



ELGHALIA DJIMI

Elghalia, born in the Moroccan city of Agadir in 1961, was from a family who had moved from the former 'Spanish Sahara' for economic reasons. Elghalia was brought up by her grandmother, Fatimatu Ahmed Salem, whom she always referred to as her own mother, Amma. Amma had disappeared and so, Elghalia has dedicated her life to seeking answers looking for answers on her disappearance.

At the age of 65, Elghalia refrains from speaking about her own story before mentioning what had happened to her “mother.”

The charismatic and warm woman, who has toured the world and has regularly attended sessions at the UN Human Rights Council, was herself a victim of secret detention for three years and seven months, including 32 days in solitary confinement.

Amma was the primary provider of her family during a time in history when it was unconventional for women to be the family’s breadwinner. Amma worked in physically demanding jobs like fish factories, allowing her children, including Elghalia’s father, to attend school.

At home, Amma made sure that her children and grandchildren, like Elghalia, spoke the proper Hassaniya dialect. She frequently reminded them that their lives in Agadir were only because of economic reasons but that they were really from Western Sahara. Elghalia's initial interactions with Moroccans occurred when she started school in 1967.

The neighborhood where Elghalia grew up was a marginalized Saharawi community in a neighborhood called “Lehkyam” - a term denoting the tent-based housing arrangement. Notably, Elghalia herself was born in a tent.

Ammas House: a Meeting Point for Sahrawis

The residence belonging to Elghalia's "mother" served as a gathering place for Saharawis arriving from Western Sahara. At the tender age of 14, Elghalia began to attentively observe the conversations and the faces of those who frequented their home. The conversations were about arrests and secret detentions. Elghalia recalls the faces of heartbroken parents who came accompanied by their daughters who had been raped by Moroccan soldiers.

The Moroccan security in the city of Agadir started to pay closer attention to the constant visits of Saharawis to Amma's house. They started monitoring the house, and positioning agents around it. Moroccan security also persuaded some Saharawis to inform them about the nature of conversations taking place inside the house. The spies reported that the house occupants listened to the forbidden Saharawi national radio.

Elghalias First Political Reflections

Hearing stories of Saharawi prisoners, secret detention, and sexual assault, made Elghalia reflect on the political situation they were living in. She also started to reflect on the fact that despite all these years living in Agadir, Moroccans did not try to get close to them or even considered them as Moroccan citizens. Elghalia witnessed the social and economic disparities that Saharawis experienced in comparison to Moroccans, who enjoyed advantages through the welfare system, including better housing conditions and access to superior facilities.

At the age of 19, Elghalia traveled, seeking out the Polisario office in Las Palmas, Spain. As she was introducing herself, she realized they were already well-acquainted with her and her family, acknowledging their staunch support for the cause. Eager to contribute, Elghalia inquired about any opportunities to get involved. This marked the actual start of her activism, and political engagement. It was the year of 1983.

The Unexplained Disappearance of the Mother

During the two-week holiday in April 1984, Elghalia returned to her mother's house in Agadir. As customary, Amma's house had guests from Western Sahara. That day, there were eight visitors.

April the 4th fell within the sacred Muslim month of *Rajab*, and Amma, observing her fast, was still seated on her prayer rug, completing her prayers.

While she prayed, they heard forceful knocks on the metal door. Two plainclothed policemen entered, stating they were looking for "Fatimatu". Both Amma and one of her guests had that name. The guest's face froze in fear upon hearing her name called by the security forces. Hailing from the town of Smara in the occupied territory, she was well aware of the harrowing tales involving Moroccan forces. The two men clarified that they were actually seeking *Hadja* Fatimatu, an Arabic term of respect for someone who had undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The two security agents walked straight to grandmother Amma's room, displaying an intimate knowledge of the house's layout. They looked through all her personal belongings: property documents, her identification, and letters from her children who moved to Europe. Elghalia was standing there, watching and hearing them classifying items in French, remarking phrases like "pas important" (not important) between themselves.

The two agents found a picture of a younger Elghalia not wearing a *melhfa*. "Is this you?" they asked her, to which she nodded. "We are from the security and we want Hadja to go with us," they said. They asked Elghalia to tell her mother to put on warm clothes and bring her identity card with her. The two men went through every inch of the house, even inspecting the water tank.

The 60 year old Amma, who was struggling with asthma, stood and took her traditional Saharawis white rope over her *melhfa*. Adorned with silver hand bracelets, she removed them and handed them to Elghalia, who threw them

against the wall, remarking, "These will be worthless without you." To this day, silver jewelry is Elghalia's favorite as it reminds her of her mother.

One of the security agents was dressed in sportswear and a casual cap. The other was dressed resembling people who often sell vegetables in the city market. No one would ever guess that they were security agents. Elghalia politely approached them and asked if she could bring her mother food when the fasting breaks in the evening.

The two agents took her mother, and she followed them. Outside the house, a Renault 4 car was stationed, with a name on the side: National Security. Elghalia maintained her gaze on the departing vehicle until it vanished from sight. This was the last time she ever saw her mother.

As the time for breaking the fast prayers approached, a small gathering of Elghalia's closest relatives and neighbors gathered the food in a basket and went to the police station. The police sent them back, promising they would care for everything. From that day onward, there was no information about her. They did not have time to say goodbye. In the beginning, the family did not understand the reasons for their mother's arrest. Later on, they realized that their house was under constant surveillance, with some considering Amma's house a Polisario office.

During this period, Morocco abducted thousands of Saharawis, with forced disappearance becoming the tragic fate for many, particularly between 1975 and 1984. The family didn't know where to start.

Elghalia describes the loss of her mother as a needle that falls into the ocean, swallowed by its depths forever.

Elghalia's Father Returns Seeking his Mother

Elghalia's father, who was at the time in the Netherlands, returned in search of his mother. Upon arriving in El Aaiún, he went to see the Moroccan mayor early the next morning. However, the mayor, angered by his inquiry, advised him to leave immediately, warning him of potential arrest and missing without a trace. The mayor continued yelling telling him that his mother is a pro-Polisario criminal. In a blatant threat to ensure his safety, the mayor explicitly instructed him never to inquire about her. Moreover, he forbade him from ever setting foot in El Aaiún again, under the threat of arrest. Complying with the warnings, Elghalia's father traveled back to the Netherlands. He wrote a letter to Amnesty International, providing all her personal information.

Afraid at School

Elghalia was enrolled in a Moroccan boarding school, where she was the only Saharawi student. Despite her frequent phone calls or conversations with her biological mother, she refrained from daring to inquire about any updates regarding Amma's disappearance. She preferred waiting until she had two or three days free from school to visit.

One day, while at the school, Elghalia witnessed a police car entering the compound. Her first thought was they were coming to kidnap her as well, causing her to faint. She only woke up after the car had left, and her Moroccan friends, who tended to her. They were good friends, but she could never tell them about what she was going through.

In the neighborhood, the police spread rumors claiming they had discovered weapons and communication equipment in Amma's water tank, alleging it had been used to be in contact with Polisario. Earlier, the house had been crowded with guests, with cars parking in front of it. Now, people stopped visiting fearing being perceived as associated with Amma. Both Elghalia and her biological mother virtually cut off contact with people in the city.

The Study Break

After two years of studying, Elghalia took a gap year. This decision was driven by her desire to assist her biological mother, who was unaccustomed to managing household responsibilities, shopping in the market, and caring for her youngest siblings. Additionally, the gap year served the purpose of providing companionship to her mother as everyone distanced themselves from their residence.

Seeking solidarity with others in a similar situation, Elghalia secured a job in El Aaiún. She was thrilled, not because of the job itself, but because of the opportunity it presented to connect with fellow Saharawis. Her goal was to gain insights into locating families of the unaccounted for and to enhance coordination efforts. When she moved to El Aaiún, she decided to stay with her friend who was an activist and shared the same ideas as Elghalia.

When Elghalia initiated contact with families, some conveyed it would be better only to lose one family member than everyone. Many of them advised her to forget about her mother and pray for her. At the same time, they appealed to her to never ask or even bring the topic up again. Elghalia was shocked.

This was 11 years after the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. Throughout this period, Elghalia traveled abroad every one or two years to establish contact with the Polisario office in the Canary Islands for coordination. To avoid arousing suspicion, she would take a flight to France or Malaga, even though it is a lot cheaper to travel to Las Palmas from Western Sahara.

In 1987, the Polisario office relayed information about an African committee planning to visit Western Sahara. At that time, El Aaiún was experiencing issues with the phone line. In response, Elghalia traveled to Agadir just to make a phone call. It was during this call that she received the news that a girl would be delivering her documents from the Canary Islands.

Sentenced to 3 Years and 7 Months

The Saharawi girl who brought the documents was living in Mauritania. The documents and posters were packed in a candy box. Elghalia's task was to receive the files and deliver them to the committee. Elghalia hid the documents in a barrel in the house where she was living.

A week prior to the committee's arrival, a Saharawi man, pro-Morocco, came to Elghalia's workplace. He wrote down the names of Saharawis, who are pro-Morocco and would be arranged to meet the committee. He looked at Elghalia and said that this girl, who was born and grew up in Morocco, would be added to the list. She was very happy and told herself this was a perfect opportunity to pass on the documents.

Having moved to El Aaiún in 1986, Elghalia walked to work every day. Despite her limited interactions with people, she noticed a car trailing her daily for an entire year. The driver was an elderly man and Elghalia didn't give it much thought, as she assumed he was simply one of the older individuals with a tendency to follow women.

The committee was expected on a Friday. On Wednesday, before leaving for work, she was wearing wide pants and a *melhfa*. On each side of her outfit, she had put inside a flag held by hair barrettes. The letter that she had prepared to give the committee was attached to her leg.

Elghalia typically began work at 2:45 pm. Just 15 minutes into her time in the office, she received a summons to the staff manager's office on the upper floor. She left her bag in her office and went up.

What had happened is that when the Moroccan authorities evaluated all the people who were on that list, they found her activities suspicious. She had never visited the mayor's office and had never participated in any of the Moroccan celebrations. On top of that, her mother was arrested. They identified themselves as the security personnel and requested a brief moment of her time. Elghalia replied "Of course," but requested permission to go to her office to bring her bag.

Elghalia intended to return to remove the flags and letters, concealing them elsewhere. Their response was no, asserting that they only needed her for a short time.

Fearing the Same Fate as Amma

In front of her work building, a Land Rover was parked. They ordered her to get into the back. As soon as she entered, a man pulled her head down, squeezed her between his legs, and covered her head with a black bag and he tied it around her head. At that moment, she knew it would not last only for one or two minutes, as they said. From there, she was sure that she was facing the same fate as her mother.

Subsequently, another woman was brought to the car. What had happened is that the Moroccan police had apprehended hundreds of Saharwis before the arrival of the African delegation.

Secret Detention

The detainees were taken immediately to a secret detention center. This building was used during the Spanish colonial time to hold pigs before they were slaughtered. Morocco repurposed this space for hanging Saharwis.

The room they were confined in was sealed, lacking any doors, and had a foul odor. In the company of Elghalia, a total of twenty women were held captive. The guards asked them if they had any jewelry or anything sharp proceeding to search each detainee individually. When he got to Elghalia, he heard the rustling of the papers underneath her clothes.

The guard ordered her to take it out, and if she were not willing, they would do it by force and strip her naked. Reluctantly, she revealed two flags. The guard immediately rushed to the room where individuals were being tortured, and within moments, a large number of soldiers came into the room.

Elghalia, like other political prisoners know well the difference between a soldier and a high-ranked officer from their elegant shoes and expensive perfume. All the people who came there were bosses.

They dragged her out of the room and started interrogating her about the flags and the letter. Elghalia said that the police kidnaped her mother, and that she was searching for her. She didn't want to tell them about the Saharawi woman who brought everything to her.

Straight to Torture

The police took Elghalia straight to a torture room tying up her hands, then her feet to a wooden chair and started to beat her up. Her body was tied over a wooden table, with her head suspended in the air. One of the policemen stood by her head and the other by her feet.

Her eyes were blindfolded with a bag and they poured a stinky liquid on her head. This liquid was water mixed with pee and cleaning chemicals. They kept pouring and choking her while simultaneously slapping her on the face and beating up her feet until she could no longer feel them. The interrogation and torture lasted for a day.

The False Promise to Bring her Mother Back

At the age of 26, Elghalia was presented with a tempting offer: if she cooperated and told the truth, they would release her mother. All they wanted from her was a full confession, and the venue for this was the office of the right-hand man to the Minister of Interior. Blindfolded, she was escorted to this location in a car.

In the office, several men were standing, including the top of the General Directorate for Territorial Surveillance, DST. The minister's right-hand man was the only one sitting. He asked her to sit beside him.

Elghalia's clothes were soaking wet, and she had worn plastic sandals borrowed from another political prisoner since her shoes no longer accommodated her swollen feet.

He looked at his watch and said to her: "Now it is 10 pm".

“I will give orders to my guys to stop torturing you until midnight. So you have a chance to come clean and confess”.

Elghalia was escorted back into the interrogation room, and her blindfold was removed temporarily, allowing her to survey the surroundings. In the middle of the room, there was a huge table, around which several men were seated. Each represented a different division of the security units and each man posed their own set of questions. Among them was the elderly man who followed her daily to and from work. He was apparently the director of the judicial police.

Isolation

Convinced that Elghalia was only feeding them lies, they opted to return her to the torture room.

There, she faced threats of rape and death from some, while others claimed to possess a lying detecting machine. They subjected the 26-year-old to torture through electric shocks and a concoction of dirty water and chemicals.

During one incident, Elghalia was insulted by a soldier and she slapped him. The consequence of this act was isolation.

Elghalia was brought into a tiny cold room, where she could no longer hear any noise. She was not given any food. When she asked to use the toilet, the guard would come in and kick her with his feet, calling her an enemy of the nation. Once, the guard's kicks were so bad she fell, and a dog bit her, leaving a lasting mark on her body that she would carry for the rest of her life. She spent that night alone in solitary confinement.

Guards would often go into the male political prisoners, beating them with belts and ordering them to say “long live the King” while affirming that Sahara is Moroccan. Amidst this coercion, one prisoner resisted, contending that he had a president, not a king. The guards took a sharp stick and stabbed it into his liver, leaving him bleeding to death. One of Elghalia’s painful memories is stepping on his lifeless body while walking to the toilet. She was blindfolded and the guards didn’t tell her anything about the dead man in front of her.

Losing her Hair

Her hair remained unwashed for two months and twenty days. When Elghalia got a chance to wash her hair, it fell off. She kept holding it back, trying to glue it back to her skull. To this day, the frontal part of Elghalia's head is still hairless. Her hair never grew back despite consulting several European experts.

Faith, Determination and Diplomatic Skills

Elghalia believed that her fate was to die in the secret detention center. That is why she promised herself that she must die standing and steadfast.

Her proficiency in *darija*, the Moroccan Arabic, helped her to build connections with some guards. Through these relationships, she managed to secretly leak a list of names of all the political prisoners to the outside world. One of the guards even bought her a radio, and she was thrilled to hear the list of political prisoners on the Saharawi news. Elghalia still prays for her former guard to this day.

She also had an unexpected result of her time in jail. Morocco arrested many Saharawis, among them a political prisoner who would later become her husband and the father of Elghalia's children—Dafa.

The woman who smuggled documents and posters to the occupied territories was arrested, too. She could not endure the prison conditions and succumbed to mental distress within the same facility where Elghalia was detained. Four of Elghalia's comrades died in the prison.

Looking for Closure and Accountability

Over the years, Morocco spread many lies regarding the whereabouts of those who were forcibly disappeared. According to Morocco, some of them allegedly moved to the neighboring country Mauritania. Others, whom Morocco claimed had passed away for medical reasons in jail, were later discovered in mass graves, bearing bullet wounds in their skulls and identified by Spanish forensics.

Elghalia contends that employing new tools, such as DNA, would provide a definitive answer to confirm the identity of the human remains.

Despite enduring three years and seven months in secret detention, Elghalia is content with her life except for an empty hole that would only be filled with getting a proper answer. She yearns to bid farewell to her mother, and offer her a burial with dignity - if indeed she is deceased, as Morocco claimed in one of its answers.

Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed