



# **BETWEEN BORDERS AND BOMBS**

## **THE EXISTENCE AND RESISTANCE OF THE SAHRAWI TERRITORY THROUGH THE BODIES OF SAHRAWI WOMEN**

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## KEYWORDS

SAHRAWI WOMEN, MINES, TERRITORIES, BODIES, ARTIVISM, RESISTANCE CORPOLITICS, CHOREOPOLITICS, FREEDOM.

## ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE ANALYSES THE SAHRAWI TERRITORY AND THE RESISTANCE OF ITS PEOPLE BASED ON A CRITICAL FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY APPROACH. THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH IS TO CONCEIVE THE BODIES OF SAHRAWI WOMEN WHICH ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THEIR TERRITORY (NOT RECOGNISED AFTER THE INVASION OF MOROCCO AND MAURITANIA IN 1975) AS TERRITORIES IN CONFLICT AND IN CONSTANT RISK, EMPHASISING THE POWER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BODY AND TERRITORY AS SPATIAL SCALES.

THE ARTICLE USES DANCE AS A TOOL FOR AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH AND EXPLORES THE IMPORTANCE OF "ARTIVISM" AS A POLITICAL ACT AND AS A METHODOLOGY OF ACTION-PARTICIPATION IN THE ARTIFARITI FESTIVAL. WE PARTICIPATED IN THIS FESTIVAL AS PART OF THE HANIN PERFORMING DANCE COLLECTIVE IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND AND LEARN DIRECTLY ABOUT THE SITUATION IN WHICH SAHRAWI WOMEN LIVE. SPACES FOR REFLECTION AND RESISTANCE ARISE AND ALTERNATIVES FOR AND WITH THE SAHRAWI PEOPLE ARE GENERATED THROUGH ART.

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## Introduction

For migrants who leave their homes out of necessity or pressure, the urge to flee to other places represents a process in which women suffer violence, imprisonment, forced disappearance and displacement, and therefore, resistance implies existence. Such is the current situation of the Sahrawi people in the face of the conflict with Morocco. The Polisario Front of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic has confronted the invasion of Moroccan armed forces to ensure that the Sahrawi people achieve the decolonisation of their territory and independence.

This paper<sup>1</sup> is based on the knowledge of and personal and collective<sup>2</sup> approach to the reality of Sahrawis, mainly that of the Sahrawi women. The fieldwork took place two years ago (October–November 2017) within the framework of the Artifariti Festival in Boujdour, one of the refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. In this paper, we focus on the importance that art has had in making visible the situation of international abandonment in the face of the lack of recognition of the existence of the Sahrawi people. During this festival, we had the opportunity to become acquainted with the daily life of the Sahrawi people. Also, in Tifariti, a territory liberated by the Polisario Front, we had the chance to interview the women who work deactivating mines putting their bodies on the line and risking their lives.

For Sahrawi women, to live in the Algerian desert and in exile is like being inside a prison in the open sky, where day after day they survive in the hope of being able to return to their lands and once again gaze upon the ocean that used to belong to them.

The lack of freedom within their territory is reflected in the refugee camps, which offer few opportunities for women. However, the history of resistance of the Sahrawi people has led women to become politicised and actively involved in the conflict. Despite the latent danger, several young women seek to assert their identity as Sahrawi and make sense of their lives, while “clearing” the territory by deactivating mines. Today, these women have broken many stereotypes and are respected by their community.

Other examples of resistance in which Sahrawi women have participated will be mentioned at the end of this paper. By this we want to highlight the important role of the Sahrawi women in the struggle for the permanence of the Sahrawi people in their territory.

## Historical context of the Sahrawi conflict

No territory is empty; therefore, no desert inhabited by nomadic peoples is empty either. However, that logic does not apply to Western colonial thought. From 1884 to 1976, Spain occupied and colonised the Sahrawi territory; Western Sahara was Spain’s 53rd province. Like the rest of the region, it had the right to a process of decolonisation and to become an independent state. But, in 1976, Western Sahara ceased to be Spanish, becoming from that moment, as mentioned by Grande and Ruiz (2016, p. 186), “a decolonization conflict that remains unresolved today”.

In spite of this colonialist conception of a “vacuum” over the desert territory of Western Sahara, both Spain and Morocco have always been clear about the presence of valuable natural resources in the territory. The dispute and control of phosphate<sup>3</sup> and oil have been at the centre of the Sahrawi-Moroccan conflict. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that phosphate was previously a key demand of anti-Spanish protesters in the early 1970s, when Spain was exploiting the rich reserves of Western Sahara; a situation that Morocco continues to exploit today. According to Joanna Allan (Allan, 2016), this last fact constitutes an illegality, as Morocco is not internationally recognised as having sovereignty over Western Sahara. Therefore, an occupying power cannot legally exploit the natural resources of the occupied country without the consent of the original population of the territory being exploited (Allan, 2016).

This neglect of Spain is known in the forgotten history as the “betrayal of the Sahrawi people” as the journalist Iker Armentia (2015) recalls. The Franco regime gave in to pressure from Morocco and handed over the Sahara to Hassan II, with the signing of the Tripartite Madrid Accords, on 14 November 1975, whereby Western Sahara was shared between Mauritania and Morocco. This provoked the opposition of the Sahrawi population inhabiting these territories that had been recently divided.

In view of the disagreement over these events, on 27 February 1976 the Polisario Front - recognised as the official representative of the Sahrawi people - proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Thus, an armed conflict and a deterritorialisation of the Sahrawi population towards Algeria began, while another part of the population remained under control in the Moroccan-occupied zone.

After a decade of war, peace negotiations between the Polisario Front and Morocco began, which resulted in the 1988 Arrangement Plans, establishing a ceasefire and stipulating the holding of a referendum on self-determination based on United Nations guidelines. Thus, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO, for its Spanish initials) was created, which supposedly came into force in 1991. However, after almost three decades, the consultation has not been held. Part of the Sahrawi people live marginalised and repressed under Moroccan occupation and another part is sheltered in the Algerian camps of Tindouf, after they managed to escape the so called Green March.

The Green March was a central part of Morocco's strategy to force the annexation of Sahrawi territory. It was carried out on 6 November 1975, and consisted of a "peaceful" march, inspired by the United States and financed with Saudi money. 350,000 Moroccans made their way across the border with flags, portraits of their king and the Quran in hand. This led to the expulsion of a large part of the Sahrawi population. Forty-three years later, the Madrid Accords signed by Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania have not been validated internationally and "Spain's responsibility over its former colony is still valid" (Armentia, 2015).

## The female body as a territory of control and imprisonment

The social space is built on trajectories and power relationships. Power relationships, in turn, establish the rules; and the rules define the limits and boundaries that are often imposed both socially and spatially. They determine who belongs to a place or territory and who is excluded from it. Feminist critical geographies rethink spatial analysis on the basis of historically invisible power relations (GeoBrujas, 2019).<sup>4</sup> This gender perspective allows us to situate violence in a specific historical context, as well as in a multi-scalar framework that integrates different spaces and territories: the body, domestic space, the desert, refugee camps, the region, global space etc.

Amongst others, María Luisa Grande and Susana Ruiz (Grande & Ruiz, 2016) have pointed out that gender - understood as a social and cultural construction that all societies have developed throughout history to legitimise inequalities between men and women - has been incorporated into different disciplines, including geography, as well as peace and conflict studies.

As a category full of symbolic and sociocultural meanings, feminist geographies redefine gender as a social construct that has been created and reproduced through the ideologies, institutions, and everyday practices that define the context of different places in the world (Sabaté et al., 1995). Therefore, when defining gender, we must go beyond the Western gaze and take into account the cultural context and social constructions, including those arising from the broad spectrum of interactions in multiple places and situations. In this particular case here, we want to highlight the lack of recognition and the territorial struggle of the Western Sahara, together with the action, organisation, and mobilisation of its women.

For Dolores Juliano (Juliano, 1999), there are strong currents in the feminist movements that emphasise strategies developed by women to neutralise or overcome patriarchal mechanisms of discrimination. However, it is worth mentioning that these works have become generalised in women of the so-called "First World", since cultural and social filters combine to make invisible the vindictive strategies of the "Third World", especially when these do not coincide mainly with the American or European ones. Thus, Juliano (1999) mentions that it is easy to assume paternalistic (or, better said, maternalistic) positions with respect to the struggles coming from the "underdeveloped" worlds, reinforcing deep-rooted stereotypes, such as the belief that Muslim women are submissive and passive, in addition to the fact that there is an enormous generalisation of all Muslim women, along with the homogenisation of their religious practices and customs.

It is not only necessary to break with this perception, according to Juliano (1999); it is also necessary to recognise the massive participation of Saharan women in society. The consideration and "respect" that they enjoy in public and political spaces did not arise in recent years corresponding to the current SADR, but comes from their nomadic history, in which women were

respected and contributed to society like any other of its members. In order to understand the Sahrawi people and their possibilities of success against Morocco, one must first understand what their traditional gender role has been and how it fits into other scales of power (Juliano, 1999).

Within political geography, conflicts are not gender neutral. Territorial analysis requires gender to be applied as a category to show how power relations between men and women are defined in conflict and post-conflict scenarios, as well as in peace processes (Grande & Ruiz, 2016).

If the territory is a space defined and appropriated both materially and symbolically, where identities are built, then the body is our most immediate territory. However, as women, the autonomy and sovereignty of our own territories have not always belonged to us. Throughout the history of humanity (narrated and traced, mostly, by men), women's bodies have been stereotyped, repressed, and used as tools of control. Rita Laura Segato argues that the feminine or feminized body is the new territory of war and conquest, and that violence and rape are the central aspects of new forms of domination (Segato, 2014).

"The body is what we are; through it we experience our emotions and connect with the world", says Anna Ortiz (Ortiz, 2012, p. 112). Therefore, bodies not only occupy space; taking up the ideas of Doreen Massey (Massey, 2008) and Anna Ortiz (Ortiz, 2012), they are places where the trajectories of gender, class, and ethnicity are embodied and practiced. In this way, desire, pleasure, disgust, pain, hate, violence and war are constantly mapped out in bodies, as well as love, struggle, resistance, hope, and freedom.

The concept of "biopolitics"<sup>5</sup> used by several authors, including Edgar Morin and Michel Foucault is useful for addressing the control over people's lives (López, 2014). Edgar Morin used this concept to refer to the conditions of survival resulting from the economic imbalances brought about by capitalism. In Cristina Lopez's words, "the peculiarity of the Foucauldian perspective on the approach to biopower lies in the fact that it attributes an ontological significance and scope to it that highlights the normalizing and deadly potential of liberal and neoliberal governments" (López, 2014, p. 113).

The symbolic and physical power of society reflects on the body as it does on the territory. The concept of "corpolitics"<sup>6</sup> focuses on the body intervened by social forces, body politics,<sup>7</sup> political bodies<sup>8</sup> and the relationship between them; it considers the body as a place where negotiation and discipline take place, as well as a means of expression and significance (Werth, 2007, p. 1).

The Argentine-Brazilian feminist anthropologist and specialist in gender violence Rita Laura Segato (2014) shows that it is in the female body that the territorial conflict is most deeply rooted and, therefore, the field where the battles take place; and where, in national and international contexts, murders occur, reflected in what has been called "femigenocide". But also, women are murdered in both public and private spaces and scales, in contexts where society "normalizes" violence (Segato, 2014).

All these cases of violence against women and femicide respond to "necropolitics", a term coined by the Cameroonian philosopher and politician Achille Mbembe (2003). Mbembe's concept necropolitics is a radicalised version of Michel Foucault's concept biopolitics; it complements the duality of power exercised between life and death. For Michel Foucault "to make live, to let die" determines the modality in which biopower is exercised (López, 2014). Nevertheless, for Mbembe (2003) this concept is not enough to account for the contemporary forms of politics, under the guise of war, resistance, or the fight against terror. This means that the murders of others are not necessarily the main objective of necropolitics, but the control of bodies through a political and economic system that borders on death or arises as a consequence of it: blockade of food and access to natural resources, control of mobility and territory due to the presence of explosive mines, and finally, lack of recognition of their territory, their sovereignty and their existence as a Sahrawi people.

Exploring these practices of corpolitics – carried out in different scales and circumstances – in addition to murder, rape, or any other form of torture or explicit domination of the female body, anthropologist Aída Hernández (in Melgar, 2018) considers imprisonment and family separation to be the last link in a chain of exclusion and violence. They represent the marginalisation, isolation and complete punishment of a person, in which he or she loses sovereignty over his or her own territory. We must not forget that the refugee camps are experienced in the words of the women themselves as invisible prisons without bars, where people's mobility is limited and families are fragmented.

On the one hand, Michel Foucault explains, in a schematic way, that "sovereignty is exercised within the limits of a territory, discipline is exercised over the body of individuals and, finally, security is exercised over the entire population" (Foucault,

2006, p. 27). On the other hand, Mbembe (2003) uses the concept of necropolitics to assert that the maximum expression of sovereignty lies in power and the ability to dictate who can live and who should die. "To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as a deployment and manifestation of power" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 12). Moreover, this concept refers to the fact that it is no longer necessary to kill, but to let people die (Bidaseca, 2014). So, "What place is granted to life, death, and the human body (in particular the injured or murdered body)? How do they fit into the order of power?" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 12). This question from Mbembe invites us to reflect on the causes of the invasion of the Saharan territory and the consequences of the war that Morocco developed against the Sahrawi people to whom Morocco has exercised control and power in a number of different ways.

To complete Mbembe's analysis of the control of the body movement by the Moroccan military at the border, it is appropriate to take up André Lepecki's concept of "choreopolice". Lepecki mentions that, when faced with a demonstration, the police function first and foremost as controllers of the movement. They impose blockades, contain the protestors, disperse the masses, and sometimes literally lift and drag bodies. "Both choreographically and conceptually, the police can then be defined as that which, through their skills and physical presence, determines the space of circulation for the protestors" (Lepecki, 2016, p.12). In the same way, the Moroccan military constantly exercises "choreopolice" over the bodies of the Sahrawi people; this has determined their deterritorialisation and, at the same time, their reterritorialisation. First, through the invasion of their territory, and then, from the explosive risk of the bombs installed on the border imposed by Morocco.

## The mined border, the Sahrawi deterritorialisation/ reterritorialisation and their transterritorialities

This is the logic of the system based on necropolitics, against the oblivion and abandonment of certain territories, along with their inhabitants. Such is the case of the Sahrawis, who are denied the possibility of crossing over to reach their territory, occupied by Morocco and with the construction of a border full of mines in 1980. For the Moroccan government, the existence of the Sahrawi people is not a priority; therefore, neither is their death. These eradication actions, as well as leaving them to die far from their land or in the middle of the desert next to a mined wall, are part of the Moroccan state policy that are also reflected in their corporeality.

Measuring more than 2,700 kilometres, the barrier erected by Morocco in Western Sahara is the longest military wall in the world. In addition, it is one of the most heavily mined territories worldwide (according to information from the NGO Action On Armed Violence, AOAV). This is the physical proof of a legacy of a conflict which continues to affect the trajectories of the nomadic communities who inhabit these lands and which, since 1975, has separated Sahrawi families.

The international campaign *Together to remove the Wall* estimates that there are more than seven million mines along the wall, in addition to large amounts of explosive remnants of war including rockets and cluster bombs, so the number of explosive devices could be as high as 10 million. The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) estimates that there are over 2,500 mine victims in Western Sahara. Local human rights groups warn that people continue to die every year, especially children and shepherds (Marina, 2018).

The separation of the Sahrawi people due to the fragmentation and occupation of their territory has led to the migration and exile of almost 200,000 Sahrawis who live in the refugee camps in Algeria, plus another 120,000 who live in the territories occupied by Morocco (who are in an even worse condition, fighting against the occupation and subject to continuous repression where human rights violations are frequent) and a few scattered in other parts of the world. The Sahrawi refugees depend for their survival on the international assistance provided by international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the European Union Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Official Development Assistance (ODA) from different countries, with one of the most important being the aid that comes from Spain (Grande & Ruiz, 2016).

We cannot talk about migration, exile, and Sahrawi deterritorialisation without considering the meaning of borders. They are more than limits. Boundaries are points of disagreement, places of exclusion and rejection, and the result of disputes over

territorial control. However, the territorial links must also be mentioned, as well as the territorialities – understood as experiences, behaviours, strategies and forms of appropriation of the territory – even though the Sahrawi population no longer lives in their own territories or in their place of origin.

In order to talk about deterritorialisation, it is necessary to consider, first of all, territorialisation. For Rogério Haesbaert (Haesbaert, 2006), this concept refers to the creation or disappearance/loss of territories. However, the author affirms that rather than deterritorialisation, a spatially discontinuous and extremely complex process of deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation is manifested (Haesbaert, 2004), because territories are never completely emptied, despite the processes of exile and dispossession.

Gilberto Gimenez argues that (1996, p. 10), “it is possible, through memory and nostalgia, to physically leave a territory without losing the symbolic and subjective reference to it”. Under this mobility in which the actors leave their territory or lived space, they can re-territorialise new spaces, that is, transnational spaces (Reyes, 2011) that create transterritorialities. We consider this last concept to be more appropriate for our analysis, as it goes beyond borders and national states.

In this regard, Daniel Hiernaux (in Reyes, 2011) mentions that in the current territorial dynamics, there is a strong need to rethink the individual as an actor of the territory and, therefore, of the conformation of territorial identity. As such, for Miriam Reyes (2011), migration is not only a matter of people moving across borders, with real and symbolic goods, nor does it only create transformations (individual, collective, and territorial); but, in turn, produces a constant deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of perceptions, strategies, experiences, imaginaries, projections, memories, and feelings, expressed in the body and in the “new” territories, which go beyond the physical borders imposed and controlled by nation states, such as Morocco in our case.

## The situ-action of the Sahrawi women

The situation of women in Western Sahara, like that of the rest of the population, is not very encouraging, since they were forced to fight for their freedom against the illegitimate occupation of their country. There is well documented information about the violence suffered by women in the occupied territories by Moroccan groups, including beatings, torture and rape.

While women and children are most vulnerable when it comes to conflict, according to María Luisa Grande and Susana Ruiz (2016, p. 186), in the case of women who suffer discrimination, war occasionally becomes “a source of empowerment that allows them to carry out activities other than those traditionally assigned to them in society, related to the performance of a merely reproductive role”. Likewise, from the political point of view, “gender has the potential to transform society”, thus acquiring “a special significance in conflict resolution and peace building” (Grande & Ruiz, 2016, p. 186).

An example of this is Aminetu Haidar, the recent winner of the Alternative Nobel Prize (2019) awarded by the Right Livelihood Award, who “has spent three decades struggling for justice and the self-determination of her people without violence” (Redacción, 2019). The ruling in favour of the 53-year-old Sahrawi, founder and president of the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA) highlighted “her firm non-violent action, despite imprisonment and torture”, as well as her dignity and willingness to make visible and change the injustices endured by her people throughout the process of deterritorialisation in which they have lived.

For María Luisa Grande and Susana Ruiz (2016, p. 186), “the reductionist approach of representing women only as victims, has made invisible the active role they have played in conflicts and in peace processes”. On the other hand, it should be noted that deterritorialisation – a consequence of war conflicts – produces considerable family disintegration, thereby transforming gender roles. In these circumstances, women assume exclusive responsibility for the family and community, which modifies the social aspects of key organisations, such as the division of labour and political participation.

As a result of the conflict, the territorialities of the Sahrawi have changed. From the pre-colonial times, when a nomadic desert herding society was based on territory and family ties, Sahrawi men had to leave for long periods during which they transported goods across the desert, while Sahrawi women were left in charge of the responsibilities of daily life (ANARASD). Thus, they had a certain autonomy, unlike the sedentary Arab women, and controlled the subsistence economy (Polo, 2012, in Grande & Ruiz, 2018, p. 187).

During the armed period, the Sahrawi men fought against the Moroccans, while most of the women remained in exile, organising the *wilayas* (villages), the *dairas* (municipalities), and the *haimas* (family tents), thus being protagonists in the construction of the camps which, given the uncertainty of the return to their lands, were becoming more permanent and less temporary. It is also important to mention that there were women who actively participated in the conflict, forming part of several committees of the Polisario Front, and taking up arms on the battlefield.

Violeta Trasmontes (2011, in Grande & Ruiz, 2016, p. 188) mentions that, as of 1991, there was a turning point when the ceasefire took place and the men returned to the camps. This caused certain changes that affected economic activities, such as an increase in the active population and the reorganisation of the economic and social tasks, which until then had been carried out only by women. Likewise, various economic initiatives began to emerge, particularly since 1999, driven by international cooperation and private initiatives on the part of people worldwide. These economic and social changes of the Sahrawi people are reflected in the current territorialisation and configuration of the camps, which are divided into five *wilayas*: El Aaiun, Auserd, Smara, Dajla and Boujdour (with names alluding to cities in the occupied territory); as well as Rabouni, its administrative centre.

It is worth noting that in the midst of improvisation, located in the Algerian reterritorialised desert, Sahrawi women carry and organise themselves through their territorialities. They have built nurseries, schools<sup>9</sup> and health centres that provide for the population's immediate needs. In this political and social process, Sahrawi women have acquired shares of decision-making power as part of the project for the liberation and independence of Western Sahara (Grande & Ruiz, 2016); at the same time, they have achieved the recognition of their rights. This is reflected in the fact that Sahrawi women currently hold positions in the Ministries of Culture, Vocational Training, Public Function and Employment, Education, Social Assistance and Promotion of Women.

Another great result regarding the actions, organisation, and participation of Sahrawi women is the creation of the National Union of Sahrawi Women (UNMS), founded in 1974, which highlights "the need for an entire people to come together for the right to self-determination and awareness of the importance of making visible the presence and role of women in Sahrawi society".

The UNMS is associated with the Polisario Front and its main activity is carried out in the camps. The result of its work has been the presence of women in the organisational structures of the Polisario Front and in the SADR government. But it is also linked with several international and regional organisations. It is a member of the Women's International Democratic Federation, the Pan-African Women's Organization and the General Arab Women Federation.

## Artivism through our bodies and the bodies of Sahrawi women

Artivism is a hybrid word that results from the combination of two words: art and activism. This concept arose in response to the social events of the 20th century and needs that emerged and it was reflected in urban expressions. However, artivism has moved to other spaces, beyond the streets and the appropriation of public spaces in cities, using art as a path for social change that goes beyond the academic and commercial spheres that revolve around it. Thus, art is presented neither as an end nor an object, but as an alternative language that traces ways to communicate a transformative energy (Aladro-Vico et al., 2018), and provide tools that can lead to the search for justice and peace.

For over 10 years, this has been precisely the aim of the Artifariti Festival,<sup>10</sup> an International Art and Human Rights Meeting in Western Sahara held since 2007, "with the purpose of using contemporary art as a support tool to the Sahrawi people in their resistance to the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara". In this form of "artivism", art becomes a political act and instrument that positions itself by claiming the liberated territories and the camps as spaces of resistance or "counter-spaces" (Moreira, 2011),<sup>11</sup> and spaces of peaceful struggle for Sahrawi freedom, recreating "heterotopias"<sup>12</sup> and "utopias"<sup>13</sup> (Foucault & Miskowicz, 1986) necessary for their existence.

Being a dance collective, the main purpose of Hanin's presence in the Sahrawi refugee camps was to participate in the 2017 Artifariti Festival. During this encounter, in the middle of the Algerian desert, artistic practices (music, painting, poetry,

literature, dance, plastic arts, muralism, theatre, performance) are tools used to claim human rights, as well as the right of the Sahrawi people to their land, their culture, their roots and their freedom. It is an annual public art meeting that aims to reflect on the capacity of social creation as a point of contact between foreigners and Sahrawis, where art is the means to question and transform reality. In this way, Artifariti promotes intercultural relations, encouraging the exchange of experiences and skills between local and international artists. Likewise, for the Spanish artist, Pamen Pereira – who has participated in several editions of the festival – it seeks to contribute to the international dissemination of the Sahrawi reality, provoking questions within the artistic world through its recognition; and finally, it aims to encourage the personal and social development of Saharan refugees through their cultural heritage<sup>14</sup>.

Artifariti is a compound word, which arises from the union between art and Tifariti, a village near the wall, belonging to the territory liberated by the Polisario Front; as well as the scene of many battles between both armies and a massacre caused by the bombing by the Moroccan army of the Sahrawi population that resulted in them fleeing to Tindouf, Algeria, in 1976. It is in this place the Sahrawi government promotes Artifariti in the hope of generating a common territory for coexistence, “where interconnection and intercommunication transcend the artistic fact itself, and also a place where the arts take on a public role”. For Maribel Domenech (Domenech, 2010) a collective feeling is developed in Artifariti, where each artist projects all his or her action and political will at work.

From the beginning, the Sahrawi people have decided to resist peacefully; and today they are betting on the arts as their best way to defend their cause. Artifariti’s goal is to become a “cultural challenge”, while the city of Tifariti wants to become “a place where the public arts trigger the symbolic fall of the wall”. In the words of Maribel Domenech (Domenech, 2010), Artifariti’s objective is to demand, through artistic practices, respect for human rights and for people’s freedom. In this way, every year Artifariti is built with the tools that are offered from the arts to lead to peace processes that go beyond the binational agreements signed since 1991. Mainly with the purpose of creating the social transformation, the Sahrawi people need to assure their recognition, autonomy and freedom (Hidalgo, 2013).

The dance collective we took part in during our ethnographic fieldwork is committed to social activism. This collective is made up of diverse bodies and, therefore, different territories. Through dance and other embodied practices, regardless of imposed borders, we constantly try to go beyond the limits imposed by society, culture, and politics. We dance to provoke movement and to bring together isolated, fragmented, wounded, enclosed, deprived and forgotten body-territories. In this way, in Hanin, we believe that the movement of bodies has an impact on territories, generating a certain transformation in them. As Valeria Ysunza and Daniela Mondragón (2019, p. 178) mention, “we know that dance generates subjective processes of self-perception, awareness and exploration that stimulate the freedom of women in prison, which also allows them to generate their own knowledge in limited and enclosed spaces.”

Thus, in Hanin we explore the movement of the body through dance as a political act. “Choreopolitics” is another term proposed by André Lepecki (2016) that we use in our analysis. Lepecki talks about the power of the movement of the body and taking up the idea of “politics” of Hanna Arendt, redefined as a general orientation towards freedom, and the urgency of learning to move politically. “Our reason to act from choreopolitics is that what is at stake is not just learning how to choreograph or stage a protest. If we don’t learn how to move politically, the risk is that the political will completely disappear from the world” (Arendt, 1993, p. 13, in Lepecki, 2016, p. 5).<sup>15</sup>

For André Lepecki (2016), it is the dancer who, in the most policed, most controlled spaces, even in the strictest choreographic compositions, has the potential to activate the appearance of a highly mobile political act and action, not necessarily of one subject, but of several, or of a resignification and context in movement that needs to be transformed. Thus, our choreographic duty as Hanin dancers responds to the demand for kinetic knowledge of the body on how to move towards freedom and with political sense.

As Anna Ortiz (2012) points out, it is important to situate our knowledge and accept that our bodies “speak”, stressing that research is only confirmed by our embodied relationships:

Understanding the experience of the body, both that of the researcher and the research subjects, may be essential to understanding people’s relationships with physical and social environments (Longhurst, 1997; Butler, 1999). Bodies play an essential role in shaping people’s experiences in places. And the practice of

our bodies (with their gender, sexual preferences, physical abilities, age, color, or ethnicity) is unique and depends on the specific spatial, temporal, and cultural contexts in which they find themselves (Ortiz, 2012, pp. 117–118).

Due to our interests and social commitments, *Germinando* was born, as a dialogic project in constant development and creation. It is the result of the experiences of the *Hanin* collective members on the streets of Mexico City (in peripheral and marginalised areas), on the mountains of Chiapas (south of Mexico) and in the Sahara Desert in Argelia (in the Sahrawi refugee camps). Based on these experiences, memory finds a foothold to bring the migrants and disappeared people of Mexico back from oblivion as well as to draw attention to the existence of the Sahrawi people.

To germinate (*germinar*) is the process by which a seed becomes a plant. *Germinando* is *Hanin*'s metaphor for the process through which dance and body movement restore fertility to the territories previously deterritorialised (Haesbaert, 2004) due to situations such as: exile, enforced disappearance, femicide, and imprisonment. While the Moroccan government has planted a minefield with millions of bombs, in *Hanin* and along with Sahrawi women who dig up mines, we try to contribute with fertile lands where life, hope, and peace can be sowed for the Sahrawi people.

In the project we worked with Sahrawi women refugees in the Algerian desert for almost two weeks, where we had a first look at their understanding of the camps in which they live as an "open prison". Besides using the most frequent qualitative techniques for the study of the geographies of bodies, places, and emotions (semi-structured interviews, discussion groups, participant observation and diaries), we took the body (our own and that of others) as a research tool.

Relating through the body allowed us to cross cultural and linguistic barriers to live and communicate with the women, providing a listening ear and making visible the daily problems through the movement of the bodies, which are their immediate territories and that remain and exist despite being exiled from their place of origin.

We contacted a number of women who are active in different social, economic, political and cultural spheres. First, we visited them on the premises of their organisations in the Boujdour camp to learn about their work, mainly at the UNMS headquarters. There, on several occasions, we were invited to tea, a symbolic and important moment in terms of socialisation, in which everyday issues of common interest are discussed. Quite often during our visits, music (improvised with palms, percussions, voices and zaghareets<sup>16</sup>) and dance were present, and we tried to learn some expressions, gestures and movements, focusing on the cadence and the weight of the hip to the floor as well as the shaking of the hands. We shared sensory experiences through workshops in which techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed for the movement of the body were involved.<sup>17</sup>

Some of them confessed to having experienced a sense of freedom, unexpectedly and for the first time, which they very much enjoyed. Afterwards, we had the opportunity to meet the women who live in Tifariti, the main city of the liberated territories, who carry out one of the most dangerous tasks in the world: deactivating bombs. We conducted interviews that revealed part of the complex and risky reality in which Sahrawi women live.

We talked with amongst others three young women whose parents died in the war due to explosions of mines. The Sahrawi government selected these women to stay for long periods in the liberated territories and venture out into the countryside; not to fight, but to detect mines and deactivate them, in order to protect the Sahrawi population from the risks of mines exploding when travelling through the desert, which were left as an aftermath of the war.

These talks revealed that both the task of demining and dancing with the bodies in constant resistance are two ways of making choreopolitics, using the body movement and the link with the territory; in other words, these actions are two ways of expressing different corpopolitics in the body-territory scale over the same fragmented territory. These are different ways of being able to express liberation or control of the body through one's own or external power exercised under pressure. Both need concentration and seek, in some way, liberation. While the female deminer puts her life at risk, listening to the metal detector and not touching anything that looks suspicious, dance attempts to restore the limits of the body as a safe territory. The two actions seek freedom of bodies and, therefore, of Sahrawi territories.

During our stay we also provided accompaniment to the brigades near the mined border and international presence in Tifariti to mitigate any harassment from the Moroccan state. At the end of the day, after the collection of mines, a ceremony

was held to witness their detonation, in which important members of NGOs, international organisations such as UNMAS, and representatives of the Sahrawi government were present. For the detonation, the bombs were gathered and placed in a small excavation. We all witnessed the explosion. It was a shocking image, accompanied by resonance and a strong physical sensation. A sensation that the Sahrawi people and their deminer women experience on a regular basis.

## Deminer women in the desert

The presence of the mines in the Saharan desert confirms that the war is continuing, and that Morocco's necropolitical strategy continues to work, even without direct deaths, but with serious physical and emotional injuries that forever transform the lives of those affected.

In 2017 Carlos Martín et al., with the help of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Mines (ASAVIM), conducted a study based on 96 civilian testimonies (only one testimony corresponds to an event prior to the signing of the Ceasefire in 1991). Merely around 30% of these testimonies were made by women. This contrast between men and women is due to the difference in traditional roles in the Sahrawi culture. It is usually men who move over long distances with the livestock, while women perform more care tasks and move in a smaller circle around the nomadic settlements.

However, the relationship with mines, beyond being victims, has changed for Sahrawi women, who are participating in the deactivation of the devices. Many of them have academic training, thanks to international agreements and exchanges. Unfortunately, when they return to their camps, these young Sahrawis have no space or activities in which to exercise their profession. Therefore, in order to feel "useful" they decide to join one of the demining brigades, organized by the UN (through the United Nations Mine Action Service, UNMAS, and the Mine Action Coordination Centre), the NGO Norwegian People's Aide, the Polisario Front, and the AOA, in the liberated territories.

lauguiha Mohamed, a biologist, specialist in animal ecology and head of one of the teams, noted in an interview for the newspaper *El Diario* (July 2, 2014) that "each person works in whatever they can to make a living"; while in another interview (conducted four years later) she explained that "in the field, we are all equal" (Delgado, 2018); mines make no distinction between men and women. According to *El Diario*, in 2014, of the 87 people who worked for AOA in the area, 79 were Sahrawi. Of them, only ten were women. In more recent figures from *La Nación* (June 11, 2018), there are 31 women and 148 mine-seeking men in these organisations.

Although men were initially very skeptical about the idea of women working in the deactivation of mines, the few women that work in this field are highly respected by their families and communities. Currently, some of them are in charge of the teams. Such is the case of lauguiha Mohamed, mentioned above, and Minetu Larabas Sueidat, the coordinator of the Mine Action Program of AOA in Western Sahara, who followed the example of her predecessor Mariem Zaid, the first Sahrawi to leave the refugee camp six years ago with the task of locating and destroying landmines (Hernández, 2014). Zaid had never travelled anywhere before; her reality and her world existed only in the camps.

Lauguiha Mohamed knows that what she does is not a simple job; for her it is a commitment to her country and to her compatriots who continue to suffer the ravages of war. The purpose of her work is to free part of Western Sahara of bombs so that the Sahrawi refugees can live there. However, she recognises that the war continues, because civilian victims are still being mourned (Delgado, 2018).

## Other peaceful resistances of Sahrawi women

As we have seen throughout the paper and according to María Luisa Grande and Susana Ruiz (2016), Sahrawi women are putting their capacity for commitment, creativity and resistance to good use in the political project for the liberation and independence of the Sahrawi people.

Sahrawi women, together with their people, have resisted through actions to demine their territory. Their resistance is strongly

based on their social organisation at different scales; not only in the camps or through their National Organization of Sahrawi Women, but also with the *intifadas*, the *infra-politics* exercised in the Moroccan occupied territories, and the expression and use of the arts; an example is the voice of the Sahrawi singer Mariem Hassan (1958–2015), who spread Sahrawi culture and protest against the Moroccan occupation and exile of her people.

The Sahrawi people decided to lay down their arms to continue their peaceful resistance. Today, this decision has been questioned by certain Sahrawi sectors in view of the international ineffectiveness of the 1991 peace agreement.

In the early 1980s, acts of resistance in occupied territories were largely clandestine. Joanna Allan (Allan, 2016) mentions that outside the public sphere, “hidden transcription” (Scott, 1990) grew; that is, overt acts of resistance to the occupier were multiplied behind closed doors. Thus, since the Sahrawi inhabitants could not protest publicly in a safe manner, they used strategies of “*infra-politics*” (Scott, 1990), which refers both to these hidden transcripts, and to daily acts of resistance and dissident subcultures.

Periodic and peaceful protests, called Sahrawi *intifadas*,<sup>18</sup> have been important in the occupied territories since the late 1970s. Recently, one of the most significant was that in November 2010. In response to the call for freedom, for a whole month 7,000 tents were erected, bringing together almost 30,000 Sahrawis to form the Gdeim Izik camp (15 km from Aaiun, in the Moroccan-occupied territory). The camp was brutally dismantled by Moroccan security forces. According to Allan (2016), this protest is considered by Noam Chomsky as “the seed of Arab springs”. However, the changes spurred by the latter, which brought a lot of hope to the Sahrawi people, have hardly had any impact on the political situation of the conflict.

These demonstrations include figures such as Djimi el Ghalia, Hdad Hdad, Sultana Jaya and Brahim Noumria. One woman in particular stands out: Aminetu Haidar, best known for her activism against the Moroccan occupation,<sup>19</sup> whose 32-day hunger strike at Lanzarote airport in 2009 had significant media coverage.

There are numerous examples of women who have followed the same path of struggle, repression, imprisonment and torture. In this sense, women in the occupied territories have played an important role in the struggle against the Moroccan occupation (Grande & Ruiz, 2016).

## Final thoughts

The body as the first territory - and therefore its *corpopolitics* - is immersed in the spheres of *biopolitics* and, above all, *necropolitics*. We have shown how this count for people living in the Sahrawi disputed territory which is not internationally recognised and is not in direct war either; but it is mine-controlled by Morocco, in order to keep the bodies of the Sahrawi people vulnerable in their own territory. However, some of the actions in the struggle for justice and resistance of the Sahrawi women are carried out not only through the deactivation of mines, but also through art, understood as a means or a tool that contributes to social transformation for the benefit of the Sahrawi people.

The work done by deminer women (where many of them have no other options than being engaged in mine clearance) repair and heal the territorial fragmentation that provoked the Sahrawi deterritorialisation. The demining activity is part of the construction of “spaces of hope” through the bodily action of Sahrawi women. Movement carried out in which their bodies are the main actors of their freedom sensation and utopias, in spite of not having assured the future in an uncertain present, where there is no true peace, but neither war, nor resolution. Given this scenario, the recognition of a territory, and therefore the existence of Sahrawi people, becomes more fortuitous. This is where the importance of the continuation of resistance comes in.

From the refugee camps, Sahrawi women in exile have shown us that, despite their de-reterritorialisation by war, they have become the safeguards of Sahrawi roots, history and identity. They are organising and actively participating in the social and political restructuring during the last forty years of the Sahrawi struggle and seemingly unending resistance in one of the world’s most closed, dangerous, and complex borders. The geopolitical interests of the region, mainly on the part of the Moroccan and European governments over the Sahrawi territory, reaffirm borders as places of disagreement, tension, and conflict.

As stated by María Luisa Grande and Susana Ruiz (Grande & Ruiz, 2016), the contribution of women to peace processes and conflict resolutions continues to become increasingly important in the context of international relations and studies and

research on armed conflicts. In many cases, such as that of Sahrawi women, the role and presence of women is still scarce and without sufficient international recognition. But it is worth mentioning that the UNMS and its actions reflect an incipient Muslim feminist movement, with nuances that differ from Western feminism, which fights for real, and not only formal equality of men and women in the midst of their peaceful resistance to the conflict with Morocco.

For this reason, we attempted to approach the issue from the perspective of feminist geographies, so as to obtain first-hand information and have the chance to analyse it with alternative and interdisciplinary methodologies from activism through dance. With this we seek to know the personal experiences of Sahrawi women, through their bodies and from the different corporeality present in their complex reality, and thus reveal to the world their perspective and feelings regarding their situation, in order to understand their position. By making their bodies and their movement visible, Sahrawi women seek alternatives for survival, resistance and conflict resolution.

Finally, for both André Lepecki (Lepecki, 2016) and the Hanin Performing Collective, the task of the dancer is particularly urgent at the present time, when control practices have redefined all socio-political fields on the freedom of movement of bodies. Therefore, from our participation as artists in the Festival Artifatiti (metaphorically as an oasis, as another "space of hope"), it is up to us to imagine and represent a movement policy as a choreopolitics of freedom for the Sahrawi people.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Part of this investigation was previously presented at the 8th International Conference of Critical Geography in Athens, Greece, 19-23 April 2019. First of all, I would like to thank Louise Fabian for her interest, support and confidence in the realization and publication of this article. Also to Ingrid Ebergenyi for her translation, and to Cynthia Abeledo, Perla Abdie Muñoz, Constanza Romero and Erika Pérez for the review and reading of the English text.
- 2 From our participation with *Hanin* (Arabic word that means “longing”, “nostalgia”):<https://hanincolectivo.wordpress.com/>
- 3 This is the integral element of agricultural fertilizer production. Morocco dominates the world’s phosphate market with a share of 85% of total production. In 2014, Fos Bucraa produced about 3 million tons of phosphate, with an estimated value of \$230 million USD per year (Western Sahara Resource Watch, 2015).
- 4 GeoBrujas is a community of women geographers (Adriana Hernández, Esperanza González Hernández, Frida Itzel Rivera, Gabriela Fenner, Giulia Marchese, Karina Flores, Karla Helena Guzmán, Nadia Matamoros and Valeria Ysunza) formed in Mexico in 2014 who live in different parts of the country, and have found various motivations to question and transform the patriarchal geographical activity, understanding cartography perspectives on bodies and territories as a tool loaded with ideology, something considered important to deconstruct, decentralise, and socialise at a collective and community level.
- 5 “According to Roberto Esposito, Rudolph Kjellen was the first to use the term at the beginning of the twentieth century to account for the State as a living entity, thus inaugurating an organicist conception of politics [that is, as a] direct and persistent reference to the sphere of nature as a privileged parameter of political determination” (López, 2014, p. 112).
- 6 Definition discussed in the “*Corpólicas*” meeting, organised in Buenos Aires 8–17 June, 2007 (Werth, 2007). This refers to the fact that there are forces that cause certain bodies to be charged and validated with greater power than others.
- 7 It refers to the approach to the human body from the perspective of institutional actors, who determine knowledge, techniques and technologies for its social and political control (Hernández, 2006).
- 8 According to Miguel Hernández (2006) – who takes up Michel Foucault’s (1975) ideas – the body is understood as the centre of a struggle of powers and counter-powers, whose immediate effects are the conformation of subjects, due to the game of strategies and forces that are interwoven of statements and identities fixed in the reality of the body by its practices and meanings.
- 9 One of its first social achievements was the 27 February School, created on 14 November 1978. It was the first school for women, which became the symbol of an organisation and the banner of the formation of Sahrawi women.
- 10 <http://www.artifariti.org/en/about-artifariti>
- 11 It refers to social movements that respond to the spatial organisation of the state and capital.
- 12 For Foucault (2008), these are different spaces; these other places, these mythical and real challenges to the space in which we live.
- 13 According to Foucault, utopias are places without real space. They are the spaces in which a general relationship of direct or inverse analogy is established with real space.
- 14 <http://www.artifariti.org/en/>

- 15 André Lepecki (2016) talks about “the political” in the freedom movement: The adjectival ‘political’ defined as the movement of freedom is a difficult, constantly evolving compromise. It is less based on a subject than on a movement, defined by intersubjective action, which must also be learned, tested, nourished and above all experienced and practiced. Again, and again, and in each repetition, through each repetition, renewed. What is the practice that needs to be practiced ensuring that the political does not disappear from the world? Precisely that thing we call freedom. The disappearance of the political thing from the world is the disappearance of the experience and practice of movement as freedom.
- 16 A traditional long, wavy, high-pitched sound from the mouth, made by women to express joy in Arab and Middle Eastern countries. It is produced by the rapid agitation of the tongue, also accompanied by a shout.
- 17 It is a theatrical proposal, created and systematised by the Brazilian playwright and pedagogue Augusto Boal in the sixties. It was a response to the country’s dictatorship, to represent situations of oppression, as well as their possible liberation through the stage (flexible, mobile, adaptable, and spontaneous, be it a stage or the streets) and as a space of freedom and creativity, with the involvement of all participants and people in the audience.
- 18 An Arabic word that means “uprising”. There have been several intifadas throughout the conflict: 1976, 1987, 1999-2994, 2005, 2010 (Barona, 2015).
- 19 Her life as an activist began at the age of 17, involving herself in the struggle of the Sahrawi people in the Moroccan-occupied territories. She was arrested in 1987 after participating in a demonstration, and many believed that she was missing. She was tortured for four years in a Moroccan prison. She was arrested again in 2005, but international pressure led to her release after five months in prison (Grande & Ruiz, 2016).