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Leaders in the desert: The Sahrawi women of Western Sahara

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Abstract

This report is based on research conducted in the Sahrawi refugee camps in southern Algeria in September of 2014. As two anthropologists we travelled to the refugee camps near Tindouf in southern Algeria to learn more about the leaders of the camps who we had heard were predominantly women. The Sahrawi became refugees after the Moroccans invaded Western Sahara after the Spanish withdrew as a colonial power in 1975 starting the Sahrawis long struggle for independence. Throughout our research in the camps women did not speak of violence or of rape. They did not complain of harassment or physical violence from their husbands. They instead spoke of the burning heat, the difficulties of not having enough water and their struggles for independence. The governing body of the Sahrawi, the Polisario Front was built with women's equality being one of the strongest features of their social organization and that women's equality was the dominant theme of life in the Sahrawi camps. Islam has also played a key role in the empowerment of women as the Sahrawi understand Islam as acknowledging men and women equally throughout the Koran and that Islam calls for the respect of women. Thus the example of the Sahrawi demonstrates that the equality amongst men is not only possible but that it is possible regardless of environment, culture or religion.

Keywords: Women, Sahrawi, Islam, empowerment, Algeria

Introduction

Despite the long suffering of the Sahrawi people due to years of struggle to reclaim their land from the Moroccans, the Sahrawi have one dominant strength; gender equality. As two anthropologists and activists we had heard that the Sahrawi community living in refugee camps in Algeria was not only matriarchal but also that the majority of the leaders were women. We went to the southwest of Algeria to stay in the Sahrawi refugee camps to learn more about how women have gained significant positions of power. We found that the Sahrawi people living in the refugee camps near Tindouf in southern Algeria are Muslims where women are in charge of the daily running of the camps. Life is difficult in the camps yet we did not hear women complain about violence and discrimination; instead they spoke about the struggles of living in the camps and wanting to go back to their homeland. Their position within the camps is fully supported by Polisario, the governing body of the Sahrawi and their powerful position is thought to be linked to their culture and traditions as well as women's active participation in the armed conflicts. We were told that their version of Islam calls for

the respect of all women. We were told that Islam is a religion of peace and does not tolerate violence against women. Thus, this report explores how regardless of religion or difficult situations women can live within societies where violence and discrimination not only does not exist but is not justified due to environmental factors.

Methodology

We arranged to stay in one of the refugee camps in the southwestern region of the Sahara desert, which houses thousands of Sahrawi people who fled their homeland decades ago. We first contacted representatives of the Polisario Front in Australia, the Sahrawi national liberation movement, which oversees the camps. The Polisario set us up to live with a family so that we would be able to learn about women's roles within the camps, where traditional Muslim rules abide. As two anthropologists hailing from Australia and Latvia, we had heard that the camps, which house about 50,000 people were primarily run by women. Our goal was to learn more about this dynamic and how Sahrawi women have gained significant power within their society.

In early September we arrived in the early hours of the morning at the tiny airport of Tindouf, the closest town to the camps. After clearing immigration we moved into the waiting area where we saw large groups of white African women sitting around in brightly coloured robes. We were eventually approached by one of the representatives from the Sahrawi camps and were led outside to a jeep with an older man who spoke to us in Spanish, the second language of the Saharawi people after Arabic. We were driven to the camps in an armed convoy along with a number of other jeeps carrying foreigners. Algeria has had problems with kidnappings and terrorism in the past and although there has been a decline in terrorism in recent years, it has not dissipated completely (Le Seur, 2010). This became very real to us a few days after our return from the camps to the capital city Algiers, as a French man was kidnapped and killed by the Islamic wing of Al Qaeda just outside the capital (BBC).

Our arrival into the camps was surreal. After leaving the armed convoy to enter the camp that would be our home for the next two weeks, we were able to see through the moonlight the mud structures of the small houses that were spread over the vast desert land. We were taken to a small home made from mud and timber that would be our home for the next two weeks. As we stepped out of the truck, we were greeted by a smiling woman called Selma who would be our host mother for our stay along with her

husband and three children. We were led through the mud door into their home which consisted of several rooms that were separated by outside sand corridors. We were surprised to see that they had a television and electricity and we later found out that this was the only camp out of all the camps in the area that had electricity. There was a small kitchen and a small bathroom with a little tub that was left filled with water that we used sparingly each day due to the shortages of water in the camps. There were two living areas, one which had the television and the other which we came to learn was the most valuable, the one with the very old, but still functioning air conditioning.

Life in the camps required tolerating incredible heat. On a good day it would be 40 degrees Celsius but most days it was 42 to 45 degrees Celsius. Wherever you stood the desert stretched beyond the horizon and blended into the sandy brown buildings where the refugees live. The only burst of color came from the bright robes the women draped over themselves. We too draped ourselves in the robes but we avoided wearing scarves on our heads and the thick woolen gloves the women wore, even inside their home. The intense sun meant they covered every inch of their body to protect themselves. The Union Nacional de Mujeres Sahrawis (National Union of Sahrawi Women - UNMS) was in charge of our stay and organized a translator for us who came to our home each day to take us to our interviews. We were able to meet with a number of Polisario representatives as well as many members of the community and held our interviews in homes, shops and offices.

Sahrawi history

The Sahrawi struggle with Morocco first began in 1974 with the departure of the Spanish. Spain colonized Western Sahara for almost a century and in the 1950s and '60s exploited its phosphate riches and forcibly settled most of the nomadic Sahrawi in cities (Cyr, 2001, pp. 349). By 1973, many Sahrawi began to join the Polisario Front, which had been founded to fight against the Spanish. The Spanish finally withdrew as a colonial power in 1975 however, on the eve of Sahrawi independence, Morocco invaded Western Sahara and as a result many Sahrawi fled to refuges in southwest Algeria suffering aerial attacks from Moroccan aircraft which sprayed white phosphorous and Napalm on the fleeing refugees (Ramdan and Smith, 1992).

The Sahrawi women primarily took charge of those fleeing the major towns of Western Sahara and organized shelter, supplies and protection for the refugees who were mostly

women and children (Lippert, 1992, pp. 642). Many, especially the children had been traumatized by homelessness, hunger, thirst and air attacks before their arrival in Algeria (Lippert, 1992, pp. 646). The refugees not only had to deal with the harsh conditions of the desert but also with the trauma of being separated from loved ones. Many of the inhabitants had seen family members killed before their eyes and others had been wounded. There was little water and it had to be trucked in for most of the refugees, as there were only one or two wells. In the early days there was not enough food and there was no medicine to care for the ill. Women organized a health infrastructure in the camps, which still stands with a number of small health care centers and two general hospitals in Rabuni (Belloso and Mendina, 2008, pp.168).

After the camps had been built the Polisario Front officially established itself as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in Bir Lehlu on February 27th of 1976 and has since formally been recognized by over seventy five nations. They declared a National Liberation War, initially on Mauritania and later on Morocco after the Mauritanian retreat in 1979. War between the two countries continued until 1991 when a cease-fire was signed (Asprey, 2002, pp.1179). The United Nations sent a special mission to monitor the cease-fire agreement and to organize a referendum which would allow the people of the Western Sahara to decide their future status (Belloso and Mendina, 2008, pp.163). The Polisario Front also began to initiate social reforms within the camps at this time, including promoting the equal participation of women (Ramdan and Smith: 1992). The Union Nacional de Mujeres Sahrawis (National Union of Sahrawi Women - UNMS) was established initially with the Polisario Front to organize women's participation against Spanish rule and has developed into an organization that continues to advance women's place in Sahrawi society. The Polisario Front has supported this traditional role and promised expanded roles for women in a liberated Western Sahara as a major policy direction of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (1992:637). The UNMS has become one of the primary institutions for the administration of the Sahrawi refugee camps. Despite the harsh desert conditions, these camps demonstrate the remarkable achievements of Sahrawi women within the camps including administration and justice, education, health care, agriculture, and production and development (Ramdan and Smith, 1992).

The strength of the Sahrawi women

Perhaps one of the most defining factors of the Sahrawi community is that they claim there is no violence against women within their society. Throughout our time in the camps when we asked about the struggles of women living in the camp, they never spoke of violence or of rape. They did not complain of harassment or physical violence from their husbands. Like us, they spoke of the burning heat and the difficulties of not having enough water but mostly they spoke about their struggles for independence. “We’re not here for a better life, we’re here for a safer life,” said one woman we met, referring to the most difficult conditions in Western Sahara. During our time with the Sahrawi we certainly noted that due to the sun and difficulty in accessing resources life in the camp was very difficult however, we also saw that the camp was completely run by women and the majority of government ministers that we met were women. We were told that it was considered shameful for a man to hurt a woman, that men and women were treated equally and women were able to access higher positions within Saharan society.

The high levels of equality within Sahrawi have been noted by a number of groups. Harrell Bond reported that the Polisario Front was built with women’s equality being one of the strongest features of their social organization and that women’s equality was the dominant theme of life in the Sahrawi camps (cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, pp.67). In the mid 1980s Oxfam commented that perhaps the most impressive thing about Sahrawi society was its balance in terms of the relationship between men and women. The World Food Program has also stated that Sahrawi women are known to be assertive and to participate in all aspects of camp life (cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010, pp.68). Rather than containing patriarchal oppression by Sahrawi men Sahrawi society has instead been described as matriarchal and asserts that there is a total absence of violence against women in the camps. Our primary question thus became to understand how Sahrawi women were able to gain power within their society as well as create a violence free society in the midst of a region where women generally have few rights. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh found that Sahrawi women's contributions to the camps are a considerable source of pride. The active roles of Sahrawi women as distributors of aid, nurses, teachers, builders, as members of the Polisario Front and as individuals who have received military training to protect the camps should they come under attack are recognized and celebrated. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh interviewed one 14-year-old refugee girl

who said that the Sahrawi woman is the most important in the camps. She built the tents and provides the food, organizes the municipalities and is active in all the refugee camps they are active (2010, pp.68). They also noted that women have a strong role in the activities of the camp and are free to do as they wish (2010, pp.68).

Belloso and Mendina argue that in order to understand the particularity of Sahrawi women and their position in the refugee camps, it is necessary to take into account the traditional construction of gender roles in Western Sahara. They argue that the participation of Sahrawi women in society and their high social status is linked to the history of the Sahrawi people and their life as nomads in which women were considered, respected and contributed to society the same way other members did (2008, pp.165). Lippert found through her research that in traditional Sahrawi life, women exercised power and played a dominant role in the camp as well as in the home which had emerged in nomadic life because it supported Sahrawi resistance to Islamic and Western forces. In traditional Sahrawi society women could inherit property and could live independently of their fathers, brothers and husbands. They were valued by Sahrawi tribes, among which monogamy was the rule in contrary to many other Muslim societies where polygyny is commonly practiced, for their importance in building alliances through marriage within tribes. The traditional nomadic Sahrawi woman was the head of the home and was responsible for the tribal education of her children. She was also not required to cover her face and had great personal freedom within the tribe, where men and women would interact openly. Women were responsible for the camps while the men were away and would be in charge of making, repairing and moving the tents, for milking goats and camels and for participating in major tribal decisions, including the Koranic schooling for male and female children (1992, pp.638).

Belloso and Mendina further argue that due to Sahrawi women being inhabitants of a geographical area that consists of two different historical and cultural realities, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa as well as the mix of Arab and Berber traditions, they have created unique cultural traditions which differentiate them from other Muslim women. The Bedouin tradition has typically given women the role of managing assets and traditionally almost all desert nomads were matrilineal and matrilocal communities in characteristics of family organization. This allowed women a certain amount of independence such as being able to receive visits from both men and women when at

home alone as well as being able to leave the home without the husband's permission, which is less common in many other Muslim societies in North Africa and Middle East. Women and men also share public and private spaces, women are not required to use the veil and all violence against women is forbidden (2008, pp.165). Thus the cultural and traditional aspects of Sahrawi culture have been highly influential in the status of Sahrawi women.

Women have also been heavily involved in the resistance movements against foreign invaders, starting with the resistance movement against the Spanish and the Algerian revolution. Lippert argues that it is most likely the Sahrawi women's earlier involvement in the liberation struggle as well as in tribal activities that led to the prominence of social and political rights for women. It is also most likely what led to women becoming some of the first members of Polisario which has consistently been 90 percent female (1992, pp.644). The establishment of women's rights has been firmly implemented in the Sahrawi constitution that states that the government 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. All these areas of concern have been addressed by the local, regional and national popular congresses throughout the struggle for independence (Lippert, 1992, pp.644).

Islam and Sahrawi society

Another defining factor of the Saharawi community is their interpretation of Islam. Throughout our time in the camps we were told that Islam is a religion of tolerance that acknowledges men and women equally throughout the Koran. They say that the Koran explicitly states that men and women are different but equal. We were told that Saharawi believe that Islam calls for respect of women and we were told that other Islamic countries that use Islam to oppress women do so by misinterpreting the Koran. The representative of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic in Washington confirmed that the role and position of Saharawi women was unusual in Arabic societies. Women have always been in charge of the family in the camps he said, as women were the ones to create a sense of village in the camps, despite the ominous desert landscape, and instill a way of life in them. He further attributed the gender equality within Sahrawi society to Islam, and explained that real Islam honors women

and that Islam is about tolerance. He says that violence against women is completely unIslamic behavior and that in the Koran the relation between men and women is only about kindness and generosity.

This perspective was further reinforced when we met with four female teachers in a school for disabled children in the camps. When we asked about violence in the camps they all shook their heads and waved their fingers. They said that they do not have problems with these things. It is a shame for men to hurt them they told us, all the men are very nice with them. When we asked about what they think about women in other countries who experience violence, they said, “We feel sorry for them, no woman should have to put up with this.” When we asked them what they would say to other women who experienced violence and discrimination they said, “They should fight: they should not be silent. It would be better to live in the street than live with this kind of man. It is important to teach their children to respect.” At the end of the interview one of the women looked at us with a strong smile and told us that she is with us in the fight for women. We found throughout our interviews that when we asked women what they thought about other countries using Islam to oppress women and to deny them opportunities of leadership as well as to justify violence, all the women shook their heads and said that this is not Islam. They explained that Islam is a religion of tolerance and does not take away women’s rights.

Another factor that is particularly notable about Sahrawi society is that men within the camps as well as the male founders of Polisario view equality for women as a primary strategy for advancing the Polisario cause. One local shop keeper that we spoke to called Mohamed Solek explained to us that there is no violence against women in their society and when we asked why, he explained it was because of their tradition. He said that when he heard about these things happening in other societies he felt that these societies would not be able to develop. He said that he would never want violence and discrimination to affect his sister and he does not want it to happen to other women either. Our host, Selma also explained to us about the strong respect women receive among the Saharawi. Women, she said, were considered equal to men in many ways, for example, they are free to divorce here, and they even hold a party when they are divorced. That is a huge contrast to many other Muslim countries where divorce is often only permitted if the husband initiates it. Amongst the Sahrawi Selma told us,

traditionally, if a new suitor becomes interested in the divorced woman, he arranges the divorce party: however now because of the war in Western Sahara, a friend of the woman usually arranges it. It is also acceptable among the Sahrawi for a woman to have children with another man, should she remarry.

Throughout our time in the camps we saw women praying openly in public and we were told that girls participate equally in school and excursions. During an interview with the Sahrawi Minister of Defense we were told that women are welcome to participate in the military and a number of women told us that they would be prepared to fight should there be another war with Morocco. We saw women moving freely in the camps and we attended several meetings that were run by women, just for women. In an interview with Khadja Hamdi, the Minister of Culture of the Sahrawi she said she knew about a man who years ago physically abused his wife. She divorced him and married another man. The divorced husband is still alone because no woman is willing to marry him. When people did speak about violence, they said it emanated from Moroccan forces abusing women in Western Sahara. Hamdi said that women have had their hands cut off, had their teeth pulled out, been beaten and been dragged by their hair.

Conclusion

The stories that emerged from our journey into the Sahara desert painted a picture of a strong group of women that had taken charge of their lives and the struggles for their people's independence. Tales of the mistreatment and sadness of women which are so common around the world were absent in the Sahrawi refugee camps. The case of the Sahrawi women demonstrates that there are women living in extremely difficult situations, within Muslim societies that have successfully taken charge of their communities. They are not dominated and controlled by men but instead are respected and hold high positions in society. Violence against women is not condoned and is considered a shame. The case of the Sahrawi refugee camps offers hope and encouragement to all societies around the world that despite difficult circumstances and regardless of religion or ethnicity, women can live in peace without the threat of violence and discrimination.

It could be argued that the Sahrawi Liberation Movement offers a kind of a 'third way' in which nationalist revolutionary thinking can be linked to activism for gender equity.

In the case of the Sahrawi, gender equality is very much interlinked with Sahrawi traditions and respect and consideration of women are seen as a defining factor that differentiates them from Morocco. Thus, all efforts towards gender equity are not only understood as part of their ethnic identity but are also a basis for their independence struggle (Belloso and Mendina, 2008, pp.164). Thus our discussions with women were centered around freedom - not freedom from violence or having the freedom to move from their homes or to participate in society, like so many other women around the world. Rather they spoke of wanting freedom for their country and for their people.

It seemed to us that what we found deep in the sands of the Sahara was not quite what we suspected. Surrounded by strict Islamic countries many of which have a reputation for violence against women and a denial of women's rights, we expected to find something similar here in this hot and dusty refugee camp. But what we found instead was a camp full of strong women in positions of leadership and power. Draped in robes with scarves across their heads, the women we met told us very strong clear stories that did have pain, but instead of the pain being about violence and discrimination from their own men, it was about pain that came from other men in another county. It was about the pain of being away from their land that they so desperately wanted to return to and the pain of having to live in a dusty, desolate desert camp, with little water, under the scorching Saharan sun. "You can't be human without your freedom," said Jadod of the UN. However, during an interview with the Sahrawi Minister of Culture she told us that the solidarity between women needs to be strong and there is still much work to be done both globally and within Saharwi society to push forward with the struggle for women's rights.

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Biography

Johanna Higgs was born in Mt Isa in the desert of Australia but grew up in Perth, Western Australia. Johanna has a undergraduate degree in Anthropology and Politics and wrote her honor's thesis about the child soldiers of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. She has a Masters degree in International Development and is currently working on her PhD in Anthropology about the child combatants of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in Colombia. She has travelled through many parts of the world including the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, North America, Asia, the Pacific Islands and Europe. She has a passion for women's rights and founded the organization Project Monma which advocates for women's rights around the world. She could be reached at: J3higgs@students.latrobe.edu

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