I do not think that any religion can offer a long-term basis for struggle for women's rights. In my view, any form of religious extremism, whether it is based on Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or Islam (or any other religion) is a threat to women and women's movements. Extremism is being used as markers of purity and authenticity and are generally subjected to severe restrictions in movement, appearance and behavior.

I do not think that any religion can offer a long-term basis for struggle for women's rights. I understand that in certain situations it might be necessary or useful to evoke religion.

4. Pluralism in itself is neither good or bad. It very much depends whether resources and energies are put to good use, or whether women's groups are wasting their efforts by working all over the place and not focusing. In my experience in Egypt, the problem was not pluralism in terms of activities, but ‘reinventing the wheel’ and lack of cooperation. In other words, different groups and organizations would start certain projects with no building on the work done by other groups earlier. Furthermore, activities were sometimes the result of available funding rather than well-thought through needs.

Yet, ideally, Arab women’s movements (again as women’s movements in other parts of the world) should be able to work on many different levels and issues, as gender inequalities are pervasive in all aspects of life. In light of the severe lack of human resources (due to the relative small size of women’s groups), and in some countries of funding (though not Egypt), priorities need to be made.

5. Yes, the existing family laws in most Arab countries affect women of all social classes. They are the source of much anguish, emotional and material suffering and a general symbol for unequal gender relations.

6. I do not think it is an ‘either or question’. I certainly agree that there should be more movements (‘women only’ and ‘Talibet and women only and South’. One of the most powerful arguments in countering the common accusation of ‘imitating the West’ is to show that women in non-western countries, such as Pakistan, Nigeria and India, suffer from similar problems and engage in similar struggles.

7. To some extent, this holds true for many social movements worldwide. It is the educated middle class that have the time and energy to change the world while the poor struggle for daily survival. However, several factors account for the fact that Arab women’s movements today seem particularly to fail to mobilize women of other classes (as opposed to places like Turkey where the women’s movement has been much more successful in this point on various occasions).

8. Definitely. Unfortunately many women’s organizations in the Arab world follow the prevailing political culture in the region, i.e. authoritarianism and hierarchical political structures. Those women and groups that try to challenge prevail ing forms and cultures of doing politics struggle on several fronts at the same time. They often spend more time trying to create democratic structures and processes than in fighting for women’s rights. In the long run, these attempts are extremely important and positive.

9. One of the greatest challenges for members of Arab women’s movements is to challenge existing gender ideologies and relations in our own families and amongst friends. Many of us, whether in the Arab world or the West, fail to practise what we ‘preach’. It starts with our relationships as at home as towards our sisters. We are often still complicit with the patriarchal system of divide and rule, and we treat other women as rivals rather than partners in a struggle.

10. All inequalities and injustices - whether on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. - are linked. Women’s movements anywhere in the world need to have a holistic approach to the problem of gender discrimination. At the same time you can’t fight the discrimination of religious or ethnic minorities, or the oppression of poor people, without addressing gender inequalities.

11. I think we should move beyond the endless debates about terminologies. The term ‘Arab feminism’ is as valid and as misleading as the term ‘Western feminism.’

12. Initially, the UN decade for women seems to have boosted Arab women’s movements but some of the activities were not sustainable.

13. The effects have been multifold: It has led to the professionalization of women’s societies which in previous decades were either based on charity and welfare work, or political militancy. On one level, this professionalization resulted in a situation where highly qualified women - doctors, lawyers, academics, etc. - became part of women’s movements. They managed to combine their professional qualifications and insights with the political struggle for women’s rights. I think that this has been a positive development. At the same time, the women’s movements may have lost the voluntary and militancy of earlier decades, and now sometimes run the danger of ‘careerism’. I noticed in Egypt that some women made a career out of being women activists. This is not a problem if it is merely a side effect of their activism, but it becomes problematic if the job becomes the goal in and of itself.

14. Repressive governments within the Arab world severely limit all forms of dissent and political expressions. They feel particularly threatened by women’s movements that challenge the status quo. Radical Islamist movements and increased social conservatism also pose a great obstacle to the growth of the women’s movement. Western imperialism, and particularly US foreign policy will always have a direct bearing on the politics of the Arab world, and the so-called war on terrorism all increase anti-western sentiments in the region. Until Arab women manage to be less defensive towards the accusation of being too pro-Western, and show their critics that 1) the West is not one thing; 2) Western feminism is heterogeneous; and 3) most western feminists are critical of their own governments, their work will be very difficult.

It would be fantastic if there could be less rivalry and competition, and more solidarity and cooperation.
However, there are new women's groups that are addressing some of these issues.

2. Charges of ‘Westocation’ have been leveled against active women’s groups by both conservative and to some extent progressive forces in the region – including sections of active women’s movements - but more so by conservative forces. I think the question to be asked is: why is this the case? Most of the time this has been for political reasons, mainly with the aim of undermining progressive feminist discourse. As I argue elsewhere, I have listened time and again to the first women parliamentarian in Sudan arguing:

We are not feminists! For us, liberation does not mean ‘dising’ [behaving like men], nor promiscuity or moral laxity. Look at what feminism did in the West! Look at the photos of naked women you see in the walls of subway stations (in London)! Look at the spread of drugs, homelessness, and broken families! Do you know why this is the case? It is because bourgeois women have made it a point to lead women’s movements astray, and their conspiracy was successful.

Some of these issues are actually being challenged by feminist groups in the West. In the case of Egypt, this issue has been discussed by Nadje Al-Ali in her excellent article “We are Not Feminists”.

It is important to mention here that one of the reasons of such a stand has been the tendency of some of the western feminists to homogenize women. "Othering" Third World women in the process. In the case of conservative forces and politicized Islamic groups in the region, however, what is often criticized is usually a construct of what conservative forces see as ‘Western feminism’.

3. I believe that there are both local and external factors that account for the spread of politicized Islam. Generally speaking, this is part of a resurgence of movements organized around religious, ethnic or national identities. These movements find a particular voice in an increasingly globalized world, where they are able to mobilize religious collectivities by - amongst other things - emphasizing their difference from the ‘West’. Given the fact that women are often considered as markers of national identity and cultural difference, they are often expected to commit themselves to specific notions of ‘womanhood’ and to reproduce ethnic and national boundaries, in a way that often undermines women’s human rights. As such, I believe that it is difficult for any religion to offer a long-term basis for struggle for women’s rights. However, I acknowledge the existence of Islamic feminist discourses and the fact that there are elements of religion and culture that can form a basis for promoting women’s human rights; but they need to be approached critically. Groups like the ‘Women’s Memory Group’ (Cairo) could play an important role in this.

4. This pluralism is not necessarily bad, but we need to be cautious about the transformational component of some of these activities. We need to look at why and how they are being undertaken. With high rates of illiteracy amongst women (and men) in countries like Sudan, literacy should be introduced as a basic right. This might contribute to changing the way women and women’s roles are defined in society but it will not necessarily transform the ‘position of women’ in that society. If adult literacy is used as a form of pedagogy - feminist pedagogy - and if women who attend literacy classes are organized around a transformative gender agenda, then that is another story.

5. There should be more struggle towards changing personal status laws but this should not constitute the only activity of women’s groups in the region.

6. Feminist theorizing has developed immensely in other parts of the Third World, mainly in Latin America and the Indian subcontinent. There, in the process of conservative forces and politicized Islamic groups in the region, however, what is often criticized is usually a construct of what conservative forces see as ‘Western feminism’.

There is always a tendency to look at various cultural or ‘Other’ ethnic/cultural groups exist, and that they have distinct problems would be a good starting point. In fact, this has been already happening within some groups in a number of countries including Egypt and Sudan. In the case of Sudan, given the homogenizing tendencies of the post-colonial state and its attempts to impose a singular Arab and Islamic identity on a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural region, and the fact that this was linked to unequal distribution of wealth and power, identity questions have been central to our political experience. Mobilization and organization of women in Southern Sudan for example, has taken place in the context of struggle against oppression, linked to cultural hegemony. In the process, they have been challenging the tendency of women’s groups to construct women from marginalized regions as victims who need support rather than as activists capable of organizing themselves, and adopting transformative agendas.

11. Yes: also because the term implies that there is a single Arab feminist perspective. I have addressed this in my “Arab Cultures and Human Rights: A Genealogy”.

12. (not answered.)

13. I am particularly interested in the fact that the number of women interested and/or trained in feminism, women’s and gender studies is on the increase, and that this has resulted in a slowly expanding tendency to look critically into existing groups and structures. Unfortunately academic feminist/women’s activists are sometimes excluded by the mainstream women’s movement and their concerns branded irrelevant. Others feel that this movement does not reflect their beliefs. However, I hope that this will lead to the development of local theoretical perspectives.