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MAHFOUDA LEFKIR DANBAR

This is the account of a human rights defender and activist who was illegally sentenced to six months in prison for reprimanding a judge.

Moroccan police maintain a daily presence in front of her residence. Additionally, her daughter was denied receiving scholarships and was instructed by the Moroccan occupation to seek payment from her mother. Furthermore, her husband becomes an online target, accused of not being a "real man" for supporting his wife's activism.

The occupation left a mark on Mahfouda's childhood. Half of her family fled to the Saharawi refugee camps during the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara. Similar to other families, individuals from the refugee camps and the occupied territories exchanged recorded cassette tapes to communicate with one another. As a child, Mahfouda would sit besides the cassette player listening to the voices and news from family members she had never met.

Mahfouda has been active in defending the rights of her people since 2005. Over the years, the 39-year-old mother of two has been subjected to many reprisals from the authorities, who wished to silence her. She has endured physical harassment and been subjected to threats of sexual violence.

Her Arrest: Six Months in Prison

During a recess in Mahfouda's cousin's trial proceedings, Mahfouda found herself in a confrontation with the judge. Her cousin's mother had requested permission to step outside for some fresh air, prompting the judge to berate and

yell at her aunt for speaking loudly in the courtroom. Mahfouda, who witnessed how disrespectful the judge was towards her aunt, replied, advising him to show some respect.

The sentences that led to Mahfouda's six-month imprisonment were: "Show respect; she is your mother's age. Show her respect," Mahouda told the judge.

Mahfouda was escorted to the prosecutor's office and then to the police station without any clear explanation. At the station, she was ordered to undress and they proceeded to hit her on her back. The police confiscated her phone and checked its contents. They read, analyzed, and documented every detail, including her recent calls. Based on the phone's contents, they accused and confronted her regarding her alleged efforts to mobilize people to attend the courtroom.

Mahouda spent the entire night in a dirty cell full of cockroaches, on an old, smelly mattress. Mahfouda still has no idea why she was confined or what was going to happen to her. She was also deprived of food and drinks.

The following day, Mahfouda was brought back to the courtroom without being afforded the opportunity to have legal representation, and none of her family members were present. The prosecutor asked her questions while another man took notes. Mahfouda, without any insight into the contents, was coerced into signing documents using her fingerprint. No one else was allowed into the courtroom, prompting her husband and brothers to stand atop a rock outside the building, attempting to observe the proceedings through a closed window.

After signing the document, without her phone or sunglasses, she was handcuffed and taken to a cell within the courthouse. Mahfouda still had no idea what she was being charged for. Curiously, she asked a policeman if he knew. He only told her that he was frustrated because he had to work during the weekend.

"Because of you, I had to work on a Saturday," he responded.

Outside, Mahfouda's family sought information about her situation from another policeman. He responded by stating that if a police car arrived at the courthouse, it indicated that she would be taken to jail. Witnessing a police car approaching, Mahfouda's brother reacted with hysteria, loudly protesting that they couldn't take her. He had spent time in prison himself and was well aware of the conditions there.

Mahouda was escorted out of the courthouse. On the way to the car, she heard her husband's voice shouting, "Be strong, Mahfouda!". Subsequently, she was placed in a police car with dark-tinted windows, still unaware of what awaited her or where she was being taken.

When she arrived at the prison, the administration awaited her. She said it felt like a nightmare, having no idea that the story would unfold this way. Having gone without food for a day, she fainted as soon as she arrived, hitting her head against a cement flower pot. They did not check her head but instead only gave her paracetamol.

She was to spend six months in that jail.

The Horrible Prison Experience

In prison, Mahfouda shared a cell with eight other women. She was the only human rights activist; the others were convicted for various crimes. In contrast to her cellmates, who slept on beds, Mahfouda was provided with only a blanket and instructed to sleep on the floor. The cell's dimensions were two meters in one direction and three meters in the other.

The toilet was located in the corner of the cell with a partially closed door that was forbidden to shut. Ventilation was nonexistent. Occasionally, drops of water would accumulate on the cell walls due to humidity, and caterpillars crawled up from the toilet holes. The stench was unbearable, particularly at night.

Every morning, the guards woke the inmates by harshly knocking metal against the doors. Everyone was required to get up and stand to be counted. The first few days, Mahouda frequently fainted, frightened by the brutal manner in which they were awakened.

The food was horrible, and it often contained cockroaches or insects. Those with financial means could purchase canned food from the prison shop, so Mahfouda survived mostly on canned food. The inmates had to be outdoors from one o'clock until four o'clock in the afternoon. This was particularly unbearable during the cold winter months.

Betrayal by Fellow Inmates

Despite the prohibition on having books, notebooks, or pens, Mahfouda ingeniously managed to obtain a pen and a piece of paper, which she discreetly concealed in her cell. That way, she was able to write some sort of defense speech for herself. Unfortunately, her efforts were compromised as other prisoners, acting as informants for the prison administration, spied on her. It didn't take long before she was called to explain herself before the administration. The boss, red-faced with anger, accused her of inciting other prisoners to protest against the prison.

Throughout her incarceration, Mahfouda was continually harassed and provoked by the other prisoners. On one occasion, she found fingernails in her food.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, conditions further deteriorated, yet no measures were taken to address hygiene concerns. Inside the prison, the inmates never fully understood the pandemic's extent or what it was about. Mahouda harbored fears about the unknown virus and the possibility of never seeing her family again. Suddenly, even visits were no longer allowed.

Mahfouda's Prison Visits

On Mondays and Fridays, she was permitted a mere five-minute phone call with her parents and husband. A guard was always in close proximity, ensuring oversight of her conversations. Inside the prison, the days went slower and slower.

She often pondered how she had ended up in her current situation.

Each visit took an emotional toll on her entire family. The children would cry while embracing their mother. Mahfouda's son, in an attempt to cope with the separation, would promise her one kiss for Saturday and another for Sunday - a gesture representing each day he couldn't be with her. During one visit, Mahfouda noticed her son staring blankly in the direction of the prison guards. It was evident that something was troubling him, an underlying worry and fear for his mother's safety. Seeking to comfort him, Mahfouda remarked, "You know, these guards? Mom can easily beat them up". He smiled and continued his conversation.

Mahfouda was limited to receiving no more than four visitors at the time. Her family would arrive at eleven o'clock, enduring hours of anticipation before finally seeing her at three o'clock in the afternoon. All visitors were thoroughly searched and the guards ordered them to speak loudly and forbade them from whispering in each other's ears. Three guards always monitored their interactions.

Reflections on Life in Prison

After her time in prison, Mahfouda reflects on the absurdity of enduring such an ordeal for her minor comment in the courtroom. If the judge felt offended, he could have told her and asked her to come to his office to apologize. Instead, they imprisoned her to send a message to other female activists.

The lesson for disrespecting a judge was for the Saharawi human rights activist Mahfouda Lefkir, a six-month sentence in prison. She received the sentence on November 16, 2019.

The Close Neighbours Son who Grew up to be an Agent

Mahfouda's brother's death in 1988 profoundly impacted her motivation during childhood, particularly in education. Despite her family's provision of everything necessary for her to excel academically, including additional support, Mahfouda displayed little interest or motivation for her studies. Mahfouda would leave her house for school, but instead of going to school, she would go to her neighbor's house and continue sleeping until 11 am. She would return to her house for breakfast, where the mother had prepared all types of food for her, believing she had been at school the entire time.

Mahfouda was fortunate to have kind and supportive neighbors, and the two families shared a close bond, both among the parents and the children.

Recently, Mahfouda's house has been under a prolonged siege. Security agents, dressed in civilian clothes, are stationed daily in front of her house. Morocco now has a new strategy: to hire Saharawis to spy on fellow Saharawis. The day Mahfouda discovered that her former neighbor had taken up work as a security agent, she couldn't help but shed tears. It is easy for her to accept and tolerate the spying and surveillance from a Moroccan security agent but not a fellow Saharawi. Still, Mahfouda sympathized and understood the potential reasons that might compel someone to accept such a job. These reasons can be financial desperation, blackmail, or fear of consequences for refusal. Yet, she neither respects nor fully accepts these justifications.

Mahfouda's Bold Approach

If you follow Mahfouda's bravery and her confrontation during demonstrations, you'll see that she is unafraid to vocalize her political opinions and challenge the oppression. However, when the security agent is a Saharawi, she becomes aware of the significance of maintaining politeness and diplomacy.

Morocco's deliberate strategy is to incite strife between Saharawi families and tribes. Therefore, Mahfouda takes the direct approach of engaging with security agents in an effort to persuade them to cease their activities.



Planting Spies in her Close Circle

Mahfouda had rented a floor of her house to an educated gentleman. When her daughter needed to install Zoom for an online meeting, she noticed something unusual with her laptop. Concerned, Mahfouda took the laptop to a Saharawi activist who specializes in online security. The expert informed her that the laptop had been compromised, and all her online activities and work were being copied to another unit. Mahfouda is convinced that it is almost impossible to trust anyone because Morocco could pressure anyone.

Threat of Rape in Front of her Children

In 2013, when Mahfouda was on her way from her in-law's house, she stumbled upon a peaceful protest she wasn't aware of. Standing next to her husband, holding her child's hands, and on the phone with her father, Mahfouda experienced an abrupt and violent incident. All of a sudden, a Moroccan policeman struck her on the head with a handheld police transceiver on the side where she was holding the phone. The policeman yelled at her, calling her a whore, and that one day they would capture her and rape her. This forceful blow to Mahfouda's head left her with chronic headaches.

Planting Spies in her Close Circle

Mahfouda's daughter is currently studying contract management and human resources and will soon graduate. When her daughter went to ask for her student scholarship, a relatively small amount of money the state gave to university students, the daughter was met with the response, "Go back to your mother and to Polisario to pay your studies".

Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed