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SAHRAWI WOMEN'S RESISTANCE IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS AND IN THE SPANISH DIASPORA

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September, 2023



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E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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This dissertation is dedicated to all the Sahrawi women who give their lives to their people and the Sahrawi struggle. These women show strength, resilience, and bravery every single day.

Acknowledgement

I am deeply grateful to every single person who played a pivotal role in supporting me throughout the journey of writing this dissertation. Without their support and encouragement, this research would not have been possible and would certainly be far less enriching.

Foremost, I extend my gratitude to my two supervisors, Giulia Daniele, and Dora Rebelo, for their insightful guidance and support. Their expertise and commitment to my academic growth have been invaluable, shaping the course of this research.

Special appreciation goes to Jadyia, a Sahrawi woman whose dedication and collaboration were integral to this study. She not only engaged in conversations with me about Western Sahara but also arranged meetings with most of the women in the refugee camps, providing crucial translation services throughout. Jadyia's involvement enriched the project beyond measure.

I am profoundly indebted to all the women who actively participated in this research, particularly the nine women who shared their stories during the interviews. Their willingness to share their unique perspectives formed the backbone of this study, and I am deeply moved by their contributions.

On a personal note, I extend my deepest thanks to my family, especially my mother and grandparents, for their unwavering support during the most challenging moments of writing this dissertation. Their love and encouragement sustained me throughout this journey.

My sincere appreciation also goes to my friends and colleagues, who walked alongside me. Feeling understood and supported by them provided the strength and determination needed to carry out this research successfully.

Resumo

Enraizadas numa rica herança que se estende por gerações, as mulheres Saarauís desempenham um papel central na preservação da identidade cultural do seu povo. Esta dissertação analisa de forma abrangente as contribuições destas mulheres no seio da sociedade Saraauí, explorando a sua resistência contra a opressão, tanto nos campos de refugiados como na diáspora espanhola. Apesar da importância da invasão do Saara Ocidental, o papel vital das mulheres nesta luta é muitas vezes negligenciado. Através de entrevistas online analisadas através de Análise Temática, este estudo foca-se nas ligações históricas das mulheres Saarauís com a luta nacional, revelando as múltiplas facetas no movimento de resistência. Os resultados destacam perspetivas distintas sobre igualdade de género e desafios de emancipação. Uma preocupação em comum surge em relação à sub-representação das mulheres na Política. No entanto, entende-se que as mulheres Saaharauis nos campos de refugiados e na diáspora não concordam com os níveis de igualdade de género existentes, nem com os assuntos que carecem de prioridade na luta. Esta investigação enfatiza o papel indispensável das mulheres Saarauís na preservação do património cultural e na resistência à opressão. Sublinha-se a importância de reconhecer as suas diversas perspetivas na construção do futuro da sociedade Saraauí.

Palavras-chave:

Sahara Ocidental; Mulheres; Resistência; Igualdade de Género; Emancipação.

Abstract

Rooted in a rich heritage spanning generations, Sahrawi women play a central role in preserving the cultural identity of their people. This dissertation comprehensively analyses their pivotal contributions within the Sahrawi society, exploring their resistance against oppression in both the refugee camps and the Spanish diaspora. Despite the significance of the Western Sahara invasion, the vital role of women in this struggle often remains overlooked. Through online interviews analysed through Thematic Analysis, this study delves into the historical ties of Sahrawi women to the national struggle, uncovering their multifaceted roles in the resistance movement. The findings highlight distinctive perspectives on gender equality and emancipation challenges. A shared concern emerges about women's underrepresentation in politics. However, it is understood that Sahrawi women in the refugee camps and in the Diaspora do not agree on existing gender equality levels, nor on the subjects that need priority in the struggle. This research underscores the indispensable role of Sahrawi women in preserving cultural heritage and resisting oppression. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and embracing their diverse perspectives in shaping the future of Sahrawi society.

Keywords:

Western Sahara; Women; Resistance; Gender Equality; Emancipation.

Index

Acknowledgment	iii
Resumo.....	v
Abstract	vii
Glossary of acronyms.....	xi
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2. Self-Reflexivity and Feminist Approaches: My Positionality	3
Chapter 3. Theoretical framework on women in war zones and occupations	9
Chapter 4. History of Resistance.....	13
4.1 Nomadic Ancestry: Western Sahara before colonization.....	13
4.2 From 1884 until 1975: Spanish Colonization.....	15
4.3 From 1974 until 1975: the referendum that never happened and the Green March.....	19
4.4 From 1975 until 1991: the Western Sahara War.....	20
4.5 From 1991 to 2020: new prospects for a Referendum and the ceasefire	22
Chapter 5. Sahrawi Women’s Resistance in the Refugee Camps and the Diaspora	25
5.1 Survival in the refugee camps	27
5.1.1 Organization of the refugee camps in Algeria.....	27
5.1.2 Women in charge of survival	30
5.2 Sahrawi Women in the Spanish diaspora	33
Chapter 6. Methodology.....	35
6.1 Operationalization	35
6.2 Hypothesis	36
6.3 Data collection and analysis	37
6.4 Study limitations.....	38
Chapter 7. Results	41
7.1 Understanding Sahrawi Gender Roles and Equality Narratives.....	41
7.2 Exploring Differing Views of Challenges.....	49

Chapter 8. Conclusion57

Bibliography61

Glossary of acronyms

ICJ – International Court of Justice

MINURSO – Misión de Naciones Unidas para el Referendo en el Sáhara Occidental

MLS – Movimiento de Vanguardia para la Liberación del Sáhara

OALS – Organización Avanzada para la Liberación del Sáhara

PUNS – Partido de Unión Nacional Saharaui

SADR – Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic

SPLA – Sahrawi Popular Liberation Army

UN – United Nations

UNMS – Unión Nacional de Mujeres Saharaui

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Colonisation and subsequential decolonisation processes moulded the African continent to European needs. This was the case of Western Sahara, colonized by Spain. When the European country began taking its first steps towards democratisation, the independence of Western Sahara – then Spanish Sahara – started being discussed. Yet, this process never saw its close, as Spain transferred sovereignty to Morocco and Mauritania, through the Madrid Accords (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). In November 1975, these countries invaded Western Sahara territory in what came to be known as the Green March. A war between the Polisario Front and these two forces was initiated, and in 1979 Mauritania was defeated. The Western Sahara War lasted until 1991, however, despite the agreement of a ceasefire of 30 years, the conflict between Western Sahara and Morocco has not yet been solved, and the armed conflict returned to the region (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021).

The people of Western Sahara, the Sahrawis, are considered an outlier case within the Arab and Muslim worlds in terms of organization against oppression and in the way that they perceive gender equality and women's issues. Ever since its creation in 1973, the Polisario Front focused on including these matters in the agenda of the struggle for independence (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). However, adding to the general neglect of the Western Sahara conflict both in academia and in civil society, the analytical lens of gender is also typically overlooked. Despite general recognitions that women play fundamental roles in the Sahrawi society – especially within the refugee camps –, gender is usually studied as a secondary issue instead of a primary one. Broadly speaking, women and women's issues often constitute gaps in literature and academic studies. This happens not only because women are simply not understood as a fundamental group to be focused on, but also because frequently, seeking to carry out gender-neutral or inclusive research, the investigation ends up being gender-blind. Patriarchy, capitalism, racism, colonisation, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression work together in the subjection of women and people of colour.

Taking this into account, the proposed research question in this dissertation is the following: How have Sahrawi women resisted oppression and fought towards gender equality from 1975 until now? This period was delineated considering the pivotal moment that led to the situation of the Sahrawis today – the Green March. Throughout this time, as will be discussed later, multiple resistance efforts took place, such as the two Sahrawi Intifadas and the Gdeim Izik camp protest, in 2010, which marked the beginning of the Sahrawi “Arab Spring” (Lee, 2015). To answer this question, the three proposed goals of this research are to: 1) understand what Sahrawi women perceive as gender equality and women's role in

the society; 2) assess the obstacles identified by Sahrawi women in the context of the occupation, namely in the context of political leadership roles; and 3) gain insight on whether women's advocations shift depending on their geographical location. In particular, the second goal proposes to study whether leadership roles are a concern presented by the women interviewed in what regards issues to consider for their emancipation. Moreover, this research pursues a representation of women not as passive agents, or victims of conflict, but as fighters and active agents in their lives.

The following sections of this study will present the sustained positioning of the dissertation, followed by the theoretical framework on women in conflict zones, whilst bridging the gap between these situations and women under invasion. Subsequently, the history of the Western Sahara conflict will be explained, and posteriorly a focus on Sahrawi women and women's movements within the context of the conflict will be conducted. The specificities in the literature on women in the refugee camps and women in the diaspora will be highlighted. Posteriorly, the methodological strategy will be presented, and the method for data collection and analysis will be discussed. Lastly, the results will be analysed, and the conclusions will be brought forward. This dissertation is conducted through a feminist and post-colonial framework, which seeks to listen to the women involved as well as to move away from a discriminative Western perspective. Throughout this research, I sought to incorporate some images to facilitate the understanding of its content.

CHAPTER 2

Self-Reflexivity and Feminist Approaches: My Positionality

Before proceeding with the research, as a Western researcher, I must consider the bias of the world I grew up in and am influenced by. Western feminism is often perceived as discriminative of other types of feminism when it considers matters from the Global South instinctively as oppressive, without questioning women about their perception. This can be considered colonialist thinking within Western feminism (Ormazabal & López Belloso, 2011). In this sense, different branches of non-Western feminism will be mentioned in this section, to be able to better understand the various forms of feminism present in Western Sahara, as well as to shed light on the positioning of the present research.

To do this, I need to deepen my understanding of Islamic feminism and the issues related to Western Sahara. Islam and the Arab world are often misunderstood as the same issue. However, whilst Islam accounts for the Islamic religion, and is therefore linked to culture, history and law, Arab refers to the language spoken, along with ethical concepts, culture, and politics (Medina Martín, 2016b). Islam is perceived by some as responsible for the loss of women's rights and status in Arab societies, as it is considered to have conducted significant changes regarding gender roles in North and Sub-Saharan Africa (Salime, 2008). According to Salime (2008), Islam led to a shift in cultural dynamics, as the culture moved from matrilineal to patrilineal kinship systems, leading to a loss in women's traditional power within their households. Yet, another perspective considers colonization as an enforcer of several important changes in societal dynamics in this region, concerning gender roles, namely in the incorporation of patriarchal ideologies which reinforce women's subordination and oppression in society (Salime, 2008). Yet, existing literature does not agree on which – Islam or colonization – had a definitive part in the subjugation of women. Contrarily, some studies¹ understand the important role played by Islam in the struggle against colonialization, as it created a grounded identity for the people to resist together (Salime, 2008).

As a Western white woman born in the 2000s, I grew up in a globalized world, where information was always a second away. Thus, misinformation was also just around the corner. Islamophobia grew strong in my country, and racism was present in education and in personal relationships. The history of Fascism in Portugal did not stand as a barrier to the growth of the far-right over the years, nor for the acceptance of hate speech in everyday ordinary conversations. Despite efforts at trying to unlearn racist and xenophobic discourse, these intrinsic narratives of the culture ended up influencing my thoughts

¹ See Charrad, M. (2001). *States and women's rights: The making of postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco*. Univ of California Press.

and understanding of the world. Hence, it is of utmost importance to keep trying to unlearn the teachings and develop an emancipated perspective of the world. The rights of women continue to be stepped on globally, and it remains central to address these issues head-on and through solidarity among the peoples. Hence, considering my shallow understanding of the different branches of feminism in the Muslim world, encompassing a section on this subject was fundamental for this research. As a woman, I feel connected to the Sahrawi women whose rights and self-determination are at stake and thus feel responsible for the solidarity I can express overseas. This chapter is fundamental for this study, as it allows me to shift my understanding of Western Sahara from a European gaze to a more anthropological perspective. This means that it becomes easier for me to analyse this issue without such great bias of transpiring my personal perspective and seeking to pass on the perspectives and interpretations of the Sahrawi women.

Concerning gender equality in Islam, Islamic feminism accounts for the belief in gender equality within Islamic societies, as feminists seek to overcome the patriarchy latent in said societies (Ahmad, 2015). Islamic feminism seeks to emancipate women within Islam, and it opposes both patriarchal Islamism and Secular feminism. These feminists perceive the nature of women's oppression not as anchored in the Quran, but in the weakening of tradition and sickening of its teachings – this is what, in this perspective, led to the rise of a patriarchal Islamic structure that oppresses women (Ormazabal & López Belloso, 2011; Ahmad, 2015). Islamic and Muslim feminists often argue that the Quran itself is not the issue; rather, they identify its interpretations as problematic (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2008). Islamic feminists believe that a reformulation of the interpretation of the Qur'an should be undertaken through a self-critique of Islam from within (Ahmad, 2015). It is considered that the misinterpretation of the text arises from the interpreters – men – who promote the idea of male superiority and patriarchy (Bahi, 2011). Lamrabet (2008) understands the holy doctrines of Jesus, Mohammed and Moses as messages of liberation against oppression. According to her, the interpretations of these religions' texts are equivocal, as they use their misinterpretations as justifications for the oppression of women under religion. Supposedly, this stems from the need from Muslim cultures to shelter their religion from Western colonization, which led women to be closed up in their homes, to protect the community from westernized modern perceptions of a woman's role. In this sense, Islamic Feminists employ *ijtihad*, in which the Quran is re-read, maintaining its teachings and manifestations, whilst gendered issues are interpreted in line with contemporary roles, as social and historic dynamics shift (Ahmad, 2015). Contrarily, Ahmed-Ghosh (2008) defends that the Qur'an is inherently discriminative of women, in the sense that it poses women as inferior to men, perceiving the ideal woman as obedient. Hence, Islamic States base their creeds on an ancient text, without contextualizing it in today's reality. Islamic feminism encompasses a multitude of approaches, reflective of the vast and diverse regions where Islam is practiced. As previously discussed, the theories on the issue connecting feminism and Islam are multiple, and frame the issue differently based on individual standpoints. The different sociocultural contexts of the regions where Islam is present are also influenced by different contexts, and thus different

interpretations of the root causes for gender-based violence arise. These geographical frameworks also propose different interpretations of the wide possibility of approaches to one theme in particular. Moreover, it is essential to recognize the relevance of globalization in this context, which facilitates communication and allows for foreign influences, both of which can either positively or negatively impact the feminist cause.

Islamic Feminisms focus on the language used in these texts and highlights it as fundamental in the re-interpretation of the holy documents (Ahmad, 2015). Simultaneously, Islamic Feminists focus on the way history is told. Women are ignored in retellings, meaning their role in society and history is neglected. This led to the fundamental role of women throughout the centuries to be constructed as invisible (Ahmad, 2015). According to Sadiqi (2006), Arabic as a language connotes societal issues as gendered spheres: the public sphere is considered male, whilst the private sphere is deemed female. According to her, gendered adjectives and nouns contain different connotations: male forms are linked to strength and abundance, whilst female forms are considered to be more loving and emotive (formal androcentricity). Far from being neutral, these meanings shape the way a culture perceives and understands the world, placing women as subordinates to men, in a patriarchal system. Most often, the starting point of the language is the male formation of a word, to which it is added material to then become a female word – thus, the default is male. This transpires into the society and its culture: men, as a group, have a higher social status within the society, when compared to women (Sadiqi, 2006). Furthermore, Patriarchy in Arabic countries confines women to the private sphere and men to the public, in terms of space and culture (sociolinguistic androcentricity). The former is considered submissive and weaker and is circumscribed to the care realm and domestic and reproductive activities – which usually are seen as having less value within the society, whilst the latter is associated with law, politics, the economy and power (Sadiqi, 2006). That is, women are constricted to home childbearing and childcare. Thus, the public opinion of a woman is more often than not neglected and ignored (Sadiqi, 2006). Hence, the tendency of Islamic countries to ostracize women from public spheres creates a barrier between them and their full understanding of the language, and so, of the teachings and ideologies preached through them² (Sadiqi, 2006). Deviating women from the Arabic language alienates them from the knowledge of the law – and hence, their rights – as well as from the intellectual sphere (Sadiqi, 2006). Thus, Islamic Feminists engage in conversations with Secular Feminists to address issues inherently related to religion, to broaden feminist positionings and ultimately to incentivize reforms at the legal level (Ahmad, 2015). Islamic Feminism is a target of several forms of criticism. It is often considered that feminism and Islam are incompatible or antithetical. This means that frequently, it is assumed that a person can either be one or the other, but not the two simultaneously (Ahmad, 2015).

² There are exceptions to this. For example, in Lebanon women carry a historical role in the public sphere; or in Tunisia, where the legal and political framework encompasses women's participation in the public and private spheres.

Drawing a parallel, Indigenous feminists contrast amongst themselves, depending on the generation. Older women are seen as wise, which is often associated with menopause, and have been influenced by colonialism (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010; Medina Martín, 2016b). Younger feminists studied in formal settings, and are aware that in the Global North, Global South issues tend to be ignored. This does not, however, stand in the way for them to advocate for women's participation and freedom. It is imperative to understand this branch of feminism to understand feminism and gender equality in the case of Western Sahara – particularly, in the refugee camps (Medina Martín, 2016b). As will be studied in chapter five, this is the case of Western Sahara.

Several resistance movements, such as the case of revolutions in Islamic countries, are organized with a section dedicated to women and women's issues within the larger scope that considers decolonization and liberation. However, once independence is achieved, these matters are neglected, either by State appropriation of these movements or by incorporating them in the struggle – especially in communist and socialist movements – while maintaining the patriarchal system that oppresses women (Ormazabal & López Belloso, 2011). In the case of the Western Sahara struggle for independence, the revolutionary front – the Polisario Front – created a branch focused on women and women's issues, the Unión Nacional de Mujeres Saharauis (UNMS, National Union of Sahrawi Women). According to Ormazabal & López Belloso (2011), the UNMS can be positioned within Muslim feminism, due to its work on the re-interpretation of Muslim texts to emancipate women from the patriarchal order established.

In the refugee camps, younger generations are influenced by foreign cultures due to the time spent studying abroad. However, women and girls still maintain barriers to working far from their family homes, perceiving it as unsafe (Medina Martín, 2016b). Older Sahrawi women, responsible for building the camps and ensuring survival in exile, play a role termed "politics of resistance" (Medina Martín, 2016b, p. 340). Family responsibilities are identified as a significant barrier to women's participation and Sahrawi women perceive younger generations as less politically driven, privileging the focus on marriage over work and economic independence. The Polisario Front played a pivotal role in creating a "memory-script" to connect Sahrawis through a national cause and minimize tribal identity in Western Sahara (Lacroix & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013).

To understand the positioning and ideology of Sahrawi women on gender equality and women's oppression, it is imperative to understand that the diversity of women and their perceptions create a heterogeneous group with different priorities and approaches. When studying Western Sahara, an Islamic culture, it is imperative to take into account Islamic and Muslim feminisms, and how these approaches apply in this case. Neglecting these problematics would inevitably lead to a misinterpretation of women's statements and beliefs. As a Western woman, it is fundamental to be aware of this issue, to tackle and respond to it for the understanding of the study. Nonetheless, my efforts at minimizing my personal bias are limited. I am still a Western white woman who grew up around bigotry and a lack of compassion towards other peoples. I am still a young researcher who has not been through the great journey of academically balancing my bias and misinterpretations of a world I have not had much contact with thus far. Moreover, it is also relevant to point out that I am a member of the Association of Friendship Portugal-Western Sahara. For this reason, throughout this research project, I sought to consider cultural sensitivity and reflexivity, whilst respecting the people who trusted me to tell these stories. In spite of this, as a researcher, I strive for objectivity, while recognizing that this positionality inherently brings subjectivity to the interpretations here conducted.

CHAPTER 3

Theoretical framework on women in war zones and occupations

If during peacetime women already feel the prejudices imposed by a patriarchal society, it is not surprising that during oppression women's struggles become even more emphasized when compared to men. Amina Wadud (2006) conceptualises Patriarchy as “a hegemonic presumption of dominance and superiority that leads to the eradication of women's agency” (in Bahi, 2011, p.6). During wartime, women are the group most vulnerable to economic sanctions and to violence. Being economically dependent, due to the link between Patriarchy and Capitalism, women (especially poor women) are the first to be personally affected by oscillations in the national economy, as jobs traditionally linked to them are the first to let go of workers. This reality is aggravated by their dependency on men (their husbands, fathers, or brothers), as well as by social matters, as they are the primary caregivers of the elderly, children, and people with disabilities (Tickner, 2018). This is a fundamental aspect of Patriarchy, but it is also most evident in countries where women are mostly present in lower-income sectors or jobs with less worker security. As the heads of the household move away to fight the wars at the battlefield, women become responsible for providing for their families, despite the hardships that they face because they are women in an endangered society (Tickner, 2018). Furthermore, during wartime, women become even more vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation, as militarized forces who are not on the frontlines of battle occupy the streets as authority figures (Tickner, 2018).

To understand the factors that most affect women during conflicts or invasions, Cynthia Cockburn (2004) proposed three gendered elements of war. The first, the brutalization of the body, is the phenomenon where we find the greatest gap between sexes, due to physical differences and cultural meanings (i.e., common understandings or interpretations of traditions, culture, language, history, and social norms). In the case of Western Sahara, sexual violence in conflict zones (SVCZ)³ is mainly present in the occupied region of the country, as a form of humiliation and torture of women conducted by Moroccan forces (Bouzeid, 2018; Lee, 2015). Provided that this is not the scope of the present study, this aspect of the occupation will not be deeply studied. A more detailed analysis would be needed to understand the implications connected to this issue, which will not be possible to conduct at this level.

³ See Heineman, E. (2008). The History of Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones: Conference Report. *Radical History Review*, 101, 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2007-035>

The second gendered element of war proposed by Cockburn (2004) regards mobilization into the armed forces, which considers that despite the vast majority of combatants in the military being men, women also enrol in the sector: while in some countries they join non-combatant roles, in others, they wield weapons. Thus, women being integrated into roles connected to war accounts for neither equality nor for the feminization of the military (Cockburn, 2004). Furthermore, women are often excluded or face greater obstacles than men to enrol in the military forces. Yet, it is perceived by most societies that the military forces bring to its members self-respect and full citizenship, and in the case of women enrolling in the armed forces, they are expected to obtain higher social equality with men (Ruddick, 1983). When women are completely excluded from this arena, a higher gap between “protector” (men) and “protected” (women) arises and leaves women more vulnerable to male violence. Moreover, women’s roles in war are often neglected – regardless of it being a combatant role or not, and despite the fact that women all around the world have been implicated in all kinds of armed struggles throughout history. In the case of Western Sahara, women have always been connected to the armed struggle for the independence of the country, as martyrs and as fighters on the battlefield (Lippert, 1992). However, feminists have argued that the permission of women to take part in war and the military is not the same as emancipation. Nonetheless, some feminists in the Global South consider that they cannot afford the luxury of taking on antimilitaristic stances, for armed conflict may be the only solution for their national liberation goals. Although there is no extended literature on this matter, it is possible to understand that given the constant violation of rights and the generalized oppression of women in the Global South, it is not rare to find women who advocate for militarism as the sole solution to oppression, that is, as the only tool that they have to fight against any means of oppression and towards their emancipation⁴ (Yuval-Davis, 2004). Thus, some women argue that armed resistance is fundamental for their self and communal protection, leading to the emancipation of their actions and, ultimately, of their agency.

In this regard, it must also be contemplated the role played by motherhood in wartime. Sending off their children to battle is a great wound in what Ruddick (1983) calls “preservative love”, which accounts for the care of a woman towards her loved ones. Moreover, according to Ruddick (1983), women are more likely than men to prioritize peaceful resolutions, seeking to not engage in violent outbursts. In the case of Western Sahara, it is frequent to encounter Sahrawis who believe that in the thirty years for which the ceasefire lasted, no changes towards independence were made (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). Contrarily, there is great acceptance of the idea that the return to the armed struggle has allowed for greater advances in this matter, as well as for the attaining of international mediatic interest (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). Furthermore, women are often excluded from decision-making roles by the culture or by the structure of the political parties. This exclusion directly leads to political, economic, and social discrimination, inequality, and insecurity (Castillejo, 2016). Here, there does not seem to exist

⁴ See, for example, Leila Khaled (Palestine), or Lina Ben Mhenni (Tunisia).

much consensus on whether the role taken by women in government politics is enough regarding national emancipation and women's capabilities in peacekeeping.

Finally, disruption of everyday life has to do with the shift in wartime casualties, for contemporary wars account for a greater number of civil deaths than they did before: according to Hauchler & Kennedy (1994, in Cockburn, 2004), 90% of casualties in World War II were civilian, and civilians are usually women and children. Furthermore, daily life is shredded and so women's responsibilities change. Cockburn (2004) understood that during conflict, men were allowed to flee because women had dependents to look after. When seeking to flee from a war zone, women have their freedom of movement obstructed by more factors than the war itself. Since women are almost always the primary caregivers for children, the elderly, people with disabilities or other family members, they cannot flee by themselves. The dependents they look after have to be considered when planning the trip, and so, their safety – and the woman's safety – is in peril. This duty that is most often enforced on women stems from cultural and gender norms, through which women must prioritize the safety of the whole family. Naturally, this affects their capabilities to seek refuge and escape from violent regions. Additionally, women are greatly affected by the feminisation of poverty – especially in vulnerable areas which have been affected by armed struggles. The concept of “feminisation of poverty” was brought forth in the 1970s by Diane Pearce. This concept draws on the notion that women are more vulnerable to poverty simply because they are women (Chant, 2008). However, it is fundamental to understand that the term “feminisation of poverty” does not account solely for income disparities. It is linked to the severity of poverty (women are more likely to live in extreme poverty), as well as the durability of said poverty (women are expected to remain in poverty for longer), the increasing disproportionality of poverty when compared to men, and the barriers faced when seeking to come out of poverty (Chant, 2008). It is also important to note that households where the head is a woman stand amongst the poorest of the lower economic class, which becomes systematic for descendant generations (Chant, 2008). When in a vulnerable situation such as fleeing from their homeland for survival, women are at an even greater risk of suffering gender-based violence or sexual exploitation. Knowing this, some women may be more hesitant to begin this journey, especially if no familiar man is accompanying them. Finally, if a woman is able to reach a refugee camp, new vulnerabilities arise. Since these camps are often overcrowded and present poor living conditions, women are at a greater risk of sexual exploitation or human trafficking (Chant, 2008). As the characteristics of war shifted from impersonal and far to home fronts, women became increasingly more affected, as they could be killed by the military on their daily journeys (Afshar, 2003). The tendency to neglect women's roles in conflict has led to what Afshar (2003, p. 181) called the “myth of the silent cowardly woman”. In the case of Western Sahara, the situation is distinct. When the conflict began in 1975, thousands fled to Algeria to escape constant bombings (Zunes & Mundy, 2010; Perez-Martin, 2014). However, the specific demographics of these refugees, particularly the gender distribution, remain unclear due to limited available data. Thus, conclusions about gender

discrepancies in fleeing are challenging to draw. Moreover, the risk to women's safety during their daily lives due to military presence is uncertain. The dispersed nature of the Sahrawi people — in occupied and liberated zones of Western Sahara, refugee camps in Algeria, and the diaspora — complicates this analysis. In the occupied region, the people are under surveillance and in danger of imprisonment, torture and forced disappearances. In the liberated zones, the region has nowadays become an immense battlefield, where the people are only present for war. In exile – in Algeria and the diaspora –, Morocco cannot use military force to repress the people and the revolution.

This chapter sought to understand the impact of wars and occupations on women, with a greater focus on how gender inequality is heightened during these periods. The vulnerabilities here addressed stem from Patriarchy, Capitalism, and Colonialism. Understanding the three gendered elements of war proposed by Cockburn (2004) sets the tone for the focus of the research – gender inequality and women's resistance in Western Sahara. Moreover, the overview of the role played by motherhood in warzones and occupations provided by Ruddick (1983) will prove itself relevant in the empirical section of this dissertation. It is crucial to bear these aspects in mind as a deeper focus is placed on Western Sahara and Sahrawi women, seeking to understand the multiple aspects affecting this demographic. In the following chapters, the history of Western Sahara and a deeper focus on the struggles of Sahrawi women towards autonomy and equality will be the focus.

CHAPTER 4

History of Resistance

Western Sahara is a disputed territory and one of the least populated regions of the globe. This territory is the only one in Africa that is still present on the United Nation's list of Non-Self-Governing Territories (United Nations, 2022). It is the last colony in the African continent. By 2017, Morocco occupied 85% of Western Sahara (Estrada & Costa, 2017). The country is one of the richest areas in phosphate in the world and has one of the most abundant waters, along with iron, uranium, gold, petrol, gas, and sand (Naili, 2019) and the exploitation of these resources constitutes a way of financing the war (The Resource Curse, 2021). The waters off the coast of Western Sahara are exploited in unregulated and large-scale fishing, whilst phosphorus byproducts contaminate the water, causing diseases and death tolls on the population (The Resource Curse, 2021). Therefore, neighbouring countries have an interest in this area, seeing it as a way to minimize their national economic crisis (Estrada & Costa, 2017).

This chapter provides an overview of the history of Western Sahara, with a particular focus on the resistance of the Sahrawi people. Commencing from the nomadic period and crossing over from the era of Spanish colonization to the subsequent Moroccan invasion, it will highlight the persistent efforts to resist various forms of oppression. The primary emphasis, however, will be on the period from 1975 to the present, as this timeframe aligns with the research scope of the study.

4.1 Nomadic Ancestry: Western Sahara before colonization

The history of the Sahrawi people is inherently nomadic. The first people to settle in what we today know as Western Sahara were of Berbere origin, a people called Sanhaja. By the XIII century, the Bedouin Arab people Beni Hasan – who had come from Yemen – arrived in this region. The several tribes started meeting in Assemblies to discuss matters of greater concern, such as politics or economy (López, 2014). Hence, the Sahrawis are considered to be of mixed blood between Berbers, Black lineage, and Arab descent. The Sanhaja Berbers, whose presence stretched across parts of Morocco, Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Western Sahara from 500 BCE, developed into four central tribes in Western Sahara by the ninth century. Three of these tribes – Lamtuna (the largest), Massufa, and Guddala – later formed a confederacy (Suarez, 2016). Taking this into consideration, it is not hard to grasp that the numerous bloodlines and descents that led to what we see now as Sahrawis harden the understanding of the Sahrawi genealogical tree, as not only one induce is present. Moreover, as the Islamic religion permeated the region, its influence began to shape and impact the growth of these tribes. In the 16th century, the first European contact was established in the region, as the Portuguese were the first to attempt communication with the local population (Suarez, 2016).

In this sense, the countries that make up the Maghreb region share a common history. The first ethnicity to settle in North Africa were the Berbers. Yet, while the population remains numerous in this region, its language has never been official in any of the countries (Sadiqi, 2008)⁵. The language remains alive due to the efforts of women. According to Sadiqi (2008), society is organized according to a patrilineal family and gender hierarchy, in which the father of the nuclear family is the utmost authority figure, creating a dynamic of dominance of the men over the women. In this region, education is perceived as fundamental to women's emancipation – particularly higher education –, yet there are great disparities between urban and rural areas concerning access to education. In the Maghreb, women have begun attending universities, which led to the development of the areas of feminism and gender studies (Sadiqi, 2008). Furthermore, the region of Western Sahara was, before colonization, a part of *Trab el Bidan*, the “land of the whites”, to contrast with sub-Saharan Africa. This region was composed of Western Sahara, Mauritania, the west of Mali, the southwest of Algeria, and the south region of Morocco. The characteristics of the Sahara led the Berbere communities who settled in this region to resort to nomadic living, which led to the establishment of the name “*hijos de las nubes*” (“children of the clouds”) for the Sahrawis (Medina Martín, 2016b).

Western Sahara is an integrant of the Maghreb region. According to Sadiqi (2008), women's rights in this area began improving in the 1960s. The necessity of developing the economy in these countries led to improvements in the population's access to school as well as to paid work, or to the increase in the number of women in political roles, for example. This led to the broadening of women's role within these societies to outside of the private sphere (Sadiqi, 2008). Nonetheless, the broadening of the rights of women did not account for – according to Sadiqi (2008) – an improvement of their social status, still blatantly subjected to gendered and cultural hierarchies and the patriarchal system. Consequently, instead of leading to the improvement of women's status, the societal and economic changes mostly targeting women led to improvements within the society as a whole. So, women remained the first ones to be subjected to national issues, such as economic crises (Sadiqi, 2008). However, once independence was achieved in the colonized countries, women and women's issues were not seen as a priority (Sadiqi, 2008).

To understand the fundamental role of Sahrawi women in the national culture, it is essential to comprehend their status and role in society – particularly, at the political level. Sahrawi women were consulted in the period before colonization when political decisions needed to be handled (Medina Martín, 2016b). This is what Segato (2011, in Medina Martín, 2016b) conceptualized as low-intensity

⁵ Sadiqi outlines the Maghreb region as the countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania. Interestingly enough, she leaves out Western Sahara. In her analysis, only the countries of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are analysed. However, considering the fundamental connections of both Morocco (as the invader force) and Algeria (as the biggest supporter) in the Western Sahara history and struggle for independence, this article was deemed important to analyse and incorporate in this dissertation.

patriarchy, as the political sphere was not perceived as masculinized. Yet, it is also fundamental to comprehend that Western Saharan culture is ideologically Muslim, drawing from the teachings of the Sharia law (Piniella, 2018). Thus, the culture is inherently patriarchal, as women are seen as a secondary sex; men are always prioritized. In this sense, women's bodies and lives are controlled by men (Piniella, 2018). According to Piniella (2018), because women menstruate, they are seen as religiously inferior to men – and menstruation is also seen as a way to control women's pregnancies. In this line of thought, a woman must remain a virgin (as determined by the hymen) to protect the honour of the men of the family (Piniella, 2018). Through the Sharia law, it is a woman's utmost responsibility to get married and bear children. The Muslim law perceives that women should remain within their home (the private sphere)⁶, living to provide for the men in their families and God. Hence, political and public spaces are enclosed for men (Piniella, 2018).

The traditional Sahrawi society was greatly different from the society we see now. Women inherited property and were independent from the men in their families. Women were valued and the society tended to be monogamous or diachronic polygamous: women were fundamental for the forging of alliances between tribes through marriage and divorce was somewhat easy to obtain (Caro Baroja, 2008, in Medina Martín, 2016b). Women led the family and were essential for the education of children (Lippert, 1992).

4.2 From 1884 until 1975: Spanish Colonization

Until the XIX century, Spain carried out short attempts at communicating with the Sahrawis (Medina Martín, 2016b). However, on the 26 of December 1884, Spain announced a Royal Decree which stipulated its sovereignty over the territory, as the Berlin Conference (1884-85) established the legitimacy of Spanish colonialization in Western Sahara territory. Hence, periodic contact between the two countries began, leading up until the XX century, when Spain effectively commenced the economic exploitation of the region (Medina Martín, 2016b). Spanish colonization was marked by three distinct periods. Between 1884 and 1940, Spain focused on superficial control of the territory, along with the creation of cities. Between 1940 and 1964, territorial projects were undergone and settling policies hardened, seeking to combat the nomadic tradition. Lastly, between 1964 and 1975, greater territorial changes were committed and the focus on phosphate exploitation increased (Rodríguez & Barrado, 2015, in Medina Martín, 2016b).

Spanish colonialism stood in the way of the formation of a Saharawi identity. Hence, the Sahrawis felt the need to carve social and geographical boundaries. Thus, "Sahrawi" developed into the term used when a person is considered indigenous from Western Sahara (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). However, since

⁶ To better understand this delineation of the public/private sphere, see Sadiqi's (2006) conceptualization, presented in Chapter 2.

today many Sahrawis have not stepped foot in their native land, considering that a great part of this population was born and raised in exile, the descendants of the ones born in Western Sahara are also Sahrawis by blood and identity (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). There are even cases of people who were born in Morocco and defend Western Sahara independence, who ethnically consider themselves as Sahrawis. As Zunes & Mundy (2010) explain, the term “Sahrawi” emerged as an act of resistance and negation of annexation (for example, Sahara, not Spanish Sahara): Sahrawis as more than colonial subjects. Yet, nowadays, there is no consensus on the number of Sahrawi people scattered around the world.

In terms of gender issues, Spanish colonization was sceptical of the organization and dynamics between men and women within the Sahrawi society. Sahrawi women’s role within the pre-colonial society was considered a problem that needed to be taken care of by Spain and the established gender roles were perceived as dangerous. The dowry went straight to the bride, which balanced the status of daughters and sons within the family, who could then separate from their first husband and eventually marry another man (Medina Martín, 2016b). Furthermore, the firstborn children were taken care of by their grandmothers, aiding them with other relatives. This brought some independence to the mothers, who needed not to constantly take care of their children, as well as for the grandmothers, for they acquired help in caregiving (Juliano, 1998; Medina Martín, 2016b).

The Sahrawis strongly resisted the attempts at colonization, and only in 1958 did the settling effectively take place. By this time, other countries throughout the African continent had already achieved their independence or were on the brink of doing so – such as its neighbours Morocco (1956), Mauritania (1960) and Algeria (1962). In 1957, Morocco pronounced its interest in the annexation of Western Sahara along with Mauritania. In 1964, the “Women’s Section” of Franco’s Falange party began its work in the region, aiming at spreading the ideal role of women as that of a wife, mother and educator of children – what Medina Martín calls “gender colonialism” (2016b, p. 258). Westernized traditional gender roles connected to the maintenance of the household and care of the family were undergone in this period (Allan, 2016). However, this perspective is challenged by some, such as Caratini (2006), who consider that the gender roles traditionally associated with cooking and cleaning within the household were the responsibility of men; whilst labour such as sewing or looking after the children was the concern of women. According to Allan (2016), the gender role shift carried out by Spanish settlers did not stem from a feeling of envy over Sahrawi women’s status, but instead, it constituted a perspective on women’s empowerment within this society. In her doctoral dissertation, Allan (2016) argues that Spanish colonialism reinforced the Sahrawi patriarchal order, by strengthening women’s economic dependency on men. Spanish settling altered the established gender norms: for example, divorce, which had, according to Medina Martín (2016b) always been free of charge, became dependent on payment, which then became a factor to be considered.

The Women's Section faced great obstacles regarding its work with Sahrawi women. By the '70s, the pressure enforced by women towards increasing classes of literacy led the Section to drop some classes about motherhood and housework, with the intent of developing new literacy courses to promote intellectual development (Allan, 2016). As it seems, the focus of the Women's Section on propagandizing Sahrawi women to become good housewives and mothers shifted towards the interest in educating women. Although this does not account for women's emancipation within the Sahrawi society, given this information, it is illustrative of Sahrawi women's resilience and resistance, which came to the extent of transforming a colonial institution. In this decade, women were quick to gather against male oppression and for the independence of Western Sahara (Allan, 2016). Sahrawi women took an important role in the defence of the land, as they were active fighters against Spanish colonization. Once the Polisario Front was established, women were present in the battle lines (Lippert, 1992), as radio operators, drivers, and medics, and were sometimes incorporated into the armed forces (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Women took part in political activism demonstrations, both in the public space – in the frontline of battle –, and in the private sphere – through the organization of meetings among militants and the encouragement of participation in the armed struggle (Sebastián, 2021). According to Juliano (1998), women were the first ones to rebel against Spanish colonialism in the '60s and '70s, mainly through artistic art expression. During the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) visit in 1975, women organized demonstrations expressing the Sahrawi interest in independence, through the mobilisation of people, the elaboration of banners and flags, and the organization of petitions. Furthermore, during the independence struggle against Spain, women were part of the documentation and arms smuggling or were engaged in providing their houses for activists and encouraging their husbands to fight (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

In 1966, the UN Resolution 2229 called for the decolonization of Western Sahara through a self-determination referendum and on the 12th of December of 1969, the Organización Avanzada para la Liberación de Sáhara (OALS) or Movimiento de Vanguardia para la Liberación del Sáhara (MLS) was created, with the intent of achieving independence, whilst maintaining healthy ties with Spain (Medina Martín, 2016b). In 1970, Spain organized a protest calling for the adherence of Western Sahara into Spanish territory. OALS organized a large counter-protest, which was answered by heavy repression, resulting in hundreds of dead Sahrawis. The leader of the Organization, Bassiri, was imprisoned, tortured, and forced to disappear. This became known as the Intifada of Zemla, and Bassiri as the first martyr against the Spanish army. The UN Resolution and the Intifada led to the emergence of the indigenous Sahrawi nationalist movement, the Polisario Front, in 1973 (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021; López, 2014).

In 1973, women and women's struggles were included in the struggle for independence: the Polisario Front created the Ala Feminina, which stood as an independent organization connected to the Polisario and the national struggle (La Unión Nacional De Mujeres Saharauis – UNMS, 2023). Thus,

the Sahrawi women had an active role in the resistance efforts against Spanish colonization (Gascón & Seisdedos, 2016). The Ala Feminina sought to incorporate women and women's issues into the agenda, contemplating the need to address gender issues when advocating for independence (La Unión Nacional De Mujeres Saharauias – UNMS, 2023). The UNMS was established to develop efforts to enhance national consciousness, aid the mobilization of the people towards independence, as well as for the emancipation of women and to fight for the freedom of the Sahrawi women from colonialism (Lippert, 1992). Ala Feminina constitutes the first of three stages of women's organization and political participation within the Polisario Front (1973-76), which focused on political awareness and cooperation. The second stage, Unión Feminina (1976-85), saw women becoming social and political leaders during the Moroccan invasion and refugee migration. The current UNMS period (1985-today) continues the contemporary struggle of women as leaders in the camps (Medina Martín, 2014).

The Polisario Front and the Partido de Unión Nacional Saharaui (PUNS), created in 1974, expressed differing gender discourses (Medina Martín, 2016b). The PUNS followed a perspective connected to Spain's advocations, defending traditional gender roles. Contrarily, the Polisario Front called for the valorisation of women's role in society and the domestic sphere (Medina Martín, 2016b). The latter group's ideology was shaped by anticolonialism and Marxism, seeking to eliminate tribal inequalities, promote gender equality, and establish a Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) (Caratini, 2006). To achieve these goals, the Sección Feminina del Frente Polisario (later UNMS) was formed, pushing for reforms such as abolishing tribal structures, ending genital-cutting practices, and advocating for women's rights to vote and education (Caratini, 2006). Simultaneously, they advocated for the establishment of girls' consent to marriage, and the reduction of the dowry to a symbolic amount (Caratini, 2006).

Taking all of this into account, Bengoechea Tirado (2013) considers the Sahrawi nationalist movement to be divided into three moments: the first, between 1968 and 1970, constituted the presence of the Organización Avanzada de Liberación del Sáhara (created in 1969); the second, beginning in 1970, is characterized by women joining the nationalist movement; and the third constitutes the last years of Spanish colonization, where the nationalist struggle intensified and the focus on women arose. The third period was put an end to by the Green March and the consequential war that led to the revolution from the refugee camps (see the next chapter).

To summarize the influence of Spanish colonialism in the region, one can understand that Spain began taking up careful attempts at controlling the territory of Western Sahara in 1884. During this period, the established gender norms were under criticism by the foreign power, who sought to establish its own interests in the region. By 1940, Spain effectively began establishing policies that sought to combat the nomadic tradition and stir change in the traditional Sahrawi gender norms, namely by making women more economically dependent on men. Between 1964 and 1975, Spain reinforced its intervention in Western Sahara, driven by phosphate exploitation interests. Through the establishment of the Women's Section, Spanish intervention carried out forced changes in gender roles, including what

concerns divorce rights and women's economic independence. These practices led to a shift in established gender dynamics, through the creation of a higher level of dependency of women and less freedom within their rights. The Women's Section sought to mould Sahrawi women into traditional Western roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, reinforcing gender colonialism; despite these efforts, Sahrawi women resisted.

4.3 From 1974 until 1975: the referendum that never happened and the Green March

In 1974, Spain announced a referendum on the Independence of Western Sahara (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). This referendum would allow the Sahrawi people to choose whether to gain independence or be integrated into either Morocco or Mauritania. In the same year, in one of the meetings carried out between the Women's Section and Sahrawi women, Embarca Mahamud, Arbía Mohamed Nas, and Fatima Taleb criticized the Section's independent work, which neglected the women's opinions and aspirations (Allan, 2016). This meeting went on to become more than a form of criticism against Patriarchy, but also of vindication against Colonialism. Entangling the two together, these women advocated for the right of women to vote in the Independence Referendum (Allan, 2016). Morocco asked the UN to delay the referendum and for a hearing from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) considering the country's claims of sovereignty over the region (WonderWhy, 2014). Morocco claimed that they had historical ties to the region of Sagui el Hamra – the northern two-thirds of Western Sahara – while Mauritania considered Rio de Oro – the southern one-third – as connected to their territory (Lippert, 1992).

In 1975, a UN mission in the region was deployed to analyse these claims. During the ICJ's visit, women organized demonstrations expressing the Sahrawi interest in independence, through the mobilisation of people, the elaboration of banners and flags, and the organization of petitions (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). The ICJ concluded that there was strong support for independence (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). Despite understanding that both Mauritania and Morocco had historical ties to the region, the Court settled that "the materials and information presented to it did not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity" ("Advisory Opinion on the Western Sahara," 1975, p.68). Nonetheless, Morocco considers the region of Sagui el Hamra a part of Greater Morocco, in which other countries would also be included: the kingdom of Morocco, a part of Algeria, all of Mauritania, a part of Mali, and a part of Senegal (Lippert, 1992). Morocco answered this opinion with the declaration of its will to annex the territory. This set the stage for a pivotal event in the history of Western Sahara: the Green March, on November 6, 1975. On this day, 300.000 citizens and 20.000 Moroccan troops invaded Western Sahara, (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021; Zunes & Mundy, 2010). The UN Resolution 380 called for the immediate retreat of the

troops of the Green March (Estrada & Costa, 2017). Meanwhile, Mauritania invaded from the South (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

On the 14th of November 1975, Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania signed the Madrid Accords, which established a tripartite administration of the Western Sahara region and handed over administrative control of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania. The Polisario Front criticized these Accords, for they explained that this was not the will of the people, and so the occupation troops were met with resistance by this party, supported by Algeria (WonderWhy, 2014). The UN did not recognize this transfer of administration (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). Consequently, both countries began occupation efforts and a migration crisis exploded. According to Lovatt & Mundy (2021), about 40% of the native Sahrawi population fled to Southern Algeria, where they remain in refugee camps until this day. According to the website *Sáhara Occidental* (2023)⁷, a source that analyses differentiated aspects of the struggle, it is estimated that 173.600 people live in the refugee camps in Algeria presently. Since the first settlements, in 1975, the refugee population has lived in *jaimas*, and posteriorly in clay houses while Morocco provides economic incentives to make its citizens settle in Western Sahara (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). This led to the beginning of the war, and consequent exile of thousands of Sahrawis in Algeria. Thus, the Western Sahara War began, and it only saw its close in 1991 (WonderWhy, 2014; Lovatt & Mundy, 2021; Medina Martín, 2016b).

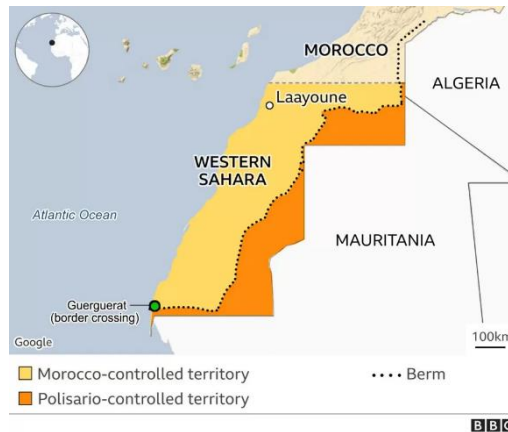
4.4 From 1975 until 1991: the Western Sahara War

The Green March led to the beginning of the Western Sahara War, which lasted until 1991. Thousands of people were forced to flee to Algeria for refuge, but many others stayed in the western region, which was occupied by Moroccan forces. On the 27th of February of 1976, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was proclaimed, standing until today, as the government of the Sahrawi people in exile, supported by Algeria (Medina Martín, 2016b; Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). The following day, on the 28th, Spanish forces retreated from Western Sahara and in 1979, Mauritania retreated from the war. Morocco, backed by France, the United States, and funded by Saudi Arabia, constructed a 2,700km mined and patrolled barrier – known as 'the wall of shame' – between 1981 and 1987. This wall now divides Western Sahara into occupied and liberated zones (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021; Estrada & Costa, 2017; Medina Martín, 2016b). It is the second largest in the world, following the Great Wall of China and is patrolled by 12.000 Moroccan soldiers, whilst presenting an expense of \$1 million per day (Medina Martín, 2016b). Furthermore, it is considered that the wall is surrounded by about 10 million antipersonnel mines (Lee, 2015) – although other investigators (Escobar, 2014) consider that the wall is surrounded by over 3 million anti-personnel mines. This period was marked by bombings of napalm

⁷ This website covers different aspects of the Sahrawi struggle and was referred to for its current information.

and white phosphorus of Sahrawi people in the liberated zone, whilst in the occupied regions, people were tortured and forced to disappear (Medina Martín, 2016b). Between 1975 and 1991, the Sahrawi people dispersed around four geographical sites: the occupied region of Western Sahara; the liberated zones, under the jurisdiction of the Polisario Front; the refugee camps in Algeria; and the diaspora.

Image 4.1. Map of Western Sahara



Source: BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14115273>

In the occupied zones, forced disappearances are one of the strategies most used by the Moroccan settlers. During the early stages of the occupation, about 25% of disappeared Saharawi prisoners were women (Medina Martín, 2016b). In 1976, 500 women gathered in a demonstration against the repression, torture, and disappearances conducted by the Kingdom of Morocco. The goal was to be heard by a foreign delegation hosted in Hotel Parador, in El-Aayún. This revolt put women at the forefront of the resistance (Medina Martín, 2016b). In 1987, ahead of the visit of a United Nations Commission, the Sahrawis planned a protest, which led to the arrest of 40 people before it even took place. The prisoners were subjected to heavy torture and their families did not hear of them for four years – they were forced to disappear. Among the prisoners, are the internationally known Aminetu Haidar and Djimi El Ghalia (Medina Martín, 2016b).

Simultaneously, in the refugee camps, the women were in charge of building the *jaimas* that served as homes for the population and harboured the schools and hospitals. In her 2016b doctoral thesis, Medina Martín interviewed a woman who explained how women were invested in building these shelters and fighting against illiteracy: some of the women constructing the *jaimas* were pregnant. During the time living in refugee camps, surviving in exile became a form of resistance. SADR operates from the refugee camps, standing as the political formation of the Sahrawi government, exiled from the homeland. The focus on health and education allowed for the survival and improvement of the Sahrawi society. The history of nomadism allowed for the survival of the people in the *hammada* and it paved the way for the children to visit other countries, especially within the program *Vacaciones en Paz*

(Medina Martín, 2016b). The first years of survival in the camps were, according to Medina Martín (2016b), close to primitive communism.

Conversely, according to Juliano (1998), three principal strategies to balance women's position within society emerged during this initial period: 1) invisibility, in which women criticized systems of oppression and sought to influence global frameworks through an invisible position, allowing for them to insert subtle changes within society (such as sexual freedom and autonomy); 2) self-affirmation, through which women would fight the oppression in the light, once they had achieved some power to do so; and 3) motherhood, a lens through which women consider pregnancy and childbearing as a form of active participation, against the invasion. It is also central to take into consideration that Sahrawi women's identity is under construction and is fundamentally linked to women's education and literacy in terms of rights and status (El Mehdi, 2016). However, the permanent survival priorities – education of the children, water, food and supplies, medicine, and transportation –, which stand at the forefront of the necessities of the Sahrawis living in the camps, put women's issues – emancipation and equality – at a second plan (Medina Martín, 2016b).

In occupied Western Sahara, women's resistance takes the form of peaceful protesting and activism. However, the dictatorship kingdom of Morocco answers these demonstrations with imprisonment, torture, kidnapping, disappearances, and rape. In the occupied zones, Sahrawis are a minority people, as compared to the majority of Moroccans settling in the area. One of the most commonly known cases of oppression of Sahrawi activists in this region is the case of Sultana Khaya, who has since become a symbol of resistance against the colonizer's oppression, and her family (Sebastián, 2021). According to the research conducted by Bouzeid (2018), women in the Arab world are considered the honour of the family – and to a greater extent, of the society as a whole. For this reason, in the occupied territories, it becomes justified to control women, with the pretext of defending them. The Western Sahara war lasted for 16 years, as the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front sought to gain control over the disputed area. During this period, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic developed in exile, and a great portion of the Sahrawi people fled to Algeria for survival. Sahrawi women emerged as community leaders, central to the survival of their people (see Chapter 5).

4.5 From 1991 to 2020: new prospects for a Referendum and the ceasefire

By 1991, the war had already stilled, as it was not feasible for either side to overcome the other: for Morocco to win the war, it would have to invade Algeria; for the Saharawi guerrillas to win, they would have to resort to terrorism or urban warfare (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). The Western Sahara side has always been considered “relatively clean” (Zunes & Mundy, 2010, p.25) – which means that there are not many reported deaths on either side of the struggle when compared to other wars –, which could also explain the struggle's neglect in international outlets. Consequently, Morocco and the Polisario Front signed a cease-fire agreement, in which it was agreed to conduct a referendum – within 6 months

– which has still not taken place to this day. The United Nations established the mission MINURSO (Misión de Naciones Unidas para el Referendo en el Sáhara Occidental⁸) to monitor the ceasefire, reduce Moroccan troops in Western Sahara, and identify and register voters. MINURSO is the only peacekeeping UN mission created since 1978 that does not present a mandate to observe and report on human rights violations (Lee, 2015; Perez-Martin, 2014; Medina Martín, 2016b). In 1992, the Intifada de las tres ciudades (Intifada of the three cities) took place, with revolts in El-Aayún, Smara and the Moroccan city of Assa. The two attempts at referendums, in 1992 and 1997, were shut down after voter eligibility doubt claims were made. An alternative was put forward – the Baker Plans (2001 and 2003), which called for an autonomous government of the Sahrawi people, under Moroccan sovereignty (Stephan & Mundy, 2010). A transitional period of five years was present in the Plan, and it was established that a referendum would take place afterwards. Although the first version was not accepted by the Polisario Front, the second was and it was unanimously endorsed by the UN Security Council (WonderWhy, 2014). Yet, this Plan was shut down by Morocco, who no longer perceived independence as an option within the referendum. In 1999, Sahrawi students gathered in Zemla, a neighbourhood in El-Aayún. A sit-in demonstration for scholarships and transportation subsidies gathered dozens of Sahrawi students in El-Aayún, in a vigil-like protest composed of tents (Stephan & Mundy, 2010). This protest was joined by former Sahrawi political prisoners demanding compensation and responsibility for disappearances. Moroccan police forces responded through beatings and tear gas, arresting dozens of protesters and abandoning some in the middle of the desert. This repression resulted in the radicalization of the population, which, therefore, led to the emergence of yet another protest, which accounted for a larger number of participants. However, this time around, protestors advocated for political issues: pro-referendum and pro-independence. This protest was joined by Moroccan citizens, moved by economic issues (Stephan & Mundy, 2010). This period was followed by years of small and periodic protests, with no great impact, which lasted until 2005 (Medina Martín, 2016b; Stephan & Mundy, 2010). In May 2005, family and friends of prisoner Haddi El Kainan demonstrated outside the Black Prison, leading to the Intifada de la Independencia (Medina Martín, 2016b). The protest escalated when the demonstrators advocated for independence, holding Polisario flags, which are illegal in the occupied territories. Moroccan authorities repressed the protests, leading to larger and more violent demonstrations. The protests spread to other cities in Western Sahara and Morocco, with Sahrawi protestors being detained and beginning hunger strikes. Hamdi Lembark's death in October marked the first martyr of the Intifada, and his funeral in January 2006 saw the Polisario's flag being held by the attendees. In the same year, Aminatou Haidar was freed from prison after being held since 1987 (Stephan & Mundy, 2006). Four years later, in 2010, the Campamento de la Libertad Gdeim Izik protest (Gdeim Izik protest camp) took place outside of El-Aayún, with over 10,000 participants and numerous detentions by Moroccan authority forces (The Resource Curse, 2021; Medina Martín, 2016b).

⁸ United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.

By the end of 2019, the Polisario Front decided that to combat the stillness of the situation created by the United Nations a new approach needed to be undergone. As the years went by and the ceasefire did not lead to the long-needed referendum, public opinion started moving towards a militarized discourse regarding the only way for the Sahrawi people to be independent through the taking up of arms. However, the Polisario Front defends that the Sahrawi struggle asks neither for guns and ammunition, nor to occupy a land that isn't their own; according to them, the Sahrawis fight for the sovereignty of their land, and the independence of their people (Sàhara Dempeus, 2020). In November 2020, Moroccan armed forces crossed the armistice frontier into SADR territory, leading the Polisario Front to put an end to the ceasefire foreseen in 1991. Morocco stands now within the top 30 countries that most import arms, it is supplied by the US, France, and the UK. The country has also purchased drones from Turkey, Israel, and the US (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021).

Looking back at the overview of the history of Western Sahara in this chapter, it is deemed relevant to draw from these events regarding its implications on women and women's issues. To do so, two academic perspectives must be considered. On the one hand, Medina Martín (2016b), divides the periods ever since the Moroccan invasion as follows: between 1976 and 1991, women raised the SADR in exile; after 1991, with the return of men to the camps following the ceasefire, the sexual division of labour was readjusted; and by the end of the '90s, the adoption of the "Development in the Refuge" strategy. On the other, Caratini (2006)⁹, splits the Saharawi history into four: the "pre-revolutionary phase" (the late 1960s to 1975), before the invasion; the "revolutionary phase" (from 1975 to 1991), characterized by the leading role of young women; the "latency phase" (from 1991 to 1997), considering that with the ceasefire social transformations were created in the camps, with the return of the men and the insertion of money (which led to the increase of social inequalities); and the "post-revolutionary phase" (after 1997), with increasing social inequalities, and the return to tribal solidarities.

Considering the information discussed in this chapter, it is possible to appreciate two key moments in Western Sahara history to help understand the role and the condition of Sahrawi women today. First, the redefinition of gender roles led by Spain during the colonization process, which shut down the precolonial gender system implemented. Second, the beginning – and return – of the armed struggle, which led the men to fight in the frontlines of battle, whilst the women built and led the settlements in Tindouf (see the next chapter for a more detailed analysis on this latter aspect).

⁹ Important to note that Caratini's work here cited was published in 2006, therefore not encompassing the period of the Second Sahrawi Intifada – and the Arab Spring –, nor the resumption of the war, which took place in 2020.

CHAPTER 5

Sahrawi Women's Resistance in the Refugee Camps and the Diaspora

Understanding the changing dynamics, gender roles, and women's status within the Sahrawi society is essential. First, it is fundamental to understand that the literature is quick to agree with the premise that Sahrawi women are central to the development of the Sahrawi society, due to their massive participation and the respect that they carry as women within said society (Juliano, 1998). However, in the Sahrawi struggle – similar to other movements for independence and self-determination –, the priority is the revolution in itself (Ormazabal & López Belloso, 2011). Thus, issues like gender are pushed to the background, under claims of division among the struggle and of creating antithesis and thus breaking unity (Juliano, 1998). Nonetheless, it is central to understand women's role in the struggle for independence, as women are widely considered to be the backbone of the struggle, and to be responsible for the survival and resistance of the people. Below are presented three images that I believe capture the historical roles of Sahrawi women¹⁰.

Image 5.1. Women building the refugee camps



Source: Unknown

Image 5.2. Native woman with her son, probably descendants of slaves.



Source: Martínez, J. F. T. (1973).
Zone of Awserd

Image 5.3. Sahrawi choirs.



Source: Archivo Gerald Bloncourt. (1976).

Western observers often scrutinize women's rights and status, highlighting issues relating to polygamy, marginalization, or the mandatory use of the veil (Juliano, 1998). As we have seen before (chapter 4.2), one of the reasons pointed out by scholars regarding gender inequality is linked to Spanish colonial practices, which altered the genesis of the precolonial gender norms (Juliano, 1998; Medina

¹⁰ These images were provided by Saharawi people I got into contact with throughout this research.

Martín, 2016b). Thus, different scholarly perceptions of gender equality in this context arise. While some consider some practices here conducted as supporting of women's rights, others perceive it the other way around. Juliano (1998) emphasizes that some Islamic customs have a positive effect on the general status of women, such as the prohibition of the consumption of alcoholic beverages, which leads to a decrease in situations of violence against women. In the Sahrawi culture, both men and women use coverings on their heads – the women wear *melfas*, and the men turbants. Juliano (1998) considers that women are not geographically confined to the home, as they are free to welcome both men and women in their *jaimas* and leave their homes without restrictions (Juliano, 1998). Yet, as Piniella (2013) highlights, within the Sahrawi culture, there is a great influence of the Sharia law, which confines women to the private sphere, encompassing the public spaces for men. Furthermore, according to Juliano (1998), in the Sahrawi society, there is no recollection of female genital cuttings¹¹ or of prioritizing bearing sons instead of daughters. Along this line, boys and girls are fed equally. Women and girls in the Sahrawi culture are not scrutinized on virginity, which is considered to be a private matter between the woman and her first husband. However, the society defends pre-matrimonial chastity and fidelity during marriage (Juliano, 1998). Historically, familial structures were reinforced through marriages between cousins or even nieces and uncles, solidifying women's position within the family and shielding them from being perceived as outsiders (Juliano, 1998). Nevertheless, marriages between family members create conflict in the divorce process, as they create tension in the family. Additionally, the dowry, seen as a respectful practice towards women, stands as a form of compensating the family when a daughter moves out to live with the husband. Simultaneously, men grow more committed to seeking to maintain the marriage, due to the economic investment (Juliano, 1998). Furthermore, post-divorce, the children frequently remain under the care of the mother (even after she remarries), while the father must economically support his offspring (Juliano, 1998). According to El-Mehdi (2016), during the 1960s-70s, women posed a fundamental role within the nationalist and anticolonial movement of the Sahrawi people.

Ozanas Marcos (2015, in Bouzeid, 2018), Caratini (2006), and Juliano (1998) estipulate three different periods in which Sahrawi women's socio-political situation differs: 1) the Bedouin period (*badawiyat*), in which women's responsibilities consisted, mainly, of three roles – reproductive, productive and communal; 2) Spanish colonialism (*muhtalat*), characterised by the fixation of Sahrawi women in cities, having the colonizers neglect the nomadic nature of the Sahrawi people; and 3) the period following the Spanish colonization (*lajiyat*). This last period is characterized by the different quotidian lived by women in the occupied territories, in the refugee camps, and in the diaspora. Caratini (2006), however, delineates a fourth period, the post-revolutionary phase, which began in 1997. El-Mehdi (2016), now Secretary-General of the UNMS, considers the history of Sahrawi women as divided

¹¹ Yet, as was studied in the previous chapter, one of the goals of the Sección Feminina del Frente Polisario – later UNMS – was addressing genital cutting practices. Hence, one perception does not concur with the other.

into three phases: 1) political movement before exile; 2) survival in the refugee camps in Algeria; and 3) grounding of the identity of oneself as a woman. Although the perspectives somewhat differ in terms of the exact years and regarding the focal issues addressed in each phase, the groundings of each are the same, as it is agreed upon that the status and rights of women in the Western Saharan culture were influenced by the context of each era. Thus, gender role changes were enforced once the period of Spanish colonization imposed Westernized and European standards; and later on, the war – and flee of a great part of the population to refugee camps in the desert – altered the living conditions, and thus priorities of the people, which led to yet another shift in women’s lives. These processes of change in gender roles will be discussed in a deepened way in the present chapter.

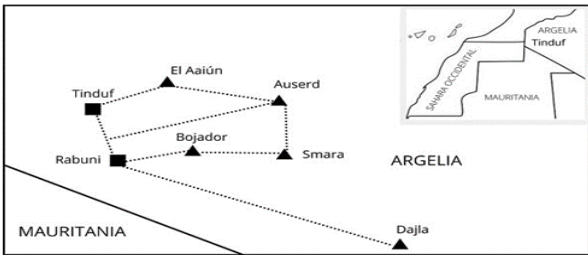
In this sense, throughout this chapter, a deeper analysis will be conducted on the demographics encompassed in the scope of this research. In the first moment, a greater focus will be placed on women’s roles and women’s rights in the refugee camps in Algeria, seeking to understand its shifts and developments, as well as the key aspects to consider leading up to the empirical part of this project. Then, the focus will shift to the Spanish diaspora, seeking to understand the most relevant academic contributions to the understanding of this demographic.

5.1 Survival in the refugee camps

5.1.1 Organization of the refugee camps in Algeria

After the Moroccan invasion, and the consequent flight of the population, the Sahrawi women posed a fundamental role in the refugee camps, building them from scratch. In the middle of the desert, they started as unorganized cluttered tents, and families lived all together in a single tent. The Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria were established in the harsh and inhospitable region of *Hammada*. Many had endured hunger, thirst, and attacks before arriving to these camps. The men primarily focused on securing the battlefield, while the women took on the crucial responsibility of ensuring the survival and well-being of the people in the camps. However, despite the nomadic nature of the Sahrawi people, the number of displaced people from one day to the other hardened the chances of survival in the camps. Nowadays, there are six refugee camps: El- Aayún, Auserd, Boujdour (previously called 27 de Febrero), Smara, Dakhla and Rabouni – the administrative camp of the government of SADR (Sáhara Occidental, 2023).

Image 5.4. Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria



Source: Sáhara Occidental, 2023

According to the website Sáhara Occidental (2023), it is estimated that the camps are constituted of about 173.600 people. The camps of Smara and El-Aayún are the ones that present a larger number of refugees: 29% of the refugee population each. Awserd is home to 21% of the population, while Dakhla and Boujdour are the smallest camps, with 11% and 10%, respectively. Additionally, it is estimated that the camps' overall population is 49% women and 51% men. 38% of the population consists of minors younger than 17 years old. The settlements are divided and organized into *hayys* (barrios, neighbourhoods) constituted of around 200 tents, and a local 12–15-person cell (*khaliyah*) which divides the neighbourhood into different activity sectors. Four *hayys* constitute one district (*da'irah*), and each possesses a council (*majlis*), composed of elected representatives (*mas'ul*) (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). During the war, women were typically involved in the role of food distribution (*hayy mas'ulah*). Yearly, six/seven districts meet for a Base Congress to elect the *da'irah*'s executive and assign positions within the local committees (*lajnah*), which cover five aspects of the social life: 1) children's education; 2) health/sanitation; 3) justice; 4) food/provisions; and 5) production/crafts (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). The camps constitute the wilaya (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Each camp is separated from the other by about one hour of distance, except for Dakhla, which is three hours away (Perez-Martin, 2014).

From the beginning, especially in the camps, education was considered a vital form of development for the Sahrawi people, which should be made available for everyone, no matter their gender or age (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). As for education, primary schools are free and mandatory, with Spanish as a second language while adult literacy classes are available. Adults can learn Arabic and European languages (according to teacher availability), and there is the possibility of child day-care support for the parents when they are attending classes. This makes this population one of the highest educated in Africa (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Furthermore, children often seek secondary education in Algeria (Rivero, 2013). Cuba was a great supporter of Western Sahara, as they took in students and provided thousands of scholarships to Sahrawi children for secondary and higher education (De Vega, 2012). By 1977, women had been sent to Algeria for nursing programmes, allowing for their formation as nurses. Some women were sent to Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Algeria, and Spain to specialize in medical professions (Lippert, 1992). In 1987, there was a Sahrawi woman gynaecologist and a dentist. Right at the beginning of the refugee camps in Algeria, literacy campaigns focused on women took place – the teachers moved on from being mostly men and boys to women who had then completed school. By 1988, about 64% of the teaching staff were women (Lippert, 1992). Moreover, according to El-Mehdi (2016), women of all ages had access to education to such an extent that literacy rates account for 90% in the refugee camps. Education became one of the goals of survival in the desert, which became a form of resistance against the occupation. This was only possible with the support of allied countries, such as Venezuela or Cuba (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

In this sense, great focus was placed on education. Thus, the younger population often studied abroad, in countries like Cuba, Spain or Algeria. During the school break, the children integrate the

program *Vacaciones en Paz*, where they go abroad and stay in host families – which, on its own, is another form of resistance, as it prevents the isolation of Sahrawi children and contributes to international solidarity (Juliano, 1998). *Vacaciones en Paz* is a programme that oversees the temporary trip of Sahrawi children from the refugee camps to different countries of Europe, namely Spain and Italy (Arapaz, 2023). In these countries, the children are welcomed by host families. The programme seeks to ensure an improvement in the health of the children, as they spend weeks away from the Algerian *hammada*, allowing them to access better health facilities and services (Arapaz, 2023). Moreover, the children become acquainted with a whole different perspective of the world, whilst escaping the scorching temperature felt in the refugee camps during the summer (Arapaz, 2023). The programme started back in the ‘80s and has ever since aided the development of the children’s capabilities in what concerns speaking Spanish. Furthermore, *Vacaciones en Paz* is a great example of the solidarity of other peoples to the Sahrawi struggle, as ties of mutual support are forged (Historia Vacaciones En Paz – CEAS-Sahara, n.d.). The focus on education – and especially women’s education – led to the emergence of the perception that housework is not a job, and thus women must work outside the domestic sphere. Before the integration of monetary exchange in the camps, the work done did not account for any wages. Therefore, the collective work for the good of society is inherent to Sahrawi history: the so-called *tuiza* (Juliano, 1998; Medina Martín, 2016a). The increase in the number of children accessing education – both boys and girls – led to the delay of the first marriage from 17/18 years old to 24/25 in women (Juliano, 1998). This transformation can be seen as a form of women’s emancipation, as they attain higher levels of education and greater independence, particularly by not relying on marriage at a young age. Ultimately, this led to a higher equality in terms of age between the couples, who became the ones to agree on the marriage, instead of the family (Juliano, 1998).

Health was a fundamental part to take into consideration, considering the lack of maintenance and the trauma of the Green March. The first years were especially obscure: every child younger than 2 years old died of a measles outbreak, and child mortality was at 40% (Caratini, 2006). The early days of the Sahrawi camps did not possess a responsive strategy for illnesses, due to the difficulties linked to the establishment of the camps, the initial organization, and lack of resources (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). During 1975/76, the epidemics killed thousands of children, as vaccination was not possible due to the lack of refrigerators. Other diseases, such as tuberculosis and bronchitis were also quick to spread. SADR has ever since invested in vaccination programs and breast-feeding campaigns, as well as no-smoking initiatives. However, medication is still scarce and mal-nutrition frequent (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). In the adult population, female mortality was higher than men’s, which Juliano (1998) considered to be due to the gap between nutrition and pregnancy and childbearing. Furthermore, in the refugee camps, Juliano (1998) considers the fact that women are often in charge of managing the economic and social life – given the absence of men –, as embedded in the nomadic roots of Sahrawi culture (Juliano, 1998). Regardless, more contemporary perspectives, such as Medina Martín’s (2016b), acknowledge shifts within Sahrawi society as the 21st century unfolded, indicating a growing sense of women’s

oppression. Between 2000 and 2004, women constituted 80% of the body of the health workers in the camps, as well as 60% of medical and paramedical staff and camp teachers (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010).

The families now live in mudbrick houses next to their tent, which provide higher protection from sandstorms but are volatile to heavy rain (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Water is scarce, despite El-Aayún and Dakhla being settled on underground water sources, and the temperature can oscillate between 60° Celsius and drop to freezing temperature (Perez-Martin, 2014). Hence, international aid is necessary for the refugees to survive. With the ceasefire, movement between the camps was facilitated, due to the reallocation of vehicles and a somewhat growing internal economy, which allowed for the personal ownership of vehicles (Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

Caratini (2006) describes two distinct phases in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria from 1991 to 2006. The revolutionary phase (1991-1997) saw the support of young people and women in the armed struggle, leading to increased freedom of movement and monetary exchange. The post-revolutionary phase (1997-onwards) witnessed the development of an informal economy, social inequalities, and the return to tribal solidarities, among other changes (Higgs & Ryan, 2015). According to Higgs & Ryan (2015), the Sahrawis interviewed for the purpose of their research in the refugee camps consider that gendered violence primarily stems from Moroccan oppression rather than within the community.

5.1.2 Women in charge of survival

In this sense, it is now possible to focus directly on women's roles and their daily lives in the refugee camps. Throughout this section, women's relevance within the Sahrawi society and culture will be considered, seeking to understand it among the greater scope of this research. Caratini (2006) perceives women as the core of the liberation struggle in Western Sahara, as they sought to influence the community towards the revolution. According to her, three elements paved the way for women to be able to influence the Sahrawi society. First, during the war, as most men were recruited to fight, the population in the refugee camps constituted about 80% of women. This cleared a path for women to take up positions of leadership both within the government and the refugee camps. Second, there was a rupture in affective relations caused by the separation of families. And finally, living in exile, away from the homeland and the people who could not escape from the invasion.

Women were the ones in charge of building and organizing the refugee camps, that is, in charge of the survival of the people, while the men went off to war. Here, women participated in every part of the Sahrawi resistance: in administration, politics, the economy and the military (Medina Martín, 2016b). During the war, the body of the SADR was constituted of almost 90% of women (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Despite being in charge of the survival of the Sahrawi people in the refugee camps, many women also joined the Sahrawi Popular Liberation Army (SPLA) (Lippert, 1992). In the refugee camps, women were not only present in the committees of the *wilaya* but also through the organization of political cells, in which debates were conducted (Caratini, 2006). It was only once the first year of settling in the camps had passed, that women had the opportunity to rethink their stand as women and form a cohesive

political position (Barona, 2016). Yet not even this status that they accomplished gave entire freedom for women's struggles to be addressed on their own. Because the priority lied with survival, women's identity and interests have been passed on to the second plan (Ormazabal & López Belloso, 2011).

One of the pillars of Sahrawi resistance hinges on reinforcing cultural ties through oral history, predominantly entrusted to women who pass down the people's history (Juliano, 1998). However, with the introduction of a monetary system in the refugee camps, women's circumstances took a step back. Prostitution became prevalent, occurring within the camps and extending to Tindouf (Caratini, 2006). Similarly, the dowry returned (Caratini, 2006). On its own, labour lost its value, for it is now only linked to the wage. Monetary exchange altered the inherent culture of the Sahrawi people: the tents used to be open spaces, where anyone could enter if welcome, and the clay houses built after the ceasefire remained along these lines of openness; yet, as money was introduced in the camps, the houses began being locked to protect the goods inside. The inequality of means started being visible through the means of comfort of each household. Furthermore, with the ceasefire, a new division of labour between men and women, with men remaining in the camps, led to a shift in the role of women (Medina Martín, 2016b). Hence, the role of women in the camps altered: women lost the numbers of representation in leadership positions, the bride price (*al-mahr*) resurfaced, and the use of the traditional female full body-covering (*milhafah*) increased, encompassing girls as young as 11 years old (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Nonetheless, Higgs and Ryan (2015) highlight that in the refugee camps, women do not speak of gender or domestic violence, instead, they perceive the greatest struggles to be linked to the environment where they live: in the desert, where they struggle to survive, and away from their homeland. Moreover, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010) argues that the perception of Sahrawi women as empowered at the social, political, and economic level, neglects many women who are not engaged with societal organizations – such as the UNMS. This leads to the marginalization of whole sectors of women within the society of the camps.

It is also relevant to consider the diverse contexts that influenced and altered the lives of women of different generations. Within this line of thought, it is to be expected that different women will have different positions depending on their age. This happens because each generation is influenced by different contexts, and younger generations live in a world in which, even in the refugee camps, globalization led to developments in culture and everyday life. In this sense, two different delineations of Sahrawi women's generations emerge, contributing to the understanding of the main specificities of each, as well as how they contrast among each other. However, it is fundamental to keep in mind that the categories presented represent the overall perception of each generation; each woman has a unique background and a specific perspective. Barona (2016) and Bengochea Tirado (2013) highlight three different stages of the history of women in the refugee camps. The first, “exile and construction of the camps” (1976-1979), relates to the first few years when women were focused on the survival of the people. Whilst women's issues were relegated to the second plan, women as a collective became leaders of the camps at the decision-making level on issues such as education, healthcare, or political

development. The second relates to the linkage of women's vindications to the political cause (1979-1990), as women focus on female literacy and political and diplomatic participation (in this period, women integrated the Secretariat of the Polisario Front in 1974). The final stage begins with the peace agreements (1991)¹², as space opened up for the consolidation of the norms established in the years of the armed struggle, to ensure the resistance of the Sahrawi Nation-State. Despite the importance given to women's issues, it is perceived that there is a general concern regarding the possibility of global interests overshadowing women's vindications. Considering the time when this research was conducted, the break of the ceasefire and return of the war had not happened yet, and so no interpretations were made on how this new period has affected the lives of the Sahrawi people through this perspective.

Going further than speaking of the stages of survival in the camps, Medina Martín (2016b) distinguishes three generations of Sahrawi women according to the general experiences lived by these groups. Here, Medina Martín considers the context of the oppression of Sahrawi people when the women were born, along with the context lived throughout their lives. The "First Generation" relates to older women (who were born between 1950 and 1970), who – in some cases – lived through Spanish colonization, followed by the revolution, the Madrid Accords and Spanish retreat, the Green March, and who then fled to exile in Tindouf. These women were present during the unfolding of the war, as supporters of those on the frontlines or as soldiers. The older women of this generation lived through nomad culture and some of them later on became members of the nationalist movement. The "Second Generation" consists of women who were mainly born in the refugee camps and grew up as the armed struggle developed – women born between 1970 and 1985. Several of these women studied abroad, especially in universities in Cuba, Algeria, or Libya, having then returned to the camps with different experiences and educational backgrounds. Nonetheless, many of these women migrated abroad permanently. Lastly, the "Third Generation" accounts for young adult women, who sometimes were old enough to know the camps as support bases for the war, which saw its close in 1991. Only a small number of these women have stepped foot in Western Sahara territory. Some of these women also studied abroad, in countries such as Algeria or Spain, although not as many as in the "Second Generation". These are women who were born between 1985 and 1997.

To finalize this section, it is relevant to address yet another factor relevant to be considered regarding women's rights and gender equality: a penitentiary centre described by some women (Bouzeid, 2018). Women who have broken the social norms are taken to this centre. To be able to leave from it, a man must come to them to get married. According to Medina Martín (2016b), the UNMS explains this detention centre as a form of protecting said women from their families. On the other hand, Sahrawi women living in Spain perceive the centre as chauvinist and oppressive of women. This centre was only referred to in these two sources, as not much information can be found.

¹² Noting that both sources were published prior to the resumption of the war, potentially allowing for evolving perspectives in the present day, namely, the delineation of a new stage. This, however, was not possible to verify within the scope of this study.

5.2 Sahrawi Women in the Spanish diaspora

It is possible to find many Sahrawis living in exile, especially in countries like Spain, due to the transnational solidarity ties created due to the support of Spanish counties to the Sahrawi struggle. The struggle here isn't solely about the occupation of the territory; it also encompasses the conflict that arises on an individual level as the various cultures one is subjected to clash (Mujeres jóvenes saharauis en la diáspora y su lucha por la libertad de su pueblo, 2022). In this sense, it is crucial for Sahrawis to recognize the dual realities – those of the diaspora, and those residing in the camps and Western Sahara territory – prompting an understanding of diverse perspectives and advocacies (Mujeres jóvenes saharauis en la diáspora y su lucha por la libertad de su pueblo, 2022). Sebastián (2021) draws upon Cohen's (2008) comprehensive study, categorizing diasporas into five distinct types: 1) victim; 2) labour; 3) imperial; 4) trade; and 5) deterritorialized. Within this framework, she situates the Sahrawi diaspora primarily in the victim diaspora category. However, it's crucial to clarify that this categorization does not imply homogeneity within the Sahrawi diaspora. Rather, it underscores the shared experience of a traumatic event – the invasion – that propelled hundreds of Sahrawis to seek refuge in Algeria and other parts of the world, whether immediately in November 1975 or in the years that followed. This dispersion marked the beginning of a significant Sahrawi presence beyond the homeland. However, it is also relevant to understand the Sahrawi diaspora within the other provided categories. First, the “labour diaspora”, provided that – as will below be presented – many Sahrawis migrate for labour opportunities and economic independence. Second, “imperial diaspora”, as many Sahrawis have migrated for political or diplomatic reasons, seeking to bring awareness to the Sahrawi struggle and obtain transnational solidarity. And finally, the “deterritorialized diaspora”, given that the Sahrawis maintain a rooted sense of identity and activism within the diaspora. In this scope, it is considered that the main contribution of the women in the diaspora lies within the spread of awareness and education on the Western Sahara occupation and oppression, through diplomatic action (Barona, 2016).

The perception of Sahrawi women on gender equality and women's emancipation¹³ in the refugee camps is heterogeneous. Sahrawi women living in the Spanish diaspora are keener on discussing issues related to gender inequalities in the refugee camps. It is considered that a subject that needs to be accounted for is the gap in how children (boys and girls) are brought up within the Sahrawi society. It is presented that girls do not have the same freedom as boys, as they cannot engage in activities considered masculine. Moreover, girls are often prevented from playing with boys, for fear of possible sexual relations (from 5/6 years old) (Jessica Fillol – Roja y Motera, 2021). It is also considered that women's freedoms are enclosed, with girls becoming mothers at a young age, for example (Mujeres jóvenes saharauis en la diáspora y su lucha por la libertad de su pueblo, 2022).

¹³ These terms are mostly used in the diaspora, where women have greater contact with the Western World, and so, with the language used by western feminists. In the refugee camps, the term “gender equality” does not usually resonate with the women, especially older women; whilst the term “emancipation” is usually replaced by “freedom” or “empowerment”.

Sahrawi women who live in the diaspora feel that they have less space for manoeuvre to fight in the struggle. It is widely accepted that here women should be more focused on their education along with telling the story of the country and the people (Mujeres jóvenes saharauis en la diáspora y su lucha por la libertad de su pueblo, 2022). Hence, Sahrawi women make use of the internet as a tool for activism (Allan, 2014, in Sebastián, 2021). In the diaspora – but also in other locations where Sahrawi people have access to the internet –, women from Western Sahara use media platforms to call out against human rights violations, through poetic art forms or YouTube videos, where kidnappings, torture or enforced disappearances are exposed (Allan, 2014, in Sebastián, 2021). Yet, as a political message and vindication, women's action online is often targeted at harassment and violence. To fight social media harassment, women have undergone several strategies: 1) self-censorship, in which women end up shutting down their accounts; 2) collaboration with other feminists, through which women come together to report perpetrators to the police; and 3) solidarity across borders, through the creation of networks of support between the different people and regions (Allan, 2014, in Sebastián, 2021). Furthermore, in the diaspora, the Sahrawis often struggle between the society and culture of their homeland and the habits taken on in the host country. New social codes lead women in exile to suffer from transnational gossip perpetrated by the communities in the camps (Sebastián, 2021). Regularly, people who migrated away from the camps were seen by the ones who remained as traitors, who considered that the Sahrawi cause would be neglected by them. This sometimes leads the Sahrawis living in foreign countries to create two separate accounts on social media – one for the homeland, and another for the host country (Allan, 2014, Almenara-Niebla & Ascanio-Sánchez, 2020, in Sebastián, 2021).

Taking into consideration all of the issues discussed in this chapter, it is possible to understand the various interpretations and perspectives on existing standards of gender equality in Western Sahara. First, it is possible to conclude that both in the refugee camps and in the diaspora, Sahrawi women have a fundamental role in the resistance, despite facing different challenges relating to gender inequality and expectations. Nonetheless, education is perceived as fundamental on either scenario. However, in the refugee camps, the priority aspect to be addressed lies with the survival of the people, which is often criticized overseas, by the Sahrawi women in the diaspora, who consider that women's rights and gender equality should be considered as pivotal issues to be tackled. In the diaspora, women highlight the challenge encompassing the balance between the two cultures – homeland and host country – and how it hardens their daily lives, as well as their activism. Moreover, as will be studied and analysed through interviews, women do not agree on whether women's issues should be a priority right now or not, nor whether women's status within society is at a good enough stage. These perspectives change according to age, education, and geographical placement. Therefore, it is once again crucial to understand that each woman has a different background and perspective, and thus will highlight particular issues and present different standpoints.

CHAPTER 6

Methodology

The present research adopts a qualitative approach, using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis identifies recurring patterns or “themes” within the data, focusing on participants’ experiences and meanings, making it an essentialist or realist approach. The researcher’s judgment determines the most relevant themes, considering the women's perceptions and supporting literature. This research utilizes a top-down analysis, guided by the researcher’s theoretical interests. The methodological strategy for this research is a case study on Western Sahara, chosen due to personal reasons. The impetus for this research arose from an encounter, during a volunteer engagement in Italy, where I interacted with Sahrawi children. Their narratives generated a greater curiosity to study this issue, namely concerning the perspectives and lives of Sahrawi women. The significance of understanding their point of view and acknowledging their resistance within the scholarly discourse underscore the *raison d’être* behind this research. Moreover, the perception of Sahrawi women being greatly emancipated is challenged by some authors (such as Medina Martín, 2016b), making it an interesting topic to explore. The empirical section of this dissertation aims to study the alignment of realities presented with existing literature and diverse perspectives encountered.

Despite existing literature, Western Sahara remains a neglected struggle, as more research needs to be conducted to fully understand this occupation. Additionally, women’s resistance in African war zones and occupations often focuses on other countries, such as Rwanda or the Democratic Republic of Congo, leaving a gap in the literature concerning Sahrawi women. To address this, the study will analyse the period from 1975 to the present, encompassing the beginning of the armed conflict and the pivotal role of women in the survival of the Sahrawi people in the Algerian *hammada*. The research will concentrate on diverse perspectives from women in both refugee camps and the diaspora.

6.1 Operationalization

The proposed research will study two concepts: gender equality and resistance. Gender equality encompasses women’s role in society and their perceptions of gender equality within the Sahrawi community. Understanding gender equality requires an authentic grasp of the lived realities, aspirations, and challenges of Sahrawi women at the heart of the resistance movement. To shed some light on this, presented below is one of the explanations provided by one of the interviewees on this subject, Malika, which will be further analysed in the next chapter: “[Gender equality] to me it’s, you know, providing

opportunities. Opportunities for both men and women, also realising that historically women had more barriers, (...) but also to unlearn... to help women unlearn a lot of things they were taught about women and also to see that they are already so powerful". To study this issue, the focus will be placed on the different perceptions presented by the interviewees regarding their own conceptualization of gender equality. From here, women's role in society will be studied by seeking to understand the part played by women, especially in the refugee camps, in the day-to-day activities and concerning the focus on the survival of the people. Here, the issues sought to be addressed are connected to the everyday survival in the camps, to the public and private spheres, as well as to women's role – as a group and individually – in the national struggle. The second conceptual aspect of this research revolves around women's resistance, specifically focusing on their emancipation, the adversities they confront, and their active participation in political leadership roles. The indicator "obstacles" regards women's understanding of the difficulties faced by them: within this subject, do they consider the lack of resources? Do they mention patriarchy? Do they regard the war as an obstacle to their own emancipation? Here, the research also seeks to understand whether the women interviewed perceive the obstacles mentioned as gendered, or whether they consider them of national scope. Lastly, the fourth indicator, leadership roles, explores women's involvement in political leadership, which need not be confined to government positions. For instance, one of the interviewed women has founded a centre to combat illiteracy in children, an act of political resistance against Morocco's efforts to leave the Sahrawi people uneducated. While this role may not be directly tied to the central government's leadership, it nonetheless represents a significant political contribution. To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of this, the subsequent table provides an elucidation of the operationalization of concepts.

Table 1. Concept operationalization

Concept	Dimensions	Indicators
Gender equality	Women's role in society	Women's role in society
	Gender equality	Gender equality
Resistance	Women's emancipation	Obstacles
		Leadership roles

6.2 Hypothesis

It is in this sense that three hypotheses emerge. Firstly, women's struggles are considered. Women all around the world experience violations in terms of gender equality, and armed conflicts are usually more blatant in the assault on women's rights (Tickner, 2018). To comprehend whether this is the case for Sahrawi women and the West Sahara conflict, and bearing in mind existing literature on this issue, the

first hypothesis is elaborated, seeking to directly answer the first research goal, and tend to the indicators “women’s role in society” and “gender equality”:

H1: Sahrawi women living in the camps perceive their society to uphold gender equality.

Secondly, resistance, in itself, is analysed. Women’s movements emphasize anti-war discourse and perceive women’s struggles as inherently gendered. This means that these movements promptly prioritize advocating against war and recognize that women’s experiences and challenges are intricately shaped by their gender identity. Moreover, some movements go as far as to consider that women should have separate movements from men, for their advocations would otherwise be neglected (Yuval-Davis, 2004). Thus, the second hypothesis, which links to the first two research goals, and to all the indicators (dependently on each participant’s answer), goes as follows:

H2: Sahrawi women living in the Diaspora perceive their society of origin to lack a feminist perspective.

Finally, Sahrawi women in the diaspora have expressed a divergence in terms of the perspective of gender equality in the camps, when compared to women living in the refugee camps (Jessica Fillol – Roja y Motera, 2021; Medina Martín, 2016b). To better understand if this study goes according to the existing literature, the third hypothesis is presented below, looking to directly understand the implications of the third research goal:

H3: Sahrawi women’s advocacy priorities vary based on whether they live in the Spanish diaspora or in the refugee camps.

6.3 Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with Sahrawi women, five in the refugee camps and four in the Spanish diaspora. An ethical approach was paramount, guided by the POMEPS initiative emphasizing ethical research in the Middle East. Informed consent was carefully obtained, and participants received comprehensive information about the research purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. In the case of four of the interviews in the camps, it was not possible to have the participants sign the relevant document, due to material limitations. Regardless, consent was obtained orally, after previous information was provided. Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded using pseudonyms, and cultural sensitivity was prioritized to mitigate potential power imbalances. Furthermore, the research aimed to benefit the Sahrawi community positively while adhering to transparent and robust methodologies. Furthermore, due to the impossibility of conducting in-person

interviews, Mwambari, Purdeková & Bisoka's (2021) insights on online interviews were considered. The internet's use as an instrument of surveillance by States and its limitations in capturing physical behaviours and fostering free and trustworthy communication posed challenges to this project. To mitigate this, the platform used for the interviews was suggested by the women themselves – Whatsapp – as it was considered to be safer. Nevertheless, online interviews allowed for obtaining personal narratives and unique perspectives, experiences, and beliefs. To ensure cultural sensitivity, adaptations were made in terms of phrasing, particularly when addressing women in the camps.

Data analysis was conducted using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, facilitating the exploration and interpretation of the most relevant themes for this study. Once the interviews had been conducted, the data under analysis was coded with drafted and simplified labels, to encapsulate the most relevant pieces of information to be extrapolated. From then on, this data was studied to understand patterns and connections, and thus compare and complement the different perspectives that arose. Codes with shared similarities were gathered into groups, which became preliminary themes. The more information analysed, and the deeper the analysis, the more complex those themes became, seeking to capture and reflect the information acquired. Finally, data was extracted accordingly, supported by quotes provided by the interviews, and the importance of each theme was reflected upon.

6.4 Study limitations

As mentioned above, one of the main limitations of this study is the impossibility of conducting the interviews and fieldwork in person. The online interviews conducted were faced with technical issues, as the internet connection was not always helpful – sometimes the video call had to be interrupted due to a weak connection. Furthermore, the lack of personal interaction blocked the awareness of body language, whilst standing in the way of creating ties of trust, fundamental for studies such as this one. In some interviews, the conversation was interrupted by family members, especially children; or the interviews themselves were conducted in the presence of one or more people who were either listening or even chimed in. This could stand as an impediment for the women interviewed to speak freely on their perception or interrupt the flow of the conversation. Lastly, four of the five interviews conducted with women in the refugee camps were performed with the assistance of a professional translator, which allowed the women to speak in their native language, with expressions used in *Hassanyia* and to be more eloquent when expressing their points of view. This allowed for the overcoming of potential language barriers that would otherwise hinder communication, which in turn facilitated a more inclusive and comprehensive analysis, ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives. Additionally, a translator can bridge the cultural gap and offer insights into local nuances and contextual meanings that might

otherwise be overlooked – which turned out to be extremely relevant in some accounts where doubts emerged. However, the reliance on a translator may introduce potential weaknesses, including issues of interpretation and translation accuracy. Nuances in language and cultural expressions might be lost in translation, leading to a potential misrepresentation of the participants' perspectives. Moreover, the intermediary role of the translator might influence the dynamics of the interviews, affecting the participants' responses and the researcher's understanding.

CHAPTER 7

Results

During the span of two months, nine women were interviewed for this dissertation: five in the refugee camps, and four in the Spanish diaspora. The ages of the five women interviewed in the refugee camps varied between 23 and 61 years old. Below, a table presents the summarized and anonymized information regarding the women interviewed:

Table 2. Sahrawi Women Interviewed Data

Name	Age	Location	Occupation
Qadira	61	Bojador camp	Began her professional life in sewing, later on became a teacher, and is now a vet for camels and other animals
Amani	30	Bojador camp	Store inspector
Fatima	42	Bojador camp	Organization of the Vacaciones en Paz programme
Iesha	55	Bojador camp	Health sector and Camp's Central Office
Malika	34	Smara camp	Health and education centre for women and children
Karyme	33	Spain	Health and social field
Jamila	36	Spain	Education sector
Nashwa	34	Spain	Activist
Nura	23	Basque country	Student and activist

In this section, the four indicators proposed to be studied were analysed based on the contribution of each of the women interviewed. Initially, the study will explore the role of women within Sahrawi society by gathering insights directly from the individuals interviewed, offering a firsthand account of their experiences and viewpoints. In the following moment, perceptions of the concept of gender equality and thus existing gender equality standards in the Sahrawi society will be considered. In the third aspect, the viewpoints of the women interviewed on obstacles to women's emancipation will be analysed, and in the last section, women in leadership roles and the importance of integrating women in these positions will be addressed. The names used below are fictional.

7.1 Understanding Sahrawi Gender Roles and Equality Narratives

The role of women in the Sahrawi society is widely considered fundamental. Lippert (1992) and Juliano (1998) address this, as they acknowledge the power of women within the community. According to El-Mehdi (2016), the Secretary General of the UNMS, women's role is fundamental to the nationalist and

anticolonial Sahrawi movement. These perceptions go accordingly with the ones presented by all the women interviewed, who understand the important role that Sahrawi women historically carry with them. One of the most often presented arguments when discussing this idea lies within the period succeeding the Green March, as women were the ones in charge of building the camps and organizing the day-to-day activities in the Algerian *hammadas*. Thus, Sahrawi women were in charge of the survival of the people in the camps throughout the decades:

“Even since the start of our struggle, after the population fled to the refugee camps, we can say that that was the point where Sahrawi women had the start of their significant presence within the society because they were the ones to basically build the refugee camps. (...) When I say building the refugee camps, I’m referring to building schools and referring to building kindergartens, and referring to building medical centres, to assist the men coming from the front and also to provide medical assistance to the women and kids living in the refugee camps. So, basically, the Sahrawi women built what we see today as the Sahrawi refugee camps. (...) Basically, you can say that the internal management and administration of the camps was at the hand of Sahrawi women.” (Qadira)

“Despite all the suffering from the moment Sahrawi women were obliged to flee their land, and came to the refugee camps, they sought strength to build the camps, to be able to build the schools, build the centres, and provide health and education to the rest of the population. They got strength from nowhere to be able to build a whole society and continue the fighting and the struggle up until nowadays”

(Amani)

These quotes contribute to the understanding that there is a generalized perception that women are fundamental for the Sahrawi's survival. This period marks a significant turning point for Sahrawi women, as they emerged as influential contributors to the community, and this is widely recognized. They took the lead in building essential infrastructure within the refugee camps, including schools, kindergartens, and medical centres. This led to their increased presence and influence within the society. This concurs with academic findings, such as the ones brought forward by Caratini (2006), Juliano (1998) and Medina Martín (2016b). Hence, it is possible to conclude, based on all this evidence, that women's role in the refugee camps was and stands to this day fundamental for the people's survival and to the nationalist resistance. Yet, none of the women interviewed considered the role of Sahrawi women in the independence struggle prior to Morocco's invasion. Thus, it seems that the contributions of the women to the society and culture during the pre-colonial period and during the epoch of Spanish colonialism – as discussed in Chapter 4 – have been overshadowed by the Green March. Furthermore, we must consider the specific contexts in which the different revolutions took place. The oppression

carried out by Moroccan forces may have generated circumstances which on the one hand, allowed for the discussion of different forms of oppression, and on the other, strengthened the Sahrawi need to put women's issues at the forefront of the struggle to distance said culture from other Islamic countries and to obtain greater support and solidarity at the international level. The invasion carried out by the Kingdom of Morocco led the men to stand in the frontlines of battle, and consequently opened space for women to take on leadership roles – which, perhaps, would not have been possible under different circumstances. As women took up those spaces, they became responsible for all forms of survival in the *hammada*. Additionally, in agreement with theoretical interpretations of the role of women in the liberation struggle (Caratini, 2006), the women interviewed understand the women's part in society ever since the 1970s as one of the main pillars of the Sahrawi resistance:

“I would say that we are the backbone of the struggle. There is no way around it. Whether you like or not like it, whether you agree with it or you don't agree with it, that's just the reality, that's just a fact” (Malika)

One scientific evidence that I was only able to find in Yuval-Davis' (2004) research – regarding women's role as mothers and caregivers – was addressed in one of the interviews. Here, it was presented that the great responsibilities that women carry at all times have to be balanced, between family and domestic responsibilities, and societal and national responsibilities, which was even conceptualized by one of the interviewees as a “*double role*” (Malika). Hence, during wartime, women need to handle all the issues and struggles of living in a refugee camp in the desert while the men are on the frontline of battle:

“At the beginning of the war, the women were soldiers, the women were mothers, the women were builders. That is why I say that there is so much involvement of women in the daily life of the Saharawi people, because women, in the end, they founded everything. Because while they [men] were at war, the women were also at war, but they were setting up refugee camps, taking care of the children, doing everything.” (Karyme)

This focus on the central role of Sahrawi women also resonates with the concerns of women and the Polisario Front during the first years of survival in exile. This is particularly addressed when regarding the education of the people as a form of resistance against illiteracy. Along with the programme *Vacaciones en Paz*, which allows children to come into contact with different perceptions of the world and new languages, younger generations grew ever keener on broadening and deepening their education. One of the women interviewed in the Spanish diaspora, a student, stresses this reality:

“At first, women stand out as the social figures who made progress within the camps, since they were the ones who built life within the camps, but in today's

society we have a different model of women, it is more common to find women who prioritize training with higher education and return to the camps to set up their own business, unlike before where women had the role of designing how the survival of the country was going to be like” (Jamila).

Hence, according to the theorizations of Bengochea Tirado (2013), Barona (2016), and Medina Martín (2016b), younger generations have brought forth new individual priorities, since the circumstances in which they were born and grew up in are so specific and intrinsic of their generation. By leaving the refugee camps to further their education and seeking to come into contact with other forms of thinking and approaches to different contexts, younger generations are able to return to their home community and discuss these new teachings. This could further aid the development and survival of the people in this context, along with the need to preserve the culture’s identity and origins, which are attacked daily. However, this fundamental role that women are historically linked to, to build the refugee camps and carry out the survival of the people, has been considered to have been taken away by the Sahrawi men, with the ceasefire. Once the ceasefire agreement was signed, in 1991, the number of soldiers on the frontline of battle drastically fell, as men returned to the camps and their families (Medina Martín, 2016b; Caratini, 2006). Hence, the men began taking up spaces that had been led by women for the prior decades:

“They [women] dedicated themselves to construction for years, but it is already as if the women were taken away from there. It was like the war ended, the men came back and said, ‘Okay, we need you to build things, now it belongs to us” (Nura)

Therefore, it is important to consider why this happened and what it means for women’s role in society. Did women effectively obtain rights and status in society, or is this space merely ceded by men? Considering the findings of this research, it seems that men remain the leaders of the Sahrawi culture at the political level. Women were only allowed to take up spaces usually associated with men because men were focused on other priorities at the time. Once they were allowed to return from the battlefield, they took those spaces back, and so the work of women as leaders of the camps was eclipsed. Yet, in this research, it was not possible to understand whether this process was publicly criticized by said women or if they accepted this shift in leadership roles. Nonetheless, provided that the Sahrawi society as a whole maintains the collective memory and respect of women’s work throughout the sixteen years of war, that work was still neglected once men occupied those spaces.

Throughout the interview process, two opposing views on gender equality¹⁴ emerged. Drawing on from Malika's above-presented perception of "gender equality" – providing opportunities and take historical conclusions (see Chapter 6) –, I tried to understand the multifaceted perceptions on existing gender equality within the Sahrawi society. The five women interviewed in the refugee camps expressed agreement with the notion that the Sahrawi society is engaged in defending women's rights and upholding gender equality, despite some issues in need of greater focus:

"[Gender equality] could be improved, of course it could, but as in all aspects and all countries, equality is progressing everywhere and obviously even more so in a refugee camp. But today we can say yes. It can be improved, you can always improve what you already have, but yes, we have equality" (Karyme).

However, in the Spanish diaspora, the most prevailing stance challenged the notion of Sahrawi society being a feminist society, which may be one of the most fundamental contributions of this research:

"[The] Saharawi society is a tribally matriarchal society, since we were tribes, it was a matriarchal society, but it does not mean that it is a feminist society, or that it fights for women's rights. In other words, because many Saharawis tell you 'No, it's a matriarchal society because women have many rights'. (...) It is true that in the Saharawi society as such I have never heard and I have never experienced the murder of any Saharawi woman or a man who has beaten his wife. It doesn't exist, it doesn't happen. (...) [But] I can't tell you "It doesn't exist" [gender violence]. Because it does exist, that is, psychological abuse and emotional blackmail. That is also abuse, but for the Saharawi society, for Saharawi women, for men, it is not abuse, they do not see it as abuse, they see it as advice, they see it as family protection, but they do not see it as abuse. (...) If you do not have that gender perspective and you are able to see it because you have been able to see other examples, but when you are in the society you do not see it, you do not know it. And you see that everything else and you see that the people who point it out, you see them as enemies because that is not your point of view because there is so much noise around you and so many women who live it and it is something so normalized that you do not feel it is abuse" (Nashwa)

The above presented quote stands in agreement with the findings of Higgs & Ryan (2015), who understood that the Sahrawis do not mention any accounts of gender-based violence in terms of domestic

¹⁴ Regarding women in the camps, especially older women words such as "emancipation" or "gender equality" needed to be adapted. Thus, as an example, instead of asking "What do you perceive as gender equality?" the question proposed was, instead, "Do you think women are equal to men?"

or physical violence. Yet, it is fundamental to understand, just as Nashwa highlights, that this does not account for actual gender equality. Here, a great gap is found between the perceptions of the Sahrawi women interviewed in the refugee camps and those in the diaspora.

In summary, the findings from the interviews demonstrate the fundamental role of Sahrawi women in their society. Scholars like Lippert (1992) and Juliano (1998) have acknowledged the strength of women within the community, which aligns with the perceptions of all the interviewed women. The period following the Green March marked a significant turning point for Sahrawi women, as they emerged as influential contributors to the community, taking charge of building essential infrastructure within the refugee camps, such as schools and medical centres. This led to an increased presence and influence of Sahrawi women in society, a perception widely recognized and emphasized by the interviewees. The Sahrawi women's role is seen as central to the nationalist and anticolonial movement, playing a crucial part in the resistance against oppression. Yet, none of the women interviewed mentioned the role of women in the military. However, the interviews also shed light on the challenges faced by women in balancing their familial and societal responsibilities, as the settlement of the Sahrawi people in the refugee camps led to a shift in the role of Sahrawi women. Women were forced to not only take care of their families but also of society as a whole. They became responsible for the survival of the people, along with their traditions, customs and history. They had to single-handedly build the shelters in the refugee camps and organize the resources available. Hence, their role is widely acknowledged within the community, along with the international gaze. Whilst men were on the frontlines of battle, women were ensuring the survival of their people, despite the famine and malnutrition, and despite the inhospitable conditions of the desert where they were forced to settle in. This created a legacy for women's active role within the community. Nevertheless, with the ceasefire and the return of men to the camps, there has been a perception that women's historically linked roles in building and sustaining the camps have been diminished. This happens because women did not take the spaces that they occupied during the war. Those spaces were ceded by men, and so no right was obtained. Despite the respect gained by women during this period, due to their role in ensuring the survival of the Sahrawi people in the refugee camps, those roles were still volatile to men's return from the war. Furthermore, Sahrawi women in the refugee camps particularly expressed the view that gender equality exists and is protected, whilst emphasizing the need to empower¹⁵ women while acknowledging the historical barriers they faced. However, the perception of gender equality is not universal, as reflected in the contrasting views of women in the diaspora. While some, like Karyme, perceive significant progress in gender equality, others, like Nashwa, challenge the notion of the Sahrawi society being a feminist society. This section reveals the complexity of understanding gender equality within

¹⁵ Throughout the interviews the women predominantly used the term "empower" rather than "emancipate." Since the latter is the specific concept adopted for this research, an attempt is made to establish a connection between the two terms, acknowledging the diverse perspectives and backgrounds of the participants.

the Sahrawi context. The diverse backgrounds of these women create different narratives and understandings of the issues related to women's rights and their emancipation within the society. This means that foreign influences have created a larger gap among the two factions of women, which directly correlates with the third research goal of this research, "gain insight on whether women's advocations shift depending on their geographical location". As it can be concluded based on these findings, Sahrawi women in the refugee camps perceive their society as engaged with women's interests and freedom; yet women in the Spanish diaspora do not see this as the truth, as they believe more effort needs to be placed on gender issues. Thus, while some interviewees reveal greater optimism about the progress made, others underscore the need for further examination of cultural norms and a gender perspective to address existing challenges. The diverse perspectives call for a nuanced and context-specific approach to promoting gender equality within the Sahrawi society.

In what concerns the issue of women in leadership roles, the resumption of the war seems to have taken an important part in the return of women to positions of power, which – as was addressed before – had an opposing tendency with the ceasefire, in 1991 (Caratini, 2006; Medina Martín, 2016b). In this sense, it is broadly understood that with the resumption of the war, women were able to take up more leadership positions:

"Of course, the presence of women increased, especially to fill that gap that men created when the majority of men were requested to be present on the battlefield and the military regions. So, that gap was filled by women, and we can say that the presence of women in politics and in other sectors increased after the return to war" (Fatima).

Furthermore, it is stated that women are present in the main offices of each camp, and as ambassadors in foreign countries:

"At the political level, you will find women as ambassadors and representatives; when you go the parliament, you'll also find a percentage of female and male representatives or parliamentarians; at the level of the camps, you go to the offices, and you will also find male and female workers. So, from my point of view, there is equal representation at the current state" (Qadira).

Nonetheless, this is not the perception of one of the interviewees in the diaspora. In this case, it is pointed out that higher positions of power are occupied by men, whilst lower positions are occupied by women. Below, Nashwa sheds light on the dynamics of power and gender representation within the Sahrawi society, highlighting the discrepancy between the perception of women believing they have won certain spaces and the reality of men reclaiming those positions after returning from the war. It is stressed that women played crucial roles in building and sustaining the camps during the conflict, taking

on diverse responsibilities, but once the men returned, they assumed dominant positions in important spheres:

“When you look with a magnifying glass, those who are in high positions, in important positions are men. (...) In the end, the spaces were ceded by the men, yet the women believe that they have won those spaces, but in reality, it was not like that... it has been a struggle, the men returned from the war, the women were building the camps, raising everything, they were teachers, doctors, nurses, sweepers, they did everything. But the men returned from the war in the 1990s and began to occupy all those spaces” (Nashwa).

Interestingly, one of the Sahrawi women interviewed in the camps, Malika, understands that the women in leadership roles have a totally different approach – and thus, results – from men. According to her, women in positions of power are more efficient, more effective, and more democratic than men. This perspective challenges traditional gender stereotypes that might associate leadership and management positions with men. Malika's observation underscores the importance of recognizing women's skills and contributions to effective management and leadership, advocating for a more inclusive and equal society where both men and women have an equal opportunity to succeed in these roles:

“When you compare the position where men are in and positions where women are in, it's totally different. It's totally different management, it's a totally different approach, and definitely women have proved they are more successful on managing. (...) They are also more protective of resources, (...) they are also more inclusive towards people they work with. They are not taking decisions on their own, they are not like, trying to use the power only them; they try to include everyone” (Malika).

In this sense, it is suggested that the persistence of the situation of exile and oppression of the Sahrawi people has led to changes in the role of women, which is no longer focused only on the survival in the camps, which links to Medina Martín's (2016b) understanding of the context latent to the “Third Generation” of women in the refugee camps. Adding to this, one of the women interviewed in the diaspora comments precisely on this debate. Another aspect that was presented as important to be considered when discussing women in leadership roles, is the first female Minister of the Interior:

“For example, this year we have had the first Minister of the Interior, a woman. And that it is too important a position in the Government, and on top of that, she is a declared feminist. So, it seems to me that in that aspect it is true that it will be the greatest opportunity for the Saharawi women” (Nura).

Seeking to understand these findings in light of the first research goal – understand what Sahrawi women in the refugee camps perceive as gender equality and women's role in society –, several conclusions can be extrapolated. First, the Sahrawi women interviewed understand “gender equality” as equal opportunities and the process of unlearning discriminative interpretations of gender roles and gender expectations. Second, Sahrawi women in the refugee camps play a dual role: on the one hand, they must bear familial and domestic responsibilities; on the other, national duties must be fought for. This means that these women have to balance these two facets of their individual responsibilities. Yet, these national-level responsibilities were central to the survival of the people as a whole, as women took charge of building and organizing the refugee camps, standing as the primary leaders of the day-to-day activities. This role is well recognized by the Sahrawis in the camps and in the diaspora. However, a shift in women’s roles has been developing over the decades, as the younger generations have begun to focus more and more on education and personal development, marking a shift from the survival-focused roles of older generations. These findings collectively illustrate the multifaceted and crucial roles Sahrawi women perceive themselves to have in the refugee camps, emphasizing their contributions to both the daily life and the resistance efforts of the Sahrawi community. Younger generations, in particular, are placing a greater emphasis on education as part of their evolving roles within the society. Overall, this section facilitates a dialogue with literary sources discussed in the academic review presented above.

7.2 Exploring Differing Views of Challenges

Seeking to understand Sahrawi women’s perception of obstacles to women’s emancipation in the Sahrawi society was a particularly interesting topic. For the most part, the women interviewed in the refugee camps considered issues relating to the whole society, not just women in particular. These concerns focused on issues mostly relating to education and health. The Sahrawi cause is thus considered to be a priority that needs to be focused on primarily. This perspective goes accordingly with Medina Martín’s (2016b) and El-Mehdi’s (2016) studies, in which it is found that the permanent survival priorities (that is, food, water, and medicine, particularly) take up most of the space and funding. In this sense, women’s issues are relegated to the second plan. In the interviews conducted in the camps, the women presented similar standpoints, as they considered that living in a refugee camp, whilst their homeland is under occupation, the main goal is the independence of the people:

“So, our main priority as a society, and women in particular, is the struggle for independence, that is our main vision, our main priority. (...) Even now we are in the refugee camps and with very limited resources, very limited means for development and for many other things and to cover many other needs (...)”

(Amani)

Here it is emphasized that the central goal is the struggle for independence, which remains the foremost priority for the Sahrawi people, especially in the challenging context of living in refugee camps with limited resources and development opportunities. However, the community might not give women's struggles much attention because they believe gender equality is already quite prevalent in society. Thus, this perception may lead to a lower sense of urgency in addressing these specific issues. This understanding is strengthened by Iesha's contribution, as she explains that the Sahrawi people are not enjoying their land and are in a refugee situation due to circumstances beyond their control. They are unable to fully benefit from their resources or exercise their right to live freely in their homeland. Thus, as the existing literature suggests, the situation in which the Sahrawi people live in the Algerian *hammada* obliges women's issues to become secondary, placing the priority on the survival of the people:

“The fact that they are not enjoying their land, them being in a refugee situation, and cannot fully benefit and enjoy their resources, their right to live freely and in their land. And this drew them to live in the refugee camps, and to experience the refugee life” (Iesha)

As for the women in the diaspora, a whole diversity of issues is raised. First, it is presented that knowing the oppression that the Sahrawi people face every day in occupied Western Sahara, is limitative of a free and fulfilled life in Spain. In this sense, in agreement with some perspectives of the women in the refugee camps, one of the women interviewed advocated that the primary goal of the resistance is the liberation of Western Sahara is the freedom of the whole Sahrawi people, which stands in agreement with the perspective presented in the refugee camps:

“Imagine you migrate to another country knowing that your country is rich in all aspects, but you cannot go there because you feel threatened. Because they can rape you because they can kill you because they can put you in jail, they can force you to disappear, and nobody will talk about you, and nobody will know anything about you. So, knowing that how can you be calm? To be calm and think freely of oneself, in Western Sahara, not in a refugee camp, the main thing for us is self-determination. And the liberation of Western Sahara from Moroccan occupation is the most important thing” (Karyme).

However, another point of view is presented by another woman interviewed in the diaspora. In this sense, the perception that women are dependent on men is named as one form of oppression towards Sahrawi women, stemming from Patriarchy, which concurs with Medina Martín's (2016b) analysis of the same issue:

“The fear of believing that it is necessary to depend on a man for everything, from having to be "maintained" to survive, to needing to be married in order to fulfil the objectives that society dictates” (Jamila).

Furthermore, it is also highlighted that women’s standing within Sahrawi society is exploited for political purposes, often showcasing a facade of gender equality and women's rights within the community. It is proposed that this exploitation may not necessarily align with reality. In this perspective, it is suggested that this overall generalization of women’s rights is used to promote a political agenda, to the detriment of actually addressing women’s issues. From an academic standpoint, this perception presents an interesting contrast of viewpoints among Sahrawi women, contributing to a discourse within the existing literature. Zunes & Mundy (2010), two men, depict the society as promoting gender equality and women's rights, while Medina Martín (2016b), a woman, takes a more critical approach, delving into these issues from the perspective presented below – which is important to analyse on its own. The conversation generated by these perspectives enriches the academic understanding of the complexities surrounding gender dynamics in the Sahrawi context and highlights the significance of considering diverse viewpoints for a comprehensive analysis. Nashwa challenges the notion that the Polisario can be seen as the most representative entity or as an advocate for women. She suggests that portraying the Polisario and Saharawi society as the epitome of women's representation could be viewed as political propaganda, which implies an element of manipulation or distortion of reality:

“But it also does not stop being political propaganda when we say that the Polisario and Saharawi society represent women the most, because that’s not true” (Nashwa).

Additionally, another point of view that does not seem to be well represented in the existing literature considers that the threats to women’s emancipation in the Sahrawi society are not political, but religious and familial. Although some studies have taken an approach regarding this issue, it is usually focused on the link between women’s rights and societal traditions, and not on societal expectations or implications itself. This means that the Sahrawi women are under scrutiny by society itself, despite the legal and political framework recognizing their rights. This social opinion on each woman is deemed controlling and oppressive, circumscribing them to a life that is considered by the population as a whole as what a woman’s role should look like:

“Neither the Polisario Front nor the police nor anyone, they will never go to a woman who decides to go live alone, no one; there is no Islamic police like in other countries, there is no Islamic court, there is none of that. But you have a family, you have brothers, you have cousins, who are going to harass you, they are not going to leave you be. I mean, it's social and familial.” (Nashwa).

Here, Nashwa highlights the profound influence of social and familial pressures; the idea of family members as enforcers of traditional norms, potentially harassing women who seek to live independently. This is complemented by another contribution, this time provided by Nura, who introduces the concept of the "social gaze", illustrating the strict gender roles expected from women by their families and society. Straying from these roles may result in disapproval and disconnection from one's family. Both perspectives converge on the pivotal role of social expectations, which may limit women's agency and choices:

“We in Hassanyia, in the language of Western Sahara, we have a word... it is the social gaze. (...) The moment you step out of that line of what is expected of you, you are disowned, both you and your family. So, I think it's a lot... that, that is, it limits women especially, more than anything because of the weight they carry of saying ‘no, I'm going to make my family have a hard time’” (Nura).

To wrap up this issue, it is important to note that globalization and foreign influences are considered to have brought a shift to women's rights and to what women are allowed to do in the camps. This is a factor that has already been addressed in other studies. Medina Martín (2016b) focuses on this issue, as new contexts arise, and a new social order develops in the camps. In this sense, one of the women interviewed in the diaspora, Nura, highlights factors which she considers to be oppressive to women, and are linked to globalization and religious fundamentalism:

“For example, the melfa has been a symbol of resistance for Saharawi women, but the fact that now adolescent Saharawi girls are wearing the hijab is new. 20 years ago... well, around 40 or 30 years ago there was none. And why is that? Well, because now we are in a process of globalization, and because 30 years ago, in a refugee camp, you didn't have Saudi television, there were no mosques, there was nothing” (Nura).

Additionally, the fact that this struggle has lasted for almost 50 years is contemplated by some as responsible for the exhaustion of the people. The stillness and hopelessness of this struggle has led many, particularly younger generations, to lose their revolutionary drive. In this sense, it is presented that younger women settle for gender roles that stand in the way of their own independence. Nashwa elaborates on the challenges faced by the current generation of Saharawi women and the broader societal implications. As a consequence, many women are constrained to play the traditional role of a housewife, limiting their independence and agency:

“Unfortunately, this entire generation that has nothing to work for and if they do have a place to work is very poorly paid, and if it is well paid, the brother or husband does not want them to work. So, they play the role of being a good

housewife. And in the end, society has fallen asleep, numb, and also having gone almost 40 years without war, men in the society... everything that has happened in the world at the level of all Islamophobia with the issue of terrorist attacks, with the anti-Muslim discourse, this has made Muslim societies more closed, and they become more hermetic to the world” (Nashwa).

Furthermore, one aspect of the content provided by the interviews also stands as dissonant between the women in the refugee camps and the women in the Spanish diaspora: the notion that once independence is achieved, there will be more space for women’s issues to be addressed and claimed. In the refugee camps, one of the women interviewed stated that women’s issues will have more space to be addressed once independence is achieved:

“I would say that women’s needs and requirements will be covered more and taken more into account once we get our independence. Because right now the focus is mainly on the struggle and the return to our land, and then the other issues or needs are taken to second. They are not the priority, let’s say” (Amani).

Adding on to this, another woman interviewed in the camps considers that during wartime and tge refugee situation, there is no space to address women's issues; the priority lies with independence, thus, once it is achieved, there will be more space to address women's issues:

“In our current situation, we cannot have a separate goal that is not our full liberation and independence. I am telling you this, because... that Sahrawi women cannot have a separate goal or objective other than their independence and liberation, because they gave blood for this cause, they gave their children for this to be achieved. So, right now, our current situation... women cannot even think of a separate goal other than the liberation” (Iesha).

Contrarily, the women interviewed in the diaspora present a different standpoint. As is analysed in the scientific literature (Ormazabal & López Belloso, 2011), in many struggles such as the Sahrawi struggle for independence, it is considered that the priority during the occupation must be the freedom of the people as a whole. Women’s needs and issues are relegated to the second plan. The priority is the survival and resistance of the people. In this sense, it is commonly accepted that, as the citations above illustrate, once independence is achieved, the people will then have the possibility to address these issues. In the diaspora, however, the point of view challenges this view, along with the argument that women’s issues need to be addressed presently and need to be present in every discussion:

“Many, many Saharawis, both women and men, will tell you that the feminist struggle is a struggle that we must resume once we achieve independence as a country. But you know what’s the catch? That this has been said to all women in

all conflicts throughout history. We have always been told that our fight has to wait, that we are not the priority. And what history has shown us is that a country in which women are not free is not a country that can make progress or is going to make progress, socially, economically, or culturally. (...) History has shown that it is false, that it cannot be done like this, because that objective is never achieved. So, the two struggles have to go hand in hand: the struggle for the freedom of the Saharawi people and the struggle for the freedom of Saharawi women” (Nashwa).

Here, Nashwa brings attention to an important perspective within Saharawi society regarding the feminist struggle and its relation to the broader struggle for independence. She highlights a recurring pattern in history, where women’s issues are often considered secondary or postponed until after achieving national liberation. Nashwa challenges this notion by emphasizing that the fight for women’s rights cannot be postponed, as history has shown that a country cannot make true progress socially, economically, or culturally if women are not free. This perspective is shared by Iesha, who emphasizes the indispensable role of feminist consciousness and the active participation of women within the Sahrawi society and the broader independence movement. She highlights the urgency of not delaying the pursuit of women’s rights until after achieving independence, as this could jeopardize the movement’s overall resilience and success. Iesha argues that the liberation of Western Sahara cannot be achieved if women’s voices, rights, and contributions are not fully recognized and integrated into the struggle from the outset:

“The movement is really not going to be able to resist if there is no feminist consciousness within our society. But not in terms of the liberation of the Sahara, because if the participation of women is not taken into account, we will not get anywhere. (...) We shouldn't wait for it [independence], we have to continue ringing it right now, so that they give us space to have that freedom, to be able to work on what equality is. (...) Nothing guarantees that the day the Sahara is liberated this will happen if there is no previous work” (Iesha).

In this section, the divergent views on women's emancipation in the Sahrawi society were explored. While many prioritize the struggle for independence as the central goal, some argue that women’s rights must be addressed currently. The challenge lies in balancing the pursuit of independence with the urgent need for gender equality. Additionally, societal pressures and globalization influence women’s roles, adding complexity to the issue. As established in this section, whilst women in the refugee camps tend to connect the priorities to be addressed at the socio-political level with educational or resource factors, this perception is challenged in the diaspora. This could stem from the different contexts in which the women interviewed are inserted. The lack of goods and resources in the *hammada* centralizes leadership concerns, not allowing for much space for feminist debates. Here, it is important to point out that I was

not able to get women to define “women’s issues” in the refugee camps: despite recognizing their existence, anytime they were asked about this, they would start naming issues of national relevance. This could be linked to two factors. The first, the possibility that the Polisario Front makes use of political propaganda to heighten international solidarity, without focusing on the issue itself. Thus, the Sahrawi women replicate this discourse without considering its meaning (all the women interviewed were not a part of the UNMS). The second, that living under such harsh circumstances has not allowed women to develop their identity as a collective, as proposed by El-Mehdi (2016). Moreover, as globalization has increased the influence of foreign Islamic discourses in the camps, on the one hand, Islamophobia perpetrated by the Global North has led society to create a shield against foreign Western influences, enforcing standards connected to the Sharia law. Contrarily, better conditions and access to resources in Spain, allow migrated women to consider issues beyond this scope. Allied with Western perspectives of women’s rights, and greater access to education the women in the diaspora benefit from more possibilities of addressing feminist issues. This does not, however, mean that women’s emancipation should not be presently cared for in the camps, for addressing these factors is fundamental for the full liberation of Sahrawi women.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

This research aimed to understand how Sahrawi women have resisted oppression and fought for gender equality from 1975 until now. By analysing relevant literature on this issue, it was possible to understand the importance of studying the case of Western Sahara. Drawing on scientific articles, books, and documentaries, which provide diverse perspectives on the study, it was possible to understand how the national Sahrawi struggle began taking on a gender-specific approach against colonization early on. The women in Western Sahara are considered by many (Zunes & Mundy, 2010; Lippert, 1992) as beneficiaries of a great deal of rights, in a society regarded as enriched by its focus on gender equality. However, despite historical evidence on gender equality in the Sahrawi society, namely rooted in Berber ancestry, others (Medina Martín, 2016b; Caratini, 2006) consider the Sahrawi society as oppressive of women in conventional Westernized forms – for example, domestic violence is not systematic within the society, contrarily to different countries around the world. Nonetheless, it is agreed by all that women's role in the society is central. Throughout the national struggle, women were on the frontlines of battle – although their role was often neglected – and they were the ones responsible for the survival of the Sahrawi people in the refugee camps, ever since 1975.

This research has built upon previous studies on women's role and resistance in Western Sahara. The interviews conducted allowed for the understanding that the perceptions encountered stand in agreement with the existing literature. Regarding the first research goal presented – understand what Sahrawi women in the refugee camps perceive as gender equality and women's role in the society –, the analysis conducted allowed to understand that in the refugee camps women perceive gender equality as encapsulating the principles of equal opportunities and the dismantling of ingrained sexist views regarding gender disparities. Women are considered both by academia (Caratini, 2006; Zunes & Mundy, 2010; Juliano, 1998; Medina Martín, 2016b) and by the Sahrawis in the camps and in the diaspora as central to the resistance of the people. However, the Sahrawi women who live in the camps have to balance familial and domestic responsibilities alongside societal and national duties. Furthermore, women were fundamental for the establishment of the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, through which the government in exile operates, and the military support stems from. This role is the one where the greatest agreement is met among the women interviewed, along with perceptions in academia. Ever since the beginning of the war, in 1975, the Sahrawi women have participated in every aspect of the struggle and of society. However, younger generations within the camps are placing a greater emphasis on education, reflecting a shift away from survival, which contrasts with the roles shouldered by the older generations. Yet, despite the consensus of the women in the camps on gender equality being a

deep focus of the national struggle, the women interviewed in the diaspora did not share the same perspective, for the most part. The Sahrawi women living in Spain consider that the absence of domestic and physical violence in the Sahrawi society does not account for real gender equality, which they deem is still in need of a great focus. In this sense, the first hypothesis presented in this study – Sahrawi women perceive their society to uphold gender equality – was verified considering the Sahrawi women living in the refugee camps, but not regarding the women living in the Spanish diaspora.

Taking into consideration the second research goal – assess the obstacles identified by Sahrawi women in the context of the occupation –, several conclusions can be taken. In the refugee camps, the main obstacles that are considered to be in need of being prioritized relate to the independence of Western Sahara and the survival of the people (which, on its own, is connected to education and health). Here, issues particular to women are relegated to the second plan, as it is considered that these issues do not have the space to be addressed presently. As for the diaspora, when asked about concerns to be addressed, the interviewed women named several. For one, the oppressive conditions endured by the Sahrawi people in occupied Western Sahara are mentioned to stand in the way of a free and fulfilled life. Here, women are also concerned with the patriarchal norms imposed in the camps, as it is considered that women's dependency on men hardens the struggle for gender equality. Interestingly, another issue addressed in the diaspora was the use of what is perceived as women's rights within the community as propaganda. Here, it is proposed that instead of actively striving towards the mitigation of gender inequalities, political leaders merely use women's conditions in the Islamic world to obtain support for the struggle. Other aspects addressed link to the social gaze, controlling of women, and the continuity of the situation which leaves the population hopeless, and thus less revindicating of more rights and less participative at the political level. In this sense, when comparing the divergent perspectives presented by the Sahrawi women in the refugee camps and in Spain, it is possible to conclude that the second hypothesis presented – Sahrawi women living in the Diaspora perceive their society of origin to lack a feminist perspective – is also confirmed.

Finally, considering the third research goal – gain insight on whether women's advocations shift depending on their geographical location – it is possible to conclude that in fact, the narratives presented by the Sahrawi women diverge greatly. This stems from the different contexts of each. In the refugee camps, the importance of the Sahrawi struggle in the daily lives of the people, along with the overbearing needs concerning health and resources do not allow for much debate on feminist discourses. Conversely, in the diaspora, Sahrawi women are exposed and have access to different societal dynamics, allowing for the development of feminist ideas and ideals in what concerns the Sahrawi society. Here, two aspects can be highlighted. On the one hand, while in the camps, the women consider to be well represented at the political level, in the diaspora, the women interviewed perceive the representation to be performative, given imbalances on the ranking of political roles among men and women. On the other hand, while in the camps the women interviewed defend that the feminist struggle will benefit from

greater attention once independence is achieved, in the diaspora, the women challenge this notion, considering that the feminist struggle must be debated presently. Hence, the third hypothesis presented – Sahrawi women's advocacy priorities vary based on whether they live in the Spanish diaspora or in the refugee camps – is also demonstrated.

This research aligns with the broader body of knowledge, strengthening the theoretical framework concerning gender equality and women's resistance within the Western Sahara refugee camps and diaspora. The specificity of each individual's perception is influenced by their unique background and environment, bearing diverse and distinct contributions. Notably, women in the refugee camps predominantly prioritize survival and armed resistance, while their counterparts in the diaspora display heightened scrutiny of the existing evaluations of gender equality within Sahrawi society. This understanding stands in agreement with the findings of Medina Martín (2016b), El Mehdi (2016), and Ormazabal & López Belloso (2011). The research conducted here presents empirical insights into Sahrawi women's perceptions of gender equality, their roles in society, and their advocations.

This research analyses existing literature, stirring conversation between its findings and the contributions of other authors. Yet, certain aspects remain beyond its scope, calling for future investigations relating to this issue. It is important to study Morocco's hold on International Relations with other countries, as few stands on Morocco's invasion of Western Sahara have taken place, and thus the reasons behind this silence are relevant to address. Furthermore, an important aspect to study concerning women's resistance in the Sahrawi struggle is the historical role of women in the military. Women have participated in military roles throughout history, but their contributions are often neglected or unseen. Additionally, it is also relevant to consider why Sahrawi women only speak of women's fundamental role in their society starting from the Green March, without mentioning pre-colonial and colonial ages. In this line of thought, also delve deeper into Sahrawi women's own perceptions on the impact of Spanish colonialism on gender norms. Finally, this study focused on a small sample of nine women interviewed, which did not allow for more specific contributions. Hence, a bigger sample should be studied, for it could provide more diverse perspectives, as has been ensured in other studies.

To conclude, this research presented an overview on Sahrawi women's perceptions of their agency and status within the Sahrawi society. Hopefully, this will allow for a more generalised conversation on Western Sahara and Sahrawi women, which is still widely overlooked both in academia and in civil society. Thus, this research aids the understanding of the diverse voices within the Sahrawi society, as they are complex and strong contributions to the enhancement of existing gender equality in said community. No discussion of the national struggle would be complete without acknowledging the pivotal role played by Sahrawi women, an integral force of this struggle.

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