



## EMBARKA MOHAMED HAFED

Even as a teenager, Embarka was eager to be part of the network of Saharawi activists officially. Despite her family's attempts to convince her that it was a dangerous field for someone of her age, she secretly began participating in demonstrations and attending political meetings.

Embarka has, in recent years, been one of the women who actively supported the fellow Saharawi Sultana Khaya, who for a nearly two-year-long period was imposed a de facto house arrest by the Moroccan authorities. Embarka was one of those who constantly tried to reach Sultana's house, leading to her being repeatedly beaten up and harassed.

Sometimes when she walked the streets, police agents on motorcycles would throw liquids at her before swiftly driving away. Other times they would send random men in civilian clothes to sexually harass her and her fellow female activists in public. During demonstrations, the police would drag female activists to smaller, concealed alleys to beat them away from the view of cameras held by other activists.

On May 16th, 2022, Embarka, her sister, and their entire group were subjected to a brutal assault. This incident was documented by Amnesty International, which urged the Moroccan authorities to open an investigation.

On one fateful day, Embarka was en route to Sultana Khaya's house. She had barely taken a few steps from her house, holding the hand of her youngest child, when a civilian car carrying five security forces pulled up beside her. They inquired about where she was headed. Embarka answered that she was not going very far. They told her: "We know that you are going to Sultana's house. You are forbidden to go there".

The five men stepped out of the car and began to kick the door to her house. They demanded that she unlock the door using the keys. She refused and replied that they could try it themselves. One of them slid his hand in her handbag and took her house keys by force. Then they kicked her hard through the door. The kick was so strong that she ended up on the other end of the corridor that faced the house entrance.

For the remainder of that day, these security agents forcibly stayed in her house, preventing her from leaving. The goal was to ensure that no one could reach the Khaya family's residence. If the police observed anyone helping the Khaya family by visiting the house, those visitors would face different sorts of punishment, such as police raids or harassment. Embarka found herself among those who faced such consequences.

## Violence in Front of Children

The five policemen violated, beat, and dragged Embarka in the presence of her seven-year-old child. The trauma was so overwhelming that he became terrified and fled, and was scared to come back into his house.

Witnessing their mother being assaulted on a regular basis, her children developed a profound fear of the police. They are often anxious that the police will break into the house.

Before bedtime, they would express their feelings, voicing their fears about the police breaking in. Even when she went out to meet friends, her children would interrogate her to ensure she was not heading to any place where the police might be present.

Embarka and her group were under constant surveillance and followed everywhere. Sometimes, the police followed each one of them until they were certain that they had entered their houses without causing any trouble.

## Being an Activist and Wife

As happens to many Sahrawi women human rights defenders, while Embarka's family supported her activism, her personal life suffered. Morocco's relentless pressure on her and her loved ones has made it impossible for her to have stable relationships, and today she is divorced.

## Art and Music

Born in 1979 in Boujdour, Embarka has always adored the Saharawi revolutionary songs, and listening to Saharawi national songs became her favorite hobby. These songs instilled in her a profound sense of patriotism from her childhood. The Saharawi heritage, culture, and historical events, particularly the early years of Saharawi resistance, are predominantly documented through oral poetry and songs. Therefore, these songs serve a purpose beyond mere entertainment; they embody a collective memory for Saharawis. Leveraging her beautiful voice, Embarka takes pleasure in singing at political gatherings.

Throughout the siege on Sultana's house, Embarka found it difficult to sleep at night, grappling with the personal challenges she faced and the distressing situation surrounding Sultana. The national songs were their source of additional motivation.

A video shows Embarka and Waara singing during a protest.

## Brother in Jail

Embarka's youngest brother received a ten-year prison sentence due to his political opinions, and he is currently incarcerated in Morocco. Last year, when he initiated a hunger strike to secure access to medical treatment, he was transferred to an even worse prison as a punishment for protesting. The fact that he is imprisoned so far away from his hometown and home country places a big burden on his family in terms of money for transport and accommodation and in terms of time.

These journeys marked the first instances for Embarka's family to travel to a city in Morocco, surrounded by a predominantly Moroccan population.

Sometimes Embarka undertakes the long trip to visit her brother, leaving behind her children - who are attending school - just to be denied visitation without explanation. When visits were permitted, they were given very short time with him, and there was no privacy.

Throughout these visits, she would wait an entire day to be given a mere five minutes. "What really bothers me is even in the room where you visit, they wouldn't leave you alone. They would stand there listening to your conversation. It is a well-crafted strategy also to torture the families of political prisoners", she said.

Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed