



AMINATAOU HAIDAR

Aminatou has often been referred to as “the Saharawi Gandhi”, and has shown the world the Saharawi struggle against the Moroccan occupation. She is well-known after having been nominated for a dozen human rights prizes, and has become influential due to her public speaking skills and her fluency in several languages. Although she was born in a Moroccan city called Tata on the 24th of July 1967, she studied and lived her whole life in the occupied territories of Western Sahara.

Beginning to Understand the Cause

As a child, Aminatou often wondered where her uncles on her mother’s side were. Later on she came to understand that the reason she sometimes saw her mother crying was because her brothers were in the Saharawi refugee camps. Five of Aminatou’s uncles fled because of the Moroccan occupation, and one of them died in the war. Aminatou started to be active, and protest against the Moroccan occupation when she was 17 years old. Aminatou, and a handful of other young activists organized themselves in secret cells. Their main activities were tagging on walls, creating disturbances, distributing leaflets in the streets, and putting up posters with slogans demanding that the occupiers leave.

The Secret Detention: Four Years of Arbitrary Detention

Aminatou was twenty years old when she was arbitrarily detained for the first time. An African mission was supposed to visit the occupied territories, the liberated territory of Western Sahara, and the Saharawi refugee camps. The Saharawis decided to organize a demonstration during the mission visit to the occupied territories. Among those who were supposed to demonstrate were students like Aminatou, and the well-known human rights defender Elgalia. A week before the arrival of the mission, Moroccan forces started to arrest people who they suspected were pro-Polisario. Aminatou was arrested the same night that the mission arrived in the occupied territories in 1987. According to Aminatou, more than 400 Saharawis were arrested. Most of them were later released, while 58 were kept in

detention. This was the first time Aminatou had been arrested, and she spent four years in secret detention. Aminatou's family did not know anything regarding her location or if she was alive or not.

Daily Life in Secret Detention: Blindfolded, Tortured and Kept Incommunicado

Aminatou was kept blindfolded the whole period of her arbitrary detention, and she was subjected to all kinds of torture. Her body was tied to a table in the torture room, while her head was hanging down. The blood would go to her head and she would faint. The guards would then wake her up by throwing cold water mixed with pee and washing chemicals. While she was tortured and beaten up she once fell and injured her right shoulder, which she then could not move for a long time.

After her eventual release from prison, Aminatou has had several health issues, including stomach problems, eye and skin allergies. She developed a serious problem with her spine, which she had to operate after prison. Having been blindfolded for such a long time, she also developed a sensitivity towards strong lights after her release.

Inside the Room where she Spent Four Years

In the secret detention outside the city there were only Saharawis, and 17 female political prisoners were kept in a two-meter square room. Among these there were two old ladies. Aminatou, and the younger ones would squeeze close to each other to make more space for these old ladies. The room was dirty, stank, and there were lice everywhere. Most of the guards did not allow the women to talk at all. They would spend the whole day with their eyes covered, looking towards the wall. When the women had their periods, they had to use the same piece of cloth. They had to wash it, and each time one of them had her period she would use it.

After four years in secret detention, Aminatou had forgotten what a good night's sleep was. The guards would spend the night knocking on the doors. They would jump on the floor, and sometimes pour smelly liquids. All these methods were used to disturb their sleep. Even many years after her release. Aminatou would wake up every three hours during the night. It was not until 2007 that she managed to have a normal sleeping routine again.

Some Vivid Memories from the Secret Detention

One of the people that made a strong impression on Aminatou was a young mother who was arrested only 20 days after having given birth. Her breasts were swollen and painful. The only way to release the pain was that Elgalia Edjimi had to suck on her breasts and spit the milk out. Another painful memory was the 20-year old political prisoner who refused to say "Long live the Moroccan king". He was beaten with a stick that had nails on it. He was moaning from the pain. When he stopped, and could no longer be heard, his mother, who was inside the same secret detention center, was relieved that her son was getting better. But he had died, and no one dared to tell her. The guards had let him bleed to death on the floor. Aminatou, like several other prisoners, stumbled over him while walking to the bathroom. The guards did not bother to warn them.

At the secret detention center the food was terrible and disgusting, and it consisted mainly of beans: lentils, chickpeas and cowpeas. No matter how hungry she was, Aminatou never ate cowpeas and lentils because they had worms and insects in them. For Aminatou, it was difficult being unable to control her hand after developing rheumatism due to vitamin deficiencies. Her friend Elghalia was brought to her to help her and to feed her.

The Psychological Torture

Aminatou, and the other female political prisoners, who were used to be treated with respect and courtesy in their society, found the daily verbal insults, and cursing more humiliating and painful than the physical torture, and the inhuman conditions in the prison. Some female political prisoners were sexually harassed, and the guards often threatened them with rape, which was their biggest fear.

The Second Arrest in 2005: Intifada

After finally being released from secret detention in 1991, Aminatou continued her struggle for the Saharawi cause, documenting human rights abuses and campaigning for the release of Saharawi political prisoners.

2005 was the year when the Intifada broke out in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, with a series of large protests. On 17 June 2005 Aminatou was brutally beaten up while she was on her way to take part in a peaceful demonstration. The physical violence she was subjected to resulted in an injury to the head which required twelve stitches, and she had several broken ribs. Aminatou was arrested on the accusation of participating in violent protest activities.

Although this time she had a trial, the trial was more like a theater because when it comes to activists, all the trials are politicized. Aminatou was now a known figure, and many international observers attended her trial, and because of this her trial was postponed several times. For her activism, Aminatou was sentenced to prison for seven months on false charges.

Her Son Mohamed: Keep your Head High and do not Cry

While standing inside the prisoner dock during the day of her sentencing, Aminatou felt someone holding onto her. At first she thought it was a policeman who tried to silence her while she was speaking. But the touch was softer and warmer. It was her eight-year old son, Mohamed. He was crying, and screaming the word "Mom".

The scene of Mohamed clinging to his mother shocked the room including the Moroccan judges, who lowered their heads, and looked down. People in the room started to cry. Aminatou looked at her son, and warmly, but firmly told him that he should not cry or beg because the Saharawi need a generation that does not kneel or let itself be humiliated by anyone.

Differences between being Jailed as Young Student and as a Mother

Even though the trial was false, this time Aminatou had a chance to stand in a courtroom and speak, compared to the arbitrary detention. This time her family and kids could visit her. When reflecting on her first arrest, Aminatou describes how much it made her mom suffer, to not know whether her daughter was alive or not. A prison is a prison, but for Aminatou the second time was definitely emotionally harder being a mother separated from her young children.



2009 Lanzarote Airport Hunger Strike: «I am not Moroccan»

Aminatou received the Civil Courage Award in the US in 2009. Upon her return to the occupied territories, at El-Aaiún airport, she refused to describe herself as a Moroccan under the “citizenship question” in a form she had to fill out. Moroccan authorities confiscated her passports, and sent her back to Spain describing her behavior as “treason”, stating that she would never be allowed into the territories again unless she apologized.

As she didn't carry any passport Spain refused to send her back to the occupied territories. Abandoned at the airport, Aminatou entered into a hunger strike which lasted for 32 days. Her protest at the airport of Lanzarote generated huge media attention, not only to her life-threatening protest, but to the Western Sahara issue which often received very little media attention. The media coverage, and the international pressure forced Morocco to allow Aminatou back to her homeland. She never apologized and she never stopped fighting.

Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed