

“I WOULDN'T TRADE WHAT I'M DOING FOR SECURITY”

Yara Sallam

- *The Egyptian, who has been jailed for more than a year for her activism, would not give up fighting for women's rights in order to lead a quieter life*

By Luiza Bodenmüller

It was not the revolution in the Arab world that freed women from the home. For Yara Sallam, women began participating in public spaces before the historical moment that the West baptised as the “Arab Spring”. “The difference between women’s participation during the revolution and prior to it is that before, it was not covered by the press or social media”, the Egyptian rights defender explained. One of the positive aspects of the revolution was that it brought a series of discussions previously considered taboo to the public stage. Issues such as sexual violence, rape and conversations on sexuality and the relationship to the body began to be part of the repertoire of public debates.

This public space was also, to a certain extent, what allowed Yara to come into contact with issues linked to human rights and, later, the rights of women. At the age of 15, she began to volunteer for organisations that held activities to build awareness on the rights of children and adolescents. Her growing interest in this issue led her to law school. During her undergraduate studies, Yara got involved in a series of civil activities: “I participated in a module on the Arab League, a module on the U.N. and I also got involved in a project for volunteers that promoted annual trips to develop artistic activities with refugees in Lebanon. But, when it was my turn to go, we couldn’t travel because of the war there and so, we went to Jordan”, she explained.

While still at university, the then aspiring lawyer started to attend courses on human rights offered by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. That was when Yara identified some problems in the field of human rights work. "I thought that people who worked on human rights did not get paid well. So, I thought, 'ok, I'm going to work for a large firm and after, I will volunteer for one of these organisations'", she noted. But it did not take long for her to become drawn to the dynamic of the work and, as soon as she graduated, she worked as a research assistant for one of her professors who was studying how women went through the legal system when they asked for a divorce and the response of private international law to these cases.

In 2007, Yara began to work on issues related to freedom of religion and belief. "For a year and a half, or almost two years, I documented and monitored the status of freedom of religion and belief in Egypt. Back then, no one had documented this properly, except the United States Embassy and Freedom House [a Washington-based think tank]", she explained. Yara dedicated her work to registering cases and legal decisions related to this issue and also violent incidents in places of worship. Between 2009 and 2011, the Egyptian lawyer concluded her LLM degree in international human rights law and worked in The Gambia, then she came back home in March 2011.

In Egypt, Yara helped create a programme for women human rights defenders – a concept that had received little attention until then. For her, being a feminist in a Muslim country is no different than in other countries. "Perhaps in Mexico, women feel free to wear what they want, but they also suffer from violence and they suffer from patriarchy in different ways. Here, I can't wear the dresses I'd like to wear, but I suffer in a different way too. Patriarchy takes on different forms", she stated.

Yara's involvement in the struggle for human rights ended up landing her in prison in 2014, when she was arrested during a protest for the liberation of political prisoners. A series of charges were brought against her and her colleagues, ranging from a simple infraction for participating in a protest to robbery and attacking public and private property. "When you go to a protest, you end up being accused of some very strange things", the lawyer stated. At the court of first instance, Yara and her colleagues were sentenced to three years in prison, three years of monitoring and to a fine. A higher level court reviewed the conviction: it eliminated the fine and lowered the sentence to two years in prison and two years of monitoring. After 15 months, however, a presidential pardon for 100 prisoners was granted, including for the case for which Yara was in prison, and she was released.

Her time in prison taught Yara many things. "This experience made me more aware of the different layers of oppression that exist", she said as she reflected on this. Living with other prisoners led her to deconstruct the stereotypes she was carrying. She realised that the majority of the crimes could have been avoided if the women would have had access to basic rights, such as the right to get a divorce and to choose the person they marry. "I know women who killed their husbands because



they were abusive, or because they had been forced to get married and wanted to escape with someone they loved”, she recalled.

For Yara, prisons fail to fulfil their fundamental role of rehabilitating human beings. Moreover, they end up reproducing the inequalities that exist outside of their walls. “I think they also end up isolating disadvantaged people. What I saw was that only a small number [of the prisoners] deserved to be in prison: people who actually robbed millions of dollars, corrupt people. But they put people in jail who are addicted to drugs or who are sex workers. This made me very aware of the different layers of oppression women are subjected to. It also made me more conscious of my own privileges”, she concluded.

The fifteen months of confinement served as fuel for Yara’s fight. Even in the midst of the government crackdown on people who get involved in issues of public interest and go beyond the limits of private space, she still finds ways to act. “They only want to scare us so we stop doing our work, and I don’t want to stop. I don’t want to give up my work. I wouldn’t trade what I’m doing for security”, the lawyer stressed. Yara looks to the engagement of new generations for hope.

“A lot of investment could be made in the new generations because they are very politicised”, she said in reference to youths who grew up during the revolution. For her, political training for women is one of the challenges feminism in Egypt faces. Another point to be explored is that of the production of knowledge and the documentation of experiences in Arabic so that women can have access to the discussions and reflect on the daily practice of feminism. She believes that these factors, combined with the search for new tools, will strengthen the fight for women’s rights in her country. That is one of the important outcomes, which made her return to her origins - both geographical and the origin of her struggle.



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