



[13]25 – In the Beginning was the Word WOMEN OF THE SAHARAWI PEOPLE

Daniel Lagartofernández

www.lagartofernandez.info

English translation: Anabel Torres - arboldepapel@yahoo.com

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“Sahrauia”

For Zahra Hasnaui
(Dedicated to Saharawi women)

I felt thirsty and your fingers
Sprinkled dew.

I was hungry
For bread, for peace,
And your songs filled me.

With a blanket of stars
You covered the cold night,
Brought the moon and the sea breeze closer.

Spirit,
Joy, hope,
How to compensate you, tell me,
How to surpass the magic.

The Catalanian Coordinator of Town Halls in Solidarity with the Saharawi People (CCASPS) and the Catalanian Cooperation for Development Fund (FCCD) are pleased to present the exhibition **[13]25 In the beginning was the Word. Women of the Saharawi People**, entrusted to photographer Daniel Lagartofernández, an author endorsed by Luisa Morgatini for his previous work among women in Palestine and Colombia.

In this sense, both CCASPS and the FCCD believe that this exhibition makes the value, strength, integrity and resistance of the Saharawi Community visible, which is embodied by the 13 women photographed here. Their life histories and experiences have enormous value. These women have entrusted us with their testimonies, for which they have our special gratitude, while at the same time they can count on our wholehearted sympathy.

We share the conviction that women have a fundamental role to play when it comes to building peace processes in general and, in this particular instance, Saharawi women are crucial for the construction and achievement of a real and lasting peace in Western Sahara.

With our best wishes for peace to become reality, we hope that this exhibition is of interest to you and that it becomes, for the institutions in Catalonia dedicated to promoting peace and respect for human rights of the Saharawi people, a good contribution and a way to rally support towards attaining a fair peace process in the Western Sahara region.

Ms. Meritxell Budó i Pla
Mayor of la Garriga
President of the FCCD

Ms. Neus Lloveras
Mayor of Vilanova i la Geltrú
President of the CCASPS

Barcelona, November 2013

Mabrouk, Daughters of the Clouds,
You who have never considered yourselves victims but survivors

This Project is inspired by UNCR Resolution 1325, ratified by the UN Security Council in 2000. R1325 urges States and Governments to adopt measures supporting women's peace initiatives, and that guarantee respect for the human rights of women and girls. Likewise, this resolution urges States and Governments to take into account the special needs of women and girls when processes of peace reconstruction, reintegration and post-conflict resolution are in motion.

I developed this same Project first with women from Palestine and Israel, and then with women from Colombia. Now I wish to make visible, value and pay homage to the crucial role Saharawi women have fulfilled in their society, and which they have continued to fulfil, before, during the war, and currently, during this 'time of peace', as it is euphemistically called.

In contrast to the rest of Arab societies, Saharawi people display extraordinary levels of gender equality. It is no coincidence that, after fighting side-by-side with men to attain sovereignty and get their land back after Spanish Colonization, and the invasions by Morocco and Mauritania, women were chosen to set up the refugee camps in Algeria.

The Saharawi population had been forced into exile and the men had had to stay behind in the trenches they dug across the desert. Women carried their mission out in an exemplary manner, while feeding their children and withstanding many hardships. Today women are also at the forefront during the peaceful and massive demonstrations held in the Occupied Territories. Women from Saharawi have been tortured or imprisoned together with their male countrymen, for undertaking nonviolent resistance against Moroccan occupation. And it is the women who most insist that the Saharawi people have nothing against the Moroccan population and that their struggle is directed against the policies implemented by the King of Morocco and his government.

Thirteen Saharawi women take the lead here, bearing witness to an injustice that has already lasted too long, and which continues to bypass the sovereignty of the Saharawi people. These thirteen women remind us that international legality supports their cause and the sovereignty of the Sahrawian State, warning the international community that if it does not pressure the Member States in the UN Security Council, blocking the Referendum so that they finally allow it – i.e. the United States and France – the Saharawi people may find it inevitable to take up arms again, though this is not an option they desire. Forty years is already too many years: even these women, who have withstood everything, begin to feel that they are exhausting their limits, and that they cannot endlessly continue to bear the effects of the hypocrisy and the humiliations that their people continue to confront. And this is certainly not hard to understand.



I a g a r t o f e r n á n d e z

Refugee Camp at Rabuni.
Tinduf, Algeria, 8th of October 2013

We Saharawi women resemble the Phoenix bird: always emerging from its ashes. We have not taken a step back the past 38 years, unyielding before the harsh Algerian desert and before Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara. We have always held our ground between two open struggles: the national liberation of all Saharawi, and the right and freedom of women to be leading actors in their own histories. No other Arab culture is as permissive, tolerant and gender-equal. In the private sphere, it is us women who raise our children in the value of nonviolence, and who fight to keep hope alive: we want our children to grow up thinking that they can have a better future, and in spite of all the hardships we have suffered, we do not want our children to inherit a legacy of resentment towards the occupation.

However, it is incredibly difficult today to hold on to our pacifist struggle, or for our young people to trust international institutions. They say: "We have done everything possible to carry out a model of nonviolent resistance; to make the international community take us into account". All the same, Morocco continues to strike against us in the Occupied Territories of Western Sahara, under complete impunity. What they want is to goad us into striking back with violence and thus have more reasons to justify their brutal system of repression, especially against women, who have been the mainstay of peaceful resistance on both sides of the Wall of Shame.

Is so much sacrifice really worth it? What is the point of MINURSO, the United Nations Mission stationed in the Occupied Territories? It happens to be the only United Nations mission in the world which does not have monitoring the respect for human rights in its mandate: it is simply a passive actor and this only perpetuates the occupation.

The Saharawi victims have nothing else to place on the table, and the Saharawi conflict is at a turning point right now. We wish to transmit the message that it is urgent to find a political solution to this conflict. The Spanish State, and Europe as a whole, cannot allow themselves to perpetuate a violent conflict taking place south of its borders, particularly Spain, which is morally and politically responsible for the suffering of the Saharawi people.

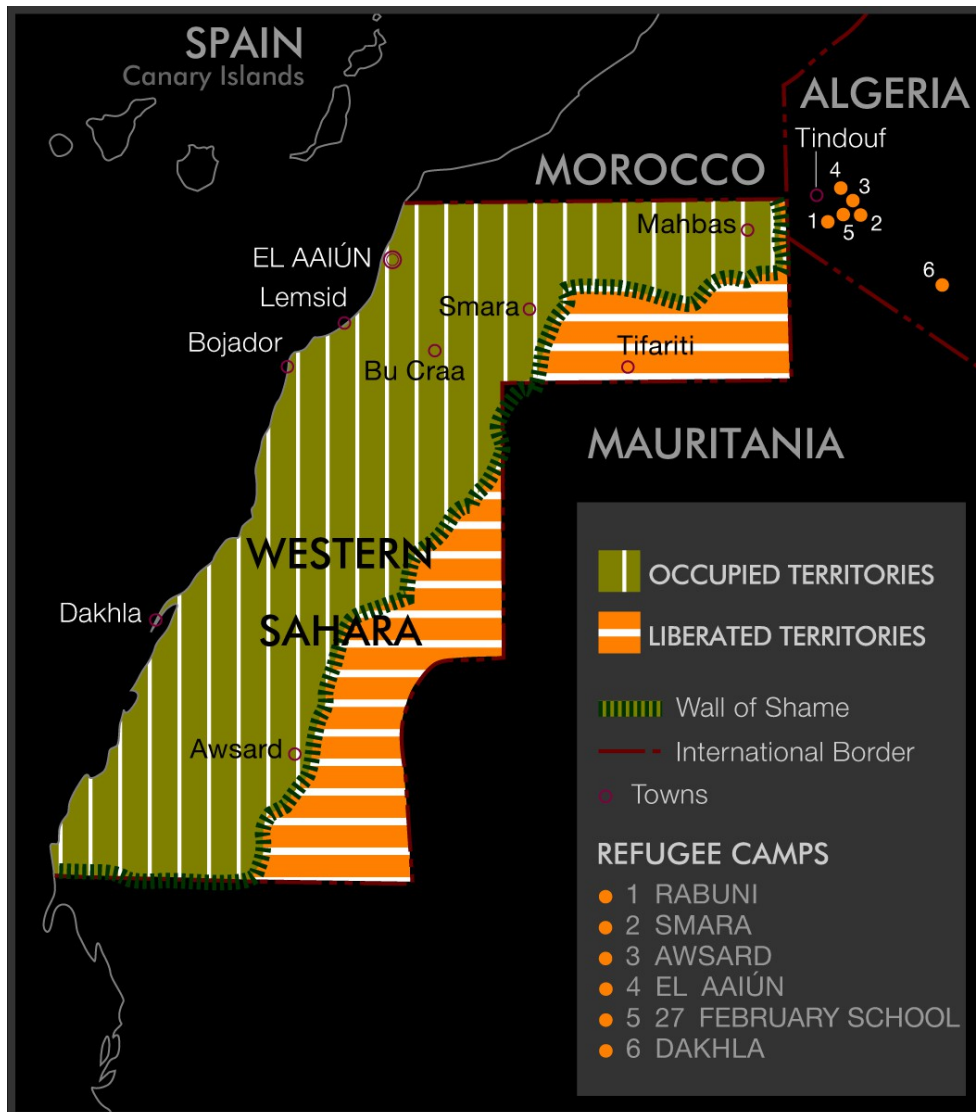
Morocco's allies have been trying to legitimate what is downright illegal. If we decide to take up arms again, Morocco won't be responsible. The culprits will be France and the United States, on the one hand, and on the other hand the European Union. We cannot stress this enough.



Talk with Jadiyahet El-Mohtar, representative of the National Union of Saharawi Women (Unión Nacional de Mujeres Saharauias UNMS) in Spain. Alcalá de Henares. August 2013.

HISTORICAL LANDMARKS

1884	Spain colonises Western Sahara.
1965	The United Nations urges for the decolonisation of Western Sahara.
1973	The Polisario Front is created: this National Saharawi Liberation Movement takes up arms.
1975	October 16 – The International Court of Justice rules in favour of self-determination for the Saharawi people. Morocco and Mauritania reject this claim of sovereignty. November 6 – Moroccan King Hassan promotes the "Green March" ("Black March" for the Saharawi); 350.000 Moroccans enter the Western Sahara and the invasion begins.
1975-91	A guerrilla war between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan army breaks out. The Saharawi manage to expel the Mauritanian Army as the latter attempts to invade the Sahara from the South.
1976	February 27 - Spain withdraws. RASD, the Saharawi State is self-proclaimed in exile. Moroccan planes bombard Saharawi civilians fleeing the conflict, attacking them with napalm and cluster bombs. Tens of thousands of Saharawi civilians take refuge in the City of Tindouf, located in the South Western desert of Algeria, where they continue to crowd the camps with their offspring up to the present.
1981-87	Morocco builds a wall longer than 1500 miles to separate the Occupied Territories from the Liberated Sahara. It is the longest defensive structure in the world. Over 5.000.000 mines and 100.000 soldiers align what the Saharawi people call the Wall of Shame.
1991	The United Nations sponsors the signing of a 'ceasefire'- MINURSO enters the Western Sahara to organise a self-determination Referendum at the beginning of 1992.
1992	The Referendum does not take place due to Moroccan opposition.
1999, 2001, 2005 y 2010 up to the present	Several peaceful uprisings take place in the Occupied Western Sahara denouncing the absence of human and economic rights for the Saharawi and the standstill in the Referendum process. October 2010 The Gdeim Izik Camp of Dignity, on the outskirts of El Aaiún, is created: this is considered a prelude of the Arab Springs. Moroccan security forces violently eject the population, causing mortal victims.
The present	The Saharawi people continue their wait in order to be able to vote and decide over their own future. Many voices call out to take up arms again: many people feel betrayed by the United Nations, Spain, the United States, France and the rest of the European Union.





AMINATOU HAIDAR

President of the Saharawi Human Rights Defenders Collective CODESA

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES – WESTERN SAHARA

I am one of the many victims of the Moroccan occupation and repression, and of forced disappearance. Between 1987 to 1991, I was held captive in a secret detention centre. I was freed because of the peace agreement and ceasefire. Since that time I have had a solid commitment with the more than 500 Saharawi who have been disappeared to this day. Without access to the Internet or an international phone line, and while suffering threats and imprisonment, a group of activists managed to break the political and informative blockade. Thanks to the enormous sacrifice of many people, we were able to overcome fear when the 2005 Saharawi Intifada erupted.

Buoyed by the support and recognition of some international institutions, ever since I became committed to our cause I have travelled to explain the alarming situation we endure. I have won several awards, which I view as prizes to the nonviolent civil resistance of all the Saharawi society.

I went on a hunger strike at Lanzarote Airport in 2009. I wanted to show that international legality, individual and collective rights of people and their dignity must prevail over economic and political interests. It was a victory for my people: during those days, international media attention focused on the Saharawi cause. This victory served to empower us, and in less than a year we had managed to set up the Gdeim Izik Dignity Camp.

Our youngsters ask us for weapons in order to attract the attention of the international community. It worries me that we won't be able to continue having the means to educate them in the principles of nonviolence, solidarity and equality. I don't want the same thing that is happening to the people of Libya or Egypt to happen to my people.

Behind me stands the secret detention centre of the Rapid Intervention Brigade (RIB), where we were held captive at the beginning of 1987. I want the memory of this shame to endure. I have chosen to use sun glasses: they forced us to stay blindfolded during the four years I spent in captivity. No, I won't use the black blindfold we were forced to wear now. I don't want to provoke the police members who are constantly watching us, and I don't want you to get kicked out and be sent back to your own country because of this.

DISAPPEARANCE



EL GHALIA DJIMI

**Vice-President of the Saharawi Association of Victims of Serious Violations of Human Rights Committed by the State of Morocco ASVDH
Member of the Committee of Families of the Saharawi Disappeared**

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES – WESTERN SAHARA

After being held captive in a secret detention centre between 1987 and 1991, and as a woman who believes in Saharan independence, I decided to continue my struggle in the open, and peacefully, in spite of the suffering that I have experienced in my own flesh and in my heart; in spite of the fact that my mother was disappeared in 1984.

When someone asks about my experiences in jail, I remind them of the photographs taken at Abou Ghraib Prison in Iraq that were made public. I have bite marks from the dogs of the Moroccans on my arm, and I lost my hair due to the chemical products they used when they tortured us. Thanks to our belief in God and in the legitimacy of our cause, we have not lost our courage and we forge on ahead without fear. One day our struggle and our peaceful resistance will be an example for the whole world, an example of living together, of love for peace and love for life. *Inch'allah*.

I have picked the word Tolerance. For me it means the same as endless peace. In spite of all the suffering I have witnessed and endured, I feel an inner tolerance, even towards my torturers. I have told them to their faces that they should have the guts to acknowledge the crimes they have perpetrated; that they should have the guts to ask for forgiveness. I don't seek revenge and I don't feel any rage at all. What helps me is the positive energy that springs from tolerance.

I have chosen to be photographed in these dunes close to El Aaiun. In May 2006, we found the skeleton of a Saharawi buried here, with his clothes, his *darraa* and his pleated trousers, a black blanket covering him like the ones we used to have at the secret prisons. We are sure that this must be a common burial site, and that my mother must also be buried here, under the sand. And we demand that the Moroccan Kingdom carries out an official investigation, so that there can be justice at last and we can claim the right to bury the remains of our loved ones and honour their souls in accordance with our religion; and for there to be peace.

TOLERANCE



DAGJA LACHGAR

Member of the Saharawi Association of Human Rights ASDH

Member of the Committee to Support the Self Determination of the Western Sahara People
CODAPSO

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES – WESTERN SAHARA

I wanted to be free ever since I was little. I hold on to the memories of images taken at the 1970 demonstration, during which Bassiri was disappeared and several Sahrawians were assassinated by the Spanish Legion. I couldn't completely understand what was happening at the time, but I never forgot it. From then on my fighting spirit lives inside me and it will live forever.

I have been in five prisons in my life, due to my activism, both in Western Sahara and in Morocco. I've been in prison eleven and a half years. I've been disappeared without being sentenced in the secret prisons that the State of Morocco continues to deny having.

I am a member of the so-called Group of Seven. We are activists who defied the Moroccan Government and visited the refugee camps in October 2010. The Occupied Territories in Western Sahara suffered a political and information blockade, and we were not allowed to have any contact with our own people at the camps. We wanted to break that blockade, even though we knew that when we returned we would be sentenced and jailed. We wanted to reinforce the notion of unity. When we got back we were arrested, accused of high treason by Morocco, judged by a Military Tribunal and condemned to the Salé Prison, in Rabat. I was tortured physically and emotionally during the four months I was held there, with a kind of abuse I had never known before.

Our sacrifices have made it possible for our people in the Occupied Territories to be allowed to visit their families in the camps. We always rebel against Morocco's repressive laws and mandates. We have nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of with our resistance. And it is the fruit of our courage and valour that the authorities finally gave in, allowing visits to the camps. I have travelled to the camps two more times after that first visit.

The State of Morocco has forbidden us to have *haimas* in the Street after Gdeim Izik. For us the *haima* is a traditional and cultural symbol. It is not like a normal house, it has a lot of doors and it is always open. The whole family and their friends gather under it: it is the refuge of the Saharawi people. Defying the Moroccan ban, this *haima* has been erected on the ceiling of the home of activist Hassanna Duihi. And that is how we call it, the *Haima of Defiance*.

DEFIANCE



MARIAM BORHIMI
Member of the Saharawi Media Team

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES – WESTERN SAHARA

The Saharawi Media Team was the first organised group to break the news blockade instigated by the Colonial occupation forces. Our teams are simple: we use mobile telephones and small video cameras. We are also forced to work in a “mine field”, as our physical integrity and our freedom are compromised day-to-day. But we keep on fighting, carrying out our audio-visual coverage of all the cities in the Occupied Territories: we document human rights violations, abuses committed during demonstrations, the declarations of Saharawi activists, the international activity of our leaders and the cases filed against detentions, unfair trials and forced disappearances. We make good use of the social networks, constantly updating our page on FaceBook: *Media Team*.

I was the first woman to join the group but other women have followed. My main function is to be at the forefront during El Aaiún demonstrations, confronting Morocco’s security forces. That’s where my heart lies, though naturally my camera is another valuable tool I hold unto during my struggle.

I would have preferred to have this photograph taken on the street, in my territory, but both of us would be risking repression. This is why we came to the seashore. I have a special emotional link to the sea: it’s something that can’t be enclosed or dominated. It’s open. For me it symbolizes the Saharawi shout: Freedom. Being Saharawi, the sea forms part of our lives and our geography. And our fishing resources have been pillaged for too long... it hurts me to know that many children who live in the camps dream of being able to face an ocean that they have never been allowed to see; to play in the golden sands found on the coasts of the Occupied Territories.

From here we ask for international accompaniment, so that our nonviolent resistance becomes known throughout the world. We invite people from all over the planet to visit us and bear witness to the State violence we have to bear every day, making it increasingly harder not to respond with violence. We are in our own land and yet we suffer segregation and a lack of educational and labour rights, just for being Saharawi. It is very complicated to resist the temptation to take up arms once more.

FREEDOM



SALMA LIMAM
Member of the Saharawi Media and Communication Centre
Member of the Gdeim Izik Committee

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES – WESTERN SAHARA

I am a fighter, like all Saharawi women. My place is on the street, next to my people in their protests and demonstrations.

I took part in the Gdeim Izik Camp, the Camp of Dignity; just one more Saharawi. We were the first to settle there. First there were 40 *haimas*, then 100, 200...until we had over 7.500. We lived in peace and harmony there, over 25.000 of us.

The first thing we did was to set up safety, cleaning and feeding commissions. We proved to ourselves that we knew how to organize ourselves and how to carry out a massive peaceful demonstration. This raised the alarm among Moroccans and they kicked us out using violence.

That day, the 8th of November 2010, they threw tear gases at the crowds and my grandmother was hugely affected, like many other old people there. She died hours later. To this day we are still mourning her. Nobody could suspect that the occupation authorities would force their way into the camp like that and wreck it. We could not defend ourselves against this brutal deed. The only thing we had that we could use against them was rocks. They had gases, pressure hoses, sticks, plastic balls, guns, a helicopter...

After that siege, we went back to the city and we demonstrated. Most of us were women. The Army would make fun of us: "Where are your men, where are the Saharawi men?" We would reply: "Our men are in your jails!" They felt obliged to release most of the detainees, but 22 of those arrested that day are still in prison, nine of them condemned to life sentences.

Everything that has happened to us has made us stronger and more courageous to raise awareness among people about our occupation; to continue with our resistance. I hope the international community will see how Saharawi civilians gave an example of liberation with the Gdeim Izik camp, which was the first popular uprising of the Arab Spring.

I've wanted to return to the site where the camp flourished. Behind me we see where the management and the infirmary were located. In order to come here, we had to dodge the police road controls, driving through the desert. We are still forbidden to come here. The occupation forces have been watching the place up to only three weeks ago.

RESISTANCE



SULTANA JAYA

Sub-Director of the Forum for the Future of Saharawi Women

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES – WESTERN SAHARA

I grew up witnessing that we could not declare in public that we were Saharawi. Up to the Saharawi Intifada of 2005, I had never seen a Saharawi flag, the one I'm wearing on my head right now for the photograph. For me, Intifada means Independence and that's what we called it: it heralded the day all Saharawi had the courage to go out in the streets and claim our rights. And it was Saharawi women who presided over the Intifada. It is women who attend every demonstration; the ones who defy the occupation forces and represent our Independence.

Many things have changed since 2005. Now we can express in public, on the streets, our demand for self-determination, and our voices are also heard abroad. We have broken the blockade; we have emerged into the world.

Due to the continuous police violence during the student protests in Marrakesh I lost an eye in 1970. For me this is only a small example of everything Saharawi women have had to endure in the Occupied Territories: the quiet suffering of the mothers of martyrs, women who become heads of household while their husbands are in prison, so many women jailed, raped, beaten ...

I feel strong, surrounded by the solidarity of my people. I am missing an eye, but there are many eyes around me. Our homeland warrants a lot from all of us, men and women alike: I have chosen the word Patience because patience is what we need in order to get what we are fighting for.

Moroccan colonialism seeks to destroy the Saharawi culture. This is why I want my picture taken sitting in the *amshakab*, a piece of furniture to be found inside all our *haimas*. It is used as a wardrobe, to store clothing and household items, and it is also a symbol of our culture. We may be forced to live in modern houses, but our roots we don't forget.

PATIENCE



MARIEM HASSAN

Singer

THE DIASPORA – CATALONIA

I am a singer and a refugee, living in Catalonia since the end of 2002. All my children were born while I was clutching a microphone in my hand: I sang while I was pregnant, and when my children were just babies I took them to France, Spain and also Liberated Sahara, cheering the fighters on.

I started singing traditional wedding and baptism songs at 14. At the end of 1974, I started learning revolutionary songs, songs against Spanish domination and in support of the Polisario Front and Saharawi identity. I joined the *Luali* in 1978 and from then on I've been all over the world, raising awareness through my music, singing about the plight of our people and our legitimate demands.

My voice comes from Allah and it belongs to my people. It's in their cars, houses, mobile phones and shops. My songs speak of the tortured and those in prison, of resistance on the street and in universities. They speak of orphan children and widowed women. They tell about Maata-la, the most combative neighbourhood in Occupied El Aaiún, they sing the Camp of Gdeim Izik...I ask God for health to compose a song dedicated to the people illegally condemned to life sentences.

I choose the word *Melfa*. A *melfa* is the traditional dress of Saharawi women and it is a symbol of our own culture. And for me, no other clothing is more elegant. Before, I used to live in fear and this is why I usually wore trousers, a long shirt and a scarf. In 2009 I was assaulted in Madrid while I was there, recording "Shouka"; they were Moroccan youngsters on their government's payroll. That night I was wearing a *melfa*. This attack made me feel more proud of my lineage and I haven't stopped wearing a *melfa* since: fear would weaken so many years of struggle.

I don't want to be photographed in a pretty place, because I suffer like this, living in the *diaspora*, fighting against Morocco and now also battling cancer. I want my picture taken behind my house, where the industrial area of Sabadell lies, to help denounce the fish and phosphate factories that Morocco owns in this country, where they continue to illegally exploit our natural resources.

MELFA



NADHIRA MOHAMED
Saharawi Activist in the Diaspora
Leading Actor in the Film *Wilaya*

THE DIASPORA – MADRID

I am the daughter of a fighter, Luchaa Mohamed Lamin. I was born in the camps but I came to live in Spain when I was 12 years old. It is the duty and responsibility of any Saharawi, whether outside the camps or in the Occupied Territories, to be an Ambassador of our cause. We owe it to those who have died for our cause. And to those who are not yet born.

Those of us who are daughters in exile have adapted well to our lives in Spain. We are educated women and we are also fighters. Perhaps many of us do not wear a *melfa* but that doesn't mean we have stopped feeling we are Saharawi.

Our women continue to raise their children in a culture of peace, when what really comes natural, from deep in our souls, is to defend ourselves. Saharawi women have built the camps, worked as teachers, doctors, mothers, aunts... their husbands don't do anything without the women's consent, out of respect for the mothers of their children. In the Sahara, if a man hits his wife this is a reason for shame and rejection. And here, they are supposed to be so advanced and still there is gender violence?

How much longer will our peaceful resistance last, you ask? I don't know. We keep obeying the Polisario Front when it asks us to trust that the peaceful way will work. But when it brutally dismantled the Gdeim Izik Camp, Morocco violated the ceasefire. I am fed up with Western hypocrisy. The West asks us to avoid war, but it does nothing to apply the international resolutions that have already accepted we are right. Would people really be surprised if we wanted to take up our armed struggle again?

My father was one of the founders of the Polisario Front. He gave it all for our people and our cause. To see him now, dying of cancer in my arms, without having been able to return to his land, liberated... that gives me infinite pain.

I want to be photographed on the street – my sisters in the Occupied Territories can't do that without risking going to prison. I want my picture taken here at Lavapiés, in Madrid, which is my second home: it symbolizes multiculturalism, barter and solidarity. In this neighbourhood of mine Senegalese, Latin, Chinese, Moroccans and Saharawi all live together... and we can be friends.

PAIN



ABIDA MOHAMED ZAID

**Member of the Association of Imprisoned and Disappeared Saharawi AFAPREDESA
Social Researcher for the National Union of Saharawi Women UNMS
Co-Founder of NOVA**

REFUGEE CAMPS – TINDOUF, ALGERIA

I am a young Saharawi refugee woman, born in exile at the camps. I finished high school and then a university career in Biology in Algiers. When I came back, I realised I owed all my education to my people. And that my people needed me. I take part in initiatives and social projects related to human rights. With me, a group of other young people founded Nova last June.

All of us had received training in nonviolent strategies and we saw that we could change the notion that guns are a quick solution to our problems: here they think that the war accomplished more than these 20 years under the ceasefire. But we are talking about a war that would make a people rise against a State: the King of Morocco would not hesitate if the time came to sacrifice his own subjects in order to achieve his ends, and for us each human life is a treasure. Convincing Saharawi society that nonviolence can furnish tangible results to the cause is not easy. We need help. We are swimming against a very strong current, made stronger by our own people's scepticism and the violence or indifference emanating from abroad. We have to undertake distinct actions with people who can commit to carrying them out.

We have approached Moroccan activists who would risk their freedom if they were to openly declare that they are in contact with Saharawi. They tell us that Moroccan society is under the influence of their government's official propaganda. The Moroccan government assures people that we are terrorists and enemies of their people. I have a lot of faith in Moroccan civil society: it is the people who always give rise to revolution, people who can change a regime. And they are living out this process of struggle.

And my own struggle is for the Sovereignty of all our territories and for our future as a nation. As a woman, I vindicate that Saharawi women enjoy a kind of sovereignty over our own selves and our acts, like many women throughout the world cannot claim they do.

We live in the desert, a part of the world where it is hard to imagine that anyone or anything can survive. And the world is trying to bury the Saharawi cause under the sand, stopping its people from knowing what is really happening. But here we are: Survivors. It is our choice to forge on ahead.

SOVEREIGNTY



LJADRA MINT MABROC

The Poetess of the Rifle

REFUGEE CAMPS – TINDOUF, ALGERIA

I come from a family of Nomad shepherds. Ever since I was a little girl I started composing poetry.

I am a warrior. They call me the poetess of the Saharawi Army. We rebels took up arms without even knowing how to fire them, but we learned to make them work eventually. We had three adversaries: Spain and Mauritania and Morocco, with their French allies. We fought against all of them with courage: thus we became heroes. Our Army protected the people and I offer my poetry to the soldiers. I used to make poems about military operations, about our great fighters. I knew this would raise the morale of our soldiers. We would record the poems and broadcast them on the radio. People thought I was at every front, everywhere our soldiers were fighting for our homeland: war gave a sense of purpose and a mission to my poetry.

We Saharawi have always suffered from some form of colonization, of occupation. And we have always fought against our enemies. When the Moroccans stormed in, we had to flee. The trail was very tough: we had to walk all the way from El Aaiún until we reached the Liberated Territories. I took my five small children with me. From there the Polisario guerrilla fighters escorted us to Rabuni, in Tindouf, Algeria. On the way, we witnessed and mourned the disasters left behind by the bombings at Tifariti.

From Rabuni we came to this camp, which we also called El Aaiún, in January 1976, and here we are still. There was nothing here before. Nothing. After a lot of hard work, a great deal of cold, without firewood, without winter clothes; without doctors and without any means, we began to make bricks out of adobe, in groups, to take care of our sick children. Little by little, and with a lot of effort, we have built what we have here now.

And thus, sooner or later, we are bound to gain our Independence. The persistence of our struggle and our work will give us back our freedom. This is how all Saharawi people are: we the older ones know how not to give up fighting all the time, in order to get what we are looking for, and we want our children to also be like that.

Can you make the photo look as if I were in our occupied El Aaiún? No? Then let's go outside, so that your people can see what the El Aaiún Refugee Camp looks like. This is where I live, and then they will be able to see from where we will someday start out, going back home.

CONTINUITY



MAMA SIDI ABDELHADI

Ex-Secretary General of the National Union of Saharawi Women UNMS

REFUGEE CAMPS – TINDOUF, ALGERIA

I spent two years in prison under the Moroccan occupation. Before that, I had been part of the Polisario Front's resistance cells under Spanish domain. I escaped from the repression of the Occupied Territories and came to the camps. When I got here I continued to militate, this time in the education camp. I studied to become a teacher at the February 27 Women's School. After I graduated I stayed on teaching there, and I also taught at other schools. I was elected Secretary General of the National Saharawi Women's Union in 1996, a post I held up to 2002.

But I was elected just like any other woman might have been elected. I don't feel that I have done more for Saharawi women than the rest of my sisters. We are all refugees and we have all suffered the occupation: we are all equal. And all of us (all of us!) have done the impossible to keep on struggling and surviving: those who speak out and those who don't. Just to think about this moves me tremendously.

I don't believe in anything but peace. I hate the consequences of war. We women have paid a very high price for everything that happened during the war. And we did so in silence, a silence that has a lot of meaning. The first thing that comes to mind is that a Saharawi woman never talks about her own problems; the second is the silence surrounding the Saharawi cause; the third is the news blockade that continues to be effective in the Occupied Territories. Yet the time has to come when guns become still, silence is shattered and dialogue begins. It is the only solution.

I want you to take a picture of me in the patio where we used to assemble at the February 27 Women's School. Women received military training there first, and then they were trained to fulfil the needs of the different *wilayas* at the camps, whether as teachers, clerks, health workers... Many girls went abroad to study and then came back here to teach. This school symbolizes the strength and the importance of Saharawi women in the refugee camps.

I've chosen the word Dawn: after a cold, dark and long night, the sun comes out. Always.

DAWN



MARIAM ZEID

Deminer

LIBERATED TERRITORIES – WESTERN SAHARA

I happen to be in Timkerdad, Mijek, in the Liberated Territories, 640 km south of my home in the camps. I am very near the Wall of Shame. During the war, Morocco destroyed what was the longest defensive structure on the planet, a wall in the desert measuring over 1.500 miles, with the help of Israel and France. The wall divides our land into two regions from North to South: to the West lie the Occupied Territories, occupied by Morocco, and to the East lies the Liberated Sahara, freed by the Polisario Front. The wall is guarded currently by 100.000 Moroccan soldiers, who have gradually planted in excess of five million anti-personnel mines. Saharawi at both sides of the wall suffer the consequence of this deadly harvest. Our people are basically nomads and shepherds and our families are constantly falling victim to these mines.

I decontaminate the ground from these mortal traps. I am proving that women can do anything, even the things men used to think we could not do. This is the type of work that demands a lot of bravery and great physical effort, working under harsh climatic conditions and at great personal risk. These are challenges I face daily and this makes me immensely proud. I am sure that all Saharawi women also feel proud of the work I carry out.

I heard an announcement on the radio: they were looking for three women at a mine-dismantling programme. It seemed to me I wouldn't be by myself – another two girls would be with me – so I went to Rabuni and introduced myself. The people in charge explained that we would be very far from home and that we would have to bear extreme pressures, carrying out a very dangerous job. I realized that all these challenges made me feel more motivated.

We have never ever felt discriminated. We carry out the same tasks as our male colleagues. We are a team in every sense: we give each other mutual support. It is the best type of psychological help anyone could hope for.

Since you couldn't come all the way over here, we decided Abba Mustaf, who is a colleague of mine, would take my picture, and we've done the interview via Skype. The most important thing is for the story of this infamous wall to become known, and to tell people that there are some stubborn women here, who just won't give up. Persistence is what makes a good mine deactivator. It is also what makes a good Saharawi woman.

PERSISTENCE



RABA MOHAMED SAID EL HUSEIN
Ex-Secretary General of the Women's Organisation
Ex-Parliament Member

REFUGEE CAMPS – TINDOUF, ALGERIA

I have given my life for my people. I was a soldier and I trained women for combat. During the war I took part in military operations in the North of Sahara. After the war they enlisted me to go help set up the camps. At first we lived in holes dug in the ground: five women on our own and the military. Those were miserable times. In Tinduf they gave us a *haima* and there we had the first council in exile, and the first health post.

As Secretary General of the Women's Organisation, I was instructed to found a women's school, which would later be known as the February 27 Women's School. At first it was used for military training. Further down the line we began to train female students to fill positions in administration, education and sanitation at the camps. We were the ones who had to create the strategies; who had to run things. And we were also entreated to make the population grow, as the war was killing us off day after day. Throughout the entire struggle, I've given birth to eight children.

We have managed to create very stable government, education and health systems. This is what we were aiming for since the very beginning as a government in exile, in order to avoid the problems that might arise during the construction of the first freedom initiatives, something we had seen other refugees suffer.

Yesterday I had a discussion with three of my sons. They said: "If you are going to meet that photographer fellow and he doesn't offer you something that can help us get our Independence, you shouldn't even talk to him". They always repeat the same words: "If there is no solution, mom, tomorrow we will take up guns". I understand their desperation, these are clever, educated youngsters: people who are wasting their lives in the squalor of the camps, people who are tortured day after day in the Occupied Territories.

My mind speaks to me: sometimes it urges me to keep going, and at other times it says I am full of wrinkles and I haven't managed to get anything done. But this is normal, I guess, I don't want to depress anyone with my thoughts. It's just that I can't avoid feeling the injustice of everything that is happening to us. And the only thing that really affects this life is that we don't have total independence yet.

TOTAL INDEPENDENCE