



# Gender Profile of the Conflict in *Western Sahara*

**“Women’s status in Western Sahara should be the barometer of peace and security in the country.”**

UNIFEM

*Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director,*



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## Introduction

Western Sahara, a Territory on the north-west coast of Africa bordered by Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, was administered by Spain until 1976. Both Morocco and Mauritania affirmed their claim to the territory, a claim opposed by the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO). The United Nations has been seeking a settlement in Western Sahara since the withdrawal of Spain in 1976 and the ensuing fighting between Morocco, which had "reintegrated" the Territory, and the Frente POLISARIO, supported by Algeria. (Mauritania renounced all claims to Western Sahara in 1979.) In 1979, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) also became active in seeking a peaceful solution of the conflict.

Following the agreement between the Government of Morocco and the Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro (POLISARIO), the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was deployed in September 1991 to monitor the ceasefire and to organize and conduct a referendum which would allow the people of Western Sahara to decide the Territory's future status. In addition the Secretary-General appointed James A. Baker III as his Personal Envoy after a particularly long impasse between the parties from the end of 1995 to 1997.



The ongoing conflict and displacement of most of the Sahrawi people has been a catalyst for women's organizing and a source of suffering for the women of Western Sahara. Sahrawi women have been subjected to physical and psychological torture and rape. At the same time, other women have seen positive results from their organizing efforts. The National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW) is a powerful force that has successfully brought together thousands of Sahrawi women to advocate for their involvement in political and economic processes in the search for peace.

Thousands of Sahrawi women continue to live outside of Western Sahara as refugees in Algeria and Morocco. While NUSW, other local organizations, and international aid agencies provide some assistance to the refugee women, inadequate medical services and an extremely limited food supply continues to threaten the lives of women and children in the camps. One alarming trend is the resurgence of the practice of selling daughters for early marriage to receive the bride price as daughters are one of the few forms of capital many family possess. Morocco's July 2003 rejection of the most recent peace plan with Western Sahara means continued work for Sahrawi women's groups to help resolve a conflict and its consequences that have spanned nearly three decades.

## The Impact of the Conflict on Sahrawi Women

### Political and Security Impact

- Information regarding Sahrawi women inside the occupied territory is scarce due to the limited access and opportunities for communication between insiders and Sahrawi refugees and exiles.<sup>1</sup>

### Humanitarian Impacts

- 45% of refugee women in Western Sahara suffer from iron deficiencies, according to a 2002 report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.<sup>2</sup>
- Women and children comprise eighty percent of the population of refugee camps in southwestern Algeria, and consequently play a very active role in the administration and smooth running of the camps.<sup>3 4</sup>
- Except for a vegetable garden and a chicken farm servicing 1000 people, Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps in Algeria (numbering 200,000) are wholly dependent on external aid to meet their basic needs.<sup>5</sup>
- Faced with the insecurity of refugee life, Sahrawi girls as young as eleven are wearing the traditional dress formerly only worn by married women.<sup>6</sup>
- Most of more than 155,000 Saharan refugees in Tindouf refugee camps have been separated from their families for nearly three decades.
- Twenty-seven years of living in refugee camps have had serious health consequences for women as food shortages and limited health resources are endemic. The most serious health problem amongst women is iron deficiency caused by malnutrition.<sup>7</sup>
- One gynecologist stationed at the Sahrawi National Hospital estimated that 40-50% of pregnancies terminate in miscarriage due to malnutrition. Most women give birth in their tents due to the limited availability of a Well Woman Program, which provides basic reproductive care.<sup>8</sup>
- As of December 2003, tens of thousands of refugees suffered from acute and chronic malnutrition due to insufficient and undelivered aid. The acute malnutrition exceeds the local malnutrition rate and the high incidence of chronic malnutrition often stunts victims' growth. With



UNHCR reporting that women and girls make up fifty-percent of refugee populations throughout the world, the malnutrition rates in Western Sahara significantly affect females of all ages.<sup>9</sup>

## Human rights Violations and Violence Against Women

- Keltoum Ahmed Laabid, a 24-year-old young Sahrawi woman was arrested in October 1992 in Smara for having participated in the demonstrations demanding the liberation of the Sahrawi prisoners and "disappeared." She was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment by the military tribunal in Rabat in 1993. She experienced and witnessed physical and psychological torture and sexual abuses including rapes in the prison cells and in the secret detention centers.<sup>10</sup>
- A January 2003 issue of *Forced Migration Review* included an article titled "Western Sahara and Palestine: shared refugee experiences." A portion of the article discussed Sahrawi women's status within refugee communities in Western Sahara. According to the article, "Islam, as practiced by the Sahrawis, is tolerant and liberal. One of several examples of how SADR [Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic] has been able to draw upon local traditions is its institutionalization of women's rights. Traditionally, women have total autonomy in managing the daily activities in and around the tent. Any form of violence against women, verbal or physical, is condemned and the man is usually ostracized by society. Consequently, these incidents are so rare that the issue of domestic violence against women or children is almost non-existent." The article goes on to argue that these characteristics may have been livelihood strategies developed by Saharwis in response to Moroccan occupation by maximizing what little resources they have.<sup>11</sup>

## Economic Security and Rights

- While the payment of the traditional bride price had become unfeasible in the camp setting, this practice is flourishing once again following the 1991 cease-fire and the emergence of a camp economy. As girls are the only capital many families have in the camps, the National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW) fear that the resurgence of bride price might lead to an increase in forced and juvenile marriage.<sup>12</sup>
- In the absence of non-elderly, non-injured men, Sahrawi women have undertaken the burden of care for children, the aged and the disabled.<sup>13</sup>
- With the influx of women into the public sphere, workplaces and schools in the Tindouf refugee camps provide childcare services for women employed outside of the home.<sup>14</sup>

## Sahrawi Women's Peace Building Activities

- Sahrawi women administer the refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, distributing food and other aid to the camp's residents
- The 27<sup>th</sup> of February Camp, named after the day the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was proclaimed, originally contained a women's school and was therefore known as the "women's camp." Subsequently, the 27<sup>th</sup> of February has become a full-fledged camp where women participate in income generating activities and work as community leaders.
- The Women's School in the 27<sup>th</sup> of February Camp teaches skills such as weaving to help provide supplies for the camps and to give women skills they may use when they return home to Western Sahara
- The National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW) with 10,000 members and established by the POLISARIO front, assists Sahrawi women, fosters development and alleviates suffering caused



by abductions and imprisonment. NUSW mobilizes and orients women, and improves their visibility in political and social fields so that Sahrawi women will remain central to the planning process after Independence <http://www.arso.org/NUSW-1.htm>

- In March 2002, the Fourth Congress of the NUSW was held in Tindouf, Algeria. The Plan of Action formulated at the Congress stressed maintaining links with Sahrawi women in the occupied territory.

## What UNIFEM is doing in Western Sahara

- UNIFEM currently has no activities in Western Sahara.

## Latest UN Documents

### Security Council Resolutions

- **1720** (31 October 2006): The Security Council reaffirms the need for a “just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution” between all parties regarding the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara and “decides to extend the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 30 April 2007.” Gender-specific language includes the following: The Security Council “Requests the Secretary-General to continue to take the necessary measures to ensure full compliance in MINURSO with the United Nations zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse and to keep the Council informed, and urges troop-contributing countries to take appropriate preventive action including pre-deployment awareness training, and other action to ensure full accountability in cases of such conduct involving their personnel.” (P4)
- **1675** (28 April 2006): The Council reaffirmed and reiterated priorities previously outlined in resolutions related to the situation in Western Sahara. The Council requested that the Secretary-General “**take the necessary measures to achieve actual compliance in MINURSO with the United Nations zero tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse, including the development of strategies and appropriate mechanisms to prevent, identify and respond to all forms of misconduct**, including sexual exploitation and abuse, and the enhancement of training for personnel to prevent misconduct and ensure full compliance with the United Nations code of conduct.” The Council also urged “**urges troop-contributing countries to take appropriate preventive action including the conduct of predeployment awareness training, and to take disciplinary action and other action to ensure full accountability in cases of such conduct involving their personnel.**”
- **1634 (28 October 05)**: The Security Council called on member states to “consider voluntary contributions to fund Confidence Building Measures that allow for increased contact between separated family members, especially family unification visits.” MINURSO’s mandate was extended until April 2006.
- **1598 (28 April 05)**: Urging the POLISARIO Front to immediately disclose the fate of disappeared persons and reaffirming its commitment to achieving a sustainable solution to the conflict, the Security Council decides to extend MINURSO’s mandate until 31 October 2005. The



Council further urges Member States to consider contributing to confidence building measures. The Council also looks forward to receiving results from a review of MINURSO's civilian components.

- **1570 (28 October 04):** The Security Council decides to extend MINURSO's mandate until 30 April 2005. The Council requests the Secretary-General to submit another report discussing the options for downsizing MINURSO staff within three months of the adoption of this resolution.
- **1541 (29 April 04):** The Security Council continues to support the Peace Plan for Self-Determination for the people of Western Sahara and extends MINURSO's mandate until 31 October 2004. The Security Council refuses Morocco's rejection of the Peace Plan and Morocco's suggestion to provide Western Saharans with limited autonomy under its rule.
- **1523 (30 January 04):** The Security Council decides to extend the mandate of MINURSO until 30 April 2004.
- **1513 (28 October 03):** Recalling resolution 1495, the Security Council decides to extend the mandate of MINURSO until 31 January 2004.
- **1495 (31 July 03):** The Security Council decides to extend the mandate of MINURSO until 31 October 2003.
- **1513 (28 October 03):** Recalling resolution 1495, the Security Council decides to extend the mandate of MINURSO until 31 January 2004.
- **1495 (31 July 03):** The Security Council decides to extend the mandate of MINURSO until 31 October 2003. The Security Council also demands that the parties work with the Secretary-General and his Personal Envoy. The Security Council demands POLISARIO release all prisoners of war and calls on the POLISARIO Front and the Kingdom of Morocco to help the Secretary-General resolve the fate of those missing.
- **1485 (30 May 03):** Following the Secretary-General's report and commending his work on Western Sahara, the Security Council extends MINURSO's mandate until 31 July 2003
- **1469 (25 March 03):** Extends MINURSO mandate until 31 May 03
- **1463 (30 January 03):** Extends MINURSO mandate until 31 March 03
- **1429 (30 July 02):** stressing the lack of progress and determined to find a just solution, the Security Council continues to support the work of the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy, calls on parties to cooperate with the Security Council and collaborate with UNHCR. The Security Council calls on the Frente POLISARIO and Morocco to help the ICRC uncover the fate of missing and disappeared people and extends MINURSO mandate until 31 January 03. The Security Council requests a report from the Secretary-General before the MINURSO mandate expires.

### **Reports of the Secretary-General Reports to the Security Council**

- **13 October 2005:** The report covers progress made since the last report of 19 April 2005. Since the last report there was an increase in unrest in Western Sahara including demonstrations and subsequent arrests. The report noted "While available food supplies should ensure the provision of assistance to the beneficiaries in the camps until the end of the year, the results of a nutrition survey conducted by WFP in early 2005 showed an increase in anaemia among women and children since 2002. This could be the result of a lack of animal proteins, fresh



fruits and vegetables and fortified foods in the daily rations provided to the refugees. Chronic malnutrition in the refugee camps is a major health issue and UNHCR and WFP intend to take corrective measures, including supplementary feeding of the vulnerable groups." The Secretary General reiterated his concern over reported human rights violations and encourages all parties to cooperate with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

- **19 April 2005:** The Secretary-General submitted the report pursuant to a Security Council request to review the mandate and operations of MINURSO. Despite some progress, the Secretary-General expressed regret that more progress had not been made during the reporting period. The Secretary-General outlined MINURSO's capacity and its activities during the previous three months. MINURSO's activities included monitoring the parties' compliance with the military agreements. The Frente Polisario continues to hold prisoners of war and the territory continues to be used for human smuggling. WFP, UNHCR and MINURSO have continued their support to Sahrawi refugees living in Algeria. The Secretary-General remains particularly concerned about the high prevalence of anti-personnel mines and the lack of compromise on the part of the parties.
- **27 January 2005:** the Secretary General presented his interim report on the situation in Western Sahara pursuant to the Security Council's request. In October 2004, the Security Council passed resolution 1570, extending the mandate of United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) with a request to have an interim report presented after 3 months. According to the January report, no agreement has yet been reached with regard to Western Sahara's self-determination.
- **20 October 2004:** The Secretary-General reviewed the activities of his personal envoy and the military component of MINURSO. The Frente Polisario released another 100 Moroccan prisoners of war. During the reporting period, incidents of illegal migrants using the territory en route to Europe increased as Bangladeshi and Indian nationals were found in Western Sahara. The first phase of the family visitation exchange scheme were completed on 31 August 2004. The Secretary-General also outlined possible options for downsizing the MINURSO observer component.
- **23 April 2004:** In his report, the Secretary General reviewed the activities of the personal envoy, the special representative, and the military component in Western Sahara. The report also contained sections discussing logical aspects regarding MINURSO's activities, prisoners of war, other detainees, and persons unaccounted for, Western Saharan refugees, confidence building measures, such as family exchange visits, telephone services, and mail services, the African Union, Financial Aspects, and the Secretary General's observations. The report contained two enclosures, including a letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Morocco to the Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General dated 9 April 2004 and a reply letter from the Kingdom of Morocco to Mr. Baker's proposal entitled, "Peace Plan for Self-Determination of Western Sahara." The Secretary General urged all parties to accept and implement the Peace Plan. He praised the confidence-building measures and called for the two parties involved to continue to cooperate with UNHCR and MINURSO in order to extend the family visitation program. The Secretary General recommended that the Security Council extend the mandate of MINURSO until 28 February 2005.
- **19 January 2004:** Report following the decision to extend the UN's mandate in Western Sahara until 31 January 2004. The Secretary General's Personal Envoy requested that the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) be extended until 30 April 2004 in order to have additional time to reach a peace plan. The Secretary General reviewed the work of his newly selected Special Representative to Western Sahara, Alvaro de Soto, of Peru. De Soto officially began work on 29 October 2003 and throughout the following month, he met with all sides involved in the peace agreement, namely Frente POLISARIO, the Government of Morocco, and the Government of Algeria. De Soto engaged in discussions with international humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs)



and UN agencies regarding the release of Moroccan prisoners of war and increased assistance for refugees in the Tindouf region. The Secretary General reported that the Identification Commission successfully completed its duties for the fiscal year and he intended to include the Commission in the budgetary expense for the 2004-2005 period. MINURSO continued its monitoring of the area that has been in operation since the 1991 ceasefire. The 227 combined MINURSO forces report relative peace. The Royal Moroccan Army (RMA) and Frente POLISARIO continued to train troops, while the Frente POLISARIO moderately limited MINURSO's movement in the eastern region. MINURSO worked with both sides on the elimination of landmines and has initiated an information collection system regarding mines. The Civilian Police were removed upon the completion of their duties at the end of December 2003, but the Secretary General planned to include the unit in the 2004-2005 budget, particularly to help facilitate the potential visits between family members. The Frente POLISARIO released 300 Moroccan prisoners of war on the 7 November 2003. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) assisted in the return of the detainees to Morocco. While the Secretary General viewed the release of the largest group of prisoners of war in Western Sahara with optimism, he called for the further release of the 613 prisoners who remain in prison, most for a period exceeding 20 years. The Secretary General asked both sides to cooperate in investigations regarding individuals missing due to the conflict. Following ongoing discussions, in 2004 the WFP and UNHCR plan to implement programs to address chronic malnutrition problems of the refugee camps in the Tindouf area. Both sides were open to mail and phone services for refugees under the supervision of UNHCR and cooperation with family visits. In January 2004, telephone services between Algerian-based refugee camps, including the "27 of February" Camp in Lindouf and Western Sahara, were re-established. The Secretary General recommended that MINURSO's mandate be extended until 30 April 2004.

- **16 October 2003:** Following Resolution 1495, the Kingdom of Morocco sent a high-level delegation to meet the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy. During the meeting, the representative from the Kingdom of Morocco and the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy discussed the progress of the peace plan. The Moroccan delegation decided it needed more time to discuss and consult regarding the operation paragraphs of 1495. Otherwise, the Secretary-General reported that the stalemate continued largely as it had since his previous report.
- **23 May 2003:** During the reporting period, the SRSG continued close contact with the governments of Morocco and Algeria and the Frente POLISARIO. Individuals registered by the Identification Commission totalled over 244,000. The Secretary-General reported that Frente POLISARIO continued to hamper the free movement of MINURSO. In addition to outlining the progress of peace negotiations since 1997, the Secretary-General proposed a new settlement plan to go into effect as soon as all the relevant parties sign the agreement. Under the plan, a final referendum organized by the UN will be held between four and five years of the signing of the plan. The plan combines elements of draft framework plan favored by Morocco and the settlement plan favored by POLISARIO. The plan is a compromise meant to give each side some of its demands. There will be a transitional period during which the parties will divide responsibilities before the referendum takes place. The Secretary-General recommended an extension of MINURSO for a further two months.
- **16 January 2003:** The Secretary-General recommended extending the MINURSO mandate until the 31<sup>st</sup> of March in the wake of James Baker's visit to the region. Baker met with Moroccan officials, the Frente POLISARIO, Mauritanian and Algerian officials. The Secretary-General urged the parties to bear in mind the many years of suffering of the Sahrawis
- **19 April 2002:** The Identification Commission continued electronic archiving of the voter applications. In addition to performing mandated duties, the UNHCR organized a workshop on international refugee law on 27<sup>th</sup> of February in the presence of Algerian officials and refugee representatives. Also on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, President Bouteflika of Algeria visited refugee camps in Tindouf and met with Frente POLISARIO Leadership. The Secretary-General called upon the international community to extend support to meet the humanitarian needs of the refugees



**General Assembly Documents:**

- Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on the Question of Western Sahara: **12 September 2003**
- Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on the Question of Western Sahara: **11 July 2002**
- Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on the Question of Western Sahara: **9 July 2001**

**Human Rights Commission**

- Draft resolution on the Question of Western Sahara
- Resolution 2003/1 on the Question of Western Sahara
- Resolution 2002/4 on the Question of Western Sahara
- Resolution 2001/1 on the Question of Western Sahara

**ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> Elena Fiddian, "Promoting Sustainable Transformations in Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps," MSc Dissertation in Gender and Development. London School of Economics. 2002.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR Statistics. 2003 <http://www.unhcr.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Elena Fiddian, "Promoting Sustainable Transformations in Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps," MSc Dissertation in Gender and Development. London School of Economics. 2002

<sup>4</sup> Elena Fiddian, "Promoting Sustainable Transformations in Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps," MSc Dissertation in Gender and Development. London School of Economics. 2002

<sup>5</sup> Elena Fiddian, "Promoting Sustainable Transformations in Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps," MSc Dissertation in Gender and Development. London School of Economics. 2002

<sup>6</sup> Elena Fiddian, "Promoting Sustainable Transformations in Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps," MSc Dissertation in Gender and Development. London School of Economics. 2002

<sup>7</sup> Elena Fiddian, "Promoting Sustainable Transformations in Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps," MSc Dissertation in Gender and Development. London School of Economics. 2002

<sup>8</sup> Elena Fiddian, "Promoting Sustainable Transformations in Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps," MSc Dissertation in Gender and Development. London School of Economics. 2002

<sup>9</sup> UN News Online, "UN Agencies Seek Funds to Help Malnourished Refugees in Western Sahara," 19 December 2003, accessed 30 January 2004, <http://www.un.org/news>

<sup>10</sup> Women's Caucus for Gender Justice. *Public Hearing on Crimes Against Women in Recent Wars and Conflicts: A Compilation of Testimonies*. 11 December 2000

<sup>11</sup> Randa Farah. "Western Sahara and Palestine: shared refugee experiences" *Forced Migration Review*, no. 16, pp. 20-23 (2003). <http://fmo.qeh.ox.ac.uk/fmo/Reader/ViewDoc.asp?Path=FMR/1600/01/07&Page=20&Label=20&PrimId=Ar0790000&ZoomOn=1&Zoom=1&BookCollection=FMO&Language=English>

<sup>12</sup> Elena Fiddian, "Promoting Sustainable Transformations in Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps," MSc Dissertation in Gender and Development. London School of Economics. 2002





<sup>13</sup> Elena Fiddian, "Promoting Sustainable Transformations in Gender Roles During Exile: A Critical Analysis With Reference to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps," MSc Dissertation in Gender and Development. London School of Economics. 2002

<sup>14</sup> Lawless, R and Monahan, L. (eds.) War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict. Refugee Studies Programme; London: Pinter. 1987

