

Make landmines the forgotten chapter of our history



“There was once an American Dream that everyone knew about. My Sahrawi dream is for the Territory of Western Sahara to be free from landmines.” In the picture, Mahjuba Borki poses in her workplace at the Sahrawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO). Photo credit UNMAS

This is the story of a person whose determination and courage are not minimised by the difficulties in which she lives. Mahjuba Borki’s family is one of the millions of families who have suffered the horrors of war. In Mahjuba’s family’s case, they lived through the armed conflict that took place in the Territory of Western Sahara from 1975 until 1991 between the Royal Moroccan Army and the Front POLISARIO Military Forces. After four years of brutal confrontations, her family fled from Laayoune in 1979, the main city of the Territory of Western Sahara approximately 20 km away from the Atlantic Ocean, to the depths of the Saharan desert. They reached Tindouf, a city located in the south west of Algeria, characterised by its harsh isolated desert environment, with temperatures surpassing 55 degrees Celsius in the summer. They set up a khaima (tent) in one of the five refugee camps of Tindouf, where they have lived since then. Mahjuba was born there 10 years later.

In 1991, a ceasefire was signed between the parties to the conflict under the auspices of the United Nations. Mahjuba was 2 years at the time, and 27 years later, Mahjuba continues to live in one of the territories most heavily contaminated by landmines. The last confrontation might have been almost 30 years ago, however, the local population has been living in constant fear of these invisible explosive devices ever since.

It is the summer of 2019. We are at the offices of the Sahrawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO) in the refugee camp of Rabouni, where Mahjuba has been working for the last three years as a Finance and Administration Officer. We are here to learn more about her history and



role in making the Territory of Western Sahara free from the threats of mines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW).

While drinking a cup of the traditional tea, Mahjuba begins by telling us about her childhood and her experience growing up as a refugee. *“Life was never easy but I still accepted it. However, once I became older and realised my condition of refugee, the way I understood the world changed forever.”* Mahjuba was relatively lucky in comparison to other young Sahrawis. At the age of 11 she moved to Algiers, the capital city of Algeria, to pursue her education. Once she finished high school, her thirst for knowledge was not over, and therefore she attended university in Algiers, graduating with a Bachelor’s degree in English literature. The experience of studying in Algiers made her a young intellectually engaged person with excellent communication skills: she is fluent in Arabic and English and possesses a working level of Spanish. After obtaining this set of skills and qualifications, she returned to the refugee camps in Tindouf to apply her knowledge to work for a better future for the next generations of Sahrawis. Since she returned to the camps, she has worked in a variety of roles in organisations such as the Spanish Red Crescent, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Sahrawi Ministry of Health. In December 2016, she joined the SMACO, where she has worked ever since.

We ask her how she first heard about the SMACO. *“One day in December 2016, I received a phone call from a SMACO staff member informing that they were looking for a person to join the team as a translator. I immediately applied to the position.”* The the Sahrawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO) constitutes the local Sahrawi mine action centre, which is responsible for coordinating humanitarian mine action activities taking place in the Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm, in accordance with International and Local Mine Action Standards (I/LMAS). Thanks to her skills and professional attitude, Mahjuba was quickly promoted to Finance and Administration Officer. Shortly after, she was also named the victim assistance focal point of SMACO.

Like other local women, Mahjuba wakes up very early in the morning. She prays, cleans the *khaima* (tent) in which she and her family live and then starts work at the SMACO at 08:30. *“One of my main responsibilities is overseeing the effective and transparent financial management of the SMACO. So far, I have accounted the use of over USD 300,000 from various international donors through UNMAS/UNOPS.”* Apart from her financial responsibilities, she is also in charge of managing the maintenance of the compound, for which she leads a team of five support staff. Furthermore, she is responsible for identifying partnership opportunities in regards to victim assistance with international organisations working in Tindouf, as well as local Sahrawi ministries and civil society actors.



“I was already born as a refugee, I do not want to become a migrant now. I will not let the challenges of the era I live in impede me from chasing my dreams.” In the picture, Mahjuba in discussion with a UNMAS staff member in Rabouni. Photo credit: UNMAS

When asked how she feels about contributing to the development of her society, Mahjuba starts by highlighting her close emotional link to mine action. Her father lives in Mehaires (locality situated in the Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm), however his movements are strongly restricted by the continuing presence of deadly explosive devices. *“My family and I would love to leave the refugee camps and live with my father. However, we are unable to reunite with him as long as there is a big threat of unrecorded landmines still present in Mehaires.”* Despite the threat of landmines, Mahjuba’s hopes and dreams are still alive. *“There was once an American Dream that everyone knew about. My Sahrawi dream is for the Territory of Western Sahara to be free from landmines.”* Mahjuba explains to us that if she contributes to strengthening SMACO at all levels, this will ultimately lead to a more effective coordination of mine action activities and, therefore a faster clearance of landmines. *“A landmine-free Western Sahara would lead to the socio-economic development of the land. If not for me, at least for my children.”*

We ask Mahjuba what are the main challenges to her job, to which she responds: *“As a refugee, the main challenge I encounter in my job is a psychological one. It is the fear of losing my job any day and the threat of prolonged unemployment. For me, employment is not only about receiving a salary every month, but also about being busy and having a routine. As a refugee there is not much else apart from your job, and therefore the opportunity to do something intellectually engaging is priceless. The prospect of losing such a basic pillar of life is scary.”* She pauses for a few seconds and then concludes: *“In this context of uncertainty, the fact I have something to do is what pushes me to work every day. I work; therefore I live.”*

In these refugee camps, where the threat of prolonged unemployment is a daily menace, the only possible ambition seems to be to find a job and stick to it at all costs. However, Mahjuba’s ambitions go beyond this fear and she would like to continue progressing in her professional career. *“I was already born as a refugee, I do not want to become a migrant now. I will not let the challenges of the era I live in impede me from chasing my dreams.”* Mahjuba’s determination is



remarkable, particularly taking into account the social pressure and scepticism she often faces, even from members of her family. Perhaps this is exactly what helped her to forge such a strong and assertive personality. We ask how she would describe herself in three words. Her answer is clear: *“Determined, courageous and perseverant. I believe nothing is impossible: once I want to do something I will never give up until it is accomplished.”*

Mahjuba is the perfect reflection of a young woman that has become a role model for her society, despite the difficult conditions in which she lives. She works hard, is eager to learn, and will continue to fight until the contamination of landmines is a forgotten chapter in the book of Sahrawi history. When asked if she would encourage her children to become deminers, her answer is certain. *“Absolutely. I want my kids to contribute to the Sahrawi dream.”* Following her answer, Mahjuba stresses the humanitarian catastrophe that the contamination of landmines represents, one that can affect generations to come if not properly addressed. *“Everyone thinks that each side of the Territory of Western Sahara is controlled by the parties to the conflict. In my opinion, the Territory of Western Sahara is, above all, controlled by landmines.”* We conclude the interview by thanking her for her good work and by asking one last question: *“If you could send a message to a woman working in mine action somewhere else in the world, what would it be?”* Mahjuba hesitates for a moment, thinks about her answer for a couple of seconds and then responds: *“Thousands of lives are still threatened by the continued presence of mines. These people need your help. Do not leave them behind, they depend on you.”*



“I believe nothing is impossible: once I want to do something I will never give up until it is accomplished.” Mahjuba Borki, Finance and Administration Officer, poses in front of the SMACO compound. Photo Credit: UNMAS

UNMAS continues to encourage participation by women like Mahjuba, in the work of local mine action actors such as the SMACO. 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.



Thanks to the generous contributions of the Government of Germany and Denmark through the Voluntary Trust Fund for Mine Action (VTF), UNMAS has been able to develop the capacity of the SMACO to coordinate mine action activities in the Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm, sustainably and under minimal supervision. Mahjuba is one of the key staff members to benefit from regular on-the-job trainings in the following areas of work: finance, administration, organizational management and resource mobilization. In 2017, she had the opportunity to attend the “*UNOPS Mine Action Basic Support Services Course*” in Spiez (Switzerland), which she successfully completed.

So far, UNMAS in the Territory of Western Sahara has released over 147 square kilometres of hazardous areas and has destroyed almost 40,000 landmines, cluster munitions and ERW. To complete the known hazards, UNMAS is now seeking USD 3.5 million to contribute to the clearance of all known landmine/ERW contamination in the Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm (excluding the buffer zone)."

UNMAS in the Territory of Western Sahara would like to thank SMACO for affording us the opportunity to conduct this interview. UNMAS would especially like to thank Mahjuba Borki, for her interest in participating in this interview and for her relentless work for a mine-free world.