

Interview with Doaa Abdelaal

2013

TAPE 1

Nicola Pratt: Can I ask you to begin with when and where you were born?

Doaa Abdelaal: I was born 1976, September 1976. I'm under the sign of the Virgo. I was born in Cairo. Four years later, my dad moved to work in United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi. He is a journalist. We moved with him for ten years into Abu Dhabi. Back to Cairo in 1990, the same year of the Gulf War, but we didn't move back because of the Gulf War, he just decided that it's time to go back to Egypt after ten years, yah.

NP: And... so your father was a journalist, how about your mother? Did she work?

DA: Yah, she was a school teacher all her life. She is retired now. Yah, she retired two years ago after she became like a school principle. But she hasn't worked when we were children, I mean, both my brother and I and my sister we were growing up, she had children to stay at home to take care of, but then she went back to be a career woman.

NP: what school did you go to in Abu Dhabi?

DA: It was a private school. Actually, a catholic run by nuns, it's called Rosary school, so... Yah, I stayed there for ten years then when I came back... after I came back I went to a public school, a second public school, and then from there to Cairo University faculty of Economic and political science which I considered as my second home. I finished my graduate studies and post graduates, still struggling with my PhD there, but I still consider Cairo University as my home, my second home.

NP: What's your PhD on?

DA: Well, I'm still struggling with... this is my struggle with my supervisor, if she will continue to be my supervisor, because now we are at a totally ideologically opposite sides, so I don't know if she would be still interested to supervise me. She is a typical Nasserist pro army. Although she had a very huge impact on me while doing my undergraduate and post and she even was my supervisor on my Masters. But now I don't know, after the revolution and everything, I don't know, we're on totally opposite sides. So I don't know if she will continue to be. But any way, I'm still struggling on

doing... I want to do my research on how the political turning points affect the women's rights movement, and because it's very much of a comparison of students I'm trying to take between Egypt and Iran. But, actually, my Master was on civil society in Iran's women movement. So, this is the line I want, I want to see how the Iranian revolution affected the women's right movement and how is the Egyptian revolution affecting women's rights movement, especially on the political demand, political agenda. So I'm still struggling with this. People say it's a big research, just focus on Egypt and everything, but my point is, there is very few written in Arabic, of course, I'm writing my dissertation in Arabic, there are very few things about Iran in Arabic. People doesn't understand the dynamics, the inside dynamics in this country. Everything about the... the political regime, about Ahmadinejad, and about Rouhani, about the nuclear program and all of this, people know very few things about the society, how people organize themselves in that society, the different social movements inside it. And I see... I wouldn't say I see similarities, but there is very good lesson to learn from the developments inside Iran. Maybe... OK, I'm very biest, I'm fascinated by the... how persistent and stubborn the social movements, the different social movements, I mean, the women, the youth, the labor movement, on continuing under very harsh system and regime. And there is a lot to learn from this... from what is happening inside. And actually, when I'm... my Master thesis... the defense committee was not happy with my assumptions and my results, because I was saying very much that although the system is very rigid theocratic regime and all of these things, despite all of the effect, there are vibrant and very active civil deferent NGOs and several society and social movements inside Iran. And we cannot say that their society is dead or something like this. So, people were not very happy with assumptions that this is like interviews, documented stories and everything... so... anyway. This is something I wanted to continue working on, but we'll see. It's more... it's not a comparison issue, it's more actually finding how the different political action that is taking the shape of a revolution can affect how women deal with the public space especially, and with the agenda and demands. I don't know if this is going to your recorder.

NP: We'll be OK.

DA: OK, so, yah. Let's see how it's going to develop. If don't manage to convince my current supervisor, I have to move to another one. We'll see, that's something for 2014.

NP: Yah, good luck with that. It sounds very interesting and maybe we can have more discussions about it in another time. Can I just ask you about growing up in Emirates? Do you have any strong memories, clear memories from that period?

DA: I have all the memories. Actually, the best memory from my childhood, from this time which I would call “my childhood” is from four years old to fourteen, is the number of friends I had from different Arab countries. And so it was like a small Arab league in my class, my class looked like a small Arab league. Actually, the friend I had since that time, she was Iraqi. She moved back to Iraq the same year I was moving back to Egypt. She moved... no, she moved a year earlier than me, like 1989, and the next year it was the Iraq war, the second Gulf War. So we got disconnected. And then after all this (??? 8:40) and under the “Hisar”: siege under the American... for Iraq for ten years. I still have the letter she wrote to me. Then she moved now to... then she moved ten years later after the siege stopped and everything, she moved to Sweden, and she’s working there. She finished her studies as a doctor, I don’t know how to say it in English, but she was an eye doctor. She’s married with two children now. So, these are the best memories from my childhood. Yah, many of these friends and childhood friends, we still connected to Facebook; we found each other on Facebook. So, this is the thing, some of them still live there in Emirates, some of them moved to Canada, to Europe to live there. The other best memory from this time was... I wouldn’t say ‘best memory’ but the thing that I keep telling people that I grew up in a catholic school. Although we were surrounded by nuns and all of these things, but they were all the time emphasizing that we have... all of us have different religions, and the first time I went to the mosque, it was a nun who took me to that mosque. Well, I’m a practicing Muslim, so I still say that there is a space to respect each other. And although I was supposed to be living in a so called Muslim country, but still, my parents, for the sake of diversity and openness, looked for a different school, to send me to deal with... to learn that there are other people in this world, not just us as Muslims or whatever. So, actually, I have a lot of memories from this time, and I can go on forever.

NP: A lot of memories.

DA: But these are best, yah. These are the best things. I can go on for ages.

NP: Would you say that also your family setting was also very open in this way as well?

DA: Yah. Actually, my... I don’t know if my mom was very busy or occupied with my two other siblings, my brother and sister, or she was like an open minded person, because my dad was very busy most of the time. But I think what really helped to develop my personality that she had much trust on me and she barely censored things that I would like read or watch or anything like this. So, I don’t remember her from any time in my childhood, growing up, telling me ‘don’t read this’ or don’t watch that movie, or... And because my dad was a journalist-political activist, or something, I don’t know, in our house there is like, and I’m talking literally, hundreds of books everywhere, in our living

room and our bedrooms sometimes in the kitchen. So, books were everywhere, and, again, I don't think that any of them; my mom or my dad, ever told me 'don't read this'. So I think this openness in dealing with things helped really shape my character in accepting that there are... as humans we don't look like each other, that freedom comes as a priority in life. I think some people say that... I remember my grandmother and my aunt would say that they messed up with my head. I don't know, I owe much for them two, especially my mom for letting me know that there are different choices and options for life and you go for it. Actually, she is very supportive.

NP: When you came back to Egypt, how did you find it?

DA: I was a teenager by this time, like fourteen-fifteen years old. A little bit intimidating, because of the traffic, the chaos, the... When you grow up in the Gulf countries, these are like a protective environment. And although we used to come to Egypt every summer for two or three months, but it's not like living here all at all. At the beginning, I thought it was quite intimidating, chaotic... not sure how I'm going to find friends and interact with people and all of these things. But, then, gradually, it went OK, so I managed to go to a good school which is not far from home so I walked to it instead of taking the bus which was the ritual all my childhood, then to find good friends at the school. And it went OK. It took me like a year to really adjust to this chaotic city, but again, because when we came back we lived in Nasser City, which is a new neighborhood with... which is... it could be considered upper-middle class, people were OK. Things were calm and decent most of the time. It was a big shift but I can say it went smoothly and not in very in a harsh way. I think it went OK. And then high school was much fun and then university after that, so life went a little bit easy.

NP: Did you say high school was much fun or not much fun?

DA: No, it was much fun, yah. So, it was... as most of the high schools here in Egypt are public high schools, it was an only-girls school. Most of my life or all my life it was an only-girls school. This is why, I think, till now, I'm very comfortable when it's an only set of women or something set up with only women. In general, it was good. I had good friends, nice teachers; the school was OK compared to other public schools. So, yah, it was much fun. I had many friends, we shared the same interests and experiences, like childhood experiences and all of... most of them came also... their families were working in the Gulf areas, so we had like very similar... many things in common. It was much fun most of the time.

NP: When you went to university, why did you choose to study in the faculty of economic and political sciences?

DA: I don't know. I think I saw it since I was very young that this will be the discipline... I will be into social sciences and not like into medical school. So this was something I decided very early that I would go to social sciences, but I was not sure which discipline I would choose. Then... while I was in high school I was much interested in issues related to history and I thought I would go for the Faculty of Arts to study history. Then I thought it would not be like, when I graduate... you know here in Egypt to graduate from certain departments like history or geography or some think like this, you will not properly find any job except being a teacher, and I didn't want and still don't want to work as a teacher. So I thought "OK, maybe I would go for studying sociology or something like this", but then, again, graduating from the department of sociology, here in Egypt, will not give you a good opportunity. So, what to choose, mass communication or political science? So I went for political science. Yah, it was actually the department where my dad graduated years before me. So...I felt that I know most of the people. The professors, they know my dad. It was a safe choice to go with. But when I joined, I really found that I'm really interested in the different subjects that were taught and it was four interesting years as well, to learn about all of these things and to get challenges, actually, on our way of thinking. I was lucky, I have to say, I was even luckier than other people who joined the university. The years I was there, there was a time where most of the professors would really challenge us, challenge our way of thinking. They presented us to different thinking paradigms and all of these things. They were really interesting years. Some of our professors were... I felt we were in a school, I'm sorry say this. But it was like, some of them I don't remember their names, but the ones I remember really affected my way of thinking. Some of them now, with all these changes going on in Egypt, they really shocked me, because this is not what you actually taught us and told us fifteen years ago. I would give an example of this, like Saifeddin Abdulfattah Ismail, who used to be one of the advisors of ex-president Mursi, because I remember him seventeen years ago. It was my second year in the faculty. He was teaching us political thinking. He always challenged us of issues that you cannot take the concepts and try to consume it, don't consume the concepts like they are M&Ms. Think about them, deconstruct them, see what the context they were coming from and see the context they are working for. Don't... I keep repeating till now, in Arabic we say "el mafhoom seerah wa maseerah wa sayroora" which is that concept comes from... it's difficult to translate... but any concept has its context, has its path, and has a target. We spent the whole semester talking about this, the different concepts; what is human rights, civil society, democracy, and so on. This really contributed to shaping my understanding and really widened my... that I cannot take things for granted. But seventeen years later to find him very stubbornly defending a dogmatic fascist project with this political Islam and all of this, it was like I'm still not feeling comfortable about. Anyway, the university

years were very interesting, yah. For me, it was very (??? 25:10), especially people who joined after I left, they said that it turned to be like a very big high school, but for the years I spent, it was very challenging and very rewarding actually.

NP: When you were in the university, were you involved in any student clubs or societies?

DA: Very active, very active in all these things. I don't think I've stopped for a minute in being involved in everything, but not politically. I've been involved in everything and anything except political. I have to be very honest when I say this, because... as I said, my father was a political activist. He was a member in Al-Tagammu' party since it started. Then he was the editor in chief of their newspaper, and a highly ranked member. It was like... this is his...our life, all of his friends and contacts and family friends come from these surroundings. I was feeling like I grew up knowing more about politics in Egypt than anything in my life. So, I didn't want to get involved in this. Basically, I also felt that I also had this feeling all the time that my mom will not be happy if I get very involved again in politics like my dad. So I was not sure that this is what I will follow. The other thing is that I've never and I still wouldn't be... I don't see myself as a political party member. So, I was very active at the university, anything, all student activities, starting, for example, education models for the people's assembly, for the U.N., for all of these things, doing awareness sessions about environment and how all these changes around us can affect the environment. So... yah, I know that this is outdated, like the newspapers on walls, this was my domain, whenever people say "It's Doaa doing it again". This is why the four years I remember them as full of friends and colleagues and activities. They were fun, actually.

NP: Where you involved in any activity to do with women's rights?

DA: Not at that time. And I don't remember having specific activities related to women's rights. There was nothing in particular. Maybe it was main stream. Maybe I was feeling that being there with the female friends and colleagues and that we are breaking the taboos, and that the social activities are for men only or for male colleagues. I don't think that we have established something in particular about this, but we were very keen to be there as women, as female students, so, no, not at the university.

NP: During the time that you were at university, where there... what sort of environment was there in terms of students being active in politics?

DA: You would be a very... happily, people will see no problem with any activities, and I mean the administration of the university and the administration of the faculty, as long as it isn't political affiliation. You want to practice politics, you want to do politics, do it

outside. As long as our activities are not like... touching politics in any way, there is no problem. But I do remember that...because I was telling you that we used to have these wall newspapers...

TAPE 2

Doaa Abdelaal: all of these things. I do remember that we used to do them, stayed very late at night to do them and to prepare them inside the university, I cannot take them home to do it at home, I come back because most probably when I come back the security at the door, at the gates will stop me and ask me what is written there and most probably they will take it and never give it back to me, that was the first clash between me and the security at the university, that the first time I had the newspaper I did it at home, and I was like very normal, then they stopped me, looked at it and took it from me, and there was nothing political inside, we were just... and I remember it was basically some literature articles and things like our experiences as first year students at the university, nothing political inside, and then the police officer at the gate he took it and he never gave it back to me and he said I better go to catch up with my classes instead of begging with him, and then I went back to the class and I talked to my colleagues and they said okay we know him we'll go to talk to him, and these were the male colleagues and they went and brought my newspaper and I was very frustrated because why he gave it to the male colleagues and this is mine? This was the first time I was really upset with having these security law, and I still have this story in my head and I was very happy actually in March 2012 when I went back, when I was going to the university and I didn't find the security at the gates, I was so, I have to say I was so happy, my story was in 1994 and in 2012 finally we got rid of them, so now I'm very upset that people are calling for the security, for the police to come back to protect the university, that was like, no, they will... it's not, this is one of the biggest achievements actually for the Egyptian revolution that we got rid of the security there, so because I remember for 4 years after this incident I had to stay very late in the university to finalize and sometimes to slave people, my colleagues who had good handwriting to keep writing all of these because I had awful handwriting so I used to have someone to write it, and I remember that we had to stay inside to do it, although we were not writing anything political, we were very... writing about our diaries as students in university, writing about the bands we liked, it was like... it was fun, it was the light side of student life, nothing political, nothing very... I mean it was very personal. And still, they wouldn't allow us to do it at home and bring it back, if we bring it we have to have

security approval of that, but also to have it on the wall we have to have the administration on the faculty to approve what it written, so once we finish everything we have to go to the vice dean of the department and ask him to read it and sign it so we have the right to put it on the wall, but sometimes it was very frustrating because sometimes he would... I remember sometimes he would sometimes make fun of what we were writing and we were like, there are our personal stories, we want to have them out and we just need you to sign it so just go ahead and sign it and just don't laugh at our dreams and hopes and criticism, so we were not able to criticize the system inside the faculty if you don't like it, we were not able to criticize any of the professors so , and I had to go in circles sometimes to make ourselves... to hide the ideas between lines. It was painful at that time but when I go back to it I think that we were doing a nice job, we're so like... the colleagues and friends I had from this time we still meet and talk and make, laugh at those stories but it was painful at that time. So, nothing specific, maybe on the thing that I used to write, maybe the issue of women's rights was there but it was not very crystalized and clear.

Nicola Pratt: yeah so, how did you become interested in women's rights and become active in the field of women's rights?

DA: Obviously this started with my masters, when I graduated from the university I was not sure what I'm going to do, people assumed that I would be a journalist like my dad, I didn't want to be a journalist like my dad, okay? So I was not sure what to do then a friend of mine she told me okay there is the computer in IT 5, let's go and learn all about this computer and IT, so I took a year doing a software development diploma for a year, and then when I finished it I was very lucky that I applied for a job that they asked me to, they asked us for some training and then an exchange program between the French government and the Egyptian government, so I can join the program for one year in Paris, which was very interesting for me... so I went there, and actually 9/11 happened when I was in Paris so I remember this very well, that I was sitting in my office and my boss came and said, my boss at that time was from Cambodia so his French was like not very clear for me, and then he was like babbling in French that like someone bombed America and I said okay, I think you just need to go to your office because no one is going to bomb, you're talking about the States, no one is going to bomb the States, then it took me like 2 hours and when I went back home and I opened the TV and I was like, oh my Dear God! He was like seriously babbling about this. Anyway, so I went to Paris then back to Egypt, got married, then to Doha in Qatar, and then I was not happy in this marriage so I got divorced back in Egypt, and at this, within this circle, I was like every time, with every experience I was challenged every time, a challenge of what is a woman doing in the IT field? How can a woman travel back and forth? How can a

woman independently and freely choose who to marry and then independently if you choose to get out of a marriage? And these were questions not coming from my parents but also from my brothers and sisters, sister, and friends and colleagues and the whole society, these were the questions that I was faced by every day, and for the first time I realized that I'm out of my bubble where I'm thinking that the world can be shaped according to my understanding, according to the thing that I want, and there are different issues, then I started my masters and I decided to do it on social movement in Iran and specifically the reformist movement, this is how it was called under Khatami, and it was like doing this, the readings and digging deep, and I was like, I actually realized that there are other... a different experience than what is happening in Egypt, because in Egypt we thought, I thought as women we have all the rights in the world, we can work, we can walk on the street freely, no one has to enforce the veil on us for example or decide what kind of jobs we take or what type of education you should take around and I was very doing this comparison all the time between what's happening there and what's happening in Egypt was an eye-opening for me, and then I was looking for an opportunity, an internship or something in Iran to learn more, and because of that diplomatic coalition was cut between Egypt and Iran, it was very difficult to find an opportunity and I had to find someone inside to send me an invitation, so I went digging and asking and I remember sending hundreds of e-mails to people, to universities, and then one night I remember I got an e-mail as a reply to one of my requests in an e-group for an organization??? (11:22), and the e-mail was from ?? (11:26) who was a professor of anthropology in "Concordia" I usually don't know how to pronounce the name of her university, anyway, and I found an e-mail and she said: If you like?? (11:42) I can try to find you an internship inside Iran, and then she went on telling me a story about he she used to be a PhD in Egypt herself in the mid of the eighties and I was like, I don't know this lady. But then I said okay, let's see if she can. She actually for 3 months kept trying to find me... but then most of her, at that time it was 2005, Khatami was out of the picture, it was Ahmadi Najad, so he was closing the NGO's and attacking activists, so I couldn't manage to get any authentication (12:27), but anyway, she kept in touch, she asked me to send her some of the things I've written and she made comments and we had this relationship and then 2007 I was almost done with my master's but she said, she sent me an e-mail saying: Women Living in a Muslim Laws, we have this feminist leadership institute every year, and this year we're going to have it in Malaysia, would you like to join? Some of the Iranian activists will be there so you can interview them for your thesis but you also can attend their institute for two weeks, and it's all paid. In 2007... I was lucky to go to Malaysia, introduce to all these international women rights defenders and feminist groups, I only read about them, and it was a good time, it was an amazing time actually and I automatically clicked on hwat the organization was working

on, and I was fascinated by the type of discussion and discourse going around in the world, and actually in Egypt we're not aware of it, I've never been exposed to all these discussions about... honestly, I remember Aicha Evan telling us about militarization of the feminist issue, I never thought about it, and no one has ever told me, I never read about this, no one has ever told us here in Egypt we're dealing with issue of sexuality is inside the gender studies and women rights studies. When I say no one because I'm a good reader, I read extensively and there was nothing, there was nothing in our curriculum at university, nothing in our... in the books we have, all of these discussions they weren't reflected in Arabic, and I felt at that time that these things need to be translated and discussed in Arabic, so I kept volunteering as an Arabic translator and editor for most of the work and the... and then I stayed active with them (15:26) and I started to be, then I was nominated to be a council member and then a board member 2012, so I think that I have a different experience than many other activist women in the region because I have the international interaction, more than I'm rooted there in the national or the grassroots level of activism, despite that at that time I was working in a small consultancy company here in Egypt, so most of my work was around gender and women's rights and all, so I was exposed to the work on the grassroots level, but not as an activist, but this was part of what I'm doing as research as something like that, so... 2010 Fatma Imam introduced me to Nazra for feminist studies so I got very much engaged at that time, as fundraisers and then program's manager for 2 years till 2012, so this is how I kept my involvement at the international level but also I started another engagement at the national level. Then, then now with other... and my involvement with Nazra made me realize that it's very important, and especially that much of the involvement after the revolution made me realized very much that we need young men and women to be really engaged in the movement, so... and it was very inspiring to see them coming in big numbers to the movement, and really inducting new ideas, new techniques, new tools, everything. But then after 2 years of the revolution and now looking at the things yeah it's very good to have the fresh blood but also it's very important that they come to... so I don't know how to say it but to a much better develop and coherent discourse about women's rights, and I'm very radical, I'm a radical person, but also this is also, after the revolution here in Egypt, after 2012, 2011, I will say after the revolution it's still going on, after 2011 it was very important that we develop a simple but radical and engaging discourse about human rights and women's rights and about change and transformation and all these things, because people they don't... people don't understand what they want to do, I mean till the moment people talk about us, the women and men from the Tahrir square. And they don't understand what we really want, I know we had millions of people around us, they were looking to topple Mubarak because it was what they thought, what they thought what makes

things change, but I would believe that me and hundreds of other people where there not just people they wanted to topple Mubarak but because we want to change, we want to see a different picture of the society. So I think by 2012 I realized that we are on the move, on the action all the time but we didn't have time to develop this discourse, this coherent presentation of our rights, so now this is why I'm more involved with the new collective which is "Choice" to try and work together on this coherent discourse about human rights and gender equality and all, and it's not just about women but also I would rather use the term gender equality. So, I don't remember what was the question.

NP: How did you become involved in women's rights?

DA: I'm sorry, I went on and on and on. So yeah, if I put a date it would be 2007 when I started with women and it became my cause, amazingly this would be if I want to put a name but, it was there most of the time, with different personal experiences that polarized at this point.

NP: Can I ask when you started working with Nazra for feminist studies, have you heard about Nazra before? Have you heard about any other women's rights organizations in Egypt?

DA: Basically I 2007 when I met Fatma Imam, we met in the same feminist institute for women living in Muslim laws, she was talking about Nazra all the time, because she was one of the founders, and she was talking about it most of the time how it's going to present a fresh phase with young women and men activist defending women and gender equality and all of these things, and this was interesting, it kept going into my head for some time, till she invited to join in 2010, before this I heard about other women's organizations especially the New Woman foundation, but I always didn't have time to join the meetings, especially for the young activist, the youth of... "Banat Teeba" as meetings for young women, but I didn't have the chance to engage with them, and I didn't know how to find a way to engage with women's rights, maybe I didn't have time because I was working and studying and I was not sure that I would have time to do boring meetings with the women's rights foundation, the other thing is that I was not sure... I don't know how to say without being bad, but I wasn't very comfortable with the type of the discourse that was presented, it was... I always thought that there is something missing, it was me, it was about how... this discourse that gives you the sense of victimizing women, and how the society is so oppressive and all this, I was not really comfortable, I was... despite all my bad experiences as a woman, I never felt that I'm a victim, or I don't want to turn into a man hater or something, it was not me, so I would feel that there is something missing in this discourse, so I was not much willing to

engage, but then in 2010 I met the people at Nazra, this was like, they were like, shared the similar mindset of the things I'm... and then came the revolution in 2011 and we had to start like a new initiative, a new program that was really exciting, and it helped us to turn the place to, as a wide engaging opportunity for men and women to come and talk and all of these things. So, I think it was a good time for engaging more and more men and women, but as I said my problem before 2011 it was the type of the discourse that was presented by many, I know there was lots of contribution by many people, by many women, I don't know, but there was something that I couldn't actually adapt and put my hand on, where is the problem? But I think now I'm comfortable I would say the type of the discourse was not really appealing to me.

NP: Can I ask you about the time leading up to the 25th of January revolution? Were you involved in any other activities and movements before the 25th of January?

DA: Regardless of my involvement with Nazra, no. I... before 2011 I was this relaxed type of, quote and quote, "activist", I was enjoy sitting in gatherings and meetings and discussions and nothing, so I wouldn't even call myself an activist, I would be like very... flying in this universe of discussions and challenging ideas with other colleagues and similar people with similar... I wouldn't say similar mindset but in the same line of thinking. So before 2011 no, I was so relaxed, and sometimes I go back to this time when I was getting things easy and not rushing things, hundreds of things at the same time, but 2011 I felt... I don't know how to, I'm not sure how to describe it, but if anyone was in Tahrir square in this 18 days with hundreds of people around you and hundreds people having the same dreams and the same... not the same dreams but the same hopes for change, it came into an energy for change, and I was very... everyone wanted to do something, and it's not just in terms of demonstrations and sit-ins, but also in terms of contributing to the change. But, so beside the sit-ins and demonstrations I was lucky at that time and still, I have this good paid job o most of my salary would go to medicine and blankets and like, some of my friends said you spend a fortune on these things. I didn't care because I got this salary and I don't know what to do with it, so it should go to this, and the other thing that all the time talking and supporting and mentoring, it doesn't have to be a structured mentor but for all these young men and women coming, and then... so, donations and, specifically for a few years it was through Nazra and then... women living in Muslim laws we started to be very active with ??? (29:24) with the resources we have we started all this feminist leadership institute, engaging new women or what I call newcomers, it doesn't have to be young women, but women coming for the first time for the public and active space... so I don't know, I don't know how to structure what I do every day, because I never thought that I can be, or this is intentionally I do, that I cannot be on the front lines, I

cannot be the face of anything, doesn't work with me, so I like to be on the second row, where I'm actually pushing people to take the lead, because they will know that, at the end of the day they have someone to go to, as a mentor, as a friend, as a supporter, as something like this. So I don't try to bring myself to be in the first rows because I'm not this, I cannot be the face of something. From time to time I enjoy being, I enjoy my readings and times off sometimes so I cannot have the burden or responsibility to be on them, and the second thing I...

TAPE 3

[Text is not available]

TAPE 4

Doaa Abdelaal: For this I would say especially for the women's rights, language, women's right more than language. We should not say that okay the society doesn't understand us so let's adopt our language to what the society because we are conservatives. No, no, I'm sorry... we cannot say, we cannot call marital rape domestic violence, there is a big difference between domestic violence and marital rape, this is [tape 4 inaudible - 0:00:29.3], and we have to advocate for this, this is the time to advocate for this. This is the time we come up with an agenda to explain to the people why militarization is a feminist and a woman's issue, because it's affecting our rights in education and in public services. And there are the times to develop a radical agenda. Simple but radical. So, I know this is not going to be easy but... it's part of being engaged and active, and the other thing is to reclaim fun to the process because if we take it slow, seriously, actually we will die before this. And I want to see the change I'm working for, I'm not going to be a saint and say the change I'm working for will happen to my children or something, no, I want to see the change, so I want to keep my health and see the change. So I need to reclaim the fun to the process, to take of myself of the people around me. And this is another responsibility for us. And again I'm not sure I'm answering your questions, I'm sorry.

Nicola Pratt: Don't keep apologizing. You talked about "we", and I just want to clarify who do you mean when you talk about "we" or "us".

D.A.: Look, I have this issue. When I say... I feel that the we thing is very... comfortable for me, I don't like the I thing, I hate it, I don't say I'm doing this, I'm working for this, I don't feel comfortable, when I say we I feel that there's this sense of unity. In the Egyptian context when I saw we I mean the people who believe the possibility for change. And who share the same set of values as me. Like: freedom, justice, equality. Not justice, freedom and equality and solidarity and transparency and accountability. So, when I say "we" these are the people who I feel are in the same camp as me or in the same group as me and who are not... who are respecting human rights so, I don't mean all Egyptians, because I don't think all Egyptians share the same values as me, but these are the groups who share the same dream of... an alternative world, possible different world. So, these are the "we".

N.P: Are you... do you say there is consensus in what type of change, is it political change, is it social change, economic change, is it all of those?

D.A.: No. there is no... I don't think there is a consensus of what we are here; because sometimes even when I look at... and when people ask they say that the civil and liberal groups were the ones behind the June 30th, it's like... actually not all of them, because, first of all I was bumped for what was happening, what happened on June 30th. I think it was a failure to our groups as liberals to work with the people to change the regime, and we chose to go to a well-established organization, we recognized the institution of the army as the easiest way to support us. So we sent a wrong message to the people that we cannot do it, and we need someone else to... and this was our biggest mistake. Looking at the groups who call themselves liberal and secular and civil, there is no consensus around what are the political demands or economic demands, some people are very comfortable with the current social set-up in Egypt, with its closest racist features. Inside all these groups, there is an intersection of... there is a sense that we need to change all of that. And we come from different ideologies, some of us are very liberal, some of us go to the left, to the far left actually of the spectrum, but I think the one thing that we all agree on is that there is a need for change, because this stagnation is not working for any of us. But I don't think we have reached this consensus because we don't sit and listen and talk to each other enough. Everyone comes to the table with their own agenda and programs and all of these things and we don't place them [tape 4 inaudible - 0:06:51.2], and I will give an example from the women's rights movement, like the discussion about women political basic [tape 4 inaudible - 0:07:01.0], special measures for women, you will find that... some of the well-established women's rights activists, especially the ones affiliated with the National Council for Women, and even the council itself, they will say we have reached the best we can for women's participation, we need to continue working on this with some other groups, when I

[tape 4 inaudible - 0:07:31.6] we think what we have reached is less than what we have advocated for and we need to go. So, in the state of working together and finding like a common... agenda, or a common set of demands, we start fighting with each other, instead of working together and talking to the system and fight with the system to have our demands. So, I think this is the type of consensus we are looking for, we don't... we think that we need to advocate for this agenda and there is a separate agenda and you're not going to talk to each other. It's not going to work this way, we need actually to... we need... and, myself when I talk to someone from the National Council for women or from the groups that say that this is the best, I'm not intimidated and I say okay what you're saying is not enough for me, you just have to raise your expectations and I have to lower my expectations so we can meet, I'm not going to compromise my agenda, you're not going to put more effort on this but you cannot trash my agenda saying I'm very radical, so let's try to find... and it's all about politics... and we need what... this time in the sense of all this radical feminism or whatever, we just need to present our language, and don't be afraid, and show that there is a problem with the system, we cannot just keep working with the system as with the very few opportunities and possibilities in gives us, we need to be more creative and expand our... and this is one of the small things that we have never reached consensus on. And it will take us time, it will take us a long time, but also what is happening in Egypt, one actin after another, and we are expected to react to all actions, and we are expected to answer to all, and this is really stretching us, this is really... and we have to... this so called democracy cap, we need to stop and say okay, not all of us are going to react to what is happening, there are things we cannot control, and this is our agenda, this is our space, we are going to keep it and we are going to defend this... I don't expect that the women's groups for example will have a reaction from every article of the constitution, these are more than 220 articles, I don't know how they came up with this number of articles honestly, I haven't finished reading the constitution, it's very boring, I don't know... and as women we cannot just keep looking at all these article and expect a reaction, we have to split the world, we have to divide them. But over three years there were a lot of things to do, and actually we don't have to be... because it's easy to be distracted, like for example I would be talking about women's rights and quota and special measures then I find someone asking: how about the soldiers dying in Sinai? With all my due respect, I cannot comment on this, I cannot give a reaction to this, it doesn't mean I don't care, I care as a human. But not because I'm coming with a human rights agenda that I will be... answering to all the problems in the world, I'm here I'm coming for certain issues to talk and... I think this is again one of the problems we're facing down in Egypt, that we are so much reactionist to every single incident or detail in Egypt and we have to stop this. And we have to stop doing this, we have to be very

strategic on the things we care about and command and very strategic in even seizing the opportunity we have now, because... maybe in 2-3 years we will not have the same opportunity of people interested in what is happening and reading the constitution and following the news, maybe in 2-3 years people will totally forget about this. At this time we have to reinvent the wheel [tape 4 inaudible - 0:07:31.6], so we have to use the time we have now in keeping people engaged, and not engaged in terms of being active all the time, but engaged in supporting out agenda of change. Otherwise, we will be scaring everyone and we will lose it.

N.P: Just for clarification, when you said the National Council for Women argues that this is as good as we can expect in women's participation, what is this? Are you referring to the number of women? When you talk about the level of women's participation and different expectations of what level of women's participation could be achieved, do you mean women's participation as voters, in elections, as...

D.A.: As candidates

N.P: As candidates?

D.A.: As candidates, as members of the parliament, as... the number of women in government, and all of these things. Because voting, and I have to say from experience, women have always voted in Egypt, especially women with ID cards... you have your ID, you can issue a voting card, this was before the revolution, now after the revolution you go with your ID card and you vote. So women have the possibility to vote most of the time, and actually most of the women who voted were used by the Islamists or the National Democratic Party before the revolution to vote for the candidates that their families... would support. So, there was no problem with voting, when I talk about political participation, it's the number of candidates, the number of women in the parliament, the number of women in the government, the number of women in the local councils, so... and this is our mission and we have to be very clear and we have to understand that this is a structure of the problem in the Egyptian society, that women cannot face down and claim that without the quota, without the special measures women can go to these places, to the parliament, to the local councils. So, special measurements are much needed at this time. And we needed them in the constitution, and the constitution is to protect rights, so the electoral law or the law on political engagement would give a clear explanation how this practice is going to be. So, not having this in the constitution I see as problematic because we're under threat that anyone can explain what is written in the constitution as they understand. And I'm not looking to have women in these places for the luxury of having women. No, women in these places will give a better understanding and a better... first of all, it's the right of

these women to be in the parliament, but also women being there should give another dimension to political life. And having actually feminist member in the parliament will help them to question laws and regulations as I really hope they would. But actually seeing the National Council for Women coming and saying that this is... we should support the constitution... is giving a kind of legitimacy to what is written there. And, it's like putting a full-stop, not helping us to continue bargaining or negotiating on the things we really want to do. So... and they do it without... as much as they can... sorry, they do it without consulting with other NGO's and other women grassroots... I think before they talk in the name of every Egyptian woman they should at least give others... to have the opportunity to talk to most of the Egyptian women and... and it's not helping that they take the lead and say we should say yes to the constitution, actually no institution must tell people what to say, not a political party, not the National Council for Women, not anyone to tell the people you should say yes or no to the constitution. So...

N.P: I asked you a lot of questions, I'm sure I've tired you out.

D.A.: No

N.P: Can I ask if there is anything that you wanted to tell me that you haven't had the chance to speak about? Did you want to say anything more about Ekhtiyar?

D.A.: The only thing that I can say about Ekhtiyar is that it's still in a trial period. And, it is a contribution to the course of change in Egypt, and this contribution comes in the form of trying to put to use knowledge around gender in Arabic, so... I cannot say much, the collective of Ekhtiyar comes from different backgrounds, different affiliations, different interest, and it's interesting and scary at the same time, because having all these differences and trying to mediate between them and mediate between the different interests, it's challenging. So, by the end of the day we all realize that we want to work, we are all working for gender equality, for one goal, from different approaches, so remembering this all the time helps us realize that we should not fight and struggle but we should build on these differences and diversity and try to achieve this common goal. So, it's still in trial period, I don't know where it will lead us, maybe it will not exist in one year from now, maybe it will continue, but it's another way to keep things going and reclaim the fun to the process, that's all.

N.P: Can you tell me when Ekhtiyar was formed?

D.A.: We were thinking of it since May 2012. Actually Dina and I were thinking of it earlier than this and then we stopped then... I kind of pushed for it, so... the meeting of the collective was in June 2012, so, yeah, around that time, 6 months ago.

N.P: June 2012 or 2013?

D.A.: 2013, sorry.

N.P: 2013, okay

D.A.: Yeah. So... and people come to the collective with their... what they can do. Meaning, if I cannot do something I'm not interested [tape 4 inaudible - 0:22:24.4] in all other activities, I'm just coming with my activity, I'm going to support and defend it and that's it, so... this would be the idea, but... when someone comes with the initiative she has to defend it within the collective and convince other people that this is my activity, I'm going to present it this way, this is my approach to it, so, as they say, she should sell it, and find allies within the collective to support it, so, yeah, we're around 9 persons in this so far.

N.P: So, the decision has to be taken by...

D.A.: The gender seminars? Because this is one of the activities. So the gender seminar... initially we to call it gender school, two weeks intensive work on issues related to gender, but then we realized we don't have the resources to host people for two consecutive weeks, and... and we don't have enough people, resource people to talk about gender issues academically. Not just, it's not a training we have to be structured, sessions with readings, with discussions, with questions. So, we thought about having it as weekly seminars where we discuss one subject and the resource person in this session will send the reading beforehand so people will read it, so the resource person will present his or her session and then it will be followed by questions and something like that. So, and the idea is to expose the participant to this new gender discipline. And, so basically it's designed around 10 seminars over ten weeks and a half. One session every week for three hours, and this is the first round, so it's still in the making, so... we were caring about deconstructing the myths about gender, then to take about ways of feminist intersectionality... gender and nationalism, women political participation, gender and development, these are the main subjects. And we wanted to expose the participants to the literature and writings on different issues, so... things written by Chandra Mohanty, Pivak

and different other people, so... and these are the people most of the... who claim to work on gender and women rights have never heard about. So... so, this is the idea and we encourage them by the end of the sessions to write papers, not big ones, like 600 words to 1500 word sin Arabic about a certain subject. And, then we will collect these papers and put them in a periodical and print it. And it's all a self-funded initiative because we also want to accumulate writings on issues related to gender, not to be like

bits and pieces here and there, a report here or something, but gradually build... a set of literature about gender issues in Egypt. So once we finish this we will do some evaluation and see how it's going to work next, we thought we will not get enough interest in this and actually we got quite a number of applications and people are interested. People sometimes skip sessions, but it's all challenging at the beginning. So, maybe in the next round I hope we will do better in the round after this or maybe we will stop because there is no interest, I don't know, but I know that we need to... and this brings me back to my first experience. It's being exposed to all these types of discussions and literature, I think it made me a better person. I wish that all people who are... who can... most of the people who are active really be exposed to this kind of discussion because I hope that it will make them better persons I don't know. That's it

N.P: Thank you

D.A.: Welcome