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Introduction to the Special Issue: Activism, Solidarity, and Diversity: Feminist Movements Towards Global Sisterhood and the 5th, World Conference on Women's Studies, Bangkok, Thailand, April 25-27, 2019

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Introduction to the Special Issue: *Activism, Solidarity, and Diversity: Feminist Movements Towards Global Sisterhood* and the 5th, World Conference on Women's Studies, Bangkok, Thailand, April 25-27, 2019

By Omnia Amin¹

It was at the 4th World Conference on Women's Studies 2018 in Colombo, Sri Lanka that I first met Diana Fox. She was delivering the opening speech, in which she mentioned famous feminists and in particular Egyptian feminists who had impacted her life and the lives of many others. The names, from Hoda Shaarawi to Nawal El Saadawi, rang in my ears, crossing decades, centuries, distance, race, culture, politics as well as social, economic and religious divisions. They evoked the voice of women through the ages who dedicated their lives to fighting for liberty, dignity, freedom, equality and justice for themselves and their people. Sisterhood needs no introduction; I went straight up to Diana and proposed inviting Nawal El Saadawi for the next conference. Diana could not imagine how someone of Nawal's renown would travel all this distance for a newly formed platform that cannot financially offer her much. I explained that Nawal happens to be a mentor, friend, and a mother figure to me. I had no doubts about her acceptance. A woman who says, "Solidarity between women can be a powerful force of change and can influence future development in ways favorable not only to women but also to men", would surely stand up for her word and endorse TIIKM². And indeed, she did, the minute she knew that TIIKM was initiated by two young Sri Lankan men who wanted to make a difference in their community by uplifting the status of women in their country and the rest of the world. It was not the first time for me to see Nawal setting financial considerations aside in order to stand up for a worthy cause.

I first met Nawal in a conference in 2002³ and, just as with Diana, the understanding and admiration between us was mutual. Nawal immediately invited me to her home and allowed me to translate her work; and as our relationship developed, I became her spokesperson on a number of occasions including the 5th World Conference on Women's Studies 2019, for which JIWS is producing this current issue. The minute I learned that the theme of the conference would be *Activism, Solidarity, and Diversity: Feminist Movements Towards Global Sisterhood*, I could not imagine Nawal not being part of it. She is a rare model for a lifelong militancy, starting from the age of ten, when she had to fight her family in order to avoid the path to marriage and insisted on continuing her education until she graduated from the medical school. This early struggle developed into serious activism as she lost her job at the Egyptian Ministry of Health in 1972 for

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² The International Institute of Knowledge Management (TIIKM) was founded in 2012 by Oshadee Withanawasam and Isanka P. Gamage.

³ More details about my first encounter with her can be found in the introduction of: Elsaadawi, N. (2016). *Diary of A Child Called Souad*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (English Translation and Introduction by Omnia Amin).

writing against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)⁴ in her book *Women and Sex*, in which she linked sexual problems to political and economic oppression. This was followed by the closing down of the magazine she founded, *Health*, and later her imprisonment by President Sadat for being one of the major intellectual thinkers whom he saw as a threat to his regime. Throughout the 1980's and 1990's her name appeared on a fundamentalist death list and she spent a number of years in exile fearing for her life. Needless to say, many of her books were banned in her own country, including her play *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*, for which she had to face trial in Cairo court as the Al Azhar clergy accused her of apostasy and heresy.

In 1982 she established the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA)⁵, which the government closed down in 1991 and handing over its funds to an association called Women in Islam, chiefly in order spite her. They also closed down the magazine *Noon*, published by AWSA, of which she was editor-in-chief. In 2002 she was accused of apostasy by a fundamentalist lawyer who raised a court case against her to be forcibly divorced from her husband, Dr. Sherif Hetata. She won the case due to Egyptian, Arab and international solidarity. In 2007, Nawal and her daughter Mona Helmy, a poet and writer, were accused of apostasy and interrogated by the General Prosecutor in Cairo because of their writings to honor the name of the mothers everywhere. They won the case in 2008 and their efforts led to a new law giving children born outside marriage the right to carry the name of the mother. She took part in the demonstrations in Tahrir Square during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 and the youth gathered around her to protect her. They also founded The Nawal El Saadawi Forum to discuss her books and writings⁶, then attempted to establish the Nawal El Saadawi Institute for Thought and Creativity, which the government to date refuses to license.

Unfortunately, Nawal's health deteriorated⁷ and she underwent a series of operations that prevented her from attending the conference. In spite of her pain, she agreed to record a special session with me in which she addressed major questions about global sisterhood, militancy and how individual efforts can be part of global change. The disappointment of her not attending led some conference participants to stop en route in Cairo hoping to meet her. One of them was Donna Johnson, who contributed the piece "Feminist Counseling" in the Feminist Reflections section of this issue. Donna's words remain with me as she told me upon meeting Nawal: "Today I took part in history." Nawal's life, work, and courage to face politicians, religious men and corrupt regimes have made her a role model and a mother to many generations. The fifteen articles in this special issue cover a wide range of topics that show the strength, militancy, and persistence of Nawal and other women all over the world who continue to fight and reach out to one another in order to create a better future. Sisterhood knows no boundary, and over the course of the year Diana and I, were concerned for Nawal's health and lack of material support. At Diana's suggestion, we started a GoFundMe campaign to enable her to get better medical services and help at home. Diana graciously took care of the logistics and invested her time and effort in helping a woman she had never met. Likewise, Nawal spoke about Diana to me in a manner that reflected she knew her well, though they had never spoken. This issue of *JiWS* is not just about a collection of articles with a

⁴ FGM was banned in Egypt by law in 2008 because of Nawal's continuous efforts for fifty years, but her contribution was never acknowledged by the state or the media.

⁵ She is the founder of the Egyptian Women Writers' Association (1971) and the founder of The Egyptian Women's Union (2011).

⁶ Nawal is the author of more than fifty books of fiction and non-fiction; her writings have been translated into more than 40 different languages.

⁷ Nawal turned 89 on 27th October 2020. She had eye surgery that went wrong and left her with impaired vision. As a result, she fell down and broke her ribs and thigh bone and has still not recovered.

common theme, it is about connecting and working together for and with one another. This is global sisterhood, this is solidarity in action, and this is what this issue is about.