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MARIAM MOHAMED LAMIN ABAH

Mariam remembers the episode well. It was during primary school, and she had a disagreement with her teacher. Her teacher came with insulting and discriminatory statements against Saharawis. Like how Saharawis were nothing before the Moroccan presence in the territory and that the Saharawi society is primitive and backwards.

Even at such a young age, Mariam was not intimidated, and looked him straight back in the eyes. For the teacher, looking back was an insult. It showed a lack of proper upbringing.

He then yelled at her ordering her to look down while he was saying the abusive verbal insults accusing her of being fed the hatred, and grudge against Morocco. Mariam had a witty humour – a sort passive-aggressive humour that is common among Saharawis. She told her teacher that she was not breastfed at all as a baby. She was not lying. Her mother had once heard the news about a relative who was killed in the war, and her body reacted by completely stopping producing milk. So Mariam was given sheep's milk. The teacher beat her up, and punished her. He saw her answer as an insult, and disrespect while she was telling the truth.

Mariam was a child that came from a family divided by the invasion.

Her whole family from her mother side fled to refugee camps except her mother. Her mother at the time was in another city than the rest, in Smara. Since the Moroccan invasion, her mother never managed to meet her family again, as all of them passed away. Mariam's mother was jailed for one year as she was supporting and sympathizing with the liberation movement Polisario Front.

Those of Mariam's family members who were behind in the occupied territory faced hardship. While she was a child, three members of her family were kidnapped, and kept in secret prisons. Others died in the war. As a young child, she was too young to really understand or grasp what was happening to her family. She remembers women in her family constantly crying, and that the adults never explained the reason.

2010 was the first year Mariam would meet her family members in the refugee camps via the United Nations program of exchange of family visits.

Refused job

Mariam found her way to business studies and did well academically. One day Mariam attended a reception to celebrate a political prisoner who was released. During the reception the police attacked and beat them up. When she went back to class, the bruises from the beatings were still visible.

From that moment the teacher started to hold a grudge towards her. It was not only that she became the target of hatred. The punishment translated to her final grades. So when she arrived at school to register for the next level, they told her she had to take the first year again as if she failed. She protested, cried, and didn't accept it. In the end she transferred from the school in Smara to El Aaiún, and gained a degree in Management and Hotel Reception.

Thanks to the degree, Mariam was called by the employment agency. They had a job opportunity for her. It was in Qatar. They asked her to sign a contract. She declined the offer. The director of the agency was not pleased with her rejection, and got annoyed. Mariam responded that she didn't see carrying the Moroccan passport as an honor. He got mad and told her «Go to Polisario to find a job».

Work as a female journalist

Mariam had always dreamed of being a journalist, ever since she was a child. She started being active in the school radio, and participated in writing plays. Mariam would participate in anything which was connected to media and culture. As an adult she has been very interested in theater and dramatics. She loves to write poetry, and she recently won a competition about Arabic poetry.

Saharawi activists and journalists are seen by Moroccan authorities as criminals. Operating as a journalist in the occupied territories means not having the right conditions to do anything. Her first correspondence as a journalist was to the Saharawi national radio. Once Mariam did a live correspondence from a public phone in a cybercafé. This was very risky as it was in the middle of the day, and a street full with Moroccan settlers.

Threats

Mariam kept the fact that she was a correspondent to the Saharawi national radio from her family to protect them. So in case they are arrested, and interrogated, they would not have anything to confess. Her aunt, who works teacher, was one day stopped by a secret agent. He told her about Mariam's job as a correspondent journalist from the occupied territories. He threatened her that one day, if Mariam doesn't stop her work as a journalist she would disappear, and her family would never find her. Her aunt became very worried about her safety. She told her to be careful, and to be aware of possibility of being kidnapped.

Because of her role in media in the occupied territories, Mariam has often received threatening phone calls. She has been told that she would be taken and raped. Once, while she was out in countryside – the *badia* - with her mother, she received messages that they would rape both of them.

Producing a film

Together with other activists from the occupied territories Mariam produced the first film ever made inside the occupied territories. They only had ten days to produce it. It was 15 minutes long. Mariam was the one who wrote the scenario in the movie, and she was the main actor. The short film won the second prize in an international film festival in 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcjfU64hAvw>

Harassments

Humiliating searching at the airports. The way they search activists is degrading. Once Mariam was travelling back from South Africa, the Moroccan police stripped her naked. Mariam felt a horrible feeling of humiliation. When activists return home from participating in international events, the police seemingly take revenge at the airport.

It normally functions in the following way: When flights arrive, they would keep the activists aside, and wait until the other passengers leave. When the airport is completely empty, and the police is alone with the activists, they would take them to a tiny room for interrogation.

Mariam explains that the interrogation was stressful. The room was full of police dressed in civilian clothes. They played different psychological tricks on her. Their aim is to confuse her. Some took her handbag, and start digging, and searching. Others were yelling at her with questions. And others were just kicking the door. It is an evil psychological tactics. When they took her handbag, Mariam was scared that they could plant things like drugs to fabric a crime.

Defamation and slandering

The Moroccan occupation focuses primarily on the activist's reputation. They understand very well the conservative nature of the Saharawis society. Their goal is to harm the activists, and their families, and their networks. The rumours planted against female activists would be that they are prostitutes, alcoholics or witches. The goal is to isolate you from your own society, and community. Some of families get impacted by these type of rumors. However, families who have been active are very aware of this strategy. The goal is to plant the feeling of shame, to demoralise, to isolate.

Settled in the camps

Mariam was born in 1983 in Smara in the occupied territories. Right now she is based in the Saharawi refugee camps where she married and is currently raising two children. She hasn't stopped her fight. She is responsible for the media department of the Saharawi government's own Ministry of the Occupied Territories.

One of her children has a down's syndrome. When Mariam visited her family in the occupied territories, she saw how he was bullied. She never let him out of sight.

"I wish I could build a special world for him, where everything is safe", she said.

Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed