

The Cause
The History
The Women

Western Sahara





Western Sahara

the last colony in Africa

The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), better known as Western Sahara, is a region in Northwest Africa bordered by Algeria to the East, Mauritania to the South, Morocco to the North, and the Atlantic Ocean to the West. The region, which remained under the colonial rule of Spain between 1884-1976 and then occupied by Morocco and Mauritania, witnessed the independence struggle of the Sahrawi people first against the colonial and then the occupying powers for over 50 years. Sahrawi people are still fighting for the recognition of the Sahrawi cause at the international level, the liberation of the territory of Western Sahara, raising awareness of their right to self-determination through a free and fair referendum, expulsion of the invading army, and the recognition of the Democratic Republic of Sahara. Today, Western Sahara is the oldest unresolved conflict in Africa.

In this region, summer temperatures rise to more than 50 degrees in the shade and in winter, it is freezing cold. Despite these unbearable extreme conditions, Sahrawi people were able to organize their political, economic, and social life in refugee camps in the middle of a desert, mainly thanks to the incredible resilience of Sahrawi women.

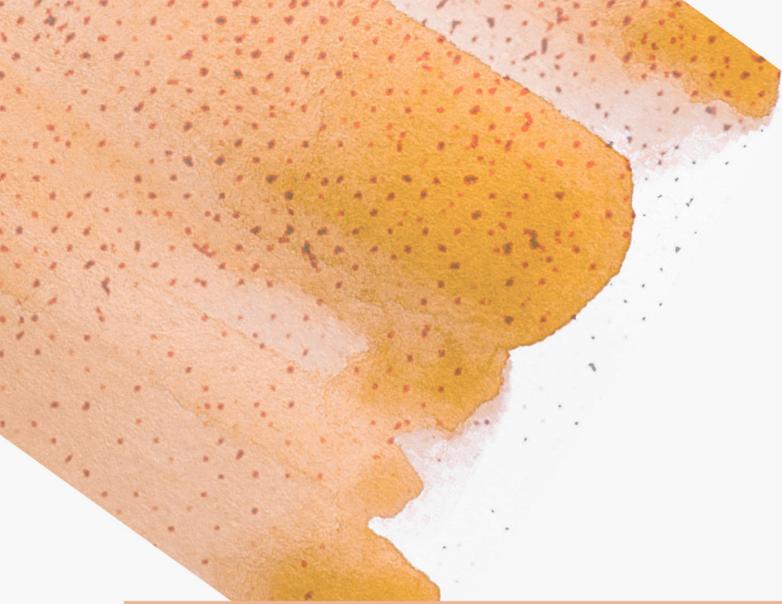
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Women, caretakers and thus responsible for maintaining life, food, care, and the community, are facing the challenges posed by the occupation of their territories. Therefore, they are great fighters and have been the pillars of this resistance from the beginning.

The World March of Women supports the struggle of the Sahrawi people for self-determination and their right to sovereignty over their territory, their culture, and their ways of life; we are calling on everyone to strengthen international feminist solidarity with Sahrawi people.

The main objective of this document is to make the Sahrawi people's fight for their right to self-determination more visible and known, which is mostly overlooked by international institutions and media. With this purpose, in the first part of this brochure, we will try to briefly summarize the history of the Western Sahara in order to have a comprehensive understanding of what is happening today. In the second part, we will try to reveal the roles, experiences, and struggles of Sahrawi women in the fight for self-determination and peace. We hope that this brochure will serve as a useful resource for everyone interested in building peace and solidarity.



View of a Sahrawi town

A Brief History

of Western Sahara

The problem in Western Sahara is still unresolved, where the legacy of colonialism, geopolitical interests, and the regional struggle for influence between Morocco and Algeria are intertwined.

After the coastal area west of the Sahara Desert was given to Spain at the 1884 Berlin Conference, Western Sahara became a colony of Spain. The Sahrawi people have fought for the independence of their territory, and they founded the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro) in 1973 with the goal of obtaining the territory's independence from Spanish colonial rule.

The Western Sahara has always been framed by the intervention of different governments seeking to protect their own interest. Several resolutions were passed by the United Nations calling upon Spain to hold a referendum for the people of Western Sahara to use their right to self-determination. Spain abandoned these referendum decisions in the face of both the problems in domestic politics and the attitude of Morocco, and left the administrative control of Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania, which claimed rights over the region with the Madrid Accords.



A Brief History

of Western Sahara

After the signing of the Madrid Accords, Moroccan soldiers entered the north of Western Sahara in December 1975, while Mauritanian soldiers entered the south.

Following these developments, the war continued between Morocco, Mauritania and the Polisario Front. Polisario received significant support from Algeria and gained legitimacy both from its own people and in the international community. They founded the Western Sahara Democratic Arab Republic (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) (SADR) in February 1976 in order to gain more strength in the international arena. With Polisario's success, Mauritania made an agreement with Polisario in August 1979, withdrawing from Western Sahara and giving up its claim.

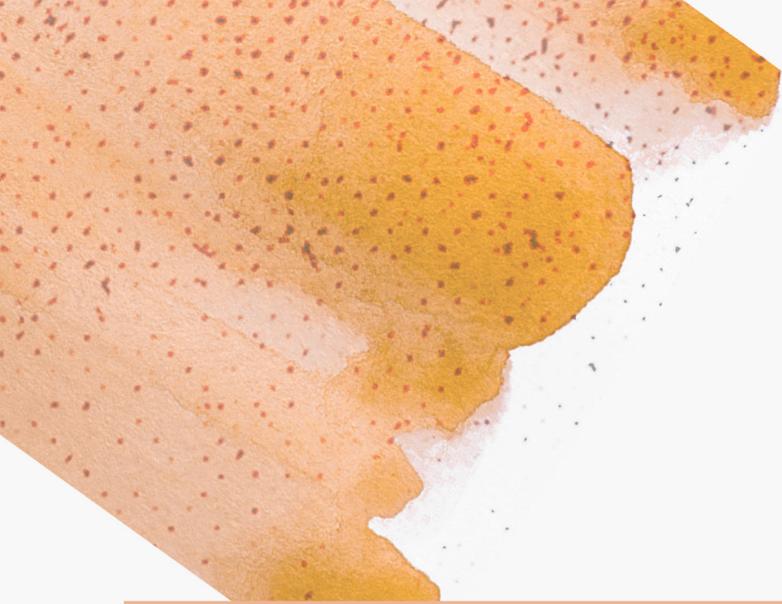
However, Morocco's strategic location controlling access to the Mediterranean and its good relations with Western countries led to intense military aid to Morocco by the imperialist USA and France. Another reason behind this support of the imperialist countries to Morocco is the large mining basins of Western Sahara. In 1949, the Spanish geologist Manuel Alia Medina discovered phosphate deposits that constitute the world's largest open-pit phosphate deposit which can be mined for a century and a half before its exhaustion.

A Brief History

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Also, there have been successive discoveries of mineral wealth in the region: phosphate, uranium, iron, copper, and zinc can be extracted in abundance within its borders. Gaining profit from the illegal exploitation of natural resources of Western Sahara natural resources is another reason why the USA and France support Morocco against the Western Sahara's struggle for independence for the sake of their extractivist policies and economic interests. Any exploration of natural resources in Western Sahara without the consent of the Sahrawi people is illegal and plunderous.

With this support, Morocco gained strength against the Polisario. The fact that countries such as the USA and France sided with Morocco in the face of the struggle for the right of self-determination of the Sahrawi people for the sake of their economic and political interests led Morocco to keep Western Sahara under its sovereignty by opposing a fair referendum that the Sahrawi people wanted to hold to determine their own destiny. The firewall (Berm), which Morocco has built since 1981, divided Western Sahara into two, severing relations between Western Saharans living under Moroccan occupation and Western Saharans living in "liberated areas" under Polisario's control.



Sahrawi woman in the Liberated areas

A Brief History

of Western Sahara

However, the base of the Polisario Front within the borders of Algeria prevented Morocco from achieving a decisive military victory against the Front.

This stalemate in the military situation caused the parties to approach the UN's proposal to initiate ceasefires and peace talks positively. In 1991, a ceasefire agreement was established between the Moroccan state and the Polisario Front but it was not enough to put an end to the violation of human rights and arbitrary arrests against the Sahrawi people. And peace will not be possible as long as Sahrawis are denied the right to land and self-determination.

Since the eighties, the UN has intervened, trying to provide a solution to a conflict; however, it has failed conspicuously because of the conflicting interests of the parties involved. The efforts of the United Nations to find a resolution could not reach a conclusion due to the attitudes of countries such as the USA and France, which implicitly supported Morocco's sovereignty claims. The right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination is accepted by the international community, but Morocco's continued stance of not allowing more than autonomy under its sovereignty causes the problem to remain unresolved.



A Brief History

of Western Sahara

Since 2019, the Western Sahara Special Representative has not been appointed, and the process has been left to its own devices.

However, in November 2020, the Polisario Front declared war on Morocco in response to Morocco's violation of the ceasefire. This process resulted in violent attacks and war crimes committed by the Moroccan army.

Currently, the situation continues and Western Sahara remains the last colony in Africa. The Sahrawi people still suffer occupation, mistreatment, and Human Rights violations by Morocco's occupying forces.

Pillars of Resistance Against Occupation

Sahrawi Women

Women in Western Sahara have been active key subjects in the Sahara independence struggle from the very beginning, both in times of war and peace. Thanks to the extraordinary efforts and socio-political activity of Sahrawi women living in the middle of a desert, the Sahrawi people were able to arrange their political, economic, and social lives in refugee camps. Being at the crossroads of all social reproduction processes, they organized life from scratch. During the years of active warfare, when the men were at the front, Sahrawi women had to take charge of everything while struggling to survive extreme conditions: They created administrative and political structures in exile. It was the Sahrawi women who built the Saharan nation from the ground up: They are the ones who built houses, schools, and hospitals in the refugee camps. Not only did they build these places, they also worked there. They educated the new Saharan nation in schools, healed them in hospitals, and kept the camps alive. This is such a success that while the literacy rate was 5% when the Moroccan invasion first started, the Sahrawi people now have a literacy rate of over 90%.



Sahrawi Women celebrating in Tindouf

Pillars of Resistance Against Occupation

Sahrawi Women

In every camp, there are nurseries, and in every province, there are primary schools. For secondary education, they have built two large boarding schools. These successes happened thanks to the Sahrawi women. These are women who created their country's infrastructure on their own almost 50 years ago. Today, 75% of the education work, 85% of the public administration, and 75% of the health services are carried out by women. They also actively participate in politics.

Women also started their own organization in 1979 under the umbrella of an organization called the National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW), a people's organization of all the women of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), initiated by the Polisario Front. The NUSW was created in 1974 to "make all women aware of their position in society and their role in national independence" and to "guide them regarding the role that must be played in the independent Sahrawi nation and for the preservation of the victories achieved in the process of national liberation". Today the NUSW has 10,000 members from the refugee camps in Tindouf, both the occupied and liberated areas of Western Sahara, and Sahrawi emigrants, organized in local and regional offices.



Pillars of Resistance Against Occupation

Sahrawi Women

NUSW has played a strong role in mobilizing women to strengthen state structures and platforms, promoting women's participation in local government bodies, managing camps, ensuring security and social solidarity, distributing food aid, organizing social life, conducting literacy campaigns and education. It also enabled all Sahrawi women to participate in the struggle for the recognition of the Sahrawi cause at the international level and raise awareness of their right to self-determination through a free and fair referendum.

While defending the Sahrawi cause, women were also organizing and educating themselves. In the refugee camps, they established women's centers where women could take computer and English lessons, attend sewing and carpet workshops, publish magazines and traditional Sahrawi poetry, and write poetry. They set up their own radio and TV stations where the cameramen, technicians, and other workers were women. They also established and manage agricultural cooperatives.

And although they have to live in extremely difficult conditions, Sahrawi women are fighting for the independence and right of self-determination of the Sahrawi people on the one hand, and on the other hand, they are already forming the democratic society of the future.

Pillars of Resistance Against Occupation

Sahrawi Women

In the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara region, political, economic, and social living conditions are intolerable due to the brutal repression, kidnappings, and detentions that continue as punishment for protests in favor of the autonomy of the Sahrawi nation.

Women and men are tortured, assaulted, insulted, abducted, raped, detained, deported, and discriminated against by the Moroccan police, for peacefully protesting the occupation. Despite that, women continue their struggle for independence. They conduct political activities, including political education and organizing. The Sahrawi people continue to hold on to their hope in a different future. They are striving for the recognition of the Sahrawi cause at the international level and raising awareness of their right to self-determination through a free and fair referendum, and they have no intention of giving up their struggle until they achieve it.

No one can live happily under occupation. Occupation is a space of injustice, violence, abuse, exploitation and marginalization. In order for us to support Sahrawi people and their cause, it is necessary to break the wall of silence and allow their struggle to become visible.



February 18th:

the International Day of Solidarity with Sahrawi Women

During the 9th International Meeting of the World March of Women, we started a political discussion regarding an international day in support of Sahrawi women. This debate was concluded with the International Committee's decision to show our solidarity with our sisters' struggle in Western Sahara, on February 18th of every year. Today, from Asia to the Americas, by way of Africa and Europe, we raise our voices to stand in solidarity with Sahrawi women and their daily struggle for freedom and self-determination in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, in the refugee camps and in the Diaspora.

Today, in the last colony in Africa, Sahrawi women need women from all over the world to mobilize for their cause, as a demonstration of solidarity with their struggle for freedom and dignity. But Sahrawi women also need initiatives to pressure international organizations to fulfill their responsibilities. We denounce the failures of the UN and its mechanisms, failing to protect Sahrawi civilians and lands from the crimes committed by the Moroccan state, which are crimes against humanity, and to realistically support the right of self-determination of the Sahrawi people.

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Sahrawi Feminist Figures

Shaya'a Othman Ahmed Zain

During the treacherous Moroccan bombing of Umm Idriga, the martyr Shaya'a Othman Ahmed Zain, pregnant, was killed. Her baby never saw the light. She was working as a nurse when the Moroccan enemy's warplanes shelled the hospital.

The martyr Shaya'a Othman Ahmed Zein was born in the occupied city of Dakhla in 1957, where she studied medicine and worked during the Spanish colonization, until she was killed while practicing on February 18th, 1976- the date which was announced by the National Union of Sahrawi Woman as the Saharawi Mother's Day in appreciation and celebration of the land's women martyrs' sacrifices.

The bombing of Umm Idriga and the genocide of the Sahrawi people remain an enduring crimes despite the passage of time, and it will remain immortal in the collective memory of the Sahrawi people. The martyr Shaya'a Othman Ahmed Zain is the symbol of strength and courage for Sahrawi women and is an inspiring story in the history of the Sahrawi people and those who believe in justice and truth.

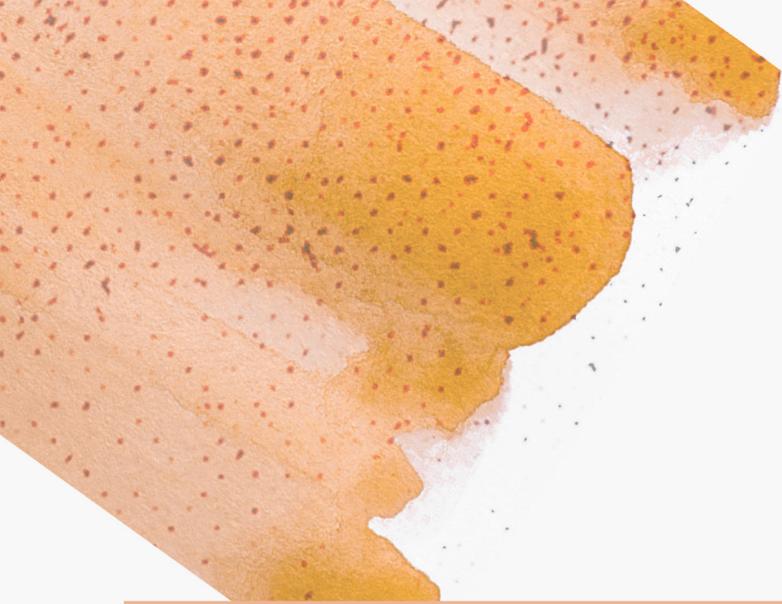
Sahrawi Feminist Figures

Chaba

Chaba derives her strength from the truth. For her, justice depends on the legitimacy of peace. She believes that communication between generations is a revolutionary endeavor, and in a sense, this is what made her aspire to be in a decision-making position. Today she feels that she embodies communication between generations, while striving to convey her experience and the unique and distinct experience of Sahrawi women, to the ambitious youth.

Born in 1966, after secondary school Chaba studied at the Teachers' Institute in Libya in 1983. Her first experience of her people's struggle was to practice the profession of teaching for 3 years, as a young woman. She then assumed the position of member of the National Executive Office in the Saguia El Hamra and Valley of Gold Youth Union, being in charge of public education in the eastern and western sectors of the state of Smara in the desert refugee camps in 1985.

Chaba was then elected member of the National Executive Office of the National Union of Sahrawi Women from 2011 to 2022. She also held a position in the Sahrawi National Council (Parliament) from 2014 to 2022, representing the National Union of Sahrawi Women, during which she chaired the Foreign Affairs Committee in 2020.



Chaba, Secretary General of the NUSW

Sahrawi Feminist Figures

Chaba

She was a member of the Sahrawi National Committee for Human Rights and is still a member of the board of the Union of Democratic Women for the Middle East and North Africa. In addition to that, she was a member of the Sahrawi National Mechanism for Discourse.

Due to her belief that being in decision-making positions is a way to serve Sahrawi women and defend their rights, and to advocate for them, Chaba wanted to be a member of the National Secretariat of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al-Hamra and the Valley of Gold and the Secretary-General of the National Union of Sahrawi Women.

For her, direct communication with people is a way to understand their daily experiences which guarantees real representation and democratic political activity.

Today, as a leader, her ambition is to advance the conditions of Sahrawi women, and to ensure continued communication of generations in order to achieve the continuation of her people's struggle towards liberation.



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