Introduction

MARLENE SPOERRI: Welcome to Ethics Matter. I'm Marlene Spoerri, program officer for Ethics Matter here at Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.

When most of us think of war, our thoughts turn to the front lines—the battlefields, the weapons, and the deaths. But as today's guest reminds us, there's another side to war's story, one that's little discussed, but no less important.

It's the story of women. Women are among the foremost victims of war. Every year tens of thousands of women in war zones are sexually abused, raped, and denied access to health care. Yet time and again, it's these very women who are keeping life going amidst the chaos of war. They keep kids in school, families intact, and hope alive. These women are not simply victims; they are survivors, and they form the foundation of their communities before, during, and after war.

Zainab Salbi has dedicated her career to ensuring that the voices of women survivors of war are heard here in the United States and around the world. As a founder of Women for Women International, she has helped 370,000 women living in conflict zones develop the skills and resources needed to take back control of their lives.

Zainab Salbi is also the author of three books: the bestselling memoir Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny: Growing up in the Shadow of Saddam; The Other Side of War: Women's Stories of Survival and Hope; and her latest release If You Knew Me, You Would Care.

When she's not writing or receiving awards, she is talking directly to woman survivors of war, recording their stories and offering her thoughts on a journey to self-empowerment. Zainab Salbi, thank you so much for joining us.

ZAINAB SALBI: A pleasure, thank you.

Remarks

MARLENE SPOERRI: I would like to begin with your latest field trip to Iraq. Can you tell us, how are
the women you spoke with faring today, 10 years after the invasion of Iraq?

**ZAINAB SALBI:** Not so good. I think everyone in Iraq would agree on that. That also is a complicated story. Women have gained political positions much more than they ever had before. They are guaranteed 25 percent of the Parliament's seats and they are now about 33 percent of the Iraqi parliaments.

But that's not the story of what Iraqi women are going through. Socially and economically, women have regressed to a great extent. I grew up in an Iraq where women were working, in the 1970s and the 1980s. My aunt was the leader of a factory. My mom was a teacher. My other aunt was a principal. The other aunt was a lawyer. I grew up with working women who went on vacations to Europe. They were middle class women, not only upper middle class women, but they worked. That was an era when women all worked.

Right now it is rare to see women in the workplace—very, very rare. Most women have regressed economically.

I grew up in a time when women drove as they wished. They dressed as they wished. If you wore a headscarf or did not wear a headscarf, it was not a big deal. Most did not wear a headscarf. Right now most women do wear a headscarf, and the ones who do not feel like a naked person in the streets. There are no more women driving. There are one in a thousand cars that are driven by women at the moment. The woman's space in the public sphere is no longer there.

When you interview women, they are very depressed, actually. They talk about how, before, in Saddam's time, they were afraid of Saddam and his sons, who were notorious for their violence against women. As one woman said, "Today we're afraid of everyone. Every day, we leave the street, we're afraid. Who's going to attack us, as a woman today?"

Sexual harassment in the workplace, in the streets, increase of violence against of women—legal treatment of women is no longer equal. It's now up to every state, every province, every religious cleric to interpret the law vis-à-vis women in terms of divorce and marriage and custody and all of these things. Before, we used to have a federal law that guaranteed all Iraqi women the same treatment. Now every woman gets treated differently based on her religion and the area she is living in.

So overall, it's actually not a good story for women. There are many messages out of it. One is, we always focus on women's political participation. As important as that is, we have to focus equally on women's economic and social participation. The Iraq story is not necessarily a good, rosy story, to be honest, vis-à-vis women.

**MARLENE SPOERRI:** Is that the story that you see elsewhere throughout the Middle East?

**ZAINAB SALBI:** Women in the Middle East right now are the battlefield for a political fight, a fight that is in your face. It is not a symbolic fight. It is actually a very real fight in the Middle East between two sides, between the Islamists, who believe that religion is to regulate our daily life, that God is in the relationship between all of us, and, not secularists—there is no one in the Middle East who calls themselves secularist—rarely.

Actually, the word does not exist in Arabic anyway. But they are referred to also as "modernists," who are also saying, "We are Muslims," and practicing Muslims—pray, fast, all of that—but the relationship between the individual and God is a private relationship, as opposed to a relationship
that's regulated in the society on a daily basis, and the legal system and all of that.

In that fight—and it's not men against women; it is women and men here and women and men there—women are the battlefield. Who controls women? What should they wear? How can they be married? Can they be presidents or not? Can they go to school or not? Can they be in polygamous marriages or not? Who controls the mobility and the look of women is the most critical discussion in the Middle East right now.

Yes, it's a different story from Iraq. The change in Iraq happened from outside, it's a change that was imposed from America and the allies. The change in the Arab Spring, it happens from within. So there is a different perspective. But the fight right now is going on. This is perhaps the most critical time in the Middle East.

MARLENE SPOERRI: Do you see the rise of Islamist parties as inherently problematic for women?

ZAINAB SALBI: Yes. There is no other way to go about it. I think it's problematic for different reasons. It's problematic for the economy as well. I look at women's issues—and I keep on repeating that—there is a merit; there is a moral discussion about women's issues, about women having to be free to fulfill their full potential, to go to school, to get married whenever they want, to get whatever jobs they want. So there is that merit and moral discussion and obligation vis-à-vis women's issues. There is also a very pragmatic and practical decision about women's issues to be made, which is how they impact the economy and the society at large.

One of the most essential reasons for the economic growth of Western Europe and America is the inclusion of women in the market space, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit. If the emerging market is to grow at the same rate that the Western market has grown, they need to incorporate women in the marketplace.

To incorporate women in the marketplace in terms of work, as a workforce, you need to make sure that they are safe, safe from violence—that there is reduction of the violence, there is legal retribution—they are getting education, they are getting access to health care, they are getting access to economic opportunities. You can't talk about a growth of a country when, as one Iraqi sheikh actually told me, one of the country's wings is broken or not used. A bird cannot fly if one of its wings is broken.

If we are talking about the Arab Spring, for example—the Spring was about jobs and was about livelihood and it was about dignified life. That's what all the chants, men and women in the streets, the demonstrators, were saying. It's the dignity they wanted. It switched from that focus to a focus of controlling women.

Yet you can never address the core of the Arab Spring if you do not address the economy, if you do not address that there is 60 percent of the population under the age of 25, and they want jobs. They are unemployed. Sixty percent of university graduates in the region are women, but they are unemployed. The marriage age is decreasing to 16. It used to be 21 when I was living there 20 years ago.

Yes, it's not good, because there is decision-making that is happening on an ideological level and not addressing the practical needs for growth. That's what the Islamist Party—I don't think they have reconsolidated the two. It's one thing to lead, but lead a country with economic growth in mind, and do not lead a country only on a moral discussion of how to control women. It does not make sense, considering the region's needs.
MARLENE SPOERRI: I would like to move back a little bit now and talk about your own story. You were, of course, born and raised in Baghdad, under the watchful eyes of the Baathist regime. Yet, as you have just described, you said that growing up in Iraq was at the time very much like growing up in an American suburb. That changed for you when your father became the pilot of Saddam Hussein. Can you talk to us a little bit about that?

ZAINAB SALBI: About Iraq? About Saddam?

MARLENE SPOERRI: That change and how that affected the Iraq that you lived in.

ZAINAB SALBI: The Iraq I lived in—Saddam was like a fog of fear in our lives. My family happened to see the fog at a closer level, at a closer range. The fear in Saddam's era was like fog. You cannot touch it, but it's always surrounding you and you cannot breathe through it. But it's there. I don't know how to describe it, but everyone knows what fog is. That was how fear was.

In my particular case, that fear was very real. But we were in between two places. People saw us as close to Saddam's family, entourage, and Saddam's family saw us as part of the people. Both were suspicious of us.

I remember growing up, when my father became Saddam's pilot, first of all, my identity was erased. All of our identities were erased as the individual. As a matter of fact, it was my biggest leap of faith to write my memoir and sort of tell my truth. It was the only way that I could liberate myself from that fear. That fear I held onto until six years ago, until I wrote the book and sort of said, "The only way I can free myself from that fear is if I actually take the leap of faith and be proactive about telling the truth, rather than always be afraid of it."

But my fear was that if I tell you that I knew Saddam Hussein, my actual face would disappear and all that you would see is his identity and his face, because he's so much stronger than I am, and because I grew up with—everything about me was related to Saddam. My house was referred to as the house of Saddam Hussein's pilot. The street to the house was referred to as the street of Saddam Hussein's pilot. The car I drove is the car of Saddam Hussein's pilot's daughter. I am Saddam Hussein's pilot's daughter. Everything was related to that.

So everyone else was afraid. My friends were afraid of me in college and all of that. But in our own home, we were afraid of everything. My parents would whisper in their own beds, because they were scared that even their bedroom was tapped. I would be interrupted by phone calls as I'm talking with a friend. The palace would call and say, "Hang up. The president wants your father." Every aspect of us was bugged. Every aspect of us was fear.

There were rules to engagements with him. My mother used to tell me to smile when he smiles and cry when he cries, and never look him in the eyes, because he will know how to read the eyes. I grew up with my mother trying to commit suicide because of that fear, because of that suffocation that we were living in.

It changed my life. It made me what I just described, someone in between—I'm miserable here and I'm miserable there. It changed my life seeing my mom really struggling with her life with that. It changed my life to know power at a close range, and know the corruption of it and how it can get corrupted. And that impacted, really, who I am. It made me always suspicious of power, because I have seen how it has corrupted people. It impacted my strength.

My mother used to shake me as a teenager: "You've got to be strong. You've got to be independent."
You cannot cry. You've got to leave the country."

I was a teenager. I was like, "I don't know why you're yelling at me. I haven't done anything wrong."

I understood later that what she was trying to do was sort of embed it in me—it's almost like tattooing it in my DNA—that you've got to be strong.

The way I got out of Iraq was because of Saddam. I got into an arranged marriage just to get me out of Iraq. I was very confused—"How could you do this to me?"

Saddam changed my life to a great extent. I would say he changed the country. I mean, he changed my life particularly. He changed the country, obviously.

But it made me aware of these things. And mostly it's made me aware of the treatment of women. A lot of people, including me, would tell you that actually a lot of the laws during Saddam Hussein were much better then than they are now. A lot of the laws under the Mubarak regime of Egypt, the Ben Ali regime of Tunisia—they were dictators by every definition of the word—the laws vis-à-vis women were better than they are right now. It's not a defense of these systems, but they were better laws.

We have to reconsolidate the fact that—yes, these guys also manipulated women's issues in a very interesting way. I would see Saddam doing what he did to women at a very intimate level. He had a day of the people, when he raped women as much as he wanted, those who wanted to ask him for help. But he also introduced decent laws towards women.

It made me aware of this encounter on a very personal level, as I would see in school how classmates would talk about public executions in the streets, and at night I would be dining with him and his family, and how they were so disconnected from the reality. It obviously impacted who I am to a great extent.

MARLENE SPOERRI: Right. You mentioned rape, and it was, of course, the mass rapes in Bosnia that inspired the founding of Women for Women. Can you talk to us about how you got involved in Women for Women, how you started it and what inspired it?

ZAINAB SALBI: I came to America with an arranged marriage, which was horrible, awful. It lasted for three months. I left. Iraq invaded Kuwait during that same time. I saw myself suddenly with no family here, with $400 in my pockets, and with my country in war. I could not even call my family to tell them to help.

I started my journey alone in America, with the intention of going back to Iraq. After a year here, I said, "No, I need to stay here. One day I will go." For me, this is the day that I am going back to the region, in a different way. But I remember, at that age, I was like, "One day I will go back and help there. But right now I'm going to stay here."

I stayed here and I started my life from zero, really. I moved from being the daughter of Saddam Hussein's pilot, in the elite of the elite of Iraq, to a very vulnerable person, alone, out of an abusive marriage—no money, nothing, nothing, not even a work permit. I went to the Immigration and Naturalization Service and said, "You tell me what to do, because I need to survive here."

Within two years, I got myself back to college. I could not transfer my university years in Iraq. I reenrolled in college. While I was here, I learned two facts in one month. One fact was about the Holocaust. I did not know about it until then.
I was in Iraq a couple of weeks ago and I asked people, "Do you know about the Holocaust?" They really don't know. They know vaguely about it, but it's not something that we studied. They don't know exactly what Hitler did. So I learned it in detail. I was like, "Oh, wow, I really didn't know."

The same month, by happenstance, there was coverage of the Bosnian War and of a concentration camp and rape camps in Bosnia, on the front page of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. I remember just putting it together. I was 23 years old at the time. I was like, "But they said never again." And it was exactly the same picture. It was 40 years later, 50 years later, and it's happening again. I was like, "I don't understand. Didn't we say that?"

In hindsight, it's interesting. I actually was just reflecting on that issue. I am very angry at that point, because I thought it was the past. It's the past when we see injustice and people live on in their lives. What I actually came to understand is the present. Every single one in here sees injustice. What I'm realizing is that it takes a lot of courage for people to stand up and say no. And if you can't act against injustice that is in front of your eyes, how would you act against injustice that is in another country?

I still have this curiosity. I call it a childlike curiosity. I was like, "Why would you not"—so at that time, I called around different organizations. There were no websites. There was no Internet at that time. There was, but not public. In 1993, there were yellow pages. I don't know if the young people understand that here, but there were yellow pages.

I called the women's organizations and I asked if they were doing anything for Bosnia. They were like, "No, no, no. Come after six months."

I'm like, "Six months? There are rape camps." Women were given numbers. When their numbers were called, they had to go to the other room and get gang-raped. They were in prisons and camps nine months. There were 8-year-old girls and 80-year-old women. There were concentration camps. We were seeing their pictures. What are we talking about, six months?

That's where, for me, I was like, "Well, I have to do something about it."

I had really no experience, no work experience, no American experience. I had just been in the country for less than three years, newlywed to another—this time my choice—another man, going back to college. I was, like, "We have to do something about it." That's how Women for Women started. Really, I was at Denny's at midnight eating french fries—my favorite. Truly, I love it. Usually I stuff myself with fries after a speech.

And I was like, "Why don't we just do the sponsorship program?" That's how it started. It's still running. It's a sponsorship program that asks every single woman—and eventually every single man—to sponsor a woman, a survivor of war, who is in her context. We don't need to bring everyone here. But in her context, she needs to survive. Give her cash and we'll give her training. It's about sponsoring her for $30 a month and exchanging pictures and letters with her. In the meantime, we'll make sure that she's getting vocational skills, training so she can get a job.

We are teaching her about women's rights and about her position in the society and the economy so we can build her self esteem and self confidence. After a year of your sponsorship, we'll help her graduate and place her in a job or help her get an income, whether microcredit loans or whether it is a formal placement.

The reason for that is because people in war still have to work. That's what everyone forgets. I don't
understand. Syria right now—we're talking about war and war and war and war, this bombing and that bombing, and this rebel and—but people in Syria still have to earn a living so they can eat. It's as simple as that. We have to address that very practical reality.

Even when we send aid to people, we send mostly conflict resolutions and democracy training, which is all valid, but at the end of the day, people need to get jobs and work and earn a living and eat. That's a very practical need.

If you haven't noticed yet, I'm very practical. We've got to address people's needs in a very real way. If we do not address it, others are addressing it. The others are the fundamentalists. Indeed, as long as there is an injustice in this world, as long as there is misery in the world, there will always be people who will take advantage of that and there will always be extremists, whether it is religious or whether it is military or whether it is fascists or whether it is whatever. As long as there is misery in the world, there will always be extremists who will take care of it.

That makes it upon every single one of us to address that misery.

MARLENE SPOERRI: You mentioned "never again" and you mentioned Syria. Are we witnessing the extent of rapes that we witnessed in Bosnia in Syria today? Are we entering that?

ZAINAB SALBI: No. Bosnia and Rwanda were a class on their own, just to clarify. It's interesting. You're the second person who asked me. I just came from overseas, so I'm not sure if this is being covered in the news.

Bosnia was an organized rape. Soldiers were ordered to rape. There were camps. The women were imprisoned in these camps. They were released in a prisoners' exchange. It was very organized. There were pamphlets distributed to soldiers to rape as many Bosnian women as possible. It was a systematic way of raping.

In Rwanda, around that same time, it was also very systematic. Half-a-million women were raped in 100 days during the Rwandese genocide.

Not only Syria; before that, Libya—it was a discussion. It is indeed encouraged by the governments. I actually just came from interviewing the Libyans. It was indeed encouraged by the governments. There was a push and they used political rivalries between tribes and between regions to encourage one to rape the other side. There was indeed a distribution of Viagra and a promotion for anybody who raped. There was indeed. And there were regions in which there was so much rape that it destroyed the social fabric of that region. That was Libya.

In Syria, it is the same way. There is rape. Woman prisoners are getting raped. I was in Iraq. Right now woman prisoners are getting raped. Woman prisoners are getting tortured. There are women who are being raped, indeed. But it's not the volume of Bosnia and Rwanda.

So it's a big deal. It's huge in that part of the world—huge. But to compare it to Bosnia and Rwanda would be doing injustice to Bosnia and Rwanda's story, because that was such—there were half-a-million women raped. There were at least 60,000 women raped in Bosnia. We're not talking about the same volume.

Now, one woman is enough. It's similar. But it's enough to pay attention to, to say, "This is dangerous. Pay attention to what's happening."
MARLENE SPOERRI: And enough also to act. What do you think we here in the United States can do for the women in Syria, in terms of helping?

ZAINAB SALBI: I was just talking to some young women from Syria this morning, as a matter of fact. Syria is a very important place. This is a very pivotal time in the Middle East. We cannot talk about criticizing the Middle East from afar, wanting democracy and stability and all of these things, if we are not going to invest. I am talking about it in a very practical way. There needs to be an investment in all the moderate voices, and women are the most moderate voices. Women are actually the only hope in the Middle East. I have complete faith that the only way out of this crisis in the Middle East is to invest in women and empower women.

But when we look at the investment in women vis-à-vis all the moderate voices, vis-à-vis the investment the Islamist regimes, I guess, are getting, it's minuscule. We're talking about differences of millions of dollars that are consistently being poured to fundamentalist groups, Syria included, as opposed to much more mediocre support to the modernists and to women's issues.

So that's one thing. Money is an important factor in this dynamic.

The second one—and this is something that I was really caught up in a few years ago in Sudan, when I was visiting Sudan and met with government officials. I was like, "Where are the women? You've got to invest in women," and the officials said, "Just stop it here. Just stop it. Unless you guys, the U.S. delegations and the UN delegations and the European delegations, also come with 50 percent of your delegations being women, do not lecture us about what we need to do, because you guys are not doing that."

Very good point, and a point that silenced me, to be honest. Good point.

If we are to talk about all Muslim women having to get better roles and all of these things, we have to push for that debate. You cannot meet with businesspeople in the Middle East if you don't ask where the women are. You cannot make investments if you don't ask. That push makes a difference in there.

So we just cannot sit on the bench and criticize, if we're not going to actually invest and say, how can we support it? There are women's groups in Syria. When I talked to them, I was like, "So do you have any hope?"

They said, "The only hope is if we actually get together and try to propose our own political proposition for the solutions over there."

It's possible. Liberian women did it. So can Syrian women.

I'm working on a documentary at the moment on Arab women and the Arab Spring, with Abby Disney and Gini Reticker. We're going all over the Arab world—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya. We have to talk about Yemen. They were a critical part of the Spring. They were in every single country. It was women who triggered the change.

If we are talking about the second change, a change to a Middle East that has stability, economic stability and social stability, where women can thrive and everyone is contemporary and modern and celebrating, rather than sadness and crying and explosions, then we've got to invest in women, as the most critical investments we can do.
MARLENE SPOERRI: Do you see that new social media are playing a role in enabling women to get their stories out there?

ZAINAB SALBI: Very critical, absolutely. I switched my life because of that. After 18 years of running Women for Women as the CEO, I decided to actually step back, because of the Arab Spring and because of social media. I was like, "My god, this is charity. This is fantastic. I've done my dues, raising and distribution $100 million to woman survivors of wars. Now it's my part of the world that is actually in the most crisis, and a critical crisis that is holding attention in the world right now. What can we do to change, besides charity and aid?"

What women need is a platform to express their voices. Social media becomes hugely important. But not only social media, all kinds of media. The truth of the matter is, all kinds of media. The poorest of the poor still do not have good access to the Internet or consistent access to the Internet.

When I was in Iraq, I spent three days with a very, very, very poor family in an internally displaced area, which means I was eating from breakfast to dinner with them, and stayed with them the whole time. There is no Internet over there.

It's very important. It gives access. Indeed, the digital world is moving very fast. It has triggered the Arab Spring in many extents. People don't email each other anymore, but they Facebook each other. It is because of the Arab Spring that I had a Facebook account, seriously, because no one emails anymore. So it's very important. But I would say it's not only social media; it's all kinds of media platforms that are needed for women to express themselves and get their voices out there.

MARLENE SPOERRI: Finally, before we open this up, you mentioned Facebook. Of course, Sheryl Sandberg just released her book, Lean In. How do you weigh in on this debate and the notion of empowering women here in the United States to take on CEO positions and move to the top of their fields?

ZAINAB SALBI: To be honest—again, I just came from overseas. I was like, "Wow, I leave America for three weeks and I come back and it's like a war that is going on in America"—seriously. I have to tell you, I don't understand. All Sheryl is saying is—and I really agree—the woman's story has a twofold to it. One is an internal and one is an external.

The internal story—we indeed need to own our voice. We indeed need to own our confidence and claim our space and stop acting as victims always.

This is for women. Forgive me, women, I'm saying this in front of men in here. But we do need to claim it. We need to own our space and stop fighting with each other, first of all. Instead of fighting for the one seat at the table, we need to make more seats for the table, where it includes more women. And we need to have that entitlement that men do have of saying, "Yes, I'm going to claim my space."

The system is unjust, indeed. But the way to change the system is not to sit on the bench and just say, "Bad, bad." We've got to change the story. The story is not a victim's story anymore.

I actually find it mesmerizing, why Sheryl's book Lean In is getting attacked, when, for me, all we're saying is, own it. Own the story. Go for it.

Yes, there are challenges, but those challenges are not going to be addressed unless we actually increase our proportion in the corporate world, in the media world, in the government, and in the
Most women want to go to the social services. Most women want to go to the humanitarian thing. I'm one of them, I'm telling you. And I am coming out of it saying we need to go to the corporate world and we need to take over the media, the corporations, the governments, all of that. The only way to do that is to own your voice and to own your space and move on—and lean in, indeed. I actually find it—I don't understand.

In my experience, as women from the Third World, as you call it, I have seen women all over the world, from Sudan to Congo to Rwanda to Afghanistan. These are horrible places in the world—to my own home country, Iraq, which is not necessarily very nice at the moment. There is a difference. I've always seen women victimized. In all these contexts, there is always this one woman who sort of claims her voice, and the men treat her differently. I look at them.

What's the difference between that woman and all these other women? There is no difference. There is no power. She doesn't have privileges. We're talking about traditional societies here. The only difference is that one woman owns it and she just has strength. She just claims her voice. She just claims her space and takes it. And the men respond well to her.

Honestly, that has been, in my case, very true. In my own family, I sit with the men. I enjoy conversations with all the men in my family. The women separate themselves intentionally. I was like, "Why would you separate yourself?"

Do you see what I mean? There is a part of it that is a story we need to own. Yes, we change the system because we come to it, not because we stay outside of it and criticize it. The system is indeed unfair to women—indeed, very unfair. It's sexist and masculine in its treatment of women. But the only way to change it is for us to get in and claim it.

Questions

QUESTION: Thank you for sharing your perspective on women in the Middle East. Whenever I look at the Human Development indices, I'm always struck by how countries like Sudan and Iraq, among the other countries in the Middle East, have the highest women shares in Parliament, but if you look at the Gender Inequality Index, it's the highest among the countries in the Middle East.

One time I asked my Sudanese women colleagues what accounts for the discrepancy, and they told me it's the male interpretation and application of Islamic teachings, to the point where that puts them down and makes them fearful of overcoming their situation in the country.

My question to you is, as long as you have this singular interpretation of Islamic teachings that puts women down, is it possible for women to get into the corporate space, the media space, the marketplace space, and be successful?

ZAINAB SALBI: A wise man once told me that what the Muslim world is going through, particularly in the Middle East—actually, the majority of Muslims are in Malaysia and Indonesia, where they are doing much better—particularly in the Middle East, it's just simply going through the Dark Ages. It was actually this statement that made me like, "Okay, I understand what's going on historically."

I just read that about 5 million women were killed during Europe's Dark Ages—the witch hunting and all the inquisitions and all of these things. Horrible history. Thank God we're out of it.
I am optimistic that we will get out of it. Otherwise, I would not have changed my life and done everything for the Middle East, for that.

It is about what religion, whose religion—I'm a Muslim. My mother, growing up, told me that the best prayer you can do every single day—and she never taught me how to pray the Muslim way. I had to teach myself, out of rebellion against my parents, who were very secular. So I had the reverse story in here. But she told that the best prayer you can do is to smile every day and thank God. It's beautiful. It's just so beautiful. She said, "God is everywhere—is in the trees, is in the sun, is in the sky, is in the air, is everywhere. All that you need to do is just smile and thank everything that is around you." That's Islam for me. That is honestly the Islam I grew up with.

Osama bin Laden said something very different. It is Islam out of fear as opposed to out of love. It is fear. And that's the narrative right now in the Middle East. That is the narrative. It is that of fear. It is, "God will punish you if you do not do that."

I was just there recently, and I was like, "Seriously? You think actually God cares? Do you think God doesn't want you to be free and happy?"

So God is in the picture, which is different than the story in this country, although God is here as well, in the political dynamics.

But it's about how you change the narrative of the religion. When it comes to women, how do you change it? In my opinion, you revive what is beautiful in the religion rather than fight it. Islam is the main core identity of the people in the Middle East. You cannot go around it. The most secular will still see themselves as Muslims as a core identity. So rather than fight it and have the alternative as no religion or no God or no Islam, in my opinion, you do it the positive way. You revive the positiveness of the religion.

Going back to women, one of the most prominent women in Islam is Muhammad's wife, Khadija. It's not a controversial story, what I'm about to tell you. Everyone agrees on it. It is just a skipped story. It is just passed over very fast.

Khadija was 20 years older than Muhammad. She was a 42-year-old woman when she fell in love and married him as a 23-year-old young man. She was a very wealthy businesswoman who had her own trading caravans, and hired him to run her business for her for the caravans. They had a most beautiful marriage for 20 years. She is the only mother of his children. He never fathered any other child outside of her. When he got the prophecy and came to her shaking, doubting that Gabriel spoke to him, she's the one who shook him and said, "You have to believe. This is the messenger of God." Thus, she became the first believer in Islam.

That, for me, is a role model for Muslim women. She's educated. She's a businesswoman. She made her choices. Boy, if a woman right now in New York City marries someone who is 20 years younger than her, it will be the gossip of every newspaper. Imagine, this was 1,400 years ago.

For me, I look at her and I'm like, we need to revive Khadija's narrative. That's an independent woman who made her free choices to fulfill her full potential, economically independent, politically, socially, and had a great marriage, actually. And it's all skipped. We don't know that about her. What people know about Muhammad is that after she died, he got depressed for six months. Islam was spreading at that time. That's when the multiple marriages were introduced, as a political strategy. In order for the tribe to give you their allegiance, they married you to their daughter. So he is known for the second half of his life rather than the first half.
What I care about, I care about Khadija.

How can we revive and celebrate, rather than fight? In my opinion—I'm telling you my opinion; that doesn't have to be true, but that's what I'm doing—how do we lead out of love rather than out of fear? It's almost sacrilegious when I'm in the Middle East and I say I love God. They're like, "Really?" I think that's the way to God, through love. It's not through fear. It is through beauty. It's not through ugliness. It's almost the reverse.

For me, it's, how do we revive that rather than fight what is not nice? I want to revive—that's my Islam. God is everywhere, and the best prayer I can do is thank and smile.

**QUESTION:** Susan Gitelson.

We are all upset about the regression for women in Egypt and all these things going on. But you are a practical person and you know what's happening and you have been working on this for a long time. Can you give us ideas of what can be done, despite all the difficulties, in the Middle East for Middle East women and men who are outside, and therefore not as subject to the domination of the regressive forces, the UN, friends abroad? You might want to tell us more about where you have been. In the United States, in Europe, and elsewhere, what can be done?

**ZAINAB SALBI:** It depends on which part of the Middle East and what country you're talking about. But if you're talking about Syria, for example—politically, let's say—I would insist, as America, and I would put pressure on the UN to include women in the negotiating process. There are only four Syrian women in the political opposition out of 73 men. When we talk to all of the opposition—we in America—and we don't ask where the women are, we become part of the story, in my opinion. So we want women because they will bring different dynamics to the discussion and they will bring different political perspectives to the discussion.

Actually, one of the politicians in the region—and he's a friend—is like, "I don't understand this Western pressure focused on women. What would women do to the negotiation? How would women bring peace into Syria?"

He's modern. He's actually a very good friend. He is liberal. He is all of these things. And he doesn't get why we need to include women. I actually think a lot of people don't know why we should include women, including in this country.

If we really want to include women, we first need to act on it, and we need to ask constantly, when we are negotiating in the Middle East, "Where are the women? We want the women to be here. We want to have a voice for women." Hillary Clinton, when she was secretary of state, did that. We need to continue that habit, and we need to make it much, much more, and consistent. So that's number one.

Second, there are lots of women NGOs, and they are doing a wonderful job in the Middle East. There is actually a recent study about what the change agent is in women's rights in different countries around the world. It was not big corporations acting. It was not government doing. It was not the law. It was actually small women NGOs who pushed. In their small activities, they just pushed, pushed, pushed, until they led into a mass awareness. What we're seeing recently in India—it was the women who were rising up. We need to support them, in my opinion.

Third, I would invest in getting many more women in the media. Do you remember Hanan Ashrawi, the Palestinian woman? Hanan Ashrawi emerged as a figure actually much more because Ted
Koppel introduced her into the limelight of American politics. That helped push a platform, a new political platform, for her.

So we need to invest in who these women are right now who are emerging. They are young. They are brilliant. They give me hope, actually. It's just beautiful. But we need to give them platforms and we need to support them financially. We need to give them media platforms so they can be heard. We need to do that for our best interests. The only hope for the Middle East is in its women, in my opinion.

So there is the financial, there is the political, and there is the media aspect of it.

**QUESTION:** My name is Jennifer Tavis.

I was wondering if you could speak a little bit more about women's economic empowerment and the role that that can play in creating the circumstances where peace is possible.

**ZAINAB SALBI:** If we are to create sustainable peace, we cannot only talk about the politics. In the region, the most active people, including women in politics, are the Islamists, are the religious parties, not the secular parties. They are so much more savvy and complicated and brilliant, in my opinion, in their strategies to include women in their political parties. The secularists just say, "Oh, no, no. We are cool." And we're like, "No. You've got to include women," for one.

Second, it is the religious parties—I did my master's dissertation on why women would support religious fundamentalism in Egypt—the religious parties go all the way to the grassroots. The Muslim Brotherhood goes all the way to the grassroots. They provide food. They provide transportation. They provide free education. They provide clothing. They provide subsidies, financial subsidies. They provide mass weddings so they can reduce the marriage costs on young couples.

They actually go all the way to the grassroots, provide very tangible needs to people, and then they get their support.

I came to my conclusion—when I first started my research, I was like, why would any woman support religious fundamentalists? I came out after a few months saying, "Oh, my God, if I was a poor woman in Egypt, I too would support the Muslim Brotherhood." They are the only ones who are providing tangible needs.

If we are to fight, we've got to fight this way, not just talking about democracy. We've got to actually deliver these services and provide the alternative. The economic alternative becomes the most viable, the most tangible. At the end of the day, it is women who are making sure that the food has to come into the family. Even when the husband does not earn a living, even when he is unemployed, it is her who has to make sure that there is food in the family. So women's economic opportunities are vitally important.

Everyone looks at women's economic opportunities as microcredit, which I'm a big fan of. God knows, I launched a couple myself. I'm saying it's not the only opportunity. God bless microcredit. It is fantastic. But not every person is an entrepreneur. Not every woman is an entrepreneur. Most of us are not entrepreneurs, as a matter of fact. Most people are wanting 9-to-5 jobs or lived on a 9-to-5 job. That's the majority of the population.

Those who are entrepreneurs are going to run with it. It's fast. They just need access to credit. You need to make that access available. We also need to address those who are not entrepreneurs.
We've got to address them. They need jobs. They just need jobs. How do we make sure that there is actually availability of jobs and investment in these?

We need to invest in women farmers. In the Middle East, farming is being destroyed in that part of the world. Iraq moved from being food self-sufficient 10 years ago to now importing every single food item in the country. Women are 70 percent of the farmers in that region, as well as worldwide. So we need to get women back into farming.

We need to get women back into the factories. We cannot look at economic solutions and stabilities as outside and just say give to microcredit. We've got to address all targets of the population.

I don't know if I answered your question. If it was me, I would say inclusion of women is the most important because it impacts the economy so significantly. To do that, we need to invest in women's security, education, health, and all of that. But their economic output is the most important one, as long as we do it in a non-abusive way.

**QUESTION:** Zubadia Rasul-Ronning.

Thanks for your presentation. You say we need to support women. We know that women in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Egypt, Tunisia, and many other countries in the Middle East, have a lot of capacity. They have had decades of a seesaw history of emancipation, activism, professionalism, and then decline in some cases. But there's a lot of capacity there.

When the West and when we support women's groups and women in those environments, there is very often a political backlash, and there can be the risk of stigmatization in their own communities, because as soon as Western money is seen as backing somebody in their environment, particularly local NGOs that you were talking about, women's groups, then the community tends to react. There is definitely a political dimension to that as well.

What would be some of the ways you would say that we could support them in a less harmful manner and in a more constructive manner? Because direct financial assistance, for instance, gets them onto target lists, and things like that.

**ZAINAB SALBI:** I would say support them in a financial manner. The risk by you not doing that is their folding. It's not as if someone else is coming and covering that money that you are not giving. The risk for them folding is a silencing of a voice.

Yes, indeed, they do get criticized for being supported by the West. Indeed, that's a risk that they are saying they are willing to do, and they are doing anyway. When it comes to the community itself or the services being delivered, the communities don't talk. It is the religious people, the fundamentalists, who are talking and criticizing.

The alternative of not supporting them is not someone else picking up that package and Saudi Arabia supporting them. It's becoming a zero-sum approach.

So I don't agree, actually. I understand. I actually agree with the assessment. Indeed, they get, "You're Westernized," and all of these things, yes. But the only groups that are working effectively—in Libya, they are Norwegian-supported. In Egypt, they are British-supported. They are all Western-supported, and "Western" does not mean only American.

They are the only ones. The others are not being supported. The religious people are—the volume
of money in here is buckets, loads of money, on the religious groups and pennies on the secular groups—pennies, in comparison.

So by not supporting them financially, it is actually then a zero-sum approach. They will fold, and you will marginalize them much more than marginalizing them because they are Western-supported.

Yes, I understand. It's a privilege to be in that situation and say, "I don't want them." But in reality, they need money. They really do need money and support.

**QUESTIONER:** What else do they need?

**ZAINAB SALBI:** When you are speaking with someone in the region politically, include the women in the discussion. Your role is to create a media platform for them. I don't know what else to do. Don't go there. What else do you think? I don't know what else.

**QUESTION:** Particularly in the last presidential election, it was a big, hot topic, women's reproductive rights and their link to women's economic success. In these religious, fundamentalist communities, that's not something that is available to women. I'm having trouble, I guess, identifying the link between economic development and opportunities for women without also the opportunity to control their families.

**ZAINAB SALBI:** We have these things.

**QUESTIONER:** Yeah?

**ZAINAB SALBI:** Oh, yeah.

**QUESTIONER:** I mean in the current climate.

**ZAINAB SALBI:** Sex is sex, no matter where you are in the world.

The perceptions—there is a Talmudic saying that says we see things as we are, we do not see things as they are. Don't take them wrong. Just because they are wearing the headscarf and the abaya [cloak] does not mean that they don't have access to family control and all of these things. They have these things. The reason they are having a lot of children is not because of lack of family planning. It is because the society has not changed its perceptions.

I'm writing a book, for example, right now on an Iraqi woman who used to work in my family home. She's my age. She used to be a child servant, basically, in my family's home. I grew up with her. We became very good friends. She went to school. She started as a maid, but towards the end, she had her formal job at the airport as a receptionist, but living in her family as a family member. So there is an evolution.

I didn't see her for 20 years and I didn't know where she was for 20 years. I end up, by complete happenstance, meeting her. She becomes a member of Women for Women and I end up meeting her. I'm writing a book now on that. It's a magical story.

But this is a woman that I know. Her husband got killed. I don't want to tell you the story. I go and spend time with her. She has six children. I'm like, "Six children! What are you doing? How could you even fathom six children? You're poor!" I was like, "Why?"

It was, "Well, I got girls, and I was afraid if I don't get a boy, my husband will marry someone else."
I'm like, "You grew up with me. How could you even think this way?"

She says, "I know. I did not think this way when I was with you. But then I came, and it's a different society and a different neighborhood and everyone is scaring me right and left—'If you don't have a son, if you don't have a son, if you don't have a son, he'll divorce you, he'll divorce you, he'll divorce you,' until it becomes real. Until it becomes in my head, 'I have to have a son, I have to have a son.'"

So she has four girls before she has the fifth and the sixth, who are sons.

For example, she marries off her teenage children, 16-years-old. She marries off her girls.

"What, are you crazy? How could you marry—they are kids."

She's like, "No. I had no money." Her husband got killed in the war. "I had no money. I could not feed them. I need to send them to college. I had to make a choice between sending them to college and marrying them."

So she cut a deal with every husband. "I marry her off at 16-years-old. In exchange, you send her to college."

Her deal worked out, indeed. I'm against child marriage—against it and still horrified. Now the 18-year-old wants to get married. I'm like, "You're a boy." He's like, "No. I'm a man."

But she is making that decision. Just because she's making that decision, we have to understand the underlying reasons why she made that decision. Most women are not having more children because they don't have access. Believe me. I just came from the ghetto there and interviewed woman and woman and woman. It's not. It's societal pressure, and it's an artificial one.

So the teenage girls got married, went to business school and pharmacy school and nursing. Indeed. But they each had a child immediately. I'm like, "Why?"

They said, "Because we need to prove our fertility."

These concepts are not because of lack of, but because of the cultural traditions and nuances that we need to address in a positive way. But all the girls want to work. All of them want to work. And they see their children as just the route that they have to go through in order to be freed.

I met one woman in a very religious province in the south of Iraq. She's covered head to toe and wearing gloves, which means very religious. I was scared of her. This is seriously religious. My car was not there. My driver was not there. She said, "Do you want a ride?"

I was like, "Yes, I would appreciate it."

She comes with her four-wheel drive. She sees me very surprised and she looks at me and she says, "Oh, honey, this is just a façade so they leave me alone." She ended up being a women's rights lawyer. She represents marginalized women and prostitutes in the courts. She said, "I need to do this so they leave me alone, so they don't criticize me."

So just because they are doing this, it doesn't mean anything, actually. They are making decisions on what gives them access to go on. But it's just a different navigation.

That doesn't mean it's easy. It's very challenging. They have to go through mountains and deserts
and hills and rivers to actually make it. The route is not an easy one.

But it's not lack of accessibility or even knowledge about it. It's lack of courage to say, "I don't care what the neighbors say. I am not having another child," which many of us don't have.

QUESTION: Linda Senat.

Thank you. This is fascinating. You spoke of the Dark Ages. Is there a Renaissance on the horizon? What should we be doing, if anything? Can we help it along?

In particular, yes, it's child marriage, which is one of the ideas which is so awful to us. The story on the front page of yesterday's New York Times—a little 6-year-old being bargained away.

Can you talk about one leading to the other, please?

ZAINAB SALBI: I'm an optimist by nature, even though my last name actually means "negative," literally in Arabic. I am a very positive person. So, yes, I believe in the Renaissance coming up—"inshallah" [God willing], as we say.

I am putting the bet on women as leading that. And it's not only me. I really don't believe it's only me. A lot of men and women in the region are putting the bet on women, mostly because they are being pushed the most. We are going to have more of the Malala Yousafzai situation. The more they get pushed, the more they burst out and say, "Enough." Malala was the 13-year-old girl who got shot. I have goosebumps just thinking of her—that courage of saying, "Enough."

They are being pushed so much, so, so much, that they are being angry at the moment, very angry in the region at the moment. People don't know what to do. So there is an awareness in the region—"We know that the women are angry, but we don't know how to address that."

What the West can do is address the situation with sensitivity. If the West is going to go on a crusade and liberate Muslim women, that's the worst thing that can happen. If it's supporting and respecting the voice, that's the best thing that can happen.

But to go on a crusade—and I think this is to your point—it's destructive, because the women become attacked on two ends. There are religious people saying, "You are Westernized," and the Westerners saying—they have to defend two fronts.

It's how to support. When I was learning how to ride a bicycle, my parents used to hold the handle and try to teach me. I could never learn how to ride a bicycle that way. Then my father's friend came and he said, "That's not how you teach her how to ride a bicycle. You just hold the seat from the back." In two seconds, I was zooming out and had a great bicycle experience.

I think that's the support that is needed, to hold the back seats, as opposed to the handle. I'm not sure if that's clear. That is, I think, to your point as well. Hold the back seat, but don't drop the seats.

MARLENE SPOERRI: Thank you so much.

Audio
In this fascinating conversation, Zainab Salbi discusses her personal journey from growing up in Saddam Hussein's Iraq to becoming a global champion of women's rights. She also focuses on the realities of women's lives across the Middle East and proposes constructive ways to change negatives to positives.
Video Clip
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