



In Their Own Words

Features of the Struggle of Women Human Rights Defenders in Egypt

EuroMed Rights

Brussels – December 2016

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Bibliographic information**Title:**

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Corporate author: EuroMed Rights

Publisher: EuroMed Rights

Date of publication: December 2016

Pages: 40

ISBN: 978-87-92990-60-0

Original language: Arabic

English translation: Adli Hawwari

Layout design: Jean-Yves Leblon

Index terms: Human Rights / Egypt / Women Human Rights Defenders

Geographical terms: Egypt

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Features of the Struggle of Women
Human Rights Defenders in Egypt



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GLOSSARY

Kefaya (enough!)

The Egyptian Movement for Change. It was created in 2004 to oppose the transfer of power from President Hosni Mubarak to his son, Gamal.

Khaled Saeed

A young Egyptian who died while under police custody in the Sidi Gaber area of Alexandria in 2010. His death is believed to have helped incite the Egyptian Revolution of 2011.

6 April

The April 6 Youth Movement. An Egyptian group established in 2008 to support the workers in El-Mahalla El-Kubra, an industrial town, who were planning to strike on 6 April.

The 18 Days

The 18 days of the Egyptian Revolution, which led to the removal of President Hosni Mubarak (25 January - 11 February 2011).

Mohammed Mahmoud Clashes

Clashes between demonstrators and the army on Mohammed Mahmoud Street in Cairo in 2011. The demonstrators were demanding the end of the rule of the military council after Mubarak's resignation.

The Cabinet sit-in

Shorthand for the protest that took place in front of the offices of the Egyptian cabinet. It was broken up in December 2011.

Al-Ettihadiyya March

The first demonstration to take place after Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi became president. Al-Ettihadiyya is a presidential place in Cairo. The demonstration took place on 21 June 2014, demanding the release of detainees. On that day, 24 people were arrested, including Samar Ibrahim and Hanan al-Tahhan, two of the women human rights defenders featured in this report.

Context Setting and Methodology

The present report has been compiled by Yara Sallam. Yara conducted personal interviews with several women human rights defenders (WHRDs) between September and November 2016. This report is based on these interviews. It presents the features of the struggle of these WHRDs.

International interest in women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Egypt started at the outset of the revolution of 25 January 2011. However, the term was not widely used in legal or revolutionary circles until 2012. In that year, an organisation called Nazra for Women Studies started publishing reports documenting and analysing the patterns of violations of the rights of WHRDs during the revolution¹. Nazra also played a role in raising awareness about the concept of WHRDs so that the definition covers a broader sector of women who are active in the public sphere, even if they are not perceived as “activists”².

Much of the interest in the involvement of Egyptian women in the public sphere was related to the emergence of many WHRDs who had the knowledge, linguistic abilities, and other advantages such as their class and social standing as well as their appearance. They were able to reach out to international media during their coverage of the events before, during, and after the revolution.

Before that time, the involvement of women in the public sphere and their participation in political action in the late 1990s and early 2000s received little coverage and international attention. This was the case even though that period can be considered, in a broader context, a prelude to the revolution of 2011.

Because international interest focused on a limited group of WHRDs, particularly women political activists, or those working in civil society or women organisations, the important role played by other women in other sectors, such as trade unions or the internet, was ignored.

Arguably, the individuals who do get international recognition for the value of their work, and those who obtain media coverage and are listened to in international legal forums, are often those pertaining to a certain cultural class, certain religious or political orientations. Their appearance plays a similar role. Many of the WHRDs are women who can be easily reached. Therefore, others, who perhaps contribute just as much or more to the struggle for human rights, are ignored. However, they remain anonymous because they do not enjoy the same social privileges, often by as simple a factor as not residing in Cairo.

Despite the feeling of despair prevailing among many of those interested and involved in the public sphere in Egypt, many of the WHRDs, internationally recognized or otherwise, are still working for human rights, inside Egypt and outside; on the ground and on the internet.

At the end of the 1990s, a woman lawyer and human rights defender, Marwa Faruq, started taking part in the activities of one of the leftist movements. She led activities held inside Cairo University. The activities were of the usual kind, carried out by students interested in politics and the public sphere, such as membership drives; organising exhibitions in support of the Palestinian cause; organising small demonstrations inside various colleges; and propagating leftist ideas through a magazine published by the movement.

In 2000, the year of her graduation, she first clashed with security forces. This was after the second Palestinian uprising. She was served with a notice to come to the headquarters of State Security on account of being very popular at the university, and because many students were joining the movement. She ignored the notice, and was consequently arrested. She spent two days at the headquarters of State Security.

Marwa was able to continue coming to the Cairo University campus by registering as a post-graduate student. This way she was able to continue her political activity. In 2002 however, she was prevented from entering the university.

“They posted my picture on the gates of the university as they wanted to arrest me. They also recorded a meeting I chaired at the Orman Garden. We were planning three days of demonstrations in support of the Palestinian uprising. I was arrested and held for three weeks at the Giza police station. No legal proceedings were initiated. They kept me until the situation calmed down. One day they came and told me “go!” Two weeks later, I went back to the university. The situation was calm then. We continued to work quietly. In 2003, after the Iraq war, they confiscated my ID card and tore it to pieces. They said go or we will arrest you”.

In 2004, Marwa was arrested for the third time at the Cairo book fair. She was distributing a book against handing the presidency from Hosni Mubarak to his son, Gamal [The inheritance]. She and a colleague appeared before a prosecutor at State Security. After the investigation, they were sent to al-Qanater prison for women, where she spent two to three weeks in the wing normally reserved for those who have been sentenced to death.

Marwa took part in the revolution from the start. However, she sees a difference between political action before the revolution and after.

“Before the revolution, one had limited hopes and expectations. They were small. The revolution removed the ceiling of dreams and expectations. It also brought another level of misery: an unprecedented level of oppression not seen even by the 1970s generation. I lost interest in politics after Raba’a [massacre of August 2013]. However, I know a huge wave is coming. I am keenly waiting for a strong movement. I am certain the situation will not stay the same. I also have a fear of what might be worse. I cannot find the energy to create something new. All the efforts are focused on those who have been arrested. We are unable to build an alternative. There is no energy, and the circumstances are not helping. We wake up in the morning barely able to help, and nothing more. This is the limit of what can be done. The eagerness is in the zone of thinking about the future”.



Introduction

The WHRDs featured in this report were not selected arbitrarily. They were selected because of a connection between their own personal struggle and their struggle in the public sphere. For example, Hend Nafea and Ghadeer Ahmed decided to leave the family home to live independently in Cairo. Although they did not know each other before, they dealt with their families in a similar way, which contradicts the stereotypes about independent women, perhaps because of the strong bonds with the family. However, this has helped bring their families to accept their choices. Ghadeer believes that this may affect other women in the family.

The report sheds light on the features of the struggle of defenders who got involved in the public sphere at the start of the revolution. Others had experiences related to other important political events in Egypt, such as the Kefaya movement, the events of 6 April 2008 in the Greater Mahalla, and the murder of Khaled Saeed. The common factor between the defenders featured in this report is that they witnessed the corruption of the ruling regime, which had an impact later on their decisions to get involved in the public sphere. For example, the matter of inheritance of the presidency (from Mubarak to his son Gamal); and the rigging of the presidential and parliamentary elections. The WHRDs still remember the events that shaped their awareness, such as the way the police deal with the citizens; the children who live on the streets and beg for a living.

The involvement in the public sphere of several of the WHRDs featured in the report depends on the particular problems present in the areas where they live. The proposed solutions, therefore, stem from their particular environment, not on the basis of theories, or institutional plans. In addition, what distinguishes the work of these defenders is the ability to adapt according to circumstances. Strategies are selected on the basis of the potential for success on the ground.

This report features a few examples of Egyptian women with different backgrounds, who chose to defend human rights and get involved in the public sphere and political action in several forms. It goes without saying that it is not possible to tell the stories of all the women for lack of space, despite the desire to recognise each and every individual's role.

Ghadeer Ahmed (25 YEARS OLD)

INTERVIEW ON 11 OCTOBER 2016

Ghadeer Ahmed is a feminist and legal activist. She set up a page on Facebook called the 'girls' revolution'. She likes to identify herself as a feminist writer. Ghadeer was born into a traditional family in the Greater Mahalla, al-Gharbiyya Governorate. Talking about politics or charity work was not part of the family conversations. When the revolution started, Ghadeer began to follow events passionately. She felt she belonged to the revolution even though she did not take part in the famous 18 days. She began to participate in events that were organised in the vicinity of her city after the first days of the revolution. She did not join any political party or movement at the time. When Ghadeer started to be involved in the public sphere, she felt there was a connection between what happened to her at home (the private sphere) and the public sphere.

In Ghadeer's own words:

"I started to feel there was something wrong in what was happening at home and on the street. I started to become aware of gender. At the time, the matter was not clear in my mind. I was not aware that the discrimination against me was because of gender. I started to be interested in finding out the common thread in what happened in the private sphere, i.e., my home, and what happened to me outside the house. I found common things such as sexual violence, coercion, and discrimination. My father would shout at me and say: 'do not join the demonstration'. On the street, a boy would say: what are you wearing? You will be harassed, and you will spoil the reputation of the demonstration'.

On the first anniversary of the revolution, Ghadeer asked her followers on Twitter, using the hashtag #Thawrat_al-Banat (girls' revolution) to write about the problems women face in the Egyptian society. Many interacted with the

hashtag, so she decided to move the discussion to Facebook where people can write more than on Twitter. She setup the page called #Thawrat al-Banat".

"Our vision and awareness were not mature yet. But instinctively, we knew something was happening to us, but we did not know what it was. We were not happy and wanted to change it. This was what brought me together with the women who worked with me on Thawrat al-Banat in the beginning".

Ghadeer wanted the page to be an open space so that women could talk about their different experiences without being stigmatised, and without being told their experiences did not happen. It was open to all women.

"The internet is an easy tool and accessible to women, as we are talking about sensitive issues such as physical and sexual rights. Not every woman can talk about this. If I wrote on a placard 'my virginity is my right' or 'my hymen is mine' and carried it on the street, I do not know what would happen to me. On the Internet, however, we can have a discussion any time, and people would participate and follow any time. "On the Internet, ideas have their own space, and can be discussed any time, whether they are on the political agenda or not, if other people think it is important or not. In a fundamentalist, traditional society like Egypt, technology enables us to talk about our gender freely. We express our views and receive ideas from other people".

The 'Thawrat al-Banat' page has nine writers, who were chosen from two electronic workshops on feminist writing (2015 and 2016), and is managed by three people, who started with the page.



Ghadeer tries to help other women initiatives on the Internet through her own social media accounts. She has more than 16,000 followers on Twitter and many fans on Facebook. She also has a group on Facebook to support independent young women (FemiHub) and a blog (Feminista), where her feminist writing is published and which is different from the quick views expressed on Facebook. She believes in the importance of feminist writing in Arabic and wants to develop her ideas on a forum for which she would research feminist issues that she cares about. Ghadeer chooses the discussions she engages in.

“The fights [arguments] about women on Facebook are not all mine. I choose which fight I should join, such as those about physical rights. When we were talking about the standards of beauty, I thought the fight was important because it is about the body and its place in the public sphere. I accept criticism. Sometimes, progressive and revolutionary ideas stop when the matter is related to personal freedoms. In this fight, I used my hands, legs, head and everything I have, because as I see the matter, it is not only about physical rights, it is also about personal freedoms, rights in general, and gender. I see it from a gender-based perspective. It is a very important issue for me, and that is why I get engaged in it. I do not join other fights. They are not mine, or they are ordinary issues many people talk about, so I have nothing to add”.

Ghadeer takes the discussions from the Internet to the traditional media. She says for this reason she gets criticised and accused of seeking fame. However, she insists that she chooses to talk about these issues on TV because she sees herself as a ‘tool to create spaces’ in order to talk about topics that are not discussed in traditional media. Ghadeer is also interested in entering other spaces unrelated to the Internet. This is what happened when she discussed

Nawal Saadawi’s book “Women and Sex” in a forum which belongs to the author. Ghadeer would like to repeat the experiment if an opportunity comes up.

Ghadeer’s participation in the public sphere stems from her personal struggle after she decided to remove the veil she was forced to wear, and to leave her city and live independently in Cairo.

“I was concerned that I would not be an example of a woman who leaves the family home, severs her bonds with them, and lives in a different world. We have other women in the family. My concern was limited to this small circle. I did not want to be the woman who was kicked out; left because of a scandal; or for having done something ‘wrong’. I wanted to be able to come and go without any problem. I wanted to send a message that a woman who leaves the family home has not necessarily chosen a deviant path. Working in another governorate is not deviant. There is nothing wrong in living on my own”.

Ghadeer is careful to keep separate her life on the Internet and her real life, so that one does not negatively affect the other. She is also a person who prefers to protect her privacy. Her personal safety is an important factor in keeping both lives separate.

“When I entered the public sphere on the Internet, my personal life became public property all of a sudden. People started to assume the right to talk about my personal life. This was a real fight on the net. People started to tell me to accept criticism because I came to a public space, and I should accept to be dealt with as a public figure, and that my personal life would become public. This is not logical. Even if I became a public figure, I try as much as possible to protect my privacy on the Internet. I do not write about

my personal life. Many people do not realise that the arguments I get into on the Internet have nothing to do with personal issues”.

Ghadeer faced a lot of harassment and bullying on the Internet because of her opinions on sensitive issues. A private video [dancing] she sent [to her boyfriend] was published without her consent [after they broke up]. Images of her face were superimposed on pornographic images. She was threatened with rape. She ignored all instances except the case of the video. She sued the man who published it and won the case. He received a jail sentence. When Ghadeer's real life and Internet life met, she felt her personal safety was in jeopardy. Therefore, she was forced to change residence.

“Two or three months ago, people near where I lived, teenagers and young men, discovered my page on Facebook. They found out that I talk about gender-related issues. As far as they are concerned, this means sex and a lack of manners. So, they began to target me. They started to stand near my place, and watch the episode in which I talk about gender. They started to curse, and to harass the women who were living with me. They sat near the door of the building; which was the worst that could happen. What I had been trying to prevent for years - harassment and intimidation - was happening near my residence. I remember well that these boys were good mannered. No one bothered me until they found my page on Facebook. They started to see me as an easy prey because family members weren't visiting me, and because I was a woman living on her own. I decided to move. This was the first time the Internet had an impact on my real life. I needed to separate them again. So I moved out of the place because I did not feel safe, and would not be able to continue my activity on the Internet.”

Hanan al-Tahhan (21 YEARS OLD)

INTERVIEW ON 28 SEPTEMBER 2016

Hanan al-Tahhan is a political and student activist, still studying at the College of Business in Ain Shams University. Hanan was brought up in a family she would not consider political. However, she remembers that during the 2005 election, they were interested in the presidential candidate, Ayman Noor. The family would occasionally talk about the problems of the country. Hanan also recalls when she became aware of the way police officers treat people differently according to class.

In Hanan's own words:

"For example, they would treat drivers brutally. They would treat other people nicely. Some people would be fearful when they pass by them [the police]. Why are you afraid?"

Hanan began to take interest in the public sphere before the revolution. Her logic was to change herself to change the prevailing situation.

"I thought I would try to help people with what I could. I did not have money then because I was young. I thought I would give time and effort. That is what I had. I am not downplaying the importance of other things. Unfortunately, we have needs, and the situation is tough. People need food".

Hanan participated in the revolution during the anniversary of the clashes that occurred in Mohammed Mahmoud Street in 2012. She took part in an activity at the university when she started studying there. At the university, she got acquainted with colleagues, males and females, who belonged to political groups and parties representing the revolutionary trend. She attended their activities and meetings. Hanan feels that she totally belongs to the university as a scene for struggle.

Hanan started her political action in her residential neighbourhood, al-Marj, during the campaign of Tamarrod [rebellion], which was calling for the withdrawal of confidence in the then president, Mohammed Morsi.

"At first, I worked with Tamarrod. We used to go to the streets and talk to people in al-Marj and surrounding area. We used to collect signatures [for the campaign]. I also collected signatures at the university".

Through the Tamarrod campaign, Hanan got acquainted with many people in her area who were interested in political action. She then decided to join the al-Dustour Party around the middle of the year".

"The best thing about the al-Dustour party in my view was that the majority of the members were young people, who formed a big base. I thought it was great to have young people together".

In addition to the collective political action, it was important for Hanan to continue the individual solidarity with the detainees, by attending the hearings of their trials, and joining activities demanding their release.

Hanan did not want to give up and leave the party as many people did after its leader Mohammed Baradei, resigned after the Raba'a massacre.

"I thought it was better to remain in the party, even though I was annoyed by many. However, I thought the young people who remained in the party could still do something useful. I decided to stay and try to reform it from within. I would not leave the battle. If we could not reform the party, how could we reform the country? We had to stay and try".



After Baradei's resignation, the party faced a financial crisis. Hanan found herself doing the same work she was doing at the charitable society. However, she remembers the importance of setting up a library at the office of the party in al-Marj. It was open for everyone, and served an area that did not have a public library. The library had many books of different types. After that, Hanan stopped taking part in party activities. She felt that they had more to do with charity. On more than one occasion, she was not consulted about decisions she should have had a say on as a member. Hanan did not resign. She is still engaged in the elections of the local chapters and the problems facing her area as a way of winning the residents' support. She still thinks student's actions are important and useful. However, she is aware that the current regime has curtailed political activity inside the university. The only thing they can do is to supply the detainees with the provisions they need. The university is no longer the scene of protest as it was the case before the revolution.

On 21 June 2014, Hanan was arrested during a march in support, and demanding the release of the detainees. The march was known as the al-Ettihadiyya March. Hanan was released with other people by virtue of a presidential pardon, after spending 15 months in al-Qanater prison. Hanan didn't mind going to prison as such. She was more concerned about the consequences of being in jail for her family, who had to deal with arranging visits, and provisions to be brought to her. Now she thinks twice before taking part in a protest that could lead to her getting arrested.

Hanan believes jail has given her space and time to see things differently. Although she is convinced of the importance of supporting the cause of detainees, she still believes that work should be done to resolve the problems directly affecting citizens so that they are not turned off by the demonstrations and demonstrators.

While in jail, Hanan was able to see things from 'the outside', which is the opposite of what happens when a person is involved in an event and its aftermath.

When she left jail, she decided to learn many things, because she realised the importance of time and the necessity of not wasting it. Hanan is still active in the public spheres.

“The matter is not over. What I wanted to do was not done. I used to get involved because of injustice and corruption in the country. Now one tolerates ugly things. Every event affects us in its own way”.

While being involved in public life, Hanan's most important concern is her family.

“The most challenging thing for me is my responsibility towards the people around me: my family. During my 15 months in jail, the family went through an ordeal. I do not want this to happen to them again. However, this bothers me sometimes, because these are all personal concerns.”

“The way I look after myself is to learn new things. This makes me happy, makes me feel alright. When I don't do anything, or am not learning new things, I don't feel alright, and I have to look after myself more”.

Hanan sometimes feels her energy was sapped completely. She notes that her jail experience played a big role in this.

“After prison, the situation at home became difficult. There was pressure. The way I dealt with people, their pressure, and the way I dealt with that pressure, were completely different. It took me a lot of effort to continue.

After jail, you find yourself in a situation where no one understands you. This is very hard. However, I resisted because I have to remain well and continue to think of something to do”.

Jail was a difficult experience for Hanan.

“There are things in jail that people don’t get to see. To be between four walls and behind a closed door drains one’s energy. I lived with many people whom I met for the first time. You start to get acquainted with them. Your life starts to synchronise with theirs. These small details affected us a lot, such as the light, the door, and whether a voice was loud or not. If I wanted to do something, all these people had to be okay with it. Other details concerned visits, and the worry if a visitor or letter is late. These things sap even more of your energy. Outside the prison, you are confronted with things that are much bigger than the things you were able to see in jail”.

Hend Nafea (28 YEARS OLD)

INTERVIEW ON 29 SEPTEMBER 2016

Hend Nafe' is a woman human rights defender. She was arrested in December 2011 when the army broke up a protest outside the cabinet office. She was tortured, and later released. Hend worked at Hisham Mubarak Law Centre, but is nowadays the Executive Director of Human Rights Port and a fellow of the National Fund for Development. Hend was one of the 229 people who were given a life sentence on 4 February 2015, which forced her to flee Egypt.

Hend's family is traditional and lives in a country village in the Banha region. Her first encounter with the corruption of Mubarak's regime was during the People Assembly elections of 2010. When she went to a polling station with the family, she witnessed rigging in favour of the candidates of the ruling National Democratic Party.

Hend was unable to report the incident because her family prevented her from doing so. She said the family supported the regime at the time. They also prevented her from taking part in the demonstrations of 25 January 2011. She was effectively kept a prisoner at home on both occasions.

She had to think of ways to avoid the family restrictions, which prevented her from taking part in the events of the revolution.

In Hend's own words:

"I was brought up in a village. I had to be home by 7pm. Therefore, I used to join the demonstration or go to Tahrir Square, but went back home before 7 pm, so that they would not suspect my joining the demonstrations. Until I was arrested in 2011".

Hend was beaten and sexually harassed when she was arrested.

"The soldiers removed my veil (hijab) and tore my clothes. They hit me on the head with a wooden stick and dragged me by my hair from the Scientific Complex to the Shura [Consultative] Assembly. They continued dragging me inside the Assembly. Anyone who saw me in the corridor kicked me. Eventually, I went inside. There was a group of soldiers. They said they had been waiting for me for a long time. They indulged in mistreating me. Some beat me; others molested me".

Hend and other tortured women were taken to a hospital, where they were interrogated. Later she and others were released because of their bad health conditions. After her release, Hend faced more family problems. She was kept at home for 55 days, and was threatened with a forced marriage. However, she managed to travel to Cairo in mid-2012, and found a job at Hisham Mubarak Law Centre, where she worked on torture cases and on issues related to human rights defenders.

After attending several trial hearings, the chair of the Lawyers Syndicate prohibited its members from representing her. Hend was sentenced to 25 years in jail. She was forced to flee Cairo for over a month in order to decide what to do. Many people advised Hend to travel abroad, to avoid the long prison years. The decision was not easy.

"The only reason that made me leave is that if I went to jail, they [the authorities] would be the beneficiaries. I would be in jail, unable to do anything. If I leave Egypt, I will be able to speak out, criticise them, and continue my work on human rights".



Hend left the country in mid-2015. She decided to continue her work on human rights, especially the human rights violations in Egypt, and to try and help human rights defenders, both men and women.

“I cannot give up the cause. I believe I have a right, and many people have rights. We chose from the beginning to carry on for the sake of this right. For this reason, I wake up every day with my right and the rights of the people before my eyes. I get my inspiration from Mr. Seif, God bless his soul. I learned from him to keep trying to achieve my goal, even until the last day of my life, even if I do not achieve what I want”.

After living abroad for a year, sometimes Hend feels ambivalent about the decision.

“All the time I feel like I am forced to live abroad, that I’ve given up the right to return to my country. However, I try to convince myself that I will return one day, and that, here, I’m doing something that can help [others]”.

Hend’s participation in public life and her personal life were intertwined. She had to deal with the traditional way people in the countryside treat girls and women.

“At the beginning, when I wanted to participate, I was partly motivated by social justice and achieving the goals of the revolution. I also had a personal motive. I was brought up like many females in the countryside. They are taught that everything is forbidden. They don’t have any right to take any decision affecting their own lives. The family decides everything for us. We do not have the right to choose who we want to marry in the future. They choose the person they deem suitable, and I have to marry him”.

Hend believes that she has already challenged many social restrictions: when she travelled to Cairo to live independently; to work in a field of her choice; and to manage her life by herself. Although she travelled abroad, and is now far from her family, she maintains good relations with them. As time passed, they started to accept her choices, and their relationship improved.

“They are no longer narrow-minded. They no longer look at me like someone who has brought the family shame and scandal”.

There are still some other types of pressure on Hend as a result of being abroad. When she posts a happy picture on her Facebook page or other social media, she is criticised.

“I told a friend that I am free to do what I want. I talk about the martyrs and detainees when I want. When I have a picture in a place I wanted to visit, and feel happy, that does not deprive me of the right to post it on Facebook. I felt [Facebook followers] wanted to impose certain things on me: restrictions because I live abroad, and not in the centre of the action. On the contrary, I always think of the cause”.

No one expected the price for participating in one of the protests in 2011 would be this high. Although she was willing to spend several years of her life in prison as a price for adhering to her principles, 25 years was a lot more than Hend imagined.

“It is odd that someone who was tortured, a victim, after a while became the accused, instead of the torturers. It is odd to see myself in the dock instead of the officer or the person who tortured me. It is odd that I was sentenced to 25 years in prison, and all the thieves who pillaged the country were found not guilty, or received light sentences. What did we do? Our crime was taking part in a demonstration. Is this a crime that deserves punishment? No, we are citizens, and we have the right to express our opinions. I am the one who was violated and suffered injustice. I have a big right. This is too much of a punishment for someone who takes part in a demonstration. Those who tortured us and dragged us are the ones who should be punished. I have the right, as an Egyptian citizen, to live in my county, and not to be forced to live in another one”.

Mahienour El-Massry (30 YEARS OLD)

INTERVIEW ON 3 OCTOBER 2016

Mahienour El-Massry identifies herself as “a human being who believes in the revolution”. However, she is also a lawyer, a human rights defender, and a political activist from Alexandria. She began to take an interest in the public sphere in 2004 through the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya), which started its activism in Alexandria in 2005 when a group of young people started to call for change. When she joined Kefaya, her family did not object, not even her father who did not see any benefit in politics because of the opportunism of many politicians.

Mahienour was interested in the issues of labourers and farmers more than the issue of the inheritance of power [from Mubarak to his son]. In 2006, she became a member of the Revolutionary Socialists movement. All the issues Mahienour worked on stemmed from the needs of her city, Alexandria, and its surroundings. After the start of forced evictions in Alexandria, she took an interest in the Sarando case in 2006 and 2007.

In Mahienour's own words:

“My interest in the issue began to take a different form. My mind got organised in a different way in relation to some questions: who are the real victims in the country? What is the alternative? Which path should we choose and pursue more and more?”

Through her work on the cases of forced evictions in the al-Talibya area of Alexandria, Mahienour heard for the first time about the military trials for civilians. She became aware of them because she and those who worked with her on the cases started receiving threats. They were warned that they could be referred to the military courts, because the al-Talibya area is owned by the coastguard. In 2008, Mahienour got interested in the 6 April Movement. She

took part in demonstration in Alexandria in support of the demands of the movement. In 2010, cases of torture in police stations started to emerge. The case of Khaled Saeed embodies the systematic violence used by the police against the citizens of Alexandria. He was tortured to death by the police.

“We started to take action. We were a group of young people from different walks of life. In those days we set up what we called “the coordination bureau for the national movement of young people in Alexandria”. Through this body, we coordinated the demonstrations, and we agreed that everyone had his own background and orientation”.

When the 25 January 2011 revolution started, Mahienour was in Libya, on the cusp of its own revolution. Mahienour witnessed the many creative initiatives the Libyans came up with, and she was inspired by them. Mahienour and her friend, Izis Khalil, decided to create an alternative cultural space.

“We set up what we called “al-Sandara”. It was an open space for people to do what they wanted. We tried to do things on the streets as well, so we thought of seminars to discuss topics freely; reading clubs; and films. We would discuss different types of films. We also thought of literacy classes, in order to vary the activities.”

Mahienour also joined a group called ‘Save Alexandria!’, which was formed in 2010 to resist the attack on the buildings that are part of the heritage of the city. The campaigns had three objectives: the first was concerned with heritage and the importance of preserving it; the second was concerned with Alexandria's Corniche. It belonged to the army, and was being rented out, which deprived ordinary citizens of a breathing space. The third objective was concerned with new buildings that were uninhabitable”.



“Our battle for freedom is connected with our belief in life and beauty. We believe in them more than they [the authorities] do. They believe in ugliness and death. Some of our friends thought it was a luxury and the time was not right for it. I did not agree with them. I thought it was very important”.

At the end of 2013, an individual contacted Mahienour because two of the Syrians working with her had tried to migrate by sea from Alexandria. However, they were arrested. Subsequently, Mahienour became aware of the role of the national police in deporting Syrians to Syria where they would face Bashar's regime. Therefore, she was among those who formed “the movement for solidarity with refugees”. Before that, Mahienour worked on the military trials for civilians in 2011, and after that on a campaign called 'lying military'.

One week after the adoption of the Demonstrations Law, Mahienour took part in a demonstration, which was held on 2 December 2014, in relation to a hearing of the Khaled Saeed's Trial, after which she had been jailed for the first time.

“It was customary in Alexandria to organise a demonstration in relation to the trial of those charged with Khaled Saeed's death in 2010. They took place no matter what, whether we were supporters of the revolution or not. The demonstration took place one week after the Demonstrations Law went into effect. Ours was among the first demonstrations in Alexandria that were subject to the new law. We were in front of the court before the demonstration began. We witnessed the familiar situation: a huge security presence in a place known to be the venue for demonstrations. We were standing in front of the court on a wide sidewalk. We were dealt with violently”.

Luay Qahwajy, Islam Hassanain, and Omar Hazeq were arrested. By accident, Mahienour found out that there was an order for her arrest. On 20 May 2014, Mahienour entered prison to serve her first sentence.

“I was jailed because of the Demonstrations Law. It was days before the presidential elections. The timing was fortunate. I was able to meet people of different inclinations, some of them people of the revolution. They had been jailed for several days and had nothing to eat or drink, and could die any minute. I was exposed to special cases of women prisoners, especially women who were incapable of repaying debts, and who suffered from double oppression and victimisation. Not only the percentage of women who were bread winners for their family was high, but also women who volunteered to go to jail so that their husband could continue to look after the children. According to Egyptian tradition, a house should not be without a man. I also got acquainted with the Kawaheel [plural of Kahool 3], and I started to get interested in the cause of women in debt”.

Mahienour recalls one of the experiences that affected her, namely the prisoners who were sentenced to death. This was when she was in jail for the first time.

“In the Damanhoor jail, our cells were in the same place as those of the prisoners who had been sentenced to death. When one of them was taken away, ‘pulled’ in prison terminology, it felt like we were with them because we had forged a connection with them. They were human beings made of flesh and blood. They had a life and hope. They had dreams and things they wanted to do. They had a family, etc. Overnight, they ceased to exist”.

Mahienour was released on 21 September 2014, before completing her sentence (six months and a fine of 50,000 Egyptian pounds). She found out that she had been sentenced to 15 months in jail in another case. Mahienour had participated in a protest after a lawyer was attacked on 29 March 2013. The case was given a name: 'storming al-Raml police station'. Consequently, Mahienour went back to jail to complete the first sentence and serve the second one. The conditions were worse in Damanhour prison (she spent three months in al-Qanater prison.). Eventually, she was released on 13 August 2016, two days after the release date because of an investigation by the national security.

In between the two prison terms, Mahienour became interested in practising law. Initially she focused on legal translation and journalism. However, she subsequently resumed her studies at the Law College. The subject of her thesis was Women in Peace and War.

After leaving prison for the second time, Mahienour had become interested in many issues she had experienced first-hand, such as prison conditions; women who are unable to repay debts; capital punishment; and personal and religious freedoms. The continuation of the struggle for her is connected to these principles.

"I am convinced that people deserve something better. People deserve to live. I look at the matter from a pragmatic point of view. Your personal security and existence in society will not survive if people do not have the minimum requirements to live. I believe we are in a state of war. Even when the revolution ebbs a little, as it has now, we are winning points, such as discussing issues we never discussed before. I am convinced we are a building block. I don't know what will happen tomorrow. Perhaps I won't be here to see it. However, Rome wasn't built in a day, and we all take part in the

construction process. If we decide now that because we lost a few battles, we should stop fighting, we will lose the war. There is a bigger picture. We will not necessarily see the end of it. I don't see that as a problem".

Comparing her life before and after her involvement in the public sphere, Mahienour believes the security forces' grip before the revolution was light, because the authorities thought they had tight control over the people. Although there were widespread violations before, the violence of Egyptian authorities exceeds that of the pre-revolution period.

In addition, since the revolution, there is pressure for change to happen, which was not the case before. However, what is distinct about a revolution is that those who are interested and involved in the public sphere are more than a few dozen people who knew each other. It creates a space for people to test many different ideas and principles.

Mahienour considers her family and friends as a fundamental support system in addition to her work to improve her academic knowledge in order to continue to come up with new ideas. She believes that 'solidarity is our fundamental weapon', whether through writing personal letters to detainees; organising discussions in support of the right to demonstrate; or demonstrating to support the detainees. Any form of solidarity, small or big, makes a difference in her opinion.

Mona Seif (30 YEARS OLD)

INTERVIEW ON 7 OCTOBER 2016

Mona Seif is a researcher in biology, specialising in cancer. She is a human rights defender and one of the founders of the campaign “No to military trials for civilians”. Mona started her activities in the public sphere around 2005/2006, coinciding with the movement of Egyptian bloggers and the independence of the judiciary. Many of her friends and members of her family participated in the protest of the judges. Her brother, ‘Alaa, was arrested at that time. This was when her activism began, by providing provisions for the detainees, getting in touch with their families and assisting them in getting in touch with lawyers.

Because of the murder of Khaled Saeed in 2010, Mona started to see the situation from a different perspective, not necessarily in line with her family heritage, but motivated by her personal interest and passion.

In Mona’s own words:

“Maybe like many people I felt Khaled Saeed was close to me without knowing him. He looked like many of my people. Maybe because of this I paid attention. There were always two types of people who would be subjected to this appalling violation: firstly, the very poor people. This I had known since I was young. I followed the work of my family in this regard, and helped their efforts from a distance. Secondly those who were politically active and very involved. There were however limits to the level of the violations they would be subjected to. Khaled Saeed’s case shattered this notion for all of this for us, our families and our families’ acquaintances, because he represented three quarters of the young people in our lives, whether friends, brothers or colleagues. He was a young man from the middle class. He was not politically involved. A simple encounter with people of the Ministry of the Interior led to his brutal death. This was a turning point for me”.

Mona took part in the 25 January revolution from day one. She joined the demonstrations and covered the events in what later became known as the “people’s press”. In addition, her role included supplying provisions, and acting as a liaison with doctors. An important sign of her role in the legal field emerged on 25 February, when the military police broke up a protest in front of the offices of the cabinet. Amr al-Bhairi was arrested, and she was an eyewitness.

“Because we were eyewitnesses, we decided to follow the matter with lawyers and the families of the youth. We then wrote our statements and published them. From that time, it was not an easy matter, because even among the revolutionary forces (army), mistakes were overlooked because the army supported the revolution”.

The work on the Amr al-Bhairi case was the start of the campaign ‘No to military trials for civilians’. The campaign’s importance became clear after the occurrence of more military trials for civilians after the breakup of a protest in al-Tahrir square on 9 March 2011. The interest in this issue started to gain the attention of other actors in the public sphere, and a campaign was launched. In the beginning, the campaign was run by volunteers and detainee families.

“We divided ourselves into five groups to cover every aspect of the issue. One group was responsible for collecting data about the detainees and contacting their families. Another group was concerned with the media: video recording statements, and producing items to be used in social media. A third group was responsible for organising conferences, seminars, or other activities on the street. Another group was concerned with legal support”.

Over the course of two years, detainee families were the driving force behind the campaign. During the July 2011 protests, the families set up a tent and went



on a hunger strike. After first completely ignoring the issue, the media outlets started to interview spokespersons from the campaign.

“No military trials for civilians” became a demand raised in all the squares where protests were held. Until the beginning of 2012, the campaign was able to apply enough pressure to release some of the detainees.

Mona thought at the beginning that the campaign was a pressure group.

“We used to study how to create a public narrative that does not adopt military trials, and to narrate stories of the people. In April 2011, we held a public conference in the streets”.

In mid-2012 and beginning of 2013, the campaign started to work on the issue of military trials in the context of writing the constitution in the presence of the first elected parliament after the revolution”.

“We began to realise that the solution would never come one case at a time. We were drawn into this. It was important to work on a case by case basis, and to focus on certain individuals, but because of this we lacked the overview, the figures and statistics. We lacked a sense of direction. Therefore, we started to study the laws. The first thing we did was to suggest a legislative amendment in the People’s Assembly”.

The proposed amendments were rejected. However, the proposal was used when the 2013 constitution was being drafted. The momentum of the campaign started to wane.

“The problem when you have a long campaign is that you have to think of projects; otherwise it dies. When you have a single-issue campaign, you win what you win, and lose what you lose. A few people will join or leave, according to their level of involvement. It is different when you have small projects for people to work on. In a situation like this, there is a lot of different information coming in regarding cases and violations, which can be disorienting’.

In addition, Mona saw that the sentences of the civilian courts did not differ a great deal from those of the military courts. The group lost a major motivation because of the absence of the mothers of the detainees, who, for different reasons, were missing from the core group driving the campaign.

Mona still follows the cases of arrests tried in civilian courts, and cases of forced disappearances. She continues to act as liaison between detainee families and lawyers. She also helps in the campaign for the improvement of prison conditions and the release of detainees.

Based on her life experience, which put her in the shoes of the detainee family, she is aware of the information the families need for the procedure to submit visitor application. The same goes for other ever-changing information and details unknown even to lawyers, but known to those who deal with the prison system.

Mona wants to go back to focusing on scientific research. She believes it’s important for someone who is interested in the revolution to have something else to do in life, and only allocate part of their time for the public sphere. She also believes that academia still offers some protection from the brutality of the regime, in addition to being interested in the scientific field.

“That last and very essential thing is that I started to feel that I am losing my grip on my profession. I sat and thought one day, and decided that I did not want to do something that will make me angry at the revolution. This has never happened despite everything. I wake up feeling angry because of this happening now, but I never felt bitter towards the revolution, or regretted being part of it. I never felt angry for the things that I missed, or being behind in my profession compared to some friends. I felt that my profession could become a turning point, and I should not give it up, so that I do not feel angry at the revolution. Therefore, the revolution remains something I like, and it likes me back, even if we do not win”.

Mona continues to work in the public sphere for several reasons. The first is that the consciousness that emerged at the start of the revolution is irreversible. The second is that her work is always connected to the families of the detainees, so it is difficult to be disengaged. Also, at the time of writing her brother and sister were still in prison on account of exercising their right of expression. This makes it hard for her to feel despair and to withdraw. Mona feels frustrated because of the tensions within revolutionary circles, which has impeded their continued work for no good reason. Also, the space for discussion has diminished, unlike the situation before. In Mona's view, the risks of participating in the public sphere now are higher than they were before the revolution, and the space for legal struggle is nearly non-existent.

“At the same time, the effectiveness of people is higher now; so is their willingness to get involved. Although the situation is much worse now, in my circles at least, people are more willing to talk and criticise even on the streets. There are more discussions than before. The impact of the public work in these dangerous circumstances is higher than before, when it was much more limited”.

Now and then, Mona chooses what she wants to focus on to maintain her spirits and psychological health. She does not follow the news, and takes frequent holidays, in addition to relying on her personal circle of support.

“I am more useful when I am well. This is better for me, my family, and my mother. It is not right that she has a son and daughter in jail, and the third [Mona] is not well”.

Samar Ibrahim (29 YEARS OLD)

INTERVIEW ON 27 SEPTEMBER 2016

Samar Ibrahim is a teacher of Arabic language and political activist. She participated for several years in the political movement, both before the revolution and after. She also spent 15 months in prison for exercising her right to demonstrate.

The first time Samar participated in political life was when she voted in the referendum on amending the Egyptian constitution in 2007. However, her political awareness concerning the possibility of transferring power from Hosni Mubarak to his son Gamal was formed before.

She was monitoring the presidential election. The presidential candidate, Ayman Noor, was imprisoned. In her view, Mubarak received an illogical percentage of the vote.

In Samar's own words:

"I felt that the transfer of power from father to son made me feel as if the country is a fiefdom. We are in a country where power is inherited as in a monarchy".

The only way for Samar to get a voting card to vote in the referendum on constitutional changes was to become a member of the then ruling party, the National Democratic Party. Samar took part in the protests organised by the Egyptian Movement for Change [Kefaya – Enough!]. She didn't think her participation entailed a high risk. She feels that there is nothing wrong in admitting that one is afraid, even if this is considered by some as "cowardice".

"When I used to see that the Syndicate was surrounded by five or six security vehicles, I would not participate. I used to think at that time that if I was arrested then, no one knew me. I felt something big was going to happen, and I was being saved for it".

Samar could not take part in the protests of Greater Mahalla in April 2008 because she was unable to travel. She decided to stop taking part in street protests, and to monitor events from a distance until the January revolution. In the meantime, Samar followed the elections of the People Assembly. As she was a teacher, she saw how the schools were used during elections when they were turned into polling stations. Candidates who were not members of the National Party were not allowed to enter, and thugs were used to keep them out. Samar considered this a clear example of corruption.

Samar expected the calls to join the demonstrations of 25 January to be heeded. She wanted to take part, along with a dozen other people, as was the case in the protest of Kefaya. However, the level of violence used by the police was much higher than what she had experienced previously. The goal of the police was not to disperse the demonstration, but to kill the demonstrators, and spread fear among the survivors.

"You must die and be silenced. You must die and be humiliated. You will not only die. The ones next to you must see how you are humiliated while you are dying, so that they are silenced as well".



Samar could not participate in any of the protests that took place after the revolution because she abided by the family rules.

“I did not join protests at all because it was difficult for me to leave the house”.

However, she remembers being moved by women's participation in the first round of events that took place in Mohammed Mahmoud Street in November 2011.

“The events of Mohammed Mahmoud changed all the women who took part in them. Mohammed Mahmoud was the start of girl power. I witnessed the power of women, not during the revolution, or at its start. It was during the bloody events, which started at Mohammed Mahmoud. The women were very firm. They were there to treat the casualties. They had bags in which they had all the tools they needed for treatment. There was no place for makeshift field clinics. When the army struck, and a clinic was dismantled, they would erect another and join the doctors. The role of the women was very important, more so than at any other time”.

Samar continued to take part in the events of the revolution because she saw herself as part of the country. She felt she had to voice her opinion on what happened.

“I am carrying on because I did not get my rights. Nothing at all changed: neither the living conditions, nor the freedom, or the social justice”.

She paid little attention whenever she was told that women should not risk their lives by taking part in the revolution.

“Both of us live in this homeland”, she says.

Samar did not join any political party; even those considered revolutionary parties, because she thought they did not have clear political programmes. After a period of inaction in 2013, the Demonstrations Law was adopted in November 2013. This prompted her to re-join the street protests. She decided to take part in some of the educational activities of one of the most popular political movements, which deals with issues of concern to all the different groups in society.

On 21 June 2014, Samar decided to take part in a march for the last time.

“That was the last time. I decided not to take part again. Later, I might do things differently”.

Samar was dismissed from work. After 15 months in al-Qanater jail, she faced obstacles whenever she applied for a job, because there was a conviction in the official records. In addition to the procedural matters related to the jail sentence, she was forced to remain at home whenever there was an official holiday related to the police, in order to avoid arrest. She received calls to advise her not to stay at home so that she could not be arrested at home.

“Should I stay at home or not? Outside there is freedom and beauty, but is it safe? No, there is no safety at all outside”.

The harassment that occurs after leaving jail are not limited to security harassment. They affect the family, especially if the WHRD belongs to a conservative family.

“My family is opposed to the idea of women participating in a demonstration. When you take part, you can be arrested. This will affect you when there is a proposal to marry you. What will you tell the man? Will the family tell him you were jailed? (...) they think it is a stigma, and they feel grateful that people did not know I was jailed. A man taking part in a demonstration is OK. Yet, a woman’s participation is disgraceful”.

In addition to the social burdens, there is the burden of having to eliminate everything related to the experience of being in prison. There is no support system for those who are released from prison. There is pressure on the woman who left prison to go back to the situation that prevailed before the experience.

“The first comment after ‘congrats, you made it out!’ is ‘forget the prison, and kick it out of your life’. Prison will certainly remain in my life because I spent 15 months in one; that is one year and three months of my age, work and life. My family thinks that I will be alright if I do not meet or talk to any friends from jail. That I will be alright if I don’t get into politics. And if I marry (...) the man my mother chooses for me, I will be alright, and that the prison will leave me. That I will no longer be upset, and I’ll be as beautiful as a rose”.

Samar decided not to cease being active in the public sphere. She believes that while there are children on the streets, without a home or a chance at an education, she has sufficient reasons to continue the struggle for a better life. However, her family’s opposition is one of the obstacles she faces.

“When there’s something that requires me to leave the house, I don’t know what to tell them. I do not wish to lie to them. I do not wish to lie to be able to leave the house to demand something that is supposed to be a right.”

Endnotes

- ¹ Masa Amir, "The violations continue: the policy of the military towards WHDRs", December 2011, at the following link:
<http://nazra.org/node/49>
Also see "A year of impunity: The violations of the rights of WHDRs in Egypt from August to December 2011", August 2012, at the following link:
<http://nazra.org/node/141>
- ² Masa Amir, "A series of profiles: Women Human Rights Defenders", June 2012, at the following link:
<http://nazra.org/node/122>
Also see "Profile: Women Human Rights Defenders", December 2012, at the following links:
<http://nazra.org/node/182>
- ³ The Kahool is a person who undertakes to bear the legal responsibility for fines and prison sentences for violating the building regulations. This person is often a woman who is paid a sum of money ranging from 5000 to 100,000 Egyptian pounds.



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