

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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AZIZA HELMY

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INTERVIEW

Q: ... I'm really grateful to you for your willingness to do this.

HELMY: It's a privilege to be chosen to participate in this important activity. I have a lot of appreciation for my days at USAID and the people I worked with, yourself included. I really want to thank you.

Q: This is the first interview with Aziza Helmy, a senior Foreign Service national in the USAID (United States Agency for International Development) mission in Cairo for many years. We agreed to start by your early days, and all of the factors that influenced your interest in development and brought you to AID (USAID). So I'm going to sit back and let you talk.

HELMY: As mentioned, my name is Aziza Helmy. I have been privileged to work for USAID as a senior FSN (Foreign Service National) member for 15 years. It's an honor to participate in this project, the Oral History of USAID. I treasure my days at USAID and I think highly of this time. I would like to share some thoughts – but before I do that I want to say I'm on pension now. I was born in 1943, so you can think of me as an ancient Egyptian. Anyway, let me give you a briefing about my background and what led me to take part in USAID.

As to my background, I was born in a family with a father who was a civil engineer. While my father was in the engineering area, he was a chairperson of a housing company and his work was technical, but he had the hobby and appreciation of Arabic poetry. He was friends with some prominent Arab poets like Nizar Qabbani and others. I mention that because I think this hobby for my father that I inherited helped me a lot in my career and in my life in general. When you send messages in poetry, you can encapsulate your thoughts in a few words that come home to the people who hear the statements you make.

Q: Do you write poetry?

HELMY: I appreciate and recite poetry, but do not write it. This is my main hobby. I love it. I'm going to mention how I benefited from this in my work with USAID.

My mother was a housewife. I had four brothers and no sisters. Being in a family that treasured girls, and being the only girl in a family with four brothers, I was really privileged. I think I had more than my share of love, care and attention in the family. I was the special one since my early days. Being a female – I know female friends who say; “if we had been given the choice we would have liked to be males, that is boys” but for me, not for a second; I'm very proud of being a woman and this is how I wanted to be.

I lost both my parents and two of my brothers who passed away; I'm left with two brothers now, one- an engineer- and the other was in the merchant marine. In 1966 I got married to a civil engineer who graduated in the States from the University of Illinois, who passed away after 25 years of marriage.

Q: I'm so sorry.

HELMY: Yeah. It was a shock for me, but c'est la vie as they say. I have three children, two girls and a boy. Actually they're adults now! The eldest is Amira, who has an MA (Masters of Arts degree) from Harvard Business School in the U.S. She has a family of her own – two sons, one is a basketball champion. Dina has three daughters, and the eldest is a student at Cornell right now. My youngest is my son, Mahmoud, who is married with three children. He was trained as a civil engineer but works in marketing and sales now. Two of my children live in Dubai, so I'm living alone here after my children left and my husband passed away. But I'm very busy all the time – there are just not enough hours in the day! I'm invited to conferences and events, so I'm very busy most of the time.

As to my education, I studied at the American College for Girls, which is a high school, where I was elected president of the Student Council and Chairperson of the School Judiciary Committee. After I graduated from the American College for Girls where I made friends who are still good friends till now, my undergraduate studies were in Economics and Political Science at Cairo University, where I was also elected “Ideal Student.” During my days at college, I was captain of the basketball team – I like to do other things, not just scholastic duties. I took part in most social activities as well as sports.

Q: You were in basketball in college?

HELMY: Yes, I was captain of the team during my days at college.

Q: Was it unusual for young women to play sports?

HELMY: Not at all. During my days it was common and appreciated. Other than playing and being on the team, I was the captain so I had a lot of media interviews. For example we traveled to Beirut to play against the university there so I was bombarded with interviews on TV. I have to confess – I did play basketball, but I

cannot say I was a top-notch player. But I enjoyed it, and was more instrumental on the promotional and media aspects on the team.

As to my post-graduate work, it was in the U.S. where I had my masters degree in human resources development at Vermont College, Norwich University. I recall that at that time in Vermont, the slogan was “Vermont is what America was!” It was a simple place. I was there in the early ‘80s. I enjoyed being there but the life there was much simpler than in other parts of the U.S.

Q: And probably simpler than in Cairo!

HELMY: Yes. Believe it or not, at that time certain things that were very common like travelers’ checks, people did not recognize what they were. People don’t use travelers’ checks now, but to my astonishment it was not recognized by some people there.

Q: So how did you deal with the cold weather in Vermont?

HELMY: That’s another story. I just had to cope with it. I’m not a cold weather person at all, but you just have to do what it takes.

Q: How did you choose human resources as your area for graduate work?

HELMY: I am very interested in people and education and training and the status of people. Human resources are sometimes thought of as personnel issues; this is not what I did. My work was on technical and vocational education; my thesis was on technical and vocational education in the Arab world, a comparative study. I always wanted and worked on enhancing the abilities of people, particularly women. On this particular issue I wanted to contribute to the limited ability of women to get engaged in technical work and jobs. Women, whenever there is training for them, donors provide sewing and knitting equipment for them to prepare them for what they call pink-collared jobs that are women specific.

For me, I wanted to see women doing a lot more than that because we are capable and the potential abilities go beyond those limited capabilities. During my career later on, I organized training sessions for women in Upper Egypt to be plumbers and electricians. This was shocking for some people here because most donor agencies, whenever they think of training for women it’s sewing and knitting, as I mentioned. When I organized these training sessions, women were so excited about it and were queuing in lines. That was in Upper Egypt, which is kind of a conservative society.

Q: I think we’ll get into this, but I suspect one of the jobs you had to do was educate USAID about what women are willing to do and are capable of doing. Everybody comes with their own prejudices and I’m sure they for the best of reasons thought women wouldn’t do anything except sewing. We’ll talk about that.

HELMY: Yes, we can talk about that later. Now, going through my story I also want to mention here that I was very pleased during my years of study that I had the chance three times to host American girls who came in the summer to live with my family through exchange programs. In the summer of 1960 I hosted Carol Lion, later Carol

Vogel from Topeka, Kansas. In '63 I hosted Susan Wilson, later Susan Bynum, from Syracuse, New York. In '64 I hosted Pat Gronowski who later became Pat Mackowiak from North Dakota. Interesting part is that I still maintain strong ties with them to this day, thanks to Facebook. Susan I met last year after 50 years and the time just elapsed like we met yesterday. This kind of exchange program of students enhances the ties among people and promotes peace among nations.

Q: I agree. Were they all Experiment in International Living exchange programs or did they come from other programs?

HELMY: No, they came through two different programs. One was AFS, American Field Service; the others came through American Friends of the Middle East. I was in Egypt a pioneer for hosting American students, and I spread the word among my friends and family. A lot of people became interested in hosting American students. That was a summer program; the American students came for the summer, not the whole year. It was really exciting. For me it was exciting because I didn't have any sisters so the girl who came and stayed with me was close to my heart and like a sister to me for the summer. This experience makes you see things through different eyes.

Q: All three of them had a good experience?

HELMY: They said that they enjoyed their stays here and for me, I was so excited and interested. Interesting thing also for Pat Gronowski –and the group of 64, they organized a reunion at the Caribbean in 2014. We went for one week on a cruise in the Caribbean, Egyptians and Americans who were involved in 1964 exchange program met again after 50 years! Can you imagine the screaming and excitement of everyone; it was a golden reunion. As you know Mike Van Dusen was an exchange student in '63. Also Dr. John Anthony who is now head of U.S.-Arab Relations Organization, who once told me “I would never have any ill-feelings against someone I lived with and I shared life with in Egypt or any place”. That's what I'm saying, that young people when they actually meet and have this kind of experience, it is a promotion for peace. I hope more programs of this nature would be implemented.

Q: I hope so too. We certainly need them.

HELMY: Let me now add a few words about my career before USAID. Right after my completion of university, I joined the Fulbright Commission in Cairo, which is a U.S.-Egyptian educational exchange commission. I was a Program Assistant. I kind of organized the appointments of American professors to teach at Egyptian universities. I had an additional assignment at that time, to teach these professors colloquial Arabic. I would just say a funny thing that happened – I was teaching them some of the words that they might need to use for inconveniences like headache and diarrhea. I was telling them that diarrhea in Arabic is “is-hel”. They burst out laughing! They heard it as “is hell!” It was an interesting part of my job.

Q: How did you get the job with Fulbright?

HELMY: I was approached even before I graduated. Someone I knew and highly respected was a senior person there and she told me, “The minute you graduate, you come and work with us here at Fulbright.” I joined Fulbright in 1965 and stayed there

for one year. I got married in '66. I had to resign Fulbright to travel with my husband to Tanzania, Dar es Salaam.

Q: Oh, I didn't know that.

HELMY: Yes. Over there I picked up the Swahili language. (Like "Jumbo" = "Hello", "Habari" = "How are you?", "Missouri" = "Fine" I lived in Tanzania for six years. They were good years.

Q: Did you work in Dar es Salaam?

HELMY: Yes. I worked at the American Commission responsible for granting educational scholarships to East Africans; because of my experience at the Fulbright Commission I got this job and worked there. Other than living in Dar Al Salam I had a chance to visit other places like Moshi, Arusha, and Ngorongoro Crater which is an open park. Have you been to East Africa?

Q: I have been to Kenya but never been to Tanzania.

HELMY: It's a beautiful place.

Q: Although I think to jump ahead, they seem to have adopted a very conservative policy on reproductive health recently.

HELMY: That's a recent thing. I was there from '66 to '72, ages ago. Anyway, after my six years in Tanzania where my husband was assigned to the City Council there as a civil engineer. We moved back to Cairo. My youngest child was very young at that time so I wanted a part-time job. I got one at the American University. It seems most of my career has been America related.

Q: It does seem that way.

HELMY: I worked at the American University in Cairo (AUC) at a part-time job in a program called "Arabic Lexicography Program". That was the first computerized dictionary in the Arab world. It was really something notable. It was colloquial Arabic/English. It involved very interesting analysis. The important thing for me was that it was a part-time job; my kids were very young at that time. Anyway, my next station after that, we went to Kuwait. We lived there for 14 years.

Q: I didn't know that either!

HELMY: I worked with the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. This is like the World Bank, but at the level of the Arab world. It is the regional machinery for the flow of Petrodollars from the haves to the have-nots. It's a very big institution there, and I was really privileged to work there. I was very well paid and given a lot of facilities like an apartment overlooking the ocean, first class tickets to wherever one travels, stuff like that. It was really a privileged position. I worked there for 14 years, of which six years I was seconded to represent the Fund at a joint program with UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) . It was called "Identification and Preparation of Intercountry Investment Projects and Related Feasibility Studies". This

was the name of the program which I worked in. So I had a chance to travel more extensively all over the Arab countries. Not only because of this program, but also because I was for the Fund the Women in Development, WID Officer. That gave me the opportunity to travel to many of the Arab countries that were recipients of loans and technical assistance from the fund. I've been involved in development financing for a long time with a focus on women.

Q: So that I get the sequence correct, when did you go to Norwich University?

HELMY: I graduated in '83, but I did that while I was working. I used to travel to Vermont to take my courses and they assigned an advisor for me in Kuwait. I did it – they knew I had this job and could not be full-time, so I used to travel every once in a while to Vermont until I finished my work there.

Q: So it was while you were working in Kuwait?

HELMY: Yes, correct. My years of experience at the Fund gave me a chance to travel extensively as I mentioned before. I used to sit under trees with Yemeni women and sip tea with the people also sitting on the floor, with Moroccan women. I managed a number of training projects in Khartoum, so I traveled extensively. This was really an asset; it gave me an insight into different parts of the Arab world. On this note, I would like to mention something interesting that I came across. You know that the classic Arabic language is the official language of all the Arab countries. But the colloquial language is different in different parts of the Arab world, to the extent that in the eastern part of the Arab world if you tell someone 'Yetiek al Afya' it means "May you have good health," but if you say the same thing in the western part of the Arab world, it means "May you go to hell!" (Laughter)

Q: So you have to be careful!

HELMY: Sure! You don't greet someone by saying, "Go to hell!" There are other terms that are acceptable in parts of the Arab world but in other parts they are not. However, I have to say the Egyptian colloquial has been understandable all over the Arab world because of the 6 movies and media.

Q: Before you did all of this travel, were you aware of how different the different colloquial dialects were?

HELMY: Not really. I was aware there were differences, but when I traveled and came face to face with these things, I came to know a lot more. I could write books about these things and incidents that took place from misunderstandings. Let me tell you, once I went to Tunisia to attend a conference there. I was received by people who were waiting for me, and they told me in their local language 'Madame etfadali mehezek belkahraba!'; that means in Egyptian colloquial "Madame, come we will electrify you." I thought "What the hell are you going to do to me," but it meant they were going to give me a lift with a car in their local language. The difference was alarming until I found out what their intentions were!

Q: That's amazing. So 14 years in Kuwait gave you a chance to travel a lot and work with a lot of women?

HELMY: Yes, exactly, in many Arab countries. Women and NGOs (non-governmental organizations). As I told you also this Program of Inter-country Investment Projects and Related Feasibility Studies was a joint program with the UN (United Nations), so I also had UN involvement for quite a while.

Now we move to the juicy part, USAID. After 14 years nobody would resign a job like that at the Arab Fund, but my family moved to Cairo. My husband was transferred to Cairo and my eldest children were admitted to the American University in Cairo. So my whole family left to live in Cairo; I stayed for six months and then I decided to resign this very well paying and prestigious job for my priorities were defined. I guess I'm a career woman, but family comes first.

Q: It's hard to balance career and family. What year was that, when you resigned?

HELMY: I left there in early '89. It was a good thing because I came to Cairo to live with my family. Unfortunately my husband passed away in '92. It was a sudden thing; he was only 56 when he passed away. But anyway, that's what destiny is like. We celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary and shortly after he died in January 28, '92. That was a very sad event in my life because he was a great man, I still love him until this day

Q: Can we go back to where you were when the phone cut out? So you went back to Cairo in 1989.

HELMY: Now getting into USAID. Shortly after my arrival to Cairo, I saw an advertisement for a senior job at USAID Cairo and thought I wouldn't apply because I was sure there were hundreds of people who would be interested in the job. So I thought there was no chance, but just let me send an application and see what happens. One does not know how things will develop or what to expect. A few weeks after I sent the application, I received a call from USAID asking me to come for an interview. I was really surprised; I didn't think I would have a chance.

When I was given the date of the interview, I went to USAID. The nicest part was that the interview was on my birthday. So when I sat in front of the interviewer, he glanced at my application and said "Happy birthday, Aziza!" It was a good omen. To make a long story short, I was employed by USAID shortly after. Apparently they thought I could fit well with the job. I was hired at grade 12, which was the most senior grade for FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals).

Q: You didn't have security clearances and all that stuff?

HELMY: Of course, this was all done but very quickly. They needed to fill this job immediately.

Q: Describe the job – what was the job you were hired for initially?

HELMY: I was Development Program Specialist and Gender Officer. I worked with the Program Department. Apparently they recognized my experience with the Arab Fund and the other development organizations and that I'd been involved with

development financing for a while, so they thought I would fit in. Then when I started working there I had to forego my earlier plans of getting my apartment painted and taking a year off after my return from Kuwait. I plunged myself into work at USAID and I loved every minute of it for the next 15 years. Fourteen years were regular years, then they gave me an exception after I reached pension age, they gave me one extra year, which was something that I was very pleased to have.

Q: Was it very intensive work? Did you have long days and many meetings?

HELMY: Yes, Mam. But I loved and enjoyed my work there.

Q: How does it compare with some of your other jobs?

HELMY: I traveled domestically and internationally representing USAID at different locations. As I told you, I was appointed as Development Program Specialist and Gender Officer in the Program Department which later was changed to SCS, Strategic Coordination and Support. My work involved providing backstopping to education sector, health, democracy and governance, as well as small and micro-enterprise development activities at different intervals.

Q: Oh my gosh, that's a huge portfolio!

HELMY: That's not all. There are other things I will tell you about. I was also a resource person in the expanded team of Improved Basic Education to Meet Market Demands, and Small and Emerging Business Results Package team which included implementation support and guidance on documents and evaluation. As the Mission Gender Officer, I was the head of the mission's Equity Team, and was responsible for the preparation of the Mission's Gender annex to the R4, which is the main annual reporting document of USAID sent to Washington. I was also responsible for USAID gender-related activities with other donors through the Gender and Development Donors Subgroup; it's called GAD. This is a subgroup of the Development Assistance Group (DAG). I was in GAD in which gender development officers of all donors in Egypt were members. I was elected chairperson of this group twice. USAID was given the recognition that it supports gender activities.

In this capacity I represented USAID in many places and I had also many assignments. Among the things I did, I prepared speeches as needed for the mission director for meetings or conferences that focused on gender issues. That was kind of a privilege; to prepare a speech for the mission director is not something easily done. Especially if it was gender related. I drafted speeches for Mission Directors; Toni Christiansen, Anne Aarnes and others who were very appreciative. I enjoyed working with them.

My work also involved responding to Washington gender specific enquiries. And as I mentioned I attended local and international conferences, countless numbers of activities. One of the most prominent was the Fourth World Conference on Women that was held in Beijing in 1995. Did you attend it?

Q: I did not go to that one. I was working with Sally Shelton-Colby and she attended.

HELMY: OK. Actually the American delegation was headed by FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States), at that time she was Hillary Clinton.

Q: Right, and she gave a great speech.

HELMY: That's correct. Also on representing USAID at different events, I was invited on several occasions to participate in development-related seminars as discussant or presenter – to present papers or discuss other people's inputs. These included the UN-Cairo University sponsored Conference on Socioeconomic Policies and Poverty Alleviation. I was a discussant on a paper on Pro-Poor Education Policies. Also another conference on gender and the environment at American University in Cairo (AUC). I was also on several occasions asked to teach seminars at AUC for post-graduate students on gender related topics.

Q: A couple of things I'm curious about. During the time you were working with USAID, relations between Egypt and the United States went up and down. Did it affect you in any way? Was it awkward for you working for an American institution?

HELMY: Very frankly I like to think of myself as a patriotic person. I love my country and my people and my leaders. When I worked with USAID, I firmly believed that this program benefits both countries; Egypt and the U.S. as well. I felt that in my own way and in my small capacity I could contribute to promoting relations, doing what can be done to enhance relations. Of course there are other factors that affect things but I believe that the USAID program in Egypt was beneficial to Egypt and to the United States as well. I used to emphasize this in every speech I did. That's why to answer your question I was very comfortable with working there.

Q: You mentioned there were times when you represented the Foreign Service nationals. I'm curious about that – about what the issues were that they wanted to bring up with USAID and how they handled that.

HELMY: That brings us to a point – I was elected by the FSNs of the embassy as the chairperson of the FSN committee. There were about 1500 Egyptian employees in the embassy in Egypt. Those elected 11 as members of the committee, and the 11 elected one as the chairperson, and that one was yours truly. We used to have meetings with even the ambassador sometimes. You asked about the issues. The issues revolved around the interests of the staff. Health insurance, facilities, salary increases if they qualified for that. If the employees had any issues that they felt they need to raise to the senior members at the embassy, we used to take them there. I recall once when we sat with the ambassador, I think it was Ambassador Walker, I started listing the things the FSNs called for, at the end he said, "Look, I can promise you effort, but I cannot promise you results." I never forgot that sentence; he was very cooperative and understanding.

I used to also give the annual speech of the FSNs at the Fourth of July event. That was also something interesting I liked to do.

Q: What do you think was the most difficult FSN issue that you had to deal with?

HELMY: I think frankly this furlough thing, the furlough that we are not used to here in Egypt. You understand what I mean? They do not send the salaries because of a delay in some Congressional clearance or whatever it is.

Q: Oh, the furloughs. Right.

HELMY: That was quite a difficult time. People can go three or four months without salary. That was not easy.

Q: When we had a furlough, the FSNs went without salary?

HELMY: Yes. No money would come for the agency. Some Congressional clearances or whatever they do over there if they are delayed would stop everything. People were not familiar with this way of doing things but that was not easy.

Another difficult thing that applied not only to the Egyptians but also to the Americans was as I remember the incident of the U.S embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya. We were asked to move to the embassy premises from the Cairo Centre where we were in 48 hours. The whole Program Department which was about 27 people, had to move to the embassy for safety and security. We all sat in one room, 27 people. Actually for some reason I was asked to make the plan for the seating of these people. We had to seat these 27 people in one room on a temporary basis for seven months. People breathing, talking to each other, phoning, making all sorts of noises.

Q: That is difficult. Did all of the AID people have to move?

HELMY: Yes. We had to leave the building where we had our offices and go to the embassy. Our office, the Program Department, was seated in one big room, as I mentioned. We had the Americans sitting by the windows and the others opposite each other. It was really difficult. That was for seven months, until the building which seats USAID now was finished and we moved there.

Q: You've talked a fair amount about USAID and the embassy. It sounds as if you worked with both the embassy and AID. Maybe because of your FSN committee role or because the State Department was getting increasingly interested in the issues you were covering – what were your thoughts about the relationship between USAID and the embassy?

HELMY: I can speak for the things I have been involved in like the FSN committee and the things that relate to gender. Many was the time when I was invited to the ambassador's place; when he invited people or delegations that relate to gender, he used to invite me. For example, the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM). He was interested in this and used to invite people to discuss these issues and I was many times invited. I was there as USAID person.

Q: During your time at USAID there were some remarkable achievements certainly in the health area and probably in some other areas as well. Love to hear your thoughts on what USAID did well and what it could have improved on – where was it not as successful as it might have been?

HELMY: If you would let me say a few more things I will come to that. I have some points I will mention I thought could stand improvement. I just want to finish this part about my assignments because I had two other assignments with USAID. One had to do with the child labor issue for Egypt, for the mission. All issues on child labor I used to coordinate with Washington. Also I was the Disability Coordinator for the Mission. At that time we had a visit by the Agency Disability Coordinator, her name was Janet Allen. She visited Egypt in a wheelchair; you probably know her. I organized her visit. I also used to prepare the mission's input to the Agency's Annual Report about disability.

Q: Child labor – was that related to the education portfolio?

HELMY: No. That was a stand-alone. There were child labor issues in agriculture and child labor in industry. I used to coordinate with the different offices on child labor issues that they had.

I would like to also mention that I was pleased to report that I had several opportunities for training and gaining further experience during my days of service at USAID I attended seminars and workshops on project design and project implementation, some were in Washington. I attended a workshop on presentation skills which I thought was very useful. I'm only mentioning examples; there are so many other things that happened and I gained experience from. These were like managing diversity – a lot of things I thought added to one's ability and know-how. Other than that, I also wish to mention that USAID sent me to attend a major evaluation of a big USAID project on women and development that was held in Kathmandu, Nepal. That was a multi-disciplinary project that included economic enhancement through provision of small- and micro-enterprise credit for poor women, to provide literacy and education for these women as well as legal rights awareness. This exposure was very useful and benefited our program here in Egypt. It was Mission Director Toni Christiansen who sent me on this one.

Q: Were you on the evaluation team?

HELMY: No this was done by a team that came from the U.S. but I was there to monitor the exercise and benefit from the experience and bring it back home. The idea was to take into consideration that work on women should not be only in one area; it's better to be multi-disciplinary because if you try to educate women only, they might not be interested. You have to insert other incentives like micro-enterprise credit so that they would be interested to come to you for education and for legal rights awareness. We went by plane to the outskirts of Nepal and we saw women who benefited from the program. I used a lot of these techniques when I came back home, in our work here.

Q: That's exactly what we should be doing more of I think.

HELMY: Yes, I strongly recommend it. I also would like to add that I gained recognition for my performance during my time at USAID. I received the Certificate of Appreciation presented by the National Council of Negro Women for services provided in developing the capacity of Egyptian NGOs. I was also involved with NGOs support big-time.

Now that said, there are a few things I would like to add here. I will say this and then I will say my comments about the negative aspects, if I may call them “negative” here. During my years at USAID, I had several field trips to different parts of Egypt as part of project implementation – these are some of the things that happened during my service. Here I want to mention that I went with a group of American officials, Foreign Service staff members, to Sohag which is a governorate in Upper Egypt. When I went there, I wanted to ask one of the women working in the fields some questions about how things were and how the project is benefitting her. I am an Egyptian and I look Egyptian; I speak Arabic. But the minute I started speaking to her she was startled and she was so afraid. She said, “No, no, no, I know nothing. There is nothing I can say.” She was really petrified. I said, “Okay, calm down. Whom can I speak to?” She pointed to some man. When I started asking the man the questions, she began CORRECTING his answers! He admitted she was right. The message is that women know, but do not know that they know. We need to work on awareness-raising to empower women that they have the capability, they can do it, and they know it. But they just don’t know that they know. I’ll never forget this woman and how she corrected every word the man said and how she was right.

Q: That’s interesting. It’s a self-confidence issue?

HELMY: Yes. I also want to mention – this is something I take a lot of pride in. Other than all the work done for USAID, whether technical or whatever, I used to be responsible for organizing the Big Bash every year – the Big Bash of USAID/Cairo which is a very big party in order to let people interact under a different light. That improves the work environment; this is very important in my judgment. One time, I chose the theme of Egyptian wedding. I had Americans and Egyptians act like they were brides and grooms, and we had a full-fledged wedding ceremony. The interesting part of this was that one couple of them who were an American engineer and Egyptian assistant were actually getting married the following day. They told me later that the wedding party I planned was much better than the actual one they had the following day. This kind of thing makes people more comfortable with each other, it’s not just work work work, but also have some element of personal life in the relations.

Q: Do you think the leadership of USAID understood the importance of building these informal connections across the mission?

HELMY: They used to attend all those events, the Mission Director and everyone. Another event I invited a lot of the Americans and Egyptians at the mission including the USAID Director to visit a farm owned by one of my family members. We spent a day there with children riding donkeys and stuff like that. They all enjoyed it very much. It’s important to promote this friendly atmosphere around people who work together, as I mentioned this improves the work environment and motivates people to work together to achieve common goals.

I mentioned earlier preparing speeches for the mission director when it had to do with gender. One time when I was preparing a speech for Toni Christensen I inserted a saying by Ahmed Shawqi who is the Prince of Poetry for Egypt – this makes things better received by the audience. So I added at the end of the speech to emphasize the

importance of hard work and striving to achieve results, Shawqi said (wama nayloo al matalib beltamani, walaqen tokhazo el donia ghelaba.) meaning “Wishes do not bring about achievement; they have to be coupled with hard work and fought for.” When you say quotations like this, the message gets better received. I didn’t just use Arabic quotations. Many times I used American quotations as well, which I have a long list of; I like to collect them. One of my favorite ones, that I used often in trying to emphasize the importance of women’s strength is a quotation by Eleanor Roosevelt: “A woman is like a tea-bag. You never know how strong it is until it’s put in hot water.” You’ve probably heard that one before.

Q: I have. I think it’s a good one.

HELMY: People always appreciated this quotation with a smile. I want to say something else also as an observation from a non-American who worked for USAID. It is very dominant in USAID, the usage of acronyms. If somebody spoke perfect English and just walked into USAID any time, he/she would not understand the language because people are speaking with abbreviations and acronyms all the time.

Q: I know; it’s terrible.

HELMY: Just an observation that I noticed working there.

Q: I know – and you speak perfect English and were saying, “What are they talking about?” I felt the same way when I joined AID; I didn’t know what a TDY (temporary duty) was or anything.

HELMY: FLOTUS (First Lady of The United States) and POTUS (President of the United States), it’s just a common language and you have to be a USAID person to know what was being talked about!

Q: When I first came I said, “I’m not going to do that, I’m not going to use those acronyms.” And you know what? After a while, you start using them.

HELMY: Exactly. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Now we come to the point where I tell you life was not all sugar and honey; of course there were some hardships, some of which I mentioned before. All in all, things have been good. I personally think my experience was very interesting and I enjoyed it. On this note, I have a few recommendations in my humble opinion, and maybe some critical views that I would like to share with you.

One – USAID has not really invested much in measuring the impact of the program. Mission staff were rewarded for how fast they could get program money obligated and funding pipeline drawn down. Less recognition was given to what programs had accomplished partly as a result of the fact that by the time impact is evidenced, most mission staff have moved on to other assignments. So little time and attention was given to gathering baseline data and monitoring the progress of projects in terms of impacts and participants. So I would recommend more energy be given towards measuring the impact and outcome. USAID is doing a lot; it is justifiable that this be measured.

Q: Right. It's a fair criticism and one that we hear a lot. I'm curious what you think the overall impact was? I know we don't have the quantitative data because the baselines weren't collected and there was more emphasis on moving the money than measuring the impact. Over your 15 years, there must be some things that stand out...

HELMY: Definitely. There was a lot. What I cared for more than anything else in the projects I worked with was the transfer of know-how or technology to the counterparts, because this is what lasts. This is what contributes to sustainability. That's one of the things I would really like to emphasize. More needs to be focused on getting the human resources that are involved in the work, to give better training and better understanding of the issues, knowing how to do things. It is important you be sure that the sustainability is in place for the objectives you are promoting. This approach was evident in many of our projects, among them NARP (National Agriculture Research Project)

One of my greatest achievements at USAID was my work on the funding and implementation of the research component of the Arabic version of "Sesame Street" that addressed pre-schoolers and had a long-lasting impact.

One negative point is that over time the amount of resources made available to USAID Cairo declined, as you know. There might be other observations that affect that, but resources declined and more time and attention was spent trying to address Congressional problems than strategic concerns. There were endless numbers of rules and regulations and controls put in. While that may have stopped certain things that should have been stopped, but also impeded the efficiency and effectiveness of the AID Program. This is a point I wanted to bring about.

Q: So over the 15 years you were there you saw things getting more bureaucratic and cumbersome, and it's partly related to dwindling resources and issues with Congress?

HELMY: Yes. The bureaucracy was more than words can tell, really. After my AID days, I'm going to jump somewhere else and come back here, I became the Program Director for an EU-(European Union) funded 20 million Euro Program. The bureaucracy was no less than USAID, I mean push-paper stuff and bureaucracy. This impedes the attainment of results. I'm just making observations.

I'd like to make a few recommendations. More attention and focus needs to be put on evaluation of programs and project impact. And more on the importance of recognizing and advancing cultural differences while implementing the project. I will tell an anecdote here that might tell the story. The cultural background where Americans and Egyptians come from vary in some ways. One time there was an American engineer of USAID; he was to talk to a high official in the government. He told them, "I want to give you feedback." This is a normal thing in an American setting. "Your work is so-and-so." he mentioned some negative points. The local officer was so offended; he said "You tell me that I don't know how to do my work? Get out of here!" Of course the first one wanted to give feedback for the benefit of the work, and the other one took it to mean he was going to teach me what to do and stuff like that. Cultural differences need to be considered; this is important. There are some differences that can make or break.

Q: Certainly sensitivity to what will be perceived as criticism. One of the issues is an important one – one of the issues that often came up was, are there some roles that women would not be accepted in as senior USAID officials. I ask that knowing that we've had women mission directors and women ambassadors in Egypt; I'm wondering whether you think there was...

HELMY: Not at all. We're one of the countries that have the highest numbers of women ambassadors. The problem is with the technical aspects, like plumbers and carpenters, these professions in Egypt people think are a man's job. But for the jobs of senior people especially government, this is very well taken; there's no problem there at all. But there is a glass ceiling in the private sector. Sometimes women are not able to ascend to higher levels because of the family obligations and what have you. But mostly women employed in the government, have an equal chance. Here in Egypt we have now by far more women in parliament than we ever had before. We used to have single digit women members, six or eight, now we have 89. In Egypt, women are gradually getting their share of power and status. Of course, there is much left to be desired. We have a very reliable head of the National Council for Women, a young woman; her name is Dr. Maya Morsy, she is in her mid-40s. She is giving a big push for the movement of women in Egypt.

Q: Going back to your observations. One was more evaluation and attention to impact. The second one was be more aware of cultural differences.

HELMY: And another one is addressing gender concerns in projects and activities. Sometimes this is overlooked. But being mindful of gender activities and involvement of gender is very important. More training opportunities that are job-oriented, I would highly recommend that. This is what contributes to sustainability. More transfer of technology and know-how to the local counterpart; as I said for more sustainability.

Do you want me to say a few things about what I did after USAID? Or Shall we continue to focus on USAID?

Q: If you have more observations on USAID and the whole U.S. presence, I'd love to hear those.

HELMY: I have to be frank with you. At times as you rightfully said at the beginning, there were ups and downs in relations and how people conceived mutual relations. But as far as I'm concerned, I always emphasized that USAID has contributed a lot to Egypt AND to the United States. It is very important to say that. People do not want to feel they are only at the receiving end. It works both ways and is beneficial and useful for both parties. It gives people confidence or the ability to better appreciate the program.

Q: Aziza, one of the areas you worked on was NGOs, and I know NGOs are having a hard time now. Did you see that coming? Did you see policy changes?

HELMY: I have two comments to make. One, there is a problem with the laws, and with the governance of NGOs. The law is still in the making and I hope when they finalize it, it will give NGOs the power and space to work and be effective. The good

thing is that we have an excellent Minister of Social Solidarity who is overseeing NGOs. Her name is Minister Ghada Wali. I know her personally. She is very supportive of NGOs. She comes from UNDP and the development financing world, and is aware of what it takes to empower NGOs. She arranged for representatives of the NGOs to meet with the president who gave them full support. That was a very recent thing. She is contributing to availing a better environment for the NGOs to flourish. I'm not telling you things are painted with flowers; there are difficulties, yes. But the presence of this minister and the promotion she's making for NGOs and the president's support, I think will pave the way to a better performance and impact by NGOs.

Q: Any other thoughts about your years at USAID? Or the role of FSNs?

HELMY: We're talking about 15 solid years! When you told me about this oral history, I didn't know where to begin! Especially since I left USAID 12 years ago. I was involved in other things. Still, it's in my heart and I still maintain good relations with the American and Egyptian staff I worked with. We correspond and we interact. This is a very pleasant thing for me.

Q: So you still have friends who are working at USAID?

HELMY: Yes, yes. In the mission there. The gender advisor Soad Saada, Manal Alfred for example and there are many who left – some left to the States, Egyptians also, living in the States, and others are here still working at USAID, the ones who were younger than myself. The Americans also – Carl Derek, Priscilla Del-Bosque and Bob Jordan. Thanks to Facebook, we are communicating on occasion, so I'm maintaining good contact with my friends, Americans and Egyptians and I thank USAID for that.

Q: Facebook is remarkable – it's also problematic, but it's a remarkable system for tracking down and being in touch with people.

HELMY: Yes, sure.

Q: Maybe just any comments you want to make on life after USAID? I can't believe we haven't talked about the Arab Spring, but if you have any observations I'd be very happy to hear them.

HELMY: My experience after USAID in terms of professional involvement – Before I left USAID, I was contacted by the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, to work as a Senior Advisor there, and also to be Director of a 20 million Euro program called Children at Risk. This program had five objectives. Girls' access to education, combating FGM (Female Genital Mutilation). Street children. Working children, especially in hazardous occupations. The fifth was Children with Disabilities.

Many of these areas I worked on at USAID; the experience from USAID continued to flow from a development viewpoint to other programs and projects. This was a five year program. It had a lot of good results to the extent that on the final evaluation of the program, the representative of the EU said "This is the best project we had in Egypt." I was flattered. My experience at USAID helped sustain this other activity.

Q: You said the EU is equally as bureaucratic as USAID. Were there differences in your experience managing projects for the EU versus USAID?

HELMY: The bureaucracy was equally heavy. Things take a lot more time than I would have hoped. The donors of course want to make sure their money is in place. There are other ways you can ensure no fraud is undertaken, it was too taxing. Anyway, there's nothing you can do about that. EU might even be more than USAID.

I also managed another program called "Family and Child Rights" that had to do with human and child rights. I left work four years ago. My last job, I was the Senior Advisor to the Minister for Family and Population. She is now the Egyptian nominee for the position of head of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization), Dr. Moushira Khattab. I hope she gets this position; it would be good for Egypt.

Generally, I would like to say that my experience with USAID was very fruitful and very inspiring for me, very enjoyable. There were tough times; life was not all sugar and honey. But all in all it was a very good experience and I think highly of it. I gained a lot and tried to contribute as much as I could. The letters of recognition that were written to me by the mission directors say a lot of nice things that I'm very proud of. I don't want to mention these things, but I want to say that my work at USAID has been recognized and appreciated. That for me is something I am very proud of.

Q: And you should be proud. Because you made an enormous contribution to USAID. I thank you for thinking through this, giving us your time and your thoughts.

HELMY: I appreciate your time and involvement!

End of interview