

Solidarity with imprisoned activists with or without Facebook

On the 23rd of June 2014, I opened Facebook and found news that two friends had been arrested after participating in protests on the other side of the world. Natalie Lowrey is an Australian environmental activist who **was arrested in Malaysia on 22 June during a peaceful action against Australian-owned Lynas Corporation's rare earth plant in Malaysia. Yara Sallam is an Egyptian feminist activist who **was arrested in Egypt on 21 June** during a peaceful demonstration against the country's anti-protest law. These two women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and friends who I had met at different moments in my activist life were now in jail, and I was alarmed and worried.**

I immediately re-posted the two news items with messages that said "Sending strength and cheer to **Natalie** (Nat) while in detention after a protest in Malaysia" and "Sending strength and cheer to Yara during her detention in Egypt." I found it odd that I was not able to tag Yara like I had tagged Nat, but I didn't give it much thought.

For three weeks, I engaged in a frenzied exchange of testimonies, pictures, news items, and calls to action about my two friends who were in jail. There was a lot of traffic on my newsfeed regarding Natalie's situation and the background of the **fight against Lynas**, and also about Yara's situation along with other **WHRDs arrested during the 21 June** demonstration. Another WHRD arrested along with Yara is **Sanaa Seif**, a young woman I do not know personally but whose stories I am learning about through the **campaign** demanding their release. My sole contact was through Facebook, and the two intertwined experiences of Nat and Yara raise questions for me about my own use of Facebook, and how as a movement we can be conscious of the benefits and the threats involved.

At first, Nat was posting directly to Facebook – a **video** from the protest, a short note saying she was fine and expected to be deported back to Australia soon. Later, Nat's friend Tully began

posting on her behalf – reporting that she had visited Nat in jail, that Nat was being treated well, that she was in good spirits although concerned by the **delay** in her case. The other 15 activists arrested at the protest, all Malaysian, had been released within hours but Nat was held overnight, and then longer. Friends of the Earth created an **Avaaz petition** demanding Nat’s release, several **calls to action** started circulating, and friends used Nat’s Facebook wall to give **updates** and share news regarding her detention. On 26 June, The Guardian published an **article** stating the case may not be straight-forward, and that the police were considering charges that carry a 2 year jail term. Luckily, on 27 June Nat was **released on bail** and she was able to return to Australia. She immediately continued her activism, giving **interviews** about her experience in jail where she focused on the campaign against Lynas, delivering an **eviction notice** to Lynas in Sydney, and to **organizing solidarity** for the Malaysian **activists** who were now being charged for the 22 June protest. Nat has expressed that the solidarity messages she received on Facebook and through other channels helped to keep her strong throughout the campaign. I’m glad that Facebook served as a platform for us to know what was going on with Nat and for her to know that she was not alone.

Contrast this to Yara, who I was unable to tag in my initial posting about her arrest. Several organizations quickly became active on Facebook to support Yara, Sanaa, and all the WHRDs jailed since 21 June. The hashtag **FreeYara** was the first item I saw, followed by a **statement** from the African Women’s Development Fund, a **press release** by Human Rights Watch, and an **action alert** from Front Line Defenders. I posted a **picture** of Yara from the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, pointing out Yara’s acts of solidarity and that it’s time to stand in solidarity with her. On 27 June, The Feminist Wire re-published an **interview** with Yara, including this beautiful quote from her: *“Solidarity is not only important in terms of having a collective feeling of support that we are all fighting for the same cause, to end patriarchy, but also because we all know different tools and have different skills.”* On 30 June I saw an **update** pass through my

newsfeed that the court had decided to postpone the case until 13 September 2014, effectively keeping Yara in prison until further notice. AWID organized a [petition](#) and the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition circulated a statement with a [photograph](#) of the WHRDs in jail. On 7 July, I was moved to tears by a [post](#) by Mona Seif, describing her sister Sanaa's strong spirit. On 15 July, someone circulated through Facebook a [blog post](#) from A Paper Bird gathering support for Yara and all human rights defenders in Egypt. On that same day, I was inspired reading a [newsitem](#) stating that hundreds of people had come out in Cairo to demonstrate in solidarity with Palestine, in defiance of the anti-protest law. At that point, my Facebook newsfeed was starting to be filled with Palestine and the atrocities that Israel is committing in Gaza.

The possibility that Yara's Facebook profile has been removed continues to nag at me, a low murmur among the distress I feel about her prolonged detention. I checked my inbox in Facebook and the message thread I had with Yara has been interrupted. All of her messages were replaced by this: "This message is no longer available because it was identified as abusive or marked as spam." Instead of her name, I see "Facebook User." At the bottom it reads, "You cannot reply to this message." All that remains is a monologue from me to her last January, when we connected on Facebook.

I asked some friends (on Facebook, of course) if they had also noticed that Yara's profile was down. This elicited a brief exchange about the dangers of Facebook in relation to privacy and surveillance, and a [couple of resources](#) were posted and shared. Digital security is a huge concern for WHRDs whose accounts are surveilled and hacked, whose whereabouts can be mapped through social media creating potential online and physical risks. It's important for all of us to pay attention to these issues, for our own protection and to make sure we don't put others at risk by tagging or posting about people who are vulnerable to threats and attacks – or who simply don't want to be tagged.

The truth is, I don't know what happened to Yara's profile. All I know is that she and I connected on Facebook last January, I saw her posts regularly on my newsfeed, and when I tried to tag her on 23 June, her profile was gone. Did I accidentally delete her from my contacts? If so, I should still be able to search for her on Facebook, right? One explanation for Yara's sudden disappearance from Facebook is that her profile was disabled by Yara or her friends as a digital security strategy since she is under arrest and likely does not have access to the Internet. If that is the case, why would I see a notice saying that her messages were removed because they were marked as abusive? It seems more likely (to me) that some people in power in Egypt made use of the complaint mechanism in Facebook to denounce Yara as abusive and got Facebook to take down her profile. And this is the issue that concerns me: what are our rights regarding our Facebook accounts, and how did Yara lose her right to have her account? What happened to all the information in her account? Her status updates from reading Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, her photographs of her vacation, her posts about the situation in Egypt, the messages that she wrote to me? These questions are slightly rhetorical, as this incident mostly serves as a reminder that Facebook owns everything, and we own nothing. Our profiles, accounts, and everything we post of Facebook are the property of a corporation that does with it what it pleases, including deleting us altogether. When we conceptualize Internet rights, how can we articulate the right to our digital identity, including ownership and control of our Facebook profiles? At minimum, Facebook should provide an explanation to what happened to Yara's profile. Was it shut down because someone complained? What were the complaints? I think it should also explain what happened to Yara's archive, where is it? Who has access to it?

I know it sounds naïve, we know Facebook is a corporate entity and if we don't want to play by their rules then we can always opt out. But in this globalized interconnected world, I feel it's much more complex than that. On one hand, there is the recognized power of social media as a tool to mobilize, share information, and counter

mainstream media propaganda. But there is also an aspect that is more to do with personal connections, and the relationship-building required for movement-building. Yara and I lost touch after I left my job at AWID. We reconnected on Facebook a year later, and by then she had also changed jobs. We met through our work, and didn't have each other's personal email addresses. I appreciate that Facebook provides a platform where activists can connect and communicate beyond our organizational affiliations. I think that helps us build a stronger movement. (More on this issue about unaffiliated activists, and how we build relationships and movements that transcend our jobs and organizational representations some other time.)

Through Facebook I've also stayed in touch with Nat, who I met in 2009 when I worked at Friends of the Earth International. A few months ago, Nat posted an [interview](#) where she recounts her experience with burnout and her strategies to stay healthy. This was a bridge between my environmental activism and my work in support of WHRDs, where I was promoting the importance of self-care. I have seen these unexpected bridges pop up regularly on my Facebook account, with 900+ contacts ("friends", if you will) that I collected from my 20+ years of activism and NGO employment, studies, and family. There is the scary part of Facebook that this corporation can map your life and relationships – sell it to advertisers and also give it to whomever is surveilling you. But also the amazing side of this same coin: seeing for myself how disperse bits of my life come together, the global trajectory that brought me to where I am in the here-and-now.

So, I'm not ready to give up on Facebook. I need to be mindful about how I use it and ensure that I am not over-relying on it. Immediately, I need to get better at taking conversations off Facebook and onto email, as well as keeping track of my friends' email addresses. (And I'll hold the questions about Gmail for another time as well... let's just say I'll be looking to change email service soon.) But I still count on Facebook to stay updated on what is happening to Yara and the other Egyptian WHRDs who are in jail

today, to learn about the struggle against Lynas that landed Nat in a Malaysian jail for some days, and to continue finding connection and common purpose with my sisters and brothers all around the world.

Yara has been in jail for six weeks and counting. We are invited to **write letters** to her and other human rights defenders jailed in Egypt, like **this one** published by Amina Doherty on the Feminist Wire. I **re-posted** a beautiful photo-montage made by Mona Seif to keep Yara in our hearts and minds: "*Since Yara's profile seems to have gone missing, let's populate Facebook with her smile and continue support actions to free Yara and all defenders jailed for protesting against the anti-protest law.*" It's one small contribution to make sure that Yara doesn't vanish along with her Facebook profile.

Analia Penchaszadeh 6 August, 2014

Original published on <http://www.genderit.org/es/node/4077>

Update on the article on 16 June 2015

Update about Yara: In October 2014, Yara and the other 23 people arrested in June 2014 were sentenced to three years in prison, to an additional three years of police surveillance, to a 10,000 EGP fine (1,000 euros), and to repayment for property damages they allegedly caused, in relation to their alleged participation in a protest on June 21, 2014. In December 2014, an appeals court reduced the sentence to 2 years' imprisonment and 2 years' police surveillance. In a few days, they will have been in prison for one year.

Update about Yara's Facebook profile: While Yara's Facebook page has not been re-established, someone created a Wikipedia page about Yara that does appear on Facebook when I searched for Yara's name. Meanwhile, the original message thread that I had with Yara now appears with this statement (in Spanish, translation mine): "This message has been temporarily eliminated until we are able to

verify the sender's account." Curiously, when I change my settings to English, I just have a thread that only shows the messages I wrote, no other explanation.