you.” And obviously it's all physical, and sexual harassment is there. So I think what we need right now is respect, and I don't want to say empowerment because empowerment is becoming more of a cliché in a Western—full of Western values that a lot of people in my region are totally against. They think that when you talk about women's empowerment then that means you're going to apply Western values attached to it, forgetting about our background. And that's why I want to say that maybe we want more immunity, maybe by laws that protect our rights. We want power, and power can be in different ways. We want men who believe in the cause to really help us find our way safely because if I'm sexually harassed for example and I don't have a piece of law that really protects my rights and a man who believes in the cause to stand up [to] other men who really believe that I should be home and cooking and doing all the stuff. I don't mind cooking, but I have other things to do as well. [Laughter.] I can do that. In my mind, I think these are the main important things that women should be gaining in the next period and I think we're working on it. What we have to lose right now—again if I have to gain respect then I'm losing respect. I'm losing respect because I'm seeking advancement; I'm trying to be intelligent in a society that does not really give much attention to that.

The most important thing for women right now is still after education, you have to get married. Period. I want to get this out of my way. I can get married whenever I want. Yesterday I was having this discussion with one of the Indian fellows at the fellowship. And she said they are pushing for a law in India that would simply not allow the families to interfere in their children's marriage. I hope that we can get to the day that I can really stop my family from interfering in my love life, really. [Laughter.] So that's really important I think. Second, persistence. Women have been very persistent, but it's very challenging. So I think second to persistence and passion and strong belief in the cause, women need technical guidance.

Now, I think we get education—we're very well-educated—but we don't think strategically on how to take our strife to the next level intelligently. Yes, I can believe in the common values, the international common values of what human rights mean, women's rights, women's empowerment—but how can I apply it in a way that does not come across as a Western value? Because it's always attached to that. And it's always full of conspiracy theories and all that stuff. So how can I apply that in my own setting without being trashed with: “You are Westernized, you are Americanized, you're not Muslim, you're not Egyptian, you're not all of that.” So I think we need more of the technical guidance. We need to be—how to make this fight more visible. Like for example, I keep pointing at sexual harassment because if there's a freedom of association law for example and I still go out on the street celebrating the feast. And I still get a gang of guys, stupid guys, who just walk up to make me feel bad and make my day horrible, I did not do anything. Totally my whole career, my professional career, goes down to the trash because simple acts that they think they're successful at and they know they can do it, just ruins my whole self-esteem as a woman. We need to take the fight to be visible in a way that does not contradict with my values and my traditions.

I know there are a lot of organizations in the US and a lot of people in the US who are really concerned with whatever is going on in the Middle East. Maybe we should think together on how women can take



that forward with consideration to the challenges that really face women when they try to apply. Like for example, the female circumcision. It's one of the taboos. I remember one last year. I was giving a presentation at the British Council to a group of professionals from the UN. They were from different backgrounds. One of them was a PhD student from Chicago. She asked me a question about gay rights: "Where do they stand in Egypt?" To me that was like, "Oh my God, I have not paid attention to such an important topic [as] that after the revolution, it is very much going to come up and no one, I bet you no one, has a good answer to that because there's a lot of things to it. And now I was struggling with a smart answer, like how can I give her a good answer when I'm totally not aware of it. And I realized I had to tell her, well, if you're talking about a society that cannot accept stopping female circumcision, how can you talk about gay rights? And still it's all about the government. If the government wants to talk to the civil society to address that, they will find a way out, a way to it. If they don't want it, then we'll be put all in jail. That's the best they can do.

So I think that there's a lot of topics, there's a lot of challenges, a lot of things that we are willing to take on, the thing is how. And I think this is all about the technical approach that maybe the US can help with that. Maybe the organizations that are interested in the region can help with that, sit down and make a decision together, not for each other, just sit down together and see what we really need because one of the main problems—and I've said that before, and I'll keep saying it—it's good to always be able to support financially and emotionally and everything, and I think the US has done a great job in the past years helping a lot of countries in the region get somewhere. Maybe it's one of the main reasons why the Arabs right now are claiming their rights. Now they feel confident that they can do it and because maybe they've had enough of the double standard politics and all that. I think it's about time to map the needs of the people in the region, like every country, people what do they want and how can we channel that, how can we guide that? I think that this is very important, instead of just throwing out money and then for the most reputable organizations, yes a lot of organizations have done a great job but is that what Egypt needs? Is that what Tunisia needs? Is that what Saudi Arabia needs? We need to ask this question, "What do they need?", so that we put the right person and the right dollar in the right place.

Elections. I was just talking to a friend this morning who's actually concerned with the status of the elections. I asked, "How's that going?" He's like, "No clue." It's in September, but it's not something that you can put into words. I don't even know about the candidates because some people keep going up and down in the picture. I know about the presidency, the candidates for running for president. One of them is a woman, Buthayna Kamel, and they call her a lunatic, a retard, because she's one of those activists who really rose during the revolution. She's been in the media profession for so long that no one has really seen her significance until the revolution. And now she's taking it to running for president, which is really brave of her, but she's the only person.

I don't know what else I should cover, but as I've said before, I think it takes two hands to clap. On one side, it takes men in my country to believe in the cause, and I believe there's a lot of feminist men in my country who believe in the cause who are really helping, but we need laws. There are so many things that we cannot really talk about unless we see how the Constitution is going to turn out to be, how the elections are going to turn out. Are we going to have fair and free elections? The referendum was a good example; there's a lot of turn-out compared to the past. There's slightly a good story, but I think the real test for Egyptians is coming up in September in the presidency elections, and I hope that turns out as we expect it to be, because this might set the mood for the rest of the year, maybe, I don't know. Thank you. [Applause.]

**Mr. Dunne:** Thank you very much, May. That was a very stimulating presentation that I think provides a basis for a great conversation. We're going to turn it over to questions now and what I would ask is that when you get the floor, if you could please stand up, identify yourself, and ask your question of our panelists. I'm going to take the prerogative as moderator to ask the first two, and I'm going to throw one out to each of our panelists.

My first question is for Sanja, although May, if you would like to comment on this as well, please feel free. What I'd like to ask is: What do you think is the single greatest barrier to effective women's participation in the political process? Are they legal? Are they more social barriers and attitudes? And what do you think is the best way to address them? Or a combination of ways to address them?

May, I would like to say that I found your point on the need for respect for women in Egypt to be very compelling, but I think this is not a woman's issue only. I mean, it's a social issue. What is the role for women and those who support more social and political rights for women in building coalitions with women's groups? If there are efforts ongoing, perhaps you could describe those a bit. If there are not, what steps do you think should be taken to build coalitions between like-minded groups, some of whom might not necessarily be focused principally on women's issues to help support those. So, Sanja?

**Ms. Kelly:** Well, that's a very interesting question. There are obviously several factors that play into this question, but I would say that social barriers are probably the number one reason behind low female political participation in formal institutions. When I spoke to a number of women in the Middle East, I asked them specifically, what kinds of obstacles if they decide to nominate themselves as candidates in, let's say, parliamentary elections, would they face? And I really received a wide variety of answers. So for example, throughout the Middle East, there is a great stress on separation between men and women. Of course, you know, as I mentioned before, when it comes to Saudi Arabia that's very much implemented, but even in places where there's mixing of the genders, it is still something that is frowned upon if we're talking about the mixing of men and women who are not related to one another. So if you're a candidate trying to talk to your potential constituents, you will really have a hard time trying to, for example, meet with large groups of men, trying to really present your ideas, and campaign in more traditional ways in the way that we think about when we talk about campaigning.

Another very important obstacle does have to do with tradition and religious aspect. For example, back in 2005 there was a woman who said that she was considering running for President. When she announced that, and again this wasn't an official announcement of her running as president, just something that she was considering, the former Grand Mufti, so the religious authority of Egypt, issued a fatwa saying that women cannot be leaders of a modern Muslim state. This actually provoked a lot of back and forth in both papers and also among people who were discussing this issue. Although later on the same Grand Mufti actually clarified this and said that women could indeed lead the modern state, just the fact that religious authorities would step onto this issue and send such a powerful message, really speaks of some of the challenges that women face.

**Mr. Dunne.** Okay. May?

**Ms. Kosba:** Thanks for your question. All your questions are great questions, and I hope I give the right answer to that. Now, the problem is there's a lot of women speaking out, and you can tell that they all might be connected one way or the other, but there's no unity. Like you cannot tell there's a coalition for women to do that. There are organizations on the ground. There are women who are taking their challenge individually. There are organizations, NGOs doing the same thing just to make sure. Some people just decide to—the simple idea is to either be an activist doing this on your own or maybe form an organization to be legal so we can get funding and do projects on the ground so we can maybe play on changing behaviors. But there's no such coalition that brings people together, and maybe I can take this question as a recommendation that something is enacted, that something has to be introduced and maybe we can work on that women should be working in groups and the question would be at that point is what is the mechanism that we need to bring women together and whoever believes in creating maybe a coalition or a platform for women. All the women who believe in certain cause or maybe put a mission together like, "This is what we need. This is what we need to achieve by this time." And we need to create certain players in the groups to get somewhere. But so far, there's nothing that I'm aware of. I don't think we have a coalition. This is I think something that we should be working on back home. Thanks.

**Mr. Dunne:** Thanks. Let's open it up.

**Patricia Ellis:** Hi, Pat Ellis, Women's Foreign Policy Group. I'd like to follow up on the last question and comment. Do you think that you have any supporters in places of power, be they women or men? There is one woman member of the cabinet at the moment, I don't know if there's been any interaction with her. Are you seeking out people who could help you who have some clout in society? Whether they're in government or not, I think this is very important. A follow-up to that is: Is there a generational divide amongst women? I don't know the answer to that. And the last question is, I'd like you to address, which is something very much on people's minds: raised expectations. I mean, you are so passionate, so excited, and so many of the women with you have that feeling and they want things to happen and you're hopeful that it will happen quickly. But what are your expectations, and might you not get frustrated because you're not going to see things change quickly?

**Ms. Kosba:** These are two great questions. Frustration, well, we've been living with frustrations forever, and we don't expect thing to happen, unfortunately, quickly on the ground because the problem with the situation right now in Egypt, we're not talking about women only, we're talking about a nation. We're talking about the fate of a nation. We're talking about not just a generational divide about women's role, we're talking about generation divide regarding the revolution.

Like, I remember a friend of mine during the revolution when the Internet was cut off, I was having phone discussions—like land-line—because everything was cut off so I remember having conversations with some of my friends and I remember one of those friends, she's a dear friend, and I thought she was smarter than that. I was like, "You're killing me right now," because she said, "When the revolution started, no one called me and said, 'Do you really want this to happen?'" I was like "Seriously? Are you serious?" [*Laughter.*] "Because when revolutions happen, people don't really get to fill out a survey or get called for that." [*Laughter.*] And it's funny and it's not, because unfortunately this is how a lot of people think, not just her. There's a lot of people who think. I know there's a lot of divisions in families, like heated discussions during the revolution. Do we want Mubarak out? Or not? Is it safe for the country or not? We have Israel at the border, we have internal issues, we have poverty, we have so many things to think about before starting something like that. Thank God the situation did not get as bad as in Libya, for example.

But we're not talking about women alone, and that's why women cannot find a space to push for that, just like so many other minority issues. I think Christians right now are not really taking...the reason why there's a Muslim-Christian debate is because of the attacks in Imbaba, for example. This was really bad, so now people have to talk about the Christian-Muslim relations and there's discrimination and all that. Otherwise, this would have been one of the things that's put on the back burner for a while until everything settles down.

And just like I said before, gay rights, for example, they're gonna come and they're gonna come with a lot of support from everywhere because, I mean, there's a group in Egypt that exists that the Egyptians have been living in denial for so long and now, how to address that? How to address people with HIV/AIDS? There are so many things on the agenda, not just women, and that's the challenge. Where do you place yourself, how to make yourself a priority? And I think that's why it goes back to Charles' question: How can we create a coalition? Because maybe that's what we need right now—a coalition and a strategy and a mission and take it further to be put on the top of the list.

**Ms. Ellis:** And get men supporters?

**Ms. Kosba:** And get men supporters too.

**Ms. Kelly:** And I will add very quickly to that. I think there has been a lot of enthusiasm about the prospects for women, particularly after, in the Western media, there were flashes of pictures with women waving flags and yelling for freedom, it really seemed that they were out there, they were

pushing for their rights, and good things were going to happen, but I have to say, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, where the regimes were toppled, after that a lot of women said “hmm.” Women were actually excluded when it came to some of the post-revolutionary events. So, for example, in Egypt there was a special committee that was formed to recommend amendments to the Constitution, and not a single woman was appointed. Also, a number of women marched for the International Women’s Day in March, and a lot of them were booed, and they were told to go home. They really faced a lot of harassment, so then a lot of women, both in Tunisia and Egypt, started wondering whether Arab Spring was going to be followed by Very Disappointing Summer, and we’re yet going to see what’s going to happen but from my end, particularly having followed women’s rights in the Middle East for a number of years and looking at the historical progress, there are reasons to be optimistic but there also reasons not to be as positive.

For example, if you looked at women’s participation in Algeria or in Lebanon, in Morocco, in the 1930s and 1940s when women were struggling and marching alongside men in their movement for liberation, you again could see flag-waving women protesting, yelling pretty much the same things—they were really at the front lines—but then after these goals were achieved, then women were told to go home, and women’s rights agenda was nowhere to be found. In fact, when we look at Lebanon, where, you know, again there was a lot of excitement before Lebanon achieved independence from France in 1940s, after this really intense activity, not a single woman was able to win representation in parliament until the 1990s. So that’s a long period. So that is just something that we need to keep in mind when we think about these issues and historical progress that occurred in the region.

**Ms. Kosba:** One last point because one of the problems right now also is youth. Remember, youth started the revolution, but right now they’re excluded from the decision-making. What happens is the military, which is sitting down with the decision-makers, would only invite the youth at the end, like the icing on the cake, just to say that we had already involved them in the decision-making when they did not. So clearly it’s not even just a women’s issue, it falls back to even the youth who actually should take credit and keep pursuing this. And they’re not even involved in the decision-making.

**Question:** Hi, my name is Courtney Radsch. I’m the Freedom of Expression Officer here at Freedom House, and my own research focuses on cyber-activism in the Middle East, as you know. What’s interesting to me is that, from the advent of cyber-activism with blogging, you saw gender parity in Egypt, but when you look at the statistics of social media used, you’re seeing a gender divide and you’re seeing actually about two-thirds of men compared to one-third of women using social media. And I’m wondering what you think explains that? Is that concerning? Do you have any kind of thoughts on why that might be?

**Ms. Kosba:** Are you talking about social media in general or just in activism?

**Question:** In general.

**Ms. Kosba:** In general. Well, the thing is, in my community, most of the women—I know most of my friends have accounts on Facebook and Twitter, and I have not really questioned the percentage, I’ve always questioned the quality of their interaction, participation, whatever, the way they use Facebook. And I’m sure you’re aware of that before the revolution most of women’s or people’s in general, the way they used Facebook was really pretty trivial, for entertainment, like the things that we do, check your picture, like/dislike, all of that stuff. After the revolution, it’s amazing is one of the things that I really noticed is the women that were never, never had any political or any activist, ideas that really could stand out, after the revolution, everybody’s opinionated, everybody has something to say. I don’t know about the percentage. I believe you’re talking about Cairo and Alexandria—those are like big cities in Egypt with the most educated people.

And I believe not everybody has an access to Internet because, remember, some of them belong to very conservative families. Maybe they can’t go online or don’t have a computer. Some of them are

economically or financially challenged; they don't even own a computer or can go out. Sometimes you don't even—men can do that because, remember, men can go to a cyber-place and they can stay out in the night, all the night, playing video games, and doing the things. That's why they have a lot more exposure than women. They can go out and stay out late—Women cannot do that. They can own computers; that's why they can get access to computers when women cannot because they cannot go out late. Some of them live in the villages and live in very geographically challenged places where you cannot commute or get out of the place easily, they don't have the transportation. I think there're a lot of challenges other than that's not really related to not really wanting to be there or not. My question has always been the quality of the participation. I think it has improved a lot after the revolution. Thanks.

**Ms. Kelly:** And I will just add to that. I find Saudi Arabia extremely fascinating, both given the level of repression when it comes to women's rights but then also seeing activists finding innovative ways to push for positive change, and the Internet is actually one of the ways how a lot of women have actually found a voice and have been able to push for these positive developments. Female bloggers in Saudi Arabia are extremely well-respected and when we actually look at the number of blogs and in terms of the visitors and just the sheer respect that they get, I would say that, some would argue that, women bloggers as a group are actually more effectively able to use that medium than men.

Also, what's really interesting about Saudi Arabia again, the Internet because it allows you to be active from the privacy of your own home, which you know, given the Middle East from context, where women are really not that encouraged to go out and mingle with men, it really provides this extra layer and extra way of being involved. And we have seen that in some of the countries, again particularly in Saudi Arabia and when it comes to this issue of women driving, as most of you may know, there was a Facebook group that actually started this drive, pushing the government to allow women to drive, and one activist was arrested last month after she posted a video of herself driving, which actually prompted international discussion and outcry from both the international community as well as people from within the country. So this just speaks of women being really able to utilize some of these new tools and push for their rights.

**Question:** Hi, my name's Jessica. I'm with Freedom House. My question is you spoke a little about the idea of there being kind of being a fine line for women's rights activists in Egypt and that they want to advance women's rights but want to do it on their own terms and have to do so and not be accused of being Western, and I think there's also a desire to not just be Western and not surrender culture. It's about owning women's rights. I'm wondering, being a woman and I think I am in a room full of women who are from the Western world and are dedicating a lot of their careers to advancing women's rights and supporting the cause, what type of support in a very concrete means or what type of support would you look to the West and look to women in the West to provide, to advance your work and to advance the work of other women's rights activists in the Middle East?

**Ms. Kosba:** That's a great question. And it's always, when I say we don't want to apply Western values, is because the history of US and Arab relations has been—we have good stories and bad stories and sad stories actually. Because it's not just the US and Arabs. There's a lot of details and a lot of other regions involved in this relationship and interests. It has come to a point where now when I, for example, as an Arab or as an Egyptian—I don't like to say Arab because I'm a North African—but let's say, as an Egyptian, if I come here and criticize one of the values of the US or try to improve that, I think I would have to find the significance. How does that affect my message and what does it mean to the American society and how can I address that? And I think it should be the same thing.

As I said before, the US has done a great job in introducing a lot of things and helping, maybe taking our causes and strifes in a technical manner or approach better than years before, but I think in order to kind of remove the reputation of applying Western values for the sake of applying Western values because it's not just that, it's also the pace. Like I believe there are a lot of people complaining not just about applying—not just talking about women empowerment, but you want women empowerment at your speed. And you cannot do that, because you're talking about countries that existed for so long, so

long and if I look at the history of Egypt, it's hard to talk about one history. It's even amazing when tourists come to Egypt and expect when they keep talking about Egyptian art. One of my friends—I have my landlord actually—he said, “I have Egyptian art.” I'm like, “What is Egyptian art?” He said like, “My grandfather, he just gave me this ancient Egyptian stuff, like the paintings on papyrus.” Well, when you talk about Egyptian art, there's Islamic art, there's Fatimid art, there's a lot of things. So there's a lot of history that even Egyptians are not aware of because it's too much information and because education has been so dysfunctional, we're not aware of what are the strength points of our history so that we can take it forward. I get amazed when I listen to Americans because they know the dates, like certain dates, when certain things that happened in the American history that they're so proud of and they memorize it and talk about it.

It's different for Egyptians because I think Egyptians are lost in the realm of history and what makes Egypt and what makes me proud. And I think as a Westerner or as an American, when you come to address a certain issue, you have to think about the background; you have to understand the setting that you want to address your cause so that you don't hurt your mission before anything else. I'm not encouraging that maybe the US can apply an agenda that does not fit in my community, I'm just saying that to make it a win-win situation and a successful situation for everyone is to understand more about the culture, know more and be open to that because there's a lot of frustrations even for someone who is out. I've seen a lot of American who've been to Egypt who work in the field and they've been frustrated by the differences. And no matter how hard an Egyptian tries to make it a good experience for them, even on a very personal level, they will never see the bright side. So I think it's more of a willing to understand the culture, the history, what it means to change that value and change that behavior for that person. Because you can't change a person; how about a nation? That's it, thanks.

**Mr. Dunne:** Let me throw out one more question here. We talked a lot about the use of the social media as a way of expanding women's political participation, but my question is that given the low rate of Internet penetration in a lot of these countries, Egypt being one example. I think I heard a figure where 15% of households have access to the Internet, and it's certainly not as widespread as it is in the West and in the rest of the region. Given these limits and the effective measures that many governments have begun to utilize to even track activists through their use of social media, is this in a way a self-limiting way for women to participate in the political processes? At a certain point, do they have to step outside the boundaries of social media and start organizing in the old-fashioned way? I'd just be interested in your views, Sanja.

**Ms. Kelly:** Well, I think regardless of the country, whether Internet penetration is 90% or 9%, if you limit your political activity on the Internet, you're not going to get far. You really need to either pick up the phone and call your representative or send letters, go out and protest. So I think the medium itself is somewhat limiting to that extent. With that said, it also presents the world of opportunities in terms of really getting people engaged, getting them interested in the issue, in formulizing what the demands are and the bottom line, as we've seen in Egypt, you can actually successfully mobilize in that way.

I think the medium itself might be a little bit more limiting now because the Internet penetration is low in some countries, but this is an incredible growth area, because if you look at the Internet penetration rates even five years ago, they were half of what they are today. And five years from now, they're going to double or triple. So this is where I think the activism is going to be at in the future, and I think this is the area where we need to pay close attention for.

**Mr. Dunne:** Thank you.

**Ms. Kosba:** I would add to that one, just point. I really agree on that, and I'm gonna have to quote, paraphrase, Wael Abbas, one of the best, most important bloggers and activists in Egypt. He once said that social media is not the main change—it's a catalyst. Remember that a very good example when the Internet was cut off, I think Egyptians were put into a very major test: Are they going to take their strife out of the Internet? Because the revolution was organized online on Facebook, so are they going

to take it to the next level? So I think Egyptians showed a great success in that. It was no longer about the Internet; it was no longer about some foolish guys, teenagers, or young guys who really are causing some kind of disturbance in the political system. But no, these are people who actually are angry, and they are so dissatisfied with the level of the performance of the government for the past decades and now they're taking this to the extra miles. So, yes, social media is a great platform for freedom of expression, but it's not where the strife should be. It should be taken outside of that.

**Ms. Kelly:** I will just quickly add to that. Freedom House recently released a project called [Freedom on the Net](#), which evaluated the state of Internet freedom in 37 countries around the world. These were countries ranging from some of the most oppressive states to democracies such as the US and the UK. And something that was interesting was that out of 37 countries, 12 of the countries were actually at some point they had blocked or they were blocking permanently one of the main social media tools, whether that be YouTube or Twitter or Facebook. And this actually came in the response to political activism that occurred in recent years and particularly in recent months around the world. So this is something that governments generally are noticing, that this is where the activism is originating and although it doesn't necessarily bring about change without really political and large masses going out on the streets, it really has a huge impact. So unfortunately when it comes to these tools, we have seen governments becoming more and more repressive.

**Question:** Good afternoon. I'm Mary O'Connor, with the Center for the Study of the Presidency in Congress, and a very proud member of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. I recently heard a former ambassador to Egypt say that there will not be political stability until there's economic stability. What I'm trying to get at is since women are rising in the educational positions, is there any economic impact with this in the workforce so that economic empowerment can translate into political empowerment?

**Mr. Dunne:** Who would like to take the first shot at that one?

**Ms. Kelly:** Absolutely. I think there are definitely very strong positive correlations between education and then economic empowerment and political empowerment in turn. With that said, Middle East is a very interesting and unique region, so when we look at some of the most repressive states in the region, at least some of them, we will also see that they actually have very educated women, particularly when it comes to the very wealthy, Gulf-Arab states. So according to our survey of political rights and civil liberties, for example, countries such as Kuwait or Qatar or the UAE, they're not the beacons of democracy and in fact, they score quite poorly, apart from Kuwait, which we tend to rank as "partly free." All the other countries are not free, yet they have 99% girls' literacy rates and as I showed in one of my slides, women at universities actually outnumber men. So that's something that's very interesting, because I think what really matters, apart from education, is the quality of education so women in addition to just learning facts and reading and so forth, they need to be empowered to use that information for their own betterment but then also to get out and obtain jobs. And something that we've seen throughout the region is that many women, particularly who are in the upper economic echelons, they will obtain education, but then very often they will get married and they will decide not to work and then their education is obviously only for the benefit of their own family as opposed to the country and the society.

**Ms. Kosba:** My comment on that, I actually had it put in the notes but I kinda didn't want to stress on the money at the time because I'm really not very material, maybe? But it's really one of the most important things because it's not even just a women issue in my region, it's also a country issue. Like for example, when tourists and people come to Egypt they would describe it as dirty, poor, and beautiful. Which is hard to understand—beautiful and dirty and poor? I mean, okay. But Egypt is not a poor country. It's actually a rich country. Egyptians are poor. Egyptians are poor because the resources go to the elites and the greedy people, and of course that includes the regime and the president and everything. And I think one of the main elements of reform is economic advancement for all Egyptians, not just women, because I remember I had a friend from Iceland like 2 years ago and we were talking about the economic crisis in Europe and he was like before the economic crisis there was no crime in

Iceland because everybody was making good money so they didn't really get to focus on the differences and the little things. Once you get little money, now you start getting frustrated and oppressed and then crime increases and so forth. And in Egypt we don't have significant crime but we have frustrations and people who have gotten to a point that they've been so apathetic about speaking out about their issues, and one of the things that are going to empower groups and women in Egypt, I think, is economic power also. And that falls back to the coalition. If they come together and they get the support financially and they have a strategy or something to take it somewhere, I believe there will be something on the ground that we can see. Thanks.

**Dr. Negroponte:** May Kosba, the role of the overseas community, overseas Egyptian community, in the West and Europe, can play an extraordinary role in supporting you. Are you reaching out to them?

**Ms. Kosba:** This came at the right time, actually, because I'm right now I'm a fellow at Atlas Corp. I'm surveying at the National Conference on Citizenship, and I met an amazing woman from Egypt on the same program. She's actually Christian and since we started out, she's a very passionate woman and she been activist. She believes in issues. She's artistic and she believes in arts and everything, and we have come together to—okay let's just as soon as we go back home we have to start this inter-faith initiative. And right now we are in the middle of planning this and creating our own network in the US and in Egypt and see how we can move that forward. And one of the things that we did was we managed to be part of a youth coalition here in the US, and they are Egyptian diaspora and ex-pats and been born and living her for so long and are so active, they're so passionate and they're taking their causes in too many different directions and this is something that we're reaching out to. I'm not in a position to give you too much information about that because we're starting this relationship, but I believe the Egyptian diaspora can play a great role, but as long as we don't have the Christian and Muslim thing because I believe there's a Christian-Muslim issue right now. Most of the Christians feel segregated and, you know, not Egyptian. I think the problem right now or the question is how can we engage them? How can we engage everybody and unify our efforts to get to do something? Right now the coalition or this alliance is pushing for how can we vote from here in the presidency? I know we cannot vote for the parliamentary elections. I think the government is preparing for that but I think we can do that in the presidency elections, I hope.

**Question:** Manilee Bagheritari, I'm an independent gender equality consultant, and I'm Iranian-American. So we've been watching what's been happening in Egypt with excitement and some doubt and also envy. And so I want to know, I have three questions for you. First, are you collaborating with other women's rights activists in the region, such as women's rights activists in Iran or Tunisia? Second, you know, the first feminist book I read was "Woman at Point Zero," written by Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian feminist. It was "Feminism 101" in the US. Are you working with the older generation of women? Third question: Are you using CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the women's bill of rights?

**Ms. Kosba:** Are you talking like I, or in Egypt?

**Question:** Women's rights activists and the coalition. Are they using the international human rights instruments in their work as some kind of a pillar to hold onto?

**Ms. Kosba:** Okay, these are very important questions, and I'll start from the last one. The CEDAW, as far as I have worked with an organization, a community and youth development organization, in Egypt and one of the main goals for most of the NGOs in Egypt is to fulfill the millennium goals. We're so far behind but one of the main motivations is how can we fulfill our role in the agreements or the conventions that we signed? The problem with CEDAW is that there's a stereotype about CEDAW specifically because a lot of people think Mubarak signed or Egypt ratified and agreed on a lot of elements and items in the agreement that do not really fall into the Egyptian, do not fit into the Egyptian culture and tradition.



But if you're talking about the overall, if Egypt is trying to apply the human rights values—yes, we do. For the most part, a lot of NGOs are doing that. But I cannot claim to speak for every NGO, but from my very humble experience working with NGOs, I believe that that has been the goal because remember you always have to get the funding, even from foreign organizations, including US organizations, and it's one of the things that maybe sometimes you have to put into the proposal to make sure that your argument actually falls into the international human rights values.

Going to the book that you talked about, unfortunately I don't know about the book, and maybe we can talk about it later because I'm not really aware of that book. But are we working with the older generation? Are you talking about older women activists? Well, when you talk about women activists, like older generation, I have to think about Nawal El Saadawi. Nawal Saadawi does not really have a good presence in Egypt. A lot of people are against her because she's very secular and she's very daring and blunt about it and not everybody's really happy with the way she addresses her issues because she tends to be very feminist to the extent that she could come across as a man-hater and also very secular to the extent that she could come across as an infidel. There's a lot of women activists, but they're not really as visible as her because she gets to get all of the fame because of her statements and the way she addresses things. But if you're talking about the older generation, I would say—I'm not talking about the famous ones—but there's an older generation that are working hard and working with the young generation. I think the problem is coming under one umbrella to unify their efforts and this is something that, I think, will come up or eventually happen in the future when they realize that this is the right thing to do.

Collaborating with other activists in the region. Unfortunately, I have not been able to work with international activists, but I have an experience. I worked with the British Counsel and there was this Global Changemakers Program that I was coordinating with my organization and other organizations in the field on a regional level and I worked with Moroccans, Syrian, Algerians, Jordanians, Lebanese, and I was really amazed by what we were working on this identity issue in the region and I was really flabbergasted by how each of these countries define identity and what are the challenges to identity. For example, in Lebanon, the problem with that is the marriages between Sunnis and non-Sunnis and how can you get a Sunni and an atheist get married or Sunni and Shiite get married? This is their identity issue. In Morocco, for example, their identity issue is that they have too many languages, and the official language is Arabic despite their desire—they're actually not Arabs, whatever and they're struggling with the language—what language do we speak and do we have to speak and do we fight for? It was really important and right now since I came, I think in the panel that you spoke on, Courtney—I met Courtney and she was on a panel talking about a Feminism Day. She had an amazing presentation and Courtney, with Freedom House—raise your hand. *[Laughter.]* And there was a Tunisian woman on the panel and she was amazing and I managed to make good friends with her. I heard her talk about the women activism is very enlightening. It's one of the best things about this city is meeting with people from different backgrounds that I never able to do back home. So I'm looking forward to meet more activists in DC hopefully and connect with them.

**Question:** Hi, I'm Sarah. I'm with the Women's Foreign Policy Group, and I have a question about the political quotas. There seem to be two different camps in that either it will help women in the fact that it will give them spots at the table, and there are others who say that women need to find those spots themselves and argue that it could sort of backfire if they have those quotas. I'm just curious to see what your opinions are on that issue and whether or not you think quotas are an effective means for women to participate.

**Ms. Kelly:** I think gender quotas, not only in the Middle East but around the world, are a controversial issue. I know that even in this country at some point we had some discussions and particularly given that even in present Congress, I believe women represent less than 20% of representatives. So it's really an issue and different countries try to tackle and resolve the issue in different ways. I think there are obviously pros and cons, but one thing that I will tell you for certain is that almost every single women's rights activist that I spoke to in the Middle East was in favor of the quotas. There was a very

strong perception that although perhaps women would not obtain such seats in their own right by campaigning, just the presence of women in formal institutions would then culturally make a huge difference because they would get an opportunity to legislate, make important decisions, show what they're capable of and as such, men would also be accustomed [to] seeing women in such high and powerful positions and then when the time comes, when the quotas are abolished, then women would have that necessary experience and support of the general population to compete.

**Mr. Dunne:** Thank you. Actually, you took my question, so thank you for asking that. [*Laughter.*] Before I give May a chance to answer, let me throw in one little bit about Egypt here, which is that the quota for women parliamentarians in the lower house of parliament that I mentioned in my remarks, you may want to address this, was seen as very positive in principle but some women's groups were actually quite upset about it or at least ambivalent about it, because it was seen as a way by the National Democratic Party, the erstwhile ruling party of Egypt, to sort of pack the lower house with their own supporters so it was in fact, in practice, a two-edged sword. It opens the question whether, again, these quotas, while very positive in a lot of ways, might not in effect retard political progress in other areas.

**Ms. Kosba:** Well, I think I might have quite a shocking, maybe to most of you, opinion because I never really took the quotas seriously. Why? Because it's like a puppet thing, like a card they wave for you, you can be in or out. And the problem is not just with the number of women representatives in the parliament, it's just the quality of the women. Because remember we don't have free and fair elections, so it doesn't really matter if they bring in a man or a woman because at the end of the day they get to fulfill the regime's agenda, which totally contradicts the benefits and the interests of the Egyptian society. So it hasn't been a question of do we put the right women? It's not really a question of women representation, because I wouldn't really want to see a woman who's not sensitive about our issues. Speaking from the ministers who have been in power for in the last regime, they have not done a great job at all. On the contrary, they have been pushing us down, so to me the quota doesn't really mean anything. If we have fair and free elections, I believe, I have a very strong argument to talk about women and their representation, but so far it doesn't really matter if she's a man or woman because it's even a disgrace for her to be in a position that she doesn't speak for her community or her cause. I think that's my point on that.

**Mr. Dunne:** Alright, well, thank you very much. I want to, once again, thank the Women's Foreign Policy Group for helping us co-host the event. I want to thank all of the audience members for your participation in this. I learned a heck of a lot from your questions, as much as from the answers. Again, I'd like to thank Lisa for also hosting the event on behalf of Freedom House, and most of all our two panelists for their terrific presentations and their very insightful answers to all of your questions. So thank you very much. [*Applause.*]