

Leila Alaoui obituary

Photographer who highlighted issues relating to migration and cultural diversity



Leila Alaoui died after a terrorist incident in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Photograph: Augustin Le Gall/Haytham

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The photographer Leila Alaoui has died aged 33 of a heart attack after being shot in terrorist attacks in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Alaoui was in Ouagadougou to work on a photography project for a women's rights campaign called My Body My Rights for Amnesty International.

Her work appeared in publications including the New York Times and Vogue, and her photographs have been widely exhibited. She was probably best known for a series of portraits of Moroccan people, shown recently in Paris at the Biennial of Contemporary Arab World Photography. "It's work I began in 2010 but it's ongoing," she told me in an interview in

November. “Moroccans have the most complicated relationship to photography among Arabs because they are very apprehensive due to superstition. They are also tired of tourism, so there is a sort of rejection of the camera. My hope was to show traditional Moroccans without the folklore.”

One of three children of a French mother, Christine (nee Abrate), and a Moroccan father, Abdelaziz Alaoui, a businessman, Leila was born in Paris and grew up in Marrakech. As an adolescent, she wanted to become a photojournalist. She studied photography and anthropology at the City University of New York and was inspired by the work of the US photographers Richard Avedon and Robert Frank.

After working in photography and film, Alaoui returned to Morocco in 2008 when she received a grant from the European Union for a photographic project on migrants, a subject which remained of constant interest to her, as did the humanitarian consequences of migration. She explained: “I wanted to do a project on cultural diversity. I’m from Morocco but when I travel from region to region, I have the impression of being in a different country each time. I wanted to make a cultural road trip like Robert Frank did with *The Americans*. It’s important to capture these traditions that are disappearing and to create a visual archive.”



A photograph of Martine Kabore by Leila Alaoui, taken on 13 January in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, as part of the My Body My Rights campaign. Photograph: Leila Alaoui

Alaoui would pick a region in Morocco and then spend a week in a village with her mobile studio “so that people would get used to me and feel comfortable. I would wait for market day, when people not just from the village but also from surrounding villages would come. I installed my studio in the middle of the market, with a black background and two spotlights. Kids would come and I would take pictures of them, print them out and give to them. Out of 200 photos there would be one that was interesting.”

She used different methods to engage local women: “It was more complicated. On Fridays sometimes I would buy ingredients and we would make a big couscous together. None of the photographs were staged. People naturally pose in a similar manner and I framed the

photographs the same way for visual unity.”

Alaoui had also started to work on a project she felt passionate about, photographing the generation of North African workers who moved to France, primarily to work in the automobile industry. She was planning on then photographing their children, the second-generation, some of whom have turned to radical Islam. “I want to look at this lost youth that has no more identity,” she told me. “France holds some sort of responsibility in not integrating this youth. If you’re a young Muslim today in France without opportunities, feeling stigmatised, unfortunately there’s nothing for you, not even leftist ideologies or Che Guevara. When I was 18 I listened to Bob Marley - everybody wants to be a revolutionary at that age.”

When I interviewed her soon after the opening of the Paris biennial, it was only a few days after the 13 November attacks in the city, in which a friend of hers had been wounded. “Given what happened last week, there’s a lot to be done to show that the Arab world is not just Islamic State,” she said. “This biennial plays an even more important role now. What is great is that for the first time you’re not seeing cliches of the Arab world but the diversity.”

Alaoui is survived by her parents and by her siblings, Soulaïmane and Yasmina.

· Leila Alaoui, photographer, born 10 July 1982; died 18 January 2016

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