WHEN UNCERTAINTY IS THE ONLY CONSTANCY: THE AGENCY AND SERIOUS GAMES OF SAHRAWI MEN MIGRATING TO SPANISH CITIES

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Abstract: *This article aims to describe the situation of young Sahrawi migrants who live in Spanish cities and work in precarious conditions. To analyze and describe this phenomenon, I will use Sherry Ortner's agency theory, focusing on the important aspects of values, social norms, and interdependent agency. The migration of Sahrawis from refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria) is a consequence of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the camps, diminishing international aid, and increasing inflation – a context in which migration to Europe is the best choice for supporting one's family. Nonetheless, the situation for young Sahrawis in Spain is often one of precarious work, temporary legal status, and frequent changes of residence. Within systemic constraints, however, the strategies (e.g., career strategies) of Sahrawis can be understood as agency-as-project – in which crucial cultural values make it more important to support one's family and loved ones living in the camps rather than to a mass financial capital. As a result, temporariness is the only constant characteristic of the life of this group of refugees, which is visible as a lack of long-term plans or opportunities related to migration.*

Keywords: *agency; migration; masculinity; Sahrawis; Spain*

Bashir[1] never planned to live in Madrid. He knew Spain; he had spent summers there and spoke Spanish quite well. Despite this, he did not intend to come to Spain, neither to study nor to settle permanently. Bashir is Sahrawi[2]: he was born in a Sahrawi refugee camp in Algeria, near the town of Tindouf. In Spain, he is a migrant with a temporary residence permit. In the camps in Algeria, he was a refugee, although he was born there. His parents' homeland, Western Sahara (formerly Spanish Sahara), is a disputed territory that has been occupied by Morocco since 1975. Bashir's grandparents, however, were Spanish citizens – until 1975, Spanish Sahara was just one of Spain's provinces. The unfinished process of decolonization and the occupation of a substantial part of the Western Sahara territory by the Kingdom of Morocco, however, has left Bashir living in limbo between trying to build a life in Spain, wanting to return to his family in the camps, and dreaming of moving to an independent Western Sahara.

In the following text, I conduct a combined analysis of the care regimes and economic aspects of migration in the context of Sahrawi migration to Spanish cities.[3] To describe and analyze this phenomenon, I will use Sherry Ortner's (2006) agency theory. The main purpose of the article will therefore be to analyze the agential actions and practices of individuals within the constraints and opportunities of migration regimes in the Sahrawi/Spain context. This paper is structured as follows: First, I outline the theoretical background of agency and practice theory in the context of regimes of mobility. Second, I describe the methodological framework of the study. Third, I identify the basic features of Sahrawi migration, along with a brief description of the historical and political background of the current situation.

Agency in migration studies

The concept of agency has been applied to migration studies in several contexts. First, it lies at the heart of the division between forced and voluntary

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[1] All names used in the article are pseudonyms. Quotes are annotated with the pseudonym and age range of my interviewee.

[2] The term *Sahrawi* is widely used in the literature to describe both an ethnic group and a nationality, which is also the approach I adopted in this article. As Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2018) points out, historically the inhabitants of Western Sahara were nomadic groups of mixed descent (both Arabic and Berber), who spoke a dialect of Arabic called Hassaniya, adhered to the Maliki school of Islam, and were united by certain cultural practices.

migration – a division that has been criticized for its analytical inadequacy (Carling 2002; De Haas 2003; Turton 2003). Second, reflections on agency appear in refugee studies, where it is observed in the power of the powerless – migrant women and forced migrants, especially those of irregular status or those in refugee camps and detention centres (Puggioni 2014; Pasquetti 2015; Sigona 2015). Most research on the agency of refugees follows the pattern of understanding agency as an active effort to transform an existing situation (Kanal, and Rottmann 2021). As Kanal and Rottmann (2021) write, however, such analysis typically does not extend beyond the duality in which refugees are portrayed as either powerless victims or proactive individuals attempting to change their circumstances. Moreover, Karen O'Reilly (2014, 217) emphasizes that existing theories of agency are designed to outline the relationship between agency and structure; they tend to overlook the imaginative and creative elements of agency.

Kanal and Rottmann's (2021) analysis draws attention to two specific dimensions of agency. The first of these is psychologizing agency, the main purpose of which is to take care of the individuals' well-being and psychological health.[4] Actions performed for psychological health often involve responding to certain moral codes and normative structures, such as the "sacrifices" of mothers for the sake of their children. From an individualistic perspective, this is not necessarily understood as agency; it only becomes so when placed within the context of values that are important to a specific person. Second, when conduct in accordance with social norms translates into the improved psychological health of the individual, we can understand this as an interdependent agency. While some theories of agency may not recognize this, it is the primary and most firmly sanctioned form of agency in many cultural contexts (Kanal, and Rottmann 2021). Kanal and Rottmann (2021) also point out that independent and interdependent agency should be considered as existing along a scale rather than as a strong dichotomy. This transition from understanding agency as an individualistic (and rather Eurocentric) phenomenon appears to be particularly important in the context of feminist and postcolonial studies. As Saba Mahmood (2005) writes, it may also be especially relevant when analyzing the agency of groups with a strong Islamic cultural influence, which is relevant given that the Sahrawis are Sunni Muslims.

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[4] In situations of limited control over one's life – as is the case for forced migrants – acceptance of one's powerlessness can also have an adaptive dimension (Nakamura and Orth 2005; Park 2010).

In my theoretical analysis, I follow Sherry Ortner (2006), for whom the dialectical link between structural constraints and people's practices as social actors is a means to acknowledge the human experience, enabling us to understand the constraints affecting actors, the transformation and creation of structures, and attempts to escape from or change the established order. Ortner (2006), however, sees structure at the micro, as well as the macro, level. As Federico Settler points out when discussing Ortner's concept, structures are "established, expressed, resisted, and reconfigured in the micro-level interactions between social actors" (2019, 97).

Ortner (2006) differentiates between two types of agency. The first, agency-as-power, refers to issues of control, domination, and resistance. The second, agency-as-project, deals with intentions and desires. As Ortner writes, agency can, therefore, also be "a form of intention and desire, as the pursuit of goals and the enactment of projects" (2006, 153). The first type unfolds in situations of unequal access to power; the second, however, is a feature not only of the privileged, but also of the disadvantaged. When analyzed in conjunction with intentionality and social norms, these forms of agency explain the apparent internal contradictions of structure and power while highlighting the cultural aspects of plans and strategies.

Ortner also emphasizes the emotional and sociocultural aspects of agency: "Agency is not some natural or originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constituted) emotions, thoughts, and meanings" (2006, 110). This is evident through the analysis of practices as serious games, such as the shifting rules described by Bina Fernandez (2020) among Ethiopian migrant women. Fernandez (2020) draws on the analytical framework proposed by Ortner (2006), in which the agency of migrants can be seen within a framework of structural opportunities. Ethiopian women working in Lebanon, for example, sought better working conditions as part of a survival strategy in a difficult system of employer dependency, and their ability to navigate the system improved with their length of stay in the Middle East (Fernandez 2020). Interestingly, however, "women tended to view 'luck' or 'fate' or 'God,' rather than their own 'choice,' as the primary factor determining their working conditions" (Fernandez 2020, 63). This highlights the importance of the cultural aspects of agency.

As some researchers have shown, when analyzing agency in migration processes, an important role is played not only by the analysis of behaviours and practices, but by the analysis of hoping, imagining, and planning (Pessar,

and Mahler 2003). From this, Settler derives the idea that it is important to pay attention to "mindwork that emanates from the social and religious imaginaries of migrants" (2019, 102). The analysis of hopes, potentialities, and social imaginaries of a good life shows us the different dimensions of uncertainty that migrants face, but also the possibilities and hopes they see, and the meaning-making practices they perform (Kleist 2017).

In this article, I apply Ortner's (2005) theory of agency-as-power and agency-as-project in detail to the case of Sahrawis who migrate to Spain, focusing on culturally positioned agency by including aspects related to values, psychological well-being, and interdependent agency (Kanal, and Rottman 2021). The cultural aspects of agency are evident both in the practices of young Sahrawis men migrating to Spain, and in their hopes, imaginations, and planning (Pessar, and Mahler 2003). This perspective on agency will allow for a better understanding of the migrants' situation in Spain and the strategies they adopt.

Research methodology

This study is based on multi-sited ethnographic research (Marcus 1995), with an important component of interviews with Sahrawis from the camps who migrate to Spain, representatives of the Polisario administration in Spain,[5] and Sahrawis who live in the camps. Some of the latter have returned from Spain, some dream of leaving the camps, and others are unwilling or unable to depart. The interviews with migrants and non-migrants were biographical and semi-structured (60 interviews); those with Polisario representatives were semi-structured expert interviews (11 interviews). The research was carried out by myself, and the interviews and conversations were conducted in Spanish. The field research began in 2019 in several Spanish cities and regions (Catalonia, February 2019; Madrid, August 2021; Basque Country, May – June 2022; Valencia and the Canary Islands, November – December 2022), as well as in Sahrawi refugee camps located near Tindouf in southern Algeria (October – November 2022 and February 2023). Interviewees were selected using a snowball method, considering the diverse trajectories of migration and assuming the relevance of multi-sited ethnography, in which subsequent ethnographic sites resulted from interviews during earlier stages.

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5 Polisario Front is a Sahrawi national liberation movement that is considered to be a representative of Sahrawis by the UN, and that cooperates closely with the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic government.

In this article, I examine the situation of Sahrawi men who have migrated to Spain since 2010 and have worked in precarious conditions, and I do so by detailing the cases of four young Sahrawi men.[6] Because it is possible for these men to quickly enter the relatively well-paid labour market (e.g., construction, renovation, or production work in factories, and the seasonal hospitality industry), they choose one of two strategies: living in Spain (the scenario analyzed here) or working seasonally in Spain and living at least three or four months per year in the camps. The research questions focused on the cultural elements of agency, indicating the values relevant to Sahrawis that influenced their imaginaries of a good life, and their choices and strategies.

The theory of practice does not impose a specific method of analysis. Data were analyzed using open coding in NVIVO qualitative data analysis software, following the grounded theory method through a "constant comparative strategy" (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The data were analyzed cyclically: analysis and data collection happened alternately, making it possible to address emerging empirical gaps in subsequent stages of the study and to verify during the fieldwork if initial interpretive tropes had any merit.

Point of departure: Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria

Since 1976, Sahrawi refugee camps have existed in Algeria, and now a significant portion of the population are so-called born refugees (Bloch 2011), meaning they were born in the camps. In addition, a significant, perhaps even larger, number of Sahrawis live in areas occupied by Morocco, and the Sahrawi diaspora is spread across Mauritania, Morocco, Spain, France, and Italy (Wilson 2021).[7] According to the most reasonable calculations, around

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[6] I have not conducted quantitative research, so I cannot conclusively determine the statistical correlations of the Sahrawi migrant population. However, comparing migration and work trajectories from the gender perspective, what emerges from the numerous interviews I have conducted is a picture of women who are less likely to choose seasonal work, and most of those who live in Spain have had the opportunity to learn and study there or to accompany their working husbands. In this article, I only analyze the stories of men who have close relatives in the camps, since their absence (which is a rare situation associated with the emigration of all close relatives to Spain or Mauritania), significantly affects the situation of migrants by changing the practices resulting from normative care regimes.

[7] As Tavakoli (2020) states, the Sahrawi diaspora is an important source not only of financial support, but also of networks for the sale of goods abroad, such as the export of *melfas* (traditional women's clothing) to Spain and France and employment opportunities in transport. For some families, one source of income, and also of economic and small-business growth, is cooperation with Spanish aid networks. This includes camp tourism in the form of families involved in the *Vacaciones en Paz* ("Holidays in

173,600 people were living in the camps as of March 2018 (UNHCR 2018). Importantly, the camps are located far from other Algerian cities or settlements; this distinguishes them from, for example, Palestinian camps in Lebanon, where the Palestinian and Lebanese communities have become more integrated over time.

The year 1991 brought not only a ceasefire but also social and economic changes, including greater openness to the movements of goods and people to and from the camps (Wilson 2021). This is sometimes even referred to as the Sahrawi Perestroika (Shelley 2004), due to the market economy, as an economic rule for a free Western Sahara, being written into the 1991 State Constitution (Wilson 2020). In addition to humanitarian aid, the incomes generated from small businesses, the salaries owed to state employees, administrators, and teachers, and the pensions owed to former Spanish administration employees, have been important sources of financial support over the past three decades (Tavakoli 2020; Wilson 2021). However, neither humanitarian aid nor the (extremely limited) income opportunities eliminate the hardships faced by Sahrawis living in the camps. Statistics show that humanitarian aid is responsible for 52% of the food provided, while for the poorest households, food accounts for as much as 60% of their expenditure (WFP 2017). However, aid has been declining in recent years, meeting less than 50% of the needs for permanent programs (UNHCR 2022). Following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, rations issued by the World Food Program were reduced in Sahrawi camps, reflecting a worldwide trend (Krawczyk 2021). My informants also pointed out that with the outbreak of the Morocco-Sahrawi war in November 2020, possibilities for trade were considerably reduced; border traffic is now significantly restricted, forcing many people who had been importing goods from Mauritania to give up their work.

Despite the reopening of the economy, it is therefore impossible for refugees to self-sustain in the camps, and for some families the most important sources of financial income are remittances sent by relatives living abroad[8] (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019; Tavakoli 2020). Although Malmberg (1997) points out that people are inclined to migrate internally rather than abroad, for those

Peace") project, but also athletes participating in the Sahara Marathon, and participants in the FiSahara film festival and the ARTifariti art and human rights festival (suspended from 2020, due to hostilities). These initiatives have been in place since 2000, 2003, and 2007, respectively (Tavakoli 2020).

   [8] These data came from an interview conducted on 16.02.2023 in Madrid with a Polisario representative.

in the camps, this is not an option. Due to restrictions on freedom of movement and taking up employment in Algeria outside of Tindouf, Sahrawis have no prospect of benefiting from the local Algerian market. Thus, foreign migration has become one of the few options available to them.

There are no certain data indicating how many people have migrated from the camps to Spain and other countries. Migration began in the mid-1990s, initially consisting mostly of individuals, but over time the Sahrawi diasporas in some Spanish cities have grown (e.g., Vitoria-Gasteiz, Valencia, Zaragoza). There are currently around 17,000 Sahrawis living in Spain[9].

As Wilson points out, Sahrawis in the camps are "citizens-in-exile of a state-like administration of their own" (2018, 145). However, after almost 50 years of existence in temporariness, the camps are still places of waiting, which corresponds with the tradition of analyzing limbo spaces in refugee studies. This suspension in time and constant waiting makes some families settle in, despite the temporariness. When more cash arrives, they build bathrooms without running water or they tile their kitchens without constant electricity and gas. Behind this temporariness in Spain and in the camps, there are processes such as the externalization of European borders towards Maghreb countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and pre-war Libya or Mauritania) and the securitization of border regimes (Lorenzo 2014), the precarization of migrants, as well as the increasing difficulty of legalizing their stays. These are "neither new nor typical only of the region" (Sampedro Vizcaya 2019).

The everyday life of the Sahrawi people living in the camps is framed around *Khayma*, a word denoting a tent in Modern Standard Arabic, which in Hassaniya (a variety of Maghrebi Arabic spoken by Sahrawis) also means a house, a home, and a family (Isidoros 2015). *Khayma* is a key element of Sahrawi culture and is reflected in the importance of both close and extended family, with the figure of the mother as the founder of the family and from whose name the family is identified. For young men, it is therefore crucial to support (not only financially, but also through emotional care or assistance) his family of origin, including everyone living in the so-called "big house" (his mother, sisters, remaining brothers, cousins, aunts, etc.), but also – if he has managed to start his own family – his wife and children. This strong sense of attachment has resulted in three migration strategies. The first one is the departure of the

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[9] Unlike in other migration contexts, remittances have extremely limited potential to contribute to the economic independence of the inhabitants of the Sahrawi camps.

whole close family and the establishment of a life in Spain; however, this strategy is very rarely chosen due to the limitations of the migration regime, as well as the reluctance of a large part of the elderly residents of the camps to move out. The second strategy is a circular migration to Spain to undertake seasonal work there, with stays of several months in the camps; this is the most commonly chosen strategy in recent years. Finally, some Sahrawis, often those who came to Spain as children under the *Vacaciones en Paz* ("Holidays in Peace") project and stayed there for health reasons, often choose to live permanently in Spain. However, this does not change their sense of attachment to the family living in the camps and the subsequent tasks associated with their well-being. It is the situation of these young men and their migration strategies that I will analyze further in this article.

Agency and serious games in the migration trajectories of young Sahrawis

Sidi was born in the camps in 1991. Unlike many older migrants, he hardly spoke Spanish when he arrived in Spain. The Spanish lessons at his camp's school were insufficient for him to be able to speak fluently; he only knew isolated words. He had the opportunity to travel to Spain four times as part of the *Vacaciones en Paz* project. After completing his basic education, he had to support his family, so he worked in the camps as a driver and helped with building houses. However, as he says: "You work one day and you earn three or four euros. And those three or four euros don't even give you enough to buy meat for your mother, or anything else. It gives you just enough for a minimum".

He arrived in Spain in 2017; with the economic crisis long past, he had expected to find work easily. Indeed, until 2020, most of the time he had the right to stay and to work. However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced the number of jobs available to him. He failed to meet the requirement to work legally for a minimum of six months in a year, so he lost his residency. The following year, his application was rejected because he failed to submit additional documents; unfortunately, the letter from the court arrived at one of his old addresses because, for financial reasons, Sidi had to move around a lot, often being put up in friends' flats. He is currently working, although without permits and papers, which is rather uncommon for Sahrawis. His employer has promised to help him legalize his situation soon.

As with many Sahrawis, his father also held Spanish citizenship. Unfortunately, the practice of granting family citizenship to Sahrawis had ended by the time he arrived in Spain. For some years now, the prevailing practice has been to grant Sahrawis stateless person status (*apatrida*), which is more convenient than a residence permit (*residencia*), from the Sahrawis' perspective. Baba, Sidi's younger cousin, directly addresses these pragmatic and temporarily profitable aspects of the legalization of stay:

> Now they all have only *apatrida*. *Apatrida* is different from a residence permit. With the *residencia* you get one year and you are obliged to work six months to be able to get the next year. The *apatrida* doesn't. You take it and that's it. So we prefer the *apatrida* because it's easier to stay legally [Baba, 25–30].

This significant change in the way residence is legalized is one element of the precarization of the situation of migrating Sahrawis. Despite Sahrawi colonial dependence, Spain is moving away from recognizing the Spanish ancestral documents of Sahrawi migrants. Starting in the 2000s, nationality has been granted with decreasing frequency, procedures have been prolonged, and applications have been increasingly refused. For individual migrants, the increasingly inaccessible status of Spanish nationality was replaced by the much more obtainable *apatrida*, which is characterized by greater uncertainty and precariousness. It does not give access to full citizenship rights and is granted only for a period of five years, after which one can apply for citizenship if one has continued living in Spain during this period, or for an extension of *apatrida* status. For young Sahrawis, for whom the foremost necessity when coming to Spain is to enter the labour market quickly, this shift towards a more quickly attained, albeit more precarious, status is seemingly a change for the better, especially when compared to a residence permit.

The precarious situation of migrants is also linked to their limited knowledge of the law. This is unsurprising, as the law changes quite frequently and the predominant source of information is conversations with family and friends. However, as Baba says, this ignorance of the details reflects a pragmatic approach to the law and the opportunities it provides:

> The majority of Sahrawis do not have knowledge of, for example, what is statelessness, what advantages do I have; nothing like that. What they are concerned about is that they have the papers to be legal in Spain and to be allowed to work. That is what

concerns them. What stateless status means or the advantages that stateless status has, most of them don't care about and don't even have in mind [Baba, 25–30].

Young men arriving in Spain are aware that their chances of gaining citizenship are non-existent at this point. They have concrete needs, mainly economic (but set in the essential context of social norms and moral values), associated with providing financial security for themselves and their families in the camps. They therefore have a practical approach to any legal situation, seeking to acquire the right to stay and work as soon as possible.

However, for many Sahrawis, a long stay in Spain, legalization of residence, and even citizenship do not translate into a stable situation in the labour market. This precariousness may be partly due to some of the choices that Sahrawis make. Serious games that people play are, according to Ortner (2006), the intentional strategies they choose to achieve goals in the thicket of structural constraints and opportunities. As Mukerji points out, an "agent playing serious games is not a free agent, but rather someone who picks up a cultural script and then decides how to play it. This agent is neither a passive recipient of a predetermined role nor a mirror of societal rules. The agent is a strategic participant in social life" (2009, 562). These strategic actions, taken by people both in everyday life and in such key life events as migration, have the causal – and importantly, intentional – power to affect various kinds of constraints.

Many interviewees highlighted that, compared to Spanish citizens and even other migrants, Sahrawis have great ease in changing their place of residence. Linking the ease of migration to the tradition of a nomadic Sahrawi culture is a simplistic explanation for a multifaceted situation.[10] The fact is, however, that for Sahrawis, moving to another city is usually not too much of a problem. For Baba, it is clear that this ease has to do with a culture that does not place great value on putting down roots and attaching oneself to one place:

> For example, when I stay in a city for too long, I automatically get overwhelmed. It's something we have in our blood; I can't say no to that. Because we are nomads. After all, I like to travel to other places, to see other places. I think there are many Sahrawis who have it in their blood or in their mind [Baba, 25–30].

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[10] For example, Daniel Williams and Norman McIntyre (2012) enumerated important markers of the quality of life in the context of lifestyle migration, such as climate, nature, facilities, employment, security, family ties, and tradition.

Even so, it is much easier for Sahrawis to diasporically settle more permanently in cities such as Vitoria-Gasteiz, Valencia, Alicante, Sevilla. or Zaragoza. These locations provide assistance and greater opportunities, for example in employment (mostly in construction, renovation, or production work in factories, and the seasonal hospitality industry). Choosing and sticking to a particular career path has allowed Baba, Sidi, and other Sahrawis to support their families in Spain, to give continual financial support[11] to their families in the camps. Importantly to them, it has also allowed them to live better lives by moving to a country offering better healthcare, a milder climate, and running water.

Imaginaries of a good life now and in the future as elements of the cultural dimensions of agency

Gianluca Gatta identifies time and the possibility of managing it as an important element of agency, which can be deprived by the appropriation of autonomous time (2012b after Fontanari 2018). Such appropriation, however, does not always reach into the future, giving space for aspirations, goals, and dreams (Fontanari 2018). Hein de Haas (de Haas 2010) has also discussed how aspirations for a better life are essential to migration and the formation of migration trajectories. For Sahrawis, the imagining, planning, and playing of serious games are aimed at enabling their families to *tener una vida mejor* ("have a better life"). Caring about the future of their loved ones' (and also of all Sahrawis') hopes and futures, alongside current financial and emotional care, form the main normative reference point of Sahrawis living in Spain.

The concept of a "better life" is a complex one that escapes simplistic, homogenizing definitions. It is not just about achieving a comfortable dream life in the West. In fact, it is much more about the climatic conditions in the camps than the European availability of material goods.

> It's a question of money, but it's also a question of the quality of life out there. We are talking about the climate, we are talking about the heat. We are talking about a land that is called hamada; it is a land that nobody can live in (Baba, 25–30].

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[11] On the subject of nomadic culture in Sahrawi society within the context of a critical analysis of the literature on the subject, cf. Kluszczyńska (2021).

Baba came to Spain through the *Vacaciones en Paz* project as a child and managed to live for a few years with a host family in a large city in the south of Spain. His parents decided on this move because Baba's older sister lived nearby, so Baba was not left alone in the new country. His health was so bad that he could not return to the camps, and after a year he moved in with his sister, with whom he lived for several years until she left for Belgium. It was then that he decided to move to the Basque Country; he had distant relatives there and knew that he could count on their support in case of any problems. His parents and siblings, apart from his older sister, live in the camps. He realizes how privileged his family is to have two children living abroad, despite the daily difficulties they face:

> Of course they are suffering, of course they are still suffering. Of course they have a lot of difficulties in life, that's for sure... At the end of the day, they are the people who live with anything. Living with what they have. Now it has improved somewhat with people who have someone here, like me, like him. We can send them something; this makes it easier for them [Baba, 25–30].

An important element of Sahrawi masculinity is reflected in caring for and ensuring the good lives of relatives and friends. In migration studies, the picture of the subject of care is primarily a woman – a mother, daughter, or grandmother – involved in reproductive work, often as part of a global care chain or international transfer of caretaking (Parreñas 2001). During this research, however, it was clear that care, and the norms and values associated with caring, apply as much to Sahrawi men as to women. What differentiates them is only the roles assigned in a given situation and thus the opportunities and responsibilities.

When we look at the migration of Sahrawis not only from the perspective of the migrating individuals, but as a piece of a puzzle that also includes family members who remain in the camps, then – according to the assumptions of new economic labour migration theory – the migration of some is in fact a survival strategy for the broader household. This strategy allows access to additional financial resources and enables the diversification of the family income. As Anna Triandafyllidou (2015) writes, even when a departure is the result of an individual's decision – or, as in Baba's case, derives necessarily from a medical condition – it also has an impact on the material situation and emotional well-being of the entire family. Nevertheless, the decision to migrate or remain abroad can sometimes allow individuals to overcome difficult situations and can

become the moment when they begin to exercise decisiveness (understood as agency) over their own lives (Benson and O'Reilly 2009).

Sidi, who tries to visit the camps once a year, notes how the situation for those living there has deteriorated:

> Before, a lot of money was not necessary. But now it is. Everything is expensive now. Before we bought bread with 5 cents or 10 cents; now we buy it with 30 cents... Before they gave you a lot more things; now the level has gone down, but there is still rice, flour, and that's all. Before, you would have enough and you could have a little for the next month; now you have enough for 15 days. Those who don't have must make more effort or look for a different way [Sidi, 30–35].

For Ali, who has lived in Spain since 2010, living in the camps has a sense of meaninglessness. He decided to migrate to Spain because while in the camps there, he felt that he could neither notably help his family, nor could his activities support the Western Sahara struggle. As he said while describing his adult life in the camps: "It is becoming more and more frustrating. So you think to yourself, if I want to help my people, I don't think I can do anything from the camps" [Ali, 35–40]. Both Sidi and Baba also clearly indicated that they do not plan to return to the camps. In addition to feeling accustomed to the more comfortable life in Spain, they point out in particular the lack of usefulness they would feel living in the camps. As Sidi explains:

> When I'm with my family, I have nothing and neither do they. I don't have anything and neither do they. If I go with money, I'm going to spend it in three months. I'm not going to sit there with my family, not having enough money to buy bread [Sidi, 30–35].

The care extends not only to the immediate family and friends but also to other Sahrawis. This community of care brings us closer to thinking about agentive norms and actions in a collective dimension (Madhok et al. 2013). Bashir, whose story was presented at the beginning of the article, points to a sense of community of care that is typical of Sahrawis, whereby newcomers to Spain are supported at the start of their path in a new country.

> I go to my cousin's house now. But my cousins, when they have nowhere to go, they come to my house. We are even doing it this way, where people come to

my house, because they don't have papers or work and they stay in my house for months, without paying for anything – no food, no electricity, nothing – until they are able to. My parents offer them the house and everything. We are very united, we have a lot of unity [Bashir, 20–25].

Staying and working in Spain not only has the dimension of the possibility of supporting individuals, but also serves as a form of political support for the Sahrawi cause – an essential element of Sahrawi identity, in which the struggle for Western Sahara independence is understood not only through armed struggle, but also through awareness-raising activities in Spain, supporting the Sahrawi diaspora abroad, and attending demonstrations or cultural events. This type of political loyalty, which is one of the most important values of contemporary Sahrawi culture, and which is practiced through the norm of supporting the struggle for a free Western Sahara, was an important element for many of my interviewees, reinforcing their decision to leave the camps and to remain in Spain. Sidi and Baba send around €100 to €150 a month to the camps. This is a relatively large sum, considering that their salaries oscillate only slightly above the national average, and they have to pay room rent and all their bills:

I can't tell you that we can help them very much. But we can help them with something. Because you know perfectly well that even here you are going to have difficulties in life. Because you go to work, you have to pay all the expenses: the electricity, the water, the house. And in the end you are in a way making an effort to make a living. Because you want to support your family, because at the end of the day it is also difficult for us. For them and for us it is difficult [Baba, 25–30].

The precarious nature of their work does not allow my interviewees to set aside any money or stabilize their housing situation; even less so because of the need to support their families back in the camps. Living in uncertainty is one of the constant characteristics of this group of refugees. It translates to a lack of long-term plans or high hopes related to migration. Among the interviewees, the dominant view was rather the need to think ahead to the most immediate future and to support relatives in need, as in the case of Ali, who after having obtained the status of a stateless person works in a café in the centre of a tourist city.

Live in today and think about tomorrow. I can't make plans, because if I had a place to hold on to, I'd say yes, I'm going to do something in my homeland. But this is

the saddest thing; we don't have this place. For me, this is so bitter for all of us. Because we live in refugee camps, we can't settle there either, because it's a refugee camp in an Algerian land [Ali, 35-40].

However, the plans combining the continuation of life and work in Spain, local social and political activism, and the ongoing support of family living in the camps in the face of all difficulties indicate how agentive they are within the possibilities they have. Agency-as-project is part of their actions through their daily choices of career strategy. I argue that, above all, this is a selection within a game in which crucial cultural values make it more important to support one's family and loved ones than to build financial capital. This essentiality of care, manifested in the choice to live and work in Spain, but with constant support and being part of the family in the camp, points to a strategy that can be understood as interdependent agency.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that one element linking the histories of Sahrawi men living in Spain is their strong connections with their relatives living in the refugee camps in Algeria. This link translates into support, primarily in the form of financial remittances, to enable their families to cope with decreasing humanitarian aid and rising inflation. And, as is the case with Bashir, an air of uncertainty is also present for other Sahrawis living in Spain. This manifests as a state of limbo, characterized by attempting to build a life in Spain, wanting to reunite with family in the camps, and dreaming of moving to an independent Western Sahara.

For migrants living in Spain, the desire and need to support those who remain in the camps determines their financial management practices. Giving away a significant portion of their income leaves them unable to improve their own financial situation in Spain, as they lack the capital to invest in themselves, improve their professional skills, study, or buy a flat. At the same time, the strong bond with the camps leads many to choose jobs that allow longer trips to the camps. Thus, many Sahrawis are not only forced to work in the secondary sector; they also choose to stay in it because of the flexibility of the work and the possibility of taking longer holidays, allowing them to see their families but also take a break from the fast and stressful life in Spanish cities. This strategy can be understood as agency-as-project – in which crucial cultural values make

it more important to support one's family and loved ones living in the camps than to build financial capital and stability in Spain. As a result, temporariness is the only constant characteristic of the life of this group of refugees, which is visible as a lack of long-term plans or opportunities related to migration.

At a time when the regulations of the migration regime tend to exclude and create precariousness for the situation of migrants while victimizing them, caring seems to be one way to overcome migratory hardships. However, care – which should be understood more broadly along with values and norms – should be analyzed not as a reflection of the heart, but as one of the sociocultural aspects of a given society. The above stories indicate that even the secondary labour market enables agentive moves according to the projects people have. However, the realization of these projects can have the effect of reinforcing precariousness in the labour market, including instability related to wages, employment, or financial security. I also argue that structural cultural conditions, including generosity and mutual support, as well as political circumstances involving the unresolved status of Western Sahara, prevent any prospects for substantial change in the situation of young Sahrawi man.

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