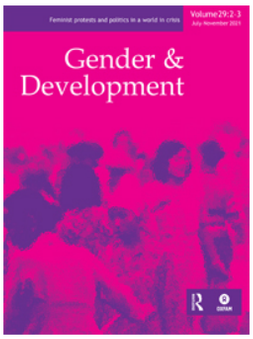

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The story of the Doria Feminist Fund: de-colonising the funding narrative in the MENA region

Lina Abou-Habib, Mozn Hassan and Carla Akil

ABSTRACT

International funding has played an important role in the struggles of women in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, directly and indirectly. In this article, we reflect on the narratives and processes that influence and oftentimes determine the funding accessible to the MENA region, which have often excluded those emanating from local feminists. We then trace the emergence, rationale, and journey of the Doria Feminist Fund against the background of the oppressive politics of the region, and the obstacles facing emerging local feminist groups, especially queer groups, that demand 'radical system change' rather traditional 'reforms'. In addition to examining the processes behind the creation of the Doria Feminist Fund for the MENA region, we highlight the ways in which it proposes to address gaps in funding, and to engage constructively with the international donor community to amplify the voices from the region. In essence, this article sheds light on the extensive and diverse struggles of grassroots-based intersectional feminists as well as on the importance of the availability of sustainable and flexible resources rooted in the perspectives and needs of feminist movements of the region.

Le financement international a joué un rôle important dans les luttes des femmes de la région Moyen-Orient et Afrique du Nord (MOAN), ce directement et indirectement. Dans cet article, nous réfléchissons aux discours et aux processus qui influencent et, souvent, déterminent le financement disponible à la région MOAN, qui ont souvent exclu ceux émanant des féministes locales. Nous retraçons ensuite l'émergence, la raison-d'être et le parcours du Fonds féministe Doria, avec comme toile de fond la politique répressive de la région, et les obstacles auxquels se heurtent les groupes féministes locaux, en particulier les groupes altersexuels, qui exigent des « changements systémiques radicaux » plutôt que des « réformes » traditionnelles. En plus d'examiner les processus qui étayent la création du Fonds féministe Doria pour la région MOAN, nous mettons en relief les manières dont il entend remédier au déficit de financement et collaborer de manière constructive avec la communauté internationale de bailleurs de fonds afin d'amplifier les voix de la région. Essentiellement, cet article fait la lumière sur les luttes vastes et diverses menées par les féministes intersectionnelles actives au niveau de la base populaire, ainsi que sur l'importance de la disponibilité de resources durables et flexibles ancrées dans les points de vue et les besoins des mouvements féministes de la région.

KEYWORDS
Feminism; funding; policymaking; MENA

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En la región de Medio Oriente y Norte de África (MENA), la financiación internacional ha desempeñado un importante papel en las luchas de las mujeres, tanto directa como indirectamente. En este artículo reflexionamos sobre las narrativas y los procesos que influyen y frecuentemente determinan la financiación disponible para la región MENA; a menudo estos han excluido aquellos que surgen de las feministas locales. En este sentido, damos cuenta del surgimiento, la justificación y el historial del Fondo Feminista Doria, en el contexto de la política opresiva de la región y los obstáculos enfrentados por los grupos feministas locales emergentes, especialmente los grupos *queer*, que exigen un "cambio radical del sistema" en lugar de "reformas" tradicionales. Además de examinar los procesos que subyacen a la creación del fondo destinado a MENA, destacamos las formas en que se propone abordar las deficiencias de financiación y participar de forma constructiva para amplificar las voces de dicha región con la comunidad internacional de donantes. En esencia, este artículo arroja luz sobre las extensas y diversas luchas de las feministas interseccionales de base, así como sobre la importancia que conlleva la disponibilidad de recursos sostenibles y flexibles enraizados en las perspectivas y necesidades de los movimientos feministas de la región.

We dedicate this article to Sarah Hegazy.[1] May her courage inspire. May no feminist and queer activist in the MENA region be forced to leave their home and country. Her first memorial was in June 2021.

This article was written in mid-2021 – at a time when violence was devastating Palestine and taking many innocent human lives. Amidst this brutal, volatile, and conflict-ridden context, feminists from various walks of life, in different geographies and periods of time, have struggled using various strategies, with uneven success but with tangible gains for the lives of many women and girls across various sociodemographic strata.

Throughout this time, international funding has played a significant role in supporting some of these struggles as well as thwarting others, directly or indirectly. We argue that at the heart of these policies, directions and trends in funding are narratives which have not been necessarily woven by local feminists in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region. The fact that, unlike many regions, the MENA region was the last to have its own feminist fund is indicative, to a large extent, of the invisibility of homegrown feminist narratives.

This article will explore the rationale and journey behind the creation of the Doria Feminist Fund,[2] and the ways in which this journey is intertwined with the oppressive politics of the MENA region and the challenges facing emerging local feminist groups, especially burgeoning queer groups, demanding 'radical system change' rather than the traditional 'reforms'. The Doria Feminist Fund, a newly set up feminist fund for the MENA region, is concerned with the ways in which Palestinian feminists and Women Human Rights Defenders were impacted by the violence and seek meaningful actions and solutions. These amazing feminist 'sheroes' have inspired our writing and reflections on the sustainability of feminist movements in this region, which continues to be marked by conflict, instability, inept social and economic policies, authoritarianism, and brutal repression.

In setting the scene for this article, we will explore the history of the name of the fund, the Doria Feminist Fund, as well as the source of inspiration. We will share with the readers the sources of information used for this article, by and large the same sources we have used to construct the Doria Feminist Fund. We reflect on the narratives and processes that influence and oftentimes determine the funding accessible for the MENA region, and which have often excluded those emanating from feminists from MENA.

The article will then take the reader through the process of the creation of the Doria Feminist Fund for the MENA region, the ways in which it proposes to address gaps in funding, and to engage constructively with the international donor community to amplify and make visible the voices from the region. In writing this article, the authors hope to shed light on the extensive and diverse struggles of the grassroots-based generation of intersectional feminists, as well as the importance of the availability of sustainable and flexible resources rooted in the feminist movements of the region.

Who is Doria Shafik and why did her story inspire the creation of a feminist fund in the MENA region?

> This is the story of an Egyptian woman who wanted her life 'to be a work of art'. It is the story of one woman's struggle against those conservative forces within her society – whether cultural, religious, or political – that opposed the full equality of women. It is the story of the encounter between a woman's emergent feminist consciousness, shaped by the values of Islam and humanism, and her society's awakened nationalist identity grounded in the historical realities of the post-World War II era. Doria Shafik was a woman who wanted 'to experience it all', to be a public heroine in a society that defined and circumscribed woman primarily in terms of helper, supporter, and moral guide to the family in the domestic sphere. She derived strength, importance, dignity, and self-respect from her own exploits in pursuit of freedom. (Nelson 1996, xxi)

Doria Shafik (1908–1975) was an uncompromising, independent, and *avant-garde* Egyptian feminist who was educated at the Sorbonne and was a trailblazer for women's rights in Egypt and the region. In fact, women in Egypt were granted the right to vote in the Constitution because of her efforts, tenacity, and commitment (Nelson 1996). Shafik was an artist, a writer, and a vocal and courageous activist who fought for women's and girls' education, freedom, and full participation in public life. She stood against conservative politics and societies, founded the 'daughter of the Nile' association, and undertook many a civil disobedience action including public demonstrations and storming the parliament, as well as repeated hunger strikes. In 1957, Shafik went on a hunger strike at the Indian Embassy in Egypt, protesting the increasingly authoritarian regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the then ruler of Egypt and popular national figure throughout the MENA region. As a retaliation to this peaceful act of resistance, Nasser put Shafiq under indefinite house arrest, banned her name from the press, and recalled her magazine and other writings from circulation. Shafik spent the rest of her life under house arrest and later on in the solitude of her home. She committed suicide in 1976. Throughout her house confinement and while at odds with the authoritarian regime, she saw many of her sisters

in arms abandon her publicly for fear of retaliation. This precautionary measure, however, did not spare them the ire of the regime, and imprisonment at various periods of their lives (Nelson 1996).

The Doria Feminist Fund was named after Doria Shafik in recognition of her struggles and feminist values: uncompromising, independent, fearless, writer of her own life and story, her connection to women on the ground and dedication to amplifying their voices, and her fight against various forms and sources of conservatism and obscurantism. Most of all, Doria Shafik believed in the voices of women and girls within and beyond the cities and urban agglomerations, and their struggle for their freedom from patriarchal laws and practices.

Where did we harvest the information for this article?

In this article, we use research data produced three years ago (2016–2017) in order to inform the creation of the Doria Feminist Fund. This included a series of short and unpublished scoping papers, as well as an in-depth safety and security study (internal and not for publication) which delineated the ways in which the Doria Feminist Fund could operate while ensuring the safety of its team members and of its grantees. The bulk of this research work has yet to be available in the public domain as the Doria team is mindful of and preoccupied with the personal threats that still prevail at the time of writing against some its members, who remain in their home countries in the MENA region and who, in some cases, are banned from travel and deprived of freedom of movement.

In addition to this research and reflection work conducted internally during different periods of time before the writing of this article, we have spoken with donors, feminist and queer activists from all walks of life, as well as several allies and friends, and gauged their insights and personal views and experiences. These exchanges were not conducted using the protocols of a well-rounded methodology typical of academic research. They were rather informal consultations which preceded the setting up of the Doria Feminist Fund (and which continue to date) in an effort to gather thoughtful and diverse insights that would help shape and inform this process. The raw data are safely kept, and represent a treasure trove of feminist voices. In this article, we allow those voices to be heard by using quotes from people we consulted, whose identities will be anonymised. We have yet to consider the ways in which this material will be organised in the future to become available in the public domain without jeopardising the lives and livelihoods of many informants.

In addition, we have drawn a lot from our own personal experiences, direct engagements, and long-term in-depth understanding of the political, social, and economic diversity of the MENA region, as well as of the rich variety of the feminist and queer movements and their complex histories. This is also an account of our own stories as long-time feminist activists, our successes and failures, and, most of all, what we have learned and continue to learn.

The MENA region: a history of volatility and a decade of revolutions and civil dissent

MENA countries share a history of colonial legacies, postcolonial authoritarian states, Islamic opposition movements, and failed neoliberal economic reforms. However, they still differ extensively when it comes to their political conditions, legal systems, opportunities, and challenges that exist for women's rights activists and feminist movements (Moghadam 2020). There are 22 MENA countries where the official state language is Arabic and the dominant religion is Islam, with significant ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities (Wingfield 2002). However, it is important to note here that despite such diversity, when it comes to women's rights, MENA countries all rank low on most global scales of gender equality (World Economic Forum 2019).

Many of the barriers faced by women in the MENA region are tied to regimes in power, and to the absence of laws which would protect the rights of all citizens and residents, including those of all women and girls as well as non-binary people, and which would ensure their safety and security, freedom from violence, discrimination, and oppression in both the private and public spheres (Kelly 2016). In conjunction with a lack of adequate laws against gender-based violence and sexual assault, violence against women is all but condoned (Plan International 2020). In addition to oppressive gender laws, most of the MENA countries also suffer from a strictly patriarchal and male-dominated culture, where male supremacy is the norm (Heideman and Romano 2016). While some MENA countries have taken some steps to guarantee women their rights (Belhaj 2021), especially in partial matters of personal status (Human Rights Watch 2014; Marzouki 2010; Olimat 2013), their impacts have not been as expected, mainly because of societal resistance.

Women's rights movements in the region thus face a set of structural challenges that include the existence of both legal and extra-legal barriers to their activism. Public spaces have become more male-dominated (Heideman and Romano 2016) and gender-based violence has increased in many of the MENA countries that witnessed political transitions (Alsoswa and Livani 2019). Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria are cases in point of the ways in which women, girls, and non-binary people have been the main target of the hostility of both state and non-state actors (Idris 2020) and have borne the brunt of increased violent militarisation (Dalacoura 2019).

A first feminist fund for a region

It is perhaps because of the context described above that the MENA region has for many decades served as a vibrant lab which has allowed the meteoric growth of many academic, development, political, and international careers, especially in women and gender studies. Many of such career trajectories have probably contributed to furthering the understanding of this region from the indirect (and by and large mediated) perspective of its women, queer communities, and other groups, and possibly amplified their voices. However, many studies have undoubtedly reproduced stereotypes and silenced the voices

of women and queer folks from the region. Indeed, various feminist scholars in the Middle East were affected by Western hegemony, which inevitably produced work through an Orientalist lens (Abu-Lughod 2015). Certain studies have also strengthened the 'Western' gaze and normalised a Western and colonial narrative about women, feminism, and feminists in the MENA region, producing and reproducing the accepted model of an essentialised 'indigenous and authentic feminist' (Mohanty 2003). It is such analyses and narratives of the MENA region that, according to many feminist activists we spoke with, have often informed, shaped, and influenced external funding and engagement policies by the international community in all its variations. This has affected not only the sustainability of the feminist movements in the MENA region, but it has also played a decisive role in the making and unmaking of its internal dynamics, 'culture', and *modus operandi*.

Many of our informants perceive a marked similarity between the ways in which information that shape and influence practices in development funding, and those for the support of feminist organisations and their work are collected and used. According to L.B.:

> We spend significant time, time that we do not have, responding to interview requests by junior and senior academics from the global North who continuously pick our brains, one way or the other, ask us for data, and then go on writing their papers, policy briefs, and briefs for donors without necessarily validating their interpretations and analysis with us.

A.D., a veteran of the disability movement in Lebanon, shared that she could not recognise any of her recommendations for supporting the disability movement in Lebanon after she and her colleagues had spent days briefing international experts about what needed to be done. She added 'it is as if we were boxes that needed to be ticked. All our funding recommendations were ignored'. Feminist activists reported the exact same thing. In addition, according to D.K. the very mechanisms used to disperse and manage the actual funding are unconnected and often contrary to local requirements and conditions in the region:

> we kept telling many experts that the current funding mechanisms are very problematic for us. They are not flexible or user friendly. Small and young organisations cannot meet the complex and multiple requirements. We complained about the forms and legal requirements. We argued that these are totally not adapted to the realities in the MENA region.

N.M. says that:

> no matter what we say, all the explanation we give, the story we read as a result has no bearing to our lived experiences, our needs, and our priorities. In fact, I have personally stopped agreeing to give interviews, respond to questionnaires or having my brain picked.

There is a clear dominance of external narratives about the realities and needs of both feminist and development endeavours. As the abundant scholarly work about the MENA region indicates, there are way more writings about women from the region than by women from the region about their own conditions and aspirations. The process of setting up the Doria Feminist Fund and what it entailed in terms of consultation, scoping, and research raised some critical questions about this historical silencing of genuine

local voices that may inform funding thinking and practices, and knowledge creation more broadly. We asked feminist and queer activists, including feminist activists and scholars from the MENA region, what they thought about this, and what would encourage homegrown feminist knowledge production. According to many of those we spoke with, knowledge production activities, storytelling, documenting one's own history, and gathering and archiving biographies and oral histories is rarely a priority on their agenda, and hardly ever an item on their budget.

The MENA region includes a few examples of organisations that have been set up for the sole purpose of harvesting and archiving the history of local feminists and their intellectual production such as, for instance, the Women and Memory Forum in Egypt,[3] Qorras,[4] Kohl,[5] and the Knowledge Workshop[6] in Lebanon, and the more regional Arabic Wikigender[7] and Jeem,[8] among others. Despite the existence of these institutions, the knowledge production gap is evident, especially in terms of women and queer people in the region having enough space, safety, and resources to write their own stories and document their own experiences.

This dearth of homegrown knowledge production by feminist activists and practitioners, as well as the invisibility and limited outreach of what is already there, may explain why the lived realities of feminist organising on the ground continue to be overlooked by the international donor community, save in the case of women's funds which do not necessarily cover the MENA region such as, for instance, Mama Cash, the Urgent Action Fund, and the Global Fund for Women.

What this means in practical terms is that, by and large, funding streams to the MENA region continue to ignore the challenges that emerging, and community-based feminist and queer groups face in accessing and making use of available funding opportunities. These include, to cite just a few, language barriers, limited familiarity with using donors' terminology, possibly a situation where the organisation has no formal registration and no bank account, or their inability to maintain records properly. This was very well articulated by S.M., a representative of a feminist donor organisation who told us

> mainstream funding streams are unaware of what it takes to support small feminist groups in MENA, especially queer groups, migrant women groups, sex workers, and others who make a serious difference on the ground. This is painstaking work which is needed and which yields important results. It is empowering and it is about strengthening the new generation of intersectional feminists. It is about the recognition of and the investment in this invisible work. Just like the case of women's care work. As donors, we need to recognise this. We need to help in making the invisible visible.

The Doria Feminist Fund: genesis of an audacious idea

The above-mentioned consultations, analysis, feeling the ground, and reflections over the need and possibility of having a feminist fund for the Arab region were the subjects of recurring thoughts for several years before the Doria Feminist Fund materialised and launched on 8 March 2021, on the occasion of International Women's Rights Day. Indeed, the nagging question was always about the reason why there was no regional

feminist fund for the MENA region. Others were: What are the challenges? How would these challenges be overcome? Who would this Fund target? And the most immediate questions of all were undoubtedly: how would such a Fund be set up? With which seed resources? The reply to these questions came in 2016 when the co-author of this article, Mozn Hassan, the co-founder of Mozn for Feminist Studies, received the Rights Livelihoods Award 'for asserting the equality and rights of women in circumstances where they are subject to ongoing violence, abuse and discrimination'.[9] A strategic and feminist decision was taken immediately to dedicate the award funds entirely to the purpose of creating the Doria Feminist Fund. This indeed heralded a turning point in galvanising all efforts towards developing a plan of creating what would become the first Feminist Fund in the MENA region, specifically from the feminists of the region, to the feminists of the region.

The Doria Feminist Fund came to life then, and proceeded with a consultation in Egypt (as the founder was put under a travel ban there which remains to this day) with a small group of feminist activists from the region and the diaspora, as well as global feminists. The documentation of this internal consultation is also not yet available in the public domain. However, this consultation, along with several other discussions and engagements, identified the following set of conclusions:

- The pervasive oppression of authoritarian regimes in the region is suffocating the public sphere where civil society operates, as well as the space for autonomous, independent, and radical intersectional feminist activism. This includes bringing in new laws which place constraints on feminist activism and make use of available financing difficult if not impossible.
- This is concomitant with the strengthening of state-sponsored women outfits such as national women commissions and national councils of women, as well as large and docile civil society organisations which do not present any threat to the regimes' narrative.
- The usual sources of funding (international and multilateral donors, foundations, and others) work according to mechanisms and criteria inaccessible to grassroots intersectional feminist organisations and groups. These include formal registration, bank accounts, a complex and expensive organisational structure, the preference for disbursing large grants rather than smaller and more manageable ones, and familiarity with layers of requirements for reporting and for visibility (e.g. imposing logos and branding), etc. While we are aware that this situation applies to most parts of the global South, the situation is further complicated in the MENA region by the explicit threats against feminists, the queer community, refugee and migrant women, and others. This situation has intensified following the first round of revolutions in the MENA region (Alsoswa and Livani 2019; Belhassen 2013; Charrad and Zarrugh 2013; Hassan 2015; Heideman and Romano 2016).
- While some donors might fund directly a select number of queer and intersectional feminist groups, the scale of funding remains very small and limited compared to what the same sources provide to larger, more powerful and well-resourced organisations which exclude LGBTQI+ groups as well as intersectional feminists.

These findings bear a strong resonance with those of the Associations for Women's Rights in Development's (AWID) recent robust report on the funding ecosystem for women's rights work.[10] The dearth and conditionality of funding for intersectional feminist organising as shown in the AWID report and reiterated by our various consultation processes is indeed one of the most powerful inspirations for the creation of the Doria Feminist Fund.

There were other lessons from our consultations. One is that a new feminist fund for the MENA region should not just aim to bring in flexible and direct funding to emerging, fresh, and independent intersectional feminist groups, but should also invest in the production of homegrown feminist knowledge and counter-narratives. Another lesson is that despite the signs of some improvements in certain well-defined spaces in a few countries of the region (Human Rights Watch 2018; Lezaar 2020), isolation and vulnerability of many intersectional feminist groups remains the norm for the majority of spaces in the region. As such, identifying and directly supporting intersectional and queer groups struggling and working under the radar is key. Finally, many informants mentioned the importance of connections, solidarity, and most of all, peer-to-peer feminist mentorship.[11]

For whom and for what?

The Doria Feminist Fund was thus set up to be a model of direct and flexible small funding for various forms of intersectional feminist and LGBTQI+ organising in the MENA region. Its priority is to support small emerging intersectional groups, fully trust their judgement in terms of what their needs and priorities are, and provide them with a one-time small fund for core support or for activity support. The funding is also accompanied by a tailored mentorship grant aimed at building capacities towards strengthening safety and security (especially internet security) as well as ensuring that the group will develop internal mechanisms for transparent internal governance and due diligence.

As already mentioned, an equally important feature of the Doria Feminist Fund is the allocation of flexible small grants to feminist knowledge production,[12] which is based on a broad definition of what constitutes knowledge production and who are the knowers and producers of indigenous and homegrown knowledge. The key purpose of this particular funding stream is to make a contribution towards decolonising knowledge, amplifying the voices and stories of feminists from and in the MENA region, and, most importantly, encouraging feminists in the region and from all walks of life to engage in writing, documenting and, in the process, honouring their journey.

The Doria Feminist Fund is thus conceptualised as an enabler of the emerging, inclusive, and intersectional feminist movement in the MENA region. While it does not work according to specific 'themes' or 'areas to support', it nevertheless directly addresses the concerns of the most invisible within the movement, with special emphasis on queer groups, migrants, and others who work under the radar, seek to bring about change in different ways, and who definitely fall outside the remit of mainstream funding.

At the time of writing this article, the Doria Feminist Fund has already begun its operations and will be announcing the first cycle of grant making in the summer of 2021. As the operations of Doria will unfold, the Fund will invest time and effort in documenting its own history and journey, in addition to the stories of the grantees, in their own words.

A global recognition of the need to fund feminist movements directly, consistently, and with flexibility

On 3 July 2021, the Generation Equality Forum (GEF)[13] concluded with a commitment for direct, flexible and multi-year funding for feminist movements amounting to $US60 billion, with more commitments to be made in the future by philanthropy, the private sector, and gender equality-friendly states. While it is still early to see whether these commitments will actually fulfil their promise of funding being dedicated directly and fully to inclusive feminist movements, the GEF statement is a landmark in global recognition of the challenges that feminist movements face, and of the dearth of direct funding as one of the main challenges they experience.

In a pre-GEF event focusing on the MENA region and organised by the Doria Feminist Fund under the umbrella of 'Stop Talking Start Funding Campaign', the point was reiterated that there is urgent need to transform the funding scene and to identify innovative funding for intersectional feminist movements, in a region which has historically been hostile to such movements and profoundly dislikes any call for freedom. During this event, Oumou Toure, a young feminist activist from Mali, urged the Canadian and French ministers speaking at the event to 'stop making speeches and put their hands in their pockets'.

It is within this current ecosystem that the Doria Feminist Fund was created and now aspires to respond to what young and emerging intersectional feminist organisations have shared as key to their sustainability, namely flexible funding, trust in their knowledge and analysis of the movement, core support, knowledge production, and mentorship.

Notes

1. See www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/16/sarah-hegazy-rage-grief-exhaustion.
2. See www.doriafeministfund.org.
3. See www.wmf.org.eg/en/.
4. See www.qorras.com/.
5. See https://kohljournal.press/about.
6. See www.alwarsha.org/.
7. See https://genderiyya.xyz/wiki/Project:About_Gender_Wiki.
8. See https://jeem.me/.
9. See https://rightlivelihood.org/the-change-makers/find-a-laureate/mozn-hassan-nazra/.
10. See www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/movingmoremoney_finalfinalfinal.pdf.
11. The Doria Feminist Fund has found inspiration and solid guidance in CREA's Feminist Mentorship for Feminist Futures, see https://creaworld.org/resource/feminist-mentoring-guide-for-

feminist-futures-part-3/?fbclid=IwAR2toPMA3aksR8HV47ynZ0WCR7nt4i7NvdU-OZp2pC8DGgvdxt5wcnijvpI.

12. See www.doriafeministfund.org/knowledge-production-funds.
13. See https://forum.generationequality.org/.

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Mozn Hassan is an Egyptian feminist activist and founder of 'Nazra for Feminist Studies'. She has received many awards, among them the Global Fund for Women's inaugural Charlotte Bunch Human Rights Award in 2013. Hassan and Nazra were jointly awarded one of the Right Livelihood Awards, often called the Alternative Nobel Peace Prize, in 2016, asserting the equality and rights of women in circumstances where they are subject to ongoing violence, abuse, and discrimination. In 2019, Hassan received the Hrant Dink Award for peace, rights, and equality. Email: mozn@doriafeministfund.org

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