

RELEASE IN
PART B6

From: Anne-Marie Slaughter
Sent: Tuesday, May 1, 2012 9:45 PM
To: H
Cc: Abedin, Huma; Cheryl Mills
Subject: A v thoughtful response to Eltahawy

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I realize from Twitter that you are on the ground in China right now, so this is definitely for plane back. Good luck!

Do Arab men hate women? It's not that simple

Mona Eltahawy's controversial article in Foreign Policy magazine about the treatment of Arab women is a misdirected call to arms



o [Nesrine Malik](#)



Photograph: Foreign Policy

The latest edition of Foreign Policy, the cover of which bears the same stark question posed by its main article Why Do They Hate Us?, has stirred up some serious controversy. In the article, Mona Eltahawy runs through a litany of indictments of women's rights in the Middle East, and issues a call to arms against cultural relativism. What stands out, however, is her simple demand for readers to recognise that men, in the Arab world, hate women.

Reading the article I found myself bristling, yet simultaneously felt guilty for doing so. For who can deny the serious, endemic discrimination from which women in the Middle East suffer? Reading on I tried to convince myself that it was the author's sensational style that was bothering me, and that this shouldn't obscure the message, or that the title and imagery were unfortunate, but the problems they were attempting to illustrate were real.

Yet to my dismay I found, as I read on that instead of unravelling and unpicking the usual stereotypes which pepper the plethora of commentary on Arab women and exposing missing nuances, the author simply reinforced a monolithic view – holding the argument together using rhetoric, personal anecdotes and a rhythmic punctuation with her main theme – that all Arab men hate Arab women. It did not help that with every page scroll, a different iteration of an unbelievably misguided shot of a naked woman, posed and blacked out in paint to expose only her eyes, assaulted one's sensibilities. A lazy effort at controversy, equating women with sex, and jettisoning the whole point of the edition, by ironically, reducing women to the stereotype Eltahawy dismisses as "headscarves and hymens".

I grew up in Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and in personal and professional dealings have had to grapple with most of the problems highlighted in the piece. They are very real. But there is a fine line to tread when writing about the status of Arab or Muslim women. For to do anything but condemn outright, and expose the real suffering we go through feels like shirking a responsibility and wasting an opportunity. And the problem with rejecting generalisations around women's oppression is that it is easy to misunderstand this rejection as a denial of the problem. Who could quibble with highlighting child marriage, female genital mutilation, or legally protected domestic abuse? Only a Stockholm syndrome-suffering apologist for patriarchy and moral relativism. How can one truly call for equivocation when we have a war on women on our hands?

The offences mentioned in the article are undeniable. We should not be distracted by the west's reduction of Muslim women to pawns in culture wars or military campaigns. Nor should we be distracted by ad hominem attacks on Eltahawy herself, or complain at the idea of airing of dirty laundry. But these offences are not just because men hate women. Or, as I fear the article suggests, that Arab men hate Arab women. This is not a disease men are born with, or contract from the Arab atmosphere. Even Eltahawy herself, attributes it to "a toxic mix of religion and culture". And to this I would add the political oppression and stasis that enabled these structures to become de facto governance, where entrenched tribal allegiances, pre-Islamic mores and social tradition trumped weak political culture. A general retardation that extends not just to women but to every aspect of personal freedom and civic rights.

Yes, in Saudi Arabia women cannot drive, but men cannot elect their government, instead they are ruled over by a religiously opportunistic dynasty. In Egypt, it's true that women were subjected to virginity tests, but men were sodomised. In Sudan women are lashed for wearing trousers, but ethnic minorities are also marginalised and under assault. We must not belittle the issues women face, or relegate them to second place, but we must place them in a wider context where wholesale reform is needed. One cannot reduce a much more universal and complicated problem merely to gender.

Eltahawy argues that "our political revolutions will not succeed unless they are accompanied by revolutions of thought". But I would argue that nor can the latter succeed without the former; a more generous political space will allow for the challenging of patriarchy, which in turn extends the roots of political reform deeper. To heed Eltahawy's call and indulge in cultural absolutism – if we are to use the west as a model, basic women's and even minority rights, did not become enshrined until there was a political environment when traditional structures (particularly the church) had sufficiently receded.

The call to arms, therefore, should not be to the outside world to recognise the truth of men's hatred towards women, but rather to Arabs. And in a time of political upheaval this call should ask them to look inwards and continue to recognise and dismantle the structures that have been perpetuated for too long. This reform is already under way when it comes to women's rights thanks to the efforts of several Arab feminists, such as Nawal El Saadawi and Tawakul Karman, who recognise that we need to fight the patriarchy, not men.

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