



*Beyond the Headlines*

Featuring  
**ISOBEL COLEMAN**

Author of the book,  
***PARADISE BENEATH HER FEET: How Women  
are Transforming the Middle East***

A conversation moderated by  
**WARREN HOGE**  
Vice President for External Relations, IPI

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**Warren Hoge:**

Good evening. I'm Warren Hoge, IPI's Vice President for External Relations, and I'm delighted to welcome you to this *Beyond the Headlines* event, featuring Isobel Coleman, author of the new book, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East*.

Many people in the development world, and around the UN community, now accept the notion that empowering women is the best resource investment -- that the multiplier effect is greater when you put control of money into the hands of women and that consequently, investing in women carries the greatest hope for alleviating poverty and promoting posterity.

Isobel prefaces her book with a story from the ninth-century Muslim scholar, An-Nasa'I about a man seeking advice from the Holy Prophet, who responds with a comment about the man's mother. And the Holy Prophet says, "Stay with her, because paradise lies beneath her feet." Hence the title of Isobel's book.

That was then. Twelve centuries later, now, we have the viral YouTube video, "Girl Effect," and its companion, "I Dare You," and if you haven't seen these two, go look at them tonight. They're incredible, making a similar argument with a kind of new media flash.

In her book, Isobel recalls the familiar self-help story that if you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day, but if you teach him to fish, he will eat for a lifetime. And then Isobel updates it with a version she heard from a development expert friend: If you teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime, but if you give a woman title to the fish pond, she will clean it up, preserve it for the next generation, stock it with new fish, and create a fish farm to employ the whole village.

As you know, the UN Millennium Development Goals include the promotion of gender equality and the improvement of maternal health as two of its eight targets. Now the Muslim world -- or maybe the existing caricature of it -- would seem to be an unpromising place for this theory to take hold, but UNDP's first human development report for the Arab states in 2002, which was written in Arabic by Arabic scholars, concluded that the Arab world lagged far behind other developing regions and it cited three reasons: lack of freedom, lack of knowledge, and lack of women's empowerment. A subsequent report, released in 2005, concluded that an increase in the status of women was a prerequisite for an Arab renaissance.

Now, happily, we have Isobel's book. It's at once a scholarly and anecdotal 21st century account that says that the need for women empowerment is not only recognized in the Middle East, but that it is the women there who are the ones leading the way to bring it about. They are practicing "Islamic feminism", and if you think that phrase is an oxymoron, Isobel is here to set you straight.

By the way, one of the great strengths of this book is that Isobel goes to the places she writes about -- a practice that obviously pleases an old foreign correspondent like me -- but it will resonate with people here in the UN community, who know the value of on-the-ground reporting. She goes to five countries in the greater Middle East, where gender discrimination is entrenched: Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. She also travels to Malaysia for a Masawah movement conference with representatives from more than fifty countries from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East to South Asia and North America. These are women who want equality and the right to practice their Muslim faith and who complain that their actions are often denigrated as insulting to Islam.

Isobel brings her story to life through the lives of some remarkable women, including one known as the "Dr. Ruth of the Muslim world". Isobel, I'm very glad you are here to tell us about your book, which incidentally is for sale outside, and which Isobel, I'm sure, will be happy to sign afterwards. I'm happy you're here to tell us about these women, about your book, and about the dramatic change that I know you believe they are producing in the Middle East. The floor is yours.

**Isobel Coleman:**

Thank you. Thank you so much, Warren, for having me here, and thank you all for joining us here this evening. Let me start out by telling you a little bit of background to this book and how I came to write it. So, in 2004, I wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs*, the publication of the Council on Foreign Relations, and it's called *The Payoff From Women's Rights*. And it makes an argument, in there, that women's rights are not only an important human rights issue, but they could be, in fact, the promotion of women's rights, really the most important development, economic development tool that we have today. And it really builds on the work of the Arab human development reports and a lot of other UN work and World Bank work that's been done, to look at the role of women in society and women in development. And when you look at the Middle East, there's so many statistics that show that women have lagged in that region. When you control for income, when you control for the development of society, women have less economic activity, fewer political rights, and fewer legal rights, in many respects.

So the question becomes, "How is that part of the world going to improve the status of women?" And Warren mentioned, again, these Arab human development reports. That first one said that there are these three deficits: knowledge, freedom, and women's rights. And then they did a whole report

looking specifically at women's rights in the Middle East and the Arab world. And they were so careful to couch everything they were doing in Islam, in Islamic argument, in saying there's no reason that women can't have political rights, that they can't have economic rights, that they can't be active in society, because there's all this Islamic justification for it. So I was sort of intrigued by that approach, but I was really intrigued, as I traveled around the region and met with all of these women, and saw what they're doing and how they're doing it, because they know that they deserve paradise beneath their feet. And in fact, the title is from -- not directly from the Koran -- it's a hadith, and a Saudi man said to me, in Saudi Arabia some years ago, he said, "You know, the reason that we don't let women drive and the reason we don't let them vote and the reason we don't let them leave their home without a male escort and a guardian and they can't own their business -- you see, in Islam, we have a saying that paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers. We revere our women." Meaning unlike in the United States, where you don't revere your women and you let them cavort out in public. "But in Saudi, we revere our women." And I thought, "Okay, yeah, I'm going to, you know, just move right along, here."

Later, a group of Saudi women said to me, "You know, the reason we should own our own business, and the reason we should drive, and the reason we should vote, and the reason we should be able to do what we want to do is because in Islam, there's a saying that paradise lies beneath the feet of mothers, and that's who we are." And I thought, okay, here are men and women reading the texts in a very different way and coming out in very different places. I found myself in central Afghanistan. Now, you all know that the Taliban used Islam as a justification for not letting girls go to school. And here was a community in the central highlands of Afghanistan, twelve hours outside of Kabul, over a dirt road, where the only school for miles, for girls, was held in the mosque, hosted by the local mullah. And he says to me, "You see, Islam insists that we all read and learn, girls and boys. The Taliban, they were crazy. They were a distortion of Islam. But here, you know, I don't really want these girls in the mosque. You know, we need the mosque for other things, but there's no other place for them, and until a girl's school is built, I'm going to have them here in the mosque and teach them to read."

And all of these anecdotes I'm telling you sort of added up to me to the fact that religion has been used around the world to repress women, to oppress women, to keep them away from the public sphere in many different respects. And over time, that has changed in many cultures. You're seeing the process going on today in many conservative Islamic societies, where Islam and religion are being used as a justification against women, but now it's also being used by more and more people as a justification for change. And in these -- people say to me, "Well, why do you need Islamic feminism? Why can't you just have secular feminism?" And I think to myself, "Have you ever been to the central highlands of Afghanistan? There is nothing secular in that part of the world, nor in Saudi Arabia, nor in Iran, nor today, frankly, in Iraq." You know? We have a very religiously-charged environment, in fact, across the Middle East, even in quasi-secular countries like Egypt, with a secular government. Even in Syria, with a very secular government, you have a very strong movement of political Islam that has made part of its identity women's issues and control over women. And so, when women's groups fight back against that, they're labeled as anti-Islamic, and trying to fight against culture is one thing. Trying to fight against religion is a whole other kettle of fish. And the women's groups have come to understand that, and many of them in the Middle East now approach it, some out of deep faith and conviction that their religion has been distorted and that in fact what they're trying to do is bring a new interpretation of that religion to bear.

Others, they're secularists. They don't really want to weigh in one way or the other on religion, but they're engaging with religion and with the text and with religious leaders because they know it's a more effective way to change whatever it is that they're trying to change. And I see this across the region. So one question I'm asked from time to time is, "How big a movement is this? Is this a group of marginal women sort of on the fringe, or is this something more mainstream?" And I'd say it's not a revolution, it's an evolution. And you see groups coming together at a local level, you see them networking across international borders. Warren mentioned, at the end of the book I talk about this Masawah conference, where these women all met up in Malaysia to launch a whole global movement, but you can look at it at a more local level. In Morocco, for years, secular feminists tried to change the family code, the family law, the *mudawana* in that country, without much success. Then they started a real grassroots campaign to get local Moroccan men and women involved, and they worked very closely with religious leaders to have Islamic justification for what they were doing, because changing the family code really butts up directly against *sharia*, or people's interpretation of *sharia*. And so they were very careful to work with local religious leaders to say, "You know what? These changes are consistent with a reading of *sharia*. We can do this. We can make these changes." And they were very successful in their grassroots movement. They got a whole signature campaign going, and in 2004, they were able to change the law.

In Iran, the women looked at this and read about this and were inspired by this, and started their own million signature campaign, which has been repressed by the government. The leaders have been jailed, but they continue, they persist. And now you have Ayatollah Khomeini's grandson and granddaughter signing the million signature campaign in Iran very publicly, calling out for these legal changes for women. You have other religious leaders. You have another Grand Ayatollah, Grand Ayatollah Saanei, coming out in support of these changes for women. So there's a real debate now going on in Iran over what *is* the religious justification for these restrictions on women? Even in Saudi Arabia, which I think of as ground zero for the most conservative interpretations on women today, there's a debate going on. King Abdullah opened a university in September, King Abdullah University for Science and Technology, a \$10 billion endeavor, to address one of those Arab human development issues, which was the lack of knowledge in the region. And for the first time, it's co-educational, men and women studying together. And one of the senior clerics in the country, an official of the officially sponsored government, Ullumah, came out and said that this mixing of the sexes was against Islam, and in fact issued a fatwa against it. And the king fired him. And so he's really put down his marker and said, "You know what? We're going to look at this mixing issue and allow some debate and discussion over it." And you've had some other clerics come out and issue fatwas again, saying, "Mixing is disallowed. It's against Shari'ah." You've had others now come out very publicly. In fact, one of the senior members of the Mutallah, the religious police, has come out and said, "There's no Islamic justification to have segregation of men and women." And so there's a debate now going on over a very sensitive subject that didn't exist before, and I can tell you, from my multiple trips there, that women are very much pushing that debate, because it affects their life directly, more than anybody.

What else is encouraging these changes? Certainly rising levels of literacy. I mean, the region has lagged economically and the region has lagged educationally, so women have lower levels of educational attainment than women in other parts of the world, but that is changing, and you've seen

countries make some significant strides, particularly in the last 20 years, and now you have countries across the region where women outnumber men at the secondary level -- Jordan, significantly. Even parts of Egypt. And at the college level, you have now far more women, in some countries, than men. We have a new growing gender gap; it's the other way around. So in Saudi Arabia, 60% of college graduates are women. In Iran, 70% of college graduates are women. So you have a much more educated generation of women today and they're asking questions. And they're engaging critically with society, with the restrictions on their lives, and with the religious texts, in ways that they hadn't before. So that's part of it.

Another part of it is media. You have the rise, in the last 20 years, of Arab satellite television, which has given a pulpit to some very conservative and some very nasty views out there, but it's also brought into people's living rooms shows like an Arabic version of *The View*, with women sitting around discussing women's issues and discussing what some of the restrictions of them are in terms of religious justification, getting religious leaders onto the show to discuss these things -- somebody like Sheikh al-Qaradawi, who is a very prominent religious leader in the region -- talking about the restrictions on women and why they should be changed. And so you have television being radio, in Pakistan and Afghanistan -- a very powerful force, too, in Iraq. You know, so many of the women are listening to radio shows and asking questions. So that's part of it too. Warren mentioned the Dr. Ruth of the Middle East; there's a little vignette in the book: she describes herself as a 'sexpert.' And she wears the hijab, and she, cloaked in this hijab, she's now able to go on television and talk about all sorts of things that I think most of you in this audience would find quite shocking. I don't think she's necessarily a liberal, in the way that we would think of a liberal, but she's bringing out into the open things that have been so taboo in society in a way that I think is asking for some engagement of people in a way that they haven't engaged before.

What else is driving the change? I would argue that terrorism is driving the change, that governments around the region look at extremism in their own societies and they're frightened by it. 9/11 was a huge wakeup call to us. 9/11 was a huge wakeup call to the Saudis. They were frightened by what they saw in their own society. They denied it at first, but they also can't help but look introspectively. And after 9/11, there was a girl's school in Mecca that caught on fire. I read about it in the book, and the girls -- somebody was smoking, dropped a cigarette in the trash in the hallway. It caught on fire. The building quickly went up in flames. The girls rushed out onto the street. The *mutawa*, the religious police were there, pushed them back into the burning building because they were not appropriately covered, and many died. And it caused a revulsion in Saudi society, to say, "How has our religion been so interpreted in such an extreme way that men could push a girl back into a burning building?" And it opened up a dialogue in the country, and it opened up a lot of questions about the role of women in society and I started out by talking about terrorism because I think that leaders around the region understand that extremist views on women are linked more broadly to extremist views in society.

The King of Morocco has started a whole program to train women as preachers - - *morchidates*. They go out into the community and work as local mullahs, in effect, although they cannot lead the Friday prayer. But they can do everything else. And he has said, very explicitly, that the reason he's doing it is because there's extremism in these local communities in Morocco. Morocco's the number one exporter of terrorists to Europe. And there's an idea that by having women engage more both with the religion and with the day-to-day issues that affect

people's lives, that maybe it will help temper that extremism. Do we have any data that shows that? Not yet. But these women preachers have been very popular, and men and women alike say that they're much better at understanding their issues and relating to them, so I think it's interesting that Morocco has done it. You've seen Turkey do it now. You've seen Jordan experiment along these lines. Even Qatar is training women preachers, a Wahabi country. So you do, you have rising levels of literacy, more open media. You have the pressures of terrorism, and then frankly, you have the economic pressures. Those Arab human development reports were poo-pooed when they came out. 'It's a bunch of people in the West criticizing us in the Arab world again.' But I can tell you, because I spent a lot of time in the region, people said to me, "Do you know the authors of that report? I'd like to get them here to come and talk to us about it. We're interested in some of the stuff that's in that report." And the World Bank has done a lot of work that I know has made an impression on people in that part of the world. I hear all the time, "Why should we create jobs for women when we don't have enough jobs for men?" And the World Bank has this very interesting report that show that countries that have a higher proportion of women working have lower levels of unemployment. It's not a zero-sum game.

Women in the economy create jobs for other women and for other men. And they understand that to be part of the global economy, they have to invest in and empower half their population. And they're struggling to figure out how to do it without creating the backlash. And I hope you'll read the book, because there are lots of anecdotes in there about women and men around the region who are trying to find a way, a path, to do it that is seen as authentic, that is seen as legitimate, and is therefore more sustainable than other efforts that have happened in the past. I talk about some of the history and how we got to where we are today, but there's a lot of baggage that goes along with women's rights, and no more so today than in that part of the world. And I think that what you see is the beginning of a shift that I hope will be a pretty profound shift. And I'm looking forward to watching it flower and progress and continue, because I can tell you this generation of women, today, is more educated, more energetic, more connected, and more determined than any generation that has come before them. And it inevitably will lead to change. Thank you.

**Hoge:**

I'm going to ask Isobel a couple of questions and then throw it open to the floor. You know, one thing, which is really not a question for you, but I was just thinking, those UNDP reports are terrific because they are written by people from the region. And I remember four or five years ago, there was a report on Latin America, a place where I lived for five years -- and I happen to have a couple of Latin American friends of mine in the audience tonight who are visiting from Rio - - and I remember when that report came out, it galvanized the Latin ambassadors, because it was a report basically saying that Latin American populations, which had become democratic over the past ten or fifteen years, were starting to lose faith in democracy because it was not delivering. And that really shook the diplomatic class here, and it was the authenticity of that report, because it was written by Latin Americans about Latin America that gave it its strength, which I think is also true of these UNDP reports about the Arab world.

Isobel, I want to ask you about Iran, and I want to try to make you tell an anecdote that you tell so affectingly in the book. Iran is an extraordinary case. Seventy percent of its graduates are women. I have been to Tehran. I've been on college campuses there. You can see it. As a matter of fact, I would have guessed 80 or 90 percent, because I think a lot of guys didn't go to college that particular day when I was there. In Iran, where you have this very repressive government, and I would say certainly with an anti-woman government...I mean,

look at the people they beat up in the streets of Tehran, including the famous Neda, who died. But you tell a wonderful story, in the book, about your minders, and how -- you go ahead and tell it. Just the gradual adjustment while you were there over days, what you discovered about them.

**Coleman:**

Well, my minders were exactly that. I went not as a tourist -- you can go as a tourist, but I am a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations writing a book. I can't show up in Iran as a tourist. Somehow, and that's another whole story, I got a visa to go to Iran as a guest of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I show up, and from the moment I arrive, I have a minder. In fact, I had four different minders who were with me pretty much constantly, and they were all four young women. And they turned out to be the most fascinating part of my trip to Iran, was getting to know these women. When you spend hour after hour in the back of a car in the streets of Tehran traveling around, you hear their life story, and they opened up and they asked so many interesting questions and so many revealing questions and told me so much about themselves. But at the end of my trip, I got a message saying I had to go visit the bursar, and I thought, "Okay, I don't even know what the bursar is, you know?" So I thought, "Okay," and we go in, and my minder takes me, and we walk into the bursar's office and they present me with a bill for something like \$700 for my minders. And I thought, "Well, what am I going to do? I really have no interest in paying the Iranian government for the spies that they've had watching me this whole time," and yet, you know, I don't want to go to jail. And I also thought, "I don't have enough cash," you know, on hand. So I didn't know what to do and I was frozen, and before I could even think of what to do next, my minder, who is, you know, all of 23 years old, she lights into the guy in this Farsi tirade, [mimics Farsi], like this, screaming at him. In walks somebody else. She's screaming at him, she's screaming at everybody in the room. And they all look at her and they mumble something, and she turns very calmly back to me, she picks up the bill, she rips it up into little pieces and she says, "They made a mistake." I thought, "I'm so glad she's on my side." That's all I could say.

**Hoge:**

There's even more, though. Do you remember? Because in the book, at least, you -- about how you discovered them, after awhile, putting on makeup and --

**Coleman:**

Oh, absolutely. They all -- I mean, one of them is going off to meet her boyfriend, and she's making herself up in the back of the taxi, and we've been having these long conversations about how her first love, which was a true love affair in college, hadn't worked out because his family didn't think her family was religious enough because her mother only wore hijab and not the full chador. And so then on that basis, his family rejected her family and she was so hurt and so incensed by this. And there she is in the back of the cab getting all made up, and she turns to me and she says, "You must think this is unusual. You know, I'm the religious one, and you know, you -- you don't wear makeup, but I'm the religious one and I'm putting on makeup." And I think to myself, and I say to her, "What makes you think you're more religious than I am? What makes you think that?" And she was a little bit speechless at that point, you know? It's just -- we all have our stereotypes.

**Hoge:**

You make an observation in the book that I was really struck by because I hadn't thought of it. You say that unlike in other societies, where you expect the young generation to be the generation that favors reform and makes it tough on the older people, that actually in many Arabic societies, many Muslim societies, the young generation has been brought up to become more religious than their parents. Does that mean they will be tougher on this sort of women's movement

you're talking about? Does that mean they will resist in a way that their parents might not have resisted an effort by women to come forth in Arab societies?

**Coleman:**

Well, the most obvious manifestation of this is that you see, in many countries, more women wearing the hijab today than you did 20 years ago, or 30 years ago, and to the dismay of the mothers, you know? They wore miniskirts and Western clothes and now these young people are wearing abayas and chadors or wearing the hijab voluntarily. And that's very confusing, what's going on? At the same time, though, this generation is more religious. It's more overtly religious, more politically religious, certainly, than the parents' generation. So it complicates this issue of women, and women's empowerment. And that's the whole point of this book, that in these very politically, and charged, environment, how is this change going to happen? And one of the realities is that women are better educated, they're out working, and they want to be active politically, and yet they have this conservative religious that's telling them that these things are maybe not right. And so there's a real tension in society there. And what you see happening is even within, say, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which has been a real driver of political Islam in that country, you see a debate going on over what is the appropriate role of women. The Muslim Brotherhood is trying to compete politically in Egypt. The space has opened up for the Muslim Brotherhood at different points. Not right now, but at different points, it has. And they've tried to move into that political space and compete politically. But they know that they have to appeal to half the population, which is women, and women vote.

And so, they came out with a manifesto some years ago that they put on their website. And one of the things they said is that the leader under the Muslim Brotherhood, a leader of the country, could not be non-Muslim -- so therefore, cops are excluded from leadership positions -- could not be a woman. And this caused a ruckus within the Muslim Brotherhood, and if you look at the Muslim Brotherhood's website, as I do from time to time, you saw this very active debate on their own blog going on over younger generations who were active in the Muslim Brotherhood saying, "How dare you say this?" You know? "How dare you say this about women? There's no reason women can't be leaders." And it's created this whole debate and dialogue within the Muslim Brotherhood. Now, you know, clearly, secularists are way beyond this, but within the Muslim Brotherhood -- and we're talking about democracy in that part of the world -- if there was a democracy in Egypt, I think the Muslim Brotherhood would get elected, overwhelmingly. And then what would happen for women? I think what young women are trying to do is make sure it won't be bad for women.

**Hoge:**

Islamic feminism. If you told these women they're Islamic feminists, will they agree with you, or will they want a different choice of words?

**Coleman:**

Most would be appalled. Most would be absolutely appalled, for a variety of reasons. Some object to the label 'feminism.' It's a loaded concept, they don't like it at all, they don't want to be associated with it. Others object to the Islamic part - it speaks of Islamism, of political Islam. They don't want to be associated with that. So it's a loaded term. I say it right up front in the book. Most of the people I talk about don't want to be called Islamic feminists. Some prefer 'Muslim feminists,' because it's not Islamic, Islamist. It's not that political overtone. But even then, a lot of them would say, "We're just using Islam to promote women's rights." That's how they would come out on it. They don't really like the label at all.

**Hoge:**

Finally, what about men? Are there men participating in the Arab world in this movement, you know, championing this kind of thing, or are they resisting?

**Coleman:** Yeah, I mean -- both. Some are resisting, clearly, but men are critically important to this movement, and provide very, very important credibility and support and justification to what the women are doing. So the women are very strategic. They search out those men who will be allies, and they work closely with them. I gave the example of the reform of the mudawana in Morocco. Men were critically important to that. In Iran, Ahmadinejad tried two years ago to pass, believe it or not, an even more repressive law for women. The women mobilized, they had a big campaign, they demonstrated, but they went and they got critical male allies to support them. One of them was Montazeri, the Ayatollah who just passed away in the fall. Another was Saanei -- these very, very senior clerics, to come out and support them. In Iraq, the women have been very strategic in getting fatwas from Sistani. When Shia militias were going around saying that women weren't allowed to leave the house. Women weren't allowed to vote. Women weren't allowed to work. You had very conservative Shia militias out on the streets. The women went to Sistani and got a fatwa from him saying, "Absolutely. Women are allowed to vote. They're allowed to work. They're allowed to do all of these things." So they very strategically used religion and used men to help them push their point.

**Hoge:** Just one more question I want to ask before I go to the floor. Does having more women in government in this part of the world -- does that make a difference? Does that help this cause? Are women less corrupt than men?

**Coleman:** Well, there's data to show that when you have higher percentages of women in government, corruption goes down. And I don't think it's necessarily that women are less corrupt than men inherently. Maybe they are, maybe they're not. But when women are new to power, and they take it, they take that responsibility of office very seriously and very differently. Let me just give you an example -- it's not in the book, but it's from Kuwait. Women really tried to get the vote for a very long time in Kuwait. They finally did in 2005. The first election, everybody said women would never get elected. The first election, none of them did. One or two of them came close, didn't get elected. Second time around, last year, four women were elected. And one of them is a very clearly outspoken secular feminist, and everyone predicted a terrible backlash. Quite the contrary. These women are the -- they are a breath of fresh air in parliament. They go to parliamentary meetings all the time. They show up when they're supposed to. They come prepared. They have briefs. And they then leave the meetings and write on the Internet their fellow members of parliament who didn't show up, who were unprepared, who don't know what they're talking about, who miss crucial votes. And they're really throwing a breath of fresh air into parliament.

Now, is this -- I mean, parliament in Kuwait, you know, it's a monarchy at the end of the day. I mean, how powerful is this? But what these women are doing is they're showing that having women in public office is not the end of the world, and in fact, it can actually be quite a good thing. And even Islamists are coming out and saying, "We were wrong. This is actually good. We enjoy the fact that these women are in parliament," and the backlash that people had predicted is not there. Quotas are an interesting subject. The United States has had a hand in writing two constitutions recently: Iraq, Afghanistan. We have quotas of 25% for women in both constitutions. And I can tell you that without those quotas there, that there would be very, very few women in either parliament, and having women in parliament has helped make a difference. Not a tremendous difference. You know, you still have corrupt and ineffective government in both places. But there are specific examples -- and I talk about them in the book --

where women have gotten together and held the line over something that is very important to women and women's rights in that country.

In Afghanistan, I give the example of when several members of parliament -- they go with Hamid Karzai to London for a donor conference. And while they're there, one of their fellow members of parliament puts forward a bill saying that women - members of parliament -- are not allowed to leave the country without a *moghaddam*, without a male escort, because it's against *sharia*. Women are, "You've got to be kidding. We're here at a donor conference." They come back to parliament and they band together and say, "This is ridiculous. You can't do this. And by the way, I happen to know that the guy who put the bill forward in parliament, your wife holds a Canadian passport and travels around the country whenever she wants, outside and inside". So they're helping to expose the hypocrisy of what drives a lot of this political grandstanding on women's rights.

**Hoge:** This book was just published yesterday, and Isobel asked me beforehand -- we were just talking as old friends -- and she said, "Do you think I'm naïve?" Because this is -- we were talking earlier with an ambassador here who said, "You know, I just hadn't heard this was going on. How interesting." You really believe it's happening. Obviously, you wrote a book about it. But just a little bit about that. I mean, there are people who will wonder if this isn't just a Western view, if you haven't been fooled by what you've seen. I know you have an answer to that.

**Coleman:** Well, you know, I very specifically didn't write about famous people. I didn't write about people that you know of and that you've heard of, because I don't want you to take away, "Oh, well, there's a handful of women doing this." I could have written about any number of tens of thousands of women, and I chose anonymous women who -- and I tell their story so that you can get a sense that this is not just a few iconoclastic women. I mean, in Iran, these young minders I have, I write about them. I don't write about Shirin Ebadi. Everybody knows who Shirin Ebadi is. I write about these young women and how they're changing their world. And I ask the young women -- they're very conservative, traditional families. They work for the government, right? And I say to them, "Who's your role model?" And every single one of them says, "Shirin Ebadi." Every single one. You know? And they are inspired by her. And this is trickling down in a grassroots way that, I think, that we don't tend to see.

**Hoge:** Questions. If somebody has a question, raise your hand. We'll get a microphone to you. Back here to Pim.

**Pim Valdre:** Thank you, Pim Valdre from IPI. Thanks so much for a very thought-provoking and inspiring presentation. I wanted to turn the attention back to Saudi Arabia and what you mentioned about women's rights there. You mentioned the new science university, which was inaugurated by King Abdullah. What do you think in terms of this initiative to spur other forms of initiatives that can mix women and men in public settings related to education, for instance? Do you think this will help spur such initiatives, or do you see pursuing any kind of backlash with the religious community there and the *Umma* and the fact that he publicly dismissed an official there? Thank you very much.

**Coleman:** Well, so much of what I see happening is official leaders trying to catch up with the reality on the ground. So, the first time I went to Saudi Arabia seven or eight years ago, there really was almost no mixing going on. And every time I go back, I'm shocked to see how much more mixing is there. When I go to the kingdom, I interview journalists. You know, they always have their finger on the pulse. I go to

the *Saudi Gazette*. I go to the *Arab News*. I go to various -- *Asharq Al Awsat*. I go to various publications there. Before, no women. Now, women, but in a sec -- then, women in a separate section. So I could interview the men, then I could interview the women. I mean, I was just there in January. It's completely mixed. Everybody's working side by side with each other in a way that was inconceivable a few years ago. I had dinner with some young women in Diman, and they were telling me how there had been a big incident at the mall and the owner of the mall had kicked the *mutawa* out of the mall. I mean, they -- the *mutawa* had an office in the mall, and had shut that office down. The *mutawa* are still there, but they no longer have an office in the mall. So they told me that now, when they go to the mall, they don't cover themselves. They just walk around. And the *mutawa* come up to them and, you know, bother them. And the other day, it had happened, and they were bothering them, and the guy gets on his walkie-talkie, you know, calling for backup. No backup comes because he doesn't have any more backup because the owner of the mall shut the office. So, the girls know this, and they ignore them.

And one more example: in Jeddah there was a terrible flood in November. And the young people are all on Facebook, and they all got together and they came to the poor part of Jeddah where the flood was, and they were all bagging sandbags. Young men and women together, two o'clock in the morning, bagging sandbags. Who shows up? The *mutawa*. And says, "This is not right." And the young men and women say, "Either you roll up your sleeves and you bag sandbags or get out of here." And the next night, there was three times as many young people, all together. My only point is that the mixing's already happening. What King Abdullah University for Science and Technology is doing is simply throwing it out there in an official way, very carefully. I mean, 17% of the students are Saudi. You know, the vast majority are not Saudi. It's irrelevant. The point is he's put it out there publicly. There is a backlash. I told you about the backlash, and he's pushing it back.

**Hoge:** Are there women in the media in that part of the world?

**Coleman:** Absolutely. And I write about some of them in the book. I had -- there's a very personable, beautiful, Saudi woman, Muna Abu-Sulayman, who is on the Saudi version of *The View*. And there are four women: one is Palestinian, one is Egyptian, I think one is Syrian, maybe, or Jordanian, and the other is Muna from Saudi.

**Hoge:** Veiled on camera, or not?

**Coleman:** Mona is veiled. Not the face, but she wears the hijab. The others do not. She's a very high-profile celebrity in Saudi Arabia. In the book, I talk about Afghanistan. Right after the constitution, they -- the new constitution has equal rights for human rights, equal rights, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, all these nice things in the constitution, and the Afghan constitution also says, "No law can contradict *sharia*." Right after this constitution was signed, the first big battle was over a woman singing a very traditional Pashtun ode, fully covered, fully veiled, singing a traditional Pashtun ode on television. The conservatives went crazy and denounced this and tried to ban women from television. It became this huge political battle in Afghanistan. And you have these *mujahedeen* standing up and saying, "We didn't fight a civil war for twenty years to have women on television." I mean, guess what? The most popular show in Afghanistan today is like *American Idol*. And they all, you know, they all watch it. Everybody watches it, and they love it. And the last thing I'll tell you, there is a YouTube video that's really quite astounding. There is something called *Arabic Idol* -- I don't quite

know. It's something like that. It's translated like that. It's like American Idol but really is nothing like American Idol. And they come and they recite poetry and the Saudi contestant came on the show, full black *abaya*, fully covered -- not even her face showing, nothing. And she stands up and recites her poem -- [mimics language] -- and the translation is "You mullahs, you've distorted our religion. You're imposing negative fatwas on us and you should be ashamed of what you've done." I mean, it is a dressing down. You can go watch it on YouTube. She is a media sensation across the Middle East and in Saudi Arabia. She's Saudi.

**Hoge:** What's it called again? Say it again?

**Coleman:** If you Google Arabic Idol or something like that, you'll find it. But she's a Saudi poetess dressing down the religious leaders as fully conservative, dressed as traditional as can be.

**Hoge:** By the way, Google 'girl effect' too, because it's really dramatic.

**Coleman:** It is dramatic. It's phenomenal.

**Hoge:** Please, here in the third row? And would you identify yourself, please?

**Anders:** Hi, my name is Anders. Thank you so much. In Pakistan, for example, how do the non-Muslim minority women -- are they a part of this change, also? And the non-Muslim minority women in Pakistan, are they a part of the change? And if yes, how do they reconcile their needs with the laws, which are mostly, I mean, entirely based on the Koran?

**Coleman:** You know, I didn't really focus on non-Muslim minorities. So I can't really give you a good answer on that. I'm sorry. But I can tell you, you know, they have skin in this game. They certainly have skin in this game. You know, and they are very interested. I mean, I gave you the example in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood coming out, saying, "Copts and women." You know, these things -- women's rights, minority rights, they go very closely together. And there's a similar either conservative interpretation that is bad for both groups or a more progressive interpretation that is better for both groups.

**Hoge:** Please, right here in the third row.

**Luv Puri:** My name is Luv Puri, and I'm a Fulbright fellow. I must congratulate you for this great venture. Rather than taking a vantage view, from the West, you are democratically engaged with Islamic society. I'm a journalist, so I've lived in the Middle East, India, and Pakistan. And I was astounded to find that one of the first feminist interpretations came in 1896 from the scholar Maulvi Imam. So, and even now, both in Pakistan and in India, like which is like -- in India you have 145 million Muslims and in Pakistan, you have 160 million Muslims, and if you combine them from Bangladesh, it comprises 60% of Islamic society. So all these Maulvis and all these religious leaders are the vanguards of the feminist movement within Islam. So did you find any counterpart in the Middle East where the imams -- the most important thing is, like any gender rights, activists or no, in order to break patriarchal structures, you need to involve men. And here in these countries, you have Maulvis who are trying to break -- and invoke Koranic injunctions and tell that Islam stands for equal rights for men and women. Do you have anything the same happening in the Middle East? Thank you.

**Coleman:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. There are lots of men involved in this within the Middle East. And, you know, I talked, in my remarks, about Sheikh Qaradawi. He is a very traditional -- he's an Egyptian scholar who is on Al Jazeera. He's been in Doha, Qatar, for many years, for decades. Once the Egyptians kicked him out a long time ago. But there's a whole new generation of Islamic scholars and televangelists, Muslim televangelists. And I write about one of them in the book, Amr Khaled. Again, go Google him. Just look at him on YouTube. He wears jeans, he wears open shirts. He really talks a very modern talk, and part of his spiel is that women should wear the headscarf. And so, in the West, he's seen as really frightening, because he's encouraging religion and encouraging women to wear the headscarf. And many women have started wearing the headscarf because they're followers of Amr Khaled. But then listen to what he says. He says, "Wear the headscarf and do everything in society." You know, "Go out and vote and own your own business and be active in every public way," which -- we don't like the headscarf part, in this country. But in his part of the world, his message is actually pretty progressive. And he's just an example. There are lots of examples of men in the book who are very engaged.

**Hoge:** Thank you.

**Francesco Candelari:** Thank you. My name is Francesco Candelari from UNICRI. I have two brief questions. The first one is, "What's the influence of economics in this change." I mean, you probably briefly mention it, but for example, in Bangladesh or in India, one of the things that get more involved women in the society was microcredit. Is there something like that in the Middle East, or are there other forms similar to microcredit there? The second question is, "What is the role of the Western world in all of that? How we can support it, not just at the highest level or the highest political level, but even just in the relational level?" So even just how you were able -- you -- to support while discussing with them? Thank you.

**Coleman:** Well, you know, only 2% of all microfinance loans are in the Middle East, so very little microfinance in the Middle East. And where you have microfinance has been primarily in Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco. There are some very wealthy countries in the Middle East. They don't need microfinance, and in fact, the wage structure of that region is not so amenable to microfinance, but economics play a huge role in this, a huge role. And many leaders in the region come back to the economic issue. They're not inspired by human rights. They're not inspired by women's rights. But they understand the economic arguments, and if they don't invest in half their population, they're going to be economic laggards, they're never going to make it in the global economy, and they get that. In the Gulf countries, women are active in the business community -- very active, and increasingly active, and they control not an insubstantial number of financial assets, and they're using that to help push change. And you see it across the region; women are more active economically, and they're using their economic power at a local level to change things for the better, and in some cases, on a national level.

**Candelari:** Anything else with regard to our role?

**Coleman:** Oh, our role. I'm sorry. I think, you know, the West has a very important role to play in forcing the discussion. I think the Arab human development reports were part of that. The World Bank has forced these discussions. Are we on or off the record, here?

**Hoge:** We're on the record.

**Coleman:** We're on the record. I was going to tell a story, but now I'm not. Okay. But let me say -- I'll tell a version of my story -- that rankings --

**Hoge:** This eventually all goes on the IPI website.

**Coleman:** Okay. Rankings focus attention a lot. And I can tell you that the Saudis are very proud of the fact that their competitiveness ranking has really improved dramatically as a place to do business. And the Saudis joined the WTO, and as part of that process, they had to improve transparency, their legal framework, and things like that. Now, some have suggested that they do a ranking for how competitive it is to do business as a woman, and some countries in the Middle East aren't so happy about that because they know their ranking will look quite different. But I can tell you that it's an interesting forcing mechanism. I think the West can also be helpful in that a lot of the active women's groups are funded by Western supporters, Western donors. And now there's a whole group of Western-based organizations of Muslim women who are really trying to engage with Muslim women in the Middle East and other parts of the world. There's the Muslim Women's Fund, there's a number of organizations that are trying to help stimulate the change.

**Warren Hoge:** Ambassador Schaper?

**Herman Schaper:** Yes, my name is Herman Schaper. Thank you. How do you see the interplay between the three weaknesses mentioned in the original Arab human development report. So, women are making progress now. What effect could it have on the other two weaknesses in the area of knowledge and the lack of freedom? Are there interrelationships, and to which degree?

**Coleman:** Well, I think that certainly, the women and knowledge, certainly, as you can't increase knowledge without investing in half your population. So if you really have half your population that is under-educated, you're not addressing your knowledge issue. And again, Saudi Arabia, an example. I was there in January. Every single crane that used to be in Dubai is now in Saudi Arabia, and there is a massive, massive development project going on, on the outskirts of Riyadh, building the biggest women's university in the world -- Princess Norah University. Forty thousand women, with its own light rail system. I mean, that part of the world is investing hugely in female education. Now, it's got a problem on its hands because it's investing in female education, but then not allowing them to work productively. So it's a double whammy. You know, they're going to make this huge investment and then not realize it. But they're talking about that. They're aware of it, and they understand the economics of this. How quickly it's going to change, I can't predict, but you're not going to end up with a hugely educated female workforce that's going to sit at home all the time. I can tell you that. So you're going to have an interplay between women and the knowledge piece, certainly.

The freedom piece, I think, is going to be the last to come, and certainly, women and knowledge are important to the freedom piece, but they don't necessarily lead to it. I mean, I think you have a case in Iran where you have very educated women with a lot of knowledge and you don't have freedom. And eventually you will. I just can't predict how much longer it's going to take.

**Hoge:** I've got one more here in the front row and then Ann Phillips afterwards.

**Female Speaker:** About the women -- the secular women of Iraq, many of whom are refugees in Jordan, Syria, and neighboring countries -- what would your message be to

them? Do you think they will be able to regain the space they had in Iraq, or if they do go back, will they have to change their approach and the way they live in terms of seeking more female empowerment?

**Coleman:** You know, I think the women -- secular women in Iraq experienced a huge setback after the war, and many of them did leave. And you had the rise of much more of a theocracy, and that's what people were predicting. You've seen more space today, now, for secularism in that country. In fact, the secular-leaning candidate won the most votes in the election, although it looks today as if you're going to end up, still, with a Shia coalition in that country. What I can tell you is that -- and I write about this in the book -- some of the women's groups, their space closed down. It shut down for them, but it has opened up. And some of the secular women couldn't -- I mean one of the women I write about in my book, Sundus Hasan, she couldn't go. She runs an organization in Basra. She couldn't go there. She was going to risk her life, and she couldn't go out unless she was fully covered, and today she can. You know, it's gotten much better. It's much more open for her now, but religion plays a big role in that country -- a huge role. And I talked about the Afghan constitution, which has all these nice rights and also elevates *sharia*. The same thing in Iraq, and it's not clear how that's going to play out for women's rights. But I can tell you that if they can't figure out an angle that's a religious angle to go along with their secular angle, they're going to be less effective.

**Hoge:** I'm going to make it two last questions, because the women there raised her hand, and we'll ask them back to back. If you would ask yours, and then Ann, if you would ask yours, Isobel can answer them both at once.

**Ugoji Eze:** Oh, hello, there. My name is Ugoji Eze from the International Association for Justice. I'm an attorney at law myself. I have practiced *sharia* law 20 years ago in Nigeria. I was actually the first attorney -- woman attorney to appear in front of the *sharia* courts. Now the question I'm asking you: what are the women's role post-divorce in the countries you've been to -- mainly the Middle East? Do they still have their rights, especially as regards property, as regards custody? Because when I practiced law in Nigeria, once a woman divorced, that was it for her. She left the house, she had nothing. This evolution which is taking place as regards women, are they getting the same rights and liberties that women in the West, we have? Do you find there's a change? Are the ladies fighting for their rights in the Middle East? Thank you.

**Hoge:** Okay, just hold that a second. And Ann?

**Ann Phillips:** It was a fascinating presentation. Thank you so much for it. For many, many years, Iran and the United States have had no contact -- the least contact of any of the countries in the Middle East with the United States -- and yet, ironically, the most pro-American population in that part of the world have been the Iranians. Not the government, obviously, but the Iranian people. I wonder whether that has had an impact on their visions, their aspirations for the future, their activities and so forth. And I would like to hear your observations about whether the fact that -- and this doesn't in any way display any bias of mine, just a curiosity -- whether the fact that obviously, the Iranian women are Muslim women, but they're not Arab women. It's a Persian culture. Whether that culture, being different from the Arab culture, has impacted the women in their activities and their aspirations for the future?

**Coleman:** The question on *sharia* and women's rights, post-divorce -- it's very, very varied across the region. So after the reform of the *mudawana* in Morocco, women now

have a much better deal, when they get divorced, than they did before. A Saudi woman who gets divorced has nothing. And in fact, I had dinner with a friend in Saudi in January and she brought along another friend who told me the most heartbreaking story about how she hasn't seen her children since the day she got divorced. Nothing. So it really varies across the region and it's all over the map on what women have been able to achieve so far. In terms of Persian culture versus Arab culture, what I would say is that there's a very strong patriarchal culture in both places, and in Iran, I think, you have a long tradition of education and of learning. You know, the Shah put in place a range of programs for women that the Khomeini regime overturned a lot, but then actually came back around and said, you know, for economic reasons we actually can't really operate like this. I mean, one of the most dramatic things was the -- Khomeini exhorted women to have babies, to produce martyrs to fight against Iraq.

So in the heart of the Iraq war, this was the mantra, to be a nationalist and have lots of babies. In 1988, '89, '90, after Khomeini had died, Rafsanjani came to power. You know, they looked around, and they said, "We've got a population crisis on our hands. We have one of the highest birth rates in the world. What are we going to do about it?" And the mullahs got together and said, "You know, our read of Islam now says that women should not have all these babies." And they went and they preached it in the mosques, and Iran had the most dramatic reduction in fertility rate of any country recorded in history -- from one of the highest to one of, you know, replacement level -- in the shortest period of years. And my only point is that culture is changeable and religion is a big part of it and can be used to drive in one way, and can be used to drive in another. So, thank you.

**Warren Hoge:**

The bar is staying open. We're about to open the doors. We're about to sell books. Isobel will stick around, also. Thank you very, very much.