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You go there, you've been expecting to meet someone to know you, and then suddenly you find the cop coming taking you from the café. It's like that. Somehow he knows. Without even practicing or saying that you're gay. You're in the secret, and even in the secret you're hunted by the society and the people, so you cannot hide, you cannot go away.

Gilad Cohen:

You're listening to The Hum.

Gilad Cohen:

Miral and Nouran, I haven't seen you both in person in so long. It's been years.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, three years.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah. I met you both years ago when we were working on an exhibition called Am I Wrong to Love?, which featured the stories of 20 LGBTQ refugees who were forced to flee their homes as a result of their gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation. So we met you when you participated in the exhibition, and that was two years ago. So thank you so much for coming back.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, thank you.

Miral Mokhtar:

Thank you for this amazing opportunity. It was our first interview, not publicly, but it was our first one in-

Nouran Hussein:

In Canada.

Miral Mokhtar:

In Canada, yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah. It was a gift for us to start our activism in the real world because it was only in the social media. Yeah, it was a very good chance for us.

Gilad Cohen:

[inaudible 00:01:14]

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

[inaudible 00:01:18]

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Come full circle, we've come full circle.

Gilad Cohen:

Awesome, awesome.

Miral Mokhtar:

A little bit close.

Gilad Cohen:

And Taylah!

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Hi.

Gilad Cohen:

Yo, we've done now... This is episode, I don't know. I don't know what order these will come out in, but we've done four together?

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yup.

Gilad Cohen:

I actually just met you for the first time today in person. How's this feeling for you?

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

It's feeling good. It's feeling good. I'm enjoying this. Lovely to meet you both as well. I'm having a good time.

Gilad Cohen:

Amazing. So, Miral and Nouran, how are you today? How's life, how's everything going?

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, actually, the last time when we saw you, which was we were refugee at this time. Actually, today after three years, finally, we got our permanent residence.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Hey! Congratulations.

Miral Mokhtar:

We just got them last March. It's like, finally, we started our life.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Aw, that's brilliant. I'm so happy for you both. That's fantastic.

Miral Mokhtar:

Thank you. We're so happy.

Gilad Cohen:

That's huge news! Congrats!

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, thank you a lot.

Miral Mokhtar:

Thank you. Yeah, I think this is a much change for us and also we find a way to start to go back to school again. A lot of happy news.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

Nice.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

I'm interested to jump more into... Again, thank you so much for being here. I'm going to nod over to you, Taylah and let you... We're sharing a computer here.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah. All right, so let's just jump in. So, identifying as LBTQ... I like to use the word queer. How does queer feel for you guys?

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, good.

Nouran Hussein:

Good. Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

So, identifying as queer folks and having it be illegal in Egypt since 2000, with all of the punishments and everything that is written into the laws right now... Knowing that, what's it like to come to the understanding that you are queer in a place like Egypt?

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, I think for me for understanding to be a queer person in Egypt, it was hard in many ways. Not only the society but also the religious, because in Egypt it's an Islamic country. So, it's very hard to be a queer person there. What's interesting for me, that there is no law against us in the constitution. Actually, there is no law that says it's forbidden to be a member of our community. But what happens is we go to prison treated as sex worker.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Oh!

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

Oh, interesting.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah. Under the law of prostitution, it takes up to 17 years in jail and with physical abuse and a chance of being raped from anyone in the same jail...

Gilad Cohen:

Would classify as a sex worker?

Nouran Hussein:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

Interesting.

Miral Mokhtar:

Prostitution, yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Wow.

Miral Mokhtar:

Also, the law have the word immorality.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Interesting.

Nouran Hussein:

So the police can use a very, very bad way of catfishing the gays on the application Grindr. That's what happened. They use it as a catfish. So you go there, you've been expecting to meet someone, two of you, and then suddenly you find the cop coming taking you from the café. It's like that. Somehow he knows. Without even practicing or saying that you're gay. You're in the secret, and even in the secret you're hunted by the society and the people. You cannot hide, you cannot go away.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, it's so hard.

Nouran Hussein:

But, I think in the history, you were saying to me about the ancient Egyptian.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, the ancient Egyptians, not a lot of people know about the past of the ancient Egyptian because they usually in Egypt want to hide this part of the ancient Egyptian, that they had many LGBT people. But they were not seen in the world of course as LGBT because at that time the terminology wasn't existing. Queen Hatshepsut was having two genders, and also there was two ancient Egyptian married women who existed there, and their statue is in Italy, in the Egyptian Museum. But because the Egyptian people doesn't know about this part of their history, so they don't believe in the LGBT rights that it need to be existed because they don't know that it existed in their history.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Right, yeah, that seems to happen a lot. Like, we look at homophobic societies and you look into the history of those societies, and they're full of queer representation and revered queer people and it's a one-off, you know what I mean? Yeah, it's really interesting.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, it's not only about being lesbian, even the non-binary was existing in the ancient Egyptians.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Definitely.

Nouran Hussein:

Yes, it's very brave to see that, but at the same time we find the people are hiding it. Like, the government trying to hide the walls, and everything was written on the walls. It's just that nobody can see it.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Have their own agenda.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah, exactly, yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

They didn't have an agenda, they had the religion that was respecting the nature, protecting the nature, just so beautiful.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

With information, you know it was a piece of our history. It is a part of us. How do people react? Have you been in that experience before?

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, anyone who is Muslim or religious conservative in any way, not particularly Muslim, don't want to say that this ancient Egyptian history is part of the Egyptian of today because they think that now they are all our people but not ancient Egyptian. So, somehow because the ancient Egyptian had no religion that is represented today, some people don't want to be proud of it.

Nouran Hussein:

And also, it wasn't only in the ancient Egyptian. During the Osman Empire there was rights for the gay.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, a lot.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, and when I say this to any Muslim who is speaking to me, they say, "No, it wasn't!" It's like, no, it's in the history. I can't [crosstalk 00:07:48].

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Right (laughs)

Nouran Hussein:

It's not me lying. It's like, it's in the history.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

You can quote it.

Nouran Hussein:

And I'm proud today to see that there is a lot of people who are queer Muslim. It's something important for me to see because when the people start to say that we are queer Muslim, or that they are queer Muslim, I'm so proud because you can represent this type of people because they think no, you cannot be Muslim and queer. But actually you can be anything and be queer.

Gilad Cohen:

Exactly, exactly.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah, there's an interesting, I don't know if it's a real divide, but there's this assumption that being religious and being queer can't function together and just erases a whole swath of the queer community, right?

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

It would soft combust.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah, no, you can't do both, you're just going to burst into flames. Yeah, no, it's a-

Gilad Cohen:

Heaven is just this really straight place where people [crosstalk 00:08:43] unless you think about it.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Just throwing Nickelback in there for fun.

Gilad Cohen:

It's weird. A straight people glove party [crosstalk 00:08:52] Nickelback.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah, so cops catfishing queer people on Grindr is a known thing that's known to happen. How do folks navigate dating if there's always this fear of being catfished by the cops?

Nouran Hussein:

Right now, most of our gay community in Egypt, they cannot date the person who they don't know. You have to know this person. You have to know the circle, and who's coming from, like, where is he coming from so I can date him because it's not only the police who use this, but also some people who use it to bully the gays.

Nouran Hussein:

I had a friend in Egypt, he was telling me, once they came to Canada, that he met on a date on Grindr and then he went to the house to this guy. He didn't know this guy, and then the guy started to take a video of him naked, and he made him to sign a paper to just give him all the money and the apartment that he owned, at this time, and he told him, "If you're not going to sign, I'm going to put this video online and say to all the people that you are gay." So it was just like this.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

I'm wondering how would that work? Because wouldn't the guy who posts the video, even if he's not gay, be assumed to be gay?

Gilad Cohen:

Or how could you end up in that situation?

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah, how did you end up with a naked man in your apartment?

Nouran Hussein:

Because he's going to say that, "I'm a hero because I took a video of a gay." It's like that. It works different.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Right, right.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, it's worse-

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

You have a naked man in your apartment but you're not gay.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, exactly. And the guy who's really gay, he cannot go to the police.

Miral Mokhtar:

And there is a law against releasing content that is related to anyone without their consent, but this law doesn't work to protect any LGBT person. It works against them...

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.



Nouran Hussein:  
Resident Evil game.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah, it's like in Resident Evil where you don't know who's a zombie, who's real. You end up in an apartment, you have your clothes off and someone's like "Give me your money!" It's just bananas. Knowing all that, and knowing that the cops are also using, you said, Grindr as a tool to catch people. I'm curious, how did you both, you didn't meet in Toronto, you met in Egypt?

Nouran Hussein:  
Yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:  
Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

So guide us through your story. How did you meet? How did you meet? How did you start dating?

Nouran Hussein:  
Yeah, I met her on Instagram.

Miral Mokhtar:  
Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:  
I was like, talking to her.

Miral Mokhtar:  
I remember our first conversation.

Nouran Hussein:  
Yeah. I was talking to her for like two years before we met because she's an artist and she used to put all her artwork online, and she was very known in my circles, this very known artist. And wow, just like me, take a look at the stuff and then I was following her, and she started the chat with me.

Miral Mokhtar:  
Yeah, I sent a message to her and I told her, it seems like you like my paintings so much.

Gilad Cohen:  
You were using the paintings as an excuse.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah!

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

I love it.

Gilad Cohen:

Oh, yes.

Miral Mokhtar:

I'm inviting you to an exhibition that didn't exist.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, she said this.

Gilad Cohen:

Wow.

Nouran Hussein:

Oh my goodness! It's like a total [crosstalk 00:12:05].

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, and then we start talking and she told me that she was talking about the girl, that she's a lesbian and she told me do you mind speaking about that? I told her, no, I am.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, it was by chance. I didn't know that she's a lesbian.

Miral Mokhtar:

And she told me, "me too." So great.

Nouran Hussein:

I was praying that she's a lesbian.

Miral Mokhtar:

Like, we trusted each other, and the same time without both of us knowing anything, we just trusted each other.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

That's risky, too, right?

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Especially going out on a limb and just coming out to somebody you don't know. Wow. I'm glad that worked out for you though.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah. We're so glad, yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

[inaudible 00:12:45] trust.

Gilad Cohen:

The message that you sent, were you-

Nouran Hussein:

No, the message on Instagram.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah, well, when you said, "I'm a lesbian"-

Nouran Hussein:

It was me who said that.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah, was there any fear hearing those words come out of your mouth?

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, I was afraid that this time, but at the same time I fall for her. She's the love of my life. I need to tell her because give her a chance. Maybe she's bisexual. Even anything! Please! Yeah. I just said it, and this moment she was typing and was like, oh my God, right now she's saying that stuff of homophobic people. And then suddenly she said, "Oh, I don't mind, I'm a lesbian too." And it was like that.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

I can't even imagine.

Gilad Cohen:

About there, but I'm sure that second one is really tough. I'm sure it was a huge sense of relief when that came back all right.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

Being able to appreciate your love for one another in public ways. How does that work around your friends and also your family? Guide us through that.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, of course when we are in a public place we cannot hold hands; we cannot look in a romantic way. We just have to pretend that we are just friends. Even on our first date, it was so obvious that we are on a date, but I was trying to hide myself. Like, no, don't be nervous, don't look like you're going on a date. It was so hard. Only the moment that we had together, it was in our house, alone. When my family went away and when her father is not at her home. This was our only moment together not like that.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, it was so hard. I remember that there was so much feeling of fear, that maybe my father can hear me talking to her or maybe he can check my laptop search or anything. And we were using, at that time-

Nouran Hussein:

Signal.

Miral Mokhtar:

An app, yeah, that doesn't show any message to anyone in the notification. So, if someone checked our phone, they would not find the message at all.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

Just both of us can see it.

Nouran Hussein:

For me, I had to delete our conversation every day.

Gilad Cohen:

Wow.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, because I had a history with my family checking my phone and my stuff because they knew that I'm lesbian. I had to delete anything because I'm also not afraid for me, I'm afraid for her, because if they knew that this is the woman I'm dating, maybe they can call her father or call her mother. I don't know what they can do.

Miral Mokhtar:

My father was already every day feeling that he wants to see what I am doing, and he was controlling so much. I didn't feel that I was safe at home. Even talking on the phone, I feel that he is watching me somehow. Because he used to watch me without me knowing.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Did both of your parents, your families, did they both know that you were both queer?

Nouran Hussein:

My family knew.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Your family knew. Did your family know as well, or?

Miral Mokhtar:

They find out and when they found out, my father wanted to do a virginity test to me in front of the whole family. He told me that you will no longer be able to go outside or see the sun. Probably, you will be killed after the virginity test, after they find out that I'm not virgin anymore. So I ran away. I took my bag of paintings. I didn't take anything else, just the bag of paintings. I went to run in the street. I was calling Nouran. She was in traffic. She was coming to-

Nouran Hussein:

I was in traffic. She's running away! It's like, I'm in traffic, really. I'm not late for you.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

How did you end up in Canada? What was that journey like? So you ran away from home. You were stuck in traffic.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

And then how did you end up here?

Nouran Hussein:

We both run away together.

Miral Mokhtar:

But after her family knew that she's a big fan of Mashrou' Leila, the musical band. After she went through therapy, conversation, not condition therapy-

Taylah Harris-Mungo:  
Conversion therapy.

Nouran Hussein:  
Yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:  
No, cure of homosexuality, imaginary therapy that exist in Egypt.

Nouran Hussein:  
Yeah, it's the same.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:  
It's the same thing?

Miral Mokhtar:  
Yeah, it's the same thing.

Nouran Hussein:  
But it's more in a-

Miral Mokhtar:  
More homophobic way.

Nouran Hussein:  
Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:  
Okay. That is impressive.

Nouran Hussein:  
It's not like talking. It's like taking meds. Maybe it can end up by being raped by a man. It's in a very abusive, homophobic way.

Miral Mokhtar:  
So, after that, when they saw the flag in the concert of Mashrou' Leila, they knew that she's still like that, and she's not going to change at all.

Nouran Hussein:  
So we had to leave.

Miral Mokhtar:

She ran away too.

Nouran Hussein:

And this time she was away from the home, so after this I ran away with her. We started our journey of running away after only three or four months having a very good time, and then we had to run away.

Miral Mokhtar:

For one year.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, for one year.

Miral Mokhtar:

We were running away for one year.

Nouran Hussein:

In Egypt.

Miral Mokhtar:

Between different cities and places. They still were trying to call the police and find a way to find us. I remember that I changed my phone number, but I found that the other number was seeing my message. And I knew that my father were able to bring another SIM card for my old phone number to use it to check the conversation I was having with my friends at that time.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

But you were using that app? Were you still using-

Miral Mokhtar:

No, it was just a number in the chat on WhatsApp.

Nouran Hussein:

He can check the messages on WhatsApp.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Oh, on WhatsApp. So, you were running away for a year. How did you support yourselves?

Nouran Hussein:

We had to buy a, how do you say it?

Miral Mokhtar:

Sale.

Nouran Hussein:

Sale, yeah. We had to sale everything that we have at this time: her laptop; I had a gold necklace. I had it from my mother. We had to sell it. My watch, bag.

Miral Mokhtar:

I sold some paintings too.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, paintings, camera, we had to sell everything.

Miral Mokhtar:

Very loved one, I sold it for not expensive price.

Nouran Hussein:

We had to sell everything that we had at this time. We've been living ups and down, ups and down. Some days without food. Some days without furniture. We used to move also in Egypt, but not because we didn't have a stable house, because we cannot stay in a place for more than one month or two months because our family can know. So we had to run away. Like, we've been living in all Egypt. Not only in Cairo, we went into Sinai. It's very far away.

Gilad Cohen:

Is there a safe place for queer people in Egypt to go to? Is there a community, an underground group of people, like an online forum? A place that you can find advice or someone to lean on in this time that you're describing?

Miral Mokhtar:

That's a very good question because we thought that when we seek for help from our own community, they would be the first one to help. But we were shocked that what we saw was not what we expected. They were the first one, the three organization that exist there. The first three, they rejected to help us. It was very disappointing.

Nouran Hussein:

Actually, it was disappointing because Miral was working with one of them. We were like, why are you doing this? It's supposed to help the community. We actually discovered that we were not the only one who didn't do this for us, you understand. It's very bad to say that, it's a benefit for them just to take money and fund from every country that they can, and saying that they helping the LGBT in Egypt, but actually no, they are not. So, yeah, it was disappointing for us.

Gilad Cohen:

So, it sounds like you're on your own. You're completely on your own. How do you make the journey all the way from Egypt here to Canada? How did that happen?



Nouran Hussein:

We've been connecting to a feminist organization because it's like a community that we all know each other. A guy who's working in this feminist organization told us about Rainbow Railroad, that they're coming and they are going to be interviewing some people, so maybe you can have the chance to go to Canada. At this time, this guy knew about our story and knew what's happening to us. So, I told him, "Yes, please put our name on the list so we can go to the interview and see what's going to happen." Maybe we can get accepted.

Nouran Hussein:

We went to do the interview. It was in May, I remember the day. It was in downtown Cairo. Actually, this place used to have a lot of conference for the LGBT underground. We already knew the place very good. So we went and we did the interview. We heard back from them maybe one week, I think, we got the response.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, one week after the interview we got the response that we got accepted and we're going to leave.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Amazing.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

What was it like coming here? What was it like when you first arrived? When did you arrive?

Miral Mokhtar:

I think we didn't realize for a while that we came.

Nouran Hussein:

On 28 of June, 2018, exactly.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Okay. Summertime.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

You have no idea what you're in store for.

Nouran Hussein:

Well, no, we didn't know. I was having some clothes for the winter, I thought, because Canada, we had this idea, it's only winter. Oh, my god, it's summer!

Gilad Cohen:

Yep.

Miral Mokhtar:

But we didn't know that there is housing crisis here in Canada. We found them asking us to have an address here so we can come to here. I didn't know anyone in Canada except someone in France, a feminist, that I met in France. I asked her, "Do you know anyone who can be in Canada or know someone?" And then she connected me to a person who connected me to two women who are here in Canada. I got an address from them, and I give it to the immigration when we came because they said there should be an address here. Then we came, we stayed for 10 days at her place and then we start to connect to the other women, and we stayed there for some months.

Nouran Hussein:

Three months.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, till I had the heart ablation surgery in...

Nouran Hussein:

It was in October.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, in October. Then we start moving.

Gilad Cohen:

So, a very tumultuous, and we're going to get into that. I know the housing thing is something that you're both very outspoken about. I'm just curious, in contrast to what you're describing in Egypt where you're out on a date, but you can't really be open about being out on a date. There's no community. You arrive here in June. It's Pride month. You're in a place that's a bit more open, a lot more open, let's say. What was that like for you as a couple, for you as individuals, to be able to express yourselves truthfully?

Nouran Hussein:

I think once we arrived at the place, we kissed each other on the street.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

And it was our first moment to do it. I need to do it so I can believe we are in Canada! Nobody's going to watch us. Yeah, I can remember this time exactly because we were afraid that even when we finished kissing, it's like, oh, nobody's looking at us, like, yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

Expecting fire extinguishers [crosstalk 00:25:30].

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

And nothing.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

And we saw the Canadian flag raising, and it was so great.

Nouran Hussein:

She was crying once we went from the airport.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, I was crying.

Nouran Hussein:

It's like, she was literally crying. We're here in Canada, finally! She cannot believe it. Yeah, it was very hard journey just to arrive here.

Miral Mokhtar:

I think also we have put so much pressure on the LGBT Egyptian organization because we were doing this here. We were connecting and sending emails to global organization in every country telling them our story and telling them we need help. This is everything about us, how we can get the help that we need. This was so much pressure.

Nouran Hussein:

I know. But, you know what, it's not easy for anybody to get you out of the country. It's very hard. Very hard process to do it. You cannot expect when you text somebody to tell them that I'm in danger that they would believe you, because I know that there is much people that do it. It's very hard.

Miral Mokhtar:

I think at the last days, our friend was telling us maybe you can go live and do a live video and tell out your story. But, you will risk everything. Every security you still have, could be very little, and-

Nouran Hussein:

We didn't do it.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, yeah, we were so stressed to do something like that.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah, I mean, it's the home stretch, right?

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

That's hard. So when you got to Canada... Previously hearing you folks speak, you've mentioned that the Canada that you were sold wasn't necessarily the Canada that you got. Can you tell us what that means? What was the Canada that was described to you while you were in Egypt looking for a way to escape, and how does that differ from the place that you are living now, the Canada that you're living in now?

Nouran Hussein:

Like, when we were in Egypt, we were told that at least we will have a secure place for maybe our first month, once we arrive here. This was the important thing for us, just to have a place. Anything else, we can do it. We can try our best to do anything, but at least the first push, to have a place. But this was the thing that we didn't find. This was our first shock. Like, why? Why we didn't have this?

Nouran Hussein:

So we started to live our own life, and we were trying till today to find a place to stay in. But it's very hard cause we didn't get the first push that we were promised. But, what we've been doing right now, we've got into college. We've got accepted. We've got our permanent resident. We've got our credit card, finally. But, the first push that we didn't get till now we can feel it. We can feel the impact of it that we didn't get our first push. That was very hard for us, and not only for us. I found out later that also some of our friends who came here also didn't find this first push. It's like, why? You did a very good job to get us out from Egypt and come here to Canada. So, at least continue the roads. Just continue it.

Miral Mokhtar:

[crosstalk 00:29:08] Get to it!

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

So, yeah, for me it was like that.

Miral Mokhtar:

For me, I think we had the idea that we were going to be coming to live, to start to live, but we saw that was so much better here that need a lot of activists' work on it, the lack of information. Many people were supposed to be giving information, like the Ontario Works, at least the organization that brought us. Many organization there that we went to but they were not providing the information that are really needed. They were giving lots of information and lots of support, but it's not realistic for a refugee that is coming literally with nothing, trying to start a life, not to build a life even, just to start living. It was so hard to face all these barriers. Some people, I think, could not face all of that in the first years of refugee because we come with so much problem that we already faced, and we need to take care of our mental health, of course as everyone else.

Miral Mokhtar:

But when we came, we see all of that. That's a lot.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah, it's a ton of trauma that you're bringing here with you and also trying to navigate a place that's completely different from your culture and from your home. You talked about some of the barriers. One of them, you mentioned, was coming here with nothing. Not just physical things, but a lack of community as well. Can you tell me a little bit more about the barriers that you're talking about? You said there are a lot of barriers. For those that are listening that might not know what that means, what do you mean by the barriers?

Nouran Hussein:

We can start by maybe, like, if I came to here as a refugee and I wanted to have some money. So I applied for Ontario Works. I didn't know how to apply for Ontario Works. So, it took me four months to know how can I apply for Ontario Works. When I applied for Ontario Works, what we faced as refugees, because they think that we cannot speak English and cannot understand what's happening, it's racism and homophobia. My first case worker was telling me that I need to prove that you came here in Canada by Rainbow Railroad because you're a lesbian. Like, literally, she said that. I was like, is it legal to ask me this thing? They were asking at the reception. They said, yes, it's legal. I was like, how is it legal to ask me how I came to Canada? It not your problem. You're not immigration officer. Because of this, she didn't give me the first months of my Ontario Works. So, I was late five months instead of four.

Nouran Hussein:

So all of this time, we were just staying with the money that Rainbow Railroad provided us once we first came. They gave us each \$950. So we were staying five months with this amount of money in Toronto. I was in depression. We weren't going out. We cannot go out. I don't know anybody, and I don't know the country, and I don't have money. What am I doing here? So this was one of my barriers, and of course

the employment because they cannot accept you except you have Canadian experience, and of course the education. We just found out three months how we can continue our education. This was crazy. Everything was like... I cannot have credit. You have to apply for asylum, and it's very long journey applying for asylum because we had to apply for asylum in Canada, not outside.

Nouran Hussein:

Everything... You have tried your story in asylum and you have to have evidence, you have to have support letters, you have to do everything and checkups, mental checkups, physical checkups to see if you have any physical trauma on your body because if you are beaten or abused. Everything, you were going through the story again and again. It was a very bad, very, very hard and depressing years for us because it took us two years to get out of depression and PTSD and trying to start. It took us two years, literally, since we arrived here.

Nouran Hussein:

During all of this, she had to do a heart ablation. It's like, what's happening? I was like God, please, if you're here, stop it! It was very hard. At this time, we just needed a place to stay during all of this to get rest from all the trauma that we faced. That's it, yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

I think also that the second case worker in Ontario Works for Nouran was very bad. He told her to, I don't know how to say that.

Nouran Hussein:

He told me, because I'm lesbian, I should go and work with my community, like, gays' community.

Miral Mokhtar:

But I will say in that way, he told you to work-

Nouran Hussein:

And that means that you should go and put an ad on Church's Street because it's for the LGBT community, because I'm musician, that you can learn the child of gays to play violin. I was like, why should he suggest that? Why are you saying that? And at this time I didn't have work permit. So, I told him, I don't have work permit. How can I work? He told me to work in a black market. I was like, no. Because if I did this I know what will happen to me in Canada. I'm ready to lose my status here. No sir.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Just got here.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah. Sorry, not for me this year.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah, 100% pure, unfiltered, terrible advice.

Miral Mokhtar:

Of course. The worst one-

Nouran Hussein:

I don't know, but they always think that the refugees are ignorant and cannot speak English because every time he spoke to me, he was like, "Do you need translator?" It was like, "I'm speaking to you right now. Why am I needing a translator? Can you tell me?" "I thought that you didn't speak English." It's like, okay?

Miral Mokhtar:

And he wrote on your application that you need English course.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, it's like, okay, maybe useful there. I don't mind taking an English class. But you're saying it in a racist way. You can feel it.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Right, right, totally. Get your game up Ontario Works.

Miral Mokhtar:

I had one that was...

Nouran Hussein:

I think yours was the best.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, the first one was so good.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, she wasn't bad. She was the best, yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

[crosstalk 00:35:59] She was giving so much information that I wish that I wrote on a note. It was a lot, but she was good. After that one, I had another one that was so bad. I was trying to tell her that I move every month, and I rent from Airbnb. I don't know what came in her mind, she thought I am running away from a crime.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, literally. You know what, I found out that Ontario Works, if I'm homeless or if I'm moving, they cannot give me the money, the allowance for the home, the housing.

Miral Mokhtar:

I didn't know that at that time, and she was asking for the proof of address.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Right.

Miral Mokhtar:

So I was telling her that I'm moving and it would be so hard to give a proof of address because I move. Then she told me that I should come to the office, and she took-

Nouran Hussein:

With your acceptance letter.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah. The acceptance letter, and literally she left me in the office for two hours and Nouran was sitting out there, she saw what happened. There was a police officer, she came-

Nouran Hussein:

Immigration officer checking on her status.

Miral Mokhtar:

Immigration officer checking without my consent.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, they don't understand.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, this one was like-

Nouran Hussein:

You are the people working in the government. You should be the most understanding people what's happening to the refugee and how their status are.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, I wasn't doing anything wrong and I felt scared.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, of course-



Miral Mokhtar:

I wasn't doing anything wrong.

Nouran Hussein:

You've been questioning for who you are and why you're here.

Miral Mokhtar:

And when I went outside, she was giving me expired courses to go to take. I told her they are expired. She told me you should go.

Nouran Hussein:

Just go.

Miral Mokhtar:

I said, okay. And then when I went out to the elevator, they were looking at me.

Nouran Hussein:

It's like, just go to this expired class.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah, so you said that the first thing that you did when you got here was kiss on the street.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

How have your past experiences of being monitored and closeted and living in that state of hypervigilance, how has that impacted the way that you live openly now?

Nouran Hussein:

I think right now, I just telling her, I want to be out as fuck. No more closet for me!

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Put it on a shirt.

Nouran Hussein:

Please, no more closets for me. That's enough. I've been in my closet all my life. But, you know what, my experience gave me the understanding of the people who are still in the closet. I can understand and I can help them to go out from the closet if they want, because not everybody wants to go out. It's their choice. But if someone wants to go out, I can help them by my experience. So it helped me. I think it's also yours who helped you because you had a very different one from mine. Like, your closet story, it was very different than mine.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, it was very different.

Nouran Hussein:

Mine was religious.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah. Mine was like living under control, feeling that someone is recording every step you are doing in the house. Also, my parents are separated. My mother was living in another house, but I was living with my father. I thought they could be understanding, somehow. I had hope in that. But what I saw was very bad.

Gilad Cohen:

You're both very open on social media. We're friends on Facebook. We follow each other, I think, on Instagram. We're on all the things except for TikTok because that one confuses me. I don't know how to do any of those things.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

[crosstalk 00:40:05]

Gilad Cohen:

When my wife's on it, it gives me a panic attack just watching her scroll. I'm curious for the relationships you had back home in Egypt, do you still have any relationships? Are you in touch with your family, especially considering how outspoken you are being and how open you are? Out as fuck, as you say. Does that take a toll on your relationships back home?

Nouran Hussein:

Me and Miral, I don't speak with my family since I left home. It's been four years. We don't know anything because last thing I knew about them, that they did death certificate for me so I cannot have any money or any name by them because they're ashamed, of course, because I'm a lesbian. I'm not talking with my family.

Nouran Hussein:

Most of my friends know. I think it was like two or three people who accepted me when I came out on social media. Yeah... No... It's very hard because they cannot understand that you're the same person, accept that you love another gender because they only think that you're going to sleep with them. It's like, no, you're my friend.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah. You're the zombie.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah. The monster.

Nouran Hussein:

Or maybe that they will get... That they will be lesbian because I'm lesbian. It's not a cure... It's not-

Miral Mokhtar:

Contagious.

Nouran Hussein:

It's not a disease. I'm not going to touch-

Miral Mokhtar:

A rainbow will come out of your eyes.

Nouran Hussein:

Rainbow eyes, yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

That's what they think.

Nouran Hussein:

Especially when we wrote our post. Once we came here, we wrote a post on her Facebook because she's the famous one, so I'm always using her social media. So we wrote this Facebook post. It was in July, and we wrote that we're going to be engaged, that we are happy, that we are here in Canada. And all your friends came to us. It was crazy at this time because we couldn't believe that your friends are like that.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah. I thought that they could be a little bit open-minded. It was a French school so I thought maybe there is some hope, but no. They were telling me, "Oh, how come you're like that?" It wasn't clear for us. So, after that, we thought that only the friends on my Facebook who saw it. But the news shared it.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, but after it.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, the Egyptian news.

Nouran Hussein:

We wrote it in July, and then news shared it in December. So it was a gap. You didn't know what happened, or maybe someone could have taken a screenshot. After this, in December, we've been known worldwide. Because everybody saw it, do you know these girls? Even Turkey was writing about us! We don't know anybody living in Turkey. Why are you writing about me? It was crazy at this time because, right-

Miral Mokhtar:

Even the Arabic newspaper here wrote, and we were shocked that they going to wrote. They shared the photo without our consent. Also we found that there is death threats from some people here, for us. We went to do a police report and we were so happy that the police going to protect us. We did the police report there. That was a very good thing.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

We felt brave after doing the police report.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, we felt in a safe place. At least I can go to the police. I didn't have this Egypt. I cannot go.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, because it was written that I will be killed on the 25 of January. I told the investigator. He told me, that day don't go out. Stay away from the windows. Don't tell your address to anyone because you don't know who's going to do that.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Was anybody ever caught or punished for the threats?

Nouran Hussein:

No, because it was all fake accounts. It's all fake accounts who are sending this.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Are you still getting these threats?

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah [crosstalk 00:44:29].

Nouran Hussein:

Because our videos on TikTok. They usually get mad.

Gilad Cohen:

Telling you about TikTok.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

You're also TikTok famous, all right, all right.

Miral Mokhtar:

Only [crosstalk 00:44:38].

Nouran Hussein:

They usually get mad, yeah. It's just because we're criticizing the way that the people think about the LGBT community. But in a very bold, courageous way, nobody ever did it of course in Egyptian Arabic. They went crazy. I remember this guy wrote that they lose with the gayness test because our TikTok videos only. I can believe this guy because Egypt is crazy. They can do anything! It's already happened to two women in Egypt. They were straight women who were just dancing on TikTok. Right now, they are in prison getting up to 10 years.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Oh, shit.

Nouran Hussein:

It's crazy that the government there, it's a very crazy, misogyny, patriarchy.

Miral Mokhtar:

I think there is a lot of those who are against us. I cannot count. Because of our TikTok is so bold. We tell them they think this way, no it's not like that. We're not like that. You think this way? We're not like that. We say what they say about us. This is what they hate about us, that we tell them, you think we are like that? No, we're not like that. But there is part of something-

Nouran Hussein:

Of the history.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

It was like that.

Miral Mokhtar:

It's like that. But we're not like that.

Nouran Hussein:

For example, they think always that the gays or lesbian are a sexual harasser or sexual predator. I told them, if we are sexual harasser and predator, then all the Egyptian are like that. All the men are like that because Egypt is a very known country for the sexual harassing. And they went mad. This is the reality of this country, don't be mad at me.

Miral Mokhtar:

99% of women in Egypt got harassed.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

99%?

Miral Mokhtar:

99%.

Nouran Hussein:

According to the Egyptian women council.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, and leave them also. Now there is lots of Me Too movement, even here-

Nouran Hussein:

[crosstalk 00:46:46]

Miral Mokhtar:

-is a lot of victims are speaking about what rape happened to them. There is also rape to happened to children, lots of that from the family, from outside the families. It's so bad.

Nouran Hussein:

I'm so glad that they started to speak finally. It's like a movement starting. It's starting in the COVID last year, in 2020. So good.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

You're also role models. When folks from Egypt or any other country where being out or being open about your sexuality is perceived in such terrible ways, when they see you speaking so openly about it. Out as fuck, again, as you say. I'm sure it inspires people in a number of ways to open up about their truth. That's something we should be celebrating. What's your TikTok? Drop that handle.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Drop the links.

Nouran Hussein:

I think, what's the name? It's miralmokhtar6 I think? Or miralmokhtar-

Miral Mokhtar:

It was our name. Yeah, miralmokhtar6. The other name is miralnouran.

Nouran Hussein:

Okay.

Gilad Cohen:

Miralnouran, all right. We'll share that. I'm curious, you're here in Canada now. What's it like for both of you to build community here in Toronto? The LGBT community is vast. It's spread out everywhere. Obviously, the Village is the hub. Church and Wellesley the epicenter of that. Has it been challenging to build community while you've been here? Has it been easy? If it is challenging, why?

Miral Mokhtar:

I don't know because you're like...

Nouran Hussein:

I think the first year we were in our journey of asylum and we were so depressed, so no. The second year we had the COVID.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Fair enough. Fair enough.

Nouran Hussein:

So, no, no.

Miral Mokhtar:

Quarantine. No friends allowed.

Nouran Hussein:

So, till now we've known some people but not close friends, we cannot say close friends. But we've been having some connection.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, connections are good. Better [crosstalk 00:48:44].

Nouran Hussein:

Not till today close friend though. Yeah, it's hard during the COVID and things.

Miral Mokhtar:

I think we have hope in the college to make good friends.

Nouran Hussein:

I think in the college, yeah [crosstalk 00:48:55].

Miral Mokhtar:

[crosstalk 00:48:55] study assaulted women and children counselor and advocate.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Really? Both of you?

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, both of us.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Congratulations. I've heard so many good things about that program. Honestly, I know a few people who've gone through that program and are doing really awesome things.

Miral Mokhtar:

How was it?

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

They loved it. They're working in the field. I used to work in a women's shelter. A lot of folks I worked with went through the program. I've only heard good things about it.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, so good.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Congratulations!

Nouran Hussein:

Thank you.

Miral Mokhtar:

Thank you so much.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

That's amazing. That you guys are going to do great work.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, it's going to help us, especially to know more about what's happening in Canada. We know what's happening in Egypt. But here, for the women in Canada, the children and how the system works or failed them, we don't know.



Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

And a lot of perspective, I think, your stories alone and your experiences alone will lend itself so well to that work and being able to actually do what you want to do of supporting people who are in similar situations, to get out of them and to have violence-free lives, happy lives.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, I hope so, really.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, we hope so.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

It's going to happen. I'm manifesting. It's a done deal.

Miral Mokhtar:

We want [crosstalk 00:50:12]

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

It's on its way. It's going to happen.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

All right, so, it's Pride month. It's June. We're back again, full circle, right? What is something about your journeys or your identities as queer women, as lesbians, that you want to celebrate this year? It's still COVID, but what are you celebrating?

Miral Mokhtar:

I think we don't like to look at Pride as celebration. We are more protesting during every Pride because during every Pride, there is someone in jail or someone who got killed or who committed suicide. We try a lot to raise awareness. There is a lot of people who started to accept LGBT rights from our content, and we see some, a little but there exists.

Nouran Hussein:

There is hope.

Miral Mokhtar:

People who are living in a small town or a small village in Egypt that we never guessed that they could accept one day, but they ask us lots of question and we answer them. Then they start to accept.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Right, yeah.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, because you know what? The people needs to know, needs to understand, because they have never seen anybody who's from the LGBT can speak or they can ask them directly. We did this clubhouse application and we've been on it, and we've been trying to do every week a room just to tell the people how can you ask politely without homophobic way. I can answer you if you just want to know, I can answer you. So I think they started to understand and accept that we're different, at least.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, I think they didn't see a couple lesbian before. Maybe they saw gay men, but not a lesbian couple. So they have lots of imaginary thoughts, unrealistic, mostly false, about a lesbian couple. So-

Nouran Hussein:

Wearing high heels.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah, this is how we started.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Sensible shoes only.

Miral Mokhtar:

This is how we started to speak to them. We told them, you think this way? No, this is not right. This is the right idea about us. You think that we are not planning to have a family? We wish to have a family for real. We wish, but there is a lot of barriers. Let's see what barriers are there. One, two, three, economics barriers. We wish to adopt. We are not able to get pregnant from each other, so we will try adoption. How much does it cost? Very expensive. There should be stable employment, stable housing, good career, good bank statement, good credit [crosstalk 00:53:12].

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Pride is protest. Pride is activism.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

Yeah.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

I love it. I love it. You know what? In a way, through protesting, through education, through community-building, ideally, one day, we'll have something to celebrate.

Miral Mokhtar:

I hope so.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

So I think you guys are a vital part in that and the work that you're doing is amazing.

Nouran Hussein:

Thank you very much.

Gilad Cohen:

[crosstalk 00:53:44]

Nouran Hussein:

I'm sure one day there will be LGBT rights.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Definitely.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah, I'm sure of that.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

Yeah, we'll get there. We'll get there.

Gilad Cohen:

I want to say thank you. First of all, Taylah, nice to actually meet you in person for the first time. That was great. That was awesome. This was the first in-person interview I've done in two years, and I can't think of a better environment to be in today than with the two of you.

Miral Mokhtar:

Thank you.

Nouran Hussein:

Thank you, really. Thank you so much. We love JAYU. It had a very, very good part in our hearts. It's important for us to be part of this amazing organization because it gives you the voice to speak. In our documentary, I was telling the director that this our first place that Miral could speak freely, during the human rights festival, when you give her the chance to speak.

Miral Mokhtar:

I was so stressed. But I wanted to speak. I wanted to say the reality no matter what. It could be, not the first time on stage, I was singing on stage.

Nouran Hussein:

Definitely not the first time.

Miral Mokhtar:

Yeah. But what I said was real and it was hard to say because there was a refugee sitting that's saying the opposite, but I wanted to stand for the truth as usual.

Gilad Cohen:

Thank you for sharing your truth today. Thank you so much for joining us. To more things together.

Nouran Hussein:

Yeah. Thank you so much.

Miral Mokhtar:

Thank you, thank you.

Gilad Cohen:

Thank you, thank you.

Gilad Cohen:

Thank you everyone for tuning in. My name is Gilad Cohen and I'm one of your co-hosts here on The Hum.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

And I'm Taylah Harris-Mungo, your other co-host.

Gilad Cohen:

Our producers are Alice Castelani and Rachel Lewis.

Taylah Harris-Mungo:

The Hum is an initiative of JAYU, a charity committed to sharing human rights stories through the arts.

Gilad Cohen:

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