

Documenting The Experiences of Women Entrepreneurs

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The Women and Memory Forum

2022

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Cover Design: Ghada Khalifa

Editor: Hala Kamal

Edition: First edition 2022

Website: <http://www.wmf.org.eg>

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Printed by: Promotion Team Co.

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Preface

Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in Egypt Through Documentation

Hoda Elsadda

Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in Egypt Through Documentation is an important addition to the work of Women and Memory in documenting women's lives in Egypt, to highlight their contribution to the professions, with the aim of building a just society with equal rights for all.

The Women and Memory Forum (WMF) was established in 1995 by a group of women researchers and activists with the aim of changing the stereotypical representations of women and challenging all forms of discrimination against women in society caused and propagated by dominant cultural misconceptions and ideas. These cultural misconceptions constitute a stumbling block in the face of efforts to improve the conditions of women and enable them to attain their rights. Therefore, one of the main objectives of WMF is the production and dissemination of alternative cultural knowledge about Arab women that can be used in consciousness raising and in supporting women's rights.

WMF established an archive of Egyptian women's voices with the aim of documenting and preserving women's memory and experiences in both the private and public spheres. The establishment of the archive started at the end of the 1990s with a project to document the life stories of pioneering women in the professions in the twentieth century. WMF also built a data base entitled *WholsShe* in order to make available biographical and professional information about contemporary women who excel in their fields.

Feminist oral history is an important pillar in the production of feminist knowledge to support women's movements and resist exclusionary narratives about women and their roles in mainstream histories. Since the beginning of interest in oral history in the 1950s and 1960s by socialist historians who focused on recording the experiences of the working classes, the 1970s witnessed a surge of interest in the field of oral history as more research revealed the gaps in mainstream histories that foregrounded the lives of the rich and famous and ignored the lives of ordinary people. This exclusionary lens was partly the result of the dependence of mainstream historians on official documents and papers housed in official archives. Oral history became an important resources and effective method for shedding light on the voiceless, and for supporting liberation movements as well as social movements that sought to disrupt and effect change in the unequal relations of power consolidated by authoritarian policies.

Women's movements were at the forefront of social movements to utilize oral history in the service of its liberatory objectives. Feminist historians engaged with the questions raised by women liberation movements: where are the women in history? Why are women excluded from mainstream historical narratives? Responses to the questions came in the form of research projects that excavated archives in search of women who were excluded from the historical narrative because their lives and interests were not considered important enough to be preserved and documented. Reclaiming the voices of women became a key focus of feminist historians for decades. Feminist historians also challenged narratives that excluded women and integrated gender as an analytical lens for reading and writing history. One of the most effective approaches in the writing of women's history was the documentation and preservation of oral narratives of women. Feminist historians succeeded in initiating and consolidating a research movement in support of women liberation movements in the world.

Against this background, and in addition to continuing the work on the Archive of Women's Voices at WMF, WMF organized and conducted education workshops over the past two decades in feminist oral history methodologies and with the aim encouraging and supporting the establishment of feminist oral history archives in the Arab world. The WholsShe database, in turn, holds information about Egyptian professional women active in the public sphere in general, and those whose life-narratives are kept in the WMF archive.

The establishment of feminist oral history archives that document women's lives and shed light on their experiences and contributions to society constitute an effective method for challenging discriminatory ideas and practices and for moving towards a more just society for all.

Introduction

Feminist Oral History in the Time of COVID-19

Dalia Ebeid

Embarking on a feminist oral history project cultivates its special challenges and wonders. Each feminist oral history project at the Women and Memory Forum brought with it new experiences and demands on how to formulate questions, select potential interviewees, and map out the timeline for each project. The Women Entrepreneurs Project came at a unique time of a raging global pandemic that raised new questions on the way of conducting feminist oral history during a time of fear and uncertainty. The Women Entrepreneurs Project focused on the lives of these entrepreneurs, what it means to be a businesswoman in Egypt, and the intersection of the private and public for these women. Women narrators addressed sexism in the workplace and their private lives as well as personal triumphs and being the lead pioneers within their respective sectors.

Over the course of ten months (January-October 2022), I conducted twenty interviews in different venues and using various technologies. Several women entrepreneurs preferred to meet online rather than in-person to avoid any possibilities of infection. Technology also enabled me to perform a joint interview with three business owners who happen to be sisters who were outside of Cairo at the time. The group interview enriched and added a novel dimension to a process that usually consists of individual interviews and demonstrated that their close familial bonds allowed them to become successful entrepreneurs together. There was the convenience of easily scheduling an online interview, but I worried about a few issues: the loss of personal communication between interviewer and interviewee which is essential to feminist oral history, as well as the body language which also constitutes an integral part of feminist interviewing. I felt both privileged and disadvantaged owing to the convenience of technology but needing that personal touch and communication to establish trust between me and the narrators. Another unique aspect of this project was that I was granted access to the world of these women entrepreneurs during the in-person interviews, which occurred in their places of business.

Interviewing them in their places of business added new dimensions to the interviewing process: I was able to witness firsthand the way they ran their businesses, interacted within their spaces, and engaged with their employees. Each space expressed the personality of the interviewee and the contribution that she had added to the business sphere of Egypt. Their businesses encompassed diverse sectors such as public relations, media and advertising, food industries, and artwork among other sectors. As feminist oral histories aim to shed light on the private and public lives of

women, this project demonstrates the endless ingenuity and creativity of Egyptian women in different fields. The women narrators divulged nuances of the business world and their navigation of ups and downs of both careers and family life. They opened up about the difficulties and challenges of what it means to be women in highly demanding positions who are, more often than not, expected to juggle multiple roles of business owner, wife, mother, daughter, and on occasion caretaker. Feminist oral histories foreground women's narratives as told and framed by them and allow us to observe how women tell their stories and attempt to find their places in the world.

Amani Arafa

Amani Nabil Arafa is an Egyptian engineer, businesswoman, and entrepreneur, who entered the field of energy engineering to become the first Egyptian woman to work as an energy contractor, responsible for managing the installation and supplies for energy stations, and the first woman business owner of a private energy contracting company in Egypt. In this interview, Amani talks about her exceptional journey in the public domain, her successful career that spanned over twenty years in a male-dominated work sphere, and her efforts to mentor young business entrepreneurs.

Amani commenced the interview by tracing her first steps into energy engineering. She earned her university degree in Structural Engineering from Ain Shams University in Cairo, then worked for two years in the field, before receiving her first job offer from a natural gas company in the year 2000. Since then, Amani has worked in energy and natural gas engineering, offering technical and executive solutions to projects in Egypt and abroad. She also holds an MBA, a diploma in project management, and a corporate organization and management certificate, among her other qualifications.

On her experience as a woman working in energy engineering, Amani stressed that the early stages of her career were very challenging, since the number of women engineers in the energy sector was very limited, which she attributed to the harsh working conditions, and the deliberate exclusion of women. Amani recounted her experience with rejection and exclusion in the workplace, which was directed at her for no other reason but for being a woman. She started her career as an employed engineer in a major natural gas company, where she proved her aptitude and proficiency, and earned the trust of the company's executive leadership. However, some of her colleagues and managers saw that there was definitely a man who could take her place no matter how competent she was, because for them there was no actual need for a woman in this job. They talked about replacing her with a man engineer as to offer a job opportunity to a man who was more worthy of the good pay than Amani the young woman who, then, lived under the care of her rich father.

When Amani earned a promotion into a leadership role in the company as the General Manager of Missions, the rejection escalated into exclusion, by subjecting her to financial violence in the form of temporarily withholding her salary. She described her perseverance under such conditions as a declaration that she had the "upper hand" in determining the course of her professional life, and in defending her right to leadership. Her resistance did not only secure her new post, but also urged the executive leadership to compensate her financially for the injustices and discrimination she endured.

Amani noted during the interview that male dominance in the energy sector is a global phenomenon that manifests itself in how only men occupy leadership roles. She added that the rejection she faced in Egypt was less severe than the exclusionary practices she experienced in other countries, as a direct response to her being a young

woman in a leadership position. Even the communities with powerful economic entities, and advanced high-tech industries suffer from the absence of women in energy business.

Amani recounted her visit to one of the international factories in South Korea to close a business deal in 2002, when all the factory workers declined to work under the management and supervision of a woman, and threatened to discontinue the factory's operations, since it was impossible for them as men to accept "being watched" and evaluated by a woman. The factory managers had no solution to offer but to suggest removing Amani, the manager assigned to inspect the contractual terms of the work, from the factory floor. For them, women worked only in service sectors; they did not work as engineers, and they most definitely did not hold leadership positions that allow them to oversee men's labor. Amani resisted the attempts to exclude her, and threatened to call off the deal. Under her supervision, the factory workers completed the required tasks for contracting.

Amani also recalled a business visit to a company in Germany, and everyone's astonishment at her managerial title, and the scale of responsibilities entrusted to her as a woman. She was especially stunned when they wondered about the salary of a man with the same title, and their conviction that the sex of the employee was a determining factor in setting wages, so that if a woman was to hold a position like hers, she could not possibly get paid the same as a male counterpart with her qualifications and expertise.

Amani remarked that this was in the early 2000s, and women were still excluded and discriminated against in the global energy sector, in which the glass ceiling, vertical segregation, and the gender pay gap were normalized as shared standard practices that deny women access to equal pay, and the same managerial and leadership opportunities granted to their male counterpart. Amani added that, in order for her to reach the top management positions, she had to work twice as hard as any man to prove her eligibility, and to collect the qualifications and expertise that would justify her competence to lead. While her male counterparts were granted the same positions as a natural step in the course of their careers and without any particular requirements to attest for their leadership capability, she had to constantly prove she deserves a seat on the table.

These were among the key reasons that motivated Amani to start her own business. She launched her energy contracting and supplies company in 2005, at the age of 31, as a young business entrepreneur. Despite her family's relentless support for her work and education, they were rattled by her decision. Her father was worried about the evident male dominance in the field, which entailed that Amani would be left out of the business alliances and partnerships. Her mother's concern stemmed from social pressures and misconceptions about the implications of a woman's independence and equality with men in the public domain. For the mother, her unmarried daughter was not only risking her success in a stable and financially rewarding job, but she was also starting her private business to compete head-to-head

against men as their equal, which means eliminating all her chances of finding a husband.

Amani explained that the social pressures she experienced as a young entrepreneur derived from three major issues. First, she was too young for the tough market competition and the significant financing required for energy businesses. Second, there was no precedence for a woman who made it in the energy industry. The third issue was her decision to start her own independent business on her own, for which she has full control and total authority. Over the years, Amani managed to prove herself, by effectively running the technical and administrative operations of the business on her own, and expanding the scope of her business to include natural gas and solar energy stations. By the year 2017, Amani became the business owner of an energy solutions and supplies company that operates in a number of Arab and African countries, handles contracting and dealership for various international European manufacturers, and competes in the business market for international tenders.

Amani is the only woman to break through the energy supplies industry. She spoke about how being the only woman in the business used to make her very proud to have achieved such unique success, but by time, she wondered why women were still reluctant to enter the field. She started her own business determined to break the glass ceiling that holds women back from going into the energy business, and to open the door for more women to join. However, until now, Amani is still the only woman working in energy contracting. Nonetheless, Amani stressed that her experience in the global energy sector reveals that the Egyptian woman is in a better position from the energy business and industry than her counterparts in Africa and Europe.

Amani's involvement in the public domain does not stop at her entrepreneurial work in the energy industry, and appears distinctly in her dedication to social responsibility, through her commitment to offering coaching and mentorship to young entrepreneurs, and her support to women empowerment practices and organizations. Amani collaborated with non-profit organizations for youth empowerment in several countries in Africa, in addition to her active efforts towards offering work and training opportunities to young people with intellectual disabilities in factories and companies, as part of her role as a board member in the Egyptian Federation Association for Intellectual Disabilities. Amani also collaborated with UNESCO to deliver coaching sessions to women business entrepreneurs in Cameroon, in addition to being an active member in a number of women organizations, including The Boardroom Africa, which is the region's largest alliance of women in executive and managerial positions. Amani participates in the networking events held by the organization among the most influential women in the region to exchange their experiences and analyze the challenges women face in their journey towards corporate leadership.

Amani's experience carries aspects that reveal the multiple efforts women have to exert when entering an area traditionally occupied by men. It also sheds light on women's exclusion leading Amani to opt for establishing her own business; while at the same time alerting her to play a social role in helping other women find their place in the world of entrepreneurship.

Farah Ahmed

In this interview, Farah Ahmed talks about her start-up “The Baby Garage,” her family, women in business and in the public sphere, and the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on her work in general.

Farah has 14 years of experience in corporate life, as she started climbing up the corporate ladder when she was a first-year student at the university. She worked in different companies in the fields of development, advertising, and marketing. She even helped establish Think Digital Group’s franchise office in Egypt, before she dedicated all her time to her start-up “The Baby Garage” in March 2021, which was officially established in January 2020. Farah says that the idea began in 2015 and was only reliant on the efforts of volunteers back then. She also worked on the platform on a part-time basis only. The platform was dedicated to mothers helping each other without generating any profit. Later, Farah started an initiative called “Momprenneur,” which helped mothers work from home by encouraging them to buy baby products and resell them to other mothers on the platform. Farah says that this initiative supported more than a thousand mothers start their own business until now. Farah also developed the platform through content creation. She started publishing an online magazine that specializes in motherhood and childcare in Arabic, while citing reliable references and the advice of experts. This was all not-for-profit, until the platform was incubated by the Egyptian Ministry of Communications, when the platform won a competition called “Hiya Ra’eda” (She’s an Entrepreneur). Farah then began to expand her company and her team, which used to consist of volunteers only.

Farah says that what motivated her to start her initiative was her own experience being a mother. She believes mothers do not find much support as they go through the experiences of pregnancy and childcare. She believes motherhood is a beautiful experience, but it is difficult, as new mothers find themselves faced with huge responsibilities and may suffer from medical complications or mental health issues. Society does not try to anticipate such problems or help mothers through them, Farah says. Farah also highlights the fact that the platform does not only target mothers, but fathers too, since fathers need to play a more active role in the upbringing of their children and relieve mothers of some of their duties. She, however, says that 90% of the burden is still shouldered by mothers, thanks to the culture surrounding the experience of motherhood.

As for the challenges Farah faces in her work, she says that they are mostly personal and have to do with her being a mother and a woman, which leaves her with multiple responsibilities. She compares between the typical day of a mother and a father, highlighting the fact that men in Egyptian culture are not as involved as women in childcare. Thus, if a man and a woman are given the same task, the woman/mother would take longer than the man to accomplish it. As for other challenges pertaining to women and entrepreneurship, she highlighted a problem she encountered in

women entrepreneurship support programs. She says that most of these programs encourage women to start their own companies, but do not say much on how to sustain them. She also says that most incubators invest in men, and that this has to do with global culture, not only Egyptian or Arab culture, as it is considered typical of men to be in leadership positions. Farah also sees a lot of stereotypes in corporate culture, as some companies prefer hiring men in certain positions and women in others. However, she says that she met women who broke those stereotypes, despite facing a lot of challenges in their work environments. She believes that in her field, women and men are hired equally, but when it comes to sales for instance, women are preferable, which is a stereotype Farah does not believe in. She does not see a difference between men and women in their professional performance, and says such differences have to do with different personalities and backgrounds, not gender. She criticizes companies that discriminate against women due to their marital status or the fact that they have children. She did not face much trouble being a woman in a leadership role but believes that some employees cannot tolerate the idea of having a woman manager or leader.

As for the novel coronavirus pandemic and its impact on Farah's personal life and career, she said that she had problems with long-term planning because the situation was hazy at the beginning of the pandemic. However, she asserts that because her platform is an online platform, this was a huge privilege. Audience began to better interact with the platform and benefit from its services during the pandemic. However, this does not suggest there were no challenges. People may be enjoying the different services provided by "The Baby Garage," but there needs to be a team on the ground for such services to exist. Even if she decided that her team would work in-office, other companies she has collaborations with may not make the same decision. Farah and her team are on a flexible work schedule, where they work from the office for three days and for two days, they work from home or from anywhere else.

As for Farah's family, she says they were supportive of her from the beginning, when she was still an undergraduate student. They even supported her on her first business trip while she was a first-year student. When she decided to abandon her stable job and become a full-time entrepreneur, they only had some legitimate concerns, but they still supported her. Farah's mother even accompanied her to the UAE for a year to take care of her newborn child while she took a job offer at Yahoo. Her husband was also supportive even of her trip to the UAE. She stressed the importance of self-actualization for both parties in a marriage as well as the importance of sharing responsibilities between husband and wife.

This interview tackled different aspects of Farah's personal life and career, specifically her work at "The Baby Garage" and its current success, women, business, and gender, as well as her personal support network.

Fatma El Zahraa Ahmed

In this interview, Fatma El Zahraa Ahmed talks about her startup MEAComS, which she launched fourteen years ago. She also talks about her studies, her beginnings in public relations (PR), her family, and answers some questions about gender and business in general and about the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, she voices her opinions on education, and the importance of parents supporting their children's chosen career paths.

Fatma graduated from the Faculty of al-Asun, Department of English, and worked as a translator for some time. She later decided that this was not where her passion lied, and switched careers to marketing in the field of communications, then to PR. She began studying for her MBA, when she noticed how important it was, as she says it used to be "preferred" in job postings, then became a requirement. By coincidence, she started communicating with a solar energy company headquartered in the USA, then she had to launch her own startup in order to start doing business with the said company. She launched her startup on her own, without any partners. In the beginning, some of her family members were against her work, worrying that she would lose her own funds, which she invested in her company.

Fatma emphasizes that her work at MEAComS is very dynamic, as she gets to work with a versatile group of clients, from different fields, just like advertising companies do. She also indicates that working in PR requires multitasking skills, social skills, and adaptability. Fatma describes MEAComS as a PR agency, specializing in corporate media activities, such as press conferences, interviews, crisis management, media monitoring (monitoring competitors' media), and training, specifically training clients to deal with journalists and the media. MEAComS also specializes in media communication, events, and provides services such as translation and content writing, which clients, in turn, present to the media.

As for impediments that she faced in her career due to her gender, Fatma said that indeed there have been many. For instance, when she audits accounting records, the male accountant she employs would sometimes get offended. Fatma says that men do not like the idea that they are managed by a woman, which, she believes, has to do with the patriarchy. Luckily, Fatma says she does not face similar problems with clients, as her clientele knows who she is when they ask for her services. In a related vein, Fatma says that it is difficult to do business in Egypt, and that a comparison between the business scene in Egypt and in other countries would not be in Egypt's favor. Fatma also sees that business is usually linked to men, especially steel and industrial businesses. However, she, in addition, sees Azza Fahmy's business as an exception to that rule, as she, a woman, was able to build an iconic jewelry-making business. Women unfortunately are obliged to fight against backward customs and traditions and the weight of doing so could be even heavier than the weight of doing business, states Fatma, especially when women do not have enough support. Sometimes, she

also says that women do not support other women, but she believes that the current generation of young people are very supportive of each other.

Also, regarding gender, Fatma states that her current team consists of women only, and that was intentional, not a coincidence. She thinks women are more capable of working in PR than men, and that she is for women's empowerment. Fatma also hires men, such as photographers and designers, but she hires those who are more open-minded, so that they would not clash. She asserts that sometimes she must stand her grounds and be a "dictator" to guarantee the success of her business. When asked about gender differences between men and women's performances at work, Fatma said that women are better at multitasking, while men would rather focus on one task at a time and not distract themselves. She states that she likes working with women and values their input, as they never disappoint her.

Fatma also said that PR attracts more women, and that 80% of owners of PR agencies are women and the rest are men. On the other hand, advertising attracts more men, since those who work in the field spend many long hours at their offices and need to deal with technicians who tend to be men. PR, however, needs language skills, talent, and presentability, which tend to be more feminine traits, she believes. Fatma, however, asserts that these are not hard-and-fast rules, as there are many women in advertising and many men in translation, etc.

Fatma adds that her startup is currently affiliated with one of the top PR agencies in the world, and that this gave her the opportunity to work with international clients, such as Blackberry, Canon, Shell, and General Electric. When the Covid-19 pandemic started, however, business slowed down. She thinks lockdown was a good break though, as there were not many events to organize and no work-related stress as usual. Fatma and her team could also adapt to the new normal by working remotely.

Fatma concluded the interview by emphasizing the importance of parents encouraging their children to find their passion, even if that passion, in their opinion, was not a good source of income. When one succeeds at what they are passionate about, they will, in turn, have good income, she says, and they thus should not be forced to pursue a career they do not want. Fatma also commented on the problem of education in Egypt and the fact that she notes that some schools do not provide good educational services, and that some parents are also lax in their parenting. She emphasized the importance of hard work if one were to achieve their dreams career-wise.

Hanan Abdel Meguid

In this interview, Hanan Abdel Meguid, founder and CEO of Camelizer, talks about her long career in the field of entrepreneurship and technology. She also talks about the entrepreneurship scene in Egypt and women. In addition, she discusses her family, the values they taught her and their support of her in every step of the way. Finally, she talks about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on business and entrepreneurship in Egypt.

Hanan graduated from the American University in Cairo (AUC) with a B.Sc. of computer science in 1993. She majored in computer science by chance, but she later truly found herself and her passion in it, especially in software development. She talks at length about the role of the AUC in her life and how she spent long hours in the University's laboratory. She then formed friendships that would last until after graduation and would also turn into business partnerships. Upon graduation, she co-founded her company Microlabs, inspired by the global Microsoft. Despite the company's success, disagreements between the founders led to its closure two years later. Hanan talks about the trauma of this experience and the lessons learned from it. She later worked for a government entity, the Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) for about a year. However, she asserts that as she worked there, she kept searching for an opportunity to make her own ideas happen. While she worked there, she was fascinated by the internet – the IDSC was among only two government entities that had internet access back then. She felt she could see the future with her own eyes and that she needs to be part of that ongoing change. She later on moved to LINKdotNet, which helped establish many important websites on the internet, some of which continue to exist online today.

As for her family, Hanan states that they always supported her, even when they had some doubts about her launching her own company at first. She said her father was always asking the question "Why not?" rather than "Why?" He also taught her the importance of self-confidence. As for her mother, she said she taught her both pride and self-discipline. She says her parents were not interested in marrying her off, like some Egyptian traditional families are, but were more interested in her education, her skills, and her career.

Hanan recalls the Egyptian Revolution, and says that when it happened, she discovered that she is driven by making a difference in her work, specifically in the market. She says money is important, but making a difference and innovation are even more important for her. One of her friends invited her once on a tour at the Greek Campus, affiliated with the AUC, and she found herself pointing at one of the offices and asking him to reserve it for her. This is when Camelizer was born. Regarding the name, she says it has to do with the qualities of camels, who are beautiful animals that are patient and persistent, and keep reserves of food and drink for difficulty days, and these are the qualities that Hanan wanted to see in her business. Camelizer is an angel

investor, interested in working with technology startups at the seed stage, and taking them to the next stages where they have a product they own and can sell.

Hanan has also received an Eisenhower fellowship, a fellowship for innovative young leaders, where she spent seven weeks in the USA. It was difficult back then for her to leave her family and her job, but she approached the matter with a “Why not?” mentality as usual, and she says the experience was one of most important in her life.

When asked about whether she keeps a specific quota for women-led startups in her company, she said that she does not. However, she was proud to state that she invests in several companies co-founded by women, even if this was not intentional. She says that women understand other women, and that their problems could be the same or similar at least. As for whether men tend to do some jobs and women others, she said that some women do administrative jobs because they believe they are the only suitable option for them. She, however, says that this is wrong, and that women are more brilliant and capable than men. She asserts that women only need not deal with the world as “women”, meaning, they should not use womanhood as an excuse for slacking. She, at the same time, criticizes the lack or scarcity of women-friendly laws and guidelines at many companies. She also says that women may take more difficult decisions when it comes to their social life if their work matters to them. Moreover, she states that she, herself, found difficulty with work–life balance at some points.

Hanan asserts that some women entrepreneurs tell her that investors ask them intrusive questions, such as questions about their marital status and whether they plan to start a family soon. She wonders why men are not interrogated the same way, though they also get married and have children, and have a share in domestic duties. She, in addition, adds that women create “support groups” for themselves when they are in the same workplace, and that the more women exist in the workplace, the higher the interest in women’s labor becomes. She says that she noted this correlation herself.

As for the novel coronavirus pandemic, Hanan said that regardless of losing loved ones, the pandemic pushed the process of digital transformation forward. She also says that remote work gave her the chance to care for her family while at the same time do the work she loves. Tech companies’ value rose, thanks to the pandemic, she says, though some startups suffered from lack of funding in the beginning. People, however, became more interested in new models, like hybrid learning.

This interview, thus, covered different aspects of Hanan’s life and career, specifically her early start in the field of technology, her different jobs, and finally launching her own angel investor company. The interview also covered important aspects of her personal life.

Hend Gomaa

In this interview, Hend Sherine Gomaa talks about her education, career in the field of digital media, her company, the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and about her family and husband.

Hend graduated from the Faculty of Simultaneous Translation, Al-Azhar University, and joined EBM as an editor and a translator. She worked then in content writing on the internet at an early stage in its relatively short existence, that is, in 2000. Hend says that back then, most people were not fully aware of the importance of online Arabic content. She did not find her passion in translation, so she decided to take a different path. In the beginning, she used to think that programming was difficult, but she began to learn it by herself, without taking any courses. She gradually left translation and focused on digital media. After 15 years in her career, she traveled to Beirut to attend an event, and that is where she met her current business partner. He discussed starting their own company together. This is when she left her stable job, where she had numerous benefits. From day one, both partners agreed not to interfere in each other's work, so he does not interfere in operations and technicalities, and she does not interfere in business development. Hend believes in the importance of mentorship programs and employing fresh graduates. Most businesses employ fresh graduates because they are mostly satisfied with lower salaries, says Hend, but she believes in hiring them to give them a chance to learn and discover themselves.

As for raising awareness about the importance of Arabic content online, Hend says that investors began to gradually realize it, as well as the fact that it could generate great revenue, especially with the Egyptian 25th January Revolution. Hend believes that the Revolution led to enriching Arabic content online somehow. Before then, online forums were a large repository of content, some of which was of a low quality; but despite that fact, it generated enormous revenues. Therefore, she believes that high-quality content would even generate more revenue.

When asked about her family's reaction to her leaving her stable job and establishing her own company, she said that her family, especially her mother, was supportive despite her initial concerns. Her father had passed away long before her decision to establish her own company, but she believes that had he been alive, he would have also supported her. Despite his relative conservatism, she said he gave her complete freedom to decide on her own path during her upbringing. Hend married later and says that her husband is also supportive of her in both words and actions. She also talked about her conscious decision not to have children, as she is not ready to abandon her career and focus on children.

One of the challenges that she faced was that one full team of developers resigned when they learned she was going to be their manager. She says they could not take the idea that their manager is a woman and one who does not even wear hijab. She intentionally replaced the team with another one that consists of women only. Hend

also understands that some women have concerns about having a female manager, but she asserts this is not a matter of gender, but of character. Some managers are tough, while others are gentle and nice, and this has nothing to do with gender, she says.

In a similar vein related to gender dynamics and business, Hend emphasized that clients do not find a problem in dealing with her as a female manager, even in a traditional society like Saudi Arabia. She believes that women can prove themselves through their experience and their diligence. When asked about whether investors have concerns about investing in a company owned by a woman, Hend said that the opposite is true. Most investors understand that women are more responsible than men and take their time when making decisions. Hend also sees a difference between men and women when it comes to work. As previously stated, women tend to take their time before taking any steps, so Hend believes investing in women is more worthwhile than investing in men, who tend to be rash and to change jobs more often. She also talked about some of the problematics of being a woman in a leadership position in Egyptian culture, such as saying that any behavior she exhibits is the result of her "hormonal problems." She said she and an employee had a disagreement once, and she did not deal with it in the best manner, so she tried apologizing to him more than once. He suddenly resigned after a month and only told her he was a traditional man, and he cannot accept that a woman raised her voice in front of him. She asserts that men may show their anger in our culture, but women are not entitled to do the same.

As for the novel coronavirus pandemic and its impact on business in general and Hend's business in particular, she said that it had a great impact on the field. Some companies laid off some employees or cut their salaries. However, Hend's work was not greatly impacted by the pandemic, as she and her team usually rely on working online. However, this does not negate the fact that her business was impacted somehow. She said that some clients cut their marketing budget out of fear. However, she asserts that the field is almost back at full force again because the world realized lockdowns are not the solution. Coronavirus is a pandemic, she says, thus it is meant to stay. As for how Hend and her team coped with the pandemic, she said they spent four months working from home in the beginning. She is, however, totally against working from home, as she believes in direct face-to-face communication with her team.

The interview covered different aspects of Hend's character, her work in digital media, and the challenges she faced and continued to face as she works on enriching Arabic content online.

Hend Salem

This interview revolves around Egyptian feminist Hend Salem's career and personal life. Hend is an Egyptian woman and executive director of Elles/Hunna Publishing House. She talks about her beginnings in Egyptian NGOs, the establishment of Elles, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on publishing, and her personal life, husband, and family.

Hend graduated from the Academy of Arts, Department of Drama and Criticism, in 1998. Throughout her studies, she always felt that women are subject to injustices, but back then, she was not aware of feminist theory or feminism as a movement. She went on to hold many important positions in feminist Egyptian NGOs, however. When she graduated, she joined the New Woman Foundation's program "Female Youth Forum" and thanks to this program, she began to be aware of feminism and to adopt the label "feminist." She also managed the "Creative Women in the Shadows" project, which seeks out Egyptian creative women outside the center, Cairo. She also worked at the Development Support Center on gender. Until 2017, Hend was executive director at "Nawras," the company affiliated with New Woman Research Center at that time. Then, she traveled to Jordan where she offered consultancy services, specifically in capacity building and gender. Hend says that her experience in the area of training comes from her work at the Development Support Center. As for her feminist experience, she said it comes from her work at NWF. In addition, Hend went to Kurdistan, where she participated in developing the national strategy for health services, making it more responsive to women subject to sexual abuse or abuse in general. Hend emphasizes the crucial nature of the issue of violence against women and her own passion about the cause, given that it lies at the core of the feminist movement. She also spoke about problems faced by NGOs in Egypt, especially funding, the lack of which caused many to fail.

As for Elles and its beginnings, Hend stated that she and her husband were inspired by feminist publishing houses in France during the seventies. She highlighted the fact that there are many well-established feminist organizations in Egypt already, so there is no need for a new organization. What is really needed, she believes, is a feminist publishing house that cooperates with these organizations. Elles is interested in publishing feminist writings in Egypt, the Arab world, and North Africa; it even has a section for Kurdish works. Hend had reservations at first due to the August 2017 crackdown on NGOs (including feminist ones). However, she says that her husband took the risk and Elles was established. Hend also wanted Elles to play a cultural role in society through holding workshops and cultural events. Elles held workshops such as "Methodologies of Feminist Research," started an Elles film club, a book club, and the "Feminist Photography" exhibition, the first of its kind in Egypt. This is how Elles participates in the dissemination of culture and attempts to even change it. Its role, thus, goes beyond that of a traditional publishing house.

Hend and her husband started Elles with their own resources, and no external funding. They chose the French "Elles" because it parallels the Arabic "Hunna." They did not try to find investors for their project, and Hend justified that by the fact that her experience comes from non-profit organizations. However, Elles is "for-profit." Hend believes that she and her husband need to further contemplate the issue of investors because it is problematic. Elles, though, welcomes cooperation with women entrepreneurs in the same field. In a related vein, Hend asserts that the publishing field is masculinist par excellence, and that accepting a feminist publisher was challenging in the beginning. People often confuse what is "feminist" with what is "feminine" and have the misconception that Elles only publishes women authors for instance. Hend, however, states that Elles eventually proved itself in the field and its existence became more acceptable to the audience. She says that Elles is popular in Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Kurdistan, and Syria, and that she hopes to open a branch for Elles in Tunisia one day.

As for the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on Elles, Hend said that all the publishing house's activities were switched from face-to-face to online during the pandemic. She believes that this has its pros and cons. It allowed people outside of Egypt and even outside of the Arab world to participate in Elles' activities. However, working or participating in events from home is also problematic for women, since they traditionally do most domestic work, so they get no rest and cannot separate between both types of work.

Regarding the challenges that Hend faced in her professional life, she said that since 2017 and until today, NGOs are targeted and could fail due to that. She also said that the Me Too Movement in Egypt prompted her to make sure that Elles is a safe place for women. She asserted the importance of believing survivors of sexual assault and harassment and openly discussing issues related to the movement as well as rights of survivors of violence in the shadow of a legal system she believes does not support women. She also emphasized the difficulty of maintaining Elles, since it largely relies on Hend and her husband's own resources.

Hend believes that women are more motivated to learn than men and she sees that herself in the cultural events organized by Elles as more women join them. She also says that she is more comfortable working with women generally. In addition, she asserts that many women have become entrepreneurs on the level of informal economy. Covid-19, moreover, prompted many women to take on sales online.

Hend also spoke about her family, specifically her sister, who supported her in studying drama. As for her brothers, Hend said she feels alienated by them intellectually, since they are traditional men. She also asserts that her family rarely interferes with her work. Her husband, however, is a feminist who strongly supports her work. She believes that her personal life has never constituted an impediment to her work and that she was lucky to have found her husband. It is clear that Hend's life decisions are guided by her feminist consciousness, which developed early in her life, and was sharpened by her work in feminist milieus, leading her to become the first Egyptian founder, owner, and manager of a contemporary feminist publishing house.

Karam Tawfiq

In this interview, Karam Ahmed Tawfiq spoke about the different stages of her life and the kinds of experiences she gained from them, viewing every single phase as a learning adventure that was formative and eventually led to her long-held idea and dream of starting a publishing house and bookstore: the future Kotob Khan.

Knowledge gained through reading and writing was always apart of Karam's life. As a five-year-old child, she learned from her teacher mother how to read and write, which is how she first developed her love for books. However, when Karam wanted to pursue English literature in university, she faced some pressure from her mother that led to her studying and receiving a mass communications degree in 1988 instead. A little change of plans never succeeded in stopping Karam's work or dreams; conversely, she worked harder and learned more. In fact, she believed in and loved exploring many work vocations and paths, even when they took the form of volunteering, as she did in radio broadcasting. After getting her MBA in project management, Karam spent a considerable amount of time in the corporate life.

Between the years 1991-2005, she worked in multiple multinational companies like the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T), HP, and many others. There she learned and gained more experiences, which she would later put into practice in building her own business, Kotob Khan. One of the major lessons that Karam learned from this time was the value of sharing. In particular, the sharing of information is very essential to successful business. When information is not accurately shared, proceeding with anything takes more time and corrections have to be made. Because of this, Karam strives to do her best and to be generous with information sharing. She says that information sharing is critical "for everyone to be at the same level and having the same information, and knowing the workflow will keep progressing and not stop because someone is not available."

Related to her time in the corporate world and her previous professional experiences, Karam was asked about whether she faced any discrimination or sexism as a working female in the corporate life. She said she did not and considers this to be one of the most positive aspects of her life. She attributes this experience to the structure of international corporate life and how mechanisms have been developed to not allow for these sorts of behaviors to go unnoticed or unpunished. She said, "there were secret assessments done on a three months' basis for every subordinate, manager, and so on...," which helped to monitor and prevent any bullying or harassment. She elaborates that the only sort of aggravation and annoyance she ever received came from the same sex, other women, because "I am not veiled and my hair shows and I look a little different." She also says, that she faced more tensions from women than she faced from men.

Talking about this issue of women in the workplace, Karam particularly wants to understand better why many women, who have received advanced educations, are

increasingly willing to give up joining the workforce or starting businesses and rather stay at home. She sees this phenomenon as increasing in the last decades. The problem bewilders her and she thinks the phenomenon deserves more research and inquiry. In contrast, Karam talks about her mother's generation – people born in the forties and fifties – who were more active: "They finished their education, worked, got married, raised children, and taught their children with way less means than we have nowadays."

Reflecting on this whole period of her life and these experiences and lessons, Karam says: "everything I achieved, and all that is Kotob Khan, is a product of my work in the corporate world." While this phase of her life was invaluable, Karam never lost sight of her idea of starting something new and innovative. Therefore, finally in 2006, Karam turned her dreams into a reality and started her bookstore/publishing house Kotob Khan, without hesitation or fears, but rather with a sense of excitement and enthusiasm that she still keeps to this day.

At Kotob Khan, making a profit was never the goal for Karam, and she stands behind any serious piece of literature even if it is not going to have a high return. Spreading culture and helping writers and artists go through the publishing process are her major beliefs. To do these things, Karam has to sometimes work around the clock, saying "I am a workaholic." Gaining the knowledge that Karam required in order to run a business like Kotob Khan was never an easy task. She had to start from scratch in order to be able to understand how the entire process of her line of business worked; even in logistical details like where to get bulk paper, how to import books from abroad, and how to distribute printed books in Egypt and elsewhere. Gaining this knowledge personally cost her a lot of time and effort; nonetheless, she generously shares those years of knowledge and struggle with anyone seeking help. Understanding the ups and downs in any business is a very crucial skill, and being able to make the most of the down times is something that Karam learned during the peak of the corona virus pandemic during the last couple of years. Although book sales were down to fifty percent, Karam saw this as an opportunity to refocus and devote more time to her work; especially in giving more attention to good pieces of writing. Aside from the work, she was also able to spend more time doing the other things she liked to do for herself like reading and spending time with her family.

Founding Kotob Khan was difficult and continually moving forward, especially during the pandemic, was especially challenging. However, Karam accepted these difficulties in order to follow her passions, while always knowing that she could have stayed in the corporate world with all of its comforts and benefits. Karam says clearly that everyone should choose their dreams and be what they want to be, even if it is difficult.

Kristin Ibrahim

In this interview, Kristin Ibrahim discusses her professional career in sales, specifically in fashion wholesaling, as well as some aspects of her personal life. Kristin started work during secondary school. She worked at several important companies in Egypt, such as Ikea, Eva Pharma, and TGI Friday's Restaurant, where she started out as a hostess, then was promoted to coach and eventually, manager.

Kristin is an Egyptian 30-year-old woman who works as a fashion wholesaler in Faisal, Giza. She thought her career was over after marriage and children, but instead, she decided to pursue her passion, which is fashion sale. In the beginning, she began selling clothes online, via social networking websites, and did not launch her own store until she was certain it was going to be a success. She built a Facebook community of approximately 11.000 members. On her beginning in the field, she said she had always loved marketing, even while she worked at Friday's before she started out in clothing sale. She started out with her sisters as partners. Each one bought several pieces of clothes and tried to sell them online. To their surprise, all the pieces were sold. They, thus, started buying more pieces, which in turn sold out. They began buying "bales" of clothes, that is, clothes that are lightly used or have some defects. Together they perform all duties related to the job, beginning from procurement, to modelling and finally selling the pieces. They only started out with a humble budget, 500LE, and did not need investors or a large capital. Kristin's home became her workplace too. She emphasized the importance of social networking websites in today's world, as people use their phones round the clock, and she was able to benefit from this in her business.

Kristin said that the Covid-19 pandemic was a blessing in disguise for her work. During the pandemic, most people preferred staying safe by not going out shopping, so they started to shop online more frequently. Lockdown also negatively affected traditional in-store sales. Kristin gave her customers free returns of the items if they did not like them, and that made people trust her and helped expand her clientele. In addition, women are usually tight on time because they have a lot of responsibilities, so they resort to online shopping more often. Most clients look for quality material, cheap prices and a seller with good people skills, Kristin says. She asserts that she was able to provide that for her customers. Thanks to selling online, Kristin has many clients in all different governorates in Egypt.

Kristin recalled her formative years and emphasized that she wanted to be financially independent especially after the death of her father. She worked at an early stage in her life doing needlework from home. When asked about her family's stance on her work, she said that they were supportive, despite their initial doubts. They tried to convince her that she does not need to work as they would support her financially themselves, but she genuinely enjoys work. She said that her husband is one of her biggest supporters.

Kristin also spoke about her work as it relates to women. She said that women have swept the fashion retail market recently. She also believes that women are capable of multitasking, unlike men who traditionally work their full-time jobs only. Women may have swept the market, but they are still mothers, she says, who do the majority of domestic work. No man, Kristin insists, can bear the amount of pressure working women shoulder. Kristin also says that she constantly receives phone calls and texts from women who want to work in fashion retail as well, and that her work inspired many. She uses the "live" feature in social networking websites to speak with her audience about how to start a business, succeed at it and sustain it. Kristin also believes that women must financially support the family and that this is not only men's duty. Moreover, she asserts that work improves women's mental health and gives women an identity outside the family unit.

As for challenges that she faced in her journey, she said that she was sometimes defrauded out of money, as she bought bales of clothes thinking they are of the highest quality but turned out to be low quality bales. Kristin is preoccupied with providing advice to other women who want to start their own businesses so that they would not make the same mistakes she did. Kristin also highlighted the importance of respecting one's employees, because she, herself, suffered under the pressure she was subjected to by some of her managers. She strives to create a stress-free atmosphere for her own employees as a result. She also said that it is important to separate one's personal problems and work when it comes to retail. In addition, she said women working in retail could get verbally harassed by passersby and that this is one of the cons of working in the field. However, in a different but related vein, she stressed that men do not refuse working with women just because they are women, but benefit from their experience now, since women have proven themselves in the field.

Kristin is now a primary supplier, that is, she deals directly with importers, who are mostly men. She, however, is ambitious, and hopes to become an importer herself one day, in which case bales would be imported under her name, not under another man's name.

Lobna Abo Doma - Omayma Abo Doma - Rabab Abo Doma

Lobna Abo Doma

Lobna's interview formed a part of a group interview with her sisters and business partners, Omayma and Rabab. Lobna discussed her long career, personal family matters, and her entrepreneurship on two separate projects with her sisters.

Lobna started the interview by mentioning that she is a graduate of Alsun with a major in French. Like her sisters Omayma and Rabab, Lobna had worked at several local and multinational companies until she decided to pursue her entrepreneurial ambitions and start two businesses alongside her sisters. She mentioned her pride in the success of Touch Wood, a wood-based home accessories enterprise and she emphasized that their products are 100% made in Egypt. Through their combined efforts, Touch Wood has become a name brand with strong market presence.

On their decision to leave behind the corporate world and open their own business, Lobna pointed out that corporate work provides stability and knowledge of where your next paycheck is coming from. Entrepreneurship can be riddled with uncertainties as their income fluctuates from season to season. However, Lobna agreed with Omayma and Rabab that entrepreneurship creates flexibility and the opportunity to design your own work schedule, things not offered by the pressure of corporate life.

Lobna hinted at some initial trepidation when they decided to leave the comforts and benefits of being employees and starting their own business. However, they decided to take the risk with the support of their families. Lobna mentioned that in Egypt it is expected to find a steady job with a company once you graduate. Her passion was always art, however, so she found herself working in handicrafts as an afternoon occupation. Art was a constant presence in her life that she actively pursued. Lobna discussed their first entrepreneurship project together as sisters, a school called "Art Fun" where they taught children different forms of art. The early stages of founding Art Fun were permeated with some challenges. Lobna narrated that locating a suitable place and ensuring their school was well-promoted were some of these early challenges. This was around nineteen years ago, so it was before the days of social media and they had to rely on print media such as magazines to advertise their school. Art Fun lasted for seven years and it was a successful project. The main impediment of Art Fun was its time-consuming nature. They were providing morning and afternoon classes and running everything by themselves. They enjoyed the work, but it was coming at the expense of their families, so they made the decision to shut it down.

The conversation then shifted to the founding of Touch Wood and the differences and similarities between Art Fun and Touch Wood. Whereas in Art Fun, Lobna, Omayma, and Rabab mainly dealt with women, with Touch Wood they have women workers as well as male suppliers and carpenters. When asked to elaborate on the gender dynamics of working with men while being women entrepreneurs, the three of them admitted to the difficulties of working with men. Some suppliers and carpenters

assumed they were not familiar with woodworking or lacked any basic understanding of different types of wood. At first, Lobna felt awkward dealing with and attempting to correct older men. With time, however, she realized that this is a transactional process and that they are paying money in exchange of goods. Time and experience taught them to discern high-quality woods and to learn to assert their demands and specifications of the materials they use in their business. When asked whether they intentionally chose women workers only, they said this happened by accident. In the beginning, the girls working in their workshop were students at the Faculty of Fine Arts who wanted to work during their summer vacation. As Touch Wood expanded, they required more stable labor and they hired women workers. The three sisters said they refused to hire any male workers because the girls and women are working by themselves without any daily supervision. Lobna refused the idea of gender-mixing out of concern for their workers. Lobna, Omayma, and Rabab assert that Touch Wood is a family business and they are always careful to treat their employees with respect and to be considerate of their needs. Due to their good treatment, women workers always want to return after taking maternity leave or needed time-off. As women, they understand that girls and women shoulder several responsibilities towards their families while they pursue their careers. Thus, they try to be accommodating and understanding of women's obligations towards their households.

Gendered roles in the workplace was an issue that Lobna observed during her time at HCH supply. She noted that all the engineers were men while women occupied administrative duties. She did concede that this was twenty years ago and that she feels that gender divisions within the workplace are not so clearcut anymore. She felt confident that she never suffered any form of pressure to pursue a specific career because of her gender. She made her career choices as she saw fit for herself. In terms of who is more committed at work, men or women, Lobna stated that she perceived women to be more committed at their jobs than men until they get married. Her sister Rabab mentioned that currently the most dedicated worker is a single girl at their workshop. Familial responsibilities compromise women's dedication and commitment to their jobs.

On the issue of entrepreneurship and being pioneers, Lobna pointed out that when they founded Art Fun around twenty years ago, they were among the first women and people in general to start such a project. The three sisters even mentioned that a famous plastic artist wanted to merge with them and take over their business owing to Art Fun's success. The three of them refused since this was their project and they did not want to hand over their work to anybody or be under anyone's thumb. Their work with Touch Wood is also special and unique as they were the first artists to draw and paint all their products by hand. Lobna also said that what also makes their products unique is that they are meant for daily use, not merely decorative items. The influence of both Art Fun and Touch Wood touched others who were inspired by their examples and decided to start their own art school or wood-based projects.

Within Touch Wood, Lobna, Omayma, and Rabab are all artists who handle different artistic aspects. The labor division comes down to Lobna handling human

resources and finances while Rabab takes care of operations. The three of them also take care of product distribution across different sectors of Cairo. Touch Wood's success and reputation extends beyond Egypt as they have clients in Saudi Arabia, Germany, Bahrain, and Kuwait among other countries. The three sisters asserted that they are very happy working together and they never looked back on their decision to quit their jobs and pursue their artistic endeavors.

Omayma Abo Doma

In this interview, Omayma Abo Doma discusses her long career and diverse work experiences as an employee and then as a two-time entrepreneur. Omayma's interview was part of a group interview with her sisters and business partners, Lobna and Rabab.

Omayma's work experience encompasses 36 years of diverse work environments and expertise. Omayma has worked in administrative capacities in Petroleum companies and she has also worked in marketing. She chose to stay at home with her children for a while and she mentioned that she needed work with more flexibility. She stressed that she loves working with her sisters and that she is very happy with their family business. This was a better option to her than attempting to be a conventional employee climbing up the corporate ladder. Each sister has her strengths in business and they work well together.

As Omayma and her sisters Lobna and Rabab all have experience and talent for art, they decided to open their art school to teach young children and they named it "Art Fun." This was their first entrepreneurial project together which they launched nineteen years ago. The three of them were pioneers with this endeavor as their school provided a systemized and innovative teaching approach to plastic and fine arts. Art Fun was a major success as parents and children sought them and their services. The three sisters even mentioned that a famous plastic artist wanted to merge with them and take over their business owing to Art Fun's success. The three of them refused since this was their project and they did not want to hand over their work to anybody or be under anyone's thumb. However, the only issue was that the school was too time-consuming. They found that they were dedicating all their time to the school and not enough time to their families. Art Fun lasted for seven years and then they decided to shut it down and pursue other opportunities.

Omayma's career started in the corporate world in the Petroleum division of the company HCH in administration. After that, she left HCH for Roussel where she also worked in administration and then she had the opportunity to work in marketing. Omayma enjoyed marketing since the work was creative and she was in charge of creating and publishing promotional materials for the company. Creative work has always drawn Omayma and allowed her to display her artistic talents. She spoke about her prior work experiences positively and when asked if she ever faced gender-based discrimination in the work place, she denied this ever happening. Companies had implemented policies in place to ensure that employees were treated equally regardless of gender.

In terms of workplace gender dynamics, Omayma, Lobna, and Rabab stated that their work at the school of Art Fun was mainly with women; therefore, they did not face issues of being women owners and bosses at the school. Their current company "Touch Wood" is a wood-based home accessories enterprise. In Touch Wood, the men they deal with primarily are the suppliers and carpenters. Omayma pointed out that suppliers and carpenters make assumptions since the three owners of the project are women and therefore, they would not have any experience with woodworking or being able to discern low- grade from high-grade wood. Her sister Lobna said that it took

them time to learn how to address this issue and make their demands and specifications clear. Omayma revealed that this is still an ongoing issue, but that time and experience have taught them how to handle it better.

Their workshop for Touch Wood has female workers only although the three of them asserted that this was not done on purpose. They brought in female students on their summer breaks from the Faculty of Fine Arts to assist them in their workshop. Omayma asserted that they run it as a family business rather than a large corporation. Therefore, the girls who work with them feel a strong sense of loyalty towards the place as Omayma also said that they make sure to treat everybody with respect and to provide the girls with flexibility if they are facing any difficult circumstances. Lobna and Rabab are of the opinion that girls are more committed in work than men until they become engaged and get married. Omayma disagreed with them on this. Her work in multinational entities did not leave room for anybody to not be fully committed or to work overtime if needed. She said that she would be asked to work overtime and stay late while she was married with young children. There was no accounting for personal circumstances or the traditional gender roles of girls and women in terms of family and household responsibilities.

On the question of entrepreneurship and being pioneers in the arts and crafts sector, Omayma wavered a bit. She initially did not perceive herself or her sisters as entrepreneurs or women leaders within their sector. However, she backtracked on this and explained how Touch Wood is unique in that every piece is drawn and painted by hand. Other artistic home accessories businesses do not follow their methodology. Art Fun and Touch Wood are both stand-out projects that brought new and untrodden areas into the market. Lobna, Rabab, and Omayma even added that there were several copycat art schools and wood-based home accessories projects after they launched Art Fun and later Touch Wood. Their work inspired others to copy their example and expand on both these markets. When asked about whether the market of art schools or wood-based home accessories favored a particular gender, Omayma replied that both market sectors have men and women.

Omayma stated the mechanisms of the labor division of Touch Wood. Lobna, Rabab, and herself are artists with different specialties. Lobna handles the human resources and financials while Rabab takes care of orders. The three of them are in charge of product distribution across different sectors of Cairo. The decision making is done by the three of them and they emphasized how much they love working together. Omayma mentioned that starting her two businesses with her sisters was a great decision and that all of them are happy.

Rabab Abo Doma

Rabab's interview was part of a group interview with her sisters and business partners, Lobna and Omayma. Rabab discussed her family, her career, and her decision to launch two businesses with her sisters.

Rabab started the interview by mentioning that she is an alumna of the Faculty of Alsun, but that she did not work in her selected major. She worked as a graphic designer for a big company and then decided to stay at home to take care of her family. She founded two businesses along with her sisters Lobna and Omayma: Art Fun, an art school for children and "Touch Wood," a wood-based home accessories project. The three of them decided to leave behind the corporate world where their working experience was and to become their own bosses. Rabab discussed the pressures and expectations of corporate life and how achieving a work-life balance was challenging. Running their own business provided them with much needed flexibility and the ability to set their own work schedules. It was important to Rabab to have this choice and to be happy with her work. Running the art school (their first project) and now "Touch Wood" allows her to follow her passion and work with her sisters, which she enjoys tremendously. Lobna addressed that abandoning the benefits and stability of corporate life was not easy, but they are happy with their decision. Lobna, Omayma, and Rabab also assert that their family was supportive and that nobody raised objections when they wanted to start their own business.

On the transition to starting the art school, Rabab stated they did not face difficulties due to their gender. The difficulties lied in logistical aspects such as obtaining permits and the like which Rabab found challenging. At Art Fun, they mainly dealt with women such as the mothers of their students. There was not much space to deal with men while they were running Art Fun. The three sisters mentioned an incident where a famous plastic artist wanted to merge with them and take over their business owing to Art Fun's success. The three of them refused since this was their project and they did not want to hand over their work to anybody or be under anyone's thumb. They felt some forms of gender-based discrimination when they founded Touch Wood and started dealing with male suppliers and carpenters. Rabab mentioned that they underestimate them as women and might think them to be frivolous at their business. Her sister Lobna mentioned that they were hesitant at first yet they later learned to be more assertive with their specifications and demands. Over time, their expertise with wood grew and they started to gain better understanding of what worked and what did not.

When asked about whether certain professions are gendered in her experience, Rabab did not agree with this. While she was working in media and advertising, the number of girls and boys was the same. She did not feel that girls were directed into some careers rather than others. At the company she worked for, there were gendered differences as the company allowed girls to leave work within their allotted time while boys could be expected to work till midnight. The workshop for Touch Wood only employs girls and women although the three sisters state this was unintentional. Rabab asserts that they naturally felt more comfortable with girls and women and when

someone has to quit, they ask them for a girl to replace them. Regarding whether she feels men or women are more committed in the workplace, Rabab said that in their workshop now the most active worker is a single girl. Lobna, Omayma, and Rabab have perceived that girls are very committed in their work until they become engaged and get married. Their personal lives start to compromise their jobs.

Rabab noted that their work is unique and that Touch Wood addressed a niche in the market. She also added that after the success of Touch Wood, there emerged several copycats and imitators. They inspired others to go into woodworking and start their own businesses. She believes they are true pioneers within their market sector. Her sister Lobna proudly declared that they were the first company to do all the drawing and painting by hand on their products. No other company had done this before them.

As for the division of labor between the three of them, Lobna, Omayma, and Rabab have distributed their work responsibilities in accordance to their strengths. All of them are artists who use different styles and techniques. Lobna handles human resources and financials while Rabab takes care of organizational matters and handles orders for example. The three of them also take care of product distribution across different sectors of Cairo. Touch Wood has also expanded and reached different countries as buyers approach them from Saudi Arabia, Germany, Bahrain, and Kuwait among others. On the impact of COVID-19, Rabab mentioned that sales were drastically reduced and that she, Lobna, and Omayma stopped receiving salaries to ensure that the girls and women in their workshop were paid along with the carpenters. Things have improved but the pandemic's effects are still affecting their business.

Mariana Maher

In this interview, Mariana Maher – co-owner of a coworking space – talks about both her professional and personal life. She also answers gender-related questions regarding women’s work in Egyptian society, and about the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on her business.

Marianna graduated from the Faculty of Law but did not work in the field. She instead worked in marketing and sales, then human resources (HR). Her brother, Mina, started the project First Step, a coworking space particularly focused on serving children and young adults. They currently operate two branches in Giza.

Mariana started her career in sales early on, when she was eighteen years old, while studying for her degree. She says that she particularly enjoys working with people face-to-face, hence her choice of career path. She asserts that her family, especially her father, were always supportive of her work at such a young age, despite their anxiety over her, an anxiety she respects but does not succumb to. She states that she has always felt that she was independent and should not wait for financial support from her family even though they never withheld it. She also says that she has always felt different from more traditional girls, as she does not devote much time to her looks but is more inclined towards work.

Regarding her work in sales, Mariana states that sales managers usually prefer employing girls, and that this is a kind of exploitation, and that they do not care enough about the products they are promoting. They teach girls how to smile and how to act, not giving them ample information to digest about the products themselves and how to sell them to everybody, not to a select group of people. She says that some women resort to this job when in financial need, not out of enjoyment. Mariana states that her father was her first teacher in sales, as he was also a salesperson, but when she started to work, she was shocked to see how sales managers ask women to deal with customers, as in teaching them to deal with customers in vague ways, like saying to deal with them “nicely,” which is a given. Why, then, are they overly emphasizing it? She also asserts that most sales managers are men who do not support girls’ promotions into sales managers like them and prefer them to stay in the same positions. Mariana has no objection to employing girls as salespeople but says they must also be supported and promoted to become sales managers as well.

As for the beginning of her project with her brother Mina, Mariana says he had always loved all things related to children and childhood, so he bought a store in Haram and turned it into a coworking space, where children and young adults come to study. She decided to help him in his project, until they started looking for a bigger place. That is when she had to quit her stable job and free herself for that project. She describes her decision as “difficult,” and asserts that she is used to taking her decisions by herself, without waiting for her family’s approval and thanks her family for giving her this space to make decisions independently. What encouraged her to quit her job

was closely encountering young people aged 17–25 years old and getting the impression that they are different. The founders follow a “Help Yourself” model of operating their business, where customers make their own food and drinks and clean up after themselves. Mariana is considering taking her project to Cairo, and really likes the “Help Yourself” concept. She also said that she previously owned a small sewing project but did not pursue it further due to health reasons. She believes that money is not the deciding factor when it comes to business, but perseverance. Business owners may find themselves working double the hours because they must be fully aware of all aspects of their work, says Mariana.

Mariana believes that there is a difference between men and women at work. She says that when women are properly trained, they excel. But men, in her personal experience, need some sort of “strong push” to give their best. She also states that men have a problem with the idea that their manager is a woman. In a related vein to gender too, she said some companies ask women about their marital status explicitly during interviews, which shook her a lot, until she started her own business. Then, she noticed that some women who get engaged or start relationships who work with her begin to neglect the duties of their jobs. She wishes she could confront them with this fact, and wonders if they think their lives are going to waste.

As for the novel coronavirus pandemic, Mariana said it was a difficult period for her, as she loves people, and particularly enjoys working closely with others. Therefore, it was an overall negative experience for her, but she noticed that people quickly adapted to the new normal and children started to return to the coworking space, with new rules she asserts they learned quickly.

When asked about problems women entrepreneurs face, Mariana said the fact that many people in Egyptian society do not believe women can have their own business is an impediment to their development. Technicians, for instance, would rather deal with a man. Mariana, however, believes that women themselves are the only ones able to assert their authority. Her advice to women in general is for them to see themselves as fully capable human beings, and that they are no less than men in any way. She also says women need not worry excessively about the steps they take and to take responsibility for each step, while making sure her time is properly managed between work and domestic duties. When asked about her dreams, she said she hopes to be able to help anybody realize their own dream and said she would not consider herself an entrepreneur before that happens.

Marwa Kabary

Marwa Kabary Kamel is an Egyptian entrepreneur born in Cairo, and currently working as an agricultural engineer at an institute affiliated with the Ministry of Agriculture. She founded a leathercraft project, designing and producing handmade genuine leather products, and earning national awards for creativity and excellence, among which is the First Prize Award in the national competition "I Am Egypt" in 2018 for her carry-on travel backpack, featuring Egypt's diverse civilizations. She has also earned the third place prize in the national competition for creative craftsmanship, awarded by the Supreme Council of Culture in 2021, for the first fully-handcrafted genuine leather suitcase, styled as the sarcophagus of Tutankhamun, with Anubis guarding it on both sides. In this interview, Marwa talks about her journey into the world of handicrafts, the challenges she had to overcome, and her experience with starting her own business project.

Marwa traces her passion for handicrafts back to her early childhood. Her mother's experience was the spark of inspiration. When she was a child, Marwa would watch her mother's attendance to handicrafts, and imitate her sewing, tailoring, needlework, embroidery, and crochet. When the mother noticed Marwa's interest in handicrafts, she decided to pass down her skills and knowledge, teaching the daughter everything she herself learned in her childhood. When Marwa joined primary school, she found in the home economics classes a new learning opportunity, and the teachers minded with training Marwa, and enriching her set of skills during her school years. Upon joining college, Marwa had to face her first challenge. Society does not deem artistic handiwork fit for a degree education. With her academic accomplishments, she had to join a serious top-level college, and studying art was not an option. Marwa studied agricultural engineering at Ain Shams University, and graduated with flying colors in 2009. As one of the top students, she was merited a job offer in the institutes of the Ministry of Agriculture, where she has been working since 2012. Yet, Marwa had not given up on her passion for handicrafts. Through all those years, she continued to practice and develop her skills, and even learned to create accessories with silver, copper, and stones, in addition to making bags from canvas and crochet, until she came across leather crafting.

Marwa's new challenge was to learn how to create bags from leather -this new material she knew very little about. She enrolled herself in a training course on leather crafting, offered by a handicraft training academy. This was the first step towards her new dream. By the end of the year 2016, Marwa had mastered leather crafting, and founded her startup project online, launching her products via a Facebook page. She then participated in an international handicraft exhibition, hosted by the training academy. Her great success in the exhibition granted her exposure, and she began to receive sales orders on her page. The growing demand on her products was the greatest challenge Marwa had to overcome. During this time, she was working on her

own in all stages of productions, from the creative work and sales to financial management. At this point, her family members came to the rescue, and offered their help and support.

Marwa highlighted the influential role her family played in sustaining the success of her leathercraft project, particularly her mother's support during the project's early stages. The lack of startup capital was a huge obstacle for Marwa, making it impossible to secure the needed tools and material, or employ permanent help with stable salaries. Her mother provided the financial capital to jumpstart the project. As the project gained momentum, the mother asked Marwa to teach her leather crafting, and to become the first member of the project's workforce, which allowed the project to grow, and increased the production. Marwa asserts that her entire family was supportive and always "had her back." Her sister took over the marketing and branding component of the work, with her expertise in graphic designing. The cousins and friends helped with sales and digital marketing management, and even the leather crafting itself after Marwa had taught them.

Now, Marwa offers training courses on leather crafting, in which men and women from all over Egypt take part. Marwa notices that women are getting increasingly keener on learning handicrafts, attributing this to how Egyptian women, especially the heads of the household with families to provide for, always seek opportunities for independent work that offers them the chance to make money from home, and increase their income. Marwa also notes that the majority of women who pursue training and work opportunities in handicraft are unemployed women homemakers, who do not have a formal job outside the household. Marwa adds that it is particularly these women that make up the handicraft community, and they are the ones who manage to successfully transform their handicraft into lucrative business projects because they find in handicraft what Marwa describes as a breathing space for them to attain financial independence through home-based hand labor that does not demand full-time commitment.

As for being a woman working in the public domain, Marwa is also a pioneer par excellence in agricultural engineering. When starting her career, she was the only female engineer in an all-male team. She specialized in geospatial landscape architecture, and proved her aptitude in the office, yet was not included in the on-site fieldwork. The fieldwork in the Geographic Information System Unit, where Marwa worked, required walking for long distances into rough unpaved land to survey and map sites in Upper Egypt. Marwa explained that her managers and colleagues were worried that she was "too fragile" for such an arduous mission, but she insisted on joining the fieldwork team traveling from Cairo to Upper Egypt to carry out the surveying mission. It was Marwa's manager who convinced her mother to support Marwa's decision to travel out of town for work.

In Upper Egypt, Marwa encountered a community that she describes as highly respectful and classy, but just did not fathom why a woman would commit to such hard labor. Because of her determination to accomplish the work with her own hands, just like her male colleague, the townsmen, as well as her manager and colleagues

recognized her diligence and competence, and she earned everybody's trust. She was assigned various tasks, in and outside Cairo. Throughout her years of work in agricultural engineering and until the present day, Marwa with her perseverance has paved the way for other women to join the Unit, and made room for more women to be accepted and recognized for their valuable hard work in the field. Her pioneering effort in agricultural engineering equals that in handicraft.

When talking about being a woman in the handicraft industry, Marwa spoke about her relationship with the suppliers. Despite being very respectful of the work she does, they were very skeptical at first, because it was odd for them to deal with a young woman in this business. Yet, she managed to break through this initial impression, and built good connections with the community of suppliers. Marwa became an inspiration and a role model, especially for women seeking to start their own business in handicraft, and she guided many men and women by sharing her advice and experience.

May Gah Allah

In this interview, May Gah Allah – an Egyptian Nubian woman and a social entrepreneur – talks about her life and her long and versatile career. She also answers questions about her upbringing as a Nubian woman, Nubia, and Nubian displacement. In addition, she discusses the issues of women, business, and gender.

May's journey with social work began early on, as she loved volunteering, and would constantly volunteer during the summer vacations of her school days. She also loved trade at that age and would sell her old toys and magazines at the club she used to go to. In secondary school, she started to communicate with several international institutions, which allowed her to have the chance to travel to approximately 21 countries, where she spent her summer vacations volunteering and learning. After graduation, she worked as compliance officer at New York Mellon Bank, but she continued to volunteer for a set number of hours. Her career even took her down a unique path, that is, sheep farming, which testifies to the versatility of her experience. One day, she decided to quit her job at the bank and return to the development sector on a full-time basis, as she felt she was not giving back to the community as much as she wished.

May then decided to take a trip to several villages in different Egyptian governorates, but she was disappointed. She noted that people complain a lot, but do not do much to improve their livelihoods. Because she is Nubian, she decided to start there. She launched her foundation Konouz Nubiyya (Nubian Treasures), a foundation keen on reviving rich Nubian heritage. May got married and had her only son, Noah, who eventually became her companion in all her activities. May talks at length about Konouz Nubiyya, and how she endeavored to create a good working environment for the women working there. This environment, to her, was meant to be mother-friendly and comfortable, as she allowed women to bring in their children. May sees in social entrepreneurship the right balance between making profit and giving back to society.

May asserts that her family has always been her greatest supporter. Perhaps they tried to have her reconsider her work in sheep farming or her decision to quit her work at the bank, but they knew, May says, that once she sets her mind to do something, she would do it. May's current husband is also one of her greatest supporters, as well as her son.

Patriarchal, pseudo-religious thought was always one of May's greatest challenges in her career, especially while she worked in Upper Egypt. She tells a funny anecdote about this when the local community was pressuring her to wear hijab. She, instead, started to wear the 'imama, which is a traditional head cover for men. People around her, then, asked her to stop wearing it as it is unacceptable for a woman to wear men's clothes, and they eventually let her be. The way the local community also looks at single or divorced women was also a challenge that May met, as she says those women do not enjoy any level of privacy. In a related vein, when asked about challenges faced

by women entrepreneurs in general, May said that the family plays a huge role in women's success or failure. Many families, she says, only want their girls to get married, or even get a regular government job. May also spoke about stereotypical ideas about women as a gender, such as saying that women are "extremely emotional," thus cannot be decision-makers. May asserted that women are the primary decision-makers in many families today, as many women are the primary breadwinners in those families. Even in families where the main breadwinner is the man, women also have jobs and support their families.

When asked about gender differences between men and women in relation to work, May said that it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations. Working in jewelry-making for instance is a job many men would find inappropriate. But she also says she wanted to give special attention to women. May criticized some stereotypical ideas, such as women being better than men in the kitchen, since many of the best chefs in the world are men. May thus tries not to fall in the trap of gendered differences.

May emphasized Nubian societies greatly value women, so much that there were four Nubian queens in the past. Women used to wear colorful clothing under the Nubian jarjar (traditional Nubian dress) and wear traditional jewelry. However, displacement came to change these customs and traditions. Nubian women now wear attire that is imported from other cultures, typically Gulf cultures, May states. She also says that her great paternal grandmother was a very important woman in her community, as she knew Arabic, English and French. People used to come to her to write contracts of buying and selling and to record their debts. May also spoke about the effects of displacement in general, stating that many Nubians died when they were forcibly removed from their simple homes into ones built with cement as they could not stand the heat. Even their children died as a result. Nubian cultural symbols also disappeared from traditional accessories and jewelry, which now look more Indian than Nubian. She also said that not many young people speak the Nubian language today.

May also encountered difficulties due to tribalism. When young people would come to volunteer at her project, sometimes they would refuse to work together because their fathers occupy different places on the social ladder. Therefore, they would think they are not socially compatible and should not work together. May would resist such ideas and insist they work together or would ask a girl to be a team leader, leading a group of young men.

Nashwa Habib

This interview addressed Nashwa Habib's long experience in supporting women entrepreneurs and helping them develop their skillset for more than two decades. Nashwa is particularly interested in gender and economic empowerment for Egyptian women. In addition, her experience went beyond Egypt, as she worked on the "Safe Cities for Women" program on three different continents, namely, Asia, Africa, and South America.

Her focus, however, remains on Egypt, so she launched the first Egyptian network for entrepreneurs, called Women Entrepreneur Network (WEN) with support from the UNDP. This network undertook to become an information database for women entrepreneurs in Egypt. The network aspired to help women develop themselves, choose the right business environment for them, have access to all the relevant information, get in touch with the right people who support their businesses, secure financial and non-financial resources, and advocate for laws that would guarantee women's economic success.

Nashwa believed in the importance of storytelling and documentation in changing women's status quo. She gained experience in this area while working with creative women, in her interest in creative drama and the Women and Memory Forum itself twenty years ago. She started her work in development from Beni Suef in Upper Egypt, while studying for her degree at the Faculty of Commerce and Business Administration. While volunteering with World Vision, she met girls who help their families in their different activities, such as agriculture and fishing. She witnessed firsthand the discrimination that these girls face, which motivated her to continue working to support them.

At the same time, she traveled to Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago with funding from the UN to be trained on supporting HIV+ women and sex workers, which, as she says, made her more well-acquainted with the power structures working against women in the world. When she was back in Egypt, she decided to continue developing herself, so she studied creative drama and psychodrama to help survivors of violence. She did a diploma on equality between the sexes from a Swiss university.

Nashwa worked on awareness campaigns that target men to draw their attention to the role they could play in helping women climb the corporate ladder in business. She also helped establish different initiatives for women entrepreneurs-to-be. She co-founded the first angel investment network in Egypt and the second in the Middle East, called Tia Angels, under the auspices of her WEN. Angel investors provide support and economic and psychological mentorship to new entrepreneurs. They also are a non-banking tool that could support women's economic empowerment. With the scarcity of venture capitalists in Egypt and around the world, angel investors can affect change in the economy by deconstructing men's hegemony over the economy. Entrepreneurship in general encourages innovation and creativity and works to find

new solutions to create productivity on the one hand, and to create new investment opportunities on the other.

In Nashwa's opinion, Egyptian women are capable of innovation in different fields, unlike what is widely believed, that there are businesses where men excel, and others where women do. Women, however, are influenced by the nature of the economic activities in their governorates, so if commercial activities are more common, they tend to lean toward them. In some governorates, women increasingly work in businesses that require a simple skillset, like packaging. In addition, stereotypical ideas about other jobs that require a more complex skillset affect women's opportunities of taking on these jobs. Traditions may prevent women from owning capital and investing it in projects, such as depriving women of their rightful inheritance, overburdening women with domestic work, and discouraging women from work after marriage. All these represent instances of masculine insecurity toward women having capital, thus, power. Nashwa also adds that there is no equal access to information among men and women, which affects women's opportunities when owning capital. When considering initiatives like financial inclusion for instance, they have given women and young people a priority, but unwritten biases among bankers dictate the evaluation of economic feasibility of women's projects in many cases.

Nashwa states that she did not face many of the impediments faced by her peers, as her family had always been supportive of her work. Her husband too, she says, was her greatest supporter. Her family always encouraged her to learn even during her summer vacations. They also supported her wish to travel and get to grips with other cultures. Church also played a role in Nashwa's upbringing, as she realized early on the leading role of the church in development of Upper Egypt. Thanks to cooperation between Egyptian churches and the private sector, institutions like World Vision and Upper Egypt Development Associations were born. Nashwa met pioneers like Dr. Marie Asaad and Dr. Laila Iskandar. She says that she belongs to Dr. Laila Iskandar's school of thought in development, where the private sector is engaged in the process of development.

Throughout her career, Nashwa's husband always supported her. But her only impediment was perhaps not getting support from her work when she was trying to have children. Nashwa says this is a problem rooted in the fact that the law does not give women time off to try and expand their families in Egypt. Even time off taken to care for an elder parent is not taken easily, and the fact that women are mostly the ones who have to care for ailing parents is not taken into consideration.

When she returned to work at the Upper Egypt Association for Education and Development in the nineties, she found herself part of the alliance of Egyptian activist organizations who worked on fighting discrimination, thanks to support from the UNICEF. Nashwa then could see that women's economic empowerment is one of the most paradigm-shifting aspects of women's empowerment. Also, her study of gender at the American University in Cairo helped her devise a transformative approach to women's economic empowerment, an approach she still follows to this day.

Ola Loutfi

In this interview, Ola Loutfi talks about both her personal and professional life, especially about her career shift from being a tourist guide to an entrepreneur. She discusses the challenges she met on her versatile journey and the challenges women face in building their own businesses. She also talks about the novel COVID-19 pandemic, how she spent her time in lockdown, and how she benefitted from it to the largest possible extent.

Ola graduated from the German School in Bab El-Louk, then Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality, Department of Tour Guiding. She worked for 12 years as a tour guide, but the terrorist attacks that occurred in more than one location in Egypt in the nineties made her reconsider her career path, because she found that the job does not provide her with financial security, so she decided to shift careers.

Ola states that this was not an easy feat, as computers were just starting to replace old typesetters and such in the workplace and learning such new skills was vital for her career. She took a job as an instructor of Pharaonic History in German at a private university, but did not find her passion in teaching. Therefore, she switched careers again, this time, by starting a career in advertising, but still, she did not achieve her desired financial security and did not get many career development opportunities. She joined Vodafone, where she worked in PR, then Ghabbour Auto, and finally, Mondelez. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic happened, and she faced the choice between relocating to Dubai or resignation, so she chose the latter. When her son graduated from college, she started considering the launch of a project managed by both of them. They decided on manufacturing pet foods. She says that the project has left a mark and is a strong competitor in the market today, and next October, it will be the project's second anniversary. Ola also launched The Dog Café, a cafeteria for dogs, and currently markets both projects.

When asked if she had any concerns prior to starting her projects, she said she likes challenges and that just the fact that she is doing something 'different' gave her a sense of optimism about these projects. Ola did not stop learning. She obtained a diploma in pet grooming, whereas her son studied pet nutrition. Ola emphasizes that this project is the first of its kind in Egypt, and that there are some similar cafeterias, but they do not provide the same services. She says she sells pet items and has a special menu for pet foods, unlike other cafeterias that feed dogs human food, which may cause them health issues.

As for Ola's family, she said they have always been her support system. She talks about her father, a banker, with whom she enjoyed discussions about corporate life. As for her marital status, she says she was a single mother, and decided not to break, as she wanted her son to have someone to look up to and to never let him down.

Regarding the challenges that she faced throughout her career, she said that back when she was a tour guide, the greatest challenge she faced was lack of awareness of

the importance of tourism for Egypt, as some Egyptians mistreat tourists. As for her time working for a car company, she said she felt out of place as most employees there were not used to dealing with an experienced, confident woman. However, her will to prove herself made them finally accept her. Even when she has left the corporate world and started The Dog Café, she has met many conservative men, as her work involves dealing with technicians, suppliers, and refurbishing companies. They would sometimes refuse to let her lift heavy objects, but she expressed strong dislike for such thinking. She also asserted that she has many different interests and lots of experience in different fields, which may make men feel intimidated.

As for challenges faced by women entrepreneurs when building their startups, she stated that some people take women lightly, or make light of their capabilities in business. She would sometimes go to the nearby market to buy some pet supplies, and would be given strange looks, as if those around her are uncomfortable dealing with a woman who does not look like them.

As for the COVID-19 pandemic, Ola said that lockdown worked out well for her, and that she used the time to conduct laboratory tests on her formula for pet foods, which proved that it has the highest level of protein in the market. She also said she spent quality time with her family, and that the surrounding quietness helped her think creatively. Ola concluded the interview by saying that she is at a stage when she wants to work because she enjoys work, not because she must.

Her opinion on gender discrimination when it comes to employment was clear: she did not witness such discrimination, but admits that women do not prefer doing jobs that require a lot of physical activity and she believes this is justified. When asked about whether she noticed differences between men and women's performance at the workplace, she said that she did not notice a difference in the quality of work, but noticed a difference in favor of women when it came to punctuality and deadlines. She particularly emphasized the difficulty of being a woman manager, but said that she eventually earns men's respect when they realize that she supports them, and that she has a certain management style, which they should, in turn, respect. Less conflicts happen when they realize that. She also said that women have to work harder in order to prove themselves in the workplace.

Rania Ayman

In this interview, Rania Ayman, Founder and CEO of Entreprenelle speaks about her entrepreneurship endeavors, specifically as a woman in the field. She talks about her early beginnings as an undergraduate student, her concept of entrepreneurship, and challenges she confronted on her journey, in a relatively new “field” in the Arab region. She also talks about the difficulties imposed by the novel coronavirus pandemic and its impact on entrepreneurship and business in general.

Rania Ayman is an Egyptian woman, a graduate of the Faculty of Commerce, Business Administration division, Ain Shams University, Cairo, class 2013. During her undergraduate years, she participated in many extracurricular activities, including Enactus. In this context, she points out that opportunities for further growth are scarce in government universities, and that the concept of entrepreneurship was still relatively unheard of back then. As an undergraduate, she also worked on projects affiliated with marginalized neighborhoods in Cairo, such as Saft al-Laban and Hayy al-Zabbaleen (Garbage Collectors’ neighborhood). In Saft al-Laban, she took part in helping women learn a craft, such as sewing. In Hayy al-Zabbaleen, she helped them take up recycling. In addition, during her university years, she had her own project on Facebook and worked in digital marketing until graduation.

Rania currently holds several important positions. She is a consultant with UN Women’s Project Agora and a steering committee member at WEN (Women Entrepreneurs Network). In addition, she works with the National Council for Women in Egypt and is Egypt’s only representative at the Beijing 25+ Youth Task Force. Rania is also an alumna of the International Visitor Program, an exchange program where participants travel to the USA to learn more about how their peers ‘lead’ and develop their communities. Additionally, she is an alumna of the Danish Egyptian Dialogue Initiative’s program “Women Take the Lead” and a member of the Rotary Club.

When asked about Entreprenelle, Rania said that the company holds a number of activities, the biggest of which is “She Can,” the largest women’s entrepreneurship event in the Arab region. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was organized online in 2021 and was attended by approximately 9000 individuals. She stressed that all Arabic-speaking individuals were welcome to attend. Entreprenelle also conducts workshops and trainings on entrepreneurship, where women are trained on coming up with a business model, marketing, logistics, etc.

As for challenges that Rania faced when starting her own company, she said that resources were available, but inaccessible to her as a girl, and that not many people helped her early on. She thus wanted to establish Entreprenelle to help women overcome the challenges she, herself, faced and for them not to commit her same mistakes. Rania added that there were additional challenges that relate to the nature of the job in Egypt. For instance, no laws govern the social entrepreneurship sector. She was also only 23 years old when she established her company, and had to face a

lot of unfortunate stereotyping, since some people believed that she would set aside her professional ambitions once she is married. Personally speaking, Rania also said that even though her family did not oppose her work, they were not supportive enough. She justified that by the fact that the concept of entrepreneurship was not easily grasped by them, when compared to more traditional jobs. Rania believes she overcame these challenges, as nobody underestimates Entreprenelle now, thanks to its impact on the entrepreneurship scene.

In a different but related vein, Rania recounts some of the challenges she faced in relation to the training she provides at Entreprenelle itself. She regrets the fact that some women who come to the training do not believe in their own abilities due to their upbringing. Many of these women grew up with low self-esteem, so they do not believe they can establish a successful project. They, therefore, do all the related registration paperwork under their brother's or father's names, hoping to avoid the legal problems that could ensue for them if the project fails. She believes that this does not relate to the specific social class the women come from, as women from different social classes have that mentality. However, Rania sees that numbers and statistics point to the fact that women have proven themselves on the entrepreneurship scene, citing the fact that more men terminate their projects than women.

Rania also deconstructed some misconceptions about entrepreneurship and startups in the interview. She said that finding an investor to fund one's startup is not necessary at the beginning but is only important when one's goal is to expand their business. At Entreprenelle, she attempts to spread the right information among women interested in entrepreneurship. She also asserted that the goal of Entreprenelle is not to isolate women from men and keep them in closed communities, but to adopt UN Women's principle of "inclusion of men in the process of empowering women".

Rania does not believe that there are jobs acceptable for women and others acceptable for men. She thinks, however, that men and women are different and that women are more capable of multitasking than men. She also said that, from her own experience, women are more committed, since they are more motivated to prove themselves before a society that undermined them for long. In addition, she said she values women's creativity and their superior ability to work with others. She also discussed women's commodification in advertisements, where women are used for their physical beauty, and not appreciated for their abilities and skills.

Finally, regarding COVID-19 and its impact on the entrepreneurship scene, she said that her company was able to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic to a great extent. Her company had to quickly adopt new "digital" strategies as a result. However, other companies could not do the same and unfortunately failed. She pointed out that Entreprenelle worked with the British Council in Egypt on a project called "Women Entrepreneurs at Risk," which focused on helping women entrepreneurs whose startups suffered the consequences of the pandemic.

Salwa El-Kasabgy

In this interview, Salwa Magdy El-Kasabgy talks about being CEO of Sara's Advertising, as well as her personal life, religious convictions, and working in the field of advertising and marketing in general. Salwa introduces herself as a mother and businesswoman. At Sara's Advertising, Salwa and her team help their clients market their factories and projects and develop their businesses. With Salwa's help, they may even discover some aspect in their business they were previously unaware of. Salwa specifically talks about the "feeling" one gets when they hear the name of a trademark, such as Coco Chanel or Nike, and says that such feelings lie at the core of her work in advertising. Salwa believes in corporate responsibility and donates 2.5% of the company's revenue to the underprivileged.

Salwa's passion for advertising began at an early age. She says that Tarek Nour's advertising company greatly inspired her as a child as she hoped she would one day have her own advertising company. Salwa was also hoping to work in a field where she can relate to people. She got into advertising when she could not become a doctor as she wanted. In the interview, Salwa differentiates between marketing and advertising, as marketing is the stage of planning that comes before advertising, and includes product analysis, its quality, its packaging, etc.

Salwa previously worked with Engineer Mamdouh Hamza, the designer of the hanging bridge above the Suez Canal and the half-sunk sun design of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. She describes him as a "legend" in the areas of engineering, business, and management and says that she learned a lot from him while working on the inauguration ceremony of the library. Among the lessons she learned from him was treating people working with her as team members, not mere employees. Salwa believes that she, too, is a team member and disagrees with the common adage that people in business believe in, which says that they got into business so that they can be their own boss. She believes that her clients are her boss and that satisfying them is her mission. She also considers them partners. Salwa gives some female clients who work with her a discount when they are going through difficult circumstances and works closely with them to impart her experience to them. Sara's Advertising is considered one of the top 10 companies in working with start-ups in Egypt.

Salwa spoke about her role models. She considers her mother, an engineer, a role model. She also loves Zaha Hadid, the Iraqi architect, Jehan Sadat, TV talk show host Oprah Winfrey and Khadija, wife of Prophet Muhammad. Salwa believes that Islam teaches Muslims valuable lessons about business and cites examples from the Muslim tradition about management and negotiation skills. She also believes that men and women push each other forward if their relationship is healthy. She criticizes some mothers, who, despite their education and culture, lean more towards their sons, not their daughters and thus do their girls an injustice. She asserts that, despite what is common in our culture, Islam does not ask women to do domestic work, but the

patriarchy does. She does not exactly believe in equality between men and women but believes that Islam holds women in great respect and that just like they have duties, they also have rights. Salwa strives to be a good representative of her country when dealing with clients abroad and wants to prove that Arab and Muslim societies are not backward.

As for her family and her friends, she said that they were all supportive of her work. Her mother was helping her financially and her father was constantly giving her advice. Her siblings too supported her. Salwa talks about her first marriage, which did not last, but she says that her current marriage is one of the reasons behind her success in advertising. Salwa tries to teach her children self-confidence and independence and does not lean toward "spoiling" children. In this vein, she takes billionaires like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates as role models, as they disinherited their children to compel them to work hard to achieve their own success. Salwa does not take the employees' age into consideration when hiring and does not believe that entrepreneurship is only in business, but it could be at home, where properly raising children is a rewarding job in itself.

As for challenges that she faced, she said it is corruption and bribery in Egypt that are huge challenges she must deal with. She says she rarely encountered that when dealing with clients abroad. She also said that it took her a very long time to learn about accounting and taxes, especially with a constantly changing Tax Code.

When asked about gender and business, Salwa said that the team cannot solely consist of either men or women. They both must work together because they complement each other. She believes that manual labor, as in organizing events for instance, is more suitable for men. Jobs that require an artistic sense are more suitable for women, on the other hand. As for her being a mother and a wife besides being a business owner, Salwa said that she benefitted from time management skills, but sometimes work impacts one's personal life and vice versa. She believes that people must be flexible and accept that this is a natural part of being a working woman.

Salwa views the COVID-19 pandemic from a religious point of view, citing the "7 years of hardship" in the Quran and the fact that it is impossible for life to stay the same. She also stated that it was a challenge for her business and that she switched to working online as many other business owners did to guarantee their business' sustainability.

The interview, thus, covered many aspects of Salwa El-Kasabgy's life, most importantly her work in advertising and marketing, her personal life (specifically her husband, children, and family) and the importance of religious values in her life. She concluded the interview with asserting that a society is strong when women are strong.

Samar Assem

This is an interview with entrepreneur Samar Assem, co-founder of GTTDUN Consultancy and marketing director at a leading venture capital fund in the Middle East and the USA. Samar spoke at length about her extensive professional background and her pioneering work supporting new businesses owned by women and young women entrepreneurs. She also discussed the most serious challenges women entrepreneurs face as well as the challenges brought on by the novel coronavirus to the business scene in Egypt.

Samar graduated from the German University in Cairo (GUC) in 2009, double majoring in marketing and strategic planning. Since then, she has worked in marketing nonstop and in various companies, until she was able to launch two companies, while keeping her job as an incubator for new entrepreneurs. Samar has always been preoccupied with challenges that face fresh graduates from Egyptian universities at the job market. She emphasized the fact that graduates of universities from local universities (away from Cairo, the center) face other sets of challenges as well. This is one of the reasons why she attempts to give women more space, whether they are entrepreneurs, new employees, or leaders in their work. In 2021, she was chosen as one of Agora UN Women's youth development advocates.

Samar talks about her partnership with her sister, Heba Assem, specifically their pioneering initiative in training women university graduates and giving them more experience. Heba manages several activities and works as a consultant to the Egyptian government in a development project, so both sisters take turns in shouldering the responsibility of managing their companies. For instance, one of them would free herself up to manage a company, while the other delivers other unrelated consultations for a different entity. Samar and Heba divide their tasks based on their experience, so Samar oversees the provision of strategic consultations, without prejudice to her other responsibilities, be it financial, legal, or otherwise. Samar is also grateful to her family, especially her mother for supporting her and her sister's academic endeavors and career. She says she was always encouraging them to excel in their education, at home, or in sports and other activities they were doing. Her mother fostered an environment of support and care, where they were encouraged to discover their own interests and passions. As for their relationship to each other and to others, they were always encouraged to share, and their father was their role model when it comes to this.

As for her career, Samar says she faced many challenges related to her gender at work. For instance, she would not be promoted or commended for her performance in comparison to men despite her excellent work because she is a woman. She was even told that she is a woman, who may marry and be overwhelmed with domestic duties, so that would make her unreliable in the workplace. She was also told that she got certain jobs because she "looks good," not because of her excellent performance.

Another company withdrew its job offer to her because she was engaged to be married, as they were worried she would quit her job as a result. Since she was in her twenties, she learned not to accept a job offer in a company where the professional environment does not foster gender equality. This is because Samar's personal experience is inseparable from the reality of women in general, who often lack the necessary funding due to their gender, even though 90% of startups that fail are led by men. When Samar and Heba started their two companies, they never tried to seek funding so as not to face that kind of discrimination, which Samar knew about thanks to her position at a venture capital fund. However, Samar notes that the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by major financial institutions and US Silicon Valley companies has a positive impact on directing more funding to women entrepreneurs. These institutions and companies require investment funds and business incubators to allocate 25% of their funding to women, and this is what is behind the partial change in this attitude toward women. Although Samar has moved away from this kind of funding, patterns of microaggression such as delaying the financial compensations her two companies are entitled to or not taking her opinion during the decision-making process face her from time to time.

Women passionate about innovation start facing difficulties once they graduate, especially those located outside Cairo. Backward social traditions are also an impediment faced by women, since women are often not rewarded for their excellent performance, which happened to Samar in the beginning of her career. The centralization of funding is also problematic, as most funds go to entrepreneurs based in Cairo, which is unfair for other entrepreneurs located away from the center. Gaining government funding is difficult as it has too many requirements and is focused on specific sectors and not others. Going back to the private sector, it cannot fund more than five or six economic sectors, and educational projects are not considered a priority for that kind of funding. For example, the past few years have witnessed an interest in investing in e-marketing among companies and funds, followed by a newfound interest in electronic payments. These limited sectors constitute a problem for both men and women entrepreneurs. Finally, the patriarchy is also a problem, and it could lead to women themselves being misogynistic, as they sometimes prefer men as superiors to women in the workplace.

Samar asserts that there are positive and negative consequences to the novel coronavirus pandemic. The digital transformation that came with the pandemic allowed more women to participate in trainings without worrying about long commutes. Through their initiative, Samar and her sister managed to deliver their training to graduates of technical institutes below the university level. These training courses were also easily recorded and translated into sign language. Many women who started working from home became even more productive and more capable of developing their skills through remote learning. However, 30% of Egyptian women lost their jobs, based on UN estimates, and both men and women were laid off as a result of the economic recession that came with the pandemic.

Samar believes that women and men do not each excel at certain fields and not others. On the contrary, women can innovate in the fields of education, tech, e-commerce, blockchain and sustainable development. It is not true that women only work in handicrafts. When asked about the scarcity of women programmers and the problem that most women opt for careers in graphic design instead, she said that this may be due to the long working hours that programmers have to do and some companies' corporate culture, which prevents women from assuming leadership positions in programming. Some multinational companies even specify the "gender" of the potential candidate when hiring.

Yomna El-Sheridy

This interview was with Yomna El-Sheridy, who is the head of the Special Food Industry International and the president of the Business Women Association in Egypt. She started out as a pharmacist, which led her to travel abroad and work for multinational company. There, she was interested in the economical side of production and was assigned tasks accordingly. During her time in the United States, Yomna was one of the first women to hold the position of developing pharmaceutical products for the Middle East. She was also posted in Greece, where she lived for four years, and later came back to the Middle East. Gaining experience along the way, Yomna became very knowledgeable and interested in the business side of her field – the pharmaceutical industry. She states, “I gained a lot of experience in how to launch a product, how to brand it, what kind of efforts are needed to start business.” After her return to Egypt, Yomna decided to start her own business instead of getting a regular job in a company. Furthermore, because of being a mother, she was interested in the health of newborns and children, so she launched Gerber in Egypt and started importing baby food, which became her first business that lasted twelve years.

Sadly, she had to let go of this first business due to a series of unfortunate events that took place at the time. In the year 2000 was the first devaluation of the Egyptian pound, and accordingly prices sky rocketed and people looked elsewhere for the baby food. About this time, she said, “I slept and woke up; my business was gone, and it was a big loss.” Yomna decided to start over and not succumb to defeat. After some research, Yomna decided to switch her technique and instead of importing, she started exporting. Although she had no background in agriculture, she managed to acquire the knowledge needed and gain the skills required to start a new project exporting frozen strawberries. However, this was not the only business Yomna started from scratch, but rather the first from many. Although the frozen strawberry business proved fruitful, Yomna wanted to start something that had more demand. “I believe in demand, demand is the deciding factor on what kind of business one should start,” she explains. Accordingly, she started a new initiative, where she learned the olive business from planting to exportation. Although Egyptian olives were not well known, Yomna’s foresight allowed her to see the potential of what they could become. Consequently, with a little persistence and patience, she was able to make a name for them, to the extent that she would later be able to export them to twenty different countries.

As a woman leader, Yomna also elaborated on gender inequality at the different stages of her life. Although she did not mention any particular situation where she was faced with gender bias, there were times when Yomna felt that life was harsher on a woman than on a man, such as the period of childbearing. She says, “the childbearing age, when a woman has to be a mom and responsible for a family, limits her ambition to a certain extent. It occurs at the same exact time for a man to travel, follow his

ambitions, and achieve all that he wants." Despite the fact that Yomna was affected by this personally, she was able to navigate around it by adapting to the situation and find the means to succeed at last. Being a role model to her family is also very important to Yomna, just like her family supported her as child with no limitations, she would like to raise her kids and grandkids with the same demeanor.

Giving back to society is very essential to Yomna. In 1999, she established the Businesswomen of Egypt 21 to be able to motivate and support other women leaders, something which was lacking in Egyptian society at the time. Additionally, there were other programs and initiatives by the Businesswomen of Egypt. One example is Women for Success, which is a program started seven years ago to be able to better the image of women and give them the confidence they need to succeed, which was something that the political Islam wave was trying to diminish. They also started the BWE website to promote female products and to attract and ease the path for other women leaders.

During the time of the Coronavirus, all of Yomna's skills were tested and she had to confront multiple challenges on many fronts. Her business suffered a huge decrease in exporting, and her association meetings were limited to Zoom instead of in person. Nonetheless, with perseverance and belief in her message, she has been able to hold through these hard times, and both her business and association remained open every day. In everything, she says, "It's all about having the right attitude."

The successful life that Yomna has led did not come easily, but rather it required a lot of hard work, farsightedness, and ambition to be able become the businesswoman and leader she is today. Yomna spoke at length about her journey, the challenges with which she was faced, and what she had to overcome and learn to achieve her growing dream. One of the major challenges that she mentioned is the fact that what people learn in school is different than what they encounter in real life. On this point, she states, "there is no school that will make you a businesswoman/businessman, you have to teach yourself through trial and error, which is a huge hurdle on its own."

She also talked about how a strong assertive character is essential for any woman who wants to succeed. When asked about any struggle she faced as a woman in her daily life, she instead elaborated on the crucial need for a strong character and ambition. She said, "if any girl has ambition and a goal, she will be able to get what she wants without hiding behind the fact of being a woman. She can really be more assertive."