



**«We must stand up for our rights together despite our differences»  
National Dialogue Forum, Alexandria, Egypt, May 2015**

From the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2015 PeaceWomen Across the Globe organized a National Dialogue Forum on Women's Participation together with Egyptian and international organizations: "Empowering Egyptian Women : From recommendations to strategic implementation". For three days between 70 and 100 participants from different sections of the population and segments of society worked on a national strategy for the implementation of political equality in Egypt.

**At the back of the queue**

On the opening night the participants were able to approach the issue of women's rights in an artistic way. During one hour the Egyptian John Milad and his theatre group Wlessa led the audience through different situations in the lives of women in Egypt, while painting a social-critical picture of the whole society. With or without words, the young actresses and actors succeeded in presenting feelings such as joy and love, but also pain, sadness and shame in a very touching way: for example, two births - while the boy is welcomed with applause and cheers in the world, the girl is kicked back into the womb of the mother.

The first day of discussions was opened by speeches of the organizers (Peace Women Across the Globe, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the National Council for Women, UN Women) and the Mayor of Alexandria. Again and again the speakers highlighted the new Egyptian Constitution as an excellent starting point for women, but they also emphasized the necessity to actually activate the various articles of the constitution: Why have rules and principles, if no one knows and no one obeys them? Ruth-Gaby Vermot, Co-President of PWAG, encouraged the women present to remain stubborn:

**"Throughout the world, women are frequently in the back of the societal queue and have to wait until they get their turn with their concerns. Sometimes it is hard not to lose hope and to find the strength to use our disappointment as a motivation to take action. However we must motivate ourselves to bring up our concerns again and again – as peacefully as possible because violence is not our language."**



The former parliamentarian told them what it was like to be on a women's list and to be elected - a subject that obviously met great interest among the present Egyptian candidates for the parliamentary elections: "I admire that there was a list just for women in Switzerland and that the voters could then vote for the best candidate among the women. This way they had a real chance to be elected and to show

what they are capable of. From then on it becomes easier to be re-elected. But for the first time you just need a small push", Dalia Al Aswad said, who wants to run for the next national elections.

### Reaching your full potential

The first workshop on "Bridging the Gap between Empowerment Policies and Their Implementation" was opened by the South African PeaceWoman Thulisile Madonsela. In the position of Public Protector she controls the South African government in many areas. She is well known and respected as an "anti-corruption watchdog" in her home country. Thuli Madonsela began her speech with a reference to the favourite movie of her daughters - Mulan – that tells the story of a girl who goes to war against the will of her father and ultimately saves her country. Empowerment means that all people have the opportunity to reach their full potential and thus contribute as much as possible to the welfare of society, said Madonsela. Women have an important role to play in this:

**"There is no doubt about the fact that women can lead - they have always done so. If there is a problem, women come and make every effort to resolve it. But once you designate this issue with a specific name and a position, many women are in the habit of taking a step back and to look for a male colleague."**



Women must also trust themselves to assume responsibility and power. In addition, not only is it crucial that a country has a good constitution and laws, but also structures to specifically implement these laws: "In South Africa there are, for example, my job as Public Protector and an Equality Commission. We are constantly working to help monitor each other and give an account of whether and how the constitution is implemented", said Madonsela.

In this spirit the participants sat together and started working on how to put into practice different recommendations for women's participation. The recommendations had been collected prior to the event and resulted from the three dialogue forums organized in 2014 in various regions of Egypt.

The working groups were divided into different segments of society: media, academia, government, parliamentary candidates and political parties, civil society / NGOs, youth, experts, private sector, and Muslim and Christian leaders attended the forum.

At the table of civil society, for example, the participants discussed how to improve the communication and cooperation among women and equality organizations: the result was a calling for a database that lists all projects and organizations working in this field. At the table of the candidates for the next parliamentary elections the discussion was about what can be done to combat the widespread violence during the elections and how the communication between women candidates and political ministries should be improved. The discussions were lively, sometimes noisy and chaotic, sometimes focussed. It became clear that there are many women (and men) who are very committed to vouching for their rights and for social change. And that many of them are losing their patience, slowly but surely.

## **"You must not love each other to work together"**

On the second day PeaceWoman Justine Mbabazi from Rwanda led the workshop on "Egypt as a Leading Country in Women's Empowerment: The Way Forward". In a captivating speech, the experienced gender expert and human rights activist encouraged the women present not to get lost in unnecessary power struggles. Rwanda has 64 percent women in parliament and is therefore an absolute leader in terms of women participation. Justine Mbabazi recalled the spectacular transformation of the country in which one million people were brutally murdered in 1994 during the 100-day genocide:

**"I remember very well when I participated at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing with a Rwandan delegation, just nine months after the genocide. We were devastated and admired the Egyptian women who seemed so strong, successful and educated to us. In Beijing, we realized that we needed to work together. That in order to continue living in Rwanda we needed to be strong. We had no choice but to commit ourselves with all our strength to equal rights and a better society."**

The Rwandan women realized that they could only bring change by working together: "No woman chose to be married to a man who would kill other people. And no woman chose that her husband would be killed. We had to talk to each other and stand together for our rights in spite of our differences and problems", said Mbabazi.

In order to convince, one must jointly define goals and then communicate these demands clearly and concisely so that even a busy president could understand them quickly. Moreover, she advised her Egyptian colleagues to involve men in this process: "A lot of men do not think evil, they just do not know better. You have to show them what is at stake and then they will strengthen your back. "

## **Dialogue across societal divisions**

Subsequently, the participants met again on the discussion table to continue working on the concrete implementation of the demands. This time the eleven segments of society were mixed: So journalists discussed with scientists and NGO's with government representatives and young people.

**The exchange across generational, religious and ideological gaps in this form was an absolute novelty for Egypt. The Egyptian society is strongly divided and constructive discussions or collaborations rarely happen outside of these groups. The fact that PWAG could contribute towards overcoming these gaps is in itself a success for us.**



There was for example one discussion on how to create a new ministry for the implementation of equality. Would "Ministry of Gender" be an adequate name? Is there a need for new structures or would it be sufficient to develop the existing ones further? Another group dealt with the problems that women face at the working place: How can you prevent women from losing their jobs when they get pregnant? And how can one ensure enough childcare places for women to continue working (and being independent) even with children?

**"You are the change – you have all the resources that are necessary."** These were words of encouragement from PeaceWoman Fawzia Talout Meknassi from Morocco in her closing speech.

### **What now?**

Now, these resources must be used. The idea is to gather the results of the discussions and to formulate a clear and catchy strategy in the next few months. The Egyptian organizations, including the National Council for Women, UN Women and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina will be in charge of this next step. The specific formulation and preparation should take place in close cooperation with the political ministries, so that the implementation of the strategy stands a chance. Seven ministers have already explicitly promised their support.

It will not be an easy task, this is very clear. It will be a tedious job. That is also clear. But as Thuli Madonsela from South Africa aptly said in her speech: "It is better to take small steps forward and to carry along anyone who wants to be a part of the journey, instead of losing people. If one goes ahead too quickly, sooner or later one will be pulled back by those who never really understood what is at stake."



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Pictures:

1. Ruth-Gaby Vermot-Mangold, Co-President of PWAG , in her opening speech
2. Thuli Madonsela, Public Protector of South Africa
3. At the table of the working group of civil society
4. Final group photo

