Women´s Knowledge International

A Report Back from Research Visit to Egypt of Professor Nayereh Tohidi

This report is a result of the collaboration between the Foundation Culture of Peace - (Spain), the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Egypt) and California State University at Northridge (USA)

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I.   Sumary of Prof. Nayereh Tohidi's Report.

An initial collaboration within the framework of Women's Knowledge International (WKI)-Pilot Project 2011-2012 at the Foundation Culture of Peace (FCP), with a third party and ally of WKI-FCP, California State University at Northridge-Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Program (CSUN-MEIS) consisted of a research oriented exchange of experts; concretely, a two-way visit between CSUN-MEIS and the Center for Democracy and Social Peace Studies at the Biblithea Alexandrina (BA-CDSPS) and, reciprocally, BA-CDSPS/CSUN-MEIS for the purpose of forging a strong collaborative venue and exploring a mutually beneficial plan of action towards follow-up joint educational and advocacy initiatives regarding women and peace building in Egypt and the Middle East & North Africa (MENA).

The first part of this initial collaborative action described above (a two-way research oriented exchange of experts) was actually materialized by Prof. Nayereh Tohidi's short term visit (two weeks) to Egypt, primarily in Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria and also American University in Cairo during November 13-25, 2012. This was an introductory visit for the purpose of exploring the possibilities and goals for a partnership or collaborative project that can be mutually beneficial.

Professor Tohidi's visit to Egypt coincided with another rising political tension in the country as the dispute over the draft of the new constitution intensified. A preliminary draft of the Egyptian constitution that was made available by the Constituent Assembly by late October 2012 demonstrated increasing religious undertones to the state and failure in granting the envisioned civil rights and freedoms. Most attempts to amend the draft did not succeed. Those who wanted the new constitution to maintain separation of religion and state; to safeguard civil rights, women's rights; and to limit the power and role of the military in civil matters were upset about the shortcomings and vagueness of the final draft set for referendum. Moreover, the drafting process was seen as an indication of power grabbing toward a totalitarian political orientation rather than respect for pluralism and diversity of Egyptian society. Professor Tohidi's preliminary conclusion regarding this matter is that more than the content of the constitution per se, many were actually upset about the non-democratic drafting process of the constitution as the views different from those upheld by the Muslim Brothers (MB) were not taken into account, thus several non-MB members of the Constituent Assembly left it in protest.

Prof. Tohidi's visit was planned to coincide with a national conference on "Women and Transition to Democracy in Egypt" that was held at BA on November 23-24, 2012 so that she had the chance to make appointments and interact with more Egyptian people in general and Egyptian activists and scholars in particular. The conference seemed to be quite difficult to manage due to the increasing distrust and polarization among various women's groups and also the violence and clashes that erupted in both Cairo and Alexandria, preventing some of the Cairo participants from reaching to Alexandria.

The growing tension in the larger society had its obvious impact on everybody. Despite this, our colleagues from the BA did very well in helping Prof. Tohidi make relatively the best use of her visit with regard to learning about women's issues and exploring the overall situation. Having been in revolutionary situations herself in the past (in Iran of 1979-80 and in the Soviet Union of 1991-92) during which every aspect of one's public and professional life (and even personal life) get disrupted and distracted, she could empathize and sympathize with her host members and appreciate and enjoy their hospitality and cooperation despite all the odds.

The two-day conference at BA was meant to provide a forum for many leading Egyptian women activists, scholars, journalists, lawyers, and others to come together across differences to engage in a national dialogue over "the most challenging problems" facing women's participation in Egypt's politics and democracy building, including the new constitution.

About 150 Egyptians attended this conference, mostly women and some men. A few international guests (from Sudan, Uganda, Kuwait, Palestine, Ireland and England) were also present. In addition to the plenary panels, the conference was broken down into smaller groups of 8-11 people over 13 different sessions. Each session gave a chance for deeper conversation and dialogue among the participants of different viewpoints and political orientation. In their Dialogue Guidelines for the Participants, the organizers had aptly explained the necessity of dialogue and its differences with debate, e.g., "In dialogue, finding a common ground is the goal, while in debate winning is the goal."

In practice, however, the increasing tension and disagreement made it hard to overcome the divide and reach a feasible common ground. Yet, the arguments were for the most part healthy and constructive. The level of discourse and degree of awareness, steadfastness, and determination of many women to challenge discriminatory and retrogressive views and policies and push for an egalitarian agenda and progressive direction was very impressive.

During the different sessions, especially the smaller dialogue sessions, Prof. Tohidi observed commonalities and differences in gender views of the participants who represented some of the major political groups in Egypt such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Freedom and Justice Party), The Popular Current (supporters of Nasser), National Egyptian Movement, New Wafd Party, and generally liberal and social democratic and non-violence advocates.

Besides attending the national conference, Prof. Tohidi met with several activists from some NGOs in Alexandria, particularly the ones from the Women and Development Association led by Aida Nuredin. The meetings were also very insightful and instructive.

The main concerns and challenges as far as deduced by Prof. Tohidi from the dialogue sessions at the conference and the other meetings with groups or individuals (mostly in Alexandria and some in Cairo) were the following:

1. Ideally, one would have expected that democracy, human rights and the fight against violence, corruption and poverty to become the real line of demarcation among Egyptians after a generally anti-dictatorial uprising. But realities on the ground are much messier and more complex;

2. An alarming polarization and divide in Egyptian society over the direction that the new polity was taking. On the surface this divide seemed to be among those supporting versus those opposing the new government, a divide that many in the Western media have presented in terms of a simple binary or dichotomy of religious/Islamist vs. secular. Actually some Islamists use such a simplistic binary to characterize the opposition as anti-Islam, hence appealing to people's religious sentiments. But such simplistic dichotomy does not explain the complexity and diversity on each side of the divide. Many of those who oppose the new constitution and President Morsi are not necessarily non-religious, nor are they necessarily democratic-minded and pro-women's rights;

3. The disturbing sense of insecurity and worries about the future, as many secular and professional women and men were talking about leaving Egypt, hence a trend of brain drain seems to have begun;

4. Violence and sexual harassment against women perpetuated in various degrees and forms by almost all sides: The military, the police, the new government and Islamist extremists at domestic, community and state levels;

5. Alarming economic decline, drastic fall in tourism and construction projects as manifested in many incomplete buildings and development projects, rising unemployment and poverty with obvious negative implications to further women's vulnerability;

6. Prevalence of an unfortunate 'third-worldist' mentality of victimhood and resentment toward the West that goes beyond the valid resentment and resistance against colonial and neo-colonial exploitation and domination in the past. This mentality is rather paralyzing as it takes away the reliance on people's own agency and responsibility to bring about change and keeps blaming almost all the failures and shortcomings in the present and past on the "imperialists and foreigners" in the region or globally. Many people on different sides of the political divide argued that the ultimate culprit in this situation is the US. Those who hated Morsi viewed him as a US agent and at the same time those who supported him blamed the hidden US hands behind the opposition to Morsi.

7. The rising tension during the stay of Prof. Tohidi was in part due to people's anger and frustration about the atrocities in Gaza and occupied areas of Palestine. The one-sided policy of the US in favor of Israel has certainly contributed to conspiracy theories and a deep sense of resentment toward the West. This socio-psychological state so widespread in the MENA has some not so subtle gender implications against women's empowerment. Persistence of patriarchy at the domestic sphere and an obsession with holding onto the control and dominance over women's body and public appearance due to a sense of emasculation in the public sphere cannot be understood aside from this geo-political and economic context.

8. Despite all these challenges and difficulties, one can be cautiously optimistic and hopeful about Egypt. Overall, this majestic country of a great old history and civilization is holding together despite all the odds. There is an impressive level of civility, discipline and self-policing among people despite being faced with an ongoing revolution, little presence of the police on the streets, disrupted state apparatus and declining economy. Many seemed dignified and proud of their nation and possess a good sense of self-respect.

9. It seemed as if fear was gone and people were still defiant and determined to push for better changes and resist a new tyranny to replace an old one. Many women looked worried, but determined to fight back. The level of local sensitivity and global awareness among many of the students and scholars in Egypt is much higher than average colleagues and students in the US. Egypt has a rather long history of feminist activism and women's organizations. Therefore

one would expect that currently a considerable number of middle class, gender conscious, professional and active women in Egypt are equipped with feminist knowledge transmitted to them by their mothers and grandmothers. We can build on this background and the seasoned women activists in Egypt as a core element of a feminist movement that can resist retrogressive forces and assert women's agency and feminist intervention in the process of democracy building.

10. Egyptians generally seemed not to like to compare Egypt's revolution with that of Iran in 1979. But Prof. Tohidi observed several worrisome similarities and certain hopeful differences. Further comparative research should be done on Egyptian and Iranian revolutions and the gender dimension of each as a small part of a joint project for the future.

II.   Women's Knowledge International – Observations on Prof. Tohidi's Report Main Points.

> ➤ Differences and commonalities in gender views observed at the National Conference.-

It seems like a necessary collaborative venue to deepen on the ways in which a common ground and a common action plan among women's organizations and feminists can be reached in Egypt. A major issue we identify is how to overcome differences in gender views for a common cause. But to agree upon what constitutes a "common cause" for Egyptian women and what is the bare minimum of such agreement is the stepping stone. WKI suggests that a transnational approach and exchange will help reach such an agreement. A transnational exchange should entail among representatives from MENA but also from the West and elsewhere.

> ➤ Realities on the ground in Egypt are more complex than expected after the uprising.-

WKI proposes to define the complexities on the ground, identify them and determine how women and feminist organizations are contributing or can contribute to untangle them. It would be particularly useful to list those aspects of the current political situation in Egypt that are more relevant for women and gender equality agendas. We wonder if and how feminists and women in general in Egypt have already identified how they can work around the complexities on the ground, and unite rather than divide.

> ➢ Alarming polarization and divide in Egyptian society towards a simple binary or dichotomy of religious/Islamist vs. secular, although support and opposition to President Morsi is not just based on this simplistic duality.

We wonder if this is a similar fracture among feminists and among women's organizations and how this, which can become a real difficult obstacle, can be sorted out. It may be so that such fracture, religious vs. secular, gets entangled with other complex polarities.

> ➢ Disturbing sense of insecurity that is pushing people to leave Egypt.-

Security issues jeopardize unity efforts for women and feminists. We suggest that security issues be put on the table upfront and addressed to build unity among different and diverging factions of feminisms. WKI wonders how security issues may be addressed and if they are specific issues already identified as such by women and feminists directly related to the political situation. We wonder to what extent security issues affect academic gender studies programs too. WKI's allies, for instance, Scholars at Risk (http://scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/) as well as our direct access to international feminist peace building networks such as the Women International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) (http://www.wilpfinternational.org/) may be useful assets in the near future.

> ➢ Violence and sexual harassment against women perpetuated in various degrees and forms by almost all sides.-

We should discuss preliminary lines of collaboration for a future transnational program. We could aim at gender based violence professionals and incorporate diverse institutions in MENA and/or beyond. It may include participatory actions and capacity building workshops among diverse sectors and countries: academics and researchers, action oriented and intervention actors, policy makers, representatives from social movements and civil society.

> ➢ Alarming economic decline with negative implications to further women's vulnerability.-

We would like to further determine whether the issues regarding poverty/economic decline affecting women are similar to those that are often related to economics elsewhere (eg. Economic dependence on men, fewer educational opportunities, increased violence against them, etc.), or whether they have specific considerations that need to be taken into account and are closely related to the political situation. It should be determined if there are any issues considered particularly relevant. What are some of the nuances of Egypt historical and political background that need to be paid attention to regarding women and economics?

> ➢ Prevalence of an unfortunate 'third-worldist' paralyzing mentality of victimhood and resentment toward the West.-

This may be a very important topic to address at a WKI transnational forum because of its "paralyzing" effect for women's and feminists' knowledge to flow across diverse sectors, countries and facets of gender equality agendas. A topic to keep in mind for curricular development, for instance, so that transnational alliances can be built and feminists/women can be empowered at the local level.

> ➢ Geopolitical context of Israel vs. Palestine and Gaza and US one-sided intervention is essential for understanding the persistence of patriarchy in the domestic sphere and the emasculation of the public sphere.-

This seems like a very important and complex point. We wonder if the negative development of women's rights and realities as observed by Prof. Tohidi during her visit is directly related to the militarization as well as to the rise of a conservative version of Islam and their radio of influence in political / social spheres.

> ➢ Reasons to be optimistic due to the level of civility, discipline, self-policing and strength of Egyptian people in general and a history of women's rights activism in particular.-

These observations seem to have a very important inner value to capitalize on as "knowledge" to be shared around in other countries, as an Egyptian contribution and an example of the Arab Spring. It is important to outline that Egypt may be a good example of the importance of clearly distinguishing between a country's political developments and manipulations of governments and its people (eg. the MB government and Egyptian society). We wonder what the role that women play in this state of things is and what feminist and women's organizations specific contributions to it are. It seems that such state of things is a good manifestation of Egypt widely shared "culture of peace". Do women/feminists contribute to strengthen it? What is "women's knowledge" contribution to it?

> ➢ People were determined to push for the revolution and fight back tyranny without fear.-

This may be a great potential for women's empowerment programs to progress. It should be addressed at a prospect forum or similar, and explored as a possible positive asset to build unity among women in the midst of a difficult security situation.

> ➢ Certain worrisome similarities and hopeful differences between Iranian and Egyptian revolutions.-

We agree to explore this important point through a joint project, like Prof. Tohidi suggested, that can eventually be extended to other countries in the MENA region.

III. Bibliotheca Alexandrina – General Comments.

✓ A comparative project on Iranian and Egyptian revolutions and gender issues should be very relevant.

✓ Exchange of views with national and international group of experts and academics is very important in the process of empowering women in the communities and the nation at large. A follow up joint action plan should be developed to highlight this point. It may include capacity building workshops, as well as training materials.

✓ The main issue in Egypt nowadays is the misunderstanding of CEDAW under the Muslim Brotherhood's rule. Since MB are currently the most potent political force and the ruling party, we need to focus more on this to counteract their radio of influence and to clarify CEDAW to both Egyptian women at large and policy makers. Organizing workshops or training programs to identify this issue may help to increase public awareness, explain the positive potential of the declaration and clarify that it is not against the teachings of Islam. Women in Egypt should be aware of this declaration and that it is there to protect their rights. Despite the documented progress, it remains a major challenge to make

the actual conditions of women's lives in many regions of the world conform to international agreements. Such is the case of Egypt.

Joint research projects to be developed between WKI, BA and CSUN are also a recommended endeavor to shed light to the many changes that have occurred in our communities after the 25 January Revolution. Issues concerning women's conditions and their role in the Revolution should be addressed.

IV.   **Additional Observations.-**

During these exchange of comments on Professor Tohidi's Report and three-party collaborative venue, her initial proposal to work towards the creation of a Transnational Gender Studies Program at the University of Alexadria was rejected by our BA colleagues, for it seemed untimely at this point considering all the issues raised in this Report.

Instead, we have initially agreed upon an alternative strategy for collaborative work: Educational initiatives around CEDAW. It is a concrete and major issue around which we can contribute to counteract the above mentioned "third wordlist" mentality and abuse of "cultural relativism" when it comes to women's rights. Such collaborative initiative around CEDAW will bring the focus among women's rights advocates on the need to emphasize transnational cooperation and comparative approaches thus contributing to building alliances rather than divisions.