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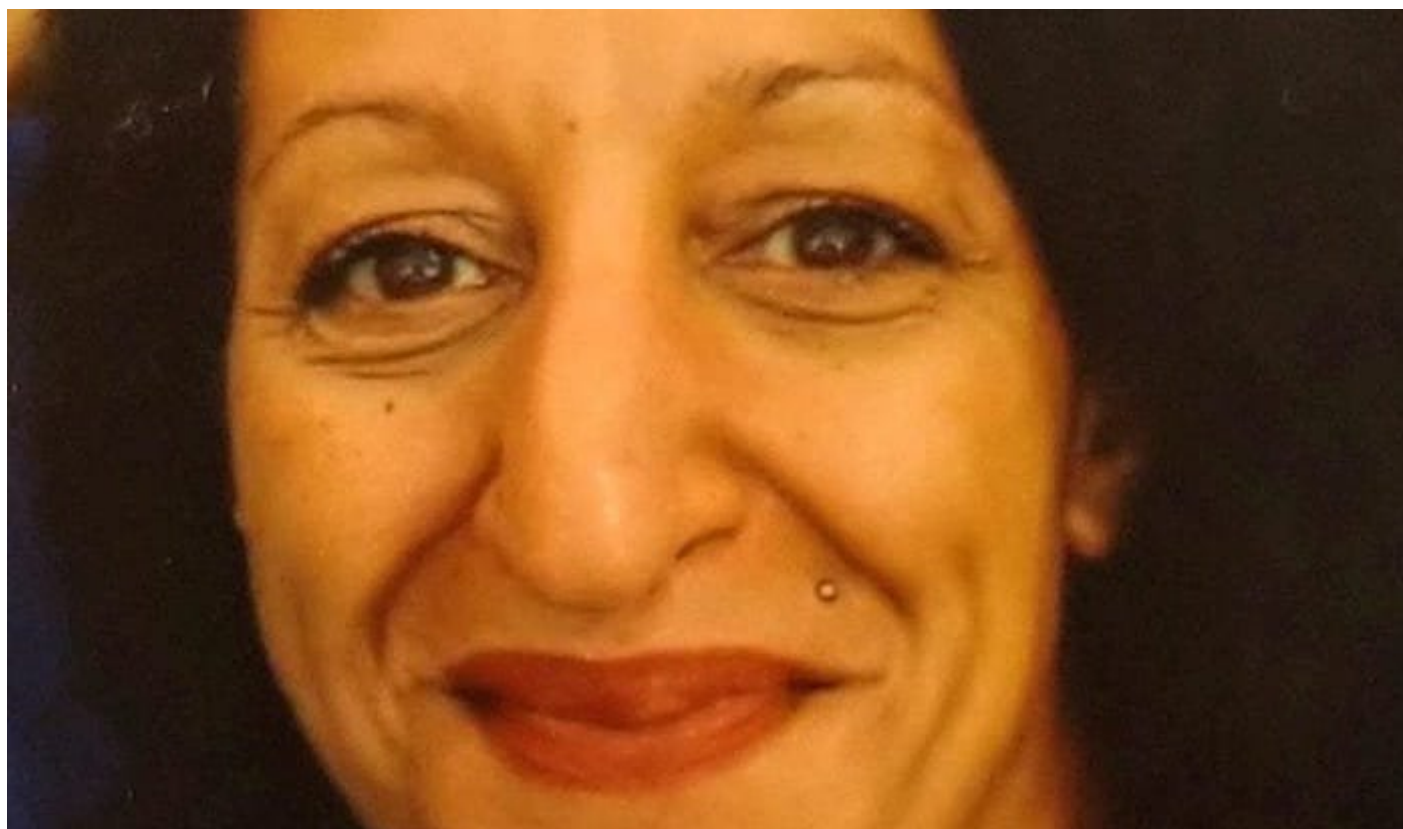
Family's plea over Belgian-Tunisian woman found dead in police cell

Sourour Abouda is the third person of North African descent to die in unexplained circumstances in Rue Royale.

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Sourour Abouda, the 46-year-old mother and NGO worker who died in a police cell in Brussels. | Mouvement de PAC

The family of a Belgian-Tunisian woman found dead in a Brussels police cell deny the official line that she died by suicide and have asked the Tunisian government to conduct its own investigation, openDemocracy has discovered.

Two other people of North African descent died in the same police station in 2021, when the UN expressed concerns about “police-related racial violence” in Belgium.

On 11 January, Sourour Abouda went for lunch and drinks with colleagues at a Portuguese restaurant in Brussels to celebrate the new year. At 8.34am the following day, the 46-year-old social worker and mother was found dead in a police cell.

“We talked a little, we laughed a little, and then I didn’t see her again,” said Fabrice Gérard, who knew Abouda and saw her at another café the same night. Gérard is also a journalist reporting on the story for RTBF, Belgium’s French-

language public radio and TV service.

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According to Gérard, the police told Abouda's family that she died by suicide, using her sweatshirt to strangle herself, but the family refutes this.

"Her family said she never made any suicidal indications in the past. She would have never left her son alone," the family's lawyer Selma Benkhelifa told openDemocracy. "Suddenly, in a police [cell], she decides to kill herself without any apparent reason? It's very strange."

The public prosecutor's office also claimed that "the death could correspond to a suicide". "Based on the initial findings and the provisional autopsy report, it would seem that there was no third-party intervention," a spokesperson said on 16 January.

A judicial investigation into Abouda's death by Belgium's police watchdog, known as Committee P, is currently underway.

Benkhelifa and the family have not seen a police report, CCTV footage from the night Abouda was arrested, surveillance footage of her cell, or a post-mortem report.

Abouda's sister Soumaya told openDemocracy that the family was busy arranging a burial for Abouda in Tunisia and also trying to set up a "counter investigation" there, because "the Belgian state isn't helping us". They are currently waiting for the results of a second post-mortem.

Abouda is the third person of North African descent in two years to be found dead in a prison cell at the same Brussels-Capital-Ixelles police station, which is located on Rue Royale in City of Brussels municipality.

“Unfortunately, this is not the first time that we see deaths occur in a cell in this police station, which implies that serious things have happened,” wrote Allan, Abouda’s 19-year-old son, in an Instagram post four days after his mother’s death.

A spokesperson from the Tunisian embassy in Brussels told openDemocracy last week: “The embassy is in continuous contact with the family of the deceased and the Belgian authorities (federal and regional) to find out the exact circumstances of the death of the Tunisian national Sourour Abouda, as soon as possible.”

Sobering-up cells

The police arrested Abouda at about 6am on 12 January in the chic district of Châtelain in Ixelles, a suburb south-east of Brussels, for public intoxication and disturbing public order, according to Gérard’s reporting. She was handcuffed and placed into a *cellule de dégrisement*, or sobering-up cell, at the Rue Royale police station.

Belgian law says that an intoxicated person causing public disorder, or appearing as a threat to themselves or others, can be detained for up to 12 hours in order to ‘sober up’. They must also receive medical attention, if needed. Police cells are designed to make injury, self-harm and suicide difficult, but the police are expected to continuously video-monitor the detainee.

“But [Abouda] didn’t see a doctor,” said Benkhelifa. “Why did the police officers whose duty it was to take care of her not watch the cameras? The station was supposed to protect her from herself.”

The mayor of Ixelles told local media he had read Abouda’s police report. It said she was arrested in a car after the vehicle’s owner had called the police because Abouda, who was drunk and incoherent, had refused to get out of the car,

according to the mayor. She was then taken to the police station to sober up.

As soon as the police report becomes publicly available, Benkhelifa plans to file a civil lawsuit against the police for failing to protect Abouda while she was in their custody.

‘Persistent racial profiling’

In 2021, two Algerian men in their 20s died in unexplained circumstances in the same Brussels police station as Abouda.

Ilyes Abbeddou, 29, was found dead in his cell in January, the afternoon after his arrest. Mohamed Amine Berkane, 26, was found dead in December, nine hours after his arrest. Berkane's friend, who was detained at the same time, said: “In the police station, the police know where the cameras are; they hit us when they know they won't be filmed.”

There are still no answers as to how Abbeddou and Berkane died. Committee P is handling both of these ongoing judicial investigations. In both cases, the prosecutor's office has ruled out the intervention of a third party (as it has in Abouda's case).

But a spokesperson for the Observatory of Police Violence in Belgium (ObsPol) told openDemocracy: “The fact that three deaths occurred in the same police station cannot be considered an ‘accident’... Especially since in these three cases, they were people of North African origin.”

ObsPol, which regularly receives testimonies from victims of police violence, said it hoped the investigation into Abouda's death would be “honest”, adding: “We believe it is not only the person who committed the acts that should be sanctioned, but also the system that allows him to do so and that often keeps silent.”

Belgian activists have long pointed out that ethnic profiling by the police is almost normalised, while the 2021 report on Belgium by the UN Committee on

the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) expressed concern over “police-related racial violence” and “persistent racial profiling”.

CERD recommended that the country “take measures to ensure prompt, thorough and impartial investigations into all allegations of racist incidents caused by or involving the police”, and also that it should diversify its police force.

The public prosecutor’s office in Charleroi, south of Brussels, has just announced that police officers will not be put on trial for the death in 2018 of a Slovakian national, Jozef Chovanec, after he sustained injuries in police custody.

Images leaked in 2020 showed police officers laughing as one female officer made a Nazi salute, while another sat on Chovanec’s rib cage for 16 minutes. A 2021 report said he had died of self-inflicted wounds.

Parallel with George Floyd

Selma Benkhelifa, the Abouda family’s lawyer, believes there are parallels between Abouda’s death and the murder of George Floyd by white US police in Minneapolis in 2020.

An official post-mortem found that Floyd, who was the same age as Abouda, had suffered a cardiac arrest while being restrained by police. But a second independent autopsy, requested by the family, revealed that he died from asphyxia – and that there were no underlying health issues that contributed to his death.

Both examinations, though, concluded that his death was homicide.

“We see that [state] pathologists and police work a lot with each other. They know each other,” she said. “It makes it difficult to know the truth.” She added that if, by contrast, the Tunisian government were to lead an investigation, “they would have no reason to lie”.

Benkhelifa – who is a member of the Progress Lawyers Network, which fights racial discrimination in the justice system – told openDemocracy that she had wanted to be a lawyer since she was a teenager to address this problem.

“If there are no sanctions, the message you give is that [the police] are free to do what they want – and that makes me very afraid,” she said.

‘They deserve the truth’



A photograph of Sourour Abouda at a vigil marking her death in Brussels, 15 January. | Jean-Philippe Wéry

On a rainy Sunday evening, three days after Abouda’s death, a candlelit vigil was held on the steps of the police station where she died. More than 300 people came to place candles, photos and memories of Abouda on the memorial, said the journalist Fabrice Gérard.

It was “strong and symbolic,” he told openDemocracy. “It was a moment of recollection, so it remained calm.”