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SAHRAWI REFUGEE CAMPS AND SAHRAWI REFUGEE WOMEN, A UNIQUENESS IN NORTHERN AFRICA

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Introduction

Nowadays the Sahrawi conflict is one of the oldest non-resolved conflicts. From 1884 to 1975, Western Sahara was a Spanish colony. In 1973, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguiaat el-Hamra y Río de Oro, known by its Spanish acronym Frente Polisario, was created. Quickly, it gained popularity because it led to the independence's movement and launched its first raids against Spanish holding. At the same time, Morocco and Mauritania claimed also their sovereignty over the Sahrawi territory. They started to fight against Polisario when Spain transferred its colony to Morocco in 1975, even if the transfer was rejected by the International Court of Justice¹. In 1976, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was proclaimed, but due to the war, tens of thousands of Sahrawis started to flee to refugee camps in Algeria, the first allied country that recognised them². After violent assaults, Mauritania signed a peace agreement with Polisario while Morocco kept going on, engaging in armed conflict with Polisario. It was not until 1991 that a ceasefire was established with the creation of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, also called MINURSO, by the United Nations in order to oversee the implementation of the peace plan and the organisation of a referendum. Today, the Western Sahara "remains on the UN's list of non-self-governing territories pending decolonisation, and the camps continue to be home to both Sahrawi refugees and the Polisario³". However, Morocco is continuing to reject any referendum that would include independence as an option.

When a population is faced a crisis such as war, it is quite common that it migrates, so did the Sahrawi people to Algeria. The refugee camps settled in Algeria needed humanitarian aids to survive. However, with a minimal presence of international NGOs/IGOs workers in the camps and helped by Polisario, the population took control to rule and to organise the

¹ See annex 1

² Toby Shelley, *Endgame in the Western Sahara, What Future for Africa last Colony?*, London, New York, Zed Books, 2004, p IX.

³ Rachel Rosen, Katherine Twamley, *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood, Friends or Foes?*, London, University College London, 2018, p 94.

camps since the beginning. Thus, the Sahrawi refugees became "the ideal refugees"⁴ as the management of their camps showed a particular uniqueness among refugee camps all around the world. In addition, the women's role in the Sahrawi society and consequently in the camps is also a major characteristic of this "uniqueness". Indeed, their egalitarian approach was highlighted from the creation of the camps, even if, the Polisario's leaders "where primarily male activists", they had a "strong commitment to the principle of women's emancipation"⁵. Their guideline was clear as evidenced in the following extract from the Polisario's official journal published in 1974: "It has become necessary for our struggle... that the Sahrawi women bears all responsibilities and undertakes her duty in the national struggle by participating actively in the armed revolution like her sisters in the Palestinian, Algerian and Guinea-Bissau revolutions"⁶.

Moreover, it should be noted that according to UNHCR, women refugees are particularly vulnerable to Sexual Gender-based Violence in both conflict and post-conflict contexts⁷. Post-conflict insecurity for female refugees is evident through their vulnerability to sexual abuse, trafficking, and enslavement within refugee camps yet the situation is quite different in Sahrawi refugee camps. The Sahrawi women insisted that "they themselves have not experienced this kind of sexual oppression in the camps"⁸. The role that women played in several aspects of camp life was very important from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, as they comprised an estimated 80% of the adult population. In 2001, "the UNHCR's Refugee

⁴ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, *The Ideal Refugees, Gender Islam, and the Sahrawi politics of survival*, Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2014, p 1.

⁵ Tony Hodges, *The Western Saharans*, London, Minority Rights Group, 1984, in Rachel Rosen, Katherine Twamley, *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood, Friends or Foes?*, London, University College London, 2018, p 94.

⁶ Tony Hodges, *The Western Saharans*, London, Minority Rights Group, 1984 in Rachel Rosen, Katherine Twamley, *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood, Friends or Foes?*, London, University College London, 2018, p 95.

⁷ UNHCR, *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced People, Guidelines for Prevention and Response*, May 2003.

⁸ Tina Wallace, "Saharawi Women: 'Between Ambition and Suffering'.", 1994, *Focus on Gender* 2, no.1, p 51.

Women and Gender Equality [...] explicitly presented the camp-based National Union of Sahrawi Women, NUSW, as an example of “good practice on gender mainstreaming”⁹.

To what extent the uniqueness of Sahrawi life's camps allowed Sahrawi women's empowerment? The first part will present the original organisation of the Sahrawi camps, then it will precise how the political project of including women is organised to finish with the empowerment of women.

I - The original organisation of the Sahrawi camps

The camps' creation and their management by the Sahrawi authorities could be proof to show their capacity to self-govern. Five camps are located near Tindouf, southern Algeria: Smara, Dahkla, Aaiun, Auserd, and Boujdour¹⁰.

1. A Republic in practice

As the refugees became more settled in 1976, they began to implement a system of self-management. Thus, from 1975, "leaders instituted new structures for the political life of the Front and the administration of the SADR and the refugee camps. They included:

- ❖ The congresses (popularly elected representational meetings) of the base (the *daira*, or town);
- ❖ The popular councils (elected leadership) of the *daira*;
- ❖ The popular councils of the *wilaya* (region);
- ❖ The national popular congress;
- ❖ The Sahrawi National Council;

⁹ Rachel Rosen, Katherine Twamley, *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood, Friends or Foes?*, London, University College London, 2018, p 97.

¹⁰ See annexes 2 and 3 for more details about Dahkla's organisation

- ❖ The Executive Committee/Command Council of the Revolution, the highest administrative body¹¹”.

Since women make up the majority, these political structures involved significant numbers of women. Besides, the Sahrawi National Council includes women as well. This very structured organisation also confirms the will of the establishment of a Republic, particularly with the new Constitution of 1991 which speaks to the rights of all citizens "not defined by sex¹²". It also contains specific sections on "human rights include mention of old people, mothers, wounded people, and victims of the war for liberation and their fathers, mothers, minor children, and widows¹³". Furthermore, the SADR is also part of the African Union (AU), advocates of people self-determination, since 1982 and was considered as a full member of the AU in 1984. In order to protest Morocco boycotted the Tripoli Summit in 1982 and eventually left the AU two years later.

2. Active agent of the conflict: the place of the nationalism achievement

Regardless of population, moving to a camp is always a traumatic experience. Yet, Sahrawi people refused to be passive and they acted to use this exile as a strength to legitimate their fight.

The Western Sahara was a battlefield occupied by Morocco between 1975 and 1991, and the camps seem to be a relative safer place to Sahrawi nation building. The main idea was to create a collective identity that would become national, founded on solidarity and common destiny¹⁴. Even in exile, they succeed to be unified in a special location (the refugee camp area) and not only people who live in tribes. Within the project of camp's

¹¹ Anne Lippert, "Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People, University of Chicago Press, 1992, Vol. 17, No. 3, p 643. For more details, it is also recommended to read Tony Hodges, Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara, London, Sacrecrow, 1982.

¹² Anne Lippert, "Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People, University of Chicago Press, 1992, Vol. 17, No. 3, p 644.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Université Paris Nanterre, Sahara occidental, une colonie en mutation, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2008, p 154.

management, we also find the willingness to return home. Indeed, the more the Sahrawi refugees work on their organisation, the more their determination for independence grows¹⁵. This determination is explained by their efforts to become legitimate as an independent nation and to get worldwide recognition. Indeed, the United Nations and international institutions are looking at what Sahrawi refugees are doing. Because of their uniqueness, they are a window on the world, that is why they need, and they want to do things properly. It is also a way to oppose Morocco which denies the existence of the Sahrawi nation.

The refugee camps, that are ultimately the base camps for Polisario fighters, lie within Algerian territory, so the military movement and civilian reservoir exist only with Algerian complicity. Indeed, Algeria has been a strong supporter of Sahrawi independence and the first country to recognize them in 1976. Different reasons can explain this support: Algeria describes itself as an advocate of self-determination, that is to say they promote the right for the people to freely choose their sovereignty and international political status with no foreign interference. However, another reason is Algeria wants to have the hegemony in the Maghreb area (they can have a close partner to access the Atlantic Ocean and it would also deny to Morocco significant resources like phosphates, iron, and fishing).

Moreover, those camps are a real hub for what it is today called the "Sahrawi diaspora"¹⁶. The camp area is the link between the Sahrawi abroad and the Sahrawi in the camps. Communication the outside and the inside is easy due to the new technologies, the relative freedom of the press and activism. Nevertheless, because of their demographic¹⁷ and political weight, the camps constitute the main nucleus of the Sahrawi network through the world¹⁸.

¹⁵ Ibid., p 55.

¹⁶ Université Paris Nanterre, Sahara occidental, une colonie en mutation, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2008, p 56.

¹⁷ The exact number is unknown and there is a disagreement between Algerian and Moroccan Authorities, UNCHR and Polisario: they were around 75,000 when they fled to Algeria in 1975-1976 and almost between 100,000 and 165,000 today.

¹⁸ Ibid.

II - Including women: a political will

Polisario and the NUSW are two organisations in favour of women's rights and equality. In order to achieve their purpose, they are setting up "education" as a major factor to their strategy.

1. When Polisario and NUSW work together

Created in May 1973, the Polisario Front is the main anti-colonial movement with growing popularity because it firstly resisted against Spanish colonialism and later against Moroccan and Mauritanian colonialisms when they claimed over their territory.

Since its inception, Polisario has made a conscious effort to incorporate women and their issues in the struggle for independence¹⁹. Amongst its priorities, it "officially aimed to establish equality both between the men of different tribes, and also between men and women²⁰". "Women's education under Polisario included not only formal education, but also practical skills, such as issues of hygiene, child-rearing, etc., which are revolutionary. This is not just a military and political revolution, but a revolution of the whole fabric of society. It is a total revolution to the very essentials of life²¹".

The National Union of Sahrawi Women is a people's organisation of all women of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic and was created in 1974 to "contribute to the national consciousness, to assist in the mobilisation of efforts for independence, to work for the

¹⁹ Stephen Zunes, Jacob Mundy, "Western Sahara, War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution. Syracuse Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2011), p 133.

²⁰ Rachel Rosen, Katherine Twamley, *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood, Friends or Foes?*, London, University College London, 2018, p 94.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 135.

emancipation of women and to liberate the Sahrawi woman from the results of colonialism²²".

To run the camps, Polisario and NUSW leaders, among them women, established committees on literacy and children's education, health, sanitation, crafts, supplies, and arts. Most of the members were and are women. Today, there are five committees which are: preschool education, health, supplies, protection, and justice²³.

Apparently, those two organisations seem to have the same agenda: the independence of Western Sahara, but they use different ways to achieve their purpose. However, it is coherent to state they both are complimentary for the struggle for independence.

2. The importance of education's role

The women's education was always been a goal of both the Polisario Front and the NUSW. In 1975, 90% of the population was illiterate²⁴ and among it, 98-99% were women²⁵. They wanted to educate children as they are the future and also women because they were directly in charge of the supervision of the camps. They even began clandestine²⁶ schools for women, before their set up in the camps, and asked them to join the movement for independence.

Literacy campaigns began immediately for the adult female population in the camps. The School of February 27 was established to target older Sahrawi women who never went to

²² Anne Lippert, "Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People", 1992, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 17, No. 3, p 641.

²³ Ibid., p 648.

²⁴ The Sahrawi refugee camps in <http://www.sadr-emb-au.net/refugee-camps/>

²⁵ Anne Lippert, "Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People", 1992, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 17, No. 3, p 649.

²⁶ Because they were not authorized like the movement for independence.

school. In 1988, 64% of the teaching staff in the *daira* and the *wilaya* were women²⁷. Some women were sent abroad for brief nurses' training programmes in Algeria and in other countries and had returned to staff hospitals and clinics being constructed through women's "popular campaigns," in which women built the dugout dispensaries and made bricks for hospitals and health centres. Educational networks are particularly necessary for students to continue their studies. Agreements have been established with ministries of education several countries, such as Algeria and Cuba, to enable Sahrawi youth to complete university degree programmes²⁸. Indeed, since their childhood, if their financial resources allow them, young Sahrawi know they will leave their camps in order to continue their studies. It is taken very seriously by the youth because it could be felt like a duty to their families to get educated and then come back, with more knowledge and skills in order to help them but also to help, directly or indirectly, the Sahrawi independence. However, although women do leave the camp to study, they will be fewer than men to access places and scholarships abroad. The aim of education goes further than simply rendering women literate. It is also to "achieve societal cohesion among the several tribal groups and across all age groups²⁹".

III - The empowerment of women?

Sahrawi women have played an important role in traditional Sahrawi culture. They actively resisted foreign invaders, they were heard for important decisions making in the tribes and the family, and they had "equal rights to men in inheritance and divorce³⁰". That's why their role was highlighted and reinforced in the struggle for independence. Thus, since most of the men were at the front or even imprisoned, the women, both following the Sahrawi tradition and on a pragmatic level, maintained the camps.

²⁷ Ibid., p 647.

²⁸ Dawn Chatty, *Deterritorialized Youth, Sahrawi and Afghan Refugees at the Margins of the Middle East*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2010, p 6.

²⁹ Anne Lippert, "Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People", 1992, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 17, No. 3, p 650.

³⁰ Stephen Zunes, Jacob Mundy, "Western Sahara, War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution. Syracuse Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2011), p 133.

1. New roles and new responsibilities

Usually women refugees' image is depicted as helpless victims of war, weakened and dependent. Yet, some women, who were both members of the Front and the NUSW, joined the Sahrawi Popular Liberation Army (SPLA) in early 1976. Their role was to defend Sahrawi towns and to take charge of people fleeing the major towns of the Western Sahara for refuge in the desert³¹. They were also builders, teachers or doctors. Unlike the North African region, "women are fully integrated into, and in some cases, dominate local and national policy-making³²".

Structures of the political life (see above)	Congresses of the base	Popular council of each daira	Popular council of each wilaya	National popular congress
Percentage of women	90%	70-80%	45-70%	Over 50%

Source: Anne LIPPERT, "Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People", University of Chicago Press, Vol. 17, No. 3, 1992, p 645

Decided at the Third National Popular Congress in 1976, the institution of military training for all women was a new step for women's empowerment and a new way to protect the refugee camps³³. The military is a field very gendered because women were excluded from it, as it belonged to males' sphere, yet, the fact that the Congress opened the doors usually closed proves that the society is changing (and the needs too).

During the UN Visiting Mission (May 12-19, 1975), women's groups "prepared Polisario Front banners and flags, recruited women to come to the demonstrations, and organised

³¹ Anne Lippert, "Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People", 1992, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 17, No. 3, p 642.

³² Ibid., p 644.

³³ Ibid., p 645.

special groups to petition the visiting mission in all the major towns throughout the territory³⁴". It is interesting to see that some women joined the fight through NUSW did so against the wishes of their male relatives who feared violent reprisals. However, "with only one woman, Senia Ahmed Marhba, ever having acted as a camp governor, since the 1970s men have held the most powerful positions in the political administration of the individual camps, districts and neighbourhoods, and have also systematically controlled Rabouni, the camps' male-dominated 'capital' and structural core³⁵". Although women do serve at all levels of management and have full responsibility for the organisation of the camps, the glass ceiling has yet to truly be broken.

2. From patrilocality to matrilocality

In the former system, before the war started, when a woman got married, she had to live with her husband's family. When the war began, their husbands went to the front. Overall pain and complications to live with their in-laws led wives to remain in their families. They were joined by their husbands at the end of the armed conflict³⁶. Today, many young men work abroad so it is still common for young wives to establish themselves next to their mother's tents. Another explanation concerns "the decreased collectivisation of women's labour care during this time increased the individual obligation of women vis-à-vis their closest and maternal kin³⁷". In addition, the children's tribal identity used to be defined by the paternal line, as they were born and grew up in their father's tribe. As wives do not leave

³⁴ Anne Lippert, "Sahrawi Women in the Liberation Struggle of the Sahrawi People", 1992, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 17, No. 3, p 641.

³⁵ Elena Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, *Ideal Refugees, Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival*, Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2014, in Rachel Rosen, Katherine Twamley, *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood, Friends or Foes?*, London, University College London, 2018, p 98.

³⁶ Université Paris Nanterre, *Sahara Occidental, une colonie en mutation*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2008, p 49-50.

³⁷ Vivian Solana, *Regenerating Revolution: Gender and Generation in the Sahrawi Struggle for Decolonisation*, Thesis for the Degree of Doctor in Philosophy, Women and Gender Studies Institute of the University of Toronto, 2017, p 179.

their family anymore, the children live henceforth within their maternal line³⁸. Eventually, this matrilocality is a result of an "expression of women's structured agency³⁹".

3. Freedom of movement threatened: when girls and women's Rights are denied

From the beginning of the conflict, both SADR and Polisario encourage women to take an active place to fight for their independence and therefore, contribute to their emancipation, yet Sahrawi society still maintains gendered roles sometimes as far as denying their fundamental rights. "The Vacaciones en Paz (Vacations in Peace Programme) created in 1979 is an important programme that links Sahrawi youth to Spain. It is an annual holiday programme that enables between 7,000 and 10,000 Sahrawi children between the age of 8 and 13 to be hosted by Spanish families in their month for a two-month period during summer. During their stay, the children receive medical examinations and treatment as well as gift of clothes, toys and money which they take back with them to the camps. The relationship established during the programme often endure beyond the summer months, as proto-familial relationships form between the children and their Spanish host-families, and return trips reinforce these cross-border bonds⁴⁰".

Indeed, after the studies programme, some of children go to Spain to continue their studies beyond the secondary level and stayed with their "new family" and could be adopted by them. Nevertheless, when girls or young women come back to the camp, their families do not want them to go back to their new life, and the girls and young women has to stay against their will. An article appeared on the Human Rights Watch website to denounce these practices. "Two of the women said they have been held against their will for more

³⁸Université Paris Nanterre, Sahara Occidental, une colonie en mutation, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2008, p 54.

³⁹ Vivian Solana, Regenerating Revolution: Gender and Generation in the Sahrawi Struggle for Decolonisation, Thesis for the Degree of Doctor in Philosophy, Women and Gender Studies Institute of the University of Toronto, 2017, p 179.

⁴⁰ Dawn Chatty, Deterritorialized Youth, Sahrawi and Afghan Refugees at the Margins of the Middle East, New York, Berghahn Books, 2010, p 6.

than two years and the third has been held since December 2015, according to her civil partner in Spain⁴¹". The main reason is because "some of the families contended that the women should stay to reinforce their ties to their native culture and language, the women said⁴²". It is clear in this case that while the possibility is given to women to have their own life, their family could still be an obstacle to their freedom, and they do not respect their rights. Matrilocality clearly shows its limit because by wanting young women to come back to Western Sahara and stay with their family, it goes beyond freedom of movement.

Another example came from the experience of Spanish NGO organisers who wanted to plan a three-day trip for children. They faced difficulties to recruit girls. Sahrawi mothers allowed their sons to go but not their daughters while others wanted to know : "where the girls would sleep, what sort of contact they would have with the boys, who would be responsible for them (i.e. Spanish or Sahrawi, female or male instructors), and when they would return home⁴³". Another mother let her 8-year-old daughter go but not her eldest daughter, aged 13, under the pretext that she needed her to help her with younger siblings and household tasks⁴⁴. It definitely shows gender inequalities between boys and girls and even between siblings, as the elder daughter has to stay home to help her mother.

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch, Western Sahara Women held Refugee Camps in <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/04/western-sahara-women-held-refugee-camps>

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Rachel Rosen, Katherine Twamley, *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood, Friends or Foes?*, London, University College London, 2018, p 102.

⁴⁴ Rachel Rosen, Katherine Twamley, *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood, Friends or Foes?*, London, University College London, 2018, p 103.

Conclusion

The last Africa file in the UN's decolonisation dossier remains open as the Western Sahara conflict is still treated as an "emergency" situation because a solution has not been found. This designation also means that UNHCR is limited in the activities it can carry out in the camps⁴⁵. Between 100,000 and 165.000 Sahrawis (men, women and children) live in the refugee camps for nearly 37 years in one of the most inhospitable regions of the world, where the summer temperature rises to more than 50 degrees in the shade and in winter it is freezing cold⁴⁶. The fact there is no such violence like in other camps is because Sahrawi people, both men and women, maintain a social cohesion through upholding social traditions and customs, and they have controlled the day-to-day running of the camps. Indeed, being actors was a key thing to not "lose control of the situation" and to fall into the spiral of violence. The Sahrawi camps, as portrayed by Polisario, SADR, and Western observers alike "are in essence the antithesis of what refugee camps are 'meant to look like': they are democratic, empowering spaces that are safe for active and empowered women⁴⁷". These women have survived by organising their lives, the distribution of aid, work and responsibility. "They have organised in such way as to include everyone, to ensure no-one feels marginalised or excluded⁴⁸". Women's participation in the Sahrawi liberation struggle is rooted in both written and oral traditions and representations of active and empowered Sahrawi women have been very powerful. The SADR promoted gender equality since the very beginning in order to build the Sahrawi nation and to continue the fight for their independence in the camps. However, gender inequalities still persist in everyday life, especially for girls and young women who see their future prospects eroded by the weight of tradition. Notwithstanding, it is quite common that during a crisis even if women took

⁴⁵ Stephen Zunes, Jacob Mundy, "Western Sahara, War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution. Syracuse Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2011), p 128.

⁴⁶The Sahrawi Refugee Camps in <http://www.sadr-emb-au.net/refugee-camps/>

⁴⁷ This was an exclamation of surprise made by a visitor to a Tanzanian refugee camp (quoted in Lisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1995, in Rachel Rosen, Katherine Twamley, *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood, Friends or Foes?*, London, University College London, 2018, p 99.

⁴⁸ Tina Wallace, "Saharawi Women: 'Between Ambition and Suffering'.", 1994, *Focus on Gender* 2, no.1, p 52.

new responsibilities, once men came back, they have to quit what they did so well to return home. Yet, Sahrawi women want to hold on the gains they have made during the last years.

Annexes

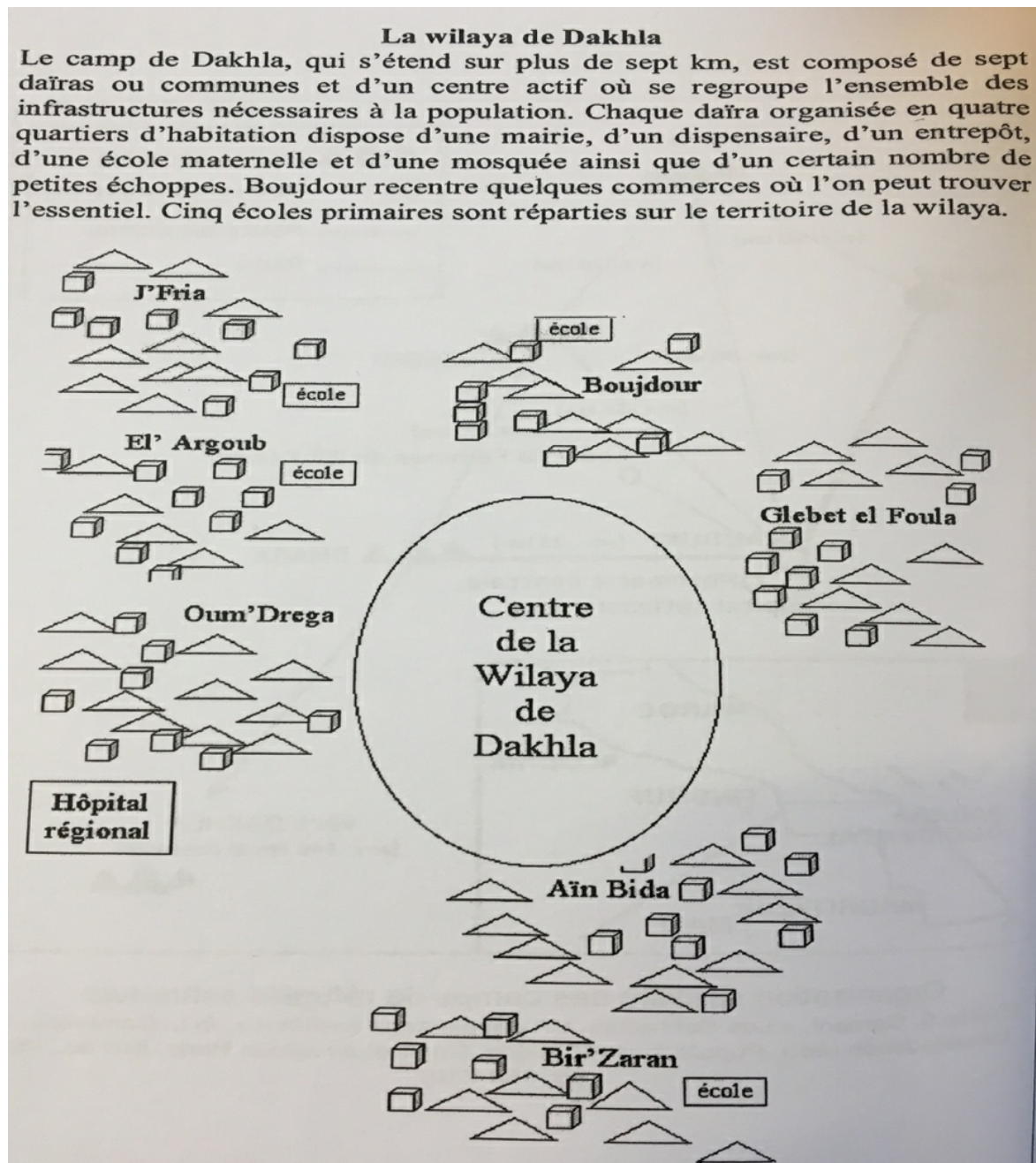
Annex 1



Map No. 3691 Rev. 83 UNITED NATIONS
October 2017 (Colour)

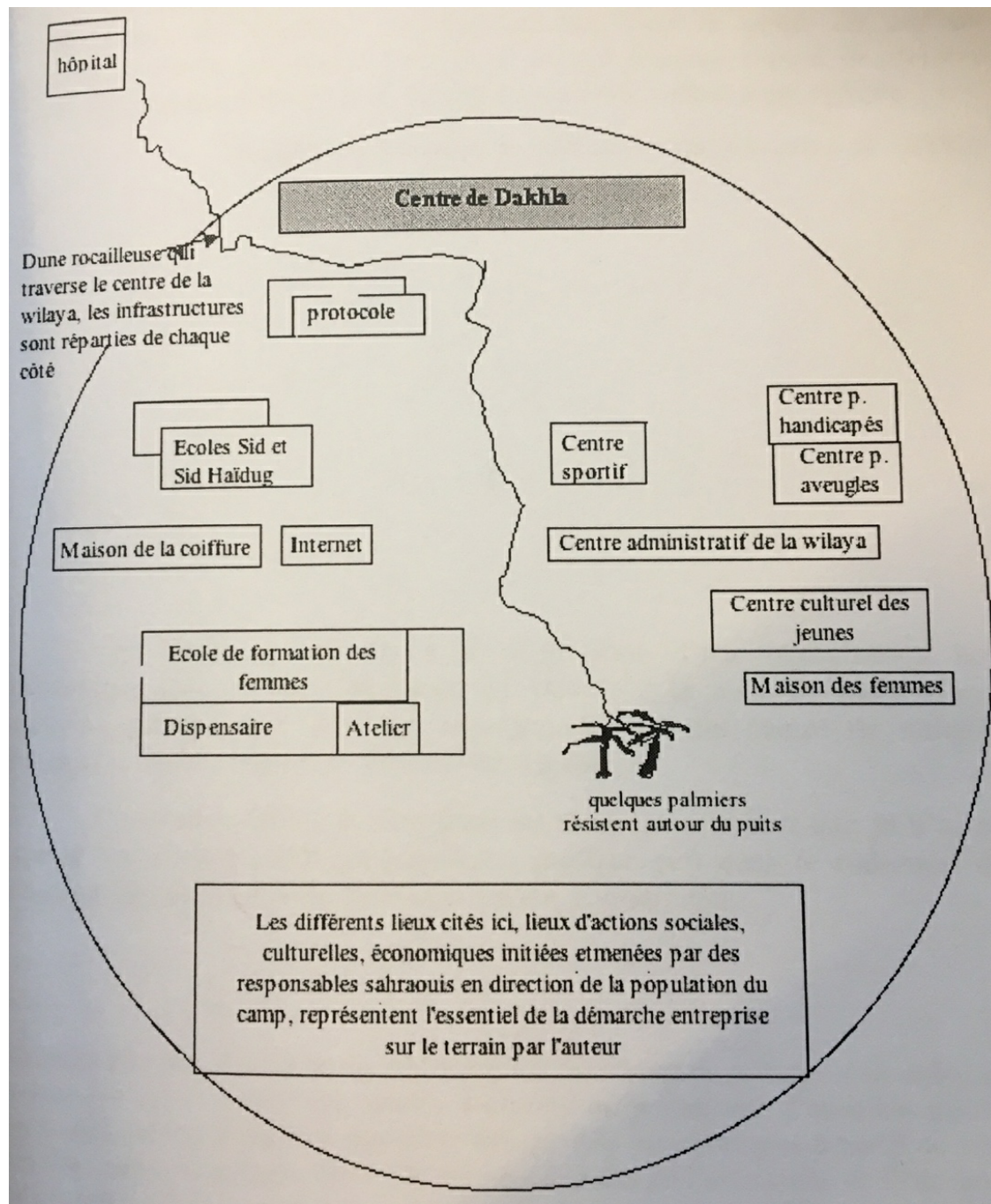
Department of Field Support
Geospatial Information Section (formerly Cartographic Section)

Annex 2



Exemple of the structure of Dakhla, from Elisabeth Peltier, *Malgré tout Dakhla existe...* Chronique d'un campement sahraoui, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2008, p 19

Annex 3



Example of the structure of Dahkla, from Elisabeth Peltier, *Malgré tout Dahkla existe... Chronique d'un campement sahraoui*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2008, p 19

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