

Egypt - "What has Azza done?": Azza Soliman, a unique feminist at risk

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The escalation of judicial harassment against Azza Soliman triggered many angry, but also surprised, reactions: "what has Azza done?" This indeed is a question I would like to answer.



Azza Soliman. Picture by Rene Celement.

It is often said, to portray the extent of authoritarianism of the Egyptian state, that "even" feminists and women's organizations are targeted, given that feminism and women's issues are not seen as part of what authoritarian states perceive as threatening. Contemplating the situation of women human rights defenders in Egypt on the International Women Human Rights Defenders' day (WHRDs), cannot but challenge this assumption.

On the 19th of November 2016, Azza Soliman, a feminist lawyer, WHRD, and the head of the board of trustees of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA), was informed that she was banned from traveling based on a judicial order issued on November 17th, 2016 while on her way to participate in "Musawah" movement's training on women's rights in Islam in Jordan. A day later, Soliman found out that her assets and those of her law firm have been frozen.

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It is assumed that these measures are directly related to the case nb. 173 for the year 2011 at the Cairo High Appeal Investigations, commonly known as "NGOs foreign funding case", even though neither Soliman nor any of CEWLA's members have been officially charged or summoned for investigation. The escalation of judicial harassment against Azza Soliman triggered many angry, but also surprised, reactions: "what has Azza done?" This indeed is a question I would like to answer.

For nearly two decades, Azza Soliman and CEWLA have been relentlessly working for women's rights, especially women's access to justice. They have been combating violence against women particularly in the private sphere. They have worked on extremely sensitive issues such as marital rape, reforming the personal status law, women's right to divorce, etc. Although there are many feminist and women's rights organizations in Egypt, CEWLA represents a unique example. They

have made the difficult choice of working, and mobilizing at the grassroots level in a popular quarter in Cairo, that of Bulaq Al-Daqrur, despite all the challenges this poses.

Few feminist organizations have been able to strike the balance that CEWLA has, between providing services for women, and maintaining a strong feminist discourse that doesn't compromise their agency. Over the years, CEWLA has helped thousands of women, provided them with legal assistance, and saved them from abusive husbands, families, or relatives. The crackdown on CEWLA and Azza Soliman means taking away a source of support and security from thousands of women in Egypt.

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Yet, this is not the only reason why I consider Azza Soliman to be a unique and rare example in the Egyptian feminist movement. Over the years, I have observed in awe Azza's ability to develop her feminist discourse, and her openness to new generations and ideas within the movement. When Nazra [1] for feminist studies started off with a group of young and hopeful feminists, Azza Soliman was there to support us, and it was having feminists like her by our side that turned our hopes into realities, and gave us the strength to carry on. She never failed to show her support during the rough times that Nazra has faced with the state crackdown; her presence is an everyday lesson in feminist solidarity.

This is only part of what Azza Soliman has “done” for women, and for us, feminists of a younger generation. This feminist activism was in itself enough reason for state targeting. The appalled reactions asking “what has Azza done?” for her to be perceived as a threat, insist on seeing feminism as a soft, apolitical and low-profile form of activism, ignoring everything that history has taught us about the ways in which feminism challenges power structures.

Questions of marriage and divorce, of equal rights to inheritance, of domestic violence and marital rape, are not easy ones, and feminism is not the safe option an activist can make. Rather, these questions, because they upset patriarchy, deeply upset “power”, whether in its diffuse form in society, or in its more structural form in the state. Feminism, as we have always seen it, is in itself a political question, because authoritarianism is a gendered, not a neutral structure, and an authoritarian state is also usually a patriarchal one.

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Azza Soliman is being targeted in a context where the feminist movement as a whole is facing a severe clampdown. The targeting of Al-Nadeem Center for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture [2], which has provided medical and psychological help to women survivors of violence through its women's program for years, as well as Nazra's official summoning and continuous targeting, are examples of that. Despite all attempts not to take feminist activism seriously, it seems like the state takes it 'too' seriously as an existential threat, to the extent to which it needs to ban feminists from traveling and freeze their assets.

It seems that as feminists we will always be trapped in the paradox of being targeted because what we do seems “too dangerous” on the one hand, and being dealt with more lightly and less considerably because we are women, on the other. It is also apparent that we will always be sandwiched between societal hostility towards feminist discourses and state targeting, which only emphasizes social stigmatization of feminists instead of generating a real societal debate around the

issues they raise. In fact, state targeting only accentuates the more comfortable idea that many societal actors like to believe: we are bad women.

Despite the very precarious time we live in as feminist organizations, and the current risks we face as WHRDs, if there is one woman who taught us to fight, and resist, it will be Azza Soliman. For Azza, and with her, we will continue the struggle for women's human rights as long as we can.

Mozn Hassan

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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/mozn-hassan/what-has-azza-done-azza-soliman-unique-feminist-at-risk>

* Mozn Hassan is the founder and executive director of Nazra for Feminist Studies since December 2007. Nazra is a feminist group that works on sustaining the feminist movement in Egypt and the MENA region, by integrating gender and feminism in these societies. She is also a member of the Experts' Committee of the Regional Coalition for Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Footnotes

[1] <http://nazra.org>

[2] <http://www.alnadeem.org/en>