

**Reaction to Kim Ghattas Annie-Romein Verschoor lecture 6 March 2014**  
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**1. Saying 'no' is harder than you think**

Throughout Kim's speech I had to think of an eye-opening moment for me when it comes to the challenges to real change for women (and men) in the Arab region.

I have to take you to Damascus, a year or so before the start of the revolution in March 2011.

I was in that beautiful city for an evaluation of the work of a Dutch NGO with civil society activists.

One evening I was invited to Celebrations, a theater performance by Noura Morad at the Citadel, a play about the rituals of a wedding in the Arab world. An appropriate place for this theme, as the Citadel has a notorious reputation as a former prison. When I arrived with Hala, a good Syrian friend, something strange happened. We were both asked to line up with the other women attending the performance. The men in our company were whisked away to the men's queue. When we entered the dark corridors of the Citadel, we were asked to keep at some distance from each other.

In a weird way it reminded me of the birthday parties of my Catholic family in Roermond, in the southern part of the Netherlands; men and women at different ends of the room, separately discussing men's issues and women's issues. As a small child I was often confused about where to sit, as I was interested in politics and soccer more than fashion and family problems. Anyway, the segregation of the audiences in the Citadel lasted until the final moment of the performance when all of us, men and women, were invited to join in the last dance of the wedding celebration.

A few days later I met Noura for a coffee, and I confessed to her that I felt tempted throughout the performance to cross that invisible line they had created between the male and female audience.

'Why didn't you?', she asked

I hesitated, 'Out of politeness? Not wanting to disturb the actors, or the other spectators?'

Noura laughed and said, 'Well you got the point perfectly... your hesitation is all about daring to say 'no' when society demands that you conform to the rules, to traditions, and to stay within the boundaries of religious and cultural norms.'

'Basically you are asked not to rock the boat. And that's what we do to each other,' Noura said, 'even in the 21st century.'

We are so obsessed with obeying the One, the Only Order, our father, our boss, our God, that it is extremely hard to say 'no' before we can say 'yes' to another future.

*Question to Kim Ghattas:*

*I told this anecdote to point out the cultural, religious and identity politics in the region surrounding the topic of tonight. So I would like to ask Kim whether she feels it has become easier after the revolutions in the Arab world for women/people to say 'no' to the authorities around them, whether it is in the direct family or in the public sphere outside the political context?*

**2. Saying 'yes' to bread, freedom and social justice:**

Having listened to the excellent lecture by Kim Ghattas we now know that people in the Arab world did dare to say 'no' after all to the dictator. Or rather ; a big 'yes' to their rights for a better life, or as the banners in the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, Sana'a said: bread, freedom and social justice.

But everybody who has ever said 'yes' to a job, a relationship, a book contract knows: it's after the 'yes' that the hard work starts.

So I agree with Kim that the Arab spring metaphor proved too flawed, even though I owe a lot to the title of my first book *Dreaming of an Arab Spring*. At the time, in 2008, I chose that title as I felt during my work as a human rights diplomat in Cairo and Damascus the enormous longing for real change in the region.

Now, three years after the start of the revolutions, it is clear that we have to literally look beyond the four seasons, a beautiful piece of music, but not helpful when trying to analyse the Arab revolutions. Continuing the relationship metaphor: after the honeymoon, after the initial euphoria, somebody needs to take the garbage out.

And as Kim pointed out so clearly: the Arab revolutions revealed to everybody that underneath the houses of cards that those dictatorships were, a lot of garbage was hidden away. And indeed these revolutions were not about gender per se but about in- and exclusion, or as many people from the Arab region have told me: the change from being a subject of a tyrannical ruler to a citizen in a society where people can say 'no' to their ruler in elections, to their husband at home, to their father or mother.

One of the places where this 'no' should be heard more loudly according to progressive women such as Mona ElTahawy and Shereen al-Feki is in the bedroom. I agree with the notion that, as long as personal liberties at home are still limited by the little Mubarak on the couch, political freedoms will be hard to come by.

Or in other words: as long as men and women have no equality in the choice of who they marry, how many children they will have and who they will have sex with, it will be hard to sustain any political gains for women outside the house.

*Second question to Kim Ghattas:*

*Do you agree with the notion of authors such as Shereen al-Feki who argues in her book *Sex and the Citadel* that a sexual revolution is needed, but in a way that fits the cultural and traditional pace of the Arab region and Mona ElTahawy who asked in her famous *Foreign Policy* article: 'Why do they hate us?' that a real revolution can only succeed after there has been a spring in the bedroom?*

### **3. Mutual inspiration: non-conformity on both shores of the Mediterranean**

So what does the topic of tonight mean to us, men and women in the Netherlands and Europe. So many of the women Kim referred to are in a way working in the same vein as tonight's namesake of tonight: Annie Romein-Verschoor. Her whole biography breathes non-conformity. I guess many of the women in Kim's work, and life, could recognize themselves in her life story.

But will we tonight go home satisfied with ourselves that we have listened to yet another great inspirational lecture? Or could we do more?

Will we remain spectators? Or can we become more deeply involved? Why would we want to? And if we do, how should we do that?

I have been asked the same question Kim referred to at the beginning of her speech a zillion times: What is it like to be a woman in the Arab region - as if I am a great adventurer who dares to go into the wild lands....

Somehow I detect an underlying assumption about widespread oppression of Arab women in the name of religion, politics, traditions or the combination of the three.

I wonder whether my colleagues who work on Japan get similar questions, which, when we look at the Gender Gap index of the World Economic Forum, would not be so illogical. Japan is as red as many countries in the Arab world on that map when it comes to disparity between the rights of men and women.

I often wonder as well: Is this concern for women's rights or the situation of women a reflection of our own political debate on migrants and their religion (often Islam?).

And is this concern connected to the rhetoric of politicians who told us that we needed to go/invade Iraq and Afghanistan to defend women's rights?

Might it even be a reflection of post-colonial sentiments that 'those Arab-Muslim women need to be rescued from barbaric customs and oppression?'

At the same time I feel that we have to look in the mirror as well. I know, two wrongs don't make a right. But some humility in our visions about other regions is called for when we look at the situation in our own country: Yesterday a European survey carried out by the European Centre for Fundamental Rights was published on physical and sexual violence against women in Europe. The statistics are shocking: one out of three women has faced some kind of violence in her life, one out 20 women has been raped (that's nine million women in Europe) and 18% women are faced with some kind of stalking by ex-partners.

So to sum up: I think Kim Ghattas has made clear tonight that no woman in the Arab world wants to be rescued. Most women are perfectly capable of dealing with their own lives, indeed sometimes in really tough, painful and harsh circumstances.

*Third question to Kim Ghattas*

*But at the same time I wonder how you look at international cooperation in the public, academic, human rights sphere focused on improving the legal and practical status of Arab women? You mentioned Hillary Clinton: is she an example to follow? Does John Kerry have the same priority? Can Europeans learn from the US, or what mistakes should we avoid.*

I would like to end on a personal note, my daughter Soraya... her namesake is a woman from Saudi Arabia... professor of anthropology... A great role model.

Last year, after Kim's book came out: a short clip of her and an interview with Secretary Clinton: I showed it to my daughter... living her dream:

Kim wanted to be a journalist...

But she became a role model to Soraya as well.

I can assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that in my family a 16-year-old girl knows how to say 'no' to the idea that women should have fewer opportunities in life than men, and that is for sure partly due to the inspiration she got from my Arab female friends such as Kim:

She has shown in her personal story what happens when a woman from Lebanon says 'yes' to her ambitions.

Thank you all.