



©Sidahmed Muftha

## MINA BAALI

When Mina was a child, she really wanted a bicycle and would not stop asking for one. Her mother would have the same answer every time young Mina asked, “You'll get it when the revolutionaries are back.” Mina felt as if whatever she wanted or dreamt about was contingent on the return of the revolutionaries.

The entire family on Mina's mother's side fled to the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria when Morocco occupied Western Sahara.

Mina's mother could not handle the occupation restrictions in the city, and moved permanently to a tent in badia, the countryside, leaving Mina's older siblings to raise her in the city.

Mina's sister was politically active and closely connected to the Moroccan student movement. When she gained access to political books forbidden by the Moroccan government, Mina would steal them to study.

As a child, Mina was a troublemaker and was spoiled by her older siblings. At home, she would do as she pleased, and outside, she would regularly get into fights, especially with the boys in her company. Instead of conforming to society's expectations and wearing the traditional melfha, Mina would wear pants, play football, and practice karate. She rejected the view of women as weak or soft. Mina was - and remains, stubborn. She has little tolerance for injustice, and her headstrong and principled nature from childhood has shaped her activism propelling her forward even through episodes of forced disappearance, secret detention and house arrest.

### Education in Secondary School

Secondary school was crucial in shaping her political views. The influence of the forbidden books she borrowed from her sister came to the surface during these years.. She developed an understanding of concepts such as fighting, defense for the homeland, and torture. Consequently, she developed a hostile attitude towards Moroccan settlers and would regularly get into fights with them.

In her fourth and final year of secondary school, Mina faced a turning point when her sister received a threat from the occupation administration. Consequently, her sister decided to leave for the refugee camps, bringing her younger sister along. In 1989, they organized their journey, traveling first to Tan Tan in Morocco before continuing to Casablanca, and finally to Zagora, on the border to Algeria. For the Moroccan government, anyone traveling towards the eastern border of Morocco towards Algeria was perceived to be heading to Polisario, so that journey was a dangerous one. Mina's sister told her that in case they get caught, their story should be that they are here to look for sheep. At the time, Mina was only 16 years old.

Zagora is a city divided by Morocco's longest river. Despite the freezing temperatures and a shortage of clothes and food, the girls opted to walk at night to avoid detection, following the path along the river to not get lost. At one point during the journey, Mina's sister fell into the mud and began sinking. Reacting swiftly, Mina jumped in to assist her, and with the aid of three men accompanying them, they managed to continue, now soaked and shivering in the cold.

Continuing along the river, they searched for a safe crossing point. The region consisted of flat desert terrain, with no shelter in sight to hide from the authorities. After a week's travel from El Aaiún, walking through the cold, they managed to cross. However, when they were less than a kilometer from the Algerian border, they ran into the armed Moroccan soldiers.

One of the men took off running and managed to escape the bullets, crossing the border to safety. Unfortunately, Mina, her sister, and the two remaining men were not as fortunate and were apprehended by the Moroccans.

They were brought back to Zagora, where they were interrogated all through the night and subjected to both verbal and physical abuse. The sisters stuck to their cover story, denying any intent to cross the border.

The sisters were returned to the police station in Ouarzazate before being transported to their hometown, El Aaiún. After three months of detention and nightly interrogations, the mayor of El Aaiún issued an order for their deportation to the city of Tan Tan. There, they would be placed under house arrest far from home.

## **Forced Deportation and Imposed House Arrest**

For 16-year-old Mina, the first months were challenging, and she sank into depression. Separated from her family, city, and comrades, she felt isolated and would avoid visitors. The house arrest, she expressed, in many ways it felt worse than prison. She has never imagined being forced to live in another place other than her city. She was under constant surveillance.

## **Returning to High School in El Aaiún and the Forced Kidnapping**

After her time under house arrest, Mina was able to return to high school. She started wearing a headband with the Saharawi flag. A friend invited her to join a secret "cell" with other politically active high school students. The girls were put in charge of collecting money, whereas the boys were active out in the streets.

Mina soon joined the latter and was the only girl in the group who tagged flags on walls around the city.

The young activists autonomously organised themselves and coordinated protests. When the Egyptian politician Boutros Boutros-Ghali became the UN Secretary-General, the young activists were optimistic. Being an Arab, they thought he would certainly be sympathetic to the Saharawi's cause, so they decided it was time to take to the streets with Saharawi flags. Before the protest, Mina showed her mum the huge flag they had painted in her mother's honour. She then said goodbye to her mum, uncertain whether she would ever see her again.

Mina and her group distributed the flags and banners with slogans among themselves and ventured out at 4 am in the morning, intending to spend an hour in the streets. The plan didn't go as smoothly as they had planned.

One of the main organizers failed to show up, and Mina and her comrades knew he had been arrested. They kept this from the rest of the group to avoid spreading fear. In the end, Mina returned safely but was covered in black spray paint.

Knowing well that the paint could implicate her if the security forces showed up. To prevent this, she desperately attempted to remove it, using everything from water and soap to oil and, finally, gasoline. The gasoline finally got rid of the paint on her face, but reflecting on it today, she feels lucky not to have been blinded or otherwise permanently injured by the gasoline.

## The Day After the Protest

The day after the protest, Mina slept in, exhausted. She was woken up by one of her friends who informed her that the police had arrested many of their friends. She was told she should hide and join her in fleeing to the refugee camps, but Mina chose to stay behind. Later, she learned that her friend had successfully made it to the camps.

Mina continued her day by going to the *hamam* (what is often referred to as 'Turkish bath'), after hiding all the flags and banners in her house. Anything that could serve as evidence against her was hidden away. Before leaving the house, she put on as many layers as she could, to protect herself in case of an attack by Moroccan security forces. She got through that day safely.

The following morning, at around 4 am, the forces arrived to her house, knocking violently on the door, and forcibly taking Mina with them. Mina's neighbour witnessed what happened and was certain that it would be the last time he would ever see Mina.

## In the Police Car

When Mina entered the the car, she saw her comrades. The security forces immediately blindfolded, handcuffed, and kicked her under the seats. Throughout the journey, they continued kicking her, assaulting her back while hurling derogatory names at her, such as "whore." These young activists had no idea where they were taking them.

## Forced Kidnapping for the Three and a Half Months

The abuse did not stop when the car parked. Rather, it intensified with kicks, yelling, and batons. One of the guards removed her foulard, grabbed Mina by her long hair, and began slamming her head into the wall. Handcuffed and defenseless, she had no means to shield her face from the injuries.

The political prisoners were blindfolded, unable to discern whether it was day or night. For six days, they were kept without food or water, subjected to endless interrogations and torture. At one point, a fellow prisoner, desperate for water, asked a guard. In response, the guard callously instructed the prisoner to open his mouth, proceeding to urinate into it. After that, no one dared ask for water again.

The six days without sustenance severely impacted their health, leading to frequent unconsciousness, hallucinations, and some prisoners engaging in conversations with imagined loved ones, as if they were in the safety of their homes.

There were 35 political prisoners, with Mina being the only female. On the sixth day, Mina's last memory was of her face being covered in blood after a guard struck her severely on the head. Mina also started to hallucinate, envisioning an escape to a safer space. She was physically in prison, while mentally she was sitting with her sister who was cooking delicious roasted chicken.

After six days, the guards finally brought them tea, sugar, and bread. From that night on, they were all interrogated independently. One night, as they were interrogating Mina, they brought dogs. Mina was blindfolded, and believes there might have been four of them. She was warned that the dogs would be commanded to attack unless she cooperated and spoke..

Sometimes, Mina would be slapped. Other times, they would pour freezing water on her. Other times, they would threaten her with rape. In their conversations in her presence, they openly discussed stripping her naked, with one suggesting, "Let's remove her clothes and if we rape her, she would for sure speak out." Another would approach her and start to touch her, attempting to undress her.. Mina answered that she expects nothing from them, and that rape, and the slaps are the same for her. Having read about prisons from a young age, Mina was aware that such horrors could be part of her fate as well.

Mina's daily life and her comrades' was torture during the day, and interrogation during the night. They kept hitting her with batons on the back and plucking her hair strand by strand. One of Mina's friends had his arm paralyzed due to the torture.

The guards subjected Mina also to sexual harassment while she was blindfolded, handcuffed, and unable to protect herself. They would push her against the wall, kiss her, and touch her private parts like her breasts. Mina didn't scream, but instead painfully kept it to herself. She was afraid that if her comrades heard it they would react to defend her, which would amplify their torture or cause their demise. The guards would fold plastic between the fingers of her hands, and threaten her they would burn the plastic with matches if she didn't speak

## The Day of the Release

One day, two agents approached Mina and told her she would be released. She was ordered to wash her face and hair, and trim her nails. She was given soap to wash her hair, which had matted together. She was given breakfast, and they inquired about any visible signs of torture on her body.

She was taken into a police van, still blindfolded, as they didn't want her to see where she had been imprisoned. It wasn't until the vehicle reached the city that they removed the blindfold. Mina saw that in the car were some Saharawi students who had visible traces of torture on their bodies.

At the police station, she was labeled as an inmate. Mina corrected them, asserting that she was a political prisoner. Once again, Mina was forced to leave the city and subjected to house arrest in another city.

However, they didn't bother driving her to the city where she is forced to stay in. They took her outside the city, stopped a random truck on the road, and ordered the truck driver to take Mina to Tan Tan. The police didn't notify her family that she was released or, more importantly, that she was alive, as she had been kept in secret detention, and no one knew anything about her. For every prisoner being released and returning home, Mina's family got increasingly worried. Now, they were convinced that she was killed.

As Mina was leaving for Tan Tan, she was starving and barefoot. Her pants were now far too big for her, having lost so much weight in prison, so she used a piece of cloth as a belt to keep the pants up. The guys in the truck didn't say a word to her, nor did they have any food.

Mina was starving, and when the truck stopped, her first thought would be to look around for Saharawis, who could bring a message to her family. Most people didn't look her in the eyes because she looked like a homeless or a mentally unstable person. A car stopped near her, and Mina looked inside to see if there was someone that she knew who could pass on a message to her family. One young Saharawi who saw her condition began crying, and he offered her food.

## In Tan Tan Again: The House Arrest

Mina was instructed to go directly to the city mayor upon arrival in Tan Tan. She didn't do that. Instead, she went to visit her sister. The authorities communicated to her that she had to study or work in Tan Tan and that she was not allowed to return to the city of El Aaiún without prior official permission. The house arrest in Tan Tan meant that Mina was obstructed from finishing her studies in El Aaiún.

In the initial days, Mina spent her time crying and wrote verses about her longing for home and family at night. She was now under constant surveillance, and her movements were closely monitored.

## Back to the House Arrest

Mina had declined the mayor's offer, explaining that she would rather be back in secret detention than be forced to stay under house arrest far from home in Tan Tan.

In the end, she was forced to adapt to the routines of a life in house arrest. She started to take over house chores like cleaning and going to the market. After nine months, which Mina neither chose nor enjoyed,, she was granted permission to return to El Aaiún to see her family.

As she returned, it felt like the whole city came by to welcome her back and show her support. People showed up as she had just been released from prison. So many came that for the one week she got, there was no time left to visit her mum in the countryside. Mina only had one week.

When the week was over, the police came to her house and took her back to her exile.

## Her Attempt to Escape to Visit her Family

In December of 1992, Mina violated the order to not enter El Aaiún without permission, by going back a second time. She escaped to see her mum in Badia, and her friends and family in the city.

While there, she fell ill and was taken to the doctor, who prescribed medications. As her sister went out to get the medications, Moroccan security agents came to her house, and brought her back to Tan Tan while she was still sick, without leaving a message to the sister.



## Going Back to School:2012-2013

Spending much of her early adulthood in and out of prison and house arrest, Mina was close to forty before she could return to school.

At 39 she had regained enough freedom to re-enter high school, determined to complete her education. Nothing could deter Mina's determination to finish her education despite her responsibilities as a mother and activist.

Mina had to study for her exams while she receiving foreigners in her house who wanted to learn about the occupied territories and while she sewing flags for demonstration. Without a job, and with her husband's salary covering both their children's and his siblings' needs, Mina managed this feat thanks to her determination, hard work, and the support of other activists, both morally and financially.

## The University: Studying Law

After high school, Mina enrolled in Law School and wrote her final dissertation on humanitarian and international law. While her classmates' dissertations were all made available in the university library, Minas' thesis was kept censored.

Mina's accomplishments were a significant personal victory, of course. But maybe just as importantly, it posed a challenge to Morocco's occupation and served as inspiration for other activists.

Alongside three other activists, Mina collected testimonies from over eighty women in the occupied territories, compiling what is likely the largest, most detailed contribution to uncovering human rights violations in Western Sahara's history.

## The Mental Health Consequences

In the earlier years, Mina had no problem speaking about or witnessing violence. Today, she can't tolerate even listening to anything related to violence. Her reaction would be breaking into tears and crying nonstop. Mina has never received any mental health follow-up from professionals. However, she encouraged and ensured her children sought professionals after her two older children moved to Europe.

Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed