

Sarah Baldwin: From the Watson Institute at Brown University. This is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin. Scholars and the media have a problem when it comes to talking about gender in many Muslim majority nations, whether it's issues of violence against women or oppression of women, topics relating to gender are too often explored only through the lens of religion or culture, but it's not so simple according to Nadjé Al-Ali.

Sarah Baldwin: She's an anthropologist at the Watson Institute who studies women and gender in the Middle East. In her recently published book, *Gender, Islam and Governance*, Al-Ali and her co-editors illustrate how rather than being a side issue, gender is central to understanding the political questions in these countries. I started the conversation by asking her to define her terms. Nadjé, thank you very much for coming in to talk today.

Nadjé Al-Ali: Thanks for having me.

Sarah Baldwin: I wanted to start by talking about your forthcoming book, which you co-edited, in which you look at the links between governance and the politics of gender and you use nine case studies to do that. I wonder if you could just start to unpack that for us, what do you mean by governance? What do you mean by politics of gender and how and where do they intersect?

Nadjé Al-Ali: Yes, I should say that the book, which is co-edited with Deniz Kandiyoti who was actually my PhD supervisor over 20 years ago, and then another colleague, Kathryn Spellman is really building on a previous edited volume which was published 25 years ago, which was called *Women, Islam and the State*. It was the first time that a book challenged the idea that we understand what is happening in Muslim majority countries by reference to culture and Islam alone, because that was the prevailing narrative.

Nadjé Al-Ali: We understand the oppression of the poor Muslim woman by reference to culture and religion. What this book did at the time was to show that the role of the state is really, really important in shaping specific legislation and specific conditions in different countries in the region, and that book became a classic.

Nadjé Al-Ali: So the last few years I was in discussion, with Kandiyoti and I was saying, "This book has been so important. It would be really great to update and show how have the terms changed." When we speak about women, we don't really speak about women anymore, we speak about gender because we recognize that it's not just about women, it's about men as well. It's about the relationship and it's about constructions of masculinities and femininities.

Nadjé Al-Ali: Yes, it is still about the state, but governing and politics happens also at sub-state level, so political parties, social movements, trade unions and so on.

So the one constant is Islam, right? But Islam now, how do we understand Islam now as opposed to 25 years ago? What the book tries to show through the nine case studies, is that if you want to understand specific regimes in Muslim majority context, if you want to understand the level of authoritarianism or the level of democracy, the politics of gender is not a side issue, it's central to it.

Nadje Al-Ali: So often I think mainstream political scientists and international relation scholars, or even area studies scholars, they think about women and gender issues as a side issue to the big issues of political transition, democracy, authoritarianism. You don't need to be an academic to see when you look at what's been unfolding, especially since 2011, in terms of the various protest movements in the region, that when it comes to women, men, sexuality, this has been actually a central component of challenging previous regimes, but also has been a central component of regimes trying to control their populations in terms of how does a regime try to actually crack down on a protest movement?

Nadje Al-Ali: By controlling women's mobility, by sexually harassing women and telling them, "Your place is not on the street." It's not a coincidence that in the Egyptian context, yes, it was man and woman who were harassed and they were also tortured by police, but it was mainly women who also experienced sexual harassment, whether it's forced virginity testing or other forms of harassment.

Nadje Al-Ali: It was a way to tell women, "No, your place is not on the street." Then I think this is a trend in the United States maybe more so than in Europe. You have lots of feminist scholars in this country that try to explain everything in relation to imperialism, neoliberalism and sometimes also Zionism. So all the bad things that we see happening to women and gender relations more broadly in the region, is because of imperialism.

Nadje Al-Ali: Of course in my own work on Iraq when I looked at the impact of the invasion and occupation on women and gender relations in Iraq, of course I had to stress the impact of the invasion, the occupation, but 15 years after the invasion it's not good enough to just speak about imperialism and the invasion and the occupation. I also have to speak about local and regional factors.

Sarah Baldwin: Because gender-based violence is ongoing.

Nadje Al-Ali: Gender-based violence is ongoing and gender-based violence cannot only be explained with reference to the consequences of the invasion occupation. It plays an important role, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that it did not contribute. I mean gender-based violence in Iraq increased as a consequence of the invasion on the occupation.

Sarah Baldwin: What's the connection?

- Nadje Al-Ali: Well, the connection is, A, that the U.S. Led occupation turned a blind eye to gender-based violence and said, "It's not our problem. We are focusing on national security." The other issue is that Saddam Hussein was a dictator, but it was a dictatorship that was largely secular, and this has been replaced by Islamist political parties with militia that have been very much targeting women, again, with often the complicity of the U.S. occupation.
- Nadje Al-Ali: In a situation where you have lawlessness, where human security has not in any way been granted, we have an increased gender-based violence, or certainly for women in Iraq because the situation is worse now, I would say, than it was before the invasion generally speaking.
- Nadje Al-Ali: But what I'm saying is we have to speak about militia, we have to speak about corrupt local politicians, we have to speak about regional factors, without forgetting that of course imperialism... I mean the military invasion and the occupation has very much contributed to a deterioration of women's issue. So the book makes the argument that, yes, we need to look at the macro processes linked to neoliberalism and imperialism, but that is not good enough.
- Nadje Al-Ali: We need to also look at local actors and regional actors and those look differently if you go from one country to the next. So we need to do our homework and actually do very, very careful historical and empirically grounded research.
- Sarah Baldwin: How controversial is that notion of it's not just neo-liberalism or imperialism, it's also local forms of patriarchy? Are you getting pushback on that?
- Nadje Al-Ali: Yes, in this country. Also of course in the Middle East, I mean I think unfortunately the discourse is often very polarized. So in the media circles and policy circles, you often have this very orientalist and racist idea that you explain gender-based violence or deterioration of women's rights because of Islam or because of their culture, which is very problematic.
- Nadje Al-Ali: Then you have, I think, in some activist circles and some academic circles, especially in the U.S., because people have to push back against Islamophobia of this government and the media and the racism of the media and the government, I think there's sort of a fear, if you speak about local and regional factors, you contribute to the prevailing narrative that is Islamophobic and racist.
- Sarah Baldwin: So they over correct in a way.

- Nadje Al-Ali: Yes. Of course you have that also there are some people in the Middle East that's also polarized. You have some people who also just trust culture and religion and some people who say, "No, it has nothing to do with us. It is because of them," as in the U.S. or sometimes people also mention Israel.
- Sarah Baldwin: That makes me think of your work in exploring how feminism and nationalism are sometimes aligned and sometimes at odds with each other. In the context of the Kurdish women in Turkey, how have the Kurdish feminist, Kurdish nationalist and Turkish feminist movements all affected each other?
- Nadje Al-Ali: So historically the Kurdish political movement based in Turkey was very much a Marxist, Leninist, but also Nationalist independence movement. My mean formally the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, in the '80s, Abdullah Öcalan, it was about establishing an independent Kurdistan, and it had men and women. Women from the beginning were fighting, but they were taking sort of secondary roles.
- Nadje Al-Ali: But very early on women started to challenge this and they also wanted to be in leadership positions, and they put up a struggle within the political movement. Then actually, Abdullah Öcalan has been imprisoned now for over 19 years and he started to sort of change his ideas around what kind of political movement he wanted to see developing, and also what kind of Kurdish entity. He moved away from the idea of nationalism to what he called radical democracy, and recognizing that really women and gender-based equality and justice have to be at the center of an equal and just society.
- Nadje Al-Ali: So instead of arguing or struggling for an independent Kurdistan, the Kurdish political movement, at least formally and officially is now struggling for radical democracy within existing nation states. So then saying it's okay to live in Turkey as long as we have radical democracy, and radical democracy is not only defined in terms of equal citizenship rights, voting rights, but it's very much also about men and women are equals.
- Nadje Al-Ali: So to my mind, it's probably right now the most radical movement globally where gender-based equality and justice is concerned. Any leadership position, whether it is a mayor of a town or whether it is the head of a branch of a movement, there always has to be a man and a woman.
- Sarah Baldwin: Oh my gosh.
- Nadje Al-Ali: I assumed it was a cosmetic exercise, but actually they're really, really practicing it and they're really trying to implement this gender-based equality. So this is on the Kurdish side. On the side of the Turkish feminist movement, historically it

was very much linked to the idea of Turkish nationalism, the idea of Kemalism, which is an idea of a secular, modernist movement.

Nadje Al-Ali: They were often quite patronizing towards Kurdish women and saying, "You are experiencing problems and gender-based violence and lack of equality because of Kurdish culture, because of your backward culture," but not recognizing that the fact that the Kurds are systematically sidelined within the Turkish state, has contributed to Kurdish women experiencing different forms of violence.

Nadje Al-Ali: But the Turkish feminist movement, especially the young generation, has been very much influenced by the Kurdish women's movement. Three years ago I was in Istanbul for International Women's Day and historically, they always have a big march on this Istiklas Street, it's one of the main streets. The Turkish young feminist women were shouting Turkish slogans.

Nadje Al-Ali: So for young Turkish feminists, their idea of gender-based equality and freedom is now very much linked to wider issues of equality and justice. So in feminist academic terms, we call it intersectionality. It's not just about gender, but it's also about ethnicity, and it's about class. I was very moved to see that.

Nadje Al-Ali: So definitely I feel that the Kurdish, especially the Kurdish women's movement has very much influenced the Turkish feminist movement and actually many work together now.

Sarah Baldwin: Do they apply an explicitly intersectional framework? Is there a word for that notion in their world, in their language?

Nadje Al-Ali: I would say they do employ an explicitly intersectional framework. They might not call it intersectional, but they certainly recognize that gender, being a woman, intersects with ethnicity, being Kurd intersects with class. So it's very much actually on the agenda. I've also argued actually in my work that intersectionality as we know it, of course in the academic context, is very much linked to the struggle of African American women feminists in this country.

Nadje Al-Ali: But intersectionally as it has been practiced, a political practice has emerged in many different contexts. Also with people who have never read anything written by Kimberlé Crenshaw or others, have contributed to it. Of course it's not exactly the same, but the principles that you have-

Sarah Baldwin: The notion that you have.

Nadje Al-Ali: ... the notion that you have, intersecting power configurations that are impacting on people's lives and that you need to address all of them simultaneously, and that they influence each other. I think that is a political

recognition that I've seen, especially in the context of the Kurdish women's movement.

Sarah Baldwin: I thought it was very interesting to learn, or to actually be forced to think about how during nationalists liberation movements, women are side by side with men, but when those movements turned to state building, they lose ground.

Nadje Al-Ali: Yeah, so that's of course historically, we have seen that in so many different contexts. We saw it in Vietnam, we saw it in Eritrea, we saw it in Palestine, in Algeria. The Kurdish women that I've talked to are very much aware that this has happened to women elsewhere in the world.

Nadje Al-Ali: So this idea that at the moment of national liberation, at the moment of nationalist movement, often you have these political spaces opening up for women. So then you see men and women literally side by side either on the street protesting, or on the battlefield.

Sarah Baldwin: Because liberation is gender blind.

Nadje Al-Ali: Exactly.

Sarah Baldwin: Because the identity supersedes the gender.

Nadje Al-Ali: Yes. Then when we get to the point of actual state building and trying to put this into practice, women have been told in so many different contexts, at different historical moments, "Wait your turn, we need to deal with the big issues first." The big issues could be, again, national liberation, it could be class, struggle, you name it.

Nadje Al-Ali: Of course once we liberate the working classes, women will get their rights. This is kind of the classic theme, and it never happen automatically. We've also seen it in terms of the Soviet Union, I mean it didn't mean that women had equal rights. What is so interesting that the Kurdish women are very much aware that this has happened in different contexts and they're trying to push against that. Also, Kurdish men, although I think it's mainly the women who are pushing for it and they're saying, "No, we don't want to be in that same situation. We want to put mechanisms into place that if ever the moment arose that we don't have to struggle anymore, we are not being pushed back."

Nadje Al-Ali: I mean in the Iraqi Kurdish context, that is precisely what happened. So the Iraqi Kurdish movement is a different kind of Kurdish political movement and their women were fighting at some point, but it's a much more conservative movement, and women were literally pushed back when you had the establishment of the Kurdish regional government in Iraq.

Nadje Al-Ali: In the Turkish context, in the context of the PKK led movement, there's really an attempt to push back against it, and of course we have also that same movement is linked to what we see in northern Syria or Rojava. We have the Kurdish fighters who fought against ISIS and who have been trying to build this utopian society.

Nadje Al-Ali: They have the same idea. Of course it's too early for us to assess now whether they will succeed or not. I mean already now I can see that there are some problems. I think that as long as the political movement says, "Okay, we want to be equal and we have to implement gender justice, but we don't touch issues around sexuality," I think we have a problem. So in order to be equal in the Kurdish political movement right now you have to become sexless. So both men and women, that is not very realistic.

Sarah Baldwin: It's sounds artificial.

Nadje Al-Ali: It is artificial, and it also means that outside of the movement, outside of the armed units or outside of the more active political movement, of course you still have ordinary human beings who get married and have children or even have sexual relations outside of marriage, and they are then conservative, traditional gender norms and relations continue, because you don't tackle it.

Nadje Al-Ali: So you have the development of two parallel societies. I think that is one thing that needs to be addressed. But despite some of the issues... And it's not perfect, obviously I think it's a movement that we need to take seriously and we can learn from.

Sarah Baldwin: You've pointed out that feminist movements throughout the Middle East and in North Africa are not homogeneous, why would they be, but why is it important to understand conflicts within these movements and among these movements or even just differences? Can we learn something from those differences?

Nadje Al-Ali: Yeah, I mean, first of all, I think it is important because by recognizing differences, we recognize complexity and it's pushing back against... I mean, Middle East is not a country. Even if we would take the United States, which is a country, I always get very upset when people say, "American feminist." I don't know what they mean, because there are so many different kinds of American feminists and that recognizes that in the U.S. people have choices, they have different politics and that gives them a level of complex humanity.

Nadje Al-Ali: By denying that to people in the Middle East, they're all like one form of feminist, either they're Islamic feminist or secular feminist, you are actually denying people complex humanity and you're denying that people do make

different political choices. It's not only the case that there are differences from one country to the next, but there are also huge differences within each country.

Nadje Al-Ali: The differences are not only around whether it's a secular feminist or religious feminist, you have differences along the lines of whether they're kind of informed by socialism or Marxism or they're informed by post-colonialism or they're informed by radical feminism. You have a whole range of different options and some are... and they're long trajectories, historical trajectories.

Nadje Al-Ali: So when I did my PhD on the Egyptian Women's movement, that was quite a while back in the '90s, some Egyptian feminists told me, "You know we are being accused of imitating the West? We don't need to imitate the West. At the turn of the 20th century we had a feminist organization, the Egyptian Feminist Union."

Nadje Al-Ali: So we have a long history of feminist activism and many countries in the region. You have a long trajectory of feminist activism. So as much as I reject the idea that there is the homogeneous, Middle Eastern, anything culture, there's not a homogeneous middle eastern feminism. To my mind, I don't know what people mean when they speak about western feminism either.

Nadje Al-Ali: It means there are so many different forms of feminism and right now, certainly in the circles that I'm plugged in, feminists are often very much linked to struggles elsewhere, are connected either through politics, through background, through travel or education, and are often very critical of I guess the sort of imperialist feminism, which often when people speak about western feminism, that's what they have in mind. But that's not what I see even in the U.S. I mean there's so much exciting, different kinds of feminism happening.

Sarah Baldwin: Do you consider yourself an activist and an academic?

Nadje Al-Ali: Yes. I could not think of myself as-

Sarah Baldwin: One without the other.

Nadje Al-Ali: ... being one way or another, yes, and one feeds the other. So I mean it would have been absurd for me to write on the impact of the invasion and occupation on women in Iraq and just write in a peer reviewed academic journal, which maybe 20 people would read. So I felt it was very important that I would reach out to wider audience.

Nadje Al-Ali: So there was a time when I would come like three, four times, five times a year to the U.S. to give talks about that specific topic, and often when I was invited to

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give a talk by a university, I would insist on also doing something in a community center or some contexts, a bookshop, where I would be able to reach a wider audience. That's been one way that I've been trying to be an activist.

Nadje Al-Ali: But the other way is of course that I've been linked to feminist activist organizations. I was a co-founder of a group called Act Together women's action on Iraq. It was a London based group and we were trying to raise awareness about the impact of economic sanctions on women and gender in Iraq, and then later war and occupation. I've been part of Women in Black, which is an international network of women. I always find it surprising when people ask me, "How can you be an academic and activist together?" And I feel like, "How can I not be an academic and activist together?"

Sarah Baldwin: Well, Nadje, it's been so interesting to talk to you today. Thank you so much for coming in.

Nadje Al-Ali: Thank you.

Sarah Baldwin: This episode of Trending Globally was produced by Dan Richards, Alex Laferrière, and Alina Coleman. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield.

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Sarah Baldwin: Thanks for listening, and we'll be back in two weeks with another episode of Trending Globally.