



ZAINABU BABI

Among fellow activists, she is commonly hailed as "the real boss," a testament to the profound respect she commands as one of the most prominent figures in her city's activism scene.

Her unwavering commitment to activism has subjected her to numerous instances of harassment at the hands of Moroccan police.

On April 16, 2022, while in a taxi en route to a supermarket, Zainabu was arrested. Two police officers physically assaulted her, with hits and kicks, before forcefully placing her in a car and transporting her to the police station. Upon arrival, Zainabu was interrogated about her activism while they kept hitting and punching her.

Following a three-hour ordeal during which she endured insults from four police officers, Zainabu was eventually released. The arrest was over, but not the physical insults and harassment. As she exited the police station, more police officers assaulted her again, this time hitting her with sticks.

During a police interrogation, Zainabu sustained broken hands as a result of the methods for questioning.

As she neared her house, a fresh group of security agents obstructed her path, surrounded her, kicked, punched, and beat her with wooden sticks until she lost consciousness.

A [video](#) documents the severe beating Zainabu endured on her face and head, leading to bleeding. The scene illustrates



the power imbalance between peaceful female human rights defenders and the brutality inflicted by the police.

One specific aspect has annoyed the Moroccan police: Zainabu's tireless challenge against the house arrest imposed on the Khaya sisters in the town of Boujdour that they all live in.

Born in 1979 in Boujdour, Zainabu, a charismatic activist and mother of three, experiences constant surveillance at her residence. Secret agents position themselves in front of her house, tailing her every movement and monitoring her every action. Even when she sought relief from an allergic reaction by following friends' advice to shower with seawater, police agents were quick to arrive and surround her before she could even take a seat on a beach chair.



In 2012, while heavily pregnant, Zainabu faced brutality when she was beaten with batons. The policemen kept kicking her as she fell to the ground.

The Moroccan government, in its attempts to curb Zainabu's activism, has employed a variety of methods. When these efforts proved unsuccessful, the police resorted to intimidating anyone who associated with her. They went so far as to threaten taxi drivers with the revocation of their driving licenses if they dared to pick her up. In addition to bullying her, they engaged in the dissemination of malicious gossip about her activism, suggesting that it would lead to an unfortunate fate. According to these rumors, anyone who wishes to take the same path will end up like her, "handicapped" or "sick with strange allergies."

The constant physical violence has caused health challenges that require costly treatments and medicine. As an activist, she will never receive financial benefits from her work. The only source of income that she has is the support she receives from her family.

Physical Violence and Visual Documentation: Is it right or wrong to publish pictures of exposed body parts of a muslim woman?

This dilemma might not be readily comprehensible to outsiders, yet it poses a legitimate concern for individuals from relatively conservative societies. The dilemma revolves around the decision of whether one

should expose human rights violations and beatings through visual documentation, thereby risking potential defamation and slander for violating cultural norms governing the perceived proper behavior of a woman.



The Saharawi female activists feel that the pressure is not only from the occupier but from their society too. When they try to document the physical violence by taking pictures of traces of torture, they run the risk of being targeted by rumors that assail their honor and reputation. For instance, when Zainabu's pictures were published, her husband encountered significant pressure. He faced questions about how he could permit photos of his wife's body to circulate on social media platforms with inquiries directed at his acceptance of the fact that everyone on the planet had seen those images.

Zainabu recounted how they truly backed him into a corner with all these arguments. Fortunately, Zainabu's husband is a kind person and supportive spouse who shares the same values as her. She had to sit down with him and explain that anyone engaged in this fight would face various forms of pressure and violence. She emphasized that he should indeed anticipate more challenging situations and the possibility of harm, including the potential targeting of her children or even her own life.

The unfortunate reality is that many of the injuries and bruises often go undocumented, hidden in more sensitive areas of the body. Many female activists describe instances where the police deliberately target areas that they cannot expose, resorting to kicks or pinches. These women are keenly aware of societal and religious norms, consciously practicing self-censorship based on what is deemed acceptable in their own cultural context.

Regrettably, not all husbands are as supportive as Zainabu's spouse. Enjoying respect and admiration in her community, she occasionally assumes the role of a mediator, conversing with certain husbands and explaining the strategies employed by their adversaries. Once she was told, "You may disrespect your own husband, but I will not allow my wife to disrespect me".

Mum Guilt

Zainabu, an activist, a mother, and housewife burdened with endless responsibilities, strives to ensure that her activism does not disrupt her children's school routine. Unfortunately, female activists are often labeled as "bad mothers."

Following an expensive medical examination, Zainabu discovered a spinal issue that restricted her mobility. In need of family support and a house on the ground floor, she had no option but to relocate to her family home and enroll her children in school within her family's neighborhood.

A family relative took her aside for a four-hour lecture on how she could become a better mother for her children. He asserted that she was not a good or responsible mother and should prioritize staying at home instead of being an activist.

This emotional pressure is often an untold chapter in the stories of the challenges faced by female human rights defenders.

Defamation and Slandering

Morocco has systematically employed a strategy of slander campaigns against the activities. With social media, this has increased. The Moroccan intelligence apparatus often designs these rumors. Slandering campaigns include spreading false rumors, engaging in gossip, vilification, publishing fabricated chats, and spreading manipulated pictures.

The incident of Zainabu being kidnapped in a police car fueled rumors suggesting that she had been subjected to sexual assault and harassment by the police.

Regrettably, some individuals perceive rape as an act that not only harms the honor of the woman but also tarnishes the reputation of her family, exploiting it to diminish their worth. The origin of these damaging rumors is often traced back to the occupier. Unfortunately, individuals unaware of this maliciousness may recount them consciously or unconsciously. The daily reality of female activists involves dealing with occupation, gender violence, sexism, patriarchy, defamation, and unemployment. All at once.

Childhood

Zainabu spent her childhood in the countryside, *badia*, where daily conversations about the occupation filled the air. As a child, she observed her father listening to news about the war. Late at night, after little Zainabu had gone to bed, her mother would switch on the illegal Saharawi radio station to enjoy the music of Saharawi artists, such as the musician Maryam Hassan. Zainabu vividly recalls how her closest relatives held the radio very close to their ears. Even out in the remote countryside, Morocco would be sending their spies.

Saharawi families are divided into two: half residing in the occupied territories, and the other in the Saharawi refugee camps. Many families also regularly experienced tragic losses of family members during the war. One incident that left a lasting impact on Zainabu as a child was witnessing her mother's profound grief when her uncle lost his life in the conflict. Her mother was six months pregnant when she received the news.

Zainabu named her oldest daughter Nidal, a name that translates into English as something akin to "fight" or "struggle." Whether the 14-year-old Nidal will follow in her mother's footsteps and join the ranks of activism remains uncertain. But the story of her mother's struggle will echo each time a Moroccan teacher, administrator or policeman types the name of her daughter.

Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed