Hilda B. Silverman Memorial Lecture on Israel/Palestine

May 12, 2017

No Place to Raise a Daughter: My Life and Work in the Middle East—A Woman's Perspective

Martha Myers

Author's Note: I was lucky, all those years ago, to have been acquainted with Hilda Silverman, a woman brimming with a sense of practical energy and compassion. Having had this acquaintance, I feel a sense of wonderment, and humility, to have been invited to give a lecture and contribute a paper to the Hilda B Silverman Memorial Lecture reflecting on my experience and observations as a woman in the Middle East.

While this paper does explore some objective, engendered realities, the primary thrust is to reflect on my own experience as a woman in the Middle East over the past 40 years. So it is quite personal –I am sharing my personal views, experience, and observations. In these four decades, I have lived in Palestine for the most, but also the Sultanate of Oman, Jordan, and Egypt. For more than three years I lived in Turkey in order to work on Syria, and therefore within the Syrian refugee community. I worked in Lebanon and Yemen, as well. I was married, bore and raised children, and was divorced in the region. I have experienced many of life's vicissitudes while immersed in Middle Eastern communities – that immersion informing my own life experiences and my understanding of the women around me.

The Arab Middle East, and I am only reflecting on the Arab Middle East and not Turkey or Iran – is not a good place for women on the surface of things. That would seem to be the common and accepted knowledge. To review some of these realities:

The Middle East is reportedly a region of dismal human development and gender equity profiles. Women in the Arab region are, on average, disadvantaged economically, politically, and socially compared to women in all other regions, particularly as one considers the oil wealth and high levels of urbanization. However, the extractive economies of the Arabian Peninsula skew the labor market and levers of power to the disadvantage of women and the human development benefits derived from wealth are not shared across the region. Everywhere in the world, labor roles are engendered, but in the Middle East these divisions are particularly resilient. Valentine Moghadam has aptly characterized this as kind of "patriarchal gender contract".[1] Arab women are a small proportion of the workforce for a variety of reasons - economic, historic, and cultural. Regionally, literacy and educational attainment rates are comparatively low and Arab women are very poorly represented in governance and decision-making positions in the political and economic spheres.[2]

---

[1] Moghadam, Valentine. *Towards Gender Equality In The Arab/Middle East Region: Islam, Culture, And Feminist Activism*. UNDP Occasional Paper, Prepared for the Human Development Report 2004; Final Version, Dec. 2003)

[2] See, World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Equity Gap Report* 2016, http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/middle-east-and-north-africa/ and UNDP, Human Development Report for 2016, Table 4, p. 214. http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2016_human_development_report.pdf

Family, or personal status, laws legislatively relegate women to a dependent status in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. In some countries, these restrictions prevent a woman from traveling without the permission of a male guardian or to travel with her children without the permission of their father. Women are disadvantaged in their access to capital, relative to men, by inheritance laws based on Islamic law that stipulates a woman receives 50 percent of the male portion.

The cumulative effect is gender-based discrimination and second-class citizenship for women, albeit in varying degrees across the countries of the region.

The World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report for 2016 measures, on an annual basis, the equity gap between men and women in their respective countries in four domains - economy, education, health and politics. It confirms the bleak picture for Arab women. Out of 144 countries, a sampling of Arab states categorized as being at various levels on the overall Human Development 'spectrum' ('Very High' Human Development e.g. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to 'Low' Human Development e.g. Yemen and Syria) all scored near or at the bottom of the ranking as pertains to gender equity:

Lebanon	135	Tunisia	126
Jordan	134	Yemen	144
Egypt	132	Oman	133
Saudi	141	Kuwait	128
Syria	142		

Even countries, like the oil-producing states, whose wealth has allowed them the resources to achieve very high overall score perform poorly in offering or assuring equity and opportunity to their female citizens.

In sum, the common knowledge seems to be – reinforced by reports and indices - that Arab women are disempowered and that every day of their lives a man makes decisions for them in terms of what they will wear, where they may go, if they may study, whom they shall marry, and whether or not they may divorce or chose to limit family size or control birth spacing.

Obviously, the Middle East is a terrible place to be a woman and, clearly, the Middle East is no place to raise a daughter.

Thank heavens the Arabs have Western development professionals to come to their assistance with gender mainstreaming, engendered programming, and gender analysis to fix things for them and make them in the Western image.

So allow me to look at the country I come from, the United States, a significant foreign assistance provider and promoter of women's rights and empowerment. The Center for Disease control (CDC) National Violence Against Women Survey[3] estimates that:

[3] US Center for Disease Control, *Costs of Intimate Partner Violence, Atlanta*, Georgia. 2003 and US Center for Disease Control, *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*, 2010-2012.

- 5.3 million intimate partner violence victimizations occur among U.S. women ages 18 and older each year
- This results in 2 million injuries, more than half a million of which require medical attention
- Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) victims also lose a total of nearly 8 million days of paid work—the equivalent of more than 32,000 full-time jobs—and nearly 5.6 million days of household productivity as a result of the violence
- On average, 3 women in the United States are killed every day in intimate partner violence
- A total of 1500 women on average a year are killed by a family member
- 1 in 5 American women have experienced attempted or completed rape

If we look at the issue of equal pay for equal work the United States also performs poorly. American women, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, constitute almost half of the workforce and are also the sole or co-breadwinner in half of American families with children.[4]

Yet, although American women are better educated than their male counterparts, they still earn less then men - 80 cents on the dollar as an average. This means that from mid-October onwards to New Years, every year, I, as a woman, am working for free compared to the guy next to me. The picture is even bleaker in middle skill occupations where jobs usually done by women bring home 66 percent of jobs usually done by men – that is a woman's 66 cents to a man's dollar.[5] When you compare these numbers to Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon where it is 71 cents to the dollar[6] or Tunisia, 81 cents on the dollar,[7] one must ask oneself - are we so very different?

What this means to me is that women's inequality, inequity between genders, and relative female disempowerment and disenfranchisement is a global reality and not just a feature of the Arab world. The Middle East, for a whole range of reasons that are beyond the purview of this paper, performs worst as compared to all other regions in terms of overall equity scores. And yes, of critical and related importance, women in all Middle Eastern countries are severely disadvantaged by unfair and unequal laws and policies. But to only understand what it is to be a woman in the Middle East through this lens is monochromatic –ignoring the complexity of culture, society, and human interaction in the region.

---

[4] Institute for Women,s Policy Research, https://iwpr.org/issue/employment-education-economic-change/pay-equity-discrimination/

[5] Institute for Women's Policy Research, https://iwpr.org/issue/employment-education-economic-change/pay-equity-discrimination/ and Institute for Women's Policy Research, Hegewisch, Ariane and Williams-Baron, Emma. *The Gender Wage Gap by Occupation 2016; and by Race and Ethnicity.* Institute for Women's Policy Research, April 2017. https://iwpr.org/publications/gender-wage-gap-occupation-2016-race-ethnicity/

[6] Dah Abdallah, Salah Abosedra and Farouk Dahbourah. *Gender Pay Discrimination in Lebanon, Assessment of Recent Data.* 6th Global Conference on Business & Economics, 2006. http://www.gcbe.us/6th_GCBE/data/confcd.htm

[7] Jeddi, Hela and Dhafer Malouche. *Wage gap between men and women in Tunisia.* Cornell University Library. November 10, 2015. https://arxiv.org/pdf/1511.02229.pdf

I work in development and in humanitarian response. I can tell you that, for decades now, foreign assistance funding has come with solemn caveats about mainstreaming gender. The former head of UN Women and now President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, once said, tongue in cheek, in a meeting I attended, that in her view gender 'mainstreaming' basically meant doing nothing about gender. Donors insist on gender disaggregated statistics and that women must be 'represented'. They promulgate serious policies on the topic. All to very uncertain impact ends.

This well-enough meaning western gender agenda is ramping up and becoming more assertive. Of course I believe that funding and resources skillfully directed to members of the community, like women, who might not otherwise have access is desirable – it is fair. And of course I recognize that as men and women experience the world differently, the best assistance programming will be calibrated to mold to those different realities. I also support resources to support those in Arab societies who are debating and advocating for more equity.

But I have two concerns. First, we in the West are not the only ones on the planet who wish to protect civilization as we know it. Western gender agendas are fundamentally grounded in the view that the way we live is the right way and the way other people live needs to be fixed. The pushing of an agenda which many Arabs, men and women, see as inimical to their way of life can actually do damage to the question of fairness and to those who are working, for example, to address personal status issues like a woman's right to custody of her children or to transmit citizenship to her children. Very often I fear we do not get over the minimum bar of do-no-harm.

Let us be honest. In the Arab world the West is generally viewed with a well-earned skepticism. Indeed, we have colonized, expropriated, upheld repressive dictatorships, steadfastly backed the occupation of Palestine, invaded, bombed, and generally meddled. The apparent hypocrisy of our shock at ISIS beheadings and our acquiescence to Saudi beheadings, or our concern about the status of women in the region when our very best friend, Saudi Arabia, denies women control over their lives in almost every way, is not lost on people across the Middle East. So when we then come calling, wishing to roll up our sleeves and delve into the intimacy of home, family, human relationships and to 'improve' things for women in the Middle East, we are certainly seen as something less than a skilled and honest broker.

My second concern is related to a favorite quote of mine. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens advised that one should "understand before disagreeing". Before pushing to remake Middle Eastern societies in our own image in regard to gender relations or, in the marginally better case, advocating 'change' – we need to understand the Arab world. What does our pushing a western feminist agenda fail to see? It fails to see that the Middle East is radically different than the West and people view themselves and their world in a wholly different way.

I believe it is important to remember that, for the most part, social systems are set up to mitigate conflict and protect people. Before we start trying to tear apart social fabrics we see as patriarchal and disempowering, we should look at things through a protection lens. For example, instead of analyzing a very common course of events in the Arab world - that a girl goes from her father's house to her husband's house - as if this is some kind of chain of custody transaction and draw the conclusion that she is mere chattel and requiring liberation, let us consider what protections this system provides the individual in terms of her educational and

economic opportunities. Let us consider what social and psychological support she is experiencing encompassed by a family who will continue to love and afford protection as she starts her married life. Let us consider that for most people in the Arab world, the idea of living alone and separated from family is not a norm – it is an anathema. In fact, to me, the saddest women in the Arab world are precisely those in the places where all the traditional social protections are being ripped away by global economy, war, occupation, and urban migration – and there is no substitute safety net. That girl, moving from the protection of her birth family to the protection of a newly created family, cannot and should not be viewed as a person who has no agency.

Now, of course, I am generalizing. The Arab world is not uniform –it is just the opposite. Different countries have different histories, experiences, and exposures. They have had different leaderships. Class differences matter. Religious diversity matters – not just whether you are Christian, Muslim, Druze, or one of the plethora of variables there within those categories – but whether, as a Sunni Muslim for example, you are a Bedouin, urban dweller, or rural peasant. To which of the Islamic schools of law does your particular cohort adhere? How is your particular slice of life impacted by the forces that are driving what we call radicalization and Salifism? In my experience, a significant driver of the movement towards radicalization, as we in the West like to call it when referring to other countries, is the sense, reinforced by reality, that grave injustices have been visited upon one and one's community. And that the world is either indifferent or actually participatory in those injustices. Injustice, real and perceived, can cause a retreat into some imagined moral order of the past. In the United States and Western Europe we are calling it 'populism' just now. This may sound like a digression from the topic, but it is not. This sense that one's world, identity, security, and ability to navigate are under sustained pressure and attack is highly germane to women and their possibilities in the Middle East.

All the economic, political, social, and class variations are at play as one talks about the experience of a woman in the Arab world. And then, of course, individual personalities and socialized expectations come into play.

In thinking about being a woman in the Arab world, and the position of women, I prefer to steer away from the rather voyeuristic '*harem*', '*veil*', '*subjugation*' stereotypes – leaving them where they belong with the Orientalist painters of the 19th century - and point to what I think is a very important reality. The Arab world, generalizing, is a world constructed on the pillars of community. It is not a place, by and large, where people have the appreciation of individualism and the different drummer that characterizes Western societies. Of course a community construct as opposed to an individual construct profoundly informs how people see themselves. It influences how they evaluate themselves as being successful. It defines where they derive acceptance, approbation, and affirmation – things very important to the healthy human. I contend that, again generalizing, most people in the Middle East are most happy and comfortable in their skins when they are functioning within the normative structures of their community. Of course, there are rugged individualists – many of them. But most humans, at the end of the day, are hungry to fit.

Let me ground this idea in the specific. I am the emphatic product of an individualist culture that has socialized me to believe that I can and should do what I think is best for me and that my broad responsibility is that my exercise of my independence should not infringe or abrogate the rights of others. On this basis, I got up and went to the Middle East – something that nobody in my family or circle had even thought of doing. I married across religious,

cultural, national, and linguistic lines. Nobody in my family or my world ever thought that I should do anything other than responsibly exercise my individualism.

I had a friend in Palestine, years ago - a lovely, professional, well-educated young woman. Much loved, nurtured and supported by her family, she, a Christian, fell in love with a Muslim - a very nice young man. Her family utterly opposed the match, as did his, because of the religious difference. It hurt both of them terribly, but upon consideration both of these sophisticated young people decided that the road to future happiness and contentment did not lie in bucking the system. It lay in working within their community. Frankly, they were right. The point here is that they made decisions about what felt right to them – and those decisions might appear at first blush to the American or Western eye as repression of free will. The conclusion they came to might not have been what would have felt right to me – but I have been raised to be happy in a social construct that many Arabs find lonely and isolating. And I do confess that I also sometimes find it lonely and isolating.

In my life in the Middle East I have lived through wars, coups, uprisings, suicide bombings, scary encounters with armies and armed groups, and the generally terrifying driving. Of course, when I have come back to the United States to visit I have regularly been asked "aren't you afraid?" In fact, of course, there have been times when I was afraid – but what people are referring to when they ask me that question is what I call "the CNN effect".

Media has exaggerated reality, a statement that it is necessary to caveat. This should not be interpreted as diminishing the extreme violence and profound suffering in the Middle East region. Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen – these are blights on the international conscience - a spot which, like Lady Macbeth, we may be unable to scrub clean. That said, even in the most extreme situations, the resilient way in which people go about their business is remarkable. The media's fairly exclusive focus on extreme violence does distort the view of Arabs and the Arab Middle East.

There is definitely a "CNN effect" when it comes to women and their roles in the Middle East. Allow me to address some of the issues that, in their presentation in the west inform thinking on women's roles and positions in the Middle East, and impact programming. The stereotypes and single dimensional views of Arab women do no service, and actually do great disservice, to the women of the Middle East by failing to address the real challenges facing them. The list is long, but for the purpose at hand, let us consider (a) honor killing, (b) Arab male chauvinism, (c) women's alleged complete disempowerment, (d) women's role in the community, and (e) clothing.

On the matter of honor killing, it is a statement of what must be the obvious that the phenomenon known as honor killing is real – and it is terrible. It is, in fact, highly indicative of the community construct of Arab societies, where the group value has precedence over individual value and where the community unit will act to protect itself from what it perceives as harm to that unit. The collective sense of family honor and reputation is a very powerful force – and there are historically strong survival reasons for that.

UNFPA reports that there are an estimated 5000 cases of honor killing world-wide every year.[8] Some comparative perspective – about 1500 women are killed annually just in the

[8] UNFPA. *The State of the World Population: Lives Together, World's Apart, Men and Women in a Time of Change*. 2000. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/swp2000_eng.pdf

United States, a country representing about 5 percent of the world's population, in incidents of domestic violence. Obviously domestic violence is not an 'Arab' phenomenon, or a Muslim one – it is a universal one. And yet, the Trump administration's 'Muslim ban' specifically mandated reporting on honor killings by immigrants.[9] As a woman, I find that striking given the accusations leveled at key officials throughout the Trump administration. A leadership who sees one sort of assault on women as 'boy talk' and thereby provides a form of permission, then wants to double down on another kind of assault – if it is perpetrated by Muslims. What is really important here though, in my view, is that this focus on honor killing in the Executive Order is actually reflective of popular prejudices.

Western reporting of honor killing sensationalizes it. Domestic violence should be viewed as sensational. Sensationally bad. Sensationally unacceptable. And yes, it should go without saying that countries in the Arab world should get rid of legislation and practices permissive of domestic violence, and introduce appropriate legislation as well as providing education and enforcement around that legislation. It should be made clear in the Arab world that intentionally killing a family member is simply murder. But the sensational, orientalist analysis of honor killing does absolutely nothing to further this goal.

I have read articles in which Western observers tried to make the argument that honor killing is not a form of domestic violence – that it is in an especially awful category of its own. The obvious implication is that it is something particularly vile committed by those terrible Arabs and particularly Muslim Arabs. These observers argue that because the killer can be a brother, a father, a mother, or an uncle – as opposed to a husband – this crime is in a class by itself. Why would that be? If the dictionary definition of domestic violence is "the inflicting of physical injury by one family or household member on another", then it would seem honor killing fits.

Of course the whole honor killing discourse is nurtured by, and itself nourishes, a prejudicial view of the "Arab male chauvinist". Now yes, generally societal construct in the Middle East is patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal. And yes, in general there are societal expectations, internalized by men and women alike, that men are the head of the family and that authority, particularly in external affairs, vests with them. I am actually not so sure that is so different than the world I grew up in – and a world that I see still exists.

But to tell you the truth – with some exceptions of course - exceptions that I have seen in the Arab world and exceptions that I have also seen in the United States – this monochromatic view of the Arab man who is the insensate 'boss', ready to kill his daughter or sister on the slightest provocation, and indifferent to the dreams and aspirations of the women around him – is a man I do not know. I have not met him and in 40 years immersed in the region, I do not know anyone married to him or who has him as a father, father-in-law, or brother. I have not worked with him. I have not seen him as the beneficiary of programs I have worked on.

[9] The White House. *Executive Order Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States*. March 6, 2017. Section 11 (iii). https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states-2/

What I do see is Arabs as individuals, each with their own needs and tastes, each, as we all are, informed by experience and education. So some men are more rigid than others and some are more sensitive to the outward appearance of their dominance than others – and this is an important point: the matter of outward appearance. People raised and molded by a community-based society do tend to care about outward appearances because these are indicators of acceptance and approbation. Of course this concept is not wholly alien to our own society, but the difference is, perhaps, in the matter of degree.

I argue that social appearances do not translate to create men who are hard and insensitive. Actually, usually somewhat the contrary. Let me give you an example. A husband may be displeased to learn that when his wife's car broke down in the middle of the road, she simply had it towed and went with it to the garage – the garage being a province of men. In most cases it is not the tabloid interpretation "men saw her". It was not that he thought she should stand on the road waiting for his orders. It is that he fears the potential perception that he is not taking good care of her, resulting in her having to be inconvenienced. And in my experience, more often than not, he really does not want her to be inconvenienced. I am sure many of us would assert that this is paternalistic or somehow denies us equivalence. We might point to the clear engenderment of roles. Why should a man take care of me? Why isn't a woman as competent as a man to go to a garage? This is an individual matter – part of my point – but I wonder if there are many among us, male or female, who do not long for someone who, on occasion, takes care of us, takes on chores, and interfaces with things and places that are perhaps not our particular bailiwick.

Which leads me to another stereotype that is deeply prejudicial and does little or nothing to actually address the real barriers Arab women experience in accessing their rights. And that is the myth of Arab and/or Muslim woman's disempowerment. This was very powerfully articulated by then candidate Trump in his back-hand reference to Gold Star Mother, Mrs. Ghazala Khan – he said "Look at his wife, she was standing there. She had nothing to say. She probably, maybe she wasn't allowed to have anything to say. You tell me." It is interesting how he seized upon this stereotype of the Muslim woman when in fact his own wife is a woman whose career has been the marketing of her looks and who is rarely heard from, focusing on her traditional role of homemaker and mother. Where in Trump's statement is the particularly feminist argument or message?

Again, yes, women in Arab societies are legislatively disadvantaged and this should be remedied – I pointed to a number of the issues in my introduction.

However, in my experience in the Arab world, that is not the whole story – in part because the story of the all-powerful Arab male is not the whole story. Like people everywhere, as Arab women function within and manage relationships and social constructs, they are interacting with individuals – not stereotypes.

My experience as a woman in the Arab world and with women in the Arab world is that in general they do have loci of authority and power. Indeed often this is the authority and power that comes with traditional roles, but is that so different than anywhere else? At the same time, Arab women are also highly dynamic. They are educated, professional, entrepreneurial, creative, articulate and unafraid. They are

lawyers, doctors, engineers, professors – bosses. They can and do set agendas. Over the years, I have known Arab women married to very abusive men. They did not shut up and accept this as their expectation – they fought back. Oft times the fight back was through traditional means and safety nets, but the point is that they did not see abuse as their God-given lot.

By portraying Arab women in a stereotypical manner – as helpless slaves and concubines in some kind of imagined harem - we also fail to perceive their role in their communities. Women themselves are the most powerful enforcers of societal norms – for good or bad. But whether or not you agree with what the mothers, grandmothers, and aunties are pushing; virginity until marriage, marriage within your own community, the importance of child bearing, men's predominance, acquisition of skills usually associated with women – you are missing a great deal if you fail to understand that these women are powerful and do not hesitate to wield their influence.

Beyond the sphere of personal and societal norms there is also the very important role that Arab women have played in civil society, community development, and the arts. They have been politically important too – not enough perhaps in the formal national leadership roles, but powerful. I have now spent a lifetime working around the Palestinian struggle and, more recently, the fight by Syrians to throw off the awful Assad regime. Everywhere I turn, women have been and are involved, committed, taking risks, passionate. More often than not, they are not the front line warriors – but show me the society where women in the trenches is the norm. Certainly not in our own.

If we insist on viewing Arab women – and men – in this very narrow and rigid manner of "strong man"/"subjugated woman"/end of story, then we do not understand the Arab world. And if you do not understand something, you are more likely to do harm than good as you interfere. Women are definitely part of the equation.

Which leads me to the final stereotype I would like to address – and the one that just annoys me beyond words: women's clothing, and most particularly, the hijab. The discourse around the hijab bothers me in many ways. Over the last 40 years in the Middle East, I have seen enormous increase in the wearing of the hijab and I hear the conservative narrative articulated by various elements in the Arab world, including women. I do not understand why it is that everywhere, women seem to become the symbols of nation, culture, religion, politics – and this symbolism gets expressed, in part, by what they wear. But it does seem to be the case.

That said, conservative Muslim dress codes, which require covering the body loosely and covering the head, attract an inordinate amount of media attention, commentary, discussions about whether to ban this piece of clothing or another, and seem to be underpinned by a mass assumption that women are not exercising will or choice in the matter of how they dress.

Now yes, of course, I know women who have been strongly urged, against perhaps their own liking, to wear the hijab. And I have known women who leave the house wearing a hijab and whip it off the minute they get to a part of town where nobody knows them. However, most women who wear the hijab – and that is a lot of them –

do so because it is a standard piece of clothing and they are comfortable that way. And if you have ever looked carefully at hijabs, you will see they have styles – and the way they are tied and folded can be intricate and beautiful.

So the hijab is symbolic, but I am not sure it is symbolic of women's subjugation. And, frankly, not a few Arabs--men and women alike--over the years have suggested to me that the sexualization of women's dress in the West symbolizes something and represents a form of subjugation and objectification. I cannot say that I disagree. One thing I am very certain of is that there is no hard 'equal sign' between wearing the hijab and the disempowerment or subjugation of women. It is for this reason I find the debates about whether European countries should forbid the hijab in public to be stupid and beside the point. If the French legislated that I could only leave the house in a bikini or halter top – it would have the effect that I would never leave the house. I would be uncomfortable in the extreme and my personal decisions about my body would be taken away from me. There is a parallel to the hijab. How can we talk about supporting women's agency and empowerment while we try to legislate their clothing choices?

I love the Middle East. I love the history, the politics, the culture, the language, the food – and I love the people. My experience in the Arab world has been warm. It has been respectful. It has been tolerant.

And I think it is a great place to raise a daughter – in fact one of the reasons I stayed so long was that I felt like it was a wonderful place to raise children of both genders. Why do I see it as so great?

First, broadly speaking, Arabs like children and welcome and tolerate them in almost any venue. There is none of the sniffy judgment when you show up at the restaurant with children, or the store, or your friend's house. On the contrary. The warmth, generosity, and hospitality so characteristic of Arab societies emphatically extends to children. Boys and girls.

The community-based society construct also means that everyone is in everyone else's business all the time – and this has a happy sidebar of the neighborhood watching out for the children of the neighborhood. As a professional woman and a mother, I have appreciated the liberal approach to children and the community support.

Second, it has not been my experience, and I have not observed that it has been my daughters' experience, that we have been relegated to some back seat. My wonderful, feisty Gazan mother-in-law, their grandmother, doted on all the children. She was equally demanding of all of them that they perform in school. She encouraged all of them to learn and explore. As might be expected, her expectations of my daughters and my sons have been different – but that is fine. She relishes their successes. Of course, my girls' US passports mean they can transcend the personal status codes that can legislatively impinge women – not to mention the rights abrogation of the Israeli occupation.

Third, for boys and girls, the Arab childhood is a slower childhood. There is no expectation of drugs, alcohol, or sex. The peer pressures in this regard are much, much lower – and that business of the neighbors keeping an eye on your kids? It does not stop.

Maybe there are people who feel like it is an abrogation of rights that boys and girls are expected to forgo sexual relations until marriage, which means for most until their 20s. I listened recently to an interview with Peggy Orenstein, the author of *Girls and Sex*.[10] Her recent research found that one in three teenage American girls age 15-17 report having given oral sex. Not received it, given it. Where is the equity in attitude or practice? And really, how many of you want your girl to think that a 'relationship' with a boy is her providing oral sex? Personally, I fail to hear the 'rights' or 'empowerment' in this – I hear inequity and disrespect. I have felt that raising daughters in an environment where they were not under pressure of this kind was a good thing.

I want to say something about the title of my lecture and paper - "No Place to Raise a Daughter". Of course I hoped it would get people to pay attention, either to wring their hands over the plight of powerless Arab women or to flay me alive for my lack of understanding. But more important – many years ago a colleague of mine very much wanted to accept a position working in Jerusalem. He longed to work on Palestinian issues and to learn Arabic. His wife, my friend, a woman of sensitivity and intelligence, put her foot down. Absolutely not. As she said to me about their young daughter, "I do not want my daughter brought up in a place that treats women like that". I have puzzled over this remark – and her poorly informed view all these years. I understood why she thought the way she did, I applauded her willingness to champion the interests of her girl child, but for the life of me I simply could not understand what she thought would happen to the child. And I have wished, as one does, that I had been faster on my feet that day over tea to say, "wait a minute".

As a result, I want to thank Dr. Sara Roy, Professor William Granara, and the Center for Middle East Studies at Harvard University for having provided me the opportunity to say what I should have said all those years ago to my friend. Yes, the position of women is a problem and it needs work. Everywhere. But do not underestimate the strength, resilience, strategy, and determination of the women of the Arab world. The Middle East is a great place to raise a daughter.

[10] Orenstein, Peggy. *Girls and Sex; Navigating the Complicated New Landscape*. Harper. 2016