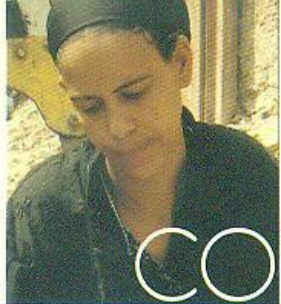


# Our Story

Documenting fifteen years  
of the Association for the Development  
and Enhancement of Women







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Adew would like to thank Mariam Al-Foudery for researching "Our Story" and preparing this brochure



As the founder of ADEW, we feel very proud when we look at what we have accomplished. ADEW has become like a precious daughter to us. As ADEW's parents, we are full of pride when we look at its accomplishments. This pride is not simply an innate one felt by parents, but stems from the fact that ADEW has achieved such a wide range and breadth of accomplishments even at the still-young age of sixteen. Today we now see ADEW as a young woman and hope that she will continue to develop and improve every day.

It was in the mid 1980's that our group began to toy with idea of having a "child". When we originally thought about ADEW as an organization devoted to enhancing and working with female heads of household (FHH) we were only a small group of young men and women interested in poverty alleviation and the cultural differences between genders that perpetuate inequality. It was not until 1987 that our thoughts actually gave birth ADEW was registered as an Egyptian nonprofit organization.

ADEW started as a small room located in Manshiet Nasr, an impoverished squatter area near the outskirts of Cairo. What began as a small organization expanded, and it was from this simple room that ADEW branched out. For years we worked hard with FHHs, observing their needs and trying to solve their problems. Finally, after years of hard work, policy makers listed to us and now the problems and needs of FHHs are priority on the political agendas of both the government and the National Council for Women.

Today, when we look back at past years and the effect of ADEW's presence, at how we were and what we have become, we not only feel proud, but we also feel responsible. For this reason we are proud to present in this publication a glimpse of our experience to everyone interested in working to develop gender, women, and marginalized FHHs. We are presenting this publication to our partners in social work as evidence that patience and hard work can achieve noble aims, even if it seems like only a dream in the beginning.

On behalf of the founders we would like to thank Mariam Al-Foudery for her dedication and commitment to make our story see the light.

Iman Bibars,  
Chairperson







# INTRODUCTION

The average person's glimpse of Manshiet Nasser is from the highway that runs to Cairo's famous citadel. Through the window of a taxi or bus, one can see a series of brown buildings with unfinished roofs crammed together on a hill; will perhaps be surprised at the sight of small children playing on railway tracks that run outside the neighborhood; feel a moment of fear as the kids scramble out of the way of a blue cargo train belching black smoke. And then, within a few rotations of the tires, the area is gone.

For there are no casual visitors to Manshiet Nasser itself. Over four hundred thousand people survive in the squatter tenements of the area, and yet outside of a handful of development professionals, most people are not aware of its existence. Have never walked through the twisting dirt paths and avoided the piles of old bottles, torn plastic bags, faded cardboard, and rotting food strewn everywhere. Have never paused to look at the almost Venetian canal occupying the main thoroughfare, and then recoiled as they realized that it is filled with raw sewage.

It is in Manshiet Nasser, however, that one of Cairo's most prominent feminist non-governmental organizations was conceived. The Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women was born in 1987 from the efforts of a group of young professional women and men who decided that it was time to take a more active role in combating the poverty that ravaged their country. They were friends and they were colleagues, but in ADEW they found a mission to unite them.

## ADEW Works in the Field:

The ensuing fifteen years have seen ADEW rise from a tiny association run by a group of idealists in their early twenties to one of the premier civil society organizations in Egypt. For unlike many other high-profile non-governmental organizations, ADEW organizes the direct provision of services to women in the field.

In addition to a head office in El-Manial, ADEW has four offices in the slum areas of Manshiet Nasser and Masr El-Qadima and a mandate to work with the poorest of poor women. ADEW programs include a legal awareness program to inform women of their rights under Egyptian law and a legal counseling service that assists women to secure ID cards, social security entitlements, and inheritance provisions. ADEW holds literacy classes, health classes, and environmental awareness classes for its beneficiaries, and additionally organizes a counseling service for their adolescent daughters. Moreover, ADEW runs microfinance programs to extend credit and savings products to poor women who would never otherwise be able to access such services. Thousands of low-income women have been reached.





## ADEW Drives Policy Change:

ADEW is an advocacy-oriented organization as well as an activist in the field, and the organization can be credited with identifying what have become four of the most important policy initiatives driving the women's NGO movement in Egypt today. For example, ADEW was the first organization to bring the phenomenon of female heads of households to national attention. When it began its work in the mid-1980s with a mandate to deal with female heads of households, one of the chief objections made to the organization was that it was wasting its time. The resistance came from all levels. How was it possible that in Egypt, a conservative Arab country, women would be left without the protection of both a husband and her family? To many, the notion that a woman could be both the primary economic contributor to her household and its social and legal representative in the community was anathema. And yet in 2000, the Egyptian government officially announced that 20 percent of all households nationally are headed by a woman.

ADEW was also a pioneer in the issue of identity cards. Some of its earliest research in Manshiet Nasser revealed that a shocking majority of women have absolutely no legal documents – from state-issued ID cards to marriage, divorce, and birth certificates. The question of ID cards is particularly critical as without one, women cannot work in the formal sector, register assets, apply for public housing and social security, or even register their children in school. In other words, women have no legal existence. However, at the time that ADEW began to emphasize a legal awareness project in its fieldwork, few other organizations were willing to take up the issue. They insisted that the problem was localized and minimal. Today, women's lack of access to ID cards in poor communities is a universally acknowledged fact. A study conducted by the Ford Foundation in the early 1990s shows that only 20 percent of Egyptian women vs. 60 percent of Egyptian men own ID cards throughout the country. The National Council of Women, the nation's most powerful women's organization, and other NGOs have also adopted the ID card question as a top priority.

ADEW also brought notions of group credit to Egypt. Microfinance has increasingly gained currency as a development solution in recent years, but in 1985, the concept of providing financial services to the poor was still relatively new in the Middle East. The programs that did exist gave small loans to individuals to buy conventional income-generating equipment like sewing machines. ADEW was the first Egyptian non-governmental organization to organize women into credit groups, and to use social pressure instead of collateral to guarantee loans. Currently, the group credit model is used by almost every NGO providing microfinance services in Egypt.

Finally, ADEW raised awareness on the once taboo Egyptian Nationality Law. The Nationality





Law dictates that Egyptian women married to non-nationals cannot pass on their citizenship to their children. The law has devastating effects on poor women in particular, who find that they have to pay exorbitant "foreign" tuition fees to send their children to school or even to continue to renew their visas so that they may remain in the country. ADEW sponsored a national conference on the subject in April of 2001 under the auspices of Egyptian first lady, Mrs. Susanne Mubarak, and the media blitz generated by the event has resulted in a parliamentary bill being floated to repeal the discriminatory statute. The issue has also been picked up by other leading feminist organizations.

## ADEW's Story:

The name "ADEW" has become a national byword in Egypt today. But as the press increasingly flocks to the organization to ask about its current activities, a series of questions about its past remain unanswered. Where did this organization come from? What trail did it carve in arriving at where it is today? Who are the players behind the logo that so many poor women recognize instantly?

These questions are critical because they are at the heart of what the organization has achieved, and for the first time ADEW can take the time to answer them. When we were struggling to survive on a single grant from the Ford Foundation for the first decade of our existence, we did not have the time, resources, and experience to systematically review our history and growth. Now that we have attained a measure of success, however, we can afford to step back and be introspective about our journey.

We have decided to publish our conclusions primarily because we believe that a decade and a half of experience in the field deserves to be shared. We learned our lessons the hard way, and sharing the challenges we faced may spare others the necessity of repeating them. Even more importantly, we want to encourage others working in development to think big and take measured risks. ADEW began with a small group of young people who had a dream, and we want everyone to know that with enough faith and hard work, dreams can come true.

## Here is our story.....





## Working with the Garbage Collectors

By the mid-1980s, the face of Egypt was changing dramatically. Luxury hotels with sprawling manicured grounds had sprung up along the banks of the River Nile, and Western consumer products were flooding the markets. Everywhere there were signs of new wealth, of technological progress. But in the back alleys of Cairo's slums, Cairo's poor were getting poorer.

The structural adjustment measures that opened the country to foreign investment also stripped away many of the traditional safety nets in Egyptian society. From 1980 on, the official poverty rate in the country was estimated at a record 23% of the total population. State-funded schools were breaking down, health care facilities started closing in rural areas, and the unemployment rate doubled. It soon became abundantly clear that the era of generous subsidies, comprehensive social protection entitlements, and bloated public budgets had finally come to an end.

It was in the context of this simmering backdrop that the Ford Foundation in Cairo received a rather unusual letter in 1984 from a recent graduate. The letter read, "I just finished my Master's Degree in America and I am coming home. But I do not want a research position, I want to work in the field with the poor of my country," recalls Barbara Ibrahim, who at the time was the head of the Women's Economic Development Program at the Ford Foundation.

The epistle was from twenty-four year old Heba El-Kholy, an Egyptian woman who had just finished a Masters program in development at Cornell University in New York. "I really just wanted to get my hands dirty," Heba remembers with a quiet smile, her light brown eyes uncharacteristically sober. "I had gotten a degree in the States, and I wanted to do something."

With the help of the Ford Foundation, "doing something" took the form of eschewing the lucrative corporate route, instead working with one of Egypt's premier development consulting firms. Heba joined an urban development project being run by the company Environmental Quality International (EQI) in the garbage collector's neighborhood on the fringes of Cairo.

The Zabaleen, the garbage collectors, community, was infamous for its poverty and sanitation problems. Neighbourhood homes had no running water, sewage systems, or official electricity connections. Children played among the piles of putrid garbage that filled the twisting streets. Perhaps worst of all, residents were shunned by society for their perceived lack of hygiene and "dirty" lifestyle, left to dwell in squalor by the majority of Cairo's population, who had only the faintest awareness of the garbage collectors' very existence.

Marginalized by both location and circumstances, the residents near the Moquattom mountain were one of the most vulnerable populations in Egypt. But as Heba soon found out, the women in the community were at particular risk. Domestic violence was a common problem, as was complete economic dependency on men who nonetheless, often could not or would not support the family.





Eighteen years later, as we conducted field research for this publication, we often heard the type of stories that must have galvanized Heba so many years earlier, one day for example, we entered the house of a woman we will call Sakina, and noticed immediately that she could not sit still. She jumped up to greet us, rushed to make us cups of too-sweet tea and then moved from corner to corner straightening the few articles of furniture in the threadbare room that was her home. When she finally settled down to speak with us, she bounced one child on her lap and rubbed a smudge of dirt off another's face.

Her story was heartbreaking. "My husband is an *urzuki*, or temporarily employed wage worker, so of course we have no money," she began. "And I don't work either. I cook and take care of my children all day. But now I need to have an operation and I don't know how I will pay for it."

"When I was a child, I fell on my leg and hurt it badly and have had problems ever since." Sakina faltered as she explained that the inattention of her uncle to the wound had turned a relatively minor childhood injury into a lifelong disability. "The pain has been getting worse lately, and the doctor says that if I do not get it operated on, they will have to cut off my leg entirely."

There is something about the way she speaks that makes this story different from the other tales of misery and despair that we have heard. Perhaps it is that she is only thirty, and yet simultaneously manages to look years younger and years older. Perhaps it is that her youngest daughter is mentally disabled, and as she pauses in her conversation to fix a curl of the baby's fine brown hair, an expression of incredible sadness washes over her face with unconscious sincerity.

"The operation is expensive," she continues. "But maybe if I can begin my own business, I can start making enough money to save for my operation. I want to sell plastic plates – I really think that people will buy them."

In the mid-1980s, the notion of microfinance (providing financial services like savings and credit to the poorest of the poor) was little known. Although the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh had been providing loans to low-income people for income-generating projects with incredible success for almost a decade, the idea had not spread to the Middle East. "Banking on the poor," or the notion that the poor are savvy and have ideas that they can use to help themselves once they have the capital with which to implement them was revolutionary. Almost dangerous.

But after hearing a string of tragic stories from the Sakinas of the Zabaleen, Heba decided to use her knowledge about the Grameen Bank projects to create a credit program for the wives of the garbage collectors. Potential clients would be required to form groups before applying for a loan, and all members of the group would have to repay their loans before additional funds would be dispersed. In other words, instead of requiring poor women with no assets to prove that they had collateral, the project would use social pressure as a mechanism for ensuring that repayment rates were high instead.





"I thought, let's try it, I think it will work," says Heba. "It was a way of reaching a particularly vulnerable population and no one had ever tried it before."

The objections were numerous, however. Sceptics had difficulty believing that poor women could actually implement their own income-generating projects and repay loans. There was much muttering about how barefoot women with seven children and no education would never be able to manage their own finances.

"The idea met with a lot of resistance, both in the community and out," points out Heba. "We had to go back and review traditional financial mechanisms in order to figure out some way to justify the idea. And then we hit upon the Gameeeya."

"Gameeyas" are informal savings associations that operate in every level of Egyptian society. Participants contribute a fixed amount of money every month for a certain time period, and each month one woman takes home the total sum until each woman in the scheme has her money returned to her. The Gameeeya is a way of generating large amounts of instant cash without having to resort to applying for a loan.

"We framed our credit proposal in terms of the Gameeeya model," said Heba. "The similarities are obvious, because women come together to manage their finances collectively. Even the poorest women were successful in implementing Gameeyas, so why not a credit program?" "But I have to admit that the credit program idea came first, and then the notion of the Gameeeya was used to back it," adds Heba with some amusement. "In order to get what you want, you sometimes have to backtrack a little."

Heba pitched the idea to EQI's Muneer Namatallah, a man many describe as a visionary. He backed the project and the proposal was sent to various donor agencies, and in the end, both OXFAM and the Ford Foundation decided to fund it.

"I guess Heba just had a spark," says Barbara Ibrahim, formerly of Ford. "I remember the day she came to us to pitch the idea...you know, you can always tell the difference between someone who has genuine conviction and someone who is just feeling around to see what the donor agency will fund."

The Zabaleen women's credit program was scheduled to run for two years, an experiment in how well the group credit model would work in an Egyptian context.





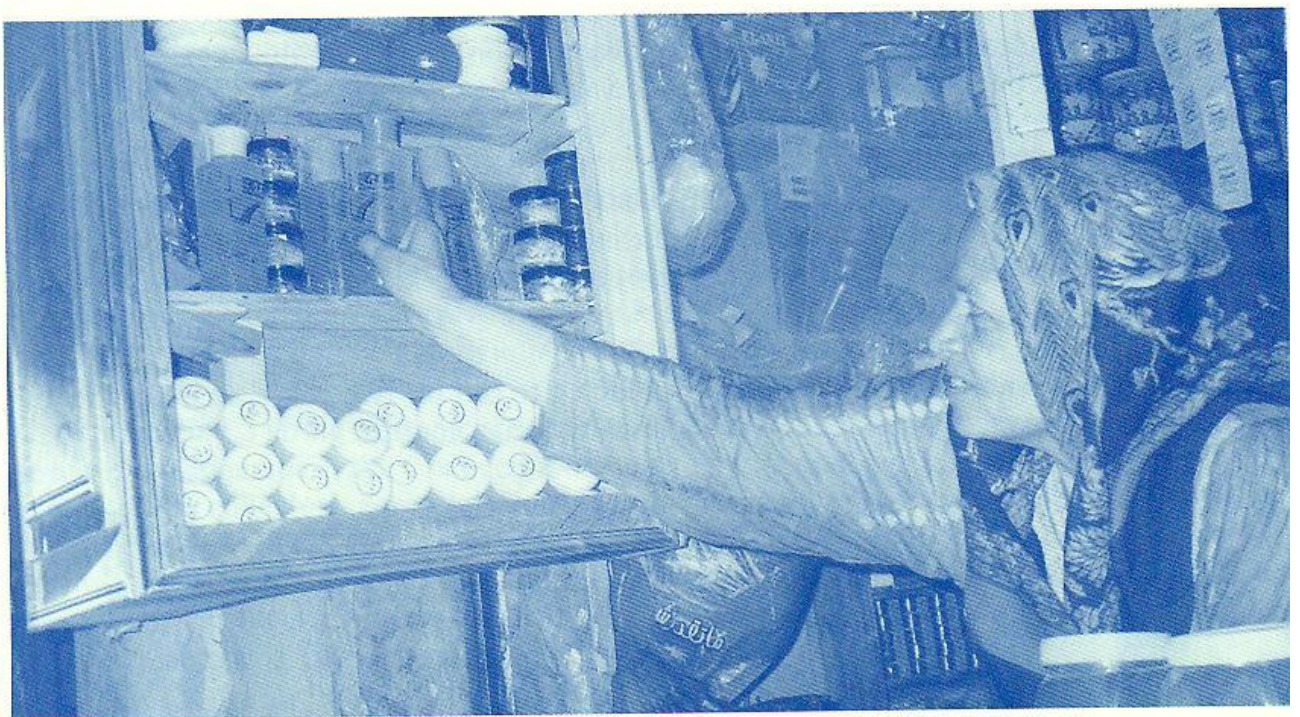
## Patterns of Truth

Marlene Anawaty, met Heba El-Kholy in 1985 through the credit project in the Zabaleen district. As representatives of the donor agency and implementing institution, respectively, they developed a close working relationship that they were to maintain for the rest of their careers. That was also the year that EQI hired two more young development professionals to work on the project with Heba, Somaya Ibrahim and Ahmed Zakaria. The three soon became fast friends.

"We were a tight group," says Somaya. "We used to spend hours discussing women's issues and micro-credit, both during working hours and afterwards. Sometimes it seemed that we were always at EQI."

Somaya moves a strand of honey coloured hair away from her eyes. "I remember how we used to climb all over the hill of the Moquattam to do our research and check on how the project was going. The neighbourhood was so rough that we were terrified to stay there after sunset, but we used to spend our days clambering down rocks to visit various local workshops to see if we could replicate their efforts,".

The team's efforts were not wasted. The idea of distributing loans to groups instead of to individuals quickly proved to work well, and women who would never otherwise have had access to financial services were joining the program in droves. Best of all, women were using their loans to invest in small businesses and were actually repaying the money. The gamble had worked. El Kholy had gambled that the German model would work in Egypt and the gamble worked.







At the same time, however, unanticipated issues also cropped up. The EQI team knew going into the project that most of their clients would be living under the poverty line and that over 70% would be illiterate. They did not realize that most women would not even own any official documentation. Birth certificates, marriage certificates, or divorce papers were rare, and few women had a state-issued identity card. The lack of ID cards, issued automatically to all men at the age of sixteen, was particularly troublesome. Without an ID, women could not work in the formal sector, enroll their children in school, register their assets, apply for public housing, qualify for social security or social aid, or go to a bank. They simply did not exist legally.

Another unexpected and disturbing find was that a significant number of women were heading their households economically and socially. At the time, it seemed inconceivable that in a society as conservative as Egypt women would be left without the protection of a male member of the household. However, Heba's best friend from childhood, Iman Bibars, who was doing field research for her Masters' Degree in different low-income areas on marriage and divorce laws confirmed that female headed-households was not a phenomenon restricted to the rather atypical Zabaleen community.

"My interest was actually in domestic violence. I wanted to build a shelter for battered women," Iman qualifies. "But I definitely noticed in the course of my research that there were a lot of women who were running their homes without any male presence. And it wasn't just widows and divorcees, it was women whose husbands had other wives, women married to drug addicts, women married to urzuki (wage workers), etc. It was an issue – a much, much bigger issue than anyone was willing to admit."

Iman Bibars is a dynamic woman, and her voice thrums with emotion as she remembers the frustration of trying to convince people that female headship was a real phenomenon. "I would have conversations with my mother and she would say, 'No, ya Iman, what are you talking about? Men always help out their women in Egypt.' And then I would go into the field and see women whose husbands had deserted them struggling to make a living because the state refused to help them because they were still technically married, and I would think, 'Come on, this is crazy.'"

For both those directly involved in the project and interested bystanders like Iman, the patterns of truth that had begun to emerge were too alarming to ignore. Women in low-income areas were facing even bigger problems than absolute poverty and domestic violence. They were marginalized in every way: ignored by the state because they had no official papers proving their existence, ignored by a society that practised a double standard, and ignored even by a development community that was not aware of the magnitude of their problems. Something had to be done.





## An Association is Born

"The problems were obvious to us," says Heba of her feelings at the end of the Zabaleen project. "Women needed access to credit in order to have any shot at a sustainable livelihood. There were many women heading their households who needed extra attention and protection. And poor women had no ID cards or official documents because their fathers and husbands just attached their names to their own IDs and never bothered to help them get their own. But no one else seemed to recognize these things as problems."

As a result of the fact that most organizations did not see the lack of ID cards, lack of access to financial services, and female headship as legitimate and widespread concerns, Heba, Somaya, and Ahmed decided to find a new institutional structure to deal with the issue. They began playing with the idea of promoting a credit cooperative for women in the slum area of Manshiet Nasser, the lower part of the hill that contained the Zabaleen district. They tried to mobilize women to create their own association, but their efforts were met with little enthusiasm.

"It is all a vicious cycle, you see. Women did not have ID cards, so there was no way that they could register themselves as an Association," says Heba. "Besides, we could not convince women to deal with the government bureaucracy. They did not want to take the responsibility for such an initiative."

The group then investigated the notion of working through existing NGOs and community development organizations to convince them to provide credit and other services to poor women. That notion too was quickly disqualified. The civil society institutions operating in Manshiet Nasser either had a religious agenda or were associated with the Egyptian government in some capacity, and the team decided that they wanted to be able to take an independent approach to the controversial issues they were interested in.

The friends then began to wonder if perhaps they could instead begin their own association on behalf of women. Iman Bibars was soon drawn into the plans. "Heba and I are life-long friends, we cared about the same issues, and on this subject our ideas met perfectly," points out Iman. "I wanted to work on domestic violence counselling and legal awareness for women, Heba was interested in credit, and we were all interested in female heads of households...So we thought, 'let's create our own non-governmental organization and do a mixture of those things'."

It seemed that the opportunity to take long, heart-felt conversations about poverty and actually do something about it had arrived. "We were so much younger then," reminisces Heba. "And we were so scared. We knew we had a good idea and we were committed to it, but at the same time you have to realize that we had very little experience. Besides, the government context





was not conducive to new NGOs being formed."

"Also, we were terrified that we would be perceived as too Westernized," adds Iman. "We had all graduated from the American University of Cairo, and we had a real fear that people would not want to work with us because they would think that we were foreigners playing at development."

"We were so sensitive to criticisms that we had absorbed 'Western principles' like feminism and were now going to impose them on Egyptians," she says. "But I guess it is a point in our favour that we decided to try creating our own NGO anyway."

Heba, Iman, Ahmed, and Somaya were all obvious candidates for the new organization because they had been brainstorming together for a long time, but the Egyptian NGO Law required at least twenty people to sign the registration forms to create an NGO. All signatories would then bear some legal responsibility – a daunting prospect during an age in which the legislative environment was restrictive and arrests of activists were fairly common.

"We used to invite people to lunch at the pizzeria at the Nile Hilton," laughs Heba as she recalls trying to 'coerce' people into joining ADEW. The first official meeting of the organization was at EQI. Marlene Kanawaty from OXFAM, Barbara Ibrahim of the Ford Foundation, and Muneer Namatallah of EQI all decided to participate, showing support for an initiative led by a much younger group of colleagues.

"It was an unusual group," says Barbara Ibrahim of her young colleagues' efforts. "They were really the first example of their generation getting involved in development, instead of with a charity movement."

In the end, the team got their twenty cosignatories mainly through their networks of friends and family. They also got a \$100,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to set up the project. Unfortunately, however, the process of starting up an NGO was not an easy one. The registration process alone took two years.

Many of the group's fears about being perceived as too Westernized did indeed factor into that delay. "Someone in the Ministry of Social Affairs got it into his head that a bunch of American University of Cairo graduates was trying to set up an NGO for unclear reasons," Marlene tells me. "No one of our education or class went about registering the type of NGO that we were proposing in those days, and so they figured we must have an agenda. But I guess they finally came to the conclusion that we were just trying to do some good."

Today, ADEW has legal status as a private voluntary organization (PVO). After the Beijing Conference in 1995, many women's rights groups decided to register as civil companies rather





than PVOs because the body of legislation surrounding Egypt's "Infitah" Policy, (penness to foreign investment) allows for-profit companies unusual financial and thematic freedom. Private voluntary organizations, by contrast, operated under the legal status of Law 32, known to be fairly restrictive. While many feminist organizations concerned about close governmental supervision stemming from the controversial nature of their work chose to register as companies instead of PVOs and thus escaped scrutiny for a period of time, ADEW is happy that it made the decision it did.

For by the mid-1990s, partly as a response to the burgeoning number of "civil companies," the Egyptian government passed a law nullifying the legal status of these institutions. While the law was later declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, the fact remains that the legal status of civil companies continues to be tenuous today. "No one is quite sure what law applies anymore," said an observer who prefers not to be identified.

ADEW, however, has been largely exempt from such problems because it was officially granted status as a non-governmental organization in 1987 with the mandate to contribute to the economic livelihoods of female heads of households in Egypt. It is the first feminist NGO in Egypt created to explicitly address the issue of FHHs.







## Setting Up Shop

The first time we went to Manshiet Nasser to interview ADEW staff for the documentation project, we got terribly lost. I had never been to the area before, and my guide was also new to the organization. It was a cold, wet day, and the smell of garbage emanating from the damp piles strewn through the streets was particularly pronounced.

"We have to ask someone for directions," I said firmly to Shimaa Al-Bana, a young ADEW staff member assigned to help me with the reporting aspects of writing this history. "Let's ask him where the ADEW office is," I added, indicating a man in a stained butcher's outfit whacking the skinned corpse of a lamb with an axe.

I was levelled a severe look. "We will ask a woman," was the curt response from Shimaa. "This neighbourhood is conservative, Mariam. We already stick out enough without needing to add to it by speaking to strange men."

I squirmed and kept trudging through the January rain storm, mud sluicing over my shoes. "Excuse me, can you tell us where the office of the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women is?" Shimaa asked politely of an older woman wearing a bright green robe with faded purple embroidery, and a veil that covered her hair and shoulders.

"Oh, you are in the wrong place completely," the woman replied. "You must have let the microbus take you too far. It is at least half an hour on foot."

She gave Shimaa detailed explanations and as we hurried back to the highway, I couldn't help but comment that it was amazing she knew where the office was even though it was so far away. I knew from ADEW research reports that women's mobility was seriously restricted in the area, and it was surprising to me that ADEW would be well-known outside of its immediate geographic surroundings.

"We have a good reputation in the neighbourhood," Shimaa pointed out with obvious pride. She smiled broadly, a smile I was to come to know well in the following months.

It was a sweet victory, for thirteen years earlier the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women was virtually unknown in the community. ADEW had just gotten its official registration papers and was ready to set up a legal awareness service and credit program, but had no office space.

Manshiet Nasser is an "informal" neighbourhood, made up mainly of squatters from Upper Egypt, and available space is at a premium. Not only are a majority of settlements in the area





illegal, but the neighborhood as a whole is considered one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Whole families live in single rooms. Finding an entire apartment to convert into an office, therefore, was a Herculean endeavour.

It is no coincidence that the first ADEW office in Manshiet Nasser was a tiny room that once served as a street-level grocery shop. With one desk, one filing cabinet, and seven extension workers, Board members admit freely that they were just a little surprised at the lines that would form in front of the store.

"Women came though," says Marlene Anawaty almost wonderingly of ADEW's first clients.

ADEW was one of the few NGOs operating in the area and the only one that emphasized women-oriented programs, so its popularity was enormous at first. The fact that ADEW extension workers were all young women from the community itself also added to the program's success. The extension workers spoke the same language as the beneficiaries, and were neither intimidating nor unfamiliar with the problems of the neighbourhood.

All too soon, however, ADEW met unusual resistance on several fronts. Firstly, the community leaders who were used to running the "gameeyas," or saving cooperatives, were hostile to ADEW because they feared that their business would suffer from ADEW's loan program.

"I remember one woman so clearly, her name was Um Sabhi," recounts Sumayeh Ibrahim. "She must have been at least 70, and she had a very sharp tongue.

"She used to run the local gameeya, and charge women two pounds to join." Sumayeh paused to chuckle. "And if any of her clients didn't pay, let me tell you, she would go to their houses and scream at them from the street. She would curse them so badly, that they would be too embarrassed to leave their houses that day, even to go to work."

"Anyway, Um Sabhi boycotted us at first. She thought we were competition, and she refused to have anything to do with us."

"But we persisted. We knew that we needed the input and cooperation from people like her in order to make the program work. And finally we convinced her to speak with us. And in the end, her resentment turned into a powerful love for us. She would insist on accompanying me all the way to my car, just as a friend would."

The second problem came from the mosques. ADEW charged an administrative fee on loans, and religious leaders in Manshiet Nasser condemned the fee as *riba'a*, or usury. In addition to their verbal opposition, the mosques in Manshiet Nasser set up a counter program providing money to "orphans" (and by extension, female heads of households) for free. The combination





threatened to undercut ADEW completely.

ADEW field staff took the initiative to solve the dilemma. They went to a local Sheik and explained that ADEW was not operating for profit, that the money being charged covered only operating costs, and that without the administrative fee, the program would not continue. The Sheik accepted the argument, and his Fatwa decreeing that women could go to ADEW saved the program.

"We even had problems with our posters," adds Sumayeh. "Our logo was the women sign – the circle with the cross at the bottom. People interpreted it as a sign that we were a Christian group and they did not want to deal with us. We had to change the logo. It wasn't even something we had thought of."

"I guess a fact of life in field work is that you have to deal with what comes up," says Iman. "Sometimes the reality on the ground is completely different from what you anticipated." This principle has served ADEW well over the years.

## Growing Pains

In 1991, the organization found new office space in Manshiet Nasser. The small two-room flat had neither windowpanes nor doors, but all felt that it was an improvement over the one-room ground-floor shop.

"The organization has changed so much since then," says Ashraf Aziz, ADEW's solemn Financial Manager. Ashraf joined the organization that year at the tender age of twenty-two.

"I had just graduated from the Faculty of Commerce and was not even looking for a job," he says when asked how he came to ADEW. "I was far too busy doing volunteer work at my church. A friend sent my résumé to ADEW. But when I found out what the job entailed, and realized that it would enable me to continue my commitment to service, I took it."

"I think it was the right decision," Ashraf continues. "Although my values were in place before I came to ADEW, ADEW has given me a chance to put them into practise – working with the poor, even feminism." His usually dry tone has warmed as he talks me through eleven years of an organization's history.

For the first few years, ADEW's programs were very successful. Hundreds of women were applying for and receiving state ID cards, and hundreds more had benefited from the loan program. New income-generating projects owned and managed by women were springing up all over Manshiet Nasser.





Um Sayed, one of ADEW's early loan recipients will testify to the revolutionary effect that the credit program had on her life. "Oh, I love ADEW," she says when we ask her about her contact with the organization. "There was a time when I did not work and I had to put up with my totally useless husband."

"Then I got my first loan. And then another and another. And now look, I take care of myself." She waves her hand happily over the large piles of eggs and cheese that she is vending, and laughs raucously. "No more useless husband."

Um Sayed does in fact do a brisk trade. In the course of only twenty minutes, she has been forced to interrupt the conversation at least twelve times to sell someone a hunk of white, fleshy cheese or a boiled egg thrown into a small plastic bag.

"I put my son through school with the money I made from my business," Um Sayed tells us with justifiable pride. "He is in his first year of college now! I am so happy, Thank God."

Despite its initial success, however, by the mid-1990s, the organization began having some internal difficulties. ADEW's extension workers, all women from the community itself with intermediate education certificates, were having difficulty matching loans with the correct target group. Loans were not reaching female heads of households, or they were going to relatives of the extension officers, or they were not being given to an appropriate number of women.

"In Alexandria, there is a NGO that started working five years after us, and they were doing better than we were, even though we had trained them," Ashraf says with a touch of irritation at the memory. "And they had 100% repayment rates, whereas our beneficiaries were defaulting on loans."

Part of the problem was that the field staff simply did not have the management experience necessary to run the project. According to Iman, a bright extension worker was supervising the office, but she did not have the background to do it properly. Ashraf concurs that the staff did not have the capacity at the time to fully handle the responsibilities they were given.

Moreover, the Board's involvement in the initiative was slipping somewhat. "We got tired," says Somaya Ibrahim. "At the beginning it was so intense, we used to discuss and debate everything all the time. And then we all sort of quit for a while." Board meetings had once been well attended, and all decisions made by consensus but attendance started dropping off. It was perhaps inevitable that when ADEW's second chairperson, Hannah Ayoub, resigned the position in 1997 citing personal reasons, no one volunteered to take up the leadership of the organization.

The Board formally asked Iman Bibars to take over instead. "I was in England at the time getting my PHD. I did not want to deal with ADEW, but I finally agreed," says Iman. "We didn't really





do much in those first months in fact, and somehow, by inertia, luck, God's will, we continued to survive," she adds with characteristic good humour.

But then in the summer of 1997, ADEW received a warning letter from the Ministry of Social Affairs. It threatened to dismantle the organization unless certain financial records were made instantly available. "We knew we had done nothing wrong, though," said Iman. "So when we asked the General Assembly what to do, we were told, 'Don't worry about the letter, it is not important. Just ignore it.'"

In February of 1998, ADEW got the second letter. It said, "The organization is dissolved. Elect a temporary Board and hand over all funds." A sense of panic overtook everyone in the organization. Iman, as ADEW's Chairperson, went to a high profile lawyer, who in turn spoke to the Minister of Social Affairs. ADEW's Board quickly realized that the process by which ADEW had been disbanded was illegal and was therefore able to postpone the actual dismantlement for a few months.

It took months of visiting the Ministry of Social Affairs every day, however, to figure out that the reason the organization had come under scrutiny was because there were fifteen administrative mistakes in the records. "We immediately audited our program financially and administrative-wise. And then we sat down, and pulled out old records. All the documents we had from 1987 till then were lumped together loose in one cupboard. We had to go through everything until we had fixed all the mistakes. Me, Ashraf, and the consultant we hired, Said Taha. We barely slept," says Iman.

"It happens all the time in Egypt," points out an observer who prefers to remain anonymous. "The government suddenly decides to crack down on an NGO, and they will use whatever they can to do it. 'Oh, the bathrooms don't meet regulation standards.' And then the NGO will be shut down. ADEW is lucky that it survived a run-in with MOSA."

"We patched it up with the Ministry," says Iman. "But then we had no money. We realized that we had enough of a budget to pay four months of salaries, but no overhead costs after that."

Iman herself frantically wrote seventy-two proposals in 1998 in a desperate attempt to generate enough resources to keep the organization going. Fortunately, funding came through from the Ford Foundation, the Royal Netherlands Embassy, and NOVIB, and the organization had a second chance.

"We took a good look at our credit program and our legal unit, and realized we did not have the organization we had dreamed of," said Iman. "So we decided to try again."





## Creating a Solid Base

With the influx of new funding and a renewed "go for it" attitude, there was fresh motivation to grow and improve. The critical first step was to strengthen ADEW's bedrock programs of legal awareness and credit.

The **credit program** saw new fieldworkers being hired and increased emphasis on training. Fieldworkers began traipsing to the furthest reaches of Manshiet Nasser to recruit new women to the loan program. "We literally walk around knocking on every single door speaking to women," says Hanan Mohammed, a loan officer who has worked with ADEW for three years.

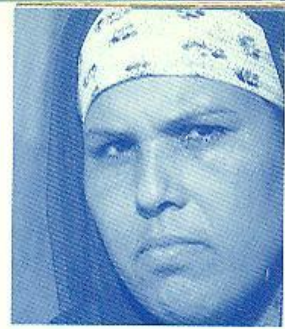
New incentive structures were put into place to ensure that the loan officers were forming a maximum number of groups, and soon ADEW was able to boost its loan portfolio to 400 active loans per annum. Loan officers also began evaluating the impact of loans. "We look at whether or not a woman can afford to buy new furniture for her home, whether she puts her children in school, whether or not she has increased decision making power in the house," points out Hanan. "Then we know how well they are doing, but how well we are doing as well."

New staff were also hired to deal with the **legal awareness and counselling programs**. In the course of their work, however, they decided that their methods for helping women obtain ID cards were not as effective as they could be. There were simply too many bureaucratic constraints. "Dealing with government officials is so difficult," says Elham Mohammed Sabe who works in the legal program. "It is a real problem at times because they do not take women's problems seriously."

ADEW thus began negotiating directly with the Civil Registration Authority to facilitate the administrative procedures involved in women obtaining ID cards. ADEW invited government officials to Manshiet Nasser to speak with poor women so that the officials would understand the problems firsthand. The officials were moved by the testimonies of women and vowed to expedite the process, and in less than one year, almost 200 ID cards had been generated. Today ADEW has helped over 4218 women obtain ID cards. ADEW has also helped produce 2300 birth certificates, 900 termination of schooling certificates, 720 death certificates, 1180 marriage certificates, 1250 divorce papers, and 865 documents pertaining to pension cases.

ADEW also invested in training and capacity-building for staff. Senior management was careful to ensure that all staff had gender sensitivity training, and ADEW decided to subsidize extra lessons in English and computer skills for all those who cared to take them outside of working hours. Mona Ahmed, the head of the credit program in Manshiet Nasser, was one of several staff members who decided to take night classes and progress beyond her intermediate educational degree. She enrolled in the Open Learning Center associated with Cairo University.





and studied on her Fridays off from ADEW. When Mona passed the exams for her first year of university in May 2002, ADEW threw her a party.

"Only three more years and I will have a university education," Mona says with the self-confidence of a woman who knows that she has worked hard for everything she has achieved. When Mona joined ADEW in 1995, she was only twenty years old. A resident of Manshiet Nasser, Mona had previously worked in a nursery and a contracts office but had never had exposure to the field of development. Today Mona can both speak fluently about the concepts of microfinance and its influence in the community to a potential donor, and then go to the field and convince a crowd of women that girl-children have as much right to an education as boy-children.

And Mona is far from being the only ADEW staff member to have benefited from ADEW's increased emphasis on capacity building. "What I like best about ADEW is the way that it supports and invests in its employees," points out Douaa Ahmed, a member of the three-person committee that manages ADEW. "I had never been a manager before and now I have this great opportunity. And even though we all make mistakes sometimes, we all learn so much by doing."

As the existing activities of the organization grew in scope, ADEW decided that it was also time for the organization to become larger and more professional overall. A new office opened in the area of El-Manial, and college graduates were hired to staff it. These acted as a bridge between the highly educated Board (who as volunteers at ADEW were all extremely busy with their full-time careers) and the field staff. A management team, consisting of ADEW's branch manager, the head of units, and the head of programs, was hired to take over the everyday responsibilities of leading and supervising the office.

In a very short period of time, the organization was poised to grow even further. "Things changed very quickly at ADEW," says Mona Ahmed. "Things were quiet at first, and then Dr. Iman became Chairperson, and it seemed like overnight we began to grow and improve."







## New Programs and Targets

By 2000, ADEW was characterized by a core of professional staff, well-trained and dedicated field officers, and senior management capable of handling a large organizational structure. It is no coincidence, therefore, that its activities and mission began to expand exponentially.

Field officers in Manshiet Nasser made the first major contribution to ADEW's new programs. While going to women's homes to speak about the principles of microfinance, the field officers observed that women tended to ask them a series of questions related to health. They were worried because they did not have the background to answer many of the questions with precision, and so they came to ADEW management and requested that a formal **health program** be initiated.

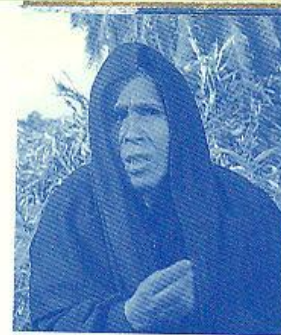
ADEW responded to the staff initiative immediately. All field officers were trained in basic reproductive health issues by a certified medical practitioner. Moreover, a doctor began to give weekly lectures on women's reproductive health at the ADEW office in Manshiet Nasser. Women were taught everything from how to conduct a self breast cancer examination to why early marriage had negative health implications for their daughters. The female doctor also gave free check-ups, one of the only such services for women in the area. In the past five years, over 3500 women have attended the classes and received free health examinations at ADEW.

The second new addition to ADEW's programs was also born from years of fieldwork. Over time it had become increasingly obvious that women who were joining the credit program and taking legal classes lacked the personal confidence and leadership skills needed to play a powerful role in their family and community. ADEW began to brainstorm on how to create an activity that could empower women socially. In 1999, ADEW collaborated with CEPDA and Johns Hopkins University to come up with a curriculum that would teach women gender sensitivity, self-confidence, negotiation skills, how to access social support networks and how to participate in public positions. To date, over 600 women have attended ADEWs' **"Arab Women Speak Out"** seminars.

ADEW beneficiaries themselves have also gotten more involved in the creation of new activities. For example, participants in the "Arab Women Speak Out" seminars requested that ADEW begin teaching literacy classes. Although other NGOs in the neighborhood were already teaching literacy, the women pointed out that the classes were at inconvenient times and locations. Again, ADEW agreed to their demands.

"We didn't want to get into literacy. Personally, I hate literacy. But women wanted it, so what could we do?" says Iman. "We began a **literacy program** as well." ADEW is after all committed to incorporating the visions of its staff and beneficiaries.





In 2000, **Girls' Dreams**, another hallmark program, was added to the organization. Iman Bibars, began doing research on the daughters of ADEW beneficiaries when she realized that almost 30% had dropped out of school. These girls tended to work long hours both inside and outside the home. They were restricted from public areas because their families feared for their safety, and they were subjected to Female Genital Mutilation and early marriage. The girls were so overworked and generally disillusioned with life that they did not even spin the usual daydreams that characterize teenagers everywhere.

The transcripts from Iman's initial interviews are chilling. "My name is Naima and I am sixteen years old and have finished third preparatory," reads the testimony of one girl. "I left school in order to help my mother in the house, I am the oldest, and my mother was getting tired from serving all of us, in addition to her work in the market."

"I have no time to take literacy classes or to go to sewing or any other skills training. I work from early in the morning until late at night. I have six brothers and sisters of different ages. Some of them go to school and I prepare their breakfast and help them get dressed. Others work and I have to prepare their food. Then there are those who are younger than I am and whom I take care of during the day. Between cleaning the house, cooking, washing, and taking care of the younger children the day goes by."

"My only dream is to rest, to relax, and have time for myself. Just to sit and do nothing. I do not have any other dreams for I do not have time for such things," she finishes with devastating simplicity.

ADEW responded to stories like these with classes targeted towards adolescent daughters of ADEW clients who had dropped out of school. The classes were designed to provide a safe space for the girls to play and talk in. With their peers, girls watch videos and discuss issues like female circumcision and early marriage, take drawing and singing classes, and get basic skills training.

"I love the Girls' Dreams classes," says Hoda, a thirteen-year-old participant in the program. "We make friends and we learn something. And we get a break from housework for a couple of hours too," she adds with an impish grin.

With the addition of health classes, Arab Women Speak Out, literacy classes, and Girls Dreams, the face of the organization began to look very different in only two short years. Not surprisingly, ADEW's reputation began to grow nationally as a result. Whereas once the organization had been left out of important panels and discussions, policy makers and the press now began to court ADEW. Other non-governmental organizations requested training from the organization on matters such as credit or programming for adolescent girls, and funding started pouring in from donor agencies like the European Union and GTZ.



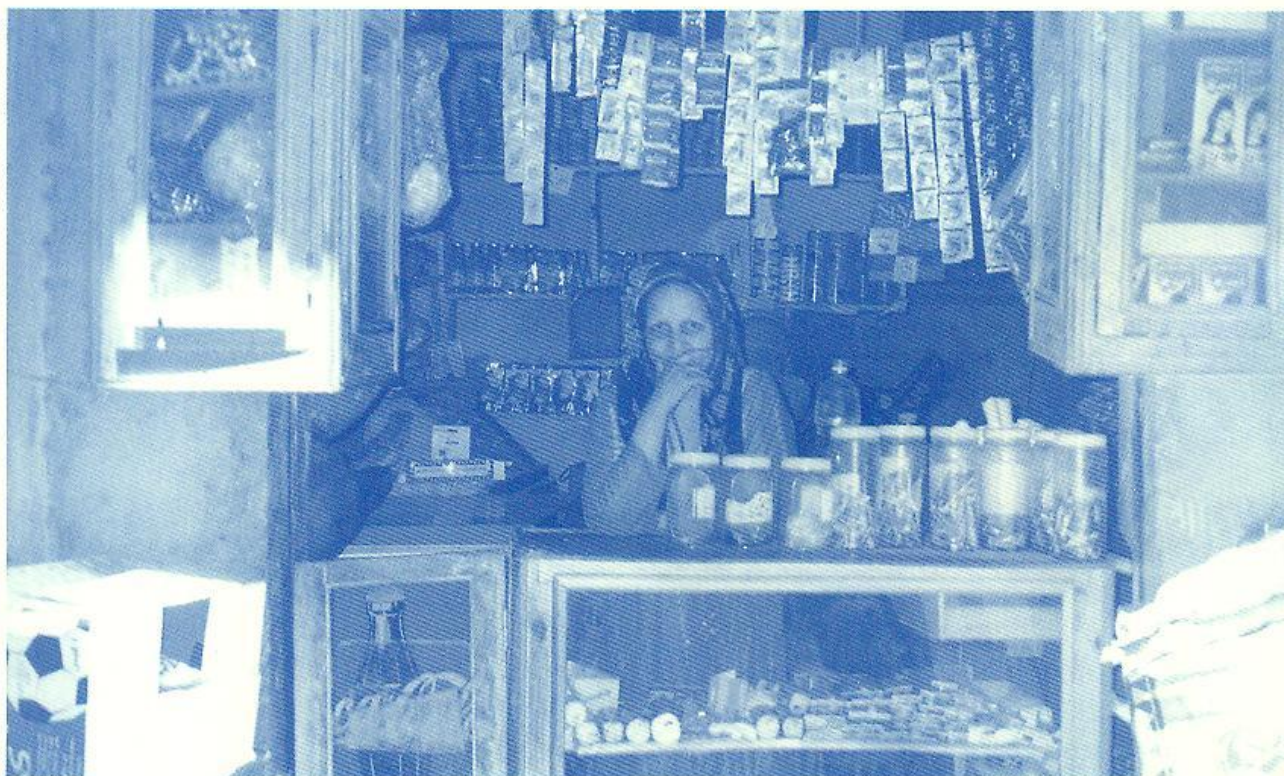


"ADEW seemed like an organization we would want to support. Iman had real vision and we thought that they had the capacity to do what they said they would," says Barbara Hatour of GTZ about their decision to fund ADEW activities.

With increased support, ADEW began to prepare for its first national conference. The conference was to be on **"Women and the Law"** and the two topics to be discussed were women's lack of ID cards, and the problems facing women married to foreigners as mentioned earlier (Egyptian women's nationality is not passed to their children, and women married to foreigners have to obtain visas to keep their own children in the country with them).

In a complete reversal from in the mid-1990s, when Board members were complaining bitterly about being ignored, ADEW managed to obtain Egyptian First Lady Suzanne Mubarak's sponsorship for the conference. When the conference doors opened on April 19, 2001, they opened on participants from over 275 NGOs from all over Egypt. The ensuing press coverage from the conference even encouraged an Egyptian Parliamentarian to introduce a draft bill in the Legislative Assembly to change citizenship laws. The bill failed, but ADEW had officially arrived.

Only a year later, when a fourth ADEW office opened in the slum area of Masr El-Qadima, a government Minister was at the opening ceremony. "Far cry from the old days," points out Iman Bibars wryly.







## Challenges We Face Daily

The girls giggled. I had only asked them for their names, but they giggled as if I had asked them to tell me about their favourite movie stars. I grinned back at them, amused by their obvious amusement with me.

As we began to speak, however, their teenage faces became increasingly serious, and when I left their home two hours later, it was with a start that I realized that I had not heard them laugh again the entire time.

Amal, Naglla, and Shadia are best friends and neighbours, and they had all just arrived at Amal's home after ADEW's Girls Dreams class. The discussion of the day had been on Female Genital Mutilation, and the girls were in the mood to talk about it.

"I don't remember the operation at all," said Amal matter-of-factly. "I was really, really scared and I begged my mom to let me get out of it. She told me that we would call a doctor for a consultation, but that I did not have to get the operation done. The doctor came, and he made my lie down. He gave me an injection and I went to sleep and when I woke up, it was done. Amal's face twisted. "It hurt afterwards though. I had to stay in bed for days because it hurt too much to get up."

Naglla's story was much shorter and more graphic. "The hairdresser did my operation. She made a mistake or something though, because I almost bled to death."

Amal's mother had been listening to the conversation, and she pulled me aside to whisper, "I know it is terrible, but what can we do? The people will speak badly about them and they will never get married if we do not circumcise them."

"I know it can ruin your life though," she admitted. "On my wedding night, I screamed and screamed. And I never really got over it and enjoyed my marital relations with my husband. I think that is why he left me in the end.... But at least I got a doctor for my daughter, she added wearily. I struggled to show no reaction to this fervent confession.

"Hey girls, do you think you will do the same with your daughters?" I asked, striving to insert a casual note in my voice.

"No way!" Amal answered promptly. "Absolutely no way – I don't care what people say." Naglla was more measured. "I think no, but I would have to discuss it with my husband."

Shadia sat quietly throughout the discussion, and then announced. "I will. It is the right thing





to do or they will grow up and be loose women. And I don't want to talk about it further," she said, cutting off Amal's muttered protest.

The field of development always means hard work, but at times it seems that ADEW's job is particularly challenging. First, the organization has grown so much so quickly that staff find that they are constantly consumed with their work. Although complaints are infrequent, there is a sense of constant urgency in the office. "Let's just say that if you work at ADEW, you had better know how to work under pressure," says Mona Bekheet, ADEW's cheerful administrative assistant. Productivity is demanded and productivity is produced, but stress levels can be high at times.

Second, the organization is diverse at every level. Field officers with intermediate education, coming from the community itself work side by side with graduates from some of Egypt's most prestigious colleges. The mix results in flexible programs that reach a multiplicity of audiences, but again, it is not completely without its tensions. Staff find that they must go out of their way to respect cultural sensitivities. "It is hard sometimes because we do have so many different backgrounds represented," points out Berlan Kabeel, Head of the Media Unit. "But at the end of the day, we make it work. We are unified in the face of our diversity and I think that is pretty amazing."

Perhaps most difficult, however, is the fact that ADEW dwells daily with the spectre of failure. It is the unfortunate reality that discriminatory attitudes towards women are entrenched in the very social fabric that binds people in low-income communities together. Employees have learned the hard way that for every girl like Amal who embraces principles of equality, there is a girl like Shadia who will reject them just as fiercely. It is a phenomenon that ADEW staff constantly struggle with.

"I have to keep reminding people that if we only help one-hundred women instead of one-thousand women, we should still be happy," says Iman Bibars. Her role as the leader of the organization involves many heart to heart conversations with staff that sometimes get discouraged by the magnitude of the task at hand.

Her wisdom can be hard to absorb by people who take their work so seriously though. "You have to understand, these people that we deal with, these women, their problems...they are my problems too. I live in this area," says Wafaa Salah, a Manshiet Nasser field officer who has been with ADEW seven years. "People know my name, they consider me their friend. The emotional connection is strong."

Moreover, the conflict between the message of equality that ADEW tries to send and the reality of what happens on the ground rages in more people than the beneficiaries alone. Field staff report that they too are often torn between what happens in the office and what happens at home.





Mona Ahmed, the outspoken and dynamic leader of the Manshiet Nasser office, tells us that although she spends all day transmitting feminist ideals to women, she herself often struggles to implement them at home. "My husband does not like the fact that I work, and he does not like my job," Mona says. "He never helps me out with the housework, even though I have a full time job, two children, and am trying to obtain my university education. My only time off is on Friday, and that is the day that I study. It makes everything very difficult."

At the same time, Mona is quick to point out that despite the challenges, ADEW has changed her worldview forever. "I have one daughter and one son, and I am determined never to treat them differently. They will have the same food, clothing, and love. They will go to school – my dream is to see my children become well-educated. My daughter will not be subjected to Female Genital Mutilation." Mona laughs and grimaces at the same time. "All of this scandalizes my mother, and my husband too, but I know that it is the right way."

And perhaps this is the ultimate lesson learned by ADEW: one can never control others' reactions, but if the process of activism is implemented with a desire to help others and a sincere belief in the causes one advocates, then that must be enough. We know that we try our best, and we can see the effects both in our own work force and in our clients.

'ADEW is not a job. It is a cause,' is the rallying cry of the organization and it is echoed in everyone from the newest field officer to the Chairperson.







## Where we were, where we are going

"You don't work at ADEW for the money, that's for sure," points out Berlant Kabeel, Head of Media Relations with an engaging grin. "But then, you don't think about the money. It is not about that. You know, I was tired and sick one morning but I still came to work. You don't want to stay away. There is too much to do if we want to be the best, and I want to be the best."

The Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women is an NGO in transition. Plans are being made to expand its field activities to new slum areas in Cairo, as well as to poor communities in Upper Egypt. A new ADEW office just opened in the neighborhood of El-Gayara, and extension offices are opening in Amr Bin Ass, Ezbat Al-Madabag, and Ezbat Abou Soud. A proposal to begin a full women's clinic in Masr El-Qadima has been floated, and ADEW will be investigating the legal possibilities of creating a registered national bank for poor women. Furthermore, ADEW is planning on creating the first women's domestic violence shelter for women in Egypt.

Furthermore, the organization has its eye on becoming a regional voice for women's rights. It will soon begin organizing research projects and workshops with civil society organizations throughout the Middle East to discuss some of the most devastating problems facing Arab women. It successfully organized a second national conference on female head of households in Egypt, and is now preparing a third.

At the end of the day, ADEW is committed to working with poor women wherever they may be. We are dedicated to allowing their voices to be heard, to give them a forum to speak to policy makers, and to speak on their behalf if no one is listening. We are unswerving in our belief that working with women allows us to train the next generation of Arab youth.

We will take our fifteen years of experience and use it to grow stronger, and we hope that others will also use our experience to do the same. In the words of ADEW Chairperson Iman Bibars, "We find our motivation in the women that we work with, our strength from our supporters, our courage from the depth of our beliefs, and our future in every person who wants to make a difference. To win this war is going to require a variety of people and groups engaging in multiple battles on multiple fronts. And this is the plea that we make – get involved. Now."





## Methodology and Constraints

Fifteen years worth of organizational history is not easy to obtain. Important players have come and gone, and tracking down everybody that had an integral part in creating ADEW is virtually impossible endeavour. The people and anecdotes woven through this story are only a small sample of those that have touched ADEW, or been touched by it in return.

In order to create this work, the author spent six months working at the ADEW office in El-Manial. From her vantage point in a rather crowded office, she was able to observe the complex personal and professional relationships that steered the heart of the organization. Although she only conducted formal interviews with members of the Management Team in El-Manial (Nashwa Habib, Berlant Kabeel, Douaa Ahmed, and Ashraf Aziz), she spent many hours speaking informally with ADEW staff about their history with the organization and dreams for the future. Shimaa El-Banna, Noha Gamal, Ahmed Ghoneim, Mona Bekheet, Hanan Gerges, Douaa Hilmy, and Nesreen Salah El-Din, are among the people she learned from through participant observation.

In terms of field visits, the author visited ADEW offices in Manshiet Nasser and Masr El-Qadima multiple times. She conducted formal, in-depth interviews with Mona Ahmed, Said Taha, Hanan Mohammed, Marwa Ezzat, Elham Mohammed, Fayza Mohamady, Intisar Mitwaly Fadel, Khalid Abdullah, Magdy Shafik Girges, Wafaa Salah, Akram Abdul Ghany, Sabah Boutrous, Iman Fawzy, Marfat Shaker, and Nagwa Fikry. Many of these staff members, including Mona Ahmed, Said Taha, Wafaa Salah, and Ashraf Aziz, are among the longest term employees at ADEW.

The author also attended ADEW awareness classes for both beneficiaries and adolescent girls and thus had the opportunity to observe ADEW activities in action. She conducted semi-structured interviews in women's homes with a variety of beneficiaries, who are identified only by their first names. The author is grateful to Um Saber, Sahinaz, Sabah, Naglaa, Amal, Um Sayed, Zeinab, Sakina, Nora, Nagar, and Shahida for sharing tales of their own lives and of their connection with ADEW.

All founding members of ADEW's Board of Directors were interviewed, including Iman Bibars, Heba El-Kholy, Marlene Anawati, and Hanna Ayoub. Ahmed Zakaria's testimony is unfortunately missing from this work as he passed away two years ago. Finally, the author spoke to representatives from the international donor community that enabled ADEW to conduct so much of its work. We thank Trina Pertou of the European Union, Barbara Ibrahim formerly of the Ford Foundation, Catherine Essayer of NOVIB, and Barbara Hatour of GTZ for telling us of their experiences with working with ADEW.

Finally i want to thank Shimaa El-Banna for her help in reporting this story and translating during weeks of field visits.

*Mariam Al-Foudery*





## In their Own Words

### In Retrospect, What Should ADEW be Proudest of?

*"The Board has a very strong bond that has kept us going. We all have no reason for involving ourselves except for a belief in our mission, and that commitment is very important."*

*(Hanna Ayoub, Board Member)*

*"ADEW is more than a job, it is a commitment to a life of service. And the feeling that you get from knowing that your work is to help people is like no other."*

*(Ashraf Aziz, Financial Manager)*

*"At ADEW you feel that you have space to dream, to think big. And you know that with enough hard work and dedication, your dreams can come true."*

*(Berlant Kabeel, Head of Media Unit)*

### Lessons Learned Along the Way:

*"Publicity helps an organization. Broadcasting our activities and publishing is important. We have nothing to hide, and there is nothing wrong with being famous."*

*(Somaya Ibrahim, Board Member)*

*"The Board should have one foot in and one foot out of an organization. It encourages self-reflection."*

*(Heba El-Kholy, Founding Member)*

*"I learned that being good as an organization begins with the individual. Although I am only a small part of the organization, I invested in teaching myself the principles of my job because I know that it will ultimately affect everyone. If everyone teaches themselves, then all of ADEW improves."*

*(Mona Bekheet, Administrative Assistant)*





## **Visions for the Future:**

*"We need to keep pushing for NGOs to collaborate to raise issues with policy makers. We have a high profile now, and we need to keep it up. If civil society works together, we can make governmental bodies realize that they need to work differently. Look at the issue of ID cards, it has been picked up by everyone now."*

*(Hanna Ayoub, Board Member)*

*"We are becoming a directed and reflective NGO, working in the public eye instead of the shade."*

*(Somaya Ibrahim, Board Member)*

*"I want young people to sit on the Board. A new generation to take over. When I think about the future, I see our pictures on the wall with white hair, and young enthusiastic people doing the work."*

*(Iman Bibars, Chairperson)*

*"We need to maintain the highest possible standards. I want us to be the best."*

*(Berlant Kabeel, Head of Media Unit)*

*"It is time to take ADEW to a regional and international level. Perhaps not the organization itself, but the issues. For example, preliminary research suggests that there are problems with women's ID cards in countries like Yemen and Morocco as well. I want to take the research and advocacy that made ADEW successful to other countries. ADEW is not just an organization, it is a cause."*

*(Heba El-Kholy, Founding Member).*





"People have different skills, and there is room for all of them within a group. We used to hesitate to jump and take a leadership role, but we are more confident now. Strong, rotating leadership is important."

(Heba El-Kholy, Founding Member)



"When we speak to the State, we use the language of the State. So for example, we don't talk about women's 'rights' we talk about protection and survival instead."

(Iman Bibars, Chairperson)



**The Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women**

First Egyptian NGO that targets female heads of households and provides them with credit and legal assistance

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