

# MAHA BALI

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, education, students, Egypt, Kuwait, university, friends, computer science, Egyptian, teach, open, pedagogy, equity, class, teachers, conference, online, eLearning, open education, women's rights, Virtually Connecting, Equity Unbound, Soliya, Tarbiyah

## SPEAKERS

Maha Bali, Betty Kankam-Boadu

### **Maha Bali** 00:00

So I think openness can give, if you're willing to give it. I think a lot of people may benefit from other people's openness without ever doing anything first. And that's okay, because a lot of open stuff is there for anyone to use without reciprocity. But if you reciprocate, and if you maintain relationships, and you invest in building them, you're going to get so much more out of it, because people will find you and get you things you didn't even know you needed. Because they know you're interested in them.

### **Betty Kankam-Boadu** 00:27

Hello, and welcome to Inspiring Open, candid conversations with influential women whose careers an open ethos have pushed the boundaries of what it means to build community and succeed as a collective. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu, a journalist and women's rights advocate. Join me as I explore the fascinating backstories behind Africa's most tenacious female personalities. Inspiring Open is a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women, a project of Wiki in Africa. Be inspired, be challenged, be bold.

On Inspiring Open today is Maha Bali. Maha comes from a family of medical doctors but fancied studying computer science. This was not to last however, as it didn't gel with her personality as an extrovert. She then made the happy option of becoming an educator. She is currently an associate professor of practice at the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo. Maha's love of interacting and connecting with people led her to co-found Virtually Connecting, a grassroots movement that challenges academic gatekeeping at conferences. She's also the co-facilitator of Equity Unbound an equity focused, open, connected, intercultural learning curriculum. Welcome to Inspiring Open, Maha. Let's dive right into the conversation. Let me welcome you once again, to the Inspiring Open podcast. And thank you so much for making time to join us.

### **Maha Bali** 02:02

Thank you so much for having me.

### **Betty Kankam-Boadu** 02:05

I saw that cute baby on your WhatsApp. Is that your last baby?

### **Maha Bali** 02:10

Yeah, I only have one. She is now 10 years old. In that photo she was probably maybe one-and-a-half or two years old.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 02:18

Oh, okay. You mentioned somewhere that you use the toys and tools your daughter plays with in your teaching and your workshops. And I thought that was so cool and interesting.

**Maha Bali** 02:31

Having a child and watching them learn inspires me so much for my teaching. And it's also one of the reasons I'm open. And I'll talk about this as we go along. I'm also remembering, as I was finishing my PhD, I remember reading an article by a female scholar talking about how empowering it was for her to bring in her motherhood into her pedagogy. And ever since I read that, I don't even remember who said it, but I remember reading that and ever since then I bring her into... I have a lot of articles or blog posts, at least, where I talk about it. But also, she is a lot of the reason why... or just being a parent in this culture that I'm in, sort of encourages me to be more open.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 03:12

Let's just delve into your background a little bit. You grew up in Egypt.

**Maha Bali** 03:16

No, I was born in Kuwait. And I was there up until 1990. It's actually important story because I was in a very good British school in Kuwait. And then 1990 there was the invasion of Iraq and Kuwait, so we had to come back to Egypt because I'm originally from Egypt. My parents are from here. And so I had to go to a school here. And the education system was so completely different, that I remember I was 11 years old at the time and I said, I want to improve education in Egypt is so bad. And I had to stay here for like three years and then I went back to Kuwait where I did my high school GCSE and A levels and then I came back to Egypt, to the American University in Cairo for a university. So I didn't actually grow up here.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 04:01

Ah, so how was growing up like in Kuwait, then? Why did your parents move to Kuwait? Did they move for work?

**Maha Bali** 04:07

Yeah, they moved for work with. Both my parents or medical doctors, and they moved to Kuwait for work. And growing up in Kuwait was multicultural and multinational. So Kuwait is one of those countries in the Gulf where there are very few people from the country itself, most of the population are expats. So I grew up and around me, not only a lot of Egyptians, but also a lot of Arabs from different nationalities and then people from all over the world in school. So I got used to that. My teachers were all English, or Australian, or Irish, things like that. So I grew up with that. And that made a difference, because that growing up, seeing that kind of diversity is very different than being exposed to it when you're older. And adapting to it.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 04:48

Yeah, that's right. And then when you came back to Egypt, you had to adapt, I guess.

**Maha Bali** 04:56

I mean, first of all, it's an identity crisis, because you're a third culture person. You're officially Egyptian, but you were born somewhere else that doesn't give you that nationality. And you're used to being in a certain environment and the very westernised education system, and then I came here and they were supposed to speak English, but they didn't speak good English. And they made fun of me because my English was good, which is confusing. And I spoke Arabic, but my way of speaking Arabic was different than their way of speaking Arabic. And the education system was strange. And the way people made friendships was strange. And, of course, it was a traumatising time, when my daughter was going through the first isolation of COVID and saying, "You've never experienced that." I'm like, "Yes, I've never experienced COVID." Of course, none of us in this generation have maybe. But I did experience trauma. When I was at age 11 have suddenly not having my home and my friends and my school and everything. And just that shift in itself was really difficult. But thankfully, I wasn't poor. We had a home here. We had family here that welcomed us, but it's still a big shift for someone at that age. And you're going through puberty and you're becoming a teenager so you're moody anyway. So having to make new friends completely with people who seem so culturally different. I kept making a lot of cultural misunderstandings and nobody expects that because you look Egyptian, you are Egyptian. How could you not understand our jokes? How could you not understand our way of being? How could you talk like that to the teachers? But over time, I sort of got used to it a little bit and then, towards the end, the one friend that I got closest to in that three-year period was someone who also grew up in Kuwait. But she was from the Sudan. So she wasn't Egyptian, but she had grown up in Kuwait, and so... and we both did our masters in the UK later. So that was really... and we're still in touch right now.

It's interesting, and even when I went to university, again, at the American University in Cairo, a lot of my friends were people who had grown up in similar parts of the world – Kuwait, Dubai, Saudi Arabia – they had that kind of culture. But then I also branched out into, "Well, no, wait a minute. I don't have to only have friends who are like me, I also want to know other people." And I lived in Egypt for a while, did my undergraduate studies here and work started. I was originally a computer scientist, which actually didn't like very much.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 07:10**

Both your parents are doctors, right?

**Maha Bali 07:13**

And my husband, and his mom and his sister. And half of my family.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 07:19**

Oh, there wasn't any pressure to also follow that path?

**Maha Bali 07:23**

It was the opposite. I grew up and my parents didn't want me to go through that, because of the way medical education in Egypt is frustrating. Probably, in a lot of spaces in the developing global south and so on, is this lot of medical healthcare is not well resourced and well organised. And they lived in Kuwait where they saw it done really well. And they were frustrated by coming here. They didn't want me to get frustrated with that. So they raised me not to want to become a doctor. But towards the end, I started to get interested in medicine. I was like, "Hey, you know what? I might want to try it." And so what they said is, "Go to the American University in Cairo, it's a similar cultural environment to your education in Kuwait and try it. And if you don't like it, move to the medical

education." And it actually pulled me in socially. It was a nice social environment, there are a lot of them. The thing about higher education, which I think a lot of people are missing during COVID, is it's not about the classes and what you learn in the classroom. It's about the social and cultural capital you develop by interacting with people. And that's what kept me at the American University in Cairo more than the actual... I didn't like computer science, but I liked everything else. And that kept me happy. And I made a lot of friends and I just wanted to stay there. My husband is a medical doctor, and when I first married him, he was going through the hell of exams for his doctorate. And now I understand why my parents don't want me to go through that. Because it's torture. It's torture. I don't know why they do that. It's oppressive.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 08:44**

When you say is torture, can you give me some details. What do you mean?

**Maha Bali 08:48**

There's two elements of why it's torture. One is related to education and corruption in education, and one is related to actual medical care and the healthcare system. The corruption in education is they make it really difficult to get a doctorate by making you do the exam and failing, and making you do the exam and failing all the time. And I don't understand why they have to do that to people. And actually—

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 09:08**

That sounds deliberate.

**Maha Bali 09:10**

It is deliberate. And there's a lot of nepotism, like, "Who's your father?" and "Who do you know?" and things like that, that are really, really frustrating. I saw that happen to my husband and the effect it had on him. And he was always saying, "I hope that when I'm in power, I don't do that to other people." They would do some really mean things to them in the oral exams. And why do you have to do that to a person? And then the other element that's really frustrating is, my husband's a vascular surgeon and he had the opportunity to do a one year fellowship in the US and an almost one year fellowship in the UK. And he would come back home and say, "Oh, my God, I see people here who lives until age 90. And in Egypt, because the healthcare system doesn't help, they don't survive past 40 or 50. And it's not because the doctors aren't good. It's because the whole system doesn't work for the good of the patients. And so that is really sad to experience, to know that, oh my God, I could have saved that person's life, and you can't because of all these circumstances. And so when you've become a doctor, and you really care to save people's lives and to heal them, and then you know that you're not doing the best you can because you don't have the resources, it's hard.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 10:21**

Yeah, that's right. I can imagine. And so now you studied computer science. You're from a family of physicians, and then you studied computer science. What drew you to computer science?

**Maha Bali 10:31**

Yeah, so this was a really silly process of elimination. I looked at all the things in the university that were available and made sense to me that I might be interested in. And I'm like, oh, engineering, not that good at physics. Even though I had to do a lot of physics for computer science, but never mind,

I like math. Okay, that's good. That's computer science. And then I was considering business, so first I declared both business and computer science. And then when I studied business for a while, I had already done advanced level business in school. And I did business as a minor. I'm like, I'm not really learning much. This is intuitive to me. I don't need to study it to be able to do it. But computer Science was harder for me, it was challenging. It was something I didn't know. I used to be afraid of computers. If my computer didn't work, I would turn it off and go pray and come back. And of course, I didn't know at the time, but it was the restart that was working, probably not the prayers. I mean, just restarting usually works. After four and a half years of studying computer science, I know that it's the restart that fixes everything.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 11:28**

Did the computer come on every time you went to pray?

**Maha Bali 11:33**

Usually, that was all the problem that was. But I didn't like computer science for a couple of reasons. First of all, it wasn't a very social major. I made a lot of friends, but the crux of it is you work on your own. That doesn't even make sense to me now. I don't know what your background is. But of course, when you're in computer science, you have to work with the person that you're developing a programme for. You need to understand accounting to help the accountants. You need to understand the doctor to create a medical system. But actually, most computer scientists don't make a lot of effort to do that. And that's why a lot of educational software is not good, because it's a computer scientist imagining what education should be, and doing it for us. But that's not actually what the teachers want. And then the administrators convincing the teachers that this is good for you and it's good for efficiency. But it's not good for pedagogy.

So anyway. The lack of sociality in it, I'm a very social, emotional, very extroverted person. And so most of my university experience was let's get done with the computer stuff so I can do the extracurricular stuff. And in my last year of computer science, our thesis was about using neural networks. This is like machine learning now, like the kind of machine learning, which simulates the way the brain learns. And I was like, "Oh my God, that's what I'm interested in." I'm interested in how the brain learns. I'm interested in psychology and neurology and cognitive neuroscience. And I took a psychology class. And then I was like, "Oh, hey, this is actually what I want to do." In my last year. And so after I graduated, I worked in IT at Procter and Gamble. That's a very big multinational and it's a very good place to work and very nice environment and everything. But after a while, people who are older than me mentoring me said, "You know what? I think you're more interested in giving training than doing the actual work, and helping people and you're interested in, again, the social aspects." And I realised, oh, I like psychology, I like teaching. I already, when I was 11 years old, wanted to work in education. And so I took this one educational psychology class, and then I switched careers and went to work where I work now and did my masters. And at the time it was a Master's of Education, in eLearning. And then I did a PhD in education afterwards.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 13:31**

Oh, interesting. My background, actually... no computers in my background. But I've worked with people who work with computers a lot. And in one of my jobs five years ago, there was this particular developer that we worked with, and I thought his people skills was not the best. And the explanation I got was those of us who work with computers, we like to be in our corner, we like to be very secluded. And like you said, when you're building a system that people would have to work

with, it's very, very important that you interact with the people who work with the system. So yeah, I thought that was interesting. I thought that was a little bit weird then.

**Maha Bali 14:21**

Another stereotype, of course, but it is one stereotype that is based on reality. Of course, not a lot of neuroscientists are like me, but they usually get frustrated, and they leave or they take a different pathway. I mean, I originally went into eLearning. And then I became pure education. Then I went back to digital education, because that was what my university needed. I forgot to tell you the other reason I left computer science. It's a gender issue. And I assume this is pretty worldwide with STEM fields in general. I was just telling some of my friends the other day, I was one of the best people in my class, but people always assume that the boys knew better. If there was ever a problem they would ask the boys. Even my father, who was a very, very supportive father, and generally not sexist at all, always believed that he knew how to fix the computer better than I could. He's a doctor. He knows nothing. My husband and his cousin who are both doctors always think they can fix the computer better than me and a computer engineer cousin of theirs. I face this in my work, if a man needed help with something, they would go talk to my male colleague sitting right next to me, even though it was actually my job to do a thing. And my male colleague would just do it. He wouldn't say this is actually Maha's work. It's really frustrating. Like no matter what you do, you're still perceived as less.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 15:18**

So you had to leave. You're like, "Oh, I'm done."

**Maha Bali 15:21**

Yeah. And it wasn't that much fun either. I wanted to be with people. And I wanted to focus on people and education was much more worthwhile than doing IT for a company that sells shampoo.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 15:31**

Yeah. You mentioned that when you were 11 years, you always wanted to be an educator. Where did that come from? Did you experience something? Did you see something?

**Maha Bali 15:39**

It was the experience of seeing Egyptian education versus the high-quality education I was receiving in Kuwait. I realise now that British education in Britain is not of the same quality as what I experienced there. I experienced the good quality British education. It was private. My parents were expats, everyone with me in school were expats. They got good teachers and a good system and so on. Coming to Egypt, it was more of a mainstream, semi private type of education, but using the public curriculum, which was really, really poorly designed. It was very memorization based. Pretty useless. I had never been asked to memorise anything in my life, and here I was memorising these useless, useless facts. And stuff that was hard for no reason. You would learn things; I still remember this really well. You would learn then population numbers of a lot of different Arab and African countries. Why? This number changes all the time. You can maybe learn that this country is more populous than the other country, but why do I need to learn the number? I needed to learn the names of petrol fields in different Arab countries. Why do I need to learn this stuff? It's meaningless information. And then with history, they would spend an entire year teaching us about maybe ancient Egyptian history. And then with modern Egyptian history, the three most important dates in modern Egyptian history were on one page. One page! The three most important events in recent

Egyptian history. I don't know how they decided what to emphasise. Maybe was for political reasons that they didn't want to get these things. But it felt very problematic. And, yeah, it was just a really bad curriculum.

And then the way they taught language, the way they taught English... and they also had a problem with teaching Arabic, is they teach it in a very functional not a communicative way. You learn the grammar rules, and so on, but you don't... and the meanings of words and their opposites. But how do I use the language to communicate? It wasn't being taught. And so people get out of school, and supposedly, they tick a box of "I know this language, and I did well on the exam," but then ask them to actually write something or to actually do something with it, and they can't,

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 17:36**

Yeah. It's not different from my experience here as well. English is also taught in a very functional way, like you're saying, not in a very communicative way. So, sometimes it's hard for a lot of people, and it's hard for us to express ourselves in English. And it's even harder when we have to write. And English is the official language here. I get what you're saying. Let's talk about your people skills, because you mentioned a lot that you are an extrovert. How did that start? Would you would you say that it was the environment in Kuwait in school? You said there were a lot of different people, different cultures, different backgrounds. Do you think that that's why you picked it up? Or it's just how your parents raised you?

**Maha Bali 18:26**

A very interesting question. I don't know how much of this is the way you're born and how much is that question of nature/nurture, as much as parenting. I'll say one thing, the environment in Kuwait was safe. It was easy at a young age for me to go out and play with people. My parents didn't have to worry about where I would go, what I would do. Whereas in Egypt, it was a little bit less safe in the sense of the openness, like you have to be very careful where you let your child play and things like that. Not that huge of a difference, but it's still made a difference at the time, at a very young age. Definitely the exposure to diversity made it easier to deal with diversity. But then when I came to Egypt when I was 11, I was struggling with the lack of diversity. So that's an interesting thing, that diversity doesn't... or you don't realise that someone might appear to be the same as you but aren't. So you're surprised every time. And they're surprised because they're not used to that. And then it becomes a whole cycle of that until everybody adapts to it. Definitely, there were stages. I like reading a lot. And so for my family, if I'm sitting with my cousins, and I want to actually sit and read that was an introverted behaviour in their view. Whereas for me, I'm like, "No, I'm reading an interesting book, and I just want to finish it." And so, there was a time when I'd be sitting and reading and reading and reading and my mom would be like, "I'm going out you want to come with me? I'm going out you want to come with me?" And I didn't want to. But at some point, I started to okay, I'm not going to upset my mom. I'm going to start going out and then I started to realise that actually like going out. But I was never... yeah, I mean, there are small phases of my life where I wasn't very extroverted. But I think I did sort of get better at it as I got older.

And one of the things, for example, at university is I had a lot of my school friends with me in university. A lot of people would just then stick to those friends. But I didn't, I wanted to get to know a lot of different people and join different organisations. So maybe I wasn't at the time the kind of person who would walk up to anyone to get to know them, but I would join an extracurricular activity where I could get to know people within a certain structure or framework. Right now, I'm not like that

at all. I'm really, really extroverted. But it's easier online too, because online, if someone doesn't answer you it's not a problem. If they give you a rude answer, you can just brush it off. In person, if you actually walk up to a person and they brush you off, it's really, really embarrassing. I will take it, but it doesn't feel good.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 20:48

How many siblings do you have?

**Maha Bali** 20:52

I don't have any.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 20:53

Ah, you're an only child.

**Maha Bali** 20:55

Yeah.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 20:56

Is that fun, being an only child?

**Maha Bali** 20:57

When I was younger, I had my imaginary friends. And I had lots of brothers and sisters, in my imagination. And I'm also really close to my friends and my cousins. I had cousins with us in Kuwait as well. I was very close to them. And when we came to Egypt, some of them lived in the same building with us. That was really cool. They were like my little brothers and sisters. After a certain age, like around age 10, I was like, I don't want any brothers or sisters, I like this attention. I like having all my parents' attention and resources and everything, and I started liking it. I think the moment I felt bad about it is when my father passed away, and I was pregnant. And so realising that my mom and I were now alone, there was nobody else to take care of us, but ourselves. And I had a lot of trouble getting pregnant in the first place. At the time, I was like, I would like to have more than one child so that my daughter doesn't have to live through this. But I actually had a really traumatic time when I was pregnant. I really don't want to get pregnant again. Because my father passed away when I was pregnant. I had all sorts of other issues. And so, for now, my daughter is happy being on her own, I could just focus with her because I'm just worried about getting another child and not being able to handle it.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 22:00

Do what's best for you. I think that's, that's what's most important, what is best for you. And again, growing up with your parents, what should I say value or principle do you think they insisted on that has held you as an adult?

**Maha Bali** 22:16

I'm going to say, one of the things that I always remember about my mom, this is actually quite related to openness. She said, "If you're doing something right, if you're doing something that isn't wrong, that you should be willing to share it with anyone. And if you find yourself not able to share something, then you're probably doing something wrong." This concept has influenced me a lot. And it also has influenced my view about academic integrity. A lot of this idea of let's use a



plagiarism detection software, or let's use something to watch the students, proctor them while they're doing an exam. This is not promoting that value of integrity coming from you, from inside you. It's promoting the value, oh, somebody is surveilling you, so you should not cheat because someone's watching you, not because it's the wrong thing to do.

The other value that my mom gave me, which is also really interesting, is about being proud of your own identity. When I was very young, I had a lot of friends with different Arabic dialects, as I told you, and I would meet a friend come back and speak in a Palestinian accent. Meet another friend come back and speak and a Sudanese accent. And my mom was like, "Wait a minute, you're Egyptian, you don't need to change your accent every time. You don't need to colour yourself by the way other people speak. Just be yourself." And even though I can speak all these different accents if I wanted to, I just learned that I don't have to change my accent every time I talk to someone. And I think that was more than what it sounds. Like it sounds like a technical thing. It's just an accent. But it's more than that. It's about being who you are and not feeling like you need to change depending on who you're with. I think that's important too.

My first big boss at my current work at the American University in Cairo used to tell me that I have a lot of confidence. And she thinks my mom taught that to me. I don't know for sure if that's the case. I definitely know that when I was younger, I was overconfident. I thought I knew better. I'd been studying education for two years and I thought I knew everything. And then when I did my PhD, I realised that I know nothing. And as I get older and learn more, I realised that I know less and less and less, and so getting that humility I started to get when I was older. And I think that again, being open and talking about your practice and talking about your mistakes, increases your humility. And it also makes you vulnerable. And it takes some confidence and some privilege to be able to expose yourself that way, and be willing to say I've made mistakes, and I do some things wrong. And here's me trying to figure out how to do this.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 24:31**

And how much of your personality, like being extroverted, how much has it impacted your work as an educator?

**Maha Bali 24:40**

Well, first of all, I always want to connect with my students and get to know them as individuals. I'm not there to just teach them content, I want to get to know them. And I care about their lives. And they come into my classes, and this semester especially, they said, "We made friends in the class. I care about their social life." And one of the issues there is that I like a very participatory class with lots of discussion and talking and so on. But some students don't like that. And there's an element of it, where you don't want to put so much pressure on someone that that is not a good class for them anymore. And on the other hand, it's an important social skill that they need to develop. What's important for me is to create a safe environment where everyone eventually feels comfortable being part of the discussion, making sure that it's a safe space that other students won't... It's possible sometimes that students who are very competent, and eloquent will make it difficult and silence the others. It's really important for me that nobody gets silenced. And there are different ways of participating and things like that. I'm also very social with teachers. My main role is actually teaching teachers. I give workshops and so on to the professors in the university where I teach. And again, I do the workshops, but I also maintain these relationships with them. They'll tell me more than and I'll know more about what's going on in their class than what would officially be

told. And that helps me support them better. And for me, it's the building community aspects and supporting their confidence and helping them meet their own teaching philosophy, rather than giving them best practice of, "Oh, this is the right thing to do."

When the pandemic happened, I was one of the key people involved in helping the university move online. My boss was going to all these strategic planning meetings and coming back to me and telling me, this is what the university wants to do. And I was the experts in eLearning, so I was making it work. And a lot of the time, other than all my official work, I was getting lots of phone calls and texts from professors telling me what they're really facing and what they're panicking about and what they're anxious about, and where they need help. And this was helping us create a more responsive support system. And if you don't like people, you're never going to tolerate the amount of phone calls and texts I was getting at the time.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 26:41

That's true. That's true.

**Maha Bali** 26:43

I'm lucky that I like them.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 26:44

I'm sure they like you, too.

**Maha Bali** 26:49

Some of them.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 26:50

Not all of them. Nearly Yeah, a lot of people who

**Maha Bali** 26:53

I'm sure there're a lot of people who don't want to hear from me. Well, because what happened in the pandemic also, I was very strong on my care and equity values. And that's a lot of work for some people, because not everyone teaches that way. And so, I was very strong on the understanding of your students' circumstances, the understanding of the trauma. If they tell you the workload is too much, believe them. They're not just being lazy. Figure out a way to help them, be forgiving of people who miss classes, because they have circumstances. Things like that, that normally I don't have the right really to tell people, but during the pandemic, I felt like I had to.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 27:25

You've left computer science. Now, you are into education. And now you're doing what you've always wanted to do. Tell me about how that transition was. Was it easy? And how that journey of going into education started when you quit computer science?

**Maha Bali** 27:47

I don't know if it's the same for you, but in Egypt, if you study something, and then you want to switch careers, people are looking you like weird, like you've spent all that time studying but now you want to change? And you work in a really good multinational company, you want to change? And so the first thing that was happening was, when I was working in my old work, the company

Proctor and Gamble, I was doing a lot of extracurricular, NGO work, volunteering and doing things. I was very involved in grassroots movements, trying to do things like mentoring and some forms of education in some way or other. And I was running around trying to fill that gap with these extracurriculars. I was like, wait a minute, why don't I just switch to that? And so when I started to talk to my parents about it, they weren't very happy, but they agreed to let me take one educational psychology course. Just one course that I took twice a week at my old university, American University in Cairo where I graduated from. And so when I took that the professor there is the one who helped me figure out what to do with my masters. And there was just a coincidence that because I was talking about it so much, my mother met someone who told her there was a new centre coming the AUC Centre for Learning and Teaching. And so they let my... who was my boss, the person who hired me, they let her know that this, there's a person who exists who's interested. And it turns out... I went to meet her to just see if we would be compatible. And it turns out that her sister used to be my professor. She had heard of me from her sister when she told her sister my name and so on. And then there was a job opening at the centre, and I applied and I got in.

When I got in, it was the same time I wanted to start my masters. And so I found a masters online. And my boss at the time, who hired me, we talked about, there are several different options. And so I did the one in eLearning, because that was... this was 2003. This was really new, early days of eLearning. And it was a fully online masters. And it makes sense if you're studying eLearning to study it online. At the time, people always thought eLearning was lower quality, they kind of do sometimes. But at the time, even more so. And there was no Zoom, there was no that. There was a little bit extype, I think I started to use in 2006, after I finished my masters. But when I do my Masters, it was all asynchronous text-based. And it was a beautiful, very social experience. I was doing my masters. And in my work, I was supporting people as an instructional technologist. It sort of didn't feel weird because I had the computer science background and a little bit of education that I was increasing. And I just taught myself and took a lot of free online courses before they were called MOOCs. They existed. And I found all these opportunities just to teach myself. So that was how I got into the education. And then when I finished my master's, I found a way to do my PhD in the UK without... I found a way to do my PhD in the UK without living there. I would go visit my supervisor once a year or something come back, and I did my research about my university. There was a reason to be in Egypt while I was doing it. And then, when I finished my PhD, my positions were shifted a little bit and I started teaching just before. And now I teach students as well as the work of actually helping professors. And, for some reason, I also do a lot of extracurricular stuff. All my open stuff is not part of my job. I'm not one of those people where we have a big open programme at my university. I introduced sort of some different things because of my interest in open, but most of my open work is just outside.

### **Betty Kankam-Boadu 31:01**

As an Associate Professor of Practice at the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo, what do you do? What does that entail?

### **Maha Bali 31:11**

My work is officially, it's an educational developer. Different people call it different things. But my work is to support other professors. But this means different things in different places. In my context, I give workshops to professors on different ways to teach. I give consultations, someone will come and say, something's not working for me, or I want to improve this. And I can either go into their class and observe them or we do in class assessments. I also help with institutional assessments.

And throughout different parts of my life, I've done more on less technology, depending on what was needed. I introduce new things into the university or I support new things. So that's generally what I do. And I help people if they want to do like classroom action research and things like that.

And then the background is my exposure to different educational systems, the British, the Egyptian, and then the American University in Cairo with an American system. It made me understand how these systems sort of change the way you think and you develop. When someone enters our university, they could be coming from an Egyptian background, or British school background, American school background, other school backgrounds, and therefore they don't come in the same place. They have different skills, and they have different weaknesses, and they need different kinds of support. And that's part of what I did in my research was, the development of critical thinking is different, has a different trajectory for each of these kinds of people. And if you don't take care, some of them will struggle a lot, and others will breeze through it. And that influences. And also, of course, the professors who come to teach. AUC is a liberal arts institution, which is a very specific American style of teaching. But most of the professors who teach engineering computer science, they have a degree from a university that's just focused on that. They don't know what liberal arts education means or how it should be done. And so they'll teach the way they were taught. Professors who got their PhDs from different places are just coming from a different culture. And it's not just you teach and you teach No, you teach with certain values and philosophy, and do they align with what the university expects and wants for its students? And then how well do you make sure that every student is able to succeed in the way that you do things?

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 33:07**

I can just tell from one of your blog posts, when you were reviewing how the semester went, and of course, it was also based on assessments your students state of your work. And for me, what stood out was just the level of care. You try to analyse every kind of assessment that you are giving, how to make it better, what accounted for the students coming to this conclusion. And it was so interesting, even down to ensuring that they are punctual and instead of instituting punitive measures, you were concerned about what other ways you could go about to get students to come to class on time, instead of going the normal route, which would be punishing them. And, yeah, I thought that was so interesting.

**Maha Bali 33:54**

I think there's a very important expression that we use in Egypt, they don't apply it on the educational system, but it's the way they say it. And they don't just say education as in learning. They say tarbiyah. And tarbiyah is about sort of raising the person. There's a German expression called Bildung, which I think is the closest thing. And to me, I interpret this as, how do you cultivate the human being? And I think education or my role as a teacher is not to teach them the content or to teach them the skills. I mean, yes, that too. But for me, it's how do you help shape them as a human being, as a citizen? How do you shape their morality? And how do they shape the way they are in the world? The way they be, not what they do and what they say, but how they are. And so that's been central to my practice for a long time. And it requires making yourself very vulnerable all the time and reflecting a lot and questioning yourself about what you're doing. As you grow with your students and learn with them and learn from them. And that particular thing that you're talking about, the lateness and the punctuality and stuff, is like, "Oh, I value punctuality. But I understand why students may have trouble with. They're Egyptians." That is not a thing. But maybe it shouldn't be a thing. Are they doing it because they will respect me? No, I'm not going to assume they don't

respect me. Because when they're there, they seem engaged. There must be another reason why it's happening. Can we discover what... can we help them do it better? Rather than punish them, which is not going to help them do it better? Like the punishment is not going to achieve the result you want, it might make you feel better, like you got your revenge, but it's not going to improve the situation most of the time.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 35:34**

Yeah. It's not. I mean, we've been punished so many times at school. I remember, we learned French in school, and our teacher... and I'm sure this will be the same experience for most Ghanaians who had to learn French, because it was so traumatic, because our teachers will beat the hell out of us. And we're now being introduced to a foreign language, if I should put it that way. And they will beat the hell out of us to the point that a lot of Ghanaians, even though we're surrounded by Francophone countries, don't know how to speak French. And it's because of the kind of foundation we had with our teachers in school. They beat the hell out of us. We were practically scared of the language.

**Maha Bali 36:18**

Yeah, and then you're not going to like it. That's a very strange approach. And then also even more colonising than it already is. I mean, as it stands anyway. At least at least when I was taught English, I was taught to love it, which is another kind of colonising, to the extent where you like it more than your own language.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 36:36**

So now your life and open. First of all, you're very, very open with your life and your work you share a lot, both on Twitter and on your blogs. And, of course, the other things that you are involved in, Virtually Connecting and Equity Unbound and all of that. How did you discover the world of open?

**Maha Bali 36:57**

One of the main things that started at all is being in an environment where there was nobody around me directly to learn from. Not nobody, but not enough. And so, I'm always seeking someone to learn from. And so, when I first got the job I have, there was nobody doing instructional technology work in Egypt but me. I was always seeking things, and I found stuff that way. I was on mailing lists, and then joining courses and staying in touch with people after courses. And in my own masters programme, staying in touch, like a lot of... not everyone, but a couple of people I stayed in touch. There was that element of it. And then with the openness that I'm in now, when I was about to finish my PhD, because I lived in the US in the UK for short amounts of time while I was there. But when I was finishing it, there started to be around me a few people, because we started to have departments for education, so I started to see some people like that, but there weren't enough who had done their PhDs in the UK. And I wanted to know, "What's it like to finish a PhD and stuff?" And so I discovered on Facebook, on Twitter, there are communities of people that I could ask, and they could answer me and I could get help. So that was one element of how I got into social media. And I remember I had also started to... one of my mentors liked my writing. And so, he encouraged me to start writing non peer reviewed pieces as well. And I liked the element of just expressing my opinion quickly. I found a space for that and realised that social media would help me reach people that way. At first I was like broadcasting and asking questions. And after a while it became a space to meet people and get to know them long term, not for a purpose. Not because I want something from

them, or I want to just broadcast myself, but because I actually want to get to know them and know what they need and help them with what they want, as well as get help when I need it.

It started like that. And again, when I was finishing my PhD, I was on maternity leave, because my daughter was still very young and the country was a bit politically unstable. I couldn't go out a lot. And so, I got the benefit from that, is that the social media allowed me... I could be looking for something and not find it, and people would help me find an article. And then what started to happen is there was a point in time when my supervisor wanted me to write a lot of methodology work. The University library was closed because of political unrest. And the online library didn't have everything I needed. And I realised that some people put stuff open access that gave me what I needed. And I fell in love with open access and openness and piracy, honestly, because piracy can be socially just if knowledge is being prevented from reaching us, because we're in this kind of country where we don't have access. So that's where I fell in love with the Open Access part. But the social media part came from that.

But then the way my daughter comes into it is, it was difficult to travel for conferences when I needed to, to learn more. And as I started to learn a lot with these ongoing Connectivist MOOCs as well as the regular MOOCs, but the Connectivist MOOCs were all about making connections on social media. And I learned that I learned from people. And also, I had a very critical perspective on educational technology that was, again, very rare. And so, you had to find your people, you weren't going to find them everywhere. And so, finding them, having conversations with them, blogging across each other and learning about each other. I didn't have confidence to blog until I finished my PhD, actually. And the key thing was in the PhD, you have to write in a formal way. And I liked my non formal way of writing. And the blog allowed me to do that. And I could just publish whenever I wanted. It was very empowering. And when I had an audience, and people started to read me, I was reading them and we would respond to each other. That helped a lot. When I couldn't go to conferences, I started to discover where could I do a virtual conference, and I realised that the virtual conference experience is good, because I don't have to leave my daughter, or I don't have to take her with me, which is expensive. But the interaction wasn't enough. I did interact a little bit on Twitter, and people would respond because they knew me. But I wanted more. And so that's where Virtually Connecting came about.

I was on the organising committee of one of the conferences, and I was planning to go but I couldn't in the end for social and logistical and financial reasons. And so, one of my friends, Rebecca Hogue, said, "Oh, well, maybe I can get my phone or my iPad and you can talk to people while you're..." I wanted to talk to people. I didn't want to attend the conference sessions, I could do that. That's not a problem. But it's the chatting that you do when you're over coffee or in the hallway, that's what I was missing. And I had so many of my friends, the friendships I've been cultivating online for two or three years, I wanted to meet these people and spend time with them.

And the thing is, we're like, oh, well, maybe other people want to join us, maybe not just me talk to them. Maybe other people want to. We say, "I'm meeting this person, do you want to come?" and it would be someone that a lot of people know and they'd like to meet them. And we just have these informal conversations. You're not meeting for a webinar. You're just, "Hi, how's the conference going? What's the funny thing that happened today?" And you just have a conversation. And after that was over, people were like, "It's was a good idea, are you going to do it again? I'm going to a conference; do you want to come to this conference and talk to people?" People started

volunteering with it. And then it became our thing that people go to conferences, and we became a very big group. And it was not about Rebecca or me anymore. There was a large group of people who... It started as giving access to conferences for virtual folks, but it actually became challenging academic gatekeeping that was preventing voices of global south, and women, and early career people, and PhD students, who didn't have access to funds, and single parents who couldn't travel, people with disabilities, or health issues that may travelling difficult. They now had a voice in the conferences, in the conversations. And so that's what Virtually Connecting is and became. It grew from being about access to being about disrupting, and challenging, and justice, really. And sometimes you could have these critical conversations, even though the conference was doing a very conservative route,

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 42:21

And it's interesting, because now I'm linking this to just your love and your personality to connect, get to know people to interact. And look at what has come out of it. This is so beautiful. It's such a beautiful story. How did your Equity Unbound come about?

**Maha Bali** 42:37

Equity Unbound came about originally, because I teach a course, as well as my full-time job, I also teach an undergraduate course on Digital Literacies and Intercultural Learning. And my students take part in an experience called Soliya, which is something that I used to facilitate myself in my early days. And now it's part of my course where other people, my students go and have intercultural dialogue with other students all over the world, with a facilitator from Soliya. It's something they do outside of class, and we reflect on it in class. It's a great intercultural experience. But there's two issues with it. It's not an open experience. And I know from my life that there's a lot of usefulness in intercultural interaction that happens openly. And I wanted my students to sort of experience a little bit of the power of that. It's not the same as being online for five or six years on Twitter, but at least they experience a little bit of it. And the other thing is, Soliya tries to be equity focused, but I also think there's value in having a curriculum that's centred on equity focus and open intercultural. What Equity Unbound is, it's an open connected, equity focused intercultural curriculum. I developed it with two people that I met online, Mia Zamora and Catherine Cronin. Mia is in the US, Catherine is in Ireland. And originally what we did was, all of us were teaching, we would gather resources, we decided on certain topics and dates for when we would do things, and we'd do things across our classes so that people could do them together. And then we would open it up so that other people in the world could join in, they could join in the Twitter scavenger hunt, they could join a hypothesis annotation of an article and things like that. And they could see the resources that we are reading and watching in our own classes. And we would do live sessions with experts and invite students to come and talk and we'd record a livestream, so other people can watch and so on. That's how it started. In August 2020, the fourth project of Equity Unbound, which is for me, the most valuable one is a community building resources. We were like everybody's going to have to teach online next semester, especially people in the northern hemisphere. But so useful for everyone, I think. And they don't know how to build community online and a lot of the online learning before the pandemic was very different. Not everyone did it. It was not synchronous, a lot of it, and they weren't younger people. Most of the time it was usually graduate students and stuff. People needed to know how to build community online and a lot of them were struggling with that. Not just in my university, but everywhere. We decided to use Equity Unbound and to work with OneHE. On Equity Unbound there's a big community of educators. Originally, we did it for our students, but we realised that it's important with us as educators to inspire each other and support each other. And so, the Equity Unbound community building resources that we did on the OneHE

site is a collection of demos of how do I do an introductory activity that's inclusive? How do I have an ongoing conversation that involves all the students? How do I warm up in my class to make sure the students are ready for the class and are interested? And so on. It has demo videos of us doing the things, so you see what it looks like in practice. And there's a description and templates and adaptations, because for us, one of the central things is intentionally equitable hospitality, which is a concept we developed at Virtually Connecting, which is, when you're a teacher, you have power in the classroom, and you need to use it to be hospitable. Pulling away as the teacher is just going to introduce power dynamics between the students. It's not about empowering students that you pull away, it's to create an environment that allows for equity, and you need to be intentional about it with every single thing that you do. And then you need to check that it's working. Every time we demo an activity, we say, oh, but what if students don't have good internet can turn on their camera? What if a student doesn't feel comfortable turning on their camera because their family is behind them? What if you don't have access to Zoom and breakout rooms, how could you do it? Could you do this asynchronously? Could you do it text based instead of video based? We did this throughout, and we always thought about these things. And so, when we shared these resources online, we also invited other people to contribute their own. It wasn't just Mia and I, there was also our colleague, Alton, who was Virtually Connecting co-director at the time, working on these. But we also invited other people to contribute one or two. And so that one was, I think, for me, one of the biggest open contributions, the biggest open resource that I've contributed, that I think has value to the world. And I'm glad that I didn't do it just for my institution.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 46:42

You're so passionate about this, Maha. You are very open, open in all aspects. You share your work, you share about your life and all that. How important do you think being open is in this day and age, in this world that we live in? Do you think that there's something great to be said about being open with your work and adopting an open philosophy?

**Maha Bali** 47:04

First of all, I don't think there's anything that is right for everyone. This is not maybe one of the things that will be the right thing for everyone. I have a friend, just personality wise, who felt like every time she tweeted, she feels naked. If that's not a comfortable thing for you... it took me about 10 years to feel comfortable blogging, I didn't just do it right away. I had a Twitter account from 2008. But I only started using it properly in 2014. It can take time to warm up to these things. You might need to see a lot of examples of how it works. And also, it takes time to build up your network so that it gives you dividends. It doesn't quickly become useful. It's really confusing at first and difficult. Like I'm on Instagram, I don't use Instagram, I still don't know what to do with it. And you also need to find out where your people are. Because maybe in your field, whatever your field is, maybe people are on Snapchat or people are on Tik Tok. I don't know where people are. But a lot of my people are on Twitter, and that's why it works for me. And that's why I'm there all the time. But if my people were somewhere else, I probably go wherever they are. That's the first thing.

And the other thing is, one of the advantages of openness, it's like it crosses these boundaries. If your work is extremely local, sometimes you need to focus your energies on the local. A lot of times the local can learn from the global, but sometimes the global can be distracting or not relevant. And so depending on what you're doing, if you need to make a decision about yourself and your safety and your family. Could it harm you? How badly can harm you? I haven't gotten a huge amount of



harm from anything that I've done. I've got an occasional comment about just being a Muslim, and maybe I'm a terrorist or things like that, but they're very rare.

So I think openness can give, if you're willing to give it. I think a lot of people may benefit from other people's openness without ever doing anything first. And that's okay, because a lot of open stuff is there for anyone to use without reciprocity. But if you reciprocate, and if you maintain relationships, and you invest in building them, you're going to get so much more out of it, because people will find you and get you things you didn't even know you needed. Because they know you're interested in them. When someone just tells you, "Oh, I saw this thing, this project, these people. Get to know these people, they're relevant to what you're doing." And that's just magical when it happens.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 49:08

So Maha, how would you describe life in Egypt as a woman? And the kind of woman you are, very passionate, very vocal, very, very extroverted? How is that like in Egypt?

**Maha Bali** 49:24

First of all, it's really important to realise women's rights in Egypt has a very long history. And my first boss who hired me, her mother was one of the leaders of that movement. And compared to a lot of nearby countries, not all of them, but it's one of the... we have all kinds of issues. But there has been a lot of work on improving family law. It's still not great. We don't always get what we want, because it's patriarchal society, but there's a lot of that going on. There's a lot of oppression of women, but there's also a lot of vocality about it, so that it's not one of those things that you can't really talk about.

There's also a lot of men who talk the talk of gender equality, but in reality, in their own homes and with their own families, they don't do that. But I think being a woman anywhere in the world, your awareness of gender inequality is intuitive. I think I was six or seven when I started noticing it and talking to my mom about it. My child notices it. She says, oh, first of all, "Why is this photo all men?" Or "Why is the teacher calling on the boys more than just calling on me." And so, it's really hard not to notice it. So if you're given the opportunity to talk about it, it helps other people talk about it, too. I think that's one of the reasons I'm open is that there are things a lot of us are feeling that we don't talk about. But when someone starts talking about it, then it becomes a thing that we can do something about. It's not just me on my own and nobody else, I'm just the only one who has that problem.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 50:43

Thank you very much, Maha. I'm so glad we could do this. And it was so nice talking to you. I really appreciate it. And thank you so much for sharing.

**Maha Bali** 50:52

Thank you.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 50:53

Thanks, Maha. We hope you keep the connections going. Maha Bali is Associate Professor of Practice at the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo. Thank you for listening to Inspiring Open, a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women. This first series of Inspiring Open was funded through the International Relief Fund for organisations in culture and education

2021, an initiative of the German Federal Foreign Office, the Goethe Institute and other partners; and an annual grant from the Wikimedia Foundation. If you enjoyed today's show, subscribe on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your podcasts so you never miss an episode. Feel free to share, rate and review us. We appreciate the support. You can also tag us in your posts. We are @WikiLovesWomen on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. I'll leave you with the words of Ntozake Shange. "Sisterhood is important, because we are all we have to stand on. We have to stand near and by each other, pray for one another and share the joys and the difficulties that women face in the world today. If we don't talk about it amongst ourselves, then we are made silent by the patriarchy. And that serves us no purpose. Until next time, look after yourselves and your sisters. And remember, be inspired, be challenged, be bold. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu and you've been listening to Wiki Loves Women, Inspiring Open.