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Promoting Sustainable Transformations in
Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis
With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps

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Acronyms

AFRAPADESA	The Association of Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Missing People (founded in 1987)
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office
Frente Polisario	Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro (the Sahrawi military and political liberation movement founded by students in 1973)
MINURSO	UN Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NUSW	The National Union of Sahrawi Women

OAU	Organization of African Unity
SADR	Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic
SRC	Sahrawi Red Crescent
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme

Glossary

<i>Daira</i>	District: The refugee camps are divided into four <i>wilayas</i> (provinces), which in turn are sub-divided into <i>dairas</i> (districts). While the <i>dairas</i> are at present the units of administration for the refugee camps, they are intended to become the SADR's regional and local administrative units
<i>Hassaniya</i>	Dialect of Arabic spoken by the Sahrawi
<i>Kheima</i>	Tent
<i>Mehr</i>	Brideprice
<i>Mehlfa</i>	Clothing worn by Sahrawi women

Introduction

An emerging body of literature documents the extent to which gender relations may be positively affected by periods of war or exile. While the importance of documenting the gendered experiences of war and exile must not be underestimated, a clear trend emerges in such literature: having firstly revealed a selection of progressive transformations which accompany such contemporary periods of intense social upheaval, the authors of these studies invariably conclude by wondering "...whether these changes in roles, attitudes and perceptions will be maintained when peace prevails and people return to [their countries of origin]" (Edward, 2001:287-88, with reference to Sudanese refugees; see also Chingono, 1996:210-11).

Indeed, historical and cross-cultural examples illustrate that the more progressive changes in gender relations experienced during war or exile have usually failed to survive the post-conflict or post-exilic period. These examples remind us that, despite their revolutionary rhetoric supporting a change in gender roles or identities, "in none of these revolutions did post-revolutionary regimes 'remember the ladies'" (Tetreault, 1994:18). However, few authors have gone beyond simply asserting this trend towards a re-traditionalisation of gender roles and identities, often mentioning it for the first time in their conclusion (for example: Edward, 2001:287-88). On the few occasions when

authors question the reasons why this trend occurs, such questions are primarily rhetorical in nature, and are largely left unanswered (see Ducados, 2001:13; Meintjes, 2000:5-10).

The premise of this paper is that this reversal is by no means inevitable, and that it is possible, and therefore essential, to adequately address this issue. By recognising that “[w]e cannot seek the answers until we begin asking the questions” and that “[m]aintaining silence is uncomfortably close to complicity” (Nordstrom, 1999:76), the politico-ethical nature of decision-making becomes apparent, and responsibility for decisions inescapable (Edkins, 1996:547-75). In his discussion on decision-making, responsibility and policy failure, Schaffer rejects the usefulness of simply listing obstacles in order to explain policy failure: rather, he suggests that it is necessary to consider the possible obstacles prior to implementation, and overcome them at this stage (Schaffer, 1984:142-190). Hence, rather than simply deciding to document the re-traditionalisation once it has occurred, it is our responsibility to be proactive in order to establish the possibilities of preventing such conservative shifts before they take place.

Following my three visits to the Sahrawi refugee camps in South Western Algeria (see Figure 1), the principal focus during the course of my research has been to examine the means by which Sahrawi women can best retain the progressive transformations which have taken place since the Sahrawi refugee camps were established in 1976.

Colonised by Spain in 1884, the United Nations Decolonisation Committee first urged Spain to start processing the decolonisation of Western Sahara in 1964. Spain failed to comply with this directive and decolonisation never took place, with Mauritania and Morocco invading the territory on the 12th October, 1976. This led to a mass exodus of approximately 165,000 Sahrawi from the Western Sahara to the refugee camps established in South Western Algeria. By early 1976, several international groups were referring to the war as one of genocide, since napalm bombs were dropped on civilians who had fled to camps at Tifariti and Bir Lahou (Harrell-Bond, 1981b:5; 1981d:2). While Mauritania withdrew from the territory in 1979, the war between the Moroccan Armed Forces and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario Front) continued until a peace plan was sponsored by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations (UN) in 1991. A cease-fire is still in effect, pending a referendum for self-determination. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was proclaimed on the 27th February 1976, with the OAU recognising it as a full member of the OAU in 1984. Even though its government is currently based in the refugee camps, the SADR is at present recognised by 76 countries as the legitimate government of the Sahrawi people.

Nearly thirty years since their arrival in the refugee camps, approximately 200,000

Sahrawi depend wholly on assistance provided by the Algerian government, the Sahrawi Red Cross (SRC), United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and various European non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Despite this total material dependence, the Sahrawi community is responsible for the distribution of aid (via SRC) and management of the camps, and the SADR's participatory ideology and democratic organisation of the camps aim to promote maximum self-sufficiency in both the long- and short-term, with the present structure of the camps intended to form the basis for the permanent regional and local administrative units upon independence (Fadel, 2002:6-9; Harrell-Bond, 1981:1-4; Black, 1984:1-2; Mowles, 1986:8-9).

The camps have not only been described as “models of efficient local government” but also as “the world's best-run refugee camps” (Brazier, 1997:14), from which the Sahrawi are “demonstrating their capacity to begin the task of national reconstruction” (Harrell-Bond, 1981d:1). Sahrawi women, like their government in exile, recognise the connections between the past, present and future, and are determined to ensure that their potential is sustained upon their return to the Western Sahara.

Since Sahrawi men are either on active military duty or are employed abroad, the majority of the camp population consists of women and children, and women therefore

administer and manage the camps. While only four Sahrawi girls were enrolled in Spanish Saharan secondary schools in 1974 (Firebrace, 1985b:30), women have benefited from adult literacy campaigns in the camps, and education is universal and compulsory for all children, with a small number of girls and boys receiving scholarships for further education in, amongst others, Cuba, Algeria or Russia, returning to work in the camps upon graduation. The feminisation of the public sphere, and women's multifaceted participation in the organisation of the camps (for instance, distributing and managing aid, working as doctors, teachers, and police-women, and producing craft-work for internal use and for sale in the newly- established camp economy) is encouraged by the official Sahrawi women's organisation, the National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW). The NUSW, however, is concerned that following national independence, when men return from the military, women's participation in public roles and political roles may be restricted, as has been the case in most historical and cross-cultural examples (interview with Abdelhadi:12/04/01; Hamdi, 1993:26; NUSW, Document B).

Due to the situation in the camps, and in contrast to the majority of the literature reviewed which is addressed to international policy makers and aid donors, the results of this paper are directed to the NUSW and the SADR government-in-exile. Producing analyses for donors or agencies, rather than for the refugees themselves, reflects and reproduces assumptions that aid must come from "outside", and that outsiders must

manage it; that host governments lack organizational capacity, and that refugees are too helpless to take responsibility for themselves (Harrell-Bond, 1999:145-150; also 1986:1-19). The Sahrawi case, however, indicates the invalidity of these assumptions, and my intentions are therefore to present the Sahrawi with an analysis of the implications of present research for their particular situation, in the hope that such an analysis may highlight the gaps and areas requiring further attention from both the SADR and NUSW. In doing so, the necessity of two-way reflection is revealed: just as development practitioners and humanitarian aid providers must question their assumptions regarding the capacities and priorities of refugee communities and individuals (Harrell-Bond, 1986), so too must the SADR and NUSW be equally self-aware in order to overcome the limitations experienced by past post-conflict and post-exilic governments.

Reflecting the practical aims of this paper, literature from a multiplicity of areas is analysed in terms of its relevance for the future protection of Sahrawi women's achievements once the exilic period ends, since

[a] major obstacle to the transferability of knowledge to practice is disciplinary division within academia and fields of knowledge... Unnecessary mental compartmentalisation still undercuts conceptualisation and research.

(Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 2000:75)

As disciplines are compartmentalised and rarely engage with competing disciplinary

perspectives, most analyses tend to perpetuate fragmented – hence inadequate – understandings (Moser, 2001:39). The present study rejects such a compartmentalisation of knowledge, and adopts a holistic and multi-disciplinary perspective to demonstrate “*how much we do already know*” (Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 2000:76, emphasis in the original), thereby revealing the possibility, and hence necessity, of acting according to this knowledge.

While gendered analyses may be marginalized within fields, by transcending the boundaries of such fields, and complementing gendered analyses of conflict, exile and forced migration, resettlement and repatriation, and nation-building, it is possible to undertake a longitudinal analysis of change in order to indicate the connections which exist between the gendered experiences of pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic periods.

Due to the constraints governing this paper, the present dissertation is unable to present an exhaustive analysis of the factors which have contributed to the re-traditionalisation of gender relations in the past, or of recommendations which could prevent such a re-traditionalisation from occurring in Sahrawi gender relations in the future. While anticipating the need for a full and ongoing analysis of the past and present, the premise of the paper is that the government of the SADR may be able to act in favour of women’s interests during the exilic phase in such a way that it may moderate the re-traditionalisation which has characterised post-exilic phases, and that a selective presentation of past difficulties may reveal several areas requiring further attention.

In Section One I shall briefly examine the nature of the changes which habitually occur during conflict and exile, indicating the relevance of recognising the “interconnectedness” of gender relations (El-Bushra, 2000a:61) and therefore the inadequacies of studies which focus on women in “gender isolation” (Matsuoka and Sorensen, 1999:226). In Section Two I shall discuss the connections which exist between the pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic phases, with particular reference to the process of ‘nation-building’, presenting several ‘reversals’ which have habitually accompanied the ‘return’ of refugees to their country of origin, and illustrating the connections between male, female and state failures to prioritise women’s interests during the post-exilic period.

In Section Three I shall discuss the process of my research in the refugee camps, and in Section Four examine the experiences of Sahrawi women in the camps, based on my own research combined with the literature written on the camps by external agencies and analysts, and documents produced by the NUSW and SADR. By discussing women’s experiences with regards to institutionalised politics and education, and documenting two instances of ‘reversal’ and ‘reassertion’ which have already taken place in the camps, I shall suggest that the ways in which the SADR and NUSW deal with the present limitations and ‘reversals’ are of the utmost importance for Sahrawi women’s future.

Section One

Conflict, Exile and Gender Relations:

Agency, Empowerment and Change

When studies first documented the gendered aspects of conflict, they focussed on the negative impact of war on women (see Berkin and Lovett, 1980; Lentin, 1997; Turshen, 1998; Moser and Clark, 2001), illustrating how men and women are differently affected by conflict, and in particular revealing the gendered and sexual nature of violence (see Copelon, 1998:63-79; Daley, 1991:248, Moser and Clark, 2001:8). During the last decade, however, analysts have increasingly examined both the positive and the negative impacts of war and exile on gender relations (see Indra, 1999:16-21), recognising that – since men may be involved in the military and may therefore be absent from civilian settlements – patriarchal structures are often eroded during conflict, and that women adopt roles and responsibilities previously monopolised by men (for example, Byrne, 1996; El-Bushra and Mukarubuga, 1995; Kumar, 2001c; Sorensen, 1998). While El-Bushra and Piza-Lopez are largely correct in stating that “conflict is on balance more likely to disempower women than to empower them” (1993:34), agency and ‘empowerment’ have progressively become central to studies of conflict.

Traditionally, men have been represented as perpetrators, and women as passive victims of conflict. Gendered analyses initially disrupted this presentation by documenting the active roles played by women in peace movements throughout history and later by outlining women's active involvement in liberation movements (Callamard, 1999, especially p. 221 on the 'military womb'; Cockburn, 2001; Kumar, 2001a; Scheper Hughes, 1998; Spike Peterson, 1998; Tetreault, 1994). Such studies reveal that "rather than conflict 'impacting' on women's lives, people, including women, are active agents in creating and responding to conflict" (Baden, 1997:81). However, it is insufficient to represent women as agents only when they enact or promote violence, or when they dynamically advocate peace. In terms of the present study, women's agency is recognised not only in terms of their coping and survival strategies during periods characterised by conflict and exile, but also in the ways in which women build and maintain communities, and, most importantly, plan for their future.

It is important, however, to recognise the difference between acknowledging women's agency, and claiming that conflict or exile empower women. Kumar defines empowerment as follows:

In the context of gender relations, empowerment connotes that women have the freedom to decide for themselves. They interact with men from the position of equality, rather than from perpetual dependence. Thus, women are empowered when social, cultural, economic or political barriers to their freedom are removed or eliminated and they can realize their full potential.

(Kumar, 2001c:38)

Hence, while women “have the freedom to decide for themselves” in-so-far-as men are no longer present to enforce patriarchal control, and a feminisation of the public sphere may accompany the revised division of labour, women are nonetheless directly constrained, for instance, by increased levels of violence and coercion, and they are often forced to resort to dangerous or socially unacceptable means to obtain limited resources (regarding prostitution, see Sorensen, 1998; Cockburn, 2001; Machel, 2001). In effect, women will often experience “involuntary autonomy” (Lopez Zarzosa, 1998:190), highlighting that external observers must not assume that women identify patriarchal structures as oppressive, and are necessarily eager for their disruption (see Jeffrey, 1979:especially 1-14, 165-175 on women and *purdah* in India).

Indeed, women’s engagement in “patriarchal bargaining” (Kandiyoti, 1998, 1991 and 1992) suggests that

Women’s attachment to and stake in certain forms of patriarchal arrangements may derive from neither false consciousness, nor from collusion but from an actual stake in certain positions of power available to them.

(Kandiyoti, 1998:143, quoted in Jacobson *et al*, 2000:15)

Those structures which oppress individuals also offer possibilities, and the success of social control itself depends on this ambiguity. Hence, even when men are not directly present to implement patriarchal arrangements, women’s attachment to gender ideals and traditions is evident, as they attempt to maintain established claims to respect and authority (see Barnes, 1999:100-103 on *lobola* [brideswealth] during social transformation in Zimbabwe). Consequently, El-Bushra indicates that “the notion of ‘respect’... emerges frequently in field discussions as a major desire expressed by women in contrast to the ‘autonomy’ which gender literature presumes as a need on their behalf” (El-Bushra, 2000c:66).

Indeed, gendered analyses of conflict illustrate that women’s new roles and

responsibilities may be instrumentally encouraged by men, in essence enabling women to fulfil their traditional roles more efficiently, with women's status, identity and primary responsibilities continuing to revolve around the family (Bennett *et al*, 1995:10; El-Bushra and Mukarubuga, 1995:17, 20; El-Bushra and Piza-Lopez, 1993:31; Tetreault, 1994:3).

While there is an upsurge of interest in studying masculinities in gender theory and in gender and development (see for instance Chant and Gutmann, 2000; Connell, 1995; Cornwall, 1997; White, 1997), men's gendered experiences of conflict and exile have been poorly documented (for exceptions, see Brun, 2000; Turner, 2000). However, since men invariably predominate during periods of nation-building and societal reconstruction, the goals of the present analysis justify an 'efficiency-based' approach to the study of men's gendered experiences of exile (see Chant and Gutmann, 2001), as I am interested in understanding how men may have impeded women's attempts to defend progressive changes during the post-exilic phase, and how men's participation may enable women to protect these changes more effectively in future.

In addition, however, it is important to recognise that

Women do not live in gender isolation, and their situations cannot be adequately analysed as if they were. Although they recognise that women face specific problems, they do not analyse their own situations as being separate from that of men, nor do they wish to see themselves in such a way... women view their lives as being affected by the same social, political, historical forces as men. They also see their lives as being inextricably interwoven with those of men.

(Matsuoka and Sorensen, 1999:226; also see Callaway, 1986 on the interdependence of men and women)

Hence, and as I have discussed above with reference to women's "involuntary autonomy", even in situations where women form the majority of the population, their experiences and expectations continue to be related to men's.

However, further studies are required to indicate the ways in which male-only environments, such as military fronts, deal with the changes which occur within the general population (see Indra, 1996:32). Existing studies indicate that while women's experience of conflict and exile enables them, or forces them, to perform new roles and accept new responsibilities, and while revolutionary movements may attempt to promote a change in men's attitudes (see Chingono on men in Mozambique, 1996: 219-230; Ducados on Angolan men and the Movimento Popular de Liberaçao de Angola), "men adapt more slowly" (Moser and Clark, 2001:9-10), do not expand their roles to take on 'female' responsibilities (see Ager *et al*, 1995:281), and experience a greater sense of 'loss' in relation to pre-exilic or pre-conflict claims to authority, respect and control (Kay, 1998:6; Edward, 2001: 281,287; El-Bushra, 2000:76).

As supported by the studies reviewed, upon the end of exile or war, men seek to regain their prior status as men, while "the women had gained something in resettlement they did not want to lose" (McSpadden, and Moussa, 1996:235). In order to compensate for men's experience of 'loss', Large indicates the importance of socialising boys and young men during and after exile, especially in encouraging them to reclaim positive cultural traditions of manhood (as opposed to militarised masculinity, for instance, see Meintjes, 2000:9) and to feel that they still have a role to play in a society in which "their womenfolk have coped without them for years" (Large, 1997:29; also El-Bushra,

2000c: 82; El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1994:45; Woroniuk and Schalkwyk, 1998: 1-2).

Hence, gendered analyses of conflict and exile illustrate that while certain gendered roles and attitudes may change, others will be maintained or even reinforced during conflict (Krulfeld, 1994:71-72). Rather than understanding women's war and exilic roles and responsibilities as radical departures from pre-exilic actions, ethnographic and sociological analyses of refugee communities suggest that it may be more realistic to speak of "reinterpretations" of gender identities and roles, thereby indicating a combination of cultural continuity alongside the adaptation to a new context (Benson, 1994:75).

Section Two

Imagining the Past and the Future:

Traditions, Priorities and Return

Acknowledging the relationship between continuity and adaptation, many studies indicate the strength with which refugees remain attached to pre-exilic 'traditions' and ideals, despite the radically altered circumstances (see Edward, 2001:174; Gruber, 1999:2-8; Harris on Tibet, 1999:13-15; Meintjes on 'myths', 2000:9; Yuval-Davis, 1997:103). The preservation and reinvention of traditions during periods of duress indicate that the refugees' priorities transcend the short-term view of "saving a life", giving importance to "saving a way of life" (Allen and Turton, 1996:1-21; also Couldre and Morris, 1999:4; Edward, 2001:279). However, the ideals which characterise refugees' images of the past depend on static and homogenised notions (see Callaway, 1986:228-9; Hobsbawm, 1983; Ranger, 1983).

In terms of the homogenisation which accompanies the images of the past, gender relations are particularly prone to depiction in terms of ideals rather than realities, with

far-reaching implications (El-Bushra and Piza-Lopez, 1993:46; on imagining pre-migratory Chilean gender identities, see Kay, 1998:2). Firstly, the degree to which gender roles change during the exilic period will largely depend on what is defined as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour for that particular community, in relation to the stereotypical view of its past (Woroniuk and Schalkwyk, 1998:1). Secondly, while refugees may accept certain changes as temporary necessities, refugees' attachment to their past (imagined or real) will influence the degree to which they will accept change on a permanent basis during the post-conflict or post-exilic period, as I discuss below with reference to the periods of repatriation and nation-building.

While in Section One we discussed the nature and degree of change which occurs during conflict and exile, and the extent to which women may feel disempowered by such changes, it is nevertheless the case that women who have experienced exile or conflict have repeatedly resolved "not to slip back into the old ways" (El-Bushra and Mukarubuga, 1995:20; El-Bushra and Piza-Lopez, 1993:187-98, on Somalia and Northern Uganda; Matsuoka and Sorensen, 1999 on Eritrean refugees; also on Eritrea, see Gruber, 1999:7). Indeed, it is simultaneously true that "who we once were we always continue to be", and yet "who we were once we will never quite be again" (quoted in Kitreab, 1999b:423). However, despite women's determination to protect certain changes, post-exilic or post-conflict governments have failed to prioritise women's interests and needs, as I shall discuss below.

Despite the reality of change, agencies and governments have tended to speak of "re-location", "re-habilitation", "re-integration" and "re-construction" with reference to post-war or post-exilic periods (for critiques of these terms, see Cohen, 1995:4; Koser and Black, 1999:3-17; Tefsai, 1999:335 on Eritrean post-war reconstruction). All of these terms suggest a restoration of conditions prevalent during the pre-exilic period, restoring those structures which broke down during exile or war, thereby neglecting the ways in which new systems, institutions and identities – including new understandings

of gender relations – have emerged during the periods of social upheaval.

In addition, these terms fail to recognise that “repatriation ushers in often entirely new socio-cultural challenges and developments” (Gruber, 1999:5), and Hammond suggests that

The ‘vocabulary of return’ which emphasises ‘reintegration’, ‘reconstruction’ and ‘rehabilitation’ should be transplanted to focus on ‘construction’, ‘creativity’, ‘innovation’ and ‘improvisation’.

(Laura Hammond quoted in Koser and Black, 1999:12)

Despite the refugees’ expectations of ‘home’ (Koser and Black, 1999:3-10) and “the dream of return” (Yuval-Davis, 1997:110), the emergence of new structures and institutions during the post-exilic or post-conflict period indicates that it may be more useful to conceptualise ‘repatriation’ as the beginning of a new cycle, rather than the “end of the refugee cycle” (Koser and Black, 1999:3-12). Indeed, perhaps the most significant changes characterising ‘repatriation’ will occur as a result of the encounter between the refugees and the ‘stayees’ who have experienced the evolution of ‘home’ during the exiles absence (Lopez Zarzosa, 1998: 194). Since ‘exile’ and ‘home’ will have evolved separately, the encounter may prompt major difficulties.

In the case of multi-ethnic, war-torn societies, Woldemichael and Iyob indicate that the principal problem for post-conflict governments is “how to meet the expectations of the diverse groups in society” (1999:31, with particular reference to Eritrea). Indeed, the priority given to the process of ‘nation-building’ by post-conflict or post-exilic states can jeopardise the possibility of developing a dynamic democratic state, due to the homogenising effects of the creation of national unity (see Byrne, 1996 on Palestinian self-determination; Gruber, 1999:3, on Eritrea; Harris, 1999:13-15 on Tibet; Seidman, 1993:291, on South Africa and ‘imagined communities’; Tefsai, 1999:328-89 on Eritrea; Woldemichael and Iyob, 1999:31-33 on Eritrea). This homogenisation in the name of national unity has significant implications for all of civil society, but

particularly, in view of the present study, for women's organisations.

During the post-conflict period, sensitivity to questions of gender may be heightened (Baden, 1997:82), and women's interests are often represented as potentially fragmenting the collectivity, demanding a disruption of the hierarchies of values, and thereby betraying national unity. However, Hélie-Lucas reveals that rejection on the basis of 'betrayal' is not particular to the period of nation-building:

We are made to feel that protecting the name of women's interests and rights is not to be done NOW... not during the liberation struggle... not after independence, because all forces had to be mobilised to build up the devastated country... Defending women's rights 'now' – this now being ANY historical moment – is always a 'betrayal': of the people, of the nation, of the revolution, of Islam, of national identity, of cultural roots...

(Hélie-Lucas, 1991:57-58, quoted in Rai, 1996:11)

Indeed, despite revolutionary and nationalist rhetoric for gender equality, post-revolutionary states have tended "to respond to demands articulated by male household heads, overlooking the ways in which women have sought to restructure society" (Seidman, 1993:316). It is particularly common for emergency, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes espoused by post-conflict and post-exilic governments to reinforce the "bread-winner" model of male participation, thereby "flying in the face of the postwar reality" (Baden, 1997:xxi). In order to reinstate men's authority within the family, and since the post-war period is typically characterised by unemployment, governments prioritise providing men with employment possibilities, thereby remasculinising public life by officially displacing women (Callaway, 1986: especially p.214; Kay, 1988; Kumar, 2001a:21-3; McKay, 1998; Tetreault, 1994:20).

However, it is important to recognise that a multiplicity of factors lead to the remasculinisation of public life during the post-conflict and post-exilic phases. Hence, women may actively decide to retreat from public life, perhaps due to "nostalgia for the

traditional social and political order” (Kumar, 2001a:23), or in order to regain the respect and security lost via “involuntary autonomy”. On the other hand, and as mentioned above, studies also repeatedly indicate that women have been encouraged, and frequently forced, to withdraw from public and political roles, since “(a)lthough they regarded women’s participation in politics as a necessity during conflict, many men considered such activism inappropriate in the post conflict era.” (Kumar, *ibid.*).

In addition to individual and community reactions to the end of war or exile, it is also necessary to recognise the role played by the state in re/producing gender identities and roles during the post-war or post-exile periods (see Moore, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

While the premise of this paper is that the government of the SADR may be able to act in favour of women’s interests during the post-exilic phase, post-conflict states have not tended to do so in the past. According to Alvarez,

feminists should neither dismiss the State as the ultimate mechanism of male social control nor embrace it as the ultimate vehicle for gender-based social change. Rather, under different political regimes and at distinct historical conjunctures, the State is potentially a mechanism either for social change or social control in women’s lives.

(Alvarez, 1990 quoted in Rai 1996:12)

Indeed, alongside claims that women’s interests are a ‘betrayal’ to national unity, past examples indicate that when women’s self-declared priorities have not coincided with national priorities envisaged by (male) state representatives, there have often been

“allegations from different quarters that this work was against our culture, violated our traditions, and, the worst criticism of all..., that it was ‘Westernised’” (Mukhopadhyay, 1995:13). Rejection on the basis of ‘westernisation’, however, is not typically extended to men (see Baden, 1992:19) or to the states involved, despite the international contacts which have characterised liberation movements both during and after the Cold War.

In addition to overt rejections of women’s requests on the grounds of ‘westernisation’ or ‘betrayal’, many states and governments which officially support women’s rights fail to act accordingly. The Eritrean government, for instance, has demonstrated its capacity to impose its political will with reference to defining the politics of development and nation-building – in the first case defining international relations with donors and international agencies, and in the second with Eritrean civil society (Doornbos, 1999:1-23; Tefsai, 1999:325-356; Woldemichael and Iyob, 1999:29-33). However, Gruber indicates that despite its official support for gender equality, the Eritrean government’s position is that “changes in gender relations must derive from communal perceptions and wishes” (Gruber, 1999:6; see Baden, 1997:83 on Mozambique).

On the one hand, this approach appears to parallel insights from the gender and development literature which indicates that

... as there are risks and costs incurred in any process of change, such change must be believed in, initiated and directed by those whose interests it is meant to serve.

(Kabeer, 1994:97)

Since gendered violence is amongst the “risks and costs incurred in any process of change” (see Moore, 1994:50-70; Bank 1994:89-113), and past initiatives instigated solely by the state or international agencies have frequently had dire consequences (for instance increasing women’s workloads and undermining their status or health, see Kabeer, 1991; see also Turner, 2000:8-9), women must indeed be aware of both the

benefits and potential dangers of change, and act accordingly.

On the other hand, however, Kabeer indicates that while empowerment must be self-generated, it is nonetheless possible to provide a supportive framework from which gender transformation can begin:

All that a gender-transformative policy can hope to do is to provide women with the enabling resources which will allow them to take greater control of their own lives, to determine what kinds of gender relations they would want to live within, and to devise the strategies and alliances to help them to get there.

(Kabeer, 1994:97)

In order to provide part of such a supportive framework, the state must go further than offering 'protection' to women (see Lake, 2001:264), and adopt a gendered perspective throughout constitutional and legal frameworks (regarding positive state duties, see Combrinck, 1998:666-690; see Wali, 1995b:340-41 regarding constitutional models for emerging democracies; Wareham and Quick, 2001:16-17, on gender-budgeting in post-conflict Kosovo).

However, alongside many states' reluctance to implement them, the difficulties of promoting gender equality via legal and constitutional frameworks have been discussed in detail with reference to women's human rights. Even in those cases where states have promoted *de jure* (legislative) gender equality, this has rarely been accompanied by *de facto* equality (Fenster, 1999:7). For instance, despite the centrality given to women's rights within the South African Constitution, that country continues to have one of the highest levels of gendered/sexual violence in the world (see Baden *et al*, 1998; Meintjes, 2000:8-9).

However, while the existence of a positive legal framework for women's rights does not automatically confer rights on women, it is equally the case that an absence of

legislation relating to marital rape, for instance, can be interpreted as a state's implicit acceptance or naturalization of this type of violence. The state's failure to condemn discrimination or violence against women may therefore both reflect popular beliefs regarding the inevitability of such violence, and simultaneously be interpreted by members of civil society as reinforcing the acceptability of this type of behaviour (see Gardam and Charlesworth, 2000:163). The existence of a law protecting and promoting women's rights, on the other hand, can provide a set of standards by which women can hold individuals and states accountable, and it is consequently necessary to promote legal reform which can enable women's agency in this way (Poulsen, 1995: 41), even while we recognise that "the problem is fundamentally social, residing in attitudes and normative behaviour" (Meintjes, 2000:9).

The literature analysed in Sections One and Two suggests that changes which occur in the reality of gender roles and responsibilities during exile do indeed tend to 'revert' during the post-exilic period of nation-building and societal reconstruction, as post-exilic heightened sensitivity to questions of gender (Baden, 1997:82) results in male, state, and often female failures to prioritise women's participation in public and political life. The discussion regarding the relationship between individual attitudes and community and state ideals, thereby indicates the necessity of attending to both the micro-level and macro-level if the goal is to promote long-standing change.

Due to the difficulties experienced during the post-exilic period, below I shall suggest the importance of focusing on the potential of creating positive frameworks during the exilic period. While protracted refugee situations have habitually been presented as

characterised by the dependency of passive refugees on active external agencies (as discussed in the Introduction), the Sahrawi refugee camps not only invalidate this assumption, but have efficiently combined the community-management of short-term emergency relief with social development and national reconstruction within the camps. In so doing, the SADR government-in-exile has the potential to prioritise the interests of Sahrawi women 'now', thereby prompting sustainable transformations which may better endure the post-exilic period.

As I discuss in the following section, on account of the limited material available, I have complemented a review of the existing literature written on the Sahrawi refugee camps by external analysts and by the SADR and NUSW, with my own fieldwork. In the subsequent sections, I shall examine the experiences of women in the Sahrawi refugee camps, and discuss the ways in which the Sahrawi are currently attempting to promote long-standing change in women's situations, also suggest new areas to be prioritised by the NUSW and SADR which may assist them in achieving this goal.

Section Three

Studying the Sahrawi Refugee Camps

The literature available in the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre Library indicates that this case has been poorly documented beyond internal agency reports, with the exception of

a limited quantity of published and unpublished material written primarily in the 1980s (hence prior to the 1992 cease-fire). While there have been several conferences on Sahrawi women, little has been written by academics on Sahrawi gender relations in general. A search for relevant material written in Spanish revealed a similar absence, and while no Arabic or non-European language literature was surveyed, initial enquiries into the existence of such material suggest that there is none written on this matter (Fadel, personal communication: 24/07/02). I have provided the Oxford Refugee Studies Library with copies of several documents produced in Spanish and English for, or as a result of, the Fourth Congress of the NUSW (henceforth Women's Congress).

While I have only spent a total of three weeks in the refugee camps, and can therefore by no means claim to 'know' or 'understand' the Sahrawi (for the difficulties of 'understanding' other societies, see Strathern, 1988, especially 1-30) it is important to note that Harrell-Bond's influential analyses were based on a 15 day visit to the camps (Harrell-Bond, 1981d:2), and the agency reports reviewed were based on even shorter visits (e.g. Firebrace, 1985 [April 9-17, 1985]; Mowles, 1986 [June 16-21, 1986]). As I have visited the camps three times, with my first trip occurring in March 2001 and my final one in April 2002, I have formed a cumulative account of conditions in the camps, as I was able to conduct follow-up interviews, and discuss changes which had occurred since my last visit. Importantly, since I visited the camps in different capacities – firstly assisting a group of doctors, then liaising with the SADR Ministry of Cooperation, and

finally as a guest at the Women's Congress – my perspective varied accordingly, thereby permitting a diverse approach throughout fieldwork.

As my interest in the Sahrawi arose following a conference on Sahrawi women held in December 2000, I had decided, prior to my departure in March 2001, that Sahrawi women would be my prime focus of interest whilst in the camps. However, the use of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, complemented by unstructured discussions, opened up further avenues of enquiry that were identified to be of importance to the Sahrawis spoken to. The course of the research was therefore influenced by the Sahrawi involved, and thereby encouraged a more participatory experience of fieldwork.

While I shall later discuss the limitations of my fieldwork and areas for further research, it is necessary to note here that during my visits to the camps, I wholly failed to consider the effects of exile on men as gendered individuals. This can partially be explained by my limited ability to interview men, as Sahrawi men are either on military duty or employed abroad, and the majority of the adult population of the camps is therefore female. It is also, however, largely due to my initial interest having been specifically in the experiences and expectations of Sahrawi women. For instance, it was only following a discussion with a paediatrician in June 2002 that I began to consider the difficulties which Sahrawi men encounter when they return to the camps following

a long period of residence abroad, including difficulties related to sexual politics and expectations for the future. Bearing the practical aims of this paper in mind, however, the significance of this failure became increasingly evident as I recognised the necessity of considering the gendered experiences and expectations of Sahrawis of both sexes if a re-traditionalisation of gender relations is to be avoided during – and after – societal reconstruction in the Western Sahara. As there is at present no literature available on Sahrawi men's gendered experiences either as returnees to the camps, or in the male-only environment at the military front, I have attempted to compensate for my failure to investigate this matter while in the camps via the examination of literature available on men and exile discussed in Section One, despite the ultimate inadequacy of extrapolating in this manner.

Three Visits to the Refugee Camps

March 2001

During my first trip, I accompanied a group of paediatricians for six days as they examined approximately 1000 children in two schools. I assisted them when necessary, permitting me to observe the children, male and female teachers, and the non-Sahrawi medical staff. I maintained lengthy informal discussions with the teachers at both schools, either directly in Spanish (my first language), or with the assistance of a teacher translating from Spanish into *Hassaniya* (the local dialect).

When the doctors did not require my assistance, I shared a jeep with a retired British-Army Colonel, and together we met with the Minister of Health – Mr. Omar Mansour –, Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi medical staff in the National Hospital, and several non-Sahrawi NGO workers. When our preferences diverged regarding what or who we would like to visit, the Colonel's decisions were given priority over my own requests: the respect shown to him by our male Sahrawi guide appeared to be due to his age (he was over 60), former occupation and gender, while I was 'a young girl'. The Colonel explicitly indicated his disdain when I expressed my interest in gender relations in the camps, and his presence during our meetings impeded the development of a productive rapport, and limited the duration and direction of the discussions. I was left highly frustrated by these experiences, as I was only able to have one lengthy interview (with Mrs. Fatma Hmada), during my visit to the NUSW when I was unaccompanied by the Colonel.

Despite these frustrations, my most insightful conversations were with a female Sahrawi doctor who had assisted the paediatricians during their previous visits, and stayed with us in Amgala. Lehdia had lived in Cuba for 14 years, attending school and university there. As we worked, ate, and lived together, we established a close relationship, and her perspectives as a returnee to the refugee camps directly influenced my interest in Sahrawi gender relations. I also met with Lehdia during my subsequent

visits to the camps.

April 2001

At the time of my second trip, representatives from solidarity groups, NGO workers, and local government officials from around Spain were visiting the camps, and we were all accommodated in a special reception area in Rabouni. As Rabouni is the ministerial and administrative centre of the SADR, there are no schools or families living in the area, and dozens of Sahrawi women had moved their *kheimas* (tents) from the camps to house us there. The atmosphere was therefore very different from my first trip when we had stayed in the heart of the *daira* (district) of Amgala.

During this trip, I established a more conducive rapport and carried out more in-depth semi-structured interviews with most of the individuals I had previously spoken to with the Colonel. I also met with Salama, a male Sahrawi lawyer recently graduated from Algiers who had been involved in the revision of the SADR Constitution in 1999, and a local representative of the Association of Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Missing People (AFRAPADESA). Most importantly, in terms of this paper, I met the Secretary General of the NUSW (Mrs. Mom-ma Sidi Abdelhadi), several women who had studied in Cuba (I shall refer to these women as ‘Cubanas’), and spent a day speaking with other women in the 27th February Camp. This is also known as “The Women’s Camp”, as it was originally established to house the female students (and their families)

attending the National Women's School. It has since developed into a camp in its own right, with women and their children living there on a permanent basis as opposed to only staying for the duration of their educational courses.

March-April 2002

Finally, I was invited to attend the Fourth Congress of the NUSW in the 27th February Camp. While this trip was to be my shortest (four days), due to a cyclone and the subsequent air-traffic chaos, I spent eight days living with a Sahrawi family in the 27th February Camp. The Congress was held between the 28-31 March 2002, and guests from around the world were invited to participate in workshops on Women and Politics, Women and Social Affairs and Women and Human Rights. While most of the Congress was in both Arabic and in Spanish, there were sections when official translation into Spanish was not possible, and I therefore relied on a Sahrawi woman translating for me personally. This was possible on practically all occasions.

During the Women's Congress I was able to witness the ways in which Sahrawi women in organized politics act to prompt legal reform, discussing issues of

contemporary concern – such as how to counteract changes in *mehr* (brideprice), the possibility of complementing Shariah law with individual rights. The differences in opinion between the older and younger generation were evident, and my particular interest in ‘Cubanas’ increased via my conversations with Sahrawi delegates. Since I speak Spanish, English and French fluently, I was also able to follow the comments made by most of the visiting participants, only requiring the assistance of a translator when comments were made solely in Arabic or *Hassaniya*.

Throughout my visits, I primarily spoke ‘Cubanas’, as opposed to interviewing Sahrawi women who had lived and studied in Russia or Algeria, due to language constraints. Considering the different host environments, and, perhaps most importantly, the sexual politics in each host country, further analysis is required into the experiences and expectations of Sahrawis who have returned from long-periods in Russia or Algeria. Alongside my in-depth and repeated discussions with Lehdia, I also had lengthy conversations with seven other ‘Cubanas’ (all unmarried and in their mid-to late-twenties) during my trips to the camps, and I accompanied, and listened to the contributions of the ‘Cubanas’ during the Women’s Congress. My conversations with the ‘Cubanas’ revealed a clear problematisation of the official rhetoric, as I discuss in more detail below.

Section Four

Sahrawi Women and Exile:

Limitations, Achievements and Future Potential

During the Women's Congress, President Abdelaziz thanked Sahrawi women for their multifaceted participation in the struggle for self-determination, and reiterated the SADR's promise to continue promoting women's political, economic, social and cultural roles in the construction of Sahrawi society and the development of their country – a promise which constitutes Article 41 of the SADR Constitution (SADR, 1999). President Abdelaziz concluded by declaring that “the advances achieved by Sahrawi women are irreversible” (Verbatim Proceedings, 28/03/2002) and that “none will be allowed to undermine these important accomplishments, to belittle or attempt to reverse that trend of social change” (NUSW, Document K:p.2).

Nonetheless, despite the official support for women's rights, the members of the NUSW have repeatedly indicated that they do not share their President's confidence regarding the “irreversible” nature of women's achievements, primarily prompted by

their knowledge of the historical and cross-cultural examples referred to above (interview with Abdelhadi, 12/04/01; Hamdi, 1993:26; NUSW, Document B:p.4). However, alongside considering how the SADR and NUSW can ensure that women's achievements are long-standing, it is important to note that while the government proudly indicates the extent of women's achievements, the NUSW is fully aware of the limits of such achievements. These limits illustrate the relevance of the literature reviewed above in Section One regarding the nature of change during exile.

Below, I shall discuss women's experiences with regards to institutionalised politics and education, and shall also briefly discuss two 'reversals' and 'reassertions' which have already taken place in the camps, regarding *mehr* (brideprice) and the *mehlf* (Sahrawi women's clothing). I shall suggest that the ways in which the SADR and NUSW deal with the present limitations and 'reversals' are of the utmost importance for Sahrawi women's future.

Limitations, Achievements and Future Potential

While the absence of men has led to a feminisation of the public sphere in the camps (as discussed in the Introduction), Sahrawi women's under-representation in elected political posts indicates the degree to which such changes are accepted due to practical necessities, rather than due to a changed female consciousness. Despite the

constitutional recognition of gender equality, during our interview Mom-ma Sidi Abdelhadi (the Secretary General of the NUSW until April 2002) stressed that while twenty-seven years in exile is “too long”, it is not long enough to change social or personal consciousness: women still “do not trust” other women sufficiently to elect them as district governors, let alone as governmental Ministers (interview with Abdelhadi, 12/04/01).

In order to encourage women’s “self-confidence” and “confidence in other women” (ibid; Verbatim Proceedings, 29/03/02), the NUSW recognises the necessity to go beyond constitutional and legal reform, and is determined to eradicate female illiteracy, which it perceives to be the greatest barrier to women’s development both in the camps and after independence (NUSW, Document A). Khadija Hamdi, however, has indicated that not all women have been able to fully benefit from the adult educational opportunities in the camps, due, for instance, to domestic responsibilities and psychological stress (Hamdi, 1993:27).

While the NUSW has provided crèches throughout the camps in order to facilitate women’s education and employment, these are insufficient in number, and mothers continue to depend on female relatives to care for their children when they are working, or studying. The NUSW continues to prioritise this issue, and intends to increase general adult participation in education and health programmes throughout the camps

(NUSW, Document C). However, if the NUSW and SADR are to continue prioritising female education, it is also necessary to determine whether girls are withdrawn from school earlier than boys in order to assist their female relatives with household activities, as suggested by one teacher in Amgala. If so, appropriate measures must be taken to reduce these withdrawals now, and prevent their reassertion during the post-exilic periods.

In addition to the differences in perspectives between the NUSW and the general population, the attitudes of young women who studied in universities in Cuba, Russia or Algeria differ greatly from those of the older generation involved in the NUSW. Generational disagreement was constantly expressed throughout the Women's Congress, with radically different perspectives being presented by women who had never left the camps, by those who had spent over a decade studying abroad, and by the official representatives from the NUSW who have been in contact with international women's organizations for over two decades.

The administration of the NUSW and of the SADR therefore has the potential to gain experience in accommodating a diversity of needs and expectations within the camp environment, which would ideally enable it to deal more adequately with the issue upon independence (as discussed in Section Two). Indeed, during the Women's Congress, the election of the youngest-ever Secretary General of the NUSW is a significant step indicating the changes which are constantly occurring within the political structures of this organization. However, while the democratic environment in the camps currently enables the presentation of different perspectives of the camp inhabitants, the post-independence period will be further complicated by the different attitudes held by Sahrawi men and women who remained in the territories occupied by Morocco.

Despite the absence of academic literature written on gender relations within the occupied territories (due to the restrictions imposed by the Moroccan government regarding access to the area), advances in communication technology – primarily the internet and mobile telephones – have made it possible for an exchange of information to occur between the exiled Sahrawi community, the Sahrawi who remain in the occupied territories, and those who live and work for the Polisario Front in Spain and elsewhere (Bulsan, personal communication:30/03/02). Due to these possibilities, the NUSW is in contact with women in the occupied territories, and during the Women's Congress a telephone-conference was established with three Sahrawi women in the

capital of Western Sahara (Laayoune) (ibid). The Plan of Action presented at the Women's Congress emphasised the importance of sharing information with Sahrawi women in the occupied territories (NUSW, Document C:p.5), and this mutual awareness of their situations may reduce the 'culture-shock' which habitually accompanies the 'return home' (Lopez Zarzosa, 1998:194; Dona and Berry on "culture contact", 1999:171-189). However, while prioritising this issue is of the utmost importance, given the heterogeneity of experiences within the camps discussed above, the issue of representation must continue to be dealt with seriously by the NUSW.

Indeed, while Fatma Hmada of the NUSW stressed that Sahrawi girls who study abroad have "no problems when they return because they are Sahrawi inside" (interview with Hmada,13/03/01), the 'Cubanas' stressed. They felt like "outsiders within", and several 'Cubanas' described their return to the camps as a "radical culture-shock": not only were their perspectives influenced by the sexual politics of the host society (Cuba), but they were also critical of certain 'traditional' Sahrawi practices which had been "re-invented" while they were abroad. For instance, they claimed that while women traditionally wore the *mehlf* only upon marriage, girls as young as eleven were now wearing the *mehlf*. When they briefly returned to the camps in the early 1990s to register for the referendum for self-determination, many of the then-teenaged 'Cubanas' rejected the 'change' and refused to wear the *mehlf*, consequently being perceived by their families and neighbours as disruptive, 'foreign'

and disrespectful of ‘traditions’ (group discussion with three ‘Cubanas’, March 2001).

The reassertion of such traditions has been complemented with recent changes in the payment of *mehr* (brideprice). While agency reports suggest that *mehr* had disappeared, or been replaced by a small symbolic payment by the 1980s (Firebrace, 1985b:32), it appears that the emergence of a camp-economy following the cease-fire has influenced marriage practices. During the Workshop on Social Affairs held in the Women’s Congress (30/03/02), female delegates vehemently discussed the resurgence of *mehr*, rejecting the practice as dangerous for young women: counteracting the legal reforms requiring full female consent to marriage, the increase in *mehr* could lead to older, wealthier men being able to ‘select’ young women who would in turn be pressured by their family to marry for money.

However, while the NUSW is concerned about this, and many other matters, its capacity to implement programmes is limited due to its position in the political structure of the camps. Rather than being a Ministry, the women’s organisation is a ‘mass’ organisation, like the National Union for Sahrawi Youth, and the National Union for Sahrawi Workers. However, as discussed during the Women’s Congress, many of the responsibilities given to the NUSW’s by the SADR should clearly be shared with existing Ministries: Sahrawi delegates were particularly adamant that the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Affairs should work with the NUSW regarding the

management of schools for handicapped children, which are currently the responsibility of the NUSW (see also NUSW, Document D:p.6-7).

The necessity for co-ordination is partly due to questions of funding, since the NUSW is mainly dependent on external agencies and receives minimal funding from the SADR (interview with Abdelhadi, 12/04/01; Fadel, personal communication: 22/07/02). While it is clear that the government-in-exile has limited funds, the issues of prioritising and mainstreaming women-centred projects within the SADR are of the utmost relevance to the ways in which the post-independence government will deal with women's issues. It is imperative that the SADR expand upon its rhetorical support for the work done by the NUSW 'now', in order to establish a firm position of support for women's issues prior to the oft-reported post-exilic heightened sensitivity to questions of gender. This support must transcend the constitutional and legal framework being developed to support women's participation in Sahrawi society, as discussed in Section Two, and this matter is of particular importance since the SADR intends for the present political and organizational structure in the camps to be implemented on a permanent basis upon independence (Fadel, 2002:7).

Conclusion

By indicating “*how much we do already know*” (Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 2000:76) about the gendered experiences of exilic and post-exilic periods, I have stressed the necessity of acting according to this knowledge ‘now’ in order to avert the reassertion of the trend towards the re-traditionalisation of gender roles discussed in Sections One and Two. With reference to the Sahrawi refugees, I have suggested that attempting to consolidate women’s achievements during the exilic period – as opposed to waiting until ‘repatriation’ – may increase their sustainability during independence.

The protracted nature of their situation has permitted the SADR and the NUSW to concentrate on female education, and, while they remain wholly dependent on external provisions, the exiled Sahrawi are planning for a self-sufficient and modern future characterised by women’s participation in all areas. Contrary to the habitual retrenchment of women during the post-exilic phase discussed in Section Two, the SADR is certain that the post-independence employment of both men and women will be high, due to the relatively small Sahrawi population – approximately 200,000 Sahrawi in the camps, less than 70,000 Sahrawi in the territory currently occupied by Morocco (Fadel, 2002:2), and around 26,400 in Mauritania at the end of 1999 (UNHCR, 2000:267) –, the abundance of natural resources (including oil, phosphates and rich offshore fishing grounds), and potential for tourism in the Western Sahara (SADR, n.d.:20-22). Indeed, the emphasis given to the education of girls and women

both within the camps and as recipients of scholarships to study abroad, suggests that – at the very least – women with a further education will be assured a career (as doctors, lawyers, nurses or teachers, for instance) upon national independence.

However, the members of the NUSW are determined to ensure, rather than assume, that the Sahrawi will not follow the trend of female retrenchment discussed above. Khadija Hamdi is adamant that “[w]e (the NUSW) should stick to our model, improve it and consolidate our gains so that they are not simply blown away with the first fanfares of independence celebrations” (Hamdi, 1993:27). Hence, while the members of the NUSW recognise their achievements, they are clearly aware of the significance of the limitations, and I have discussed several ways in which the NUSW is at present attempting to improve their “model”. I have indicated the importance of increasing the SADR’s support for the NUSW’s programmes in terms of co-ordination and the sharing of responsibilities, and suggest that the SADR must not only revise the constitution and prompt legal reform in order to provide a positive framework for women, but also actively promote the participation of women at all political levels, for instance by discussing the potential advantages of introducing a quota-system.

However, having discussed the ways in which the NUSW and the SADR are currently promoting, and can further promote, women’s development in the camps, while Khadija Hamdi has stressed that “[i]t is obvious that the return of men from the

warfront will jeopardise this remarkable situation” (Hamdi, 1993:26), neither the NUSW (due to funding and in terms of its officially-designated responsibilities) nor the SADR have yet tackled the necessity of focussing on men, rather than women, to overcome this probable “jeopardy”.

As I have discussed with reference to the literature available on men and exile in Section One, if male attitudes are not addressed whilst women’s roles are changing, it is likely that throughout the post-exilic period they shall attempt to regain their ‘traditional’ roles as providers, thereby re-masculinising public life. The particularities of the Sahrawi exile – whereby women and children live in the camps, and men are undertaking military training in the liberated areas between the Algerian border and the sand-wall built by Morocco (see Figure 1) – indicate the reality of women and men living in “gender isolation” in a physical sense. Indeed, I suggest that it is precisely this “gender isolation” which may increase the likelihood of men attempting to ‘reassert’ traditional gender roles and identities: while women’s attitudes and roles have changed in the camps, the majority of men have not witnessed these changes. Indeed, they are engaged in a male-only environment where they too, like the women in the camps, are currently self-sufficient.

It is therefore essential that the SADR and NUSW seriously consider the importance of focusing on the socialization of men and boys during exile if they wish to protect the

achievements of women during the post-exilic periods. It is important for further research to establish whether the desire for a re-traditionalisation of gender roles exists because men disagree fundamentally with women performing the new roles *per se*, or because women have ‘taken’ something which men used to have with no alternative compensating for this ‘loss’. If the latter is true, it will be necessary for the state to assist or encourage men to develop such alternatives, in order for both men and women to perform fulfilling social roles.

In addition to future research on the male-only environments, in order to establish how men can support women during the following periods of exile, repatriation and independence, I also suggest that focussing on children born in the camps would contribute significantly to the present debates, establishing the effect of the predominantly female environment on their expectations for the future. Since the NUSW is currently encouraging young Sahrawi women to start carrying out research within the camps (NUSW, Document A,p.5), this would provide an opportunity for using research methods which simultaneously collect data whilst encouraging critical reflection and gender awareness among community members (see Baylies and Bujra, 1997:380-388 on methods and HIV/AIDS research).

Appendix One

A Chronology of the Western Saharan Conflict

1884: Colonisation of the Western Sahara by Spain begins. The King of Spain proclaims Spain's protectorate over Rio de Oro.

1885: The Berlin Conference ratifies the colonisation of Rio de Oro.

1912: Morocco and Spanish Sahara are proclaimed protectorates of France and Spain.

1945: The Charter of the United Nations (UN) recognises the right of peoples to self-determination. Since not all peoples who claim this rights will be immediately able to exercise it fully – due to colonialism – the UN labels such peoples as being in Non-Self-Governing territories.

1963: Western Sahara is included in the UN list of Non-Self-Governing Territories.

1964: The UN Decolonisation Committee adopts its first Resolution on Western Sahara, urging Spain to start the process of decolonising the territory.

1965: The UN General Assembly issues a similar Resolution to the UN Decolonisation Committee.

1966: The UN General Assembly calls for a referendum to be organised in the Territory.

1967: Sahrawi civil resistance to colonial rule becomes coordinated under the Movement for the Liberation of the Sahara.

1973: The Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro is formed (Polisario Front).

1974: In preparation for the referendum requested by the UN, the Spanish colonial administration conducts a population census of the Territory. Morocco and Mauritania reject a referendum which would offer the Sahrawi the choice of either full independence or to remain attached to Spain, as the possibility of integration with Morocco or Mauritania is excluded.

1975: A UN mission of inquiry visits Western Sahara, Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria and recommends the holding of a referendum for self-determination.

1975, 16th October: The International Court of Justice announces its Advisory Opinion on the Western Sahara. The ICJ rejects the Moroccan and Mauritanian claims of sovereignty over the territory.

1975, 14th November: The Spanish authorities illegally partition the Territory between Morocco and Mauritania in a Tripartite Agreement referred to as the 'Madrid Accords'. Spain commences to withdraw its colonial forces.

1976, 27th February: The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is proclaimed by the indigenous people of the Western Sahara.

1976: Morocco and Mauritania occupy the Territory by military force. The 'Green March' organized by Moroccan consists of 350,000 Moroccans invading and settling in the Western Sahara on the 16th October 1976.

1976: Progressive escalation of the confrontation leads to a mass exodus of 165,000 Sahrawi citizens over the eastern border to escape Moroccan air strikes, which involve Napalm and cluster bombs. Sahrawi refugees settle in tented camps close to the border near the Algerian town of Tindouf.

1976 –1979: The Polisario forces engage in a prolonged and extensive military campaign against Moroccan and Mauritanian military targets in the Western Sahara and in the adjacent territories.

1979: Mauritania agrees by formal treaty with Polisario to withdraw all territorial claims to Western Sahara; subsequently formally recognises SADR as the legitimate sovereign authority of Western Sahara

1979: Morocco moves to occupy the territory formerly occupied by Mauritanian forces. A protracted military struggle commences, with clear military inequalities as France supports the Moroccan actions, including the use of French air-force to bomb Sahrawi settlements.

1980s: Morocco commences to build a 2,200 km defensive wall (the *berm*) to enclose the occupied territory, and seeds an estimated 3 million landmines.

1984: The Organization of African Unity (OAU) recognises the SADR as a full

member, and Morocco subsequently withdraws its membership of the OAU.

1991: The UN and the OAU sponsor a peace plan, with the agreement of both parties. This leads to a) the deployment of the UN Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO), b) the declaration of a cease-fire, and c) the beginning of the identification of eligible voters based upon those included in the 1974 Spanish census.

1991, December: The UN Special Representative for Western Sahara resigns in protest at UN tacit agreement to Morocco's violations of the Plan. Morocco had blocked the deployment of the MINURSO and halted its logistical supplies at the Moroccan ports. Foreign visitors, the media and NGOs were not given access to the Territory.

Since 1991 the UN has attempted to proceed with the formal process of decolonisation with the aim of holding a referendum to determine the wishes of the people of the Territory and a lasting legal settlement to the conflict. Initially to be held in 1992, the referendum has been repeatedly postponed, and is yet to be held.

Appendix Two

The Sahrawi Interviewed

Mrs. Mum-ma Sidi Abdelhadi

Secretary General of NUSW, SADR

Mr.	Omar Bulsan	AFRADADESA Representative, Canary Islands
Ms.	Lehdia Dafa	Doctor and member of NUSW, SADR
Mr.	Kamal Fadel	Polisario Front Representative, Australia
Mrs.	Fatma Hmada	Secretary NUSW, SADR
Mr.	Omar Mansour	Minister of Health, SADR
Mr.	Mohamed Salem Ould Salek	Minister of the Exterior, SADR

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* All photographs are the author's own, taken in March-April 2002.

This section is based on Correll (2002), Fadel (2002), Harrell-Bond (1981a,b and c) and the following websites: HYPERLINK "<http://www.arso.org>" www.arso.org, HYPERLINK "<http://www.wsahara.net>" www.wsahara.net, HYPERLINK "<http://www.un.org>" www.un.org, HYPERLINK "<http://www.wfp.org>" www.wfp.org. See Appendix 1 for a more complete chronology of the conflict of the Western Sahara.

The Sahrawi liberation movement established in 1973.

The Red Cross and Crescent Societies recognised the SRC in November 1976 (Firebrace, 1985:3).

UNHCR first contributed in 1981 (Black, 1984:2).

ECHO has run annual aid programmes since 1993 (Dukic and Thierry,1998:18).

The WFP has assisted the Algerian Government in meeting the 'basic nutritional needs' of the Sahrawi refugees since 1986 (HYPERLINK "http://www.wfp.org/country_brief/index.asp?continent=1"

http://www.wfp.org/country_brief/index.asp?continent=1: 23/08/02)

A discussion of the literature regarding the 'relief-to-development continuum' is beyond the scope of this analysis, as are the political implications of the agencies allowing the Sahrawi to manage emergency aid. See Buchanan-Smith and Maxwell (1994); Cernea and McDowell (2000); Cohen (1995); McRae and Leader (2000); McSpadden (2000); UNHCR, (2000).

See Appendix 2 for the details of the individuals interviewed.

A full list of the documents produced for, or as a result of, the NUSW Fourth Congress is located in the bibliographical sub-section, Unpublished Material.

Mainstream literature on post-conflict reconstruction, and the more recent studies examining what happens "when refugees go home" have neglected to examine the gendered experiences of these periods. Former examples include Tefsai and Doornbus (1999: on Eritrea) On the latter, see the edited

collections by Allen (1996), Allen and Morsink (1994), and Black and Koser (1999). I have focussed on the gendered analyses which compensate for this absence in the mainstream literature.

Crawley, however, stresses that women's experiences of sexual violence have frequently been overemphasised at the expense of other forms of resistance and repression, leading to a "depoliticization and decontextualization of women's experiences" (Crawley, 2000b:17-20).

HIV/AIDS programmes and projects promoting safer sexual behaviour have indicated the practical difficulties which accompany attempts to prompt a change in attitudes and behaviour. See, for instance, Campbell (1997, 1999 and 2000).

On the difficulties encountered by male refugees living in European or North American countries, see Kay (1988:1-16, Chile); Matsuoka and Sorensen (1999:281-241, Eritrea); Shahidian (1996:43-72, Iran).

Due to the increasing frequency of protracted refugee situations, a new body of literature is emerging regarding the experience of children who have been born in refugee camps and have therefore never been 'home'. See Camino (1994) on adolescent refugees; Harris (1999:13-15) on the enculturation of Tibetan children; Lopez Zarzosa (1998:193) on "indirect refugee children"; McSpadden and Moussa, (1996:228-233) on Eritrean refugee children born in Canada; Yuval-Davis (1997:110) on Palestinian children born in Lebanon.

"By 'nation-building' we refer to the acquisition of a collective sense of membership and belonging to a distinct group" (Voutira and Harrell-Bond: 2000:64).

"Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design and implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women can benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality." (UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 1999:10)

Due to the difficulties of taking recording equipment through the Algerian (military) airports in Algiers and Tindouf, combined with the time period involved in research, I did not record interviews, and therefore relied upon note-taking during and immediately after interviews and discussions. In addition to these notes, I up-dated my research diary at least twice a day.

The Sahrawi practice the Sunni (Maliki) way of Islam. A discussion of women's rights and Islam is beyond the scope of this paper. See Baden (1992); Afshari (2000); Ahmed (1992); Hashim (1999); Kandiyoti (1991); Wali (1995a).

The 'Cubanas' preferred to remain anonymous and are therefore not included in Appendix Two.

Unless stated otherwise, the following sections are based on my fieldwork in the camps.

At present, for instance, only the Minister of Culture is female.

Due to an absence of gender-disaggregated statistics, it was not possible to confirm this claim.

This section is based on Castellino (1999), Chopra (1994), Correl (2002), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2000), International Court of Justice (1975), Fadel (2002)

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Figure 1. Map of the Western Sahara, indicating the location of the Sahrawi refugee camps in South Western Algeria.

(Source: UNHCR, Environmental Database, 1998)

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(Source: UNHCR, Environmental Database, 1998. Downloaded on 28/08/02 from HYPERLINK "<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Sahara-update/>" <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Sahara-update/>)

Figure 3. The Plenary Session of the Women's Congress. President Abdelaziz is seated at the centre of the plenary table.

Figure 2. In the Women's School, practical skills, such as weaving, are taught, which enable women to provide objects for use in the camps, and for sale in the newly formed camp-economy.

Figure 4. Delegates at the Women's Congress. The banner in the background reflects upon the necessity of complementarity and continuity between the generations.