

## MONA MAKRAM EBEID

Egyptian Senator and former member of Parliament, Distinguished Lecturer, Political Science Department, American University in Cairo

### Mohamed KABBAJ

I will give the floor to Mona Makram, who is a well-known woman in the Arab world. She plays a very important role in the development of the area and we will be very happy to hear from her about the role of women in the development of the economy.

### Mona Makram EBEID

Once again, I hope you are not tired of hearing me; I want to underline what the previous speaker has said about education and how important it is. The theme should be education for employment. To say that we have high rates of education today is a misnomer. There is a mismatch between what the market demands and what they are taught in school.

Let me now turn to the role of women in overcoming, Egypt's economic and security challenges. Let me start by posing a question. Do you know why Egyptians call their country 'Om el donya', the mother of the world? It is not simply because their country is such an important religious and political force across the globe; it is also because that power was defined by women in interesting ways. Women ruled over many of the greatest civilisations, not only in Egypt, in all human history, from Nefertiti and Cleopatra, to the queens of the Fatimid and Mamluk periods, to Hoda Charaoui and her daughters of the Nile. In Egypt, women have struggled and marched against colonialism, sexism, and discrimination, winning the right to vote, go to school, and to fully participate in public life. Here in Cairo in recent years, in 2011 and 2013, Egyptian women and I was one of them, took to the streets alongside men during 18 days in Tahrir Square and in 2013 to call for a new future for the country and to reject in 2013 a leadership bent on grabbing power and whose objective was to impose a theocracy on secular Egypt.

Over the years, women's leadership has inspired women across the region and shaped the course of history. Women's centrality to Egypt parallels the early role of women in Islam. As many of you perfectly know, the very first woman who was a Muslim was the prophet's wife, Khadijah, a successful and independent businesswoman in her own right. It is noteworthy that independent and empowered women are found in both Egyptian and Islamic history, even as most women here and across the globe continue to struggle for equality. We know that women thrive when they enjoy freedom and opportunity.

Unfortunately, today is a difficult time for all Arab people. Like many countries across the globe, the Arab people and Egypt face significant economic, security, and political challenges. After a period of national turmoil, Egyptians need strong growth to ensure that young people have the opportunities they deserve to learn, to work, and to shape their future. Like many other places, we in the region are also confronted with the new faces of terrorism in the form of Daesh and other militant groups across the region. The question is not whether the Arabs can overcome these challenges; the question is how. Around the world, we have seen that no country can overcome these challenges and achieve prosperity and security without women. Structural reforms are essential to modernise the economy, yet they are challenging to implement. External trends, such as globalisation, which increases competition worldwide, and regional instability which disrupts trade and investment, make it even harder to jumpstart economic growth.



Yet a fundamental requirement for maximum economic growth is tapping into the talents of all Arab citizens, the untapped resource of women, particularly as they still face enormous disparities such as the one out of three Egyptian women over the age of ten, for example, who cannot read, the dangerous and widespread practice of female genital mutilation, and the nearly one in five Egyptian girls who marry before the age of fifteen. Many are forced down this road at great risk to their health and well-being, and before they are old enough to finish school or learn skills to support themselves economically. Early enforced marriage, and we know we have a demographic problem, and limited education not only limit women's future but also those of the next generation of Egyptians who grow up in households with mothers, who, despite their every desire, cannot read to their children or assist them with schoolwork, or help them envision an economic livelihood or career.

The challenge for women will not end here. In countries around the world, corruption and needless red tape hurt women more than men because men have the connections and resources to navigate a broken system. However, it makes it harder for women to enrol in schools, apply for jobs, or secure permits to start new businesses. It is simple; Egypt cannot reach its full potential without women. Great nations draw their strength from all their people. Harnessing that strength means tolerating differences that are peacefully expressed. It is well known that a diversity of views in religion, culture, politics, and academia do not weaken society; on the contrary, they strengthen them by adding new perspectives of creativity, innovation, and challenging faulty assumptions, and allowing people to identify and resolve differences. The freedom of scholars and students to probe and question is vital for any advancement.

Because insecurity and fear can prompt governments and peoples to compromise values and principles in the search for control and stability, it can be tempting to pursue the goals by silencing peaceful dissent, limiting academic enquiry, and compromising universal values, or abusing the power of the state, as our young American participant underlined yesterday talking about the new American President. The experience of many countries around the world underscores the cost of compromising fundamental rights and freedoms. In reality, extremist views are best discredited through open debate, where citizens and religious leaders can challenge them head-on. When debate is shut down on the grounds of security, it feeds extremist propaganda and the exclusive of heavy-handed reliance on security solutions is unlikely to address, and may even exacerbate, key underlying factors that increase vulnerability to terrorist propaganda.

Let me end by quoting Hubert Védrine, who I think is here, who called this era 'an era of intellectual insurrections', and he cautions elites from all countries to listen to the social distress and understand people's attachment to security, identity and sovereignty; otherwise, insurrections will continue; these are the lessons of history that all nations must bear in mind.

Thank you for your attention.

**Mohammed KABBAJ**

Thank you Mona.