



RESILIENCE IN RESISTANCE

The Struggle of Sahrawi
Women Under Moroccan
Occupation

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To Sahrawi women and to all women living under occupation



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01. Preface

From time to time, the videos of the women emerge online. They are dressed in long, flowing dresses, carrying flags and banners, protesting from rooftops or gathered on street corners. The eyewitness videos are short and, except for the occasional cry, silent, and the images are often grainy, filmed from a distance. Most of the times, this ends up happening: after a few seconds burly men in uniform or civilian clothing appear out of nowhere. They swarm, push and hit the women, snatch the flags, stomp on the banners. The women appear fearless, verbally challenging their aggressors and trying to protect themselves and each other from the blows. The men quickly drag the women by their hair or their dresses, sometimes into alleyways, out of frame. Then the video ends, leaving viewers to wonder: What just happened? Who are these women and what are they asking for? What happened to them away from the camera's lens? And what would we see and hear if the camera was able to continue filming, zoom in on their lives and get a clearer picture?

Please read on.

The women are part of the indigenous people of Western Sahara, a territory in North Africa occupied by Morocco for almost 50 years. They are at the forefront of a long, non-violent struggle for freedom, human rights and self-determination. As a result of their peaceful activism, they endure systematic human rights violations perpetrated by the Moroccan occupation authorities. These abuses are not isolated incidents; rather, they form part of a deliberate and repressive strategy designed to instill fear in the Sahrawi people and suppress their legitimate aspirations for self-determination. As pivotal figures within Sahrawi society, women are specifically targeted by these policies of repression, which serve as a calculated means to undermine the collective will of families and entire communities.

Despite their brutality and pervasiveness, these violations are hidden from the outside world. Western Sahara is a closed territory where international media, human rights monitors and even the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights are banned by Morocco from entering. A former Spanish colony designated by the UN as a non self-governed territory, the resource-rich Western Sahara has been occupied by Morocco since 1975. The indigenous people of Western Sahara have faced five decades of brutal repression while awaiting a UN-promised referendum on self-determination. While there is a UN peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara, it does not have a human rights mandate and is unable to report violations to UN headquarters, even when its members witness them first-hand. Sahrawis wanting to file complaints on human rights violations against them face hostile local police and courts. Impunity is rampant. With no international witnesses or legal recourse, Sahrawis under occupation, including the Sahrawi women

human rights defenders who authored this report, are left alone to document and report on the numerous violations taking place in the territory, further making them targets of the occupation authorities.

Why does Morocco target Sahrawi women with such fierceness? While there is no simple answer, Sahrawi women may represent the most serious threat to Morocco's public image as a modern democracy and strong Western ally in North Africa. When Sahrawi women activists peacefully take to the streets in the occupied Western Sahara, testify at the United Nations Human Rights Council or participate in international women's and human rights events, they counter this carefully crafted image. Through their activism and their reporting, Sahrawi women effectively expose Morocco's misogyny, racism and violence against them and their community in all their crudeness, revealing the illegal nature of its occupation of Western Sahara. Thus, they must be silenced at all costs, and the retaliation against them is brutal.

The violations against Sahrawi women are extensive and multifaceted, including arbitrary detention, physical and psychological torture, beatings, sexual harassment and abuse, rape, defamation, and economic marginalization. Women are frequently detained under inhumane conditions, subjected to unfair trials and denied the protections enshrined in international standards. Many have endured torture while in custody, where they are physically and mentally abused in efforts to coerce them into abandoning their rightful demands.

Sexual harassment, abuse and rape have been used as tools of repression against Sahrawi women, aiming to degrade, terrorize and silence them. Such violations, often occurring during peaceful demonstrations, further alienate them from political engagement by

subjecting them to public humiliation, including the stripping of their traditional dresses (melhfes) and exposing them to profound social stigma.

In addition to physical abuse, Sahrawi women are increasingly subjected to online defamation campaigns. Occupation forces, powered by thousands of online trolls working for Morocco, exploit social media platforms to spread disinformation, attack their reputations and undermine their standing within the community. This modern form of harassment, which feeds directly into Sahrawi traditional society and patriarchal norms, represents a new frontier in the occupation's campaign to silence dissent.

These violations are compounded by economic deprivation, as Moroccan authorities impose economic blockades, cut off livelihoods, and forcibly displace families. Sahrawi women are denied the opportunity to run businesses or engage in meaningful economic activities, deepening their social and financial vulnerability. The economic strangulation of the women is made more effective by Morocco's strategy of financially targeting their relatives, marginalizing and impoverishing entire families.

The combination of all of these tactics causes profound stress, anxiety and trauma in the women. But in all of the Morocco-occupied Western Sahara, there is not a single safe space for them to go to for help: no rape crisis or trauma centers, no mental health facilities or professionals, no women's resource centers. Morocco's tight grip on the territory means that the few existing health care centers, all run by the occupation authorities, are deeply connected to the Moroccan state responsible for the oppression of Sahrawi women, making them unsafe.

The best they can aim for is to seek help from their families and community from which Morocco tries so hard to ostracize them.

The systematic nature of these violations, and their commission in the context of a prolonged conflict, constitutes crimes against humanity and war crimes, requiring urgent and robust international action.

This report aims to document the widespread abuses faced by Sahrawi women and the consequences it has for female participation, calling on the international community to take immediate steps to protect their rights and support their legitimate struggle for freedom, justice, and dignity, and to hold Morocco accountable for violating multiple human rights conventions and agreements that it has signed and ratified.

The report also goes further, framing violations against Sahrawi women through a new lens: what happens when an occupying power weaponizes the conservative, patriarchal norms of the people it occupies in order to force women to cease their activism? While it does not document all violations committed against Sahrawi women (there are excellent reports that cover much more ground in this aspect), this report focuses on violations perpetrated by Morocco against women specifically because of their gender and standing in their society, and with the purpose of coercing them into abandoning their activism.

02. Legal context

This report addresses violations against Sahrawi women living under Moroccan occupation in view of Morocco's international obligations. Of particular relevance is Morocco's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on June 21, 1993, which entered into force in 2001. Morocco also lifted its reservations on key provisions of the convention on April 8, 2011, thereby committing itself to fully comply with the treaty's provisions.

As an Occupying Power, Morocco also holds distinct obligations under Geneva Law. To willfully deprive a "protected person" (Saharawis) of the right to a fair trial, and to commit acts of torture, constitutes grave breaches to Geneva Law pursuant to Article 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and war crimes under the Rome Statute Article 8 (2) (a) (vi) (ii).

Western Sahara is recognized by the United Nations as one of the 17 Non-Self-Governing Territories, as defined in General Assembly Resolution 1514, which asserts peoples' right to self-determination. Since 1966, the General Assembly has called on Spain, the colonial power in the territory since 1884, to facilitate the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination through a free and fair referendum.

Morocco currently exercises de facto control over approximately 80% of Western Sahara's territory and population. The Sahrawi people within these areas are deprived of their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, primarily due to their denial of the fundamental right to self-determination. The United Nations General Assembly, in Resolution

173/75, emphasized that the right to self-determination is a prerequisite for the realization of all other human rights.

On October 16, 1975, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion stating that no territorial sovereignty ties existed between Western Sahara and either Morocco or Mauritania. Despite this, Morocco moved forward with its military occupation of the territory, dividing it with Mauritania through a tripartite agreement signed with Spain on November 14, 1975. This agreement partitioned the territory between Morocco and Mauritania while safeguarding Spain's economic interests. Spain effectively abandoned its obligations to decolonize to the United Nations and its responsibility to facilitate a referendum for the Sahrawi people.

Morocco initiated its occupation and annexation of Western Sahara by force on October 31, 1975, with a massive repopulation campaign and a military incursion that resulted in severe human rights abuses against the Sahrawi people, leading to widespread displacement both internally and to neighboring Algeria.

In response, the United Nations General Assembly called on Morocco to end its occupation of Western Sahara in Resolution 37/34 of 1979. Additionally, Resolution 25/37 recognized the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi liberation movement, as the sole legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people. The European Court of Justice further reinforced this distinction in its rulings of December 21, 2016, and on October 4, 2024, affirming that Morocco and Western Sahara are separate and distinct territories under international law.

03. Historical context of the violations

Since the onset of the Moroccan occupation, Sahrawi women have been disproportionately impacted, enduring widespread human rights violations. Early on, they were forcibly displaced from rural areas to urban centers, often under brutal and inhumane conditions, as they were perceived to be supporters of the Polisario Front. These forced relocations involved the destruction of their homes and livestock, leaving them with nothing. Many women were taken to mass detention centers during 1975 and 1976, where they endured severe deprivation and harsh living conditions.

This period also saw systematic enforced disappearances, with Sahrawi women losing their freedom for weeks, months, or even years, leaving lasting physical and psychological scars. Frequently, family members did not know where they had been taken, or even if they were still alive. These disappearances continued until 1994, paralleled by increasing incidents of arbitrary detention and unjust trials targeting Sahrawi women.

Between 1976 and 1980, Sahrawi women endured intense social and economic pressures, as Moroccan authorities coerced them into divorcing their husbands who had joined the Polisario Front, offering employment opportunities to support their families if they did so. This coercion had significant impacts on their social standing and mental well-being. The violations continued into the subsequent decades, with Sahrawi women subjected to arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual harassment, and public defamation. During the 1999 uprising in Western Sahara's capital, Laayoune, Sahrawi women played a key role in organizing protests to demand their social and economic rights.

In 1991 the UN brokered a peace agreement between the Polisario Front and Morocco that promised Sahrawis a referendum on self-determination. This referendum would allow Sahrawis to choose between independence, autonomy and full integration into Morocco, but Morocco quickly moved to block its celebration. In 2005, as calls for independence intensified during peaceful demonstrations, Sahrawi women faced excessive violence and widespread arrests. Also in November 2010, Sahrawi women were instrumental in organizing a large protest camp outside Laayoune's urban center named Gdeim Izik, a precursor to the Arab Spring. The violent dismantling of the camp by Morocco's police and military resulted in casualties among women, and many were arrested and subjected to further mistreatment. Since then, Morocco has banned Sahrawis from erecting their traditional tented homes, or Jaimas, which are made and organized by Sahrawi women, further reducing the spaces in which women can gather.

04. Main actors

→ Perpetrators

Moroccan security forces and occupation institutions: The Morocco-occupied Western Sahara is commonly described as a police state, ranking 4/100 in Freedom House's 2023 Freedom in the World Index. As such, there is massive presence of armed agents from a range of bodies, including the police, the military police, the intelligence services and the military. These agents monitor the homes and neighborhoods of Sahrawi activists, often laying siege on them; use various forms of surveillance against them and limit their freedom of movement and association. Often, they operate out of uniform, perhaps to make them less identifiable when committing violations. The long arm of the Moroccan state extends to occupation authorities working in public institutions. This apparatus is responsible for most violations described in this report.

→ Moroccan settlers

As part of its colonial project, Morocco flooded Western Sahara with hundreds of thousands of Moroccan settlers. It is they who receive the best jobs and benefits. Morocco uses some settlers to inform on, harass and attack Sahrawis. Moroccan settlers participate in defamation campaigns against Sahrawi women, issue threats of sexual violence and publicly hurl insults at them.

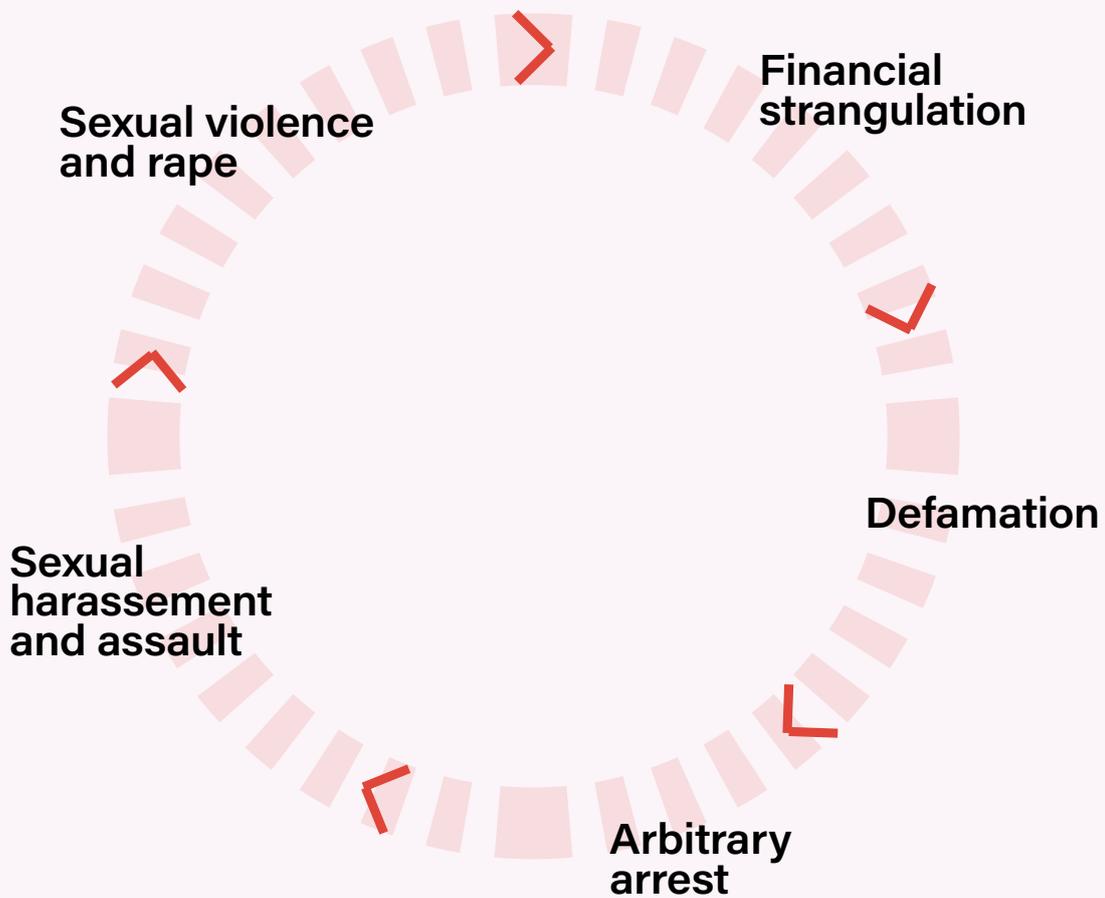
05. Systematic retaliation against Sahrawi women under occupation

05. A Sahrawi traditional society and the “wheel of reprisals”

The systematic targeting of Sahrawi women by Moroccan authorities is a key tactic in the broader suppression of the Sahrawi community. As a deeply conservative society, Sahrawi culture places significant value on traditions, especially those related to honor and dignity, with particular emphasis on the role and status of women in a society governed by patriarchy. In this context, acts of retaliation against women not only inflict personal harm but also create profound psychological and social disruptions that resonate throughout families and communities.

Reprisals against Sahrawi women manifest in various forms, including sexual harassment, rape, defamation, threats of imprisonment, beatings and both physical and psychological torture. Moroccan authorities exploit the conservative nature of Sahrawi society to amplify the impact of these actions, with the violations serving as an affront to entire families and communities, thereby spreading fear and intimidation on a larger scale.

The reprisals Saharawi women are subjected to are often referred to as a “Wheel of Reprisals.” The “wheel of reprisals” refers to how Morocco as an Occupying Power is utilizing different methods of reprisals to silence women in a constant pattern in which one violation feeds into the next and so on. These methods are directly linked to Sahrawi traditional society and patriarchy.



Often, Morocco starts by targeting the women using tactics of financial strangulation and economic marginalization with the intention of depriving them of their livelihoods and financial independence. This is often followed by defamation campaigns targeting the women's reputation and honor, aimed at undermining the social cohesion of their families. Such tactics are coupled by the targeting of male family members. Moroccan authorities take advantage of the inherent patriarchy of the Saharawi society, leading many families to attempt to restrict their daughter's activism, fearing the stigma and retaliation that might follow.

Some women refuse to be silenced, and such refusal is often followed by arbitrary arrest and sexual violence. In a community where such assaults carry heavy social stigmas, victims are often silent or silenced and choose to not go public, further reinforcing the cycle of oppression and impunity. Again, such violations are also compounded by the targeting of male family members, intending to control the female activists through social norms and rules.

The intersection of retaliation and the deeply rooted values of Sahrawi society makes the repression of women a particularly effective tool for Morocco's occupying authorities. By targeting women, they are not merely seeking to silence their voices but are also undermining their roles in community resistance and fostering widespread fear. This deliberate exploitation of social and cultural norms not only attacks individual women but also serves to erode the collective will of the Sahrawi people in their struggle for self-determination.

05. B Systematic violations

Financial strangulation

Despite Western Sahara's vast natural wealth, Sahrawis do not benefit from the resources available in their homeland, which include abundant phosphate deposits and rich fishing waters. Morocco exploits and benefits from these resources, while using financial strangulation against Sahrawis as a tool for social control.

"Economic strangulation" is one of the most effective tools utilized by Moroccan authorities to suppress the Sahrawi people, particularly women. This tactic extends beyond economic deprivation, as it directly affects the everyday lives of Sahrawi women, undermining their ability to participate in the struggle for their rights and the rights of their community. In a society where livelihoods are already constrained by limited resources, economic suppression becomes a powerful instrument to stifle any form of resistance or opposition to the occupying regime.

In the traditionally conservative Sahrawi society, where the family unit holds a central role, securing income is critical to family stability—especially under the harsh conditions of occupation. For women, economic participation not only sustains their families but also enables them to engage in political and human rights activism. Morocco's policy of economic suppression specifically targets women activists or those with ties to human rights organizations, systematically depriving them of economic opportunities, and thus hindering their financial independence.

How does Morocco achieve this? For example, a Sahrawi woman works in a local store as a salesperson. She is popular with customers and thus good for business. She earns a modest income, enough to give her financial independence. But in her free time, she attends clandestine meetings and participates in peaceful street demonstrations calling for self-determination, freedom and human rights for the people of Western Sahara. She appears in the eyewitness videos carrying a large Sahrawi flag, banned by Morocco. One day, the family that owns the store where she works receives a visit from the Morocco intelligence services. They issue a warning: either they cease employing the Sahrawi woman or they will close down the business. The next day, the woman is fired.

Ajjarhum Alia:

Born in 1957, she grew up in a militant Sahrawi family that faced disappearances, torture, and detention during both Spanish colonization and Moroccan occupation. She joined the national struggle early on, becoming part of the Polisario Front when it was first founded, and has remained committed ever since.

In 2010, she joined the Gdeim Izik Coordination for Peaceful Movement, actively participating in vigils and demonstrations for self-determination. Over the years, she endured harassment and violence from occupation authorities who tried to silence her. When repression failed, they resorted to economic retaliation, cutting her \$200 monthly salary in an attempt to pressure her to abandon her activism. The path of resistance has not been easy, but Ajjarhum is not alone. Many Sahrawis share similar experiences, enduring systematic repression, economic deprivation, and attempts to stifle their voices.

The impact of this policy is profound. By denying women access to employment and income, they are pushed into greater dependence on their families or spouses. This forced dependency exacerbates the social pressures placed upon them, limiting their capacity to make autonomous decisions, including participation in political and human rights activities. The regime's aim is not only to silence human rights activism but also to relegate women to traditional, subservient roles that limit their social and political influence.

Beyond the economic impact, this policy inflicts deep psychological and social damage. Women who face economic strangulation often experience feelings of helplessness, as they are unable to support their families or contribute to the betterment of their communities. This leads to a loss of confidence and self-worth, making it more difficult for them to participate in the broader struggle for Sahrawi rights.

Economic dependence also increases women's vulnerability to social and familial pressures, reinforcing traditional expectations that they remain in domestic roles rather than engage in activism. This suppression particularly targets women human rights defenders. Saharawi women engaged in human rights work or international advocacy are systematically economically isolated—denied employment, business licenses, or essential services. For instance, activists face blacklisting from jobs, unexplained refusals for business licenses, and punitive measures against existing businesses. Access to healthcare and education can also be restricted, with activists and their families denied treatment or facing enrollment barriers. This isolation extends to relatives, who may struggle to find employment due to association, and activists can be excluded from public aid programs. This systematic targeting is intended to immobilize their efforts, forcing them to abandon their advocacy or withdraw from public life altogether.

Financial suffocation serves as a form of political coercion. Women who challenge the regime often find themselves faced with a stark choice: either preserve their livelihood or continue their political activism. Many are left with no option but to relinquish their leadership roles in fear of further economic retaliation.

In addition, because all Sahrawi civil society organizations are banned by Morocco and receiving international funds without the Moroccan authorities' explicit approval is criminalized, Sahrawi women cannot create and safely run independent organizations that could support women's livelihoods, for instance women's cooperatives or small businesses, or pay women salaries to work at these organizations. Likewise, Sahrawi women human rights defenders who must dedicate long hours to human rights reporting and whose salaries and livelihoods are cut off by Moroccan occupying authorities cannot receive international funds for their human rights work and must do it pro bono.

Defamation

Defamation is a key weapon in the systematic repression of Sahrawi women by Moroccan authorities, who exploit the cultural significance of personal honor and dignity to destroy women's reputations. Using hundreds of loyal media outlets and social media platforms including sites created for the specific purpose of maligning Sahrawis, Morocco orchestrates smear campaigns fed by false rumors to depict Sahrawi women activists as criminals or morally corrupt individuals. The posts are then propagated by thousands of online trolls and influencers working for Morocco, who act as gasoline to spread the flames far and wide on the Internet. Once the women are discredited in the eyes of their communities they are at risk of becoming social outcasts.

The mere suggestion of scandal or rumors can stigmatize a woman, leading to her exclusion from her community, including from her family and friends. Instead of propagating explicit information about a woman, this tactic uses innuendo, a more subtle but equally damaging form of defamation -- for example by spreading information that seems innocent at face value but has an implicit meaning that is damaging to her reputation. Lacking sufficient specificity, the innuendo is often difficult to counter or deny. This tactic not only damages the woman's personal reputation but also affects her family, who may feel ashamed or dishonored as a result of the defamation targeting their daughter, wife or sister. This sometimes also implicates extended family members.

Sahrawi women activists are often accused of being "bad wives", "bad mothers" or "bad daughters" who neglect their obligations at home and bring shame on their family. Husbands may be pressured to force their wives to withdraw from activism and, if they refuse, divorce them, or else be considered as lacking authority. Coupled with the other defamation tactics, these accusations can resonate among Sahrawis who consider that women should stay in more traditional roles.

In addition to defamation, blackmail is commonly used to further pressure Sahrawi women. Women are often threatened with the exposure of personal information such as photographs and messages obtained through illegal means such as the hacking of their phones or social media accounts. The threats are used to coerce women into withdrawing from political or human rights activities. The blackmail can be both material and moral, forcing women to choose between safeguarding their privacy and continuing their activism. This

psychological pressure creates an environment of fear, as women face the dilemma of protecting their personal lives and reputations or defending their rights and the rights of their communities.

Privacy violations are an intrinsic part of the broader strategy of repression exercised by Moroccan authorities. The monitoring of personal phone conversations, electronic communications and phone content, sometimes through the use of military-grade surveillance tools such as Pegasus, and the hacking of activists' email and social media accounts, are all used to collect information that can later be exploited for defamation or blackmail.

For example, a Sahrawi woman activist is arbitrarily arrested on the street and her phone snatched by police. Soon after, personal photographs begin to spread on social media. The images are tampered with to show the woman naked or in an intimate setting. They are accompanied by accusations that the woman is financing a lavish lifestyle through prostitution. In another example, the woman privately receives the images with a threat: either stop your activism or they will be shared publicly.

Such invasions of privacy represent serious breaches of fundamental human rights and illustrate the extent to which modern technology is being used to enforce political repression. Constant surveillance instills fear in Sahrawi women, making them feel perpetually monitored by authorities. This pervasive sense of insecurity causes many women to restrict their public engagement, limiting their participation in human rights and political activism out of fear that their personal information could be weaponized against them.

The impact of defamation, blackmail and privacy violations goes far beyond the individual, affecting the entire Sahrawi community. Women who endure these violations suffer severe psychological consequences ranging from depression and anxiety to social isolation. The long-term emotional damage makes it difficult for them to trust others or continue their fight for justice. Socially, these tactics fracture the relationships between women, their families, and their communities, as they become targets of suspicion and social ostracism. This intensifies the discrimination faced by women and diminishes their ability to contribute effectively to their communities. Moroccan authorities take advantage of these social divisions to maintain control over the Sahrawi population and weaken the morale of women, who are often seen as key symbols of the resistance movement.

Morocco has been perfecting the use of surveillance and defamation as a demobilizing tactic against activists in Morocco proper. In an extensive 2022 report entitled “They’ll Get You No Matter What: Morocco’s Playbook to Crush Dissent”, Human Rights Watch documented the widespread use of smear campaigns and surveillance against activists and dissidents in Morocco.

HRW’s investigation uncovered “a range of tactics that, when used together, form an ecosystem of repression, aiming not only to muzzle dissenting voices but to scare off all potential critics”. These are the very tactics used in Western Sahara against Sahrawi women.

Aminatou Haidar

The efforts to discredit Aminatou Haidar, a prominent Sahrawi human rights defender who was disappeared in Moroccan prisons for years, have included false accusations and rumors alleging that she collaborates with Moroccan intelligence, profits from the Sahrawi cause, and exploits the suffering of her people for personal gain. Even her children have been dragged into these defamatory campaigns, with rumors spread to undermine her credibility and intimidate her family.

Following her arrest and subsequent release around the time of the 2005 independence uprising in Laayoune, the harassment intensified. Moroccan authorities accused her of manipulating minors and inciting them to acts of civil disobedience such as throwing stones at security forces, setting fire to police vehicles and damaging public property. The pressure escalated in 2009 when she was forcibly deported by Morocco from Laayoune to the Canary Islands. When she undertook a one-month hunger strike at the airport in Spain to protest the illegal expulsion, Moroccan media, members of parliament and various associations launched a coordinated smear campaign. There were even defamation seminars held at Moroccan state institutions to malign her character.

A website linked to Moroccan intelligence, known for targeting Sahrawi human rights defenders also spread slanderous content about Haidar and her children. The situation deteriorated further in 2000 after she and other Sahrawi activists established the "Sahrawi Committee against the Moroccan Occupation" (ISACOM). This action sparked another wave of hostility: Moroccan intelligence launched a prolonged smear campaign against all involved. The campaign was featured across official and unofficial media outlets and political parties, as well as civil society groups, joined the fervor, contributing to an orchestrated effort to silence their dissent and delegitimize their struggle.

Arbitrary arrest

Arbitrary arrest is one of the most oppressive measures employed by Moroccan authorities against Sahrawi women. It acts as a key tool in their broader policy to suppress national resistance and silence voices advocating for freedom and justice. These arrests are not merely security operations but a deliberate tactic designed to foster fear and intimidation. They specifically target women with the aim of breaking their resolve and sending a broader message to the Sahrawi community.

Sahrawi women are frequently detained without formal charges, due process, or justification. Arrests often occur during peaceful protests, while engaging in political or human rights activities, or even during the course of their daily lives. The authorities not only target women activists but also their families, exerting immense psychological pressure on them in the process.

Once detained, Sahrawi women endure inhumane conditions, including being subjected to physical and psychological torture and deliberate humiliation by Moroccan security forces. This treatment is not solely intended to punish women for their activism but also to shatter their spirit and discourage others from following in their footsteps. The arbitrary nature of these arrests creates an atmosphere of pervasive fear, as women recognize that their involvement in political or human rights advocacy could lead to imprisonment and torture at any time.

While in detention, Sahrawi women are subjected to lengthy interrogation sessions characterized by verbal and physical violence. These interrogations are used by Moroccan authorities as a tool to intimidate

and coerce women into confessing to fabricated charges or providing information about other activists. Often, women are threatened with sexual assault or harassment if they do not comply, further compounding their suffering and placing them in a deeply vulnerable position. In some cases police officers take sensitive pictures of the women held under detention as a mean of pressuring and intimidating them once they are released.

The conditions for Sahrawi women in Moroccan prisons are marked by cruelty and neglect. They are frequently placed in solitary confinement, often denied basic healthcare, family visits and access to legal counsel, further deepening their isolation and amplifying their physical and psychological torment.

Mahfouda El Fakir

Since the start of the peaceful resistance in Western Sahara, and especially after the 2005 independence uprising, Mahfouda has actively participated in political and human rights activities despite facing severe repercussions.

Her involvement in peaceful protests has subjected her to various forms of violence. The Moroccan authorities have retaliated by withholding her \$200 monthly salary, launching smear campaigns against her and her family, denying her and her young family the right to work, and regularly threatening her minor daughter, Nahila Boutenkiza. When these methods of repression failed to deter her, the authorities escalated by arresting her directly from a courtroom during the trial of a political prisoner. The judge ordered her arrest as a prelude to her detention. After a brief trial that lacked even the basic standards of fairness, she was sentenced to six months in prison.

While imprisoned, Mahfouda faced grave violations of the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. She was not separated from the general prison population, lacked access to a proper bed, and was confined in unsanitary conditions, whilst restricting her, reading and writing rights, and limited family visits, even inciting other inmates against her.

Moroccan prison authorities use psychological torture, including prolonged solitary confinement, as a method of breaking the detainees' morale, leaving them cut off from the outside world for extended periods. This is compounded by continuous threats of violence or sexual assault, which creates a constant state of anxiety and fear.

Even after their release, the repression of Sahrawi women continues. Many are coerced into signing agreements to cease political activities or participation in protests as a condition for their release. Authorities keep them under constant surveillance and subject them to ongoing harassment. Reintegration into society becomes an uphill battle, with their movements restricted, employment opportunities denied, and systematic exclusion from public life imposed on them.

Sexual harassment and sexual assault

Sexual harassment and sexual assault are used by Moroccan authorities to oppress Sahrawi women as part of a broader strategy to instill fear and suppress their participation in public, political, and human rights activities. For Sahrawi women, they represent a violation not only against their physical dignity but also of their social reputation in a conservative society that places a high value on honor and respect.

Sahrawi women are increasingly subjected to various forms of sexual harassment and assault —whether during detention, on the streets, or in public spaces controlled by Moroccan authorities. This can be verbal, involve sexual threats, or escalate to physical assaults. Police may publicly call them names (such as prostitutes) and threaten them with rape. Physical

assaults often target sensitive parts of the body, such as breasts, nipples, stomach, hips and the pubic area, producing excruciating pain, massive bruising or permanent injuries. Often it also involves undressing the woman by removing their traditional dresses, known as “melhfes”. Such practices are not only designed to degrade these women but also to send a broader message to them and their community: participation in public life or activism may lead to public shaming and threats against their personal dignity and social standing.

In Sahrawi society, where family and personal honor are of great importance, being on the receiving end of sexual harassment or assault can carry severe social consequences. Even the mere suggestion of such acts can stigmatize a woman, regardless of the circumstances, significantly limiting her ability to engage in public life and undermining her capacity to defend her own rights or those of her community.

The psychological and social impact of these abuses is profound. On a psychological level, the constant threat of sexual harassment and assault generates enduring anxiety and fear among women, discouraging them from continuing their involvement in human rights or political activities. Enduring harassment and assault also erodes their confidence, leaving them with feelings of shame or guilt, even though they are the victims.

Socially, women who experience this kind of repression often find their status within the community diminished. Many face criticism or isolation from their families and social networks.

Women involved in political or human rights activism are at even greater risk. Moroccan authorities target them specifically, using sexual harassment and assault as a tool to undermine their credibility, silence their voices, and destroy their reputations within their communities. This not only reduces their impact but also weakens their leadership and influence.

Sukaina Jedah-Lu

Sukaina Jedah-Lu, a former political prisoner and abductee from 1981 to 1994, recalls her harrowing experiences in Morocco's secret prisons, where she was held along with other Sahrawi women and men. Over the years, they were transferred from one detention center to another, enduring torture, starvation, and deprivation of sleep and clothing. For the women, there was also the additional horror of sexual harassment and assault, which was deeply shocking given the traditional Sahrawi society they came from—a community that held women in high esteem and had never before witnessed such acts.

Sukaina recounts that she and other women were molested, with parts of their bodies exposed—sometimes completely—in front of men, including their brothers, fathers, husbands, or cousins. The intent was clear: to break the women's spirits after the physical torment had worn them down, and to coerce the men into false confessions or admissions, using the suffering of their loved ones as leverage.

Activists often find themselves in the position of having to defend their integrity and reputation, dealing with the personal harm of harassment while facing continuous threats to their honor. In some cases, pro-government media is used to spread rumors about female activists, intensifying the social pressure and forcing them to retreat from their public roles. These systemic efforts demonstrate how sexual harassment is effectively weaponized to repress and control Sahrawi women who seek change.

Moreover, attacks of this nature are often wielded as a tool for blackmail. Women who are detained or interrogated frequently face threats of sexual harassment or assault if they do not cooperate with authorities or cease their activism. This method of coercion intensifies the repression, making it even more difficult for women to stand up against the violations they endure.

Rape as a tool of repression

Rape, a weapon of war, is one of the most egregious forms of repression employed by Moroccan authorities against Sahrawi women. It is not only intended to physically and psychologically degrade its victims but is also wielded as a deliberate tool of terror aimed at subduing the entire Sahrawi community. Occurring in various contexts—during detention, interrogation, or even in public spaces—the systematic nature of these assaults underscores the severity of the violence committed against Sahrawi women. In a conservative society that places significant emphasis on honor and dignity, rape is weaponized to stigmatize, silence, and marginalize women, discouraging their active participation in the broader struggle for freedom and justice.

For Sahrawi women, rape is more than a physical assault; it strikes at the heart of their dignity and social standing. In a culture where honor is central, rape is used as a tool to break a woman's spirit and ruin her reputation. Young women may face shattered prospects for marriage and motherhood, while married women fear rejection or abandonment by their husbands. Survivors are often silenced, forced to carry the weight of shame alone.

In the occupied territory, there are no rape crisis centers, therapists, or support services to help women heal. The lack of resources leaves survivors isolated, with no one to turn to, compounding their trauma and making recovery nearly impossible. This enforced silence and absence of support is a harsh reality that many outside Western Sahara may not fully understand.

The use of rape as a tool to instill fear has a chilling effect on Sahrawi women's engagement in political and human rights activities. Many women, haunted by the constant threat of such violence, withdraw from public life or activism to avoid further risk. The social stigma attached to sexual assault, along with the fear of retaliation or public shame, discourages survivors from coming forward, perpetuating a culture of impunity where perpetrators do not face accountability.

Sultana Khaya

Moroccan authorities have known for generations that Sahrawi women survivors of rape are unlikely to tell anyone about what happened to them, and even less likely to denounce it publicly. Activist Sultana Khaya and her sister Luara helped to shatter that silence. At the end of 2020, when the Moroccan occupation army violated the first ceasefire agreement with the Polisario Front, many Sahrawis saw it as a turning point in the liberation struggle. Among those who answered the call for renewed resistance was former political prisoner and human rights activist Sultana Sid Ibrahim Khaya. She returned to her family home in occupied Boujdour on November 19, 2020. Moroccan forces immediately surrounded the house, the neighborhood, and the entire city, restricting the family's movements, cutting off their access to water and electricity, and isolating them from the outside world.

The repression escalated far beyond confinement and deprivation. Sultana and Luara reported horrific incidents of repeated rape with sticks, including during the sacred 'Night of Destiny' in Ramadan, a time deeply revered in Islam. On that night, as their mother Aminatou helplessly listened to the screams of her daughters being raped with sticks by several police officers, members of the Moroccan special forces forced her to watch the assaults by holding her head and tying her hands behind her back.

The assaults left a lasting trauma and fear not only for Sultana and her family but also among the wider Sahrawi community. Relatives, neighbors and companions live in constant fear that they could be next, as the perpetrators remain free and face no consequences for their actions.

Sahrawi women detained by Moroccan authorities are often sexually assaulted and threatened with rape to coerce confessions to fabricated charges or to extract information about human rights and political movements. In some instances, these women endure sexual violence in the presence of fellow detainees or under particularly degrading conditions, with the aim of breaking their will. Such violations, committed during detention, represent gross human rights abuses and war crimes that leave long-lasting psychological scars on the victims.

Beyond its devastating impact on individual victims, the use of rape serves as a direct attack on the Sahrawi women's resistance movement. By specifically targeting female activists and protest participants, Moroccan authorities seek to instill widespread fear and suppress their involvement in the national struggle. This systematic strategy highlights the broader goal: not merely to punish women, but to undermine the morale of the Sahrawi people and their resistance efforts.

06. The devastating impact of repressive policies on Sahrawi women's participation

Sahrawi women have long been at the forefront of the struggle for freedom and human rights in Western Sahara. Their resilience, despite facing systematic violations, underscores their essential role in the resistance. However, as this report shows, the widespread repression they endure deeply affects their participation, imposing significant obstacles that challenge their ability to remain actively engaged in this struggle.

Sahrawi women are subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse, creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Acts of physical violence, such as beatings and torture during detention, not only threaten their safety but also inflict long-lasting psychological trauma. For many, these experiences leave deep scars, forcing them to withdraw from public activism for fear of facing similar brutalities. The psychological toll is particularly debilitating for some women, making it difficult for them to sustain their involvement in human rights or political advocacy. These violations significantly diminish their engagement in social movements.

Sexual harassment and assault also serve as potent tools of repression used by Moroccan authorities to silence Sahrawi women. As a result, women who might otherwise lead in human rights and political efforts often find themselves sidelined, their contributions diminished by fear of public shame. Sahrawi women activists are also frequent targets of defamatory campaigns and media blackmail. Constantly defending themselves against such attacks diverts

women's focus from activism, forcing them into a defensive stance. This not only weakens their impact but also isolates them, turning them into victims in the eyes of public opinion and limiting their ability to lead effectively in the resistance. Also, economic marginalization hampers their ability to engage in activism, as voluntary work and human rights advocacy often require both time and resources that are no longer available to them. In many cases, the financial strain leads to frustration and a sense of helplessness, as women feel that their efforts are being undermined by a repressive economic environment.

ElGhalia Djimi

ElGhalia, a mother of five, was abducted on November 20, 1987, while working as an agricultural technician in occupied Laayoune. She spent nearly four years blindfolded and held in isolation at a secret detention center. After her release in 1991, ElGhalia struggled to regain her job, facing suspicion due to her imprisonment and activism for Sahrawi self-determination. From 2000 until her retirement in 2023, she was systematically sidelined at work, barred from performing her duties.

Despite the repression, ElGhalia turned her home into a meeting space for international organizations, as local civil society had no formal headquarters. However, retaliation against her family—such as denying her children scholarships and employment—hindered her ability to participate fully. Her efforts to empower Sahrawi women were also obstructed, as Morocco authorities intimidated those who supported her to discourage their involvement.

Psychological violence, including psychological torture, is employed to break women's will and erode their self-confidence. Many Sahrawi women who experience this form of repression suffer from chronic anxiety, depression, and a profound loss of self-worth. These long-term effects are particularly pronounced among women subjected to constant pressure from security forces and state surveillance. As a result, many women find themselves socially and emotionally isolated, making it difficult for them to continue their activism. With no access to mental health support and other resources usually available for women survivors of trauma, this isolation forces some women to gradually withdraw from public life. Despite these enormous challenges, Sahrawi women persist in their resistance, demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. They continue to play vital roles in defending human rights and advocating for freedom and dignity, despite the social, psychological, and economic pressures they endure. However, the impact of these violations cannot be overlooked. They significantly limit women's ability to participate fully and consistently in the struggle, imposing additional burdens that make their resistance more complex and fraught with danger. Sahrawi women are paying an enormous price in their quest for freedom.

07. Conclusion and recommendations: the world needs to act

The plight of Sahrawi women in Western Sahara is deeply intertwined with the broader conflict, where they play a pivotal role in the resistance and endurance of their people. Despite facing systematic repression, including torture, sexual harassment and economic marginalization at the hands of Moroccan authorities, Sahrawi women have become enduring symbols of resilience and defiance. The challenges they encounter are not limited to physical and psychological abuse but also involve continuous efforts to silence and marginalize their voices both within their communities and on the international stage.

Given these realities, there is an urgent need to amplify international support for the cause of Sahrawi women. International advocacy and pressure can play a critical role in ending ongoing human rights abuses and supporting Sahrawi women in their pursuit of equality and justice.

Sahrawi women will continue to be emblematic of courage and resilience in the face of oppression, and their contributions to the national liberation movement remain essential to the realization of justice and dignity for their people. Their sacrifices and efforts must not go unrecognized, nor should they be left to fight this battle alone. A united global front of solidarity is crucial to empowering these women to confront the immense challenges they face and to continue their courageous struggle for freedom, equality, and human rights.

Therefore, the authors of this report present the following urgent recommendations,

For the **UN Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict** to take urgent steps and take responsibility for denouncing the reprisals, aggressions and sexual violence suffered by Saharawi women living under occupation.

For the **UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** to follow up on the information presented in this report and to issue a thematic report on the topic of violence against women in the context of occupation and particularly Western Sahara.

For the **UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls and the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls** to follow up on the information presented in this report and issue a communication to the Moroccan Government and / or take responsibility in highlighting and denouncing the reprisals, aggressions and sexual violence suffered by Saharawi women living under occupation by way of a public press release.

For **international human rights and women's rights organizations** to focus and report on the plight of Saharawi women and include Saharawi women as participants in their conference, events and granting.

For **international civil society** as a whole to support Saharawi women and to advocate on their behalf.

08. For further reading

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