2011

Gender mainstreaming in state-building: a case study of Saharawi refugees and their foreign representatives

Sonia Rossetti
University of Wollongong

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Erratum by author

Page 61
Senia Bachir Abderahman is not the former president of the Saharawi Women Union, but a Saharawi student at the Mount Holyoke College in Norway.
Gender mainstreaming in state-building: a case study of Saharawi refugees and their foreign representatives

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

Master of Arts (Research)

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

Sonia Rossetti

(Dott.ssa Giurisprudenza, University of Bologna
Graduate Certificate in Australian Migration Law and Practice, ANU)

Faculty of Arts

School of History and Politics

2011
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Original name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFRAPADESA</td>
<td>Association of Families of Saharawi Prisoners and Missing People</td>
<td>Asociacion de Familiares de Presos y Desaparecidos Saharauis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APHEDA</td>
<td>Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARSO</td>
<td>Association for the Support of a Free and Lawful Referendum in Western Sahara</td>
<td>Association de Soutien a un Referendum Libre et Regulier au Sahara Occidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWSA</td>
<td>Australia Western Sahara Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEAS</td>
<td>Coordination of Spanish Associations in Solidarity with the Sahara</td>
<td>Coordinadora Estatal de Asociaciones Solidarias con el Sahara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CESTAS</td>
<td>Centre for Health Education and Appropriate Health Technologies</td>
<td>Centro di Educazione Sanitaria e Tecnologie Appropriate Sanitarie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLAIHR</td>
<td>Canadian Lawyers for International Human Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECHO</td>
<td>European Community Humanitarian Office</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUCOCO</td>
<td>European Conference of Coordination and Support to the Saharawian People</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSI</td>
<td>Failed States Index</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICJ</td>
<td>International Court of Justice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPJET</td>
<td>International Platform of Jurists for East Timor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MINURSO</td>
<td>UN Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUSW</td>
<td>National Union of Saharawi Women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OAU/AU</td>
<td>Organization of African Unity/African Union</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAWO</td>
<td>Pan African Women’s Organisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLISARIO</td>
<td>Saharawi Popular Liberation Front</td>
<td>Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguya el-Hamra y Rio de Oro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADR</td>
<td>Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SOAWR</td>
<td>Solidarity for African Women's Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPLA</td>
<td>Saharawi Popular Liberation Army</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRC</td>
<td>Saharawi Red Crescent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UGSTARIO</td>
<td>Union of Saharawi Workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UJS</td>
<td>Union of Saharawi Jurists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UJSARIO</td>
<td>Union of Saharawi Youth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCAP</td>
<td>United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commission for Refugees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNIFEM</td>
<td>United Nations Development Found for Women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNSC</td>
<td>United Nations Security Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNSG</td>
<td>United Nations Secretary General</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNTAET</td>
<td>United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPES</td>
<td>Union of Saharawi Journalists and Writers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFP</td>
<td>World Food Programme</td>
<td></td>
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## Glossary

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<tr>
<th>Glossary</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th of June</td>
<td>Saharawi boarding school (now destroyed). Martyrdom of the first Saharawi President</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th of October</td>
<td>Saharawi boarding school, named after the date of the 1975 'Day of Unification'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27th of February</td>
<td>Women’s vocational school, named after day of proclamation of the SADR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abid</td>
<td>Slaves</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adrar</td>
<td>Southern mountain of Western Sahara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ain bentili</td>
<td>Title of a Saharawi Congress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ait arbaïn</td>
<td>Council of Forty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-ayoun</td>
<td>Town in Western Sahara and one of the provinces in the refugee camps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-khaliyyah</td>
<td>Cell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aouâar</td>
<td>In each daiïn Saharawi are organised in cells of eleven/fifteen people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aïrifat (al-khaliyyah)</td>
<td>Head of a cell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bermas</td>
<td>Six sand walls across Western Sahara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boû erwa</td>
<td>Mine area in Western Sahara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>âadi</td>
<td>Judge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chérfa</td>
<td>Descendent of the Prophet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dâïra</td>
<td>Tribal social group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dakhla</td>
<td>District, municipality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dakhla</td>
<td>Town in Western Sahara and one of the provinces in the refugee camps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>darrâb</td>
<td>Traditional veil used only by Saharawi men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desaparecido</td>
<td>Disappeared people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>djemaa (or yema’a)</td>
<td>Saharawi administrative body created by Spain during the occupation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Ouali per la libertà del Sahara Occidentale</td>
<td>Italy based association for the freedom of Western Sahara (Bologna)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emilia-Romagna Regional Coordination</strong></td>
<td>Coordination body of the Saharawi support’s associations in the Emilia-Romagna region (Italy)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fitna</td>
<td>Moral and social disorder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framework Agreement</td>
<td>James Baker's first settlement plan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Zone (or Liberated Territories)</td>
<td>Area of Western Sahara liberated by Saharawi army prior the cease fire in 1991</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fраг</td>
<td>Group of families or a camp</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hadith</td>
<td>Anecdotes about Muhammad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Important source material about religious practice and law</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hammada</td>
<td>Desert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desert plateau of hard, wind-swept bedrock covered with a thin layer of sand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hassaniya</td>
<td>Arabic dialect spoken by Saharawi people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baima</td>
<td>Tent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bays</td>
<td>Neighborhoods (Barrios in Spanish)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harratin</td>
<td>Freed slaves from black Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hassi Rabinet</td>
<td>Also called Rabuni by the Saharawi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Area around the city of Tindouf (Algeria)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hijab</td>
<td>Veil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intifada</td>
<td>Shaking off, upraising (Arabic)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jibad</td>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lajinah</td>
<td>Specialized camp committee based in each daira</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lajnad</td>
<td>Archaeological sites in the Saharawi liberated territories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrid Agreement</td>
<td>Secret declaration of principles between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malikiya</td>
<td>One of the four schools of Sunni Islamic law</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maquil</td>
<td>Tribal group from Yemen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mehari</td>
<td>French police on camels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mehija</td>
<td>Clothing worn by Saharawi women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mehr</td>
<td>Bride price</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oued draa</td>
<td>Northern mountain chain of Western Sahara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace Plan for the Self-Determination</td>
<td>James Baker's second settlement plan</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Protocol</td>
<td>Central office of the refugee camps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qabilah</td>
<td>Set of alliances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qu'ran</td>
<td>Primary sacred text of Islam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rappresentanza</td>
<td>Italian name for the group of Saharawi representatives based in Italy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio de Oro</td>
<td>River of gold</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio de Oro Solidarity</td>
<td>Western Sahara Southern plateau</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rappresentanza</td>
<td>Saharawi’s support association based in the Marche Region (Italy)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Saguia el hamma</td>
<td>Region of the red river</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saguia el Hamra wa Oued el-Dahab</td>
<td>First Saharawi liberation movement created by Saharawi journalist Mohamed Sidi Ibrahim Basiri</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sahara National Association</td>
<td>Italian national Saharawi's support association, based in Rome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sanhadja</td>
<td>Tribes from North Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>smara</td>
<td>Town in Western Sahara and one of the provinces in the refugee camps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni Malekeite doctrine</td>
<td>Islamic rite followed by North Africans, particularly from Algeria and the Maghreb portion of the Ottoman Empire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tarbia</td>
<td>Child care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>terra nullius</td>
<td>Latin expression deriving from Roman law meaning land belonging to no one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tifariti</td>
<td>Saharawi outpost in the Free Zone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tindouf</td>
<td>Algerian city and airport connection with the Saharawi refugee camps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tiris</td>
<td>Southern mountain of Western Sahara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trab el bidan</td>
<td>White nomads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuareg</td>
<td>Abandoned by God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tuiza</td>
<td>Community place</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacaciones en paz</td>
<td>Holidays in peace (Spanish)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wafi</td>
<td>The wilaya's governor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wilaya</td>
<td>Province</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yemen'a (or djemaa)</td>
<td>Assembly with legislative, executive and judiciary power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zamila</td>
<td>Suburb in Western Sahara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zemur</td>
<td>Central region of Western Sahara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zulu</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>žnaga</td>
<td>Tributaries</td>
<td>Tribal social group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>žnuya</td>
<td>Warriors</td>
<td>Tribal social group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Recent literature on peace and state-building highlights the need for women’s participation in post-conflict reconstruction to move from war and displacement, towards stability and future independence. This thesis analyses this ‘gender mainstreaming’ approach to state-building using the example of the Saharawi Popular Liberation Front (Polisario) and its long term struggle for independence, focussing specifically on gender representation in Polisario representatives abroad. Both the National Union of Saharawi Women and the Polisario liberation movement have been praised by academics and institutions alike for their achievements in gender mainstreaming. Despite living as refugees in Algeria, Saharawi women have led the camps’ administration for more than thirty years, and today constitute more than 35% of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic’s parliament. I argue that while women’s participation in refugee camp administration has always been a feature, a substantial female representation in high-level political office and in the state-in-waiting’s foreign relations is relatively new to the Polisario. Gender mainstreaming can thus be tested against the historical practice of the Polisario and the broader campaign to win international acceptance and support for independence for Western Sahara.

In a situation of political stalemate, where UN sponsored diplomatic discussions between the Polisario and Morocco on a peaceful solution for Western Sahara have been so-far inconclusive, the job done by Saharawi representatives abroad in lobbying host countries to their cause is invaluable. Yet exactly how has the presence of women as foreign representatives assisted the political cause of Western Sahara? This study draws on the work of Third World and Islamic feminist theorists in order to interpret gender relations in state-building with the Muslim Saharawi refugees, arguing that Saharawi were implementing gender mainstreaming approaches to social, political and administrative life in exile long before the international community began to promote a discourse of gender and state-building. A critical ethnographic approach is used in a bid to understand the interplay between gender and power, and analyse the relationship between Saharawi political representatives abroad and their supporters.
Acknowledgments

I wish to thank those individuals and organizations whose assistance made this study possible. First of all, I thank my husband Tom and our children for their love, support and suggestions.

The present dissertation is based upon fieldwork conducted in Italy and Australia. I thank all Saharawi political representatives and Western Sahara support associations’ representatives willing to share their experiences with me for this study.

An appreciation goes to the staff at the Faculty of Arts for their financial support in doing my fieldwork trip to Italy and at the Wollongong University Library for their assistance in locating relevant documents.

Last, but not least, I give all my gratitude to my supervisors Associate Professor Rebecca Albury and Dr. Charles Hawksley. Rebecca was to me a great mentor, a reliable and experienced supervisor and an understanding woman (especially when I fell pregnant with my third child). Charles helped me get momentum and focus on the structure. I am also grateful to Kate Hannan for her shared supervision at the beginning of this project.
Chapter One: Introduction to the case study and methodology

1.1 Outlining the approach to the case study

State-building is the product of conflict. In a world that has seen so many modern day conflicts, much of the current international debate focuses on state-building — the discussion of the societal and political aftermath of conflict, and the creation of stable governments, social compacts and institutions. In 2000 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) stressed the importance of implementing equal and full participation of women both in peace processes and state-building, as active agents. Full participation of women in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts, awareness of gender-specific human rights abuses, and the importance of a visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in policies and programmes while addressing armed or other conflicts, became the basis for the approval of UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. From then on, all UN member states were required to incorporate in their policies gender equality provisions in the establishment of a democratic system (2000: 5).

Despite its good intentions, in 2009 the UN Security Council recognized the slow progress of implementing Resolution 1325 and passed Resolution 1889, requesting states to submit reports addressing women’s participation and inclusion in peace-building and in planning for the aftermath of conflict. In October 2010, the Security Council admitted that in a decade more progress was made in addressing the protection of women in post-conflict situations than in promoting their participation. In the Report, the Security Council also mentioned that in the last ten years it has never included language on women, peace and security in its resolutions on Western Sahara and ‘in the 13 missions undertaken prior to the adoption of resolution 1325 the Council met with women’s groups specifically in only one mission (to Western Sahara [...])’ (UNSC, 2010: para 9).

The case of the self-proclaimed Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) has been largely praised by scholars and international bodies for its good practice of gender mainstreaming and the full inclusion of women in the social and political life of the refugee community (Baines, 2001; UNHCR, 2007b). Studies from Spain (Tortajada, 2004) England (New Internationalist, 1998; Fiddian-Mendez, 2002), Australia (Armstrong, 2008; Rossetti, 2008), America (Lippert, 1992), Italy (Melotti, 1999; Contessini, 2007) and France (Caratini, 2003), have examined the Saharawi women’s involvement in both the Saharawi liberation
movement and camp administration. In December 2007, thirty five percent of the parliament of the exiled Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) had female representatives (Sahara Press Service, 2008a) three of whom had Ministerial level responsibilities. The literature shows how Saharawi people have worked in the last thirty years to implement gender mainstreaming at all levels of governments, and women today are both active in the refugee camps and in the international arena. I argue that this sensibility did not develop simply because women are still the majority in the camps (while the men serve military conscription), but because Saharawi people share a strong religious and traditional sense of equality which derives from their nomadic origins and their Islamic beliefs. Palestinian Randa Farah, in an article for the refugee study centre ‘Forced Migration’, mentions how Saharawi women have traditionally possessed great autonomy despite being Muslim:

[...] Islam, as practiced by the Saharawis, is tolerant and liberal. One of several examples of how SADR [Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic] has been able to draw upon local traditions is its institutionalization of women’s rights. Traditionally, women have total autonomy in managing the daily activities in and around the tent. Any form of violence against women, verbal or physical, is condemned and the man is usually ostracized by society. Consequently, these incidents are so rare that the issue of domestic violence against women or children is almost non-existent (2003).

1.1.1 Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming, as identified by the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, is a strategy used to achieve the goal of gender equality. The process of gender mainstreaming is used to assess the implication for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels (Bargon, 2008). Part of the recent feminist literature has criticized this concept for its vagueness and lack of clarity (Beveridge and Nott, 2002; Charlesworth, 2005a):

The goal of equality should engage issues of ending disadvantage rather than merely reconciling the differences and similarities between women and men [...] Achieving sexual equality for refugee women is a long-term goal, which will still be at work long after they cease to be refugees but continue to be women (Edwards, 2010: 45).

Resolution 1325 mentions a preference for the application of indigenous processes (2000: point 8(b)) especially where traditional systems have institutionalised women’s rights within their religion and culture. Considering that Saharawi people share a strong Islamic and nomadic culture and tradition, this study uses the general concept of gender mainstreaming and integrates it with Third World and Islamic feminist discourses. In this
respect Tanya Lyons, Jayne Curnow, and Glenda Mather (2004) have argued that Third World women are often “silenced” by Western imposed voices:

It was stressed that Fiji needed to move forward slowly and carefully with the aims of gender equality, to ensure that existing positive cultural norms and practices were not threatened. To these workshop participants it was important to distinguish between ‘gender equality’ as a Western construct and ‘gender respect’ as a more appropriate Fijian modification of the concept (Lyons, Curnow et al., 2004: 64).

The gender analysis of Saharawi foreign representatives abroad was done in this study strictly considering their traditional and religious beliefs and their current institutions. For instance, organisations like the National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW) have always worked together with the Saharawi National liberation front (Polisario) to promote women’s participation in the government and in their struggle for independence. Moma Sidi Abdehadi, former President of the Saharawi Union of Women, was in the past the only female member of the Polisario’s National Secretariat. In an interview with the New Internationalist magazine she says:

We formed the Union of Women in 1974 to help liberate the country from Spanish colonization. Yes, we were interested in the rights of women but national liberation was the key. We organized ourselves in secret cells. But really women didn’t come into their own until after we had been forced into exile. It was women who had to take primary responsibility for building the camps: in a sense we were at the front, but just a different front from the men and we had to take responsibility for health, education, water, sanitation, everything (New Internationalist, 1998; Abdehadi, no date).

The Saharawi case represents a unique example of an Islamic government-in-exile, striving to include women in peace/state-building processes. A report published by the WomenWarPeace website of United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), notes: ‘The National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW) is a powerful force that has successfully brought together thousands of Sahrawi women to advocate for their involvement in political and economic processes in the search for peace’ (WomenWarPeace website, 2010). There are certainly limits to achieving gender equality, even though this is the expressed wish of the Polisario. Recent claims of slavery in the camps (particularly limiting women’s ability to marry)(Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010a), the practice of ‘enforced imprisonment’ of women who have become pregnant outside the marriage (Allan, 2008), and claims of exclusion and marginalisation of a certain sphere of society (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010c), have come to question the genuine progress on gender mainstreaming within refugee camps. While a short account of these claims is presented in Chapter Three, a full treatment of their veracity is beyond the scope of this thesis. The SADR and its constitution clearly state their rejection of slavery and the promotion of freedom and equality. More investigation is required both by scholars and Saharawi
institutions to assess these serious claims. This focus of this thesis is specifically the role of Polisario political representatives abroad, and in particular the different aspects of gender mainstreaming within this unique refugee group.

1.1.2 The role of political representatives abroad

At present, the literature on the role of political representatives abroad from “states-in-waiting” is very limited. The job of a political representative abroad is strategically important for governments-in-exile like the SADR since their role is to develop political, economic and solidarity revenues with the hosting country. Researcher Amanda Wise for example, looked at Jose Ramos Horta and the East Timorese community in Sydney and at their well-established transnational connections cultivated over twenty-five years of presence in Australia. The East Timorese’s government’s outreach to the global society helped them build a mass popular movement and attain significant international support towards obtaining their independence (2004: 171). Despite many differences in the prospect of self-determination of the two countries (Zunes, 2007), I argue that in the last thirty years of exile, Saharawi representatives abroad have built strong alliances with local governments (through twin-towns agreements), NGOs, and citizens which have then played a major role in challenging their governments’ acquiescence on the faith of the Western Sahara territory. This area lends itself to many interesting questions related to gender mainstreaming and women’s role in foreign relations: To what extent are Saharawi women involved in international activities with respect to post-conflict reconstruction and with what consequences? Does women’s activism differ from men’s activism in representing the Saharawi government abroad (to engage more productively)? Do men feel threatened or disempowered by the presence of women? What is the overall result in the Saharawi experience of the participation of men and women in the international debate? My impression is that the presence of women in representing the Saharawi cause for independence, through a variety of international diplomatic activities, has been essential to demonstrate the genuine intention of the SADR to promote internal gender balance and to engage in successful state-building practices. This work contributes to that part of the literature that looks at gender mainstreaming in high political roles, particularly in international representation, using the case of Saharawi foreign representatives.
1.2 Methodology

This study draws from empirical material, further explored by secondary literature on Third World and Western Feminism, women and governance, women and conflict, and women in state-building. Most of the written material on Saharawi people was retrieved using internet databases, collections in Australia through the University of Wollongong library and the Amilcar Cabral library in Bologna, Italy. The material selected and used in this study was in English, Italian, Spanish and French, and all translations into English were done by the author. Official Polisario documents, such as legislative bills, are hard to find since the SADR’s government does not run a website. The channel often used by the Polisario to spread information is the ARSO.org website, run by the Association for the Support of a Free and Lawful Referendum in Western Sahara. This study was also informed by EUCOCO’s Conferences websites [European Conference of Coordination and Support to the Sahrawian People], the Mujeres Saharawi blogspot [Saharawi Women], Sahara Press Service website, Sermujeres website, and the Western Sahara Info blogspot. United Nations documents, such as UNSC Resolutions and press releases were also used, along with personal field notes, photos and documents from the refugee camps, Italy, Europe and Australia, collected since 2000 during my association with the Saharawi campaign.

Fieldwork was conducted in Italy and Australia between February and March 2008. The Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong sponsored flights and expenses to Italy where I collected most of my ethnographic material doing interviews (O'Reilly, 2009). Due to time and funding constraints, I focused on a small number of interviews with key Saharawi political representatives who normally live outside the refugee camps. Secondary data from other in-field studies have been used to bridge the gap, especially information relevant to describe the life of Saharawi refugees in the desert camps. Representatives of solidarity associations were also interviewed using almost the same sequence of questions asked to the Saharawi representatives (Appendix II). This was done with the aim to compare views and understandings on gender between the two groups. Overall there were ten participants who have informed this work. The first three interviews were done in Australia; two with activists of the Australian Western Sahara Association (AWSA) and one with the Saharawi political representative. The rest were conducted in Italy, where I spent one month travelling between Rome, Bologna and Ancona: three interviews were conducted with representatives of pro-Saharawi associations working in Italy, two with Saharawi formal political representatives, and two with young Saharawi living in Italy, who
I described as “informal” political representatives. I used the adjective “informal” for these young representatives since their name was not officially listed by the Saharawi Foreign Ministry, as SADR representatives abroad. Nonetheless, they were suggested for the interview by Saharawi official representatives, and their contribution to the Saharawi government is recognised by the Polisario’s representatives in Italy as relevant as their own (see Table 1).  

Table 1: Interviewees table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview n. (Nationality)</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Language spoken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1 (Australian)</td>
<td>Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>Emily F.</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2 (Australian)</td>
<td>Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>Jack F.</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 3 (Saharawi)</td>
<td>Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>Mohamoud A.</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 4 (Saharawi)</td>
<td>Rome, Italy</td>
<td>Marian B.</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 5 (Saharawi)</td>
<td>Rome, Italy</td>
<td>Hasan C.</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 6 (Saharawi)</td>
<td>Rome, Italy</td>
<td>Jamila D.</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 7 (Italian)</td>
<td>Bologna, Italy</td>
<td>Luca G.</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 8 (Italian)</td>
<td>Ancona, Italy</td>
<td>Rita L.</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 9 (Saharawi)</td>
<td>Bologna, Italy</td>
<td>Labibi E.</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 10 (Italian)</td>
<td>Bologna, Italy</td>
<td>Anna M.</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the short length of time spent in collecting interviews for this study (collected between February and March 2008), I had previously made contact with most of the interviewees. Thanks to my own engagement, over a number of years, as an activist for the Saharawi cause, I could contact most of the participants via personal emails. In December 2000, I visited for the first time the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria. This trip was organised by the Polisario representatives in Rome, after I showed an interest in knowing more about the life of Saharawi children in the camps. In 2000, I was involved in the first hosting programs for Saharawi children, *Vacaciones en paz* (Holidays in Peace) held in the Marche region. Subsequently, I held the role of vice-president of the newly established

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1 Jamila D., a young Saharawi who has lived and studied in Rome since the age of ten, did not consider herself as a Polisario “political representative”. I explained to her that in my view she was a representative simply for the fact that the Polisario suggested for me to contact her for my study. Also, as she admitted in the interview that on a number of occasions she had spoken at public events and run informative seminars about Saharawi people in various high schools in Rome (Jamila D., 2008).

2 In Spain, the yearly programme *Vacaciones en Paz* (Holidays in Peace) transports up to 10,000 Saharawi children for the summer months, thereby allowing them to avoid the hottest periods in the camps (when temperatures regularly reach 50°C): Charter planes are organized at least twice a year to allow ‘solidarity’ Spaniards to travel to the refugee camps, including the Spanish host families for the *Vacaciones en Paz*
regional association called Río De Oro. I travelled again to the Algerian city of Tindouf, gateway to the camps, in December 2001 and for two more years I was in charge of the Saharawi children holiday programme in my town, Senigallia. In 2002, I travelled to Austria with a group of Saharawi children to be their interpreter (see Figure 1). Once in Australia, I continued to be involved with the Australian Western Sahara Association (AWSA) participating at their events.

![Figure 1: Photo of Saharawi children in Austria during an exchange for their ‘Vacaciones en Paz’ in Italy (Sonia Rossetti, 26 August 2002)](image)

In order to conduct interviews with refugee people, this study was reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Wollongong (Appendix I). I assured confidentiality, written consent of all my informants, and proofed transcripts of their interviews. In order to ensure privacy and safety to my informants, I covered their programme who visit ‘their’ children in the camps, with several thousand Spaniards arriving en masse in the camps during the Spanish Easter and Christmas vacations. During these visits, and those completed on regular flights (via Algiers with Air Algerie), Spanish visitors bring commodities and cash to ‘their’ Sahrawi families, in addition to having the opportunity to see living conditions in situ’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2009: 337). While visiting these European destinations: ‘The children receive medical examinations and treatment, as well as gifts of clothes, toys, and money which they take back with them to the camps. The relationships established during the program often endure beyond the summer months, as strong proto-familial relationships form between the children and their Spanish host families, and return trips reinforce such cross-border bonds’ (Forced Migration Organization, 2010).
identities using culturally appropriate pseudonyms. The interview technique employed was semi-structured questions, with space and time for diversions in various directions, essentially a “snowballing” model. Questions were formulated on the basis of the material already retrieved and combined with personal experience in the refugee camps of Algeria prior this study. Subjects within associations were chosen for their outstanding work in their organisations and because of their good relations with the Polisario representatives’ abroad. All the participants in this study spoke fluent English or Italian and no translator was needed. All the interviews were conducted in a private and safe environment, and had a friendly and comfortable spirit. Interviewees were provided with a transcript and asked for their corrections, although none chose to alter anything they had said. The transcripts of the interviews have kept the colloquial form and no grammatical changes have been made to the proof-read version.

1.3 Thesis structure

There is a good deal of analysis in English, French, Spanish and Italian on the Western Sahara conflict: its origins (Hodges, 1983), its current organisation within refugee (Tortajada, 2004), the situation in the “occupied territories”, the geopolitics of the conflict (Arts and Leite, 2006; Zoubir, 2006), and the international focus on negotiation tables between Polisario and Morocco (Shelley, 2004; Laschi, no date). Previous published and un-published work looked at the emergence of the Saharawi identity (Rubbi, 2005; Campari, 2007; Caratini, 2003), which grew into a self-conscious nationalism (San Martin, 2005; Hodges, 1983) with a vision of a possible new Saharawi state (Chamberlain, 2005).

Saharawi refugees’ planning towards gender mainstreaming has been widely discussed in the international literature (Lippert, 1992; Olmi, 1998; Baines, 2001; Fiddian-Mendez, 2002; Armstrong, 2008) as will be discussed later. Many agree that Saharawi women have been in control of the refugee camps since their foundation, but some argue that these actions were just used by the Polisario to secure international approval (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2009; San Martin, 2009). In my view, there is no doubt surrounding the large amount of evidence that Saharawi women have worked hard towards the goal of gender equality, not only in the refugee camps but in all aspects of Saharawi politics. However there are still areas which require further investigation. Fiddian for instance points out at the dissatisfaction of those Saharawi women who are not directly involved with the NUSW, and those others
who feel disadvantaged for having spent most of their life studying in Cuba and other ‘third countries’ (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010c).

In order to demonstrate the active participation and the building role of Saharawi women as political representative of the SADR’s government, I will analyse the interplay between Saharawi political representatives abroad and with their counterparts in the host countries (the support association’s representatives). The job of a foreign representative generally requires reportage, negotiation and representation (Nash, 2002: 9), but it all reaches a new dimension if we add that the country Saharawi diplomats represents is in fact a state-in-waiting, refugee, and Muslim. The specific job of a Saharawi representative living abroad is to prompt international discussions on the situation of Western Sahara and gather aid and resources for the refugee camps. In such a controversial position, the role of a woman becomes even more relevant in our analysis of the Polisario’s implementation of gender mainstreaming within high level political roles. With respect to women in high political office Philip Nash (2002) has written of Frances E. Willis, the first woman who held a top Foreign Affairs position as U.S. ambassador in mid 1930s. According to his account, Willis still had to suffer discrimination because of her sex despite reaching a highly regarded international position. She decided not to get married because she felt inappropriate ‘having a husband to trail around [her]’, but on the flip side she did not have anyone helping with the unscheduled important business of ‘stay home all day and address the invitations, arrange the flowers and see to the menu’ (Nash, 2002: 8). In her career she impressed colleagues wherever she went and moreover ‘by all accounts she enjoyed immense popularity in her host countries’(Nash, 2002). Similar questions may be asked with respect to Saharawi women. Have they gained popularity but not equality as political representatives abroad? Is the advancement of the Saharawi-Morocco political impasse more important than the focus on gender roles? Is the promotion of Saharawi women’s interest seen as part of the job a woman representative?

In terms of thesis structure, after this brief introduction and description on the methodology, chapter Two will give a detailed background of the Saharawi people’s history and political organization. This overview is essential to understand the substantial differences between Saharawi and Moroccans, the reasons for the conflict, and the ideology behind the Polisario movement. Throughout this work, the spelling of Saharawi names is taken from the Polisario report to the African Commission on Humans and Peoples’ Rights (Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, 2003).
Chapter Three offers an introduction to Third World and Islamic feminist literature. The idea of promoting gender equality while looking at religious beliefs and different social and cultural traditions has recently expanded in the non-Western feminist literature. As previously mentioned, indicators to measure women’s empowerment in post-conflict situations, as described by the UN, do not properly take into consideration the positive sense of agency that women express in their affiliation with tradition and religion. The specific case of the Saharawi women shows how tradition, culture and religion are a fundamental base for a stable construction of “Good Governance” and can be seen as an expression of gender mainstreaming.

The themes of state-building and the participation of Saharawi women in the process of nation-building are developed in chapter Four. While UNSC Resolution 1325 welcomes women’s participation in the monitoring of post-conflict states, the UN approach in the implementation of gender roles and relations with respect to state/nation-building has been highly criticized. Erin Baines, consultant for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in a study on the performance of UNHCR’s gender equality policies, was in fact very critical of the UN approach of integrating women into already existing humanitarian policies, programmes and agendas without committing for any real change (2004: 3). Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, in their Independent Expert Assessment on the impact of armed conflict on women, and women’s role in peace-building, commissioned by the United Nation Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)(2002), presented numerous cases in which women’s needs and requests were discarded, particularly in decision-making, political space and resources (Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina and East Timor) (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002: 124-125). After a brief discussion of why the SADR can be considered a state-in-waiting, this chapter explores the current transitions undergone by the SADR’s government to build a system of “Good Governance” and promote gender mainstreaming.

Finally, a critical ethnographic approach is used in chapter Five to reveal what type of gender relations within foreign political representation are understood by Saharawi representatives abroad, and how these match with the idea that donors, NGOs and host governments have towards them. Essentially, I develop an insider’s view of the Saharawi representatives understanding of the gender mainstreaming idea in foreign relations. I argue that the role of women as political representatives abroad can enhance the results gained in foreign relations and state-building process, especially where governments have an Islamic system in place.
Chapter Two: Background to Saharawi history and politics

This chapter provides an insight to the case study and introduces a brief historical account of the Western Sahara struggle. The focus is on three key stages of Saharawi history: nomadic life; Spanish colonization; and the Moroccan occupation, with the consequent exodus of Saharawi refugees to Algeria. It concludes with a brief overview of the Saharawi refugee camps and system of governance that highlights contemporary Saharawi political structures and policies on gender. Considering the past and analysing today’s complex political organization of the Saharawi refugees’ camps can help to inform later discussions on the fundamental role played by Saharawi women within refugee camps as advocates for their cause.

2.1 Nomadic origins

2.1.1 The Sahara Region

The word “Saharawi” derives from “Sahara”, which local tribes used to identify the desertic area of Trab Abel el-Sabel (The land of people on the coast) (Melotti, 1999: Part 1, Section 2.0). The Western Sahara region was defined in the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) by the European powers’ division of the African continent and its people. It is situated in northwest Africa, at the edge of the great Sahara desert, facing the Atlantic Ocean. It is bordered to the North by Morocco, South by Mauritania, and East by Algeria.

The original Western Sahara territory, as it existed before the first European invasions in the fifteenth century, did include the mountain chain of oued draa to the North, and the tiris and adrar mountains to the South (Barbier, 1985: 18). It was divided in three major Regions: saguia el hamra, the red river, now the site of the world’s largest phosphate mine (Forced Migration Organization, 2009a), the central mountain region of zemur, and the southern plateau area called Rio de Oro (river of gold) which is more than 400m above sea level (Frente Polisario, 2002: 3; Tortajada, : 43-44; Rubbi, 2005: 6).

Western Sahara is considered rich in mineral resources; in fact, in addition to its extensive phosphate deposits and rich fishing waters off the long coastline, it is believed to harbour substantial iron ore. Numerous oil-exploration studies have also pointed out to the potential of large offshore oil reserves.
2.1.2 Saharawi Tribes

By the end of the thirteenth century, the region was ruled in the North by the *trab el bidan* (white nomads³, *bassaniya* - speaking tribes) (San Martin, 2005: 589, note 20) and neighboured by the *people of the Sultan* (Morocco). Tindouf was the Eastern land of the *Tuarag* while the nearest city South, Timbuktu, was itself shifting between the white *el bidan* and the black people from Mali. The Saharawi people were originally organised in forty tribes, grouped in a set of alliances (*qabila*), which all claimed to descend from the founder *Beni Hassan* and the Prophet Mohammed himself. These tribes were a product of the mixture between *sanhadja* tribes from north-Africa, and the tribal group of the *maquil* (Barbier, 1985: 18; Rubbi, 2005: ch. 1.1.1; Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 96; Laschi, no date: 12) originally from Yemen, but despite their traditional differences, they shared the same religion and the same language: *bassaniya*. Inside, they were socially divided in three major groups. In order of importance there were the warriors (or *zwaya*), the religious ( *chorfa*, or descendents of the Prophet), and the tributary (or *znaga*). At the societal margins were the freed slaves from black Africa (or *barratin*) (Tortajada, 2004: 72), and the *abid* (slaves).⁴ The society was organized around the *ait arbain*, Council of Forty, with one representative from each tribe, whereas each *qabila* had its own assembly called *yemaa*, with legislative, executive and judiciary power (Rubbi, 2005: ch.1.1.1). Berbers used to travel south, to Senegal and Sudan, looking for water and to trade their herds; but this nomadic activity was restricted between the seventh and eighth century, after the Arab invasion. The discovery of gold mines in Sudan turned the Mediterranean territory into a popular slave market. Spain made her first move towards Western Sahara in 1497, prohibiting slave shipping towards the nearby Canary Islands (Hodges, 1983). Her tactic was to peacefully improve exchanges with locals, in order to slowly gain their resources and subjugate them. But when Spain tried to gain more territory in the interior, moving towards the Rio de Oro region, the Saharawi tribes rejected the Catholic invader, calling for *jihad* (Hodges, 1983: 43). It was

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⁴ In May 2009 a controversial documentary was first shown in Australia alleging the perpetuation of slavery in the Saharawi refugee camps (Fadel). According to Tortajada, the *barratin* were black people coming from the South. While their status has no direct equivalent in Western society, they were regarded as part of the family that ‘owned’ them, but apparently they were not treated badly: ‘Quando si spartivano bottini o guadagni, avevano la loro parte, e se volevano festeggiare qualcosa potevano sacrificare un animale del gregge, come gli altri figli’ [When they were splitting up the loot or earnings, they received their part, and if they wanted to celebrate something, they could sacrifice an animal from the herd, like the other sons] (Tortajada, 2004: 73).
only in 1885, under the General Act of the Berlin’s Congress (article 35), that Spain’s claim of a protectorate over Western Sahara was recognised.

2.1.3 Spanish Invasion

Generally speaking, Spain was neglectful towards the autochthonous tribes of the Western Sahara area, whereas the neighbouring French were always looking at ways to extend their borders. In 1934, after several attacks against the Mehrati (French police on camels), Spain signed an accord with France to keep a more formal occupation over its land, introducing military posts and a more restricted form of administration (Rubbi, 2005: ch. 1.2.2). In 1958 the whole region was called Rio De Oro and became the fifty-first Spanish province (Melotti, 1999: Part 1, Section 2.3); three years later, al-Ayoun was established as the territory’s capital. This formal incorporation into the motherland provoked more restrictions on the nomadic life of the Saharawi people, forcing them to settle and become more cohesive. These restrictions not only influenced the de-tribalization process but arguably interfered with and diminished Saharawi women’s rights, which were closely guarded in the nomadic traditions. (Tortajada, 2004: 74; Rubbi, 2005: ch.1.2.2).

In 1964, the UN Decolonization Committee, and two years later the Organisation of Africa Unity (OAU, today’s African Union), urged Spain to initiate a process of decolonization over Western Sahara (Frente Polisario, 2002: 12). These resolutions came after the discovery of phosphate mines in the bou craa region, therefore Madrid at first resisted the process of handing over the territory; thereafter she engaged in a double-sided politics, showing on the one hand support for the self-determination process, and on the other hand working in secret to maintain power over the territory. To keep control over the tribes and contribute to “a new sense of supra-tribal identity” Spain introduced a new administrative body called djemaa (or yemaa), in which only Saharawi people were represented:

However closely supervised it was, by institutionalising the djemaa, introducing an element of voting into selection of members, and by themselves saying it represented the Saharawi as an entity, the Spanish encouraged a supra-tribal concept of self (Shelley, 2006: 33).

This committee was supposed to exercise a consultative power within the Spanish administration, but in reality had restricted activities and was very conservative. In 1974, just prior to withdrawal from the colony, Spain conducted a census over the Western
Sahara population. Results showed that most of the 73,497 people surveyed in the census were urbanized, had overcome tribal differences, and had become more politically cohesive (Barbier, 1985: 22-23). Older people were still shepherds (5.9% of which were women, see Figure 2 below), but a growing number of youths worked in the cities as police officers, merchants and drivers. Even recently, the urbanized and educated Saharawi never accepted the Spanish regime and in the 1970s began demonstrating against the invader. The first Sahara Liberation Movement of Saguia el Hamra wa Oued ed-Dabab was created by journalist Mohamed Sidi Ibrahim Basiri (Shelley, 2006; Forced Migration Organization, 2009b: 5). Under Basiri’s leadership, young Saharawi rebels joined together, and planned attacks against the Spanish colonizer. On the 17 of June 1970 the attack at the Spanish post in the suburb of zamila was brutally stopped by the military, and Basiri became the first desaparecido (disappeared person) in the Saharawi’s history (Barbier, 1985: 25).

Figure 2: Photo of a nomad Saharawi woman with her herd of goats (Sonia Rossetti, December 2001)

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According to the “Frente Polisario” report to the African Commission of human and peoples’ rights, the population of Western Sahara in the Spanish census was 74,963, but in January 2000, the United Nation Mission for the Organization of the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) published a new electorate list with those who will be authorized to vote in the referendum, counting 86,412 people (Frente Polisario, 2002: 4).
2.2 The birth of the Polisario Front

On 10 May 1973, a group of Saharawi students from Rabat, guided by El Ouali Mustapha Sayed, united with the old Basiri fighters, met in a secret congress to form the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y Río de Oro, better internationally known by its acronym POLISARIO (Polisario, or Frente Polisario, hereinafter). Almost a year later, in August 1974, Spain agreed to hold a referendum on the self-determination of Western Sahara. In October 1975, during the ain bentili Congress, representatives of all the old Saharawi tribes proclaimed national unity against the colonizer, and stood under the manifesto of ‘total liberty and sovereignty’ (Hodges, 1983: 163). Even the United Nations recognized the Frente Polisario as the only official representative of the Saharawi people, and started to pressure the Spanish government to draft an internal autonomy plan for the Río de Oro.

2.2.1 Morocco’s claim over Western Sahara

While the UN was acknowledging the Saharawi liberation front, the King of Morocco, Hassan II, was on his quest to have the territory of Western Sahara recognised under Moroccan sovereignty, evoking old expansionist desires to build the “Greater Morocco” (Hodges, 1983: 42). King Hassan, interested in controlling the territory’s phosphate wealth, and extensive fishing resources, first attempted a diplomatic mission around the world looking for supporters; then, he decided to submit the Western Sahara’s territory dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at the Hague, hoping to persuade the United Nations to postpone the Referendum launched by General Franco (Hodges, 1983: 183).

Denying Moroccan and Mauritanian claims, the ICJ gave the Saharawi people the right for self-determination (1975: 12) under Resolution 1514 (XV) on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (1960). The king ignored the ICJ decision and went on to occupy Western Sahara. In November 1975, almost three hundred and fifty thousand Moroccans reached the Northern border of the former Spanish colony, in the so-called Green March, and invaded the territory. Simultaneously, Mauritanian forces were attacking from the South (Laschi, no date: 23-24). A secret “declaration of principles” on Western

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6 El Ouali strongly supported the rejection of tribalism which he saw as a strategy of the European colonizers to divide the Saharawi people. He was also interested in the participation of Mauritania in a Saharawi political federation, but this was made impossible later when they joined the Madrid Accords (San Martin, 2005: 589, note 20).

7 A Saharawi’s analysis on the Hague’s declaration can be found in Es-Sweyih (1998: 19-22).
Sahara, between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania (Madrid Agreement), was signed in Madrid on the 14 November 1975, just a week before General Franco’s death. Under the Madrid Agreement the powers and responsibilities of Spain, as the administering power of the Western Sahara territory, were transferred to a temporary tripartite administration with Morocco, Mauritania and Spain, with significant economic concessions on the exploitation of minerals and fisheries resources of Western Sahara (Hodges, 1983: 223).  

2.2.2 Morocco & Western Sahara

On 27 February 1976, one day after Spain completed her withdrawal from Western Sahara, the Polisario Front, from its exiled post in the Algerian city of Tindouf, proclaimed the birth of a new State, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). While Moroccan Air Forces were dropping napalm bombs over civilians in Western Sahara, the majority of the Saharawi population started a journey through the desert to reach the Algerian borders (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2008: 6). Since January 1976, the Polisario has arranged transport and support to the thousands of people fleeing to the refugee camps, with the help of the Algerian government and the Red Cross. According to Hodges: ‘administered by the Polisario, rather than the Algerian authorities, the camps were acknowledged by foreign charities and relief organizations to be superbly organized’ (1983: 234).

Mauritania withdrew from Western Sahara in 1979, because of severe military attacks and for its own internal instability (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 10), but the war between Morocco and the Polisario Front continued. Between 1981 and 1987, in order to prevent the Saharawi population from leaving the Western Sahara territory and to stop Polisario attacks from the Algerian borders, Morocco built the berms, six sand walls across Western Sahara, and more than two thousands kilometres long. According to the testimony of Saharawi journalist Malainin Lakhal in his tour to Australia:

> The Moroccan military wall (or the wall of shame) is another inhumane outcome of the occupation. It is a 2700km long sand wall that divides the territory of Western Sahara and its people in two from north to south. It is guarded by more than 120,000 Moroccan soldiers, barbed wire and landmines. We walked for three days and three nights in the desert, heading south, thinking about all the probabilities but resolute to die rather than be arrested by the military soldiers. The third day we reached the wall, and managed to cross it unnoticed. After another night walk we reached the territory of Mauritania and managed to get to the nearest city in the north-west of Mauritania.

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8 “The Madrid Agreement did not transfer sovereignty over the Territory, nor did it confer upon any of the signatories the status of an administering Power, a status which Spain alone could not have unilaterally transferred. The transfer of administrative authority over the Territory to Morocco and Mauritania in 1975 did not affect the international status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory” (United Nations Security Council, 2002a: 2, para 6).
Nouadhibou, where we could contact representatives of the Saharawi liberation movement and join the Saharawi camps in August 2000 (2007, September).

This account is supported by the Polisario and the Norwegian Refugee Council. Moroccan Air Force (Frente Polisario, 2002: 14; Rubbi, 2005: ch.1.3; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2008: 9). Morocco continues to occupy Western Sahara west of the *berms*.

### 2.2.3 UN Peace Treaty

In 1991, under the recommendation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations, the king of Morocco Hassan II and SADR president Mohamed Abdelaziz, signed a cease-fire. The settlement plan provided a transitional period in which the UN would have to organize and conduct a referendum to decide on the independence of Western Sahara from Morocco. Since the peace treaty, the Polisario has freely administered the Western Sahara territory east and south of the *berm*, commonly known as the *Free Zone*. Tifariti, the principal city of the *Free Zone*, is forty miles away from the wall, and nine hours’ drive from the Algerian city of Tindouf, but Pederson (2007) notes:

In the past few years, a number of Spanish organizations have provided financial and material support to build two hospitals in preparation for an eventual referendum, but apart from that, there is very little else. The area is known to be of great archaeological interest, with many cave paintings and Neolithic sites. Between 10,000 and 30,000 Saharawis continue practising a nomadic pastoral life in the area despite the constant danger presented by landmines (Forced Migration Organization, 2010).

The UN Mission for the Referendum – *Mission des Nations Unies pour l'Organisation d'un Référendum au Sahara Occidental* - (MINURSO) has worked since 1991 from its outposts in Western Sahara, with no great results, and allegedly causing serious damage to the *laajad* archaeological sites in the Saharawi liberated territories (see Figure 3). Spray paint graffiti attributed to MINURSO peacekeepers damaged invaluable prehistoric drawings in local caves (Sahara Press Service, 2008a).
Figure 3: Map of the MINURSO’s team sites in Western Sahara (United Nations, 2010)
In this Saharawi-governed area of Western Sahara, which comprise of about one fifth of the total territory, are based the Saharawi Popular Liberation Army (SPLA) and various MINURSO’s team sites (see Figure 3). A lack of infrastructure and resources (principally water), and the risk of renewed conflict still prevents Saharawi refugees from settling in this area (Brooks, 2005: 414). Despite the hypothetical danger, delegations of Saharawi supporters from all over the world are daily taken by Saharawi officials to visit the liberated area of Western Sahara. Emily F., one of Australian Western Sahara Association’s representatives interviewed in this study, visited the Free Zone in 2004:

We visited…an army camp in which the young soldiers were… No..., the young boys who do their compulsory service, were having their period of training. And…we travelled a lot. We went to Tifariti, so we actually went into the territory, the real Western Saharan territory and we also, on that trip, looked at archaeological sites, and in that location we had people to talk about that. We went through the desert and met people who've been living there in the unoccupied zone. […] We drove as close as we could to the Wall and could see Moroccan soldiers, as well as evidence of landmines and shelling (Emily F., 2008).

It is however almost impossible for Saharawi supporters to freely enter the Moroccan occupied territory of Western Sahara without being stopped and interrogated by Moroccan police.

2.2.4 Brief summary of the last ten years of impasse

In September 1997, Morocco and Polisario signed the so called Houston Accords under the mediation of UN Secretary General’s Personal Envoy to the Western Sahara, James Baker. This clarified the criteria and the process in defining eligibility to vote and practicalities in order to organise the self-determination referendum. In 2000, MINURSO published the definitive list of persons eligible to vote but Morocco in response lodged more than twelve thousand appeals against it. Subsequently, in June 2001, Baker presented his first settlement plan to the parties, the Framework Agreement, in which the referendum for self-determination would have been replaced by a vote on limited autonomy. Under this plan, Morocco would have had control over the territory while Saharawi would only have exclusive competence over local issues. The framework was accepted by Morocco, but rejected by the Polisario (Security Council Report Website). A year later, the UN Security Council rejected again Baker’s suggestion of four options for the resolution of the conflict, which have not been agreed by the parties, and forced him to produce a new plan, Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the people of Western Sahara (Plan II), which was adopted in July 2003 by the Security Council with UNSC Resolution 1495. It suggested a transitional
period of autonomy of four to five years under Moroccan administration, followed by a referendum for self-determination. Surprisingly, the Polisario accepted the plan, whereas Morocco rejected it because of the inclusion of a ballot at the end of the five years. According to Zoubir and San Martin, Morocco worried about the growing dissidence of the Moroccan settlers in Western Sahara (Zoubir, 2006: 286). After this latest defeat, James Baker resigned as UN Secretary General Personal Envoy, and people in Western Sahara, frustrated by the situation, began an uprising in the occupied Western Sahara and in Moroccan Universities, the Saharawi Intifada (Copete, 2006). The widely recorded and reported repressions by Morocco of protests in Western Sahara, had massive repercussions in “the formal colonial power” (Spain), as San Martin reports (2005: 585). Delegations for human rights from all over the world attempted to reach the occupied territories, or invite the Moroccan government to explain its actions. Following these insurrections, in July 2005 Kofi Annan nominated Peter van Walsum as his personal envoy. The Dutch envoy immediately suggested the UN take a step back in order to favour direct negotiations between the parties. Put under pressure, a month later the Polisario announced the release of the last four hundred Moroccan prisoners-of-war from its camps.

In June 2007, Morocco and Polisario held talks in Manhasset, outside New York. This was the first direct meeting between the parties since the year 2000. The Polisario stated its readiness to consider the newly introduced Moroccan autonomy plan, but insisted on keeping the referendum on self-determination as the option for independence; Morocco, on the other hand, seemed ready only to offer autonomy and not self-determination (Security Council Report Website). After the meeting, Van Walsum submitted a report on the status and progress of the first round of negotiations. He noted that the two parties remained far apart on the definition of self-determination, despite having accepted Resolution 1754 (September 2007). A year later, after four rounds of talks in Manhasset, Van Walsum suggested moving away from the two proposals presented by the parties, and instead to go forward on the temporary assumption that there would be no referendum that included independence as an option. His conclusions were controversial and threatened to divide the UN Security Council. They were not reflected in the Secretary-General’s report in April, and were not taken up by the Security Council (Security Council Report Website). His contract expired and it was not renewed. In January 2009, the new

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9 Carlos Ruiz Miguel, gives an in-depth analysis of the Moroccan Autonomy plan under international law (Miguel, 2007a)
UN Secretary General (UNSG), Ban Ki Moon, appointed Christopher Ross as his Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, an experienced Arabic-speaking former US diplomat, a choice greatly welcomed by the Saharawi refugees. Later that year MINURSO was extended for a further year, and extended again in May 2010, after talks in February in New York between Morocco and the Polisario had again stalled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>James Baker appointed Personal Envoy to the Western Sahara.</td>
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<td>September 1997</td>
<td>Huston Accords.</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>MINURSO definitive list of persons eligible to vote.</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>UN Security Council rejected James Baker’s.</td>
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<td>July 2003</td>
<td>The Peace Plan for the Self-Determination, Baker’s Plan II.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2004</td>
<td>James Baker resigned.</td>
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<td>May 2005</td>
<td>Start of the ‘Saharawi Intifada’</td>
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<td>July 2005</td>
<td>Peter van Walsum, appointed as UNSG’s Personal Envoy to the Western Sahara.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 2005</td>
<td>Polisario released all Moroccan prisoners-of-war</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2007</td>
<td>First talks in Manhasset (NY)</td>
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<td>August 2008</td>
<td>Van Walsum’s contract expired and it was not renewed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 2009</td>
<td>Christopher Ross, appointed as UNSG’s Personal Envoy for Western Sahara</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td>MINURSO mission extended for one more year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2009</td>
<td>Four weeks hanger strike of Saharawi activist Aminatou Haidar, in the Canary Island</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2010</td>
<td>Informal talks between Morocco and Polisario in New York</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2010</td>
<td>MINURSO mission extended for one more year.</td>
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2.3 Saharawi refugee camps

Today’s reality for Saharawi people is life in the desert. The refugees fled from their bombarded country to settle in refugee camps in Algeria, wholly dependent on assistance provided by the Algerian government, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and various European Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). These agencies provide the camps with the necessary food supplies, and living goods such as kitchens, tents, schools, furniture, and hygiene materials (Fiddian, 2002: 3-4).
Although the UN has a definition of who can be considered a refugee (UNHCR, 2007a), not every case of mass exodus can be given a refugee connotation. The condition of refugee groups can change depending on the evolution of the causes of displacement, on changes made by the hosting country, or on decisions made by international organizations. The reality of single refugees is even more difficult to predict. Some flee away from refugee camps temporarily or permanently, others may decide to return to their home countries, others stay refugees for an indefinite period of time. International refugee law makes no specific reference to the size of camps and settlements in which refugees should be accommodated (Crisp and Jacobsen, 1998: 28). According to the UNHCR, an established refugee settlement should be self-supportive in its land settlement and, should build its infrastructure, promote a sense of community, and integrate into the larger social, political and economic life of the host country (Black, 1998). Saharawi refugee camps cannot be considered self-supportive settlements since they are extremely dependent 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 [...] Algeria, as the host country, is not willing to resettle the refugees formally on its soil barring a solution to the conflict, nor have the refugees expressed a willingness to return to Western Sahara while it is still under Moroccan occupation. Thus they remain in a thirty-year-old state of emergency (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 128-129).

Despite their refugee condition, the Sahara desert represents for the Saharawi people an ideological space for the development of their cultural “revolution” (or Saharawi Perestroika as per Shelley, 2004: 179), it “provide 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 launched by Bassiri and Louali” (San Martin, 2005: 569). Pablo San Martin (2005: 570) along with Saharawi author Fadel Ismail Sayed (2001) believes that since the very early days of exile the Polisario has worked to create an “ordered society” which could sustain a future Saharawi state in the occupied Western Sahara territory. For these reasons, the Sahara desert cannot be considered a “non-place” as suggested by Rubbi (2005). The normalisation of life in the refugee camps, which occurred after the ceasefire with Morocco in 1991, contributed and strengthened the building of the SADR political and administrative structure. Symbols became essential in developing a new

10 “Saharawi refugees recall the first years in which the camps took shape as the time of the ‘Social Revolution or ‘Saharawi Revolution’ (San Martin, 2005: 569)

11 More extensive reading on the anthropological concept of refugee camps as a ‘non-place’ can be found in Barbara Harrel-Bond’s extensive production and Michel Agier, On the Margins of the World: The Refugee Experience Today (2008).
Saharawi national identity (San Martin, 2005) and a concept of citizenship (Campari, 2007: 31). The introduction of a national currency, the presence of official buildings (schools, medical dispensaries, councils, food distribution centres, a national war museum, and Rabuni’s “Protocol”) and the developing of some form of economic activity (Shelley, 2004: 175, note 28).13

The refugee camps’ structure has been more or less the same during the exile. Spread over an area of more than two hundreds kilometres in the hammada desert lie four major camps. The UNHCR and WFP estimated that in early 2000 there were approximately 165,000 people living in the desert, but according to Ángeles Sánchez Díez, the total Saharawi population dispersed between Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania14 and third countries is around 265,000 people (2007: 8). In order to maintain a link with the original territory, the four camps (also called wilaya, or provinces) were named after the cities of Western Sahara: el ayoun (the capital city), smara15, dakhla and aoussar. Each wilaya (province) is divided into six or seven municipalities called daira, which are 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 those built for the three major boarding schools: the 12th of October, the 9th of June which was destroyed by flood in 2006, and the 27th of February, a women’s vocational school.16

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12 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 twenty times less than the current Algerian Dinar (2005: 573). I personally had problems when buying Saharawi traditional goods in the camps and I was informed by Saharawi officials of the difference in value exchange.

13 For an in-depth analysis of the constitutive elements of the Saharawi Republic (territory, population and government) please refer to Es-Sweyih (1998)

14 According to Shelley there are twenty to thirty thousand Saharawi in Mauritania (Shelley, 2004).

15 In San Martin can be seen a very detailed drawing of the Smara camp, made by a Saharawi boy who participated in the study (San Martin, 2005: 578).

16 All names evoke a significant date in Saharawi history. For more details on recent demographic data see Fiddian (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2009-28).
Almost 20km South-East of the Algerian city of Tindouf is the first Saharawi outpost, Rabouni, commonly called the “Protocol”. This area of the old Hassi Robinet, linked to the airport by a straight paved road:

 [...] is home to the largest state facilities. It houses the central hospital, the pharmaceutical manufacturing facility, the broadcast tower for the ministry of information, the presidential offices, and open-air military museum and the reception point for foreign visitors to the camps (Chamberlain, 2005: 22).

The Protocol (see Figure 5) is also the place where one can find central offices of non-governmental organisations and associations such as the Saharawi Families of Prisoners and Disappeared association (AFAPREDESA), the Saharawi Red Crescent (SRC) depots, and various Saharawi Unions, as well as humanitarian NGOs and international solidarity associations (San Martin, 2009: 259).
2.3.1 Understanding the Saharawi system of governance

There were twenty-five dairas at the time of writing in the Saharawi refugee camps. Each daira (municipality), for purposes of political guidance, is internally organized into cells of eleven/fifteen people (al-khaliyah) headed by the arifat.

The cells help to maintain communication with the Polisario. Every two years, the community is called to meet at a Popular Base Congress to vote for the daira’s Popular Council which runs the districts (bayy) (Mundy, 2007: 286). Each Council has five
Specialized Camp Committees (lajnah): Education, Health, Justice, Food and Art craft.

All the daira’s Popular Council’s Presidents, and all the specialized departments’ directors, are part of the wilaya’s (provincial) Popular Council, while the Orientation Department represents the daira’s Popular Council’s Presidents and all the cell’s political commissaries (Melotti, 1999: Part 1, Section 3.2). Every three years, the representatives of the Popular Councils are called to the Polisario General Congress to elect their Secretary-General who is also the President of the Republic (Frente Polisario, 1999: Art.51).

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**Figure 7: Diagram of the SADR general congress (Rossetti, 2008)**

They also elect members of the National Assembly (the legislative branch) (Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, 2003: 28) with a eighteen months mandate. After the congress the President appoints the Prime Minister17 (Art.53 of Constitution 1999) who chairs the government’s Council and insures the implementation of programmes, laws and regulations (Es-Sweyih, 1998; Frente Polisario, 1999: Art. 64). The minister of interior nominates the wilayas’ governors, called wali (Mundy, 2007: 286) who enjoy a decentralized management since ‘its units are managed by a wilaya people’s council elected by secret and direct vote’ (Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, 2003: 29).

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17 The Constitutional changes introduced in 1999 called for multiparty democracy and a free-market economy, and also the right to the Parliament to give a vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister.
Though this is a complex and developed government structure, many NGOs’ representatives interviewed in this study were unaware of the full extent of the Saharawi’s governmental system. For instance, the former president of the Australian Saharawi Support Association (AWSA) said he did not have a clear idea of the exact structure of the Polisario and SADR, despite having worked side by side with the Polisario representative abroad and visited the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria:

> I am a lawyer and a constitutional and public lawyer, but I haven’t got a clear idea in my head of the exact structure of the Polisario and the SADR, the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic, which are two, if you like, separate, on one perception, organizations, but in fact very closely aligned because it is the Polisario leadership that effectively is the political leadership of the Republic which runs the camps and...is, as we continue to tell people a significant government in exile, it runs a government in the camps, which has a form of parliament which is elected, and to which women are elected, and there are some women ministers I understand. My understanding is that the various camps, and there are at least four, arguably five of them, have governors and we met the governor of one of those camps: Smara, I think it was. And those governors are effectively the elected heads, who run the camps with large numbers of people (Jack F., 2008).

On the other hand, Mohammed A., the Saharawi political representative in Australia, who gave a very detailed description of the Saharawi National Council’s election when asked in this study:

> The National Council, the Saharawi National Council. It is elected, direct election, secret ballot by the population, the Saharawi population every three, four years. It is constitute of 53 members and it...has a president, deputy president and committees in different fields: defence, foreign affairs, economy committee and its main task is to monitor, supervise the work of the government and the Saharawi institution in general and it adopts, discusses the program that is presented by the government, suggest changes to it and adopts it. And after adoption it continues to monitor the progress of that program of the government. It has the right to pass the motion of no confidence in the government and it has done that in the past. It has the right, in the constitution, to ask members of the government to come for the National Council, the Parliament, and ask questions. The members, individually, have the right of oral and written questions to the government. In its works also it can set up enquiries, and it can ask any executive in the refugee camps to come and answer
questions and talk about its work to the members of the Parliament. It has the right also to initiate laws and adopt them in different fields. I think there are many article in the constitution, which outline clearly and in detail the role of the National, Sahara National Council or Parliament, and how it is elected, the committee it has, how it works and all its function. (Mohammed A., 2008).

Generally, people who have become acquainted with the Saharawi situation from their home countries wish to visit the refugee camps in the desert in order to develop a better understanding of the Saharawi complex system of living. Every year, especially during the desert’s winter, delegations of supporters from all over the world fly to Tindouf in Algeria to reach the Saharawi camps in the desert. In Jack F.’s case a visit to the camps did not result in a better understanding of the full extent of the SADR’s political structure. This is not unusual. It is in fact easy to imagine a government-in-exile which operates in an unpleasant area and with limited resources to be somehow “backwards” or unorganised. Other times, the lack of knowledge on the Saharawi political structure is simply the result of a genuine lack of interest, time, or language resources from these visitors to the camps. Luca G. from the Italian association _El Ouali per la libertà del Sahara Occidentale_, when asked about his understanding of the Saharawi political structure said:

_Conosco il Fronte Polisario che è l’organo politico che gestisce la causa Saharawi. Non seguo direttamente in nell’associazione gli aspetti politici in quanto ci sono associati più competenti di me. E quindi non sono la persona più adatta per rispondere a questa domanda (Luca G., 2008)._ 

[I know the Polisario Front which is the political body that deals with the Saharawi cause. Personally, in the association, I don’t follow the political aspect since there are other associates more competent than me. Therefore I am not the best person to answer this question.]

The relatively complex political organisation, coupled with misinformation can trigger misconceptions in the real value of the Saharawi political structure, even in those people who are committed to helping the Saharawi reach a solution. Again, Jack F. noted that during a formal lunch in the Saharawi camps, where the Australian delegation was invited to dine with the Saharawi President Mohammed Abdelaziz: ‘there was no Saharawi woman present at the lunch’ (Jack F., 2008) despite their delegation being represented by a large number of women (one of whom was Meredith Burgmann, former president of the New South Wales Legislative Council of Australia) as if Saharawi women were not welcomed at official lunches. In this instance Jack F. probably overlooked the Saharawi/Islamic etiquette of eating, in which guests are served family-style and there is usually little conversation during meals so that diners may relish the food. Jack F. also did not notice, as had Emily F., that Saharawi women are so important in the camps that they do no waste time on being “window dressing”: 
I think women have every opportunity to participate and they do. And they're active at all level of the society, and that's obvious just looking around the camps [...] I think the position of women I didn't know about, because I read but I didn't appreciate, until I saw them in action, that the women were so … formidable, 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 feisty, and they were…extremely well informed (Emily F., 2008).

This is only an example to show how informed participation is essential in the creation of relations between Saharawi foreign representative abroad and international associations.

2.3.2 Examples of women’s political representation in the camps

The complex structure of the local government has created multiple opportunities for women to be represented in the democratic process (Melotti, 1999: Part 1, section 3.0). In 1987, Lippert noted that women represented between seventy and eighty percent of the daira’s\(^\text{18}\) Popular Councils, forty-five to seventy percent of the wilaya’s Popular Councils, and over fifty percent in the National Popular Congress (1992: 645). Due to this high representational base, many of the local and national policies were influenced by women, including those regarding the institution of military training for women, the establishment of women’s boarding schools, and the approval for the participation of the women to be a cadi (judge) on a judicial committee to settle family differences (Lippert, 1992: 645)\(^\text{19}\). Association representatives visiting the camps also noted the highly representational base of women in camp administration:

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 F., 2008).

In December 2007, during the twelfth Polisario Congress, three women were given Ministerial status: Jadiya Hamdi, Minister of Culture (already responsible for Information and Culture in the NUSW); Mariam Salek Hamada, Minister for Education and Teaching; and Baida Embarec Rahal (Mahfudha Rahal), as Secretary of State for Welfare and Women’s Advancement (Mujeresaharauis blogspot, 2008). In 2008, Saharawi women represented thirty-five percent of the SADR government (Sahara Press Service, 2008b), the same as Belgium (35%), Norway and Spain (36%), a great success considering that today’s

\(^{18}\) 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 haya (neighbourhoods).

\(^{19}\) For in-depth reading on Saharawi political system please refer to Mohamed-Fadel Ismail Es-Sweyih (1998: 44-53).
Hong Kong legislative government has fifteen percent female representation (2008) and Australia is up to twenty percent (New Zealand Ministry of Social Development, 2009).

2.4 Conclusions

International bodies (UNHCR, 2007b) and academic scholars (Lippert, 1992; San Martin, 2005: 568) have praised Saharawi people for their social and political organization since the very early years of exile. The restricted life-space, and the reduction of freedom experienced in refugee camps has pushed Saharawi women to generate networking and to initiate activities. Since the early nomadic origins, throughout the Moroccan occupation, Saharawi women have worked side by side with the Polisario, fought to gain a high level of literacy in the refugee camps, create infrastructures and services for the elderly, disabled and children. They are today responsible for running local and regional government structures, neighbourhood committees, schools, medical centres and food distribution. In the next chapter I will explore theories of Women of the Third World and Islamic feminism in order to frame the advancement towards gender mainstreaming achieved so far by Saharawi women by keeping in consideration their traditional and religious culture.
Chapter Three: The influence of Third World and Islamic Feminism issues on Saharawi women

3.1 Women in war-torn societies

Post-conflict societies have many different features which have been investigated by political scientists. A large portion of the Western argument focuses on the idea that these new entities must be analysed as “failing or fragile” states. Others, such as Charles Call and Elizabeth Cousens (2007: 8), have argued that in places of long term displacement, local authorities can help re-establish post-war stability, introduce changes in traditional roles, and give new responsibilities to women (see also Behera, 2006: 47). In fact, the international urge to establish security and the broader political order in post-conflict situations may result in obscuring the role of informal or traditional institutions. According to the authors of the International Peace Academy Publication, Ending wars and building peace: coping with crisis, traditional institutions: ‘may be key channels for public service delivery as well as critical actors in re-establishing post-war stability and social reconciliation’ (Call and Cousens, 2007: 9). For instance, Hilary Charlesworth, director of the Centre for International Governance and Justice at the Australian National University, in a presentation for the international conference on Civil Society, Religion & Global Governance, focused on several limitations carried on by the project of gender mainstreaming initiated by the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) because of a lack of affinity with the East Timorese culture:

The sense that equality for women is a type of luxury and inappropriate in societies in transition is a common one, although it ignores the well-established link between empowerment of women and the well-being of a society. Whenever arguments of ‘culture’ or ‘tradition’ are invoked to argue against women’s rights, I think we need to ask whose culture is being invoked and what political uses are being made of that culture (Charlesworth, 2005b: 4).

The Fourth Arab Human Development Report – UNDP (2006: 6), clearly states that Western imposed agendas to reform internal country dynamics, specifically in Arab Countries, has provoked a reaction against westernised views of women’s empowerment goals. According to the report, some segments of these Arab societies now consider strategies suggested by the Millennium Development Goals’ declaration (MDG) as: ‘a simultaneous violation of

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20 The Fund for Peace’s Failed State Index (FSI) proposes as the solution for all failed states the strengthening of five “core” institutions, three of which—the military, the police and the justice system—directly reflect a concern for order and stability (Foundforpeace.org, 2009).
Arab culture and national independence’. Traditional social conditions are very important in Arab societies, but to fully understand the complexity of changes in gender relations and women’s rights in Muslim societies we must look beyond the binary of tradition and modernity. The traditional role of women as leaders of the frig (group of families) has been successfully used by Saharawi people to enable a relatively quick transition to mainstreaming of gender roles in the SADR’s political leadership. This chapter will explore the literature of Third World and Islamic feminists to better understand these issues in the broader context of Saharawi nationalism and government’s organisation. After a brief introduction to Third World and Islamic feminist perspectives, I will analyse in depth the Saharawi’s moderate Islamic tradition and culture. Recent studies (Allan, 2008; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010a) have highlighted contrapositions to this ideal model of gender mainstreaming, but the main focus of this work is on demonstrating the high level of participation of Saharawi women in political roles and grassroots movements.

3.2 A ‘Third World’ feminist perspective

An assumption that characterized much of the radical feminist discourse that evolved in the 1980s was that women, as a category of analysis, were somehow socially constituted as a “homogeneous group” (Bulbeck, 1998: 9; Mohanty, 2003). This idea of a “universal sisterhood” was introduced by Western feminist Robin Morgan, to overcome early criticisms by “women of color” of race-based oppression against women (Johnson-Odim, 1991; Bhavnani and Coulson, 2003: 74). Morgan in her *Sisterhood is global: the international women’s movement anthology* (1984) assumed the existence of an “ahistorical” universal sisterhood based on the shared opposition to andro-centrism. On the contrary, the post-modern/post-colonial feminist discourse,21 which developed in the early 1990s, moved away from this unifying concept and underlined the claim that women should be situated in a specific social, economic, cultural, historical, political and religious context for analysis, and not just presented as “the oppressed or the powerless”. This new feminist context, presented as “Third World feminism”, introduced a shift from a global perspective of women’s unity across cultures, to women: ‘networking across local specificities toward universal objectives’ (Mohanty, 2003: 120, emphasis added). This meant that women were able to find more common ground across regions, politics, religions and issues. The expression “Third World”, despite being inexact due to its many different meanings

(Bulbeck, 1998), was largely used by the feminist literature which studied the after-effects of colonisation (Rai, 1996; Waylen, 1996). According to post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, the term Third World was coined after the Second World War for those countries that were: ‘neither with the Eastern nor within the Western bloc’ (Spivak, 1990: 270). Others, preferred to define Third World geographically; Bhavnani refers to countries like Africa and Asia (excluding Japan), Latin America and the Middle East (2003: 78); while Mohanty, with a more extensive view, adds Latin America, the Caribbean, South Africa, China and Oceania, and black and indigenous people (1991). Cheryl Johnson-Odim used the term “Third World” to refer to:

Underdeveloped'/overexploited geopolitical entities, i.e. countries, regions, even continents; and to refer to oppressed nationalities from these world areas who are now resident in ‘developed’ First World countries (Johnson-Odim, 1991: 314-315; see also Narayan, 1997: 4).

It is not the aim of this study to deepen the debate on “Third Worldism”, especially with regard to economic terms, but simply to use a renewed Third World feminist approach to better explain how gender, race and class have become: ‘inseparable determinants of inequalities’ (Chow, 1996: xix). Africanist scholar Oyèrónké Oyewumi, says that Western Feminism failed to recognise that ‘African societies, and Third world societies in general, could live under different gender relations from the ones “white women” were battling for’ (Oyewumi, 2003a: 28). Oyewumi continues saying that Western writing on Africa has given:

[...] The projection of a powerful myth of Africa as a homogeneous, unitary state of primitivism. The characterization of a vast continent of diverse nations and peoples as if it were one village can be termed the “villagization of Africa.” The “Othering” of this homogenized collectivity is done in binary opposition to the West. Because Africa has been projected as that which the West is not, it becomes absolutely necessary to impose an appropriate identity on the homogenized mass. To be sure there are commonalities among Africa’s cultures, nations, states, and peoples; however, sources of diversity are so many that scholars should be cautious, if not wary, of making overly generalize statements' (Oyewumi, 2003b: 39-40).

Western scholars’ dominant assumptions on the Third World have influenced most gender mainstreaming studies, therefore today’s Third World feminism calls international scholars to look at inter-gender and intra-gender relations, under the light of race, regional origins and religion.

3.3 Islam in the “common struggle”

Western feminism has recently accepted the need to look at religious identity under the framework of “common struggle”, but it still maintains a widely-held attitude against
Muslim women. Generally Western feminism takes the view that Muslim women are oppressed because of their religion, without making further distinction of country, region, class or community (Mahmood, 2005; Hilsdon and Rozario, 2006: 332). In response to this relaxed attitude that: ‘neither accounts for the diversity of women’s global experiences, nor integrates many elements of the more local and/or indigenous cultures’ (Marcotte, 2006: 148), Islamic feminism arrived as a pan-Islamic response to the West, and became a global phenomenon since late 1980s. The Islamic feminist movement, inspired by Third World feminist writings and collective actions (Moghadam, 2002a: 1164), was firstly framed by Kumari Jayawardena, in Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World as a: ‘local national liberation and religious reform movements’ (Badran, 2002). Today’s Islamic literature is still divided on the actual definition of the term “Islamic feminism”: some consider it an oxymoron (Moghissi, 1999: 134), others believe it to be an innovative and indigenous response to the problem of women’s status (Badran, 2005). The majority of scholars who support Islamic feminism (Tohidi, 1991; Badran, 2005; Mahmood, 2005) say that its arguments are grounded in Islam and its teachings, particularly in the investigation of religious sources and interpretation of the Qu’ran. Generally, the scope of the Islamic feminist discourse is to give women an Islamic way to understand gender equality, social opportunity and their own potential (Badran, 2002; Badran, 2006). The current debate within Islamic feminist movements shows how women, through their own interpretation of religion, culture and modernity, have begun to use Islamic sacred scripture to inform their own subjectivity (Badran, 2005):

Examples of local forms of Islamic feminist activism include demands for women to hold the positions of judge, mufti (officials who issues religious rulings), and ma’dhun (an official who register marriages) in Egypt. Another example is the demand by both men and women in South Africa that women be permitted to share the main mosque space in parallel groups rather than being relegated to the back or an upper floor during congregational prayer. As the intellectual discourse of Islamic Feminism spreads, so too will these localized forms of activism (Badran, 2000).

3.3.1 Islamic feminism and the Iranian debate

We may gain a better understanding of the strong connection between gender, political affiliation, class and Muslim belief from examining the way the Iranian internal debate on Islamic feminism developed in the late 1990s. Left wing scholars, who supported the 1979 Khomeini revolution against the Shah’s “Westernized” model of monarchy, took a very

22 In Iran, Islamic Feminism was first introduced by scholars' writing in a Teheran women's journal called Zanan (see Afsaneh Najmabadeh and Ziba Mir-Hosseini in Badran, 2002); to follow were Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and South Africa post-apartheid.
prominent position on the later debate about the achievement and definition of Islamic feminism in Iran (Moghadam, 2002b). This group of intellectuals did support low/middle class profile women (traders, merchant, shopkeepers and artisans), who felt ‘excluded, isolated, and put down by the Western dominant culture which disrespected their Muslim principles and traditions’ (Tohidi, 1991: 257). But soon after the revolution, it became clear that that Khomeini was not simply going to be a spiritual leader. His severe theocratic government pushed those who originally supported a more moderate Islamic Iran into exile, to escape torture and incarceration. Only in early 1990s, after Khomeini’s death, reforms were introduced to support women’s participation in both public areas and the legal system, and by 1997 a ‘broad-based social movement for the reform of the Islamic Republic’ pressed for the election of a liberal cleric president: Mohammad Khatami (Moghadam, 2002a: 1141). Nayareh Tohidi was one of those expatriate leftist scholars (along with Afsaneh Najmabadi and Ziba Mir-Hosseini) educated in the West, who lately converted to a renewed gender discourse. During her fieldwork in Iran, Tohidi experienced consequences of Khomeini’s radical Islamic state. She saw how reforms had made the country slide backwards, not only under human rights but also economically with the increase on women’s unemployment. In her studies, looking at Kandiyoti’s concept of “bargaining with patriarchy” (1988), Tohidi argues that despite the situation, post-revolution Iranian women were able to re-negotiate gender roles and codes in order to find ‘a path of compromise and creative synthesis’ (as cited in Moghadam, 2002b: 27).

Not all Iranian scholars were supportive of this new feminist approach. So called ‘Muslim secular feminists’, such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed (Ahmed, 1997), Hale Afshar (1996) and Haideh Moghissi (1999), prefer to use arguments outside of faith to counter gender inequality, such as international conventions and global discourses, and are strongly opposed to what they consider to be an Islamist’s regressive and patriarchal definition of religion. Rachel Woodlock, in her study about the issue of women's veiling as an important part of “the woman question” in late twentieth century in Muslim feminists, says that: ‘Mernissi and Ahmed took historical approaches to the issue of women's equality in Islam that relied heavily on western feminist-inspired readings (in particular, for Mernissi) and orientalist scholarship (in particular, for Ahmed)” (2000).

Despite these criticisms Islamic feminism is described by insiders as a: ‘movement of women who have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using female-supportive verses of the Qur'an in their fight for women’s
rights’ (Moghadam, 2002a: 1147). The re-introduction of Islamic values, and the option for reinterpreting both the Qur’an and hadith,\(^{23}\) has allowed women to acquire legitimacy (Hilsdon and Rozario, 2006: 332) and has gained them significant improvements in access to public spaces and roles which were previously denied (Mahmood, 2005).\(^{24}\)

### 3.3.2 Today’s Islamic feminism in a globalised context

The Islamic feminist discourse has recently risen in the Arab world due to the increased number of well educated and socially active Muslim women who choose to adopt Islamic values and practices, and to promote religiosity as a significant component of their identity (Tohidi, 2003: 136). Shirin Edwin in her study on the representation of the hijab (the veil) in three African novels argues that:

> Not only do African\(^{25}\) Muslim women choose to practice Islam by consciously and voluntarily situating themselves as agents of Islamic practice, but, in so doing, they, in fact, embody leadership, education, independence and consequently a re-affirmation of their religious identity (Edwin, 2008).

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood, in her study of female representation in Egyptian Mosques, argues that religious Muslim women seek something different than the secular idea of agency, which is then built on liberal ideas of resistance, autonomy, and self-fulfilment. The *habitus* which informs the agency of her participants is interpreted as the relationship between the individual and the community, and being part of a community becomes an aspect of the personal agency (Mahmood as in Jamal, 2008: 124). In her view, Bourdieu’s *habitus*, comprises: ‘cultural structures or social predispositions that condition an individual’s mind and body, and thus her subjectivity’ (Mahmood as in Jamal, 2008: 123).

This example shows that assertions of autonomy in the Third World do not always reflect the *struggle* as the fight for Westernised liberal ideas. Islamic feminists for instance, challenge the secular-liberal idea that: ‘all human beings have an innate desire for freedom,

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\(^{23}\) Jurisprudential sentences ‘Gender bias in juristic interpretations is not built on sacred texts of indisputable authority, but, rather, on differing interpretations of the content, substance, forms and views of multiple writings and sayings in the collective memory of society. It is also based on customs and traditions that have been consolidated to preserve a specific order for the family and society. General principles of interpretation enable us to infer the broad outlines of a social system that responds to the objectives accepted by the Islamic community in order to live a life of interdependence and consensus, while recognising the equality of all human beings, males and females’(UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, 2006: 13).

\(^{24}\) In this instance the role of Saharawi women as judges would not be supportable without the context of an Islamic legal framework.

\(^{25}\) Edwin in this article talks about some East African countries such as Senegal, Mali, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Cameroon.
that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them’ (Mahmood, 2005: 5). Therefore, an analysis on gender mainstreaming which did not take into consideration the origins and beliefs of the society in which the process is applied, will not produce effective results. It is common to presume that Islam is practiced in the same way in all different Muslim countries, but the reality is that Muslim practices are also influenced by their specific cultural, religious and “indigenous” grounds. This requires a theoretical approach which does not simply attempt to treat Islamic women as an extension of the Western feminist discourse. I argue that Saharawi women’s agency should be intended with respect to the local manifestation of a globalised theme of “common struggle” that, in this case, is best represented by Third World and Islamic feminist authors. It is more so considering that recently a delegation of four Saharawi women participated at the fourth International Congress on Islamic Feminism held in Madrid (Saharawi Women Blogspot, 2010).

3.4 Saharawi women and Moderate Islam

Saharawi people follow a traditional, moderate interpretation of Islam, the Sunnite Malekite doctrine, which tends to make religion a very personal issue (Sermujeres Website):

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 character (United Nation International Human Rights Instrument, 2001).

The Malikiya is one of the four schools of Sunni Islamic law, dating from the ninth century. Adherents to this rite are primarily people from North Africa living in the Maghreb portion of the Ottoman Empire (Morocco was not under Ottoman control). This rite developed around the concept that is more important to depend on the traditions of the Companions of Mohammed than on the Prophet himself. This individual approach to religion has favoured Saharawi women in their bottom-up process of transforming gender power relation. It has put them in the condition 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 and “laws and order” aspects of community life being mediated by Islamic law and Saharawi Islamic tradition.
In their approach to religion, Saharawi women follow examples of powerful heroines from the Qu’ran, such as Aisha, Fatimah and Zainab: ‘in order to encourage and religiously justify an active and important role for women in the public sphere’ (Allan, 2008). From the Saharawi women’s website Sermujeres, this article, originally written in Spanish, highlights what changes have occurred in Saharawi’s current attitude to tradition and religion:

The traditional teaching [on women] based on the Qu’ran, was opened up by modern studies. […] There are radical differences [about religion] in comparison to other societies that profess the same religion: for example, Saharawi women are not forced to get married (obligada a llevar velo), and being a single mother is not an impediment to a later wedding. Polygamy, common in the Islamic world, is exceptional and divorce is celebrated (2007: translated by the author).

Expressions of this unusual emancipation were noticed not only during colonial occupation, but also more recently under the imposed Moroccan regime. This is partly because Saharawi and Moroccans come from different Islamic religious traditions. In 2004 Morocco’s King, Hassan VI, introduced a progressive change in family law. He recognized women's rights by making repudiation of marriage conditional upon the court's prior authorization; he also introduced divorce by mutual consent, and extended women's right to divorce. UNIFEM reported that Moroccan women’s organisations ‘described the reform as a historic asset that rehabilitates women's rights, particularly the right to dignity, equality and protection, preserves children's rights and guarantees the coherence, balance and stability of family and of the whole of Moroccan society’ (Touimi-Benjelloun, 2003). For Saharawi women living under Moroccan control this was not good news. For decades Saharawi women had already been free to embrace divorce and celebrate a woman becoming available for marriage again. 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 family law, Saharawi women who want a divorce will be obliged to go to court rather than obtain a letter of repudiation from an Islamic official. Thus, Saharawi women were better off under the previous system, whereas for Moroccan women this legal change enhanced their rights. A recent study on social change in the Saharawi refugee camps gives examples of how Saharawi people practice liberal forms of Islam together with traditional nomadic interpretation 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. While most Muslims tend to stress the importance of the Islamic community, ‘the Saharawis believe that religion is a very personal issue,’ says Mouloud Said, the POLISARIO’s representative in the United
States. ‘It’s a personal relationship between the human being and his Creator. This is the mentality of the nomadic society.’ Mosques are conspicuously absent from the camps, in large part because the Saharawis ‘don’t believe that to speak to God, you need a fancy place’, explains Mr. Said. Saharawis seldom pray in groups except on important Muslim holidays, and view even these ceremonies as purely optional. [...] Their religious attitudes are significant as they reflect their social attitudes to marriage, divorce and violence. 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. ‘In the Sahara marriage is built on love, it’s not a traditional structure of marriage where a man shows up and says: “I want to marry your daughter” and she has no say in it’, said Fatima in an interview with journalist Pascale Harter (Armstrong, 2008: 62).

3.4.1 The Saharawi woman and the matriarchal tradition

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: 637-638).

The haima (tent) is still today the most important symbol of the nuclear society, the family, and it is the woman’s responsibility. Family is still at the top of Saharawi values; it is the place where the woman expresses her nurturing role and seals moral codes and Saharawi traditions into future generations. Even if today Saharawi have more freedom in choosing their future husband or wife, the family is still determinant in concluding a possible marriage (Melotti, 1999: part 3.2). In the past, marriage ceremonies are remembered to have been week-long affairs with the sacrifice of many camels, whereas today they are about a day long but still occurs at the bride’s mother’s house (Figure 9): “There are more than just chronological changes to the ceremony – the institution of arranged marriage has also fallen by the wayside, in accordance with the Polisario’s gender-equality program” (Chamberlain, 2005: 26). The payment of a “bride price” (mehr) seems to have been reintroduced despite the disappointment of Saharawi delegates present at the Social Affairs’ Workshop in one of the Women’s Congress as reported by Fiddian-Mendez (2002: 40), but even in this case, the reintroduction of traditional habits can be introduced independently from government policies.
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: 640, note 13). Education is in fact considered the first step to liberate women (Contessini, 2007). Children, from two years of age can now be sent to childcare centres called tarbia (Frente Polisario, 2002: 44), while mothers work at community places (tuiza), which serve the needs of the elderly, orphans, and the disabled. Primary schools are set in each daira, and today there is only one secondary boarding school functioning, the “12th of October”, since the “9th of June” lower secondary school was destroyed in 2006 by major floods. A young Saharawi male, who was interviewed in Italy in this study as an informal representative, says that the best contribution given by Saharawi women was in fact “everything”:

*Il maggior contributo è veramente...che le donne Saharawi hanno fatto quasi tutto. Io per esempio ho studiato li nei campi, tutte le mie maestre erano tutte donne, ed ecco che io sono arrivato a questo livello. Scuola materna e scuola elementare è tutto loro quello che mi hanno insegnato (Labib E., 2008).*

[The biggest contribution is really...that Saharawi women have done almost everything. For example, I studied there in the camps, all my teachers were women, and now I have reached this level. Pre-school and Primary school, I learned everything from them.]

Schools in the camps run under a co-educational principle, where boys and girls attend together, except for the women’s boarding school which can assist up to eight hundred
girls. The aim of this school is to:

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).

There are forty 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 thirty national institutes for men’s vocational training as mechanics, electrical mechanics, joinery, plumbing and turnery, management and computer techniques (Frente Polisario, 2002: 44; Tortajada, 2004: 105). 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 these programs, particularly the one in Cuba. While the UNHCR spokesman in Havana, in 2008 said that: ‘the education that they [Saharawi] receive in Cuba will put them in a good position to build new lives once a durable solution has been found’ (Aragon, 2008), Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh in her recent publications seemed very critical (2009; 2010b). In contrast with her previous work *Promoting sustainable transformations in gender roles during exile: a critical analysis with reference to the Sahrawi refugee camps*, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh claims that Saharawi women and children have: ‘been mobilized by powerful actors as key political symbols to obtain support from their respective audiences’. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that Saharawi youth’s “educational displacement” to Cuba, has served the Polisario to obtain international support in its political activities, boost visits to the refugee camps from non-Saharawi aid providers, and support its claim of investing in female education. According to Fiddian-Qasmiyeh these women now feel rejected by the people in the camps, being regarded as ‘foreigners’. The challenges that they all face are not unique within the Saharawi’s attempt to build a modern state from traditional nomadic moderate Islamic values. Tradition has already evolved, in fact the *melhfa*, the woman’s traditional dress, was originally black with a white skirt worn underneath; today, the *melhfa* is only a colourful accessory used to ‘dress up’, western clothes, which are worn underneath (Tortajada, 2004: 211).

### 3.4.2 Contrapositions

As previously mentioned, some scholars do not expect this moderate interpretation of Islam within Saharawi people to continue. Joanna Allan, writing for the *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*’ website, claims that more rigorous interpretation of Islam have: ‘infiltrated
SADR laws in such a way that women are left vulnerable in the face of gender-based injustices’ (2008). Allan specifically refers to the right of Saharawi men to “repudiate” a wife and to practice polygamy, and also mention the custom of “incarceration” of women who become pregnant before marriage:

[...] Any women who become pregnant before marriage are judged before a court and sent to a “centre”, allegedly to protect them from their families, until the child is born and a husband can be found. This illustrates the double standards that punish women but not men for “infringing” sexual codes and social norms, perhaps deriving from the Islamic concept of fitna [italics added], which refers to the moral and social disorder caused by the pernicious sexuality of women when left “unrestrained” (Allan, 2008).

The practice of ‘enforced imprisonment’ of women who have become pregnant outside of marriage, was also discussed by Fiddian (2010a: 101), along with Tortajada and Caratini, and recently questioned in a Human Rights Watch’s report (2008a). The Saharawi Minister of Justice, Hamada Selba, described the detention centre near the old National Hospital, outside the Smara camp, as a ‘facility for housing women who have had children out-of-wedlock’ (2008a: 137): the Centre for Maternity Assistance. Generally, Saharawi authorities justify this arbitrarily detention as a solution to protect women against 'possible revenge attacks' by the family; accordingly, the inmate will be released if 'she resolved her problem with her family, got married, or relocated to a different camp’ (2008a: 140). Far from the UNHCR’s Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women, this custom resembles the well documented practice of arbitrary detention for women suspected to transgress moral codes well established in Libya (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Rather than incarceration, the system should provide community workers trained “to identify and provide remedies [and] emergency relocation, if necessary, for refugee women who may be particularly exposed to abuse” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1991: para 49). To this day, the topic of violence against women in the Saharawi refugee camps has not yet been substantially explored. Fiddian suggests that there have been recent cases of rape in the refugee camps and women were told not to walk alone in the dark. In 2007, two men were convicted of rape in the 27 February Camp State Court and ‘were ordered to pay large fines to compensate the young woman’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010a: 103). The recording of this kind of incidents is relevant to improve further investigations on the matter by both the NUSW and the Polisario, in order to take preventive actions against future assaults.
3.5 The Saharawi women’s movement

Third World women’s writing has mostly been linked to political liberation movements which acted in order to contest norms, institutions and traditions considered detrimental for women’s well being. As Narayan well summarises, there has been a consistent focus on the need to rewrite history, considering women as an ‘integral part of the political debates and disputes within [Third World] nations’ (1997: preface, ix). Sociologists of the early Twenty-First century have argued that Third World women’s movement are shaped by women’s interests and identities which are: ‘formed within structural, political, and cultural contexts, and their mobilization occurs in reaction to and is facilitated by these (pre)conditions’ (Ray and Korteweg, 1999). Possible outcomes of these political processes are subjected to considerable variations depending on the particular forms of mobilization. In this context, the Saharawi women’s political movement can be identified as an “oppositional movement” (Waylen, 1996: 18; Allan, 2008). Since the early days of Spanish colonisation, Saharawi women were “united by the struggle”. This was a major driver for their actions, and gender mainstreaming came as a result of the communal engagement of all, men and women, boys and girls, towards the fight for liberation.

Historically, in Saharawi nomadic life women have been involved in many leadership positions within the tribal society. There are accounts of women participating in the _ait arbeen_ meetings, the highest political and social institution in Saharawi tribal society (Zeina blogspot, 2007; see also Abderahman, 2008; Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 133). Since most men spent a lot of time away from the _frig_ (a group of families or a camp), trading or at war, women ruled the tents. Marriages were used to establish alliances between tribes, and monogamy was the rule. All this freedom was curtailed under Spanish occupation; women were then not allowed to study (Zeina blogspot, 2007). This immediately changed when they engaged with men in the liberation struggle:

> Women not only sustained Saharawi culture, but they actively […] provided financial and in-kind support to [the resistance and] participated in […] movements against the Spanish during the 1900s, from 1957 to 1958, and in the late 1960s (Lippert, 1992: 638).

Saharawi women’s intervention was first done by recruiting husbands and sons to join the front, providing shelters for the Saharawi Popular Liberation Army (SPLA) members, and contributing materially to organizing supplies and protection for the refugees (Lippert, 1992, 642; Abderrahaman, 2008). Many young women took up arms and served in the camps’ militias receiving military training as radio operators, drivers, medics and light arms
Furthermore, they guarded prisoners captured during war and took charge of people fleeing major towns of Western Sahara to find refuge in the Algerian desert. These actions were similar to those experienced by other post-colonial nations, such as Eritrea (Hale, 2001). In Mebrahtu’s description of the Eritrean experience in political participation, presented in the Arab Quota Report of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, women where highly visible both before and after independence:

Eritrean women have participated in the country’s political life through various types of resistance to colonialism in the 1950s, followed by clandestine action against Ethiopian colonialism, and continuing in this role until the armed struggle broke out in 1961 to liberate the Eritrean people and the land from the grip of imperialism. Women joined the ranks of the forces fighting for liberation; they bore arms in various military positions on forward defence lines; and they served as doctors, teachers and cadres in order to boost awareness among other members of society, particularly women, who suffered from injustice at the hands of colonialism as well as society’s backward view of their status (2007: 51).

Despite these similarities, the nature of traditional Eritrean society and their approach to religion led to a complete absence of female political participation prior to independence: ‘the entire country was in the grip of colonialism: decision making was done by people other than Eritreans’ (2007: 52). Saharawi women, on the other hand, have held the right to vote and to be represented in official roles from the very beginning, and are also responsible for dealing with donors and are in charge of most vital sectors of refugee life such as water, education and health, agriculture, computers, sewing and solar energy. This is a product of their successful gender mainstreaming campaign, undertaken even in the midst of a post-conflict/refugee scenario, and because of their historical place at the centre of the political and social life of the Saharawi community. As Zunes and Mundy well describe, female Saharawi refugee activists have taken on the national duty to work for liberation “as a model that prefigures the social arrangements of an independent state” (2010: 134).

3.5.1 National Union of Saharawi Women

Since its inception the Polisario movement has advocated for the promotion of gender equality. Article four of the SADR constitution, states the importance of women’s development: ‘the state will aim to defend the political, economic, and social rights of Sahrawi women and will guarantee their participation in the improvement of society and in the development of the country’ (Frente Polisario, 1999). In 1974, at the Polisario’s Second Congress attended by twenty-two men and women leaders, the Political Bureau established
the long-term goal to improve women’s rights (Lippert, 1992: 639). In the same year, during the National Conference of Saharawi Women held by the Polisario’s first Secretary General, El Ouali Mustafa Sayed, the SADR established the National Union of Saharawi Women (NUSW) (Lippert, 1992: 642; Contessini, 2007; Sermujeres Website). This organisation, alongside with the students and workers’ union, was created to make the participation of women within the Frente Polisario more visible both militarily and politically. Today this union’s crucial role is on the promotion of ‘the role of women, their training, the development of their efforts and their participation in the struggle for national liberation’ (Frente Polisario, 2002: 48).

In 2007, the NUSW’s National Committee contained fifty-seven members, elected every five years by the Women’s Congress (ARSO, 2007a). There are approximately twelve thousand women members of the NUSW coming from the occupied and liberated areas of Western Sahara, and some from abroad, but the majority live in the refugee camps (Contessini, 2007). The Union, according to the SADR constitution, deals with national and international concerns: internally it looks at the Saharawi women’s development and to improve the situation of children, elderly and those with special needs (Frente Polisario, 1999: Art.38) and it also advocates for those suffering in the occupied territories under Moroccan occupation. Externally, the women’s union is involved in international organizations for women’s rights and development, and strives for the reinforcement of human rights and democracy (Fiddian-Mendez, 2002: 36).

The NUSW’s Secretary General is elected by the Women’s Congress and, according to the constitution, is automatically a member of the Polisario’s National Secretariat:

[…] which is the Polisario highest authority, leadership. That is different from Parliament. That is an executive branch. […] The Polisario as a movement, as a party, has its own system, and the highest authority after the Congress is the National Secretariat of the Polisario, which is the leadership, the highest leadership of the movement, of the independence movement. (Mohammed A., 2008)

The NUSW board of directors works in four different areas: foreign relations, culture and information, occupied territories and emigration, public affairs. In each wilaya (province) regional officers who meet with the NUSW National Secretariat every six months (see

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26 Some consider 1979 to be the year of NUSW’s foundation (ARSO, 2007a)

27 The National Union of Saharawi women has been active in the General Union of Arab Women and the World Federation of Democratic Women since 1977; The Pan-African Women’s Organisation since 1980 and has also participated between many others to the World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995 (ARSO, 2007a).
The Union is always well informed of each camp’s events since there is a direct transmission of information from the *daira* secretaries to those of the *wilaya*, and finally to the Secretary of the NUSW. The Union has worked since 1985, to promote a high level of education in the camps, and particularly to improve literacy, arguing that the social and political involvement of women will only come through self-awareness as opposed to gender quotas:

> We have not yet achieved our full rights and there is a lot of work to do – rights will never be given, they have to be taken – but we have come a long way [...] However we were illiterate not long ago and we still have a mindset that derives from that to some extent. It seems quite normal to me, given this that women tend to vote for men rather than for other women. We do have outstanding women figures. But it’s perfectly true that we have to fight against the old mentality (New Internationalist, 1998)

According to the 1974 Spanish census (Barbier, 1985: 24), almost seventy percent of the Western Sahara population were illiterate, and of these almost eighty-four percent were women. In contrast today, ninety percent of the refugee population is at least capable of reading and writing (Sermujeres Website).
3.5.2 Saharawi and Palestinian women’s movements

Ellen Fleishmann in *The Nation and its “New” women: The Palestinian Women’s Movement 1920-1948* (2003), describes the early days of the Palestinian Women’s Movement, under British colonial administration, as a small minority of elite women criticizing the internal patriarchal structure of Palestinian Arab Society (2003: 4-5). The fundamental basis for developing this process was founded on the introduction of women’s education and employment which brought in ‘a “new aristocracy” in Palestine (Fleischmann, 2003: 43). After only ten years from its creation, in 1939 the Palestinian Women’s Movement experienced an internal fracture that split the movement in two separate organisations: the Arab Women’s Association and the Arab Women Union. Later, in 1967 the General Union of Palestinian Women was founded. Its job was to work with the Palestinian National leadership in a bid to initiate a process of democratisation of the national movement, and ‘to mobilize and organize people of different social categories’ (Kuttab, 2008: 103). This resurgence on Palestinian women’s social and political activity provided ‘the backbone’ of the first Intifada. According to Kuttab, they ‘raised political consciousness of women through mobilization, organization, and participation in the struggle’ (2008: 104). Their actions were directed towards a boycott of Israeli products, creating alternative spaces to replace regular schools, and providing community services to sustain the Intifada. Women’s committees started to multiply, dividing those who were more sensitive to the national struggle from those who first wanted to reform women’s role.

While women have played important roles both in Palestine and in among the Saharawi, there are some key differences in the refugee populations. For one the Saharawi camps are located in the desert, whereas Palestinian camps are either urban or very close to urban areas. Politically the cause of the Polisario is easier for the West to support, having renounced the armed struggle, while organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah continue to engage in violence against Israel. Legally Western Sahara is clearly regarded as an occupied territory and the Saharawi camps are regarded by Algeria as a self-governing region within its territory. The Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank are governed to varying degrees by the Palestinian Authority but they are also occasionally subject to Israeli Civil authority and military intervention. While both are populations exiled from their homelands the Saharawi are following the international norms on non-violent negotiation in a more obvious way and have widespread international support for
their cause. The issue of Palestine and the right to return is far older in historical terms, affects many more people, and is seemingly far more complex to resolve due to entrenched positions on both sides.

Both, the Saharawi women’s movement and the early Palestinian feminist agenda, must be located within a nationalist framework. Women in fact were primarily called to fight for the making of the nation-state. One of the differences though is that Palestinian women did not want to push a gender agenda before ‘a legislative council was elected by the people [in fact] for the women in the movement, this concept of rights had a narrow, political connotation linked to suffrage and nationhood’ (Fleischmann, 2003: 138). In contrast, the Saharawi women’s union has always worked for the double aim of reaching the Western Sahara independence and gaining gender equality (Contessini, 2007).

In 1993, the signing of the Oslo Peace Accord with Israel introduced new limitation on the involvement of the Palestinian women’s movement in the national liberation struggle. This was largely reduced and replaced with a women’s “empowerment” discourse that targeted ‘individual women rather than the collective’ (Kuttab, 2008: 104). Under the impression of obtaining liberation and independence, Palestinian women moved from national issues to focus more on women’s issues:

The nascent ‘state’ has thus transformed the terrain of politics and resistance, diminishing the avenues of popular participation and particularly women’s participation, as informal grass-roots network resistance collapsed and was replaced by formal politics, while the ‘inside leadership’ of the West Bank and Gaza was marginalized by ‘outside’ leadership from Tunis (Kuttab, 2008: 105).

Saharawi women instead, used their National Union to work together, from the exiled camps and the occupied territories of Western Sahara, to promote their cause for national independence to the international community, and to look after their communities.

Today, Palestinian women mostly suffer exclusion from the male-dominated political decision-making. According to Moghadam, Palestinian women in refugee camps and villages do suffer the inability of ‘the Palestine Authority to implement a women’s rights agenda’ (2005: 63). The Palestinian women’s movement has now shifted from political involvement to a proliferation of NGOs, which caused the erosion of women’s political representation and women’s rights. Kuttab, argues that: ‘the most serious internal challenge of all those which have faced the women’s movement over the past fifteen years has been the movement’s transformation from a grass-roots struggle to an elite movement’ (2008: 106).
3.5.3 NUSW today

Today, even after the ceasefire, Saharawi women continue to be highly responsible in camp administration, and the Women’s Union continues: ‘to raise awareness amongst other women of their civil and political rights such as voting and nomination to political structures’ (Baines, 2001). The Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists adopted by the African Feminist Forum in Ghana, is what the Saharawi women’s union stands for. In this framework, African feminists point out the need for a ‘full citizenship, 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’ (Mugadza, Mukasa et al., 2006).

During the NUSW Fifth Congress, Saharawi women developed their latest achievement in gender mainstreaming approving the Global Plan 2007-2012 framework. As they held the Women and Gender Equity Workshop during the 34th European Conference of Coordination Support to the Sahrawian People (EUCOCO), Saharawi women presented to the international community their achievements of: ‘building Women’s Houses as a strategy in order to boost individual and collective empowerment processes and as a framework of reference for the NUSW’, and also in realising training courses on Education for Women’s Empowerment (EUCOCO, 2008). The EUCOCO has certainly been the most important international arena in which Saharawi could present their goals and issues. In previous EUCOCO conferences, women have openly requested to strengthen women’s political participation (El Medi, 2004): ‘an equal representation between men and women in the delegation of Frente Polisario in the Spanish Government’ (Contessini, 2007). In 2008, the NUSW drew attention to: ‘the practically nonexistent women’s representation in the opening ceremony as general reflection of the Conference development [which stressed] women’s absence in the regional and local governments, as well as in the diplomacy and the delegations’ (EUCOCO, 2008). These open discussions at the EUCOCO conferences show how Saharawi women are not afraid of confronting both the Polisario and international actors, in order to gain a more visible place in the political, social and humanitarian debate. They are not political pawns; they are addressing all of the matters that they are concerned with in an exhibition of gender mainstreaming that goes all the way from the daira to the international arena.
Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, in a recent paper in *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, argues that the progressive practice of gender mainstreaming that Saharawi refugees and their political representative promote in the camps, ‘may facilitate and solidify processes of exclusion and marginalization’ (2010c: 64). Under scrutiny is the practice adopted by UNHCR and NGOs of a ‘female-centred aid industry’ (2010c: 65) implemented in the camps only through existing Saharawi institutions such as the NUSW. According to the paper, Saharawi women who cannot participate at NUSW events or cannot attend their political meetings find themselves marginalised. These are usually young girls, young women with children, or families who would like to avoid spaces in the camps which are ‘associated with female activism and participation’ (2010c: 79). Fiddian-Quasmiyeh’s critique suggests that gender mainstreaming action, which is today occurring in the Saharawi refugee camps, may be primarily conditioned ‘by the recognition that resisting NGOs’ priorities [on female-centred aid] may lead to the withdrawal of projects’. This analysis tends to diminish the obvious results on gender mainstreaming that were obtained in the last thirty years with policies implemented by Saharawi and non-Saharawi actors in the camps. The role of the NUSW has always been to mediate between Saharawi needs and culture, and ‘pre-designed projects’ of the last-minute solidarity organisation which have been prepared outside the Saharawi camps. Despite the feeling of exclusion and limits in participating at NUSW meetings, Saharawi women have still the power to vote for their representatives and to be voted. This fight to implement their right has to come from those same women that today feel excluded. The same happens in modern democratic first world countries were the representation of women in politics is nowhere near the Millennium Development Goals declaration and the number of people participating in electoral vote is still at minimum.

Relevant in this argument, is the account of Mariam B., a Polisario representative in Italy, who illustrates a metaphor of the Saharawi harmonious society:

*Le donne Saharawi non amano la violenza, in assoluto. E ti dico, ti racconto degli episodi. Se due bambini litigano è molto facile che tutt’e due vengono menati da tutt’e due le mamme. Raramente capita che una mamma Saharawi va dall’altra e dice: ‘è stato tuo figlio a menare il mio figlio, eccetera, tu non devi fare...no! Per esempio...ad esempio non amano i litigi, non amano le cose brutte, non amano la violenza, ma questo è nella natura dei Saharawi per davvero. Già...sia uomini che donne. E quando uno, di solito, anche in una riunione dice: ‘no, no, adesso siamo stufi, forse torniamo alla guerra’, tutte le donne dicono: ‘eh, eh, fuori fuori, lontano, no, no, vogliamo la pace, il latte’. Il latte è il simbolo della pace per i Saharawi, no! Simbolo del bene, della stabilità, sai, simbolo anche che ha piovuto, che i cammelli hanno avuto da mangiare e quindi producono latte. Noi vogliamo solo latte, non vogliamo guerra, non vogliamo violenza, infatti quando votano, la maggior parte delle donne quasi mai esce in questo stato estremo. Ed è una società prettamente pacifica, che non chiede mai le sue porte, le tende hanno quattro porte, raramente capitano i litigi o cose sgradevoli. Le donne partecipano molto e chiedono molto delle soluzioni dove si trova il dialogo (2007).*
Saharawi women do not like violence, absolutely. I’ll explain, I’ll give you some examples. If two children fight it is very likely that they both will be beaten by both mothers. It rarely happens that a Saharawi mum goes to another and says: ‘your kid bashed mine, etc…you don’t have to…no!’ For example, they do not like fights, they do not like bad things to happen, they don’t like violence, but this is really in the Saharawi nature. Yes…both men and women. Then, when someone, usually even in a meeting, says: ‘no, no, now we have had enough, maybe we will go back to war’, all the women say: ‘eh, eh, out out; go away, away; no, no, we want peace, milk.’ Milk is the symbol for peace for Saharawi, you know! Is the sign for all good things, for stability, you know, sign that it rained, that camels had something to eat and therefore they produce the milk. We just want milk, we don’t want war, we don’t want violence. For instance, when they vote, the majority of women in the [camps] rarely come out in such extreme positions. It is a completely harmonious society that never closes her doors, tents have four doors, and there are rarely disputes, discord, or unpleasant things. Women really do get involved and really demand solutions where there is a discussion.

This account demonstrates the unique opportunity that Saharawi women have in the camps to engage in political representation and maintain close contact with their family. This is where gender mainstreaming is most successful in Western Sahara’s politics. But the bigger picture of historical impact of state-building and international political representation is yet to be investigated with respect with gender mainstreaming.

### 3.6 Saharwi women and gender mainstreaming

Feminists of the Third World have introduced the concept of “common struggle” and pushed 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 challenge secular ideas of freedom, autonomy and women’s agency. We cannot properly address a discussion on gender relations and gender mainstreaming in a Muslim population like the Saharawi, unless we focus in 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, since the beginning, in the Saharawi struggle for independence, within their religious and traditional context, and through the NUSW have attempted to demonstrate their agency. Those scholars such as Allan (2008) and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2009), who say that there are still areas in which Saharawi women feel isolated or widespread oppression, fail to recognise the genuine results in gender mainstreaming that Saharawi women leaders have achieved in the camps and in various international context.

Claims of slavery, forced incarceration of pregnant women outside the marriage and the sense of not-belonging from some women in the camps constitute the next challenge for Saharawi institutions. With regard to the participation of Saharawi women in high level political roles, it is important to always bear in mind the specific social, religious and
cultural contexts in which they operate. For instance, 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 women, 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. For example we have seen women in similar conditions like Aung Sang Suu Kyi in Burma, for example who has became a leader in the rally support for the human rights and it’s become very known. And people like her, relate to her, and...It’s moving. In our case for example there is many active women but are not known internationally, like Aminatou Haiddar, for example, women who have been imprisoned for many years, and has been tortured, and she is a very active leader in the occupied period. But, because of the lack of media, and because, maybe, she does not speak English, she has not came very well known internationally, but she has got the qualities, for example, to be a figure and a leader for the Saharawi cause (2008).

3.7 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the influence of issues in Third World and Islamic feminism on Saharawi women. It has attempted to assess Saharawi women’s agency in terms of their roles as foreign representatives living abroad and has attempted to address those aspects of women’s participation in high level political roles, which contributes to a genuine process of gender mainstreaming. The next two chapters examine the participation of women in building a Saharawi nation, in particular as political representatives abroad. While the advanced position of women in the SADR has already been recognised by various scholars, their participation in the political representation abroad has not to date been a priority for the Polisario.
Chapter Four: State-building and Gender Mainstreaming

4.1 The difference between nation and state-building and its application to gender

State-building is a process used to re-instate and strengthen governance and stability in post-conflict nations without the application of military force. There is supposedly a clear distinction between state and nation-building; where the latter requires force, state-building comes across as a peaceful process. Francis Fukuyama in *The Imperative of State-building* (2004), sets out the theoretical distinction between state and nation-building. Once a society has constituted itself as a political identity (Nation), then it is time to develop a functional governing apparatus that can actually control its national territory (State). State-building, comes in as the last crucial components of nation-building and its effectiveness is usually measured by the success obtained in establishing a rule of law, the introduction of democratic norms and institutions, and by the setting up of a free-market economy (Caplan, 2004: 53; Call and Cousens, 2007: 7). Yet, the path from nation-building to state-building is not always clear. Fukuyama says that Europeans, as opposed to Americans, believe that in order to build a nation you need: ‘the creation of a community bound together by shared history and culture’ (Fukuyama, 2004: 134), and therefore reject the use of force. Based on this difference, Dobbins, Jones and others do not mention the UN mission MINURSO on Western Sahara when they talk about the UN's role in nation-building. The reason is that the MINURSO mandate has a specific pacific aim: ‘to conduct, during a transitional period, a Referendum in the territory, to enable the people of the Western Sahara to choose freely without administrative or military constraints, between independence and integration with Morocco’ (MINURSO, 2007). Since the cease fire in 1991, Morocco and Polisario have chosen a peaceful path for the solution of the Western Sahara conflict. In this “no-war time” the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic has started its own internal process of reforms to reinforce stability and promote social reconciliation, and therefore started its own state-building process.

In this chapter I analyse the concept of state, as set in the Montevideo convention (1933), to argue that the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic should be considered a government-in-exile waiting to gain its independence. In order to maintain long-term stability in post-conflict reconstruction and state-building, the SADR is now undergoing the four
fundamental pillars of transitions: establish security, promote justice and reconciliation, set up democratic practices and political participation, and promote positive social and economic well-being; in one word they are working towards “Good Governance” (McGrew, Frieson et al., 2004). This concept was also used recently by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific (UNESCAP), to be:

[... ] Participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future (2010).

Scholars now suggest that the equal participation of men and women in state-building is fundamental to achieve “Good Governance” (Sørensen, 1998; Nzomo, 2002; McGrew, Frieson et al., 2004: 13). Since the 1985 Beijing Declaration on the Advancement of Women, the United Nations established gender mainstreaming as: ‘the major global strategy for ensuring the incorporation of gender perspectives in all areas of societal development and the promotion of gender equality’ (United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 2001). Relevant contribution of scholars such as Cynthia Enloe (1989; 2000), Drude Dahlerup, Sandra Whitworth (1997) and Ann Tickner (1992), reformed the “gender blindness” which permeated International Relations studies and brought to the international spotlight the impact of war's violence on women, and their role as peacekeepers or military activists (Jenkins and Reardon, 2007: 212). From the Nairobi Conference in 1985, feminist scholars and women’s grassroots organizations pressured the United Nations to produce more relevant international gender normative, policies and guidelines. In 1995, at the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the assembly adopted by unanimous consensus a Platform of Action under which UN governments agreed to promote gender mainstreaming in policies and programmes, as:

[...] A strategy, an approach, a means to achieve the goal of gender equality. Mainstreaming involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities - policy development, research, advocacy/dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects (UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, 2006).

In 2000, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This resolution was welcomed as a “watershed” political framework for: ‘the pursuit of gender equality relevant to every single Security Council action’ (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002: 3). It reaffirmed the importance of female representation in all aspects of conflict prevention,
conflict resolution and peace-building; it also stressed the importance to increase women’s participation in all aspects of the conflict prevention and resolution processes (United Nations Security Council, 2000). According to Deniz Kandiyoti, gender justice and equity should also be applied in the context of the multiple transitions undergone by Third World post-conflict states. In this sense, Good Governance should also promote gender mainstreaming in implementing: ‘security transition (from war to peace), a political transition (the formation of a legitimate and effective state) and a socioeconomic transition (from a “conflict” economy to sustainable economic growth)’ (Kandiyoti, 2005: 13). In this chapter, I will analyse the Saharawi promotion of gender mainstreaming in the making of the SADR’s Good Governance, compared to the achievements already obtained by Cambodian women as reported by the Women Waging Peace: Policy Commission’s report 2004 (McGrew, Frieson et al.). The aim is to look at Saharawi women’s role in the making of the future Saharawi state, and if this will be sustainable after independence. I will demonstrate that the gender mainstreaming exhibited in this thesis is evidence of Good Governance which is a major component of successful state-building.

### 4.2 A State in transition

The Montevideo Convention *On the Rights and Duties of States* (1933), sets out the most widely accepted textual basis of statehood. Article one reads:

> The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states.

The convention itself does not explain the origins of its criteria; concepts of effectiveness (or government), population, and territoriality, were already largely used at the time of the Convention, but contemporary legal writers doubt that they could be considered conclusive as to the nature of today’s statehood (O’Connell, 1970; Denham and Mark Owen Lombardi, 1996; Duursma, 1996; Crawford, 2006). Prior to Montevideo, sovereignty was the main focus of statehood and there were two prevalent doctrines. In the eighteenth century age of monarchy, legitimism prevailed: ‘This system relied on the proposition that a dynasty enjoyed historic rights to rule a state, and thus, the prince continued to be sovereign even if in fact displaced from his throne (Grant, 1999: 419)’. Subsequently, in the nineteenth century, the European imperialism shifted its interest towards exercising sovereignty over adjacent lands not subject to any effective control. According to the contiguity doctrine:
Territory not organized under European conception of statehood was thus perhaps at times treated almost as \textit{terra nullius}. In this way, the view that state power could be transmitted by mere contiguity dovetailed with the then-ascending constitutive view of recognition, and together, the two ideas formed a potent helpmate to imperialism (Grant, 1999: 421).

Australia for instance, was one of those lands internationally recognized as \textit{terra nullius}. On the other hand, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) determined in 1975 that Western Sahara was not to be considered \textit{terra nullius}. The Court based its rejection on the fact that the presence of Saharawi tribal leaders’ authority over the territory was clear evident by the practice of \textit{cadi} appointments (local administrators) and various payments of taxes, which were recorded prior to the Spanish acquisition of the territory in 1884 (1975: 39). Moreover, Western Sahara was listed in 1963 as a Non-Self-Governing Territory under Chapter XI of the United Nation Charter (A/5514, annex III) (Frente Polisario, 2002: 12) and:

[...] In a series of General Assembly resolutions on the question of Spanish/Western Sahara, the applicability to the Territory of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) was reaffirmed” (United Nations Security Council, 2002a: 2 para 5).

In 1930s and ‘40s, the idea of territoriality and governmental effectiveness began to expand the idea of legal sovereignty. Legal philosopher Hans Kelsen introduced the concept of state as a legal system exercising control over a territory and people, in an attempt to define statehood in terms of laws:

If a power is established anywhere, in any manner, which is able to ensure permanent obedience to its coercive order among the individuals whose behavior this order regulates, then the community constituted by this coercive order is a state in the sense of international law. The sphere in which this coercive order is permanently effective is the territory of the state; the individuals who live in the territory are the people of the state in the sense of positive international law (Kelsen, 1941: 69-70)

The Montevideo criteria, as prerequisites to statehood, are not universally accepted. Contemporary International Public Law scholars, as explained in Bagaric, Boyd and others (2007: 6, note 17), believe there is no requirement for a minimum number of inhabitants in the population criterion, nor is there a minimum area of land required to form a state (O'Connell, 1970; Duursma, 1996; Crawford, 2006), nor territorial limits (Grant, 1999: 436; Epstein, 2009: 120). Effectiveness also does not appear to be essential; non-governmental forces in fact, which sometimes control substantial areas of the territory, have previously been considered as legitimate governments of future independent states, as it happened for Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Shaw, 1997: 142). Lastly, the criterion of capacity is considered to be the most controversial. It requires the state to be capable of entering into
“quasi-contractual” arrangements with similar entities: ‘recognition by other states, though not a formal requirement, is pragmatically essential for statehood’ (Bagaric, Boyd et al., 2007: 7). Legal writers, such as Crawford and O’Connell, have contested this approach saying that states are not the only entities with treaty-making competence, this also involve international organizations.

Pamela Epstein (2009: 121-124), in the Annual Survey of International and Comparative Law Journal, well summarises that Western Sahara has already a permanent population and clearly defined territorial boundaries. Not only this, but the SADR already administers twenty percent of the Western Sahara territory, the so-called Free Zone, and in January 2009 made an official claim to its exclusive rights to oil, gas and fisheries resources offshore to the territory of Western Sahara, declared as Saharawi offshore exclusive economic zone:

The 21 January declaration of a 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) confirms the SADR's jurisdiction over its offshore fisheries and mineral and petroleum seabed resources, as provided for under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Western Sahara Resource Watch, 2009).

All this suggests that the Western Sahara territory could rightfully be considered a state-in-waiting and the SADR as the Saharawi government-in-exile.

Thomas Grant suggests that democracy (Crawford, 2006) as well as legality (intending compliance with international norms), and independence (Kelsen uses the term “impenetrability”) could be considered as the new criteria for a modern definition of statehood (1999: 450). Despite its one-party policy, the SADR government representatives are democratically elected by its people and SADR has built strong administrative and judicial powers (Article 31 of the Vienna Convention requires for a government to be sovereign over its territory and its citizens). Robert Chamberlain28 and Pablo San Marin have shown that Saharawi have already undergone an: ‘early process of nation-building in the refugee camps’ (San Martin, 2005: 566). This is particularly demonstrated by the fact that today’s self-administered Saharawi camps share a collective memory (storytelling, war

28 Chamberlain talks about Saharawi traditions such as the baby naming ceremony: ‘The host provided an abundance of food for the ceremony, including a goat slaughtered for the occasion (an expensive local delicacy). The men socialized in one room while the women and young children socialized in another. I was fortunate enough to be allowed to move between both areas, and thus had the opportunity to have a ready-made focus group for the evolution of tradition’(Chamberlain, 2005). In my own visits to the Saharawi refugee camps I had the chance to participate to some of these ceremonies, especially weddings.
memorial museum, poetry, dance, traditional celebrations, and tea ritual), which is also essential to the self-construct of their identity (Chamberlain, 2005: 28).

4.2.1 Is there any security transition in the Morocco-Western Sahara conflict?

In 2003 the Polisario Front submitted a report to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights asserting that the 1999 version of the SADR’s Constitution was fully in line with the provisions of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (SADR, 2003: 36). At paragraph five of Article 24 the SADR Constitution says that Saharawi people shall have a right to peace, security and development within their right to sovereignty:

The Democratic Arab Republic of Western Sahara directs its foreign policy towards […] the establishment of peace and international security and participation in the economic and social development of the peoples of the world based on justice and reciprocal equality (Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, 2003: 49).

Saharawi have patiently waited for the Unite Nations to produce a peaceful final resolution on the referendum for Western Sahara. Unfortunately, after years of numerous negotiations and aborted plans, there are still no real achievements. Younger generations in the occupied territories and in the refugee camps are those who suffer most from this stalemate. Young people’s boredom fuels their will to return to war. The possibility of a return to an armed struggle was mentioned by Laura Smith:

The Saharawi have nurtured a mild and tolerant form of Islam and have been committed to peaceful struggle since the ceasefire. Unfortunately, the Saharawi have not been rewarded for adhering to peaceful diplomacy, with the result that frustrations are running high. The Polisario military units languish idly at the desert front line whilst the conflict is played out in the UN […] The talk of a return to armed struggle by Saharawis in the camps is more than a rhetorical expression of their frustration. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the Polisario government to persuade its militants to accept another UN delay (2005: 554-555).

This view was confirmed by Labib E., young Saharawi informal representative for the Polisario in Italy:

[… ] I giovani adesso, come me per esempio, sono più arrabbiati, incapaci, scussami la parola, rispetto per esempio mio padre o mia madre. Ecco io adesso per esempio come un giovane, veramente in voglia tornare alla guerra, perché basta con la politica, perché siamo veramente stufi, sono trent'anni che siamo aspettando. Io sinceramente adesso non sono d'accordo con il Polisario di portare avanti questa politica qui, di trattare in modo pacifico. Io come giovane non sono d'accordo. E quindi secondo me, anche le femmine, cioè le donne della mia età, sono per esempio più arrabbiate rispetto a quelle dell'età di mia madre (Labib E., 2008).

[Young people, like me for example, are angrier, more pissed off, sorry for the expression, than my mum or dad for example. Take me for example, as a young person; I really want to go back to war, because enough is enough with politics, because we are really tired, we have been waiting for thirty years. To be honest, I do not agree with the Polisario who continues with this type of politics, to continue with peaceful negotiations. For myself, as a youth, I don't agree. And here, to me, even the girls, women of my age, are for example, more outraged than those of my mother’s age].
In December 2000, while I was visiting the refugee camps, the Polisario threatened to return to war. According to Zunes and Mundy “year 2000 held major setbacks for Polisario, which was angry at the UN for abandoning the long-promised referendum on independence” (2010: 26). The planned route for the 2001 Paris-Dakar Rally was to cross the occupied territory of Western Sahara near Smara, without the Polisario’s formal permission. The rally’s organisers refused to modify the route saying that they were to report only to Moroccan and Mauritanian governments, but the Polisario asked the UN to stop the rally threatening a return to war (ARSO, 2000). Eventually the officer for external relations of TSO (the company which organised the event) met with the Saharawi Minister of Defence in the Saharawi refugee camps (ARSO, 2000), and the Algerian chief of staff talked to President Abdelaziz. The rally went ahead.

Brahim Bedileh, Polisario commander of the Second Military Region in Tifariti, said lately with frustration:

> We are currently in a stand-by position, still waiting. Nobody wants to lose time in waiting to resolve our problem of liberation […] Always we have made a difference between the cease-fire and peace. There is a big difference. The cease-fire is not a definitive thing, whereas, peace is a definitive thing. As we are military, we are always prepared for the possibility of war (Bhatia, 2001).

As an Islamic group, in a hot area of the world, and with a record of armed struggle, the Saharawi government is aware of the need to maintain credibility as a peaceful player in the negotiations for the making of a referendum which could gain their independence from Morocco. For these reasons, the Polisario leadership has made clear its will for a peaceful transition: it embraced the UN mission MINURSO which not only works towards the referendum, but also acts as a guarantor of this unstable peace process. In the past decades hundreds of Moroccan war prisoners kept in the Saharawi refugee camps have been liberated; in 2006 all were freed. But despite this confidence in the peace process, young Saharawi returning to the camps after years of studies abroad now fail to accept without questioning the decisions made by older generations to maintain the status quo, and to continue with the peaceful handling of the conflict. Recently, Saharawi living in the occupied territories of Western Sahara have started demonstrating against Moroccan’s violations of human rights using non-violent actions. Unfortunately, this creates more tensions within the negotiations.
The Saharawi political transition

Saharawi refugees have been a state-in-waiting for more than three decades, but the Polisario liberation front, according to Laura Smith, has: ‘nurtured a strong nationalist sentiment among the population’ (2005: 555). The two key strategies for this fundamental political makeover were certainly the detribalization of the society, and the important role assumed by women in politics.

The dismantling of all the tribal and patriarchal traditions gave the Saharawi a unique opportunity to promote their liberation cause and to forge their common identity. Some refugees even deny the presence of a tribal past, as reported by Tortajada in her interviews with Saharawi women: ‘There have never been tribes in the Sahara. This was an invention of the Spaniards, contrived in order to conduct a census of an unknown population’ (2004: 100 translation mine). On the other hand, women’s participation has been central to the drafting of the SADR constitution.

The SADR constitution draws from sixteen years experience of combat and exile and it comprises a bill of rights which ensures personal liberty and privacy, forbidding torture and imprisonment without charges or trial. A specific section on human rights mentions women, the elderly, wounded people, the victims of the war for liberation and their fathers, mothers, children and widows. The document establishes each citizen’s rights to education, health, housing, privacy, and due process (Lippert, 1992: 644). Laws and institutions guarantee social equality, including women’s rights (Fiddian-Mendez, 2002: 36), free education and health services, and the right and duty to work. According to Palestinian refugee and researcher Randa Farah, the level of democracy within the Saharawi refugee camps is: ‘unmatched elsewhere in the Arab world’ (Farah, 2003). Saharawi fundamental principles are: free speech, equal worth, and equal rights to men and women. Although they envisage a multi-party system after independence, currently the Polisario is the only party represented in exile. 29 This is done in order to maintain the unity concept that has always been so important to Saharawi people during the fight for independence and the rejection of a tribal past. The constitution has been modified several times, most recently in 2007 where the Congress added a fixed quota for women representatives in the four wilayas, as suggested by Mohammed A., Polisario representative in Australia:

29 Es-Sweyih justifies the Saharawi approach to democracy despite the ‘temporary’ presence of a one-party system (1998: 66 - 67)
The Parliament has also increased in trying to get more women speaking in Parliament. In the last Parliament, there was 4% membership of women in the Parliament and, as we speak now there is an election campaign taking place in the Saharawi refugee camps and for the Parliament which it should be constituted by the 27th of February this year. And, I am aware that preparatory committee has suggested that in every constituency it has to be two women on the list, of every constituency, otherwise would it be unacceptable or illegal if there are no women on that list (Mohammed A., 2008).

Most of the analyses done by scholars and international organizations on the Saharawi political system are based on the 1991 and 1999 translated version of the SADR constitution.

The Western Sahara Democratic Republic represents today a unique example of moderate Islamic democracy, which escaped ethnic conflicts from a tribal past, and promoted women’s empowerment. A sense for this long-lasting achievement was well captured by Emily F., AWSA representative, 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 F., 2008).

The struggle for independence for Western Sahara has spread over generations. Younger Saharawi women are today still deeply involved in the 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 Decolonization). 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).

Along with other scholars, Zunes and Mundy have clearly stated that the “Polisario’s elites are able to rule because they serve the people, not vice versa” (2010: 250).

4.2.3 Socio-economic transitions in the refugee camps

At a concrete level, economic reconstruction of post-conflict states involves the rehabilitation and the development of infrastructures, production of facilities and development of human resources (Sørensen, 1998). The economic perspective in the
Saharawi refugee camps is still mostly expressed in a survival mode, based on humanitarian aid, as previously mentioned in chapter one. Infrastructure is kept to the minimum, and floods have worsened the situation (Díez, 2007). Agriculture and farming are not possible due to the harsh conditions of the desert and scarcity of water. Despite this, in the province of Dakhla and at the Rabouni Protocol there are community gardens run by Saharawi gardeners which provide for hospitals and schools (Díez, 2007: 9).

Figure 11: Vegetable garden in the Saharawi refugee camps (Sonia Rossetti, December 2001)

Since 1999 a large quantity of cash coming to the camps has boosted the creation of markets and small-scale businesses. This new form of “income” primarily comes from children who have been in overseas summer-holidays programs called “Vacaciones en Paz” (Holidays in Peace); Spanish pensions granted to Saharawi who served in the colonial security service (Mundy, 2007: 288); remittances from family members living abroad. Personally owned cars, and expansion of trading routes to Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Algeria and Spain (Bhatia, 2001) have also pushed the beginning of a local trade. Saharawi women’s economic activity has also increased ranging from manual work, as carpet makers (Tortajada, 2004: 182), to the delivering of traditional medicine and managing all aspects of education (Melotti, 1999: 4 of ch 2, part 2). The problem with these new privately-owned businesses has been the creation of disparities in a society which used to be egalitarian, not remunerated, and based on solidarity and volunteers. Moreover, there is now the issue of
keeping operational businesses in the middle of the desert, for obvious lack of resources and hiccups in international agencies’ projects:


[The electronic media has a very short life due to the sand and the hot temperatures. The pieces cannot be found in the refugee camps. The only thing that you can rely hundred percent is people’s engagement. At any hour, at any time.]

The Polisario’s first priority in constructing the refugee camps was to create a system of social services and social integration where women had to be key participants. Women are today present in all principal mass organisations: Union of Youth Saharawi (UJSARIO), Union of Saharawi Workers (UGSTARIO), Union of Journalists and Writers (UPES), Union of Saharawi Jurists (UJS), the Saharawi Red Crescent and obviously the Union of Saharawi women (NUSW) (Mundy, 2007: 280). Women generally work in neighbouring committees called tuĩţa, which are organised in each datira. In these centres their job is to look after the elderly, orphans, and the disabled. They are also responsible for running medical centres, dispensaries, sanitation programs based on prevention and vaccination, food distribution, and education (Baines, 2001: 28; Tortajada, 2004: 184-185). Health care is one of the key jobs, especially for those overseas-trained Saharawi doctors. Recently, the Italian NGO ‘Rio de Oro’ has finalised a census of the disabled population living in the camps and connected them with Italian families willing to participate in distance-adoption programs. Committees are also forming to face the growing problem of depression, especially in young people, because of the lack of employment (Díez, 2007: 19). There is no record of prostitution within the Saharawi refugee camps, but the presence of a sex trade in the Algerian city of Tindouf is well known to those who visit the region.

4.3 Promoting gender in governance

In a new social and physical context created after the conflict, women may feel free to explore different ways to be politically active. During the reconstruction, women may gain more opportunities to express representation and leadership thanks to the loss of traditional roles/leaders during the conflict (Sørensen, 1998; Mazurana, Raven-Roberts et al., 2005); in fact, while men have to reconstitute their role within the society from soldiers to citizens, women often organise themselves in grassroots associations. A study conducted by the UN’s Women Waging Peace Policy Commission, shows how Cambodian women
have worked from the ground up to promote Good Governance Cambodia’s ten years democracy. Despite the fact that in accordance with Buddhist philosophy women are presumed to be the “weaker sex” and denied equal access (McGrew, Frieson et al., 2004: 13), today Cambodian women constitute the majority of civil society; for this reason they play a vital role in project implementation and as “watchdogs”. According to the study, excluded from the powerful, male-dominated patronage networks that regulate entry into the public domain of politics, religion, private sector and financial institutions, military, government, and media, Cambodian women have achieved “their most significant contributions to governance through civil society” (McGrew, Frieson et al., 2004: 14). Through local NGOs, Cambodian women have worked to tackle corruption, engage in non-violent dispute’s resolution (protests) at community level (for violation of lands rights or disagreements with the authorities over local resources), and promote human rights advocating for legislation on violence against women. With the help of external donors, women have been involved in promoting a decentralized democracy at a grassroots level:

The commune council elections of February 2002 marked an important step towards dismantling authoritarian local-level structures that have been in place since the 1970s and toward providing a political mechanism for democratization processes to reach deeper into the countryside, where most Cambodians live and work (McGrew, Frieson et al., 2004: 20)

Eighty percent of women were elected in councils across the country and their importance grew with their ability to impact social programs and local development.

One of the indicators of the Third Millennium Development Goal declaration, which monitors progress on gender equality and women’s empowerment in politics, is in fact related to the number of seats held by women in national parliaments (Kabeer, 2005: 21). Third World countries and post-conflict societies have been pushed to introduce gender quotas in their electoral systems in order to boost the proportion of women in electoral seats. Despite a net increase of women’s political representation in most of the world’s poorest countries such as Bangladesh and Uganda, many have argued that introducing a quota system without increasing gender sensitivity will not constitute a real change of power, but simply will use women as window dressing (Baines, 2004; Mugadza, Mukasa et al., 2006). The critique of the quota system is that it will not guarantee political participation to a wider circle; rather it will be transmitted from man to wife or from father to daughter. Also, when the number of women is used as the only gender discriminator there is no guarantee that more women in parliament will produce a better response to the needs and priorities of women.
4.3.1 Saharawi women’s political participation

The 2006 African Feminist Forum, gave negative feedback to those post-conflict governments, especially in Africa, that approached the problem of women’s parliamentary representation by simply adopting a quota system (Rossetti, 2008). Mohammed A., Polisario representative in Australia, says that Saharawi women vehemently refused to introduce gender quotas in their local electoral systems when faced with the opportunity because it was considered to be an unfair short cut to a proudly owned representation, based on grassroots participation:

[...]
i the last Congress of the Polisario there was also big debate about the role of women and there was a move towards, you know, adopting a certain type of quota and the result of that is that for the first time there has been an election of women in the highest leadership of the Polisario, in addition to the women who automatically become the member of women organisation. There are two women now in the National Secretariat of the Polisario, and this is the first time. There was a move, or the hope there will be more, nonetheless I think there are still some obstacles, even lack of qualification, psychological difficulties for women to elect women. And, it is very hard because most of the population in the camps, in every, you know, constituency for election of Parliament for example, most of electors are women, because the men are away, you know. But, they still don’t vote for women, [they] don’t elect them (2008).

Mariam B, Polisario representative in Rome, agreed with her colleague in Australia:

[...]
E le donne non l’hanno voluta, molte donne non l’hanno voluta durante il Congresso. Si voleva mettere una quota. Le donne hanno detto ‘noi non vogliamo quota che non meritiamo’. Ciò che vuole coprire un ruolo politico deve avere la capacità, il coraggio e l’ambizione politica, per correre, per costruire quel lavoro. Una cosa è ovviamente, cioè voglio dire, questo credo io nella mia opinione personale, vale per quei posti in cui uno va votato per coprire un ruolo. E’ giusto che venga scelto dalla gente, secondo la sua capacità e la capacità di convincere la gente. Penso invece che sia giusto anche che certe donne che hanno certe competenze, per esempio per il ruolo che copro io, vengano nominate. Perché poi i rappresentanti vengono di fatto nominati dal governo. Non mi dispiacerebbe che ci fossero più donne nella rappresentanza all’estero (Mariam B., 2007).

[And women did not want it [a quota for women], many women didn’t want it at the Congress. They wanted to have a quota [but] women said ‘we do not want a quota that we do not deserve’. That means that those who want to hold a political position must show the skills, the courage and the political ambition to run, to build that capacity. Something is obviously, I mean, that is what I think, in my personal opinion, that is, for those position where someone has to be voted in to fill a role. It is fair that he/she must be chosen by the people, because of his/her skills, the skill of convincing people. On the other hand, I think it is fair that certain women have specific skills, for example in a role like mine, and that they will be nominated. Because then, representatives are in fact nominated by the government. I would not mind more women within the foreign representatives abroad.]

Both interviewees also recognised that one of the gruelling obstacles to gender mainstreaming in Saharawi political participation was that women were hesitant to vote for other women:

C’è una grande insistenza sulla elezione delle donne, ma si sà, no, il dramma delle donne è sempre quello, cioè che le donne non votano, le donne, purtroppo ciò devo dire c’è ancora, ci sono tabù, ma non dovuti ad una politica che esclude le donne, piuttosto a proprio retaggi culturali. Ma questo non capitò solo ai Saharawi, capitò in quasi tutte le
As Tortajada well pointed out Saharawi women do not feel still confident in their role as political representatives and leaders (2004: 190). The reticence was in presenting themselves as candidates and also in voting for other women. Insecurity is mostly fed by the requirement of total engagement in these highly political roles, and women feel this will take them away from their families (Tortajada, 2004: 190). Anna M., Italian representative of the International Bureau for the Respect of Human Rights in Western Sahara (BIRDHSO), mentioned the attempt of the Saharawi government to address the ongoing problem of being disadvantaged simply for being a woman:

[Maybe a woman is less favoured in some cases, simply because she is a woman, because of traditions which are still strong in some households, or because of motherhood (which limits her intellectual independence), but the Saharawi government is doing what it can to make this change as soon as possible].

On the other hand, there are Saharawi women who believe having a family is what strengthens their sense of justice and their desire to engage within the political process. Mariam B. explains how the everyday expectations of a family life prepare women for life in politics:

[Women have the capacity to do it since they learn to live together in the family, and women are those who hold the family together; it just comes natural.]

According to the Islamic feminist literature previously examined, for Saharawi women being a mother and nurturing a family is a life priority, linked also to religious and cultural beliefs. Once children enter a woman’s life there is less time to support the cause, but there is no need to stop supporting it. Mariam B., Polisario representative in Italy, when asked if Saharawi women have the same agency as men in the Saharawi constitution and political
Sì, avrebbero le stesse opportunità! Dico avrebbero perché le donne siano sempre quelle che vogliamo mettere ovviamente...la nostra priorità è la famiglia, no? Rimane sempre questa cosa che di fatto è inevitabile, soprattutto in quelle condizioni, c’è la donna che si occupa della famiglia. Questo limita molte donne a presentarsi e anche ad impegnarsi nel lavoro politico. Io adesso ti capisco. Prima della nascita di mia figlia, quasi al limite della nascita di mia figlia ho continuato a viaggiare, a coprire delle missioni fino all’ottavo mese di gravidanza all’estero, eccetera, e così via. Una volta nato un bambino in una famiglia è tutto più limitato. La tua libertà di movimento come mamma. cioè naturalmente la tua priorità sono i bambini, è la famiglia eccetera. Quindi credo che questo sia uno dei più grandi problemi che si presentano, soprattutto per le donne saharawi. Rifugiati, avere una famiglia eccetera, e dover anche coprire un ruolo politico diventa, diventa difficile (Mariam B., 2007).

A dichotomy exists between older Saharawi women, who have experienced the hardship of war, exile and refugee status, so now do not want to engage with politics because they just worry about their families; and younger women, who have been well educated, have travelled overseas, know how to use technologies, and speak many languages. This latest group is the one that pushes for more representation and a quick solution of the stalemate, with a hint at returning to war. In 1998, the New Internationalist magazine, reported an interview with a young Saharawi girl, who spoke English and spent time in Sweden, Greece and Spain. Describing today’s Saharawi women she said: ‘there is certainly no going back to the old ways’ (1998). In the same magazine, Moma Sidi Abdehadi, one of the first Saharawi women to become a member of the Polisario’s National Secretariat, ex-President of the Women’s union, and one of the first women to enter the refugee camps in Algeria, proudly said:

“[…We were illiterate not long ago and we still have a mindset that derives from that to some extent. It seems quite natural to me, given this, that women tend to vote for men rather than for other women. We do have outstanding women figures. But it’s perfectly true that we have to fight against the old mentality” (1998).

According to African scholar Maria Nzomo, African women: ‘must seek to organize and become active players at all levels of decision making in their societies, including in the management of conflict’ (2002: 18). Sheila Meintjes and others, in The aftermath: women in post-conflict transformation said that the Polisario’s refugee camps have been an example of ‘providing women with opportunities of innovation’ (2002: 16). Life in the refugee camps
did provide Saharawi women with a model of leadership to make them become “agents of change”.

4.3.2 The meaning of being in politics

When asked what the sentence “women in politics” meant to them, most of the respondents agreed that this sentence can have the same meaning, if not stronger, in Saharawi’s culture as it has it in the West. Saharawi women have as many chances as men to be political representatives for the SADR. Jack F. for example, had the impression that compared to the Australian) the recent development of Saharawi women’s participation outside the family will not suffer a setback once the situation in the occupied territories is resolved:

I would say that in Australia the women’s right to play a full political life is further advanced, but we starting looking at it in the early 21st century. It has to be realised that Australia has had full, in the Commonwealth, full female suffrage for more than a hundred years, whilst in the Saharawi culture that is something that with the external, meaning the outside the family role of women, is relatively recent development, but I will say to you there is no going back and my impression is that they, you know, as I have been saying, there would be an insistence by the women (2008).

The same feelings were expressed by Emily F. who said that Saharawi women have: ‘a much stronger sense of politics than Australian women […] they have a cause which is a common cause’. Labib E., a male Saharawi informal political representative in Italy, echoed this statement on the centrality of the role of women in the Saharawi culture:

Io mi sento fiero di essere un Saharawi perché è una delle politiche dove veramente c’è il ruolo della donna che in questo… e soprattutto essendo un paese islamico, è un vantaggio molto importante il ruolo della donna (2008).

[I feel proud to be a Saharawi since it is one of the political causes where there really is a role for women, that is… especially being an Islamic country, the role of women is a very important advantage.]

Mohammed A., Polisario representative in Australia, also expressed his wish for a broader representation of women not only on the Saharawi government, but also abroad:

I think the opportunity is the same for men and women. But, because of the conditions of individuals, of the situations, the women tend not to be available sometimes, through, you know, their own personal conditions, you know: they have family, they have children or, you know, their family needs them to be around. We would have liked to see more women, you know, representatives in different parts of the world and play a role in the international service, in diplomacy (2008).

As the Saharawi community continues to modernise there will be more and more prominent women in diplomatic roles of negotiations and international relations. This
process is in fact becoming an important aspect of the forty-year struggle for postcolonial independence of a Western Sahara state.

**4.4 Conclusions**

State-building can consolidate peace in a number of ways such as enhancing security at a national level and providing the necessary infrastructure for diminish the role of external actors (Paris, 2004; Call and Cousens, 2007). Saharawi people have started their process of constructing a national identity and a state democracy while living in refugee camps. The good outcomes of the SADR system of government, going from a post-conflict stage, to possibly gain independence over the Western Sahara territory, will be enhanced by the participation of women in politics.

This chapter has looked at the progress already made by Saharawi people to maintain long-term stability in post-conflict reconstruction. Twenty years of negotiations with Morocco, the renunciation of armed struggle, the liberation of all Moroccan war prisoners from their jails in the Tindouf desert, the setting up of a democratic government which promotes the participation of women and the training towards future economic independence are all examples of the SADR’s development of a “Good Governance” system. Moreover, the participation of women in political roles is valued by the Saharawi government not only for its deep meaning towards the goal of gender equality, but especially for the dedication of those families that are supporting those women in political roles. What still needs to be explored is the role of Saharawi women as representatives abroad and their impact on the local mediators.
Chapter Five: Gendered participation in the representation of Western Sahara

5.1 Establishing foreign representatives abroad

International relations literature on the foreign policy behaviour of small states reached its peak in the 1970s (Neumann and Gstöhl, 2004: 20), after the UN promoted the right to self-determination of the ex-colonies (East, 1973; Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006; McGowan and Gottwald, Dec., 1975). There is no agreement on the definition of “small states”. Some use this term to identify microstates, such as the former British colonies in the Pacific or the Caribbean; others use it for countries in the developed world such as New Zealand, Belgium, Luxembourg, Norway and Switzerland (Hey, 2003: 2), but mostly it is in the Third World, and countries such as East-Timor, Lesotho, Togo, and Bhutan, that are defined as “small states”, and some of these appear to operate in a manner of some concern to larger states when creating revenue. Some are in short::

Modern day pirates, bent on distorting international financial rules or operating on the margins of the financial system by creating offshore financial centers and attracting “unscrupulous” sources of funds, and having to live with the forecasted statement of being an “inevitable catastrophe” (UNIRSD, 2010).

The experience of the newly constituted East Timorese state fits perfectly into this picture:

In this globalized millennium, it takes more than a referendum to achieve independence. Timor-Leste has been governed by the United Nations. Its National Development Plan was largely written and enforced by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. [...] The police and military structures that have caused so much trouble recently were mostly created and trained by international advisors. Ninety percent of the economy depends on foreign oil companies. The new nation, sandwiched between two self-absorbed neighbors, has had to surrender petroleum reserves to Australia and abandon justice to Indonesia [...] (Scheiner, 2007: 135).

Leaving others to argue about the negative role of “small states” in the strategic balance between international powers, in this chapter I will focus on the importance of establishing good foreign policy relations while in the process of state-building. The East Timorese government for instance, while in exile, invested most of its diplomatic skills to create ties with neighbouring countries, and increased external support eventually brought Australia to support an international call for the referendum on autonomy:

East Timorese diaspora successfully garnered significant international support for their cause through well-established transnational connections cultivated over 25 years. This has meant that East Timorese long distance nationalism was shaped by a focus on international diplomatic efforts, and their success at building strong alliances with church and solidarity groups. So although refugee
diasporas such as the East Timorese have a specific homeland-oriented imagined community, the East Timorese imagined community is aided very much by transnational flows between the diaspora and their homeland, and between the diaspora and sympathetic outsiders (Wise, 2004: 171).

Anthony Smith, in his study of East Timor’s foreign policy shows how this new post-colonial “small-state” managed: ‘to exercise its independent judgement as a foreign policy actor’ (June, 2005: 36) tightening diplomatic relations with its larger neighbours Indonesia (its former occupier) and Australia. Similar behaviour can be seen in others “small states” emerging from post-conflict/post-colonial status; Croatian foreign policy for example: ‘has considerably helped to cross the road from fighting for an independent state to the situation where Croatia is nowadays being considered as a regional power in South-Eastern Europe’ (Vukadinovic, 1996: 150).

In their recent book on Western Sahara, Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy argued that ‘the greatest pressure in support of East Timor’s right to self-determination came from nongovernmental actors’ (2010: 262). Even in the case of Western Sahara, the work done by transnational activists and supportive foreign governments has started to pressure EU nations and private companies not to sign illegal deals with the government of Morocco, highlighting the unjust occupation of the Western Sahara territories. The Polisario worked since its constitution to establish effective foreign relations not only with African and European neighbours, but with countries all over the world: ‘one of Polisario’s main diplomatic strategies at the international level has been the pursuit of bilateral recognition from other states’ (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 123). The SADR is at present recognized as the legitimate government of the Saharawi people by almost fifty countries30 (ARSO, 2009a). Data from the Saharawi Department of Foreign Affairs31 shows that in 2009 there were thirty-two official Saharawi political representatives in Europe (including Russia) and Spain itself had twenty-one. There were twenty-two Saharawi political representatives in Africa, and seven more were cited as part of the Pan-African Parliament32 established in March 2004 (Article 17 of The Constitutive Act of the African Union). Australia only has one representative, North America has four, and South America ten. Saharawi embassies are established in eighteen of these nations, with the recent addition of the SADR Embassy in East Timor (Sahara Press Service, 2009). Those who for years held back on finalising the

30 In 2006, there were up to 81 countries that recognize the SADR. An up-to-date un-official list was published on the Saharawi website arso.org in 2009.
31 Internal document delivered confidentially.
32 In 1984 SADR was recognized by most African countries, therefore invited to join the Organization of African Unity (OAU), today Africa Union.
referendum, and who supported war and occupation were principally the French and American governments, which have always feared a solution of the conflict might have brought instability to their ally, the Moroccan monarchy.

In this chapter, after a brief introduction on the geopolitical support or rejection of the Saharawi’s right for independence, I will examine the role of Polisario representatives in Italy and Australia; was gender mainstreaming implemented? If yes, was this made tangible to their local supporters? Did Saharawi men and women use different diplomatic approaches in different countries? Finally, was their role substantial in reaching the ultimate goal of supporting the Saharawi cause for independence? As it will be demonstrated later, the work done by Saharawi political representatives abroad, both male and female, did enhance the creation of grassroots networks which has been strongly opposed to the non-interventionist agenda of nation-states. This has become more evident with Morocco’s growing fear of the outspoken international Saharawi civil rights movement, which has forced the kingdom to introduce new “media” techniques to divert listeners from finding out about the Western Sahara conflict. In my personal experience, while in Italy conducting interviews for this study, I had to confront a Moroccan representative during a public lecture on the role of Saharawi women in the SADR’s government. I was invited by the Bologna’s Women’s Centre to a talk about gender quotas and the experience of Saharawi women in government. There were two other female participants in the panel, an informal Saharawi representative who studied medicine in Italy, and an experienced European activist on Saharawi’s civil rights. The audience was mostly represented by women from various backgrounds, all interested in hearing about Saharawi’s civil rights abuses perpetrated by Morocco, and to know more about the role of Saharawi women in the SADR’s government. A woman among the others seemed very passionate in defending the Moroccan government. She verbally attacked the civil rights speaker, accusing her of lying, then pointed to the Saharawi representative, calling her a terrorist. The discussion became so passionate that the chair person could not manage the discussion, nor handle the confrontation, and left in tears. Yet, afterwards, many of the Moroccan women present in the audience came and thanked us saying they appreciated hearing about a situation that is not openly discussed in Morocco. The European activist for Saharawi civil rights also confirmed that it is not unusual for the Moroccan government to send representatives to these public talks, which may have explained the outspoken Moroccan woman who attempted to sabotage the conference. This experience helped me further appreciated the strategic importance of women’s involvement in the civil support of the Saharawi cause,
and the general significance of introducing informal representatives abroad to help spread the Saharawi claim for independence:

The most important advantage of nonviolent resistance is that it has the potential to overcome the major hurdle facing Western Sahara nationalism: the Franco-American consensus that supports Morocco. When handled strategically and with some media savvy, nonviolent resistance can highlight the moral differences between a people claiming their rights and the government that denies them (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 163)

5.2 The international scenario on support or rejection of independence for Western Sahara

Despite the clear illegality of Moroccan’s occupation of Western Sahara, geopolitical considerations surrounding the region have for years overridden the quest for international legality. The question of what the future holds for Western Sahara matters not only to those involved in the conflict; it creates tensions within neighbouring countries, the European Union’s agenda, and even the United States and United Nations’ interests. To better understand the complicated network of alliances both for and against the Moroccan government’s occupation, I will briefly introduce UN and EU policies over Western Sahara and subsequently analyse some of the interests of individual nation-states (France, Spain, and United States). To conclude, I will discuss the role played by transnational civil society in search for a pacific solution to the Western Sahara conflict.

5.2.1 UN long term engagement on Western Sahara

Christine Chinkin of the London School of Economics, published a book chapter for the International Platform of Jurists for East Timor (IPJET) in which she analyses the enduring engagement of the UN with Western Sahara (2006). The picture she frames is of a continuous presence of the United Nations in Western Sahara. Since 1976, a considerable number of different UN bodies have been directly involved in the conflict (the Decolonization Committee, the Security Council, MINURSO, the Secretary General’s various personal envoys and special representatives, International Court of Justice), and in the refugee camps (the UNHCR, the Commission on Human Rights, UN Legal Council, UNIFEM and many others). However, the Western Sahara issue has never been a priority in the agenda of the “veto nations” (the permanent five - P5: UK, USA, Russia, PRC, and France). In the language used by the UN:
The Council has not adopted the normative, regulatory or administrative role that it has in other conflict situations, for example by placing the territory under UN administration as it did with both Kosovo and East Timor (Chinkin, 2006: 335).

The question of Western Sahara has been dealt as a question of decolonization by the UN General Assembly and as a question of peace and security by the UN Security Council (UNSC). In 2002, the UN Legal Counsel was questioned on the right of multinational companies, such as the French oil company TotalFinaElf E&P Maroc, to sign agreements with Morocco in order to initiate oil extractions in Western Sahara (United Nations Security Council, 2002b). Subsequent to an analysis of the status of the occupied territory and of the principles of international law governing mineral resource activities in non-self-governing territories, the UNSC concluded, as it did in the Case Concerning East Timor (Crawford, 2006: 616-17, and ICJ Rep 1995, p.90, 105-6), that anything but drilling was legally admitted:

[…] the contracts for oil reconnaissance and evaluation do not entail exploitation or the physical removal of the mineral resources, and no benefits have as of yet accrued. The conclusion is, therefore, that, while the specific contracts which are the subject of the Security Council’s request are not in themselves illegal, if further exploration and exploitation activities were to proceed in disregard of the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara, they would be in violation of the principles of international law applicable to mineral resource activities in Non-Self-Governing Territories (United Nations Security Council, 2002b).

This is just an example that shows how, despite good intentions, the efforts of the United Nations to resolve the dispute over Western Sahara, and protect the spoiling of this rich territory, have failed continually. The real problem has always been the unwillingness for the UN’s states to find a final solution for conflict in Western Sahara: “the UN secretariat and the Security Council’s Group of Friends for Western Sahara were never comfortable with a winner-take-all vote. The referendum had only functional value, as an empty threat designed to extract a final political solution out of Morocco” (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 217).

5.2.2 The European position on Western Sahara

The European Union (EU) has always adopted a low profile over the question of Western Sahara’s self-determination process. Its political inaction was influenced by the lack of an effective foreign policy framework that could go beyond member states’ interests (Benabdallah, 2009:418; Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 86). There are two reasons. Firstly, Morocco is perceived as a strategic ally in the critical Islamic area of the Mediterranean

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33 Morocco has usually enjoyed good relations with the EU. It also benefits from a special status within the framework of the EU’s relations with the countries participating in the 1995 Barcelona Process [...] On 13
Sea; secondly, significant bilateral economic agreements have already been signed with Morocco for the exploitation of the Western Sahara territory’s phosphate resources and fishery coast. Scholars from all over Europe have condemned this illegal use of bilateral agreements which totally ignore the rights of Saharawi people (Brus, 2007; Chapaux, 2007; Koury, 2007). While France has always maintained its open support for the kingdom of Morocco, Spain has recently turned its face to the Polisario and improved its relationship with its supporters. Fortunately for the Polisario, new countries such as Sweden (Wrangle, 2007) and Norway have recently shown great support for Western Sahara’s right to self-determination, despite maintaining good relationships with Morocco.

SPAIN

Spain is still legally considered the de jure administering power of the Western Sahara’s territory. According to Carlos Luiz Miguel, the UN General Assembly never endorsed the Madrid Agreement between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania, and the UN Secretary-General has always referred to Spain as the official administering power of Western Sahara (2007b: 308). The Spanish government’s position over Western Sahara has recently been inconsistent (San Martin, 2005; Shelley, 2007; Zoubir, 2007; Balboni, 2008). Since its victory in 2004, socialist Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero has worked to improve Spain’s relationships with France and Morocco, supporting the “reformist” government of King Mohammad VI (Benabdallah, 2009: 428; Zunes and Mundy, 2010: 84). Since Madrid’s terrorist attacks of March 2004, the Spanish government had no choice but work closely with both Morocco (a U.S. ally under the George W. Bush administration), and Algeria on the “war against terrorism”. On 8 April 2005, the Moroccan weekly Alousbou’ published the news, confirmed by the Spanish press, that Morocco: ‘bought from Spain about twenty tanks, type M60 A3, at a token price, destined for Western Sahara and the border with Algeria’ (ARSO, 2005). In March 2007, the two governments met in the capital Rabat and reached a joint statement on the future of Western Sahara, welcoming the Moroccan plan for autonomy. Nonetheless, nonpartisan Spanish solidarity groups marked this new

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34 In 2009 the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has doubled his economic support to the Saharawi refugee population and a partially government-owned fish oil company has stopped trading with Morocco after ethical concerns expressed by Both the Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Finances, as well as the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara.
government’s position as “shameful”; the Coordination of Spanish associations in solidarity with the Sahara (CEAS) warned that: ‘Spanish support for the Moroccan plan will only bring war and suffering for both Saharawi and Moroccans and the rest of the region’ (ARSO, 2007b). When Saharawi human rights activist Aminatou Haidar was refused entry to Western Sahara and was sent back to the Spanish Canary Islands, Spain had to take a stand against Rabat and work with the United Nations and the U.S. to solve the impasse. This incident proved the strength of a large and very active pro-Saharawi movement within Spanish society. According to Benabdallah ‘supporting Moroccan claims over Western Sahara would come at high political costs for any Spanish government, and could also leave the door open to other claims over the other Spanish possessions’ (2009: 427).

FRANCE

It is no secret that Morocco, on the matter of the Western Sahara disputed territory, maintains the support of France, Great Britain and the United States. French leaders have always had a strong relationship with the kingdom of Morocco and clearly pursued a policy largely in favour of the territory’s annexation. In 2003, President Jacque Chirac threatened to use his veto power against the UN Security Council’s decision to impose a solution on Morocco (Zoubir, 2006: 288); again, in 2007, newly elected conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy stated before Morocco’s parliament:

Morocco proposed an autonomy plan, a plan that is serious, a plan that is credible as a basis for negotiation […] In France’s view, what will permit a resolution to this conflict that has gone on too long is a political solution, negotiated and agreed to by the two parties under UN auspices […] Morocco’s autonomy plan exists; it is on the table and constitutes a new proposal after years of deadlock. I hope to see Morocco's autonomy plan serve as the basis of negotiation in the search for a reasonable resolution. France will be at your side (Reuters, 2007, 23 October).

France is Morocco's main investor, with close to seventy percent of total foreign direct investments (Zoubir, 2007: 169). The French resolution on avoiding instability in the Maghreb region has pushed other African French-speaking countries, such as Benin, Bourkina Faso, Chad, Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), and Togo, to withdraw their diplomatic recognition of the Western Sahara Republic (Zoubir, 2006: 289). More recently, France, together with Russia, did try to block the UNSC’s proposal to establish human rights monitoring of Morocco as part of the MINURSO’s mandate (Human Rights Watch, 2008b).
5.2.3 The US position on Western Sahara

While France has always been resolute in its opposition to an independent Western Sahara (Security Council Report Website, 2010), the United States has been ambivalent. According to Zunes and Mundy: ‘between 1976 and 1984, the U.S. government spent an average of $1 million annually training Moroccan military officers [...] by 1982, there were approximately 130 U.S. military advisors working with the Moroccan armed forces, including members of the U.S. Army’s Special Forces and U.S. military attachés sighted in Moroccan uniforms in battle zones’ (2010: 19) During the Cold War, this large economic, military and logistical support to Morocco was justified by the fear that Saharawi nationalist movement would emerge as a pro-Soviet state aligned with Cuba and Libya (Zoubir, 2006: 291). In 1993, the Clinton administration changed the U.S. profile in the referendum using its influence to keep Morocco-Polisario negotiations going, and to create the Security Council’s “Group of Friends” for Western Sahara, joined by France, Russia, Great Britain and Spain. Subsequently, the appointment of former U.S. secretary of state James Baker as UN secretary-general for Western Sahara proved the efforts of the Clinton’s administration in finding a peaceful solution for Western Sahara. Unfortunately, the death of King Hassan II, and the ascension in 1999 of Mohammed VI delayed the organisation of the referendum under the Houston Accord, signed just two years before. Since 2001, with the introduction of George W. Bush’s “Global War on Terror”, the U.S. administration has looked at a stronger alliance with Morocco, which has always been very supportive of U.S. interests in the Middle East (Zunes and Mundy, 2010: ch 3). Just recently, newly elected U.S. President Barack Obama has overturned George W. Bush’s support for autonomy as the only solution for Western Sahara. In June 2009, President Obama talked in Cairo about a “New Beginning” for U.S. relationship with Islamic Nations in North Africa, and the countries of the Maghreb region: ‘Obama administration has disassociated itself from a Moroccan plan for autonomy for the disputed Western Sahara. They said the White House no longer sees itself as committed to the endorsement by then-President George Bush of Western Sahara autonomy’ (WorldTribune.org, 2009). Sources though are still contradictory. For Dr. Peter Pham, Vice President of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy in New York City, the creation of another “failed state” ‘that is too small, too poor, and too vulnerable to subversion by terrorists and other extremists’ (2010: 249) cannot be permitted if the U.S. wants to maintain the contemporary international order.
5.2.4 European “bottom-up” engagement with the Polisario

In 1986, when Spain entered the European Economic Community, the European Commission was called for the first time to rule on a bilateral fishery agreement between Spain and Morocco regarding Western Sahara (Damis, 1998: 62-63). Since then the European Parliament has adopted resolutions and declarations defining the issue of Western Sahara as a problem of decolonisation, but not defining the right of the Saharawi people to self-determination (Balboni, 2008). The Commission has continued to support the refugees in Tindouf using part of its international solidarity spending for the “forgotten” crises (Western Sahara, Chechnya, Myanmar and Nepal) (2008: 182), but has avoided comments on the conflict’s stalemate. The real political stand in support of a pacific solution over the Western Sahara conflict was taken by those European representatives who since 1976 have met every year at the European Conference of Coordination Support to the Sahrawian People (EUCOCO). This major international conference is held on a yearly basis, each time by 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 representatives 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. European activists and governments representatives get to meet and discuss with the stakeholders on strategies and ways of interventions for a peaceful solution of the Western Sahara disputed territory (see Figure 12). The aim is certainly to place the Saharawi conflict 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.
For example, thematic discussions for the 34th EUCOCO 2008 were: Political action, Humanitarian Aid (Food, Health, Non-Food Aid), Human Rights and Occupied Areas, Lawyers, Trade Unions, Women, Youth, Culture and Arts. Luca G., a representative from a Bologna’s Saharawi support group, was present at the 33th EUCOCO conference in Rome:

 [...] Beh, per me è stato la prima volta quest’anno, per cui ho potuto incontrare tante persone con esperienze differenti, dai saharawi che provengono dai territori occupati, a persone che invece vengono da altre parti d’Italia e dell’Europa, quindi con nuove testimonianze. Ho partecipato ad un incontro dell’EUCOCO quello sui diritti umani, che ci coinvolge particolarmente in associazione. Ho ascoltato le proposte di nuovi progetti e quello che si intende fare nell’immediato. Ho potuto confermare l’importanza di osservatori internazionali che seguono i processi ai Saharawi nei territori occupati, per poter portare una testimonianza a noi, ma soprattutto per vigilare un po’ su quello che accade continuamente. E’ stato molto interessante ascoltare la testimonianza degli attivisti sui diritti umani Saharawi. I loro racconti riportano sempre la sofferenze e le violenze subite. Ognuno di loro rappresenta una tragedia. E’ stata un’ esperienza molto forte e toccante (Luca G., 2008: Bologna).

[Well, this year was my first year; therefore 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. Their stories always recount the suffering and violence endured. Every one of them represents a tragedy. It was a very difficult and emotional experience.]
This European event is so significant that Saharawi supporters from outside Europe are also admitted. The two representatives of the Australian Western Sahara Association (AWSA) interviewed in this study were at the 2005 EUCOCo’s edition in Belgium:

[…] that would had been three years ago, 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 F., 2008).

There are other organizations in Europe which focus more on human rights such as the International Bureau for the Respect of Human Rights in Western Sahara (BIRDHSO) in Switzerland; the Spanish based Association of the Families of Saharawi Prisoners and Disappeared (AFAPREDESA), campaigning against human rights abuses perpetrated by Morocco against Saharawi in the Moroccan controlled parts of Western Sahara; and lastly the internationally based Western Sahara Resource Watch Association which researches and campaigns against companies who support the Moroccan exploitation of Western Sahara’s resources. Anna M. talked about her experience of working for BIRDHSO and the difficulty of promoting the respect of human rights due to a lack of funding and commitment:

[…] Frequentando poi gruppi di lavoro in Europa sulla solidarietà per il popolo Sahrawi, sono entrata a far parte del BIRDHSO (Bureau Internazionale per il Rispetto dei Diritti Umani nel Sahara Occidentale) con sede a Genève. Durante una nostra assemblea, è stato deciso che avrei fatto parte dell'esecutivo e che ci sarebbe stato un referente per ogni paese dell’Europa che lavorava per i Sahrawi, sono stata scelta a rappresentare l’Italia. Da questo momento il mio lavoro è cambiato, ho abbandonato i progetti umanitari e ho iniziato di cercare di sensibilizzare le organizzazioni italiane che si occupano di violazioni dei diritti umani. Non è facile lavorare in questo settore (perché poi non arriva un riscontro diretto), quasi nessuno vuole finanziare un progetto del genere, anche se tutti dicono che i diritti umani sono importanti e che dobbiamo rispettarli. Per fare rispettare i diritti umani è necessario un budget per preparare determinate cose, e purtroppo siamo praticamente partiti da zero (Anna M., 2008).

[While participating at European workshops on solidarity with the Saharawi people, I became part of BIRDHSO (International Bureau for the Regard of Human Rights in Western Sahara) headquartered in Geneva. In one of our meetings it was decided that I was going to be part of the executive and that there was going to be one representative for each European country working with the Saharawi; I was chosen to represent Italy. From that moment onwards my job changed, I gave up the humanitarian projects and started working to increase awareness of the Italian organizations which work in human rights violations. It is not easy to work in this sector (because you don't get direct feedback); almost no one wants to finance such projects, even if everyone talks up human rights and says that they must be respected. For human rights to be respected you need a budget in order to organize certain things, unfortunately, we practically started from zero].

Copious is also the participation of Saharawi women at these international gatherings, despite the difficulty of managing passports and visas to travel in and out the refugee camps. Their presence, as mentioned by Jack F., is generally noticed and highly regarded:
at the EUCOCO the prime minister was present and Sidati, Mohamed Sidati, who’s the Councillor for Europe, and some, you know, of the senior diplomatic representatives from the European places, and they were all men. 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 [...] I can’t remember her name [...] In terms of, of the impression she would make in European and English-speaking world she would be very impressive in the way, and you know Fatima is like this and... In some ways you see... 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. It wasn't Aminatou Haidar, but she was very impressive in terms of her personality and her way of communicating and 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. (Jack F., 2008)

Every year, since 1976, Polisario’s representatives, both men and women, have come from the refugee and occupied territories to participate at these international conferences. The scope has been to promote political participation of western partners in finding a pacific 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 in all areas. This is just an example of the groundwork done by Saharawi’s political representatives abroad to build a robust international social network.

5.3 Western Sahara political representatives in Italy

5.3.1 Roma’s Rappresentanza

In 1978, Hasen 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 University in Rabat:

Ho lavorato prima in Libia come rappresentante per sei mesi. Dopo la Libia sono andato, sono stato nominato sempre dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri Saharawi e il dipartimento relazioni internazionali del Polisario come un membro della rappresentanza del Polisario a Parigi in Francia; questo fu nel ’77. E li rimasi per altri otto mesi, lavorando alla rappresentanza Saharawi. Dopodiché, poi sono stato nominato in Svezia, lì anche per un periodo molto corto, avvevo però delle difficoltà, il problema della lingua, l’inglese, io non ero molto bravo in inglese quindi, la mia lingua originale, appartene l’arabo era lo spagnolo e capivo anche il francese. Dopodiché, poi nel ’78 sono stato nominato rappresentante del Polisario proprio qui in Italia. Lavorai in Italia per altri tre o quattro anni. Per me le difficoltà...e non avevo più voglia di rimanere a lavorare fuori, ho chiesto il trasferimento all’interno dei campi. Quindi a tornare nel Sahara Occidentale a fare altri lavori. [...] Nel ’98 venni richiamato un altre volta dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri Saharawi, poi nominato di nuovo in Italia (Hasan C., 2008).

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

"...Io, già durante i tempi dell’università facevo parte delle organizzazioni giovanili saharawi all’interno dei...degli universitari che studiavano a Cuba e quindi partecipavo inonima, amavo molto partecipare alla vita politica, al lavoro che si faceva in nell’organizzazione giovanile. Accadde però un fatto, che nel ’91 arrivò il referendum e arrivò con una richiesta da parte dei giovani di partecipare nel lavoro proprio burocratico, nella preparazione al referendum. Io finii lavorando nella commissione Saharawi per il Referendum, si chiamava la COSAR che è una specie di MINURSO Saharawi, diciamo, no, che aveva...rapporti con la MINURSO e ovviamente preparava il referendum. L’atto di determinazione. C’era una parte che si occupava di censo della popolazione, chi si occupava delle traduzioni, della raccolta...ciò eravamo una vera e propria commissione che si occupava solo del referendum. E lavoravo già negli accampamenti dei rifugiati. Dopo di che nel ’93, il referendum non andava avanti, c’era questo gruppo di giovani più o meno preparato, diciamo che potevano aiutare a svolgere il lavoro di sensibilizzazione all’estero riguardo la questione saharawi. Io fui mandata nel ’94 qui in Italia, a dar una mano al rappresentante che stava già qui. Quindi ho cominciato a lavorare negli uffici del Polisario da allora. [...] In Italia fino al ’99. Poi sono andata in Svizzera, ho collaborato con la rappresentante che era una donna, [...] poi sono stata nominata per lavorare in Svezia e poi sono rientrata di nuovo in Italia (Mariam B., 2007).

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.

Today, Rome’s Rappresentanza has four official\textsuperscript{35} foreign representatives, but still only one of these is a woman.

5.3.2 Working with Associations in Italy

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

\textit{Ovviamente io avevo, qua in Italia il Polisario, il movimento Saharawi era molto presente, ormai dagli anni ’70. Avevamo una buona relazione con le forze politiche italiane, con il Parlamento, ma soprattutto aveva creato una rete}

\textsuperscript{35} As explained in the introduction, “official representatives” refers to those listed as such by the Saharawi Foreign Department. Informal representatives, on the other hand are those who, while living overseas, were contacted by official Saharawi representatives to help in the Saharawi cause as civil representatives.
di solidarietà molto diffusa a livello di enti locali, di società civili, c'era... e ci sono ancora oggi centinaia di associazioni di solidarietà con il popolo Saharawi e questo ovviamente, questo capitale di solidarietà è anche un supporto morale a chi viene a rappresentare (Hasan C., 2008).

[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).]

Initially, the life of a representative is filled with frustrations; people do not know who Saharawi are, therefore it is hard for a representative to explain his/her role, mission, and the extent of his/her needs:

[...] Prima dovevi sempre spiegare chi sono i Saharawi, da dove vengono ed era molto faticoso [...] adesso si sa chi siamo e addirittura in un parlamento come quello italiano vengono votate delle risoluzioni a favore del riconoscimento diplomatico del fronte Polisario (Mariam B., 2007).

[In the past, you had to always explain who the Saharawi are, were they come from, and this was always very difficult [...] now they know who we are, even in a parliament like the Italian parliament, resolutions were passed which favour the diplomatic recognition of the Polisario Front.]

Difference in language and culture take their toll, especially when the time spent in one country is never enough to fully adapt:

Forse nel passato le persone non erano preparate a vivere in occidente, uno. Avevano il limite della lingua, il limite di imparare la cultura del luogo. Questo penso che era uno dei tre fattori più difficili per uno che viene preso da un accampamento di rifugiati e deve rispondere a un ruolo difficile con dei mezzi molto limitati. [...]Quasi tutti i rappresentanti Saharawi conoscono bene l'occidente, la cultura occidentale. Hanno convissuto, hanno imparato molto, parlano quasi tutti varie lingue. E' hanno anche imparato a usare meglio, no, il proprio tempo ecco, la questione del gestire le priorità e così via. Cosa che all'inizio non avevamo perché venivamo da un mondo completamente diverso, dove, venivi da un mondo e entrai in un mondo dove dovevi imparare tutto, assolutamente tutto e si perdeva molto tempo nell'imparare. Come una volta imparato già è arrivato il turno di cambiare posto e andare in un altro cultura ancora, un altro posto ancora, completamente diverso (Mariam B., 2007).

[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.]

After the pioneering job of lobbying, networking and marketing their message done by the first representatives, Italy is now one of the foremost Saharawi’s supporters in Europe, promoting political discussion, humanitarian aid, human rights watch, solidarity convoys etc...
Oggi la solidarietà, io parlo dell'Italia, è molto estesa, e il problema sono sempre i mezzi, per i Saharawi, non avendo il controllo sulla propria economia (Mariam B., 2007).

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.

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

(...) Qui il lavoro è soprattutto di lobbying, di sensibilizzazioni, prendere contatti (...). Queste è un lavoro molto complicato, molto difficile, però è anche un lavoro appassionante. Nei campi il lavoro si sa, li è anche una sopravvivenza, perché quello è un deserto (Mariam B., 2007)

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.

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

(...) Un tessuto di solidarietà con i Saharawi molto diffuso, e questo è quello che aiuta il rappresentante, avere tante sensibilità, tante amicizie, tanti...con tante forze politiche, poi anche di società civili di tutte le forze, di tutti gli orientamenti politici. Sulla questione Saharawi, qui per esempio in Italia c'è quasi una unanimità. Non si identifica la solidarietà con i Saharawi con uno schieramento o con un gruppo politico, dalla destra come dalla sinistra sulla questione Saharawi. (Hasan C., 2008).

[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.]

The work done by the Polisario political representatives in Italy made it easier for Italians to approach the Saharawi cause both politically and materially. Mariam B. showed satisfaction in talking about the work done by Italian associations in the camps:

Soddisfazione è quando vedi che si realizzano le...i progetti. Il fatto che riesci a trovare le persone che sono disponibili ad aiutare i Saharawi. Problemi negli accampamenti vengono risolti, in parte. Quando arrivai, vedi negli accampamenti che in 10 anni gli accampamenti sono completamente cambiati. I Saharawi, dal ’75 ad adesso è il popolo più istruito dell’Africa, con oltre il 95-93% di istruiti, è pazzesco per un accampamento di rifugiati. E’ una grande soddisfazione quando i bambini tutte le mattine vanno a scuola, tutti quanti possono andare in un ospedale. Escono all’anno, all’estero, oltre 9.744 bambini con gli adulti che li accompagnano e a cui vengono risolti i propri problemi (Mariam B., 2007).

[Satisfaction is when you see the realization of... the projects. The fact that you are able to find people who are willing to help the Saharawi people. The problems in the camps get solved, in part. When you arrive at the camps you see that in ten years the camps have totally changed. The Saharawi people, from ’75 till now, are the most literate people in Africa, with more than 95-93%
In 2007, the Italian government discussed the possibility of granting: ‘the Polisario Front’s delegation in Italy diplomatic status, as has been done in the past for other liberation’s movements recognized by the UN as official mediators in a peace process’ (Camera dei Deputati, 2007, July 12). After thirty years of lobbying across all political parties, the Polisario did finally obtain 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 celebrated as an: ‘important element of foreign policy because it was sympathetic to numerous UN Resolutions, and because it asked for the recognition of diplomatic status to those [Saharawi] representatives in Italy’ (RaiNews24 - Stampa, 2007).

Today, the job of a Saharawi political representative in Italy is to liaise with the many Italian associations created to support the Saharawi fight 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 thirteen official associations in Italy (ARSO, 2009b). Some started as a small committee and later became registered associations or NGOs. The Emilia-Romagna Region is one of Italy’s most supportive regional governments. Since 1999, Emilia-Romagna has given priority to the Saharawi cause in its budget for solidarity spending. Annual working plans are drafted by the Saharawi Board of Nations (Tavolo delle Nazioni) in order to select the best projects to realise in the Saharawi refugee camps (Fresa, 2004).

Luca G., who represents the Emilia-Romagna Regional Coordination of all the Saharawi support associations, says that working together has reduced duplication of resources and increased the quality of service, but has maintained the associations’ distinctive aims. Generally, the associations’ goals are shaped by two principal factors: solidarity and political action:

E’ importante cercare di avere un’organizzazione comune per unire le forze e le idee per progettare in una direzione comune. Per i Diritti Umani abbiamo organizzato negli ultimi anni, incontri e dibattiti coinvolgendo anche attivisti saharawi come Ali Salem Tamek e Hamineatou Haidar. Quando riusciamo a portare persone del loro levatura, come Coordinamento Regionale, cerchiamo di organizzare incontri su tutto il territorio regionale. Sono pochi giorni ma molto intensi per loro, ma anche per noi. Nel nostro sito c’è un continuo aggiornamento di quello che avviene nei territori occupati, nei campi profughi, oltre che di tutte le iniziative che vengono organizzate su tutto il territorio nazionale. Inoltre esiste una mailing list a cui vengono mandati gli aggiornamenti più importanti. Ogni giorno riceviamo e riportiamo notizie di saharawi che vengono arrestati. Ultimamente un rappresentante della CGIL che è andato nei territori occupati con una delegazione, è stato arrestato durante una riunione in casa di un attivista saharawi, E’ stato fermato per 24 ore, successivamente liberato. Ci sono stati momenti di tensione (Luca G., 2008).
It is important to try to have a common organization to put our strengths and our ideas together, to plan in a common direction. With regard to Human Rights, in the past we organized seminars and discussion forums, inviting Saharawi activists such as Ali Salem Tamek and Hamineatou Haidar. When we get a hold of such important people we try to organize, as a Regional Coordinative Committee, debates throughout the region. These are just a few days, but very intensive for them, and for us. On our website we constantly update news about occupied territories, refugee camps, and all the other initiatives organized at national level. There is also a mailing-list from which we send out the latest updates. Every day we receive and post news on Saharawi who are arrested. Recently, a member of the CGIL union, who went to the occupied territory with a delegation, was arrested while in a meeting at a Saharawi activist’s house. He was held for twenty-four hours and then released. There have been moments of tension.

Rita L., who represents the Rio de Oro association in the Marche Region, has worked for the past ten years with disadvantaged Saharawi families in the refugee camps. For her, as for many others, it all started when Saharawi children arrived in her home town for the Vacaciones en Paz (Vacations in Peace) programme. Rita L.’s first project for the Saharawi refugee population was drafted after her first visit to the camps:

[...] specialmente quando [...] mi sono resa conto, di che cosa si voleva fare e per chi. Si è iniziato quindi un progetto rivolto quindi ai disabili, alla popolazione disabile, iniziando con una scuola di Smara. Con la scuola di bambini differentemente abili, disabili, di Smara che poi ha portato ad un censimento di tutta la popolazione disabile di tutti i campi profughi. Questo primo progetto di adozione a distanza ha unito altri progetti sempre legati alla disabilità e alla malattia e in qualche modo ha anche unito il primo progetto di accoglienza. Quest’anno facciamo accoglienza ai bambini disabili in Italia e interventi di chirurgia nei campi profughi (Rita L., 2008).

Another testimony comes from Anna M., who was involved for many years with the Saharawi National Association which works with Italian political parties to present motions in favour of a political solution in Western Sahara. In fact, according to Anna M., being headquartered in the capital city of Rome gives the association more chances to contact local and international institutions and to coordinate solidarity projects at a national level (2008). Many of these associations’ representatives stressed the relevance of having direct Saharawi supervision to help draft their projects:

Con la nostra associazione e con il coordinamento regionale ascoltiamo le indicazioni sui progetti che ci vengono proposte da lui in quanto siamo consapevoli che sia la persona più accreditata per conoscere le vere esigenze del popolo saharawi. Ritengo che sia inutile decidere senza un suo consulto (Luca G., 2008)

[Our association and the Regional coordinating committee listen to his suggestions [Polisario representative from Rome] on projects, since we know that he is the most accredited in knowing the real needs of the Saharawi people. I believe that it is useless to make decision without consulting him.]
5.3.3 The introduction of the Polisario’s informal political representatives

Italy’s social and political movements that support the Saharawi cause are today so many and complex that the few Saharawi representatives based at the Rome’s Rappresentanza cannot satisfy the requests of participation at events or the coordination of solidarity projects. In order to satisfy everyone’s needs, 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 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:

Ogni giorno quando per esempio, gli studenti, i professori e i medici mi chiedono ma tu di dove sei, ecco, anche mi sento...devo spiegare tutta la mia storia, raccontare tutta la storia del mio popolo, quindi ecco che mi sento anche rappresentante politico in un certo modo (Labib E., 2008).

[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.]

When asked if he was part of a Saharawi events’ organization committee he said:

No, però quando fanno qualcosa ci chiamano comunque noi tutti Saharawi, quando abbiamo tempo, tutti li, facciamo quello che possiamo tutti quanti (Labib E., 2008).

[No, but when they organize something they call us, all the Saharawi, when we have got time, we are all there, we all do what we can.]

While Labib E. seemed confident of his informal role as a representative, Jamila D., who has lived with an Italian family since she was ten 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 present 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 can’t consider myself a political representative’ (Jamila D., 2008). Once I explained to her that in my view she had already been chosen by the Polisario to be an informal political representative (since the formal Polisario representative suggested to me her name for the interview) she agreed to continue. Despite her uncertainty, Jamila D. showed confidence in explaining her role as a “lecturer” for the Polisario:
Praticamente vado a fare conferenze, fatte da iniziative di associazioni pro-saharawi, iniziative pro-saharawi a livello nazionale e sta aumentando. Quindi il ruolo è quello di divulgare la mia causa. Quello di informare chi non sa chi sono i Saharawi della loro storia, di come siamo finiti in questa situazione inonima. [...] Parlo ultimamente di più con gli studenti, studenti liceali. Sto facendo un progetto con la Provincia di Roma di conferenze di quattro ore a istituto, divise in due. E qui facciamo sia proiezione dei filmati, che una mostra fotografica e spiegiamo un po’ la causa Saharawi (Jamila D., 2008).

[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.]

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 I., another Saharawi medical student in Bologna, was invited by the Bologna Women’s Centre to discuss the Western Sahara cause at the conference mentioned earlier (section 5.2) together with myself and an European human rights activist. Emma was able to present at this public panel on different aspects of women in politics, and particularly on the case of Saharawi women. Emma has lived in Bologna for several years, and participated in other public meetings such as the one organized by CESTAS, *Il ruolo della donna nel settore socio-sanitario in Africa e nel Mediterraneo* (2003). In my view, the Polisario’s strategy to employ Saharawi men and women, young and 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 I., Labib E. and Jamila D. are not afraid to show their disappointment when they encounter ignorance from their audience with regard the situation in Western Sahara:

[...] Ho una sorta di rabbia, diciamo, nel momento in cui sono lì, parlando della mia causa che è sconosciuta, che nessuno sa chi sono. Un popolo che esiste. Spesso l’indifferenza, principalmente a livello politico, permette sì che poi la gente non è informata. Quindi, si può definire problema? Non lo so, a me sì, a me mette molto a disagio questa situazione, perché spesso mi dicono “di dove sei?” “Sono Saharawi” “e chi è, chi sono i Saharawi?” Spesso mi viene anche da dire sono algerina, punto, per non...non so dipende anche dalla persona che hai di fronte (Jamila D., 2008).

All Saharawi representatives interviewed in Italy, both formal and informal, agreed that the work carried out by Italian associations in the past ten years has helped shape today’s
Saharawi refugee camps’ profile, and expressed satisfaction in the participation of Italians at any initiative organized 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.

This type of insight shows how international representatives abroad not only work to influence political parties and national governments, but how their political support is reached passing through grassroots association and social based commitment. This grassroots contact between Saharawi people and pro-Saharawi Italian social based organisations, holds an appreciation of gender mainstreaming as an integral part of what work they perform. This inclusive approach to gender encompasses the Italian associations, the Saharawi representatives, and the projects themselves. The just cause of the Saharawi and their commitment to a peaceful resolution of the situation is both a product off and results in this specific integration of gender mainstreaming, without being imposed in the movement by international organisations.

5.4 Western Sahara political representatives in 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, Jill Vidler and other supporters, to create an active Sydney group for Western Sahara. As Emily F. explains, Jill was involved with an application for a refugee status by a young Saharawi who had arrived in Australia by boat. While preparing the refugee application, Jill made contact with agencies in England, and learned about the situation of Western Sahara (Emily F., 2008). As Mohammed A. explains, he was chosen by the 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 manly 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 (Mohammed A., 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 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 India 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 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 A., 2008).

The original group which welcomed Mohammed A. on his first arrival to Australia was no more than eight people. In 2000, they became incorporated as a non-profit association in order to raise awareness and to promote action for the Saharawi cause in the Australian community. The Sydney based association, the Australia Western Sahara Association (AWSA), has now an established branch in Melbourne and, in the past nine years, has organised numerous events and campaigns that were politically very significant:

[AWSA] It is just a group of Australians who want to do what they can to encourage the Australian government to play more active role in insuring that the Saharawi people are able to exercise their right to self determination, under the UN arrangements for that. [...] We want the Australian government to do something about it (Jack F., 2008).

Some of these activists have also been supporters of the East Timorese Nobel Laureate, José Ramos-Horta when he was living in Sydney as political representative (Wise, 2004: 168). 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 has showed great support for Gusmão and the East Timorese cause, in 2009 Ramos-Horta came to Australia to support the Saharawi people (Ramos-Horta, July 22, 2009).

In 2003, under Mohammed’s supervision, AWSA organised Saharawi representative Fatima Mahfoud’s tour to Australia and New Zealand, and invited her to talk about the Saharawi cause from a woman’s 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 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 and the desert life:

[...] 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 F., 2008).

[...] when Fatima Mahfoud came to visit Australia [...] she stayed with us and that…her talking about the Saharawi cause gave me a very substantial insight into what it was all about and perhaps encouraged me to want to join the group to go to the camps. So that’s how I got involved (Jack F., 2008).

Five years later, AWSA invited Malainin Lakhal, Secretary General of the Union of Saharawi Journalists and Writers (UJSARIO) and human rights activist, to repeat Fatima’s tour but focus more on human rights and Moroccan abuses in the occupied territories (Australian Western Sahara Association, 2007).

Recently AWSA has gathered many Australian political institutions, companies, media, and unions, to support the Saharawi cause. At the time of the interview, Jack F. said that the association had made contact with: ‘the present prime minister, Kevin Rudd, when he was the shadow minister for Foreign Affairs and he knows the issue and he’s on side on the issue of a referendum’ (Jack F., 2008). On the 27 February 2009, the thirty-third anniversary of the Saharawi Republic, AWSA organised the raising of the Western Sahara flag at the Town Halls of Leichhardt (Sydney), Newcastle and various other cities and towns of Australia (Melbourne, Perth, Hobart, Geelong and Darwin) as a symbolic: ‘gesture of solidarity and friendship with the Saharawi people’ (Australian Western Sahara Association, 2009).
The physical distance from the refugee camps has made it almost impossible for AWSA to develop a humanitarian aid service to the Saharawi refugee camps:

The problem for us in Australia, of course, is, and whilst we did send a container of sugar, and that was organised through the Victorians, a couple of years ago, it’s extraordinarily expensive to do, to ship it, and while the sugar was supplied for free, from one of the main sugar companies in Australia, the costs were enormous and unsustainable in effort and, it’s one of the issues for giving aid, how is the best way to do that. So in some ways for us the food issue was not something that we could make a particularly useful contribution towards, so he [a Polisario representative in the camps] outlined the difficulties, and we were aware that the UN food program was inclined to reduce its support (Jack F., 2008).

Nonetheless, despite profound differences between Australia and North-West Africa: ‘in terms of language, culture, history’, Mohammed was happy to mention that this Australian association: ‘try to do whatever they can […] they try to help in different ways’:

[...] 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 A., 2008).

Certainly, AWSA’s great achievements in the political arena for the Saharawi campaign could not have been possible without Mohammed’s supervision: ‘without him we wouldn’t have had a focus’ (Emily F., 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 A., 2008).

This task could not have been possible without the help of organizations such as AWSA, APHEDA (Union Aid Abroad – Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad)37 and AustCare. Like in Italy, the brief but effective participation of a female Saharawi representative visiting Australia gave to local supporters a better understanding of the social and political situation in Western Sahara, and the political consequences of the conflict.

37 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.
5.5 Western Sahara political representatives on the international stage

Saharawi women, both political representatives and members of grassroots associations, have recently led the SADR government in participating at international fora; in 2008 a delegation of Saharawi women held an official visit to the European Union (Mujeresaharauis blogspot), and at the Ninth Congress of the Pan African Women’s Organisation (PAWO) the National Union of Saharawi Women was elected to be their representative at the UN (Sahara Press Service). One of the most renowned Saharawi civil activists is also a woman: Aminatou Haidar, commonly called the Saharawi Gandhi. At the age of twenty-one, Ms Haidar was one of seven hundred peaceful protestors arrested in Al-Ajoun, the occupied capital of Western Sahara, for participating in a rally in support of the referendum for independence. Ms Haidar "disappeared" without charge or trial in 1987 with other seventeen Saharawi women. She was tortured and held in Moroccan secret detention centres for four years. Again in 2005, at the beginning of the Saharawi Intifada for independence, Aminatou was brutally beaten and kidnapped by the Moroccan forces only to be released seven months later (Zunes, 2008). For her courageous campaign to promote self-determination for Western Sahara against Moroccan forced disappearances and abuses of political prisoners, Aminatou Haidar was awarded in 2008 with the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Prize, and a year later honoured with the Civil Courage Prize in New York. On her way home after this last award ceremony in the United States, Ms Haidar was refused entry to Western Sahara by Moroccan authorities, and deported to the Canary Islands. The reason for the refusal was her declaration on the immigration document of holding Saharawi nationality, rather than Moroccan. Once in Spanish territory, Aminatou engaged in a non-violent protest to express her right to be a Saharawi living in the occupied Western Sahara territory, refusing to leave the airport. Her hunger strike in Lanzarote airport drew international media attention on civil rights abuses recurrently committed by Morocco in Western Sahara. After four weeks of hanger strike and with Christmas approaching, the Moroccan and Spanish governments felt the international pressure to allow Ms Haidar to return to her family. On the 11th of December, after twenty five days of hunger strike, the U.S. Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton (2009), spoke with the Moroccan Foreign Minister asking him to allow Ms Haidar to return home:

Her homecoming was, in her own words, a victory for ‘international law, for human rights, for international justice’ but it was also significant in that it was the first time in the 34 year history of
the conflict that the international community had effectively intervened in Western Sahara to persuade Morocco to adhere to its obligations under international law. By capturing both the attention of the media and the imagination of the public, Haidar’s hunger strike gained massive public support and succeeded in propelling the issue of Western Sahara onto the political agenda (Simanowitz, 2010).

This example adds to the work done daily by SADR representatives abroad to inform the international community on Moroccan abuses against the territory and the people of Western Sahara, and to call for intervention in finding a just and peaceful solution for the impasse. Saharawi men and women, sent overseas as political representatives, have helped local activist to understand the origin of the Western Sahara situation and to establish grassroots support.

5.6 Conclusions

The work done by the joint effort of SADR’s political representatives and the associations’ representatives has often been crucial in revealing the truth about stereotypes of a Muslim “fragile” “small” state. Since Hasan C. first arrival in Italy in 1978, the role of Saharawi political representatives abroad has experienced many changes. Representatives went from having to deal with a new language and culture, to become fundamental in liaising refugees and supporters abroad. Local governors and social activist have come from not knowing anything about Western Sahara and why its people were forced to refugee status, to create a complex social and political network in favour of a pacific solution to the stalemate.

Australia, despite its geographical distance from the conflict, has managed to welcome various Saharawi political representatives to inform the national government and grassroots associations about the illegal occupation of Western Sahara, the repression of Saharawi living in the occupied territories and the harsh situation of the refugees in the desert camps. In just more than ten years, with the help of Mohammed A., the Australian Western Sahara Association has produced a massive informative campaign that has helped Australian companies withdraw from economic agreements with Morocco on the extraction of Western Sahara’s natural resources.

The Western Sahara stalemate still suffers from chronic post-colonial and post-Cold War disbelief, and so there is much more work to be done before justice can be achieved. The presence of natural resources in the territory and the political instability of the Maghreb region causes a barrier to the United Nations taking serious action to resolve the impasse in
the peace process (Zunes and Mundy, 2010). In my own view, while the Polisario has successfully engaged in internal practices of state-building and gender mainstreaming, greater support is needed by international powers to close this chapter of unresolved colonialism, and to achieve this the role of political representatives abroad has proved to be essential.
Chapter Six: Thesis Conclusions

Saharawi refugees have come a long way to establish a strong, gender conscious, nationalism. It was 1975 when the Saharawi liberation movement Polisario renounced its tribal kinship to proclaim national unity, and expressed its desire for independence. After fifteen years of war with Morocco and twenty years of negotiations, Saharawi refugees are today governed by an Islamic Republic (SADR) working from an exiled outpost in the Algerian desert. Thus, SADR’s nationalism came about as a unique result of the rejection of tribal divisions and the retention of the matriarchal Bedouin culture. Scholars have shown that SADR has effectively promoted independent state-building practices and implemented gender mainstreaming policies at all levels of government. This study adds to this growing literature by focusing on the role of Saharawi political representatives abroad, and their gendered participation in building international alliances with foreign governments, NGOs, and local activists.

As discussed in the introduction, the UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security has required all UN members’ states to incorporate in their policies gender equality provisions for establishing post-war democratic systems. This program requires post-conflict states to implement full participation of women in prevention and resolution of conflicts, and be aware of gender-specific human rights abuses. Evidences from historical accounts and recent events show that the concept of gender mainstreaming worked implicitly in the SADR government-in-exile since its inception.

Chapter Two explored the complex political structure of the SADR’s refugee camps. The defragmentation of the political organisation in various degrees of governments, all locally centred, has created multiple opportunities for women to be represented in the democratic process, and therefore limited the need to introduce gender sensitive mechanisms such as gender quotas (paragraph 3.5.1). Since the drafting of the SADR’s first constitution women have been welcomed in all ranks of politics. Mothers, teachers, mayors, ministers, political representatives and doctors, Saharawi women have kept their religious and traditional identity, which has enhanced their agency in defeating illiteracy and promoting political action within the Polisario. Saharawi women are today represented at all levels of society, both in the refugee camps and overseas. Their participation at international fora is highly
regarded, and often their contribution gives governments and international activists a different viewpoint of the situation in the camps and of the whole situation.

The large number of women working in the camps is not just the result of policy; it is also grounded in the Saharawi Islamic tradition and culture. As discussed in Chapter Three, Saharawi people follow a traditional, moderate interpretation of Islam in which women are encouraged to be an active and powerful part of the public sphere as demonstrated by some of the Qu’ran’s most renowned female leaders. Their Bedouin traits made the original Saharawi tribes a strong matriarchal society. With time though, certain taboos related to the private sphere (for example, ‘enforced imprisonment’ of women who have become pregnant outside of marriage) have re-emerged and strengthened, so much so that today’s Saharawi government has not yet being able to handle them effectively. Some scholars have also accused the Polisario of instrumentally using gender mainstreaming to gain support for their cause from the international community, but it is a matter of fact that Saharawi women have a great say within the SADR, and their participation in the Saharawi government commenced well before gender mainstreaming was introduced as an international norm. The National Union of Saharawi Women and Saharawi women representatives abroad have been closely working with the Polisario since its beginning. This of course does not completely solve the problem of women still feeling less able to run a political career because of their primary calling to be wives and mothers. This is why an analysis of gender mainstreaming in Muslim states should take into account specific traditional and social conditions in order to fully understand the complexity of political representation. A testimony from Jamila D., a young informal Saharawi representative in Italy, shows perfectly that Saharawi women have entered in politics and how this cannot be taken away from them:

La donna Saharawi è politica perché è entrata in politica per necessità. Perché era lei sola che poteva portare avanti la politica. È importante perché non viva solo nella vita familiare e basta. È importante perché possa crescere i propri figli con dignità, con orgoglio. È una donna che si sveglia la mattina, accudisce i propri figli, li manda a scuola e che subito dopo può uscire per andare a fare delle riunioni o viaggiare nel mondo occidentale per portare la sua causa (Jamila D., 2008).

[A Saharawi woman is political because she entered into politics out of necessity. Because she was the only one who could take on politics. It is important because she does not live only for her family and that’s all. It is important that she brings up her children with dignity, with pride. It’s a woman that wakes up in the morning, looks after her children, sends them to school and then, straight after, she can go out to meetings, or to travel to the Western world and talk about her cause.]

While Polisario is working to build post-conflict transitions in order for the SADR to become the rightful government of a future independent Western Sahara, Saharawi women
are working to improve their political participation. Both Italian and Australians NGOs’ representatives interviewed in this study where confident in the fact that this advanced political status for Saharawi women will not fall through once the stalemate is overcome. Their support for various international diplomatic activities has already helped the Polisario in finding supporters for the Saharawi cause, as with the Australian representatives of the AWSA association expressed in this study.

Chapter Five demonstrated the relevant and unique contribution made by these Saharawi women in presenting the true Saharawi spirit and the extent of their tragedy. Depending on their role, Saharawi women participated in the international scenario at different levels to help foreign governments and social activists to figure out the real impact of Moroccan occupation in the Western Sahara, the hardship suffered by Saharawi refugees, and the urgency to find a peaceful and rapid solution to their plight. Moreover, international relationships can help Saharawi women keep their role in Saharawi politics. The women’s forum at EUCOCO conferences for example is a great opportunity for supporters to interact with the Polisario about gender mainstreaming issues and refugee life. For the Saharawi women it is a venue to meet with their Western counterparts, discuss policies on the status of women in the SADR and in the camps and start new projects. There might be some truth to the claim that the advancement of Saharawi women was used by the Polisario as an instrument to gain Western support in their fight against Morocco (paragraph 1.3), but there is no evidence to show that these women are acting as the Polisario’s instruments. Rather Saharawi women represent a fundamental part of the Polisario’s keen desire for self-determination in the form of an independent state for Western Sahara, and they were practising gender mainstreaming in state-building throughout their refugee camps and other aspects of their internal and external politics long before it became a fashionable concept in the West.
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Appendix I

INITIAL APPLICATION APPROVAL
In reply please quote: HE07/328
Further Enquiries Phone: 4221 4457

18th December, 2007

Ms Sonia Rosetti
1/21 Smith St
Wollongong
NSW 2500

Dear Ms Rosetti,

Thank you for your response dated 4th December, 2007 to the HREC review of the application detailed below. I am pleased to advise that the application has been approved.

Ethics Number: HE07/328
Project Title: Gender in peace building: a focus on Saharawi refugees.
Researchers: Ms Sonia Rosetti, A/Prof Rebecca Albury, A/Professor Katherine Hannan
Approval Date: 17th December, 2007
Expiry Date: 16th December, 2008

The University of Wollongong/SSEIAHS Humanities, Social Science and Behavioural HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. The HREC has reviewed the research proposal for compliance with the National Statement and approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with this document. As evidence of continuing compliance, the Human Research Ethics Committee requires that researchers immediately report:

- proposed changes to the protocol including changes to investigators involved
- serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
- unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

You are also required to complete monitoring reports annually and at the end of your project. These reports are sent out approximately 6 weeks prior to the date your ethics approval expires. The reports must be completed, signed by the appropriate Head of School, and returned to the Research Services Office prior to the expiry date.

Yours sincerely,

A/Professor Garry Hoban
Chairperson
Human Research Ethics Committee

cc: A/Prof Rebecca Albury, Faculty of Arts
Appendix II

IN CONFIDENCE

Prompts for Interviews with Non-Government Representatives Participants

Representative role

Question A1: Can you tell me about your organization and your relationship with the Saharawi people?

Question A2: Did you participate to any international conference on Saharawi, such as the EUCOCO or events like Sandblast in England?

Knowledge of Saharawis

Question B1: What do you know about the overall Saharawi political structure?

Question B2: What do you think are their strengths? Did you have any issue working with Saharawi representatives?

View on Saharawi representatives

Question C1: What do you think about Saharawi political representatives?

Question C2: What do you think they should change or add to better represent their situation in your Country?

Women in politics

Question D1: What does the sentence “women in politics” mean to you? Can you say if you think there are “women in politics” in the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic?

Question D2: Do you think Saharawi women have as many chances as men, and why?

Question D3: Do you have a view about the political or policy areas in which Saharawi women are competent?

Question D4: Was the interaction with women representatives different from the one with men?
IN CONFIDENCE

Prompts for interviews with Saharawi representatives participants

Becoming a representative

Question A1: Can you tell me about your journey to become a (political) representative and what is your role?

Question A2: Can you tell me if there are differences when you exercise your role within the Saharawi camps and the country where you currently work?

Challenges

Question B: Can you tell me what the challenges are and what fulfilments of this role?

Relationship with Western governments, particularly the Australian or Italian

Question C: Can you tell me what your relationships with the ____ government are?

Relationship with Western non-governmental organizations

Question D: Can you tell me what your relationships with the non-governmental organizations are? Can you give some example?

Legislative system

Question E1: Can you tell me how does the Saharawi legislative system run?

Question E2: Do you think women have as many chances as men, and why? Is gender regulated in your constitution?

Question E3: Are you aware that many post-conflict Countries have introduced gendered quotas to favour women in parliaments? Have you considered a similar system?

Women in politics

Question F1: What does the sentence “women in politics” mean to you? Can you say if you think there are “women in politics” in the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic?

Question F2: Do you have a view about the political or policy areas in which Saharawi women are competent?

Question F3: What is Saharawi women’s contribution towards a solution of the conflict and the construction of a new State?

Question F4: What do you think of women as negotiators?

Can you give me an example?