

**NO  
MORE**

# **BORDER RESISTANCES**

**FOR AWA DIABATÉ, A FREE WOMAN**

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**PROJET  
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**Resistances at the Borders** is a **monthly column** that is part of the **NoMore: Monitoring Italian-Tunisian Border Practices project**, an initiative by **Mem.Med: Memoria Mediterranea**, funded by **Oxfam Italy**. **The column** was created as a **space for collective writing and awareness-raising**, where Mem.Med members, people on the move, and activists work together to gather and narrate **stories lived at the borders. Through storytelling from the margins, the goal is to restore dignity and value to the experiences of those facing migration and to denounce the violence and injustices that emerge from border management policies.**

**The February 2025 issue is dedicated to our sister Awa and her son Mohammed, who lost their lives in the waters of the Mediterranean in search of freedom.**

**The column is coordinated by** Ludovica Gualandi, **with graphic design by** Sofia Baraldo.

**Contributors:** Anna Paola Ammirati, Bintou Toure, Francesca Mazzuzi, Giovanni Terraneo, Giuseppe Platania, Hajer Ayachi, Jalila Tamallah, Sara Biasci, Silvia Di Meo, Sofia Stimmatini, Valentina Delli Gatti, Waffo Soho Laundry, Yasmine Accardo.

# FOR AWA DIABATÉ, A FREE WOMAN

The **story of Awa Diabaté**, as personally known by the writer, is a story of **sisterhood**, a story of **resistance** against systemic violence, a story of **courage** in the face of the fierce inequalities that affected her and other migrant women. It is also the story of a **person who dreamed of being free** in a world that is not free for Black and migrant women.

Our first encounter with Awa dates back to 2021 when her presence at the **Tunisian-Libyan border** became the focal point around which female alliances, friendships, and struggles took shape—mobilizing many people striving to survive and fight against racism and discrimination. In Medenine, within a social tailoring workshop, forms of resistance were born that still endure today, thanks in part to Awa, even though she is no longer with us.



The dress of freedom sewn by women in the social sewing workshop in southern Tunisia.

## THE PROTESTS OF MIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN

Awa was one of the **demonstrators** in the **protests at the Tunisian-Libyan<sup>1</sup> border** that took place between late **2021** and the spring of **2022**.

In the winter of 2021, with **funding cuts to UN organizations** responsible for the reception of migrants and refugees in Tunisia, **the number of housing facilities, services, and assistance for foreign nationals arriving by sea or from Libya and settling in Zarzis or Medenine<sup>2</sup> was drastically reduced.**



Awa and her son Mohamed, who died in the Central Mediterranean on the night of February 5, 2023.

1. See Inkifada: <https://inkyfada.com>

2. Report by Avocats Sans Frontières: <https://ftdes.net>

Due to the harsh living conditions, **many migrant and refugee women began protesting at the IOM and UNHCR centers in Medenine**, which were supposed to provide them with shelter, medical care, and essential goods. **Before long, the UN organizations started evicting women, children, and families<sup>3</sup>, forcing them onto the streets.**

Awa, along with her Ivorian, Guinean, Cameroonian, and Sudanese companions, set up a protest camp to oppose these new measures<sup>4</sup>. Together with other women and children, **they occupied the streets surrounding the IOM and UNHCR reception centers, loudly demanding legal protection, healthcare, and the disbursement of pocket money to buy food and secure the bare minimum for survival.**

Although it was rarely reported or given attention, **Tunisia was already unsafe for migrants and Black people long before the Tunisian president's speech in February 2023, which officially marked the shift toward state racism** under the pretext of an "ethnic replacement" threat posed by foreigners. **Between 2021 and 2022, racist discrimination and violence by authorities were already routine, albeit concealed—a "hidden hell"<sup>5</sup> that humiliated racialized and Black people.**

When the evictions from humanitarian shelters began, forcing people to leave the only roof they had, **the situation became even more dire for women: labor exploitation, sexual violence, lack of healthcare, and various forms of abuse and oppression—each taking on gendered dimensions in the way female subjects were specifically affected by the confinement and control policies enforced by humanitarian and security agencies.**

At the same time, **Tunisian authorities** were carrying out **pushbacks** of Black people into the desert at the Libyan border. We received videos and testimonies from that remote limbo and tried to publicly expose the silent atrocities taking place. This is why, **in December, a series of uprisings erupted in front of the UN offices, led by the former residents of the shelters.**

Awa was always at the forefront of these mobilizations, standing on the dusty roads of Route de Ben Gardane. There is one image that all of us hold onto: Awa, holding her son Mohamed in her arms, standing on the sidewalk and fearlessly shouting as she denounced the ongoing pushbacks, calling out the rights and responsibilities of those who were supposed to protect refugees:

*"We want justice for those people they are letting die at the Libyan border!"*

In the days that followed, the situation escalated. During one particularly intense protest, **IOM staff called the National Guard and seriously threatened to throw Awa and the other demonstrators into the Libyan desert. She was unfazed by these intimidations—she stood firm in the front line, advancing fearlessly toward the entrance, furious, with her piercing gaze.**

However, it soon became clear to everyone that getting any response to their demands was impossible. Gradually, **the protests in southern Tunisia faded, partly due to increasing intimidation from UN center managers and police forces, who intervened to dismantle the sit-in.**

# THE ROAD OF BLACK WOMEN

Awa's story in Tunisia was never an easy one, long before she ended up on the streets due to UN agencies. She had previously endured **domestic violence** at the hands of the man she lived with. Before becoming pregnant, she had left her partner—Mohamed's father—after enduring a series of abuses from which she had struggled to defend herself for a long time.

3. FTDES (Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights) Statement: [Comunicato FTDES \(Forum Tunisien Droits Économiques et Sociaux\)](https://ftdes.net): <https://ftdes.net>

4. See MeltingPot: <https://www.meltingpot.org>

5. See L'Espresso: <https://lespresso.it>

After a particularly **severe assault by her partner, she had turned to the local authorities, but her condition as a Black migrant woman ended up exposing her further to a vortex of violence: "my life meant nothing,"** she later told us during a recount of that experience.

Pregnant with Mohamed, she had left the home she shared with her ex-partner and began working as a **domestic worker in Tunisian households** to support herself. When it was time to give birth, she requested to be admitted to the IOM center in Medenine to find a safe place, where she stayed until the evictions. **"I came here to survive, to have the bare minimum. It was both torment and care, here I met my sisters."**

After being evicted from the IOM center in Medenine, several Sub-Saharan companions, with whom she had shared the days of protest, left for other Tunisian cities or Europe, but many remained in Medenine and Zarzis, unable to afford to move north or across the sea. The group of Ivorian and Guinean mothers and sisters, including Awa, continued to live together, sharing what they had with those passing through Medenine for a night or a longer stay.

**Awa continued to frequent the streets whenever a new companion arrived from the sea or the desert, offering her strength, contacts, and the strategies of someone who knows well certain forms of violence.** When other migrants, fleeing from Libya or labor exploitation, arrived at the house of the Ivorian sisters with physical and psychological wounds from atrocious violence, she immediately took action to care for them, guiding them to the right place, treating their wounds, or offering them respite, while also caring for their children. **Awa used her body with both anger and care, both in the streets and at home.**



Ph: Silvia Di Meo, the hands of the sisters sewing freedom.



Ph. Silvia Di Meo. Protests of women and children in Zarzis and Medenine 2021-2022.

# FOR THE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

Awa dreamed of Europe, like everyone else. Half of the time spent together was devoted to **imagining a future freedom, the other half to trying to achieve it.** To escape the oppression of exploited labor, the abuses of some men, and to face the malaise of a structurally discriminatory condition, **the Sub-Saharan women of Medenine decided to dedicate themselves to the weaving of fabrics** – from Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, and Nigeria – which they managed to bring from their home countries.

They began to meet daily to start this activity, which took place both in their living spaces and in a **small sewing room, a safe social space within the headquarters of an association in Medenine.** Among a couple of old sewing machines, some fabric salvaged from the market, and the support of some Tunisian seamstresses, the **FreeFemmes collective came to life.** Awa was one of the founders and the soul of FreeFemmes<sup>6</sup>, the collective we built together. She was also Awa, an “artisan for the freedom of movement.”

With the birth of FreeFemmes, Tunisian, Ivorian, Cameroonian, and Nigerian women began to meet regularly in the city of Medenine. Inside the sewing workshop, where **there was also a space for the children while their mothers worked, they studied and enhanced techniques for sewing, embroidery, and fabric processing.** Slowly, a place for work and social emancipation was created. A completely female space where the opportunity to work in a safe environment was affirmed, one where it was also possible to express oneself and share stories.

Awa, along with her companions, embroidered the “Dress of Freedom,” the first symbolic object created by FreeFemmes, which came to life in the heart of the Tunisian-Libyan border, sewn and worn by the artisans themselves<sup>7</sup>. **A dress embroidered with words that deeply marked the migratory journey, but also the stay at the border.** Words that emerged during the mutual aid meetings the artisans held: ***Killing because of self-determination, rape, violence, racism, running for only life, cultural depression, banishment, coeurbrisé...*** Words that described the stages of the journey from the countries of origin to North Africa, through the many violent and painful intersections.

Between a protest against pushbacks and the hospital care of a companion who had arrived from Libya, **sewing and embroidery became the activities that helped shape the days of each woman into collective reflection, finding space to share suffering and resistance together**

6. FreeFemmes: <https://www.facebook.com/FreeFemmes/>

7. See MeltingPot: <https://www.meltingpot.org>

Within a few weeks, with the sales of various sewing items, it became possible to gain some independence and begin to think about the future and the dreams of self-realization, in order to escape exploitation and abuse.

Meanwhile, the vibrant energy of the sewing workshop, active every day, **allowed the creation of a space for care, sharing, and redemption in the increasingly hostile and oppressive context of southern Tunisia. Supporting this project were the Tunisian mothers and sisters of missing or deceased migrants in the Mediterranean, with whom spaces for meetings and discussions on the theme of border deaths were opened.**

The workshop grew progressively and became an increasingly participatory space. The handcrafted items began circulating not only in Tunisia but also in Europe, funding the livelihood and work activities of migrants and refugees.

**No longer "cœurs brisés" (broken hearts): step by step, the FreeFemmes—through practices of care and alliances—began to realize the desire to burn down the bordering regime.**

Ph. Silvia Di Meo, one of the sisters sewing a FreeFemmes pouch.



# TO LEAVE AND DIE

**In February 2023, Awa Diabaté decided to take the sea route to reach Italy. She left on the night of February 5th with her son Mohamed.** Before boarding the boat, she sent a message to some of us declaring what she was about to do. **We understand the desire to escape that drove Awa to leave the shores of Sfax that night, and we recognize the strength behind her pursuit of a freedom she had long dreamed of.**

**That night, Awa lost her life in the waves, along with her child Mohamed.** Her journey ended early; she hadn't gotten far from the Tunisian coast. **The local National Guard intercepted the boat she was traveling on with other Sub-Saharan people and, in an attempt to prevent the departure, rammed the boat, causing it to capsize.** Nothing new—we knew these assaults by Tunisian forces had already caused dozens of shipwrecks with the same dynamics<sup>8</sup>. That night, some bodies were brought back to shore, and a few people survived the attack to tell the story.

However, **gathering more detailed information was a months-long task. The absence of a body left us hoping that Awa might still be alive, despite testimonies from some informed people that led us to fear the opposite.** A group of us went to Sfax in search of information; we spent days roaming the city, visiting beaches and morgues, but eventually had to leave because we had asked too many questions, and the authorities began to put pressure on us.

In the end, **we had understood that the truth about Awa's fate was hidden in Mahdia: we went to the local Red Cross, with the support of some Tunisian activists. There, it was informally confirmed that Awa had died with her child and that her body had been buried together with others, without names, in some pit in the cemetery ground in front of the sea in Mahdia.** No one wanted to help us find the exact burial place of Awa, which remains unknown to this day. **We never saw her body again.**

Thus, Awa's story ended like many other migrant people's stories, both before and after her. Many others for whom Awa, in the previous years, had set out searching—contacting those directly responsible—to find a body, to reassure a distant family waiting for answers.

**A few days after the news of Awa's death, we organized, on both sides of the Mediterranean— in Tunisia, from where she had departed, and in Sicily, where some of us were waiting for her— a moment of farewell to our companion. It was the only tribute we could offer to her life, a life that for us remains full of beauty and love.**

The pain and anger we felt were devastating and hard to explain. **It is a present, alive pain that burns today as it did yesterday.** There is no way to say how much her loss shattered the dreams of a happy future. How it broke the hopes of all of us, regardless of our origin and the place we were in: the strength drawn from precious alliances was harshly tested by the pain that bent bodies and minds. **We all felt like we failed and died with Awa.** There is no way to say how much the hatred for those who caused that shipwreck still consumes us, how much the anger for these borders tears us apart from within and drives us, from her death onward, to fight even harder against this silent devastation.



## TO NAME AWA

**Today marks two years since we lost Awa, two years since they killed her and her little Mohamed** to prevent them from reaching Europe, in the name of the security of a nationalism of nation-states, in the name of a colonialism with a white conscience that militarizes the sea and the land.

What saddens us the most is not having even a place to bring a flower or a word of farewell, a place to gather together to remember her with love.

We know this: the border not only takes the life of those who cross it but also deprives those left behind—families, communities, and friends—of the right to process that loss, in that barbaric wound that consumes quietly, that denies crimes and criminals, and for this reason, it never heals.



**The border takes and grinds like a meat grinder. It reduces names, stories, entanglements, existences, relationships, expectations, and desires into pulp. The border destroys an idea of freedom as a shared horizon, without leaving any trace of memory.**

After two years, we would like to say that something has changed, in Tunisia and in the Mediterranean, that the justice Awa fought for has been achieved, but it is not so.

However, we can proudly say that **the space of sisterhood and struggle, born thanks to her, continues to exist, lives on both sides of the sea, and nourishes our lives despite the fact that today, more than ever, it is an extremely difficult challenge to keep it alive. It resists, thus, without letting despair win.**

What gives us strength is the awareness that we will continue to tear apart this curtain of silence surrounding border deaths and the desensitization to racist violence, like an Ivorian and colorful fabric torn by the strength of the hands of women that Awa knew well. **We will continue to ensure that Awa's story does not fade into oblivion and the silence of countless other stories of oppression whose outlines remain indistinct.**

We will continue to accuse the murderers of Awa and Mohamed, even if they believe themselves acquitted.

We will continue to name Awa and remember the image of her in the streets of Medenine as she protested against evictions and deportations.

While she cared for us others.

We will continue to find a place of memory in the flight of birds that freely cross our skies, as Awa always told us.

While she laughed amid those fabrics that had given us a bit of freedom.

And the hope for a new world, who knows, beyond the sea.

Bintou and Silvia



Ph. Silvia Di Meo. Protests of women and children in Zarzis and Medenine 2021-2022.