

The Social and Political Lives of Women in an Egalitarian Matricultural Society: The Case of Western Sahara

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Gender equality is generally discussed as a liberal goal within international discourse. But nonliberal conceptions of gender egalitarianism coexist with and interact with liberal understandings in many contemporary societies. This article offers analysis of a Muslim matricultural society in Western Sahara made up of the Sahrawi people, where domestic violence is rare, where gender egalitarianism is highly valued, and where women are encouraged to become politically and economically active. The article explores the meaning of female agency in a society with cultural norms that promote women's autonomy, yet also in the context of a society more broadly constrained by a lack of self-determination due to external occupation. The study draws on interviews and focus groups in Dakhla and El Aaiún.

Introduction

This article looks at an unusual society in Western Sahara, where an egalitarian culture influences the ways in which women assert themselves politically, economically, and socially. Interviews in Western Sahara revealed that interpersonal violence against women was rare in Sahrawi society and interviewees upheld domestic peace as a dominant cultural value; where men spent their time concerned with how to make domestic life easier for women who work; where there was no apparent stigma against divorced women; and women were encouraged to become political leaders.

Feminist theory has shown how violence in the home is embedded in societal power relations, which reinforce women's lack of power in the public sphere (Fineman and Mykitiuk 1994). Most feminist scholarship has described societies where historically male positions are structurally dominant. What happens to women's political empowerment when this is not the case,

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where a matricultural ideology which holds women as a group in high esteem is dominant? The Sahrawi society provides an opportunity to examine what such outcomes might look like.

Nonliberal Notions of Gender Equality

Generally, very little attention is paid to contemporary nonliberal bases of claims for equality. When women's own perspectives or priorities are identified, as was the case in the universalist feminist vs. anti-normative debates, the discussion ended in an impasse (Hodgson 2011; Okin 1999). Serene Khader (2019) has tried to break this impasse by arguing for a universalist feminist position that requires opposition to sexist oppression, but does not equate universalism with Western Enlightenment values and strategies, as often has been the case in these debates. She calls for a feminism that rejects idealized versions of Western culture that equate it with moral progress. This, then, opens up space for valuing cultural egalitarianism in societies like the Sahrawi, for example. But the question remains, to what end? And what are the limits of such particularistic egalitarian strategies and practices?

This article offers a glimpse into the ways in which nonliberal matricultural norms of equality influence the political representation and economic activities of Sahrawi women in the contested territory of Western Sahara. It looks at how nonliberal notions of egalitarianism coexist with and interact with the liberal norms that come out of the international human and women's rights discourses, specifically in the form of quotas aimed at enhancing gender equality in politics. Liberalism has generally been associated with the adoption of women's rights internationally (Arat 2015), particularly through the mechanisms of the United Nations, such as UN treaties, conventions, UN Security Council Resolutions, and agencies. Morocco (and Western Sahara by extension), for example, has followed the policies encouraged by UN Women and other agencies of introducing legislation in 2011 that set aside sixty reserved seats for women in the House of Representatives. The seats were to be filled by winners elected through a proportional representation system based on nationwide closed party lists.

The general ideological underpinnings of liberal views of equality are premised on the idea that all people share a basic equal moral status: they have basic dignity and worth by virtue of being humans (Arneson 1989). A universalist feminist approach, such as that adopted by Anne Phillips (2021), would take this a step further to argue that all people should be regarded equal because we are humans, without justification, qualification, or proof, but simply by asserting it. What matters is not identifying justice and equality, but being able to identify *inequality* and *injustice*, thus setting a higher bar for equality. According to Phillips, equality should not be seen as sameness or assimilation to a prior, often male, norm, nor should it be seen as requiring a gender or race blindness that is often taken as an antidote to discrimination. Sometimes

treating people equally means treating them differently and taking their views seriously. By the same token, she opposes relativistic approaches that emphasize difference in ways that she sees defeat the goal of equality. Thus, she would be inherently skeptical of the Sahrawi approach to gender relations, and perhaps with good reason, given that no society exists in a bubble, and all are shaped by many influences that undermine gender equality.

Although liberal institutions have come to dominate international discourses on gender equality, not all societies think about gender equality within this liberal frame and there is much we can learn from a variety of approaches. For example, in Algeria and Morocco, the related Amazigh (Berber) identity has been strengthened both culturally and politically since the 1980s. Amazigh women's rights activists frequently highlight key roles played by women in their historically matrilineal societies (Merolla 2001). They point to mythic and historical leaders such as Dihya (also known as Kahina in Arabic), an Amazigh warrior queen who lived in the seventh century. She is said to have twice beaten back Umayyad (Arab and Muslim) invaders in Eastern Algeria and Western Tunisia. To this day a statue in Beghiai, Algeria, commemorates her, and she continues to appear on Amazigh websites, in graffiti and songs. Her name can be found on pizza restaurants, clothing stores, children's books, movies, and in literature in Algeria (Tripp 2019). For the Amazigh, she has come to symbolize "gender equality as well as religious and ethnic tolerance," according to Cynthia Becker (2015). The reputation of Tin Hinane, a fourth-century Tuareg warrior queen, has similarly spread from Mali to Niger, Nigeria, Libya, and Algeria. Further afield, the late Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi documents in her book *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993) the various Turkish, Mongol, and Arab women who led armies, formed empires, and led countries as queens and sultanas between the third and seventeenth centuries.

Women have also found a place in Sufi practices in the Maghreb (broadly defined as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, and Western Sahara). Amazigh women are said to have played central roles in pre-Islamic rituals associated with healing, fertility, lamenting the dead, and can be found as leaders in several *zawiyas* (religious monasteries) and mosques (ElBoudrari 1993; Rausch 2006; Sadiqi 2017). Moroccan historic texts are full of descriptions of devout Sufi women going back as far as the thirteenth century, including Sayyida Aisha Bint Chaqroun al-Fakhar (seventeenth century), Mina Fassi Fihri, and Sayyida Aisha Bint Ali Bounafi (eighteenth century). They were praised for their asceticism, devotion to silence, and removal from bodily attachments. Others were revered as seekers of knowledge (El Haitami 2014). In neighboring Mauritania, women such as Fatma Mint Haj Elbechir of Ouadane were known for their roles in oral transmission of Islamic texts in the nineteenth century. Some directed institutions for Islamic education and in the early 2000s women directed one-quarter of Nouakchott's Qur'anic schools (Wiley 2018).

Women's active roles as poets and in poetry festivals in Western Sahara as well as more broadly in the Maghreb has been another important arena for self-expression (El Nossery 2017). Thus, women have sought self-realization, independence, and alternatives to dominant patterns of local patriarchal culture through a variety of venues (Tripp 2019). These historic and contemporary imaginaries of women as military, political, cultural, and religious leaders coexist with some of the new political and economic roles women are taking on in the region, particularly in Western Sahara.

The notion of "complementarity" is perhaps the most common nonliberal notion of equality in the broader Maghreb. Complementarity, which is aligned with mainstream Islamic institutions and Maliki law (Islamic jurisprudence tradition found especially in North and West Africa), regards women and men as equal but in their own spheres of competence. Unlike the other abovementioned perspectives that emphasize women's agency in a variety of spheres, "complementarity" has not melded as easily with liberal notions of gender equality and has resulted, for example, in fiercely contested debates over constitutional reforms, for example, in the case of Tunisia in 2012–2014.

The aforementioned nonliberal egalitarian views speak to the importance of women's lived experiences as well as their imaginaries. In other words, while constitutional rights and laws can provide theoretical protections, at the end of the day, women seek political, economic, and social space in their daily lives. Culture is often thought of as a constraint on gender reform, but this article shows that it can also be a resource. For the Sahrawi, the lack of violence and the cultural valorization of women offers a powerful source of support for women in entering politics or economic activity. In many African societies, the popular veneration of motherhood provides a similar support for many women politicians (Tripp 2016).

Rethinking Women's Agency

This study also invites us to think more broadly about women's agency, beyond the stereotypical association of agency with resistance, individual choice (Gershon 2011), and/or free will (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Madhok 2013). It also takes us beyond the passive agency of Egyptian pietist women documented in Saba Mahmood's work (Mahmood 2005). It challenges us to think about culture, not only as embodying patriarchal constraints for women (Okin 1999; Shachar 1999), but as also providing resources for advancing gender equality.

The juxtaposition of women's structural autonomy within a society lacking national self-determination makes this case all the more interesting and allows us to look at the meaning of agency within multiple systems of power (Abu-Lughod 1990) from the household to the extended family, tribe, nation, state, and international order. It underscores Karl Marx's dictum that people "make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it

under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1852). For better or for worse, all of our preferences are shaped by the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The Sahrawi story is at the same time a story of external domination. The territory was colonized by Spain starting in 1884. Spain withdrew in 1975 and in the Madrid Accords it ceded administrative authority of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania. Mauritania eventually relinquished the territory it had controlled after a four-year war with the independence movement POLISARIO (*Frente Popular por la Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro*) and recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). However, Morocco continued its occupation of the territory. Today, the two provinces of Western Sahara, Dakhla-Oued Eddahab and El Aaiún-Sakia El Hamra, have been absorbed into Moroccan governance structures. POLISARIO remained in control of the eastern part of Western Sahara along the border with Mauritania. It declared Western Sahara to be an independent state, the SADR. The International Court of Justice, on behalf of the UN General Assembly, was to evaluate the Moroccan and Mauritanian claims over the territory and in so doing they concluded that there could be a referendum around self-determination, which has yet to take place. Morocco signed a cease-fire with POLISARIO in 1991, but the conflict resumed in November 2020.

At this writing, while UN efforts to broker a peace are at an impasse, the African Union is pressing ahead with its peace initiative. Morocco has offered a self-autonomy proposal, while POLISARIO is demanding that the referendum for independence be held. The participation in the September 2021 parliamentary elections in Western Sahara was higher than participation in Morocco (67 percent in El Aaiún Sakia El Hamra, 64 percent in Guelmim-Oued Noun, and 58 percent in Dakhla-Oued Eddahab, compared with 50 percent in the rest of Morocco).¹ But without an independent referendum on the future of the region, it is difficult to know how to interpret such results.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in depth the broader tensions between Morocco and those who seek independence or autonomy for the region, even though it has important consequences for the daily lives of the Sahrawi. According to Human Rights Watch, which gathered information in Western Sahara unimpeded, “Moroccan authorities systematically prevent gatherings in Western Sahara supporting Sahrawi self-determination, obstruct the work of some local human rights NGOs, including by blocking their legal registration, and on occasion beat activists and journalists in their custody and on the streets” (HRW 2019).

The Sahrawi people live in what is today known as Mauritania, Western Sahara, and southwest Algeria. They primarily speak the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic and the Moroccan Arabic dialect, along with French and Spanish. Some speak Tamazight (Berber) dialects. They are a mixture of people of

Amazigh (Berber) and Arab descent. The Sahrawi were nomadic people historically, but became semi-sedentary only in the last generation, although the process of becoming sedentary began during Spanish colonial rule. Their land was a trading route, which historically had transported salt, gold, and slaves between North Africa and West Africa.

The total population of the Western Sahara has been estimated at half a million and only 30 percent are Sahrawi since large numbers of Moroccans have moved to live and work there (Shefte 2015). The numbers of inhabitants in the Tindouf refugee camps are contested (UNHCR 2016). Other Sahrawi live in Morocco, Mauritania, France, and Spain. The Sahrawi are divided into numerous tribal groupings, including the Rgaybat, Tekna, Ouled Dlim, and Ouled Tidrarin.

Methods

The study is based on roughly fifty interviews in Western Sahara, mostly with women. I took pains to talk to a wide range of people to get many different perspectives of Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi living in the region. I spoke with women entrepreneurs, journalists, hotel owners, military personnel, local government leaders, regional council leaders, women's organization leaders and members, and members of parliament from the region. I spoke with people who had fought with the POLISARIO, and with women and men who had moved from the Tindouf camps in Algeria. I spoke with a wide range of women of different ages and experiences to try to get as complete a picture as I could.

This study is part of a broader project I conducted in the Maghreb on women and politics. I had originally not planned to work in the Western Sahara because it is such a politically sensitive area, but I was fortunate to meet a Moroccan women's rights activist and lawyer who had worked in the region and encouraged me to go there. She went well out of her way to help me set up interviews through a snowball sample. In 2016, I conducted thirty-four interviews and held three focus groups on two trips (twice to Dakhla and once to El Aaiún). They represented a wide range of economic, political, and societal perspectives. The interviews were conducted in the local Moroccan dialect, which is widely spoken, French and English.

Because of the aforementioned tensions in Western Sahara, few scholars have worked in the area. Although I was not constrained in any way, I was mindful of these realities. Most of the literature on this region focuses on the Western Sahara conflict. I am bracketing it off from my focus in this article, because as important as it is to the lives of women in the region, it is extremely complicated and would require serious treatment on its own, detracting from the questions I am examining. Nevertheless, it is important to note that

Sahrawi women are at the forefront of nonviolent resistance to Moroccan control of the territory within Western Sahara (Allan 2019).

Characteristics of Matricultural Society

Contemporary Sahrawi society is perhaps best regarded as a matricultural society, in which women are highly valued. Women hold power in a context where neither male nor female groups dominate the other gender. It involves a partnership between the genders within a specific gendered division of labor (Passman 1993; Warning 2019).

Matricultural societies can be, but are not always, also *matrilineal* societies, which are based on kinship with the mother's lineage (Warning 2019). It is unclear whether the Sahrawi have historically been matrilineal, as have been the neighboring Tuareg tribes (Murdock 1959). However, many Bedouin societies such as the ones from which the Sahrawi originated were historically matrilineal in which women managed the assets of the family, and matrilocal, where the husband goes to live with the wife's family.

What is interesting about matricultural societies is that they challenge our views of the masculine–feminine binary and the public–private divide that associates certain roles and characteristics with men and women. Although the Sahrawi are overwhelmingly Muslim, they also are fiercely protective of their culture when it comes to aspects of Muslim or Arab culture that contradict their own values. In a part of the world where norms around gender can sometimes be rigidly defined in a patriarchal manner, particularly when it comes to family law, the Sahrawi have found a way of negotiating gender differences in a way that allows women a large degree of autonomy. These patterns parallel those of the Minangkabau in West Sumatra, Indonesia, who have maintained egalitarian relations between men and women alongside their adherence to Islam (Sanday 2003).

Matricultural societies are not *matriarchies*, in which women hold political and economic power, moral authority, or social privilege, while men are excluded from it. No such societies exist. There is no female equivalent of patriarchy, which is more pervasive to varying degrees. Matrilineal and matricultural societies show, however, that patriarchy is not universal, nor is it inevitable. Much of the early literature on matrilineal societies assumed universal male dominance (Richards 1950; Spiro 1982) or concluded that the role of the man could not be understood (Schneider 1961). Feminist scholarship has also often led to claims of the universality of male dominance (Chodorow 1978). Scholars such as Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke (1992), Mary Douglas (1969), Juliana Flinn (1986), John Thomas (1980), Maria Lepowsky (1990), Ladislav Holy (1986), and Alice Schlegel (1972) have challenged aspects of feminist and anthropological assumptions of what is sometimes called the “matrilineal puzzle,” that women are always controlled by men; male roles are

central in all social systems; the most important social roles of men are father and husband; and men's control of women's sexual and reproductive potential is universal.

The Sahrawi place women in dominant political and economic roles in society. The centrality of women is evident even in Sahrawi mythology. Women are extolled for their bravery in Sahrawi stories. "The coward who became brave," for example, describes the wife who replaces her husband in battles until he learns from her courage. The protagonists of the stories are often anthropomorphized animals and woven into these stories is the idea of matrilocality, bridewealth paid by the man, women's frustrations with the monotony of everyday life, the strength of the elderly, the importance of grandchildren paying tribute to their grandmothers, and concerns of husbands who give gifts to their wife to ensure that she does not divorce him (Pinto and Jiménez 1996 cited in Juliano 1999, 76).

Perhaps the centrality accorded to women is tied to the nomadic lifestyle of the Sahrawi, which historically involved long absences by men traders, thus requiring women to remain behind to raise the children. Women made, repaired, and moved the tents, milked the goats and camels, maintained the household, and participated in major tribal decisions (Amoretti 1987; Lippert 1992). Numerous reports from Tindouf refugee camps have noted the striking differences in gender roles in the camps as well (Harrell-Bond 1981 and Mowles 1986 cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Isidoros 2018; Lippert 1992). In the Tindouf camps, women run the schools, clinics, agricultural projects, neighborhood committees, and other major areas of administration. They served in the army during the years of conflict. They make up about 85 percent of the administrative positions and make up 90 percent of the political committees in the refugee camps (Higgs 2015; Isidoros 2018; Juliano 1999; San Martín 2010; Wallace 1994).

Gender quotas were introduced in 2007 and women gained 35 percent of the seats in the Sahrawi Parliament (Sahrawi National Council) of the SADR in 2008 (Rossetti 2012). There are also four women ministers and two governors (Ortiz 2021). These patterns of women's agency in Tindouf have been documented by scholars such as Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2014), Konstantina Isidoros (2018), Tina Wallace (1994), Johanna Higgs and Christine Ryan (2015). However, they have not focused on the legacies of Sahrawi matrilineal society as shaping political behavior in these cases. Moreover, most of the literature on Sahrawi women focuses on these refugee camps and on the conflict between the POLISARIO and Morocco.

Much of the literature on Tindouf, however, links these practices to the ideology of the POLISARIO (Higgs and Ryan 2015; Lippert 1992), since equality is embedded in the POLISARIO constitution and ethos. But it is more likely that it has earlier roots in nomadism since one finds these attributes in the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara as well.

For example, in Western Sahara, women are involved in the voluntary sector. In a rare study of women and women activists in El Aaiún who were imprisoned during the war between Morocco and POLISARIO from 1980 to 1991, Erica Vasquez (2014) writes about the extensive involvement of women in civil society as leaders, founders of organizations, volunteers, and facilitators in projects run by NGOs focusing on social issues.

Similarly, women are active as entrepreneurs. I attended a meeting of local NGOs and Spanish entrepreneurs who were thinking of expanding the tourist industry in Dakhla. The overwhelming majority of Sahrawi participants at the event were businesswomen. I spoke with the regional coordinator for the Social Development Agency who said that the majority of project submissions for funding from this agency come from women who want to start companies to make tents, work in the fish sector, trade clothes, manage hotels, and start agricultural businesses growing tomatoes and melons and other products to be sold to Europe.

I spoke with a woman who had a vegetable business. She said she felt there was no difference between men and women when it came to finding markets or operating as entrepreneurs. Another woman talked about studying engineering in Morocco. She claimed that many young Sahrawi women are successful because they study in Morocco. They do so because it allows them more opportunities to travel and get out of the home and it opens doors for them career-wise. In this regard, their goals are not that different from Moroccan women in the north. Even in her engineering program, there were eighteen women and only one man because women seek education as their ticket to greater autonomy.

One business that appears to be limited in this region is sex work. Cases of sex work among the Sahrawi are uncommon and are considered shocking. I asked a ranking naval officer, a hotel manager, a doctor, and others who might come in contact with sex workers about prostitution and they all vigorously denied such practices by local women. In interviews, I was told that it existed among non-Sahrawi women from Morocco and African migrants. Joanna Allan similarly found that it was largely carried out by Moroccans who had moved to the area, but minimally by Sahrawi themselves. She notes that “prostitutes are seen to dishonor Sahrawi society” (Allan 2019, 188). When I asked why this was the case, I was told that Sahrawi notions of respect between men and women do not allow such relations.

I found a few references to sex work in the literature on this region during the Spanish colonial period, but the majority of sex workers were Spanish and only a handful were Sahrawi. A few Spanish soldiers had nonmarital relationships with Sahrawi women, most of whom had been divorced by their husbands and had been unable to remarry. Some might consider such relationships a form of sex work, even if the Sahrawi don’t label it in that way. Like my own inquiries into the present period, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh also wrote that “the existence of Sahrawi prostitutes during the Spanish colonial period

is entirely absent from all of the literature I have reviewed, as well as from all of the interviews I have conducted with Sahrawis in the [Tindouf] camps and beyond” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011, 42).

Women’s dominant role in society is evident in Sahrawi practices surrounding divorce, women’s control of resources, women’s freedom of movement, and their involvement in economic and political activities. As one Moroccan physician from Casablanca who had worked for several years in Dakhla said to me:

The Moroccan society is a patriarchy by definition. That is our reality. But autonomous women of Sahrawi origins benefit from extreme liberty. If anything, they are on the other side of the spectrum as they are highly respected and praised. For example, if a woman ever falls in love with a man other than her husband, she can very easily divorce her husband, get her papers done quickly, still get money out of the split and go and live with her new lover. Yes, it is shocking, even to me as a woman from the north, but that is how things are here. No man can ever assault or insult a woman. If that ever were to happen, the man would be banished from the tribe. Truly, women’s freedom is just extraordinary. (S25.7.16)

Perhaps related to this female autonomy is the fact that Sahrawi society more generally has a strong egalitarian streak. The same physician, noted:

What is surprising here, is that very wealthy people live very humble lives. Sometimes we as doctors live lives that appear 10 times better, while making 100 times more. Culturally speaking, being flashy or behaving in an ostentatious way is seen as disrespectful and in very bad taste. They are amazingly humble and believe in simple ways of living. (S25.7.16)

The Value of Nonviolence

One of the most unique aspects of Sahrawi society is the rarity of reported interpersonal violence. People I interviewed upheld this as one of the main values of their society. It is evident from my interviews in Dakhla and El Aaiún that being a man does not require a rejection of all that is feminine through aggression or sexual assertiveness. This influences their views of violence, particularly against women. There are other societies that have similar values of nonviolence. For example, rape is almost unheard of among the Nagovisi in Bougainville (Papua New Guinea) (Nash 1987). Matrilineal dwellers of Vanatinai (near Papua New Guinea) strongly disapprove of rape and wife abuse, according to Maria Lepowsky (1990). Watson (1970) shows that the same is true of the Guajiro in Venezuela. Historic accounts of the Iroquois

from the eighteenth century reveal the same pattern (Canfield 1902; Seaver 1932), which is found among other matrilineal groups as well.

This does not mean that there is no violence at all among the Sahrawi. Certainly, there is violence toward nonfamily members, as evident in the struggle for independence and in the intertribal conflicts and tensions between Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi. But there is a strong norm against violence toward women and between other family members, including children, even in the form of verbal abuse. This was verified by a pediatrician I spoke with who said she would have seen evidence of such abuse of children were it to have taken place.

This lack of interpersonal violence came out not only in my interviews, but it also has been documented by others in the Tindouf refugee camps (Belloso and Azkue 2009; Higgs and Ryan 2015), where researchers did not find any evidence of physical violence, sexual harassment, or rape. Men told me repeatedly in interviews that the social sanctions against abuse were so heavy and this is what kept them from even thinking about hitting their wives. There were such sanctions against both physical and verbal abuse in the form of societal ostracism that perpetrating violence was unthinkable. “For us, if a man beats his wife, he is no longer a man, he is a dog,” a forty-five-year-old Sahrawi woman who was twice divorced reported (Harter 2004). A man recounted to me how one man had barely laid a hand on a woman and was forced to compensate her quite lavishly to regain her favor:

There is a well-known story in Dakhla about a man who hit his wife. This happened 15 years ago and everyone still remembers it. The man, he pushed his wife like this [gesturing]. It was scandalous for the whole city. I can't say his name because everyone knows him. He did this to her and she got mad. He pleaded with her to return to him and she said no. He had to give her a new car, 7,000 euros, jewelry and a big party for her to come back to him. She came back because of all this. The guy until now is seen as very inferior to us by everyone, both men and women. I still remember that story. (S3.29.16)

Some men are even required to hold a second wedding and provide new bridewealth of camels and jewelry. Even after these many offers of compensation, it may be difficult to convince her to take him back.

One government employee who had lived for some time in the United States and decided to return explained how people regarded violence against women. When I asked about the absence of violence he said:

It is true. There is no violence against women in our society. Like me, my wife, I cannot do anything, even saying bad things is forbidden, even making a face is bad . . . You cannot say a bad word to your wife because as a respectable person, you bring her to your house as a partner. When you bring a woman to your place, you bring her family to

your place and your family to them. You try your utmost not to harm her because it is a family thing. I never heard of anyone I know being hit. We are raised that way. I saw how my father and granddad treated my mother. As a man, you don't want your sister treated like that. And your wife is a sister to another man. (S3.29.16)

Freedom of Movement

Women have freedom of movement and this is true even at night. Since much of daily life takes place in the afternoon and nighttime, women walk, either alone but more often in pairs or groups, around Dakhla and El Aaiún without fear of assault regardless of age or marital status. When at midnight we offered to walk a young female member of the Regional Council back home through the deserted streets of Dakhla, she declined and seemed not even to understand why we made the offer. She said she had nothing to worry about and that it was completely safe.

This freedom of movement also applies to travel to Morocco or abroad. Women are free to travel and to do business in Morocco, Spain, or elsewhere without any difficulty. One concern that was expressed to me is that as the Sahrawi society interacts with others and as people travel, some of these core cultural values of nonviolence, speaking the truth, honoring your word, and respecting women will be lost.

Women do not have guardians as in many other Arab countries. In the event of divorce, the children remain with the mother, which is different from the Arab custom of assigning them to the father (Juliano 1999). Notably, this has been the norm in the rest of Morocco after the passage of the Personal Status Code (Mudawana) in 2004.

Marriage and Divorce

The bride's family is given bridewealth (*mahr*) of camels, sheep, fabric, perfume, tea, sugar, and other goods. The bride herself is also given camels, jewelry, and furniture, depending on the status of the families involved. The bridewealth reflects not only the tribal bond between families but is also an expression of the groom's love for the bride.

Historically, the couple lived near the bride's home and the bride's mother would set up a canvas tent every night and take it down during the day to preserve the modesty code of *hishmah*, which prohibits reference to sexual relations within the vicinity of kin, especially older males, according to Alice Wilson (2016). The new bride would go to the tent in the middle of the night to be with her husband and return just before dawn to the family's tent so that the father would not see her. The couple would remain near the bride's home until the birth of the first child, after which they would move to their

own home. She would often return to her natal home for childbirth and during the husband's absence (Wilson 2016). These protections of a young woman's honor and sexuality did not apply to older women. Even today, young women take care that they are not seen alone near bars or other locations that might hurt their reputations, thus the freedoms married women enjoy do not necessarily apply to younger women.

The Sahrawi I interviewed say they do not generally arrange marriages because love is so important to them. They often point to the rich culture of love poetry as evidence of this (Chamberlain 2005). But since unmarried men and women are not supposed to date or engage in any kind of courtship prior to marriage, much of this is carried out in secret.

Although polygamy is rare in Morocco, the Sahrawi are overwhelmingly monogamous. Juliano (1999) describes strategies women have adopted to strengthen monogamy. When getting married, the wife may insist that the husband say under oath that he has no previous wife and that he renounces his Islamic prerogative of taking another wife while married to her. She may even require that it is put in the marriage contract. They can have successive marriages, but divorce is available to both women and men.

Although loyalty to the spouse is valued, like elsewhere, the reality may be quite different. As one woman physician explained: "The thing is, in this matriarchal society, women often have affairs and have sexual relations outside of wedlock. Here, having lovers is, if anything, a rebellion about pleasure, it is all about the Sahrawi woman claiming her right to pleasure. Their husbands just act as if they don't know even though most usually do. But such behavior comes with consequences." When I asked about abortion she said: "They are very open about it and would like it legalized. Passing the law on abortion is more than welcome here. In my personal opinion, they do need it, indeed."

Like other matricultural societies, the marriage bond is fairly weak. It is evident in the Sahrawi attitudes toward divorce. For the Sahrawi women, divorce is an option they feel free to use. If a woman senses the man wants a divorce, she tries to initiate it before he does. Men similarly agree to a divorce if they know that their wife wants divorce, rather than face societal disapproval. One of the purposes of this relatively open attitude toward divorce is that it allows for an escape valve in the event of conflict, and as such it is a conflict avoidance mechanism and a way of avoiding wife abuse. They reason that there is no need for men to take their frustrations out on their wives by beating her if either partner can just leave the marriage, or so I was told. In one case of abuse, the divorced man was still alone because no woman was willing to marry him.

After divorce, a woman returns to her natal home. Most marry inside the tribe, but women are allowed to marry outside the tribe because they have their own property which will not be lost if they divorce. One woman said: "Divorce is so easy here. We have no problems. You can hear about a divorce from one day to the next and nobody is shocked or shaken, it truly is common

and it solves a lot issues.” A sociologist at Ibn Tofail University, Mohammed Dahman, explained: “The woman’s status rises when she marries twice or three times, as a result she gets access to attend the public meetings and being consulted within the family, so the increase in woman’s value answers the questions how many times she get married” (*Morocco World News 2014*).

Unlike in other societies where divorce carries great social stigma, when a Sahrawi woman divorces, her family holds a party for her, partly to boost her self-esteem, to preserve her dignity, but also to announce her availability for remarriage. As one woman put it, “The party is meant to pay homage to the divorced woman, so that she doesn’t feel weak or ashamed.” Her family might slaughter a goat and invite friends to a meal, get a musician to play, and she wears her best clothes and jewelry (*Juliano 1999*). Potential suitors bring gifts such as a camel, perfume, or money. Although everyone I spoke with talked only about the positive side of the possibility of divorce, other studies have shown that women may also suffer if they are left with the sole responsibility for their children, leading to the greater pauperization of women, as was evident from a study conducted in Mauritania (*Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011*).

Because women have their own wealth (men and women keep their assets separate as is common in much of Africa including North Africa) and because they have the ability to divorce, they are not forced to stay in loveless marriages. “I divorced my first husband because I never really fell in love. I divorced my second because he fell in love with someone else,” one woman explained (*Harter 2004*). When I asked one woman what her main problems were, she replied in jest, “I have never been divorced,” implying that she had not moved up in the world. She loved her husband and love comes before wealth in this society, she explained. There is the sense that one’s worth increases with multiple marriages because one gains more bridewealth. Also, one is more experienced as a lover, and is therefore more desirable.

The lack of stigma toward divorced women means that women’s status is not determined by their relation to men through marriage. Even age is not as important for status as it is in other societies, although the elderly are shown great respect. Young single women, who generally are at the bottom of status rankings in most societies, can be afforded positions of responsibility, such as Ghalla Bahiya, who at the age of twenty-six, and single, became Vice-President of the Dakhla Oued Eddahab Regional Council. Prior to that she had been head of international affairs on the council. She was highly competent in her position and fluent in at least six languages. Some said that education might be the only stratifying element (\$25.7.16).

Women in Politics

In order to better understand how various cultural dimensions featured in political life for Sahrawi women, I interviewed various women party members,

a woman member of the Dakhla city council, members of the regional council (both men and women), and two members of parliament, one from Dakhla and one from El Aaiún. It appears that women are very active in all areas of politics except for the highest level of governor and regional council chair. In the 2021 elections there were proportionately more women elected to local positions in El Aaiún-Sakia El Hamra and Dakhla-Oued Eddahab compared with other parts of Morocco.² The cultural openness in women's interpersonal relations, the support afforded women by the extended family, men's support for women, and the lack of violence or even threat of violence as a result of strong social sanctions, all serve to make it possible for women to engage in the public sphere relatively unimpeded. Women politicians and candidates worldwide increasingly face violence and threats of violence as they go about their day-to-day activities (Krook 2020). These types of threats appear to be relatively absent in Sahrawi society itself. But this is not true of state violence against those women who openly call for greater autonomy for the region.

The lack of violence does not mean that there are no challenges. The main challenges women politicians face appear to affect women with young children. Women politicians still bear the burden of caring for the home and children. As one woman on the regional council put it: "There are many factors such as traditions or family that do not let the women venture onto the road of politics, and that makes women less competitive than men." But as one sees in the interviews below, men are making efforts to adjust to these new roles women are taking on, especially after the legislative quota was introduced in 2011.

I heard similar comments regarding women's political participation from both male and female politicians. As one male member of the regional council explained in a focus group that included both men and women:

Only here, in this part of Morocco, do you see freedom for women. We men accord more importance to the freedom of women because it has benefits in all the domains. The women educate the children, manage small shops and businesses and in sum she is one of the pillars of why our community functions so well. And in our region, women are never harassed. They are highly respected, and when she asks for something, she gets it. As for politics, it is open to everyone; men and women. The number of men and women [in the regional council] is approximately 50%–50%. In some cases, we have more women than men. We also have many women who are heads of municipalities or responsible for small communities. Overall, thank God, women in the South are doing well in terms of leadership.

Another woman council member remarked in response to a question about women traveling alone, which is often required of politicians who need to go to Rabat for meetings: "Even if she travels alone nobody will see that as bad

and her husband will even help her. I think that we are an open society, and if a woman wants to engage in politics, she gets help from all the family, and thanks to our religion, we get the respect we deserve and this respect is reinforced thanks to the culture here in the Sahara.”

One councilor brought up the issue of quotas, which were introduced in Morocco in 2002 by political parties and enshrined in electoral law in 2011. This resulted in an influx of women leaders in many new areas of political administration in the region. When asked if it had caused any problems he replied:

The new law also implemented the major presence of women in high ranks like the civil court, the township, and the town hall depending on the number of people in the region. The quota is a form of encouragement for women to participate in the political sector and be more active, and I’ve never heard someone saying that it’s easier for them.

He even had seen benefits to having more women in parliament as the parties who had female representatives tended to work more closely together.

I asked both the men and the women on the regional council how they managed housework and childcare and the group became very animated. One woman explained:

I am a member of the town hall and I have obligations towards my community, but I also feel obligations towards my role as a mother of two. I have responsibilities both at home and as a political leader. And to represent a region I need to be respectful, concentrated and serious, and not, for example, to go outside by night and party. Even though we have freedom, it does not mean that we must act in a totally chaotic way. I have to respect myself and others. Also, my husband trusts me when he lets me travel for work, and I have to respect that trust.

The regional councilors explained that women make most of the decisions in the household and are in charge of their households. Although women have primary responsibility for cooking, housework, and caring for the children, men are very comfortable in these roles as well. And while they do not see themselves as the primary ones responsible for household tasks, they are socialized to help women in any way possible and to respect them, which includes caring for children, cooking, making tea, and engaging in other household chores.

Some male councilors said that they shared childcare and housework, but it was clear that there were generational differences and a shift was going on in society in response to the new public roles women were assuming. Unlike the older council members, younger council members had spouses who worked and so the men did a share of the care work at home. It was clear that housework and childcare were seen as the domain of women, but that men “helped” and were willing to do what was needed to be done in terms of cooking and childcare. One younger woman said: “Yes, for example my husband

helps me with the baby. When I need to prepare lunch, he changes his diaper, he plays with him and it's a good way for him to get off his routine." Another younger man replied: "This is a new generation. I helped my wife with the children and cooking, for example, during the [past] weekend to change the routine."

Some of these same themes were echoed in an interview I conducted with Dakhla parliamentarian Azzouha El Arak. Not surprisingly, given the prominence of Sahrawi women in the political sphere, the Province of Oued Eddahab (of which Dakhla is the capital) had three women deputies and one man when I was carrying out my interviews: Azzouha El Arak of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), Aziza Chegaf of the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), and Fatima Ahl Takrouf of the PJD. Azzouha El Arak first became interested in politics as an activist in the PJD party because she was "attracted to the principles, goals and agenda of PJD." She said "I was attracted by PJD, because I saw that it was the party advocating for the people in need. I had colleagues from other parties, but I made my own judgment. It's the party that takes care of social issues."

It appears that today the parties that are favored in Western Sahara, based on the 2021 elections, have shifted along with currents in Morocco, where the Islamist PJD lost significantly in the 2021 elections to the center-right Rassemblement national des indépendants (RNI), followed by the monarchist Parti authenticité et modernité (PAM), and monarchist Parti de L'Istiqlal. Thus, RNI won in Dakhla Oued Eddahab, and Istiqlal won a preponderance of seats as part of a coalition in El Aaiún.

Educated in Morocco and France as an engineer, El Arak ran first in 2009 in local elections on the women's list but did not win and then ran again in 2011 at the national level. "The PJD encouraged women to be in the party, but of course you have to work hard and have experience." She felt the playing field had opened up in recent years because of the quota for women, because in the past only women from wealthy families were able to run for office.

El Arak was married to a civil servant and was a mother of two children, ages five and three. Her parents and husband help with her children when she attends parliamentary sessions in Rabat. She returns home at the end of the week. She felt supported by her husband and family. I asked if anyone had discouraged her from running and she replied: "No. They were encouraging me. On the contrary, many people trusted me because I come from a modest background, many members of the parliament come from wealthy families and are in business, so the fact that I was an ordinary woman, not coming from a wealthy family, encouraged people, because they felt I would advocate for the majority of people."

The main challenges El Arak faced had to do with traveling back and forth from Dakhla to Rabat and being away from her children. "When I was elected, my son was eight months old, and I was breastfeeding him. So, it was difficult to go to the parliament. I had to go back and forth to the hotel to breastfeed

him. My sister's maid watched the baby but it was all at my own expense. Because of these obstacles, the geographic distance, and taking care of young children, we have few women involved in politics. I don't show others that it is difficult, I just deal with this on my own." The two issues that El Arak cares most about are social issues: she advocates for health and education and was responsible for bringing more doctors to work in the area.

Discussion and Conclusions

Often traditional cultural norms are pitted against liberal women's rights gender regimes. This article looks at an uncommon society in North Africa where the promotion of women in the social, economic, and political sphere is not only compatible with traditional norms, but is encouraged by them. The ideals of nonviolence in the home and egalitarianism in gender relations stand in stark contrast to the broader lack of autonomy of Western Sahara from Morocco. [Sumi Madhok \(2013\)](#) argues in a different context of examining voluntary workers in India, "... there still remains the analytical question of how to think about agency in seemingly and overtly oppressive contexts without seeking to evaluate it through the lens of a 'liberatory discourse,' which all too often rests on an unreconstructed model of universalist, ahistorical, acontextual liberal humanist agency."

This study points to the ways in which Sahrawi women draw on cultural norms and personal autonomy to assert economic, political, and social independence, within broader political conditions not of their own choosing. It shows how, as in [Abu-Lughod's \(1990\)](#) study of Bedouin women, autonomy is not asserted in absolute terms—because it never is—but rather at different points within multi-layered systems of power. Sahrawi culture affords points of autonomy in ways not found in most societies, including liberal ones. Whether it can preserve these norms in the face of encroachments of Morocco remains to be seen, even in spite of claims of cultural resilience.

This article suggests that unlike the North African notion of complementarity, which locks women into the private realm, the Sahrawi idea of egalitarianism does not regard women's involvement as mothers and wives as problematic for their involvement in politics, in business, travel, or studying in Morocco or beyond. Unlike most other societies, the culture demands social and cultural cohesion, but it also affords women considerable freedom.

This article has shown how the absence of violence coupled with general personal autonomy, supportive male family members, and egalitarian societal norms, support Sahrawi women's participation in politics and society. Sahrawi women face the same kinds of constraints the world over in balancing life and work, but having a supportive husband, family, and community makes a world of difference. Perhaps the most interesting aspect was the attitudes of the men, who were motivated to respect women by the weight of

tradition, strong societal sanction, and pride. They were driven not by a liberal notion of equality, although their behavior certainly had egalitarian outcomes, but more by honor. Many societal supports worked to build up and preserve women's self-esteem: having a party for the woman after she is divorced; having the young couple live at the natal home of the bride so that the family can help with the birth and care of the first child; and not sanctioning or stigmatizing women who become pregnant outside of marriage. The marriage bride-wealth does not go to the family of the bride, but rather to the bride and to pay for wedding expenses (Juliano 1999). Those women who wanted to participate in politics, were encouraged to do so by their families and community, even at the highest levels of regional leadership. All of these factors conspire to make it easier for women to participate in the public sphere. The introduction of gender quotas in 2011 made it even easier for women in this context to participate in politics. No society provides for pure gender equality, and the Sahrawi society is no exception, but it points to some possibilities.

Notes

1. <https://lesec.ma/lapolitique/maroc-voici-le-taux-de-participation-aux-elections-interieur.html>
2. <https://maroc-diplomatique.net/onu-pour-le-maroc-la-promotion-des-droits/>

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