

Interview with Mona El-Sayed

Andrew: Hi Mona, thanks for dedicating this time to our interview. I know how busy you are with the WFTO Global board meeting.

Mona: It is great to be here and meet with the European office.

Andrew: Do you think Fair Trade makes a difference in the status of women and whether there are any cultural or economic challenges that interfere with the way you work or how fair trade works in Egypt?



Mona: Yes, it does make a difference, but not only to women. It makes a difference to all the producers whether they are men or women. Of course women are more affected, because of the fact that our organization works mainly with handicrafts rather than agriculture. With handicrafts, the majority, over 80 percent of the artisans are women. By definition, women have fewer opportunities than men in Egypt. So, the fact is that even educated university degree women in Egypt are four times less likely than men to find a job. If that is the case of educated women and girls, you can only imagine what the case for uneducated women would be. It does make a difference. First of all, it provides them with income, which is something that those women would never have access to, and it provides them with not only the financial income effect, but also they feel that they have respect in their communities. They can now earn money like men; they can buy things for themselves; they can buy things for their house, and that keeps them proud. It gives them more pride in their family and community. It also provides them with respect to their cultures as most of these women artisans are working on handicrafts that are authentic and traditional to their communities, like a specific embroidery or weaving technique. They say to themselves, 'wow, that's something that I used to do and wear. I can't believe a city girl or someone in Europe would wear this! They gain pride in what they do.

Mona El-Sayed, WFTO Board of Directors
General Manager, Fair Trade Egypt
Andrew, WFTO Europe Intern
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Andrew: Just to clarify is there a cultural challenge for women working in Egypt? To what extent are there counterproductive cultural attitudes towards working women?

Mona: Not necessarily in every place – we work almost all over Egypt. We work in 14 governorates in Egypt. And in each of them there are different social standards

and traditions concerning women working or going out of the house and so on. There are some similarities but some are specific to where you come from. But the thing is that it's not necessarily related to them being forbidden, or not allowed to work rather than they don't have access to work. What will they do? Even if they want to work, many of them come from the desert areas or farmers' areas, and there is not that much work they can do there, except helping their husbands or families. Fair trade provides an artisan woman with something different because she is working on something that only she can do, not a man. And, it's creating income out of something that is personal to her. One of the motivations for us as Fair Trade Egypt is that we were reminded that there are many authentic crafts that are going to die in Egypt. So now, if you apply this to a woman who was about to stop doing that craft, now she realizes that by actually working on it she can improve her life, improve the life of her family by providing education for her children, for example and preserve her craft.

Andrew: **Do many of your membership organizations involve women?**

Mona: Yes, more than 80% of about 2,700 artisans

Andrew: **Are any of them women's cooperatives? How are they organized?**

Mona: Actually, we have different types of artisan groups. One of the things about Fair Trade Egypt – we don't put a certain condition to how the group should look like. We have about 40 producer groups in different parts of Egypt and we are not restrictive on whether it should be a cooperative or an NGO. So we have all types, at the end of the day; we have NGOs, we have a cooperative, and we have informal group of people. The fact is that the majority of our groups are informal but in some groups we felt an NGO organization was a necessity because often these groups were geographically isolated – they are in a desert area or very far from a means of transportation and communication - So we felt it was better to have a local coordinator there, and that would be the NGO. Then the NGO would work directly with the individual artisans. It does not mean that we don't get in touch with the individual artisans. Sometimes, on a regular day-to-day coordination level, the NGO can do a better job at this.

Andrew: **I'd like to hear your opinions on working with the Mubarak government in Egypt. How do they interact with Fair Trade? Do they help you, do they care about what you're doing for their people? How would you describe the Egyptian government?**

Mona: There is always a need to cooperating with the government if we would like the Fair Trade movement to grow in Egypt. In the case of Egypt, there is a huge need for development that would require a comprehensive plan of support to be initiated by the government. This has not been done so far, there are few governmental programs that would help women to work and assist in crafts preservation. However, these programs have not been able to actually involve down-to-earth communities and so at the end of the day, it is not sustainable. We've tried, at Fair Trade Egypt, to link to those programs but have not been successful so far.

Andrew: **Now for your producers, to what extent is corruption an issue for them when dealing with the government or when exporting?**

Mona: Well, the producers are exporting through us. Corruption, is affecting us and indirectly, of course, them. To export, we faced difficulty and bureaucracy in implementation, for example difficulty in getting an export license, in dealing with customs, etc. Locally there are also few challenges like regulations to open a shop in Cairo. So yes, the corruption and the bureaucracy are tremendous factors in doing business in Egypt. It's not straightforward; you have to fight at many different levels. One of the things we have to fight is our own souls when it comes to this. It's difficult being a Fair Trader and work with bribes as payments. In terms of principles and values, these are not our values and principles but in some cases we have no choice. This is the position of all the people that work in Fair Trade. We feel we're doing something that is built on values. We struggle to deal with corruption because of how strongly we believe in fairness.

Andrew: **Do you think that a strong, effective and efficient government is so important to public and private sector development?**

Mona: Yes it is because collective efforts from the public, private and civil sectors will speed up the pace of development. We might not necessarily need government support to continue doing what we do but it can sure increase our efficiency if we have it. We sometimes just wish that they would not cause us problems.

Andrew: **Thanks again for your time. It has been very interesting to get know a bit more about Fair Trade in Africa, especially in Egypt.**

Mona: I am glad to hear that. You are more than welcome.