



## Middle East Youth Initiative

**Interview with Raghda El Ebrashi**

**Founder and Chairperson**

**Alashanek Ya Balady Association for Sustainable Development (AYB)**

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**Middle East Youth Initiative (MEYI):** You founded [Alashanek Ya Balady] while you were a student at the American University in Cairo in 2002. Your website describes that the club was founded by a group of Egyptian youth who believed in “the power of social and economic development and not just charity” to alleviate poverty. And in your letter on the site you state that you and the founding members did not want to just give money and blankets to the poor, but wanted “transformation, empowerment, and real change.” So if you can, just speak a little bit about where Alashanek Ya Balady is today compared to when you founded it in 2002 and if you think you are beginning to achieve that change in Egypt.

**Raghda El-Ebrashi:** You know in 2002, we didn’t think that the organization would be that big in six years, and also we didn’t know that we would really affect a lot of peoples’ lives. Not only the poor, but the rich before the poor, to speak about the volunteers. Now, after six years I can say that we didn’t end our trip, because the path is still going, there is a long way to go. But, I can say that we were able at least to make poor people aware that we [Egyptian society] have problems and that they have to participate in solving these problems – that there will be no “golden hand” coming from outside to pull them out of poverty – they have to help themselves also to get out of the circle of poverty.

... I can say that there are people whom we were able to help out of the circle of poverty through microfinance, capacity building, employment and other things. But the real thing we did was this awareness thing I was talking about – poor people are now involved in all of our programs and they are willing to help themselves out. This was actually the main achievement we were able to accomplish.

**MEYI:** How do you go about involving people in the communities that you are [working in]? How are they involved in the programs? Do you have mentorship programs, or things like this where you train people, you build their capacity, and then you keep them involved some way or another?

**El-Ebrashi:** Yeah, we have two strategies actually, to make people participate in our programs. The first thing is we do a participatory appraisal, which means involving people in the design of the programs that we do. We don’t say that we are going to educate people and “we know what you need.” ... No, we say to people that “you know more about your needs, and we are being educated *by* you to meet these needs through the programs.” So they design the programs with us. And also I can say that, in the microfinance program for example, the savings scheme was introduced by one of the women who was receiving the microfinance. So we are open to ideas from the community.

The second strategy, and I find it very interesting, [is that] in every program, we train the best youth, women and children to inherit the program so as to implement the program themselves. For example, the capacity building program, we train trainers. So we train the best people



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coming out of the program on how to conduct the sessions so they can progress with the program even if we are not there in the program anymore.

So these are the two strategies [through which] we maintain peoples' participation.

**MEYI:** It seems like the microfinance program has been very successful. Can you talk a little bit about how it got started and how it works?

**El-Ebrashi:** OK. We have Grameen Bank's model for the microfinance. The Grameen Bank model is mainly divided into two parts: the beggars program, for very poor people, and the microfinance program.

The beggars program in Egypt, for example, ... the loan bracket is from 350 Egyptian pounds to 2,000 Egyptian pounds, which is like from USD \$50 to USD \$350.<sup>1</sup> This is a free interest loan, so we don't charge any interest, and this is actually what Grameen Bank also does because [these] are very poor people. We finance all sorts of productive projects – it has to have a value added. So, we don't finance projects like clothes selling; we don't finance projects like, I don't know, selling sweets for example. No, we finance projects like breeding animals, like cheese making: something that has a value added. And sometimes we prefer to finance projects that involves production.

In this program, we have 200 beneficiaries up until this moment, and actually we have an interesting part – and we are the first to introduce this in Egypt – which is “conditional cash transfers.” The conditional cash transfer is ... a cash transfer conditioned on the beneficiary actually taking the microloan from us, he or she is paying it back on time, he or she is spending on education and healthcare of their children, not all consumption goods. However, the microproject does not generate enough income to continue the expenditure on health and education services. So, we give them this cash transfer so as to get out of the circle of poverty. Because with loans, they would spend all that they have on education and health and just be in this vicious circle where all of the money they get, they put into the problems they have, like education, health and other things – because they have a lot of crises: they have crises every day – we want them to save. So we give them three grants: first is the education fund, the second is the marriage fund, and the third is the crisis fund.

This is for what we call the beggars microfinance. Now we are introducing, it will be introduced in 2009, the microfinance program which will be from 2,000 Egyptian pounds to 10,000 Egyptian pounds. It will finance more larger projects for people who have successfully passed the first stage: from the 200 beneficiaries of the beggars' program.

**MEYI:** So drawing from that same pool of 200 people?

**El-Ebrashi:** Yeah, so this will be like a transition phase for them, so as to develop themselves and develop their projects as well.

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<sup>1</sup> As of December 9, 2008: USD \$1 = 5.52 Egyptian pounds. (350 Egyptian pounds = approx. USD \$63; 2,000 Egyptian pounds = approx. USD \$362.)



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**MEYI:** How do people find out about the program? Do you go out into the community and speak to people about it?

**EI-Ebrashi:** We don't need to. (Laughs.) We gave the first five, and the first five were very happy about it so now everyone comes. Every month we have something like a hundred people applying for microfinance. We hope that we cover them all, however our funding cannot cover all the people. But we don't have any problems in marketing.

**MEYI:** This is mostly in Misr al-Qadima [Old Cairo]?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Yes.

**MEYI:** Can you talk a little bit about that community that you work in – it is a poor neighborhood in Cairo, that's right?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Yeah. First of all, this area is an urban area: so we are addressing urban poverty, not rural poverty. It is one of the historical places: Old Cairo is the place where the citadel is there, which comes from maybe the 12<sup>th</sup> century, ... and there you have the Amr Ibn al-'As mosque, which is one of the oldest monuments we have, also. And we have the Gerges church, one of the historical churches. So this is a really historical place. It is a remarkable place in Egypt, however we have a lot of poverty in this place. It is 4 million people.

**MEYI:** That is like its own city.

**EI-Ebrashi:** Yeah, it's a city. (Laughs.) Cairo is 20 million, so...[Misr al-Qadima] is one of the areas in Egypt that really lacks infrastructure and there are many squatter areas and informal buildings.

**MEYI:** So the microfinance program began in that area. Are you expanding to other parts of Cairo with other programs at AYB or are you continuing to focus on Old Cairo?

**EI-Ebrashi:** AYB is an area-oriented NGO, so we don't stretch our projects everywhere. But our plan is, in the next five years, we will expand in other areas. We will replicate but we will not leave Old Cairo.

**MEYI:** Well it seems like there is a great need for what you are doing there ... Something I didn't mention because we've been planning it over the past few weeks is that [MEYI] is hosting David Arnold, the President of AUC [the American University in Cairo], here in a couple of weeks. ... I know that that is where AYB got its start – that is where you graduated from – so we're interested to hear what your views are on AUC's model in Egypt and whether it is actually making a difference in equipping students with the right skills to become community leaders, such as yourself, to really make a difference through civic service. Could it serve as a model in the rest of the region for these American-style higher educational institutions?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Definitely, AUC is one of the main reasons why I became this person. I believe that it was the reason for other very popular social changers and businessmen. We have the founder of [inaudible] one of the biggest IT services in Egypt is an AUC graduate. We have the Egyptian



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ambassador for the U.S. was a graduate from the AUC. ... So, we have a lot of people who were really touched by the education and the extracurricular services that the AUC gives to its students.

So, I founded Alashanek Ya Balady when I was a chairperson in the student union. And we really have a student union: it is not like any student union ... I'm talking about Egypt, for sure, because the student unions in Egypt are not that mature and they don't have a voice. But the student union at the AUC really had a voice and it's a real student body – we had all the rights to do whatever we want. So, when I proposed to do Alashanek Ya Balady, AUC gave me all the support and they gave me all the contacts. They actually helped me because we had to do [a lot] of paperwork. This is bureaucracy: we have a lot of bureaucracy in Egypt and a lot of paperwork has to be done before working in a certain area. The AUC really... I can really say that the AUC did this favor for me in helping get this paperwork done.

This is on the extracurricular activity side. On the education side, I am a graduate from marketing – business administration with a concentration on marketing – and I did my Master's degree in management of non-governmental organizations. I think, actually I believe, if I was not a graduate of AUC in these two majors – in the undergrad and the Master's – I wouldn't have been a social entrepreneur. This learning atmosphere we have in the AUC, in the discussions, in projects, and the one-to-one relationship we have with the professors, really gives a lot of knowledge about many things and we touched on many topics... So, yeah, the AUC is really a remarkable phase in my life and in my heart as well. I love it very much.

**MEYI:** I know that you now have a large part of your organization functioning through the student clubs and there is a club at AUC, and Cairo University...

**Ei-Ebrashi:** Yeah, we have five student clubs. One of them is the AUC and it's the oldest one.

**MEYI:** Well, I'll ask two questions: first, what is the role of the student clubs, in general, and what is their purpose within the structure of the organization? And also, that will lead into the next question on volunteerism among young people in Egypt and whether you think this is an emerging trend – increased volunteerism and voluntary service among young people – and if so, why? What is motivating young people to volunteer for organizations such as yours? So, that was kind of four questions in one, but start wherever you want. (Laughs)

**Ei-Ebrashi:** Yeah. (Laughs). I can't remember the first question.

**MEYI:** Well, the student clubs within AYB, what their function is.

**Ei-Ebrashi:** I think I have to start first with the vision behind opening student clubs in universities. Alashanek Ya Balady started as a student club within the AUC and then franchised to other universities for a reason, not because we were just young and wanted to do something. The reason was we have around 20,000 NGOs in Egypt: around 25 percent work in community development, and I don't know how many NGOs are active from the 25 percent. But, from being in the civil sector, I can say that there are not a lot of NGOs working in community development who are very active and [among whom] you can see their impact.



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This is in addition to the problem we have that around 60 percent of the Egyptian population are youth, so this is a great power, however most of the youth are not involved in community development. They might be involved in charity activities, like donating blood, donating blankets, ... but not involved in transformation of the society, and community development, and empowerment of other people. In 2002, if we thought of Alashanek Ya Balady like an NGO, it will be like any other NGO, and youth will ... just think it is like any other NGO.

So the vision was to invade the lives of youth, wherever they were. So we thought: "OK, we have to be there in the universities." And it happened to be that most of us were "AUC-ans," so the first branch was in AUC and then we franchised in other places, in other universities in Cairo. Hopefully, in sha' allah, the next phase will be in governates.

In 2005, three years later after the first branch in AUC, we opened [Alashanek Ya Balady] as an NGO. So, this was the vision.

I can remember that the first thing I told to the first 100 volunteers who joined the AUC club in 2002, the first thing was: "you don't like this country, yes or no?" And they said: "yes." And I told them: "you want to leave it after university, yes or no?" They said: "definitely, yes." I can remember that most of them said that.

**MEYI:** That they did want to leave?

**El-Ebrashi:** Yes. So I told them, "OK, and why are you here if you want to leave this country?" They told me: "we want to gain some skills, and maybe we can help some people before we graduate from the university and get stuck in our work." So, my comment was, and I am still saying this comment up until this moment, I have traveled to many countries in this world and I never saw a country without problems. I never saw any country [with people] that do not like the system of the country. And even when I came here in the U.S., people were rejecting the system and they want to change the system. And this is in the U.S., that we see in Egypt as the most democratic country.

So, no one on earth is not rejecting something in his or her country, but the difference between countries is not the system. The difference is the citizens who live in this country and if they are willing to change this. What I found in Egypt is youth are talking more than taking actions, and whenever any Egyptian or particularly any young man or young woman tells me "I really want to leave this country," the two things I say [are] first: "what did you do for this country? Did you ever try to change something and you failed? And if you failed, did you try again to do something?" And the second thing: "if you don't like this country, just leave it. Why are you here? You will tell me that 'I don't have any othe opportunity now,' so you have to thank God that you have opportunity in your own country."

So this is the thing we are trying to channel for youth in universities when they are still young: in the age of 16, 17, even 20 years old. They *have* to do something for their country, for a better life for them and for their children. And wherever they will go, they will find problems. This is the vision behind franchising Alashanek Ya Balady in universities: so as to educate young people



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about the necessity of serving the country, serving the poor people, and at the same time they will gain the necessary skills and the necessary experience.

**MEYI:** Do you find that the young people that volunteer for your student clubs – [those] that they are out doing grass-roots community work, out seeing the daily realities that people live in these very low-income neighborhoods – for those of them that this is a new experience, maybe, what are their reactions? Do they move on from Alashanek Ya Balady and say they want to do something bigger now, or they want to start careers in development, or they want to effect policy? What kinds of things do they move onto after? I know it hasn't been that many years so you probably still have a lot of the original people that are still in the clubs, but do you have any sense of that?

**EI-Ebrashi:** The first one who changed was me, because I actually moved from a business background – marketing and working for multinationals – to development, actually, and teaching in university. So this was the first person, and many persons in the board and volunteers who developed this sense of responsibility are now working for foundations and NGOs, local and international NGOs. So, yes, I think it did [bring about] a lot of change in the lives of volunteers. And actually this change is intentional, its integrated into our vision that its not only about bringing change to the lives of the poor, but also bringing change to the lives of the rich, as I said in the beginning of the interview. It's to bring this change, this sense of pride that you are an Egyptian and you are helping your own country.

**MEYI:** A lot of the challenges that we talk about in our research here have to do with the transition from youth to adulthood in the Middle East, and moving from the education system to jobs, to the labor market. ... Unfortunately it is not quite the situation yet where volunteering and gaining this kind of experience *necessarily* will translate into skills for the job market: for the “good jobs” that young people want. So, is that one of the challenges that you face in convincing people that your work is worthwhile, and that it is worthwhile for them to be involved in as an individual for their own larger, career aspirations?

**EI-Ebrashi:** You are talking about the poor people or the volunteers?

**MEYI:** No, the volunteers. ... Do you think that they really see the benefit in it, and they don't really need...

**EI-Ebrashi:** I don't want [it] to seem that I am trying to portray Alashanek Ya Balady as the solution for everything, but I can give you some examples for how Alashanek Ya Balady really changed the perception of some people about their employment opportunities, and actually they got some employment opportunities because *of* joining Alashanek Ya Balady.

We have many partners: we have many partners from multinational companies to foundations and international NGOs, so people actually know us. So if you are a volunteer in Alashanek Ya Balady and you are applying [for a job] in a multinational company, for sure they will know the organization. And, thank God, we have good relations with most of the multinational businesses ... I had these phone calls from my friends who passed a lot of interviews, and they work now in multinational companies and big, local firms in Egypt, saying that the first question was like “Oh,



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you were in Alashanek Ya Balady? What were you doing? I used to participate in this program.” So, most probably the interviewer was in Alashanek Ya Balady before... or he was working in one of the programs that is partnering with Alashanek Ya Balady in a partnership or sponsorship, or something like that. So this is the first thing it really influences. And I really feel happy that the volunteers are proud that they are part of the organization because other people know that – they know Alashanek Ya Balady.

The second thing is, yes, volunteers [acquire] a lot of skills. They learn a lot of time management, for sure, and they have passion for work, and also they learn project management, and for sure they learn leadership skills and teamwork skills. So, yes, it affects volunteers lives. And this is actually what we are trying to communicate to people: give to poor people and you will have even more benefits than the poor, that you gave them your time.

**MEYI:** Tell me a little bit about the people that you are reaching out to, that you are targeting for your programs. I know that you focus on Misr al-Qadima and you focus on young people and women, in particular. How did you pick that as the initial target group – how did you identify young people and women, in particular, as in need? Or was it natural to start there?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Yeah, it was not a problem to pick them out because they are the marginalized. Actually, if you focus on the women, so you focus on the backbone of the household. If you focus on youth, then you focus on 60 percent of the population. So, this was natural. And we have other auxiliary services for children and men: we are not marginalizing them. The focus is on women and youth because youth are a huge portion of the population and women are the backbone of the family and household.

**MEYI:** For people who aren't familiar with the actual development programs that you are engaged in: the capacity-building program is a big one that targets young people. Can you talk a little bit about it and what you do there?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Actually, this program got legitimized and it also became bigger and we recruited a lot of staff to this program in 2008. It was there since 2006, however the boom was in the beginning of 2008. And we are currently working with 1,000 youth in 2008. So the program works on the development of technical and soft skills of youth in Old Cairo: soft skills like CV writing, interpersonal skills like leadership, career planning, teamwork skills. Technical skills, like very specialized knowledge areas, like: HR – human resource management – accounting, finance, something very technical that they need to get a certain job. This is in addition to computer [skills] and English – the basic stuff.

So, these are the trainings we give to youth, and we have a lot of partners: the trainers are coming from every multinational company and big, local firms in Egypt so as to give the right experience and the right knowledge. And, from this program, we initiated another program which is the employment office. The employment office currently is an initiative and it will be a formal office in 2009, in sha' allah. Hopefully ... it will be the first employment office for the poor in Egypt, where we will work on finding employment opportunities for youth graduating from the capacity building program.



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**MEYI:** So now it is more of informal services you are providing in conjunction with the program, but you hope to actually open an office?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Yes.

**MEYI:** The 1,000 youth that are now receiving the training... do they mainly just have basic education, or secondary education? What type of background do they have?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Secondary education diploma holders and university graduates. This is for youth. For women, they just have to be literate, and we train them on skills like babysitting, housekeeping, because there is such a market need for them in Egypt.

**MEYI:** So they can find jobs in these areas.

**EI-Ebrashi:** Yes.

**MEYI:** Of the young people, are there a lot of young *women* that you are training? Or is it mostly young men?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Youth, mostly young men. For the women's programs, yes we have young women and we have women exceeding 40 years of age.

**MEYI:** What is the success of this program? I know you said it is relatively new to really take off. But some of the outcomes, i.e. are the young people finding jobs that you are training them in? What types of success have you had so far, and where do you think you might be able to build?

**EI-Ebrashi:** We still didn't evaluate the program because we do that after 2008, but I can tell you the results. For sure their skills increased, and this shows in the projects they do and the exams they pass...Our employment office is still informal, but we were able to employ some youth and women who graduated from [the capacity building] program. The success is not only in employing them, however the success is the evaluation that came to us from the employers, that they are really good and that they are performing well.

**MEYI:** What else have you got going on that you might want to share with our audiences?

**EI-Ebrashi:** We have the culture and health program. This program is the children and teens program, which is where we give space for children and teens to express themselves through art: various forms of art like drawing, culture, even theater. Also we have some human development programs for them, like: field trips to various places in Egypt; small forums so as to educate them on how to talk to each other, and to listen to each other, and to express their opinions about the area they are living in, and this kind of environmental awareness. And we have programs which targets them as children and also the women, the mothers, for personal hygiene, focusing on two things, actually: hygiene and reproductive health.

**MEYI:** A few more questions we had for you about your personal experiences founding AYB and setting up the NGO: what are some of the challenges that you faced, either at the beginning or that you still face, and how have you overcome them, or attempted to overcome them? I'm sure there haven't been any, right? (Laughs.)



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**EI-Ebrashi:** (Laughs.) A lot of challenges. First challenge...actually all of the challenges were in parallel. OK, I can name some. Like, number one is [the] perception of young people [toward] community development: they don't know what community development [is]. In 2002, we were trying to tell them that community development is very different from charity, so it took us a while to educate people about that.

Second thing is franchising in universities: in governmental universities in Egypt. It was smooth in AUC, in the French university and German university, but franchising in local universities was very difficult. The mindset was very different. So this was the second challenge.

The third challenge, actually this is very funny: the third challenge is our young age, which really faced us when we were dealing with the community, media, and governmental agencies. I was 16 years-old and I was trying to get a signature of the minister of local development on a certain paper, so you can imagine. (Laughs).

**MEYI:** Right. It takes months or years...

**EI-Ebrashi:** For a normal person it takes like that, but for a 16 year-old person in the office of the Ministry trying to get the signature...

**MEYI:** Was this actually to start to register the organization?

**EI-Ebrashi:** No, it was before... because actually you need a lot of signatures, even if you are a student club, to work in youth centers and public schools, and so on...I founded Alashanek Ya Balady in 2002 when I was 18, however I started two years before just to finish the paperwork.

**MEYI:** Yeah, I can imagine that it was so unusual that at such a young age you were that active.

**EI-Ebrashi:** That was really funny, and we took the signatures one way or another. And then with the support of AUC and the ministry of local development – the Minister ended up being really cooperative, he really helped us in getting the signatures of other ministries...

When we went to the community, it was not only me who was 18 years-old in 2002, it was other people as well who were 18 years-old, 17 and 16. So, you can imagine that I am talking to a general manager of a youth center who is 60 years-old and trying to convince him to [let us] work in the youth center. And also going to Umm al-Basma, who is one of the oldest women in the district, and trying to convince her to be a part of the program and to help us in the marketing. So she's, like, 55 years-old. These kind of things, like: "who are you, child? You are trying to help us, but we have more knowledge than you...where are you coming from and what are your intentions?" So, all this kind of stuff because of our age. It took us a while to build this trust with the community as well.

And this also happened with the media. I can't remember the first press release: the first press release I think was 2005 or 2006, because no one trusted a very young organization like ours. So yeah, these are the challenges. I can remember other things, but these are mainly the first few challenges that pop up in my mind.



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**MEYI:** How did you eventually convince people to work with you or to cooperate?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Which people?

**MEYI:** You said, for instance, the older woman in the neighborhood...

**EI-Ebrashi:** Yeah, maybe they sympathized with me. I was really into it and I was really convinced, and I nagged a lot. So, I went to this general manager of the youth center and talked to him many times... And also that woman in the area, I entered from this point of: "please help me, I am like your daughter, a grown daughter even. I'm working on this project so maybe we can do something together." So I tried my best until, now, they trust me.

**MEYI:** Actually this is a good segue: since you have been [in the U.S.] during the elections, we were going to ask you what your reactions are and what you think. Because you know Obama's campaign has been so historic in so many ways in the U.S., and a lot of his success has been contingent on young volunteers. Do you think there are any lessons, or anything we can take from this experience, that will support a larger role for young people in really effecting large-scale change? And then also, just your general impressions on "what next" for the U.S. in the region: is there a role for the U.S. in encouraging development and opportunities for young people in the Middle East?

**EI-Ebrashi:** OK, for the first question – lessons learned – you said it: most of the campaigners were young people. So the answer is, yes, if young people want to do something, they will do it... So, young people wanted something, working on it morning and night for the whole year, and they got it in the end. So the lesson learned is, simply, if you want it, you'll get it. Just work for it. This is the lesson.

**MEYI:** Yes, I think its really encouraging for a lot of young people who have been working very hard. But now are asking, or starting to ask, at least, OK, what's next? What is the policy agenda, especially foreign policy, especially in the Middle East...

**EI-Ebrashi:** I think we should give...(laughs). Obama will not be the president officially until next January. So I think we should give him an opportunity...

**MEYI:** (Laughs.) You are right, we should. Hopefully Americans at least, even young people in the U.S., can have a positive influence in the Middle East. I think there's room there.

**EI-Ebrashi:** Yes, I think what the U.S. can do for the Middle East is a lot. I don't speak on behalf of the President of Egypt, but my opinion is that the major problem we are facing in Egypt is that we cannot be an enemy for the U.S. and we cannot be an enemy for Iraq and Palestine. We are just in the middle and we don't know what to do, because the U.S. has a lot of influence in the political problems in the Middle East, and if the U.S. president really works on, at least *works* on, solving the problems we have in the Middle East, Egypt will have a better political position with its neighbors.

The second thing is I think a big part of the oppression we have among youth in Egypt is part of feeling inferior in the world. So, because you know Egypt is a Muslim country, and what the



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media portrays every day that Muslims are terrorists ... Actually I feel that when I go to other countries. I [have travelled] to many countries in this world, and I can tell you in every airport they ask me: “do you have weapons?”, because I am a veiled Muslim woman.

If I don't have this trust in myself, and I can't reply to him or her who is saying that: yeah, I feel inferior. So I think a big part of the oppression we have in Egypt among youth is feeling inferior, and to say that “I'm Egyptian” is not something good. And I saw that among youth, like when I have some friends and we are out[side] of Egypt and someone asks you “where do you come from?”, the first thing you think is: “oh no, I [wish] I had another nationality.” I probably say I'm Egyptian, I don't have a problem by it, but I'm talking about other people.

So, I think the U.S. really has an influence on that, to help the Middle East in general, helping us in portraying Muslim and Arab countries in the media that we are not terrorists. Terrorists are there, everywhere: they are not necessarily Muslim, they can be of any religion or any nationality. So I think the U.S. could have a good stand in that.

... So stereotyping is really dangerous and it really makes you feel very inferior. So, I think Americans now can think about, after this campaign we had in the U.S., they can think “you were stereotyping black people, and now you elected a black president.” And you think he's very good – actually you believe he's very good. And we all believe that he can bring change to the U.S. and to the world. So think of also the people you are stereotyping outside: in Egypt and the Middle East and in general. Stop stereotyping and think [about] it. So, this is actually what I am requesting out loud: stop stereotyping.

**MEYI:** It's a really important thing to point to, I think, and unfortunately it goes both ways. There are stereotypes on both sides now: what types of programs can help that, and can help destroy these negative stereotypes? Is it exchange programs between the region and the United States, is it...

**EI-Ebrashi:** Media.

**MEYI:** Media?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Media: media, in general. If you have ads, normal ads, that have veiled women or men with beards acting normally... because they are normal people. I am a veiled woman and I talk to people, I buy things from international stores, and I don't have a problem. When I go to foreign countries, they even ask me: “how did you learn English? You have an Apple – you have a computer?” So... yes, and I graduated from an American university, by the way! (Laughs.) So, to put these people in the normal life through ads, through campaigns, this is what we want. So, yes cultural programs and cultural exchanges, all of this stuff is very good, but they are not seen to the public. Not millions of people can see it. But if you just [turn on] the television, you find these people, you get acquainted to their appearances, how they talk, and everything. I think media is the solution...

**MEYI:** One final question here on the education system in Egypt. You've said in other interviews that, in a lot of senses, that the root of a lot of Egypt's development problems is in the



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education system. How do you see that in your work, in Alashanek Ya Balady's work, and what can be done to improve it?

**EI-Ebrashi:** I can't say that Alashanek Ya Balady is working on education development in Egypt, but we are working on supplementary activities – supplementary to the education system. Like providing capacity building programs, soft skills, like the "soft education," and cultural awareness. So we are not providing pure educational programs.

I think educational reform has to come from the government, not the NGOs. It's embedded in the educational system: like changing the curriculum, the syllabus, changing the way of teaching, incorporating community service into the education system, incorporating life skills, many things.

**MEYI:** But that has to come from the top?

**EI-Ebrashi:** Unfortunately, yes. The NGOs cannot do anything with that. Maybe some advocacy, but it has to change from the government.