

The 18:30 Talk

The Perspective of Women on Male-Dominated Societies: An Ethnographic Collage

This scene's title is the "Perceptions of Women on Male-Dominated Societies". Clearly, the women interviewed have an express desire to discuss the patriarchic oppression manifested in the control that males possess over females in the family unit, society, and all other forms of authority. Moreover, they are trying to shed this oppression in all its forms – religious, sectarian, secular, national, and ethnic –, by attempting to understand and to dismantle this freedom-negating system.

Hussein: If one were to take women's issues, four years after the Arab uprisings and the revolutionary movements, which sought to affect change and create new realities in the conceptual framework of the political systems that have prevailed in the Arab world – with the knowledge that part of these efforts were taken up by women's movements, which tried and are still trying to bring these movements to the fore and to ensure that women's rights are addressed, constitutionally, and so forth ... But then the Islamists emerged, and they won on almost every electoral front, heavily endorsed by massive popular support. With these developments, the discussion on women's issues has regressed back to a conceptual state that predates the pre-revolution constitutions, and back to the set of requirements relegated by the Sharia or the traditions in which these women have lived. Here, one should note that instead of being part of a liberation movement that demands a role for women in what has transpired over the last 4 years until today, and to reach an outcome or achieve more gains on the level of human rights... Instead, today, we have reached the point where we are back to discussing polygamy as a principal constitutional precept (or as the application, by law, of the Sharia). Thus, the real problem that is posed, in this context, when one discusses women and women's issues, is the repression of women, the root of this oppression, and the manner in which women exist, today...

How did we get to this point in the debate on women's liberation?

Berna: According to the systems that prevail here, women are non-existent. One can say that the answer to the root of this question is just that. The discussion about women is precisely that, a male view on women. Women, in general, and according to these systems that are rooted in reinforcing authority on a patriarchic and masculine tradition and basis – regardless of whether these systems are Islamic or secular – are non-entities.

Maya: The root of this oppression is ignorance, and its depth is a fear of women. Oppression emerges from this place. Simply stated, the problem is in the perceived inferiority of women. The other perception is manifested in "honoring" her and in putting her on a (perceived) pedestal. For me, both these perceptions are two sides of the same cognition, where the woman is dealt with as if she were a different specimen. I am not against us, as women, having specificities. But, this has become the source of the discrimination practiced against women; this discrimination is due to these perceived differences. In a way, this view that men maintain is sick. It has been the excuse for the oppression practiced against women over the course of history, and these practices have been equally manifested in different forms in both secular and Islamic systems. Both systems are harmful. The manner in which they present the larger issues – whether or not these are related to labor, economics, or nationalism – has always been from their masculine perspective. Even the participation of women has been excluded. More often than not, even the adoption of the discourse of liberation has been patriarchal and masculine.

Hiba: I agree with Maya when she says that the root of this oppression has a very antiquated history. It relates back to the old myth that proclaims that woman was the first to discover agriculture. Consequently, this was the source of the veneration shown to the woman and made her a kind of divinity, as the first who was able to preserve and store food. She planted the seed that sowed the tree. At that time, she was worshipped as a goddess. This idea is embedded somewhere in the psychology of men. How the issue has branched out from there, and where it has gone, has to do with many other factors. The issue of pregnancy is one factor that has also created a complex with the man, as he found himself incapable of carrying out this productive task and had not yet found that he can carry

out other productive tasks, which are related to money. These psychological factors are at the root of the idea of the control that one of the sexes has gained over the other. This matter is not simple, and many factors have led to its evolution. For me, one of the most important factors was the emergence of the three monotheistic religions, which sanctified the idea of the one god in the image of the violent, dominating man with brutal abilities, and the female who is, of course, considered to be a being of a lesser degree. At the very least, she is not considered godly, and she does not have any saintly or venerated characteristics. In the Qur'an, for example, it says "*Allah-us-Samad*" (God is *al-samad*), with the word *al-samad* having many different translations or interpretations. One of these interpretations is that he has no cavities or womb; thus, he does not reproduce, and he is not female. In this, the masculinity of God is affirmed. In this, patriarchal hegemony and masculinity would continue to propagate from the evolution of more primitive, communal societies into capitalist society. On another hand, the oppression suffered by women in certain societies would also increase because of surpluses in production, issues of migration, and the burden of pregnancy that she carries, so that her role would evolve from being a goddess, to being a queen, to being a ruler, until she is finally reduced to being a laborer confined to the specific role and domain of ensuring the procreation and livelihood of the family, and of ensuring that the family is fed. The nature of production has evolved with much complexity over a very long period throughout history until today. Imagine also that all these systems and concepts developed under masculine hegemony, imposing their authority through violence, war, and brute, physical strength. There is a male consciousness that is built upon the notion that objectives are met through the use of violence. And, there is a female consciousness – in my opinion – that uses other tools, and that works towards her evolution, but that has failed in confronting this brute force of which war is but one example. Today, we see evidence of this by those who are most affected by war. When the subject of women is considered with this much attention, it is perhaps because of what Maya mentioned, that the Left tried to reduce the subject to the issue of class struggle, while others reduced it to an issue of ethnicity or race. But, when one looks at reality, one will find women of all classes, of all ethnicities, and of all races, throughout history, who share common traits and suffer from similar factors that have contributed and continue to contribute to their oppression. There is something that men do not understand: that the man considers the woman inferior to him. He uses aggression and violence against her. How is she to respond? This is something that is incomprehensible.

Hussein: This discussion helps clarify how women think about the root of the oppression. However, if we look at how we live life, today... especially with women exiting the household – then, why does she still face these problems?

Hiba: I will give you an example of what takes place in everyday life. My friend and I, for example, used to live in the neighborhood of Zuqaqal-Blat in Beirut. My friend has all the attributes of what is considered feminine beauty; I do not. People talk to her, try to help her, because she has these attribute. But no one does the same with me, because I lack these alleged criteria of feminine beauty. You can use that as a measure for many things. I am not saying that women who are considered beautiful are better off for it. In light of the way they dealt with me, when one of them looked at me, and did not interact with me, he or she essentially reduced me to something of less importance. This is what I feel and am subjected to in all my daily interactions. I see that the woman is reduced to her body and to her looks. All other things are secondary. This is where it starts. This is one of the very essential points of departure to how everything else must be dealt with and should be considered.

Berna: The root of oppression begins with the body, and the things Hiba spoke about... the womb, virginity, and the female form, etc. Understanding oppression begins with the details of daily life and women's lives. The difference between Hiba and her friend places each in a different category. It is impossible to talk about feminism without talking about daily life and without politicizing the issue. The politicization of the issue begins with the womb and the body and continues to the house, the school, and the street. The struggle taking place around us, every day, is about our bodies. There was a story I read about a woman who was doing tests for uterine cancer. When she was asked if she was married, she said no. She did not understand what that had to do with the surgical procedure she was about to have. But the real reason behind the question was to find out whether or not she was a virgin. As she was unmarried, the assumption was she must be a virgin. So, they cut through her stomach to do the procedure in order to protect her virginity.

Hussein: Where in this example is the male consciousness that Hiba was talking about earlier?

Maya: I think this point reminds me of something people say all the time, “What more do you want than getting in for free, or for someone to hold the door for you, or spoil you because you are a woman?” People assume that this conduct is positive and that these benefits prove that they think we are important. This is exactly what is used to explain how they see us. It is not what we want them to see. If someone came up to me, to help me, I have no problem with that. But, is he helping me because I cannot do something, or is it because the way I look appeals to him? This is where the difference is, in my opinion. I think that we, as women, do not need to keep repeating this talk about suffering. The suffering is from authority, which affects us in every way and from every direction. For example, we are allowed to love, but not a foreigner – because a woman may never be comfortable with the fact that her own children will not bear her nationality. It is the same with matters of harassment and abuse. There are people, even those who tote the banner of women’s liberation, who consider that it is women who seduce men, and that men are just incapable of controlling themselves. This all comes back to my “nature” as a woman. These are examples of what happens to us on a daily basis. Then there is the sect, of course. We cannot go outside the sect. This, in itself, is communal violence. Those who benefit in this equation, when it comes to the system and the laws upholding the system, are the ones with more strength: Men.

Hussein: How is that?

Maya: Take the Personal Status Laws as an example. If I am with a man, and I want to sign a contract, I must do that under the auspices of the Catholic sect, which would ensure that I would lose custody over my children after I decide to get a divorce. All roads to any other solution are barred to me. This is all just on the legal level. We have not even delved into the real sectarian depths. For example, let us talk about religious women. I was raised in a church of the catholic sect where the male has all the authority over the children of the faith. He can walk all over a woman, even if she is part of his sect, faith, and legal system. And, he can deny her the right to participate in any decision. It is a group of patriarchs and bishops that make decisions. Even if I am part of their “system”, I am in the position of the obedient, not the partner. In terms of the discrimination against women, it is the same in all the other sects. If, for example, I wanted to marry someone outside my sect, I would be subjected to social pressure. One must not forget that I am a follower. So, if I marry a Muslim, and I am a Christian, I will be the one who will be affected, because I must “follow” him. That is the Catholic patriarchy. Since they attribute no value to me, and since my children are “his” children that means, if I marry a Muslim, I will give birth to a generation of Muslim children. And, therefore, I have increased the number of Muslims at my expense as a Christian. In this case, the demographics are my responsibility, and so is the sect. I have no right to love the way I want.

Hiba: When did the idea of descent become such an issue? Naturally, if a woman slept with ten men, she would still know who her children are. When did the issue of descent become the man’s sole prerogative? The idea I was talking about was that there is no place for the existence of women as human beings. But, the man is a human. Yes, he is exposed to aggression, but the reasons are different, and are due to class, race, and specific conditions – not because he is a man. Anywhere the man goes, he is privileged. In other words, there are specific factors around him that shape how he controls his condition. The woman, on the other hand, is a woman, first and foremost. Beyond that, she must deal with what is accepted for her by all; and she must accept and take what is meted out to her, based on her sex and what others expect and think of her, in addition to her social environment. If she wants to work, the least that is expected of her is to “look good”. No one demands that a man be elegant. I read in the news that there was a man who worked in a place, wearing the same clothes for a whole year, without any retribution. But the woman is expected to change what she wears every day. She must look like the image she is selling. The way I look, as a woman, is enough for me. But I cannot work in 90% of the workplaces. A man can wear a t-shirt and work. These are details of everyday life that are really disturbing. Like the right given to anyone to be able to look at the woman as a weaker entity. This daily domination is what one can be subjected to, every day, or at any moment. Once, I was driving, and without intending to, I passed one of them – without meaning to, and without any showing off, or screeching – and went into the lane I was allowed to change to. And so, I passed him. He had a nervous breakdown. He put his head out the window and cursed me. There are women who decide to have “sex”. Her family members can respond to that by ostracizing her for the rest of her life, or even killing her. Here, in

Hamra¹, we live in a cocoon when it comes to this topic. Elsewhere, sexual pleasure is a right denied to women, not only from her family. I see how sex is understood, and how it is presented in the cinema, in film, and so on. All of it puts the woman in the position of the raped... as the one who has no say in the matter. She has no say in her own pleasure. They work to convince her that this is her sexuality, and that this is how she must derive pleasure from her sexuality. There are women that get no pleasure from “straight” sex. There are statistics that say that 70% of women never reach orgasm in their lives.

Hussein: Is this political?

Berna: An issue does not necessarily have to be directed at the government for it to be a political matter. It could be directed at a woman’s father, or any other person. What Maya was talking about, that if the woman argues, defends her rights, raises her voice, or shows “masculine” traits, or in other words, if she were able to defend herself the way that men defend themselves then she is a woman who has lost her mind; she is hysterical, or possessed. That is what they label her as every time she sees, points out, or even rejects the signs and instruments of the patriarchal and male-dominated system, or specifically the oppression that is imposed on her by this male-dominated system. What I want to get to, here, is the idea that most women who reject this system and express their rejection of it are confronted by all kinds of reactions that will reassert control over them and co-opt them back into the very system they reject. What is more difficult and more profound is the control and authority that this system has over the body. For, the body is the first thing we ever possess. It is also the first thing that the oppressed has to demand, one’s physical freedom and one’s ownership of one’s own body, and oneself. This happens by expressing oneself in many different forms... expressing what it means to be a woman.

Hussein: What does possessing the body mean?

Sandy: It means that the woman, between herself and the outside, is considered a commercial entity. In other words, she is a housewife, and will be consumed always as if she is a decorative element. She is non-existent; she only exists with the purpose of decorating something. Women are born just like any other living being. But, we are treated as something decorative, and as something that is meant to complete something else. Personally, I began to shed this little by little, because all that has had power over me in this way is what also discriminates against me. For example, if I go to a political meeting, someone says, “Hello beautiful...” That is something that is only said to a woman. Why is that?

Hussein: Meanwhile, the people you mix with are considered leftists and libertarians, and they have a discourse that claims that women and men are equal.

Sandy: That is untrue. We just project that upon them. Honestly, that is a big mistake. This society we live in (Hamra, the left) is furthest from this truth. For example, I am going to tell you about the group that I perform with. There are five men in the band with me. I was once asked in a television interview, “What are you doing with these guys?” Even when we are composing music, my voice often has to be “sensitive”. This is borne of the idea that overpowers their minds – the idea of masculinity – and this is borne of the idea of authority. For instance, they must impose their authority, and they do this by reinforcing the image in their minds about the women being weaker. This always happens. In Egypt, for example, there was a story about harassment. The motivation was not just sexual – there is no value placed on the human being. We live in a shitty society and the value of human beings is nil. The regime and the military humiliate the man. And he goes down to the street to see whom he will humiliate. The military can rape, beat, and steal. And he goes down to the street to seek those who he can oppress and practice violence against. The woman here is the weakest link. She even thinks of herself as weak. She is often raised to believe this. So, it is not easy to find women that can remove themselves from these notions. It is not easy to expect them to suddenly wake up, strong, and able to demand their rights. Because, from the start, she is raised

¹ Hamra is a busy, commercial and touristic street in central Beirut. The audience of the many cafes and pubs are intellectuals, political activists, and students. Hence this street and its surroundings have acquired a micro-culture that is distinct of other areas in Lebanon.

to believe she is weak, and that she has obligations. She is not able to move outside this framework. And because of this weakness, one is unable to make one's voice heard.

Berna: So, sexually, the woman is regulated either through reproduction, or through prostitution, or as a decorative element, or as the raped. There are the raped virgins and the raped non-virgins. A woman's existence and her reality are reduced to her womb. So, her conflict with the system begins with her womb, and the foundation and the root of the conflict is embodied by how the system has defined "the feminine".

Hussein: How do you see this as public property?

Hiba: The ideas that exist about women... and where this oppression has come from... Really, they think that they know what the woman wants and what her needs are. They know how she thinks before listening to her. This is what we witness in the popular culture, and it is one of the cumulative factors. The other issue is not the question of demands made to the powers that be, but rather a process of continuous resistance that takes on many different forms. One of the forms that we see is the work that is being done within the context of organizations and movements that demand certain rights from the authorities, whereas resistance is action taken on a daily basis by women, whether or not it is deliberate. We see this in the manner in which mothers protect their children from their fathers' abuse, and the way that these women deal with the situations they are in. These are the tactics she devises for her survival, endurance, and perseverance that sometimes can continue for forty years, until they can take back some form of power. This is what we see amongst women that have to endure the presence of the masculine image of the man for longer periods of time... sometimes until they are grandmothers. The daily struggle is trying to prove that she is a woman and that she has her own mind and her own thoughts, that she loves and she hates. In the mentality of the powers that be and societies here, the woman is just a single mass governed by many factors. Another thing I want to say about how I see feminists and my faith in them: I do not have demands of equality in the sense that a little girl, who wants to play with Barbie and is not allowed to jump around and go out, is then told by someone to go out and play football with a boy who spends his time jumping around. The idea of the woman and her thought taking prominence in all aspects of public and private life is not the demand. The demand is that her thoughts and ideas have a role in the evolution of the ideas and concepts that form her surroundings and culture, where the male and the masculine dominate in every sense of the word. For me, this is the main problem.

Maya: I believe equality is a matter of luck. Like the luck that men have in our world. It is not that the demand is superficial; it is the idea that one does not have luck. The opportunities that the man gets, and the resources that he benefits from, are things that a woman cannot access. If she does, it takes double the effort while for the man, it comes free.

Hiba: No, getting her rights regarding a specific issue is not necessarily what is needed. For example, getting equal rights in citizenship.... I am not saying "no" to this; but for sure, I would reject this when it is presented as equality because I see this as yet another tool or instrument, and not the core of the problem. Achieving equality does not mean resolving a problem. One very trivial example is the 50% quota for women in parliament... because we are still under the whim of a male-dominated electoral system. This has to do with the hierarchy of power, which does not allow for these kinds of opportunities. The balance of power concepts is something that is criticized in the feminist perspective. It includes the manner in which the balance of power is formed, the hierarchy, the power politics, and the dynamics that exist in authority, the lack of justice and balance, are all disproportionate in a male-dominated system that controls authority and power. We have yet to reach a solution to these problems because pre-existing concepts still govern, and because those who work within this system are patriarchal – and that includes women and men, equally. A mother can be patriarchal with her daughters; society is the umbrella that protects the system of relations that govern, not just the relations that connect women with society. There is another subject I want to talk about. That is that men also respond with violence. Masculinity is in crisis. It cannot maintain its presence except through violence and by exerting control. Or, as I said before: If the authorities rape the man, the man goes to the street to prove this by exerting his own control. The concept of the man is, in itself, tied to imposition and domination. In general, to be a man, one must be strong in all senses of the word. So, he must prove his strength and power somewhere. Every time the man feels that he is part of a society that robs him of his

masculinity – like Sandy said: humiliates him, degrades him – he feels danger and feels threatened. So, his reaction is to respond by resorting to violence to prove his masculinity, his virility.

Maya: There are many subjects that affect young men, and their abuse and their humiliation. For me, this is the result of the abuser seeing something feminine in them. For example, when they are raped, they are raped because they showed some sign of femininity, an emotional or sensitive side. Therefore, the abuse is really against the female, the feminine – even if it is the abuse of one male over another. The violence is directed against a feminine expression that emanates from that person.

Hussein: But, when you say you consider the emotional as being a feminine trait...

Maya: I say that because this is prohibited to young men. Young men say that if they are sensitive or emotional, then they are not men, and they become women. For these young men, these issues are connected in large part to things related to girls. For instance, young men would consider this as acting like a “fufu”.

Hiba: My point is different, and the proof of it can be seen in Hbeish Police Station², where the perpetrator is not punished but the victim is. If the perpetrator is a man, he is not punished because he is considered all-powerful, and because he is behaving the way the traditional man should, and not like a homosexual.

Berna: As for the left, I can tell you about one of my first political experiences in this environment. I had many dreams pinned on the left. And, there were many things I learned. When I joined, I had no real experience, I just knew the theories. I did not know much about what these theories meant on a daily, social, and political level, or much about the informal coalitions that were formed among groups within political parties. When I joined, the left was in a state of collapse. And social male-domination had pervaded the left. One of my political experiences was related to the fact that as I was a member of a political party I could vote and be nominated – that was a natural context for equality. At one point in time, I just could not understand why women did not organize themselves, by themselves, without men. That was the equality that existed: I could join a party that had men in it, and I could be nominated for posts and get elected. But, a childish intuition made me feel that there was something strange about the role of women. For instance, once it was decided that I would read a statement at a press conference with the mtv television station when it was closed down. I hadn't even written the statement, but they made me read one anyway – when I did not know what its content was. Why? Because they wanted to be able to state that they had given a role to women; and, more particularly, I am a Christian woman, whose name is Bernadette, amongst a group of “communist students” who, in general, were mostly Muslims. This is notwithstanding all the other political calculations. For example, when you are asked to really raise the political bar, you do not tie that to well-known political faces, like mine. I was the one who used to make demands like asking the minister of the interior and the government to resign. But the political debate, the negotiations, and the political decisions were taken outside the limelight. Those calculations and considerations are based on assigning symbolic value to men within the framework of politics in clear distinction to the secondary role that the woman is allowed to play. The issue does not revolve around equality in form but rather a fragmentary comparative approach to egalitarianism... because you want to dismantle the system that oppresses you through the law, through its value system, and through values that honor violence. Consequently, your strategy of resistance has to be very different. Many women join political parties and politicize women's issues in the public domain, and they organize demonstrations that make demands for equality under the law, and so on. On the level of daily life, women constantly resist in a male-dominated public domain and in her private life as well. All women oscillate between these two domains.

Hussein: Did the Arab revolutions have any impact on changing the view of societies and the perspective of political parties on the political role of the woman?

Berna: Current events are escalating and changing quickly. If one is talking about 2011, when the leaders of the regimes fell, there was also a rapid escalation of stances. On the heels of the revolutions, many workshops were

² Hbeish police station is located in the Hamra district and it is well known for its dealing with issues related to combating drugs, prostitution, and sexual conduct.

convened through various initiatives led by women's movements, which have existed for generations. It is possible that some of these were able to put forth a redefined identity in a certain manner. New initiatives were also established, such as taking to the streets to demonstrate, even if it was just about ensuring the safety of women, who were being repressed through gang rapes, and so on... whether or not this form of repression was the result of a particular social manifestation or whether it was something instigated by a system run by the security apparatus... In fact, they breed off one another. What is beneficial to the Tunisian experience is that women's movements are of a particular character, based on the fact that personal status laws are somewhat "progressive" in Tunisia, at least relative to the legal codes and personal status laws in other Arab countries. There was "euphoria" in producing literature about the imminent threat to women posed by the Islamists – the discussion of which had previously been postponed. Before the revolutions took place, the prevailing discourse in civil society had focused on free and fair democratic elections in Tunisia and Egypt, and on the assumption that if democratic elections would take place, the Islamists would win. With that, democracy would become subject to different calculations and considerations. The outcry or the feeling of being threatened by the Islamists led to negotiations within existing institutions in Tunisia, and women's movements considered these demands for women's rights as being legitimate, and so on. Despite the fact that polygamy is illegal, there were other laws related to "sin" that were not necessarily exemplary for women. Indeed, preserving the status quo could be considered an initiative in itself. There was also the Alia Mahdi initiative, where the issue of collective sexual violence was addressed. Photos of her naked became public, everywhere. She took these photos and burned them in public to prove her ownership over her own body, the way that Bouazizi³ did. There were other initiatives that had to do with protecting the right to demonstrate, and other such limited interventions. But the issue of the body is a central issue in the Arab revolutions. If one was to point to the institutional work of organized women's movements, the goal is to break down the system and to establish equality, and to see this translated into law. In other words, to establish new ideas and norms whether or not these are related to the right to demonstrate daily, or whether or not these are at the level of politicizing one's daily life (in the system and in the laws that dictate one's daily existence, as well as the other economic and social structures).

Hussein: Sandy, you were in Egypt. How was the situation there?

Sandy: In Egypt, there was nothing the state did, specifically, to instigate the revolution. Everyone was repressed during those demonstrations. There was no place for discrimination. Of course, there were those who would say, "You are a woman, go to the back"... But those people were quickly put down because there was no space for this. Definitely, there was no place for this discussion during the meetings, because the issue of women versus men was not on the table. I can tell you about International Women's Day in Egypt, after the revolution. Three-quarters of the revolutionary groups, which participated in and organized the demonstrations during the revolution, refused to take to the streets on that particular day. That was due to the political discourse that prevailed at that time and to the fact that the sit-in was still camped out at Tahrir Square... According to them, they had gained their rights, and there was no need for an International Women's Day. Even women were not interested in talking about International Women's Day, because they believed they had also achieved their rights and that the demands of the revolution should not be fragmented. The people who organized for International Women's Day in Egypt were either foreigners, or other long-established Egyptian movements or organizations. Despite this, I went down to see what was happening to commemorate that day. There was a terrifying amount of violence and anger. There were verbal and physical attacks by almost a hundred policemen. Suddenly, everything was turned on its head. Those idealistic images that we used to see became a dream; and, no one uttered a word. When the image of the woman challenging the man was put forward, or, in other words, when the woman stood before the man, demanding her rights, his entire existence was completely shaken. After that, things returned to the status quo. At that time, there was also a great amount of political turmoil. When it came to harassment, old tactics were being used, so that when a hundred men harassed one woman in a demonstration, if anyone tried to help her, they were abused themselves – whether or not the person who tried to help was a man or a woman. This was state-based sexual harassment to scare women off from taking part in any of the demonstrations. There were centers established to document these incidents and to intervene on a grassroots level.

³ Tarek al-Tayyeb Bouazizi was a Tunisia street vendor who set himself on fire and died on 17 December 2010 in protest of ill treatment and humiliation by local police. His act fuelled the beginning of the Tunisian revolution.

Hussein: For the woman, the outcome is that she did not gain anything.

Sandy: The incidents of sexual harassment in Egypt were trivialized. These were not isolated incidents, they were premeditated and systematic.

Hiba: I do not see the problem being corporal as much as it is sexual. The situation in Egypt is profoundly challenging. What the woman did there was to penetrate the public domain. For the woman, this was prohibited in the past. The woman is subjected to violence every time she tries to extricate herself from roles defined for her by a male-dominated society. She has been confined to a reproductive role. Anything outside that framework is subject to a male authority. She can go out to work, if her husband permits that. The woman went out to participate in a battle for her rights and to create a new regime by bringing down the old. In this case the woman was exploited, the way she always is. The industrial revolution was in need of cheap labor, and revolutions are always in need of numbers. She is always politically exploited for these purposes by institutionalized parties and established movements. And that is where her role ends. That was exactly what was said on International Women's Day. The woman went down to the street to say, "I was a partner in the revolution, so recognize me". But, the response was, "The regime has fallen, and the demonstrations have ended, so your role has also ended. Now go back to your proper place". The patriarchal system is much more complicated and complex than the direct system and the regime that governs the state.

Sandy: Demonstrators used to sleep in Tahrir Square. But suddenly, after the incidents in Port Said, there was a huge demonstration where a large banner was held up that stated that "smoking is now prohibited, and women are to leave the area by eight o'clock pm". At this point, there was a great outcry, because there was something formal out there threatening women with a time limit to when they could participate and demonstrate. What I want to say is that people suddenly went back to the boundaries drawn by the regime and the value system that oppressed people before the revolution.

Hussein: Hiba, you talked about all the women's issues. Do you feel that other societies around the world have reconciled in one form or another with the personal freedom of women?

Hiba: The situation of women in other societies is better. The issue is not corporal, it is about the sexual conditions that reflect upon the image of the corporal, and which dictate that the woman is a female. Sweden still suffers from this, with rape remaining one of its greatest problems. It is difficult for the woman to prove this.

Hussein: But the woman has self-respect in the West. And there is no comparison between the laws in Sweden and those in Arab countries.

Hiba: There is a fallacy that exists around the prevailing concept that rape is more widespread here based on the fact that the woman's body is treated in a different manner. There is no difference between giving me a black eye and verbally abusing me. In this case, the issue of rape has become more important because it is related to a prevailing concept about violence as it is considered punishment for crossing certain publicly delineated boundaries. In Egypt, rape did not occur as a punishment but out of competition. Many men have said that they were raised in environments where women were segregated from men. Many men I have spoken to on this subject express that the woman poses competition in the market. They are to produce like machines all day long and to then enjoy being trampled on ... This is the stereotypical reward that prevails in the system, to divide people. And, the system bribes people with what it possesses and it says, "Go to war, and we will give you money and women".

Hussein: The religion, the religious law, and faith in God have all stated that women must be treated in this manner. The Arabists, Islamists, pan-nationalists... all of them embrace a discourse full of concepts and terms that place the women in the framework of the feminine.

Hiba: I understand oppression. When one compares between the West and the East, it is inevitable that there is a difference between the cultural, political, and historical frameworks, etc. This is notwithstanding that one must

place the United States in a particular framework. Male oppression exists and has its own instruments of war, just like the war on terror does.

Berna: You need to go back to the roots of oppression in our Lebanese and Arab contexts.

Hussein: And religion and its role...

Berna: One of the tools of oppression is the religious institution – not religious thought. These institutions are built upon authoritarian ideas with the goal of control. If you want control, you must organize power and systemize authority, and you must promote and uphold certain concepts, and keep these in place until they become “utopian”. This is notwithstanding the fact that societies have male domination at their core. The tools of repression here are religious, social, economic, and medicinal. None of us has studied Islamic philosophy enough to clarify this issue.

Hussein: There are many women who go along with this system precisely because of their religious beliefs.

Maya: This is what we were saying. We all evoke and simulate male-dominated thought and ideas. It is not that women are far from being absorbed by this thought but that they suffer from it.

Berna: Isn't there a saying that men use that says “women always stand with one other”? This is one of society's myths.

Maya: It is possible for them to be in solidarity with one another, yes. But, I do not really agree because the system works to resist any assembly, or any form of alliances. It punishes the creation of any form of solidarity. We were saying that women's movements exist only between women, and that these women have been confronted with great force. It is natural for the system to resist this form of assembly or solidarity, or any type of sisterly link between women. We all began with the oppression that we suffer from. What Hiba said about the body and sex is correct. Our battles are different from the battles of France and Sweden. But the premise is the same. Women have battles. I see that the issue of prostitution is the greatest problem of male-domination in Europe. This is a global battle. They have the problem of alcohol-related rape or “relational” rape, not the way we have marital rape. In other words, the problem has different forms, but the situation is similar. Women are saturated in male-dominated systems, but we resist it in different ways. We have all suffered in one form or another.

Hiba: I totally disagree with this idea that women are in solidarity with one another, and I say that not being able to achieve this is structural, deliberate, and organized. There are many examples in popular culture that attest to this: “the second wife, the mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law”... There are also many narratives that imply that we women are in constant competition over men. In the psychology of women, it is natural, if you are a mother and your son gets married, that you give his wife a hard time and are jealous of her, and it is natural for the wife to do the same. In that way, there is always a competition over the male. As for religion, the problem is even greater as religion is not at all separate from politics. The monotheistic religions, in any case, present themselves with an organized system of governance – Islam, in particular, has more of these traits than other religions – where there is an authority which organizes matters between people and which possesses them. It imposes certain concepts. For example, there are those who will claim that they have a better understanding of war. Hence that is why wars take place; the system is masculine in its nature. There is nothing sacred, but rather it is about political interests and about movements wanting to impose their ideas. I am of the view that a discussion about the separation between religion and state is not what is required anymore. We can put the sacred in place of religion, but not religion in place of politics. In that way, there is freedom to express oneself and the freedom to oppose that expression.

Berna: Dana Bakdonis⁴ said that she took off the veil because it had been twenty years since she had felt the light and the wind on her body and in her hair.

⁴ Dana Bakdounis is a young Syrian who had posted a photo of herself without her being covered by her veil on a facebook page that supports women's rights. Her action drew much attention. For further reading see, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20315531>. [Editor's note]

Maya: The revolutions and these movements have emerged with terrifying outcomes. What bothers me most is that we are all without memory. We can see that some things have not changed for two or three hundred years until today. During the French revolution, many slogans were touted. Women went out to declare their rights as women; the revolution seemed complete. But two years later, they chopped off women's heads. This happened in 1790, and the same is taking place today.