

Advocacy dossier

Sultana Khaya

سلطانة خيا

At liberty **Western Sahara**

Sahrawi women's rights defender who was held under de facto house arrest from November 2020 until May 2022. She has endured repeated sexual assaults, physical attacks, and forced injections by Moroccan security forces in reprisal for her advocacy.

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The case at a glance

Sahrawi women's rights defender who was held under de facto house arrest from November 2020 until May 2022. She has endured repeated sexual assaults, physical attacks, and forced injections by Moroccan security forces in reprisal for her advocacy.

Status	Arrested	Country
At liberty	**19 Nov 2020**	**Western Sahara**

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Drop any charges that remain on record against Sultana Khaya in connection with peaceful human rights work.

02 Confirm publicly that Sultana Khaya faces no residual travel, financial, or professional restriction arising from this case.

03 Guarantee that Sultana Khaya can resume that work without surveillance, summons, or further reprisal.

04 Provide effective remedy for the period of deprivation of liberty already served.

02

Documented violations

Each violation and the international standard it breaks.

Arbitrary detention International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9

Defamation and smear campaign International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 17
UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 12

Gender based violence Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 35
Convention against Torture, Article 1

Inhumane detention conditions International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 10
UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules)

Physical assault International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 7, 9

Threats and intimidation UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 12

Torture Convention against Torture, Articles 1, 2
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 7

03

How the case unfolded

19 November 2020

House arrest

De facto house arrest begins

Moroccan security forces establish a heavy presence outside Sultana Khaya's home in Boujdour, preventing her from leaving and restricting visitor access.

13 February 2021

Physical assault

Assaulted during the house arrest and refused transfer to hospital

Front Line Defenders reported that Sultana Khaya was physically assaulted on 13 February 2021, during the house arrest imposed on her in Boujdour without a court order, and that police refused to allow her to be taken to hospital.

5 March 2021

Context

Human Rights Watch documents the police cordon around her home

Human Rights Watch reported harassment, assaults and the police cordon that kept Sultana Khaya confined to her family home in Boujdour.

10 May 2021

Physical assault

Attack at home

Sultana Khaya is physically assaulted and harassed by Moroccan security forces at her residence.

1 July 2021

Statement by UN experts

UN Special Rapporteur condemns reprisals

Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, publicly condemns the reprisals against Sultana Khaya and expresses concern about violence targeting women defenders in Western Sahara.

22 August 2021

Physical assault

Second attack at home

Plain-clothes security agents raided the family home in Boujdour before dawn and physically assaulted Sultana Khaya, her sister Luara and other relatives.

8 November 2021

Physical assault

Sexual assault and forced injection

Masked agents break into the house at 4:30 a.m., sexually and physically assault Sultana, her sister Luara, and their elderly mother. Sultana is forcibly injected with an unknown substance and told she will be too sick to protest.

5 December 2021

Physical assault

Gang-rape and second forced injection

Agents break in again at 4:30 a.m., zip-tie the family, force Sultana to inhale an unknown substance, then gang-rape and beat her and her sister. Sultana is injected in her left hip and loses sensation in her left side.

2022

UN opinion or decision

UN Working Group finds her house arrest arbitrary (Opinion 50/2022)

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that the deprivation of liberty of Sultana Khaya and her sister Luara was arbitrary and discriminatory, and that they had no chance to challenge it.

15 March 2022

Context

US delegation breaks house-arrest siege

A US-based delegation of volunteers, including the acting president of Veterans for Peace, broke the siege of Khaya's home in Boujdour.

30 May 2022

Release

House arrest ends as she leaves Boujdour for medical care in Spain

Sultana Khaya left her home in Boujdour after about 18 months of de facto house arrest and travelled to Spain for medical care. The restrictions on her were never officially lifted.

04

The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: this record was checked against current sources. Sultana Khaya has lived in Spain since leaving her home in Boujdour on 30 May 2022 for medical care after about 18 months of de facto house arrest; the restrictions on her were never officially lifted, and no investigation into the assaults on her and her family has been reported.

Background and Work

Sultana Khaya is President of the League for the Defense of Human Rights and against Plunder of Natural Resources, an organisation based in Boujdour, Western Sahara. Her work centres on promoting the right to self-determination for the Sahrawi people and defending the rights of Sahrawi women. She has participated regularly in peaceful demonstrations that call for self-determination and denounce violence against women in the territory.

Western Sahara remains a contested region. Morocco claims sovereignty over the territory, while the Polisario Front and many Sahrawis advocate for independence or a referendum on self-determination. Human rights defenders working on these issues face sustained repression, including surveillance, harassment, and violence.

House Arrest and Pattern of Attacks

Sultana Khaya was under de facto house arrest from 19 November 2020 until May 2022. Moroccan security forces maintained a heavy presence outside her home, preventing her from leaving and restricting access by visitors. During this confinement, she was subjected to repeated physical and sexual violence.

On 10 May 2021, she was attacked at her home. On 22 August 2021, she was attacked again. Both incidents involved physical assault and harassment by security forces.

On 8 November 2021, at approximately 4:30 a.m., two buses carrying masked Moroccan security forces in plain clothes arrived outside her house. The officers used a construction crane to access the roof, then broke into the apartment she shares with her family. They did not present a warrant. The agents zip-tied Sultana's wrists behind her back and physically and sexually assaulted her and her sister, Luara Khaya. Sultana was forcibly injected with an unknown substance. The officers told her she would become sick and no longer able to protest. Her elderly mother was also physically and sexually assaulted. The attack lasted approximately two hours, ending around 6:30 a.m. The agents left after issuing death threats.

On 5 December 2021, at around 4:30 a.m., Moroccan agents broke into the house again. Sultana was sleeping in the same room as her family. All members of the household were zip-tied. The agents forced Sultana to inhale an unknown substance from a rag, causing her limbs to go numb. She and her sister were gang-raped and beaten. Approximately fifteen minutes after the assault ended, Sultana was forcibly injected in her left hip. She subsequently lost sensation in her left side.

International Response

On 1 July 2021, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders Mary Lawlor condemned the reprisals against Sultana Khaya. She

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 activities in Western Sahara.

Despite this public condemnation, the attacks on Sultana and her family continued. The pattern of sexual violence, forced injections, and sustained confinement constitutes a deliberate campaign of reprisal aimed at silencing her advocacy for Sahrawi self-determination and women's rights.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/sultana-khaya/

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