

25 August 2021

Western Sahara: Physical assault and sexual harassment of woman human rights defender Sultana Khaya and her family

On 22 August 2021, Moroccan security agents raided the house of woman human rights defender **Sultana Khaya** and physically assaulted her, her sister Laura Khaya and other members of her family. The security agents destroyed the furniture in Sultana Khaya's house, causing damage to parts of the house and seizing the family's belongings. Sultana Khaya and her sister were also subjected to sexual harassment by male security agents during the raid.

[Sultana Khaya](#) is a Sahrawi woman human rights defender whose work focuses on women's rights and promoting the right to self-determination for the Sahrawi people. The woman human rights defender is President of the organisation League for the Defense of Human Rights and against Plunder of Natural Resources. Sultana Khaya regularly participates in peaceful demonstrations advocating for the right to self-determination and denouncing violence against Sahrawi women.

On 22 August at 4:30am local time, a group of Moroccan security agents in plain-clothes and black masks raided Sultana Khaya's family home in the city of Boujdour in Laayoune. Three of the security agents climbed the house and entered through a second-floor window and then opened the front door from inside to allow other security agents to enter the house. They then physically assaulted the woman human rights defender, her sister Laura and other members of the family. The security agents tied Sultana Khaya and her sister together and searched them. Both the woman human rights defender and her sister were forcibly undressed and the male members of the security agents touched their breasts and searched their intimate parts. Sultana Khaya is suffering from deep bruises on her arm from the assault and her sister Laura Khaya is suffering from damage caused to blood vessels in her eye.

During the raid, members of the Moroccan security seized some of Sultana Khaya's family's personal belongings including cameras and phones used to document human rights violations. They also seized five power banks and a solar charger used by the family as a power source, since their [access to electricity](#) was cut off by the Moroccan authorities in April, as part of the reprisal measures against Sultana Khaya. Members of the Moroccan security also poured five-litre bottles of toxic substance into the house, destroying the walls and floors.

Woman human rights defender Sultana Khaya has been under de facto house arrest since 19 November 2020, with Moroccan security forces maintaining a heavy presence outside her house, during which time the woman human rights defender has been subjected to physical, verbal and sexual assaults. On 1 July 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders Mary Lawlor [condemned](#) the reprisals against Sultana Khaya and 'expressed particular concern about the apparent use of violence and the threat of violence to prevent and obstruct women human rights defenders in their peaceful human rights activities in Western Sahara'.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the most recent raid, physical assault and sexual harassment carried out by Moroccan security agents against woman human rights defender Sultana Khaya and her sister. It also reiterates its concern about the arbitrary house arrest and the ongoing harassment of the woman human rights defender. Front Line Defenders believes that Sultana Khaya is being targeted solely as a result of her peaceful and legitimate human rights work.

Front Line Defenders urge the Moroccan authorities to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally remove all restrictions on the free movement of Sultana Khaya and her family, and cease all further forms of surveillance or harassment against them, as it is believed that these measures are solely related to Sultana Khaya's legitimate human rights activities;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the sexual harassment, physical assaults and threats by Moroccan security agents against woman human rights defender Sultana Khaya and her sister, and the physical assault of her family, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Allow and provide immediate medical assistance to Sultana Khaya, her sister, other family members and other human rights defenders and activists who suffered as the result of the raid;
4. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Western Sahara and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.

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