

Education, exile, and teaching in Sahrawi refugee camps

Educación, exilio y enseñanza en los campamentos de refugiadas y refugiados saharauis

Educação, exílio e ensino nos campos de refugiados saarauís

Amira Sidahmed Mohamed-Fadel
Juventud Activa Saharaui
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4332-8416>
amiramohsid@gmail.com

Abstract

The history of colonialism -and occupation, in many places such as Palestine, for example- continues to wreak havoc today. This is also the case for the Sahrawi population, whose history spans both colonialism and exile. A large part of this population lives in refugee camps in Tindouf, in southwestern of Algeria, in one of the most inhospitable place in the world. This exile forced the Sahrawi people to create a state from scratch, with its respective ministries. Regarding education, a system with certain colonial foundations -was created. However, it persists above all thanks to the commitment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic's (SADR) to education as a tool for the liberation of their land, a land rich in natural resources such as phosphates and other minerals, which are stolen and exploited during Spanish colonization and continue to be plundered today Moroccan occupation. The Sahrawi education system is primarily divided into compulsory education stages and special education schools, alongside vocational and teacher training, including the University of Tifariti. The shortage of materials and infrastructure presents a major challenge to maintaining the system and providing quality teaching. The feminization of teaching is a reality, as is the fight against illiteracy.

Keywords: Colonialism, comparative education, special education, imperialism, inclusive education, refugee, Sahara, Western Sahara.

Resumen

La historia del colonialismo -y la ocupación, en tantos lugares como, por ejemplo, en Palestina- sigue haciendo estragos en nuestros días: este es el caso de la población saharauí, cuya historia transcurre entre ello, y el exilio. Gran parte de esta población vive en los campamentos de refugiadas y refugiados en Tinduf, al suroeste de Argelia, en medio del más inhóspito lugar del mundo. Dicho exilio obligó a la población saharauí a crear un Estado desde cero con sus respectivos ministerios. En lo que respecta a la educación, se creó un sistema con una cierta base colonial, pero, sobre todo, persistiendo gracias

a la apuesta que hace la República Árabe Saharaui Democrática (RASD) por la enseñanza como herramienta para la liberación de su tierra, una tierra rica en recursos naturales como son el fosfato, y otros minerales, los cuales son robados y explotados, como recursos naturales que son, por la colonización española en su momento y, actualmente, por la ocupación marroquí. El sistema educativo saharai se divide principalmente en las etapas educativas obligatorias, y las escuelas de educación especial, junto a la formación profesional, y del profesorado, pudiéndose considerar la Universidad de Tifariti. La escasez de materiales y la falta de infraestructuras es bastante notable, lo que supone un desafío para mantener el sistema de enseñanza, y ofrecer una educación de calidad, donde la feminización de la enseñanza es un hecho, así como la lucha contra el analfabetismo.

Palabras clave: Colonialismo, educación comparada, educación especial, imperialismo, inclusión educativa, refugiado, Sáhara, Sáhara Occidental.

Resumo

A história do colonialismo -e da ocupação, em muitos locais, como a Palestina, por exemplo- continua a causar estragos nos dias de hoje: é o caso da população saarauí, cuja história abrange tanto o colonialismo como o exílio. Grande parte desta população vive em campos de refugiados em Tindouf, no sudoeste da Argélia, no meio do lugar mais inóspito do mundo. Este exílio obrigou a população saarauí a criar um estado de raiz com os seus respectivos ministérios. Em relação à educação, criou-se um sistema com uma certa base colonial, mas, sobretudo, que persiste graças ao compromisso da República Árabe Saharaui Democrática (RASD) com a educação como ferramenta para a libertação da sua terra, uma terra rica em recursos naturais como o fosfato e outros minerais, que são roubados e explorados, como recursos naturais que são, pela colonização espanhola da época e, atualmente, pela ocupação marroquina. O sistema educativo saarauí está dividido principalmente em etapas de educação obrigatória e escolas de educação especial, juntamente com a formação profissional e de professores, incluindo a Universidade de Tifariti. A escassez de materiais e a falta de infraestruturas são bastante significativas, representando um desafio à manutenção do sistema educativo e à oferta de uma educação de qualidade, onde a feminização do ensino seja uma realidade, assim como o combate ao analfabetismo.

Palavras-chave: Colonialismo, educação comparada, educação especial, imperialismo, inclusão educativa, refugiado, Saara, Saara Ocidental.

Introduction. Western Sahara.

Western Sahara is the only country in the world that is divided by a wall from north to south, the Wall of Shame, “more than 2,700 kilometres long and riddled with landmines” (del Pozo, 2023, p. 197). This

wall separates the entire population, making it the most heavily mined country on the planet (Reviejo, 2020), with all the dangers that this entails for its population. The history of the Sahrawi people goes back many centuries before the Berlin Conference in 1884, where the great European powers divided up Africa.

The Saharawis were nomadic tribes living in the land of the Bidan in northwest Africa. However, it was with the arrival of Spanish colonialism that the boundaries of what was then known as the Spanish Sahara were established (Barreñada, 2022).

With the beginning of the alleged decolonisation of African countries in the early 1960s, the movement for the liberation of Western Sahara, known as the Polisario Front, began (Mouzo, 2025). Spanish colonialism continued until 1975, Spanish Sahara was considered another province of the Spanish state, province 53 (Bengochea, 2024). It was with the Tripartite Madrid accords of 14 November 1975 (United Nations, 1975), when Spain sold Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania, that the invasion and war among the three countries began. Prior to that, on 30 October 1975, the Green March took place, known to the Saharawis as the Black March, marking the beginning of the civilian invasion of Western Sahara, with the massive entry of thousands of Moroccans into the territory, escorted by the Moroccan army (Fernández, 2022).

With the outbreak of the war, a large part of the population continued to live under occupation in precarious conditions, while the other part was forced into exile in the Hamada desert in southern Algeria, in the province of Tindouf. There, more than 200,000 Sahrawi refugees currently reside, surviving on humanitarian aid (Hassena-Ahreyem et al., 2023). In these camps, where they have been living for more than five decades, is the headquarters of the Polisario Front, the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people. Moreover, a state in exile has been created: the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

The main needs faced by the Sahrawi population are the lack of water, sanitation, hygiene, and food safety. Despite some improvements in recent years, the basic standards required to meet these needs are still not being met (Sobejano, 2018). According to the Sahrawi Refugees Response Plan 2024-2025 (United Nations, 2023), 75% of what is needed remains unmet (Sobejano, 2018). 75% of what students consume within this population comes from foreign humanitarian aid, while only 23% comes from the regional market, resulting in numerous nutritional deficiencies and chronic diseases.

There are many adversities facing the Sahrawi people, but one of the biggest challenges is education. What is it like to build a quality education system in a refugee camp? What are the educational opportunities and the future of the Sahrawi population? Is education truly possible in a refugee camp?

The evidence suggests that yes, education is possible in such a dystopian place, despite the constraints, and this is in large part thanks to the Sahrawi women living in the camps.

Thanks to Saharawi women, who are in charge of the social and educational fabric of the population, there has been empowerment, a struggle for a more egalitarian society, and greater representation in Sahrawi politics, with SADR being one of the few African states where a woman has held the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Interior. All of this has led Sahrawi women to build a more egalitarian society, and achieve a greater representation in Sahrawi politics, as well as an unprecedented collective identity centred on survival shaped by the experiences they have lived through (Martínez et al., 2023).

The legal question

At the international level, the question of Western Sahara is very clear. Since the first UN resolutions, the International Court of Justice has denied that the territory of Western Sahara belongs to Morocco (Wynter et al., 2018), thereby affirming that Western Sahara is a Non-Self-Governing Territory, the largest and most populous of the 17 Non-Self-Governing Territories in existence today. Moreover, the Court considers Resolution 1514 (United Nations, 1960), concerning the decolonisation of Western Sahara, to be applicable, thus supporting the will of the Saharawi people (Barreñada, 2020).

The status and situation of Western Sahara are reviewed annually by the UN Special Committee on Decolonisation... allegedly. However, despite many years of negotiation, the referendum on the status of Western Sahara, promised to the Saharawis in the 1990s, has not taken place. The war of attrition continues, worsening the situation of the Saharawi population, both those in exile, and those suffering daily from rape and torture under Moroccan occupation (de Currea-Lugo, 2011).

After many years, the occupation, only intensifies and becomes more chronic over time, as the Saharawi people's right to self-determination remains unaddressed. Furthermore, the Saharawi people still do not have sovereignty over their natural resources, which continue to be plundered by the Moroccan occupation (González, 2018).

The media issue

Western Sahara suffers from a prolonged media blackout, which limits the dissemination and visibility of the political and social situation. This media silence has a considerable influence on the global perception of the human rights violations suffered by the people of Western Sahara, both under occupation and in exile. Reporters Without Borders describes the situation of journalism in the occupied territories as a 'news desert', due to the repression and persecution of Saharawi journalists who report

on what is happening in the territory. Meanwhile, doing journalism from the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria) is a real challenge, full of limitations due to the lack of resources in all aspects of life including media and information (Carrión, 2023).

Fernández and Sánchez (2023) emphasise how alien Western societies are to the human rights violations experienced by the Sahrawi people, along with many others, as these are not made visible in the news and information. At the international level, due to the lack of media coverage, it can be argued that the pending decolonisation -and the occupation of Western Sahara- is a case of media silence, where the struggle of an entire people is mistreated and silenced in the eyes of the world. For this reason, Sahrawi digital activism is on the rise. Through digital platforms, activists seek to break this silence, although this poses a great challenge due to the aforementioned restrictions (Wynter, 2022).

Meanwhile, in Spain, information on the occupation of Western Sahara is practically non-existent, as the issue is not covered in the country's major newspapers or news appearing on television. The information that is available is conditioned by the political situation in the country at any given time. What was for 18 years, the 53rd province of Spain, is today an unknown case for Spanish citizens (Díaz, 2023; García, 2024).

Education in refuge

Since the Sahrawi population was forced to seek refuge in exile in the Algerian Hamada, the SADR began to organise different areas, but mainly at the level of education, as it sought to combat the high levels of illiteracy in the Saharawi population left by Spanish colonialism, reaching 90% for men and 92% for women. The SADR government's main commitment was to send as many children and young people as possible to study in all the countries that offered them support in terms of education. Future generations of Saharawis, and possibly SADR leaders, spent decades in host countries. At the same time, schools began to be improvised, where, in a very basic way, people who knew how to read and write taught the rest of the population, making the tents their classrooms and the sand their notebooks.

At the beginning of 1976, the SADR began to build the first *tarbias* (nursery schools) and *madrasas* (primary schools) in all the *dairas* of each *wilaya* (camp), thanks to humanitarian aid. At the same time, women's literacy schools, vocational training centres, secondary education centres and teacher training centres were progressively established, thus reaching a figure of less than 1% illiteracy, an unimaginable figure for a population that lives on humanitarian aid, as is the case in many cases colonised by 'developed countries' (Vinagrero, 2020). Similarly, it can be affirmed that the Sahrawi education system has a hierarchical organisation, with the SADR Ministry of Education at the top, followed by the education directorate of each *wilaya*, and, finally, the direct team of each educational centre (Campillo, 2009). According to Pallarés and Cannet (1999), the Sahrawi constitution clearly

envisages universal and free education, which is why Article 7 states that 'education, health and social protection are the rights of all citizens' (Oliver, 1987, p. 273).

In turn, Pallarés and Cannet (1999) state that the Sahrawi education system divides compulsory education into two stages, infant and primary education, from 3 to 12 years of age, which take place in *tarbias* and *madrasas* in the *dairas* themselves. Secondary education is provided in schools outside the *dairas* or in boarding schools. One of the difficulties facing the Sahrawi education system is the lack of its own textbooks, although efforts are increasing to develop textbooks with a Sahrawi curriculum. Despite this, the SADR Ministry of Education makes recommendations on methodology, assessment and content based on Algerian textbooks.

Pre-school education

In the Sahrawi refugee camps, it takes place in *tarbias*: the buildings are usually oval-shaped, with an outer courtyard, and in the centre is the flag of Western Sahara. Around the perimeter are the different classrooms (Trujillo, 2010).

Pre-school education is only compulsory in its second cycle, from 3 to 6 years old. It is estimated that there were/are around 7640 children (Yern, 2015). Classes have a ratio of 20 pupils. There are usually two classes per year group, so in most *tarbias* there is a total of six classes. The timetable is in the morning, and once the classes are over, a lunch is offered to all students which serves as an incentive for families (Quibus, 2022).

It is important to note that there is no fixed curriculum in the case of early childhood education. At this level, the focus is mainly on competences such as play, socialisation, stories, songs and basic knowledge of the alphabet and numbers. These latter skills are mainly developed more directly in the third year, as a preparation for primary school.

The teaching staff of the *tarbias* is made up entirely of women, who have been trained in vocational schools in the SADR. Thanks to all these efforts, the illiteracy rate has decreased from 73%, achieving 100% school enrolment for all children (Campillo, 2009).

Primary education

Primary education covers the ages from 6 to 12 years, thus establishing six grades. In the third year, the study of Spanish as a second language becomes compulsory, along with other subjects such as history, geography, Islamic education, drawing, physical education, mathematics, natural sciences, and Arabic, in a split timetable from 9:00 to 13:00, and from 16:00 to 18:00, from Saturday to Thursday. Thanks to all the work of the SADR and the compulsory nature of education, a 99% enrolment rate has been achieved.

In terms of content, once again, Algerian textbooks are used, except for Spanish language books. The SADR Ministry of Education issue the necessary guidelines to carry out teaching practice, and approximately 30 primary schools are reported to exist.

These schools face the same difficulties as the *tarbias*: lack of materials, furniture, outdated infrastructure, etc. The schools usually have a teachers' room, an administration office, a kitchen for preparing lunches, and a rest area; the playground also lacks play and sports equipment (Quibus, 2022).

In relation to assessment, this is carried out by means of final exams each term, which are assessed by each teacher. In the final year, a revalidation takes place and, therefore, the exams are conducted by the Ministry of Education to determine whether students can proceed to compulsory secondary education and/or vocational training. Vocational training in the Sahrawi education system is not part of higher education (Velloso and Vinagrero, 2016). At this educational stage, although it is not exclusively taught by women, female teachers make up the majority of the teaching staff.

Secondary education

Secondary education in the Sahrawi refugee camps is a recent reality. Previously, students had to go to boarding schools in the interior of Algeria in order to study at this stage. Currently, there are about three compulsory secondary schools in each wilaya, where grades 7 to 10 are taught, in addition to the 12 de Octubre School, and the Simón Bolívar School, which are located on the outskirts of the camps, These are boarding schools where the students stay from Sunday to Thursday. At the same time, vocational training courses are offered in the wilayas oriented to the needs of the population and the environment in which they live (Velloso and Vinagrero, 2016).

In the specific case of the Simón Bolívar School, it is sustained thanks to humanitarian aid from Cuba and Venezuela, countries that promoted the opening of this educational place in 2011. This school has a capacity for 700 students, and the teachers are Saharawis who have been trained in Cuba and/or Cubans. Subjects are taught in both Arabic and Spanish. In Spanish: Spanish Language and Literature, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Labour Education, Physical Education and Computer Science. In Arabic: Arabic Language and Literature, History, Geography and Islamic Education. As students progress through this stage of education, the subjects become more specialised depending on the branch of study (Quibus, 2022).

In relation to vocational training, it was created with the aim of responding to the labour needs of certain students, either because they did not complete secondary education or because they dropped out. This is the task of the State Secretariat, which is in charge of meeting the labour demands in the territory. The Gazuani Educational Centre, which has a capacity for 70 students, the Olof Palme centre, and the 27 de Febrero school for Women, were created for the same purpose. The diplomas that are issued and

their financing are provided by foreign entities. For this reason, the presence of international cooperation in this educational stage is very significant, as it promotes the employability and access to training for students who do not complete secondary education (Monje, 2022).

Due to the needs and complications facing education in the Sahrawi refugee camps, there is no university of any kind in the camps. As a result, students are forced to emigrate for higher education to countries such as Algeria, Libya, Cuba and Venezuela, which offer scholarships to the best students. The SADR recommends that these students pursue careers such as medicine, engineering and teaching, since many other careers are of limited practical use in the refugee camps. The fact that students are forced to live outside the Sahrawi refugee camps sometimes leads to a certain sense of uprooting and even a loss of cultural identity (Gómez, 2022).

Special education

Given the needs of the population residing in the Sahrawi refugee camps, special education did not become visible until the 1990s. It initially catered mainly to people affected by the war, but over time, support was extended to individuals with intellectual and/or physical disabilities. At the beginning, the assistance provided was primarily a charitable effort by private individuals. Once the SADR Ministry of Education took over, special education schools were created, with the aim of integrating this population into society (Quibus, 2022).

In each wilaya, there are two special education centres: one for people with visual impairments and another for individuals with intellectual, hearing and/or language impairments. The structure of these centres is similar to that of the madrasas and includes writing rooms, consultation rooms, experimental rooms, showers, workshops and libraries. The goal is to help people become more autonomous and to encourage in a safe environment. Each centre can accommodate a maximum of 60 people, ranging in age from 7 to 22 years, as they are not allowed to remain in the centres beyond that age.

With the creation of these centres, it has become possible to normalise the situation of people with any kind of special needs, because in many cases they were stigmatised by society and even hidden by their families. For this reason, in many instances, the person in charge of each centre has to talk to the families to convince them to send their children to the schools, where a diagnosis is made and a decision is taken regarding their admission. At the same time, the system in the refugee camps still lacks the means and professionals to properly identify the special needs of children, in addition to the lack of educational counselling in all schools.

The aim of special education is to achieve the integration and autonomy of these individuals, using an educational methodology based on play and the practical application of knowledge, in which hands-on activities are fundamental (Navarro et al., 2020). Through this approach, they learn a trade in order to

gain a certain level of economic independence. However, once they reach the age of 22, they are forced to leave special education, which represents a setback in terms of social integration.

Special education, like all other stages of education, faces many infrastructural problems, in addition to requiring a greater number of specific materials, having insufficient specialised teacher training, and lacking vehicles to transport people with reduced mobility.

All of this means that only one special centre in all the wilayas has the capacity to attend to students with motor disabilities. As a result, those who cannot attend this centre are forced to go to ordinary schools, where not all of their needs are not taken into account, for the reasons already mentioned (Velloso and Vinagrero, 2016).

For all these reasons, it is necessary to highlight the existence of these centres and the barriers faced by the Saharawi population in accessing education in a refugee camp, particularly for those with special needs. If it is difficult for anyone to find a job, it is even more complex for people with special needs, which hinders their autonomy and inclusion. From a gender perspective, women with special needs are much more vulnerable in refugee camps (Julio, 2015).

Conclusions

With all the above, it can be seen that the colonial and imperialist era left Saharawi people with many shortcomings in education. However, after the proclamation of the SADR, the Saharawi government, through great efforts, achieved significant progress in this area, schooling all students from three to sixteen. Therefore, it can be said that illiteracy is almost non-existent in the Saharawi refugee camps. At the same time, in order to protect children and ensure their rights, the Health Committee of each daira is responsible for the care of children and for meeting their health and educational needs from an early age. These committees are run by women, thus highlighting the fundamental role of Sahrawi women socially, politically, educationally and in terms of health. A comparison with neighbouring countries shows that Sahrawi women have achieved greater freedom and involvement in the state (Campillo, 2009).

In the same vein, the education sector is practically feminised in the Sahrawi education system, a fact that occurs in many parts of the world due to the feminisation of educational and care professions (Pangritz & Andrš, 2024; Larios, 2024; Henao, 2025). Teaching in the Sahrawi refugee camps is poorly paid, as they survive on humanitarian aid, so many female teachers volunteer to educate (Quibus, 2022). Most of the teachers have been trained at the National School of Women 27 February and/or the Olof Palme School. The younger teachers have been trained at the Algerian universities with specific academic training.

The shortcomings faced by the Sahrawi education system are not only in terms of teacher training, but also in terms of resources and infrastructure, due to the lack of educational material that can be used by all students and even a shortage of basic resources such as chairs and tables. For teacher training,

Spanish universities cooperate with the Sahrawi education system by coming to the camps every year to carry out training (Aranda et al., 2012).

The limited resources at their disposal make educational variety and innovation impossible, affecting teaching and learning processes considerably (Gómez, 2022). In my view, above all, the fact that SADR has concentrated heavily on increasing the number of secondary schools in the camps has meant that infant and primary education are likely to have fewer resources allocated to them.

Martínez et al. (2023) highlight the need to create international cooperation networks to provide resources and teaching materials to schools in the Sahrawi refugee camps, with the aim of promoting this educational system and even implementing new teaching models adapted to the context. Adaptation to the context of the Sahrawi refugee camps and educational innovation are posing a challenge for education professionals, due to the shortcomings already pointed out, especially in the subject of Spanish, which is the second official language and is taught as a compulsory subject from the third year of primary school (Rodríguez, 2024).

Colonialism and exile continue to take their toll at all levels, but even so, the history of Western Sahara is a history of resistance and continuous struggle, where an entire nation is committed to education as a fundamental tool for socio-cultural advancement, the struggle for the independence of Western Sahara, and the leadership of the SADR as a state in a free Western Sahara, far from exile.

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