



LAILA LILI

As a little girl, Laila used to sit by her house window, watching planes leave and land. It was one of those planes that her mother had taken. Laila's mother left for France and joined the Saharawi liberation movement in the refugee camps in 1978.

Born in El Aaiún, in what was Spanish Sahara, Laila was the oldest daughter left behind by her mother. When Laila's mother was saying goodbye, the four-year-old girl stood by the door of their house, holding as tight as she could, refusing to let go of her mother. Her uncle took her from her mother and removed her from the door.

While waiting every day by the windows of her house, Laila was convinced that her mother would, one day, return. What Laila didn't know is that her mother was no longer in France and that the next time they would meet would be over two decades later. It was only in 2001 when Laila was a young woman, was she finally reunited with her mother and her four half-siblings who were born in the refugee camps.

Five years before the reunion, Laila and her family in the occupied territory received a written letter from her mother. This was the first sign that she was alive and well. Along with the hand-written letter was a picture from the refugee camps, showing her mother at a wedding with her younger siblings born in the camps.

Laila and her family didn't keep the letter or the picture, as it would be too dangerous to hold on to. The letter conveyed greetings to all members of the family. The messenger who brought the letter read it out loud. « How is my daughter? » the mother wrote. Laila burst into tears hearing these words for the first time in 17 years. Until today, Laila can recite the letter by heart.

Laila's case was not unique. Many of her friends or classmates had also either lost one or both of their parents due to arbitrary detention, war, or exile. It was a fearful time when the Moroccan occupation governed with an iron fist. At primary school, when the families filled in documents concerning the child's family situation, many would simply write "missing" in those cases where the parents, in fact, were political prisoners.

Children like Laila didn't always understand or grasp the situation. The adults of the family, out of fear, would often not explain what had happened to the missing parents. A large part of Laila's family went missing, more than 20 of

them, due to arbitrary detention or kidnapping. It was always an intense atmosphere, and those who asked questions about what had happened to their relatives would face the same fate. Laila's father used to kick out the children when he secretly turned on the Saharawi radio to follow the latest war news.

Laila grew up with her father and her half-brothers. She observed that her stepmother was never present. They only met once. From what Laila heard, she was taken away by the police. Her stepmother was also a political prisoner and a victim of arbitrary detention. This meant that both Laila and her brothers lost their mothers due to their political engagements. Laila's father, a judge, provided both financial and educational safety. At the house, it was the aunt to her brothers who took care of them for the rest of their childhood.

Meeting mum

Her mother traveled from the refugee camps to Morocco in 2001 due to her elderly and ailing mother. Laila's mother brought four of her children with her, who were born in the Saharawi refugee camps.

As Laila entered the room to meet her mother for the first time, they both shouted, hugged, and cried for a long time. When Laila was on her way from the occupied territories to Morocco to meet her mother, she experienced a range of emotions, from excitement and sadness to intense anger at the occupation that had kept them apart for all those years.

Education

Laila and other Saharawi children faced discrimination since primary school. The teachers were all Moroccans, and they didn't like those children whose parents were against Morocco. In secondary school, Laila, together with four other girls, started a political cell. They discussed the Saharawi national cause, updated each other on the latest news and operated secretly recruiting new students to their movement. They also engaged in activities like sewing flags and tagging walls with slogans.

The torture

Laila was 16 years old, and in her pupil activists group, there was this 13-year-old girl from the countryside who was studying in the city. Laila was drawing the Saharawi flag, writing slogans, and creating poetry, and when Laila went home every day, she kept this material with the 13-year-old who was living at the boarding school. It was perhaps one of the mentors at the boarding school who told the police about the material he had found. The police arrested the 13-year-old. This young girl, scared to death, told the police that it was Laila who had given her this material.

Laila's age didn't stop the police from violently interrogating her. They used various positions of torture on Laila, such as «the chicken position» and «the airplane position». Saharawis are familiar with these painful and uncomfortable tying positions.

The 16-year-old girl was all alone in a room full of security forces. She had been blindfolded, and hanged up towards the wall, beaten up, and subjected to questioning.

All the officers were simultaneously yelling and asking questions. They inquired about where she had obtained the flags and who in her class was politically engaged. The police even asked about students in her class who would be absent in the mornings, as they knew that students who spent the night tagging walls would be too tired to attend the first hours of school. Laila knew that she had to give them something even if it was a lie. She confessed that her brother always misses school, leading to his arrest and investigation

Some officers would aggressively yell abusive words and aggressive tones. Others would whisper in their ears, expressing their deep sympathy for the beatings and suggesting that it would be better for them to confess

Laila slept on the floor without a blanket.

Some of these agents sexually harassed young girls. The girls would be tied and blindfolded, leaving them powerless and unable to defend themselves. These security agents would touch their private parts, sliding their hands inside their bodies.

The 2005 arrest

In early 2005, the *intifada* broke out, marked with riots, demonstrations, and unrest. Laila, who had participated in one of the demonstrations, was arrested by the police and dragged by the hair into the police station. She was subjected to severe beatings on her head and feet, with 14 officers wielding batons against her. It was as if all these officers were channeling their collective anger onto her.

Upon arriving at the station, Laila was confronted with a harrowing sight. A Saharawi activist lay unconscious on the floor, a gaping wound on his head oozing blood profusely. His hands were bound in handcuffs, and his lifeless form sent a shiver down Laila's spine. The activist, seemingly on the brink of death, muttered something about sleep. Driven by compassion, Laila disregarded the traditional taboo and removed her *melhfa*, wrapping it around the wound in an attempt to stem the bleeding. This act of kindness did not go unnoticed. The police, witnessing Laila's interaction with the activist, retaliated by beating both of them.

Laila was released, and while walking from the station she was in extreme pain with her body covered with bruises and injuries.

The 2010 arrest

Laila was one of the thousands of Saharawis who took part in the renowned peaceful protest camp at a location called Gdeim Izik. Laila witnessed the brutal attack on the demonstrators, observing how the Moroccan military brought bulldozers to construct roads for their military trucks. These forces unleashed their aggression without distinguishing between children, old people, or disabled.

Laila was deeply saddened and profoundly affected by the scenes of brutality. On Al Jazeera, news reports detailed the deaths of some Saharawis. She couldn't sleep that night, and instead sat up, writing a piece of poetry. Unfortunately, she had her notebook in her handbag when she was randomly stopped by the Moroccan military which controlled the city following the protest. The police specifically targeted Saharawi individuals and women wearing *melhfa*. In her handbag, the police discovered her politically charged poetry. Taken into custody, she endured further abuse. Random soldiers would pass by and strike her on the head with their hands or feet. During the interrogation, an enraged soldier entered, asking his colleagues if they could permit him to shoot her with his gun. She was taken to a school which was transformed to a temporary military base.



Laila was then taken to the police station, where she found dozens of Saharawis. She was kept there for two days and during the arrest, the police assaulted them physically and verbally. Among the racist and discriminatory slurs, they were told that Saharawis were nothing more than a primitive people who, thanks to Moroccan civilization, had become something. Additionally, they were labeled as dirty and ungrateful for the supposed benefits bestowed upon them by the Moroccan king. The police would especially target the activists' legs to make sure that they wouldn't leave their houses any time soon to demonstrate.

Laila was blindfolded, but she could still hear how a woman next to her was sexually violated and raped, from the painful moans and cries. Laila also heard how one policeman told his colleague to take down the pants of a seven years old boy, and rape him. The woman right next to Laila was sodomized with a baton.

Laila's journey home from detention was marred by an unsettling encounter. As she boarded a taxi, the driver's intimidating demeanor immediately set her on edge because he threatened to kidnap her. The presence of other passengers, all Moroccan settlers, offered no solace. Instead, they subjected her to verbal abuse, cursing and making racist slurs

Documenting violations

Laila is one of the most prominent human rights defenders in Western Sahara. Her task is to document severe human rights violations. When Laila contacted the woman who was sexually abused, to document the case, the victim avoided all contact. Rape and sexual harassment are still taboo, and probably, the woman was scared and concerned over the consequences on her own reputation and that of her family. The uncle of the seven-year-old told Laila that the Moroccan security agents had threatened to rape his sisters if anyone spoke out or issued a complaint.

Laila and two colleagues have documented 80 cases of human rights violations against Saharawi women. The actual number is larger.

Her glasses

In pictures capturing the peaceful demonstrations in Western Sahara, Laila is a familiar face, easily identifiable by her distinctive glasses. The security forces, aware of her poor vision, precisely target her vulnerabilities. The first thing they do is to attack her expensive and indispensable glasses. Laila has tried to use lenses but due to the dryness in her eyes, they didn't work for her.

Laila has been an activist her entire life, resulting in her never receiving social or medical assistance from the government. As a divorced individual, she lives independently and lacks a stable income. Each time she tries to get a job or start a business, the Moroccan secret police ensure they stop her, either by pressuring her landlords or business associates. One of the most effective methods Morocco has been using against activists is by cutting off their sources of livelihood, and that of their family or anyone associated with them.

Laila aspires to be a writer, finding joy in crafting stories inspired by real-life experiences. But she needs to take regular jobs to sustain herself. For a while, she worked at an internet café which paid 100 euros a month. This would cover the rent of her house and other basic living costs. Her glasses alone cost between 200 and 300 euros.

Words can hardly describe what the occupation has taken from Laila since she was a four-year-old girl. As an adult, she lives under constant surveillance, with her day starting at seven o'clock, marked by what she describes as «an empty head filled with worries». When she looks out of the window in the morning, she is no longer staring at the trails of the airplanes.

What she sees now is a group of secret agents stationed in front of her house. They look at her, reminding her of the terrible reality of occupation.