

The woman who cleared landmines in the Sahara



“First, I thought this would be a temporary job. Now after more than 5 years, I still cannot express with words how humanitarian and noble this work is.” Photo Credit: Norwegian People’s Aid

This is the story of an anonymous hero. One of the many ordinary citizens that dedicates her life for a better world, and yet her struggle remains unknown. Fatimetu Bushraya Malainin is a Sahrawi woman born in 1988 in the Refugee Camp of Laayoune, located in the surroundings of the Algerian city of Tindouf. Tindouf is located 2,000 km into the depths of the Sahara, in a harsh isolated desert environment with temperatures surpassing 55 degrees Celsius in the summer. Fatimetu’s family moved to the Refugee Camp of Laayoune in an attempt to escape from the armed conflict that took place in the Territory of Western Sahara from 1975 until 1991 between the Royal Moroccan Army and the Polisario Front. Although a ceasefire was signed in 1991 under the auspices of the UN, the Territory of Western Sahara remains heavily contaminated with landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). No direct armed confrontation has taken place in almost 30 years; however, ever since, the local population has been living in constant fear of these invisible deadly devices.

Fatimetu, who is 30 years old now, is the proud mother of a two-year old child, who is looking at us with curiosity while conducting this interview and receiving some biscuits that are offered to us. At first glance, Fatimetu seems to be like any other mother. However, we have come to her home to learn more about her five-year experience of leading a team that is in charge of removing hundreds of landmines and ERW from the Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm.

While preparing the traditional Sahrawi tea, Fatimetu tells us that she had always wanted to work in mine action. She describes how she considers herself a humanitarian at heart, who wishes that her people can move freely around the Territory of Western Sahara with the certainty they will be safe. *“I feel extremely proud of my work and its inherent humanitarian nature. For each landmine I remove from the ground, I have the conviction I have saved a life.”* Moreover, Fatimetu explains to us that she has a close emotional link to mine action. She belongs to one of the many Sahrawi families that has suffered first-hand the atrocities of these deadly devices: her uncle died in an accident with an anti-vehicle mine when she was only a girl. Another of her uncles is a survivor of a mine accident, and now

works for the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Landmines (ASAVIM) in an attempt to offer a dignified life to other survivors. Through her work, her humanitarianism has transformed into passion. *“First, I thought this would be a temporary job. Now after more than 5 years, I still cannot express with words how humanitarian and noble this work is.”* In the difficult socioeconomic conditions Sahrawi refugees live, the economic dimension of her work can also not be ignored. *“I am the oldest sister and therefore have a responsibility to guarantee the wellbeing and good health of my family. This job provided me the opportunity to guarantee a source of income to my relatives and to assure a dignified future to my son.”*

After serving us a cup of tea, Fatimetu describes the many difficulties of living in a refugee camp. She moved years ago to the Refugee Camp of Awsard (approximately 30 km away from the Refugee Camp of Laayoune), however life is not better here. Livelihood opportunities in the five refugee camps of Tindouf are very limited due to the extreme geographical conditions as well as the scarcity of employment. Although these refugee camps were established over 40 years ago, Sahrawi refugees continue to lack some of the most basic services and goods.

Like other local women, Fatimetu wakes up very early in the mornings. From 05:00, she prays, cleans the khaima (tent) in which she and her family live, buys food from the local market, checks on the health of ill relatives and prepares tea and breakfast for the family. Now with a child under her guard, she has more responsibilities. *“Saying goodbye to my baby before departing for 2 months of work in the field is undoubtedly the most painful part of my job. Luckily I have an extraordinary mother that takes care of him while I am away.”* These two-month periods of work are not only about getting the job done: they are also about staying alive. *“I wake up every day with the conviction that anything can happen. However, I acknowledge with maturity and serenity that I will be safe as long as I respect and follow the security measures in place.”* Fatimetu explains us that her family still sees her work with certain scepticism. Like every other human being, they care about her security first and foremost, and therefore they worry whenever she returns back to the minefields. Nonetheless, they recognise the humanitarian and honourable nature of her work. *“Despite the numerous operational and social challenges that I face every day, I feel extremely proud of myself for making my land safe again.”* When asked about how she feels she contributes to the development of her society, her answer is a mixture of determination and humble sincerity: *“I have witnessed the monstrous impact of landmines and ERW on my generation and that of my parents, I do not want future generations to suffer the same”*, explains while she holds her kid in her arms.

Fatimetu is one of the many unsung heroes that risks her life every day to make other peoples' lives safer. She works far away from her family in remote environments, always in the search of deadly devices no one else wants to encounter. Her colleagues have unanimously described her as a strong and determined woman, always ready to give her best and lead her team against all odds. Often criticised for doing what is still considered a “man's job”, Fatimetu stresses the need to employ more women in mine action. Through perseverance, determination and a belief in a better future, she wakes up every day to fight for a world in which her kid can live in peace. When asked if she would encourage her son to become a deminer, Fatimetu does not even hesitate for one second: *“Absolutely, it is one of the most noble works he can do.”* We are impressed by the commitment and power of this woman, and therefore conclude the interview by asking her one last question: *“If you could send a message to a female deminer anywhere else in the world, what would it be?”* She smiles, drinks a sip of her cup of tea, and responds while looking at us in the eyes: *“Never mind the stereotypes and criticisms from society. I encourage you to continue this heroic humanitarian work.”*



“Despite the numerous operational and social challenges that I face every day, I feel extremely proud of myself for making my land safe again.” Fatimetu poses with her two-year son in front of her house in the Refugee Camp of Awsard, Tindouf. Photo Credit: UNMAS

Thanks to women like Fatimetu, UNMAS continues to encourage female participation in clearance operations. UNMAS operates as a component of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). Since 2008 to date, UNMAS has played a critical role in facilitating the Mission’s mandate. By clearing minefields and cluster munition strike areas as well as conducting route verifications, UNMAS has enabled safe patrols for United Nations Military Observers, humanitarian aid workers and vulnerable local nomadic populations. With funds made available to UNMAS through the Voluntary Trust Fund for Mine Action (VTF), UNMAS has also reduced the threat posed by landmines/ERW by coordinating mine action activities with mine action local and international partners, conducting humanitarian mine clearance, physical security and stockpile management (in the case of the Territory of Western Sahara; anti-personnel mine stockpile destructions), risk education, capacity enhancement and victim assistance.

So far, UNMAS in the Territory of Western Sahara has released over 146 square kilometers of hazardous areas and has destroyed over 40,000 landmines, cluster munitions and ERW. To complete the work done so far, UNMAS is now seeking USD 3.5 million to clear all known landmine/ERW contamination in the Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm (excluding the buffer zone) by 2023.