It is such a pleasure to be with all of you in this inspirational setting. Special thanks to the President of the Policy Studies Organization, Dr. Paul Rich, and to Professor Mohammed Aman for availing me this opportunity to dialogue and exchange ideas with all of you on challenges facing women in Arab and Muslim societies and what I describe as the magic touch of the three “E”s of empowerment: Education, Equality, and Economic Enabling.

In the early fourth century B.C., the great philosopher Plato concluded that “education could cultivate good qualities in individuals.” In 1798, a scholar known as Condorcet wrote *The Progress and the Human Mind*, in which he proposed that women should be declared eligible for elections in the growing body of self-governing systems to ensure fair, democratic practice.

In the early years of Islam, a female Muslim scholar known as al-Shifa used to teach reading and writing to Muslim men and women. Moreover, Amara Bintal-Rahman was known as the best narrator of Islamic jurisprudence. Following the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D., she ran a school where she taught men and women about Islamic laws. This should not come as a surprise to any of us, since as early as 610 A.D., when the *Qur’an* was revealed to Prophet Muhammad, the first message from the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet was “read,” and when the Prophet asked the Angel how can he read when he was illiterate, the Angel replied that he should read in the name of the Lord who . . . creates humankind from a clot. The Angel said that the Lord was most generous, taught by the pen, and taught man what he did not know. This was the first revelation that sends a clear message to all believers. It is the miracle of education. In fact, the meaning of the word *Qur’an* means “recitation or reading.” If we analyze the Qur’anic verse, it is clear that reading and writing are the progressive mechanisms to build a civilized community without differentiating between men or women. Both women and men are addressed on equal basis as clearly emphasized: “If any do deeds of righteousness, be male or female, and have faith, they will enter heaven, and no injustice will be done to them” (*Qur’an* 4:124).

Hence, it was not a surprise that in early Islam, women were active political participants in casting their votes, known as *bai’ah* as clearly mentioned in the *Qur’an*.
(60:12): “O Prophet! Whenever believing women come unto Thee to pledge their allegiance to Thee . . . then accept their pledge of allegiance.” In fact, sometimes there is a need to remind many Muslims of the role of Aisha, the Prophet’s wife in religious and political affairs, because she is the only woman transmitter of more than 2,210 Hadith—statements from the Prophet to the believers. After the death of the Prophet, she served to settle many points of disagreement among the Muslim community. In fact, Islamic history emphasizes that there were at least 2,500 women jurists, market inspectors, managers of Islamic endowments, and teachers of jurisprudence. There were women warriors as well. This is just to mention some of the forgotten roles of women who struggled since the early period of Islam to spread God’s word. So, why has the compassionate message of Islam been distorted, and how can we reconfigure it?

If we agree that women’s empowerment as defined by United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other organizations is a multidimensional process of achieving basic capabilities; legal rights; and the participation in key social, economic, political, and cultural domains, then we can agree that education is the main bridge to reach this goal for both women and men (UNDP, 2006). Hence, it was only natural that during the nineteenth century, when enlightened theologians and Muslim scholars were analyzing the problems in their societies and searching for means to advancing their people, the prominent Muslim Egyptian scholar, Rifaa al-Tahtawi wrote his famous book, Guidance to Teaching Boys and Girls in 1872, which led to the establishment of the first state girls’ primary school in Egypt in 1873. The narratives of Muslim scholars, such as Rashid Reda (1865–1905) and Muhammad Abdu (1849–1905), together with Taha Hussein in the 1940s, as well as Rachid Ganouchi in the 1960s and 1970s, were also written to advance society. All emphasized the importance of education, science, and technology, and the dire need to educate men and women on equal footing, while they were calling for an Islamic awakening of pride in Islamic heritage.

They did not reject the West; however, Muslim scholars did not encourage blind emulation of Western customs; instead, they called for a critical examination of Western sources of strength, particularly sciences, mathematics, and technology, from which the Muslim world could benefit. The call was for progressive thinking and building educated communities throughout the Muslim world in compliance with the Qur’an. Enlightened Muslim leaders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were able to make marked difference in their societies by declaring education as a universal right for all citizens, and here we are in 2012, after all these centuries, still dwelling on the unresolved issues of gender equality, and women as agents of social change in Muslim societies.

I would like to share with you some reflections on major issues that seem to be “hot-button issues” of universal importance—particularly at a time when we are all living through the social media revolution. How is the history of many countries in the Arab world being re-written after January 2011 by brave men and women? The
main question is, when both men and women challenge their regimes, asking for dignity, social justice, and freedom, how much will be achieved that will advance their causes as equal citizens in their countries?

Dear colleagues, in our dialogue, we need to stop for a moment and ask ourselves the following questions:

1. How can we sustain a dialogue between the West and the East, and bridge the gap by understanding the common value system that can unite us to reach out to each other? We need to talk as equal partners.

2. Why is education the “magic bullet”?

3. Why is Islam stereotyped as a religion that oppresses women?

4. What seems to be more problematic: defining the empowerment of women or understanding the causal roots for misrepresenting Islam, and bridging the gap between the cultures of the world?

5. How can we, together as conscientious scholars, change the negative images and bring about a better understanding of the human aspects of Islam?

6. While we need to look into each country on its own premise in the transition and reform periods, the citizens of Tunisia and Egypt made a statement when they chose Muslim conservative regimes, hoping for more accountability and transparency.

My dear colleagues, I do understand the immense challenges that face any policy maker or decision maker to build a dialogue where there would be clear goals and achievable results. Thus, I am proposing a dialogue that can open opportunities for Western societies to understand the challenges facing women in many Arab and Muslim societies without falling into the myth of the superiority of Western feminism’s definition of equality. We need to base our interactive dialogue on the fact that women in America and women in Egypt, as early as 1919, were exchanging ideas on the suffrage movement and national women’s liberation causes, taking into consideration the cultural and societal nuances. Women fought to free themselves from the shackles of misinterpreting religions and living in patriarchal domains. It took time to change mindsets, but by 1956, the constitution in Egypt endorsed women’s rights, and more clauses were added in the constitutions of 1971 and 1979, acknowledging women’s rights to equal political participation. Moreover, Article 40 of the Constitution reads “... citizens are equal before the law. Citizens have equal rights and duties without distinction regardless of their sex, origin, language, religion or belief.” As for education and working, articles 13 and 18 in the 1971 constitution guarantee free education and right to work without discrimination between male and female. All of these clauses are but reflection on many Qur’anic verses such as verse (33:35):
For Muslim men and women. For believing men and women. For honest men and women. For men and women, who are patient and constant, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast and deny themselves. For men and women who guard their chastity, for men and women who engage much in Allah’s praise—for them God has prepared forgiveness and great reward.

The message is clear, as both genders are being addressed equally to remind them of their social responsibilities; and the verse is clear that the most honored is the most righteous, without discriminating between males or females. Here, let us look together at John Esposito’s narrative, *The Islamic Threat, Myth or Reality?* published in 1992, where he underscores that “a fuller appreciation of the Islamic past can provide the understanding and methodology for Islamic responses to the challenges of modernity to draw and develop a viable political, legal and economic model of society in light of the Qur’anic principles and values” (p. 134). Moreover, the prominent Muslim scholar Muhammad el-Ghazali Harb (1981) stated in many of his books in the 1980s that Islamic ideals are evolving, not static; that every period in history has given a different analysis of Islamic theory and practice.

So what went wrong in some Muslim societies? Is it because of the patriarchal attitudes, or the lack of education or misinterpreting and decontextualizing some of the Qur’anic texts and the lack of proper understanding of many verses, and sometimes manipulating religious authority? If one of God’s name in the Qur’an is “justice,” how can women be ill-treated under the name of Islam? It seems that women’s issues are caught up in the political-cultural battleground and male-dominated interpretation of the Qur’an. Let me share with you a telling experience.

When I was traveling with the current grand imam of Egypt, Dr. Ahmed el-Tayyeb, to participate at the first conference on “interfaith dialogue” in 2004, I remember how he explained how many verses in the Qur’an were revealed in context, which is described as asbab al-nezool (occasions of revelation), which we need to remember, when some verses are misinterpreted in patriarchal societies. He emphasized that the most central value in the Qur’an is justice and that God condemns transgression and oppression. So the magic word is “education, education, education” that can empower women and men and avail both of equal opportunities in life and eventually alleviate poverty and many other ills of society. There is a famous saying from the first woman educator in Egypt, Nabawiya Mussa, who said in 1902 “the eyes are of little use if the mind is blind.” Many of the rights that women in Egypt have today are largely due to her struggle, and that of the leader of the women’s liberation movement in 1919, Hoda Sha’arawi.

Egyptian women have struggled throughout the twentieth century to establish their presence as full-fledged partners with men in the public sphere. Their presence outside the domestic sphere was a result of free education and economic necessity. Consequently, post-revolutionary Egypt will need to recognize the gains women have achieved through their own genuine efforts since 1919; there is no way in
which the clock can be turned back. When looking at the snapshots of the Tahrir Square Revolution of 2011, and the Jasmine Tunisian Revolution of 2011, one can see that women protestors were defying the Western stereotypical image of passive Arab women. Women in Egypt were organizing and strategizing on Facebook, and bloggers like Leila Mortada took momentous risks to keep the world informed on the situation in Tahrir Square. Women in Yemen were camping and protesting in Sanaa and Taaz, defying the tradition and the regime. No wonder that Tawakul Karman received the Nobel Peace Prize, the highest recognition not only for Yemeni women but also for all Arab women. But the story does not stop there. As these uprisings are changing the discourse of history, men seem to be eclipsing women as “partners in transition” in countries whose revolutionaries—men and women—created the slogans “dignity and social justice.” Some analysts argue that after the dust settles, gender equality will be among the priority issues on the agendas of women’s organizations in Egypt, and Tunisia who have a long history in challenging governments for women’s rights as part and parcel of the Islamic code of justice, and societal progress where women are and will always be “partners for sustainable change.” Women activists in the “Arab Awakening” have defied the traditional supposition by many analysts that women in Arab societies are submissive and not interested in political activities. While women took to the streets from all social classes, others who represent the computer generation created their blogs in defiance of the corrupt regimes.

Dear friends, while there are many concerns about women’s rights in post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt, it is important to deliberate on how to transform religious progressive thought and proper interpretation of the Qur’an to men and women in their own cultural setting, and to reach grassroots participants through education to change mindsets and advance women’s causes. Here, I would like to share with you the Azhar Reform Bulletin of June 2011, which lays out the guidelines for the new constitution in Egypt. It can be a pragmatic framework for advancing the proper understanding of citizenship and human rights, and the need to establish a modern democratic state based on a constitution that guarantees citizens equal rights. The document highlights education and scientific research as a high priority and stresses eliminating poverty and illiteracy to achieve development and social justice. The reform bulletin has 11 points that embraces democracy based on free and direct voting to achieve the Islamic concept of shura, which includes pluralism, rotation of power, accountability, fighting corruption and achieving transparency, respect of the three Abrahamic religions, and underlining the idea that there is no theocracy in Islam.

The Azhar Reform Bulletin of June 2011 emphasizes quality education, freedom of thinking, and full respect of human rights and the rights of women and children. Among the major highlights of the document is full respect of counter opinions and the need to dialogue. The reform bulletin emphasizes mutual respect between citizens based on equality in terms of rights and duties.
The Qur’anic message is inspirational as indicated in verse (49:13) “O human-kind, we created you from a male and a female, and then rendered you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most righteous.”

Another dimension for today’s discussion is the growing literature on what is known as “Islamic women’s activism,” which addresses larger issues about women’s role, from being knowledgeable in religion to playing an active level in analysis and interpreting. While facing many local and global challenges, women are moving beyond patriarchal protection and are forming what is becoming known as an “Islamic galaxy” of knowledge through the Internet, which Asma Barlas (2005) describes as “globalizing equality.” In her chapter, “Globalizing Equality: Muslim Women, Theology, and Feminism,” the scholar argues the need to ensure equality for women, wherever they live, by establishing a project that enable women’s access to education, jobs, or information technologies, as well as enables Muslims to understand the equal rights of women in the Qur’an and the social justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public–private continuum. Barlas argues against a simplistic view of information technology as the agent of democracy in Muslim societies.

Whether we agree with this argument or refute it, the most important change in our twenty-first century dialogue is understanding the complex nature of the societies we are addressing in light of the season’s changes in the Arab world; and the social network and mass media impact; and how to use technology to help women and men overcome the disease of ignorance and illiteracy. As we look at the impact of all these worldwide changes, we need to highlight education, reaching the rural areas and raising public awareness to the importance of educating girls and boys as national causes adopted and owned by each person in the community. When you educate a girl, then you have educated a village.

Indeed, as much as transnational feminism matters, because of its significance in raising global awareness of what is happening in many Muslim societies, such as “sisters in Islam” of Malaysia, yet change in conservative societies needs to happen from within because of cultural sensitivities. Also, Western feminist dialogue may not always match or fit with Muslim societies. As much as dialogue is needed, it has to match the religious and cultural ideals of different societies, with an understanding of the importance of the heritage and pride of Muslim women and men.

The question is how to transform religious progressive thoughts and proper interpretation of the Qur’an to the masses. The prominent Egyptian poet, Hafez Ibrahim, wrote in the 1940s that a mother is a school, an institution; empower her, and you empower a great nation. Then the riddle is solved. What is needed is quality education that can empower and free the spirit. It is not the constitutions that free people, but it is the spirit of the awakening and freedom and dignity within the young women and men that will rekindle the light to achieve national goals of freedom on equal footing. After all, let us all remember the words of my inspirational mentor,
Helen Keller, “It is only through experiences of living and suffering and crossing the path of education can the soul be strengthened and success be achieved.”

References