

Imagining Saharawi women: the question of gender in POLISARIO discourse

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When the Saharawis first fled their country – the former Spanish colony the Western Sahara - for the Hamada region of the Algerian desert in 1975, all able-bodied men were encouraged to depart to the frontline to struggle against the Moroccan and Mauritanian invasion. As a result, the refugee camps that gradually emerged in the Algerian desert were built, organised and administered almost exclusively by women. Indeed, women, their strong and vital role in Saharawi society, and the alleged gender equality that they enjoy, are a common focus in the revolutionary discourses and ideology of the Saharawi Popular Front for the Liberation of *Saguia el-Hamra* and *Rio de Oro* (POLISARIO). In this article I will explore such images of gender. First, I will focus on how Saharawi nationalists imagine the Saharawi nation and how gender is articulated within this, delineating the contours of POLISARIO ideology concerning gender and concepts of masculinity and femininity. My hypothesis is not only that assertions of gender equality are central to POLISARIO (emancipatory and revolutionary) discourse but also that they are central for specific reasons. Therefore, in the second part of the article, I will attempt to determine what internal and external functions and benefits these gender representations have for the POLISARIO. Finally, I will explore how Saharawi historical narratives are constructed to offer support and continuity to current images of gender.

Keywords: gender, Western Sahara, discourse analysis, conflict, POLISARIO.

Articulations of gender within POLISARIO nationalist discourses

...reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes: only in the mind of the party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the party holds to be truth, is truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the party (Orwell 1989, p.261).

On the 27 February 1976, shortly after the beginnings of the Saharawi exodus to the camps of Tindouf, the POLISARIO proclaimed the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Despite the impossibility of constructing a ‘normal state’ in their native territory due to its partial occupation,¹ the ideological vacuum in the camps provided a blank canvas, or ‘a social laboratory’ (García 2001, p. 240),² where the POLISARIO was able to create a new social order based upon the ideology of its founding members, and as such it began the process of nation-building. There is a general consensus in the social sciences about the constructed character of nations. The concept of imagined communities conceived by Benedict Anderson sees nations as invented entities distinguished from one another not by authenticity, but by the way in which they are imagined (1995 cited Wodak *et al.* 1999, p. 15). The ‘imagined

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community' is 'constructed and conveyed in discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture. National identity is therefore the product of discourse' (Anderson 1995 cited Wodak *et al.* 1999, p. 22). How do the Saharawi nationalists imagine the Saharawi nation?

Since its formation in 1973, POLISARIO discourse has been heavily influenced by the revolutionary vogue of the period. Indeed, founding members of the POLISARIO were followers of the Vietnamese, Palestinian and other African causes as well as of revolutionary thinkers such as Castro, Guevara, Nasser, and Mao Tse-tung (San Martín 2005, p. 569). They were particularly keen observers of the revolutions of Guinea Bissau and Algeria, in which the position of women changed as their participation in the armed struggle increased (García 2001, p. 135). The influence of the socialist and revolutionary ideas of the time was central in the early POLISARIO discourses and the articulation of their vision of society. As such, POLISARIO nationalist ideology was articulated in opposition to what they conceived to be 'Moroccan Nazism' (POLISARIO 1976g, p. 4),³ based on revolutionary, socialist discourses that emphasized the centrality of the role of the popular masses for social (revolutionary) change, the need of unity of the 'heroic people' (POLISARIO 1974, 1976g, p. 4),⁴ and the principle that collective interests should always precede those of the individual. It envisaged an egalitarian, communal society, in which slavery was abolished and the emancipation of women and their full participation in society was an aim (Diego Aguirre 1991, p. 348, POLISARIO 1999). Saharawi nationalist discourses launched a reading of the social that, following what Laclau and Mouffe have named 'logic of equivalence' attempted to divide the field of discursivity into two opposing and antagonist ideological blocks (Laclau and Mouffe 1987), which are able to deny each other (and therefore to constitute each other and delineate their mutual contours), while 'decontesting' and making equivalent a whole series of more particular discourses, conflicts and grievances.⁵ The discrimination of Saharawi employees in the Fosbucraá mines,⁶ the lack of access to education of Saharawi women,⁷ the impossibility of the younger generations of Saharawis of participating in the political process (blocked by the loyal tribal chiefs and notables), the racial discrimination of the slaves and *harratin* (former slaves), forced displacement and exile, etc., were all made equivalent and acquired their meaning as different expressions of a single oppression: the oppression of the Saharawi people by a colonialist foe, Spain in the first instance and Morocco and Mauritania later. The emancipation of women, therefore, became one more (and necessary) step in the process of national liberation.

According to the POLISARIO, the goal of the revolution was to 'transport the people from the world of oppression, slavery and colonialism, to the world of light, liberation and democracy' (POLISARIO 1976b, p. 2).⁸ This included the objective of eradicating tribalism, not only to unite the population but also, allegedly, to increase the level of gender equality in the light of the effect of its influence in the state-formation of nearby states, especially Morocco and Algeria. Here, the authority of the post-revolution nation states was linked to kin-groupings, which used Islamic family law to legitimise the extended male patriarchal power over women (Charrad 2001). Contrastingly, in the Sahara, the POLISARIO's efforts to eliminate tribalism, agnation and kinship as the central social cement unifying society, brought about a fall in the number of arranged marriages within the same extended family, which were common in the past in order to strengthen the wealth of the tribe (San Martín,

forthcoming). Similarly, whereas during the colonial period it was usual practice for girls as young as 10 to be married off, the POLISARIO, motivated by its 'revolutionary principles', recommended the prohibition of marriage before the age of 16, as well as marriage 'that is not based on mutual consent' (POLISARIO 1976f, p.6).⁹ It also opposed other aspects of Islamic family law manifested in neighbouring Morocco and Algeria such as polygamy, due to the 'injustice that would exist between the husband and the wives' (POLISARIO 1976f, p. 6),¹⁰ and in line with its 'revolutionary spirit and values' it recommended the unveiling of women at POLISARIO meetings, 'since the real veil is respect and faith' (POLISARIO 1976f, p. 6).¹¹

Focusing on POLISARIO publications from around the time of the beginnings of the nation-building process, 'the masses' are often addressed as 'brothers and sisters', creating an image of gender equality through language by choosing not to use solely the hegemonic male form of the noun in question, and occasionally putting the feminine noun before the male, 'women and men', reversing traditional male superiority commonly reflected in grammar.¹² The zealous participation of women as well as men was seen as vital to the success of the liberation movement, and they called for 'all Saharawi men and women' (POLISARIO 1974, p. 3)¹³ to stand firm in their roles in the revolutionary process. Furthermore, one publication from 1974 ironically states that '...Spanish colonialism prohibits our women from going to cultural education centres, perhaps to conserve our customs!' (POLISARIO 1974, p. 8)¹⁴ The irony here serves to imply that the opposite is true, and that in fact, Spanish colonisers reversed the previously existing emancipated position of Saharawi women.




Figure 1: Details of 1970s POLISARIO publication displayed in the Saharawi War Museum, Rabuni, Saharawi Refugee Camps, Algeria.¹⁵

In addition, most visual images and representations of women presented in the early publications of the POLISARIO, rather than implying equality alone, concentrate on their active roles in society. For example, Figure 1-left depicts a Saharawi mother holding a megaphone and a small child. The megaphone projects an image of a strong, assertive woman who plays an active role in the war by protesting for the rights of her people. This is echoed by the red *mehlfas* (garment traditionally worn by Saharawi women). Red conjures ideas of strength, fury, anger and passion in one's mind, and taking into account that traditionally women's *mehlfas* were mainly black, symbolizes her new position in society. Furthermore, the megaphone implies that women have a voice in society and a key revolutionary role. The baby illustrates that the woman also has a caring, tender, maternal side, linked to the reproduction of society (and therefore to the conditions of possibility of a revolutionary future); a crucial role to guarantee the survival of such a small population as the Saharawi in times of famine, exile and war. The juxtaposition of these two elements creates the image of a woman who has the necessity to play many roles in society simultaneously. Figure 1-right is very similar, the main difference being that the woman portrayed here holds a gun instead of a megaphone. This invokes an image of

an independent, emancipated, determined woman, who is able to hold any traditionally 'masculine' position in society, even that of a freedom-fighting armed soldier. Indeed, according to a 1976 POLISARIO publication, the Saharawi woman 'deservedly faces the enemy alongside men' (POLISARIO 1976g, p. 6)¹⁶ and should receive 'a cultural and political education' (POLISARIO 1976c, p. 3)¹⁷ in order to help her carry out her 'decisive...role in the revolution' (POLISARIO 1976c, p. 3).¹⁸ Furthermore, the POLISARIO was highly critical of anyone who attempted to impede women from fully participating in public life (POLISARIO 1976f, p. 6, 1976e, p. 8, 1976c, p. 3),¹⁹ as was the National Union of Saharawi Women (UNMS), the branch of the POLISARIO specifically concerned with the position of women, which noted the existence of 'attitudes that are not at all revolutionary', and argued that women had a duty to work 'in order to honour the slogan that says: THERE IS NO ROOM FOR LAZY PEOPLE AMONGST THE SAHARAWIS' (UNMS cited POLISARIO 1976e, p. 3).²⁰

Aside from making women's emancipation a central component of its nation-building project and, in fact, succeeding in introducing a whole new gender discourse and language in the official documents and publications, the POLISARIO also claimed, and continues to claim, that 'the Saharawi woman has the same rights as the Saharawi man' and enjoys 'all the freedom that she deserves' (POLISARIO 1976d, p. 5).²¹ That is, it claims success, not only in changing the discourses but also in reversing the actual situation of women in society. For example, in a 1985 issue of *Free Sahara*, one of the official publications of the POLISARIO, focusing on the first UNMS conference, leading up to an article entitled 'the SADR has established the conditions of total freedom for women', the UNMS alleged, '(t)he Saharawi woman has achieved equality, social freedom, the freedom of the Saharawi woman lies in its maturity, in the grade of its attachment to national identity, to the values of its people' (UNMS cited POLISARIO 1985, p. 4).²² As a revision of the official POLISARIO publications from the mid 1980s onwards shows, the story of Saharawi women is constantly presented as a 'success story'²³ that demonstrates the 'special' character of the Saharawi nationalist revolution, whilst the UNMS continues to use the positive voices and achievements of Saharawi women to tell the same story internationally. Furthermore, the POLISARIO also creates an image of permanency; according to Mohammed Abdelaziz, the current president of the SADR, Saharawi society has 'made irreversible advances that cannot be turned back' (Abdelaziz cited *Las Cubarauis* 2005).²⁴

However, there are contradictions that glow like luminous threads in the wide canvas of POLISARIO rhetoric on gender equality and the emancipation of women. Although the movement sometimes highlights 'the secular character of (its) society' (POLISARIO 1983b, p.5),²⁵ according to the SADR Constitution, Islam is the base of Saharawi law and societal values; 'Article 2: Islam is the religion of the state and the source of law ... Article 7: The family is the foundation of society, based on the values of Islam and ethics' (POLISARIO 1999)²⁶ These Saharawi versions of Islamic law allow – at least theoretically – many 'counter-revolutionary' male privileges, such as polygamy, which, as I illustrated above, the POLISARIO criticized. Similarly, it seems that the POLISARIO conception of gender equality does not include sexual equality. The following extracts from the POLISARIO publication *The Opinion of the Masses* are very illustrative of such contradictions and are worthy of being quoted *in extenso*,

What the Saharawi woman should be conscience of is to know how to take advantage of that freedom, as well as how to duly interpret its meaning, since most women give it the most nonsensical of interpretations, from the *weakness of men to licentiousness*.

We must not let corruption penetrate our society, since the latter is known internationally for its honesty, pride and the high significance of *moral values*. We must defend that *gift* which we have harvested throughout our history. Unfortunately, symptoms of a false evolution of these values exist, mistakenly interpreted by some individuals, who merely wish to hide themselves beneath a mistaken and contradictory conception of our people. This way of evolving, defended by some teachers, has to be avoided and we must channel our evolution onto the true path, in harmony with our traditions and laws, according to the historical moment in which we live.

Some male and female comrades interpret our evolution in a mistaken and dogmatic way, perhaps due to their contacts with other societies in different continents with types of culture, history and mentality totally unlike our own. They try to adopt these forms of life, which doesn't imply our evolution, but, simply, our degeneracy.

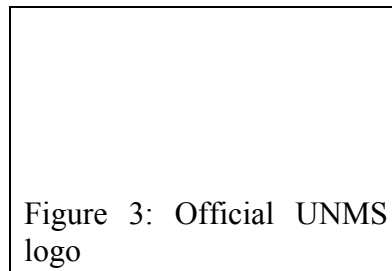
We aren't writing all this to fill a page with words, but, unfortunately, due to some occurrences, such as:

- 1) Recently, a group of women that organise a specific place for dates with men has been discovered, something which we totally condemn, since we must set an example at all times, above all when we are in a territory other than our own, since it is the least that is expected of us (a good example).
- 2) Cases of women found in the company of men with whom they aren't married also exist, some women have even fallen pregnant.

If women were to dedicate all the time necessary to their role in our society, it is certain that they would not have enough free time for these harmful acts. Unfortunately these acts, carried out by some women, are not the real interpretation of freedom. Women must realise that this is not the way to change our society (POLISARIO 1976d, p. 5).²⁷

Sex outside of marriage for women is envisaged as contrary to the moral values, traditions and revolutionary spirit of Saharawi society. The state, 'the integral meaning of (which) is...hegemony' (Gramsci 1971, p. 239), negates the 'libertarian' identity articulated by the women concerned and constructs it as a threatening obstacle to the full realization of independence and thus of the Saharawi identity. Apart from a brief reference to men (male comrades), the weight of criticism falls on women. Their sexual behaviour is symbolic of national values, and should therefore be policed. Indeed, often in processes of revolution and state building, representations of women assume political significance and their behaviour and appearance demarcate cultural projects or ethnic entities. As Valentine Moghadam argues, Anderson's perspective of the nation as an imagined community can explain this (Moghadam 1994, p. 2). If the nation is a community, or rather an extended family at large, then women, as the nurturers and child-bearers, must therefore be symbols of the community's values (Moghadam 1994, p. 4). Nira Yuval-Davis reinforces this perception. She states that 'a figure of a woman...symbolizes in many cultures the spirit of the collectivity' (Yuval-Davis 1997, p. 45). This is true of the Western Sahara, which, as the logo of the UNMS depicting a Saharawi woman wearing the

colours of the national flag illustrates, is gendered as feminine,



Furthermore, the passage above illustrates that this ‘degeneracy’ of traditional values is viewed as a product of outside influences from foreign cultures, and the ‘harmful’ escapades of women are distracting from her true role in society. This is part of a wider discourse of criticism of Western influences, as San Martín describes:

The POLISARIO would denounce in its early writings a process of ‘corruption’ (identified broadly with Westernization) of Saharawi society, which is repeatedly illustrated by reference to what they called *Hipismo* (the look and way of life of the hippies). In the same fashion as other liberation movements of the time, the early POLISARIO criticised this process of Westernization as linked with the selfish *carrerismo* (career-orientated) attitudes and consumerism that alienated the Saharawi youth and prevented them from participating in the national liberation revolution (San Martín, forthcoming).

Clearly then, there is a hostility in POLISARIO discourse towards cultural colonialism, or as the Iranian revolutionaries called it, ‘Westoxication’ (Tohidi 1994), and as women are the carriers of Saharawi culture, their sexual behaviour comes under scrutiny more so than men’s.²⁸

Gender, Politics and History: Constructing the Saharawi Nation

In a first reading of POLISARIO publications, one can very easily identify the four main levels in which the image of women is projected; 1) Women and men are equal²⁹ and have the same rights. 2) Women participate fully in society and perform many different roles and functions of great importance. 3) The current position of women will be irreversible in future circumstances. 4) Women are the signifiers of the nation and the transmitters of its culture. In summary, Saharawi society represents a ‘success story’ that demonstrates that the emancipation of women is not only positive but also possible. However, as we have seen, a closer reading of the same publications reveals constant contradictions that seem to undermine such a reading.

But what are the benefits for the POLISARIO of presenting such images of women and creating a metonymical sliding between themselves and gender equality?³⁰ Firstly, the images of women presented by the POLISARIO serve the internal function of giving coherence to political discourse in the formation of national identity.³¹ The representations of women delineated above serve to underline the egalitarian, left wing, progressive, modern ‘spirit’ assigned to Saharawi society. Secondly, imagining the nation as a woman, and seeing women as symbols of the national ‘essence’ and emancipation serves to strengthen the POLISARIO’s

construction of masculinity and thereby recruit men for the army. If the nation is a woman, then she must be protected from invasion/rape by foreign males. Indeed, as Melanie Richter-Monpetit (2007, p. 48) argues, 'rape is about violence and domination, making the Other lose control over her or his body'. Thus, men must protect their own masculinity by defending women/the Sahara from the virility of the enemy and maintaining their control over the feminised nation/body. The POLISARIO highlights the 'calamities suffered by thousands of women' and calls on men to exhibit their masculinity by protecting them (POLISARIO 1976g, p. 5).³²

The model *par excellence* for Saharawi masculinity, 'a real example of MAN' (Cheij Breih 2007)³³, is the figure of El Uali, the founding leader of the POLISARIO. He died in battle and is now the most venerated national hero and martyr. Many school textbooks feature El Uali, and through this symbol, teach boys the attributes that they should cultivate in themselves in order to become Saharawi men, shaping the concept of masculinity to be tightly bound to the nation. For example, a dictation in a year 5 Spanish language book reads 'El Uali Mustafa is a national hero. He is the example of sacrifice and delivery... he spared no effort for the liberation of his country and people' (SADR, no date)³⁴ whereas the year 3 book reads 'he was very hardworking, intelligent and polite... he loved his Homeland and he fought for it' (SADR, no date).³⁵ His humble origins are emphasized 'as a young man he looked after cattle' (SADR, no date, year 4),³⁶ 'he was born...into a poor family' (SADR, no date, year 6),³⁷ as are his religious convictions, 'true and sincere Muslim' (POLISARIO 1976h, p. 2).³⁸ In summary, El Uali represents a symbol of POLISARIO-constructed manhood, holding up the values of Islam, intelligence, self-sacrifice, assiduousness and humility, and is celebrated for loving and dying for his (feminine) country. Therefore, this construction of masculinity coupled with the gendering of the nation as a woman serves to encourage young men to display nationalist sentiment and fight – even die - for their country. Similarly, hand in hand with willing men to go to the battlefield comes the practical necessity of encouraging women to take on the role of building the camps in exile. If men were away on the frontline, women had to emerge from the *jaimas* and ensure the survival of the Saharawi people by taking over the management of the public sphere as well as fulfilling all the responsibilities of the private sphere. This extremely heavy and very urgent burden of responsibilities demanded the promotion of a strong, active and resilient image for women to model themselves on, and the POLISARIO obliged.

Thirdly, representations of women serve an external function by detaching Saharawi society from 'Western' stereotypes of backwardness normally associated with Arabic, Islamic, Third World countries. One of the ideological 'mentors' of the POLISARIO historical leaders was Franz Fanon, who argued in his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986), that white Westerners had imprisoned black non-Westerners by hegemonising the inferior, patronizing stereotypes and pejorative images of the latter. Similarly, in part IV of his classic work *Orientalism*, Edward Said looks at how Western popular images create a certain negative stereotype of the 'Arab'. He argues, '(l)urking behind all these images is the menace of *jihād*. Consequence; a fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world' (1995, p. 287). It is these Western-fabricated stereotypes that the POLISARIO attempts to distance itself from in order to attract international interest and support. This is illustrated above all by UNMS discourse. They argue that,

Saharawi women have been and continue to be direct protagonists in the social, political and economic life of their country, therefore they have broken with stereotypes introduced by the western world concerning women in Arabic countries or of the Islamic religion (UNMS and Association of Saharawi Women in Spain 2007).³⁹

On the other hand, it is interesting that at times, the UNMS seems to accept such Western stereotypes as 'true', and then tries to 'other' itself from such images. For example, Zahra Ramdan, a member of the Executive Bureau of the UNMS and head of the Association of Saharawi Women in Spain, asserts that 'Saharawi women have always had more consideration, much more respect, than those of other Muslim societies, other Arab societies' (personal communication, 7 February 2008).⁴⁰ Similarly, taking the 2001 presentation of the candidature of Saharawi women to the Prince of Asturias prize as an exemplary case, the UNMS unceasingly constructs Saharawi women in opposition to common Western stereotypes of Arab, Islamic, African women, without criticising or highlighting the constructed nature of such stereotypes, thus allying themselves with the West. In the presentation, referring to the Saharawi woman, they highlight the 'exceptionality of her key role in society, in the ambit of countries of a Muslim confession' and commend her brave, determined, independent attitude, which, according to the UNMS, 'is even more admirable if one takes into account the usual role of women in a Muslim society' (UNMS 2001).⁴¹ With respect to levels of education, they claim Saharawi women are 'an absolute exception in the African, Arab and Muslim social panoramas', and moreover they assert that the presence of women working in the field of healthcare is 'extremely important, above all if it is compared with neighbouring or similar societies' (UNMS 2001).⁴² All in all, the positive vocabulary used throughout the article along with the frequent use of the superlative and the employment of 'Saharawi woman' as the active grammatical subject of verbs constructs the image of heroic, mentally strong, physically tough, hardworking women in contrast to Western constructions of Arab women as submissive, weak, oppressed and vulnerable. But, as we have pointed out, this Saharawi nationalist discourse, instead of questioning the constructed character of Western gazes towards Muslim and Third World women, seems to accept such stereotypes in order to present Saharawi women as an exception to the norm.

Finally, in a more post-Marxist and critical discourse analysis fashion, we can see how such images of women play a part in the formation of Saharawi identity, constructed around the antagonism with Morocco. As Wodak and Weiss (2005, p. 131) point out, '[t]he general concept of insiders and outsiders is salient in all societies and between societies', and in the Saharawi case, women draw one of the frontiers between Morocco and the Sahara. As Jill Benderley (1997, p. 61) has commented, women tend to participate in ethnic and national processes and state practices 'as signifiers of ethnic/national differences'. Indeed, the POLISARIO's representations of gender equality reinforce what it means to be Saharawi in the face of Morocco, which during times of conflict is crucial in uniting and mobilising 'the people' against the 'oppressors'. Women, as signifiers of Saharawi democracy, freedom and equality, are the border markers that differentiate the Western Sahara from dictatorial, feudal and backward Morocco, where women are always represented in POLISARIO's discourses as subjugated and weak.⁴³

Therefore, the benefits of presenting the images of women that the POLISARIO does are manifold in ideological terms. It is consistent with their leftist and socialist

ideology, it works with constructs of masculinity to recruit young men to the army and encourage a strong defensive nationalism as well as promoting the activism and strength of women in order to ensure the effective building and running of the nation in exile, it detaches Saharawi society from the usual Western conception of Muslim, African societies and it distinguishes the Sahara from Morocco. But how does the POLISARIO validate and solidify the construction of such images? Above, the quotation from a 1974 POLISARIO publication stated that the Spanish colonisation reversed the emancipation of women, implying that traditionally, Saharawi women enjoyed a certain level of equality. This suggests that POLISARIO's discourses of gender equality do not emerge from a vacuum, but on the contrary are presented as rooted in a deeper tradition, that was only subverted and challenged by the colonialist foes. The narration of Saharawi collective history/story therefore becomes a central field for increasing the plausibility of the discourses concerning present revolutionary achievements. Furthermore, it adds weight to the depiction of the Saharawi nation as a 'natural entity' rather than a constructed concept. Indeed, what is in fact an invention can only appear natural and attract mass loyalty by 'seeming to persist through time and by being linked to imagined, mythic pasts - pasts often defined in ethnic terms' (Szeman 2004, p. 13).⁴⁴

According to traditional historical narratives, the Western Sahara was a tribal society, governed by an Assembly of Forty (*Ait Arbain*), with a representative from each of the tribes that inhabited the region. The Saharawis were nomads of the desert. Knowing 'no frontiers', they followed the clouds over familiar routes of hills and streams in the hope of water and green pasture, grazing their cattle, searching for wells and growing crops when possible (Arso, no date).⁴⁵ This precolonial era preceding the 1884 Spanish colonization was an idyllic time for the Saharawi woman who,

was characterised naturally, socially and politically by values which were the mirror of a society that had not known colonization, a society that was distinguished by the independence of its structures and by its social and political (UNMS cited in POLISARIO 1985, p. 6).⁴⁶

Historically, Saharawi women were empowered, and as an article reproduced in an official POLISARIO publication accounts,

Saharawi women, who enjoy great autonomy in comparison to western women ... have been in a state of active resistance against the offensives of patriarchal ideology for centuries. Other women of the world could learn a lot from them (*Le Quotidien de Femmes* cited in POLISARIO 1977, p. 5).⁴⁷

According to a high-ranking POLISARIO diplomat, the nomadic nature of traditional Saharawi life 'entailed a sharing of responsibilities between men and women in order to ensure individual and collective survival in such a harsh environment' (personal communication with Omar, S., 12 April 2006). Whilst men ventured out into the vast silence of the desert sometimes for months on end to graze cattle and search for water, women were the high priestesses of home life,

Before the colonisation, women were the principle productive element, providing the family with everything that had to do with the needs of the *jaima* (tent). This has led them to perfect their professional capabilities through simple means offered by the natural world (leather, wool...) and to

develop their participation in the cultural, cattle raising and trade domains (UNMS cited POLISARIO 1985, p. 6).⁴⁸

Thus, the woman was ‘the owner of the *jaima*’ (personal communication with Mohamed Ali, L., 20 April 2008)⁴⁹ and enjoyed power and autonomy in the domestic realms. But then disaster struck with the Spanish colonisation, which caused the destruction of this utopia, this arcadia, in which women were equal and brought about an enforced process of backwardness, ‘disorganisation and misery’ (POLISARIO 1983a, *Sahara Libre*, p. 6),⁵⁰ stripping Saharawi culture of its egalitarian traditions. In order to prevent rebellion, the colonialists ensured that the Saharawi people were ‘submerged in ignorance and illiteracy’ (POLISARIO 1978b, p. 6)⁵¹ whilst ‘women were shut up in their houses’ and ‘became useless in society’ (*Le Quotidien de Femmes* cited POLISARIO 1977, p. 4).⁵²

However, towards the end of the sixties, tired of being ruled by the decadent Spanish regime, the Saharawis began a campaign of resistance in the shape of *Harakat Tahrir Saquia Al-Hamra wa Wadi Adh-dhahab* (the Liberation Movement of *Saquia el Hamra* and *Río de Oro*) led by Mohamed Bassiri. Within this movement, women’s historical, essential strength and power was re-ignited as they wielded their ‘great capacity and ferocious resistance’ against the colonialists (UNMS cited POLISARIO 1985, p. 6).⁵³ A POLISARIO leader affirms that ‘women did more than men’ for the cause, as he recalls an episode in which, fleeing from Spanish authorities, he was forced to spend 26 days in hiding under a bed in a Saharawi family home; ‘the woman was the one who facilitated that, and convinced her husband to give me that possibility. I feel she was caring. Women really were at the heart of it, since the beginning of the struggle’ (personal communication with Mustafa Sayed, B., 1 April 2008). From 1973 onwards, huge numbers of women started to incorporate themselves into the ranks of the POLISARIO (UNMS cited POLISARIO 1985, p. 6).⁵⁴ Publications such as *La Opinión de las masas* and the *Revista 20 de Mayo* recount the deeds of the heroic women harshly punished for their participation in protests⁵⁵ yet ‘Spain did not manage to build a front against the militant labour of the Saharawi women’ (UNMS cited POLISARIO 1985, p. 6).⁵⁶ They also played a vital role behind the scenes, from ‘preparing food and seizing medicine’ (personal communication with Mustafa Sayed, B., 1 April 2008) to contributing ‘extremely significant material aid to the...fight by means of family savings, and the sale of their own clothes and possessions’ (UNMS cited POLISARIO 1985, p. 6).⁵⁷ Furthermore,

The home of each (female) militant was transformed into a centre of the political organisation, where consciousness-raising campaigns and the initiation of new militants were carried out. These centres served as schools for the fight against illiteracy, which affected 99% of Saharawi women during the colonial period (UNMS cited POLISARIO 1985, p. 6).⁵⁸

They also carried out the fundamental task of disseminating the nationalist message, empowered, somewhat ironically, by the impunity granted to them by the Francoist assumption that women could not be involved in political activity. Therefore, it was easier for her to move freely, hide incriminating evidence underneath her *melhfa*, and organise clandestine meetings (personal communication with Mustafa Sayed, B., 1 April 2008, and San Martín, P., 7 May 2008). In this way, ‘full of anger and will, and encouraged by a notably characteristic sense of organisation, Saharawi women gradually recuperated the place that they had formally held at the side of men, long before the colonial period’ (*Le Quotidien de Femmes*

cited POLISARIO 1977, p. 5).⁵⁹

This is, of course, just one of an infinite number of possible readings of Saharawi history, linked by a specific ideological operation to the present. As Hayden White (1989, p. ix) points out, historical narrative, far from being merely a neutral discursive form, entails 'ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political processes.' Histories are constructed in hindsight, with the personal opinions and motivations of the writer subconsciously or consciously influencing the final product. The above brief history of the position of women in Saharawi society as seen from the point of view of the POLISARIO serves the function of justifying and giving coherence to their current ideology and political project. Three main epochs emerge in the history: the romantic pre-colonial period which illustrates how women have 'always' been powerful and equal in Saharawi tradition and culture (the Golden Era of the Saharawi people); the disastrous Spanish colonial period which forced the Saharawi woman into a subordinate position and caused widespread ignorance and retrocession amongst the population (the time of crisis); and finally the modern period, beginning with the resistance movement in the late sixties and early seventies when women started to reclaim their 'historical' and 'truly Saharawi' emancipated position (the moment of reconstruction, of 'recovery' of the lost arcadia). In other words, regression and sexism are linked to colonialism and completely removed from Saharawi agency, whilst gender equality is a natural and historical characteristic of Saharawi society, with deep roots in a distant and idyllic Golden Era. Thus, the influence of current POLISARIO ideology (as briefly delineated earlier) on the construction of Saharawi history is clear.

Conclusion

The POLISARIO promotes the image that the only form of oppression that exists in Saharawi society is that of colonialism. The portrait of gender painted in POLISARIO nationalist discourses is one of equality in which women's emancipation is a fact that cannot be reversed in the future. The Saharawi woman 'participates in the struggle next to man and plays a strong role in political and military areas' (POLISARIO 1978a, p.7) as well as in all other spheres of social and public life. According to the POLISARIO, the power and respect bestowed on women is something natural in Saharawi society and indeed, women embody Saharawi identity and are cultural symbols that transmit the values of the Saharawi nation.

As we have seen, the benefits of presenting such images of women are multiple in ideological terms. It reinforces and links to the POLISARIO's leftist and socialist ideology, it works with constructs of masculinity to recruit young men to the army and encourage a strong defensive nationalism as well as promoting the active, powerful role of women in order to ensure the effective organisation and running of the nation in exile, it differentiates Saharawi society from the usual Western conception of Muslim, Arabic societies and it distinguishes the Sahara from Morocco.

These images are given an iron support by the ideological narratives and discourses that elaborate a primordial and golden history, which depict the modern-day archetypal POLISARIO woman as a natural and unsurprising outgrowth of the pre-colonial Saharawi ways of life, philosophies and past traditions. According to this history, Spanish colonialism attempted to break down the Saharawi egalitarian

customs and cultures, and brought about a process of retrocession, stagnation, and a plague of inequality and discrimination at all levels of Saharawi society. Then, following the Moroccan invasion and the exile to the camps, the new nation built under the leadership of the POLISARIO constituted a return to the ancient and 'true' Saharawi values, one of which was gender equality. In such an egalitarian, progressive society what more could a woman want than 'to see [her] flag above [her] sky, to breathe the oxygen of [her] independence, and to be part of a free and independent country'? (personal communication with Zrug Yomani, F., 5 April 2008). However, whether or not Saharawi society is experienced by Saharawi women as an entirely egalitarian society is a different matter that would require more research. The POLISARIO's brand of gender equality, which does not envisage women's sexual autonomy as a deserved freedom and contradicts itself over such pertinent issues as polygamy, may prove to appear distorted to some.

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¹ Pablo San Martín quotes Brajim Mojtar, “a normal state within an immense abnormality”, see Pablo San Martín, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation*, forthcoming, chapter 3.

² Translation mine.

³ Translation mine.

⁴ Translation mine.

⁵ Michael Freeden’s concept of decontestation stems from the idea that political concepts (such as justice, freedom or democracy) have no fixed and definite meaning, but are constructed concepts. The task of any ideological operation is, therefore, to partially ‘fix’ the meaning of such concepts, in order to make them appear definite and inherent, and thereby encourage a particular way of seeing society.

⁶ According to Tomás Bárbulo (2002, p. 59), Saharawi workers were paid less than half the salary of their Spanish co-workers.

⁷ Indeed, as Bárbulo (2002, p. 174) points out, the first to participate in the POLISARIO student movement against the Spanish were 13 school girls: ‘13 native girls abandoned their classes “sick of sewing and embroidery” and of “no one teaching them the slightest thing”’ (translation mine).

⁸ Translation mine.

⁹ Translation mine.

¹⁰ Translation mine.

¹¹ Translation mine.

¹² See for example POLISARIO, *Sahara Libre*, “Una experiencia permanente para crear a la sociedad saharauí nueva”, no. 178, 1983, p.4.

¹³ Translation mine.

¹⁴ Translation mine.

¹⁵ Photograph taken by the author, 2 March 2006.

¹⁶ Translation mine.

¹⁷ Translation mine.

¹⁸ Translation mine.

¹⁹ Translation mine.

²⁰ Translation mine.

²¹ Translation mine. POLISARIO, *Boletín - La opinión de las masas*, no. 8, 1976, p.5.

²² Translation mine. UNMS, *Sahara Libre*, no.240-241, 1985, p.4.

²³ The “success story” - a supposed achievement that is exaggerated, mythified, and elevated to the position of a perfect example, or indisputable piece of evidence – is often employed by politicians to justify certain policies or decisions, and to “sell” a policy or model to other societies. In this case, the POLISARIO’s gender policies are presented as an example of “good practice” for other Muslim, Arabic and African countries to follow. For more on policy studies, learning and transfer see Czarniawska and Sevón 2005, Nedergaard 2006, Page 2000, Tizot 2001 and Ward 2006.

²⁴ Translation mine.

²⁵ Translation mine.

²⁶ Translation mine.

²⁷ Translation mine. See also POLISARIO, *Boletín: Opinión de las masas*, no. 13, 1976, p.4 for another example of how women’s behaviour was criticized.

²⁸ Yet, As Richard Cleminson (2000) highlights, this is not to say that men’s sexuality does not come under scrutiny, especially if their sexuality is perceived to be “deviant”, as would be the case of homosexuality in the Western Sahara.

²⁹ Equality, as all crucial social and political concepts, is a contested concept, open to different interpretations that try to fix its meanings.

³⁰ For more on metonymical slidings see Torfing 1999, p.112.

³¹ It should be noted that identity is a contested concept as it is not static and unchanging, but rather a

continuous process.

³² Translation mine.

³³ Translation mine.

³⁴ Translation mine.

³⁵ Translation mine.

³⁶ Translation mine.

³⁷ Translation mine.

³⁸ Translation mine.

³⁹ Translation mine.

⁴⁰ Translation mine.

⁴¹ Translation mine.

⁴² Translation mine.

⁴³ For more on identity formation a social antagonism see Bowman 2002, Laclau and Mouffe 1987, and Laclau 1989.

⁴⁴ Indeed, many of the key theorists of nationalism emphasize the importance of creating a common history/story in order to give the nation legitimacy and make it appear transcendent. For example Smith 1986 argues that national elites give meaning to cultural symbols and myths, and create an “ethnie” by highlighting the shared history and descent of the community whilst Anderson 1995 asserts that the idea of a long national history is ‘central to the subjective idea of nation’. Similarly, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983 argue that states will ‘invent traditions’ in order to create a unifying factor that will feed nationalism within a community.

⁴⁵ For more on this history of the Sahara see Farah 2006, and Chamberlain 2005.

⁴⁶ Translation mine.

⁴⁷ Translation mine.

⁴⁸ Translation mine.

⁴⁹ Translation mine.

⁵⁰ Translation mine.

⁵¹ Translation mine.

⁵² Translation mine.

⁵³ Translation mine.

⁵⁴ Translation mine.

⁵⁵ Translation mine. See for example POLISARIO 1976, *La opinión de las masas*, No.4, p. 4, and 1975 *Revista 20 de Mayo*, no. 23, p. 15.

⁵⁶ Translation mine.

⁵⁷ Translation mine.

⁵⁸ Translation mine.

⁵⁹ Translation mine.