

Frequently asked questions about “STOLEN”

How did slavery surface while you were making the film?

It was on our third trip to the camps and we'd been living with Fetim and her family for more than a week. Once we'd settled in, Fetim's daughter started to talk about slavery in the camps.

It was then that things started to make sense: Fetim described Deido as her 'white stepmother'; Deido hadn't registered Fetim for the family reunion program; Fetim bears Deido's family name; Fetim was doing the domestic work for Deido and wasn't paid for her work; Fetim gave the money she earned as a teacher to Deido.

The subtleties in their relationship became more evident and then other black people started to tell us about how slavery was affecting their lives.

We had seen many incidents of racism and discrimination even amongst children living in the camps.

[Link to see video.](#)

Why did you decide to make slavery the main issue of the film and not consider the struggle for the independence of Western Sahara?

We went to the refugee camps to make a film about a family reunion, and through one family bring attention to the plight of the refugees who have lived in the desert for more than 30 years.

Our intention was never to make a film about politics or the conflict over Western Sahara; it was always to tell a story of the people.

The narrative of the film follows the story of Fetim being reunited with her mother, their separation was a direct consequence of slavery practices.

What do you mean by 'slavery'?

When using the word slavery, the most common image is that of black slaves in shackles. Slavery in the camps is different and dates back to the old testament. Slaves are usually born slaves rather than captured and remain with the the same master. Slavery is so entrenched in the mind of the slave that violence isn't necessary to keep it alive. The familiar relationship between master and slave makes it difficult for outsiders to identify or even understand.

Within the refugee camps there are 2 groups, those who call themselves "white Arabs" and make up 90% of the population, the other 10% are descendants of black Africans stolen from sub-Saharan Africa.

The black people in the camps describe slavery as: having no rights over their children, possibly given as gifts to friends or family of the master; being the sexual property of the master, the child born of a slave mother is a slave; not being allowed to decide whom you marry; having a slave name and bearing the master's surname; serving the master by tending animals, working or doing household duties without payment.

Some masters are good and some masters are bad. Many black people in the film described beatings by the master. We know one slave who was sent to Paris to study by his master.

Fetim accuses you of misleading her and falsely portraying her story, what do you say about that?

We've never mislead Fetim. During the course of filming, Fetim and Leil disclosed to us that slavery still affected their lives. The reason Fetim and her mother were separated we learned was a result of slavery, and as such important to the story. Deido (Fetim's 'white mother') told us herself, she was good to Fetim because she didn't sell her. Fetim is portrayed in her complexity, as a mother, a teacher, a woman with a 'white heart' but also a woman searching for her own identity and her real family. We believe Fetim knows we didn't mislead her, she has been made to make these retractions and statements by Deido's family and the Polisario. Kevin Bales, the world expert on slavery, explains why adult slaves feel so strongly about accepting slave life: "deeply believing that God wants and expects them to be loyal to their masters, they reject freedom as wrong, even traitorous." Fetim's story is one of the many stories. There are other black people in the camps who talk about their own stories of slavery.

When did you decide the issue of slavery was more important than the safety of the characters?

As soon as we learned slavery was still practiced in a refugee camp monitored by the UN we knew we had an obligation to tell the world. It wasn't just a moral obligation on our part, it was a direct request of the people we met and talked to about slavery.

We have not neglected the safety of these people. In March 2009 we spent several weeks in New York bringing this to the attention of many UN departments including the UN High Commission for Human Rights. The UN are now fully aware of the situation in the camps and Western Sahara.

The safety of the people in the camps is the direct responsibility of the Polisario and if anything happens to Matala, Salem, Em'barick, Tizlam, Leil, Jueda or anyone else who talked to us in the camps, the UN cannot say they weren't aware of the situation.

If we don't expose slavery now, we will be accomplices in the perpetuation of slavery in the refugee camps. In the future when someone else decides to speak out, will they be ignored as well?

[Link to see Matala's statement to the world.](#)

How do you explain Fetim turning up to the premiere in Sydney to denounce the film?

We weren't surprised when Fetim arrived in Sydney. It is common practice among governments in North Africa to go to extraordinary lengths to hide the practice of slavery.

The easiest way for the Polisario to discredit the film was to bring Fetim to Australia and have her say she isn't a slave and that slavery doesn't exist. The film doesn't say Fetim is a slave. The film shows a complex society and what happened when we as filmmakers became concerned slavery existed in the camps.

Fetim wasn't given a passport until 10 days before she travelled to Australia to denounce the film as a fraud. The Polisario paid for Fetim's visit to Australia, it wasn't self-funded as described in the Australian media. Fetim travelled without her children.

You've been accused of paying people to make statements about slavery, did you?

Nobody was paid for interviews. As can be seen in the film the interviews take place in a natural way. Those who chose to speak to us about slavery did so of their own free will and their desire for the world to hear their voices.

The strangest thing about the video of people saying we paid them to talk about slavery is that it contains footage of a man we have never met, that is not in the film or on any of the tapes we recorded in the camps. This video was distributed by the Polisario and filmed by Carlos Gonzalez.

The Polisario gave us a list of suggested presents we should take to the camps, this included many items such as shoes, perfume, clothes, radios etc.

If, as the Polisario claim, we paid people to talk about slavery, why would we then need to fake the translations, as they also claim?

Did you distort or manipulate scenes in the film?

No, we didn't distort or manipulate scenes in the film. We have accurately portrayed what happened to us and the people whose stories we told in the documentary.

We've been accused of paying people to act in the camps. We didn't go to the camps to make a film about slavery, this was only disclosed to us on our third visit, the only visit that we stayed in Fetim's house.

How come no one has found slavery in the camps before you?

That is not correct.

In May 1975 a UN mission visiting the area where the camps are, reported the persistence of slavery and a market in slaves.

In March 2007, the Spanish newspaper El Pais published the story of Saltana, a black girl that was living in slavery in the refugee camps.

[El Pais story](#)

[Video of Saltana](#)

In December 2008, Human Rights Watch published a report that examines the existence of slavery in the refugee camps. They interviewed several slaves.

[HRW Report 2008](#)

Does ‘widespread slavery’ exist in the camps?

We’ve never used the term ‘widespread slavery’ either in the film or otherwise. The first person to suggest we were saying that slavery is ‘widespread’ in the camps was the Polisario representative to Australia, Kamal Fadel.

When we were first detained, the Polisario said that slavery didn’t exist.

In the Human Rights Watch report they admit the survival, “to a limited extent, of certain practices related to antiquated thinking.”

Now the Polisario say that ‘widespread slavery’ does not exist.

The film does not purport to prove anything, it tells a story, opens questions and gives voice to the black people that want to speak out.

The Polisario argue that the liberation card in the film is from Mauritania and not the camps, what do you say about that?

The liberation card shown in the film belongs to one of the characters that lives in the refugee camps. To argue the card is from Mauritania and not the camps is pointless. The fact that someone who has lived in the camps his entire life possesses such a card shows slavery affects the lives of people there. Human Rights Watch published in their 2008 report, a [Manumission](#) document that frees a slave dated June 13, 2007. The document bore an official stamp and was signed by an official representative of the Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs of the Polisario.

UNHCR denies knowledge of the existence of slavery, what do you say about that?

We don’t know why the UN High Commission for Refugees deny knowledge of the existence of slavery in the camps, although we believe the reasons are political.

We raised the issue of slavery with them in 2007, Human Rights Watch published a report in 2008, and the UN itself published a report in 1975 that said slave markets exist in the area of the Polisario camps.

Why is the deputy director from UNHCR claiming you manipulated her interview and that she didn’t sign a consent form?

We requested an on-camera interview with the UN High Commission for Refugees to specifically talk about slavery in the camps. This is well documented through emails. The UNHCR presented Ursula Aboubacar for an interview and we travelled to Geneva specifically to record this interview.

Ursula was well aware we were recording her for a film addressing the issue of slavery in the Polisario camps. Ursula even mentions that the film is an important aspect of bringing attention to this issue.

The interview goes for over an hour and Ursula talks extensively about slavery in the refugee camps.

The excerpts used in the film accurately represent the full interview. The UN made no arrangement with us to see the edited interview before its inclusion in the film.

[Link to interview](#)

How do you answer accusations of “incorrect” translations?

Attacking the translations in the film is a tactic of the Polisario to cast doubt over the film’s authenticity and to distract from the main issue of slavery.

More than seventy per cent of the discussions about slavery are in Spanish, with the remainder being in Hassaniya. The issue of slavery was raised with us in Spanish over many conversations. That’s how we became aware of it.

After criticism was directed at the film with regard to the translations, the dialogue in Hassaniya was scrutinised forensically and verified by the only officially recognised Hassaniya interpreter in Australia.

Even the translator Oumar Sy in New York who worked on the film says the translations are wrong. Are the translations wrong?

We met Oumar Sy in New York on the 11th February 2008, to verify the translations from Hassaniya to English before we finished editing. We worked directly into our editing system and corrected

discrepancies in the subtitles as we worked through the film. We have a copy of the project before and after the changes, including dates and the time code.

Once we finished, we asked him if he was sure all the translations were correct. He signed a letter to say this. When the film was finished we sent him a copy with subtitles. He had more than 4 months to contact us with his concerns.

Oumar Sy was in contact with the Polisario before he raised his concerns with us. The first we heard of his concerns he sent the same email to the New York and Australian representatives of the Polisario. He also sent the email to the Australian media. If he was only interested in accurate translations why did he do this?

How long did you spend in the camps?

We went 3 times to the Saharawi refugee camps and spent close to 7 weeks there. The dates as stamped in our passports are: 14-27 September 2006; 14 January-3 February 2007; 17 April-6 May 2007. We also spent a week with Fetim's husband and son in Spain, 10 days with Fetim's biological family in Western Sahara and almost a week with Fetim's cousin in Mauritania.

Who is Carlos Gonzalez?

Carlos Gonzalez was introduced to us by the Polisario and came with us on our second trip to the camps, on this trip we did not suspect the existence of slavery. He is a cameraman based in California. Carlos is a strong supporter of the Polisario and has spoken at [pro-Polisario events](#) in the US.

You've been accused of fabricating your detention by the Polisario. They say it happened at 5pm and in the film it appears to happen at night, why?

We didn't fabricate our detention. The Polisario detained us from 5pm until we were taken out of the camps by the UN at 3am. The events surrounding our exit from the camps, from leaving Fetim's house to hiding the tapes, being detained by the Polisario and being rescued by the UN, all occurred over two nights and one day.

The film's producer Tom Zubrycki made a statement to the press that you weren't detained. Where you really detained?

Yes we were detained by the Polisario.

When Tom made that statement to the press he hadn't spoken to us for several days. He made the statement on his own, capitulating to the pressure the Polisario's representative, Kamal Fadel was putting on him to make a statement saying we weren't detained.

Tom later told us his thinking was to save the film and smooth things over with the Polisario, so we could go back to the camps.

Everything we present in the film happened, and more. Tom's statement was very damaging for our relationship with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. DFAT told the [press](#) they'd made vigorous representations to the Algerian government on our behalf, so we could leave Algeria.

You've been accused of having a Moroccan connection, do you?

Our connection with Morocco is presented in the film.

From meeting a Moroccan in Paris, done on the condition we filmed it, travelling to NY to filming in Western Sahara.

We spent the last 4 months of post-production in New York and once the film was finished we showed it to the UN and other Human Rights organisations, to make them aware of the situation to better protect the characters of the film. Because of that we have been accused of campaigning for Morocco at the UN. We've never tried to discredit the Saharawi fight for independence and we've never worked for Morocco.

Have you used copyright material without permission?

In January 2009 we received a video from Carlos Gonzales via Screen Australia (the film's major investor), of a statement from Fetim saying she didn't want to be in the film and that we were working for Morocco.

In the interests of transparency and to present every facet of the story to the audience we included this statement at the end of the film; at the encouragement of Screen Australia. The copyright had not been cleared with Carlos Gonzales before the film screened at the Sydney Film festival. The footage has since been removed and replaced with a stronger scene that better illustrates the Polisario's opposition to the film.

Many Saharawi families were separated during the invasion in 1975 but you left this out of the film?

We didn't leave it out of the film. Early on in the film we mention that many families were separated because Morocco invaded Western Sahara. The premise of the film was to tell the story of a family reunion, focussing on one family. Of all the characters introduced to us by the Polisario we chose Fetim.

During the course of making the film we learned Fetim was separated from her mother long before the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara. Not only did Deido bring Fetim to the camps she also changed Fetim's surname to her own, which is characteristic of slavery.

Deido left her eldest daughter behind in Western Sahara with her mother at the time of the Moroccan invasion. Her daughter, Beguia moved to the camps from Western Sahara several years ago. Deido lives with her three children in the camps.