



THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
RICE UNIVERSITY

THE “WOMAN’S ISSUE” IN CONTEXT:  
DEFRAMING THE DISCOURSE ON  
MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN

BY

HER HIGHNESS  
SHEIKHA MOZAH BINT NASSER AL MISSNED  
THE STATE OF QATAR

MAY 21, 2007

JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
RICE UNIVERSITY  
HOUSTON, TEXAS

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am pleased to be here this evening, but I have to make a confession up front. Over the past few years, I have often been asked to engage in public discussions on the status of women in the Middle East. And I have usually politely refused. I have done so because I strongly believe that separating the status of women from larger issues in the region is so loaded with political history, and so burdened with misconceptions, that it has become a counterproductive methodology.

The debate over women in the Middle East often frames women in a timeless battle against oppressive traditions and religions of the region. And it ignores the larger socio- political realities. This debate swings dangerously between two poles: patronage and apologism. The first group follows the line of colonial feminism in the hope of enlightening the women of the Middle East. They perceive an endless clash between women’s liberation and religion. They hope we will come to our senses and reach the same types of rights and freedoms as they have, only guaranteed, of course, by secularism. On the other side of the debate, there is a growing branch of radicalism that denies problems with women’s issues in the region. And claims that a return to their version of Islam is all that is needed to guarantee women’s rights. This view feeds on a mistrust that the women’s movement has been co-opted for other political objectives, just as democratization has been co-opted. That women’s rights have become a cover for a secularist agenda to annihilate our identity and religion.

I believe it is time to demagnetize these two poles. In fact we should not frame this debate as a battle between secularism and radicalism. Rather, we need to deframe the debate. We must [put] it in context where the discussion focuses on how we can guarantee human rights across the board.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The human rights problems throughout the region have been well documented. In fact, the entire world is facing serious deficits in human rights, particularly since September 11<sup>th</sup> and the ensuing “war on terror.” Gross human rights violations are being carried out in the name of security and democracy. So, any discussion about human rights violations in the Middle East needs to start here. And it is within this context that we can discuss women as members of a

larger community, undergoing tremendous violations of their rights, both by their governments and foreign occupiers. Their rights to education, to economic opportunities, to political participation.

Let us take a few examples. First of all - education.

Some of the conclusions of the most recent Arab Human Development Report puzzled me. The report noted that 98.8% of those surveyed in the region, including men, said women have the same right to education as men. While the report does mention that there are vast discrepancies in literacy rates across the region, it offered no viable explanations for these differences. And, in contradiction of its own public values survey, the Report concluded that the gender gap in education is the result of “discrimination” against women in the region.

We should not merely accept the stereotype that this gap is because of timeless patriarchal traditions, especially when the voices of our people and similar trends in other regions claim this is not so. Scholars need to call for more indepth studies that innovatively analyze the real reasons behind the gender gaps in education. Scholars also need to highlight the problematics. How can we talk seriously about literacy rates in a region much of which is ravaged by war, corruption and poverty? A region where the education of its citizens is secondary to the protection of its oilfields? In Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine where civilian buildings, including schools, have been intentionally targeted, educators murdered and the basic necessities of education embargoed.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We also need to deframe the approach taken to the economic gender gap of the region. The Middle East has a long tradition of female entrepreneurs. There is ample historical evidence to show that women were active in the market even before Islam. And this was later taken for granted in the Quran which sets forward details about work ethics, how transactions can be carried out, how to divide wealth. However, it never once mentions that women should be confined to only certain positions or places at work. Today, many women in our region are involved in the regeneration of NGOs, foundations and trusts - which had historically existed in the form of al awqaf tradition. In fact, there has been a 19% increase in women’s share in

## The “Woman’s Issue” in Context

economic activity since 1990. And over 25% of private businesses in some of the Gulf countries are owned by women.

Still there are gender gaps in economic participation. In many Gulf countries for example educational attainment of women is much higher than their economic participation. But interestingly, the Global Gender Gap Index, published by the World Economic Forum in 2006, notes that contrasting patterns of either educational gender gaps or economic gender gaps are not unique to the Gulf or Arab region.

Certainly, our region is diverse economically. And we have various problems: high among them is the incompatibility between education and market demands for men and women. We also face high rates of youth unemployment in some regions, economies that are not sustainable, over dependence on foreign labor, unequal distribution of wealth, and over regulated economies.

Again scholars need to stop blaming the economic gender gap in the region on Islam and conduct both regional and international comparative analyses. And again we need to learn our own lessons and not measure women’s societal contribution only by her workplace participation. We need to creatively develop new indicators that value women’s work in the home and innovative policies that allow the home to become a place where income is generated.

We need to offer choices that can accommodate women’s beliefs and lives. Choices that encourage women to celebrate their femininity rather than suppress it in a business suit. Choices that liberate women to set their own priorities that balance their needs as women and mothers. Such choices have allowed highly educated women to pause their careers in order to provide a quality family environment, while fulfilling the dreams of another.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Please bear with me for one more example to support my plea for a deframed research agenda. Political participation.

## The “Woman’s Issue” in Context

I can not understand how women’s political participation can be discussed as if it is divorced from the political realities of the region. A region where the few control the many. Where basic political rights, such as freedom of speech, the right to assemble, to form associations, are still either non existent or newly born. How can we, in all sincerity, talk about women’s political participation in parliaments that are farcical? Where women are often tokens of progress without any real power? Where women have become a political commodity, an indicator of progression or regression, used for the cynical objectives of gaining or granting approval to certain regimes. The truth is there is nothing in our religion to prevent women’s political participation. Women are excluded for the same reasons men are excluded.

### **Ladies and Gentleman,**

This evening I am appealing to you to contextualize the woman’s issue in the Middle East, by considering new research approaches to the past and present. In order to do this we have to discard the old frames we have used to define the issues. These very frames have been the cause of oppressive misinformation.

I am not calling for a reframing but for a deframing of women’s issues.

Scholars have made incredible progress at deconstructing western patriarchal discourse. I appeal to them to apply this same vigor to deconstructing both the harmful legacy of colonial feminism and the rhetoric of religious radicalism. This requires a critical rereading and reconstruction of women’s history in the Middle East. And an honest curiosity about the present, a deframing of contemporary gender issues.

I make a special appeal to researchers to reconsider the status of the women of the Arabian peninsula who have often been made invisible in the official historical records of the region. The spirits of our grandmothers are evident in the reawakening of women who are taking on leadership roles throughout our societies. For example, the high educational attainment of Arabian Gulf women today reflects this assiduous spirit of assertion and commitment inherited from the heroines of our past. Reclaiming this tradition is an integral part of deframing the study of women in the region.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me leave you with this thought. We have to position Muslim women not as objects of discourse, but as subjects of our past and our present.

Let us dare break the frames of the Orientalist paintings in which we have been framed.