



**On the International Day of Sport for
Development and Peace,
What about the Right to
Exercise in Egyptian Prisons?**



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Belady: an Island for Humanity-- a Human Rights Organization supporting Egyptian Women & Children since 2017

Belady aims to dismantle institutionalized violence by documenting the Egyptian regime's violations against women and children and educating national and international society and decision makers about them. We also pressure and advocate amendment of legislation that codifies violations while calling upon authorities to implement overlooked laws and treaties that would ensure respect for rights and freedoms. Belady provides legal and psychological support for Egyptian women and children who have been arrested and / or imprisoned in political cases.



Introduction

The International Day of Sport for Development and Peace (IDS DP) is an opportunity to learn about the positive role that sports and physical activity play in societies and the lives of all people around the globe, including prisoners. Sport is an inherent right and a powerful tool for peace and development. It may seem self-evident that people's health should not be affected by prison. Yet, many prisoners spend their detention durations in unsanitary conditions in overcrowded cells. It is essential to provide them with enough outdoor time per day to breathe, walk and engage in other sports activities. On this occasion, Belady chose to focus on the importance of the prisoners' right to exercise by taking a glance at the accessibility of this right in Egyptian prisons through addressing some aspects of exercise.

First, the Duration of Exercise

Outdoor exercise is considered a fundamental guarantee for the prisoner's health, and this is recognized by both Egyptian and international laws. Article 85 of the Prison Regulation Law stipulates that "all sentenced prisoners who do not perform work, detained for pretrial and under medical screening are each allowed during the prison's open hours to exercise for an hour in the morning and another in the evening. Prisoners are not allowed to exercise on Fridays and official holidays. If the holiday is longer than one day, prisoners are allowed on the following days to exercise, while being adequately guarded, in the mornings for half an hour"¹.

Furthermore, Rule 23 of the Nelson Mandela Rules, "Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners", stipulates the following:

- 1- Every prisoner who is not employed in outdoor work shall have at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily if the weather permits.
- 2- Young prisoners, and others of suitable age and physique, shall receive physical and recreational training during the period of exercise. To this end, space, installations and equipment should be provided"².

Violating these rules by shortening the duration of outdoor exercise, the authorities contribute to the worsening of the prisoner's physical, mental and psychological condition, which is considered a form of torture³. Therefore, Belady has shed light on the variation in the duration of exercise in some Egyptian prisons, especially against political prisoners, through direct interviews that were conducted with former prisoners. Some of these details are to be unfolded in the following parts.

According to these testimonies, the average duration of exercise in Wadi Al Natrun Maximum Security Annex Prison, Al Qanater Women's Prison, Burj Al Arab Prison, Tora Investigation Prison, Damanhour Women's Prison, and Minya Maximum Security Prison is about 3 hours per day, except for Fridays and official holidays, which is in line with the local and international legislation.

On the other hand, some prisoners suffer from detention for the whole day as they remain confined in their cells with no freedom of movement or sports. This is the case in many Egyptian prisons, including the Appeal Prison, in which prisoners suffer from severe overcrowding inside the cells, which impedes the movement, adding to the absence of the allotted time for exercise. Likewise, Al Hadhra Prison has an average duration of exercise that is usually half an hour per day, except for official holidays. As for Tora, the agricultural ward, the duration of exercise does not exceed one hour per day, and it may be less than that at times.

¹ [Decision of the Minister of Interior No. 79 of 1961 regarding Prison Regulation Law, Article 85.](#)

² [The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, Rule 23.](#)

³ [Guide on the case-law of the European Convention on Human Rights, Paragraph 55.](#)

“Your mood is bad and diseases are prevalent due to lack of exercise”
 “Everything there destroys your psyche. You never know the cause, whether it is the crowds, exercising, cigarettes, or overcrowdedness !”

Former Prisoners in the Appeal Prison

Second, Place of Exercise

With sufficient time to exercise, the necessary physical characteristics of the exercise yard must be provided so that the prisoner can move, be exposed to the sun, and exercise. In this regard, the internal regulation of Egyptian prisons did not determine the area and characteristics of the place designated for exercise or the availability of gyms inside prisons. This has prompted Belady to explore the design of the exercise area in some prisons and the possibility of an environment allowing exercise. The following section provides a description of the exercise area in some Egyptian prisons, according to the testimonies of former prisoners.

In Wadi Al Natrun Maximum Security Annex Prison, there are two concrete yards for exercise in each ward: around one yard per each half. The ceiling is approximately 4 meters high and is covered with bars of medium density that only allow some sunlight to enter. On the other hand, Al Qanater Prison has open spaces for exercise, which are of medium size and without a roof, and thus prisoners are exposed to the sun and air. As for Burj Al Arab prison, there is a four-meter high exercise yard covered with iron wires from the top.

Despite the existence of these spaces in Egyptian prisons, the prisoners' access to their right to exercise depends on the mood of those in charge of the prison, especially concerning political prisoners. Belady has documented that Minya Maximum Security Prison administration allots a small area for prisoners to exercise, despite the availability of large gardens in the prison. Tora prisoners suffer a worse situation as the administration does not allow them to exercise, except in the ward's corridor or in a small iron cage that does not even allow them to be exposed to sunlight and air. A former prisoner stated that more than 180 prisoners exercised in that small area during the time he spent in this prison. This leads to severe overcrowdedness resulting in the inability to move. As for the Appeal Prison, there is no equipped space for exercise. This means that prisoners are forced to remain in cells unable to move their bodies for long periods, which negatively affects their physical and psychological health. There is also a large yard in Al Hadra Prison, with a 10m x 5m area. Yet, prisoners are rarely allowed to exercise in it as they are only allowed in the corridors inside the wards.

“Ward 1 was without an exercise area. I used to go out to exercise in ward 12. I was imprisoned with criminal justice prisoners and it was forbidden to talk to political prisoners. I used to play sports, which was new to them, and they preferred to joke in a sarcastic manner. Exercising was difficult in the midst of all this crowd»

An ex-prisoner in Al Qanater women's prison

Conclusion and Recommendations

After reviewing the extent to which prisoners have access to their right to exercise, Belady embraces this day to emphasize the incompatibility of Egyptian prisons with the stipulated standards in Egyptian and international laws and regulations. The right to exercise is not a luxury, but exercise deprivation is considered a form of torture. Based on the data mentioned in this report, Belady calls upon the Egyptian authorities to expedite:

- The release of prisoners of conscience and pretrial detention to reduce overcrowdedness in prisons.
- The encouragement to adopt alternative penalties and voluntary work.
- The implementation of full equality between prisoners in terms of detention conditions.
- The consolidation of the prisoners' rights by adopting a modern prison system that is not subject to the concept of double punishment by reviewing both the legislative and executive frameworks.
- The creation of a sphere for periodic supervision by civil society and the concerned state structures to supervise the violations against prisoners.