

## WLP Interview with Amal Abdel Hadi, November 2011

*In the weeks leading up to Monday's historic election in Egypt, WLP interviewed leading Egyptian women's rights activist Amal Abdel Hadi on the upcoming elections and her thoughts on the future of women's rights in country.*

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### Full Length Interview Transcript

**WLP:** Thank you very much for joining me, I am so pleased to be able to speak with you today. Since the Revolution, there have been serious concerns regarding the future of women's rights in the Egypt. Many feel that while women were out on the streets and in Tahrir Square, playing a key role in the protests that led to the ouster of Mubarak, they have since been excluded from the political process. There were no women on the Constitutional Committee and many fear that recent achievement for women's rights may be reversed.

**Amal Abdel Hadi (AH):** Women were not just participating in the revolution, but in all the preparations, the work that was done before the revolution: the unions fights, the protests – two to four years before the revolution – part of activism with social media, Facebook etc., part of the public strike on the first of April, and women were in Tahrir, as everyone knows. But then, women were really excluded – and I say excluded – it's not just somebody didn't notice. This is an exclusion: When you have the Vice President of the high constitutional court as a woman, a very vocal woman and she is not included in a party of six looking into the constitution. When you have a cabinet, and the Prime Minister is supposed to be coming from Tahrir Square, and a group of women's rights NGOs write him a letter saying it is very important that his cabinet send a message about supporting women, and he doesn't even accept the old inherited women's minister [as a cabinet position] – it makes you think. Islamists – Salafists – were protesting against the women marching on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March (International Women's Day). The whole situation is critical. The whole unsettled situation is really impacting women's participation. Now, because of the previous regime – everyone is against the previous regime – there is an orchestrated campaign against all legal gains for women under the slogan that these changes were imposed on the people by the Mubarak regime....

Democracy is like Pandora's Box; you don't know who is coming – actually, you know who is coming [Islamic parties]. They are trying to push us back to two decades ago. But that is part of the process. We were not used to a public discourse on women's rights.

But, seven to eight years ago, when the issue of sexual harassment was opened, there were two successive cases on sexual harassment in the public streets. That campaign that we had, with continuous work, especially with the media, managed to really dismantle that thing of blaming the victim – what she was wearing, she was walking later at night, it was a dark street – these things began to fade, not completely but a little bit. If we have the chance to really change the discourse and stand up to the conservative forces ...It's not an easy thing, democracy. "The regime is toppled and you get the democracy you want" – no. We will fight, and we will fight very strongly for it -- just as we were fighting for the freedom of association and from oppression by the Mubarak regime.

**WLP: One of the challenges facing women's rights activists in Egypt is a perception held by some Egyptians that women's rights is a "Western" issue and it is seen to be representative of the old regime.**

**AH:** Let me clarify two things – Western and imposed by the regime. The term Western is not as strong as it used to be, for example, in the 80s. But it is [used by opponents of women's rights] when using the stigma of the regime. And no one really liked the National Council of Women – they did nothing for us. They [conservative forces] are using that, and it is not a new agenda for the fundamentalists. But they are using it as a new argument. It is a winning card you can play with.

**WLP: Could you explain why this is the case and the steps that women's rights activists have been taking, or should take, to change this perception?**

**AH:** My organization came – all of us -- from the students' movement in the 70s -- political activists --so it is not easy to accuse us of being "Westernized." Plus we work with women workers, laborers, marginalized women, so though we are not a grassroots organization, there are a lot of people who know this is our agenda, not an imposed agenda. We were always opposed to the regime. And there are many other groups who have similar foundations...

*Amal cites examples of how the Mubarak regime, in fact, did not support women's rights:*

[Regarding nationality law reforms] They [the Mubarak regime] used to say we will not allow this law because it is a state security issue. We will just ease the lives of the widows. But, because the whole thing went to the constitutional court and was deemed unconstitutional, the law was changed. Then they take it to the CEDAW committee and say we have changed the law. It is the

movement, not the regime that brings the change, but when the change comes, the regime coopts it.

Another example: In 1991 an Egyptian village decided and documented that they would not continue FGM (female genital mutilation). This is a very remote village. But by mid- 2000, the National Council for Motherhood and Child held a celebration for the “1<sup>st</sup> village to abandon FGM,” saying the village was counseled by Susan Mubarak. The regime just ignores what the women’s movement did. The regime was not working for women.

And that brings us to the quota system. The quota that had been approved in Egypt in 2010 – it is something that benefits women. The quota system is about empowering women and allows them to be in different levels of decision making – parliaments, representative councils, and so on. Usually it is a temporary measure. When you have a critical mass, then you stop the special procedures, as the CEDAW committee says. From the beginning it was extra seats for women, and only in the parliament, not all levels of representation. This wasn’t actually for women because you have to compete in an extraordinarily difficult situation. Cairo is like 10-15 constituencies, so if you are a man or not following the quota, you will be competing in one of these constituencies. But, if you are a woman, you are competing in all of the constituencies. Cairo is about 16 million, and you have to go and try to get a constituency amongst these 16 million. So this does not help anybody but the ruling party, it’s an extra 64 seats for them. At the same time they go to the CEDAW committee and respond to the [issue of] women’s political participation. Until 2010 women’s participation in the parliament was less than 2%. Egypt was one of the first countries to offer women the right to vote and be nominated to office. Syria and Lebanon were in ‘53/’54\*, Egypt was ‘56, even earlier than some European countries. Can you imagine—after half a decade and our representation is less than 2%. This tells you what it really means – they were not serious. They wanted to promote an image of themselves as a democratic country that’s pro-women. But, actually they were not. They were not listening to Egyptian women’s demands.

[\*Women’s suffrage Syria 1949/Lebanon 1952]

**WLP:** Bothaina Kamel, former television and radio journalist with a long history of opposing former President Hosni Mubarak’s regime, is the sole female candidate for the presidency. Do you feel that she is being taken seriously?

**AH:** No, they are not taking her seriously at all. No, because whenever they speak, they speak about the big men. I also don’t think Bothaina has developed a real clear program. She has always been liberal, supporting freedoms and liberties, and so on, but up until now I have not seen a real program-- that makes the difference. Because everyone speaks about social justice.

We all want social justice. But what do you mean by social justice? That makes the difference between a liberal party, and a socialist, and a communist. That is not just the challenge for Bothania, but for everybody. The challenge is how to get concrete -- a real strong program with concrete demands that can be really pushed on the social and economic front.

**WLP: What viable party do you think will best uphold and advance women's rights?**

**AH:** It won't be fair because I am supporting -- although I am not still a member, I have my differences-- I am supporting the Egyptian Social Democratic Party. The women's committee is strong. It has many activists and academic feminists and average women who are interested in women's rights. They spoke about having 30% quota. They have been asking women to be part of their constituency.

Actually the most organized use of women's votes are Islamic [parties]. The other parties, they won't really get real representation in parliament. They are very nuanced. They were just formed after the revolution. This election is going to be for the Islamist groups and the NDP, unless a strong position is taken to forbid those who were part of the regime and the decision-making bodies of the past five years to be allowed to go as candidates. Otherwise it is those who are the most organized, the ones who have money to buy votes, to organize to make big campaigns. But the most important thing, and I think we should be looking at a long term perspective -- short term as women we will not make any victories. But these elections, we are working for the next five year elections. Insisting on having programs and insisting on trying to secure women's demands within these programs.

The other thing that is very important is the Constitution. Many groups made constitutional initiatives on two things. One thing is the basic principles that should be governing the constitution regardless of who is in power, and the other thing is the criteria for deciding who is on the constitutional committee. Most of them aren't raising specific women's issues, they are raising non-discrimination and equality in citizenship. I think we managed to push also for [laws on] ill-treatment, on humane treatment, and so on in public and private life, which will give us a space to work on violence against women, and particularly domestic violence. It is very important that on the constitution we should be working on the long-term, but this election is not bringing happiness or real victories for women.

**WLP: Has there been an attempt by those engaged in women’s rights to form alliances with those concerned about minority rights – especially religious minorities – and other groups – youth coalitions - who have a shared interest in ensuring the formation of a secular state?**

**AH:** We are very much interested and are working on general issues, for example on the campaign against the military courts. There are two very strong women that are part of this movement and they are on the forefront. Now, at the New Women Foundation, for example, we are beginning a campaign on political participation that targets young men and women, because we feel that it is that generation that really has the hope.

**WLP: Some have said with all of the transitions taking place that this is not the right time to be focusing on women’s rights and that there will be time for that after a new government is in power. What would be your response to those who hold this view?**

We are always not in the right time. Women’s rights are always not in the right time. Whenever you speak about women’s rights there is always that ready argument, “that’s not the right time.” When we have a Prime Minister coming from Tahrir, coming from among the revolutionaries and saying if I can’t do it, I will return back to Tahrir...It is the time when you have a Prime Minister who says he is pro-Tahrir, and pro-revolution, and pro-rights and pro-freedom. If women do not get there rights, this is not a democracy. No democracy without women’s rights. And this is the thing, we are actually pushing that campaign even with our colleagues in liberal parties. Either you decide now with whom you side, or we [women] will not be there. If we are not there in the ministry and in the other committees how will the constitution come – it will come against women. It will come against women.

**WLP: At the same time are you hopeful that there will be more opportunities to advance women’s rights and political participation once the new government is in power?**

**A.H.:** I am hopeful, because my name is hope. If you translate my name it means hope. But we have real concerns. With the Christian-Muslim issue, we have real concerns. Because Article 2 in the previous 1971 constitution says -- Sadat wanted to open the way for himself, Shari’a was always one of the main sources of inspiration -- but Sadat put [Shari’a as] “the” main source of the constitution. So Copts, or Christians, are a little bit worried because there is discrimination. For example, there are not the same rules that govern building a church or building a mosque. And, I think you have been following what’s been going on the past few days [October protests resulting in deaths of over two dozen Coptic Christians], what is happening here in Egypt regarding this issues. Because this is a main concern for Egyptians, both men and women, liberal groups and so on. Everyone is afraid that the free elections might bring the Islamists. So, they are working to put in the constitution basic values so that everybody who comes to power will abide

by it. They can't say we will take of Art 2, that Sharia is the main source [for the constitution], but they wanted to add something to it – many groups agreed with it, that Shari'a is the main source of legislation but that non-Muslims can refer to their shari'a in their family issues and practice religion. So, this would be the first time that family laws and family issues are put in the constitution as according to Shari'a, If you have in the constitution that family laws for non-Muslims are governed by their sharia than it implicitly means that Muslim family laws will be based on Sharia. And this is a completely different thing than has been before

**WLP: There has been much discussion about the future political role of the Muslim Brotherhood – whether the moderate face it is trying to put forth is a façade, is it the most powerful faction, and what would a politically empowered Muslim Brotherhood mean for women's and minority rights. What is your opinion on these issues? Do you think fears regarding the Brotherhood are overblown? And what role do you anticipate they will have in the future government?**

**A.H.:** Since day one, the different groups, I will speak of a spectrum --from the Salafists to what you call the moderate or centrist, the Muslim Brotherhood -- they are speaking about implementing Shari'a – the hijab and so on. Some of them are speaking about not having equal citizenship with non-Muslims. When you are not in power you speak modestly and moderately. But, when you are in power, this is something completely different

Still, we have been 30 years under Mubarak, using this straw man to make us afraid- which is if you topple Mubarak's regime, you will get the Islamists. And actually this message has been sent to the West and also to the liberal and the leftists in our party. "This is what you want?-- If you don't want Mubarak you will get the Islamists and the Salafis." But, I am willing, I am willing to get whomever these elections bring, because we are at the beginning. We have to go through the democratic process and learn. And people in general learn. At first they will elect the Muslim Brotherhood or the moderate Islamists or the Salafists. And then they will see how they deal with their issues. It takes time. In democracy you have to pay for it. I think I am willing to take the risk even if the Muslim Brotherhood comes or the Islamists come. We'll fight. But, this country has to be political. And with this revolution it became political.

**WLP: I want to close by thanking you so much for participating in this interview.**

**A.H.:** As I said it is my pleasure, and I really appreciate what WLP is doing. And, I cherish what women have been doing in the Arab region. It is not yet spring for us, but we will make it spring.

WLP: Well, we salute what you are doing and look forward to continuing to work with you and hopefully speaking with you again soon. We share your optimism for the long-term and will keep working for the achievements in the short-term.

Thank you.

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#### Excerpts for the Interview Included in WLP's eNews Story

WLP: Thank you very much for joining me, I am so pleased to be able to speak with you today. Since the Revolution, there have been serious concerns regarding the future of women's rights in the Egypt. Many feel that while women were out on the streets and in Tahrir Square, playing a key role in the protests that led to the ouster of Mubarak, they have since been excluded from the political process.

**Amal Abdel Hadi (AH):** Women were not just participating in the revolution, but in all the preparations, the work that was done before the revolution: the unions fights, the protests...part of activism with social media, Facebook etc., part of the public strike on the first of April, and women were in Tahrir, as everyone knows. But then, women were really excluded – and I say excluded – it's not just somebody didn't notice. This is an exclusion... The whole unsettled situation is really impacting women's participation. Now, because of the previous regime – everyone is against the previous regime – there is an orchestrated campaign against all legal gains for women under the slogan that these changes were imposed on the people by the Mubarak regime....

Democracy is like Pandora's Box...But that is part of the process...It's not an easy thing, democracy -- "The regime is toppled and you get the democracy you want" – no. We will fight, and we will fight very strongly for it, just as we were fighting for the freedom of association and from oppression by the Mubarak regime.

WLP: One of the challenges facing women's rights activists in Egypt is a perception held by some Egyptians that women's rights is a "Western" issue and it is seen to be representative of the old regime.

AH: Let me clarify two things – Western and imposed by the regime. The term Western is not as strong as it used to be, for example, in the 80s. But it is [used by opponents of women's rights]

when using the stigma of the regime. And no one really liked the National Council of Women – they did nothing for us. They [conservative forces] are using that, and it is not a new agenda for the fundamentalists. But they are using it as a new argument. It is a winning card you can play with.

**WLP: Could you explain why this is the case and the steps that women’s rights activists have been taking, or should take, to change the perception that women’s rights are linked to the former regime?**

**AH:** My organization came, all of us, from the students’ movement in the 70s -- political activists --so it is not easy to accuse us of being “Westernized.” Plus we work with women workers, laborers, marginalized women, so though we are not a grassroots organization, there are a lot of people who know this is our agenda, not an imposed agenda. We were always opposed to the regime. And there are many other groups who have similar foundations...

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**WLP: Some have said with all of the transitions taking place that this is not the right time to be focusing on women’s rights and that there will be time for that after a new government is in power. What would be your response to those who hold this view?**

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**What is your opinion on these issues? Do you think fears regarding the Brotherhood are overblown? And what role do you anticipate they will have in the future government?**

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