Reflections on the 
Muslim World

AN INTERVIEW WITH SALLAMA SHAKER

Sallama Shaker is a Visiting Professor of Islamic Studies and Middle East Studies at Yale University. Since 1971, she has served in the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, most recently as Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Americas. Her publications include Canada and the Middle East, Aid, Privatization, and Development in Turkey 1979-1990, and State, Society, and Privatization in Turkey, 1979-1990. In 1993, she received a PhD from the School of International Service, the American University, Washington D.C.

You have an extensive career in international relations, as a diplomat and at Egypt’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. What initially drew you to the field?

I grew up in a very politicized family. My cousin, who was my role model, was a diplomat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I still remember the first letter with Chinese features I had ever received in my life—it was a present from him after he returned from being in China for three years. He had all of these stories about China during the Cultural Revolution and I was all eyes and ears. I was overwhelmed with all of the stories he shared with us. At the age of 10, I remember very well going to my father and asking him whether I could be a diplomat. He said he did believe that by the time I graduated, I would be able to join the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but that I had to excel in my grades and make my own statement so that the committee would be impressed enough to accept women in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I didn’t realize there were no women in the Ministry—this was very early in the 60s. I made my way to the faculty of economics and political science.

There was a group of United Nations experts coming to Egypt at the time to pick translators in English, Arabic, French, so I applied and I was accepted. I didn’t know that two years before, in 1969, three women were accepted at the
President Obama has indicated that he hopes to build a better relationship between the United States and the Muslim world. Having served as a representative of a Muslim country in the United States, what do you see for the future of this relationship?

I believe that this has been one of the major reasons behind the euphoria of Obama in the Muslim world. Having said that, I was happily surprised when I was visiting Egypt this December to find that my little second cousin, who is no more than seven years old, was asking for a t-shirt with Obama on it. It tells you how much of a change happened with the new generation in Egypt, let alone in the whole Arab world. The fact that President Obama is trying to rebuild the image of the United States worldwide and to reach out to the Muslim world is impressive. I was also very impressed to read his speech in Istanbul and later in Ankara, in which he talks about trying to bring about a better understanding of the Muslim world to the United States and the American people. This is a wonderful step that will enhance the interfaith dialogue and alliances between civilizations, rather than just being caged in Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations.’ There is right now in the White House the first-ever Egyptian American woman, who has a veil on, and she’s welcomed as a scholar who knows about the Middle East and Islam. This is a statement in itself. It speaks a lot of how much change is happening in the United States and this change is reaching the whole world, not only the Muslim world. This is going to be a global message.

Outside of the diplomatic and foreign policy realm, for regular citizens in both world regions, what are some of the avenues through which US-Muslim relations could be improved?

Education, education, education. We should have more scholarly exchange programs, and send more students all over the world—to Egypt, to China, to India, to many parts of the world, in order to understand that beyond these two
oceans there is a world out there and people who are really anxious to have better lives. The Fulbright, AMIDEAST, and Rockefeller programs are good examples. I am very proud to say that if I did not get a Rockefeller grant to finish my masters at Johns Hopkins, I would not have possibly done everything I have been able to do in my life. I would not be here at Yale and I would not have written any of my books. Education opens these doors. Once you get into all of these cultural and academic exchange programs, the opportunities for students, who are future leaders, will make all the difference in knowing better what the world is all about and understanding the diversity of the world’s cultures. Just sitting back and teaching in class, that is not enough. Until you have been there, you do not realize that there are people out there. Whatever is taught as theory should be visited on the ground so students can go and live with the people in these areas.

The issue of women’s empowerment in the Middle East has been a particularly popular topic in the past decade. How do you think the topic is best approached? Is there a role for outside campaigns (especially from the West) or is this an internal issue?

This is the one billion dollar question! It touches on the major role of women as agents of social change in their societies. We cannot generalize. That was a very important topic for me to discuss every time I was in the US Congress or visiting the State Department in my capacity as Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs. Women have many basic needs but you need to fulfill them in the context of the woman’s culture. For example, when we were talking about education programs for women and girl dropouts in Egypt, it was very difficult to generalize how the program should be in Cairo and replicated in Luxor and Aswan and Damietta. Even in one country, you need to tailor the same program to reach the cultural diversity of the people.

We take for granted the idea that the Arab world is all the same, but it is not at all. Women’s programs in Egypt will be different than those in Yemen and Iraq. Many programs coming from foreign donors try to just give one tablet to cure all different problems. One size does not fit all. When we talk about the feminization of poverty and religion, in the course I will be giving this coming semester, it is important to understand that even in one religion, the cultural dimension of a country presents its own way of thinking as far as women are concerned. It is very important to see all of the cultural traditions and the socioeconomic dimensions of the society that you are targeting. The only kind of magic wand is education. It is the key to bring about change and to reach political participation and democratic practices, but you have to fit it within the culture and norms of the society you are addressing.
Women are often overrepresented among NGOs and elsewhere in civil society. How do you see women in Egypt operating as agents of change, politically and otherwise?

Egyptian women have been active in NGOs for a very long time. What is now Cairo University was established when a princess, Fatima Ismail, realized that Egypt needed a university. She sold her jewelry and donated a piece of land, where Cairo University now stands. She had a vision that if women were educated, Egypt would be liberated of all foreign forces. Most of the leading women today come from that spirit. There are so many women who are in engaged in voluntary work; even [the president’s wife] Mrs. Mubarak herself is engaged in many of these projects.

The most challenging field in Egypt was fighting polio. The fact that we now do not have one case of polio is a success that could not have possibly been achieved without having those NGOs in remote areas in Egypt. In education, health, awareness campaigns, women’s political participation, and in changing the cruel practice of genital mutilation—one of that could be achieved without the help of women working in NGOs, going the extra mile to reach other women. Many NGOs are emphasizing the need for women to act as partners in development, and Islam encourages that. This has been part of the Egyptian system—we don’t need a law to tell women to go and reach out. It is very much accepted in Egypt that women can be agents of change and social reform.

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You have worked on the different impacts of globalization and economic change on women. I wonder if you could discuss in relation to how you see the differences playing out in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East.

The ugly phenomenon of the feminization of poverty is everywhere. It is not just in the developing world, but all over the world and even here in the United States—this is where the term originated, in Diane Pearce’s work. As a researcher, I took that concept to the World Bank, who thought this would be excellent research. If we look at globalization from a negative view, it means structural adjustment policies and privatization. It is always women who get laid off or who are paid lower salaries. There has been negligence toward to problems that women face. But globalization also brings awareness. Women are aware now of their rights. Many use the Internet to reach each other. There are ample examples of that—for instance, groups of very conservative women in Malaysia and Indonesia who use the Internet to run their microcredit programs even in rural areas.
It depends on how you look at globalization. How much did women gain from globalization? Definitely a lot. How much have we lost of the tightness of family life? That is a major problem in many of the developing countries. When we look at the feminization of poverty, it includes all of the problems that women face worldwide.

What are some of the projects you are working on right now? What will you be doing next?

I will be collecting data for my book on women as agents for change in the Muslim world, with case studies from Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia and hopefully one day I will be able to find some accurate information on women in Afghanistan. This is one of my major projects and I hope that being here at Yale, with all of the exposure to different cultures and the diversity in understanding women’s issues, will help me write a book that can serve as future reference. We are also in the process of organizing a very important conference in Egypt, which will be a first for Al-Azhar University. It will bring together scholars from all over the world. It is a very important step to bring scholars from the United States, and Europe and the whole Muslim world together at an academic conference and exchange notes. For Al-Azhar University, being the oldest in the world, this is really a remarkable achievement. Looking to the next semester, I will be teaching on religion and the feminization of poverty and I hope that soon I will be able to give a seminar on cultural diversity and conflict in the global area.

-Interview conducted by Vanessa Tucker.