

I was seven years old when I was pretending to be asleep while listening to an adult conversation. My family was discussing my uncle's recent news. They were whispering while talking about what seemed like a secret that everyone knew, yet all pretended didn't exist. I overheard that my uncle was denied admission to the pilot training program for racial reasons. He met and exceeded all the published requirements, but the person in charge of recruitment told my uncle that his African descent was a problem.

My uncle could not afford to pay for his flight training so being rejected from the only airline-sponsored training in the country meant the end of his dreams. My uncle was crushed, defeated, and broken. Something changed inside of me when I heard about his story. I promised myself I would be a pilot.

Twenty years later, I moved to the US and got my wings. I paid for my own very expensive flight training myself and was very proud because I could fly at a time when women in my country were not allowed to drive. There was a prominent figure who offered a job and a lot of support to another female pilot who was from my hometown, who had earned her wings in Jordan. He promised to offer the same package to all female pilots in the country, a guaranteed job, advanced training, and great flight experience. I reached out to his office and sent my resume and credentials. Their response was prompt and enthusiastic. I had several long conversations with his senior staff, who congratulated me and expressed excitement to bring me on board and fulfill their promise. He then asked me to email my photo, I knew what that meant, but I did it anyway. The very familiar silence and ghosting began. They realized I was black, so they stopped responding to my

calls and emails, and I never heard back from them ever again. Just like my uncle, twenty years prior, I was stopped by a gatekeeper despite the fact that I met all the requirements for admission. That program continues to sponsor and support other female pilots, none of which are of African descent.

I can continue with thousands of similar untold stories about shattered dreams, stolen opportunities, and broken hearts. Real stories from real men and women who were denied access to climb the social ladder and prevented from achieving upper mobility by a gatekeeper. This very systemic alienation of very qualified and deserving black Arabs resulted in a lack of diversity in prominent positions across the Arab world, although some countries are worse than others. There are entire sectors and lines of work where blacks are not allowed to join.

It became a common practice for employers to specify in their job advertisement as part of the job requirements that an applicant must have "good appearance حسن المظهر" which is a dog whistle for "blacks should not apply". I came across several job posts on social media that specifically asked for white Arab applicants. This reminded me of when a major Arabic newspaper published an opinion stating that Barack Obama is too black to be president and that America would never vote for him because of his black appearance. I guess they realized he was lacking حسن المظهر which is a prequalification for any significant job.

As we say in Hausa (Ruwa baya tsami banzai), the water doesn't get sour without a cause.

This massive disappearance of people of African descent from the public space in the Middle East is not because we lack intelligence, qualifications, or interest but because of the very systemic gatekeeping, that is growing like cancer.

This anti-blackness cancer is spreading across the entire body of the Arab world. It is no longer limited to denying jobs, education, and life-improving opportunities. Today the media is leading the assault and racial discrimination, alienation, misrepresentation, and misinformation against powerless minorities who are not allowed to defend themselves by presenting their truth. This organized, well-funded dehumanization smear campaign against Arabs of African descent is being done by design. The victims are being silenced.

For more than twenty years, I have been tracking and documenting examples of antiblackness racism in Arabic television, newspapers, and social media from state and private media and the public at large. A state of emergency must be declared. The level of racism, antiblackness, and discrimination against Arabs of African descent is not just widely practiced but socially accepted and vastly spreading. TV shows promote little black Sambo-like characters and Minstral shows. Soap operas portray blacks in negative stereotypical roles limited to the voodoo doctor, the magician, the door man, the butler, the servant, the criminal, the lazy, and the stupid. And yes, Black Face is actually still practiced in Arabic media. Where are the black Arab parents, teachers, nurses, doctors, engineers, and just normal, everyday, hardworking, decent people who are just like everyone else? Why do state media outlets sponsor, endorse and protect such hurtful, ignorant, and damaging propaganda? Because complaints have been filed, but, alas,

the show goes on. Stand-up comedians take the stage and mock black features and characters. And so many people find racist jokes funny. I conducted research on several Arabic newspapers for the word African/black, and I was shocked that more than 90% covered crimes and negative stories, and less than 10% were neutral, like sports or elections in African countries. Someone might find sports news as a positive, but when almost the only time black Arabs get mentioned in a non-negative way is sports, it reinforces a stereotype that Africans are here for our entertainment. When a crime is committed, the African race is mentioned. But when there is an achievement or something positive, surprisingly, the word African disappears, and the name of the individual suddenly suffices.

Arabs of African descent are referred to as "Abeed" or slaves. The word slave became such an acceptable code for the color black, to the point that I actually once heard someone refer to a black cat as an 'Abd cat. When a woman called me Abda while she was trying to kick me out of the line to take my seat, I shared my story on Twitter, asking other Arabs of African descent to share their stories under the "Alabda" hashtag. Going public and fighting back is how I was named the Rosa Parks of Saudi Arabia.

When Zozibini Tunzi won Miss Universe, the Arab social media lost it. It went berzerk. I wrote a long Twitter thread addressing the controversy that should not have been because it is OK for a black woman to be Miss Universe because black is beautiful too. There is an unchallenged and widely held belief that being black makes you extremely ugly and inherently inferior, very incompetent, which automatically disqualifies you from opportunities.

Okaz Newspaper published an opinion by Mai Khalid stating that "ghettos are neighborhoods that are occupied by low-class people, Jews, and Blacks". She went on to claim that across Europe, those "low-class people" run "wild" in armed gangs, and "every illegal thing exists and thrives there". She then talked about Jeddah Carantina, a predominantly Black neighborhood, as one such ghetto, claiming it started with African immigrants who were infested with Plague and Leprosy. The fact that she mentioned Jews and Blacks together is noteworthy because this is the same dehumanizing propaganda that led to the Holocaust. I translated and posted the full article on my Instagram, Nawal_Alhawsawi. I invite you to read it there. Antiracism is no different from antisemitism. Both should be stopped.

I am not here to single out one specific Arab country, as the problem of racism is a human problem, and discrimination against Arabs of African descent can be found across the Arab world, language, and culture. It is rooted deeply in the Jahiliah period, the time of Arabs' darkness and ignorance more than 1400 years ago but it still exists today. Arabic culture must reexamine its stance on blackness and show a fundamental change in its cultural norms by embracing diversity and inclusion.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am grateful to be given this opportunity to participate in the regional meeting for the Middle East on the International Decade for People of African Descent. Initially, I prepared a list of names of Arabs of African descent and their

magnificent contribution to society that went without acknowledgment and were almost forgotten. Their remarkable participation was not limited to sports and entertainment but in all aspects of life, including education, medicine, law, labor, business, and commerce.

I also wanted to share the most recent findings of research on anti-blackness, discrimination, overt and covert racism, and how it impacts health, wellness, the economy, and society at large.

In addition, I wanted to tell some of the stories that I continue to receive from Arabs of African descent who are traumatized by racism and discrimination. But since my time is limited, I will share these stories on my Twitter account @NawalAlhawsawi.

In Conclusion, I want to direct your attention to this state of emergency and the urgency of this crisis. Ladies and gentlemen, racism kills.

Just like a serial killer at large, It is slaughtering not just dreams but actual innocent black people who are on the receiving end of this evilness.

It's time to stand with us in solidarity. Arab people of African descent desperately need you, so do not leave them voiceless, defenseless, and alone. They need platforms and tools to tell their own stories and means to represent themselves with dignity and pride. They need training, mentorship, and sponsorship to create art and movies and write books so they can be seen and heard. They need your advocacy

so Arab states can have affirmative action laws that will limit gatekeeping practices and ensure Blacks have access to the opportunities they deserve.

Arabs of African descent must be protected, respected, empowered, embraced, valued, appreciated, and celebrated. Black lives matter, representation matters, and your commitment and support matter. Together, we can save and improve countless lives of Arabs of African descent because darkness will be defeated when you light a candle.

I will end with an Arabic poem that celebrates the beauty of blackness

أقول لمن عاب السواد سفاهة
وللسود قوم عائبون وحسد
وعيب سواد اللون ان قيل حالك
وهذا سواد المسك والعود أسود
وهذا سواد الركن يشفى بلمسه
ويهوى اليه بالركوع ويسجد
ولاولا سواد العين لم يكن طرفها
صحيحا وذمت طرفها حين ترقد
ولو علم المهدي لونا يفوقه
للألوى به راياته حين تعقد

Thank you!