

DAHBA SIDAMU

One day at her workplace, a traditional handcraft workshop, Dahba was approached by the Moroccan secret police. She was asked if she could carry a recorder, and conceal it on her body during meetings with other Saharawi activists, urging her to act as a spy for them. Dahba refused. Since that day, she has become a target of hatred and discrimination at her work. They started to monitor and follow her closely at work, indicating that her refusal to spy was interpreted as a stance against them.

Dahba Sidamu Mohamed Jalil was born in Tan Tan in 1970 and later relocated to El Aaiún in 1985, where she currently resides. A mother of three boys and a girl, Dahba is skilled in traditional handcraft, with a passion for sewing and tailoring.

Dahba received formal training and obtained a certificate in traditional handcrafting from a young women's institution. After working unpaid for 7 years, she officially started working as a trainer in 1988, marking the year she received her first paycheck. Specializing in knitting sweaters, Dahba remained with the same workplace from 1981 until her termination in 2019, a consequence of her activism.

Throughout their training years, Dahba and other Saharawi trainees sensed that the individuals responsible for the training program imposed Moroccan traditions and culture upon them, suppressing their Saharawi heritage. During the Moroccan national celebrations days, the club organized events to commemorate these occasions. As part of these celebrations, theatrical performances were arranged, such as mock weddings. In these acts, the club deliberately depicted the couple as a blend of Moroccan and Saharawi, a portrayal inconsistent with the reality where Saharawis typically do not marry Moroccans. Another example. In cultural rallies celebrating Moroccan national days, Saharawis were handed framed pictures of the king to carry. Saharawis always refused, delicately declining with various excuses.

In her job, Dahba harbored a secret desire to engage in the discrete act of sewing or knitting Saharawi flags. Mindful of the gravity of such an offense, she always tried to base her work on the same colors as the national flag. Sometimes, she took threads of the same colors as the Saharawi flag and wound them on her fingers.



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The UN visit

During the visit of the UN special envoy to Western Sahara in 2019, a large number of people took to the streets to demonstrate. The protest was big, adorned with Saharawi flags and the distribution of flyers. Because of her participation in these demonstrations, the vice governor personally summoned her to appear at his office. She never went. Subsequently, they approached her husband, issuing threats to cut her salary if she did not cease her activism.

In the end, they cut her salary, and Dahba stood by her cause. When the financial pressure failed, it was conveyed to her that the next course of action would involve her children. In the end, she was fired from her work.

Violence and intimidation

Dahba has endured violence, intimidation, and a consistent denial of her right to movement and assembly. In March 2023, upon returning from the celebration commemorating the release of a Saharawi political prisoner, she was stopped together with other activists. Their phones and belongings were confiscated, and they were confined to a security room at the checkpoint, which turned into a torture and interrogation center.

Time and again, Dahba has faced harassment from the police.

On 29th January 2021, the Moroccan police prevented Dahba and other activists from entering the city of Smara to attend the wedding of another human rights defender. On April 3rd 2021, the police prevented her from traveling from El Aaiún to Boujdour, where she and other activists intended to visit Sultana, who was under house arrest. On 13th April 2021, Dahba experienced physical and verbal abuse while she was trying to reach the family house of political prisoner Mohamed Lamin Hadi, who had been sentenced to 25 years in prison.

A video captures the incident, revealing over four Moroccan police officers in plain civilian attire harassing her and preventing Dahba from reaching the house.



She explains that once she printed out flyers, which she smuggled out in the streets for distributions. She would place them in both the front and back of her chest and distributed them to all the demonstrators in the street.

Punishing their children

When her daughter completed the university registration process, she inquired about her scholarship, a monetary grant provided by the Moroccan government to each student. They told her that she would not benefit from it and her mother's activism was to blame. Not only did they cut the financial benefit, which is around 150 euros, but also deprived her of a transport card that Saharawi students typically receive for free.

This punitive action has also impacted her son, who is currently seeking employment. It is highly probable that he will face limited job opportunities as long as his mother remains active in her activism.

18 stitches

In one of the demonstrations marking the anniversary of Gdeim Izik, Dahba was struck on her head. She endured a severe beating that led to a deep injury requiring 18 stitches. Due to this attack, she suffers a chronic headache that spreads to her eyes and nose.

Her children's reaction

"My children get very shocked when they are back from school and they see me beaten up, and the house full of people around me. I try to explain to my children that we are under occupation and that we all are targeted. I try to make them aware of our situation. Now they understand," she states.

When the children were younger, they would become hysterical, crying and throwing their backpacks angrily on the floor whenever they saw their mother injured and covered in blood. They would insist on her telling them who was responsible, and which policemen hurt her. They wanted to take revenge for their mother by throwing stones at them.

In their early years, they lived in fear. They would only sleep next to her, experiencing nightmares and screaming in their sleep. They would not go to sleep without having the door locked, anxious that the police would break in during the middle of the night.

Gdeim Izik

Gdeim Izik started on a Sunday, and Dahba joined the protest camp on the following Monday, bringing her children along. She remained there until the evening, unable to stay overnight due to her children but making a daily commitment to be present. During the protest camp, people contributed in various ways, and Dahba, in particular, took charge of preparing delicious meals, and distributing them to those engrossed in their tasks. People were busy, and they didn't have the time to eat.

After the attack on the camp, the whole of El Aaiún city took to the streets to protest. The police threw teargas on protestors. Dahba fainted but she swiftly regained consciousness.

Saharawis took over the city, waving flags, displaying banners, and chanting slogans. Dahba witnessed Moroccan settlers entering a pharmacy, looting medicines, while others vandalized and ransacked Saharawi homes.

Dahba also witnessed a Saharawi young man being brutally beaten up by Moroccan police, subjected to kicks all over until he ceased moving. At that moment, Dahba wished she had a phone to document the incident.

Defamation and slandering

Some Moroccan websites often publish content about activists, violating their privacy. Dahba understands the intentions behind this strategy very well. In fact, she feels happy when they write about her because it signifies that her work is unsettling to them and is making an impact. Among the rumors circulated about Dahba is the false claim that she practices witchcraft. The people behind these websites write about any aspects of an activist's life.

Once, they published gossip about her daughter's wedding, falsely stating that Dahba's children use drugs and insinuating that she is not a responsible mother.

Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed