



FATMA MOHAMED EL-HAFIDI

Fatma grew up in the countryside, the *badia*, with more freedom than in the restricted atmosphere of the city where the Moroccan government now has forbidden the setting up of traditional tents. Beyond the urban centers, Saharawis in occupied Western Sahara have always enjoyed a certain level of freedom.

In the *badia*, in a tranquil community comprising only five to six tents, young Fatma cultivated her skills in sewing. Here, she honed her ability to stitch and create tents.

The tents not only serve as the traditional homes for the Saharawis, playing a crucial role in their nomadic lifestyle. The tents also hold a broader symbolic significance.

These tents, known as *jaimas*, stand as a powerful symbol of Saharawi cultural heritage and tradition - and of resistance against the Moroccan occupation.

Since the Gdeim Izik camp in 2010, where thousands of protesting Saharawis set up *jaimas*, the Moroccan authorities have forbidden setting up tents, and issued fines for those who defy the order. Therefore, just making and installing the tents is a way to resist the occupation, Fatma explains. The Moroccan authorities prohibit this practice within and around the cities.

She emphasizes that the key to resisting Morocco's strategy to "Moroccanize" the Saharawis lies in preserving traditions and making them known to the outside world.

Rooftent

Fatma still lives in the city of Boujdour, her birthplace since 1984. On two separate occasions during the anniversaries of the Gdeim Izik events, Fatma personally crafted miniature tents to commemorate this significant moment in Saharawi history. The tent is uniquely adorned, crafted from *mehlfas* and she hoists it onto the rooftop of her house. It serves as a natural shade from the sun, creating a welcoming space under which she can invite friends and family to partake in the enjoyment of traditional tea.

To commemorate the occasion alongside fellow activists, they added Saharawi flags they had sewn. In 2021, when they raised a tent on the rooftop, security forces surrounded the building for a month and a half.

“Where as my sister knew how to sing, I sewed tents”, she said.

Fatma’s activism for self-determination in Western Sahara has subjected her to numerous instances of harassment from Moroccan authorities.



Beaten Up

The pictures vividly display evident signs of assault and violence perpetrated by the Moroccan police against Fatma. Fatma and her other friends were severely beaten up with sticks solely because they showed public support to fellow activist Sultana Khaya in Boujdour. Amnesty international has urged Moroccan authorization to investigate the incident.

On April 16th, 2023, Fatma was blindfolded by the police, who continued to strike her legs relentlessly with a metal stick. The repeated blows caused a hole and cuts in her leg. Despite the bleeding, the police persisted in targeting the same spot. This brutal assault on the women's legs aimed to impede their ability to walk or climb to the second floor, where Sultana was protesting in her house. (Add here the picture of Fatma and the women on the roof)

Fatma experienced excruciating pain from the beatings. However, she was reluctant to seek treatment at a public hospital. Saharawi activists assert that they face discrimination in Moroccan-run hospitals, mirroring the biases encountered in the job and housing markets. Despite severe injuries, she turned to traditional medicine.

Despite the constant surveillance of her movements and police stationed in front of her house, Fatma somehow sneaked out at night, making her way discreetly to a private hospital in El Aaiún.

Moroccan Responses

After setting up her latest rooftop tent, her house became under daily surveillance. Moroccan police, dressed in civilian clothes, were standing in front of her house. On the eve of the Gdeim Izik anniversary on 9 October 2023, Fatma and other activists sat on the floor sewing their tent. Crafting a tent is a collective act, with tasks being allocated among the women. While Fatma and others were sewing, some were busy preparing tea. Children would be seen playing around with threads and sewing tools. It was always a peaceful and harmonic atmosphere.

These women were not engaged in any illegal activities; nonetheless, security agents intervened aggressively. Armed men forcefully entered, and assaulted the women, destroying everything by breaking items and kicking over the tea

set, leaving shattered glass strewn about. They also yelled at the children. When Fatma tried to film their attacks, the police threw stones at her, resulting in an injury to the hand holding the phone.

A week after the anniversary, remnants of the cloth used to make the tent still lay in front of Fatma's house. The police and security forces came to her house, inquiring whether it was a tent and instructing her to remove it. Fed up with the persistent surveillance and harassment, Fatma responded by stating that it was simply trash and that if it bothered them, they could dispose of it themselves. This also shows how the Moroccan authorities are nervous just at the sight of anything which merely resembles a tent.

Protesting Against the Moroccan Elections

Fatma, much like the majority of Saharawis in the occupied territories, doesn't recognize the legitimacy of Moroccan elections. She perceives them as mere theatrical performances, pretending to represent or care about Saharawis. During the last Moroccan elections, local politicians organized a political rally in front of her house. In response, Fatma defiantly unfurled the Saharawi flag, waving it proudly from her window while simultaneously distributing pamphlets.

Saharawi activists are deprived of fundamental rights, including assembly, expression, and freedom of movement. While Fatma was visiting her family, who were temporarily staying outside the city, a man showed up, introducing himself as the person in charge of the area. "He started to question my parents asking why they were there," Fatma said. Frustrated by the constant presence of security agents shadowing her family, she decided to confront him. Fatma urged him to be honest, pointing out that he was there because of her. She suggested he direct his inquiries to her instead of troubling her elderly parents. The pervasive surveillance by the police is aimed at tracking their every movement.

The Work as a Human Rights Defender and Sister

Fatma's youngest brother has been sentenced to ten years in prison because of his political opinions and involvement in student activism. His imprisonment in Morocco poses a significant challenge for his family to visit him, especially considering that her parents, now in their older years, find it impossible to make the journey. They, however, try to reach him via phone. Unfortunately, the prison regulations at times only permit one phone call a week, and there are instances where even that becomes an unattainable privilege. These calls take on heightened importance during special celebrations like *Eid*. Regrettably, during the last *Eid*, authorities denied him the use of his phone. He went on a hunger strike to demand improvement in his conditions. Shockingly, instead of addressing his legitimate concerns, Morocco penalized him by transferring him to a prison with even harsher conditions.

Proud Mother

The police presence also impacts Fatma's four children, ranging from her 13-year-old eldest to her youngest, who is 5. They have been forced to witness the police brutally attacking and injuring their mother, and they have become accustomed to the sight of security agents stationed in front of their home. While this initially scared them, they are no longer afraid of the police. Remarkably, this has instilled a profound sense of pride in Fatma as she sits in her rooftop tent, with police patrolling the street below.