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BRIDGING WORLDS: SAHRAWI WOMEN'S FIGHT AGAINST COLONIALISM AND PATRIARCHY IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS AND THE SPANISH DIASPORA

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand the diverse roles of Sahrawi women in the refugee camps, in Algeria, and in the Spanish diaspora, relating to women's resistance efforts against Colonialism and Patriarchy. Drawing from academic literature and primary sources, this article discusses the historical role of women in the Sahrawi society, both in the survival of the people and within the resistance movement. A debate emerges between the perspectives of the Sahrawi women in the camps and those in the Spanish diaspora, which roughly present different standpoints on women's emancipation and rights. Through a Decolonial Feminism framework, I examine the differences between the day-to-day lives of the women in the camps, who must focus on survival, education, and health, and those in Spain, who present a distinct lens of issues from their outside perspective. Overall, the article advocates for the recognition and amplification of Sahrawi women's voices, emphasising their crucial role in the pursuit of liberation from both Colonial and Patriarchal oppression. Lastly, it calls for a greater focus on the occupation of Western Sahara and the liberation of the Sahrawi people.

Keywords

Emancipation, Liberation, Resistance, Western Sahara, Women.

Resumo

Este artigo procura compreender os diversos papéis das mulheres Saharauis nos campos de refugiados, na Argélia e na diáspora espanhola, relacionados com os esforços de resistência das mulheres contra o Colonialismo e o Patriarcado. Com base na literatura académica e em fontes primárias, este artigo discute o papel histórico das mulheres Saharauis, tanto na sobrevivência do povo como no movimento de resistência. Surge um debate entre as perspetivas das mulheres Saharauis nos campos e as da diáspora espanhola, que apresentam, grosso modo, diferentes pontos de vista sobre a emancipação e os direitos das mulheres. Através de um quadro de Feminismo Decolonial, examino as diferenças entre o quotidiano das mulheres nos campos, que têm de se concentrar na sobrevivência, na educação e na saúde, e o das mulheres em Espanha, que apresentam uma perceção distinta das questões a partir da sua perspetiva externa. De um modo geral, o artigo defende o reconhecimento e a amplificação das vozes das mulheres Saharauis, sublinhando o seu papel crucial na busca da libertação da opressão colonial e patriarcal. Por fim, apela a um maior enfoque na ocupação do Sahara Ocidental e na libertação do povo Saharaui.

Palavras-chave

Emancipação, Libertação, Resistência, Sahara Ocidental, Mulheres.

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BRIDGING WORLDS: SAHRAWI WOMEN'S FIGHT AGAINST COLONIALISM AND PATRIARCHY IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS AND THE SPANISH DIASPORA

CAROLINA FERNANDES

Introduction

The debate surrounding Sahrawi women's emancipation within their society is not recent. Some scholars (Juliano, 1998; Zunes & Mundy, 2010) understand the society as matriarchal and upholding women's rights. Yet, as will be discussed in this article, this perspective overlooks the voices and understandings of many Sahrawi women. This article engages with these conflicting perspectives, centring power dynamics, resistance, emancipation, and self-determination. This research challenges conventional narratives that overlook Sahrawi women's autonomy and resistance by prioritising their voices and perspectives. Centring Sahrawi women's voices not only enriches academic debates but also challenges the dominance of outsider perspectives in knowledge production.

The interest surrounding this research focus arose when I met five children from the refugee camps in Algeria, who had come to Europe in 2019 under the *Vacaciones en Paz* programme[1]. I became acquainted with the struggle of the Sahrawi people from conversations I had with these children and their chaperone. These conversations, paired with a previous interest in liberation struggles and women's emancipation paved the way for an academic interest to be developed surrounding the role and perspectives of Sahrawi women on Colonisation and human rights violations, along with the Patriarchal system of oppression. Seeking to take on a feminist and decolonial approach to the problems which arise from the study of literature, as well as conversations with Sahrawi women, I listened to the various intakes of the women interviewed on the historical role of the Sahrawi women in the struggle and survival of their people.

For this reason, in this article, I generated a conversation between two groups of Sahrawi women: those living in the Algerian refugee camps, and those residing in Spain, forming part of the diaspora. It is under this focus that the research question which I aim at answering in this article arises: What are the current perceptions of Sahrawi women in the refugee camps and in the Spanish diaspora considering women's rights and emancipation? To answer this question, a dialogue was created between the existing

[1] Vacaciones en Paz is a programme officiated in the 1980s to host Sahrawi children by families of different countries – usually Spain, in this case, Italy - during the months of July and August.

literature on each group and my own previous research[2]. I interviewed a total of nine women – five living in the refugee camps[3], and four living in Spain. I contacted these women through a snowball sample approach or directly through organisations. After establishing initial contact, I conducted online interviews where the themes explored in this article were discussed. Consequently, I analysed the information provided by these interviews through Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Thus, I seek to understand the different perspectives these women presented regarding their status in the Sahrawi society and their critiques on what they consider to be women's lack of rights. This way, I aim at highlighting the importance of centring Sahrawi women's perspectives and understandings, rather than depicting a Western academia contribution focused mainly on the interpretations of Western scholars.

Positionality: a Decolonial contribution

Before proceeding, I must first acknowledge my positionality within both academic and societal frameworks. I am a white middle-class woman in my mid-20s, born and raised in Portugal – a country where history is largely taught through a Western, Eurocentric lens. This background inevitably shapes my perspective, requiring a conscious effort to critically engage with histories and narratives that have been actively suppressed by Colonial structures. The Portuguese society continues to struggle with recognising the deep and lasting scars of Colonialism. As a result, systemic inequalities – rooted in class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality – persist, often unacknowledged by those who are not directly affected or actively engaged with these issues.

For this reason, paired with Decolonial and Postcolonial concerns on the inherent issues of White Feminism, a reflection on this framework is fundamental. Françoise Vergès and Ashley J. Bohrer (2019) understand that Western countries tend to repress their Colonial history and the abuse that they carried out first-hand of people overseas. These countries seek to weaken the ties between slavery, Colonialism, and Imperialism, to preserve their feeling of innocence. Accordingly, White Feminism uses the oppression of women by men to create distance from the racist legacy of the Western world and thus ignore the various issues that constitute forms of oppression, by simplifying them.

For this reason, and considering my roots, I believe it to be imperative that a Decolonial perspective be taken on, to stand in the way of replicating issues such as this one. Decolonial Feminism focuses on strengthening the bonds between the allies in the Global North and the struggles of the women of the Global South, emphasising the need to disrupt Capitalism and Patriarchy (Vergès & Bohrer, 2019). This is where my research becomes relevant, to contribute to the amplification of Sahrawi women's narratives on their own terms, stemming from a country where little discussion on the resistance of Western Sahara is cultivated.

To discuss the resistance of a people in the Global South, one must bridge anti-Racist, anti-Capitalist, and anti-Colonial struggles together to further theories on liberation and emancipation. Furthermore, to discuss the resistance of a people from an Islamic country,

[2] Research conducted in my master's dissertation: Fernandes, C. A. (2023). Sahrawi Women's Resistance in the Refugee Camps and in the Spanish Diaspora.
[3] Four of them interviewed with the aid of a translator.

it is also fundamental to understand that with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the mainstream Feminist Movement's work toward emancipation – criticism of religious authoritarianism, the analysis of heteropatriarchal domination of women, and the connections between Capital, State, and Sexism – were reduced to Secularism and criticism over Islam (Vergès & Bohrer, 2019). It is in this sense that one must contemplate Civilising Western Feminism as inherently racist and Western-centred, perceiving outsider values and cultures as oppressive, and disregarding the struggles of the feminist movement in the 1970s: the feminist struggle in Europe became a neoliberal ideology (Vergès & Bohrer, 2019).

The historical role of Sahrawi women

Nomadic ancestry

The Sahrawi people are inherently nomadic, of Berbere origin, descendants of Yemeni travellers. The Sanhaja Berbers arrived in what we now know as Western Sahara about 500 BCE (Suarez, 2016). The language spoken was developed over the centuries and remains alive today due to the efforts of the Sahrawi women (Sadiqi, 2008). The society follows patrilineal familial norms and gender hierarchy, posing women as dependent and inferior to men (Sadiqi, 2008). At the political level, the society leading up to the colonisation period was characterised by what Segato (2011, in Medina Martín, 2016) conceptualised as "low-intensity patriarchy", for the political decisions were discussed with women before being put into practice since their intake was deemed fundamental for decision-making.

Spanish Colonialism

Spanish Colonisation, which began in 1884, instigated change within the gender dynamics in place (López Tessore & Maiolino, 2022). The oppression and suppression of the Sahrawi culture hardened by 1940, when the settlers focused on weakening the nomadic culture of the Sahrawi people (Medina Martín, 2016). The provincialisation project carried out by Spain after the Civil War (1936-1939) planned to lay the basis of the assimilation of the colonised society, building an ambivalent relationship with the latter. Ambivalent because the policies at play served as a form of negation as well as identification with the colonised subject, in a state of neither one nor the other (Tirado, 2024). Spain defined the region of Western Sahara considering its Bedouin practices, the language of Hassanyia, and Muslim religion, to distinguish it from the metropole (Tirado, 2024).

From 1964 to 1975, the exploitation of phosphate increased, along with stronger colonisation efforts towards the weakening of the native culture (Rodríguez & Barrado, 2015 in Medina Martín, 2016). The colonisers were strongly against the gender dynamics in effect in this region (Medina Martín, 2016). They believed that the Sahrawi women stood in a position dangerous to the strengthening of men's power in society, namely through their somewhat independence, and the right to divorce (Medina Martín, 2016). In 1964, Franco's Falange party took the "Women's Section" to Western Sahara, hoping to shift the established gender dynamics – what Medina Martín (2016, p.258) refers to

as "gender colonialism", a concept developed by Maria Lugones[4]. Hence, the settling forces sought to create a shift in the traditional gender roles, looking to approach these towards westernised standards (Allan 2016). The changes undergone in this period led to a profound change in the role of women, as they became more economically dependent on men, and divorce became only possible through the payment of a fee (Medina Martín, 2016).

Nonetheless, the changes that the Women's Section sought to accomplish, or even was successful in developing, did not stand without indignation or contestation. The Sahrawi women advocated for teachings in non-oppressing gender dynamics (such as sewing and cooking as the main roles of women in society and the household); for example, literature classes were suggested to be made available (Allan, 2016). Their pressure to shift these teachings led the Section to move towards the reinforcement of the education of women. As the coloniser pressure grew, so did the need to resist the efforts to oppress and alter the culture. Women participated in all forms of resistance against male oppression and Colonisation (Allan, 2016). In 1973, the liberation movement, the Polisario Front, was established – and within it, the Ala Feminina (now Unión Nacional de Mujeres Saharauis[5], UNMS), followed by the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA). With the Ala Feminina, women became integral parts of the armed forces, of information devices and healthcare branches (Lippert, 1992; Strzelecka, 2023; Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Women organised protests and meetings and stood on the frontlines of contestation against Spanish Colonialism in the 1960s and 1970s (Juliano, 1998; Sebastián, 2021).

Once Morocco obtained independence from France in 1956, the country began showing interest in its surrounding regions, including Western Sahara (López Tessore & Maiolino, 2022). In 1974, in light of great pressure on the part of the United Nations, Spain announced its intention to conduct a referendum on the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara – or to be annexed by either Morocco or Mauritania (López Tessore & Maiolino, 2022; Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). Parallelly, Embarca Mahamud, Arbía Mohamed Nas, and Fatima Taleb – who were working at the time for the Women's Section – began reinforcing their critiques of the organisation and its neglect of women's interests (Allan, 2016). This led to the bridging of the contestation against Patriarchy and Colonialism, and thus, the demand for the right of women to vote in said Referendum (Allan, 2016). As two different yet entangled systems of oppression, Patriarchy and Colonialism were perceived as two issues to be fought against for the liberation of the people, and of women in particular. Thus, to liberate the Sahrawi women, the independence of Western Sahara was deemed fundamental, yet in need of correlation with independence from the Patriarchal order established. However, Morocco considered that the Independence Referendum should not take place, as it considered that the territory of Western Sahara historically belonged to the Kingdom of Morocco. In this sense, the country requested a hearing from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (Lippert, 1992; Zunes & Mundy, 2010). In 1975, a United Nations Mission was established to analyse this plea. The ICJ

[4] Lugones (2008, 2011, 2012) developed the concept of "gender colonialism" in various works, including: Lugones, M. (2008). Colonialidad y género. *Tabula rasa*, (9), 73-102. Lugones, M. (2011). Hacia un feminismo descolonial. *La Manzana de la Discordia, 6*(2), 105–119. Lugones, M. (2012). Subjetividad esclava, colonialidad de género, marginalidad y opresiones múltiples. In P. Montes (Ed.), *Pensando los feminismos en Bolivia* (pp. 129–140). Conexión Fondo de Emancipación.
[5] National Union of Sahrawi Women.

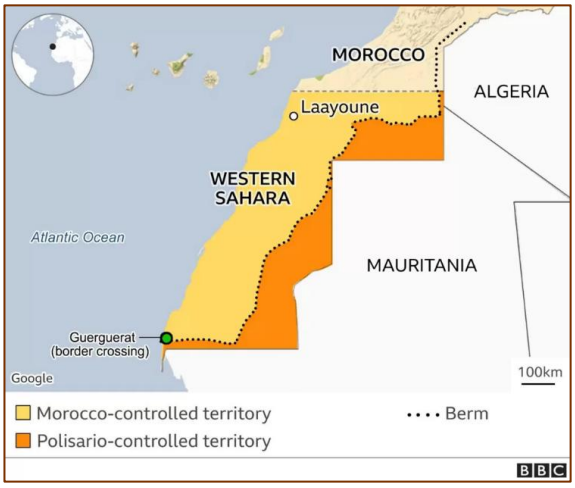
understood that there were ties between neither Morocco nor Mauritania to the territory of Western Sahara, all the while the claims for independence seemed strong ("Advisory Opinion on the Western Sahara," 1975).

Moroccan settling and the Western Sahara War

On the 6th of November 1975, Morocco and Mauritania invaded Western Sahara in the Green March, where 300.000 citizens and 20.000 troops invaded the region (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021; Zunes & Mundy, 2010). A week later, on the 14th, Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania signed the Madrid Accords, in which it was established that Spain passed over sovereignty over Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania (López Tessore & Maiolino, 2022; Lovatt & Mundy, 2021; Strzelecka, 2023) – thus recognising the invasion. The Polisario Front stood against these accords, backed by Algeria, while the United Nations did not recognise this transfer of power (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). Neither Morocco nor Mauritania retreated, leading to the beginning of the Western Sahara War, and the flee to exile in Algeria of about 40% of the Sahrawi population, where refugee camps were established (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). On the 27th of February 1976, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was declared, standing as the government of the Sahrawis in exile, in the camps in Algeria (López Tessore & Maiolino, 2022; Lovatt & Mundy, 2021; Medina Martín, 2016; Strzelecka, 2023). The following day, on the 28th, the Spanish forces retreated from the occupied territory. The war with Morocco lasted until 1991, but Mauritania was defeated in 1979 (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021).

Between 1981 and 1987, Morocco built a 2,700 km wall, the *wall of shame*, surrounded by about 10 million antipersonnel mines, which divides the occupied (to the west) and liberated (to the east) regions of Western Sahara (Estrada & Costa, 2017; Lee, 2015; Lovatt & Mudy, 2021; Medina Martín, 2016) (see figure 1). The liberated zone was bombed with napalm and white phosphorus, and in the occupied region the Sahrawis were tortured and forced to disappear (Medina Martín, 2016).

Figure 1. Map of Western Sahara



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

Whilst the Sahrawis in the occupied zone were resisting the oppression undertaken by the Kingdom of Morocco, in the refugee camps everyday survival was in peril. With men at the frontlines of battle, the women were in charge of making sure that their people survived to see the following day: building the *jaimas* (tents) which would become the homes of the people living in the Algeria *hammada*, and organising the refugee camps to ensure the survival, education, and health of the people (Medina Martín, 2016). These camps are self-administered by the Polisario Front and SADR, yet dependent on international food and humanitarian aid (Strzelecka, 2023).

According to Juliano (1998), the Sahrawi women made use of three strategies to ensure their position in society. *Invisibility* was a form of criticising systems of oppression while seeking to influence positions and perspectives, through an invisible standpoint, which would allow for their influence in society. *Self-affirmation* allowed women to combat varied forms of oppression openly after having obtained some control to do so. *Motherhood* stands from a point of view in which women perceive motherhood as a form of active resistance against the occupation and oppression of their people. However, the survival priorities faced in the refugee camps enclosed the space for women to debate their stand as a collective, and thus their emancipation within the Patriarchal Sahrawi society (Medina Martín, 2016).

30 years of ceasefire

The stillness of the war led to the agreement of a ceasefire between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front in 1991 (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). From this point onward, the influence of women in society at the political level diminished, as the men returned from the battlefront to the refugee camps, re-occupying the spaces which had been the responsibility of women since 1975 (Medina Martín, 2016). The United Nations established a mission named Misión de Naciones Unidas para el Referendo en el Sáhara Occidental (MINURSO) which sought to monitor the ceasefire, reduce the Moroccan military force in the occupied region, along with identifying and register voters (Medina Martín, 2016). However, this is the only UN mission which does not oversee a clause to observe and report on human rights violations since 1978 (Lee, 2015; Medina Martín, 2016; Perez-Martin, 2014). Two attempts at referendums took place – in 1992 and 1997 – yet these were shut down after voter eligibility issues were raised (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). The hopes of conducting a referendum dimmed as the years went by, and by 2019, the Polisario Front, supported by the people, began perceiving the resumption of the war as the sole possible solution for the independence of Western Sahara. In November 2020, the ceasefire agreement was broken by Morocco, who violated the ceasefire in Guerguerat, in the liberated zone (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021).

Human Rights Violations in Occupied Western Sahara

The occupation of Western Sahara by Moroccan forces is highly repressive and oppressive. In 1976, about 500 women joined in a protest against human rights violations conducted by Morocco in occupied Western Sahara: repression, torture, and forced

disappearances being the focus of this gathering. This event placed women at the front of the resistance efforts (Medina Martín, 2016).

In 2022, hegoa[6] published a report on the human rights violations of Sahrawi women in occupied Western Sahara. It detailed various forms of liberty and personal security violations, such as the violation of the right to life, since Sahrawis are often forced to disappear, are physically and psychologically tortured, and murdered. It accounted for the various ways in which Sahrawis are stripped of their cultural rights, as the traditional Sahrawi homes (*jaimas*) have been forbidden, and Sahrawi names, clothing and language (Hassanyia) have been banned. Concerning social rights, Sahrawis are subjected to the refusal of medical attention (and often suffer threats by Moroccan forces in hospitals). Children suffer harassment at school and can be followed home. Moreover, there are no universities in occupied Western Sahara, forcing Sahrawis pursuing higher education to relocate to Morocco (Azkue, et al., 2022).

Women and girls often recount suffering sexual violence from Moroccan forces. They describe touching, verbal aggression, rape or threats of rape, gangrape, and rape with objects, torture during pregnancy, forced miscarriages, being forced to listen to sexual violence against another person, sexual slavery, electric discharges to the breasts and/or genitals, sexual mutilation, and forced sterilisation (Azkue, et al., 2022).

When it comes to economic rights, Morocco actively seeks to exclude the Sahrawis from participating in society through economic and labour policies. The majority of Sahrawi women in occupied Western Sahara have no income or an extremely low one, which weakens their chances of affording basic goods, such as food and supplies, leaving them with less and less autonomy. Sahrawi people, mostly women, are discriminated against in the workforce, as they suffer from harassment at work, salary freezing, increased precariousness at work, and refusal of work permits. Activists who participate in activities in the defence of the Sahrawi people's rights are targeted economically, suffering reprisals (Azkue, et al., 2022).

Sahrawi women's Resistance in the refugee camps and in the Spanish diaspora

The perceptions of the Sahrawi women in the refugee camps and in the Spanish diaspora on gender oppression, gender-specific priorities, and forms of fighting against oppression are divergent (Fernandes, 2023; Medina Martín, 2016). The one aspect that gathers greater agreement between these two groups is the historical role of the Sahrawi women in society, which can be evidenced in all aspects of the resistance, particularly regarding the Green March onwards. At this time, women rose as the leaders of the people fleeing to and establishing in exile, in the Algerian *hammada*. Thus, the society is swift to acknowledge women as the ones responsible for the survival of the Sahrawi people, stemming from their role in building and organising the refugee camps, namely in the beginning stages, as quickly establishing the foundations of living in this region was the greatest priority, as evidenced by the following quotes (Fernandes, 2023):

[6] Institute for Development and International Cooperation Studies of the University of the Basque Country.

> *"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)[7].
>
> *"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. The women took charge in building the refugee camps. (…) Basically, you can say that the internal management and administration of the camps was at the hand of Sahrawi women"* (Qadira).

Hence, despite the academic understanding of Sahrawi women's role in society from the Bedouin nomadic ages, the Green March stands as a shifting point in the role of women, as they become community and political leaders, responsible for the survival of the people, their culture, and their resistance – and this does not seem to be contested at any level. The oppression carried out by Morocco necessitated and intensified debates on oppression, women's issues, and emancipation, as Sahrawi women mobilised in resistance. With the men away on the frontlines of battle, women occupied the political arena, something that would otherwise not have been possible, as these spaces were merely ceded, not obtained. Nonetheless, this paved the way for women to stand in an unprecedented status, as they became recognised as the "*backbone of the struggle*" (Malika).

Throughout the following section, the perceptions of nine women interviewed will be presented. In the refugee camps, five women were interviewed (four from the Bojador camp, and one from Smara). These women were aged 30 to 61 years old at the time of the interviews. They work in several labour fields, from the health and educational sectors to commerce and political offices. Four of these women were interviewed with the assistance of a translator from Hassanyia to English. In the Spanish diaspora, the women interviewed were aged between 23 and 36. The youngest was a student, whilst others worked in the health or education sectors. All may be considered activists.

The refugee camps

Sahrawi women themselves articulate their central role in the refugee camps and diaspora, emphasising their leadership in education, administration, and community organisation. Their accounts, along with insights from scholars and civil society, highlight the ways they shape and sustain collective resistance. Delgado & Franco (2024) present four forms of women's resistance in the refugee camps. First, educational professional roles, as Sahrawi women actively participate in education and community leadership, placing them in a central role. Second, cultural and symbolic resistance, considering their

[7] The names used in these quotes have undergone a process of anonymisation and pseudonymisation to ensure the protection of the interviewees.

vital role in transmitting the people's history, language, and traditions – overall, the culture of the Sahrawi people. Third, international advocacy, considering their role in raising awareness for the self-determination struggle globally. And fourth, daily acts of defiance, as Sahrawi women resist the erasure of their people and its culture, through the maintenance of the community cohesion.

However, there is no consensus about women's emancipation within the Sahrawi society. Whilst some perceive this society as feminist and even matriarchal (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021; Zunes & Mundy, 2010), others criticise this understanding (Medina Martín, 2016), by stating that this perception is skewed. Particularly in the refugee camps, there is some dispute between the priorities – or what some believe should be the priorities – of the people regarding various forms of resistance and oppression (Fernandes, 2023). The Sahrawi struggle in the refugee camps understands as its utmost priority the revolution towards independence and liberation (Ormazabal & López Belloso, 2011). This leads issues such as the feminist emancipatory struggle to be placed within the second plan, under justifications relating to resources and the division of the unity of the people (Juliano, 1998; Strzelecka, 2023). This means that in the refugee camps, the quotidian need to focus on obtaining and distributing goods and medicine, whilst focusing on the health and education of the people is the central issue. Women's rights and emancipation are considered secondary problems, which cannot be highlighted and addressed for now – merely once independence is achieved. This falls in line with different national liberation movements, which tend to prioritise the nationalist cause, neglecting other issues, such as women's emancipation (Strzelecka, 2023).

Sahrawi culture is inherently linked with Islam, and interpretations of Islamic law within Sahrawi society are shaped by historical, social, and political dynamics. Scholars such as Juliano (1998) have argued that certain Islamic customs – such as the prohibition of alcohol – may contribute to reducing gendered violence. However, this study does not aim to evaluate Islamic legal traditions or apply external perspectives onto them. Rather than adopting generalised assumptions about the Sharia Law as inherently beneficial or harmful to women, it is crucial to centre Sahrawi women's perspectives on their lives, interpretations of justice, and their role in shaping gender norms within their community. A factor understood by Juliano as guaranteeing some gender equality is the non-confinement of Sahrawi women to their homes, as it happens in other Islamic countries. Nonetheless, other perspectives, such as Piniella's (2018), stress that despite not confining women to the home, the Sahrawi society confines them to the private sphere. Furthermore, Juliano (1998) considers that the dowry is not understood as the purchase of a woman, but as a form of compensating the family as she moves out. In agreement with Piniella's overview – but in perspective dissonance –, Juliano (1998) defends as a positive aspect of women's status in society that women remain in the household taking care of their children, whilst the men are responsible for the economic aspect of the household, through their jobs. This debate can be reflected by the following quote:

> *"[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).

The status of women in the Sahrawi society suffered a shift in 1975, upon the Green March. Fleeing to safety in Algeria, women stood at the forefront of the survival responsibilities of their people – namely the elderly and the children – when establishing the camps (Fernandes, 2023; Medina Martín, 2016; Strzelecka, 2023). Six of the refugee camps established since then – El Aaiún, Auserd, Bojador, Smara and Dajla – were built by women (Medina Martín, 2016), Rabuni is the administrative capital. Until the ceasefire agreement signed in 1991, the women stood as leaders of the camps and of their people, while the men were on the frontlines of battle (Medina Martín, 2016), as women made up about 80% of the people in the camps (Caratini, 2006). Focusing on the health and education of the people, many women graduated from diverse areas in universities in Cuba, Spain, and Algeria (Lippert, 1992). Along with the establishment of the programme *Vacaciones en Paz*, as well as international support (namely provided by Algeria, Venezuela, and Cuba), the younger generations interacted with distinct cultures, learned new languages, and forged new opinions and interpretations of life in the camps. This brought new discussions and teachings to the refugee camps, particularly to guarantee the survival of the people, their origins, and their culture (Fernandes, 2023). The education of girls and women led to an increase in the average age of the first marriage from 17/18 to 24/25 (Juliano, 1998). The deficiency in healthcare services in the camps, particularly during the first years, led to an increase in the rates of female mortality, linked to pregnancies and childbearing (Juliano, 1998; Zunes & Mundy, 2010).

In the refugee camps, women were present in every aspect of the resistance and the survival of the people: in administration posts, in politics, in the economy, and in military roles (both in combat and related posts) (Medina Martín, 2016; Strzelecka, 2023). Until 1991, about 90% of the members of the body of the SADR were women (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). However, the urgency of establishing and organising the camps during the first years of the war did not allow for women to collectively think about their stand as women and form a political position (Barona, 2016).

The introduction of a monetary system in the refugee camps led to a negative shift in women's role: prostitution rose; labour, on its own, lost its value; and as Capitalism forced a shift in the priorities and needs of the people, the private sphere became hermetic to protect the goods of a household (Caratini, 2006; Juliano, 1998). The ceasefire led to the replacement of women by men at the political level and to a shift in the quotidian days of women and women's interests: the bride price and the full-body covering began being expected to be worn from age 11, for instance (Medina Martín, 2016; Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Furthermore, during the early years in the refugee camps, women focused on building kindergartens and childcare services. However, as the men returned from the war in 1991, the number of services provided greatly decreased. This led women to take charge in private care for children and elders, which led to the abandonment of careers and educational aspirations (Strzelecka, 2023). Thus, women's status, interests, and priorities were undermined by the return of the men. This is particularly interesting considering the perceptions of women regarding a gendered approach to the issues addressed at the leadership level, whether they are political or not (Fernandes, 2023):

> *"When you compare the position where men are in and positions where women are in, it's totally different. (…) Definitely women have proved they*

> *are more successful in managing. (…) They are also more protective of resources, (…) they are also more inclusive towards people they work with"* (Malika).

Notwithstanding, the role of women in the refugee camps and the resistance movement is central, and this is not only true regarding the economy and politics. At the cultural level, women have been responsible for the survival of the *Hassanyia* language, as well as of the Sahrawi customs and traditions, ever since Spanish Colonialism (Juliano, 1998).

The Spanish diaspora

The resistance of the Sahrawi women in the Spanish diaspora takes the form, mainly, of educating people who are not in contact with the struggle, activism, diplomatic efforts, and education (Fernandes, 2023). Here, the women must balance the expectations of the host community and the home community, as two different cultures present different understandings of what a woman's role and behaviour should be (Sebastián, 2021).

The Sahrawi women in the Spanish diaspora present a dissonant understanding of women's status in the refugee camps than those who live in the camps (Fernandes, 2023). Contrary to the refugee camps, where women tend to understand society as a defender of women's rights – albeit in need of further developments –, in the Spanish diaspora these issues are the object of a differentiated discourse. In this case, women understand that although the Sahrawi society may be perceived as matriarchal, this perception does not necessarily align with feminist standards, particularly regarding psychological and emotional violence against women. Such violence impedes their emancipation and full exercise of autonomy (Fernandes, 2023). While Sahrawi women in Spain are more likely to discuss issues relating directly to women, the women in the camps tend to speak more openly about national struggles. Notably, premature pregnancies and gender education disparities are issues vastly discussed in the diaspora (Fillol, 2021).

The divergence of perspectives between the women in the refugee camps and those in the Spanish diaspora can be found in many aspects. In the refugee camps, the utmost aspect to consider is the resistance, along with issues which affect the society as a whole – not those which mostly target women. Thus, women perceive education and health as primary subjects in need of focus and development (Fernandes, 2023; Medina Martín, 2016). This puts issues particular to women into the second plan. Therefore, the women in the refugee camps consider that only once independence is achieved can there be space and availability to discuss, address, and target gender inequality or even the oppression of women (Fernandes, 2023):

> *"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. But I would say that once we get our independence, and we get control over*

> *our natural resources, issues that affect women will be taken more into account and will be addressed properly"* (Amani).

The persistence of the settlement and the non-completion of the referendum agreed to in 1991 may have also led to a shift in the revolutionary drive of younger generations, who become less keen on believing that an actual solution to the occupation (that is, independence), may occur shortly (Fernandes, 2023). In contrast, the Sahrawi women in the Spanish diaspora name several issues in need of development. Here, not only is the invasion and settlement of Moroccan settlers in the territory of Western Sahara presented as a focus of the people's resistance – which, on its own, is limiting of a fully independent life abroad –, but other aspects are also brought forward. Patriarchy is heavily criticised here, as women discuss the sociopolitical and economic subjugation of women to men under the Sahrawi culture, oppressive of their rights, status, and autonomy (Fernandes, 2023). Moreover, it is debated in the diaspora that the legal and political framework does not account for an effective social guarantee of women's rights. This is mostly jeopardised by the social norms and expectations imposed on women by society and their own families, as social opinion – or social gaze – controls and oppresses women's autonomy. This could potentially lead women to be disowned or ostracised from their families:

> *"We in Hassanyia, (…) 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"* (Nura).

Contrary to what is believed in the refugee camps, the women in the Spanish diaspora consider that the struggle for gender emancipation and the fight for the independence of Western Sahara and its people must go hand in hand, simultaneously. They understand that if this is not the case, the feminist struggle will ultimately be forgotten, comparing the Sahrawi feminist struggle with others where this neglect happened (Fernandes, 2023):

> *"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. So, the film created is that we have to wait until we become independent as a people to fight for feminism. 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. They can go hand in hand, and they should go hand in hand in order to move forward and achieve something."* (Nashwa).

Accordingly, Strzelecka (2023) highlights the tendency of national liberation movements to prioritise the nationalist cause, neglecting other issues, such as women's emancipation. This leads, on the one hand, to the lack of development of a feminist consciousness or ideology, and thus of a maintenance of the Patriarchal oppression system – as it so happens with Palestine.

In the Spanish diaspora, another aspect is brought to light. During the interviews, one of the women expressed concerns about the international perception of women's rights in the Sahrawi society. She suggested that the notion of the society as matriarchal might be constructed as political propaganda, rather than an objective reality. This would mean that instead of actively and effectively tackling the oppression of women, the understanding of the Sahrawi society as emancipated for women at the international level is used to obtain foreign solidarity with the struggle: *"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).*

In sum, this chapter explores the divergent perspectives of Sahrawi women in the refugee camps and in the Spanish diaspora, shaped by the distinct political, social, and material conditions of each context. While women in the refugee camps navigate everyday survival challenges – including scarce access to water, food, medicine, and goods –, Sahrawi women have actively shaped political resistance and community structures. In contrast, in the Spanish diaspora, exposure to different social frameworks paves the way for engagement with alternative feminist perspectives, including those shaped by Western norms.

The presence of Western feminist frameworks in the diaspora can create friction and dialogue with Sahrawi women's own feminist articulations – shaped by both Islamic and indigenous political traditions. Western and White feminist traditions have often positioned Islamic and Muslim feminisms as inherently in need of reform, imposing thresholds of emancipation that do not necessarily align with Sahrawi women's priorities. Rather than framing these perspectives as opposing poles, Sahrawi women in the diaspora may navigate complex positionalities that challenge such binaries.

Discussion

This paper highlights the diverse understandings and standpoints of Sahrawi women, aligning academia with the Sahrawi struggle for liberation and women's struggle for emancipation. The ongoing Moroccan settler Colonialism and repression in occupied Western Sahara not only constitute direct violence but also attempt to suppress autonomous discussions of feminism and gender roles. Despite these constraints, Sahrawi women continue to shape and define their own feminist frameworks, resisting both Colonial domination and external impositions. A decolonial feminist conversation must centre Sahrawi women's self-articulated perspectives resisting both the violent occupation and the imposition of hegemonic feminist paradigms.

The issues discussed above do not necessarily mean that the Sahrawi women disagree among them, but they do not necessarily agree on the priorities, either. The Sahrawi women interviewed recognise that these different perspectives exist, and they accept

where they stem from. This divergence of perspectives can be understood by a diversity of factors. The most relevant, in my view, arises from each region's specific culture and social meanings. Whilst in the refugee camps the daily lives of women are focused on the quotidian survival, and on the national struggle for the independence of a free Western Sahara, as there have not been many chances to discuss women's issues from a collective viewpoint; in the Spanish diaspora women are influenced by a country with different standards of gender norms, where their daily priorities are education and work, whilst advocating for the independence of their home country. Yet, this could also stem from the interpretations of women's emancipation and gender equality on its own, for women in the refugee camps seem to understand the society as somewhat keen on addressing women's issues, whilst contemplating a certain nonexistence of gender oppression. Contrarily, women in the diaspora appear to disagree with this perception, which could explain their vocality in addressing these issues – for they deem them more urgent and pressing.

Nonetheless, it is fundamental to discuss the role played by globalisation in the differences between the culture of the Sahrawi people living in the refugee camps and the people living in the Spanish diaspora, and how this affects women's autonomy, oppression, and emancipation. Here, it is relevant to understand that whilst living in one part of the world, one may still be influenced by the standards of another, making it harder to balance the distinct cultures and expectations at play. On the one hand, globalisation leads women living in Spain to need to find mechanisms of protecting themselves from the harms of the host and home cultures, as what is expected in one may be heavily criticised in the other. This means that they become accountable for their choices in the host country to their families and friends back home, often almost immediately, thanks to social media. On the other hand, the Sahrawi society in the camps may have had to become more enclosed to protect itself from Westernised standards and impositions, leading to a deepening of norms that are oppressive of women, in the name of protecting them and the culture. Thus, the Sahrawi society in the camps may have felt the need to resort to the very norms it proudly stands against, as a form of guaranteeing the protection of the Sahrawi culture (freedom versus safety).

This way, it is fundamental to comprehend the importance of ensuring a conversation between the society in the refugee camps and the one living in the diaspora. By debating the different approaches and perspectives of each society, there may be chances of further developing women's collective identity, and thus a unified resistance of women against the Patriarchal order that oppresses them. This can be done whilst actively resisting the oppression of the settling forces. As this article discussed, the two struggles can and must work together to ensure the freedom and emancipation of all people from different forms of oppression – Colonialism and Patriarchy.

The emancipation of the Sahrawi women must come both from the liberation from the Colonial past and from Westernised views – Patriarchal and White Feminist; as well as from the liberation from the Patriarchal and religious oppression of their society. The Sahrawi women must actively fight against all forms of oppression that they face, be it one that seeks to hide them or one that seeks to exploit them.

Conclusion

This article aims to explore the differing perspectives on women's emancipation and rights of Sahrawi women in the camps and the Spanish diaspora. Through a historical analysis, I examined the impact of Colonialism on women's roles, noting how nomadic Sahrawi society valued women's political opinions. Spanish Colonialism, particularly after 1964, institutionalised gender colonialism, attempting to reshape gender dynamics. Over decades of Spanish and Moroccan occupation, Sahrawi women have been at the forefront of the liberation struggle, namely in the occupied territory, where they resist repression, violence, and human rights violations. This article also explored the varying views of the interviewed women on their society's priorities and emancipation. While women in the camps focused on survival, education, and liberation from Colonial powers, women in the Spanish diaspora emphasised gender-specific issues for Sahrawi women's liberation.

The critical role of Sahrawi women in sustaining their people in the Algerian refugee camps is widely acknowledged both within Sahrawi society and in existing literature. However, there is a stark lack of discussion on the role of women during the resistance against Spanish Colonialism up until 1975, as well as their role in the military. Mainstream narratives often confine women to passive roles, despite clear evidence of their presence on the frontlines of battle. This leads to the invisibilisation of countless women, who have stood and fought with their peers for a free Western Sahara.

Thus, the Sahrawi women themselves must be able to express their concerns and viewpoints; and women's perspectives on their roles in the struggle must not be dictated solely by formal institutions but must emerge from diverse lived experiences. A broader, more inclusive feminist dialogue – one that bridges the experiences of women in the refugee camps with those in the Spanish diaspora – can strengthen collective identity and reinforce women's autonomy within Sahrawi society. This exchange fosters a deeper understanding of women's rights and emancipation in a Patriarchal and Colonised context, ensuring that no contribution is overlooked.

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