

Transcript from interview with Tasneem Aly by Morgan Thompson

Conducted November 16, 2023

Tasneem Aly is an environmental and feminism activist from Cairo, Egypt. Given that she is from the African continent, Aly dedicates most of her time to promoting awareness on prevailing issues within the global south. Aly discusses how she raises awareness on feminist issues within

North Africa through her published articles and discussion facilitation through AfroFem, a student-initiated enterprise at her past school. Additionally, She highlights the importance of youth voices and discusses how the COY17 climate conference seemed to generate more performative activism as the focus was primarily on the COP27 conference the following week.

Overall, Aly discusses how she finds activism as an uplifting way to spend her time when surrounded by other individuals passionate about similar causes.

Morgan Thompson:

Thank you so much for joining today. Basically, I've already discussed with you what this interview is going to go towards, but it's completely yours. If at any point you're uncomfortable, need to get up, get water or anything, just let me know.

Tasneem Aly:

Okay, awesome. Thank you.

Morgan Thompson:

So I guess my first general question is just can you give an overview of the activism you've participated in and work you have already done?

Tasneem Aly:

On the environmentalism aspect, at ALA,¹ the African Leadership Academy, I was part of a team that wanted to work on projects that made ALA, the campus, we lived on more sustainable. So we were basically just generating ideas, making sure that the community was aware and involved as much as can be, even if at some point, we weren't working on projects, but just the notion that this group was there, and that there were people who were focused on this issue, and who wanted like a lot of conversations on campus to be focused on this issue. We got to travel to the United Nations Climate Change Conference for the youth, the last one, at the end of 2022. That was very nice, because we got to learn other people's ideas and get a lot of insight from that and then be able to apply that at ALA. We left a team that is now working there as well, so that the mission does not end with us, because we are going along with it to oversee it. So there's that on

¹ ALA is the African Leadership Academy, a two-year academic institution for high achieving students seeking to transform the African continent; located in Johannesburg, South Africa.

the environmentalism end. In AfroFem,² which is a feminism movement, specifically for African feminism. I was also part of a team there that got to hold discussion spaces for a lot of people from different backgrounds, to ask questions, like, what is African feminism? How is it different from other kinds of feminism? What does it look like for us, creating new meanings to that, in the space that we lived in? We got to hold different kinds of conversation with people around such as a gender based violence project with different schools. So we went to teenagers and preteens even and we got to discuss that with them and what gender violence means in their community. That was very different for us because it was in places that we didn't know before, and all of that. And again, the work continues beyond us after we got that space.

Morgan Thompson:

Awesome. I'm gonna just dive into more general questions, and then we can get into more specifics, but how did you become interested in your environmentalism work?

Tasneem Aly:

I don't think I can specifically pinpoint when, but I know when I was much younger, maybe six, seven years ago. I have no clue when that was, but someone came to my old school, and this guy created a nomadic movement, as he likes to call it. And it was essentially people who were traveling around very different parts of the world and connecting people with similar visions to each other. And this person came to school, and then he invited anyone who wanted to attend this event that happened later that evening, outside and it was an environmentalist movement. So I went to this randomly, I don't know why. There were a lot of different groups that were invited and they talked about environmental issues, and that was the first time I was like, wow, this is actually a thing. There was VeryNile.³ VeryNile is a project that's done here that goes on trips to clean the Nile, so they get in boats, and they collect trash and plastic and waste and all of that. There were a lot of different other ones. There was a sustainable fashion one, and they were making bags and wallets and all kinds of accessories from plastic. And so it was all of these people in the same place, I think when I was that young, that was like, wow, this actually happens and there are people who are involved in this and care about it. Right after that it was science fair time at my school, and so I was thinking of a project, and then I was thinking of straws, plastic straws, paper straws, and I was trying to make paper straws more people friendly in the sense that they can actually be used and that they would last and that people wouldn't have the same issues that they have with them. People end up relying on plastic straws since paper straws don't work for them, or they don't seem convenient. That was my first opening to it. The other thing is an oceanography class I took at school, in the beginning of high school. We learned about the ocean, animals in the ocean, and obviously the conclusion of that was also

² AfroFem is a feminism movement prioritizing the needs of women on the African continent. AfroFem is also the name of a project initiated on ALA's campus which holds discussions on African vs. western feminism.

³ VeryNile is an initiative to develop large-scale means to clean the Nile River while also working to raise awareness on protecting the environment.

more research done on the environment and how people are harming the oceans around them. So that was it I think, that was the beginning.

Morgan Thompson:

That's awesome. Especially with the paper straw thing. I totally understand the unsustainability of having paper straws. Could you actually talk a little bit more about that, like what your project was? What materials you used?

Tasneem Aly:

Sure, so that project was part from that discussion that I was part of that evening. People find that paper straws are not convenient, and they would rely on plastic straws because paper straws just don't work. They dissolve before you're done with your drink, and all of that. So I was trying to find a way to make that last longer. Then to potentially be able to market that to different companies or different places around me that use paper straws that would like to benefit from the switch. So I experimented a lot with different things. The first thing I did was I got paper straws, and I timed how long they lasted and I bought different brands to see how long each one lasted without me feeling like I needed to throw it out. I did a lot of research and I talked to a lot of people. I can't exactly remember the materials I used in the trial period, but by the end, I used beeswax. First, I had to make sure that beeswax was, you know, eco-friendly and not harmful to eat and all of that. But then afterwards, I melted beeswax and then I applied a layer on the paper straws, on the inside and outside, and I let it dry for a long time. And then I tried that. So I thus decided that it was difficult at first because I couldn't get a thin layer of beeswax I remember, so I ended up clogging the straws, which also was against the point. But it took a lot of trials until I was able to do that, and so my paper straws that were covered in a layer of beeswax ended up working best and they lasted just as long as plastic straws did. So that was the end of my project, and then I was thinking I need to market this to people. I need to let people know, I didn't end up moving along in that, but it is still an idea.

Morgan Thompson:

That's awesome. I never heard about adding beeswax to that. That's so cool. You were talking about your work at the African Leadership Academy. Could you talk about the work you were involved in there a little bit more? I know you kind of already touched on it.

Tasneem Aly:

Sure. So it started through a friend who was in the same year group I was in, Amen. The philosopher that he is, we were just talking about random things, and one thing led to another and we decided we wanted to leave an environmental impact at ALA for people to continue that discussion in whatever form that took. We got Mr. Chris's advice, who's our mentor still until now. When we started this project, we didn't really know what it was going to look like. I think near the end, our main goal, and the goal still exists was to create an accountability group. ALA

is the kind of place that has so many different projects and so many different businesses and people trying to create their own enterprises. So we wanted to create a group that held all of these different projects accountable to make sure that they met standards that we decided were environmentally conscious. So we wanted this group to go even beyond administration and to even hold the administration accountable and to hold residential life and all of these things accountable. So that the same way we make sure that nothing is problematic in the sense that nothing said in any of these meetings or through any of these projects is not conscious to the people around them. We also wanted to make sure that environmentalism was a factor in that. So when we did not know what our goal was going to be like that was when we were invited to, COY.⁴ Then, all we knew was we are this group, this group exists, we want to work on environmentalism at ALA, and we want people to understand that environmentalism isn't just through our words, and isn't just through being woke, kind of. Yes, and so we knew that we wanted to mix art, as we've said, before, we wanted to mix art with environmentalism, we wanted to show people that they shouldn't trust everything around them, and there are a lot of things that can market themselves to be environmentalist, may not necessarily be that way. So when we got the opportunity to be at COY, our workshop was on skepticism in the environmentalist act and we wanted people to be a bit more aware of how a lot of things that are marketed to them as being eco-friendly or sustainable or green may not actually be that way. That spread to more things at ALA, And from there, we got our project that we want to make sure that everything at ALA is held accountable to environmental standards. I think that's it.

Morgan Thompson:

Cool. So you've talked a little bit about your experience at COY 17. Can you just explain what COY 17 is, and what are the main objectives and goals of it?

Tasneem Aly:

Sure. I may not necessarily be the best person to describe this at all. The United Nations Climate Change Conference happens every year, and it happens in different places. This year, 2023 is its 28th. So last year was the 27th. Along with this climate change conference, there is one for the youth, where the youth get to discuss these issues and then by the end of it, they get to create, I don't want to call them resolutions, but I think drafts of acts that they want the main conference to implement. So while that was the 27th, United Nations Climate Change Conference, that was the 17th of the youth, so I assume that you started later than the actual one. But yes, so we went to this. I think from my observation of it, there were no youth. There were no youth that were as youth as us, meaning we were the youngest there from what I observed. I might be wrong, it's been a year, but we were the youngest there, and there were a lot of people who were, again, young, but not teenagers, young, and not early 20s young. There are people who've started working, who I could say an average of 25 to 30 years old. I'm not sure Don't hold me

⁴ COY is the youth conference within the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference, focused primarily on the youth perspectives surrounding global environmental issues.

accountable for that, but it was, in the end, I think young people who did not have seats at the table. They weren't delegations from countries officially, but still wanted to have a say. And so yes, by the end, they write these forms for the main conference to consider and to implement in their own rules.

Morgan Thompson:

It's really interesting. I didn't realize that most of the population was in their 20s and 30s.

Tasneem Aly:

Maybe I was just in the wrong spaces at the wrong times, but no one was young. Certainly the people who attended our workshop and our workshops that we got to attend during that time, no one was as young as we were, I think.

Morgan Thompson:

How do you think future COY conferences could work to increase the teenage perspective and maybe adolescent perspective, and voices in the conference?

Tasneem Aly:

So I think they do a good job of making sure that the volunteers and the people who organize the space are made up of teens, because a lot of people are encouraged to apply and are interested in applying. So a lot of volunteers are young. Even when I went and until now, I was still suspicious of the youth ideas being taken into consideration in the main conference. So I was always thinking, so we are basically not going to the main conference, because we're not in the delegations, we're not official representatives of anything, so now we're in this youth conference, but how essential was it in the main conference? Is it just a thing to make sure that youth have a space to be able to have these discussions, or are their ideas actually taken into account. So I think if there was some clear understanding for people who got to apply to be part of these, and for even the people in the main conference, that actually everything that goes on in the youth conference is just as important and will be taken into consideration as much as the other one, then I will understand the importance of it, and the people around me will understand this is necessary too, and I will make a difference by being there, so I should be there. Just in general, I think, if it wasn't for the ALA opportunity for me to be able to be part of that, it's just the means of being there. You know, you can't expect teenagers to be as able to finance their trips, organize their trips and all of that as adults would be. So it also makes perfect sense that the main conference would have a lot more to offer, and just a lot more people there than the youth one will be. We only got that opportunity through being at ALA, but not everyone else would get that chance. So, yeah.

Morgan Thompson:

That's a very important point, thank you for bringing that up. So you were talking a little bit about your workshop on facilitation of environmental advocacy and performative activism. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Tasneem Aly:

Sure. We did not know what our topic for our workshop could be. We watched a documentary that was all on performative activism, and it was on how everything around you may advertise itself to be green or sustainable or eco-friendly, but you need to actually dig deeper than that and understand what goes into something being environmentally conscious versus not. We wanted people to be as aware, as we were through watching this two hour documentary, just through our workshop. So essentially, it's the idea that there are so many companies and there are so many things that you engage in regularly, things that you buy, and all of that, that you buy into your consciences a little bit better, because they tell you it's green, or that most of the profits they get, they get through donating whatever. You need to make sure that you do your research beyond that and understand what goes into making something green. There were a lot of shocking discoveries in that, the idea that not all electric cars are environmentally friendly, because there's more to it. Not all solar panels are, not all windmills, because they don't produce the same energy that you would expect, but also the materials that go into making them and so on. Again, there's a lot more actual factual research to it. It's just we wanted to make sure people were as skeptical of everything around them as they can.

Morgan Thompson:

So you were talking about performative activism. In your own definition, what makes something performative activism?

Tasneem Aly:

It's straight out lies. I can't describe it. People who make certain things, the producers know exactly what goes into making something, and they know how truthful they can choose to be and how truthful they can choose not to be. And so, performative activism is when someone gives you a product or a good or service, and they market it as being helpful to the environment, when if you were to do the extra research, you would find that it is in fact not. So, performative activism is just people knowing that because as consumers, we want to care about the environment, and we want to make ourselves feel good about caring about the environment, that they will be able to make more profit off of us through faking their activism, in order to woo you and for you to get their products. So it's just not being entirely truthful in your marketing about things that you offer, and saying that they are environmentally friendly, when in fact they are not.

Morgan Thompson:

Could you give a specific example of something that kind of claims to be environmentally friendly, but isn't?

Tasneem Aly:

I mean, electric cars being one major example, because people often assume you know, electric cars are awesome, they don't use gas, of course, they're amazing for the environment, but they aren't because the parts that go into making these cars are actually also harmful in the long run. A lot of iPhones will also market themselves like that. I think on the website, they're like we've gone 100% green or something, and it's like, "what does green even mean?" Because we know for a fact that you aren't and we know that the parts that you use to make your phone are not environmentally friendly in any way. Part of the documentary was about this one festival I think that said we use renewable energy for our festival and for this concert, and renewable energies is this whole other thing because it's so unreasonable because you need so many more solar panels to work the same kinds of things that you would work through very little non renewable energy and electricity. Aside from that, the things that go into making solar panels and windmills and all of that are also very harmful for the environment and the different elements that they use, and the different things that they need to mine to make that work are also not environmentally friendly in any way. So yes, I think these are examples, I just don't have specific wording that has been used. So I don't want to say it.

Morgan Thompson:

That makes a lot of sense. Thank you for that. What specific environmental issues are you most passionate about?

Tasneem Aly:

It's not the specific environmental issues that I'm passionate about as much as it is getting the ball rolling and having people talk about stuff. That's it. I want environmentalism to be something that can be frequently talked about, and that isn't a new thing to people. I care about the ocean. I care about the ocean a lot I care about our plastic and our waste that's thrown into the ocean, I think that would be something specific, but I don't think I was brought to do work for a specific issue as much as it is for the dialogue and forth, just stimulating the discussion and for making the discussion normal and usual.

Morgan Thompson:

That makes a lot of sense. How do you reach audiences who are kind of on the contrary side thinking about climate change, or even people who don't believe in climate change?

Tasneem Aly:

That was something else that we actually discussed, someone who already goes to a conference and who's already thinking of solutions, it's not necessarily a target audience, because at least

we're all in the space and we all know that we care. It's a prerequisite to being there. If the target audience is people who have opposing ideas, and who don't believe that we should care for the environment, or anything, I don't think conferences are the right space for that. I also don't think that the African Leadership Academy is the space for that, even though we will have different ideas, everyone also goes on with the premises that where we get to make things good, and I may not understand what good looks like, but I'm willing to learn. So there's that. So that also may not be the right space. I am able to be, if I choose to be, around people that don't necessarily have time to care, they don't consider the environment, just because of the place I live in just because of the people I have the privilege of interacting with. I can't go to a place that is already clearly, "we're for the environment" and start discussing, "Do people care, obviously, people care." But I think I have discussions with people in my extended family, and it's like, "why should we care? What even is this? Why does anything I do even matter?" That's better, but that's also super unorganized. It's not an organized facilitated thing, it just happens randomly. Because I care about starting this dialogue, I make sure that it's there whenever I am there, so it's something I discuss with anyone and everyone, and that's how I make sure that even if people aren't in the same spaces where being woke is a thing or being knowledgeable is a thing or whatever, that they still get to be part of that, and I still understand where different people think from

Morgan Thompson:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I had another question. So you were talking about COY 17 and the target audience and how kind of like it was a prerequisite for everybody there to be interested in climate activism. How do you think COY 17 differs from previous climate change conferences?

Tasneem Aly:

I honestly don't know enough about previous climate change conferences at all. I have a lot of criticism for COY 17. One advantage and one thing that I really appreciated was that it was held in Egypt. It being in Africa is important, considering that Africa is mostly made up of youth. It's important if you want youth voices to be heard for Africans to be not only represented, but also for it to be easily accessible to Africans. But then, I do have criticisms in that I don't think that the youth conference was seen as significant as the main conference, talking about this through Egyptian standards, because I could tell in the organization of this one and in the organization of this one, it was very, very different. All of Egypt was hell bent on making sure that all of the visitors who came for the main conference, it was perfect for everyone. The whole city, the city has existed for many, many years, the city that the conference was held in, but everyone knew about the main conference. And because the youth conference happened a week before the main one, everyone was preparing for the main one, and the youth one kind of just got stumbled over. Again, the people that were there, obviously cared about being there, and it was meaningful to them and everything, but I mean, in terms of organization, because organization also shows you how much importance the country put on that, there was none of that. So I have criticism over

the organizers making it seem like the youth conference was less than. And so even though there were great strides, and of course, you know, making sure African voices are heard and all of, it was another way to show that not only are people now made to believe that their voices aren't as important because am I actually sure that the forms I'm making are going to be held to equal consideration at the main conference? But also, I can tell through your organization that you just don't care, and that this is just something that you need to make the main conference work. So yes, I hold a lot of criticism.

Morgan Thompson:

So you were talking about how the COP⁵ and COY conference took place in Egypt, and I've often heard of COP 27 being referred to as "Africa's COP." What significance, if any, do you believe the conference contributed to addressing Africa's climate challenges?

Tasneem Aly:

I don't think I'm the right person to speak about what conversations were held in the conference about African environmental problems specifically. Just in terms of ease of being there, and African representation, it was easier. I don't like this being the African COP, because then it makes it seem like the next COP to happen in Africa would take forever and ever, which I don't think that's a nice thing to think about also, considering Egypt is North Africa, North East, it's also very hard to reach all of Africa. I'm not sure if African environmental issues specifically were discussed there, but I could assume that they were at least more so than they have been in the past, just because there was more African representation or just easier African representation. It's through youth and through not just the delegations, but the advocacy channels outside of that.

Morgan Thompson:

What are your future goals in environmental activism?

Tasneem Aly:

I think what I now want to focus on is making sure that environmental activism is seen as an important thing for all students and all kids and children growing up to be talking about. I want to focus on schools and on what goes on in schools and to make sure that, you know, the same way we talk about kindness and compassion and care and all of these wonderful things. We learned about a lot of things in schools. I would like to be working in schools. I think there are schools that advertise themselves as being green campuses, I'm not sure the exact words that they use, but I do want to make sure that there is many schools out there that have environmentalism as a topic that is cared about and that is talked about with students from a very, very young age. You know, we learn about ecosystems and food chains and different species and all of that in

⁵ COP is the main conference within the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference in which country delegations come to discuss solutions to global environmental issues.

like third or fourth grade. I think it would be nice from then or even younger for environmentalism to be talked about just a tiny bit and to be linked to that.

Morgan Thompson:

How would you propose schools incorporate this? Do you think it should be through curriculum, through outside grassroots organizations coming in? Do you have any ideas?

Tasneem Aly:

While of course outside organizations coming in it wouldn't be memorable. I mean, I think from my school experience, I remember days where we were part of outside of school things, that makes it feel very foreign. We have the one day, Earth Day, where we go and we collect the trash. That's memorable, yeah, but it's not constant and consistent throughout the year, and so it feels very foreign. It feels like we should care about this, at this specific time when we go on this trip, or when these specific people come to us, or when we do whatever, but it's not a constant thing in our day to day. A lot of what went on in my schooling, when I was younger was not what we did in the classroom, but how we interacted with the teachers outside of it. The things that went on outside of class, or that were not necessarily related to our academic curriculum, but the games we played during lunch and how our assembly went on, and what we did after school and our prizes for coming early. I can't quite put it to words, maybe because my schooling was a bit different, but if it wasn't necessarily part of just our academic curriculum, like here's a unit on the environment, but wasn't also outside organizations coming in, if it was just part of our day to day, you know, the way we cared about collecting trash and separating the trash into different things, while even that is, you know, who knows what happens with that afterwards. But just for it to be something that we talk about always. Students need to know and children need to know that it does matter when they decide to bring reusable bottles versus when they decide to bring once use plastic bottles, that does make a difference. And even just to themselves that they should be caring enough for it to make a difference for them, and they should be mad at themselves when they don't do that, when they don't meet the standards that they've set for themselves. So I want schools to make sure that students are setting their own standards in that and that they care about that. That's all.

Morgan Thompson:

I really liked that point. I feel like a lot of times, I mean, especially what I've seen too, it seems like sometimes people can be super involved for one day, or one week or one specific event, but it's the continuation and the continuity of it over time, which is what really makes it impactful.

Tasneem Aly:

Exactly. Because, yes, I mean, both are better than nothing, of course, and you know, having that one spark of this one specific moment where I care is great, because at least you can recall that later, I can recall that this is where I cared, and at least I have knowledge, better than not have

anything at all, but it's the little steps everyday that make a difference. What I wanted to say was, it's important because I think in raising children and in speaking to youth, obviously, what everyone cares about or which is reasonably so, is my own change, my one individual change will not make a difference. While yes, it may not make a major difference, it's important to teach students about examples when it started with one spark and with one person and how that individual thing led to. It's also important for students to know that they are not entirely to blame for the environment, and that not one specific person is but it is the bigger companies, and it is the big entities because percentage wise they make up most of it, of course. But for students to know that even just for their own conscience, they should care and they should make the individual choice and stuff, and who knows what will happen later, but even if their one individual choice does not make a difference, it does to them and it doesn't their own world and that should be all that matters. So yes.

Morgan Thompson:

I really like that point. I haven't really heard the perspective of one person's narrative is important. I feel like a lot of times when I hear about Youth Activism or just activism in general on the climate crisis, it's more of a sense of we need to do big change, but I don't know, I think it also makes sense that even though you might not be making the biggest strides in the world, it's still important to you and still a little step. You were talking a lot about your work and obviously you're a student, you're doing a lot in the environmental movement and also in your other activism, how do you deal with burnout?

Tasneem Aly:

When I was most involved, which I would say was just throughout the last two years, this is not anyone else's experience, because I know people do feel burn out through this, but for me, I mean, at least the work that we were doing seemed like a good break from what was causing burnout. The meetings we held that we talked about the environment were on random Sunday mornings, where yes, I guess it could have been asleep, but it was like, I'm excited for this, because it's the one break where I don't need to talk about academics, and I don't need to talk about work, and I can talk about something that I care about the people I care about, as well, and with people whose opinions matter to me. I know that people do reach burnouts through these discussions, because it is a lot of work as well, but I think speaking about the environment or about the other issues, or about AfroFem, or whatever felt like a break from for me from the actual things that were causing you burnout. But that was not that way at all. In the same way that I will sit with my friends and gossip and have a random discussion, or a random hangout that felt like that, only I assume more productive, but it felt just as fun. So yes.

Morgan Thompson:

That's really inspirational, kind of like, not taking on a huge climate burden, kind of looking at it as like a passion.

Tasneem Aly:

Yeah, and I mean maybe I was really lucky in that the people I worked with, I really, really cared for. So if this was our one chance to be together and to you know, dedicate this time, we want to work on this, and we're being together in the process, that I absolutely love that, it was what I looked forward to. So I was lucky in that, because I assume if it wasn't the same exact circumstances that led me to care about the environment, or to make it a weekly thing from, I wouldn't. So I guess it's also surrounding myself with people that cared for the same things I cared for, and that I genuinely loved that made it feel like no work at all.

Morgan Thompson:

I'm kind of piggybacking off that point of working with people you love and people you care about, what do you think the role of communities and support systems is in your specific activism?

Tasneem Aly:

I think if it weren't for supportive communities, or people around, you would go crazy. I'm thankful that I haven't exactly experienced that in environmentalism, exactly, just because I haven't put myself in spaces where the other end of the spectrum is very pronounced. I've never really put myself in a space where I speak to the other end of the spectrum that absolutely does not care and that wishes that the environment were dead or whatever, but I'm relating it to feminism, because that's something I've cared about since I was very young as well. If it weren't for people around me, who, you know, kept telling me and emphasizing that I'm not the only one who thinks a certain way and that my opinions are valid, and that it's just the spaces I'm in that for some reason, no one seems to care, and everyone seems to be against me, then I would have actually gone crazy. I do many days feel like, what if I'm the only person who thinks that way I do, and what if all of my ideals and all of my opinions are just wrong, because there's no way all of these people are against how I feel about feminism, for example. The people who support me in feminism, for example, are not the majority of the people I interact with at all, but even just the little bits and pieces that I can get with them, make me realize no, okay, there are people who, who at least support my way of thinking so that's okay. In environmentalism, there were more, because the people I surrounded myself with all cared who were thinking of ways to help, not necessarily should we help or not. The starting point was different. So that was obviously a majority of us supportive community, and I think that makes all the difference.

Morgan Thompson:

Yeah, you've mentioned your feminism work and Afro feminism work. Could you talk a little bit about what Afro feminism is or what AfroFem is?

Tasneem Aly:

So AfroFem is one of many, many projects on the African Leadership Academy campus. We were a group of people who came together and took on this project in our second year. For some reason, feminism seems to be a lot more controversial and a lot more not agreed upon as I assume the environment would be. More people have things to say about feminism and about should feminism even exist, and you know, feminism is evil and all of that. So it felt like it was necessary to have this group that held these discussions with people to realize that AfroFem is important and that speaking about feminism, not only just feminism, because there's so many different types, but specifically African feminism, or feminism that related to African Women's problems was necessary, because feminism seems to have this really big gap. The two ends of the spectrum exist, and they are very prominent, and they both have things to say, and so that gap seems very big, so AfroFem was bridging that gap between all ends of the spectrum and what everyone had to say about AfroFem.

Morgan Thompson:

What was your role in AfroFem?

Tasneem Aly:

My specific role was in finance and logistics, but basically, when we held discussions spaces and events, and only made merch and all of that, I was just making sure that everything was going smoothly, that the meetings took place, and that they were organized, and that things were sorted out that our finances were clear, because we did also at some point, sell merch, I think they they still do. So I was making sure that our finances were intact, and everything was just coherent and smooth in the project. Also, everyone in the team got to write articles for the website. The website's also cool. I think it's under construction now, or maintenance or something, but it is really cool. So I got the opportunity to also write articles for it and stuff, because we all got to. Anyone else in the community who felt they had something to share also did. So that was a nice experience.

Morgan Thompson:

If you're comfortable with it, could you talk about one of the pieces you wrote?

Tasneem Aly:

Sure, yes. I think my favorite piece was one that I did not write in the last two years. I separate my life into pre-ALA, during ALA, post-ALA, I don't why. But, pre-ALA, at school, we had a poetry month every May. I don't know if this exists in other schools, but we did, and when we got older, middle school, high school, we started focusing on just performance poetry and slam poems.⁶ So I'm an absolute fan of slam poems. So every month, when we were younger, we had to make many poems because they were haikus and a lot of other kinds, but they were short and

⁶ Slam poems are a form of performance poetry which combines elements of preformand and writing and are intended for audiences.

didn't take us as much time. So when we got older, we worked on just one slam poem a year to share. So my very first slam poem was called, I think the title was either "What a Girl Wants," or "She Needed Feminism." I can't remember because I was very young, but I did share that with AfroFem and on the website afterwards. But it was just a slam poem of why I think feminism is important, and why I feel like I need feminism, and why I think it's a necessary need for a girl. I liked that, I liked sharing that with AfroFem because I wrote it when I was very, very young, and I liked to see that what I cared for then is what I heavily care for now.

Morgan Thompson:

How did you initially get interested in feminism?

Tasneem Aly:

That I do not remember. I think that that's just always been. It's always been what I've cared about. Yes, because I think I remember my very first fights with anyone in my community ever being about why can't things be this way for me And so. I can't pinpoint anything, because I think I was way too young to be able to do that. I've always cared.

Morgan Thompson:

I know you've touched on this a little bit, but what is specific about Afro feminism? You've talked about the intersectionality of it, but can you talk a little bit more about what specifically makes Afro feminism, Afro feminism and what separates that from feminism?

Tasneem Aly:

There are many, many different kinds of feminism, there's eco-feminism. I mean, there are so many different examples, but I think all kinds of feminism care about, you know, making sure that women are treated fairly and all of that. What's different about AfroFem is just that it has a more specific focus on what women on the African continent need specifically, which is different. The ways that sexism prevails in the West are not the same ways that prevail here. The wage gap might be something that's spoken about a lot and cared for in the U.S. For example, I don't know, it's not something that I've seen in Egypt being talked about at all. But here we can talk about, FGM⁷ being a major thing that happens in Egypt and that happens in a lot of countries here. Female genital mutilation still happens at very significant rates, and not that I've also seen discussions about that, because no one seems to talk about that, but that is an AfroFem problem simply because it's just more prevalent here and there's more necessity for it to be addressed here. There are specific issues that are prevalent that should be discussed, and others that are important for different places around the world, but may not be as necessary here. That's the only difference really.

⁷ FGM refers to female genital mutilation, which is the practice of removing (some or total parts) of external genitalia of girls and women for reasons unrelated to medical needs.

Morgan Thompson:

How do individuals outside of the African continent, or global south more generally, effectively support Afro feminist voices without overshadowing their narratives?

Tasneem Aly:

What exactly do you mean by this?

Morgan Thompson:

I feel like oftentimes, when I think about this question, I think of social media, and the role that Western media dominates the media, no matter where you are in the world. So I guess I was just kind of curious about how do we promote the voices of individuals, marginalized communities on the African continent, like surrounding feminism?

Tasneem Aly:

As you said, it's very, very rare that any kind of media that is not Western media will be shared with the outside world or even within just the borders. Speaking for Egypt, I know that a lot of people are unaware and absolutely blind of everything that happens around them within the African continent, and there's a lot to work on in that aspect. How do we fix media for it to be more objective than it is? I don't know, it just is. I have no clue. Here is a specific example, okay. I don't like, for example, that, I find that the people that I speak to here will know more about, for example, Western entertainment, music, songs, shows, movies, then they will about their own. Now you can have preferences. Sure, you know, I will prefer to watch *Friends* than I will to watch some specific shows. That's okay, but the knowledge is important of all. So I think it is more important than for us to talk about specifically how people within Africa view AfroFem and how, you know, Africans get the chance to learn about Africa than it is for outsiders to, because the first step is I need to know about myself before I can share that with the world. Another example, Egyptians need to have visited the pyramids before we're speaking to other people to get tourists to visit the pyramids. No Egyptians visit the pyramids ever, and I think that's crazy. It's more necessary and more of an obligation for the people within the continent to learn about it first, as a first step before we speak about, you know, how the media portrays to the west and so on. Because yes, that's important. But even the first step I don't think we fully have yet.

Morgan Thompson:

That makes a lot of sense. How do you think we could promote the education within the community or within Egypt, for example?

Tasneem Aly:

These are very broad terms that I don't like, but we don't have, I hate using the word, patriotism because I think it has a negative connotation, but I think we grow to be really westernized, that

we don't like to care for and to be interested in anything that is our own. We have no pride in things that are ours. So how do I fix pride? I also do not know, but we need to make sure that people grow with enough pride to care about what goes on in their own community first, I don't know how that works. I don't know how to fix that. It's all in the school system, I swear, it's all in the school system. But yes, we need to fix our pride and we need to be proud of things that belong to us first.

Morgan Thompson:

Yeah, and I think it makes total sense that you don't have a finalized solution at this or even at any point in your life, but just the fact that you observe it as an issue that needs changing, I think is impactful in and of itself. I'm going to ask a different question that's kind of a little deviant from both of the topics we talked about. What strategies do you use to engage others and activism you're passionate about?

Tasneem Aly:

To be very honest, I'm still learning about how to do that. Even more recently, I've found a difficulty in making myself not come off as hostile, simply put. There are people that I have discussions with that I know for a fact that we don't see things the same way. I know that our opinions on feminism are very different. And it's so hard for me to like, rein in my frustration and my anger, and I don't know how to control it. I don't know how to manage that at all, but I end up coming off as hostile and it makes the problem even bigger, because even though I care a lot about, you know, facilitating spaces for discussion and stuff, I'm still learning how to do that in a way that doesn't come off as angry. Obviously, whenever you speak to anyone about feminism, for example, it's like, you know, "they're all angry or whatever." So I hate that I fit into that narrative, I hate it so much, but I'm learning how not to. In all kinds of persuasion ever, you find little things to relate to, and you build upon that, so that the idea of, you know, I'm not going to agree with you. We need to come into a space knowing that I will change some of my views, you will change some of your views, but also along with that, that we start by relating to little thing and we build on that so that once we slowly start to change our point of views, I'm not changing something so major, but we've already come to many agreements. Yeah, I don't know how to do that still, without coming off as hostile. So I'm working on it, but I don't know.

Morgan Thompson:

Yeah, but I think your point about finding common ground is super helpful, just engaging in a conversation. I think it's also interesting, your take on kind of coming in with your own perspectives, and being susceptible to having them change. I feel like a lot of times people look at an issue, and are looking to fight with another individual instead of collaborating with them or learning from each other.

Tasneem Aly:

I always learned that if you were to go into a discussion thinking that you're not going to change, and that you're only going to change the person in front of you, there's no point of even going into that discussion. But that can also be very hard, because I go in thinking, no, I know that I'm right and I just want to explain to the other person in front of me, but it's not as easy for me. But I know that it's important, we need to reach common ground and we need to start by knowing I am susceptible to change just as much as this person is, and if I want to change this person then I need to know that it's okay, if I change the little parts of me to

Morgan Thompson:

What does justice look like for you?

Tasneem Aly:

What does justice look like for me? It looks like everyone is given the specific opportunities that they need to thrive. Justice does not mean specific equality as in, you get exactly what you need, the same things that I get, because we need to understand that, you know, historically speaking, knowing that different communities and different people and different things around this environment, everything, has not gotten the same exact things that as each other to be able to thrive. So we already have different starting points as of right now. So it's understanding that we all need different opportunities and we need to get these different opportunities that are tailored to each of us to be able to thrive.

Morgan Thompson:

What advice do you have for other aspiring activists?

Tasneem Aly:

To find spaces where they feel heard. You made a great point on emphasizing the importance of having a community there, and as I said, you'd go crazy if you were to be surrounded by people who don't think like you and where you feel absolutely unheard and your opinions are completely foreign. So it's finding people that you can relate to as much as possible, so that you don't feel completely alone and so that you continuously feel like the work that you do matters, or that, what you care for even matters.

Morgan Thompson:

Yeah, and kind of going back to that community aspect, when do you think a community can start to shift into an echo chamber if at all?

Tasneem Aly:

What do you mean by when?

Morgan Thompson:

What do I think about that? I think sometimes people can have their ideas, and will bring it back to the community that they feel comfortable with sharing about and who also have those ideas. But at any point, do you think it's not a good idea to bring your ideas to a community that already has those same believed ideas?

Tasneem Aly:

I think the opposite is dangerous, but this never is. There's no problem if I were to walk into a room of people who all think the way that I do and who do not think the way that I do, but who all care about the same things and who all reached understanding of something, and placing importance on that again. Yeah, I'm being repetitive, but it's not an issue. So it's not a bad thing. Obviously, I think there is a danger, unfortunately, speaking, there is a danger to bringing ideas that are so foreign, that may be misinterpreted, or that may be seen as a judgment to characters. I think that's very subjective to different communities. I can't place that specifically. I can't place specific rulings on that, but there are times when, if your views on certain matters are so so different, that it's better to actually just stay quiet or to think of other ways to not be as extreme as people like to call it in your own views, just for your own safety, obviously. But if people already have reached a common understanding, then yeah, the more the merrier. I don't see it being a problem.

Morgan Thompson:

Do you have any specific role models in either your feminist activism or your environmentalism, activism or just activism more generally?

Tasneem Aly:

Like, famous people? If I think about how feminism started, obviously, I don't know, but when I was much younger, funny story, my father used to send me to get dairy products from the far end of the supermarket, and this guy asked where I'm from, like, we're specifically in Egypt, because almost no one in Egypt is actually from Cairo, you come from somewhere, and then you kind of found your way to Cairo. So he asked me where specifically I was from, and I told him, you know, my parents are from the city called Minya. Then I was very young, but he started calling me Hoda Shaarawy. Hoda Shaarawy is this person who was from Minya. She was the most prominent in history that has ever at least shown an interest in feminism, and, you know, tried to speak for girls when they weren't all spoken for. So that was the very beginning. I was interested, because I was very young, and I was like, wow, you know, she's from the same place and she cares, and so someone cares, and maybe there's a similarity there. So she's a role model. Yes, I care for Hoda Shaarawy, I care for her, but then outside of famous people, deep respect, I think for educators. As I said, Mr. Chris was my mentor then and still is now. I still care about his advice, and his judgment and his suggestions, and even educators from before. My teachers in my old school that I'm still as close to as I was then, are people who heavily influenced me. I noticed how much it takes for an educator to be an educator and knowing the big responsibility

that every single thing you do for a student. Can you imagine every second of the day goes into forming a student to be a proper adult in society? So yeah, I have a deep respect for my educators specifically, and all of the teachers that I became friends with and still am until today, because they are the people who shaped me to be who I am. So yeah, more than my parents ever did, because you don't spend that much time with your parents, you actually do with your teachers. You spend more time with your math teacher than you might with your mom. So yeah, they've totally influenced me.

Morgan Thompson:

Do you think ALA changed the way you view activism or perform activism?

Tasneem Aly:

Yeah. Obviously in, in good ways, but it's also left me with a lot of internal problems. As I said, you know, everyone who goes to ALA is already at an understanding that this needs to be changed, we need to be the change, we all care, and that the starting point is already so much higher. So you feel so much in a bubble. Well, I don't think you realize the bubble until after you've left. But yeah, now I realize, everyone there was so cool. Everyone wanted to be a leader, whatever that means, but everyone wanted to care and everyone already cared. And so you're surrounded by very, very aware people, which is awesome, then, because you've already taken huge strides, but once you've left, you're like, I want someone to relate to as much as I did to the people at ALA who already had that sense of understanding, and that appreciation for learning and that willingness to learn. And that doesn't exist in the world as frequently as it does at ALA because obviously, it's such a rare group of people. But yeah, definitely.

Morgan Thompson:

You put the word leader in quotation marks, what do you think makes a leader

Tasneem Aly:

A leader should not be seen as the outspoken person, the one who's willing to, you know, speak on behalf of a group of people only, that's not the only thing that makes a leader. And, you know, actions speak louder than words, of course. I think this also goes back to the idea that my individual actions make a difference, because you don't know how you impact the people around you, and everyone impacts everyone around them. It's the little things that I do that may not matter at all, that I may not be advertising or asking people to follow me in, do make a difference. So I don't like a leader being seen as, you know, the one person who's at the front of the line going like this, or even, you know, the person making the said decisions, and anything. Everyone's a leader in their own way, everyone is. You don't need to be that first person to be a leader, because every action that you do, will be seen by someone, and I interpret everything that you do. I interpret everything that everyone around me does so. I may go about my normal day thinking no one cares how I choose to style my hair, or the fact that I wear this color sock and

this color sock together, or whatever it may be. But everyone does see that and people think about that, even if just for a second and just seeing something and internalizing it. So I don't need to be the first person to be a leader, but my normal actions make me a leader because people interpret that, and that's what a leader is. Your actions are interpreted by other people and people choose whether to follow them or not. So I don't like leaders because they're seen as the future generation of changemakers or whatever, but we're all changemakers in our own way.

Morgan Thompson:

Yeah, I think that's a really powerful definition for a leader. I think it's also this societally deemed leader is somebody who's at the forefront, has a lot of power and whatnot kind of prevents people from engaging in activism that they're passionate about. I think if more people took on your definition more people will get engaged in things they are excited about.

Tasneem Aly:

Yeah, because how cool is it to be a leader?

Morgan Thompson:

What would you tell your younger self right now?

Tasneem Aly:

What would I tell my younger self right now? My younger self was very very shy and was very keen on not disappointing people, ever. I cared so much about making sure everyone around me liked me and was pleased with me and yeah, so I would tell my younger self that you turned out a bit differently but that it's okay. I think if I were to tell my younger self that I am okay with not being praised and with not pleasing everyone, my younger self would be very disappointed. But I would tell my younger self that I am now okay with not pleasing everyone, and that it's better than working so hard to please everyone, that I should be more satisfied this way. So I don't think this relates to anything, well, actually, I think it does, but yes, it's the only thing I remember of my younger self. So prominently, so yeah.

Morgan Thompson:

Yeah, I like that advice. I think it also kind of can speak to your growth as an individual too, just the advice you give to your younger self. Okay, so, we are coming up on the end of the interview. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that I didn't already ask you about?

Tasneem Aly:

No, I think you've covered everything really, really well. It's just, if this is to be something for youth to think about or to ponder over, then I think relating everything to each other that anything you do makes you a leader, and that placing yourself in the right groups to not feel so alone and to not feel so by yourself helps you move on and that as youth you do make a

difference, and just making a difference for yourself should be important. You should care about yourself and you should provide yourself enough grace to feel the way that you feel and being a changemaker only within yourself is just as important. So any youth can be leaders and can make change, and you will find people around you who care about things that you do and who are willing to learn and it doesn't matter if they don't see things the same way. But just the willingness to learn is the most important thing.

Morgan Thompson:

Yeah, that's really awesome. Thank you so much. Okay, I'm gonna shut off the recordings and then just talk to you about a few logistics, but thank you so much for partaking in this interview.

Tasneem Aly:

Thank you for having me. This was so much fun, and I got to reflect, it was awesome. I always like opportunities like this.

Morgan Thompson:

Yeah, of course.