

FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

EGYPT'S WOMEN
ACTIVISTS TELL OF THEIR
STRUGGLE

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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INTRODUCTION

After the “25 January Revolution” that ousted President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, there were high expectations that life would improve for all Egyptians, particularly for women who had played such a prominent role in the uprising.

Since then, the demands of the uprising for human dignity, captured in the slogan *bread, freedom, social justice*, have remained largely unfulfilled and have yet to be linked with demands by women for equal rights and freedom from sexual harassment and violence.

Today, women play a leading role in the struggle for human rights in Egypt. Women activists are fighting for the full spectrum of human rights, civil, economic, political and social. However, while equality is at the heart of the enjoyment of human rights, the authorities have ignored their obligations to realize it and combat discrimination.

Instead, women have been marginalized. Egypt's women have been largely excluded from public life, including from positions in government, law-making bodies and the judiciary. On the streets, women protesters have faced sexual and gender-based violence from the army and security forces – as well as attacks from unidentified groups of men. The authorities have taken no steps to ensure that women are able to participate equally in shaping the new Egypt. On the contrary, they have set up a constitutional committee made up almost entirely of men and have abolished quotas for women in parliamentary elections, leading to women in parliament dropping to two percent. They have also failed to hold the perpetrators of sexual violence to account.

Under army rule from February 2011 to June 2012, women activists faced unprecedented levels of violence at the hands of the military and riot police. The army's cruelty and contempt towards women was first exposed when it conducted forced “virginity tests” on women protesters in March 2011. When the women spoke out, the army's response was first to deny the “virginity tests” and then to blame the women for “camping out in tents with male protesters”. The army tried to shield itself from criticism by smearing anyone who spoke out against it. But in December 2011 its forces were filmed beating women protesters in the streets of Cairo, and women detained in the protest said that soldiers had subjected them to sexual violence. The incident shattered the army's standing on women's rights once and for all. The violence appeared to be aimed at deterring women into staying away from protests. Instead, it galvanized women to take to the streets in their thousands.

Today, not one member of the army or security forces has been brought to justice for human rights violations against women. The only military official tried for conducting forced “virginity tests” was acquitted by a military court in March 2012. The total impunity that has surrounded state violence against women has sent a signal that it is tolerated, and paved the way for further abuses.

Many wondered how President Mohamed Morsi would address women's rights when he came to power in June 2012 after he promised to uphold the rights of all Egyptians, and as a matter of fact how much he would deliver on human rights. The first signs were not good: in

the months after he took office, Egypt's Constituent Assembly produced a series of draft constitutions that limited women's rights. The Assembly included just seven women out of 100 members, and was dominated by the ruling Freedom and Justice Party and Nour Party. The Assembly faced a court case on its legality, but in November 2012 President Morsi decreed that the Assembly was exempt from such suits. The decree, which also gave the President unrestrained powers, sparked new mass protests in which women, again, participated on equal footing with men.

The authorities ignored calls to ensure that the constitutional process was representative of Egyptian society and safeguarded the rights of women. The final Constitution was rushed through the Assembly and adopted in a referendum in December. It prohibits discrimination against Egyptian citizens, but does not explicitly prohibit discrimination against women, and refers to women only as dependents or homemakers. It enshrines provisions of Shari'a law which are likely to be used to justify legislation that discriminates against women in relation to marriage, family life and divorce. Instead of enshrining women's rights, the Constitution has sidelined them, and paved the way for new discriminatory measures.

The Constituent Assembly's reluctance to enshrine the full spectrum of human rights in the Constitution, including women's equality, sums up the continuing debate over human rights in Egypt today. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the authorities respect human rights and the rule of law, and to strive to meet the aspirations of all Egyptians for freedom, dignity, equality and social justice for both themselves and the next generations.

As further demonstrations erupted, including in response to President Morsi's Constitutional Declaration in November 2012, there were reports of horrific attacks targeting women activists in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Women were separated from their friends and colleagues and surrounded by groups of men who tore at their clothes and dragged them away, subjecting them to sexual violence. These culminated in a series of attacks on women by unidentified groups of men in Tahrir Square on 25 January 2013. Once again, the purpose of the attacks appeared to be to force women off the streets, and to prevent them from protesting. Once again, the authorities' response to the attacks was to blame the women. Members of Egypt's upper house of parliament, the Shura Council, said that the women had brought the attacks on themselves by mixing with male protesters.

Women protesters have also been smeared in the media: the owner of one private television station said that women protesters go to Tahrir Square because they "want to be raped", and that such women are "devils".¹

If there is to be a new era for women in Egypt, the authorities as well as all political leaders must first combat their own deep-seated, discriminatory attitudes towards women and their human rights. A first step would be to condemn, without reservation, sexual violence against

¹ Ahmad Mohamed Abdullah (known as Abu Islam), the owner of the Al-Ummah television station. In a video posted on-line on 6 February, Abu Islam said that women protesters had gone to Tahrir Square because they wanted to be raped, and that such women were "devils". The comments attracted widespread condemnation. See Public Statement, "Egypt law-makers blame women victims for sexual violence", 13 February 2013: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE12/010/2013/en>

women in all its forms. A comprehensive plan is then needed to address sexual violence against women, to ensure that incidents of such violence are treated seriously by the security forces and Public Prosecution, and to combat widespread gender discrimination in the country. One way to restore faith in the justice system's ability to combat sexual violence would be to ensure that the recent attacks on women in Tahrir Square are independently investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice.

Women are not waiting for an invitation to be included in the struggle for reform and human rights. Today, women activists are present in every field of life advocating for human rights: on the streets, in police stations and courts, in the media and on-line. They are lawyers, activists, doctors, journalists and bloggers. Women are also not waiting for the authorities to tackle sexual violence and harassment. While the authorities' attitude to violence against women has been one of inaction and indifference, women activists have created new initiatives such as Operation Anti-sexual Harassment/Assault to tackle abuses against women in the streets of Cairo and elsewhere.

Amnesty International has interviewed seven women activists who are fighting for justice and human rights in a number of different fields. They told us of their struggle for justice and rights.



MARY DANIEL

JUSTICE FOR KILLED PROTESTERS

“If you fight for the general cause of justice, you have to fight for justice in individual cases too.”

Mary Daniel was at a protest on 9 October 2011 in Maspero when her brother Mena and other Christian Copts were killed by the military police. She is now a renowned activist demanding justice not only for her brother, but for many others too.

Mary Daniel, aged 42 from Ezbit al-Nakh informal settlement in Cairo, said she was not involved in politics before the uprising, although from 2010 onwards she did join protests against attacks on Coptic churches.

Her life changed at Maspero, the national radio and television building in Cairo, where Copts were protesting against discrimination and attacks on churches. She said the area quickly became a “war zone” as army armoured personnel carriers charged into protesters.

“I was towards the back of the demo when the shooting began. I was frantically worrying about Mena as I had lost him. Everyone was saying we had to leave, and in the end it was only me and my sister Cheri who were left. They were shooting randomly, and beating people.”

She only found out that her brother had been shot dead at 8pm that evening, just after she had got into a taxi to leave Maspero. She received a phone call saying that his body was in the hospital.

“We immediately began the fight for justice for his death there and then in the hospital. I gave the case to lawyers, but I know nothing will happen through the law as there is no real law.”

She added: “I thought that once Mena was gone, I would be lost, but I have found new strength to fight for the things he, I and others fought for, and in the end we will succeed.”

“Given the current situation, I don't expect to get individual justice for Mena's death, but I will continue to struggle for true justice for him, which would be that Egypt becomes the most just country in the world – a homeland without poverty, repression and discrimination.”

Since the Maspero tragedy, Mary Daniel has taken up many other causes. Indeed, she only had time to meet Amnesty International as she joined a protest by teachers who were demanding a living wage. With other activists, she carried empty saucepans to protest the increase in living costs in front of the Cabinet Offices building and appeared to be one of the campaign's leaders.

She talked passionately about how women are galvanizing support for the struggles for justice. “We fight as equals, and don't see ourselves as more or less strong than men.”

Asked about the new Constitution, Mary Daniel said: “The Constitution does not guarantee any right to women in Egypt. It is not representative of the people.”

Is she optimistic about the future?

“The general view is that the Revolution has failed and its objectives have not been realized. But it is not over, and the Revolution has shown how strong women are.”

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST COPTIC CHRISTIANS

Egyptians of all faiths and denominations participated in the “25 January Revolution”. However, religious minorities have continued to suffer discrimination by the authorities and receive inadequate protection from the state from sectarian violence.

Discrimination and attacks against Coptic Christians, the largest religious minority in Egypt, are particularly prevalent. Today, Copts continue to be under-represented in relation to appointments to high public offices, positions of university presidents, as well as key security positions, for instance at the level of the National Security Agency or the General Intelligence. Egypt has for decades witnessed sectarian clashes that varied in intensity but were mostly rooted in religious stereotyping and inequalities, in some cases perpetuated by state actors. Coptic Christians in Egypt have repeatedly complained that the Egyptian authorities have not done enough to protect them or prosecute their attackers. The authorities have often favoured “reconciliation” over the prosecution of offenders.

In breach of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the authorities have failed to end discriminatory practices preventing Copts from building houses of worship or restoring existing ones. Many churches have been closed down or destroyed because the authorities allege they did not get the right permission to be built or renewed.



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AZZA HILAL AHMAD SULEIMAN

JUSTICE FOR INJURED PROTESTERS

“An obstacle to justice is the absence of justice.”

Azza Hilal Suleiman had her skull fractured by soldiers in December 2011, leaving her in a coma for days. She now campaigns for justice for those injured and killed by Egypt’s security forces during and since the uprising

Azza Hilal Ahmad Suleiman, aged 49 and from Heliopolis in Cairo, became known internationally as the “red-hooded woman” from a video that went viral on the Internet. The footage showed her desperately trying to protect another woman whose underwear was

exposed as soldiers dragged and beat her during a protest near Cairo's Cabinet Offices on 17 December 2011. Azza Hilal Ahmad Suleiman too was then mercilessly beaten by soldiers.

The next thing she remembers is waking up in hospital. She had a fractured skull and her swollen face left her barely recognizable. She had been in a coma for a week and doctors told her family to prepare for the worst.

"At the beginning, the pain was so bad that I would wake up screaming, and I fainted a lot. But lots of friends and relatives helped me."

One of those friends was a man who soon became her fiancé. "He really supported me, and we held the same views on the Revolution and justice," she smiled, "so I melted with love for him."

He was shot dead at a sit-in in Abbaseya near the Ministry of Defence, Cairo, on 2 May 2012 after unidentified men attacked the protesters. Azza Hilal Ahmad Suleiman says the "thugs" had been employed by the army used "to do its dirty work".

The uprising and these appalling abuses turned her life upside-down. She was raised in a military family and led a pretty conventional life. Now she is a fearless activist who is determined to get justice.

"My determination was fuelled by the number of people who visited me in hospital, families, men and women, strangers, who just wanted to show solidarity. I told them 'we are stronger than them, they should be scared of us, we have the strength of acting collectively together'.

"I feel that I am not weaker than anyone. Strength has nothing to do with gender, it comes from inside the person.

"Seeking justice is our common goal. Everyone tries for this every day, at work, at home, in courts. Where is justice for the police who killed all those protesters? For the army who ran over Copts at Maspero?

"It is very painful for us all that so many people were killed or lost their eyes or were injured and no one has been punished for this. The truth is that an obstacle to justice is the absence of justice."

Azza Hilal Ahmad Suleiman decried the new Constitution, saying it had not been written with the participation of the protesters who had brought down Hosni Mubarak. She accused the authorities and the Muslim Brotherhood of "trying to assassinate our freedoms".

Does she believe she will win her struggle for justice? "If there is justice, I will get justice," she said defiantly. "There are many people helping me in Egypt, but if I can't get justice here, I will sue the police [and, in effect, the security forces responsible for her attack] abroad. I will not give up."

Is she optimistic about the future?

“Yes, because there is always hope.” She added: “You only have rights if you fight for them. And the more we support each other, the stronger we are and the more we will achieve. I will never lose hope.”

CRACKDOWNS ON PROTESTS

During the crackdown on the 2011 uprising, the security forces killed more than 840 people. Under military rule from February 2011 to June 2012, the army and security forces killed over 120 more. Since then, over 60 others have died in protests, often as a result of unnecessary lethal force used by security forces. The protests have continued to call for the goals of the “25 January Revolution” to be realized – for human rights, dignity and social justice.

While recent protests have become increasingly violent, Amnesty International has continued to document unnecessary and excessive force by the security forces. The organization considers that policing of assemblies should always be guided by human rights considerations. The fact that an assembly is illegal, or that minor violations of the law occur during a peaceful assembly, should not necessarily lead to a decision to disperse it. Similarly, where a small number of protesters try to turn a peaceful assembly into a violent one, police should ensure that those who are protesting peacefully are able to continue to do so, and not use the violent acts of a few as a pretext to restrict or impede the exercise of right to freedom of assembly of the rest of the protesters.

Members of the security forces have been repeatedly acquitted of crimes committed during the suppression of the uprising. Only three soldiers have been convicted and sentenced in relation to the army's crackdown on protesters. The continuing acquittals have raised serious questions over the independence of Egypt's Public Prosecution and the effectiveness of the criminal investigations and evidence-gathering processes.

At time of writing, the authorities were considering a repressive new law that will greatly restrict Egyptians' right to protest.

AZZA SULEIMAN

DEFENDING WOMEN SURVIVORS OF
VIOLENCE

“Pessimism is a luxury
we simply can’t afford.”

Azza Suleiman, a lawyer in her forties and mother of two sons, works to prevent violence against women and to help survivors of violence, whether inflicted by relatives or state agents.

Azza Suleiman heads the Centre for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance and set up its offices in an informal settlement in Giza. The organization also runs a refuge for women victims of violence. “It’s there,” she said, “because that’s where it is most needed.”

The centre provides many services for women, such as giving legal advice and helping women to get identification documents so they can access services.

Azza Suleiman is also Co-ordinator of the Feminist Coalition and spends much of her time raising awareness in villages about human rights and promoting discussions on progressive interpretations of Shari’a (Islamic law).

So what triggered her activism? “When I was young I had a sense of leadership and I wanted to help poor people,” she said. “Then I looked to bigger causes. Everything I have done is about building a better nation.”

After she graduated, Azza Suleiman volunteered with human rights organizations. “The more I learned about human rights violations the more my concept of the nation became about improving human rights.”

She now focuses on three programmes of work: violence against women and girls, especially so-called honour crimes and tribal marriages involving children; advocacy to change the law



so that it doesn't discriminate against women; and working in local communities to improve literacy and to help young people.

"We talk all the time to women and marginalized people, and try to support them and help them access justice."

Azza Suleiman said that given social pressures women find it difficult to talk about violence, especially honour crimes. She added: "Women who try to talk to the police are not treated well. Police always take a partial position – blaming the women for 'provoking' their husband into beating them. There is also a culture of distrusting the police, as women fear being ill-treated in police stations and being treated in an undignified way. And women simply don't trust the judiciary."

She believes that the main problem for women in Egypt is that they lack financial security and suffer from patriarchal and social taboos. "This means they continue to endure abuse because they don't believe there is an alternative and don't believe they will get justice."

Azza Suleiman described the difficulties linked to violence against women by the military. "Some people refuse to believe the army is capable of torture... Before it was very difficult to take up cases of abuse of women in custody, but since the uprising it has been much easier as more women have spoken out."

Asked about the new Constitution, Azza Suleiman said: "[President] Morsi had promised an increasing role for women and Copts. The Constitution came after that with nothing! ... Women's rights have been linked to religion and not to the needs of Egyptian women."

She added: "Women are threatened by a public discourse from the state's institutions whose mission is supposedly to protect their dignity... So instead of punishing whoever is responsible for harassment, the government is consenting to more exclusion for women. This is outrageous!"

On the attacks against women in Tahrir Square, she reflected: "It is a weapon used not only to break women but the whole society and to stop the Revolution."

Azza Suleiman also spoke of her anger at the authorities' reaction to the attacks against women protesters. "Instead of pushing towards effective police accountability, women are held responsible for what is happening to them. Why are the police not playing their role in protecting women protesters?"

She also condemned the opposition's reaction to the incidents: "They say it's because there are more important issues to deal with at the moment. As if women's problems are not as important!"

Is she optimistic about the future?

"I can't be pessimistic generally because of the activism we are seeing," she said. "The fear is broken. Everyone talks about politics. In the past, women and girls didn't talk about sexual harassment, but now they do and they are fighting back against it."

“But,” she added, “there are dangers, especially for women activists. Police have threatened me. I have been accused of working with Israel, vilified for being divorced. No man would ever be castigated for being divorced, but the police stoop to this kind of dirty behaviour with women.”

She then smiled: “But I believe that the blow that doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Sexual violence and harassment of women is endemic in Egypt and the authorities have failed to take steps to prevent it.

The authorities announced a new sexual harassment law in October 2012 and again in February 2013, but did not pass it. Women who have tried to lodge complaints have reportedly been treated dismissively. Indeed, the victims are often blamed for being dressed “indecently”, or for daring to be present in “male” public spaces.

Since the uprising, women activists have frequently been subjected to sexual violence around protests. In June 2012, a march by women activists against sexual harassment was itself attacked by unidentified groups of men. Women journalists covering protests have also been attacked and in some cases subjected to sexual assaults. The violence was similar to that used during the rule of Hosni Mubarak in 2005, when groups of men were reportedly hired to attack women journalists taking part in a protest calling for the boycott of a referendum on constitutional reform.

Over recent months, women activists and others in Tahrir Square have been attacked by unidentified groups of men. Women were separated from their friends and colleagues and surrounded by the groups of men, who tore at their clothes and dragged them away, subjecting them to sexual violence. Activists involved in addressing the phenomenon provide various explanations: a culture of impunity when it comes to gender-based violence against women; opportunism by criminal elements in the current climate of political instability; systematic attempts to exclude women from public spaces and deny them their right to participate in the events shaping Egypt’s future; and the lack of interest of political movements, officials and the media. Following the attacks, members of the Shura Council’s Human Rights Committee blamed the women themselves.

ENGY GHOZLAN

COMBATING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE

“There is so much resistance to any kind of change.”

Engy Ghozlan works to combat sexual harassment and violence in Egypt. She is one of the founders of HarassMap, an on-line initiative created in December 2010 that documents incidents of violence against women. She is also involved in Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault (OpAntiSH/A), set up in November 2012.

What made her want to start HarassMap? “Our goal was to bring the issue to the public and allow girls to talk. We also aim to raise awareness of this particular issue [sexual harassment] using social media.”

As part of OpAntiSH/A, Engy Ghozlan is one of the women activists trying to stop the sexual violence in Tahrir Square and to assist the survivors. “Since the second anniversary of the Revolution, we have dealt with 19 cases of sexual assault,” she said.

“We intervene to help those girls to get out of the crowds; then we help them have access to medical and psychological care. This is our main goal; to help the girls in such distress.”

Like many, she believes the attacks on women protesters in Tahrir Square were organized and co-ordinated to silence women. “The latest sexual violence in Tahrir Square was of a political nature,” she said. “It was organized. Well, it looked organized given the context in which it happened, which was characterized by an escalation of violence against women.”

Engy Ghozlan noted her frustration with the authorities’ attitude to women’s rights. “There is no political will to change any laws, especially the ones that hurt women. They are not even willing to discuss and when they do, you hear very conservative ideas and positions such as what was said at the Shura Council that women are to be blamed for rape.”

She also expressed disappointment with the new Constitution: “I feel that the Constitution is excluding women and discriminating against them. It is not concerned with women’s well-being in society.”

Is she optimistic about the future?

“I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic about the future. I feel there is more to come, so I

am waiting to see what is going to happen. But I can tell you that it is not promising. There is so much resistance to any kind of change.”



AMINA AGAMI

PROTECTING WOMEN FROM VIOLENCE

“I am proud that I have spoken to sex workers and raised their awareness about their rights.”

Amina Agami broke free of her husband after years of domestic violence, despite the enormous social and financial risks of doing so. For the past 10 years she has worked for NGOs that promote and protect the rights of people most at risk, including sex workers and people living with HIV/AIDS, many of them living in slums.

Originally from Beni Suef, south of Cairo, and an arts graduate, Amina Agami stopped working when she had children. But her home became a place of terror.

“I was a victim of domestic violence by my husband. I suffered a lot, but eventually managed to separate from him. That was 11 years ago.”

“My family was very shocked when I left my husband. My children were three and one [years’ old] at the time.”

She learned the hard way that “the most important thing for women is economic empowerment”. She added: “Without that, they cannot escape abusive relationships or situations. They are trapped. This was my main obstacle to leaving my husband.”

Amina Agami, now aged 42, turned her personal trauma into a driving force for helping other women who had suffered or were at risk of violence. She worked for eight years with the Al Shehab Foundation for Comprehensive Development on violence against women, and on

issues relating to sex workers.

Her work has sometimes put her at risk. She was arrested in January 2010 while interviewing sex workers, taken to Old Cairo Police Station, strip-searched and kept in a cell overnight.

For the past year she has been with Maan, an NGO focusing on health, children, development and prevention of HIV/AIDS.

Asked about the new Constitution, Amina Agami said that it "...does not care about women, as if they do not exist." She said the Constitution could potentially provide for child marriage.

"The Constitution does not give women any chance to be at the parliament, ministry of justice or any other positions like that."

On the latest protests, she added: "The Revolution was violated. Young people aged 18 to 25 were killed. Those are the future of the country. You kill them and the country has no future, as simple as that."

Is she optimistic about the future?

"I think the current situation in Egypt is particularly challenging. Before the Revolution the government simply denied that women had certain rights. Now we have the problem that certain religious elements are saying we will go to hell for asking for our rights [to be respected]."

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

As in other countries, domestic violence is reportedly prevalent in Egypt. Currently under Egyptian law domestic violence is not criminalized as such; it is dealt with as an "assault". Martial rape is not criminalized by the Penal Code. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has criticized the authorities' response to domestic violence, noting the inadequacy, insufficiency and lack of co-ordination in social support services, as well as the lack of shelters for women.

Human rights organizations have pressed the authorities to pass new laws to combat violence against women. The authorities have announced that they are considering new legislation to combat sexual harassment, but have yet to pass it. In March 2012, the human rights organization El Nadim Center for the Management and Rehabilitation of victims of violence had called on Egypt's lower house of parliament to consider a law specifically criminalizing domestic violence, but the parliament was dissolved in June 2012.

Under international law, in addition to ensuring that its own officials respect human rights, Egypt has the obligation to act with "due diligence" to address abuses committed by private individuals such as husbands and other family members. This means the government is obliged to prevent domestic violence, and where it occurs, to investigate and prosecute alleged perpetrators in fair trials and to provide reparations and support services for survivors.



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MANAL TIBE

DEFENDING THE RIGHT TO HOUSING

“I expect an attack on human rights organizations soon.”

Manal Tibe is the head of the Egyptian Centre for Housing Rights and was a member of Egypt's Constituent Assembly until her resignation on 24 September 2012. She was an activist with an Amnesty International group in Egypt many years ago, and now works to stop forced evictions in slums and for housing rights to be respected.

Manal Tibe, who is 44 and mother of a 16-year-old son, said that she was first drawn towards human rights when she was a university student and became a leftist political activist. "We wanted democracy, workers' rights and social justice," she said. "But I wanted to change things immediately, even if small things, not wait for the Revolution."

After she graduated, she had a chance meeting with an expert of an Amnesty International working group. "From that point I started to learn more about human rights. I joined Amnesty and became a co-ordinator".

"After two years, I realized that I was spending more time working on human rights than on my job. So I joined the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights."

She then spent time with various other human rights organizations, including the Association for Human Rights and Legal Aid and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights, where she did research. "But this was not satisfying because I wanted to be a part of the events, not just study them afterwards."

After she married and had her son, she became a broadcaster on state media. "Then I decided to establish a movement to campaign for housing rights, because in this period there were many forced evictions. I was aware of some happening in an area behind the TV/radio building where I worked."

"I contacted many human rights organizations to take this on, but none agreed. They all only worked on political and civil rights, and said that housing did not fall into these categories – including Amnesty [at that time]."

"So I started an initiative on my own, with my funds. I worked for four years on a voluntary basis from my house or someone else's house. Eventually we got some funds from different organizations, and started the Egyptian Centre for Housing Rights."

After the uprising she became a member of the Constituent Assembly, one of the few independent voices there. She resigned the day before Amnesty International met her, blaming intimidation by Islamist members for her decision.

She said that her resignation was triggered by proposals that attacked the rights of women and children. "It appeared to me that it was now better for me to oppose these policies from outside the Constituent Assembly than inside it."

"The new Constitution does not provide any kind of protection to women. It actually reduces even the few ones that we had under the 1971 Constitution. The spirit of the Revolution has been violated at so many levels.

She added: "The Constitution will absolutely have no effect on women's leadership. I don't think we will see any change in women's political participation in Egypt."

She also spoke angrily about the recent sexual violence in Tahrir Square: "The harassment served to scare female protesters so that they stop taking part in protests."

Is she optimistic about the future?

"It's not a question of optimism – I just have to keep working to defend and promote human rights."

She added: "The present situation is not good at all. It's not what we were looking for in the uprising. Before, when we were resisting Mubarak's regime, no one accused us of being apostates. They might arrest us, but not call us apostates. Now, if you express any alternative view, they insult you in religious terms."

She fears for the safety of human rights activists as they are being increasingly accused of receiving foreign funding and following a foreign agenda. "But," she added defiantly, "I remain optimistic because of the movements of resistance – the resistance is far from dead."

"I am optimistic about the youth of this country because they want change and I am sure they won't give up until it happens." Referring to the dangers activists and protesters face, she warned: "They all are 'martyrs' in the making."

INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

More than 12 million people have little choice but to live in Egypt's sprawling slums because of the country's chronic shortage of affordable housing. For many of those forced to seek a home in these settlements, shelter is found anywhere that can protect them from Egypt's harsh climate – in the labyrinth of Cairo's ancient tombs, in collapsing old buildings, or simply under sheets of cardboard, metal or wood. Many informal settlements lack basic infrastructure such as sewerage and piped clean water, and have little or no formal connection to electricity.

In some neighbourhoods, unstable ground rock, perilous cliffs, railway lines, the risk of flooding, open sewers, high-voltage wires and other hazards pose serious threats to life and health, particularly for the old and the young. Overcrowding, lack of infrastructure and violence make life hard in these areas, but the communities are also vibrant and treasured.

Amnesty International has called on the authorities to take immediate action to protect slum-dwellers in life-threatening situations, including by evacuating hazardous areas and temporarily or permanently rehousing the residents. As a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Egypt is legally obligated to respect, protect and fulfil the right to adequate housing as provided by Article 11(1). This requires the Egyptian government to refrain from forced evictions; the authorities must also adopt appropriate measures to fully realize the right to adequate housing. It must prioritize minimum essential levels of housing for all people and prioritize the most disadvantaged groups in all programmes while allocating resources. The Covenant also requires the government to guarantee the right of people to participate in and be consulted over decisions that will affect their human rights, and to provide an effective remedy if any of these rights are violated.

In practice, the Egyptian authorities have treated people living in informal settlements with contempt, subjected them to forced evictions, and attacked and imprisoned them if they dared to protest. Many slum-dwellers live in fear because of their hazardous living conditions and the threat of forced eviction.

AYESHA AMIN

ON-LINE SUPPORT FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

“There was a feeling of freedom and acceptance in Tahrir Square that gave me hope.”

Ayesha Amin (name changed to protect her identity) is in her thirties, and since 2007 has been trying to create an informal network to advocate for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Egypt.

Few topics in Egypt are more contentious than LGBT rights, as homophobia and discrimination against LGBT people are rife and abuses by state and non-state actors on the grounds of sexual orientation and/or gender identity are a real threat.

Ayesha Amin told Amnesty International that because it is impossible to openly advocate for LGBT rights in Egypt and provide support to those whose rights have been violated, all her activism has been virtual and done by creating fake on-line profiles. “Our only gate is on-line”, she sighed, acknowledging that she is unable to reach those without access to the Internet.

She said that she considered herself lucky because her closest relatives have accepted her to some degree, even though they think that being a lesbian is a temporary, curable disease and hope that she will be eventually reformed.

She wants to help those who are less lucky: those whose families imprison them at home when they suspect something; those who are taken to mental institutions by their families; those who are forcibly married.

Her dream is to create safe houses for lesbian women facing such situations to give them refuge when at risk of violence; to find them jobs to enable them to support themselves and live independently. Ayesha Amin told Amnesty International that some gay men and lesbian women enter into “cover marriages” with each other in order to ease social pressures while allowing both to express themselves freely, which many feel is the only available, practical option given the discriminatory attitudes in Egypt.

Ayesha Amin also wants to create a network to provide psychological support to young women who feel isolated and who struggle with their own sexuality. One of her current projects is the creation of an art house for LGBT individuals to meet in a safe space.

She is already carrying out some of her ideas informally with a group of friends and like-minded people, who through their personal connections and donations support those in need by hosting them when they escape home, and providing them with material and psychological support.

One woman she helped is 22. Her brother discovered her on-line chats and she was then imprisoned at home by her family for a year and a half. She became suicidal. Ayesha Amin spent many hours talking to her on the phone and on-line providing her with emotional support and advice and discussing possible solutions.

Another girl approached Ayesha Amin on-line seeking counselling after her father raped her while her mother pretended not to notice. Other women approach Ayesha Amin on-line asking for sexual advice, and reassurances that their feelings are normal.

“During the 18 days of the ‘25 January Revolution’, I had hopes that things would improve, that there would be an opening in society, more tolerance. But we need re-education and awareness-raising. We cannot change superficially. There was a feeling of freedom and acceptance in Tahrir Square that gave me hope.”

She believes that such hopes have been frustrated by various moves by the authorities, such as when President Morsi decreed he had wide-ranging powers in November 2012.

“After the first Constitutional Declaration, I was wondering why did we do all this, why did all those people die?” she said “...It is not about the government, you have to change mentalities and that takes time.”

Is she optimistic for the future?

“I am optimistic by nature,” she said. “I believe in people, and that people can evolve and change for the best.”

LGBT RIGHTS IN EGYPT

Like in many countries, Egyptians who identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual frequently face discrimination and violence. They have also faced repression from the authorities, who do not recognize their rights.

Under Hosni Mubarak, Amnesty International documented cases where individuals were targeted for their sexual behaviour and accused of “habitual debauchery” under Egypt’s Law on Debauchery (Law 10 of 1961 on the Combat of Prostitution). Little definition is provided for “debauchery” within the law itself, but the Egyptian judiciary has applied the term to same sex relations in the context of prostitution of men as well as consensual sexual relations between men in private.

In May 2001 some 60 men were arrested in Cairo, the majority of them while at a night club on a boat known as the “Queen Boat”, eventually leading to the conviction and imprisonment of 21 men for “habitual debauchery”, one for “contempt of religion” and another on both charges. In a new crackdown that began in October 2007, 24 men were arrested in Cairo and Alexandria on charges of the “habitual practice of debauchery”. Most were forcibly subjected to anal examinations to “prove” that they had engaged in

homosexual conduct. Most of the men were sentenced to prison terms. In January 2009, a further 10 men were detained, charged with “habitual debauchery” and subjected to testing for HIV/AIDS and anal examinations without their consent. They were later released on bail.

In June 2012, an Egyptian UN representative told the Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association and on Countering Terrorism that sexual orientation was “highly controversial” and “not part of the universally recognized human rights.” He said that the Special Rapporteurs should concentrate on the human rights of “real people”.

The effective criminalization of consensual sexual relations between adults of the same sex is discriminatory and contrary to Egypt’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects the rights to freedom from discrimination (articles 2 and 26), freedom of expression (Article 19), freedom from arbitrary interference with the right to privacy (Article 17) and freedom of conscience (Article 18). The right to privacy is also violated through coercive measures such as mandatory testing for HIV/AIDS, and the right to liberty and security of the person (Article 9) is violated when HIV status is used to justify deprivation of liberty or detention.

ACTION NEEDED NOW

Amnesty International calls on the Egyptian authorities to combat the sexual violence that stops women from claiming their human rights. It urges them to:

- Ensure that women can vote in all elections and referendums on an equal basis with men and without facing restrictions, harassment or coercion.
- Ensure that women can participate in the formulation of government policy, including constitutional and legal frameworks, and to enable and encourage women to hold public office.
- Publicly condemn all forms of gender-based violence and sexual harassment, without reservation.
- Ensure that full, impartial and independent investigations are conducted into all alleged cases of gender-based violence and attacks on those attempting to rescue survivors, including in the vicinity of Tahrir Square, with a view to identifying and bringing perpetrators to justice in fair trials, without recourse to the death penalty.
- Give clear instructions to law enforcement officials to diligently investigate violence and harassment against women, respecting the rights of survivors, and ensuring they are not retraumatized by the justice system.
- Ensure that women can exercise their right to peaceful assembly without fear for their safety.
- In consultation with experts, including women's and human rights activists, lawyers, doctors, psychologists, educators, devise and implement a strategy to eradicate sexual violence and harassment against women, including a public awareness raising campaign to combat discrimination, gender-based violence and gender stereotyping.
- Introduce legal provisions to combat all forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, marital rape, sexual harassment, and amend all laws that discriminate against women, in compliance with Egypt's obligations under international human rights law.

Please write to:

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