



Photography and collage, Rawya Sadek 2019

# **Even the Finest of Warriors**

Yara Sallam

Translated by Zainab Magdy



**About the artist:** Rawya Sadek is an Egyptian visual artist and a translator from French and English into Arabic. Her artistic interest lies in the scope of interactive works specifically in the field of contemporary Egyptian history. She has been working, for almost four years on a multi-disciplinary art project on Egyptian feminist writer Doria Shafik. This project began with a solo exhibition at [TownHouse Gallery](#) in Cairo that was entitled “[On Coincidence, Old Age and Depression](#)” in March 2017. After that, she produced a publication entitled “A Trilogy of Time in Doria Shafik’s 1960s” in November 2019 with [Medrar for Contemporary Art](#). Rawya is currently working on the third and last part of the project which covers the years between 1970 - 1975 in Shafik’s life and work.

As a translator, Rawya Sadek has recently translated a collection of selected poems by Doria Shafik, *Avec Dante Aux Enfers*, that is to be published by the National Center for Translation. She has also translated *Reparer les vivants*, a novel by French author Maylis de Kerangal.

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## Introduction

"Separate, things cannot bring about change, unless they come together."<sup>1</sup>

For some reason, introductions are not to be written first, so I was told, and yet I want to write now. I want to record all my feelings and initial thoughts which will change, as I will when I listen to the testimonies. My eyes wander to the date as I write this, and I think that next year this should be in print. A year from now, I will have taken the first step in writing about my personal feelings regarding work in the public space and my attempt to bring our narratives into the feminist discourse related to it.

I remember my source of inspiration well. When I started reading *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance*<sup>2</sup> around seven years ago, I did not understand the nature of my fear of working in the field of human rights. Back then, I did not know how to articulate the negative feelings I was left with as a result of doing this type of work. I suddenly found myself reading stories; parts of these stories expressed my fears about the future, while other parts expressed emotions I was already feeling.

I also remember Sunila,<sup>3</sup> the Sri Lankan activist; I remember her illness, and later her death, as well as the conversation I had about her with a friend of mine. Sunila had advised my friend not to put her personal life on hold for her work on human rights. However, I do not remember whether Sunila's advice came before or after her illness and her not being able to afford the cost of treatment. From time to time, my friend and I meet when I'm traveling for work. Although we work in the same field, most of our conversations are about personal matters. News from work is marginal during our quick meetings.

I still remember when I met a Jordanian artist who told me about how exhausted she had become because of work only a few months after I was released from prison. One day, she just couldn't move out of bed and ended up going to physiotherapy for months, which was to be followed by mandatory rest. After that, during another work trip, a friend of mine, a Canadian

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Salwa, (alias), Tunisia

<sup>2</sup> Jane Barry and Jelena Dordevic, *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance*, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, 2007: <https://urgentactionfund.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/06/WTPR-Final-Book.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> About Sunila: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/09/sri-lanka-mourning-tireless-rights-advocate-abeysekera>

feminist working in human rights, told me about how she had to take several months off work after she had literally fallen ill from working too much.

Around two years ago, I tried to write my thoughts on the exhaustion I felt from working in the human rights field.<sup>4</sup> That was after different phases of considering how I could continue doing this work differently so as to limit how it affected me psychologically. I had not yet thought of this project, but it is clear to me now that all those 'conversations' were part of this project's journey. Although there is some overlap between the experiences of men and women who work in the public space in relation to exhaustion in this field, I decided to focus only on women for this project. Firstly, because I believe that the specificity of each group (women and men) deserves a thorough study in light of how women carry double the load that men carry, which makes their experiences substantially different than the experiences of men. The second reason for this choice is my personal interest in trying to understand my own experience as a woman living in Egypt at this time in history and with such concerns.

The title of this book project, *Even the Finest of Warriors*, is inspired by the title of an article written by Rana Gaber and published on Mada Masr<sup>5</sup> as part of a series of personal articles on mental health<sup>6</sup>. I read the article two years ago, as I was entering another cycle of work-related burnout. The article was exactly what I needed to read: that I had every right to feel exhausted. At that time, the space given to speak about the mental and physical cost of working in the public space did not exceed the margin, when our schedules are always filled up with other 'priorities'. I insist, however, that we are also a priority in the struggle for a better and more beautiful life. Revolutions don't happen for us to be miserable, nor do they happen for us to get sick, or for us to neglect our other lives. For revolution – as I believe in it – is an action for change so that beauty can win over ugliness, and hope can win over pain, and so that we are able to see beyond these binaries.

This project cannot be read in isolation from the already published writings by other feminists on the issue of well-being in Egypt and the effect of working in the public space on mental health. Naira Antoun edited a number of articles for Mada Masr

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<sup>4</sup> "No One Warned Me": the trade-off between self-care and effective activism", Yara Sallam, 20 June 2017:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openglobalrights-openpage/no-one-warned-me-trade-off-between-self-care-and-effective-activism/>

<sup>5</sup> "Even the Finest of Warriors", Rana Gaber, 23 December, 2017: <https://madamasr.com/en/2017/12/23/feature/society/even-the-finest-of-warriors/>

<sup>6</sup> "Neither pathologization nor romanticization: A series," 12 October 2017:

<https://madamasr.com/en/2017/10/10/feature/society/neither-pathologization-nor-romanticization-a-series/>

on mental health and wrote the final article to wrap up that series<sup>7</sup>. In addition to this, she has written previously about the emotions of hope and defeat and mental health in the aftermath of the revolution<sup>8</sup>. Vivienne Matthies-Boon has also written about the political trauma that activists were subjected to after the defeat of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution<sup>9</sup>. Other publications related to the same topic examined the idea of "bad feelings"<sup>10</sup> and the question of well-being<sup>11</sup>. In the past years, these articles and publications were steps taken towards speaking about what we've experienced in this period of defeat that has spanned over several years now in Egypt. I perceive my project to be complementary to this work which is concerned with the issue of well-being.

Through this project, I am trying to open up a space for speaking about what worries us as women whose lives have become entangled up with revolution. Our legitimate worries about aging, illness, lack of financial security, and other personal concerns, have not left us. We have not forgotten while we do our work, that there are those who need our support and those whom we need around us, like our families – actual and chosen ones – friends, and partners. We have not forgotten our need to spend time in solitude, nor have we forgotten about getting engrossed with a hobby we have always wanted to take up. I remember, as I write these lines, a sentence which my maternal aunt wrote and hung up on one of the walls of her apartment: "My project takes off from joy, and not from disappointment." So does this project of mine.

This project is concerned with mental health, general exhaustion, lack of financial security, as well as aging as neglected intersections, despite how important they are in the context of documenting the struggle of women in the public space. *Even the Finest of Warriors* moves forth from the precept that our struggle in the public space is not dissociated from our struggle in the private one, and that our lives and our personal struggles with our surrounding circumstances are worthy of documentation, as

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<sup>7</sup> "There are addicts in socialist utopias: In search of a language for psychic suffering", Naira Antoun, 10 October 2018, Mada Masr. Available at: <https://madasr.com/en/2018/10/10/feature/society/there-are-addicts-in-socialist-utopias-in-search-of-a-language-for-psychic-suffering/>

<sup>8</sup> "The politics of the personal: January 25 through the lens of depression", Naira Antoun, 25 January 2017:

<https://madasr.com/en/2017/01/25/feature/society/the-politics-of-the-personal-january-25-through-the-lens-of-depression/>

<sup>9</sup> Vivienne Matthies-Boon (2017), "Shattered worlds: political trauma amongst young activists in post-revolutionary Egypt," *The Journal of North African Studies*, 22:4, 620-644. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629387.2017.1295855>

<sup>10</sup> *The Alphabet of Feeling Bad* (February 2017), Ikhtyar Feminist Collective (in Arabic): [https://www.ikhtyar.org/?page\\_id=20965](https://www.ikhtyar.org/?page_id=20965) and *Feminist Killjoys* (February 2017) Ikhtyar Feminist Collective (in Arabic): [https://www.ikhtyar.org/?page\\_id=20946](https://www.ikhtyar.org/?page_id=20946)

<sup>11</sup> *Laden with Vulnerability* (February 2019), Ikhtyar Feminist Collective (in Arabic): [https://www.ikhtyar.org/?page\\_id=21619](https://www.ikhtyar.org/?page_id=21619)

are protests and public actions. This project attempts to offer a space where our private personal worries can be expressed, and to normalize the idea that 'exhaustion' is one of the outcomes of interacting with the public space in our countries in the current moment without being stripped of the title 'activist' when we need to rest, for "even the finest of warriors, my dear, get exhausted."

Perhaps it is because of all these reasons that I have decided to write this book. Perhaps it is because I have had enough of perceiving our vulnerabilities as a personal load that we each have to carry alone; we share our collective political grief and anger and leave out the personal and strip it of its political context. With this book, I come face to face for the first time with my limited human ability to deal with multiple loses at the same time. With it, I have also started to accept my vulnerability and the effect of my personal choice to continue to work in the public space and stay in my country while disregarding my physical and mental health. This book commences my search for collective solutions that can lessen the pressure on people to be 'happy' or 'healthy' so that we can perhaps realize that leading roles are temporary ones and are exhausting and that they also require support.

### *Do Our Stories Matter?*

I believe that our hesitance to speak about what we experience through working in the public space comes mainly from seeing others going through more difficult experiences. Our job focuses, mainly, on offering support to the women and men survivors and the victims of violations committed by our governments, right? Are we not working on their "stories"? But what about our stories, our daily problems that are insignificant in comparison to torture, rape, forced displacement and everything else that makes up our daily political reality?

Twelve years ago, I started recording testimonies that women gave about their lives. Testimonies about divorce procedures, alimony and child custody; testimonies about physical assault and the destruction of homes and livelihood for belonging to a religious minority; testimonies about physical and sexual assaults during political events; and finally, testimonies about the history of their involvement in the public space. While writing about some aspects of these women's activism,<sup>12</sup> I

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<sup>12</sup> "Features of the Struggles of Women Human Right Defenders in Egypt," EuroMed Rights, 27 January 2017: <https://euromedrights.org/publication/in-their-own-words-egypt-report/>

realized that part of what excited me was my passion towards discovering what makes us women want to engage with the public space. Another thing that prompted me to do this work was how disturbed I was that there are only a few select faces who represent activism in Egypt. This, I believe, has to do with privileges related to being multilingual, living in a centralized city, and being part of circles and networks of foreign journalists and international human rights organizations outside Egypt. However, I insist that we are many, and we are present, and we are doing this work no matter how different our stories are.

Sondos works in the field of storytelling and performance of personal stories about societal taboos. And yet, this "story woman" finds it difficult to talk about what she goes through: "I feel that I can't say that I'm exhausted. I'm embarrassed because I feel that there are so many people around me who have been doing this for more years. How can I say, 'I'm tired'? I am embarrassed to say I'm exhausted and that I just can't do it anymore"<sup>13</sup> Many others share Sondos' sentiments; it is not easy to stop this unkind comparison between ourselves and others. Sometimes, I cautiously wonder out loud how one can continue to work in the same context where other, older and more experienced, women still work: women who have spent years fighting different political regimes. However, I believe that we have every right to speak about our exhaustion and the emotional burden we carry even if we have worked for fewer years than others who are still 'standing strong.'

We can think of us starting to tell our stories and to talk about our personal struggles as the beginning of us practically living by the motto 'the personal is the political', which is used repeatedly within feminist circles. How then do we come to see this motto when our mental health and its crises intersect with our work in the public space? Although the work that Malak Ahmed does is very important, for this project she chose to speak about what she cannot stop thinking about: the mental illness that she lives with, its financial costs and the weight of living with it "I will always worry about myself. I always feel that I will collapse again. I collapse regularly; I just wish that the bouts of illness would allow me five years to do a Ph.D."<sup>14</sup> Reading melancholic novels or facing setbacks or crises related to the public space are capable of pushing Malak to seek treatment in a medical institution. How then can we understand this intersection between mental health and working in the public space? Should those who suffer from illness or mental disorders choose not to work in the public space in order to avoid the aggravation

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Malak Ahmed (alias), Egypt

of their symptoms or is there another solution that can minimize the damage? Until this moment, psychological disorders are stigmatized within the so-called-progressive communities in Egypt. Malak's decision to stay anonymous was primarily because she was afraid to lose job opportunities in the future if her identity were to become known.

Telling our personal stories might be a psychological burden to us, however, we can easily witness how it affects our mental health positively. 'Letter' reminds herself of the importance of what other feminists wrote about their lives and their personal struggles in making her feel that she is not alone. Her need for such references in her life makes her believe in the importance of documenting our personal stories; perhaps this can lessen the loneliness we feel in contexts where we are 'different'. 'Letter' says, "Actually, the society doesn't see our lives as normal, even our choices are not normal. Our identities are not recognized, and if they are, it comes with consequences and this is an ongoing battle."<sup>15</sup> Yet, with all the pain that comes with the process of telling our stories, knowing that what we tell could make other women and men feel some form of 'companionship' as we did while reading personal texts, could help us make sense of this heaviness.

While thinking about the concept of this project and the research questions, it crossed my mind that one of the women human rights defenders might want to speak about 'politics' which would then prompt her to ask to remain anonymous. I have come to discover, however, that how we define 'danger' and 'safety' is different than what I had become used to in the context of working in human rights. The women who chose to be anonymous did so because a facet of their identity itself could pose some risk, where exposing it could lead to defamation or the misuse of this information to belittle who they are. If exposed, these facets of their identities could cause for them not to be employed or to be at risk of detention or legal prosecution. The women defenders' reactions to the interview itself and their preference as to whether they remain anonymous or not, enabled me to understand that sometimes an identity can be risky. Being in danger does not necessarily have to do with being politically active in the traditional sense; it is about existing in a specific political context where our identities – with their intersectionalities – become a cause for our vulnerability in the public space. The choice to remain anonymous could be related to a choice of being independent, or our sexual orientation or psychological state, or belonging to a religious minority. Whatever makes up our identities is in fact a political stance once the person decides to make it public.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with 'Letter' (alias), Egypt

In many conversations with my girlfriends, we talk about what is deemed 'normal' for women like us in the society. We talk about the feeling of alienation that accompanies us in many gatherings of family or old friends. I have tried to imagine many times that I had taken a different trajectory in life and chosen to do a different job and that I was not involved with anything happening around me. Although I find it difficult to imagine myself in that way, the feeling of alienation and of belonging to the bubble of 'abnormal' visits me every now and then, when I am exhausted or when I have nothing to push me to keep going. Perhaps our collected stories could help in lessening this feeling of alienation for other women, and act as a spell that we could use when needed.

Telling our personal stories can also help us understand what we go through. Sometimes, we start doing this work with no real awareness of its wider scope and its effect on us. Aida<sup>16</sup> remembers that no one had expected that torture was happening on that scope when they established El Nadeem Center<sup>17</sup>; "no one prepared us for this, we were badly shocked, we still are."<sup>18</sup> Sondos cannot imagine that the women who have worked in the public space for decades can speak up about the breakdowns caused by their jobs because they will be met with the saying, 'the carpenter's door is off its hinges'. Precisely because of 'what we cannot speak of' and not having the space to share our 'shock', I believe that it is important to start now to share any questions pertaining to our well-being in this field of work, because I wish I was aware of how working in this field would affect me from the beginning.

Sondos uses storytelling to talk about a bad experience she went through and to heal from it. However, she thinks that 'telling stories' that are specifically about exhaustion has not happened as much as it should; "when we start speaking about our exhaustion, others will start to speak of their own." And yet to speak about our intimate feelings intersects with difficult questions that perhaps we have no answers to, or maybe we are afraid of those answers: "how can we admit that we want to stop doing this work and just escape?"<sup>19</sup> Are we capable of facing whatever comes with telling our stories? Perhaps storytelling

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<sup>16</sup> Aida Seif El-Dawla is a psychiatrist and one of the founders of Al Nadeem Center

<sup>17</sup> El Nadim Center for Management & Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence is an Egyptian organization established in August 1993 as a civil nonprofit organization. For more information visit: <https://elnadeem.org/?lang=en>

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Aida Seif ElDawla, Egypt

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

can force us to face such questions and come to terms with the implications of answering them. Perhaps we become more understanding than to those who decide to step back completely from engaging with the public space.

I have worked on the documentation of human rights violations for over ten years, and it never crossed my mind that documenting our personal journey in the public space is an important matter. Yara Mounir says, "Before the revolution and before working in the public space, I was someone else; right now I'm an entirely different person."<sup>20</sup> It is most probable that the term 'women human rights defenders' was not used in Egypt until the revolution started in 2011<sup>21</sup>. Since that time, there has been documentation of the violations which women defenders face as individuals precisely because of the work they do<sup>22</sup>. However, part of this documentation process was to shed light on the 'achievements' of women defenders as "strong women" who are always standing up to authority. This approach in writing about WHRDs has contributed to the overall difficulty of speaking about our personal vulnerability in facing the world.

Malak Ahmed does not agree with the narrative of being continuously strong nor with turning WHRDs into unrealistic icons. She says, "it is not my role to be just a strong person. I have many setbacks [due to my illness] and I have every right to be treated by people with this in mind."<sup>23</sup> The problem with this narrative is that it is directly related to our well-being and the extent to which we are able to accept our disappointments, as well as the physical and psychological pains we feel because of the work we do. It may be that some feel ashamed because they fail to embody this preconceived image of what we should feel and who we should be so as to deserve the title of activist or defender.

Regarding the same issue, Esraa finds herself saying to those who feel exhausted that it is their right to take a break: "I needed someone to tell me, 'If you need some space away from politics, take it.'"<sup>24</sup> Esraa did not want to be forced to act strong all the time, and yet when the time came and she felt exhausted, she could not find anyone to support her so that she could rest

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Yara Mounir, Egypt

<sup>21</sup> See "Series of Concept Papers: Women Human Rights Defenders", Nazra for Feminist Studies, June 2012, link <https://nazra.org/en/2012/06/women-human-rights-defenders-concept-papers>

<sup>22</sup> Refer to "[Violations Continue: Military Policies against Women Human Rights Defenders](#)," and "[One Year of Impunity](#)," , Nazra for Feminist Studies.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Malak Ahmed (alias), Egypt

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Esraa Fahed, Egypt

for a while, which impacted her negatively. Rana Gaber writes<sup>25</sup> about these moments of exhaustion, being brave and enjoying life as it comes, with all its shortcomings, as we come to know it from our daily battles. I read her article again and again whenever I need to; it seems to have become an incantation by which I calm myself with the reminder that what I feel is normal and understandable.

Even though she is convinced of the importance of telling our stories, Youstina believes that no one will appreciate this. Perhaps one of the things that could encourage us to speak about "our side battles, which no one knows of"<sup>26</sup> is being able to share our stories in an appreciative environment. No one wants to open up about something personal in a space where they will be undermined or not fully heard. There is a minimum requirement of emotional and psychological security to speak up which is the sense of interest and appreciation we get from our listeners.

As for Tunisia, I found the issue of telling our personal stories to be problematic for activists as most of those who were interviewed have placed the stories of the survivors and victims they work with above their own, believing that giving their own stories such importance could imply conceit and putting the 'self' above the cause. For example, Wafa Fraouis says that "it's difficult to find someone to listen to you when you're the one who is supposed to listen to people."<sup>27</sup> Some defenders decided to remain completely anonymous because they believe there is no point of revealing anything personal. Meriam El-Mechti, on the other hand, finds that telling her own story can help other women, and Rasha Haffar believes that our stories are important because they are informative to other women. I remember how Sara AlSherif tried to convince me that it would be better to speak to family members of the civilians being tried in military courts because she believed that their stories deserve to be heard more than hers. However, the rest of the women participating in the research from Egypt did not try to direct me towards interviewing other women. Could we claim that the Egyptian activists and WHRDs were more ready to speak about their lives? Is their readiness to open-up because of how bad the political and human rights situation is in Egypt, with no hope of change in the

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<sup>25</sup> "Even the Finest of Warriors" by Rana Gaber on MadaMasr, 23 December 2017, <https://madamasr.com/en/2017/12/23/feature/society/even-the-finest-of-warriors/>

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Sara AlSherif, Egypt

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Wafa Fraouis, Tunisia

near future? These specific questions were not directly asked to the interviewees, but they actually put them on the table; maybe the time to answer them will come in a later phase of this project.

Comparing between the interviews in Egypt and Tunisia is what shows the connection between well-being and the political context. In general, and without ignoring the singularity of each and every interview from both countries, speaking about emotional exhaustion from work and involvement in the public space with Egyptian activists was spontaneous and not at all strange. On the other hand, the answers of Tunisian interviewees showed how the issue of well-being is not discussed by those working in the public space, or at least showed it to be a marginal issue.

The answers of the Tunisian women reminded me of the general atmosphere of working in the public space in Egypt in 2012. Back then, everyone, men and women, were giving priority to activism and revolutionary work as they felt it was a defining moment which requires this kind of prioritization, and it was a pivotal moment indeed. Perhaps the Tunisians feel there is hope for some political change or that working in the public space could be fruitful and so they have neither the time nor space to think of the effect of the work they do on their well-being. Perhaps the Tunisians are doing better in terms of well-being because they are able to have an effect on the political situation more than the Egyptians. It could be that feeling hopeful and the possibility of bringing about change does leaves us in better health.

On the other hand, the situation when I was interviewing the WHRDs in Egypt was that the public space is almost closed and there is no hope in the near future for any political change for the better, and so, there is more space for self-reflection and for contemplating the past years and how these years affected them. Some could imagine that the bleak state we have come to pushes people to escape the situation and to decline thinking about how we are affected by this. However, the interviews conducted in Egypt showed that the standstill we have come to, on the political front, has left us with some headspace to rethink our experiences.

## Methodology

*Even the Finest of Warriors* is a feminist book about the well-being of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) from the Arab world post-2011, dealing with issues that have long been ignored because they are generally categorized as 'personal' issues. The book being 'feminist' means that it approaches the question of well-being by taking all the different intersections that affect the lives of women into consideration, as well as regarding well-being from a perspective that challenges patriarchal values and preconceived ideas about the roles of women in society. *Even the Finest of Warriors* consciously values the personal lives of women and their journeys as primary actors and not as secondary entities whose roles are to be care providers for others.

The idea for this project developed shortly after I was released from prison with my desire to translate *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?* into Arabic, because of the effect it had on my understanding of well-being and its intersection with the public space. I couldn't find a publisher interested in the translation project, so I followed the advice of two of my friends and went on to formulate a proposal for my own project on Egypt, which has developed to become an even larger project on the Arab region.

When I was arrested for taking part in a demonstration, the people around me were not exhausted, at least not all of them. After spending fifteen months in prison, I was released to find that everyone around me working in the same field was exhausted. I then started the journey of adjusting back to life to discover what well-being means but in a different way. While recuperating from the experience of prison, I started to think of the journey of recovering from my work on human rights, and I realized then that this was an issue I wanted to explore further. I felt the urge to document discussions about this issue that were taking place around me. The idea for this project came at a time when the Egyptian government started a crackdown on civil society organizations<sup>28</sup> creating a collective feeling of unpredictability as to what this crackdown could lead to. It took over a year for the idea for this project to materialize and I started working on it in May 2018.

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<sup>28</sup> "Background on Case No. 173 - the "foreign funding case" Imminent Risk of Prosecution and Closure" on Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 21 March 2016 <https://eipr.org/en/press/2016/03/background-case-no-173-%E2%80%9Cforeign-funding-case%E2%80%9D>

This project is to result in a book of three parts. The first part of the book focuses on Egypt and Tunisia, and the choice of the two countries depends primarily on the similarities and differences between them with regard to the impact of revolution, engagement with public space, and how WHRDs perceive self-care and 'well-being'. The second part aims to engage with WHRDs who were forced into exile post-2011, namely those from Yemen, Syria, and Libya, and how well-being is exercised in such circumstances. The third and last part will explore the Gulf region and the work of WHRDs under the tight and autocratic regimes which have no respect for women's rights, and to include the Gulf in the already growing narrative on well-being globally.

I chose to work on Arabic-speaking countries because of how rare it is to find narratives on 'well-being' from these countries, especially those written in Arabic. My choice to work on these specific countries is based on my initial supposition that there are, probably, resemblances between the experiences of WHRDs. However, this assumption is prone to change in the future if it is proven wrong, especially that, while working on this part of the book, my supposition that experiences of women in Tunisia and Egypt are somewhat similar was proved wrong, or proved to be different than how I had imagined it.

*Even the Finest of Warriors* makes no distinction between WHRDs who are still actively engaged in the public space and in the defense of human rights and those who have decided to leave the field and shift their paths. I believe that all those who have chosen to leave the movement after doing this work, be it for after a short or long period, deserve credit for the work they have done and deserve to have their voices heard, and their experiences made available for the benefit of others. I primarily use the term 'Women Human Right Defenders' throughout the book. The terms 'activists' and 'feminists' are used at times and this is due to my sense of connection to the feminist activist discourse on WHRDs in its broader sense<sup>29</sup>.

*Even the Finest of Warriors* is primarily structured around the narratives and stories of the WHRDs whom were interviewed. However, it does not intend to be a storytelling book, as it rather seeks to answer questions about continuity, challenges and feminist ethics of work and living, and to engage critically with the notions of "resilience" and "closing civic space". The book seeks to honor and validate the contribution of women and the sacrifices they have made in the public space, whether our youngest or oldest of defenders, and to acknowledge that the space we work in constantly changes. The book also

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<sup>29</sup> See footnote 21

aims to show how there is not one single narrative, especially when the dominant narrative is taken up by women's rights and feminist organizations which have access to the media and enjoy privileges such as functioning in a second language and the centralization of the capital. Furthermore, institutional politics are not within the scope of the study conducted for this book, nor are the WHRDs interviewed based on their professional capacities. The conversation around institutional roles and their impact on the well-being of their employees is not the focus of *Even the Finest of Warriors*, which is concerned with the personal narratives of women.

This book differs from the typical way of academic writing or research as I decided to write this book from a personal perspective. I write in the first person while thinking about what feminists and women human rights defenders from Egypt and Tunisia have said and connect it with my own experience to make this book a personal narrative of multiple voices. *Even the Finest of Warriors* deals partly with my personal experience in trying to understand the meaning of well-being in the context I live in, and partly with the experiences of the women who have participated in this book. I am not an observer in this narrative, but rather one of those voices that shape it. Although I have read many publications related to, whether directly or indirectly, the topic of the book, the readers will find that it does not rely primarily on these publications; rather, these publications act as a guidance within the narrative.

Different from published research projects or books which centralize the person being interviewed thus portraying their lives and their work, I have decided to leave the space for the readers to get introduced to the women who were interviewed on the project's website,<sup>30</sup> so as to allow the topics being discussed to become the real heroines of the book. This text is my personal attempt to first understand what I have experienced since I became involved in the public space, and to then find a guide as to how to continue doing this work. I could not have written about these two issues in isolation of the journeys of other women comrades and without reading what has been written on this subject.

The contrast between the interviews done in Egypt and those done in Tunisia is quite clear on several levels, perhaps not in the number of conducted interviews but rather in the content. The content of the interviews has surely been affected by my inability to travel to Tunisia to do the meetings myself and having to depend on a research assistant to do so. However, the

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<sup>30</sup> The website of the project, profiles of the women defenders: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profiles/>

differences between what the interviewing process in Egypt and Tunisia are directly related to the differences between the two countries. Such differences have shown how the question of well-being and its intersection with working in the public space is in effect a multi-factored issue. These differences have confirmed the correlation between well-being and the political milieu which reminds us of Audre Lorde's quote, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."<sup>31</sup> What appeared to be common in interviews from the two countries is that the core of well-being is the same; basically, good health, a strong support system and work that pays off.

The first part of *Even the Finest of Warriors* is originally written in Arabic and translated into English. Most publications or research conducted on well-being at the moment are written in English and are mostly never translated into Arabic. This book seeks to contribute to the current literature concerned with narratives from Arabic-speaking countries<sup>32</sup>.

I have conducted ten interviews myself in Egypt, and eleven in Tunisia with the help of a research assistant, Feryal Sharafeddin, in August and September 2018, using the same questions that I had prepared according to the chapters of the book for both countries. The interviews were based on semi-structured interview questions that were not equally asked to all the WHRDs, since the choice to interview each and every one of them was related to the specificity of her own story. Although the book has different set sections, the contribution of every WHRD is different from section to section. The interviews were conducted in Arabic either at the homes of the WHRDs or other places of their choice. They were recorded after the approval of the defender, then transcribed and approved again to ensure accuracy. The interviews generally took between an hour up to three hours each.

In choosing the WHRDs to be interviewed from Egypt, I was careful that they would not be a homogenous group. Although most of them live in Cairo, not all have been born there; half of them were born and lived in cities other than Cairo but have moved there later in their lives. I was also careful to include a variety of ages, sexual orientations, fields of work and interests as well as religions and other differences. As for Tunisia, I depended on the knowledge of my research assistant, and I discussed with her the importance of interviewing diverse women in the public space whether Islamist or secular, from Tunis or outside the capital, one who works in a feminist organization or works independently as well as differences in age and sexual

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<sup>31</sup> Audre Lorde: *A Burst of Light and Other Essays*

<sup>32</sup> See bibliography for sources

orientation. I wanted the interviews to represent as many women as possible with all their differences and despite not having ample time to conduct more interviews, this is what the project has succeeded to do to a great extent

The questions were formulated around several primary issues, each of them makes up one of the book chapters<sup>33</sup>. The first chapter is on how WHRDs view their personal stories and how important they are. The second chapter centers around why we do this kind of work. Why do we get involved in the public space and why do we continue to do this work once we decide to? Do we take a decision to create some distance between us and the survivors and victims of human rights violations as a means of adapting? How does the existence (or absence) of a strong feminist movement affect our ability to continue doing this work? The third chapter deals with pleasure and whether women involved in the public space believe they 'deserve' to enjoy life or not while they are working on mostly depressing issues that generally do not summon any optimism. Other chapters deal with issues around our families of origin and alternative families and the effect of them supporting us and our work; the way we see aging and the extent to which we are ready for it, including the issue of financial security, and what are the intersections that affect our mental safety or that place us in a highly vulnerable position; the effect of our work on our mental health; the ways in which we deal with exhaustion, physical illness, sadness, grief and loss.

The narrative structure of *Even the Finest of Warriors* is based on the topics which I chose because I firmly believe that well-being is an issue that intersects with many parts of our lives. I decided to bring up all the aspects I thought of when I interviewed the women participating in this book. When I was finished with the interviews and read the transcripts, I found that their answers automatically rearranged my questions to make up the narrative structure of the book as it is now.

The number of WHRDs interviewed in this book should not be taken as an indicator of the number of women activists in the public space in those countries, or to draw analysis or trends based on these interviews. This book will have examples of different experiences, which will merit a longer project of documentation that will help reflect on, understand, and map women activism in this region in a meaningful way without rushing to hasty conclusions because of the limitation of funding and tight deadlines. The choice of the interviewees was intentionally selected to cover less known WHRDs, and to cover intersections such as race, centralization of location, religion, age, identities, sexual orientation and work experience in the public space.

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<sup>33</sup> Please refer to the appendix for a detailed list of questions

The book is accompanied by an interactive website<sup>34</sup> containing profiles of WHRDs<sup>35</sup> who have agreed to be featured on the website, along with other forms of documentation that have been used in the interviews. Besides the interviews with the WHRDs, the book is also based on desktop research (English and Arabic<sup>36</sup>), which covers available resources on burnout, women's activism in the Middle East and North Africa region, mental health impact of activism, and well-being publications.

### **About the participants:**

I started this project out of a desire to engage with the issue of well-being in the lives of feminists and WHRDs who work in the public space in Arabic-speaking countries because I was curious to know the specificity of the area which I live in since most of what I had read about well-being does not deal with this geographical area in depth. I decided that the first phase of the project would be on Egypt and Tunisia. Egypt was one of my choices because I am an Egyptian who is concerned with understanding this issue in my local context. At the beginning, I imagined that Tunisia would be a suitable choice because the revolutions in both countries happened in a very close timeframe or because of the presence of a strong feminist movement in Tunisia. I thought maybe Tunisia's reality as a country is the closest to the reality in Egypt, contrary to other countries that suffer from armed conflicts (and hence cannot be categorized as such) or the gulf countries. It could be just that my mind has gotten used to making comparisons between Egypt and Tunisia in the past years. After finishing the interviewing process in both countries and reading more about the context surrounding the women's rights movement in Tunisia, I discovered the huge difference between the two countries, which is definitely reflected in the contrast that shows the extent to which well-being is a concern in both contexts.

I have conducted ten interviews in person in Egypt and acquired the approval of nine of them regarding the interview transcript and creating a profile for them on the website. Only one of them did not send her approval and I decided to give her an alias of my choice, Rana, and not to mention any personal details from her interview. The women I interviewed were:

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<sup>34</sup> <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/>

<sup>35</sup> See footnote 31

<sup>36</sup> Refer to bibliography

*Even The Finest of Warriors*

1. Aida Seif El-Dawla<sup>37</sup>: August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (Cairo)
2. Malak Ahmed (alias)<sup>38</sup>: August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (Cairo)
3. Letter (alias)<sup>39</sup>: August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (Cairo)
4. Sara AlSherif<sup>40</sup>: August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (Cairo)
5. Esraa Faheed<sup>41</sup>: September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 (Port Said)
6. Barah (alias)<sup>42</sup>: September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (Cairo)
7. Rana (alias): September 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018 (Cairo)
8. Sondos Shabayek<sup>43</sup>: September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 (Cairo)
9. Yara Mounir<sup>44</sup>: September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 (AlGharbia)
10. Youstina Samir<sup>45</sup>: September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (AlMinya)

Feryal Sharafadein, the research assistant, conducted eleven interviews in person in Tunisia and has transcribed them. I was not able to reach all the participants and was able to contact only nine of them through email; only seven have replied to approve the transcript of the interview. For this reason, I have decided to anonymize all personal information and create aliases

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<sup>37</sup> About Aida Seif El-Dawla: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/aida-seif-el-dawla/>

<sup>38</sup> About Malak Ahmed: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/malak-ahmad/>

<sup>39</sup> About 'Letter': <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/letter/>

<sup>40</sup> About Sara AlSherif: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/sara-alsherif/>

<sup>41</sup> About Esraa Faheed: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/esraa-faheed/>

<sup>42</sup> About 'Barah': <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/barah/>

<sup>43</sup> About Sondos Shabayek: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/sondos-shabayek/>

<sup>44</sup> About Yara Mounir: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/yara/>

<sup>45</sup> About Youstina Samir: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/youstina-samir/>

for all the interviewees who were not able to send me an approval, in addition to those women who chose to remain anonymous. The women who were interviewed are:

1. Fadoua Brahem<sup>46</sup> : 26 september 2018 (Tunis)
2. Samia (alias): 25 september 2018 (Tunis)
3. Salwa (alias)<sup>47</sup> : 18 september 2018 (Tunis)
4. Wafaa Fraouis<sup>48</sup> : 25 september 2018 (Tunis)
5. Wafaa Ben Haj Omar<sup>49</sup> : 17 August 2018 (Tunis)
6. Aya (alias): 22 September 2018 (Tunis)
7. Rasha Haffar<sup>50</sup> : 28 September 2018 (Tunis)
8. Hanan (alias): 15 september 2018 (Tunis)
9. Meriam ElMechti<sup>51</sup> : 31 August 2018 (Tunis)
10. Marwa (alias): 16 August 2018 (Tunis)
11. Souhaila Ben Said<sup>52</sup> : 27 September 2018 (Tunis)

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<sup>46</sup> About Fadoua Brahem: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/fadoua-braham/>

<sup>47</sup> About Salwa: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/salwa/>

<sup>48</sup> About Wafa Fraouis: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/wafa-fraouis/>

<sup>49</sup> About Wafaa Ben Haj Omar: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/wafa-ben-haj-omar/>

<sup>50</sup> About Rasha Haffar: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/rasha-haffar/>

<sup>51</sup> About Meriam ElMechti: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/meriam-el-mechti/>

<sup>52</sup> About Souhaila Bensaid: <https://eventhefinestofwarriors.org/en/profile/souhaila-bensaid/>

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I would like to thank all the women who have been part of this project by taking the time to share their experiences with me. Without their trust in me, this project would not have been written.

This project was only an idea that came out of a conversation with two dear friends, Poonam Joshi and James Savage, and so I would like to thank them for encouraging me and helping me get in touch with those who could make this project happen, turning an idea into reality. I would also like to thank Magda Adamowicz for being the link that allowed this project a chance to materialize and for believing in the project and helping me with suggestions on how to develop it.

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I would also like to thank Amira Mahmoud who has helped me in writing the transcripts of the interviews in Egypt; Feryal Sharafedeen who has conducted the interviews in Tunisia and written their transcripts; Mohamed Gaber who created the graphic identity of the project and the website layout; Husamuddin Hamad who designed the website; Shady Samir who has helped with

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## Chapter 1

### **"I thought that I could change the world."<sup>53</sup>**

The first chapter deals with how the women interviewed for this book became involved in the public space: why and how did they become active; how is being active in the public space connected to the struggles of their personal lives. Whenever the connection between well-being or self-care as issues pertaining to the individual as well as the political reality is questioned, I always ask myself: what makes me continue working in the field of human rights? What is the change we are seeking to make in this world? Do we not – those of us who are concerned with public affairs and aspiring to make any positive change – want happiness in its broadest form for everyone? Don't we wish for a world with less harm, a world that is more tolerant to differences, a shared space where we can all live safely? I firmly believe that what we offer to this space, and how we approach our work, is greatly affected by how we live our lives. The life I want to live is a hopeful and happy one, where I can come to terms with the difficult choices that we have to make. We have probably started off in this field from a personal motive, so before getting into the details of well-being 'now', I found it important to take a few steps back to understand what it is that moves us and makes us continue working in this field.

We do not work alone; even if we do not work in a civil society organization or a political party. If we regard any group concerned with public affairs as a 'movement', whether it is a political opposition movement, women or human rights organizations, groups of independent activists, then, at the end of the day, we all work within the same framework whether we like it or not. How, then, are we affected by existing and working within this framework and how does this overlap with our well-being?

*Why Do We Start?*

*"I'm the story woman."<sup>54</sup>*

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with Yara Mounir, Egypt

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

Sometimes, our stories begin with a story of revolution; "I see myself as someone who grew up in an exceptional moment in Egypt: a revolution is going on, there's change, things are actually happening. Some people have probably waited their whole lives for this moment. I was lucky that it happened at a time when my awareness was being shaped."<sup>55</sup> The revolution started on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, I was in my mid-twenties then and I had already decided to work in human rights; my consciousness had been shaped. Yet by witnessing the revolution, I came to feel a belonging and a sense of responsibility towards this geographical location called Egypt. Living through the beginnings of the revolution and opening up our souls to endless possibilities also requires us to find a way to deal with the heaviness of the general frustration of the period after, the anti-revolution, and with the various losses that we were not necessarily aware of how far they could reach. This state of 'bitterness' that followed the state of euphoria could have easily affected our ability to work in the public space again and our ability to preserve our well-being while doing this work.

Protests – for whatever cause – were the 'beginnings' for many activists. Meriam El-Mechti says that the revolution in Tunisia was where she started off; getting to know a Tunisian activist during the revolution greatly helped her become who she is now. Our awareness of public affairs was not only shaped by the revolutions starting in Egypt and Tunisia, because before these moments, there were protests to support the Palestinian cause and others against the war in Iraq that were also behind the engagement of some women defenders in the public space. Hanan and Aya<sup>56</sup> remember the protests supporting the Palestinian cause in Tunisia, especially those against the war on Gaza in 2009, as a starting point to their involvement in the public space: "most students were protesting [for Gaza] back then"<sup>57</sup>.

More than eight years have passed since the revolution broke out in Egypt and until now, I am unable to use the past tense in relation to it. I admit the defeat, but I refuse to consider this defeat the end of the revolution; I have yet to accept this loss. Frustration and exhaustion do not only happen as an aftermath to the defeat of the revolution or a long struggle, some of us are exhausted as they work on smaller goals or short-term ones. Sometimes the hope for change can be limited to a smaller

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with 'Letter' (alias), Egypt

<sup>56</sup> Aliases of Tunisian activists

<sup>57</sup> Interview with 'Hanan' (alias), Tunisia

scope; it doesn't necessarily imply change in state policies or laws, but rather creating an alternative space for children, for example.

Youstina Samir has loved theater since she was a child. What pushes her to continue working with her troupe, 'Panorama Barsha' in Al-Minya in upper Egypt, on issues related to their village is that she can see a 'change' in the lives of children working with the troupe. Working in the public space to make a change through art – activism – is a very difficult thing to do in Egypt, as difficult as working on human rights. The difficulties Youstina faces in her work are not only related to the risk of being prosecuted by the government but are also related to working on a small scale in a small village in a city which is three hours away from Cairo. Addressing problems which the village suffers from through street theater is certainly an activity that does not get financial support, nor enough coverage to offer moral encouragement to those working on the project. Yet, Youstina is able to continuously find something to keep her going which is seeing the change that overcomes the children after they've joined the theater troupe. Without a personal motive, and a satisfying outcome we cannot continue working in this field.

Another pattern of working in the public space is 'inheriting' the concern with it. This pattern, however, comes with its own issues related to well-being, because well-being as a topic was never part of the older generations' agenda. Like many women I have interviewed for this book, my awareness started with my upbringing as I grew up in a Leftist family. Although my mother and father were not officially involved in politics, their involvement in the cultural life and their concern with public affairs was clear to me since my early childhood. Perhaps I was not aware that I was being raised according to Leftist or feminist ideals until I went to law school and some colleagues would ask me the typical question: "Are you Left?" Even the stories of my maternal grandfather's detention several times, and my maternal grandmother's detention, did not necessarily imply that my family belonged to this movement because I have always considered the values I was raised with to be essentially humanitarian ones.

Growing up in a family that was familiar with political work and that accepted the price we pay for this kind of involvement was certainly an advantage, but I was shocked several years ago by what this entailed in relation to the importance of well-being. The idea that we should 'bear' and 'accept' the price we pay for what we believe in was nonnegotiable. There was no room to complain about the mental load of this kind of work, because that meant one should leave the public space and work in a field where they 'able' to deal with the consequences. In our household, we work all the time; even when we are 'depressed',

we 'bury ourselves in work' and depend on our 'will' and that 'we are strong', to an extent that made me feel ashamed at times by my own exhaustion. Maybe I am not cut out to do this work if the psychological effects are too exhausting for me. After my release from prison, I remember having long discussions with my mother about the sense of perplexion I felt, and I remember that she compared me to her father after his release from an incredibly cruel detention period. It is obvious that their generation did not consider well-being as it is now being considered among my generation in Egypt. Perhaps my maternal grandmother's rebellion and hatred of political work after it resulted in her own detention and then her husband's for a long period is an indirect rebellion related to her well-being and her refusal of the harsh circumstances she lived through because of her involvement in politics and the public space.

Aida Seif El-Dawla, who belongs to a generation close to the generation of my parents, said that growing up in a politically active household has enabled her to see political activism and the price paid for it as something worthy of respect. In addition to realizing the importance of working in the public space, her political awareness was formed with the detention of her father. Yara Mounir, who belongs to a generation close to mine, emphasizes the importance of the sit-in she led in the university at the end of 2011 in shaping her awareness and in bringing about her involvement in the public space. Yet, she always remembers her father's socialist tendencies and how they affected her: "I feel that it all actually started with my father. He worked as a lawyer in a small village, and they called him 'the poor people's lawyer'. I grew up wanting to help people in any way I could."<sup>58</sup>

Most of the activists interviewed from Tunisia grew up in politically active families or families that had political awareness, families that are specifically active in feminism or in trade unions. Salwa says that besides having witnessed various forms of violence repeatedly – which helped shape her awareness – it was having a family member who was active in one of the largest feminist organizations in Tunisia that encouraged her to join this organization's activities when she was going through a personal crisis.<sup>59</sup> Wafaa Fraouis links her involvement in feminist and activist fields since the age of fifteen to attending meetings at the Tunisian Association of The Democratic Women (ATFD)<sup>60</sup> with her sister then attending meetings with the association's young women's club before joining the ATFD at eighteen.<sup>61</sup> Hanan says that growing up in a family involved in trade unions and

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Yara Mounir, Egypt

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.es-cr-net.org/ar/member/385101>

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Wafaa Fraouis, Tunisia

feminist activism made her active in both.<sup>62</sup> The interviews show the importance of awareness from a young age and how the family's activism usually entailed interest and desire to work in the public space later on.

Marwa insists that as human beings we are not the outcome of a single moment. She remembers an incident in the early 80s, when she was twelve years old, when she put on her mother's clothes, including her head scarf and went down to the street close to her house. She was stopped by a police officer and was ordered to remove her head scarf. Marwa says that this incident left its mark on her and after reading extensively, she decided to join the Islamist movement in Tunisia<sup>63</sup>. Marwa feels challenged to change the stereotypical image of the Muslim veiled woman in Tunisia; "When I decided to wear the *hijab*, I heard many comments down the lines of 'you'll become ignorant and old-fashioned, no one will marry you and you'll be pushed to the margin,' when, it's the exact opposite."<sup>64</sup> Marwa's interview told her story about how the Tunisian government refusing the Islamic *hijab* in this way affected her, and it was the first time for me to hear about such an impact. Perhaps I had not imagined that such policies could drive a woman to work in the public space. However, what Marwa says in her interview proves that any restrictions on freedom pushes people to defend their right to choose, whatever their choices may be. What Marwa does is a feminist reaction to prohibiting the Islamic veil and this is the essence of freedom of religion and belief and the right to bodily autonomy.

Sometimes our personal struggles with our families is what brings us to work in the public space. Rana's father made her love reading; he told her, "I know you will be really something when you grow up." However, he passed away when she was young, and she had to fight for every step she took in her life: studying what she likes; participating in developmental activities; working in political parties; being out after classes at university. Rana works in the field of feminism and believes that working on the feminist cause is the most honest work she could do. "I've worked in many fields, but this is my main battle, my personal battle. I think that whatever we do from a personal place is always more honest than anything else." Rana says that she relied on personal experiences to know what she really wanted to work on because she didn't go to a school or university that gave her the kind of space where she could discover who she is. Until this day, Rana keeps looking for 'meaning' in all that she does. She

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Hanan (alias), Tunisia

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Marwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Marwa (alias), Tunisia

seeks achievement and passion in feminist work as a way for her to heal a personal pain that she experienced, so that maybe other women do not have to go through the same thing.

Rasha Haffar says, "Growing up, I was aware of the privileges given to my brothers and this made me very angry. I reacted to this anger and I was a feminist since I was young." Rasha was born in a conservative, traditional family who treated her differently than her twin brother regarding what is allowed or what is not based on gender roles and traditional stereotypes. All these early personal experiences are seminal in shaping our consciousness and our future tendencies, whether it is challenging the limited space given to us by society or our anger at injustice.

Despite differences in stories and location between us, it is easy for me to find the same starting points: the way our parents raised us, and the other incremental milestones which have led to our involvement in the public space. Malak Ahmad is grateful to her father for encouraging her to read and says that she has been interested in political science since her childhood: "I am interested in the public space because I see myself as part of it and because I have skills that can help in creating a better life for certain people."<sup>65</sup> Being aware of the skills you can use in human rights or feminist work is important even if we've learned these skills in a different field of work. Sara AlSherif uses the writing skills she acquired from her work in journalism in the activism she does on a volunteer basis. "I can't say I do this to help people," she says, "it's primarily to help myself. I can't go on with all these tragedies taking place in parallel. At least you've tried and maybe these little things add up and make a big difference at one point. What matters to me is making people's lives better, I think that is my only purpose."<sup>66</sup>

### *Challenges*

When I graduated from university more than twelve years ago, I was not prepared in any way for what I would hear and have to write down while doing this job; I thought that the reason for this was that I was working in institutions that had no background in psychology. However, Aida Seif EIDalwa, who is a psychiatrist, said that they were not prepared for what they saw when they established El Nadeem Center Against Violence and Torture. "No one prepared us for what we saw. We were shocked when we started El Nadeem Center, we still are. Back then, we expected activists but were surprised that those who came had

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Malak Ahmad (alias), Egypt

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Sara AlSherif, Egypt

nothing to do with politics; they were all poor, downtrodden, and with no social backbone. Then we realized that this was happening everywhere, it wasn't just state security. It was a real shock."<sup>67</sup>

One of the pieces of advice that I was given, which I've heard from many people, is how important it is to place a distance between us and the 'victim' or 'survivor' so that we can detach ourselves emotionally from what we hear. Sara AlSherif says that she chooses to deal with her passion for working with the 'No Military Trials for Civilians' group with a clear bias and deep emotional involvement. She had hated the superficial involvement which her former job in journalism required from her when working on other issues. I cannot really decide on which is better: taking a distance to preserve our well-being or getting emotionally involved in our work because this is what we are able to share with others? Whatever approach we choose, we should at least get to know ourselves to be able to read the signs well during this process so that we do not find ourselves emotionally and mentally exhausted all of a sudden.

#### *Can We Predict Our Own Exhaustion?*

Despite the heaviness of working in the public space, for many, this kind of work offers a goal in life and a sense of self-worth. The problem with connecting the work we do to generate income with our sense of self-worth is that it becomes impossible to imagine a change of career or even to consider taking a break. Even if we feel we deserve a warrior's rest, we do not know what to do afterwards. 'Letter' says; "What I do now is not and cannot be permanent; it's not normal for it to continue because of things beyond my control, because of the danger of doing this work in this country, and other factors that relate to me like getting exhausted, or bored or losing faith at one point."<sup>68</sup> It is easier to step away when we are active in a field or an issue as volunteers and so are not risking the loss of our source of income. Almost half of the WHRDs who participated in this project do not get paid for the work they do in the public space.

Not everyone is ready to accept the thought that we can just pause what we do. Sondos finds it difficult to accept advice from others telling her to stop doing this work because it is attached to her identity. At the same time, she finds that ignoring this option is quite self-oppressing when, at the same time, we refuse the oppressive regime of the state. Sondos started to

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Aida Seif ElDawla, Egypt

<sup>68</sup> Interview with 'Letter' (alias), Egypt

volunteer, then later worked, with the BuSSy Project because telling her stories and witnessing others tell theirs helped her on a personal level. When she thinks about what she could do after BuSSy, it is difficult to imagine doing anything else that would give the same meaning to her life, especially after spending ten years in the same place. The most difficult thing is having to quit your job or leave the public space altogether when this job is our only source of income; it might be easier to take a break from the public space and return to this work if we have other sources of income.

Perhaps we can imagine why our involvement in the public space dictates violent reactions from the state. Working on human rights violations places the state in a position of being held accountable. Yet it is not only the state that acts out in violence against us, because at times we face violence from non-state actors, which is a perplexing matter that creates a different kind of frustration. When Yara Mounir stopped working in the public space at the time when the late Mohammed Morsi<sup>69</sup> was the president, it was not because of state oppression but because she was violently beaten while attempting to stand in solidarity with a group of nurses during their sit-in at a hospital in Al-Gharbia governorate by one of their colleagues. After being unable to move for two weeks as a result of this beating and being threatened with burning by the same person who beat her, Yara felt that her attempts to support the nurses was not only without avail but that it would personally harm her. This is the kind of frustration that comes from the people we encounter during our work and not from the state; stakeholders, or the society at large, are able to make us lose hope entirely.

I remember my personal frustration at the time I stopped working in one of the Cairo-based feminist organizations. Perhaps this was the only time I had seriously considered leaving my work in the public space and working in a law firm and I even asked several people about the means of working in the latter field six years after I graduated. I did not want to leave my work in the public space because of state oppression or because of the effect of this work on my mental health. It was rather because of personal frustration at individuals who had acted against the ethics they claimed they lived by.

After going through a difficult personal crisis where she was not supported by her colleagues, with whom she shared a feminist collective, Rana decided to step away from the public space for some time until she got her life in order again. "When I came back to Cairo, I psychologically couldn't get involved again in any former activities, because I no longer believed any of

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<sup>69</sup> Mohammed Morsi (1951 – 2019) is the first elected Egyptian president from a civilian background. He was in office from mid-2012 until mid-2013.

those things. I didn't go back [to that workplace] because I felt that the support [they] spoke about was not really there when it was tested."<sup>70</sup>

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This first chapter has dealt with our personal stories, our interest in and initiation into the public space which is the cornerstone according to which we deal with our well-being throughout life. Much of what we feel with regards to deserving rest and pleasure is associated with how we define ourselves and our roles within the struggle on a broader scale. The following chapter deals with the way we define words related to well-being which mostly require much deconstruction in order to be able to understand their many dimensions. Pleasure deserves a conversation about earning; exhaustion requires a conversation about its signs; well-being as a word needs to be understood at the root.

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Rana, Egypt

## Chapter Two

### "If I find no pleasure in my life, I can't keep going"<sup>71</sup>

#### *Defining well-being*

One of the issues I faced while working on this research was using Arabic to write about concepts I came to know in English. However, to 'define' these words goes beyond finding a lexical translation for them in Arabic. I need to ask what 'well-being' means and how do we define 'pleasure', 'exhaustion', and 'burnout'. What does physical illness mean to us and how does it affect us mentally? Do we allow ourselves to feel grief, loss and sadness? How do we deal with such feelings when they exist at the intersection between the private and public?

Translator Nawara Belal came up with the term "*āl'āfyah*"<sup>72</sup> after consulting with other women translators. Due to the lack of a more convincing term, I decided to use *āl'āfyah* although both Nawara and I admitted that it was unfamiliar in written classical Arabic. Expressions like "*γ'ṭyk āl'āfyah*"<sup>73</sup>, "*ḥlytk b'āfyah*"<sup>74</sup> and "*āllh γ'āfyk*"<sup>75</sup> are used spontaneously without much inquiry as to what they mean literally. We wish people 'wellness' – *āl'āfyah* – which is the closest term in Egyptian colloquial Arabic to 'well-being'. Yet the term in Arabic sounded foreign to the WHRDs interviewed in Tunisia and one of them referred to it as "*mashriqi*" or related to eastern Arab countries. I finally decided to use it and to become familiar with it through this book because I needed to connect with this concept in my mother tongue, or maybe because my mother (who happens to also be a translator) liked the newly coined term.

Is 'well-being' about being happy or productive, about not having mood swings, being able to be functional with regards to basic daily tasks or is there more to it? Sondos tries to explain what this term means to her: "to be in a state of well-being is to have time, to have the financial and physical means to do things that guarantee a decent life so that I eat well, I go to a

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Rana (alias), Egypt

<sup>72</sup> العافية: well-being

<sup>73</sup> يعطيك العافية: may [God] grant you wellness/Bless you

<sup>74</sup> خليتك بعافية: I leave you in wellness

<sup>75</sup> الله يعافيك: Bless you

psychologist, I exercise, I meet friends; all this needs time and money."<sup>76</sup> How can we achieve all this? More than two years ago, I felt that well-being is a burden and that simply thinking about what I needed to do to maintain my well-being was exhausting.<sup>77</sup> I still feel the weight of the list I made for myself, yet working out and spending time with my family and friends are the basic things that contribute to my well-being. One aspect of well-being is good health,<sup>78</sup> and even though taking care of our physical and mental health is important it is still financially demanding, at least in Egypt when one tries to find decent health services.

Maybe 'well-being' is the model of the 'balanced life' everyone seeks? Rana says, "When I am well, I feel an inner peace."<sup>79</sup> For Salwa, well-being is feeling psychologically balanced which she views as a communal and not an individual issue; "When you work in a relaxing workspace, when there are no crippling set-backs from government institutions, and you solve the problems of every woman who comes to you, you'll feel relaxed, I think. At least there will be some daily victories. The individual's role is to care for oneself and try to heal oneself as much as possible. The role of the community is to try to find communal solutions to solve our problems."<sup>80</sup> For a moment, I feel that well-being is a very simple concept, however, it's complexity comes from its overlap with many other aspects of our life like the work environment and the ability to get tasks done, as well as having the financial security to afford basic life expenses.

Several years ago, talking about well-being became tied up with travelling to beautiful places or buying new things or doing costly activities such as getting a massage or shopping, etc. as well as other things that are available only based on one's financial abilities. Part of why the discussion on well-being has become problematic is how it has become linked to consumerism. However, there is an even bigger trap which we can fall into, that of tying well-being with productivity: "If I don't take care of myself," says Samia, "I can't go on or help other people."<sup>81</sup> The commodification of well-being irritates me but I understand the attempt to convince feminists and WHRDs of the importance of maintaining their own well-being so that they can continue 'working'. If doing this kind of work was what drove them to this state of absolute exhaustion and burnout, then perhaps being

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

<sup>77</sup> Blogpost (in Arabic) "Taking Care of Yourself" on *Passion*, personal blog: [https://talkingpersonal.blogspot.com/2017/03/blog-post\\_27.html](https://talkingpersonal.blogspot.com/2017/03/blog-post_27.html)

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Sara AlSherif, "I take care of myself by seeking good medical care," Egypt

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Rana (alias), Egypt

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Samia (alias), Tunisia

able to work in the public space for more years could be an incentive, making them pay attention to their well-being. However, this project is not concerned with well-being in the form of consuming services and products that cater to 'well-being', nor *la luta* continuing in separation of the individuals fighting it, but rather, this project is interested in trying to live the change we demand for others. Part of our main political struggle is a personal struggle for a better life for ourselves and for others.

I never expected that government surveillance could be mentioned in the discussion on well-being. However, when I asked Malak Ahmed about what well-being means to her, she gave several unexpected answers. "[well-being is] that my phone isn't bugged. To wake up and feel well and that the effect of my [bipolar disorder] medication isn't too bad. That my thoughts are organized, coherent, and moving in clear channels. To walk in a safe space where I'm not afraid while moving from one place to another. That I'm not pessimistic about the future."<sup>82</sup> All that Malak mentions is an example of how complicated it is to define well-being and how different it is from one person to another. Her mental disorder is a primary burden when it comes to her sense of well-being. Living in an oppressive country like Egypt, where it is customary to joke about state surveillance and the recording of our phone calls, is another factor that creates stress.

For others, well-being could be connected to livelihood security such as owning a residence. "When you own a house, and you have this independence, you're no longer stressed."<sup>83</sup> However, owning a residence, (or renting an apartment on your own), is not financially feasible for all those who work in the public space whether they are paid or they work on a voluntary basis because of the difficult economic situations in both Egypt and Tunisia. I imagine that financial and residential independence is also not easy in other Arab countries. A big part of my anxiety around my work is related to financial independence, especially regarding how to make enough money to pay the rent for an apartment in a neighborhood where I feel comfortable to live as a woman in Cairo. I believe many of us would feel much more relaxed if we owned an apartment or if there were affordable apartments to rent in safe neighborhoods. However, I cannot say that this is an issue only for feminist activists or WHRDs. This issue is similar to the unaffordable cost of proper healthcare in Egypt for citizens, or not having green and public spaces that are open to anyone, or that most entertainment activities are affordable only to those who are financially secure. I always remind myself that no matter how specific our grievances are as feminists and WHRDs due to our involvement in the public space, there

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Malak Ahmed (alias), Egypt

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Wafa Fraouis, Tunisia

is a social setting that governs the whole society. In Egypt, for instance, this results in a general state of deteriorated health and inability to afford means of entertainment because of the general state of the economy. Even if we are able to enjoy ourselves despite our income, there are still the basics requirements, such as good healthcare services or decent housing, which need a proper income.

*The Importance of Time and the Lack of It*

Just as we cannot speak about well-being without addressing the economic and political situation in whichever context we are working in; we cannot overlook the factor of time and how important it is in relation to our well-being. The International Labor Organization states that defining work hours has been one of the oldest concerns of any labor laws and that it was admitted in the nineteenth century that "working excessive hours posed a danger to workers' health and to their families."<sup>84</sup> Although we believe in human rights and in sheltering workers from working overtime without getting paid, most of the time, we end up disregarding our official working hours for political considerations. We see ourselves as activists – not employees – who are fighting for a cause that is more than just a task or that there is something urgent we need to do over the weekend. When I started working in the human rights field in 2007, I did not care too much about the time I was spending to do my job. However, by the end of 2012 (in another workplace), I realized that my work had crossed the line when a whole month had passed without seeing my mother who lives in the same city.

Marwa says that "how we organize time and allocate it is one of the most important challenges"<sup>85</sup> in relation to our well-being as she cannot find the time to go to the doctor for instance. Time is not only important for going to necessary appointments like doctors or finishing official paperwork that requires free time during work hours. Time is also important to find for leisure, specifically for resting and discovering and spending enough time doing things other than our political activism, or our feminist or human rights work. Perhaps this is close to the example of Wafaa Fraouis who has a special program every year to learn something new, something outside of her field, like theater or cinema.<sup>86</sup> Maybe spending enough time with ourselves or

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<sup>84</sup> International Labour Organization, International Labour Standards on Working Time,

<https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/working-time/lang--en/index.htm>

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Marwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Wafa Fraouis, Tunisia

with our families of origin or chosen families is enough reason for us to require time outside of the public space. Many of the feminists and WHRDs who were interviewed for this book mentioned that they do not have enough time to spend with their families, while others said that they do not have time to take care of themselves, including the time for doctor visits.

In addition to not having any free time, many of the women and men who work in human rights organizations or feminist ones do not take their annual holiday – another historical gain of the labor movement – off in full. It is necessary to find a way to make sure that something as fundamental for the recuperation of employees as official holidays is taken seriously. This should be followed up by the employees' direct managers or by the human resources officer if available.

I cannot say that we always have to work only on official working hours because at the end of the day, there is a connection between us and the work we do. For me, it is important to always be aware of the extra time we give to our work and to our involvement in the public space and to be aware of how important it is to make sure that we get enough rest and time for leisure. Samia says, "This has become a habit for me, that no matter how late my working hours are, I have to make some time for myself when I go home. If I can't do any physical exercise, then I take the time to read; eventually I let out all the day's stress."<sup>87</sup> If someone asks us, we would all have a list of things to do that are all related to self-care; like Samia says, even on the most stressful days we can find some time for ourselves to relax and regain our balance.

### ***Defining Pleasure***

When I decided on 'pleasure' as a concept that the interviewees would be asked about, I expected many questions about us deserving things that bring us pleasure when our jobs require us to continuously meet people whose rights are violated. Mainly I expected the feeling of not deserving to participate in any entertainment activities, but Barah surprised me with very low expectations related to what we deserve: "At least I deserve to not want to be sad or be depressed again."<sup>88</sup> I remember a specific meeting in a feminist organization I used to work in where we used to work most of the day and during public holidays; weren't we lucky that we did not experience the violations that women we worked with were subjected to? The consequence was that asking for a holiday or speaking about being exhausted in that workplace was met with sarcasm and emotional abuse

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Samia (alias), Tunisia

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Barah (alias) Egypt

that made everyone prefer to remain silent than to express how they felt. There was no room for us to speak about how our lives lacked pleasure; it was enough that we were not destined to suffer the same violations many women were subjected to at the time.

Can we really talk about 'pleasure' in an oppressive political context? Aya says that she cannot speak of pleasure in general because of how pleasure is connected to the political situation. "Our reality is that we're living without freedom...I'm not free if I have to think for thirty minutes about what I'm going to wear before I leave the house, or when I'm harassed on the street and I'm anxious and upset about it the whole day...On the other hand, we can also talk about the financial aspect or the cost that stands between us and what we want to do or achieve, like travelling and other things. All of this is greatly connected to the political regime and government and the global economy."<sup>89</sup> Souhaila has also touched upon the same issue saying that "Eventually, it's not [our] activism that affects us, but the general atmosphere. If the general atmosphere was healthier, we'd be fine."<sup>90</sup>

The level of awareness of the importance of engaging in pleasurable activities varied between the interviewees<sup>91</sup>. In one way or another, everyone did the bare minimum to bring some pleasure into their lives. Yet 'Letter' says that becoming more aware regarding this issue has affected her health positively. "For me, pleasure takes up a huge part of my life and I see this as a form of self-care. I became a much healthier person when I became aware of how this was something I needed to pay attention to, and not something that should happen randomly."<sup>92</sup> Rana also feels that her sense of well-being is connected to feeling strong and she connects this to having the space to have pleasurable things in her life. "If I don't enjoy my life and feel that there are good moments in it, I will feel that I'm weak all the time."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with Aya (alias), Tunisia

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Souhaila Bensaid, Tunisia

<sup>91</sup> The differences highlighted by the previous quotes could give the impression that the political situation in Tunisia prevents the WHRDs from experiencing pleasurable activities and that the Egyptian WHRDs can create small spaces for pleasure. However, because of not being able to return to the interviewed women to follow up on some issues that were raised, I cannot say that WHRDs from Tunisia are different than those from Egypt in this respect. Therefore, I consider this a contrast between some of the interviewed women that deserves further attention as the political situation in Egypt is more repressive. Perhaps the relationship between the ability to work in the public space (even if imagined) and pleasure requires deeper research.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Letter (alias), Egypt

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Rana (alias), Egypt

One thing I was keen on asking the WHRDs was what gives them pleasure in life. Despite the popular association between 'wellness activities' and consumerism, I am convinced that all of us can find pleasure in small ways that do not always require much money (except for traveling, perhaps). The following is a list of things that the feminists and WHRDs who are part of this project take pleasure in doing and I find that many of them are pleasurable to me as well. We find pleasure in:

- Exercising
- Taking long walks alone
- Having an extra day for leisure after a work meeting abroad
- Drinking, dancing, singing and laughing
- Pictures of babies on Facebook
- Reading a good novel that takes you into its world
- Listening to good music
- Going to the cinema or watching films at home
- Spending time with family members
- Spending time with friends
- Doing handicrafts
- Coloring
- Masturbation or any form of individual sexual pleasure
- Trying new and good food

*Even The Finest of Warriors*

- Traveling
- Seeing the sea and hearing the sound of the waves
- Smoking *hooka* on the sea
- Feeling that we have accomplished something important
- Sitting alone for an hour early in the morning with my cat and my coffee having nothing else to do
- Staying at home
- Having conversations with people I don't know
- Going to new places
- Turning my phone off for two days
- Swimming
- Going out for a beer with friends
- Meeting a new guy
- Having sex
- Smoking a cigarette
- Having coffee outside the house
- Going back home to take a bath, and watch some television before going to bed

- Drawing
- Going to the Tunisian *hamam*
- Massage

### ***The Weight of Working in the Public Space***

Until recently, I felt solely responsible for the state of my mental health and I blamed myself for not being able to create a safe distance between me and my work. I was not aware that my physical and mental health state were related to a larger social and political context that was more than I could take responsibility of alone. It is very difficult to be 'normal' and 'happy' while living under an oppressive political regime that is economically draining, especially for those who work in the public space. I read about 'Continuous Traumatic Stress'<sup>94</sup> and now I am finally able to make peace with how I feel. The term 'continuous traumatic stress', which is different than PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), describes the state of those who still live in the context where they were originally traumatized. Consequently, they are constantly aware of the possibility of what they had been subjected to occurring again and that they are not in a safe place. Reading about this concept was useful because 'being constantly present in the same context' is the best analysis of our situation as women who are not protected from the recurrence of trauma on account of our work in the public space. It was also useful for me to read about the concept because it helped me understand what I feel and enabled me to give it a name that comes with a scientific explanation.

Although several years have passed since I witnessed some of the terrible events that took place during the revolution here in Egypt and their overlapping with my personal life, some of these moments were heavy enough to remain as an unwelcome guest most of the time. Aida Seif EIDawla says that "there are things that we are very close to, things we come to

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<sup>94</sup> The term 'continuous traumatic stress' was proposed in the eighties by South African psychologist Professor Gill Straker and her team of trained psychologists who were offering psychological support to victims of torture and political violence under apartheid:

<https://www.cvt.org/partners-trauma-healing/continuous-traumatic-stress>

Also see: "Continuous Traumatic Stress: Conceptual Conversations in Contexts of Global Conflict, Violence and Trauma" (Stevens and Eagle, Kaminer, Higson-Smith), *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 2013, Vol. 19, No 2, 75-84

know and cannot unknow them. When the people in prison are not just names, but names with faces that you know, the world becomes a strange place. It's an abnormal state that you need to get accustomed to and act like you normally would, as if things are normal this way, but no, they're not."<sup>95</sup> I agree with Aida, that we live in an abnormal political context and yet are required to be psychologically well. We are also expected to maintain our emotional wellness and ability to work and keep up other marks of 'normality' in working adults. When my psychologist suggested that I start taking antidepressants, I was quite disoriented because I had a logical explanation for my psychological state and why I found it difficult to be happy. However, she explained to me that in past years, my body would fall ill when I went through stressful periods and that there was no need to let my body reach that state if I could use the help of medication. I was never sure whether my perplexation was because I am generally against taking medication for long periods, or because of the shame of taking medication for your mental and psychological state. Maybe I am against taking medication because I know that they will not affect the core reasons of everything I am feeling which is connected to a great extent to the political context I live in.

Aya says, "politics was a direct cause that framed the bad psychological state I was in. Right now, I am overcome with a desire to urgently find a space specifically for rest, pleasure and getting away in order to charge my energy so that I can go back to the mess."<sup>96</sup> Not everyone can create this space within the same oppressive context they live in, and accordingly they try to leave the country and search for such resting spaces elsewhere. Some of us, however, are unable to leave, whether because of the lack of chances to travel or because of reasons tying us to our countries. This leaves us with only a margin to create these small resting spaces.

Besides living in an oppressive political state that harms people in our closest circles, our existence as women in a patriarchal society places another kind of pressure on us that doubles our exhaustion. Sondos says that an important factor related to her exhaustion is being a woman; "the way we were raised and the ideals that were planted in us would make me suffer from exhaustion even if I own a grocery store."<sup>97</sup> I never thought of how being a woman could affect my sense of well-being in relation to my work in the public space, even if I am aware of the effort I make to just walk in the street in Cairo and

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with Aida Seif ElDawla, Egypt

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Aya (alias), Tunisia

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

to unconsciously think of my clothes all the time. I think about these things, but they are part of my life every day. Yet Sondos refers to another issue and that is how women are raised in Egypt generally. They are brought up to endure and to sacrifice and to put others before themselves. They are raised with 'values' related to the social perception of women as caregivers which lays an additional emotional burden on us as women who work in the public space.

One other stressful issue that we face in our kind of work is that sometimes we cannot find someone to appreciate the work we've done. Youstina says, "I feel good when my effort sees the light and some people appreciate it." She also says that her feeling of well-being is connected to being able to feel that her theater troupe can continue working without her, "this feeling that if I leave the troupe they would keep working and wouldn't stop."<sup>98</sup> This final point hits upon our ability to take a break without feeling guilty towards work and knowing that what we have created is strong enough to continue without us. Feeling responsible towards work could push many to keep working despite suffering from exhaustion and burnout from our jobs.

***"They see you as brave and hardworking and that you've got to continue being that way."*<sup>99</sup>**

One of the issues I brought up with my former psychologist is being unable to say no to more work despite how exhausted I was. I now think that this is based on how I see myself in addition to how others see me, especially those whose opinions I care about. There is a perception, heavily laden with expectations, about the personality and personal ability of those who work in the public space, as if they were women with superpowers who do not get exhausted, or frustrated or weary from the continuous problems they face. These women, of course, need to stand up to society and voice their opinions out loud at all times or else their loyalty to the cause becomes questionable. This one-sided and often ruinous conception of 'the struggle' as well as the 'iconization' of these WHRDs places a huge psychological burden on them and makes it difficult to admit to being exhausted.

For the sake of this work which gives us a sense of value, and for many other reasons, we find it hard to admit to our exhaustion. Over and above, there is a culture that glorifies exhaustion and considers it 'a badge of honor' so that the more we are exhausted, the more we prove to ourselves and to others that our priority is the 'public space'. Fatma Imam wrote a blogpost

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Youstina, Egypt

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

about burnout that happens when starting a new project<sup>100</sup> which is an issue worth discussing since the general belief is that burnout or exhaustion related to work comes after a long period of working with violent material and not at the beginning. The beginning of a project can induce frustration and despair on the financial level (finding funds to start activities) and on another level which is establishing the credibility of new projects and organizations.

Do we ask for help when we are exhausted? Salwa says, "I don't ask for help because I don't want to make them feel that I've failed at something like running my own life. I want them to feel that we're functional and that everything is alright."<sup>101</sup> It is not always easy for those who are accustomed to being 'service providers' or being the ones helping others to ask for help regarding their personal lives. No matter how convinced I am that we have every right to seek help, I find myself acting stubbornly in different situations to prove that I can individually handle my life. However, my life is an example of how the support from those close to us – whom I consider myself lucky to have – can be a great help. I can handle things alone if I must, but I remind myself many times that asking for help and feeling supported is vital for my psychological and emotional health and that there is pleasure in receiving help from others.

We do not realistically assess what we are able to do and what exceeds our capabilities in many activities. Aya says, "I used to think that I had infinite energy."<sup>102</sup> I started this project thinking it was like other research projects I had previously worked on. Starting off from the details that took much longer than I thought they would and the obstacles I could not overcome, this project came with an emotional load that I did not expect. Perhaps the person who works on issues related to torture and abused women expects that this kind of work to be heavy; yet our own stories about well-being carry many other tales of pain and trying to live with our choices. One thing we must learn about ourselves is that our energy is limited and that we need to know our own boundaries.

There is no time to grieve. I can remember days working side by side with others on a report on an incident of sectarian violence or publishing testimonies by survivors of a mass rape or recently, on executions. We did not take our time to understand what we were working on or what we were publishing. The work gets done in an almost automatic way and in a quick pace so

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<sup>100</sup> "Work Diaries" published on *Brownie*, 6 August 2010: <https://atbrownies.blogspot.com/2010/08/work-diaries.html>

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Aya (alias), Tunisia

that we finish and leave no time for thinking of what it means to witness such tragedies. I needed plenty of time to learn to accept grief. Aida, on the other hand, says, "I have no problem to grieve, I don't resist it, I can go on with my life, if I can't go on, I get some rest."<sup>103</sup> However, the danger of continuous grief is that it can negatively affect our physical health. Many of us working in the public space suffer from psychosomatic or physical health issues that are a direct result of our psychological and emotional state.

### ***Exhaustion and Illness***

Perhaps what scares me the most and pushes me to discover the various aspects of well-being is my fear of burnout and the illness that could come as a consequence of it. Sometimes, we do not have time to grieve, but can we at least take the time to think about how our choice to become involved in the public space affects our bodies and our well-being? Anxiety, tension and grief all affect our ability to sleep and affects our nervous systems. We all have weak spots in our bodies that fall ill when we are emotionally and mentally overloaded. We go through times when our bodies are not as strong as our souls; the body and the soul are not on the same page. One of the problems of physical illness is the feeling that it holds us back from what we want to do, whether it's related to what we work on in the public space or our personal life. Physical illness forced Sara Al-Sherif to stop dancing because of a back problem caused by stress. "The doctor told me that I can't just feel the pain and continue dancing, but I always used to do that. He told me that our movement should be limited by the pain we feel and that we shouldn't do something if we're feeling pain. I learned not to push myself because of my back pain."<sup>104</sup> Do we see ourselves as two separate entities, body and soul, or is the pace with which we work too fast that it does not allow us the chance to understand our bodies and how our work affects them?

I had not paid any attention to physical illness before; my biggest concerns were a headache or the flu. However, after turning thirty, I started having physical complaints. Many people warned me about back and knee pain, and I did not believe them. When I felt such pains and other ones, I tried to ignore them for a long time until I had to do general check-ups to make sure this was not because of a more serious medical problem that I should be worried about. I also added a new word to the vocabulary related to my body: chronic. Sondas says, "What I feel more than anything else is the chronic problems, they're on my

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<sup>103</sup> Interview with Aida Seif ElDawla, Egypt

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Sara AISherif, Egypt

mind every day. My body reminds me even when I forget. Starting off from my migraines to digestive problems: these medical issues are making me miserable. All the doctors tell me it's stress, there's nothing else, nothing is physically wrong."<sup>105</sup> Lately, I have come to find such comments from doctors quite provocative because their constant advice about being calm and "not taking things to heart" makes me feel that they do not live with us in the same place. Even if they do not work in anything related to the public space, I believe that the general atmosphere in Egypt at the moment is capable of ruining your mood and making you lose your temper on a daily basis.

Many psychosomatic symptoms are a direct result of shock. The WHRDs participating in this project have mentioned several symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, palpitations, back pain, head pain and stomach pain, in addition to insomnia and other things. Although we can console ourselves with the reminder that difficult times eventually pass, the physical effects can continue even after we feel psychologically and emotionally better. Therefore, psychosomatic illnesses and symptoms should not be underestimated when we speak about well-being. Sondos says, "The most violent moment in a burnout is the one where I can't feel anything or hear anything around me...when I get to that point where my body can't do its basic functions like sleeping. I become numb; [the anxiety] doesn't allow me room to feel. I'm scared of those moments because I'm scared of the price I'll have to pay for this and how it will affect my body. I'm scared that these moments will mess up something important."<sup>106</sup> I am also afraid of a burnout that could have some impact on my body that I will not be able to treat.

Many women (and men) around me treat psychosomatic illness and symptoms casually as long as they have not turned into a serious illness. Perhaps this casualty and acceptance is related to not having a space to complain or come up with actual solutions to the issue of our illness being connected to working in the public space. There remains to this day many misconceptions and stigmas about mental disorders even between those who work in the public space, including feminists. Malak Ahmed decided to anonymize her identity because she fears losing job opportunities or that people would treat her as an irrational person. "I deal patiently with physical illness, but I can't be patient with mental illness because its losses are graver. Mental illness is ruthless; it will get worse and you'll find yourself immediately trapped in a hospital. Maybe [I feel this] because [my] mental illness comes with a high price, financially and socially. I don't know if it's more costly than it is draining...it's

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<sup>105</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

degrading and there's a stigma to it that doesn't come with physical illness. Only a small part of my family knows about my mental illness."<sup>107</sup> The financial cost of Malak's mental disorder preoccupies her mind and gets her into a loop that is difficult to get out of: being admitted to hospital is financially draining and affects her ability to work regularly and thus she worries about her ability to generate income. We are not fully aware of the effect of chronic illness and symptoms of mental disorders in our social circles. Moreover, I believe that we lack the ability to understand and appreciate the experience of our colleagues who suffer from such illnesses while working in the public space.

Rana says, "When I am exhausted, I just stay in bed. My body breaks into bruises and it hurts a lot then, and I can't stand up and I don't have any energy to move or go anywhere. What gets me to that point of exhaustion? Too much fighting."<sup>108</sup> Why do we wait until we are completely exhausted? Why do we not pay attention to the signs that precede the exhaustion? Salwa also comes to recognize exhaustion when it has reached full force: "When I leave the [office] to go home and I'm crying. Then, I know that tomorrow I should not go to work."<sup>109</sup> Does delaying the moment of realizing the exhaustion happen because when we collapse, we can justify asking for some rest? Is it only physical pain that is accepted and valid as an excuse to ask for some rest?

Many WHRDs face online harassment continuously on account of their involvement in work related to human rights or feminist issues.<sup>110</sup> Esraa tells of enduring another kind of pressure because of her work, online harassment, in addition to her inability to take a break from her volunteer work with detainees in Port Said. Hanan opted to remain anonymous online in order to avoid further pressure: "I decided to remain anonymous from the very beginning with regards to all online activity, and this has helped me enormously. A lot of people are under an enormous amount of pressure because of things they've said or shared on social media, especially with the presence of online militias and informants. Anonymity has really helped me protect myself online."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with Malak Ahmed (alias), Egypt

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Rana (alias), Egypt

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>110</sup> "Using Violence and Mobilizing Anxiety: Repressing Feminist Activism Online (2019), Urgent Action Fund-Africa", available at: <https://www.uaf-africa.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Handbook-on-Repressing-Feminist-Activism-Online-2.pdf>

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Hanan (alias), Tunisia

Except for the work done by immediate service providers for victims and survivors, work does not end when the day does. Along the years, I have come to realize that no matter how many hours I add to my workday, I will still have more work to finish. Therefore, it is better to rest and recharge to be able to continue doing my work and feel good generally. Otherwise, the result will be to quickly suffer from burnout.

The case of those who provide immediate services is different since adding more hours to their workday can actually have an effect on the lives of others. Wafaa Fraouis says, "Sometimes exhaustion is due because you have no other choice, you have to go on; other times, you have the time to spare yourself."<sup>112</sup> The only solution I can think of for this problem, is increasing the number of employees so that the workload is divided between them and then none of them have to face exhaustion or burnout. However, I am well aware of the small number of those who work in the public space because it is a dangerous and financially unstable field compared to other jobs, and it comes with a clear psychological load which could drive many people away from it.

Some of the activities we take part in while working in the public space come with risks. Barah was stopped at the airport when she was going to attend an event related to her volunteer work with a feminist group. Along with others, Barah was interrogated, and she was banned from leaving the country and her passport was confiscated. Even though she got her passport back, the shock she had endured and the feeling of having her movement restricted made her take a step back from volunteer work for several years. The shock of being prevented from traveling also had its repercussions on Barah's personal life: she took off the [Islamic] veil because of how restricted she felt due to the travel ban. She also stopped applying for other travel opportunities fearing she would be banned from traveling again.

When asked to define burnout, Hanan described her state in the following manner: "You're tired all the time, you constantly feel tense and nervous, you can't keep up with anxiety anymore...When you feel that daily pleasures like taking a walk or drinking coffee somewhere can no longer offer you a little rest, it's only then that you realize that it's time for you to take care of yourself."<sup>113</sup> When I read Hanan's description, I experienced some sort of *déjà vu*. Her quote brought back memories of my life right before I started to ask for days off from work. We do not plan our holidays, but we are forced to take them.

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<sup>112</sup> Interview with Wafaa Fraouis, Tunisia

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Hanan (alias), Tunisia

Sara AISherif did not know how to stop working when it became too much; her body made the decision to shut down, giving her a chance to rest a little and listen to what it had been trying to tell. "I would always tell myself the same thing, I would tell myself it didn't matter, no matter what happens, as long as I could still walk then it was OK. It's as if this problem with my back happened so that I would be unable to walk and stop what I was doing for a bit."<sup>114</sup> Sometimes I think that we need to reconsider the boundaries we set for ourselves, and how much pain we think we 'can' put up with. A little over a year ago, I remember I was under great pressure, and all I wanted was for my body to shut down completely so that I could take a little break from things I 'had to' get done. I did not even consider that I had the right to take a break, instead I thought that if I fall sick to a point where I was unable to move, I would not blame myself, and no one could blame me for staying at home, or for not dealing with all aspects of my life. Maybe then someone would even come and help me out with my household chores, which becomes a heavier burden when I'm exhausted. This is when I made the decision to stop driving for a little while; I remember having this fear of consciously and intentionally getting myself into a car accident at a moment where my exhaustion would get the better of me.

There are those who are aware of the emotional burden of engaging in the public space, yet still prefer carrying this burden than placing an emotional distance with victims and survivors. Wafaa Fraouis says she would rather work as a doctor's assistant, routinely taking down names and ages, than to lose touch with what the women who come to the shelter go through. She believes that her work is grounded in love, solidarity and trust, which makes her continue the kind of work that she is doing, even if that comes with a psychological and emotional burden. Salwa, on the other hand, says she cannot always emotionally distance herself from her work, although she is aware of the importance of doing so in order to avoid 'breaking down'. However, she remembers going through a state of depression after witnessing the kind of suffering some of the women had been through. Afterwards, and because of this depression, she decided to stay away from cases of violence; "Women who deal with victims of violence on a daily basis, their hearts go numb, they can't feel anything."<sup>115</sup> However, it's not only her work that places an emotional burden on Salwa, but also her activism in the "No to Reconciliation"<sup>116</sup> campaign (*Manich Msamah*) – which according

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<sup>114</sup> Interview with Sara AISherif, Egypt

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>116</sup> "No to Reconciliation" is a campaign launched in August 2015. According to their Facebook page, it aims to mobilize all citizens and political, legislative and rights activists towards fighting reconciliation legislation which whitewashes corruption and prevents businessmen and politicians accused of stealing money from the people from being held accountable for their crimes <https://bit.ly/2KLGcxG>

to her – has made her feel more and more frustrated with each passing day. Salwa is fearful of the return of dictatorship to Tunisia, as she feels that nothing is going as it should. This has caused her sleeping problems and she turned to medication for some relief. Wafaa Fraouis' work in the women's shelter has also caused her sleep disturbances, as well as a general sense of physical exhaustion. Wafaa says: "I get very upset when we are unable to help, sometimes to the point of getting sick. The cases of women who are married off at thirteen leave me unable to get out of bed."<sup>117</sup>

### ***General Disappointments***

Whenever I find myself talking about the revolution, (not *a*, but *the* revolution), I find myself saying, 'since the revolution started, because I believe it is not over yet.' I did not understand the impact of this sentence except when I attended an event that brought up feelings which I wasn't ready to face nor was I aware of their existence. I had not acknowledged the denial of having lost hope which lay buried beneath my insistence that the only revolution I experienced was not yet over. I couldn't accept that moment with all the defeat it carried, even if I saw it as a temporary one, and even if I could do nothing about it. Although I have come to accept moments of personal losses, I do not think that I am able to accept the loss related to the revolution. Perhaps denial and escapism are what we come up with to continue working in the public space. Sondos escapes from facing the general frustration: "I run away from it and keep saying this is my coping mechanism. Until now, I'm unable to talk about '[Tahrir Monologues](#)' when someone tells me they want to do something related to that project "<sup>118</sup> Perhaps what we need is to find something that helps us come to terms with our disappointment, such as writing. Malak Ahmed says that she deals with public frustrations by writing, because writing lessens the weight of all that she experiences.

For many of us who work in the public space, the work we do is not just a job. Sondos says, "I connected my sense of self-worth to my work because when I walk on the street, I feel as small as an insect. Where will my self-worth come from then? How can I feel that I'm a human being?"<sup>119</sup> I had never thought of this before. I have always known that my sense of self-worth comes from my job too. When I thought of a career shift, I wondered about how my life would lose the 'meaning' I had found for

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<sup>117</sup> Interview with Wafaa Fraouis, Tunisia

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

it years ago. What would be the value of spending my weekdays doing work that had nothing to do with the public space? I used to connect this feeling to growing up in a leftist home. However, after interviewing Sondos, I have come to think of how difficult our existences as women are on a daily basis; our daily life on the street involves many different power dynamics that make us feel worthless. Perhaps doing the work we do in the public space adds a different value to our lives in this society.

Sondos highlights another aspect of our identities being entangled with our work in the public space: fully identifying with our jobs. "We are not our work. [I should] come to a point where I feel that I am worthy regardless of what I do for work, and that taking a break from work now doesn't mean that I'm worth nothing."<sup>120</sup> Since I learned scuba diving, many of those close to me have suggested that I change careers and teach diving professionally because I feel so relaxed when I go on diving trips. I do not want to teach scuba diving so that I do not lose the pleasure of doing it. However, I have asked myself many times about what I could do if I do a career shift. What will be my value in life if I spend my days doing something different? I believe that this is an important question to answer because I do not want to wake up every day to do a job that I am emotionally detached from. Yet, I do not want my sense of self-worth to be attached to it; I still cannot separate these two things. I think that I want to be useful to others and this is related to my sense of self-worth and life being meaningful. But being useful to others goes beyond myself and those close to me. It is about how the skills I have learned in life and the privileges that I have for various reasons can be useful in some way to the society at large.

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This chapter has covered the definitions of concepts closely related to the issue of well-being such as 'time', 'pleasure', the heaviness and disappointments that come with working in the public space, 'going on' despite burnout, illness and exhaustion, as well as the different forms of exhaustion. I have tried to deconstruct the concept of well-being in this chapter and addressing different aspects and challenges related to it even if the space for discussing such an issue needs to be extended to include other women.

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<sup>120</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

The following chapter deals with how we are able to (or how we fail to) deal with the emotional weight we feel while working in the public space and how we see the distance between us and the survivors and victims who we work with.

### Chapter Three

#### **"I'm scared of what I've seen."<sup>121</sup>**

When I first started working in the field of human rights research in 2007, nobody had warned me about the impact of the testimonies<sup>122</sup>, nor was I warned about the emotional and mental burden that came with working in this field. I vividly recall attending a training session on human rights for university students organized by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. I remember leaving the training with the impression that this kind of work was not financially rewarding, unlike a potential career in international law firms. The only burden I was aware of at the time, however, was the financial one. The psychiatrist treating Malak Ahmed told her that "our political attachments pull us down". These attachments can manifest in our frustration at the low ceiling of expectations of those whose rights we defend, following up on a case that occupies our minds or living through a moment of political defeat that we cannot escape because of the nature of our work in the public space.

Whether or not we have made a conscious decision to become emotionally involved in political issues, the political climate will have a direct impact on our well-being. The more involved we are in the experiences of the victims and survivors we work with, the more the violations they have endured (or continue to endure) remain with us. However, there is a difference between those who are paid for their work in this field and whose jobs involve continuous exposure to testimonies of violence and constantly dealing with a frustrating political situation, and those who can afford some distance from all this because their jobs are in a different field, even when they are actively involved in the public space. Our inability to 'escape' the clutches of the political regime and testimonies about violations because this is part of our job is intricately tied to the issue of financial independence and eventually feeling trapped when we cannot find the space for our well-being.

In addition to being financially dependent on a job that directly affects our well-being, there are other issues that further complicate our relationship between our work in the public space and our income. Some WHRDs believe it is fair to receive payment for doing a job they believe in, while others worry that a 'salary' could disconnect them from their inner compass and

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<sup>121</sup> Interview with Sara AISherif, Egypt

<sup>122</sup> "No One Warned Me": Is there a tradeoff between protecting your mental health as an activist and doing effective work?" by Yara Sallam, June 2017 <https://www.openglobalrights.org/no-one-warned-me-trade-off-between-self-care-and-effective-activism/?lang=English>

distract them. Even if we resolve the issue of receiving money in return for working on a cause we believe in, how can we take a break from our work in the public space when it's connected to our income? 'Letter' believes that the exhaustion she feels is partly due to her work being tiring and that it's difficult to take a break since it's her only source of income.

Sondos refers to the issue of some WHRDs 'declining' any 'profit' from their work in the public space. She says, laughing, "How will I pay at the supermarket? With love? With stories?" She questions the use of proposing that money is not important to those who work in our field, especially when a standard doctor visit or admittance to an emergency room in Egypt is costly and requires prior adjustments to one's monthly budget. This 'declining' or feeling ashamed of receiving a salary in return for our work on a cause we believe in prevents many people from asking for fair pay that would allow them to live a decent life. This, in turn, can help them maintain their well-being which is often compromised on account of financial insecurity.

Salwa says that her work at a feminist organization in Tunisia is not enough to secure financial independence; she still relies on her family financially. "When you work on something that you're passionate about, and you feel that it's helping society and improving people's situations, you no longer think of the value of a salary."<sup>123</sup> This divide between labor and financial compensation is quite common. However, as the economic situation worsens, it has become more difficult for women to be financially independent from their families if they wanted to. This divide is also problematic with regards to determining a fair salary in return for working in the public space. Nobody can deny the crisis which many civil society organizations have with regards to funding. However, I believe in the importance of receiving fees that can allow for a decent and independent life in exchange for the work that we do.

Maybe when I started working in the field of human rights, I had this naïve idea that as a listener in the context of my work, I would not feel like the woman whose rights were violated. Maybe I felt - and this too was naïve - protected because of my position as a researcher and the relative distance this gave me from what I was exposed to. 'Letter' also shared my 'arrogance'; "I was arrogant enough to believe that nothing could get to me."<sup>124</sup> Eleven years later, when I started the research for this book, a friend of mine advised me not to ask a question if I did not want to hear the answer. She told me that women generally protect themselves, and that I need not to worry about their reactions to my questions. She told me to be careful about what I would

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<sup>123</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>124</sup> Interview with Letter (alias), Egypt

hear since it could strike a chord with something I was already feeling. 'Letter' continues: "I feel it was only with destroying this arrogance and going through many experiences without its shield that I could be more honest with myself, the people around me, and the people closest to me."<sup>125</sup>

Perhaps I started this project so I could picture myself in the future as part of a human rights movement. I started this project to understand how one can continue engaging with the public space instead of stepping away from it; how to continue without the ignorance I had when I started off in this line of work. I want to continue being involved in the public space but with the awareness of what this means when I live in Egypt, and of how it will affect my body, my mind and my health. I want to continue doing this work while being aware of what I financially need in order to live independently and not feel ashamed if I believe that my financial independence is important. I want to age gracefully, and with a readiness to brace that phase of my life. According to Aida Seif El Dawla, "the worst surprise that comes with aging is the deterioration in health; one does not feel old till the physical exhaustion starts to set in"<sup>126</sup>.

I look around me in search for women who have joined the struggle in the public space without sacrificing their health or their families: in other words, those who haven't sacrificed their 'personal' selves for the sake of the 'struggle'. Yet, I wonder if the issue at stake here is that I do not know of any 'successful' examples. Wafaa Bel Haj Omar says, "I think that people who have the ability to continue in the struggle are the resilient ones who allow themselves the time they need to get things done, and that's something I don't have."<sup>127</sup> I think I've changed since I first started working in the public space. Maybe the major difference is the extent of my awareness of how important it is to maintain my well-being, and that started in 2013. Back then, I experienced a major burnout that was mainly caused by the work environment in a women's rights organization where I was employed. Could we possibly learn how to practice long haul strategies, for ourselves and for our engagement in the public space?

In mid-2013, I decided to take a break from working directly with survivors and victims of human rights violations, out of a desire to distance myself from this work. However, the period starting from the military coup against former president the late

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with Letter (alias), Egypt

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Aida Seif ElDawla, Egypt

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Wafaa Bel Haj Omar, Tunisia

Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, and the political violence that followed which resulted in the death and injury of thousands,<sup>128</sup> did not give anyone room for respite, and all my attempts to distance myself failed. Aida Seif El-Dawla says that “all we’ve been through after 2013 was a hard, hard blow.”<sup>129</sup>

Maybe some time and effort should have been invested in training or preparing us to deal with the people we would work with. Sara says, “This isn’t the type of training or professional qualification I received. No one had ever taught me how to deal with the parents of someone who had just been executed. [No one told me] what to say to someone I would see in prison for just five minutes. How am I supposed to act? How am I supposed to deal with this? Nobody prepared us for this. We’re just thrown into the situation and we have to learn on the spot.”<sup>130</sup> Despite the emotional labor she exerts for the volunteer activism she does, Sara chooses to remain emotionally involved with her work, and does not listen to advice on how she should emotionally detach herself. “I’m not talking about an exhibition or about furniture; I’m talking about people. I can’t deal with this from a distance and only work during official working hours. Maybe this is unprofessional but to deal with people with your heart and feelings, to affect them and be affected by them, this is how everything makes sense.”<sup>131</sup> Youstina tries to place some distance between herself and her work in theater and the stories that come out of the storytelling workshops they organize. However, she cannot always manage that; “I am affected by stories in each workshop, I feel they carry bits and pieces of me and that some of them tell things I long to tell and this upsets me...sometimes I manage to put some distance between myself and my work, but when I do that, I sometimes feel very detached and I feel nothing for the work I do.”<sup>132</sup>

Part of the burden we carry comes from how our lifestyles, and sometimes our identities, are different than the norm in the societies we live in. ‘Letter’ says, “My life isn’t easy because there’s only one specific way to be a woman in this world which predetermines certain choices in life as ‘normal’. No matter how much space we have, the choices we make are not at all familiar. And I don’t want them to be familiar, but I want people to let me be. Rather, I want to be safe if, for a moment, I don’t have the luxury to be in social bubbles where I can be myself, which is really a class privilege at the end of the day. Without these isolated

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<sup>128</sup> The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights: [Weeks of Killing: State Violence, Communal Violence and Sectarian Attacks in the Summer of 2013](#).

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Aida Seif ElDawla, Egypt

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Sara AISherif, Egypt

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Sara AISherif, Egypt

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Youstina Samir, Egypt

moments I carve out for myself, I wouldn't have a life, and I probably wouldn't have been able to live in this country. Just being able to do that, creating a bit of space in which I can move makes things bearable. Yet we forget that this isn't how it should be, we shouldn't have to create these social cocoons just so that we can survive."<sup>133</sup>

Despite how proud she is of her work, and of what people say about her, that "nobody can boss her around," Youstina feels upset that people from her village see her as different from them. She has always been proud of belonging to her village and insists on speaking in her Upper Egyptian dialect. There is a feeling of being alienated from the spaces we are bound to in some way, whether it is a village in which we were born or raised, extended family or immediate family, or our childhood friends. It is a sense of attachment rooted to our memories that is mixed with a feeling that we no longer belong to those places or people. We belong to a group of people with 'strange' ideas. Rana says that her mother's perception of her – she calls her mad – is partly because she does not see anyone like Rana in the Upper Egyptian city they come from. Rana imagines that had there been a strong feminist movement, her mother would not perceive her as 'crazy'. Most of the disputes between them would have ended if there were more of us feminists and if our feminist message had been easier and clearer for others to comprehend.

However, alienation is a feeling that is complex and contradictory, as is the case generally with feelings. The feeling of being alienated from one's family and country can coexist with a feeling of having reached a level of harmonious self-acceptance. Sometimes making specific decisions could result in feeling alienated yet still bring a person closer to their self, bringing them in touch with who they are and what they believe in. Rana left her family home in Upper Egypt and a financially comfortable life in order to live independently in Cairo. With all the heaviness and difficulty that came with the decision, she believes that giving up her financial and social status was a small price to pay for leading the kind of life that she wants; a life where she can be true to herself. Although the decision to live independently has caused disputes with her family, she stays in touch and maintains a relationship with them. Rana connects her happiness to her ability to win such battles with her family. She says, "The extent of your vulnerability reflects on your cause and on you. As long as you're trying to have fun and be happy, you'll be stronger and you'll be able to stand up for yourself, and for others, and for the cause you believe in."<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Interview with 'Letter' (alias), Egypt

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Rana (alias), Egypt

Wafaa Fraouis says that the first challenge she faced because of her work was society's perception of what she does. "The first challenge is dealing with market vendors and with neighbors. They're convinced that we've opened a 'whore house' to help women run away from their families. The first challenge is to convince them that this isn't a 'whore house' but a shelter for women, to protect them and to help them break out of the cycle of violence."<sup>135</sup> Wafaa's work at the shelter also affects her life and her personal relationships: others perceive her as an 'arrogant feminist' and men make sexual jokes at her expense because of the nature of her work.

### ***The Responsibility of Management***

In addition to the general frustration facing those working in the public space in Egypt after 2013, doing this work comes with many risks. Sondos says, "I really don't know how the people responsible for workplaces manage. Maybe I worry too much, but I am constantly thinking, who is alone at the office? What kind of [security personnel] could possibly 'pass by' the office? How many more months does the money we have cover?"<sup>136</sup> In general, managerial positions in human rights organizations or initiatives are not perceived as jobs that could affect our well-being since they don't involve working directly with victims and survivors. However, in contexts similar to Egypt, working in the human rights field is practically criminalized. There is a constant security threat, like a dark cloud looming over those who work in the field threatening them with arrest or a sudden loss of their livelihood. Feeling responsible for others in a risky workspace is also a source of exhaustion. On account of feeling responsible for the workspace or trying to sustain the space and its activities, those in managerial positions might feel the pressure to work longer hours which ultimately could lead to burnout.

### ***The Closing of the Public Space***

Another aspect that affects our well-being as women working in the public space is the degree to which our presence is taken seriously. Hanan says, "I've often found myself treated like a doll or part of the general décor; this really gets to me and I refuse to take part in certain events. They make many promises like 'we will make you the official spokesperson' to incite us but

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<sup>135</sup> Interview with Wafaa Fraouis, Tunisia

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

we are put on show for [inclusion], 'we need a woman.'"<sup>137</sup> Unfortunately, dealing with such challenges cannot be limited to women working in the public space. In most work environments, women struggle to be treated like their male peers, and they have to work ten times as hard. However, the one difference between a commercial workspace and the spaces where we work is that our male colleagues adopt progressive and revolutionary values; these values supposedly entail that as women, we would be treated differently by our 'comrades in the struggle'.

At different stages in my life, I found myself looking at pictures of my old schoolmates and wishing for a less complicated life than the one I lead or wanting worries different than my own. However, I always come to the conclusion that we each have our burdens and that it would be impossible for me to live any other life than my own. Meriam ElMechti shares that same sentiment every now and then. Since Meriam has lived through difficult political events, she felt at one point that she was about to go into depression. She says, "What's happening in Tunisia constantly worries me, like it worries many other people and activists, it becomes one of life's priorities...sometimes, I wish that I could live a normal, ordinary life."<sup>138</sup>

The idea of the 'closing of the public space' is problematic on multiple levels. First, it gives the impression that violations against the right to organize and the right to freedom of thought and expression are static. Second, it marginalizes the attempts of those involved in the public space to continue working and to find creative solutions to work in this limited space and under constant threat of arrest, travel bans, with the fear of forced disappearance or loss of livelihood.<sup>139</sup> The public space has not been shut down yet; perhaps one can say 'restricted' instead of 'closed off' in order to better describe the current situation in Egypt. Perhaps the situation in Tunisia is different as there is more room for engagement with general political and social events. In comparison to Egypt, this room for engagement in Tunisia is relatively larger and this directly affects our ability to speak about and prioritize our sense of well-being. Marwa says that "the problem is that we've witnessed successive [traumatic] events after the revolution which haven't really allowed us [the time] to care for ourselves...We couldn't interrupt the passage of time, even if

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<sup>137</sup> Interview with Hanan (alias), Tunisia

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Meriam ElMechti, Tunisia

<sup>139</sup> Refer to "Feminist Resistance and Resilience," Urgent Action Fund Africa 2018

[https://www.uaf-africa.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/edited\\_Feminist-Resistance-and-Resilience-ENGLISH-14.pdf](https://www.uaf-africa.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/edited_Feminist-Resistance-and-Resilience-ENGLISH-14.pdf)

for a moment, in order to understand our personal needs or to ask ourselves 'what do I want or what do I really need?' like we would with a car that requires constant maintenance. Unfortunately, this isn't part of our culture."<sup>140</sup>

Nevertheless, to work in the public space is not only an experience of pain and struggle. For many of us, it is also a space for learning and gaining support. Even if it isn't the most secure or financially rewarding field of work, it provides us with ample opportunities for exposure to diverse cultures and rich experiences. Rana says that one of the privileges of her work in the public space is that it has provided her with access to knowledge and to relationships with others who have the same mindset. She elaborates saying, "I can speak to [those people] without fear, without having to censor myself or feel forced to stay silent."<sup>141</sup> Sara AlSherif also feels that what she has 'received' from the public space measures up to what she has given; she remembers the presence of friends during her illness and says she has gone through new experiences and learned about her rights.

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This chapter has tackled the many different dimensions of the effect of our involvement in the public space on our well-being. The next chapter will focus on the influence of our families, chosen families and families of origin, and the movements we are actively involved in, on our well-being.

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<sup>140</sup> Interview with Marwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Rana (alias), Egypt

## Chapter 4

### **“This, too, is a project. My life is a project”<sup>142</sup>**

#### **The impact of families and alternative families on our “well-being”**

Our lives do not just revolve around our work. We are born into a family regardless of whether we decide to interact with its members, sever ties with them, or create alternatives for them. The impact of our families on our well-being is always crucial, and this was demonstrated through the interviews conducted for this project which underlined how this impact can at times be negative, and at others positive. For me, my family and my close friends are an important part of my well-being and an indispensable means of survival, as I depend on them, on both the emotional and practical levels, and I never shy away from admitting this dependence. I also see that I am there for them and that dedicating time and effort to be with them is part of my well-being.

An alternative family can be the group we work with to make a change in the public space and to stage our own little revolution in whatever matters for us. Because of our unusual choices, this alternative family provides us with a balance in life and creates a space where we do not feel alienated. According to ‘Letter’, the “invalidation that can result from our unusual choices can be difficult”<sup>143</sup>. ‘Letter’ argues that the support she gets from the group she works with is an essential part of her well-being: “If this supportive environment is disrupted, my work itself will be disrupted too”<sup>144</sup>.

Many of our social activities involve people we work with, which provides us with a feeling of companionship. Sara AISherif shares family and social events with her coworker in the 'No Military Trials for Civilians' campaign where she is a volunteer. Despite making sure that they do not talk about work in those events, Sara feels at ease when her coworker is around: “I am comfortable when someone who shares the same feelings of sadness is around, someone who identifies with that sense of brokenness and disappointment I have, those feelings that only someone working in this field would know very well”<sup>145</sup>. This

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<sup>142</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

<sup>143</sup> Interview with ‘Letter’ (alias), Egypt

<sup>144</sup> Interview with ‘Letter’ (alias), Egypt

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Sara AISherif, Egypt

companionship helps in preserving one's well-being, or in taking away the feeling of loneliness at painful moments. Sara says that her personal life has changed remarkably since the revolution, for that is when she started having an alternative family made up of her fellow activists. As for her family of origin, Sara tries her best to share as little as possible of her life with them so that they do not worry: "I am alright and able to resist when they are not concerned and when they believe that everything is alright, even if that means they will not know anything about me," she said. "When I got arrested, I felt alright as soon as I got to know that Seif [my son] is safe. I was totally fine after."<sup>146</sup>

Sometimes support comes from people we are not very close to, when the impact of the family of origin is rather damaging than helpful and when members of this family do not offer us the support that we need to maintain our well-being. Rana faced many problems with her family of origin, who locked her up for several months and forced her to do something she does not believe in. However, she was not as disappointed in her family of origin as much as she was disappointed by those in her support circles whom she considered her friends. "Nothing is compared to your friends – whom you think of as your safe space - not even calling you, or the people you spend most of your time with not checking on you. My closest friend, who was part of our struggle for independence and with whom I shared everything, only checked in twice in three months, before and after the surgery. At first, some of my friends tried to contact my family, but at the time I didn't need anyone to do anything for me. I just wanted to hear them say 'How are you doing?' and 'How are you coping?' We were a big group then what happened when I was no longer there? Nothing! As if I never existed. Meanwhile, people who were not close checked in on me all the time"<sup>147</sup>. Rana expected her family to do what they did because she grew up in a traditional society. However, she did not expect the abandonment of what we can call her alternative family or comrades in the struggle; her shock and disappointment in them was worse than the circumstances she was going through at the time.

For others, families of origin are a source of support even if there is not always enough time to spend with them. Salwa believes that her family of origin plays a major role in her well-being "because it is this family that will protect you till the end," as she put it, and yet she gives more time to "the struggle" at her family's expense.<sup>148</sup> This is not just the case for Salwa, for many of

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<sup>146</sup> Interview with Sara AlSherif, Egypt

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Rana (alias), Egypt

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

us do not dedicate enough time to important things in our lives. I wonder if this is related to age and how we perceive our families of origin as we grow older or whether we live on our own or with our families. Perhaps all that happens in the public space forces us to focus more on our work and less on our own priorities.

Interviews conducted in Tunisia showed more understanding on the part of the families of origin and underlined the positive impact of this on our well-being. "I imagine that if the family [of origin] is not supportive, one would not be able to go on and have the energy to work," said Samia<sup>149</sup>. Sohaila bin Saeid said that her family are flexible and do not put pressure on her since they are well aware of the nature of her work, while Meriem ElMechti said that her family are the main source of balance in her life<sup>150</sup>. For Wafaa Fraouis, her family of origin is extremely important, for she shares everything with her mother and four siblings. While support offered by families of origin and alternative families is necessary, we also need support from the organizations in which we work and the movements of which we are members.

### ***The role of organizations and movements in women defenders' "well-being"***

In addition to the impact of our families of origin and alternative families, our well-being is also shaped by being part of a supportive organization or movement. My work at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights<sup>151</sup> had a positive impact on my well-being when I was in jail and after I was released, and the same applies to the support I received from fellow feminists and activists both inside and outside Egypt. Support and solidarity are part and parcel of our well-being while working in the public space, for at the end of the day it is emotionally rewarding to know that people around you believe in the same cause and appreciate the work you've been doing.

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Samia (alias), Tunisia

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Meriam ElMechti, Tunisia

<sup>151</sup> To read more on the EIPR's attempt to include well-being in organizational structures, refer to p. 543-44 in "From a "Culture of Unwellness" to Sustainable Advocacy: Organizational Responses to Mental Health Risks in the Human Rights Field":

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333353460\\_From\\_a\\_Culture\\_of\\_Unwellness\\_to\\_Sustainable\\_Advocacy\\_Organizational\\_Responses\\_to\\_Mental\\_Health\\_Risks\\_in\\_the\\_Human\\_Rights\\_Field](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333353460_From_a_Culture_of_Unwellness_to_Sustainable_Advocacy_Organizational_Responses_to_Mental_Health_Risks_in_the_Human_Rights_Field)

'Letter' is attached to her workplace and the group she works with on producing feminist knowledge in Arabic because this kind of work is largely linked to her personal life and her identity. When asked what could force her to stop working, she said "heartbreak", or being let down by the "movement." 'Letter' doesn't know if she can continue working for five more years because the hardest thing about working on content with which she identifies with is the fact that she has to face her fears and worries constantly: "There will be times when I will prefer to work on something I am not emotionally attached to because I don't want the struggles I go through in my personal life to reflect on my work."<sup>152</sup>

Aida Seif El Dawla had different expectations when the New Woman magazine and Foundation was established: "We never talked about the 'feminist movement' back then. We said, 'feminist visions' and 'feminist organizations,' but 'movement'? You don't have a base on the ground to call yourself a movement"<sup>153</sup>. Some people may use the word "movement" to refer to feminist groups or organizations while others use "feminist organizations" or "feminist activism." Throughout the book, I will be using different phrasings according to the ones used by women interviewed for this research.

Sondos Shabayek argues that the "movement" may at times have a negative impact on a woman's well-being. "It is not healthy for a woman to be told she has to keep working for the sake of the 'movement' when she expresses her wish to stop because she has no more energy. If we sacrifice ourselves, we're simply reproducing, even if unconsciously, the same repressive patriarchal patterns we are trying to run away from"<sup>154</sup>. Sondos is unable to say that she's exhausted: "I see people around me who have been working for a much longer time, so how can I possibly say I am exhausted? I feel ashamed of saying that I am tired or that I can no longer take it."<sup>155</sup> This kind of emotional pressure that prohibits expressions of exhaustion and the desire to take a break needs to be addressed on a larger scale as part of discussions within movements over well-being since it impacts every woman involved in this kind of work.

Yara joined a leftist movement but living in a provincial city in the Nile Delta restricted her activities to that city and she could not benefit from the general organizational structure of the movement or learn from the experiences of her comrades in

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<sup>152</sup> Interview with 'Letter' (alias), Egypt

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Aida Seif El Dawla, Egypt

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

Cairo. “It would’ve helped had I learnt from more experienced people and if I was part of a large network of coworkers so we can support each other and learn from each other”<sup>156</sup>. Yara complained that all the movement’s organizational meetings took place in Cairo and that she was never contacted by any of the activists there. She added that she joined and left the movement without anyone in the headquarters knowing of her. Centralization does not only affect interaction and exchange of information within the same movement, but also makes it hard for members from outside the capital to attend training sessions. Professional development and skill building are two main components of our well-being at the workplace or the field in which we are specialized in the public space. This is only achieved through benefiting from knowledge being available at the entity in which one works—a political party, an NGO, or a feminist group—as well as through progressing within this entity whether through getting promoted or assuming new responsibilities.

Malak Ahmed identifies herself as a feminist yet argues that the type of activism taking place in Egypt cannot yet be labelled as a “feminist movement”: “We still lack a lot of things to be called a proper ‘movement.’ For example, we don’t have extensive solidarity. Each of us remains in her own zone and is not willing to reach out to others. I feel that the process of institutionalization through the establishment of feminist organizations is what killed feelings of solidarity and companionship inside us. This is a real problem”<sup>157</sup>. Part of the solidarity and companionship Malak talked about is the appreciation of the work done by each woman, for she says that in our everyday lives we do not thank people for the work they do and that this only happens when a given person is exposed to danger or going through a major crisis. Malak’s experience has shown that the lack of a supportive feminist movement has a direct impact on her well-being and on her sense of being appreciated and supported by a collective entity.

Rana believes that Egypt does not have a feminist “movement,” but work in this field can be referred to as “feminist activism” or can be considered an attempt at creating a feminist movement. She argues that even if the word “movement” is used, it is a fragile movement owing to internal corruption and rivalry within the organizations, insistence on addressing superficial issues that are not at the core of the cause, and the establishment of an authority that is not different from the state’s within each entity. “If women working in feminist activism did not acknowledge this problem, I don’t think there will ever

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<sup>156</sup> Interview with Yara Mounir, Egypt

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Malak Ahmed (alias), Egypt

be a strong 'movement.' I think people need to monitor and work on themselves before doing so with others"<sup>158</sup>. When Rana had personal problems and several feminists tried to mediate between her and her family, this mediation was not in line with the feminist principles those women represent, for it supported the family's stance as far as controlling Rana and imposing their value system on her life are concerned. What Rana was exposed to is the exact opposite of what we expect feminists to do to support our well-being.

Barah said that when she was stopped and interrogated at Cairo Airport, she received support from the feminist group she belongs to as well as from feminists from a sister organization. When Barah needed to go to the National Security headquarters, she did not go on her own. Barah's experience is different from those of Malak and Rana and could demonstrate that feminist support for our well-being may at times be conditioned upon the woman's position and/or privileges within the movement. For example, if we have "important" friends within the movement, or if we have a certain social status, or even suffering from a mental disorder can affect our contribution to the movement and participation in its activities, among other factors that impact the "feminist support" we receive. Several people's well-being is negatively affected not only because of the ordeal they face, but also because of not receiving the support they need; hence the suffering is doubled.

Youstina Samir said that if she feels alone in her theatre work or her feminist activism, she would not be able to go on, since working in a group is what gives her the strength to continue: "I will never move forward on my own"<sup>159</sup>. Youstina's affiliation to the theatre troupe and networking with feminists in Cairo makes her feel that she is part of an entity that is bigger than herself and provides her with the support she needs even at times of frustration. Esraa, on the other hand, is part of several entities, yet works alone in most of the cases she handles in the city of Port Said and cannot depend on anybody's support.

Talk about the feminist movement in Tunisia brought up the discussion about the main feminist and human rights organizations. Several of the feminists who were interviewed argued that feminist organizations are usually elitist, selective, and exclusionist. Even though Wafaa Fraouis considers herself part of the Tunisian feminist movement, she argues that "it is difficult to be part of feminist activism when they have a long history of activism in a different political moment and you're still a young

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<sup>158</sup> Interview with Rana (alias), Egypt

<sup>159</sup> Interview with Youstina Samir, Egypt

woman exploring the feminist experience”<sup>160</sup>. Salwa seconds Wafaa’s opinion: “Political activists keep telling me, ‘Where have you been before the revolution?’ which means that if you have not been part of the scene for long enough, you have no right to be there now. This hinders me a lot”<sup>161</sup>. This separation between old and new activists impacts their well-being and their feeling that they deserve a break when exhausted since they will always be compared to older feminists who contributed to the feminist movement and are still active in the public space.

Meriam El-Mechti, who started her activism with the Tunisian revolution, considers herself part of a feminist, revolutionary, or a human rights movement. “I always believe that we complement each other because one person alone cannot change the world. I started from scratch and learnt from a lot of people. Now I pass the knowledge I acquired to others”<sup>162</sup>. As an outsider to the Tunisian scene, it seems to me that institutions that have a long history in the feminist struggle dominated the public space before the revolution, which led older activists to see that new ones did not earn their place in the political scene.

Hanan argues that what the Tunisian feminist movement lacks is daily feminist work, which is a form of political opposition: “What we lack is continuous grassroots feminist activism with the general public. This is not done in Tunisia except by the *Beity* Association.”<sup>163</sup> Despite the gap between working on change on the policy level and working on the ground, and the gap between feminists before and after the revolution, Salwa argues that “being among people who share the same stories with you and see life from the same perspective and who can work with you to effect a real change has a positive impact on our well-being. It is what makes us feel energetic, both physically and emotionally, and encourages us to continue working.”<sup>164</sup> It is impossible for people to change the world on their own and being part of a bigger entity gives meaning to our work.

Our well-being depends to a great extent on the support we receive from others, whether through families or organizations. Because well-being is crucial in the creation of influential movements, we always need to think of our practices, not only with our friends within our work field, but also people whom we consider companions in the struggle in the broader

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<sup>160</sup> Interview with Wafaa Fraouis, Tunisia

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Meriam El-Mechti, Tunisia

<sup>163</sup> Interview with Hanan (alias), Tunisia

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

context. We also have to be held accountable for whatever damage we inflict upon ourselves or others as far as well-being is concerned. well-being is not confined to taking care of oneself but is mainly about how we practice “caregiving” on a larger scale.

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Existing and interacting with a supportive feminist group or movement is intricately tied to our well-being in the public space. The sense of solidarity offered by other women and knowing that there are those who care for you and know what is happening in your life is crucial for us to feel well. Being part of a group or a movement also contributes to our overall sense of well-being from another important angle: how being in a larger context with other women creates an opportunity for learning and growth which is also related to our sense of well-being.

The next and last chapter will tackle ideas and practices pertaining to well-being that emerged during personal interviews with feminists and activists who took part in this project. The last chapter does not offer recommendations as much as it provides a space for thinking about different mechanisms that can be adopted, modified, or used in brainstorming to address issues related to the preservation of well-being on a communal level.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> One of the publications that attempts to collectively answer questions about the well-being of activists and WHRDs in African contexts is “Strategies for Building an Organization with Soul” by Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu:  
[http://airforafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Strategies-for-Building-an-Organisation-with-Soul-WEB .pdf](http://airforafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Strategies-for-Building-an-Organisation-with-Soul-WEB.pdf)

## Chapter 5

### "There's no recipe"<sup>166</sup>

Why do we continue working in the public space with all the difficulties and emotional weight that come with it? Is it not better to work in a field which does not involve us personally? Despite the negative effect of bad news on her psychological health and the double price she pays because of her bipolar disorder, Malak Ahmed continues to work in the public space; she says; "I can see a possibility for change, when or how, I have no answer to those questions but my role is to try to make a positive change. My role is to strive for a better future even in the hardest times."<sup>167</sup> I continue doing this work because I have no passion for anything else, and I cannot live without passion. Passion is sometimes an exhausting feeling, and mostly a gratifying one: time will pass, and I will have felt something every day. Wafaa Fraouis says she continues doing this job because she loves it: "I believe that there are people who didn't get a chance to get out of the suffocating loop they're in, and I can be a thread or a ring in a chain that can pull them out."<sup>168</sup>

I do not know how to put an emotional distance between me and the person I sit with. I am almost certain that all the testimonies that I documented have remained with me. This was not a choice or a conscious decision that I took; I didn't even know that a person can take a conscious decision to be emotionally involved despite the pain and emotional exhaustion that could result from this. For some time, I decide that I do not want to get emotionally involved so I stepped away from documenting testimonies of human rights violations. Then I start interviewing women about their personal lives and how they deal with exhaustion and I find myself as emotionally involved as always. My former psychologist had advised me many times to avoid getting emotionally involved with what I hear. Yet, as I write this, I feel that maybe the only thing I can offer to these storytellers is the part of me which I give as I listen to others. Perhaps I am scared that with an emotional distance, I will not truly hear what is being said.

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<sup>166</sup> Interview with Aida Seif ElDawla, Egypt

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Malak Ahmed (alias), Egypt

<sup>168</sup> Interview with Wafaa Fraouis, Tunisia

Maybe we continue doing this work because, like Meriam El-Mechti says, we cannot live a life different than this.<sup>169</sup> Or maybe like Hanan says, we simply believe that our existence in this life is not to live solely for ourselves but to improve our societies despite our daily frustration.<sup>170</sup> I strongly believe that working in the human rights or feminist fields is a choice and we can choose to step back at any moment. Aya, however, believes that she has no choice in the current political situation in Tunisia. She says, "Our fate is to be at this age with this vitality and agency and ability to dream and to live in a reality we are not satisfied with. We can either do what are doing now or cease to exist."<sup>171</sup>

Part of being able to continue doing this work is being financially secured for your future. Malak wonders about her source of income in the future: "Where will I get money? I want to live a safe life, like I've always lived. I want to have food on the table every day...we have no insurance, so I want health insurance and social insurance."<sup>172</sup> Malak also suggested something very specific which should be looked into on a practical level to see if it is feasible or not. Her suggestion was to have a trust account which everyone can invest in and the interest would be divided on the participants. Do we dare to dream of a feminist pension fund?

I started this project primarily to find out how we can continue to work in the public space. For me, this project is a personal search for solutions. However, I do not want this project to end with impractical solutions or suggestions simply to 'wrap up the project on a positive note'. During the interviews with the WHRDs and feminists (according to how they define themselves), they were asked about their personal practices to maintain their mental and emotional health while working in the public space. They were asked if they had any institutional suggestions based on their experiences or visions of what could be useful in this regard. In addition to suggestions related to the personal and institutional spheres, several suggestions came up during the interviews that could be categorized under our expectations or hopes for a feminist "movement" that cares for the well-being of feminists.

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<sup>169</sup> Interview with Meriam El-Mechti, Tunisia

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Hanan (alias), Tunisia

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Aya (alias), Tunisia

<sup>172</sup> Interview with Malak Ahmed (alias), Egypt

Until we reach a point where our well-being is taken into consideration, coping with the current situation remains a means for survival; Salwa says: "I have to adapt to the situation, there's no other alternative."<sup>173</sup> We have got to start thinking of alternatives to deal with the conditions we work in. The following suggestions are not conclusive on the personal or institutional level, nor on the level of a grassroots movement. However, I consider them to be the beginning of a discussion on what we can do individually, and more importantly what we can do collectively so that working in the public space is not synonymous to emotional exhaustion and burnout. I must admit, the number of personal interviews are limited as I was not able to meet women from various backgrounds. Therefore, the following suggestions are only limited to the experiences and expectations of the women interviewed for this project.

*Suggestions for institutions regarding self-care:*

1. **Flexible working hours:** Most feminist organizations and collectives work with a smaller staff than they require, and workplans exceed the time available for implementation. However, being flexible regarding time can offer space for understanding and for rest to allow the employees time for other commitments which, in return, would make them work better.
2. **Flexibility regarding the workspace or the possibility of working out of office/work from home:** Sometimes allowing employees to work outside of the official workspace can help them be more relaxed. For example, it could be agreed on beforehand that they can work outside of the office for several days to break the routine. This would also offer a break from traffic to those who live far away from the workspace.

There are many ways to make sure that the employees are fully committed to finishing their tasks if more flexible working systems regarding time and place are implemented. One way is being available to answer professional phone calls; another is being regularly supervised by their seniors to follow up on the tasks required from them.

3. **Holidays:**

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<sup>173</sup> Interview with Salwa (alias), Tunisia

Besides official yearly holidays, some workspaces give their employees a midyear break (up to two weeks) and an end-of-year break (up to two weeks).

'Emotional exhaustion' is to be accepted as a valid reason to ask for sick leave.

Allowing the possibility of taking an exceptional long break (a month, for instance) due to psychological exhaustion; that can be arranged with the direct manager.

4. **Following up on work regularly and discussing it during team meetings:** This can directly affect the well-being of employees because it will ensure that the work they do is connected and reviewed.
5. **Having an ongoing conversation about maintaining self-care:** Often, talking about exhaustion is seen to lessen a person's worth and so, many keep up the pretense that everything is fine. Therefore, it is important that well-being is discussed within organizations so that everyone is encouraged to accept and deal with the effect of this kind of work on them.

"We discovered that we're not above exhaustion, and we're not above being affected by our work even if we seem to be okay and we don't show our feelings."<sup>174</sup>

6. **Having collective social activities for employees:** Organizing social activities for the team members, whether on a weekly basis like a collective breakfast, or on a bi-annual or annual basis like choosing a place outside the office for strategic planning where the employees can engage in group activities. This will greatly affect their morale and will make them feel they are not isolated.
7. **Health insurance for all employees, including mental healthcare:** The cost of healthcare is often quite high; therefore, workplaces should make sure to cover such costs according to the legal status of the institution. This can be done by joining a medical insurance program and enrolling all their employees or by reimbursing them for medical costs. In case

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<sup>174</sup> Interview with 'Letter' (alias), Egypt

the medical insurance program does not cover mental healthcare, the workplace should reimburse the employees with the cost of their mental health services.

8. **Social insurance for all employees:** It is crucial that the employees feel some sort of financial security for the future, which can be in the form of a monthly pension.
9. **Applying minimum wage rules and revising salaries regularly so that they match the increase in living costs:** Many of the institutions that work on the public space offer small salaries, probably because funding entities offer program-based financial support rather than core funding which covers salaries of employees. It is crucial to negotiate for fair pay that increases with inflation rates since salaries diminish as prices continue to rise.
10. **The importance of having a consultant or supervisor to follow up on the work from the perspective of well-being and mental health:** This consultant would check the fair distribution of the workload and ensure that employees take their days off and address related matters. If the workplace has a human resources office or manager, this consultant could coordinate with them.
11. **Capacity building:** Employees should receive training for the tasks asked of them, which should include an explanation of the mental impact of working on public space issues, specifically cases that deal with various kinds of violence.
12. **Avoiding unrealistic time schedules:** Stress should be taken into consideration when writing project proposals to be sent to funding entities. This will ensure that the workload does not double their exhaustion.
13. **Monitoring and evaluating the work performance as well as offering feedback for improvement:** This can be done regularly through team meetings, and annually by having official evaluations for all employees.
14. **Being considerate of special needs related to mental disorders which employees could suffer from:** Workplaces should exert an effort to understand the different dimensions of the disorder such as the side effects of medication; how medication can affect sleeping hours and the effect it has on official work hours; the possible impact of certain tasks on the mental health state of the employee such as being subjected to violent material or frequent travelling.

15. **Support Group Sessions:** Workplaces should offer the opportunity to have support group sessions if it appears to be needed by the team.

*Suggestions related to the wider context of a group that come together because of their feminist interests and in gaining ground for women: a feminist movement if we wish to use this term*

1. Developing our own awareness and opening the space for discussions that allow admitting mistakes and exchanging different opinions: We need to be able to open the discussion around institutions and the infrastructure and hierarchy that cause and facilitate burnout. However, this will not happen until institutions are aware of the importance of accountability in relation to well-being and its effect on the larger context of the movement within the public space.
2. Capacity and awareness building in relation to mental health and self-care by organizing and attending psycho-educational sessions by professionals.
3. Creating an environment that is supportive of everyone and that allows individuals to view themselves and their lives as valuable regardless of the value of their work. This is especially important to those who chose to step away from the public space for some time, be it short or long. We do not lose our value and worth once we leave work or decide to take some time off.
4. Appreciating the work done by different groups and collectives and the diverse issues that women work on individually or collectively. This includes not belittling the use of creative and unorthodox tools, and not belittling small and unconventional gains by referencing the gains and feminist work created by others, whether individuals, collectives or organizations.
5. Developing knowledge related to self-care and burnout for those who work in the public space. This would entail working on collecting and sharing healthy examples of women who work in the public space and their different experiences of self-care. This also requires finding the space to question and discuss the "balance between our work and our private lives" and the problems that come with trying to attain it.

"There aren't really any references around us, I can't see anyone and think, 'This is a person who has a balanced life and I'd like to be like her'."<sup>175</sup>

6. Being aware that we exist in a context that requires us to unlearn practices which harm us as well as others, practices that work against maintaining well-being. Understanding that constant tolerance and self-reflection are essential to building a supportive context.
7. Discussing and working on starting a trust account which individuals can contribute to; the interest would be divided among them as a 'feminist pension fund'.
8. Determining small milestones for long-term goals to avoid frustration due to not accomplishing more than we are able to individually.

"One needs to know that the work you do will make a difference, that there's hope, even if you can't see it."<sup>176</sup>

9. Having unofficial support circles: they can be made up of friends or fellow feminists who work in the same work field.

"I need someone to remind me of the path I chose, I need someone to remind me [why] I started this journey and [why] I must continue on this path. I have to feel that people need something from me and that they trust me; I also need them to give me time for myself if I need it."<sup>177</sup>

10. To continue working on building a strong feminist movement that supports women.

"If my mother sees [other feminists] and sees that there's a strong movement and that there are people who talk like [me] and feels that [what we do] is serious and real, she wouldn't be pressuring me the same way she does now. At least, she won't see me in the same way she does now. I'm the only one [in the city where we live] who does what I do or who lives alone or thinks

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<sup>175</sup> Interview with Sondos Shabayek, Egypt

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Sara AlSherif, Egypt

<sup>177</sup> Interview with Malak Ahmad (alias), Egypt

the way I do and dreams of the life I want to lead; that's why my mother thinks I'm strange. If we were a large group that has an impact on society – a big movement – and if people spoke up and the legal system was responsive and more people were aware, this would make a difference to my life. Half of my personal struggles would be resolved. Having a strong movement offers psychological support and security."<sup>178</sup>

*Personal examples of self-care:*

1. Having a smaller group of trust to whom we can speak with about our exhaustion.

"Having an extended circle is, of course, crucial but I believe that having a smaller group within that circle – where there isn't only proximity but also intimacy – is also important. At El Nadeem Center, we can very easily tell each other that we're exhausted. Anyone can simply say that they're exhausted and talk about this openly and they usually feel better after that. It isn't easy to find someone who you can fully open up to, but with Suzanne, Mona, Magda and Dai this exists and it's unconditional and this is huge."<sup>179</sup>

2. Putting clear boundaries in relation to working outside of official work hours, whether at home or during official holidays; this will ensure a clear division between time for work and time for our personal lives.

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<sup>178</sup> Interview with Rana (alias), Egypt

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Aida Seif ElDawla, Egypt

## **Conclusion**

A year and six months have gone by since I started working on this project; many months have passed since I started writing this book and I am writing this as I put the final touches while reading the manuscript for the tenth time. Now is the time to write what I was unable to do whether due to time being limited, or because some important issues were not within the scope of this book in this phase, or because certain questions have come up in the process of writing that were crucial to pose yet were not clear to me then as they are now. It was, of course, possible for me to continue my research and to reconnect with the women who have participated in this research. However, I have decided to finalize the book as it is now as a first step in this project and to accept that there will always be room for more research no matter how much I try to cover all aspects related to the topic at hand. This book poses more questions rather than offering answers, especially in relation to institutions and to collective issues, which require a different type of conversation than the one on one interviews conducted for this text.

There are some questions related to us as individuals that have been partially addressed in more than one of the chapters of this book, which perhaps deserve to be highlighted more in another phase of the project. When do WHRDs reach a stage of exhaustion and physical illness? Why is it so difficult to take time off for self-care? How is the issue of our well-being related to the political context and our ability to change the reality we live in? Are we able to be passionate about our work and maintain some space for ourselves at the same time? Can we separate our sense of doing meaningful work from our sense of self-worth?

This book is initially concerned with who we are individually and not with our professional identities in our workspaces. The questions for the interviews did not delve into the roles we play in our workspace and how we see this space. Therefore, there are questions that need to be posed even if they have not been addressed in this book. How do those in managerial positions deal with the exhaustion of their employees? How can the different groups and organizations support one another? How can groups and organizations work towards creating a supportive work environment? How can groups and organizations strike a balance between achieving the work that needs to be done while giving employees enough time to maintain their well-being (especially that many of these spaces suffer from a small work force)? How can wages be adjusted to allow employees the ability to live a decent life where they can practice activities to maintain their well-being and necessities are not a financial burden, in light of how many funding bodies refuse to cover the basic expenses of organizations? What is the infrastructure and hierarchical structure in organizations that leads to and fosters exhaustion and burnout? How can we handle practical challenges related to

working hours and personal space? Such questions on workspaces need first to be acknowledged as important so that we can have conversations about them.

It was possible to touch upon disappointment as a concept and the strength that it connotes in *Even the Finest of Warriors*. However, for reasons related to my fear of glorifying exhaustion and other negative feelings, I have overlooked this issue and have not brought it up during the interviews, even if I realize now the importance of deconstructing 'disappointment' as a feeling and all that comes with it.

For the sake of time limitations, I chose the women interviewed for this project in a way that would cover multiple intersections instead of using the snowball technique. Therefore, the effect of this choice on the content of the book and on my ability to analyze patterns of well-being must be taken into consideration. I believe that the number of interviews conducted for this research is not enough to come up with pattern analysis but can shed light on the different aspects of well-being in order to investigate further and analyze patterns related to the issue. Achieving this would require conducting more interviews, whether in Egypt or Tunisia, and taking more time to analyze the information collected from these interviews.

What is to follow? This project at this stage is an individual one, which means that it is not supported by any organizational framework that would work on executing recommendations of the participating WHRDs or follow up on finishing this research. Perhaps the project being independent of any organizations is an advantage. It is also a disadvantage or a challenge because this entails not having the means to implement the recommendations or open a conversation around them that would include groups and organizations. Publishing this book under a Creative Commons license<sup>180</sup> is important as it enables the continuation of the project and allows others to build on it and use it in different ways. This project was built on previously published works in Egypt and elsewhere and writing *Even the Finest of Warriors* is just one of many coming steps that myself, and other women and men will take towards writing about our well-being in the public space.

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<sup>180</sup> About Creative Commons licence: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

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## **Annex: A Series of Questions**

### *1. Why our stories matter*

I start with explaining how the idea of this book originated and I talk about *What's the Point of Revolution if we Can't Dance?* I also tell the interviewee about the conversations I had with friends and colleagues which have made it clear to me that there are some commonalities in our experiences. I will ask the interviewee how she feels about this statement "our stories matter" and whether she can relate to its healing nature, that it could provide a collective acknowledgement of how we feel and help us to find meaning. What does it mean for us to tell our stories?

### *2. Why do we do this work?*

The second question is about the motive behind the defender's engagement with the public space, and what drives her activism. What does it mean for us to do the work that we do? How did we become involved, when and why and how did we start, and why and how do we continue our activism? How do we survive the challenging changing space from 2011 till this moment?

Do you consider yourself part of a "movement"? Feminist/revolution/human rights? How do we organize? How has the culture of feminist organizing support WHRDs to continue their activism/hindered this ability? Reflect on the gaps between aspirations and visions, and the reality of the tensions between activists and these visions. For those who left the movement: Why did they leave? What factors would have helped them to stay?

Do you believe in the existence of a strong movement (or the lack of) contributes to your well-being?

For those working with victims of violations, are you able to take a personal distance from them? How do you manage to continue doing this work without allowing it getting to you? Does this happen when you are no longer able to help the victim/survivor? How can you continue this work when their families tell you that you've failed them and blame you for their status and that you're no use? How do you continue and disassociate?

### *3. Pleasure*

Do we make space and time for pleasure? Are we able during troubled times to acknowledge that we are worthy of enjoying the pleasures of life? And how does it connect to feelings of guilt and privilege? Do you think your activism gives you any form of privilege (social, financial, etc.)? Why do activists feel privileged? What distinguishes activists' sense of privilege from the traditional sense of privilege? The definition of what pleasure means will be left to the defender herself to identify.

### *4. Family*

Is there a balance to achieve between activism and family and family life? Is it necessary? Are you able to achieve it? Is family related to well-being? Is it difficult to sustain and care for a love relationship while being active in the public space? What are the sacrifices made in this regard? The topics of marriage/family and activism and the cost of activism on our love life are brought up. Does your work support your family life; paid parental leave, childcare if there is one? Do you feel the support (or lack of) makes a difference in your well-being?

### *5. Aging*

How do we think about aging, how do we look at aging as a process and how do we perceive aging feminists in our movement? Do we prepare for aging? Are we ready for it? How do we envision our future within our context and what are our fears and worries concerning this issue? For those defenders who are considered from the older generation, how do you relate yourself to the younger movement and do you believe that the issue of aging requires a response from the movement? What is the "cost" of aging (material costs such as healthcare, housing, etc., and also feeling a lost sense of "value")? For the younger generation, can you relate to and connect with the struggles that have taken place before the revolution?

What are the difficulties as you face as a young feminist/someone new to the movement? OR as an old feminist?

### *6. Mental health*

How did the engagement in the struggle affect your mental health problems in general? Did it create new struggles or exacerbate old ones?

Are we aware of the impact of our work on our mental health? How were we made aware of this impact? Were we exposed to early warnings? How did we react to the manifestations of this impact? What are the available support tools and systems for us? Who bears the cost of our mental health issues and how? And how does our mental health impact our physical health? What institutional support have we had (or we lacked and thus had a negative impact) on realizing/acknowledging/healing our mental health and issues related to it? Do you see other WHRDs prioritizing or working on their well-being? What do you think about that?

### *7. Burnout, physical illness, grief, and loss*

What does “well-being” mean for you? Do you see it as an individual matter or a collective matter? What is the role of the individual and the collective in regard to wellness in the movement?

How do you see yourself as part of different collectivities, and how does this sense of belonging affect your well-being?

How do you define “burnout”? Do we see the signs of burnout for ourselves? Do our loved ones/colleagues at work serve as our alarm system? What do we do when we realize we’re close to burnout? Do we seek help? Do we feel we deserve support and do we ask for a solution from our colleagues or organizations (if we work in one)?

Have you tried any coping strategies? What worked well and what didn’t?

How do we deal with physical illness? Do we ask for help? Are we able to demand care and support from others?

Do we allow ourselves the time to grieve private losses?

How do we deal with public disappointments/regressions/setbacks in the political context we live in?

### *8. Financial security*

Did activism meet or deliver a need for economic independence for you?

Job versus passion/salary versus volunteering: how do we strike a balance between making a decent living and doing the things we feel passionate about? Do you have any thoughts on creating a pension or a retirement plan for WHRDs? Do we allow ourselves to seek a 'comfortable' life (survivor's guilt)? How do we manage issues of financial independence and financial obligations? Do we financially plan our future?

*9. Other challenges*

How do you perceive the intersections between well-being and race; SOGI; class/capital city versus other cities; activists who are new to the field versus established activists?

**Zainab Magdy** is a performer, writer, academic and translator. She has an MA in Performance and Arab American Studies from Cairo University where she is now doing her PhD. on the Egyptian writer Waguih Ghali. In 2013, she was a resident playwright at the International Residencies Program at the Royal Court Theater in London. She was one of three resident writers at the Literarische Colloquium Berlin in the "Hilfe das Volk Kommt" workshop with the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin. Her first performance piece, *Ordinary People*, premiered at Maxim Gorki in October 2016 and was shown in Cairo in November of the same year. In 2017, she facilitated a reading and writing performative workshop at the Contemporary Image Collective: *Geography for Beaten Heroes*. For years, Zainab published her articles on [openDemocracy for 50:50](#). She has kept [a blog](#) since 2010 where she has published fiction and other experimental forms of writing. Zainab translates between Arabic and English to explain jokes to her grandmother then grew up to become an Arabic to English translator. She has translated academic articles, literature and archival material and hopes one day to write stories for children in Egyptian colloquial about cats. To take a break from words and performances, Zainab has recently started learning to cut curls and hopes to learn dry cutting professionally within the coming year.