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Author(s): Anne Lippert

Source: *Signs*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), pp. 636-651

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174626>

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Anne Lippert

Introduction

THROUGH THEIR ROLES in the current liberation struggle of the Sahrawis of Western Sahara, Sahrawi women have substantially increased their traditional participation and importance in that society. Since 1973 the Sahrawis, the indigenous peoples of the former Spanish Sahara in northwest Africa, have engaged in an armed struggle to free that territory: first from Spain, which “protected” and administered it in part or in whole from the Franco-Spanish Conventions of 1904 until 1976; then from Morocco and Mauritania, to which Spain transferred its administrative powers by the Madrid Accords of 1975 (the transfer took effect in February 1976 when Spain withdrew); and since 1979, following a peace treaty between Mauritania and the Polisario Front, against Morocco alone. The territory has been marked for decolonization by the United Nations Decolonization Committee since 1963, and in 1988 the United Nations drew up an implementation plan (approved by both parties in 1990) for a negotiated settlement of the territorial conflict through a free and fair referendum for the Sahrawis.

Morocco and Mauritania entered the conflict because of their historical claims to the Saguia el Hamra (northern two-thirds) and the Rio de Oro (southern one-third) regions of Spanish Sahara, now known as Western Sahara. Although these claims were discounted in 1975 by the International Court of Justice in favor of a referendum of the Sahrawi people, the countries used their 1975 agreement with Spain and military force in their effort to exert control over the mineral-rich region. While Mauritania dropped its claim in 1979, Morocco has continued to lay claim to all of the Western Sahara as part of the “Greater Morocco,” a vision of Morocco that also includes the present kingdom of Morocco, part of Algeria, all of Mauritania, part of Mali, and part of Senegal. Morocco spent sixteen

[Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1992, vol. 17, no. 3]
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years engaged in a bitter desert war with the Polisario Front, a contemporary liberation movement that began to represent the Sahrawis and to wage guerrilla warfare in 1973. Most of the fighting was in the Western Sahara itself, although during the time that Mauritania was engaged in the war, battles were waged in northern Mauritania and, in the late 1970s, in southern Morocco as well. In early 1990 both Morocco and the Polisario Front agreed to the U.N. plan for resolution of the conflict, and in September 1991 they ceased fire.¹

Emergence of the struggle for liberation

Sahrawi women have played an integral role in traditional Sahrawi culture and in efforts to resist foreign interference.² The Polisario Front has expressly supported this traditional role—and promised expanded roles for women in a liberated Western Sahara—as a major policy direction of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, the Sahrawi state proclaimed by the Front's Provisional Sahrawi National Council in February 1976 and formally recognized by over seventy-five nations.

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; according to Sahrawi informants, this did not continue in Sahrawi towns because of Spanish cultural influence.³ These informants believed women's power endured in nomadic life because it implicitly and explicitly supported Sahrawi resistance to external Islamic and Western forces.⁴ In traditional Sahrawi society Sahrawi women could inherit property and could subsist independently of fathers, brothers, and husbands. Women were valued by Sahrawi tribes—among which monogamy was the rule—for their importance in establishing alliances through marriage, within and across tribes. The traditional nomadic Sahrawi woman

¹ See, e.g., Maurice Barbier, *Le conflit du Sahara Occidental* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1982); Tony Hodges, *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War* (Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill, 1983). The acronym of *Polisario Front* comes from "Front Populaire pour la Libération de Saguia el Hamra et Rio de Oro." See also United Nations, Security Council, *The Situation concerning Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General*, June 18, 1990, S/21360, 1–24.

² See Ahmed Baba Miské, *Front Polisario, l'âme d'un peuple* (Paris: Editions Rupure, 1978), 124–30. Much of Sahrawi history is oral history. In my visits to the Sahrawi refugee camps, Sahrawis of both sexes recounted stories of resistance activity by Sahrawi women in tribal conflicts and in the later resistance efforts against the Spanish.

³ Cynthia Nelson, *The Dead and the Sown, Nomads in the Wider Society*, Institute of International Studies, Research Series no. 21 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Robert Pehrson and Jean Pehrson, *The Social Organization of the Mori Baluch*, Viking Fund Publication in Anthropology, no. 43 (Chicago: Aldine, 1966); Safa Mohsen, "Legal Status of Women among the Awad'Ali," *Anthropological Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (Fall 1967): 153–66.

⁴ Miské. Also see François Beslay, *Les Réguibats: de la Paix Française au Front Polisario* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984).

ruled the tent and played a major role in the tribal education of her children. She also wore no face veil and had great personal freedom within the tribal encampment, whose open tents were conducive to easy converse among men and women. 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, including those concerning Koranic schooling for male and female children. Names of women Koranic teachers, marabouts (mystic holy leaders), traditional healers, and scholars are part of the Sahrawi oral heritage.⁵

Women not only sustained Sahrawi culture but they actively resisted foreign invaders as well. Sahrawi women had provided financial and in-kind support to and directly participated in resistance movements against the Spanish during the 1930s, from 1957 to 1958, and in the late 1960s. Women were members of the immediate forerunner of the Polisario Front, the Movement for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Oued ed-Dabab/Rio de Oro (Molisario), under its leader, Mohamed Sidi Brahim Bassiri.⁶ The Zemla massacre, a violent repression of that movement's demonstration in June 1970, resulted in the reported deaths of several women; a woman was the first person killed in that demonstration.⁷

Despite Spanish repression of Bassiri's movement, the Sahrawis continued to press for independence. The Polisario Front was founded May 10, 1973, at Ain Bentili in the Western Sahara by young male Sahrawi university students who had studied together in Morocco, several male Sahrawi survivors of the 1968 massacres at Zouerate,⁸ and a few Sahrawi men of the Spanish army; they called their meeting the Constituent Congress of the Polisario Front. Ten days later seven men from the Constituent Congress attacked a Spanish outpost at El-Khanga, initiating the first armed action of the war for liberation.

⁵ For a detailed analysis of Sahrawi traditions, see Francis de Chassey, *L'étrier, la houe et le livre, sociétés traditionnelles au Sahara et au Sahel Occidental* (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1977). Also see Beslay.

⁶ Mohamed Sidi Brahim Bassir (Bassiri) founded the movement for the liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro in 1968 after returning to the Spanish Sahara, via Morocco, following completion of studies in the Middle East, Egypt, and Syria. The Polisario Front commemorates yearly the June 17, 1970, demonstration at Zemla; the Front claims Bassiri's movement as precursor to the Polisario Front. In June 1987, a daylong celebration in the Sahrawi refugee camps included exhibits of student work, a soccer match, and a four-hour program during which awards were given to various school groups by visiting dignitaries.

⁷ Miské discusses some of the earlier efforts to protest Spanish occupation and to decolonize the Sahara (124-30).

⁸ Sahrawis were involved in the liberation struggle in Mauritania prior to that nation's independence. There were several massacres at Zouerate. See *ibid.*, 134-38.

Shortly after this attack, Polisario Front leaders began clandestine schools for women and asked them to join the movement. Some of the women who joined were high school students in El Aiun, the Western Sahara's major city and capital. Others were from nomad camps, from Sahrawi exile settlements in Algeria, Morocco, or Mauritania, and from the other major towns of the Western Sahara.⁹ Many of the women's early activities in the Front were conventional: urging husbands to join, providing shelter for Sahrawi Popular Liberation Army (SPLA) members, fashioning goatskin canteens, making uniforms and saddles for the SPLA, and contributing jewelry and other resources (often livestock) to aid the struggle. As Front committees were expanded throughout the Western Sahara and in exile settlements of Sahrawis in other countries, women actively aided the organization and recruited members.¹⁰

The Constituent Congress of the Polisario Front was followed by the Second Congress, August 25–31, 1974, attended by both men and women. Leaders of the Polisario Political Bureau, a body of twenty-one (later twenty-seven) Sahrawis elected by the Congress to provide political direction, were aware of liberation movements in other parts of the world (as in Vietnam, Africa, and Latin America) that involved men and women equally. Even closer at hand was the Algerian revolution, during which women participated in the armed struggle in both cities and countryside.¹¹ This awareness, along with Sahrawi women's earlier participation in liberation struggles and their central role in tribal activities, probably provided the foundation for the establishment at the Second Congress of long-term Sahrawi goals that spoke directly to women's rights. These included: "To guarantee political and social rights to women and to open the way to women's development; to eliminate all causes of social degeneration; [and] to adopt a policy of free and obligatory education for

⁹ Since 1975 I have been studying the liberation struggle of the Sahrawis of Western Sahara. I learned of the conflict in 1975 at the end of a two-year Fulbright lectureship. I returned to Algeria in the summer of 1976 to research the conflict and to interview Algerian journalists who had been covering the war. (See Anne Lippert, "Emergence or Submergence of a Potential State: The Struggle in Western Sahara," *Africa Today* 24, no. 1 [January–March 1977]: 41–60.) I returned to Algeria and went to the refugee camps in the summers of 1977–79, the fall of 1981, and the summer of 1987. During those visits I lived in the refugee camps for twelve to fourteen days at a time and interviewed women about their roles in the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi state structures, the exodus from the Western Sahara, their organization of the camps, and the National Union of Sahrawi Women. I also interviewed a number of Sahrawi men: Polisario political leaders, former members of the Spanish Djemaa, members of the SPLA. This material on the early organization of women in the Polisario Front was obtained in 1977, 1978, 1981, and 1987.

¹⁰ Miské, esp. 154–66.

¹¹ See Anne Lippert, "Algerian Women's Access to Power: 1962–1985," in *Studies in Power and Class in Africa*, ed. Irving Leonard Markovitz (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), 209–32.

all parts of the society.”¹² In conversations with a number of longtime male Political Bureau leaders about the Sahrawi struggle, most tended to highlight the success of the “women’s revolution” as the most thorough accomplishment of the liberation struggle. The male founders of the Front apparently saw equality for women as a key strategy—along with abolishing slavery and erasing caste differences—for revolutionizing the population, transforming Sahrawi society, and guaranteeing the success of the liberation struggle and an independent state.¹³

Further organization of Sahrawi women in the struggle was accelerated when male Political Bureau leaders and women members of the Polisario Front convened the 1974 National Conference on Sahrawi Women, presided over by El Ouali Mustafa Sayed, the Front’s first secretary-general.¹⁴ Women were one of three main groups—the others were students and workers—targeted by the Front for recruitment. The mass organizations that resulted (the National Union of Sahrawi Women, the Sahrawi Union of Students, and the Sahrawi Union of Workers) and their small-cell organizational structures became the means for mobilizing the Sahrawi population into the Front; these units continue to serve as part of the framework of the Front today, although the Eighth National Popular Congress in 1991 anticipated changes in the framework once independence is achieved.¹⁵

¹² *Front Polisario: dix ans de lutte contre le colonialisme et l’expansionisme* (Condesur-Noireau: SADR Ministry of Information and Culture, May 1983), esp. 120–23.

¹³ During my visit to the camps in 1987, Ibrahim Brahim, then minister of information and former minister of foreign affairs, stressed that the education of women and their assumption of major responsibilities in the camps and in the Front were, perhaps, the greatest revolution in the liberation struggle and the greatest success. These ideas were echoed by other Sahrawis, men and women, in a variety of conversational settings. In the new Sahrawi constitution, adopted by the Eighth National Popular Congress (June 17–19, 1991), Art. 30 in the section on social and economic rights states: “The State works for the protection of all political, economic, social, and cultural rights of the Sahrawi woman and is attentive to guarantee her participation in the building of the society and the development of the country.” See Draft Document, *Constitution of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic* (adopted by the Eighth National Popular Congress of the Polisario Front at Bir Lahlou, June 19, 1991), 9.

¹⁴ *8 Marzo*, no. 1 (1985), esp. 6. Interview with Fatimatou Allali, first secretary-general of the NUSW, in September 1981.

¹⁵ Interviews conducted 1977–87 with Polisario leaders. The structure of the NUSW, like that of the two other organizations of the masses, is modeled after that of the Polisario Front. From its founding, the NUSW has been composed of an executive council made up of the secretary-general of the NUSW, the head of the NUSW Bureau of Foreign Relations, the first secretary charged with NUSW organization, a second secretary in charge of the NUSW Executive Bureau, the heads of the *wilayat* organizations (now four), the head of the NUSW Bureau of Social Relations, the head of formation, the secretary of the Bureau for Women in the Occupied Territory, the head of the Associations for Immigrant Sahrawi Women, and the NUSW head of Information and Culture. Fifty-three women, including the members of the Executive Bureau, form the national administration of the NUSW. From 1974 on, as noted earlier, Sahrawi women members of the NUSW were involved in a variety of organizational tasks for the NUSW

Established during the 1974 conference, the National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW) had as its founding purposes to "contribute to the national consciousness, to assist in the mobilization of efforts for independence, to work for the emancipation of women and to liberate the Sahrawi woman from the results of colonialism." Fatimatou Allali was secretary-general of the NUSW from 1974 until the election of Guejmoula Ebbi in 1985. As the head of a major group within the Polisario Front, Allali played an important role in organizing nonmilitary Front activities, including peaceful demonstrations in the Sahrawi towns. She coordinated the efforts of women in the Front and in the NUSW through her participation in the Political Bureau.¹⁶

The women's success at organizing was evident May 12–19, 1975, when the U.N. Visiting Mission came to the then Spanish Sahara to determine whether occupants of the territory wanted independence or a merger with Morocco or Mauritania. Women's groups prepared Polisario Front banners and flags, recruited women to come to the demonstrations, and organized special groups to petition the visiting mission in all the major towns throughout the territory: El Aiun, Daora, Bu Craa, Tifariti, Gueltet Zemmur, Mahbes, Smara, Dakhla, Ausserd, Tichla, Aargub, and La Guera. Many women who joined the Front through the NUSW did so against the wishes of their male relatives, who, remembering the failure of earlier resistance efforts, feared violent reprisals. Spanish authorities imprisoned many Front women between 1974 and 1976.¹⁷ Keltoum Mohamed Khayat, for example, who until recently served as the NUSW director of external affairs, was twice imprisoned by the Spanish.¹⁸ Following the invasion by Moroccan and Mauritanian

as an arm of the Polisario Front. The NUSW's role as an organization of the masses continues this work. Chief among the NUSW's current activities are associating with women's groups and nongovernmental groups throughout the world; organizing Sahrawi women in the camps, in the occupied territory, and abroad into the NUSW and, thus, the Polisario Front; and developing and implementing new goals for women in the areas of education, health, nutrition culture, and a newly independent Sahrawi state. Like the *daira* and national popular congresses, the NUSW has also established short-term and long-term goals for Sahrawi women encompassing everything from work parties (popular campaigns) in the camps to continuing to take part in international meetings like "Forum '85," the U.N. nongovernmental organizations' meeting July 15–19, 1985, in Nairobi, to working for a permanent consciousness-raising of Sahrawi women.

¹⁶ Anne Lippert, unpublished notes from visit to the camps and interviews with Keltoum Mohamed Khayat, Bouteta, and other women, June 8–22, 1977. See also 8 *Marzo*.

¹⁷ The actual number of women imprisoned for short or longer periods is not available. According to Sahrawi informants, Spanish authorities in February 1976 turned over the records of all Sahrawis imprisoned by Spanish authorities for independence movement activities to Moroccan authorities.

¹⁸ Anne Lippert, unpublished notes from 1977 visit to the camps. See also Anne Lippert, "The Sahrawi Refugees: Origins and Organization, 1975–1985," SPSC Occasional Paper no. 3 (Ada, Ohio, Saharan Peoples Support Committee, 1985).

forces, Sahrawi women and men active in resistance against the Spanish were imprisoned by Moroccan authorities.

As the invasion by Moroccan and Mauritanian forces began in November 1975—just prior to the transfer of administrative power by the Spanish in early 1976—some Sahrawi women who were members of the Front and the NUSW joined the Sahrawi Popular Liberation Army to help defend Sahrawi towns. Mueina Chejatu joined the SPLA regulars at the age of nineteen and guarded prisoners of the SPLA. She, like other young women who took up arms, helped evacuate and hide Sahrawis—mostly old men, women of all ages, and children—during the attacks by Moroccan bombers on Sahrawi desert settlements.¹⁹ One of the first “martyrs” of the recent war was Chaia Ahmed Sein, who died as a bomb exploded near her guard position at Oum Dreiga. And the NUSW memorialized Khouetta Hammad Hadda and her baby, who were killed as they led others to safety, in the title of the First Congress of the NUSW, March 23–24, 1985.²⁰

Sahrawi women combatants and NUSW militants took charge of people fleeing the major towns of the Western Sahara for refuge in the desert. They organized shelter, supplies, and protection for the refugees, who primarily were women and children. Surviving the attacks on these desert refuges, the women leaders then helped the refugees relocate to the safety of camps in Algeria.²¹

Governing structures of the Sahrawi state and the Polisario Front

Between the Constituent Congress in May 1973 and the Second Congress in August 1974, the Polisario Front established key structures: the three organizations of the masses; the Political Bureau of twenty-one members (later enlarged to twenty-seven members and then finally re-

¹⁹ Accounts were published in *El Moudjahid*, the French language daily in Algeria in 1975–76. I have also talked with Algerian friends who saw some of the exodus in television film on the nightly news in 1976 and who saw television footage of the conditions in the refugee camps in 1976–77. A 1977 interview with Mueina Chejatu provided some of the information. She was highly respected by Cheikh, the Sahrawi who served as a guide during my stay in the camps in 1977, who also corroborated her participation in these activities.

²⁰ The congress was called the “Congress of Khouetta Hammad Hadda and her baby.” Sahrawi informants have supplied this information. See also 8 *Marzo*.

²¹ In 1977 the Sahrawi women I interviewed found recounting this period very painful. Most of them had lost children, to starvation or thirst in the desert, to napalm attacks in the desert (there exists photographic documentation of this), or to disease and infection in the early days of the refugee camps in Algeria. Bouteta, an early member of the Front, managed to bring her children with her to the camps in Algeria. They died in a measles epidemic in 1976. Most of them had also left family members in the Western Sahara, some of whom were imprisoned, and many had lost spouses in the fighting.

duced to twenty-three), which included the head of the NUSW; and the military organization (SPLA).

Following the Front's 1976 proclamation of the Sahrawi state, the exodus of a large part of the population from the Western Sahara into refugee camps in western Algeria, and the Third National Popular Congress of the Polisario Front (August 26–31, 1976), leaders instituted new structures for the political life of the Front and for the administration of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and the refugee camps. They included the congresses (popularly elected representational meetings) of the base (i.e., the *daira*, or town); the popular councils (elected leadership) of the *daira*; the popular councils of the *wilaya* (region); the national popular congress; the Sahrawi National Council; and the Executive Committee/Command Council of the Revolution, the highest administrative body.²² These structures continue today, except for the Political Bureau, which was transformed by vote during the Eighth National Popular Congress into a fifty-three-member council of delegates.

The Executive Committee/Command Council has since its founding directed the liberation struggle and implemented policies as defined by the biennial national popular congress, an elected representational congress that sets long-term and short-term goals for the SADR. The *daira* congresses and *wilaya* congresses, also popularly elected by the peoples of those regions, set local and regional policies in conformity with the goals of the national popular congress. The Sahrawi National Council advised the Political Bureau on policy issues and practical measures.

In preparation for the Third National Popular Congress, for the first time delegates were elected from *friq* (tent groupings in the refugee camps) to the popular congress of the base (*daira*), which then elected delegates to the national popular congress.²³ In addition, until the Moroccan army sealed off much of occupied Western Sahara with sand walls, mine fields, and radar fields, congressional delegates were elected from within the Western Sahara itself. In recent congresses, including the Eighth National Popular Congress in mid-1991, representatives from the occupied territory have crossed the mined sand walls of the occupied territory and taken part in the deliberations. Members of the military have also elected congressional delegates. Since women make up the largest part of the adult population of the refugee camps, the popular base congresses have consistently been 90 percent female. Thus delega-

²² Barbier (n. 1 above), esp. 203–13.

²³ See, e.g., Tony Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (London: Scarecrow, 1982). Hodges provides excellent documentation. The congresses of the base also elected the members of the popular councils of the *dairat*, who administered the *daira* refugee camps. Members of the popular councils of the *dairat* are also members of the popular councils of the *wilayat*, which, in turn, administer the broader grouping of *wilaya* refugee camps.

tions to the national congresses from the base congresses have involved significant numbers of women.

In addition to electing delegates to the national popular congress, the congress of the base determines short-term and long-term goals for the *daira* and those to be brought for discussion to the national popular congresses. This essentially democratic fashion of arriving at Polisario political—and later, military—goals evolved so that by the Fourth National Popular Congress, September 25–28, 1978, the national popular congress became the highest political governing body of the state. At the Eighth National Popular Congress, held at the School of October 12 (a national school in the refugee camps) June 17–19, 1991, a new constitution for an independent SADR was developed by the delegates. The document speaks to the rights of all citizens (not defined by sex) and reflects the experience of the Sahrawis' sixteen years of combat and exile in the desert of Western Sahara and southwestern Algeria. Because of efforts by the Executive Committee dating from 1985 to control the direction of the military struggle and the political orientation of the people, a bill of rights was incorporated into the new constitution, ensuring personal liberty and privacy and forbidding torture and also imprisonment without charges or trial. Specific sections on human rights include mention of old people, mothers, wounded people, and victims of the war for liberation and their fathers, mothers, minor children, and widows. The document establishes citizens' rights to education, health, housing, privacy, and due process. It also guarantees that "the state will aim to defend the political, economic, and social rights of Sahrawi women and will guarantee their participation in the improvement of society and in the development of the country."²⁴ All of these areas of concern have been addressed by the local, regional, and national popular congresses throughout the sixteen-year struggle.

The democratic decision making may stem in part from the Sahrawi *djemaa*, the traditional assembly of tribal notables, which determined tribal policy.²⁵ Although women traditionally had played a role in decision making in the tribe and the family, women had not been members of the *djemaa* or of the *ait arbein*, the Council of Forty, established by the tribe for military activities. In Polisario Front and Sahrawi state structures, unlike traditional Sahrawi tribal structures, women are fully inte-

²⁴ Unpublished draft of the constitution (n. 13 above) provided to me via fax by the Polisario representative at the United Nations, Madjid Abdouallah, July 26, 1991.

²⁵ As Hodges notes, "the *ait arbain* (assembly of 40) was set up in time of war or to organize a *ghazzi* (raid)" (*Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 28). The peaceful assembly was the *djemaa*. Both traditional structures support the idea of traditional democratic-representative group decision making existing with the Sahrawis. See also Zein Saad, *Les chemins sahraouis de l'espérance* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987), 28–42.

grated into—and in some cases, dominate—local and national policy-making.

Many of the policy changes enacted by the national congresses and in the *dairat* and *wilayat* have been directly shaped by Sahrawi women, who make up 90 percent of the congresses of the base, 70–80 percent of the popular council of each *daira*, 45–70 percent of the popular council of each *wilaya*, and over 50 percent of each national popular congress.²⁶ As each national congress has met, changes have occurred in political direction, in military strategies, and in the organizational patterns and structures of the refugee camps and of the state. Delegates at the Fourth National Popular Congress in September 1978 decided that the popular congresses of the base would elect their own presidents, who would become, by virtue of office, members of the popular council of the *wilaya* and of the national Political Bureau.²⁷ Some significant changes affecting women specifically have included the institution of military training for all women (decided at the Third National Popular Congress) so that the refugee camps might be protected, the establishment of the School of February 27 for the schooling of older Sahrawi women (Third National Popular Congress), approval for the participation of women with the *cadi* (judge) on a judicial committee to settle family differences (Fourth National Popular Congress), and approval for women's participation in supporting services in a modernized war structure (Fifth National Popular Congress).²⁸

Until the adoption of the new constitution by the Eighth National Popular Congress, the national congress selected all members of the Political Bureau except members by function (the three secretaries-general of the organizations of the masses), and selected the *walis*, the governors of the four *wilayat* (who also became members of the Political Bureau). By 1987, of the twenty-seven members of the Political Bureau, three were women: the elected head of the NUSW, the woman *wali* of the *wilaya* of Smara, and the former head of the NUSW—two of whom were chosen by the national popular congress and one, elected by members of the NUSW. The Political Bureau selected the seven-member Executive Committee/Command Council of the Revolution, which in turn selected the president of the SADR, who is as well the secretary-general of the Polisario Front. In addition, the twenty-seven members of the Political Bureau and

²⁶ These figures were provided by Sahrawis in 1987. They were verified through discussions with a variety of members of popular councils. Since 1977 I have interviewed over twenty popular council groups of different *dairat*.

²⁷ Hodges, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, 287.

²⁸ See *Front Polisario* (n. 12 above), 115–65. See also *Se Congrès du Front Polisario, 12–16 octobre 1982* (Paris: Association des Amis de la République Arabe Saharaouie Démocratique, 1983); and *Sixth Congress of the Polisario Front, December 7–10, 1985* (New York: SADR Mission to the United Nations and North America, 1986).

the twenty-six *daira* presidents made up the Sahrawi National Council, a representative body that, under the Executive Committee/Command Council, implemented policies determined by the national popular congresses. Under the new constitution, the Sahrawi National Council—now composed of seventy-two members elected at the Eighth National Popular Congress in June 1991—continues to exercise its consultation and policy implementation functions until independence and the election of the first Sahrawi parliament. The Sahrawi National Council includes women, although none of them currently heads any of the council's "national" commissions.²⁹ Several women were among those elected to the current council.³⁰

Over the course of the Sahrawi struggle for independence, power of the popular congresses of the base and the national popular congresses continued to grow, particularly as they became involved in military direction. National congresses since 1982 (Fifth National Popular Congress) have determined Sahrawi policy for the armed struggle. As delegates in the national assemblies—and particularly through their majority in the yearly popular congresses of the base—Sahrawi women have a direct impact on political and military policy.

Women's maintenance of camps and resources in the war for independence

The small-cell organization developed for activities in the Polisario Front and in the National Union of Sahrawi Women was also used in the Sahrawi refugee camps established to save the civilian population. The camps were organized in the region around Tindouf in Algeria by workers of the Sahrawi Red Crescent (the Red Cross in Moslem nations), Polisario leaders, and a group of women trained through their participation in the Front. In early 1976 the camps reflected much of the confusion and trauma associated with a population fleeing for its life. Many of the inhabitants had seen family members killed before their eyes; others had been wounded or had seen relatives wounded.³¹ The region to which they had

²⁹ See *SPSC Letter* (Ada, Ohio) 11, nos. 2–3 (October 1990–June 1991): 1–8. See also *Constitution of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic* (n. 13 above). I use "national" advisedly because the United Nations has not officially recognized the Sahrawi nation.

³⁰ The actual number of women elected is known only to a few Sahrawis because of security reasons and fear of reprisals against Sahrawis in the occupied territory, who hold twenty seats. Some of those holding these seats are said to be women.

³¹ Tami Hultman, an editor for *Africa News* and the first American journalist to cover the camps and Sahrawi resistance, was in the refugee camps in 1976 and reported on the flight from the Western Sahara and the early conditions of the camps in an article she did ("A Nation of Refugees: Western Sahara," *Response* 9, no. 3 [March 1977]: 4–7, 42), which substantiates the brutality of the invasion and the bombing of refugee

fled, the *hammada* (flat, rocky plain) of Algeria, was inhospitable. In 1976 water had to be trucked in for most of the refugees, as there were only one or two wells. In the early days there was not enough food and there was no medicine to care for the ill. The refugees, especially the children, had been traumatized by homelessness, hunger, thirst, and air attacks before their arrival in Algeria.³²

Since most of the men were fighting, the women, following Sahrawi tradition, maintained the camps. Many of the Sahrawi women refugees had not been nomads but had lived in town and were completely unprepared for camp life in the desert. Even for the women nomads, the needs of a population settled permanently in refugee camps (some 50,000 in 1976; 75,000 in 1978; and some 165,000 in 1990) were very different from traditional nomadic camps of smaller numbers and itinerant custom. The most pressing needs were to protect the camps from enemy attack and to provide the population with food, shelter, and clothing. Camp organizers also needed to train the women refugees for the new tasks they had to assume in health and sanitation, education, and child care and had to bring about major changes in living patterns in the population (inoculations for children, sanitary procedures required for large groups of people living together, dietary changes because herds were decimated and there was no access to the Atlantic Ocean for fish, etc.). An essentially illiterate group of women (in 1975 Sahrawi women's illiteracy was estimated to be between 98 percent and 99 percent) took on these activities.

As awareness grew abroad of the plight of the refugees, the Red Crescent from Algeria and other international humanitarian groups with offices in Algeria or in Europe made some supplies available to the camps. Coordination of relief activities was undertaken by the Sahrawi Red Crescent. Front and NUSW leaders, mostly women, erected tents, distributed food and clothing, and organized visits by doctors and other medical personnel.

The tents were grouped into *friq* and made part of larger units, the *daira* and *wilaya*. To ensure that no one was overlooked, each *friq* was divided into groups of eleven or twelve persons, who selected a leader. Names of familiar towns and regions in the Western Sahara were given to the *dairat* and *wilayat*. At the start three *wilayat* bore the names of major towns in the Western Sahara: El Aiun, Smara, and Dakhla; later Auserd was appropriated as well.

settlements. European humanitarian groups used pictures of the wounded and brutalized Sahrawis in a booklet entitled, *Un peuple accuse* (Paris: SADR Ministry of Information and Culture, 1977).

³² Lippert, *The Sahrawi Refugees* (n. 18 above), and "Emergence or Submergence of a Potential State" (n. 9 above).

To run the camps, Front and NUSW leaders established committees on literacy and children's education, health, sanitation, crafts, supplies, and arts. All healthy members of the camps joined a committee. Most members and heads of committees were (and are) women. (As the numbers in the camps increased and conditions changed, the committee structure was refined. Today there are five committees: preschool education, health, supplies, production, and justice.) Some women were selected to serve as the presidents of their *dairat* and as heads of committees of the *dairat* and *wilayat*. As Sahrawi leaders from the popular councils of the *dairat* and *wilayat* (under the direction of the Sahrawi Red Crescent) began to provide training in nutrition, health care, and sanitation, they placed particular importance on prenatal and postnatal care programs, necessary if the Sahrawi people were to survive.

By 1977 a number of young Sahrawi women had been sent for brief nurses' training programs in Algeria and other countries and had returned to staff hospitals and clinics being constructed through women's "popular campaigns," in which women built the dugout dispensaries and made bricks for hospitals and health centers. Women who completed the training returned to the camps as nurses. A small number of women were sent to Cuba, Nicaragua, Algeria, and Spain for training in other health professions. By 1987 there was a Sahrawi woman gynecologist and a woman dentist. By 1989 Sahrawi women served as nurses, doctors, practical nurses, technicians, cooks, and cleaning personnel in the health structures within the camps. They attended health care workshops in the camps led by Sahrawi doctors as part of an ongoing staff development program, and began to teach nutrition and hygiene to women through the health committees. Today, every member of every tent is visited daily so health care problems do not escalate. Great groups of women using small push carts clean the camp areas of refuse. Areas are set aside for animals, and toilet areas are designated. All young children are inoculated. Children, pregnant women, and nursing mothers are provided with food supplements. In short, an essentially illiterate group of women, unaccustomed to modern health and sanitation methods and practices, has totally changed its life-style and has trained itself on all levels of health service.

The education of the Sahrawi woman always was a goal of the Polisario Front and of the NUSW. Only about six Sahrawi women in the Western Sahara had any secondary-school education prior to the conflict and most of these had not completed high school. Most Sahrawi women only spoke the Sahrawi dialect Hassania and could not read or write Arabic or a European language. In the refugee camps, the six women who had attended high school were sent for further education abroad, and the several dozen women who had attended elementary school were sent to

high school. Literacy campaigns began immediately for the adult female population of the camps; schools were set up in tents. Mothers brought their children along as they learned to read and write Arabic. Preschools and elementary schools were established in the *dairat* and boarding high schools for girls and boys were established in the *wilayat*. At first most of the teachers were young boys. As women completed their schooling (in the camps, abroad, or both) they replaced the male teachers. By 1982 those few women students who had been sent to Algeria, England, Panama, Spain, and various Latin American countries for extended schooling had returned. In 1988 over 64 percent of the teaching staff in the *dairat* and *wilayat* were women; those percentages have continued to increase.

The literacy campaigns have succeeded to such an extent that in a visit to the camps in summer 1987, I found that literacy campaign schools were all at level 2 (intermediate) or level 3 (advanced). The School of February 27, established in 1977, has been a major success.³³ Although not all women have been able to attend the school, over fourteen classes (more than six hundred students) have completed the yearlong program of the school and many women have attended short-term courses. Here again, at the outset many of the teachers were men. By 1981 it was largely a female staff. The school's curriculum has included both technical and administrative training. Women have been trained as drivers, typists, and radio operators and have become hospital and school administrators, major protocol officers for the Ministry of Information, journalists, writers, and radio announcers.

When I have asked Sahrawi women over the years where they have received their education, even some of the many women who have now had formal education or internships outside the camps have responded like Fatimatou Allali in 1982: "The Polisario Front." Khadidja Hamdi told me in 1987: "The struggle has been the school." To comprehend what these women mean, it is useful to look at two women whose total education has been with the Front.

Khadidja Hamdi, the NUSW officer in charge of NUSW administration and professor of Arabic at the School of February 27, has undergone formal education while active in the struggle. She left Smara in the former Spanish Sahara at the end of 1975 when she was seventeen. By early 1976 she had escaped from the Western Sahara and had arrived in the camps around Tindouf. I first met her in 1978 when she was preparing her "licence" (baccalaureate degree) in Arabic at the University of Oran in Algeria. After completing her university degree, she returned to the

³³ The name of the school is particularly significant for understanding the commitment of the Polisario Front to the goal of full participation by women in the building of a newly independent Sahrawi state. The school for adult women has as its name the date of the Sahrawi declaration of an independent state.

camps where she worked as a journalist in the Ministry of Information and was a broadcaster on the Sahrawi radio station. Next she was assigned to teach at the School of February 27. In 1988 she replaced Guejmoula Ebbi as secretary-general of the NUSW during Ebbi's three-month maternity leave. At thirty-two, Hamdi had held important professional posts, each providing her with additional skills. Married and the mother of three children, her development, according to her own account, is a direct result of her participation in the Front and in the liberation struggle.

Senia Ahmed, formerly the *wali* of Smara and recently elected head of the NUSW, joined the Front at her mother's encouragement in April 1975 and participated in the demonstrations of May 1975 at the time of the U.N. Visiting Mission. In the Front she collected funds for the work of the movement. Having had no formal education in the Spanish Sahara, she began her education in the refugee camps, first attending literacy classes and then a fifty-day boarding school program, and finally enrolling in the first yearlong course at the School of February 27 in 1978. Among the responsibilities she held in the camp prior to attending the school were distributing supplies (Smara), serving as a political orientation leader (Central Group), and serving as director of political orientation (Dakhla). After graduating from the School of February 27, she worked in its administrative offices, where I first met her. She was elected to the Political Bureau in 1982 at the Fifth National Popular Congress, *wali* of Smara in 1985 at the Sixth National Popular Congress, and head of the NUSW at its last congress in 1990. Ahmed is also married and has three children.³⁴

When Sahrawi women state that the Polisario Front has educated them, they mean it literally. The Front began clandestine schools for women just after its founding in 1973. Schooling for women has continued to be a priority over the years because the liberation/education of the Sahrawi women has been a key Polisario strategy to achieve societal cohesion among the several tribal groups and across all age groups.³⁵

³⁴ Most of this material was obtained through interviews. See also Ghania Hammadou, "Sinia et ses soeurs," *Révolution Africaine*, no. 1254 (March 11, 1988), 12-13.

³⁵ A variety of Front/SADR documents supports the contention that involvement of women as equal partners in a newly independent state has been Polisario policy since 1973. Long-term and short-term goals of the eight national congresses, the constitution of the SADR, and long-term and short-term goals of the congresses of the base and the organizations of the masses reflect this policy. Documents are available in SADR publications cited and in Hodges's and Barbier's books. The nonaligned stance of the Front/SADR comes from the constitution of the SADR. As one leader said in 1987, "We don't plan to lose our liberty while fighting for it." This same phrase has been used by Sahrawi women to mean women's rights and participation as equal partners in an independent state. Many other women in liberation struggles, including Algerian women, have lost ground following independence. Major differences between Sahrawi women and Al-

Conclusion

Women's participation in the Sahrawi liberation struggle is rooted in both written and oral traditions. Their role has expanded in the current struggle, as leaders of the Polisario Front—in an effort to erase the effects of Spanish colonialism on urban Sahrawis and to enlarge the roles of Sahrawi nomadic women—have given women access to education and on-the-job administrative and skill training. This, along with experience in the Front and in the NUSW during the sixteen years of the struggle, has consequently enabled Sahrawi women to participate more effectively in national affairs. Although there is still no woman minister, no woman served on the former executive committee of the Front, and no woman yet serves as a commission head, women do serve now in all other levels of management and have full responsibility for the organization of the NUSW and its internal and external activities. The process of involving Sahrawi women in the struggle has been evolutionary but has had revolutionary implications for them and for the entire Sahrawi population.

*Department of Foreign Languages
Ohio Northern University*

gerian women are the cohesion of Sahrawi society through the struggle, residency of a large part of the population in refugee camps, strong traditions of egalitarian participation, integration of Sahrawi women at most levels of management in the state and party, and education of a broad segment of the Sahrawi female population.