

# Interview Transcript

**Interviewer:** Farah El Ashiry

**Narrator:** Heba El Shabrawy

**Dates:** 19/02/2012

**Place:** Le Carnaval, Mohandessin  
48 Michel Bakhoum  
St., Mohandessin, Giza, Egypt  
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**College:** American University in Cairo

**Prof.:** Kim Fox

**Date completed:** 21/02/12

## **Introduction Page**

The person I interviewed for the StoryCorps project is a face-veiled woman, who graduated from AUC with a degree in Psychology in 2003. Her name is Heba El- Shabrawy and was born Jan 5, 1981 in Giza Egypt. Currently she lives in Mohandessin with her husband and two young boys. El-Shabrawy was the first student to enter the university wearing a face-veil. Although, she was not veiled when she entered AUC in 1998, El Shabrawy chose to wear the hijab in 1999, after visiting several Islamic rituals. In 2000, she decided to wear the niqab, since she felt more comfortable towards it. When the administration discovered that El- Shabrawy has been entering the university with the face-veil, they demanded her to take it off, but she refused. At the end of the semester, she found a hold put on her registration. She had to chose between her education and her religious beliefs, and since her parents pushed her to finish her studies, she found no other solution but to take the niqab off.

I chose her as my interviewee, because I have always wanted to hear the views of a face-veiled woman. All I have heard about them are negative remarks, claiming they are extremists and brainwashed and so on. I didn't want to believe that. I also discovered that she was the first to enter the American University with the "niqab", so I felt intrigued to know what changes and struggles she must have dealt with. When I heard a colleague of mine, in the academy I take design courses with, talk about Heba and the problems she faced with the university, because of the face veil, I requested her to ask Heba if she would let me interview her. Thankfully, she agreed and I set an interview date as soon as possible.

Topics of interest touched on by the narrator:

- The alteration from a hijab ( hair-veil) to a niqab (face-veil) and the reason

- AUC supporting freedom of expression, but banning freedom of clothing?
- The challenges of being a student wearing the face-veil
- The trial in 2001 banning the monakabin ( women wearing the face-veil) from entering  
the campus
- What the future in Egypt holds for its women

## **Glossary**

Le Carnaval: - a pastry & bakery shop and café

Al- Ahrām Weekly: - an Egyptian weekly newspaper that is written in the English- language

Monaqaba: - a woman wearing the face-veil

Niqab: - the face veil

Hijab: - the hair veil

19/02/2012

Persons present: Heba El Shabrawy- I  
Farah El Ashiry- S

El Ashiry: Today is February 19, 2012, and I am Farah El Ashiry interviewing AUC alumni in Le Carnaval in Mohandessin.

Hi.

El Shabrawy: Hi.

El Ashiry: How are you?

El Shabrawy: I'm fine.

El Ashiry: Would you please introduce yourself?

El Shabrawy: My name is Heba Shabrawy. I am 31 years old. I was born in Giza, Egypt. I live in Mohandessin. I graduated with a Psychology Bachelor in 2003. That's it.

El Ashiry: I took a course in Psychology, it's very interesting!

El Shabrawy: Yes, it's very interesting. I, actually, I switched from Economics to Psychology major.

El Ashiry: Oh, that's a major switch!

(Laughter)

El Ashiry: Well, the reason I chose you for my interview for the Jrnc 202 class, was because you were able to stand out in the AUC community with your religious views; and according to Al-Ahram Weekly, you were the first student to wear the Niqab in the, on campus. Can you tell me about it?

El Shabrawy: I entered AUC in 1998. I was not veiled, then a year after I wore the veil. And in 2000 I chose to be monaqaba. I was allowed for one semester to wear the niqab in the..on campus. Then they put a hold in my registration; by the end of the year they put a hold on my registration. I had to sign an agreement that I won't wear the face veil on campus or in classes to have my registration..to lift the hold....That's it.

El Ashiry: Well, what was the reason that motivated you to change from a veil, a hair veil to a face veil?

El Shabrawy: As I said before, I entered the university not veiled. Then, by time I practiced more religious rituals. I was convinced that someday I will wear the veil. I was not sure whether I would wear it while I was in university or not. I searched for, I searched about the veil in Islam and it's considered debatable whether the face veil or the hair veil is the right form of veil in Islam. And I felt more comfortable to niqab and that is why I wore it.

El Ashiry: Ok, and how did your friend and professors in the university and your colleagues in the classes react to this change?

El Shabrawy: Some of my friends were supportive, others were not. The doctors were neutral. Actually, I didn't feel discriminated from the doctors, but I was a bit

confused in how the university and students express freedom of speech but still stared at me as I didn't have a right. Just like young people wear more openly in the streets, or guys who pierce their ears, I chose to wear the veil. And I know a lot of people who believe, whoever follows the religious path is being brainwashed, but why can't we argue that those who are not following this path may be brainwashed by the media?

El Ashiry: Yea, that's right. I've never thought about that. But, according to a professor in the Daily News who commented that "Part of what we express comes from the face, and part of what we respond to in others comes from the detection of quite subtle facial cues. Veil-wearing blocks out some of these signals". What do you think the professor meant by that and what do you think as a..(interrupted by narrator).

El Shabrawy: Of course, facial expression is important. But in class the professor should hear more than look as I should listen more than stare. And as long as I express myself in class that is enough communication, I think.

El Ashiry: Yes. And we listen to the radio and learn from the radio, that's why it doesn't involve any.. (interrupted by narrator).

El Shabrawy: It's clear, you get the idea from the radio...

El Ashiry: Yea. Well, I'm sure you heard about the lawsuit Eman El-Zainy filed on the university in 2001. What can you tell me about it?

El Shabrawy: I was supported to Eman El- Zainy, but I was not part of the trial. Actually in AUC they allow freedom of speech and expression, and how you are dressed is a way of expressing yourself. And, I don't know why they banned her from entering the university.

El Ashiry: I read in Al- Ahram Weekly that she..they banned her because she wouldn't allow, they wanted her to remove the veil from her face to check on the ID or to check whether any for security reasons and she refused. And I think that is what pushed them to refuse to get her into the university, but.. (Interrupted by narrator).

El Shabrawy: Before I wore the niqab, she was allowed to get into the university and use the library. And there was no problem at the time. But later they didn't allow her and they said because of security reasons, and it's not convincing because as long as she shows her face on the gate and shows her ID that's not a problem I think.

El Ashiry: Yes, but the prob, one of the reasons AUC prohibited students wearing the niqab, was as stated in the Ahram Weekly, as well, that: "there have been cases of students using the niqab to cheat on exams. The student has a family member or friend wear the full Islamic dress and niqab and sit for tests on their behalf, assured that their identity cannot be revealed. You know, because they won't, can't see who behind the veil, or who is behind..

El Shabrawy: Actually, the whole respect to that professor, but when I used to have my exams, the professor used to check my ID with my face and this is enough for

not cheating. The issue of cheating is not convincing! Another issue was that they abided by the 1994 Ministry of Education law for banning the niqab in all educational institutes, and AUC is a private university who does not follow the Ministry's law, so why they chose this as a reason to ban monakabat from entering the university, it's not convincing!

El Ashiry: Another reason that they said, and I know that may not be true, but they said because people can steal or hide things under their veil..

El Shabrawy: Actually, there were stealing before I wore the niqab. The mobile phones were stolen from the mosque, and there are many cases of stolen mobiles. At the time there were no niqab or anything they could relate to the stealing.

El Ashiry: Yes, that's right. But, I'm sure you heard also, that on June 2007 the case has been won by El- Zainy and BBC wrote that in one of their articles, that: "Egyptian court has ruled that the American University in Cairo cannot ban women students who wear full face Islamic veil or the niqab... although will have to show the face if the security guards request them if there is a security reason". What do you think? Are you happy?

El Shabrawy: Of course, I'm happy. In the past I felt that the things that we learned in the university was not applied in real life. But now I think that justice has been served and I'm happy for her and everyone who choose to wear whatever in expression sense.

El Ashiry: Do you think more women will wear the niqab now in the university?

El Shabrawy: I don't think. But I'm happy for having this opportunity for those who would like to enter the university with face veil and it's open for them.

El Ashiry: Yea, well something else except for the niqab, that the...what do you think the future for the women stands after the revolution, you know the status, the role? What do you believe will change in the future?

El Shabrawy: The role of women was not less important than that of men. However, it was not soon and expressed clearly to the community. And I hope now that we can show the world that women have a strong role in building nations. Actually women are the most important part of the family and the kids and the children who are coming to the community are the building blocks of the community and that's how they have a very important role.

El Ashiry: Yes, I believe so, too. And a lot of women have shown their role in Thir Square and in the Revolution itself. A lot of the women have sacrificed a lot to help Egypt become a better place. And I think if people really give women their spot in this community there really could be a change in Egypt's community.

El Shabrawt: Yes, this is true. And without the women support you cannot do anything. I think men need the support of women and kids need the support of women.

El Ahiry: Yes, I really had a great time talking to you. Thank you so much.

(Lauther)

The End