



Resilience and Resistance: A Feminist Perspective of Women and the National Liberation Struggle for the Independence of Western Sahara

Omotola Adeyoju Ilesanmi*

Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Nigeria

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*Corresponding Email: tolaillesanmi668@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the role of Saharawi women in the national liberation struggle for Western Sahara's independence through the lens of Feminist National Liberation Theory. It examines their contributions in political activism, administration, governance, and transnational advocacy and the oppression women face from Moroccan colonialism and the Saharawi liberation struggle. Sahrawi women suffer torture, arbitrary detention, and sexual harassment as a result of their resistance to the Moroccan occupation and struggle for self-determination. This paper adopts the Feminist National Liberation Theory to examine how Saharawi women have been both active agents and symbolic pillars of resilience and resistance in their efforts to challenge colonial oppression. It employs a qualitative historical analysis and feminist critique of women's role in the independence struggle using secondary sources of data, including historical documents, reports and academic literature. The paper argues that women's agency is not secondary but fundamental to independence struggles, and that national independence cannot be achieved without gender justice, positioning Saharawi women as both symbols and agents of resilience and resistance.

Keywords: Saharawi Women; Western Sahara; Liberation Struggle; Resistance

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INTRODUCTION

The assertion that conflict and post-conflict situations provide women with the opportunity for empowerment and greater space for political participation finds no better expression than the case of the Saharawi women of the Western Sahara. In examining national liberation struggles across Africa, studies have largely portrayed men as active actors in liberation struggles with national liberation struggles construed and conceptualised from a masculine perspective. Women are often portrayed as absent or as passive actors in the nationalist liberation struggles. The struggle for self-determination from Morocco spearheaded by the Polisario Front has seen women increasingly assuming very prominent and active roles in the liberation struggle. Although nationalist liberation movements are usually examined from a male-centric perspective, feminist scholarship have spotlighted the active roles and women's agency in these movements. The Western Saharan conflict has lasted for long time, making the liberation struggle for the independence of the Western Sahara one of Africa's longest-running conflicts. Women have been actively working towards the achievement of Western Sahara's goal of self-liberation, during the armed struggle against Spain, Mauritania and Morocco, and in recent times through nonviolent resistance against Morocco.

The paper provides an exposition of the complexities and gender dynamics surrounding the resistance and resilience that the Saharawi women have demonstrated in the struggle for self-determination by the Saharawi people. This paper applies Feminist National Liberation Theory to analyse how Saharawi women have been both active agents and symbolic pillars of resilience, challenging both colonial and patriarchal oppression. It highlights the different ways women have participated in the struggle, and their involvement both in the political, socio-

economic and military spheres. By examining their role in political activism, governance, and transnational solidarity, this study underscores the indispensable contributions of women to the Saharawi national liberation movement. The paper seeks to examine the historical and contemporary roles of Sahrawi women in the Western Saharan national liberation struggle, and how Sahrawi women exercise resistance and agency under conditions of occupation and exile. The paper is divided into five sections, namely introduction, research methods, historical perspectives of the liberation struggle, results & discussion, and conclusion. This study contributes to the literature on national liberation movements from a feminist perspective by spotlighting the roles of women in the liberation struggle of the Western Sahara.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative methodological framework, integrating Historical Analysis with Feminist Critique to investigate the multifaceted roles, experiences, and representations of Sahrawi women in the Western Sahara national liberation struggle. The methodological design enables a multidimensional exploration of how gender, nationalism, and colonialism intersect in shaping Sahrawi women's political agency and participation. The methods were chosen to spotlight the documented roles of Sahrawi women in the independence struggle, in line with the study's feminist theoretical orientation and its objectives. Historical Analysis is a research method that involves the systematic collection, examination, and interpretation of archival records, official documents, speeches, international resolutions, and academic literature. The contemporary notion of historical analysis originates from the adoption of a scientific methodology in history, promoted by Ranke and the German historiographical

tradition in the mid-nineteenth (Thorpe & Holt, 2008). By tracing the historical trajectory of resistance and examining it through a feminist lens, this research aims to highlight the central yet often marginalized contributions of women to the broader anti-colonial and postcolonial liberation movement. Primary sources such as political declarations from the Polisario Front, speeches, archival materials, constitutions, and reports from the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and Sahrawi Women's Union (UNMS) were examined. These documents provided insight into the official stance on women's roles, rights, and contributions to the nationalist cause. In addition, a secondary sources review of scholarly literature, Non-Governmental Organisations reports, and international human rights documentation helped place women's contributions within broader historical and political developments. This included reviewing historical accounts of the anti-colonial movement, regional geopolitics, and post-colonial gender roles in liberation movements. The second methodological pillar of this study is Feminist Critique, which interrogates the gendered power relations embedded within nationalist discourses, liberation ideologies, and state-building narratives. It is employed to interrogate the nationalist discourse, institutional practices, and gender dynamics within the Sahrawi liberation movement. This method emphasized deconstructing patriarchal assumptions and amplifying women's voices. The analysis also highlights the voices of Sahrawi women themselves—through testimonies, memoirs and literature—emphasizing their perspectives, strategies of survival, and visions for autonomy and justice. Furthermore, feminist critique is used to evaluate the internal contradictions and limitations within the Polisario's proclaimed commitments to gender equality. Data was sourced from primary

and secondary sources including: archival materials and reports from the United Nations, African Union, and NGOs; historical speeches and policy documents by the Polisario Front; academic literature on Western Sahara and decolonization movements.

Theoretical Premise: Feminist National Liberation Theory: This study is premised on the assumptions of the Feminist National Liberation Theory. The theory recognises the agency and contributions of women to national liberation movements. It signifies the intersection between anti-colonial and feminist ideologies, which arose from the experiences of women in third world liberation movements in postcolonial settings. Feminist national liberation theories emerged in the 20th century alongside anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East (Tillinghast & McFadden, 1991). Studies on nationalist struggles across Africa have interrogated the roles that nationalists have played in ensuring the political independence of their countries. However, the literature has largely portrayed male-only actors in these liberation struggles, with nationalist liberation struggles construed and conceptualised from a masculine perspective (Enloe, 1990), often portraying women as absent or non-existent in the nationalist politics (McClintok, 1991). Feminist National Liberation Theory critiques the traditional patriarchal framing of national liberation struggles and emphasizes the necessity of including women's voices, labour, and resistance in both historical narratives and future state-building processes. This theory recognizes women not merely as supporters of nationalist causes but as central agents of change whose experiences are shaped by both external colonial oppression and internal gender hierarchies within nationalist movements. Feminist scholarship have highlighted the agency of women in liberation struggles while

challenging the stereotypical depictions of women as passive observers and victims in the struggle (Hassan, 2022), hereby shifting focus from the passive victimhood nature placed on women in the liberation. In another vein, scholars have also highlighted the gendered roles women play within national liberation movements. Nagel (1998) asserts that women 'take on supportive roles like messengers, escorts, nurses or providers. However, feminist scholars have challenged these symbolic constructions of women in liberation fights as merely supporters highlighting the roles they play (Enloe, 1990). Indeed, women's role in the Kenya and Zimbabwe national liberation movements have shown that women are not merely supporters in national liberation movements but also have been involved in active combat (Kombo, 2012). In highlighting the "absence" of women in nationalist liberation struggles, Nagel (1998), have argued that the absence of women in liberation nationalist struggles have largely rendered women absent in the formation of states and nations. In a similar vein, Sharoni (2001), have argued that a clear bias exists in the literature against women's struggle for gender equality within a national liberation movement. The common argument is that nationalist liberation movements use women in the course of the struggle but tend to overlook their contributions to the revolution and embrace conventional conceptions of femininity, masculinity and gender relations once the struggle is over (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Enloe 2000). Tillinghast and McFadden (1991) alludes to this by maintaining that despite the active roles of African women in the anti-colonial struggles and resistance movements especially in Southern Africa, they have been rendered invisible in historical accounts, and that the post-colonial society had robbed women of whatever gains in gender equality and empowerment recorded during the period.

This according to them was vividly seen in several countries including Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola, where we have seen a roll back of many of the gains and spaces which women made during the period of anti-colonial struggle by the state.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE STRUGGLE



Figure 1: Map of Western Sahara

Source: Britannica

Initially referred to as the Spanish Sahara, the Western Sahara became a Spanish colony in 1884 during the Berlin Conference and the scramble for Africa by the Europeans. However, following the United Nations General Assembly resolution 1514 containing the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples in 1960, and with the wave and agitations for independence in surrounding African states including neighbouring Algeria, Western Sahara began agitations for independence. According to Munene (2012), the first serious group to challenge the Spanish colonizer and demand for independence for the Western Sahara in the 1960s was the 'Harakat Tahrir Saguia el-Hamra wa Oued ed-Dahab (Organization of the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra wa Oued ed-Dahab) led by Mohammed Sidi Ibrahim Bassiri. However, the Zemla massacre of 1970 brought an end to the group. In spite of the suppression of the Harakat Tahrir

Saguia el-Hamra wa Oued ed-Dahab by the Spanish colonizing power, the fire for independence ignited by the group continued to burn in the hearts and minds of the Saharawi people. This led to the emergence of the *Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro* a.k.a. Polisario Front on May 10, 1973 by young Saharawi male university students; several male survivors of the 1968 massacres at Zouerate and a few Saharawi men of the Spanish army (Lippert, 1992).

In mid-1970s, with increasing pressure from the United Nations and the Polisario Front, Spain prepared to decolonize the region intending to transform it into a closely aligned independence state after a referendum on self-determination (Migdalovitz, 2008). However, this plan was opposed by Morocco and Mauritania who both claimed ownership of the territory based on historical sovereignty. Consequently, Spain's failure to hold a referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara as called for by various United Nations General Assembly resolutions from 1966-1973, and instead its ceding of Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania in 1975 under the Madrid Accords remains the fundamental cause of the Western Sahara/ Morocco imbroglio today. The legality of this action by Spain attracted numerous condemnations from several quarters including the United Nations. Specifically, the United Nations through the Under Secretary-General for Legal affairs and Legal Counsel Hans Corell in 2002 stated thus:

"[t]he Madrid Agreement did not transfer sovereignty over the territory, nor did it confer upon any of the signatories the status of an administering power, a status which Spain alone could not have unilaterally transferred. The transfer of the administrative authority over the territory to Morocco and Mauritania in 1975 did not affect the international status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory".

The de facto invasion of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania led to the proclamation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) by the Polisario Front, and Algeria's recognition of the SADR led to Morocco's breaking of diplomatic ties with Algeria (Zoubir, 1990). The Polisario Front forcefully resisted the Moroccan-Mauritanian takeover with guerrilla attacks, resulting in about 160,000 Sahrawis leaving the Western Sahara for refugee camps in Algeria and Mauritania in the 1970s (Migdalovitz, 2008). With Algeria's support, the Polisario established its headquarters in Tindouf, in Southwest Algeria, and embarked on guerilla attacks against Morocco and Mauritania, however, Mauritania's inability to sustain the armed attacks from the Polisario Front led to its signing of a peace agreement with the Front in August 1979, abandoning its claims to the Western Sahara. Immediately, Morocco took over the area vacated by Mauritania, and in 1981 Morocco began building sand walls to separate the 80% of the Western Sahara that it occupied from the Polisario Front and the Saharawi refugees. The territory of Western Sahara is divided by a wall 2,200 kilometres long, combined with mine fields, barbed wires and ditches built with technological support from France and the United States, and guarded by over 150,000 soldiers dispersed in bases at every fifth kilometre (Santha et.al. 2011). Over the years, Morocco has invested heavily and stationed its military forces in the occupied territories strongly resisting the Polisario Front. This led to many years of war between the Moroccan army and the Front's guerillas in the desert until a United Nations ceasefire and a proposed settlement plan was put in place. In 1991, Morocco and the Polisario Front signed the United Nations Settlement plan and a peacekeeping mission; the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was deployed to supervise the ceasefire between both parties and to facilitate the organization of

the referendum. The emergence of MINURSO ended the years of fighting conflict between the Front and Morocco; however, differences between Morocco and the Polisario Front on how to identify voters for the referendum stalled the process for several years. Several decades later, the conflict is still unresolved despite several efforts by the African Union and the United Nations to tackle the problem, with more than 200,000 refugees still in the Algerian desert (Hodges, 1983). It can be contended that while the war remain restricted, the political trajectory of the area remains unchanged, and the problems of the Saharawi people are unaddressed (Shelley 2004; Solà-Martín 2006). Despite the successive African and international settlement efforts, the decolonization of Western Sahara has not been completed yet because Morocco, which occupies large parts of the territory, continues to reject any solution to the conflict based on the exercise by the Sahrawi people of their inalienable right to self-determination and independence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I. Saharawi Women as Agents of Resistance

In contrast to the public/private dichotomy and categorization of gender roles where women are relegated to the private sphere of domestic duties, and men occupy the public realms of governance and decision-making. The Saharawi case exemplifies women's roles in both domestic duties and governance. This has been attributed to the Saharawi culture and tradition that provides women with the opportunities and space to actively engage in governance and occupy decision-making processes both within and outside their homes. (Vasquez, 2014). Saharawi women

from historical times and till date are engaged in activities that transcend the private sphere. Rosetti (2013) argued that unlike in most Islamic societies where women are generally secluded from political governance and state-building¹, Saharawi women have traditionally possessed great autonomy despite being Muslims. The Saharawi women have been and are still actively involved in the over six-decade struggle for self-determination of the Western Sahara, playing multifarious roles in the quest for self-determination. These include administrative, social, military and political roles- such as leading protests, hunger strikes and engaging diplomatic channels to make their voices heard despite repression from the Moroccan authorities (Amnesty International, 2021). In carrying out these roles, a major rallying point and platform used by the Saharawi women is the National Union of Saharawi Women (NUSW). The NUSW was established to mobilize women and educate them on their rights, and to promote political participation (Lippert, 1992).

a) Political Representation and Military Participation

Historical accounts show that Saharawi women have played a central role in the liberation struggle for the independence of Western Sahara. Saharawi women have taken an active part in both political and military resistance, in contrast to traditional nationalist narratives that frequently downplay the roles that women play in armed conflicts. In both occupied areas and the Tindouf, Algeria, refugee camps, they played a crucial role in maintaining morale, organising resources, and creating networks of resistance. During the Western Sahara War (1975–1991),

¹ It is instructive to note that in recent times women from Islamic societies have increasingly become involved in politics and nation building as modern developments such as the reconstruction of

postconflict societies and the Arab Springs have resulted in more women in politics in these societies.

women served as combatants, military trainers, and political organizers (Allan, 2010). The establishment of the National Union of Sahrawi Women NUSW led to the increased involvement of women both politically and militarily in the struggle. The increase in the level of participation of Saharawi women in the liberation struggle was also attributed to the wave of liberation movements taking place in Africa in the late 1960s and 70s. Countries such as Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia and neighbouring Algeria were also enmeshed in active resistance against colonialism, and the Saharawis were aware of the active roles men and women played in the liberation struggle. During the resistance against the Spanish in the 1930s, late 1950s and 1960s, Saharawi women were active members of the "Movement for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Oued ed-Dabb/Rio de Oro (Molisario) which was the predecessor of the Polisario Front. The violent repression of the Molisario movement during the demonstration in 1970 led to the emergence of the Polisario Front in May 1973 as agitations for independence by the Saharawi people continued. Building upon the culture of the nomadic Saharawi women, who were actively involved in the administration of tribal activities and resistance movements, the Polisario Front encouraged the recruitment and education of women in the Front, as only very few women were educated up to the secondary school level before the conflict (Lippert, 1992).

Initially, women's involvement in the Front was conventional, focusing mainly on contributing financial resources to the struggle, such as jewellery and encouraging their husbands and sons to join the front. However, later on, women took on more active roles in the Polisario Front and the struggle. Some women who were members of the Front and the NUSW joined the Saharawi Popular Liberation Army (SPLA) and took up arms to defend Saharawi towns in 1976 when Morocco invaded Western

Sahara. Women combatants and NUSW militants took charge of people fleeing for refuge in the desert and organized shelter, supplies and protection for refugees who were mostly women and children, helping them to relocate safely to Algeria (Lippert, 1992). The emergence of the NUSW led to an increase in the participation of women militarily and politically in the Front's activities and the struggle for self-determination. This brought relative gains for the Saharawi women in the liberation struggle with the introduction of reserved quotas for the enhancement of female representation politically, and the voting of women into the National Secretariat of the Polisario Front, the movement's highest level of authority (Kustusich, 2009).

b) Refugee Camp Administration

Findings show that traditionally, Saharawi women, similar to nomadic traditions, exercised real power and played dominant roles in the camps. After being displaced to Tindouf, Algeria, Saharawi refugees built self-sufficient camps where women played a leading role in administration, education, and healthcare (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018). The refugee camps consolidated women's management and administration power as they were responsible for the maintenance and oversight of the health systems, schools, and logistical supply chains (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011; Lopez, 2016). The Saharawi women were in control of the day-to-day running of the camps and played major roles in tribal activities, including education and health. According to Morris (2013), while men travelled and went to war, women administered the camps and managed the homes. Saharawi women were responsible for making, repairing and moving the tents; as well as milking goats and camels; and participating in major tribal decisions (Lippert, 1992). There are historical accounts of Saharawi women's direct participation in the *Ait Arbeen*. The *Ait Arbeen* used to be the highest political and social institution in the

Saharawi society and was made up of representatives from the forty tribes in the region (Rossetti, 2008).

These findings challenge and contradict conventional National liberation theories that render women invisible or, at best, position women as passive actors and mere supporters in liberation struggles. It aligns with the Feminist National Liberation Theory that emphasises that women are not symbolic in their participation in National liberation struggles but active actors that are central and play pivotal roles in the national liberation struggle. This challenges gendered divisions of labour within liberation discourse, underscoring the need for an inclusive feminist lens in deconstructing gender roles in national liberation struggles.

II. Women's Resistance and Agency in Camps & Exile

Findings in this study reveal that women are widely considered the backbone of the struggle for independence and are responsible for the survival and resistance of the people. The men primarily focused on securing the battlefield, while the women took on the crucial responsibility of ensuring the survival and well-being of the people in the camps. In Western Sahara, women played a significant role in the independence movement by trying to sway the populace in favour of the revolution. Three factors made it possible for women to have an impact on Sahrawi society. First, because the majority of men were drafted into the military during the war, women accounted for close to 80% of the population in the refugee camps, allowing them to assume leadership roles in both the government and the camps. Second, the separation of families led to a breakdown in affective relationships. Lastly, living in exile, far from one's native country and those who were unable to flee the invasion (Fernandes, 2023). Findings show that women are also

at the forefront of nonviolent resistance against the Moroccan occupation in the occupied territory, as they occupy the forefront of protests and are usually key targets of the Moroccan security operatives. In the occupied territories, where Moroccan repression is more pronounced, resistance is expressed through cultural preservation, underground activism, and nonviolent protest. Several reports have highlighted the horrific experiences of women as they organise and carry out peaceful demonstrations for self-determination in Western Sahara (Amnesty, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022; Vasquez, 2014). The daily lives of these women have been affected as a result of their involvement in the resistance movements and public demonstrations; women suffer arrests, torture, imprisonment, forced disappearances, separation from families and several other forms of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Moroccan authorities.

In the camps, women and children's education became a tool of resistance against Moroccan occupation, as it became a tool for survival. All Sahrawi people, regardless of gender or age, were given access to education since it was seen as a crucial component of their growth (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). Saharawi women instil the principles of resistance, community mobilisation and consciousness, and the fight for self-determination, into children and younger women as mothers and teachers in charge of education in the camps. Additionally, Saharawi women took charge of developing and conserving Saharawi traditions, along with making decisions for their families and communities. This was passed down to the children through oral tradition as a way of resistance.

Historical accounts demonstrate that another form of resistance employed by Saharawi women against Moroccan occupation engagement and building alliances with feminist movements and

women's groups across Africa, in multilateral organisations such as the African Union, UN Women and human rights organisations (Keating, 2020). Archival archives demonstrate how women established the National Union of Sahrawi Women, instrumental in international advocacy as a form of resistance employed in the liberation struggle for Western Sahara. The establishment of the NUSW during the 1974 National Conference on Saharawi women remains a watershed in the involvement of women in the liberation struggle, as this led to the clear organization and articulation of women as key actors in the struggle. The advocacy of the NUSW has brought international attention to the gendered dimension of the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara and the roles women play in the liberation struggle for independence. The NUSW serves as a crucial platform to mobilise and organize the women in furtherance of the liberation struggle. As the leading women organization in Western Sahara, it has members that cut across women in refugee camps in Tindouf, in the occupied territory and Saharawi women living abroad. Specifically, the union carries out wide-ranging activities and networking amongst Saharawi women at home and abroad towards achieving the goal of self-determination. Chief among the NUSW's current activities are associating with women's groups and nongovernmental groups throughout the world; organizing Sahrawi women in the camps, in the occupied territory, and abroad into the NUSW and the Polisario Front; and developing and implementing new goals for women in the areas of education, health, nutrition culture, and a newly independent Sahrawi state (Lippert, 1992).

This study demonstrates how displacements and exile evolved into locations of feminist mobilization and resistance by the Saharawi women rather than being seen as a state of inactivity or helplessness. Women in refugee camps

defied the established gender hierarchy, created institutions, and influenced political discourse. The extended exile of the Sahrawi people created a distinct type of feminist resilience. Unlike many postcolonial movements where women's roles were erased after independence, Saharawi women have remained central to governance. Their involvement aligns with Feminist National Liberation Theory's argument that women's contributions must be institutionalised within the national struggle rather than relegated to temporary roles (Keating, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The study contributes to Feminist national liberation theory by exploring the roles of women in the liberation struggle of the Western Sahara. Using a feminist national liberation theoretical framework, this study aimed to investigate the crucial but frequently disregarded role of Sahrawi women in the national liberation movement for Western Sahara's independence. It aimed to investigate not only Sahrawi women's political participation but also the gendered dynamics influencing their resistance and engagement, drawing on feminist critique and historical research. The results demonstrate that Sahrawi women have not only served as auxiliary members of a male-led nationalist movement, but have instead been the designers of community reconstruction, resistance, and resilience in the face of patriarchy, exile, and colonial violence. The Western Sahara conflict epitomizes one of the world's longest conflicts. The study reveals the diverse ways in which women contributed to the liberation movement's social and political facets. Sahrawi women have maintained the nationalist cause and created alternative governance structures that have allowed the movement to endure, from starting and running essential institutions in refugee camps to leading educational programs and international campaigning.

Their work as cultural guardians, educators, political activists, and carers highlights a kind of non-combative resistance that is just as revolutionary as combat action. Thus, from a history of women's earlier participation in liberation struggles including armed struggle against Spanish occupation and their central role in tribal activities, Saharawi women continue to show resilience and resistance against Morocco's unlawful occupation of Western Sahara. As a result of their active participation in peaceful demonstrations and protests, many have been arrested and imprisoned, tortured, sexually abused and killed by the Moroccan security and police operatives. Saharawi women employ multiple strategies as forms of resistance in the Occupied Territories in Western Sahara, and in the refugee camps. In the camps, Saharawi women are equally very active and deeply involved in the day-to-day running of the camps, occupying leadership and decision-making positions alongside their men. In conclusion, the Sahrawi case affirms that women's resistance is not peripheral—it is foundational to national liberation. The resilience of Sahrawi women offers a model for understanding liberation as an ongoing process that must dismantle both colonial domination and patriarchal authority.

Although this study provides significant insights into women's roles in the national liberation struggle of Western Sahara, there are several limitations that must be highlighted. First, the study's reliance on secondary sources, feminist textual analysis, and historical documents limits women's lived experience, which may have enhanced the findings with data from field-based research. Deriving from this, future research may examine whether and how younger and diaspora Sahrawi feminists are reimagining liberation in ways that are independent of, or critical toward, the traditional nationalist paradigm

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