Living Under Occupation in the Western Sahara: Women, Resistance and Self-Determination

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary ................................................................................................................ 3
Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 4
Methodology .......................................................................................................................... 6
Theory and Literature: What We Know Now ...................................................................... 7
Historical Overview of the Conflict & Occupation .............................................................. 11
Analysis ............................................................................................................................... 12
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 19
Executive Summary
The Occupied Territories of the Western Sahara, located in North Africa between Morocco and Mauritania, contain one of the oldest peaceful political resistance movements in the entire region. The Sahrawi people of the Western Sahara are a historically marginalized population that has been demanding their right to self-determination for decades, but whose pursuit of democratic statehood and human rights has been violently suppressed. The resistance movement is led and organized predominantly by Sahrawi women from different generations. Due to the difficulty of accessing the territories for research purposes, little is known and published about the activists within the territories and the roles women fill as they lead this movement.

This paper examines the roles of Sahrawi women in leadership positions and projects of resistance throughout the Occupied Territories of the Western Sahara. Specifically the analysis focuses on how Sahrawi women understand the effect of military occupation on their resistance projects, participation, and daily lives. The findings of this study are based on a six-week long field study during which dozens of interviews were conducted with women activists and non-activists in the Sahrawi community.

The following is a summary of key findings:

- **Women actively participate in political resistance and lead the resistance movement**

In Sahrawi culture and society, women hold a prominent position both inside and outside of the home. They are not restricted to domestic duties and the confines of their homes as a social norm, but are often leaders both in the family and in the public sphere. Sahrawi women’s prominence in both public and private spheres is clear when examining the gendered make-up of the resistance movement and public protests, since these efforts predominantly consist of women.

- **Existence of an active and organized network of activists across the territories**

There is a closely-knit and well-organized network of Sahrawi activists engaged in managing projects of peaceful resistance in each city within the Occupied Territories. In addition to organizing peaceful monthly protests, they document and report instances of violent oppression with their own clandestine news team. Sahrawi women are also the main facilitators of the network and the sources of communication between cities.

- **Socio-political conditions in the Occupied Territories are based on institutionalized discrimination against Sahrawis and violent suppression of resistance**

This is a common grievance amongst all of the Sahrawi activists and non-activists interviewed for this study. Sahrawis do not enjoy the same professional opportunities for upward mobility as the Moroccan population, which is reflected in the high rates of unemployment. Furthermore,
women participating in the resistance movement are most affected by the violent suppression in their daily lives since they are the most active and visible participants in public demonstrations.

Introduction

On June 15, 2014 a non-violent demonstration in El Aaiún, Western Sahara on Smara Street took place at approximately 6:30p.m. Activists had been organizing it for several days, making sure that they would filter out onto the street from different connecting streets in small groups. From the early afternoon onward, police and military vehicles lined Smara Street for several blocks. The neighborhood that is known for housing many prominent activists was blocked off by military and police vehicles, and patrolled by riot police dressed in full riot gear. They were wearing helmets with facemasks, holding shields with one hand and holding a gun in the other. For the entire day, activists were calling each other and exchanging information about the police surveillance. They had restricted Sahrawis’ mobility all throughout the day, and prevented many from walking toward Smara Street.

At precisely 6:30p.m., activists from all directions made their way to Smara Street in groups of three to five. More than half of the activists heading toward the demonstration site were women, fully dressed in their melkhfas and chanting, “La badil la badil 3an taqrir al-masir!” The demonstrators who successfully made it to Smara Street were instantly met with violent force. Women were pushed backwards and knocked to the ground as taxi cabs maneuvered around them without stopping. Secret police officers embedded within the demonstration took pictures and videos of everyone’s faces with their camera phones. According to activists, the police did this so they could keep a record of who participated in the demonstrations on a regular basis, after which they follow them home to threaten them and their families. The violence escalated when one woman, a popular activist in El Aaiún and a member of the Equipe Media news team, was punched in the face after she was knocked to the ground. Her fellow female activists rushed her back into her neighborhood, and a gang of 12 Moroccan secret police officers followed them. Throughout the entire duration of the protest, which lasted less than one hour, no Sahrawi protester was armed, aggressive, or violent toward any individual on Smara Street. Later that night, Equipe Media reported that 26 Sahrawi women were beaten, and only four Sahrawi men reported injuries.

This particular protest was not an isolated event; on the contrary, it is representative of the monthly protests that take place throughout the cities of the Occupied Territories, and the

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2 A melkhfa is a traditional Sahrawi style of dress for women. It is one long piece of fabric, which comes in a variety of patterns, colors, and styles depending upon taste. It is wrapped around a woman’s body and draped over the head.
3 Transliteration of the original Arabic chant, which is the most popular and widely used chant in the resistance movement; the translation into English is “There is no alternative, there is no alternative to self-determination!”.
4 Interview: Equipe Media, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, June 15, 2014
5 Equipe Media is a news team composed of Sahrawi activists and self-taught journalists that constantly publish their news stories, interviews, protest videos, and other forms of press and media on their website: www.emsahara.com
police response remained the same. This event shows the elevated roles of women in the movement, their organization, and the discrimination inflicted upon them by the Moroccan forces. It also challenges orientalist narratives about the subjugated Muslim woman. Consequently, this event brings up many questions: how were the activists informed of the details of the protest? Why did the police immediately resort to violent force to disperse a peaceful demonstration? Why did the police target women so much more aggressively? Why doesn’t the international community intervene? These questions, and many more, are what influenced the trajectory of this field research. Many activists feel like they are targets of police brutality simply because they are Sahrawi, while others believe it is because they are female. Despite the fact that Sahrawi women in the resistance are beaten and degraded in public, they reported no desire to stop demonstration against the occupation. If anything, they consider it another source of motivation for battling injustice and demanding their freedom and human rights.

This paper examines the roles of women in leadership positions in the Occupied Territories and how they understand the effect of military occupation on their resistance projects and participation. There is a dearth of scholarship focused on any aspects of the Occupied Territories due to the obstacles set in place by the Moroccan government for potential researchers. Accessing the territories for any extended length of time is extremely difficult, and therefore little information is shared about the social, political, and cultural conditions.

The purpose of this research is to fill a critical gap, for scholars and policymakers alike, that occurs when failing to acknowledge the heterogeneity of women’s lived experiences and treatment throughout the Middle East. Understanding the nuances and the variation in Sahrawi women’s public and private positions in their communities allows for a more accurate portrayal of their respective societies. It is crucial to include their voices as leaders in order to fully comprehend the scope of this territorial and ethnic conflict. For this reason, the role of Sahrawi women as leaders of peace and self-determination must be more comprehensively researched. Ultimately this research will help to create an enhanced understanding for policymakers and peacemakers alike.

The main questions this study seeks to answer are precisely how Sahrawi women lead resistance projects and advocate for peace, human rights, and self-determination, and also how they understand the effects of military occupation on the resistance and their participation. These research questions are significantly relevant to the field of women, peace, and security because they seek to remedy the imbalance of scholarship on the Western Sahara through intensive research on the roles and resiliency of Sahrawi women who are confronting the core issues of occupation, and seeking steps toward reconciliation, peace, and self-determination. A secondary objective for this study is to reinforce the importance of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which affirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflict, peace

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negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction. Sahrawi women in the Occupied Territories are prime examples of leadership in issues of peace, human rights, and security; however, the lack of international media coverage, aid, and diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict point to the lack of concern over this region.

Road Map of the Study

This paper will present a methodology, explaining the research methods employed to conduct this field study, followed by a detailed literature review presenting the relevant literature on Arab-Muslim women and Sahrawi women in the Tindouf refugee camps. The analysis will incorporate a brief historical overview of the conflict and the occupation in order to situate the study within the historical context, and connect to the current conditions on the ground in the Occupied Territories. Following the general explanation of the current conditions, the key findings will be restated and expanded upon by primarily utilizing interview and participant-observation data.

Methodology

The design of this study incorporates original and independent primary data collection, consisting of interviews with Sahrawis, and participant observation while living with activist host families. Interview questions began with basic and broad questions, often referred to as “typical grand tour questions,” where interviewees give a verbal description of something they know well; in this case, they were asked to describe a typical day in their lives. This is primarily for the purpose of gaining trust, and allowing the interviewee to describe something that imposes little pressure on them. Semi-structured interviews were the preferred method, which included many open-ended questions mixed with specific questions that all interviewees were asked due to the fact that very little secondary data is available to consult regarding this specific research topic.

Research subjects were included in this study based on their willingness to participate and their status as Sahrawi women living in the Occupied Territories, regardless of whether they are self-proclaimed activists or not. Men were also interviewed in order to gauge the social awareness of the role of women in leadership roles by both genders, and to examine the traditional and current gender roles of Sahrawi society and how they assist or impinge upon women’s participation in the public sphere. In total, 43 Sahrawi men and women were interviewed between the ages of 15 and 68 in the city of El Aaiún in Modern Standard Arabic

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9 Leech, p. 665
and Hassaniyya dialect. The interviewees themselves were from all of the major cities of the territories: El Aaiún, Smara, Dakhla, and Boujdour. Many interviewees, 45 years and older, were born and raised in Tantan.

Research was conducted in various settings, according to the subjects’ choosing. These settings ranged from the comfort of their own homes to public parks and the beach. Relative privacy was prioritized, and confidentiality between research subjects and the lead researcher was consistently ensured. Furthermore, interviews were not digitally recorded due to the security dilemma this would present in the Occupied Territories, which are under strict patrol and surveillance by Moroccan security forces. In order to protect the identity and safety of the research subjects, interviews were recorded by hand and then the notes were electronically transcribed onto an online cloud device each night. Following transcription, the handwritten notes were destroyed and all interviewees were anonymized.

Theory and Literature: What We Know Now

Prior to presenting the field research and analysis, it is crucial to understand the theoretical inspiration for this study and the empirical evidence that already exists regarding women in the Middle East, and Sahrawi women specifically. Given the increased international attention dedicated to the examination of women in conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, as exemplified by UN Security Council Resolution 1325, it is critical to understand how common misconceptions and assumptions regarding Muslim and Arab women have been written about in the past. Thus, this overview of theory and literature begins with an explanation of Said’s concept of orientalism, and how the perpetual victimization and stereotyping of Muslim and Arab women has hindered efforts to understand their roles in various societies throughout the Arab world, and in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Orientalism, Gender, and the Western Sahara

To situate this research into the larger body of literature on women and the Western Sahara, it is necessary to comprehend the theory of orientalism as founded and defined by Edward Said and the utility of his theory for examining the dynamics of the conflict. Said’s foundational text on orientalism provides a crucial theoretical backdrop for examining and understanding the importance of historical, socio-cultural, and political aspects of gender relations in the Western Sahara, and in any given community throughout the Middle East. There has been a perpetual phenomenon from the height of colonialism to the present day of

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10 Paraphrasing or quotations included throughout this research paper is translated into English from the original MSA or Hassaniyya dialect by the author herself, Erica Vásquez. Chants or slogans included throughout the paper will be transliterated in the text, with a translation included in the footnote.
stereotyping and marginalizing communities throughout the world that are unlike the West. The imbalance in the power to produce knowledge of the world outside of the United States and Europe has led to grave misunderstandings of Middle East life, culture, religion, and especially gender relations. A comprehensive and in-depth examination of specific cases throughout the Middle East and North Africa is thus necessary to accurately understand these topics within specific and unique historical contexts.

Many scholars have brought to light the gendered underpinnings of colonial rule and knowledge production of the Middle East, and they have contributed to developing the theory of orientalism as it relates to gender. Charrad has written extensively on the status of women in legal codes throughout North Africa, focusing on Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Charrad’s work examines the status laws throughout these Arab/Muslim states, and how the status of women has remained a focal point of criticism in the West without acknowledging the heavy influence of French colonial rule on every aspect of state- and institution-building in those states. Charrad points to the issue of examining the state of Arab governments and societies in an ahistorical context, therefore exempting former colonizing powers from all responsibility.

Most recently, Lila Abu-Lughod has contributed to the theory of orientalism by explaining in great detail why Muslim women do not need “saving.” In fact, she argues that the negative portrayals of women in the Arab-Muslim world as marginalized, abused, and highly oppressed have homogenized the entire Middle East. The differences in gender relations, family, and the legal standing of women across the region are often neglected by scholars and policymakers alike, as are the complex political factors that shape laws, institutions, and gender relations. Thus, it becomes highly challenging to accurately examine the roles and status of women across the Middle East, and even more problematic to comprehensively examine their presence in leadership positions and resistance within sites of conflict. Charrad and Abu-Lughod emphasize the importance of grounding any analysis within its appropriate historical context, and consciously avoiding dominant narratives and stereotypes of women in the region.

Sahrawi Women: In the Refugee Camps

The territorial conflict in the Western Sahara is primarily between the Moroccan government and the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Rio de Oro (from hereafter referred to as Frente Polisario), which officially represents the Sahrawi population. The conflict has been labeled “Africa’s last colony” and the forgotten conflict of the 21st century. It is understudied and neglected, especially considering the political transformations and

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revolutionary activity that took place in the rest of the Middle East-North Africa region.\textsuperscript{18} There have been numerous failed attempts at developing a functional referendum that would allow the Sahrawis to pursue self-determination and independent state formation. Regional and international state actors also play key roles in prolonging the unlawful occupation.

The history of the conflict as briefly explained above has been written about and examined by numerous scholars throughout the decades. The academic scholarship focuses on the history of the region starting from Spanish colonization, examining international actors involved in the conflict, critiquing the failure of the United Nations to create a successful referendum, and analyzing the state of the refugee camps, and there is now a growing interest in examining culture, gender, and identity of the Sahrawi people living in the refugee camps.\textsuperscript{19}

The Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria have garnered the most scholarly attention over the last several years. The dominant narrative of refugee camps as temporary sites of habitation, where vulnerable displaced persons are dependent on foreign aid and in need of saving and protection from the international community rings hollow for Sahrawis living in Tindouf camps. According to UNHCR, there are approximately 90,000 “vulnerable” refugees living in five camps spread throughout Tindouf.\textsuperscript{20} Although the UN agency explicitly labels Sahrawi refugees as vulnerable, the scholarship proves otherwise.

Contrary to UNHCR’s portrayal of Tindouf, Sahrawi refugees have taken hold of their situation and attempted to create a system for themselves that is as self-sufficient as possible.\textsuperscript{21} Sahrawi women also play a crucial role in running more self-sustainable and Sahrawi-led camps. Pablo San Martin analyzes the refugee camps with particular focus on the historical, political, and social factors that have taken part in the process of Sahrawi identity formation. He calls Sahrawi refugees “citizens of a state in waiting” due to the consistent hope that they will one day be victorious in establishing an independent Sahrawi state in the Western Sahara.\textsuperscript{22} Due to this hope, the Sahrawis have undertaken various community-building projects to ensure that their protracted refugee situation does not prevent Sahrawi youth from achieving higher education. It is crucial to note that these community-building projects and initiatives are largely administered and facilitated by Sahrawi women throughout the camps. This is a common theme for both the public and private spheres of life. Sahrawi women cook, clean, run the home and teach their

\textsuperscript{19} Zunes & Mundy
children all of these skills while also working in schools, clinics, for the local police force, and as journalists.23

San Martin thoroughly explains the role of women within the refugee camps. He states, “The camps [are] mainly inhabited and run by women, as most of the men were in the battlefront.”24 Furthermore, he describes this female-dominated structure within the refugee camps as a society where all Sahrawis are “working together as equals,” consequently multiplying their chances of achieving a just and independent state.25 In comparison to its Moroccan and Algerian neighbors, the Sahrawi community in exile has consciously developed a political ideology and a society that emphasizes political unity and has established a new social order that institutionally places women at the forefront of leadership and decision-making.

Sahrawi women in the refugee camps have attracted reasonable attention from international media due to their visibility throughout the camps. They organize demonstrations, are vocal against the Moroccan government, and consistently challenge dominant narratives that tend to victimize and marginalize Arab-Muslim women throughout the region.26 Anne Lippert highlights the role of Sahrawi women in the public sphere, writing, “In traditional Sahrawi life, as in similar nomadic traditions, women exercised real power and played a dominant role in the camp as well as in the tent.”27 Lippert explicitly explores the role of Sahrawi women within and beyond the family unit and emphasizes their prominent roles and responsibilities within society. Lippert writes:

In traditional Sahrawi society Sahrawi women could inherit property and could subsist independently of fathers, brothers, and husbands…. The traditional nomadic Sahrawi woman ruled the tent and played a major role in the tribal education of her children…. Women had full responsibility for the camp during the frequent absences of the men for warring or trading. They were responsible for making, repairing, and moving the tents; for milking goats and camels; and for participating in major tribal decisions… 28

The importance of Sahrawi women in the camps and in the home grew exponentially during the war between Sahrawi forces and the Moroccan army following the Green March into Western Sahara territory in 1975. Most able-bodied young men left their families to fight in the war effort, leaving the women behind to maintain the community, take care of the children, and make all necessary decisions in the household and in the tribe. Thousands of Sahrawi men lost their lives in this battle, and the camps were left with a vast majority of women and children. Lippert’s work adds the gender analysis of refugee life in the Western Sahara context that is

24 San Martin, p. 569
25 San Martin, p. 569
28 Lippert, p. 637-8
largely omitted in the reports of international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In doing so, she directly challenges the common conceptions of helpless Arab-Muslim women whom are most vulnerable during situations of conflict and displacement.

*Women under Occupation: The Missing Narrative*

While there is a growing body of literature focused on examining gender and identity in the Tindouf refugee camps, there is a dearth of scholarship focused on Sahrawi women in the Occupied Territories. Although the Occupied Territories are not as accessible to researchers as the refugee camps, there is a large segment of the Sahrawi female population that lives under occupation. They are subject to a wide variety of injustices and human rights violations at the hands of Moroccan security forces, and their experiences provide insight into the intra-conflict dynamics, as well as the movement for change. In the face of widespread discrimination, abuse, and marginalization, Sahrawi women in the Occupied Territories have managed to maintain their active participation in the public and private spheres of life.

The growing interest in researching the status of Sahrawi women in the refugee camps adds to the timeliness of this research on the Occupied Territories. The role of Sahrawi women in positions of power and leadership are not confined to the borders of the refugee camps; the women living in the Occupied Territories provide yet another example of the strength and perseverance of Sahrawi women. It is crucial to include their voices as leaders to the existing literature that is heavily concentrated on the refugee camps in order to fully comprehend the scope of this territorial and ethnic conflict, and to contribute to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 by expanding upon the role of women in the Middle East and North Africa that actively work on issues of peace, security, and human rights. This gap in the literature is exactly what this study seeks to fill.

*Historical Overview of the Conflict & Occupation*

The Occupied Territories of the Western Sahara were formerly part of a Spanish colony. In 1884 Spain obtained a protectorate over the territory and assumed full military and administrative control. Colonial rule came to the end after the passing of United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, and Spain relinquished colonial rule over the Western Sahara. Following formal decolonization in 1960, Spain accepted responsibility for preparing a referendum for the Western Sahara in which the Sahrawis would be able to achieve their main goals of self-determination and independence.

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Despite the importance of the UN declaration, Morocco and Mauritania stalled the referendum process by submitting an appeal to the International Court of Justice in October 1974, arguing for rights to the territory due to historical ownership. The Moroccan state’s claims to the Western Sahara emerged due to the nationalist belief in the recovery of terra irredenta, claiming that its land had been contested and lost to European colonial ambitions for centuries. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) led an investigation into the factuality of this historical and legal claim to the territories, and ultimately concluded that there was not sufficient evidence to support any legal claim to the territory, stating:

“...the Court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory.”

Although the ICJ rejected the appeal and supported the Sahrawis’ right to self-determination, Spain negotiated a settlement with Morocco and Mauritania. In October 1975, Spain granted Morocco two-thirds of the territory, and Mauritania the remaining one-third. On October 16, 1975, King Hassan II of Morocco announced the launch of the Green March. He authorized thousands of Moroccan citizens to march across the southern border into the Western Sahara to occupy the territory and demonstrate popular political support. There were approximately 350,000 unarmed Moroccans entering the territories, led by tanks and the Moroccan military. The military occupation has persisted since then uninterrupted, despite the establishment of the UN Mission for Referendum in Sahara Occidental (MINURSO). There has been no progress to move closer toward facilitating a successful referendum.

Analysis

Current Conditions on the Ground: Conflict & Surveillance

The Occupied Territories of the Western Sahara are under unlawful Moroccan administration and jurisdiction, and there is no international body that legally recognizes Morocco’s claims to the territory. Due to this lack of legitimate legal recognition, Morocco established a highly militarized security sector in each city in the Occupied Territories to curb uprisings and resistance. Today, there is constant surveillance by Moroccan security forces,

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32 Zunes & Mundy
34 Jensen, p. 17
35 Zunes & Mundy
particularly in El Aaiún since it is the largest city and most active protest site. Security in this context works to benefit the kingdom and the territorial integrity of the Moroccan state; security in this sense does not mean securing and protecting the livelihood, survival, or dignity of the entirety of the population living in the Occupied Territories. The Moroccan security regime in the three main cities of El Aaiún, Smara, and Dakhla consists of state police, military soldiers, riot police, and secret police dressed in civilian clothing that drive civilian vehicles. Due to the civilian disguises they often use, they are able to penetrate both public and private spheres in the territories.

The security regime does not solely focus on the Sahrawi population and resistance projects, but also monitors and restricts visitors and tourists who enter the territories. Numerous Sahrawis recounted stories of journalists, reporters, and tourists who were followed, monitored, searched, and ultimately expelled from the territories shortly after their arrival: “We try our best to help foreigners get in and talk to us, see what is happening. But unless you are with a human rights group and have permission from the King, you cannot stay.” The Moroccan security regime maintains strict surveillance over all foreigners that enter the territories and make certain that their mobility is restricted so that little data is collected regarding the militarized occupation. Ultimately, the security regime prevents tourists and journalists alike from witnessing public Sahrawi demonstrations for self-determination and their violent suppression by means of blunt force.

How Does the Occupation Discriminate Against Sahrawis?

The occupation has established socio-political conditions throughout the Occupied Territories that are based on institutionalized discrimination against Sahrawis. Institutionalized discrimination and violent suppression are two common grievances for all of the Sahrawi activists and non-activists interviewed for this study. Discrimination is prevalent in all aspects of life, including schooling, employment, college enrollment, and travel. In terms of schooling, there are trade schools in El Aaiún, Dakhla, and Smara, but all colleges and universities are located within Morocco proper. Sahrawis must have the financial resources to move out of the territories and into major cities where the universities are located. This presents a major obstacle for Sahrawi youth who wish to obtain a higher education since many of them live in poverty. According to the interviewees, there is very little chance for a Sahrawi to attend medical school and practice medicine. They have never met a Sahrawi doctor who is located within the Occupied Territories. There are also few, if any, Sahrawi lawyers who actively practice within the territories. Consequently, both men and women excel in whatever venues are available to them, and for the majority of women interviewed for this study, the venues they find most

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37 Participant observation: El Aaiún, Western Sahara, May-July 2014
38 Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, May 22, 2014
40 Multiple interviews: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private homes, May 21-June 30, 2014
41 Multiple interviews: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private homes, May 21-June 30, 2014
appealing are in leading the resistance movement. Being that their chances of becoming successful career professionals are so slim, they choose to learn how to report the news, record scenes of oppression and violence, organize websites, and run press conferences.

In addition to the lack of higher education institutions, there are no libraries in the Occupied Territories. Currently, the first library is under construction in El Aaiún and set to be open within the next two years. Allegedly, both Moroccans and Sahrawis will be able to use the facilities in the library, which is at the outskirts of the city near the airport. However, to date, there has never been a library, college, or university within the Occupied Territories. Access to higher education, information, and research has been completely restricted from the Sahrawi population, and discrimination within grade schools often dissuades Sahrawi children from finishing their preparatory education. Out of the 14 Sahrawis interviewed between the ages of 15 and 26, all had experienced serious discrimination in grade school. Their teachers struck most of them with rulers, books, and their hands. One 19 year-old interviewee said that she did not finish middle school because of the physical and verbal abuse she suffered at school: “I had friends at first, but when my teacher started to yell at me and hit me in front of everyone, nobody wanted to talk to me. I had no friends, and I didn’t understand why me.”

Instead, she chose to stay at home to help her mother care for her younger siblings and complete other household duties. Another interviewee, 24 years old, had obtained her bachelor’s degree at a university in Agadir. When she attempted to enroll in a graduate program in Casablanca, the director of enrollment asked her where she was from. She responded, “I am from Western Sahara,” and his response was that as soon as the Moroccan Sahara became Western, she would be able to enroll. Instantly discouraged and angered, she walked away from the program she had wanted to pursue for years because of her political status. For many outspoken Sahrawis, there is no upward mobility and freedom from discrimination in any institution.

In addition to the educational obstacles confronting the Sahrawi population, there are high unemployment rates amongst the Sahrawi population across all age groups. This is particularly true for men and women between the ages of 45 and 60. Out of the 43 Sahrawis interviewed for this study, 18 were within that age group. Only three of them are employed, one of which is self-employed. They believe that their failure to find employment in El Aaiún is because they were all political prisoners in the 1980s while Morocco fought a war against the Frente Polisario. They were accused of aiding, supporting, and sending intelligence to members of the Frente Polisario. Following these accusations, which were not accompanied by solid evidence, they were imprisoned from anywhere between eight to 24 years without trial or the ability to contact their families. In 1991, after the United Nations’ brokered a ceasefire, all but one Sahrawi man were released from the prisons. After reintegrating into society in El Aaiún, they found it extremely difficult to be employed by any company, school, organization, or shop.

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42 Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 30, 2014
43 Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 5, 2014
Unfair hiring practices and blatant discrimination are an important and common grievance among the Sahrawi population in the major cities. The number of Moroccans working in shops, supermarkets, cafes, and restaurants far exceeds the number of Sahrawis working in those sectors. Sahrawis are also underrepresented in the police force and education sector, both as teachers and administrators. One major employer in the Occupied Territories that has also failed to rectify the issue of unfair hiring practices is the United Nations mission based in El Aaiún, MINURSO. According to two current Sahrawi employees, approximately 12 Sahrawis work for MINURSO in an official capacity throughout the territories, while the same mission employs over 150 Moroccans. Due to the fact that the conflict within the Occupied Territories includes ethnic hostilities, the percentages of Sahrawis and Moroccans working for MINURSO should be as close to even as possible in order to promote dialogue and mutual understanding, among many other benefits. However, employment discrimination is an institutionalized condition of society in the Occupied Territories that many Sahrawis cannot successfully overcome.

How Do Women Participate In and Lead the Political Resistance?

Out of the 43 interviewees for this study, 30 were self-proclaimed female activists. They seize any opportunity to express support of the resistance movement and explain how the occupation affects their lives. A prime example of their dedication to disseminating as much information as possible about the occupation and its effects occurred on May 23, 2014. Nine Sahrawi women took the initiative to independently organize a focus group for this study. The researcher was brought into her host mother’s private sitting room where everyone sat in a circle; they met one another while imprisoned for several years during the war between Morocco and the Frente Polisario, roughly between the years 1980 and 1991. One woman sat with a tablet on her lap that she used to take photographs and notes, and she instructed everyone to introduce themselves by stating their names and sharing how long they had been in prison. The shortest sentence served was three years, and the longest was 11. Sahrawi women of the older generation who had any level of contact with members of the Frente Polisario at the onset of the war were nearly all unlawfully imprisoned. All those who survived the torture and food deprivation were released in 1991, following the ceasefire brokered by MINURSO. During the focus group, each Sahrawi activist was asked why she continued to resist the occupation and actively oppose Moroccan rule after enduring so much hostility. There was a consensus amongst the group that they have everything to gain from resisting Moroccan occupation: “I lost nine years of my life in

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44 The classification “Moroccan” here goes beyond the definition of nationality or citizenship, but instead refers to the population of people in Morocco/Occupied Territories that are not ethnically Sahrawi, but of Berber, Arab, or other ethnic origins.

45 Focus group (facilitated by Sahrawi female activists), 9 participants: El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private sitting room, May 23, 2014

M’gouna. When I left I could not find my children…and my husband was killed. I have nothing left to lose.”

The focus group not only highlights the dedication of Sahrawi activists to share their experiences of marginalization and struggle, but it also sheds light on the scope of responsibilities that Sahrawi women take up in the resistance movement, and, most importantly, how they define resistance. According to Sahrawi female activists, the resistance is composed of both public demonstration and political opposition combined with civil society projects and organizations.

The key roles repeatedly emphasized by Sahrawi women are advocacy, civil society leadership and participation, and public or private activism. Firstly, women are advocates for peace, human rights, and self-determination. They support these principles and discuss the issues they confront while advocating for them on a daily basis with friends and family. Many women discuss these principles and their views to visitors, researchers, and journalists that manage to get into the territories. Whether it is on the phone, in public, for an interview, or in the privacy of their own homes during dinner, the project of advocating for peace, human rights, and self-determination is constant for Sahrawi women.

Secondly, women are particularly active in Sahrawi civil society. Many are founders, volunteers, and facilitators of different projects for independently run non-profit organizations that focus on Sahrawi social issues. The Association of Victims of Grave Violations of Human Rights Committed by the Moroccan State (ASVDH) is one such organization that documents human rights violations throughout the territories, and passes the information to affiliates in Spain. ASVDH also facilitates support groups for victims of human rights violations as a form of therapy. Another organization documents the disappearances of Sahrawi youth throughout the territories, and provides emotional support to grieving mothers. According to Sahrawi activists, working within Sahrawi civil society on issues of human rights and building a supportive community for those suffering the loss of friends and family is, in itself, a form of resistance: “When I work with Sahrawis suffering like I do, it is resistance. We are not sitting at home and doing nothing. We are healing.” Non-violent demonstration and political opposition do not rigidly define the resistance movement according to Sahrawi female activists, but instead the

47 A prison in southern Morocco, located in Kalaat M’gouna, where thousands of Sahrawis were taken during the war between Morocco and the Frente Polisario.
49 Multiple interviews: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private homes and public parks, May 21-July 3, 2014
50 Focus group: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private sitting room, May 23, 2014
51 Clarification: this is not to say that Sahrawi men do not advocate and promote peace, human rights, and self-determination. This point is specifically made to highlight one of many roles Sahrawi women take-up.
52 Participant observation: El Aaiún, Western Sahara, May 21-July 3 2014
53 This organization is officially headquartered in the refugee camps in Tindouf, but has successfully recruited Sahrawis living in the Occupied Territories to record violations.
54 Interview: Member of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Violations of Human Rights Committed by the Moroccan State (ASVDH), El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 20, 2014
55 Interview: Elder member of organization, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 28, 2014
56 Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private sitting room, June 29, 2014
movement encompasses a broader range of civil and social projects that are organized and facilitated by Sahrawis in clandestine ways.

Thirdly, public and private activism is a key role that many Sahrawi women take up. According to the focus group and interviews conducted for this study, there are two spheres of activism as a result of the military occupation: the public sphere and the private sphere. The public sphere encompasses public demonstrations, non-violent protest, and meeting with international human rights organizations. This sphere is primarily composed of the older generation of activists that lived through and survived the war, and most of them are not employed. The private sphere encompasses conducting private interviews, moderating activist press conferences, organizing events, and disseminating information relating to police presence on demonstration dates. This sphere is composed of the younger generations of Sahrawi youth who cannot publicly demonstrate or oppose Moroccan occupation because of the detrimental effects it will have on their upward mobility and employment prospects. Many younger activists expressed the frustration they feel when they can only write about and observe self-determination demonstrations throughout the territories: “I need to finish my law degree before I can demonstrate on Smara Street. I have friends who were expelled from my university for demonstrating and they cannot find jobs. I need to finish first, have a job, and then go out to the streets.” Although many activists of the younger generation must participate in the resistance behind closed doors, they consciously maneuver around the obstacles placed by the Moroccan regime, therefore undermining the occupation and learning from the older generation. Thus, the public and private spheres of activism come together in the stages of planning, organizing, and documenting resistance projects.

Closely-knit Network of Activists: Communication, Press, and Media

The Sahrawi activists in the Western Sahara maintain a closely-knit social network that crosses city boundaries. Activists in El Aaiún are in contact with activists in Smara, Boujdour, Dakhla, Moroccan cities, and the refugee camps. They coordinate demonstration dates with one another so that they coincide and have a greater chance of attracting media attention. Sahrawi women play a major role in facilitating this consistent communication between activists. They are often the ones making phone calls, putting activists in contact with one another, and circulating information to other activists about the dates and times of activist meetings and press conferences. As one interviewee explained, “It is not that men do not want to communicate, but we take it as our duty. It is my duty in the resistance for everyone to know what is planned and when”.

57 Multiple interviews: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, May 21-July 3, 2014
58 Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 17, 2014
59 Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 3, 2014
60 Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 3, 2014
Due to the difficulty of renting and purchasing public space for organizing meetings, conferences, and organization headquarters, many activists instead meet inside of their homes. This also decreases security concerns since there is less of a risk of being raided, arrested, or wire-tapped if they consistently meet inside of Sahrawi homes and cycle through meeting times and locations. Sahrawi women within the activist network organize with one another over which house to meet in, and constantly measure the levels of surveillance in their neighborhood to ensure the safety of their fellow activists and the secrecy of their activities.\textsuperscript{61} For example, one interviewee explained how this is often a day-long process: “my children will play out in the street and tell me if there is a car outside, if police have walked by, or if strangers were walking by more than usual. This is how we know if it is safe to meet”.\textsuperscript{62} Children and other members of the family will be hyper-vigilant on days that meetings are scheduled for their homes, and Sahrawi women will often be the ones to decide whether there is a security issue, or if it is safe to carry on.

During meetings and interviews with Sahrawi activists, there was a sense of urgency coupled with complete dedication to resistance projects. When they hear of journalists or researchers who successfully enter the territories, the activists immediately share this information with one another. During a focus group one interviewee shared, “when we heard about your visit, everyone knew by the end of the day, and there was no question that you would meet us all. You would meet as many of us as possible on the very first day in case the authorities discovered you too soon”.\textsuperscript{63} Since it is so rare for a journalist to enter the territories, the activists instantly discuss availability and meeting places to get their message out. They are well aware that international media is not as concerned with their conflict as it may be with other parts of the Middle East, and for this reason they always embrace the opportunity to speak out and coordinate conferences. Although the serious lack of international media coverage discourages some, it has inspired other Sahrawi activists to proactively address the issue. The self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which is located west of the refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria and east of Morocco, broadcasts RASD TV\textsuperscript{64} as the national and official television channel. This channel airs coverage from the refugee camps, the autonomous region or SADR, and the Occupied Territories. The coverage on this channel serves as a media connection for the people of the Occupied Territories and the refugee camps, and allows them to see first-hand the inner-workings and events that take place in the refugee camps, and the violent suppression at the hands of the Moroccan government in the Occupied Territories.

Sahrawi activists and journalists from within the Occupied territories email encrypted files like photographs and videos of interviews and protest footage to the RASD TV headquarters. They cannot use land mail for fear of confiscation and subsequent punishment and imprisonment. They have all taught themselves how to use media equipment, how to run a

\textsuperscript{61} Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 3, 2014
\textsuperscript{62} Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 17, 2014
\textsuperscript{63} Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, May 22, 2014
\textsuperscript{64} RASD is the acronym for SADR (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) in Spanish.
website, and how to encrypt their own files. Despite the fact that the Moroccan government places myriad obstacles in their path for learning and obtaining skills in press and media, they have utilized the resources on the Internet to teach themselves how to use the press as a weapon of resistance.

Specifically, in El Aaiún there is a newly formed independent news team composed of Sahrawi male and female activists and journalists called Equipe Media.\(^{65}\) They cover every demonstration by photograph and video, and upload the material on the same day of the demonstration. They interview survivors of violence, oppression, unlawful imprisonment, and torture, and circulate their reportage online. Their website has been shut down multiple times by the Moroccan government; they are careful not to mention their names, and attempt to disguise their voices when narrating news reports on their site. During a focus group with the media team, one member explained her dedication to their work in tears, “we suffer torture here. All of us are tortured on the streets, in our homes, in prisons, everywhere and nobody knows. That is why we have to do this work. No one else can do it for us”.\(^{66}\) The work of Equipe Media and other independent Sahrawi journalists throughout the territories is a reminder that the media is often utilized as a method of peaceful resistance, and it highlights the dedication of the Sahrawi people to their resistance projects.

**Conclusion**

Sahrawi women have been fervently reporting human rights violations perpetrated against the Sahrawi people living in the Occupied Territories by the Moroccan government for years, and continue to play leading roles in promoting human rights and the legal right of self-determination in the Western Sahara. However, these efforts have gone unnoticed by the majority of the international community for decades. The reality on the ground is that Sahrawi women living under military occupation in the Occupied Territories play vital roles in leading the resistance movement and the fight for self-determination, while confronting discrimination and violent suppression by the Moroccan regime.

This paper examined precisely how Sahrawi women lead resistance projects, how they advocate for peace, human rights, and self-determination, how they define the meaning of resistance, and how they understand the effects of military occupation on their daily lives. While one of the primary purposes of this paper is to fill the critical gap in the literature that exists on the Western Sahara, it also seeks to reinforce the importance of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and serve as a case study on how women engage in conflict management, resolution, human rights advocacy, and peace-building around the world. Furthermore, this study proves how Arab-Muslim women do not exist as one homogeneous group in the Middle East and North Africa.

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\(^{65}\) Their work can be found at www.emsahara.com

\(^{66}\) Interview: Anonymous, El Aaiún, Western Sahara, private home, June 28, 2014
Recalling Edward Said’s theory of orientalism and the impact it has had on gendered analyses of the Middle East, Sahrawi women in the Occupied Territories of the Western Sahara directly challenge dominant orientalist narratives. When asked what the role of Sahrawi women is in society, every interviewee for this study responded with “whatever she wants.” Many Sahrawi women attend college and universities outside of the territories, lead demonstrations, organize press conferences, and report on the realities of occupation. Sahrawi women in the Occupied Territories recounted stories of their female relatives in the refugee camps who are doctors, nurses, police officers, soldiers, teachers, or studying abroad in Europe or the United States. Even on RASD TV there is often footage of women leading military formations and reporting the news. Thus, it is clear that the primary factor restricting the success and the potential of Sahrawi women in the Occupied Territories is not gender relations, essentialist norms, or tradition; instead, it is the Moroccan occupation itself.

Consequently, this report highlights the importance of comprehensive and historically contextualized analyses of women throughout the Middle East. Sahrawi women directly oppose the common misconception of the downtrodden, oppressed, and powerless Arab-Muslim woman. Instead, they lead and participate in the resistance movement and fervently promote their right to self-determination. Keeping in mind the important roles that women play throughout the Western Sahara, it is clear that they are a significant force in Sahrawi civil society, and, therefore, should have influential roles in official negotiating processes for peaceful resolution of the territorial conflict.

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