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By Christian LOMBARD – Co-Director TGH

Last September, a TNS Sofres poll, carried out for our colleagues from Action Against Hunger and for the « JDD »¹, revealed that nearly one French person out of two is not aware of the worsening of the food situation in a great part of the planet. According to that study, 48% of our fellow citizens do not know that, over the past thirty years, the number of people victim of malnutrition in the world more than doubled, to reach and exceed the billion mark a few months ago! 12% of those polled even think that the situation has improved...

Consequently, shouldn't we question ourselves about the content and the impact of the information campaigns carried out by the ISO² over the past decades? We often witnessed distress carefully built-up and displayed as if it was a cosmetic good, thus contributing to making poverty a perfectly ordinary matter. Consciousness-raising messages padded out with the « marketing nebulous ».

In this confusion, how to put back in the right place what should question us in priority? This probably requires a non-enticing communication policy, highly marked with great teaching skills, and capable of inspiring trust and of showing, without bargain or trick, the collective necessity to mobilize.

Humanity is presently facing numerous crises: financial, economic, climatic, energetic, food... The development model prevailing at the planet level keeps showing its limits. The appearance of new tensions and the emergence of complexity should not mask reality and the emergency it imposes. Confronted with this, the XXth century man is more than ever able to face and influence significantly the course of things. For all that, it will not succeed thanks to the use of all kinds of artefacts, but thanks to a real meaningful intention.

¹The « Journal du dimanche », equivalent to the French Sunday News

²International Solidarity Organization

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Cross portraits

By Candice Garde, project manager in Algeria

« What is hidden behind the melhfa* ? You are the one who have to find out! »

Independent, free, with a strong character... the adjectives qualifying Sahrawi women are numerous. They are said to be the ones taking in charge the organization of the camps next to Tindouf, where Western Saharan refugees have been living for more than 30 years. They act as guarantors for Sahrawi hospitality, and it is always a pleasure to come and have a tea in their *khelma* and listen to the stories they tell...

« Wilaya** February 27th ***, the smallest Sahrawi refugee camp, in a late September morning, with a cool wind gradually blotting out the memory of the three past months of extreme heat which ended with the Aïd, at the term of Ramadan.

Fatma, a young 23 years old Sahrawi woman, dressed with a white melhfa*** revealing particularly colourful and sophisticated patterns, opens her door to me. « Salam Aleykoum » « Marhaba ! » Welcome! Fatma has been living in the « wilaya February 27th » with her family for more than three years, but she was born in the camp of El Ayoun, the most populated one.

In a perfect Spanish, she explains to me that she has not always been living here, in the arid region of Tindouf where Sahrawi refugees have settled from the beginning of their exile in 1976. Fatma spent 10 years in Spain in the Valence area. In fact, many young Sahrawi people leave to study abroad in the friend countries of the S.A.D.R. (the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic): Spain, Libya or Cuba.



Fatma – a young Sahrawi woman

When I ask her what were her first impressions at her arrival in Spain, Fatma answers that she was 6 years old at the time, and that she was mostly struck by the cars, televisions and stairs. As for the differences existing between Spanish women and Sahrawi women, Fatma reminds me that we can not compare what is not comparable, and that these two cultures, these two civilizations, are totally different.

I kept going ahead, asking her what she thinks about the presence of volunteers and humanitarian workers in the camps. Fatma already took the time to analyse things: « Of course, without the presence of humanitarian workers, we would not have all the things we have today... On the other side, their presence can also alter Sahrawi people's self-confidence. Today, Sahrawi people are well-trained. It would be good to get them more involved in order for them to be more than just the recipients of humanitarian aid. »

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Pensive, Fatma adds that emigration is another problem we have to take into account. In fact, « humanitarian help provides first necessity goods. Consequently, many Sahrawi people leave to provide to their families the means to get what humanitarian aid projects consider non-essential», and thus to improve their everyday lives.

I am only half-surprised to hear from Fatma that she has been involved for a year and a half in a young Sahrawi people association within her wilaya, in addition to her filing work within the Sahrawi ministry of Information. « We have decided to fight for the Sahrawi cause ourselves. Every month, we organize a sport, a cultural, a social or a humanitarian event thanks to the subscription of each member. » Fatma clarifies that the objective of that association is to train and increase Youth awareness. « We hire the young people who want to work, to get involved ».

We often hear that Sahrawi women are independent, in all cases enjoying more freedom than elsewhere in North Africa. Fatma has her point of view on the subject. « The Sahrawi woman owns her house, which is not the case for Algerian women. It is your husband who has to come and live with you, and, if possible, to build a house close to your family. » And if unfortunately a man raises his hand on his wife, the divorce is immediate. In fact, many Sahrawi women remarry without facing any problem. According to some people, a divorced woman is even perceived as a more experienced woman.

In spite of her maturity, Fatma also knows how to entertain her guests, for example revealing to me the beauty secrets of Sahrawi woman. She laughs when I confess my surprise after I dropped in unexpectedly in the middle of a beauty session under a tent where three friends were spreading cheese *Vache qui rit* on their faces. « We can also use flour, eggs, honey, herbs and anything that keeps the skin light... to shine! ». For Fatma, the Sahrawi woman, comparable to the colourful and joyful melhfa she wears, also knows how to party, loves to dance and knows how to prepare a unique couscous, « the use of brown wheat makes the couscous much richer. ».

We become serious again when I ask her how she imagines her future. « As a refugee, I live in the present. I am already very lucky to have a job and to be able to help my family. Many young people of my age do not have the same opportunities. ». As for Fatma's dreams: « To own a land, to go back to our country. Material goods do not matter for now. Everything comes in its proper time. »

As a refugee, I live in the present. I am already very lucky to have a job and to be able to help my family. Many young people of my age do not have the same opportunities.

Khadijatou lives a few meters away from Fatma's house. She is a strong 58 years old woman, with hands darkened with henna holding out to welcome me. Native from El Ayoun, the capital city of occupied Western Sahara, Khadijatou came to settle in the area of Tindouf when there was no camp. She is one of the first exiled Sahrawi fleeing the Moroccan invasion in 1976.

She tells how she crossed Sahara, before reaching, with other refugees, the place where is presently located Rabouni, an administrative city hosting the headquarters of the government authorities of the S.A.D.R. in exile. « We gathered there, because it is the only place where there was water ». This probably explains the name Rabouni, an obvious transformation of the word « tap ».

I then start to think about the impressive water tower sitting enthroned a few meters away from my tent, at the basis of Rabouni, where the main international solidarity organizations are based. Three decades earlier, women such as Khadijatou have had to organize everything in the middle of nowhere.

« When I came here, I held my three children with one hand, and something to eat in the other. It was very hard. I had to build everything with my children, my house, without neglecting the Sahrawi hospitality which requires that the door stays open for visitors. Thanks to God, we were able to set up the camps ». Khadijatou then explains to me how women organized in groups to make and distribute mats of straw (that women picked up) and blankets in order to pitch the first *khelmas*, the Sahrawi tents.

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Khadijatou left to live some time next to the present wilaya of El Ayoun, where nothing had been built at the time, before coming back seven months later to shelter under a large black tent in Rabouni. More than one year later, Khadijatou finally settled in the camp of Aoussert.

The first food intakes were distributed to the refugees in Rabouni, via Algeria and Libya. When I ask this courageous mother what she thinks about humanitarian aid today, she answers that Sahrawi people will always ease the work of those who want to help them. But she does not know how to thank Algerians to have agreed to let them settle here.

As our conversation evolves, Khadijatou goes back to her memories. When I ask her if the fear to flee towards the unknown was as strong as the one to stay in an occupied territory, she naturally answers that she preferred to flee the occupation, and that exile did not leave time to think about anything else than her children and their settlement.

Today she lives in the « wilaya February 27th », with her daughters. Khadijatou has 7 children and around twenty grandchildren. Her husband is one of the war's martyrs. One of her four daughters lives in the occupied



[Khadijatou - Sahrawi woman](#)

territories, and she only sees her in Mauritania. « Thanks God, if they have their own land, my children will have a bright future. Their dreams will depend on that ».
Khadijatou, a strong woman? certainly. However, wrapped-up in her black traditional melhfa, she explains to me that Sahrawi women only accomplished their mission whereas men were fighting. « We all defended the same cause, knowing that we would not find anything here, except heat and siroccos».

It is almost noon. Regretfully, I have to turn down an invitation to lunch in Khadijatou's *kheima*. I have a meeting waiting for me in Rabouni. Never mind that, an appointment is made, Inch'Allah, one of these days, when I wish to hear Fatma and Khadijatou tell me their stories once more.

* A long veil in which Sahrawi women wrap-up.

**The wilaya is the equivalent of a French department. In extension, each camp corresponds to a wilaya.

***Relating to February 27th 1976, the date when the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was proclaimed.

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