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## SALHA BOUTINGIZA

Even though Salha dropped out of secondary school, she has been one of the most active journalists in the occupied territories for the last decade. Salha's task was not only to report the peaceful demonstrations but also to document the human rights defenders. She is also behind the organization of the protest, where she participates herself, resulting in her being beaten up repeatedly - this has resulted in long-lasting health problems.

Salha grew up in the countryside, *badia*, and like most Saharawis, she observed how family members listened to the Saharawi national radio while hiding under blankets. As a child, when her family camped by the sea, she would draw the Saharawi flag on the sand while writing the name of the right color on each side. Today, as an adult, Salha and her activist colleagues sew Saharawi flags, which they use and distribute in demonstrations.

### Police attacking her house

Since childhood, Salha has witnessed many violent episodes where the Moroccan police have broken into her home. One of the reasons the police broke into their house was to search for her brother. As Salha and her family slept, a loud police knock startled them. Her youngest brother was frightened and wet himself. Her pregnant sister, terrified by the attack, underwent a miscarriage. Salha's brother, the one sought by the police, managed to escape to the Saharawi refugee camps. He had already been sentenced in absentia to 15 years for his activism and political opinions.

### Nightmares and dropping the school

Another of Salha's brothers had been brutally beaten. When she returned from school, she found him lying on his stomach with severe injuries. Upon entering the house and overhearing people discussing the incident, Salha rushed directly to see him. He was injured and bleeding and some old ladies were preparing some traditional medicine. Saharawi activists would refrain from seeking medical treatment because they would often face discrimination and ill-treatment at public hospitals.

Every day after school, Salha would return home, her gaze fixed on her injured brother. Concentration eluded her in class as thoughts of her family and their hardships consumed her. Night brought either a series of nightmares or a

complete loss of sleep for Salha. As a child, she spent hours thinking of how to help her family and people. Innocently, she wondered when the Saharawi national army and police might come to rescue her and her family.

Salha's parents permanently reside in the countryside, while she and her sisters live in the city with their brothers. Attacks would often occur when only Salha and the youngest in the family were at home, as her brothers were away working. Her oldest sister, just 18 years old, would comfort Salha by placing her hand on her heart to calm its rapid beats. Additionally, she would use cold water sprays on Salha and her younger sisters. Sometimes, as a Saharawi traditional method to treat shock or panic, their oldest sister would also lightly burn their nails. These kids would be shaking and scared upon hearing the sound of the Moroccan police.

Salha was 8 years old when the police broke her brother's nose, beat him up, and arrested him. He spent nine months in prison without a trial. When he was released, Salha was scared of seeing her brother's nose, which looked almost artificial. When he tried to greet her, she ran away, scared. Her brother still carries his deformed nose.

During one of the police raids on her house, the police locked Salha and her young sisters in one room. She vividly recalls one particular policeman who ordered the children to shout even louder. The more terrified the children became, the more joy the policeman seems to have felt. In addition to searching for her brothers, the police would break into her house searching for leaflets or flags. These intrusions typically occurred at 4 am while the rest of the city slept.

## **The arrest of her mother**

Salha was only one year old when her mother got arrested for participating in a peaceful demonstration. Her Moroccan neighbors reported her to the police, labeling her «the criminal» Her mother spent 13 days in custody, sleeping on the floor, facing insults, and enduring daily interrogations.

## **Dreaming of being a journalist**

Salha has always aspired to become a journalist. Whenever asked about her dreams in school, this was her consistent response. The genuine motivation behind pursuing this career stemmed from her life experiences. As a child, she observed people being captivated by the radio for news. Witnessing the impact of media and news reporting on people, she recognized its power to inspire action.

Salha stands among the pioneering generation of female activists from the occupied territories. In her correspondence with the Saharawi national TV and radio in the camps, Salha covers demonstrations, Moroccan trials against Saharawi activists, and the receptions organised for political prisoners who are released from jail.

The Moroccan security forces sometimes refer to Salha as «The biggest instigator.» Salha has made thousands of reports from the occupied territories. In a single month in 2014, she produced over 70 pieces. Salha considers her work crucial for documenting and archiving the struggle and fight of her people. The absence of freedom, safety for journalists, and nonexistent resources have prompted many journalist activists to either seek paid jobs or immigrate.



Salha operates with a remarkable intensity and high tempo. In every demonstration, she meticulously plans how to film the event without attracting the attention of security forces, who might attack the photographer or confiscate the cameras and materials. When the security forces locate the photographer, they attempt to carry out beatings and arrests strategically directed to areas not covered by the reach of the cameras.

While most people return home to rest and recover after a demonstration, Salha follows a different path. She visits all the victims who were beaten, records their testimonies, and then returns home to write and edit news reports, aiming to distribute them abroad as swiftly as possible.

### **Hitting her in the mouth to silence her**

Deemed "the biggest instigator" who diligently reports on every incident in the occupied territories, Salha has become a thorn in the side of the Moroccan security forces. In this picture, you can witness the police targeting Salha's mouth with a forceful punch to her face.

Salha has overheard security forces saying, "hit her on the mouth," as if seeking to silence her permanently. Salha has been beaten up and harassed countless times. The security forces would drag Salha and other activists to smaller back streets to subject them to further physical abuse.



The Moroccan police are aware of the conservative nature of Saharawi society, and that women wouldn't expose or share pictures of bruises in private places. Now, they deliberately resort to pinching women in sensitive regions like their breast, thighs, stomachs, and armpits. This method, more agonizing than, for instance, kicking, poses a risk of causing serious health issues for women.

Women view this police practice of pinching in private places as a form of sexual harassment.

### **Defamation: Constant threat surveillance and spying**

To keep one's credibility intact is important for everyone but is especially crucial for journalists. So, the Moroccan secret agents spread rumors about Salha and other activists.

On one occasion, a policeman warned Salha to be cautious, threatening to expose her by claiming he had knowledge of all her secrets and access to her phone.

Slandering websites consistently publish rumors about Salha, with one baseless claim suggesting that when she gathers testimonies from male activists, she is, in fact, engaging in inappropriate relationships with them. They often publish gossip about her alleged connections with different male activists. Salha confesses that these rumors occasionally create an awkward atmosphere when she meets these comrades.

Before, it was limited to a few bothersome websites. When people behind these tactics realized that Saharawis no longer read these websites, they started using other methods. Now, the Moroccans frequently create social media accounts to attack activists and spread rumors about them. They infiltrate WhatsApp groups with fake names, and they personally send messages directly to family members.

## **Financial punishment**

According to most activists, this is the most effective strategy. The Moroccan occupation now has an overview of activists and their families, as well as their sources of income. Their approach involves cutting the income for activists and those closest to them.

Salha's dream is to learn and study English, as it would be beneficial for her job in communicating with the outside world. She decided to enroll in a private English institution, paid for by her brothers. Unfortunately, Salha had to discontinue it as she couldn't afford it anymore. To generate some income, she attempted to start a bakery. She tried keeping her ownership a secret, but when the security forces discovered it, they broke into the bakery, stole all the equipment, and threatened Salha's employee. They warned her that if she ever opened the bakery again, they would burn her alive inside. Salha donated the remaining equipment to her employee and let her go.

## **Health**

Working regularly under high pressure comes with a cost. Day in, day out, Salha would leave home at nine in the morning, returning at midnight. Instead of having regular meals, she would only grab a cookie on the way from one house to the other. She has experienced burnout a few times.

When the police stole Salha's phone in 2018 and published its content on the slandering website, Salha was emotionally impacted and began to have regular attacks where she had difficulty breathing, similar to asthma symptoms. On top of that, constant fatigue.

There was a time when Salha could not move her body; she lay down and couldn't stand lights nor people. Stress has caused Salha many physical problems including infections in the intestines, stomach nerves, severe neck pains, and cluster headaches.

When Salha visited a doctor, he asked her if she had conflicts or problems in her family, or if her work was particularly stressful.

**Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed**