

On Being a Single White Arab Woman in Sudan

■ Anonymous

For many persons, these words would mean nothing. The reality is that each of these words carried for me serious implications and challenges in the years that I spent working in Sudan. Each of them brought with it feelings of sadness, a sort of “tristesse” that is hard to define, yet overwhelming at certain moments. In many instances, it left me helpless because there was so little I could change except continuing to be there.

Being white, I was always referred to as “khawagga” (used originally in Sudan to refer to the British during colonization). It was difficult for the majority of people to think that a white person could speak Arabic; it was even more difficult to believe that a white person could be an Arab themselves. It was very embarrassing for me to accept that people would refer to me as a “khawagga”. I was embarrassed because people were referring to me by using a term that was associated with colonialism, something which gave me no pride at all.

But what shocked me most was that my identity was based on the color of my skin; it was maybe only then that I could understand what black people have felt

throughout human history. I had never experienced this before, probably because I was living in countries where the majority is white skinned and I was one of this majority. Classifying people based on the color of their skin was something I could never put up with; yet, this is what I was being judged on.

Being referred to as khawagga created for me a lot of confusion particularly when I was around Sudanese colleagues. If I was with other white colleagues, that feeling was less acute because this term was used to refer to all of us indiscriminately. But when I was with Sudanese colleagues, I saw that the word was used by other Sudanese as a clear sign of discrimination, against these local colleagues. I found this disdainful to both me and them. Often, they could not do anything about this and would just turn around to whoever was speaking and tell them ‘she is not a khawagga; she speaks Arabic; she is Lebanese’.

Being an Arab was even more of a serious challenge in a country whose identity was torn between Africa and the Arab world. I had to carry the burden of being an Arab throughout my stay in Sudan.

For the Sudanese Arabs, being an Arab meant that I had to have the same opinion as theirs, that I had to take their position on all issues. In that particular moment in the history of Sudan, this meant being pro-government, and believe me, no one should be proud of that.

For the Sudanese Africans, especially the Dinka tribe, my Arab nationality carried with it certain prejudices. Hence, I was never perceived by them as a neutral person; I could never be impartial. All my positions and attitudes were biased by the fact that I was an Arab. It is difficult to describe the feelings that I had when one of my colleagues said "you are an Arab, the security people will never follow you or be interested in what you are doing or saying." It hurt me so badly because it looked as if I was a silent accomplice with the security people.

This was even more saddening for me because the project on which I was working dealt with the abduction of Dinka children by two Arab tribes in West Sudan. Arguments that I would make based on considerations aimed at the best interests of the child or on the rights of women were often interpreted as being sheer bias in favor of the Arabs. No matter how strong my arguments were, the Dinkas did not, or rather could not, get themselves to believe me. This was a very serious blow to me as a human rights practitioner and activist. It was even more of a serious blow because of my work on that specific project. It took a lot of patience and self-restraint from me to deal with these accusations.

For my non-Sudanese, non-Arab colleagues I was a mystery, an odd case especially given the overall atmosphere in the world at that time. People were judged on the basis of their nationality, and not on the basis of what they said or did. This made me worried about how I would be classified; human beings like to classify; we all do; it is a simpler way of understanding the world and it is what we have been taught in

school and even at home ever since we are born. Where would I fall in their eyes? What would they consider me to be? How would they look at me? What picture would they draw? No matter how brave you are by saying I do not care about what the others think of you, deep inside we are very much concerned about our image.

With respect to being a single woman, many people had a lot to say. For many African Sudanese, especially the Dinka, women could not be in positions of power and they were not to be influential in public life. Their place was elsewhere, and this is why it was difficult for me to establish myself in a position of authority towards them. It seemed as if they would never take me seriously no matter what I said, or how the others evaluated and judged me. For them, you were simply a woman, and consequently an inferior creature. The fact that I was an Arab woman was even more infuriating for them, because women in Arab society and culture were already considered lower class citizens. If I had been a European or an American, my nationality would have overshadowed my being a woman.

Being single made me the object of pity for the Sudanese Arabs. For them, I had to marry; it was not right to continue to be unmarried. Many even argued with me, asking how come I was not married, recognizing that I did not have any disabilities. They

could see no reason for me remaining single; for them there had to be someone somewhere. I was also a source of concern for them because I was without a companion, without anyone to turn to in my old age.

Being a single woman out there alone in that difficult part of the world was bizarre for them. Why would I come all the way to Sudan to be alone on my own there?

For others, being single meant simply that you are easy prey, a target that they could engage with.

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