



PeaceWomen Across the Globe  
FRIEDENSFRAUEN WELTWEIT  
نساء من أجل السلام عبر العالم  
Femmes de Paix Autour du Monde  
Женщины мира за мир на земле  
MUJERES DE PAZ EN EL MUNDO  
Mulheres pela Paz ao redor do Mundo  
DONNE DI PACE NEL MONDO  
ピースウーマン—国境を越え平和をつくる女たち  
全球和平妇女

## Interview with Yasmine Arafa, PWAG coordinator in Egypt

Berne, Switzerland on the 12 June 2014

*You live and work in Alexandria, Egypt. Now you spent a week in Bern, Switzerland (editorial note: from 3 to 13 June). What are the most striking differences between the life of a young woman here and there?*

I have travelled before, so I wasn't that shocked by the differences in lifestyle and other things. What really stroke me was that there seem to be disparities between the level of salaries for women and men. In Egypt, we are confronted with a lot of problems related to gender inequalities, but we do not have this problem.

What stroke me positively was that people care for their natural surroundings. Rivers and other natural resources are very clean. In my country, people do not care much for the rivers, they do not keep it clean, even though it is a very important source of water.

*Are women in your country well integrated in professional life or rather marginalized from it?*

In the private sector, women are in a good position. But in politics, they are excluded from decision making positions. Until now, governors have not been appointing women into high ranking positions. And we have never had a female governor. Our new Constitution passed in January stipulates that women have the right to hold a high ranking position. Still, only 4 ministers out of 34 are female. But in Egypt, this is considered to be a high share!

### DIALOGUE FORA AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

*Since 2012 you are the coordinator of the PWAG Dialogue Fora. Please tell us something about the objectives of this project!*

We use this approach to generate a positive change on a societal level as our society is very fragmented. People speak to each other, but they don't listen to each other. In the Dialogue Fora, we emphasize on the importance of listening to others, also because we want to strengthen the women's movement. In Egypt, there are women's organizations, but up to now they have not shared their experiences among themselves. Our aim with the Dialogue Fora is to push this exchange and the networking between the women. We



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invited men and women from different spheres and with the help of our local partners in the regions we managed to have some people on the dialogue tables who really have an influence in the different sectors and regions.

*What are the principle obstacles for women's participation in Egypt?*

Our biggest problem is that we have a huge gap between laws and their implementation. As I have mentioned before, we have a law that gives women the right to participate in politics. We also have a law that condemns sexual violence. But these laws have not been implemented, therefore they have not been effective. The society has given women a certain space for political participation and has encouraged them to become voters, but not necessarily to be candidates.

*Since this project has been initiated two fora have taken place. The first and larger one took place in 2012 in Alexandria and the latest in March this year in Luxor. What have your experiences with the Dialogue methodology been so far?*

Our experiences have been very positive. I definitely think that Dialogue is an appropriate tool to come up with solutions in the current political transformation process. People do not like to be imposed solutions, they prefer to elaborate their own proposals. And the Dialogue Forum is an ideal platform to work together on solutions which are endorsed by all the participants. In addition, we learnt that it is very important to go to the regions because every region faces its own challenges. Another key element for success is to include influential people as well as grass root women activists.

*How do you ensure that the participants of the Dialogue Fora continue to work on the proposed approaches when they go back to their regions?*

Follow up and continuity are very important elements for the sustainability of the process. During the forum we ask the participants some very concrete questions, for example: "What will you do to foster political participation of women when you go back to your local context?" We do not ask for a huge effort, just something that the participant thinks is important and that is manageable considering his or her resources. In the last regional forum, we built two working groups, one for Luxor and one for Aswan. From the feedbacks I've received I know that they are already implementing some of the proposals they elaborated at the Forum. In addition, after having had a couple of other regional fora, we plan to have another national Dialogue Forum where the regional group leaders will report on the processes they experienced on the ground.

## **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

*You are also an activist against violence against women. Especially during and after the manifestations in Cairo, we heard and read a lot about harassment of women in the streets. Is violence a part of the daily life of most of the Egyptian women or are these just single incidents?*



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Egypt is a country with a large population and it is a fact that a lot of sexual harassment happens in the streets. Especially women who use public transportation and walk in crowds are exposed to many risks. Even though there are different forms and stages of sexual violence, one of the greatest problems is that sexual harassment is socially accepted. When a woman is being harassed in a public space, people do not interfere, they sometimes even blame the woman, for example when she tries to defend herself. In most cases, the victim does not report the incident because there is a culture of blaming the victim.

*In 2010, the project "Harass Map" was launched with the aim of curbing violence against women. You joined this initiative as a voluntary coordinator. Please tell us more about it!* Harass Map was the first initiative that dealt with the problem of sexual harassment in public spaces. And it really had an impact! Thanks to our initiative as well as the hard work of many other initiatives and volunteers a new law which defines and punishes sexual harassment has been passed in May this year. And it is no longer such a strong taboo as it used to be, people get involved and talk about the topic. Harassmap has active volunteer groups in 17 cities in Egypt which sensitize people on the ground.

*Do you think that the new government will be more willing to curb violence against women?* Our new President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi has publicly condemned violence against women. He apologized to all the women of Egypt who have been victim of sexual violence and visited a woman who has faced brutal sexual assault during the street celebrations of the electoral victory. But until now, his support has only been in his speeches. We have to wait and see if he is really committed to women's rights.



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