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To cite this article: Sonia Rossetti (2012) Saharawi women and their voices as political representatives abroad, The Journal of North African Studies, 17:2, 337-353, DOI: [10.1080/13629387.2011.627772](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2011.627772)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2011.627772>



Published online: 21 Feb 2012.



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# Saharawi women and their voices as political representatives abroad

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The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on *Women, Peace and Security*, invites all members States to introduce gender perspective in framing the re-building of post-conflict nations. The Resolution, stresses the importance to increase women's participation in all aspects of conflict prevention and peace keeping processes. This article looks at gender mainstreaming practices in political representation abroad introduced by the government-in-exile of the self-proclaimed Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Since Spain withdrew its colonial power from the Western Sahara's territory, and Morocco began its occupation, Saharawi men and women have been recruited by the liberation movement Polisario, as foreign representatives abroad. The National Union of Saharawi Women and the women's involvement in the camps' administration have been regarded by scholars and international observers as a distinctive feature of the SADR. In this paper, an ethnographical approach is used to look at Saharawi political representatives in Italy and Australia to examine whether a balanced gender representation in foreign representation can enhance interaction with international supporters. This study shows that women's participation in foreign representative's roles, especially in post-conflict scenarios, can improve third parties understanding of societal, cultural and religious differences of the country represented abroad. Hence, countries coming from post-conflict turmoil could benefit of greater international support if the participation of women could help overcome societal differences.

**Keywords:** Western Sahara; gender mainstreaming; women; political representatives; diplomacy

## Introduction

Saharawi women's political participation in the ruling of the Saharawi refugee camps has been studied since the very early days of exile. In 1974, during the National Conference of Saharawi Women held by the Polisario's first Secretary General, El Ouali Mustafa Sayed, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) established the first women's body: the National Union of Saharawi Women (NUSW). This organisation, alongside students and workers' unions, was created to make women more visible, both militarily and politically, within the Polisario. Today the union's key task is the promotion of 'the role of women, their training, the

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development of their efforts and their participation in the struggle for national liberation' (Frente Polisario 2002, p. 48).

The conflict with Morocco has certainly reinforced the role of women in key administrative and leading positions, especially within the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria, but even in Saharawi nomadic life women held positions in the *ait arbeen* meetings, the highest political and social institution of the old tribal society (Zeina Blogspot 2007; see also Abderahman 2008; Zunes and Mundy 2010, p. 133).

Due to this high female representational base, many local and national policies have been influenced by the presence of women; for instance, they organised military training for women, established a women's boarding school, and approved the participation of women as *cadi* (judge) on judicial committee to settle family differences (Lippert 1992, p. 645).<sup>1</sup> International supporters who every year visit the refugee camps from all over the world are impressed by the highly representational base of women in administrative roles. Jack F. (pseudonym) from Australia, after a first visit to the camps in 2006, noticed the centrality of women's role in the community:

I formed the impression that there were significant roles being played by women not only, you know, through formal election and that, but also in the day to day. In the camps themselves, the women were very central, and in education, in the medical services that were available, in the communication services that were been developed. Their role there struck me as at least as significant as women in our own country running schools, hospitals and organizations in our own country. But of course they are not being paid wages for any of this, and so you needed people who had a lot of personal strength and personal resources to do that. (Jack 2008)

In this paper, I focus on the broader role of women as Saharawi political representatives abroad for the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. The aim is to look at gendered participation in foreign representation as a way to enhance international action for a peaceful solution in the Western Sahara struggle for independence. This study suggests that an equal representation of male and female political representatives abroad can increasingly improve internal state-building and foreign relationships between the post-conflict state and its international partners. In a time when gender studies are used to guide international policies (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011), it is important to look at all aspects of gender participation, especially in high political roles.

After a brief background on the political role of Saharawi women in the refugee camps of Algeria, I will explore Saharawi culture and traditions to seek reasons behind the participation of Saharawi women in politics. Subsequently, I will give evidence of positive interaction between male and female Saharawi representatives abroad and local supporters from Italy and Australia. Lastly, I will look at the current situation and future prospects of the role of Saharawi women as SADR's foreign representatives abroad. The present analysis is based on in-depth interviews conducted in Italy and Australia in 2008 with Saharawi foreign representatives abroad and associations' representatives (Rossetti 2011). Names have been changed with culturally appropriate pseudonyms in *italic*, in order to maintain anonymity.

### **The right for self-determination**

Saharawi refugees have lived in the Sahara desert, near the Algerian city of Tindouf, since 1976, when Morocco occupied their territory before they could be freed from colonisation. Just months before Spain was ready to leave Western Sahara, King Hassan II moved into the territory and began to fight against the Saharawi liberation front, Polisario. In 1991, under the recommendation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations, Hassan II and

Mohamed Abdelaziz, president of the self-proclaimed Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, signed a cease-fire. The settlement plan provided a transitional period in which the UN would have had to organise and conduct a referendum to decide on the independence of Western Sahara from Morocco. After 20 years of political impasse little has changed; no referendum has yet been organised and the two parties have not agreed on any plan for independence, autonomy or resettlement. Since the ceasefire the refugee population in the Sahara camps has lived in hope for a diplomatic solution that could give them the right to cast their vote to live independently in Western Sahara.

### Life as refugees

Saharawi refugee camps cannot be considered self-supporting settlements because of their high reliance on international aid:

The Western Sahara conflict is still treated as an “emergency” situation because a solution has not been found. This designation means that UNHCR is limited in the activities it can carry out in the camps, especially long-term development projects. (Zunes and Mundy 2010, pp. 128–129)

Despite this condition, the Sahara desert represents for Saharawi people an ideological space that could be referred to as a cultural ‘revolution’ (or Saharawi Perestroika in Shelley 2004, p. 179). Pablo San Martín, for instance, suggests that the Saharawi desert ‘provided the (temporal) and spatial fix of where to develop a social revolution and build a new state, based on the new revolutionary principles of the Saharawi nationalism’ (2005, p. 569). In 1991, after signing a ceasefire with Morocco, the normalisation of life in the refugee camps contributed and strengthened the building of a Saharawi political and administrative structure. Symbols such as national currency,<sup>2</sup> the developing of some form of economic activity, and the presence of official buildings (schools, medical dispensaries, councils, food distribution centres, and a national war museum) became essential in developing a new Saharawi national identity (San Martín 2005) and a concept of citizenship.

The UNHCR and WFP estimated that in early 2000 there were approximately 165,000 people living in the desert, but according to Díez, the total Saharawi population dispersed between Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania<sup>3</sup> and third countries is around 265,000 people (2007, p. 8). The refugee camps’ structure has been more or less the same during the 35 years of exile. Spread over an area of more than 200 kilometres in the *hammada* desert there are four major camps named after the cities left behind in Western Sahara. Four are the *wilayas* (provinces): *el ayoun* (the capital city), *smara*, *dakhla* and *aousar*; each of whom is divided into six or seven municipalities called *daira*, then divided into several districts called *hays* (neighbourhoods, or *barrios* in Spanish) (Frente Polisario 1999, Art. 16). Spread between the four major camps there are smaller satellite camps such as the *27th of February*, a women’s boarding school. Anne Lippert noted that in 1987 Saharawi women represented between 70% and 80% of the *daira*’s<sup>4</sup> Popular Councils, 45% to 70% of the *wilaya*’s Popular Councils, and over 50% in the National Popular Congress (1992, p. 645). In 2008, Saharawi women represented 35% of the SADR government (Sahara Press Service 2008a), as today’s first 20 countries in the world such as Uganda (34,90%), Tanzania (36%) and Spain (36,60%) (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2011).

Constitutionally, Saharawi women hold the right to vote and be represented in official roles. They are responsible for dealing with international donors and in charge of most vital sectors of refugee life such as water, education, health, agriculture, computers, sewing and solar energy. This is the product of a successful gender mainstreaming campaign undertaken by Polisario and

the women themselves, even in the midst of a post-conflict/refugee scenario. Working for the liberation of their people is a mission for female Saharawi refugee activists and, as suggested by Zunes and Mundy: 'prefigures the social arrangements of an independent state' (2010, p. 134).

Article four of the SADR's constitution states that the Saharawi movement wishes to promote women's development: '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' (Frente Polisario 1999). To make this work in 1974 the NUSW was established. Its objective is now to deal with national and international concerns, and particularly looking at Saharawi women's development within the camps and to improve the situation of children, elderly and those with special needs (Frente Polisario 1999, Art. 38). It advocates for those suffering human rights abuses in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, and is involved in international organisations for women's rights and development. According to the constitution, the NUSW's Secretary General is elected by the Women's Congress and automatically becomes a member of the Polisario's National Secretariat (Mohammed 2008). The *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists* adopted in 2006 by the African Feminist Forum in Ghana, is what the Saharawi women's union stands for. The NUSW represents internationally Saharawi's women need

to craft new identities [...], identities as full citizens, free from patriarchal oppression, with rights to access, ownership and control over resources and our own bodies and utilizing positive aspects of our culture in liberating and nurturing ways. (African Feminist Forum 2009, p. 7)

### **A unique example of women's engagement**

As encountered in other post-colonial nations such as Algeria and Eritrea (Hale 2001), early in the conflict many young Saharawi women took up arms and served in the camps' militias receiving military training as radio operators, drivers, medics and light arms (Mundy 2007, p. 290). Furthermore, they guarded prisoners captured during war and took charge of people fleeing major towns of Western Sahara. While in Algeria *mujahidat* did not continue to fight publicly but: 'worked with orphans and mistreated war widows' (Turshen 2002), Saharawi women not only kept their right to vote and be represented in official roles, but also became responsible for dealing with donors and in charge of most vital sectors of refugee life such as water, education and health, agriculture, computers, sewing and solar energy.

In their approach to religion, Saharawi women follow examples from the *Qu'ran*: 'in order to encourage and religiously justify an active and important role for women in the public sphere' (Allan 2008). A recent study on social change in the Saharawi refugee camps gives examples of how Saharawi people do practice liberal forms of Islam together with traditional nomadic interpretations of 'harmonious' society:

They do not have many mosques and as a result they pray outside. In family situations it is possible that the men and women may pray together, which is unheard of in many Muslim societies [...] the mutual respect shown for both genders fosters a culture of equality for all and it reflects the freedoms and rights of Muslim women in Saharawi society. This mutual respect is firstly reflected in the choice that Saharawi women have in choosing their partners. Saharawi women have the freedom to marry men of their own choice and the freedom to divorce. (Armstrong 2008, p. 62)

The Bedouin traits of the original Saharawi tribes made the society strongly matriarchal: 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 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 (Lippert 1992, pp. 637–638).

Expressions of this unusual emancipation were especially noticed under the newly imposed Moroccan regime, this is partly because Saharawi and Moroccans come from different Islamic traditions. In 2004, the introduction of a progressive change in family law for Moroccan women created new frustration for Saharawi women living under Moroccan control. For decades Saharawi women had been free to embrace divorce and celebrate with rituals the going back to a single status. Naima Chikhaoui, anthropologist at the National Moroccan Institute of Archaeology, in an interview for the BBC said 'Divorce is not a problem for a Saharawi woman because she enjoys a very important social place. Men respect her not only for herself but for her family too' (Harter 2004). With the introduction of this new Moroccan family law, Saharawi women who want to divorce are now obliged to face court rather than simply obtain a letter of repudiation from an Islamic official. While Saharawi women preferred to arrange the divorce within the couple, Moroccan women's right became more regulated under the new system.

According to Ann Lippert, women's education and their engagement in major responsibilities in the refugees camps has been one of the Polisario's greatest success (1992, p. 640, note 13). In 2000, for instance, Morocco's literacy rate of young women aged 15 to 24 was only 60%, Egypt was just above 60%, and Algeria just above 80% (Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam 2003). In the Saharawi refugee camps children from two years of age can be sent to childcare, *tarbia* (Frente Polisario 2002, p. 44), while mothers work at community centres (*tuiza*), which serve the needs for elders, orphans, and the disabled. There are 40 vocational schools spread throughout the camps for training women in the field of education, management, computer techniques, solar energy, languages, weaving and tailoring, and agriculture. There are also 30 national institutes for men's vocational training as mechanics, electrical mechanics, joinery, plumbing and turnery, management and computer techniques (Frente Polisario 2002, p. 44, Tortajada 2004, p. 105):

Develop professional skills for community purposes and showing women's work as an instrument to break down patriarchal schemes which characterize Muslim communities at all social levels as well as within the marriage. (Sermujeres Website 2007, translation mine)

To obtain tertiary-level education, boys and girls are sent to universities in Cuba, Algeria and Libya, under scholarships offered to high-performing students. Despite the efficiency of the system, there are conflicting feelings with regard to these programs, particularly the one in Cuba, for the sense of alienation and disengagement young Saharawi graduates feel once back to the refugee camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009, 2010).

### **Together under a 'common struggle'**

Feminists of the Third World have introduced the concept of 'common struggle' (Mohanty 2003) forcing international scholars to look at inter-gender and intra-gender relations under the light of

race, regional origins and religion. Islamic feminists have used this concept to then challenge secular ideas of freedom, autonomy and women's agency (Mahmood 2005). We cannot properly address a discussion on gender relations and gender mainstreaming in a Muslim population like the Saharawi unless we focus to the multidimensional context where women, as subjects of agency, live and act. Social, traditional, cultural and religious traits must be considered as an integral part of gender relations analysis. Saharawi women have been actively involved in the Saharawi struggle for independence within their religious and traditional context, and through the NUSW they have attempted to demonstrate their agency. Saharawi people follow a traditional, moderate interpretation of Islam, the Sunnite Malekite doctrine, which tends to make religion a very personal issue:

This is a moderate form of Islam, free from any sectarianism or dogmatism. Owing to its tolerance, it encourages solidarity, fosters unity, disdains violence and hatred and combats arbitrariness and oppression. It has been the true unifying agent of the national. (United Nation International Human Rights Instrument 2001, point 7)

This individual approach to religion has favoured Saharawi women in their bottom-up process of transforming gender power relations. It has placed them in the position of being free to analyse, develop and voice their own needs and interests without having to follow pre-existing models. This has occurred despite the legal framework of the state being mediated by Islamic law and Saharawi Islamic tradition.

With regard to the participation of Saharawi women in the SADR's high political roles, it is important to bear in mind the specific social, religious and cultural context in which these women operate. Saharawi political representative in Australia, *Mohammed A.* points out:

[...] For many reasons, one it is there is misconception in the West that in a Muslim or Third World Country, the women rights are not satisfactory. For example that there are not, you know, opportunities, or abilities for women, that women can, you know, stay at home, don't have many rights or opportunities, which is not the case, it is the opposite, I think, in Western Sahara and the Saharawi refugee camps situation. Women they are very important to all. And there is a desire, by all the Saharawi to see women play even more active roles and to be in leadership, you know, to be in Parliament, to be in the National...in the diplomatic service. So, but I think, for Saharawi cause, a woman, you know, being representative or talking to a western audience, could have, maybe, more effect, or a better effect on that audience than a man. Because the women, you know, can be seen, you know, as a very important factor in the Saharawi status. (2008)

The Western Sahara Democratic Republic represents today a unique example of a moderate Islamic democracy, which escaped ethnic conflicts from tribal past, and promoted women's empowerment. A sense for this long-lasting achievement was well captured by *Emily F.*, Australian Western Sahara Association (AWSA) representative in Australia, who passionately said:

They [Saharawi women] have a much stronger sense of politics than Australian women; ... they are very much more politically involved than Australia women, they have a cause which is a common cause and therefore different. They are not pretty much distracted by consuming [...] They don't have to have their hair set every week, so, you know, they're much more focused on the basics of life which is survive or... And that's what they do. I think we can learn a lot from them, I'm sure [of] it. (Emily 2008)

The struggle for Western Sahara independence has spread over generations. Younger Saharawi women are today still involved in the Polisario independence movement. In October 2007, Senia Bachir Abderahman, former president of the Saharawi Women Union, was invited to speak at the UN Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonisation). In her blog she says:

As a representative of the Saharawi women, I try to talk about our struggle in the small scale with my friend at the lunch table and on the big scale when speaking before the UN Fourth Committee. In addition, I got the opportunity to give presentations both in Norway and now in the USA about the current situation of the conflict in general and women in particular. Moreover, it is – I believe – the new generation that would make a difference for this on-going struggle. (Zeina Blogspot 2007)

Unfortunately, there are few studies in the area of gender mainstreaming that look at the participation of women in high political roles keeping in mind the appropriate social, racial, cultural and religious bases that these people are comfortable with.

### **Saharawi representatives abroad**

In their recent book on Western Sahara, Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy pointed out that ‘the greatest pressure in support of East Timor’s right to self-determination came from nongovernmental actors’ (2010, p. 262). Even in the case of Western Sahara, the work done by transnational activists and supportive foreign governments began to pressure foreign governments and private companies not to sign illegal deals with Morocco, highlighting the unjust occupation of the Western Sahara’s territories.

The Polisario has worked since its constitution to establish effective bilateral relationship not only with African and European neighbouring countries, but also around the world. The SADR is at present recognised as the legitimate government of the Saharawi people by almost 50 countries<sup>5</sup> (ARSO 2009a). Data from the Saharawi Department of Foreign Affairs<sup>6</sup> show that in 2009 there were 32 official Saharawi political representatives in Europe (including Russia) and Spain itself had 21. There were 22 Saharawi political representatives in Africa, and seven more were cited as part of the Pan-African Parliament<sup>7</sup> established in March 2004 (Article 17 of The Constitutive Act of the African Union). Australia only has one representative, North America four, and South America 10. Saharawi embassies are established in 18 of these nations, with the recent addition of the SADR Embassy in East Timor (Sahara Press Service 2009).

Despite this great lobby for support some countries still do not see the benefit of a rightful solution for Western Sahara. The French and US government have always been opposing a referendum for independence for the fear that a solution to the conflict might bring instability to the region against their ally, the Moroccan monarchy. At the same time, the European Union (EU) has adopted a low profile over the question of Western Sahara’s self-determination process. According to many scholars, the EU’s political inaction was certainly influenced by the lack of effective foreign policy frameworks that could go beyond single member states’ interests (Benabdallah 2009, p. 418, Zunes and Mundy, 2010, p. 86). The real stand in support of a peaceful solution over Western Sahara was from those European representatives who since 1976 have been meeting every year at the European Conference of Coordination Support to the Sahrawian People (EUCOCO). This is a major international conference held every year in a different European city:

This Conference gathers representatives of the Committees and Associations, of local bodies and twin regions, the diverse NGO’s, trade unions, cooperatives, volunteer organizations and the diverse European parliamentary inter-groups... working for the just cause of the Sahrawian People’s freedom, and helping them to survive day by day in this tough wait which has already lasted for more than 30 years. The highest representatives of the Sahrawian Government will participate in this Conference, normally the president of the RASD [SADR] himself and several members of his Government, as well as representatives of the POLISARIO Front. Nowadays, the Conference reaches beyond the European borders, notably the wide participation of institutional and social repre-



sentatives from all the continents, especially the African representatives, and that is why we can refer to it as an International Conference, rather than an European one. (EUCOCO 2008)

The EUCOCO represents one of the most important gatherings for all those involved in the Western Sahara cause. Activists and governments representatives meet with stakeholders and discuss strategies and interventions that promote a peaceful solution of the conflict. The aim is certainly to place the Saharawi plight in the foreground of the current European political debate, but also to give Saharawi representatives a venue to share and compare political ideas with very influential activists, lawyers and politicians. *Luca G.*, a representative of a Saharawi support group in Italy, was present at the 33rd EUCOCO conference in Rome:

I got to meet with lots of people from different backgrounds, from Saharawi coming from the occupied territories, to other people coming from various parts of Italy and Europe, all with new stories. I took part in one of the EUCOCO meetings, the one on human rights, which is of particular concern for our association. I listened to the suggested new projects and what is intended for the meantime. I could confirm the relevance of international observers who would follow trials against Saharawi in the occupied territories, report back to us, and more importantly to witness what is always happening. It was very interesting to listen to Saharawi human rights activists' testimonies. (Luca 2008, Bologna, translation mine)

This European event is so significant that Saharawi supporters from outside Europe are also welcomed. Two representatives of the AWSA interviewed in this study participated at the 2005 EUCOCO's edition in Belgium:

[...] that gave us another level of understanding and that was the place where I got an even better appreciation of say, the health, and the food aid question and the adversity. It's very easy to understand that if 160,000 people live in the desert, they are going to be dependent on foreign aid but... that process is something that people don't understand that the World Food Program provides only for basics, but then if there is a political crisis somewhere else, it can affect the situation of the Saharawi. Now, I came to understand that better by going to the international conference and in the camps we did have quite a good discussion about that issue...and we learned more about the proportion of different kinds of food that were provided. (Emily 2008)

Despite the difficulty of managing passports and visas to travel in and out of the refugee camps, the participation of Saharawi women at these international gatherings is highly regarded:

[...] There was a very impressive woman who lived in Poitiers, somewhere like that, who is Saharawi, I think she is qualified as lawyer in France [...] what you see in the camps, the women playing major roles, you know, and in the government there, you don't see as much externally and I would think that a smart move would involve, more of the women, and particularly this one. (Jack 2008)

Every year, since 1976, Polisario's representatives, both men and women, have come from refugee camps and occupied territories to participate at these international conferences. The objective is to promote political participation of western partners in finding a peaceful solution for Western Sahara. Even if at times it was difficult to guarantee mainstreamed gender participation, the general presence of women at these events has enhanced discussions under all streams of interest. This is just an example of the capillary work done by Saharawi's political representatives abroad to build a substantial international social network.

### *Italy*

In 1978, *Hasan C.* was the first Saharawi political representative to arrive in Rome. He was recruited by the *Frente* Polisario to become a political foreign representative of Western Sahara when studying at the University in Rabat:

First I worked in Libya as a representative, for six months. From Libya I went, I was again appointed by the Saharawi Foreign Affair Ministry and by the Polisario International Relations Department, as a member of the Polisario delegation in Paris, France; this was in 1977. I stayed there for another eight months, working at the Saharawi's delegation headquarters. After that, I was appointed to Sweden, there again, for a very short period, but I also had some problems, a language problem, English, I wasn't very good in English, my mother tongue, apart for Arabic, was Spanish, but I also understood French. Subsequently, in 1978 I was appointed as Polisario's representative here in Italy. I worked in Italy for other three or four years. The difficulty for me was. . . I did not want to work abroad anymore, I requested to be transferred back to the camps. I went back to Western Sahara to do other jobs. [ . . . ] In 1998 I was called back again by the Saharawi Foreign Affair Ministry and appointed to Italy again. (Hasan 2008, translation mine)

In 1994, *Mariam B.* was the first woman to join *Hasan* and other Saharawi men at the *Rappresentanza* (Polisario's headquarter) in Rome. Recruited by Polisario while still studying in Cuba, *Mariam B.* was first sent to Italy, and subsequently moved to other locations in Europe:

[ . . . ] You see, even during University I was already part of young Saharawi's organizations, with those . . . university students in Cuba. I was involved then. I really loved being involved in political action, in the work done there at the Youth association. Something happened though; in 1991 the referendum came, and it came with a call to the youth to be involved, especially in the bureaucratic jobs of organizing the referendum. I ended up working for the Saharawi commission for the referendum, it was called COSAR, something like the Saharawi MINURSO; well, let's say, it had relations with MINURSO which was obviously organizing the referendum. The determination act. Some of us were involved with the population's census, others in translations, other in collecting. . . Well; we were a true commission which was working only on the referendum. I was working down there, at the refugee camps. Afterwards, in 1993, the referendum was not going ahead; there was this group of youth more or less prepared, let's say, to help increase awareness abroad about the Saharawi problem. I was sent here in Italy first in 1994, to help the representative that was already here [ . . . ]. [I stayed] In Italy till '99. Then I went to Switzerland, to help the representative there who was a woman [ . . . ] then I was appointed to work in Sweden, and then I came back to Italy again. (Mariam 2007, translation mine)

Since their arrival in Italy, all Polisario representatives have worked closely with the local community to build knowledge and support for their cause. As *Hasan C.* explains:

Obviously I had, here in Italy the Polisario, the Saharawi movement was already very active since the '70s. We had good relationship with the Italian parties, with the Parliament, and above all we have created a very large solidarity network with local entities, social groups, and there were. . . still there are today hundreds of associations of solidarity with the Saharawi people, and this obviously, this solidarity capital is also a moral help for who come to represent (the Saharawi cause). (Hasan 2008, translation mine)

Initially, the life of a representative was filled with frustrations; people did not know who Saharawi were, therefore it was hard for them to explain their role, mission, and the extent of their needs. Differences in language and culture took their toll, especially when the time spent in a country was never enough to settle:

Maybe in the past people were not ready to live in Western countries. There were limitations of language, the limited ability to learn about that place's culture. I think that that was one of the three most difficult factors for someone who is taken from a refugee camp and has to fill a very difficult role with very limited resources. [ . . . ] Almost all the Saharawi representatives know about the West and Western culture. They lived together, they have learnt a lot, and almost all of them speak various languages. They have also learnt, you know, to use their time better, you know, to manage priorities and so on. Something that at the beginning we did not have because we were coming from a completely different world; you were coming from a world entering into another where you had to learn everything, absolutely everything and lots of time was wasted in learning. Once it was learnt, it

was already time to change and move into another different culture, another place again, totally different. (Mariam 2007, translation mine)

The pioneering job of the first foreign representatives in lobbying, networking, and marketing their message, made Italy one of the foremost Saharawi's supporters in Europe, promoting political discussion, humanitarian aid, human rights watch, and solidarity convoys:

Solidarity today, and I am talking about Italy, is very vast, but the problem is always the resources, for the Saharawi, since they do not have control over their economy. (Mariam 2007, translation mine)

Italian NGOs, such as the *Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli, Africa '70, the Cooperazione per lo Sviluppo di Paesi Emergenti* and the Centro di Educazione Sanitaria e Tecnologie Appropriate Sanitarie (CESTAS), were the first organisations to realise projects in the refugee camps, and to liaise with Rome's *Rappresentaza*:

Here the job is primarily to lobby, to make people aware, to get contacts. [...] This is a very complicated job, very difficult, but it is also very appealing. In the refugee camps the job is, you know, there it is about surviving, because it is a desert. (Mariam 2007, translation mine)

The two worlds, Catholic and Islamic, could not have been further apart, but the bridge between them was the constant presence of Saharawi people in form of their representatives:

A solidarity network, with the Saharawi, which is spread out, this, is what helps the representative, have lots of support, lots of friendships, lots. . .with lots of political support, and also strength from all different social groups, of different political backgrounds. With regard to the Saharawi problem, here in Italy for example, it is almost unanimous. Solidarity with the Saharawi people it is not restricted to one political ally, or one political group; from Right to Left for the Saharawi. (Hasan 2008, translation mine)

In 2007, the Italian government discussed the possibility of granting: 'the Polisario Front's delegation in Italy the diplomatic *status*, as has been done in the past for other liberation's movements recognised by the UN as official mediators in a peace process' (Camera dei Deputati 2007). After 30 years of lobbying across all political parties, the Polisario finally obtained from the Italian lower house a motion in favour of the Saharawi political cause. This resolution was bipartisan (Communist parties – *PCRC* and *PRC*, *Lega Nord* – right wing, *Italia dei Valori* – liberals and *Alleanza Nazionale* – extreme right wing) and was celebrated as an: 'important element of foreign policy because it was sympathetic to numerous UN Resolutions, and because it asked for the recognition of a diplomatic status to those [Saharawi] representatives in Italy' (RaiNews24 - Stampa 2007, translation mine).

Today, the job of a Saharawi political representative in Italy is to liaise with many Italian associations created to support the Saharawi's right for independence, denounce Moroccan's human rights violations, and provide relief and material goods to the refugee population. According to the official Saharawi website ARSO.org, there are 13 official associations in Italy (ARSO 2009b) and the support to the Saharawi cause is so complex that the few Saharawi representatives based in Rome cannot satisfy all requests to participate and coordinate associations' activities. In order to reach everyone's need, a new form of representation has emerged within the Saharawi delegation in Italy, that of young Saharawi students. As it happened for some of the first Saharawi representatives, such as *Mariam* and *Hasan*, today's Polisario *Rappresentanza* is recruiting young Saharawi *in loco* to help them build their information campaign. *Labib E.* is a Saharawi medical student who has helped the Polisario's *Rappresentanza* since his arrival in Bologna in 2003:

Every day, for example when students, professors and doctors ask me where do I come from, well, I feel. . . I have to tell all of them my story, tell my peoples story, well it is then when I feel that in a certain way I am a political representative. (Labib 2008, translation mine)

While *Labib E.* seemed confident of his informal role as a representative, *Jamila D.*, who has lived with an Italian family since she was 10 years old, was at first resistant. In her particular case the interview took place at the *Rappresentanza's* headquarter in Rome, and one of the senior representatives was in the house at the time of the interview. When asked how she became a Saharawi political representative, *Jamila D.*'s first reaction was: 'what can I do? I cannot consider myself a political representative' (Jamila 2008, translation mine). Once I explained to her that in my view, she had already been indicated by the Polisario to be an informal political representative (a formal Polisario representative suggested her for the interview) she agreed to continue. Despite her uncertainty, *Jamila D.* showed confidence in explaining her role as a 'lecturer' for the Polisario:

Technically, I do conference presentations, organized by pro-Saharawi's associations, pro-Saharawi initiatives organized at a national level, and it is increasing. My role, then, is to spread the word about the cause. To inform those who do not know about Saharawi history, how did we get into this situation. [ . . . ] Lately, I talk more with the students, high school students. I am working on a project for the Roma Province; four hour conference for each institute, divided in two parts. Here we screen documentaries, photo exhibitions and we talk about the Saharawi cause. (Jamila 2008, translation mine)

In Italy, as in other parts of Europe, Saharawi students are commonly involved with the Polisario movement and invited to give presentations about the situation in Western Sahara when formal representatives cannot be present. Emma Iselmu, another Saharawi medical student, has lived in Bologna for several years and participated in a number of public meetings, such as the one organised by CESTAS (2003) (the role of women in the social-health sector in Africa and within the Mediterranean sea, translation mine) . In my view, the Polisario's strategy to employ Saharawi men and women, young but experienced, in the promotion of the Saharawi cause for independence, is a great example of gender mainstreaming put into practice by political representatives abroad. Younger Saharawi representatives such as Emma Iselmu, *Labib E.* and *Jamila D.* are not afraid to show their disappointment when they encounter ignorance from their audience with regard to the situation in Western Sahara, but all are grateful for the opportunity given to them to contribute in the education of Italians with regard to the suffering of their people:

[ . . . ] I felt some sort of rage, let's say, when I am there, talking about my cause that's unknown, no one knows who I am. A living people. Often the indifference, especially at political level, allows people to remain uninformed. Can you define this as a problem? I am not sure, to me it is, this situation makes me feel really uncomfortable because often I get asked "where do you come from?" "I am Saharawi" "and who are those Saharawi". Frequently I feel like saying that I am Algerian, full stop, but, I don't know, it also depends on the type of person in front of you. (Jamila 2008, translation mine)

All Saharawi representatives interviewed in Italy, both formal and informal, agreed that the work carried out by Italian associations in the past 10 years has helped shape today's Saharawi refugee camps' profile, and expressed satisfaction in the participation of Italians at any initiative organised by the Polisario to inform the public:

Projects that work well, like the women's agricultural cooperatives etc. Solidarity is now much more mature. Some strong ties have formed, even without the need for an intermediary, like us, you know.

[...] This is what is satisfying. When you go to the camps you see the results of many people's efforts throughout these years. (Mariam 2007)

This type of insight shows how foreign representatives abroad can not only work to influence national governments in foreign policy matters, but are also essential to guide grassroots associations and social-based associations in the right direction with regard to helping the refugees. This grassroots contact between the Saharawi people and the pro-Saharawi Italian social-based organisations, holds an appreciation of gender mainstreaming as an integral part of the work they perform. This inclusive approach to gender encompasses the Italian associations, the Saharawi representatives, and the projects themselves. The Saharawi cause for independence and their commitment to reach a peaceful resolution of conflict is both a product and result of this specific integration of gender mainstreaming, without being imposed by international organisations.

### *Australia*

The first and only Saharawi political representative in Australia arrived in late 1999. *Mohammed A.*, was sent by the Polisario from England to help an Australian lawyer and other followers to create an active group in Sydney to support Western Sahara independence from Morocco. As *Mohammed A.* explains, he was chosen by Polisario to travel to Australia because of his language skills, and his previous diplomatic experience:

[...] Because my ability to speak other languages I was chosen to play a role in the diplomatic service of the Polisario and Sahara Republic and that's why I have been involved in the work... in foreign countries. And the role here in Australia as Saharawi representative, is mainly to raise awareness about the Saharawi cause; to establish links and relations with the Australian government, the parliament, NGOs, trade unions, political parties, and work with the Media. (2008)

As previously recorded by Saharawi representatives in Italy, even *Mohammed A.* arrived in Australia after experiencing diplomatic roles in other countries:

[...] In India and Iran we have a fully established embassy, diplomatic status, and that is different from being a representative in a country where we don't have diplomatic status, for example in Australia. So that is a different way of work, different task to do, but the general and one objective is more or less the same which is to raise awareness about the issue and to try to obtain political support and moral support and also assistance for the refugees, aid and for example humanitarian aid. But, so for Saharawi representative it is different also from one place to the other. For example, in Italy and Spain the emphasis would be different. For example they will be more work towards "holidays in peace" the program for children, to bring children to those countries to spend time away from the camps and they will be working more towards getting humanitarian aid, assistance, like sending a convoy of cars with aid in them to the camps. But here in Australia, because its distance, and the lack of links with the area, Western Sahara is north Africa, cultural, political, economic links, the job or the past is different. (Mohammed 2008)

The very first group of supporters who welcomed *Mohammed A.* on his first arrival to Australia was no more than eight. In 2000, they became incorporated as AWSA, a non-profit association based in Sydney working to raise awareness and promote action for the Saharawi in the Australian community. The association has now an established branch in Melbourne and, in the past nine years, has organised numerous events and campaigns to become politically very significant.

*Mohammed A.* acknowledged that: 'Australians have, you know, known and contributed and got involved in this situation in East Timor, and that once they know that it's similar is not

difficult for them to relate to and get involved' (2008). These ties continue today. Just as Nelson Mandela in the 1990s showed great support for Gusmão and the East Timorese cause,<sup>8</sup> in 2009 Ramos-Horta came to Australia to support the Saharawi people (Ramos-Horta 22 July 2009). In 2003, under *Mohammed's* supervision, AWSA organised for a Saharawi female representative, Fatima Mahfoud, to tour Australia and New Zealand. It was the first time that a Saharawi woman was invited to talk in Australia about the Saharawi cause from a female perspective. This first encounter with an English-speaking, Saharawi woman, made a very strong impression on the AWSA's representatives interviewed in this study. *Emily F.* said that from: 'having Fatima staying with us, I got a much, much better understanding from her' (2008), and *Jack F.*, concordantly said he was amazed by her communication skills:

[...] her way of communicating [...] that was great strength of Fatima as well, she is an excellent communicator in English and is not just because she speaks good English, she knows how to put the argument, and to put the issue and draw you in, draw your interest in to them. And of course she speaks, obviously speaks Italian perfectly, probably she speaks some Swedish, she speaks some French and Spanish as well and maybe some Russian. (2008)

Looking at differences between the two Saharawi representatives, *Emily F.* suggested that *Mohammed's* role in Australia was more focused on the 'world's political stage', whereas the arrival of Fatima gave them a closer idea of the Saharawi plight in the camps and their life as refugees:

[...] having Fatima here, having Fatima staying with us, I got a much, much better understanding from her - as a woman and as, you know, a very special sort of woman - of the circumstances, because Fatima is much more versed in the day to day reality of life in the camps...and...was able to relate that to...to our situation here. (Emily 2008)

Five years later, AWSA invited Malainin Lakhali, Secretary General of the Union of Saharawi Journalists and Writers and human rights activist, to repeat Fatima's tour, focusing more on human rights and Moroccan abuses in the occupied territories of Western Sahara. Despite the physical distance from the refugee camps *Mohammed* mentioned that the Australian association was happy to do whatever they could to make a contribution for the Saharawi:

[...] I think there is also a trend in the Australian government to look into increase of trade and links with North Africa. There was an enquiry in parliament a couple of years ago, which I participated. Looking into the possibility of increasing links and trade with North West Africa and there was a delegation sent by the parliament to look into that. There are, you know, possibility of increasing trade links with North West Africa, between Australia and for example countries in that region including Western Sahara. (Mohammed 2008)

Certainly, AWSA's great achievements in the political arena could not have been possible without *Mohammed's* supervision: 'without him we wouldn't have had a focus' (Emily 2008). Concurrently, *Mohammed* was clear that his mandate was to:

[...] try to keep the Australian public in general informed of what is going on in Western Sahara, and seek assistance in terms of political pressure on Morocco to abide by the UN Resolution; to seek humanitarian assistance and to ask NGOs and the public NGO towards alleviating the suffering of the Saharawis in the occupied areas and to have a role in... Also put pressure in Morocco in terms of human rights abuse in the occupied areas. So the task is huge, the targets are big but nonetheless it has been very satisfying experience in Australia. (Mohammed 2008)

This task could not have been possible without the help of organisations such as AWSA, APHEDA (Union Aid Abroad – Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad)<sup>9</sup> and AustCare. But even in this case, the brief but effective participation of a female

Saharawi representative visiting Australia gave the local supporters a better understanding of the social and political situation in Western Sahara, and consequently pushed their need to know more about the Saharawi people. Inspired by Fatima, in 2004 a delegation of AWSA, along with other influential political women from Australia (such as Meredith Burgmann, former President of the NSW Legislative Council), flew to the refugee camps in Tindouf to get a first-hand experience of the Saharawi life:

Our visit was very structured. Every day we went out to look at things and every evening when we came in from driving all day we would have half an hour's break and then we would have meetings with significant Saharawi people; some of the women parliamentarians, some of the ministers in the Saharawi government in exile. [...] Going to the country, in the end, made the situation real. I found that although I was committed to it at an idealistic level, I didn't really understand what was about until I went there. I didn't appreciate the role of women as much and now I look up at articles and I understand the political structure. [Saharawi women] they were... elegant, eloquent and strong, and you didn't have a sense of them just being 'window dressing' you know, just there just because they were women. They were... extremely well informed. So that was one factor, the other was... the physical situation. Living in a country that is mostly desert, the physical reality of living in the camps, the physical reality of... of the country hadn't occurred to me much. (Emily 2008)

This trip meant a lot for those who participated, but also for those involved in AWSA. The shared experience in the Saharawi refugee camps helped them reinvigorate their action for a just solution in Western Sahara.

## Conclusions

The work done jointly by SADR's foreign representatives and local associations' representatives has often been crucial in revealing the true strength of Saharawi people behind stereotypes of being a Muslim, 'fragile' state. While the Western Sahara conflict has given Saharawi women a reason to formally engage in political and administrative roles within the Saharawi refugee camps, it also has prompted their participation in formal and informal international roles. In this paper I tried to highlight how the role of Saharawi political representatives abroad has changed since the early years of occupation, particularly thanks to the increased participation of women.

Saharawi women have greatly participated in the national struggle and the rebuilding process of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic as political representatives, formal and informal, and also as members of grassroots associations. Delegations of Saharawi women have attended numerous international fora such as EUCOCO's conferences, the European Union in 2008 (Mujeresaharawi Blogspot), and at the Ninth Congress of the Pan African Women's Organisation the National Union of Saharawi Women was elected as their UN's representatives (Sahara Press Service 2008b). The presence of women as official representatives of the SADR in political roles and as spokespersons has enhanced the profile of the Polisario and of the Saharawi culture in general.

In just over 10 years, with the help of *Mohammed A.*, the Australian Western Sahara Association has produced a massive information campaign to help Australian companies withdraw from economic agreements with Morocco with regard to the extraction of Western Sahara's natural resources. In Italy, the presence of an established *Rappresentanza* of Polisario's officials has helped politicians make statements of support for the Western Sahara self-determination process, and also create numerous NGOs that work for the relief of refugees in the Algerian camps. With the help of Saharawi foreign representatives abroad, local governors and social

activists went from total unawareness on Western Sahara, to create a complex social and political network in favour of a peaceful solution to the conflict.

The Polisario still has a firm interest in implementing practices of state-building and gender mainstreaming, but greater support is needed by international governments and supporters to close this chapter of unresolved colonialism. A larger contribution of women as political representatives abroad could help improve foreign relations.

## Acknowledgements

This paper was based upon fieldwork conducted in Italy and Australia and supported by the Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong (UOW), Australia. I thank all Saharawi political representatives and Western Saharan support associations' representatives who informed this study. An appreciation also goes to Rebecca Albury and Charles Hawksley and the staff at the UOW's School of History and Politics.

## Notes

1. For in-depth reading on the Saharawi political system, Es-Sweyih (1998).
2. The Saharawi people use the Algerian Dinars currency in the refugee camps. This physical currency is used in an exchange value which corresponds to the ancient Saharawi Dinar, officially called Saharawi Peseta. San Martin explains that the value of the Saharawi Peseta is based on the old Spanish Peseta which is estimated to be approximately 20 times less than the current San Martin, (2005). I was personally involved with the problem of buying Saharawi traditional goods in the camps when I was informed by Saharawi officials of the difference in value exchange.
3. According to Shelley there are 20,000 to 30,000 Saharawi in Mauritania (Shelley, 2004, 130).
4. Each of the four main camps, called wilaya, is divided into six or seven *daira's* (districts), which are further broken down in to four *hays* (neighbourhoods).
5. In 2006, there were up to 81 countries that recognise the SADR Point of View, no date. Paesi che riconoscono la R.A.S.D. See the Point of view website. An up-to-date un-official list was published on the Saharawi website arso.org in 2009.
6. Internal document delivered confidentially.
7. In 1984 SADR was recognised by most African countries, therefore invited to join the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), today Africa Union.
8. Mandela became a strong supporter of the East Timorese cause after he received a letter in 1994 from Gusmão. He wanted to congratulate him for the victory against apartheid. Mandela visited Xanana in prison in 1997 (Wise, 2004).
9. APHEDA was created in 1984 as the overseas aid agency of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA was established to contribute directly to countries and regions of the world where men and women workers are disadvantaged through poverty, a lack of workplace, denial of labour and human rights, civil conflict and war.

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