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Milestones in Young Saharawi Women's Corporal Experiences

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Abstract

The following work features the corporal experiences of young Saharawi women as the centre of its analysis. The aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of how these women have experienced their body throughout different periods of their lives both in the Saharawi refugee camps and in Spain or another western country. The Saharawi population has a long history which unfolds into the Saharawi diaspora in different parts of the world. This brings a diversity of realities to today's Saharawi youth and this is why the study is focussed specifically on young Saharawi women who were born in the Saharawi refugee camps, later migrated to Spain or another western country and have then returned as adults to the refugee camps for at least a period of time.

A pre-interview exercise and in-depths interviews were carried out with four young Saharawi women in order to get to know what aspects have had a relevant influence in their corporal experiences. By focussing on specific experiences and memories that the women have had regarding their body, how they have thought, felt and presented their body at these times, we get a greater understanding of how this particular group of people have been affected by moving in between the aforementioned societies. That is, how and in what ways certain aspects of both systems traverse these women's lives and bodies.

The aspects studied are: health and diet, the beauty canon, dress and representation of the body, puberty and the naked body, and feminism.

Key words: young Saharawi women, body, corporal experiences, Saharawi refugee camps, western societies.

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A short Introduction

I admit that, at first, I had not intended the subject of this work to be about the Saharawi society or its women but on anorexia, bulimia and eating disorders, as I myself have lived through an episode of my life where I experienced eating disorders and have known quite a few girls and women around me who have and are still suffering one of the above. Before I begin to explain what the work is about, I think it may be useful to recount a little more about myself as it may help to understand why I have ended up choosing the theme of this study. I am a 26 year old girl-woman with British parents but who was born and has always lived in the Basque country, and this is where I have completed all my studies. I have had the chance to travel a lot with family, friends and alone, I am interested in learning about cultures and ways of living different to mine, especially middle Eastern-Asian societies. But I would like to talk more about my experience regarding my body, and tell you a bit about certain important moments during my youth in relation to this. I was a runner when I was in my last years of high school ... I was considered a good 400m racer. In truth, throughout all my childhood and youth life I have had a healthy, strong and fast body. Participating in all different types of sports and finding them easy. When I started university, anxiety, together with other factors, took hold of my life (or rather, I let them take hold of my life) affecting me physically as well as psychologically. For the first time, my body failed me, being too thin, feeling weak, my period stopped for two years... I started to have digestive problems, which I could not comprehend at the start. In my first year in university my anxiety made me eat fast, I never noticed my stomach full, I suffered what would be classified as “eating disorders”, I had insomnia, I had breakdowns... From not feeling my stomach full I went to feeling bloated most the time ... I did not recognise my body anymore. It took multiple efforts to try and understand what was going on and make my life easier again, “normal” one would say. I was desperate, desperate to get better again.

After time and changes in life and changes I had incorporated in my way of living, I would say I got to recognise my body again. I have had the opportunity to use my experience for an essay in one of my anthropology subjects in university. Doing my own “corporal itinerary”¹ helped me look back on my own experience and pin-point some of the important moments I

¹ A methodological technique used in anthropology that focuses on body experiences (Mari Luz Esteban, 2006). This technique will be better explained further on in the theoretical framework.

lived regarding my body and my illness² at the time. Analysing these gave me a broader understanding of my own corporal experience and an approach to anthropology of the body. But most of all, I learnt that the body is vulnerable, I believe our bodies change in relation to the experiences we have had in our lives, incorporating these events in the body and later manifesting them one way or another. I consider that the more relevant the experience is in our lives, the bigger effect it might have on us and on our bodies. However, it is true, that corporal experiences have been studied from an anthropological perspective and within a gender analysis many times before and it is difficult for me to imagine contributing something new to this subject.

Not knowing where to go from here, the Sahara (with this I mean the Saharawi community, either living in the refugee camps of Tindouf, Algeria, in the Western Sahara or in diaspora in another country) came to mind. I remember my first real contact with the Saharawi people was because of the practicum work experiences we did in our third year of my degree in Social Anthropology. I remember it was a sunny day and, because of some political act, there were all types of different stalls in the centre of Vitoria-Gasteiz, where I lived. I went up to the stall selling books, T-shirts and CDs above which there was a big red, black, white and green flag with a red moon and star in the middle. I went to ask the person running the stall about their association, Amigos y Amigas de la R.A.S.D de Alava and if I could join them for a couple of months. To my excitement he said yes.

I have had the privilege to witness first-hand the different projects the association of Alava has been working on with the Saharawi society, be these in the Basque Country, the refugee camps or in the Occupied Territory. I was given books and articles to read about the history of the land and people, together with tutorials given by some of the workers of the association. During my months doing work experience with the association I took part in different activities such as hunger strikes, exhibitions, demonstrations... But most interestingly, I was introduced to a young Saharawi group of boys and a Basque girl whose interest was to create a group of young Saharawi-Basque activists, in which I was invited to take part. During a period of 3-4 years a range of cultural and political events were carried out by our group named *Eusko-Saharawi*; and Saharawi as well as Basque young girls and boys took part in them. I flew for the first time to the refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria) in 2016

² Even if I was never diagnosed as such by doctors, I have decided to refer to it as an illness.

for the film festival FiSahara and in 2017 finished my final degree project titled *Beauty Canons and Body Practices: Experiences of young Sahrawi women in the Basque Country*.

Since then I have always had a close relationship with the Saharawi youth living in Gasteiz and have maintained regular contact with the association. Later, I was very lucky to be offered a job with a team organising a new school for empowering women due to start in 2018 in the refugee camps. My work involved going back and forth to the camps from the Basque Country as well as staying long periods in the refugee camps living with a Saharawi family. I got to spend a lot of time with the women, with the ones working for the school and the ones who took part in the activities organized by the school. It was a year of learning, one involving different processes, incredible experiences and mistakes I hope I would not repeat if given another opportunity. Nevertheless, I gladly take my “baggage” of experience with me on my future journeys in life.

During the time I lived in the Saharawi refugee camps, I worked with women of all ages but my interest was aroused by the younger women, those within an age range similar to my own. I used to ask myself many things about their lives and I learned a lot while I was there. I would have liked to have been doing this study at that time as there was so much I learned and ‘encountered’ which I did not write down. However, I did take some notes and there are a lot of things that have stayed in my mind which I often still wonder about. These, I have realised, are mostly related to the body and corporal experiences. This is an example:

When we did different courses or workshops in the school for empowering women in the refugee camps, there were moments of resting, ‘informal moments’ between the women giving the course (foreigners) and (mostly young) Saharawi women and myself. These moments were after lunch or once the course had finished and we all had time to spare, waiting for drivers to come and pick us up or waiting for the second session to start. These moments were considered informal and in them a different bond was forged and a more horizontal relationship between the participants and the ones giving the course was developed, creating a space of confidence.

These moments for me were special, as sometimes we took out the hula hoop, and some young girls even took off their melphas³ to play with it (just for a couple of quick minutes and always after making sure no one else could come in the room). Conversations slowly changed to more intimate themes, such as the body. Sometimes girls asked how they could

³ The melpha is the traditional clothing Saharawi women wear.

maintain a flat belly or they would tell us why they would wear so many clothes or how they managed to maintain a pale complexion. With those whom I had more of a close relationship, I got the chance to speak about even more intimate subjects and got to know a bit more about their lives. Something that has stayed with me was when a very good Saharawi friend showed me photos of her on her phone from when she used to live in Spain. The photos were published on Facebook and my friend would appear in the photos posing with loose hair, wearing makeup and dresses which revealed her bare arms and legs. This image of hers was never visible to me while I lived in the refugee camps.

With this in mind, I first thought that it would be interesting to do a study on the Saharawi refugee camps. I thought it would be possible to somehow go back there for at least a week or two and get to do some proper observation on aspects that had caught my attention in my previous visits and interview some of the women who I had worked with. But due to the pandemic of Covid-19, which started more or less the same time I started to write this dissertation, it does not seem I will get to go there any time in the near future, which means I have had to find other ways of working on this study subject.

This is when I thought of the possibility of focusing the study on Saharawi young women in the diaspora. Young Saharawi women who had been my companions during my stay in the refugee camps, together with young Saharawi women who I have had as companions in the activist group in the Basque Country came to my mind. All these women were born in the camps, then migrated to Spain at a young age, have grown to adulthood here and for different reasons, have returned to the camps with their families for periods of time during their youth- adulthood. In short, these young women have experienced cultural crossovers during their lives, both during their infancy and in their youth. I found this profile especially interesting as it led me to wonder what it has been like for these women to move between two societies with different customs and ways of living and how this has influenced their experience regarding their body.

Therefore, there is not one specific reason I have chosen the subject of study presented, but more of a mixture of two themes I consider important in my life: my experience with the Saharawi community, specifically the women, and my experience with my body.



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⁴ Photograph taken by me in the Saharawi refugee camps, 2018.

Objectives and Hypothesis

For this work I have defined three objectives: one overall objective and two specific objectives. The hypotheses are defined accordingly, so there is a hypothesis for each objective. As the first and general objective, I would like to study and get to know how young Saharawi women who have lived both in the Saharawi refugee camps and in Spain have experienced their body. As my second and more specific objective, I would like to pinpoint some of the important moments these young Saharawi women have had during their life regarding their body, getting to know how these women have thought about, felt and presented their body in these moments. And as my last specific objective, I would like to discover what aspects have had a relevant influence on their experiences regarding the body.

In relation to my objectives these are the hypotheses I have defined: First of all, I am inclined to think that the women who are the subject of this study have experienced important moments in their lives which have had an influence on their body. During the time I have spent with the Saharawi community I have observed ways of experiencing the female body, which differ from what I am used to in a Western society. This makes me think that moving between these two societies must have an impact on how these women experience their bodies.

Secondly, and based on the idea that there are certain experiences in relation to our body that we have during different stages in our lives which have an impact on us and influence how we experience our bodies (how we feel and think about our bodies and how we present them). I believe that, in the case of these young Saharawi women who have lived different stages of their lives in the Saharawi refugee camps and in Spain, this will have had a certain impact on how they have experienced their body, that is, how they have felt, thought about and presented their bodies: 1) in terms of their physical sensations or emotions; 2) in terms of their thinking about their bodies, in relation to religion, custom, feminism...; 3) in terms of the way they dress, adorn or otherwise present their bodies.

Finally, before I carry out this study I can only hope to presume what aspects may have had an important relevance due to my own body experience as a woman. I consider that the following aspects may have been relevant:

1) Health and diet: management of the body in relation to concepts of being healthy, illness, exercise..., 2) the beauty canon: taking into consideration that the two societies, the Saharawi and the Western, have different existing beauty canons, what kind of beauty ideal

these women have and have had and what kind of repercussion does this have on the way they value their body and physical appearance, 3) dress: the use of different clothing or accessories to present/ adorn the body, 4) puberty and nudity: changes in our body, menstruation, the naked body... and 5) feminism: feminist ideology or ways of thinking which lead one to reflect about the body and gender.

Methodological framework

As I explained earlier regarding the current Covid-19 situation, finding a methodology that is appropriate but also feasible for this work has been complicated. Dates to give in and present the work are also to be taken to account, as having a time limit to accomplish this work has an influence on the decisions made in respect to the form and shape the work is going to take. As I write, the country has been in lockdown for two months since March 2020, ruling out the opportunity of carrying out any type of methodology or technique that required physical contact or being physically in the same place with someone, unless the study only involved people you were living with at that time. This is not my case, and although it seems that now, in the month of May, things are starting to get back to how they were before and we may even have the chance to move around and share spaces with different people, the abnormality of the situation and the uncertainty of how things are going to proceed has obliged me to think of a methodology design which will enable me to carry out the investigation from home, without the need to meet in person. I consider this to be a disadvantage, as I do believe the investigation loses quality and a lot of information is not so easily accessed without having the chance to spend “real” time with the people who are taking part in the study. I say this because I have chosen my work to be a qualitative investigation, one that requires in-depth interviews, a cordial but also warm relationship between me and the people involved in it.

Nevertheless, as I have said, due to the situation I had to think of other possible ways of obtaining information and carrying out the process without altering the investigation too much. After contacting Saharawi friends and people involved with the Saharawi community, I gathered a list of young Saharawi women who fitted the profile I was looking for. All of whom are between the ages 20-35 and have lived periods of their life in the refugee camps and in Spain. As I have explained, I will not get the chance to be with these women during the investigation, and this is why I have carefully chosen women whom I have met in person either in Spain or in the refugee camps, as this makes it easier for me to ask them questions that may be considered intimate. On the other hand, it is true that doing interviews via phone or computer has given me the chance to include women who do not live near me but who were residing as far away as England, the Canary Islands or the refugee camps themselves.

However, a number of drawbacks have to be taken in account. For example, talking to some of the women, I realised that not all of them had a Wi-Fi device where they lived, which meant that taking part in this work would cost them phone data and, although I offered to pay the cost of the calls and messages, this continued to be a problem. For this reason, some women were eliminated from the list. Yet, the biggest problem still remains in the uncertainties the pandemic has brought upon us. The variation in how it has unfolded in different places is something that could easily interrupt the process. How the pandemic is going to affect the people involved in this study in the months to come worries me, and the idea of having interviewees dropping out later on is a possibility I am aware of. To date, six Saharawi women remain on-board.

As I have mentioned above, I will be using qualitative methodology as I consider qualitative techniques more accurate in order to accomplish what I have proposed as my main objective in this work: getting to know how these women have experienced their bodies. When designing the methodology I have mainly followed Mari Luz Esteban's corporal itineraries and Teresa Del Valle's generic chronotopes⁵ as well as her idea of 'the memory of the body' and 'milestones'. In the theoretical framework, I will give a more extensive explanation of the two, but for now I will give a brief explanation, in order to help present the steps I have designed to proceed with the study.

Short introduction to corporal itineraries

Esteban proposes a methodological technique aiming to bring corporal experiences to the centre of analysis. With 'corporal itineraries', Esteban proposes to study the lives and body experiences of people, but understanding these not as something static but things that are in movement, that are dynamic and in constant transformation and, therefore, unfinished (Esteban, 2008: 144). Three things to take into account when writing a corporal itinerary are: who is writing the itinerary (for instance, it is not the same if it is an auto-ethnography or if we are writing about another person), why is the itinerary being written or what it is for, and what themes or aspects it will encompass. The idea is to identify certain moments of the life of the person; moments which are related to the aspects that need to be studied and analysed. Then, these moments are written and described in the format of scenes, in chronological order, relating them with one another. The scenes should be described in detail, focussing on corporal and physical sensations and practices as much as possible, and

⁵ In Spanish 'cronotipos genéricos' (Del Valle, 1999).

being able to incorporate the micro and macro elements involved in the process under study. For example, if we are studying a certain aspect of a person's health condition, a number of moments in relation to the health condition will be described by the person with help of the anthropologist.

Short introduction to generic chronotopes

Del Valle's generic chronotopes are based on the idea of 'the memory of the body'. In her words, memory summarises past, present and future together with the construction of gender identities. Her methodology also takes the body as being the centre; the memory of the body in this case, focusing on experiences, sensations and the places where these have taken place. Del Valle proposes chronotopes as a tool which enables the anthropologist to access these memories. For this, the questioning of social and cultural dynamics and how these memories or experiences affect our body experience is essential. She gives the example of beauty canons and existing social taboos. As we can see, by studying the individual's body experience we are also encompassing a collective and social experience. In order to study the memory of the body through a chronological prism, Del Valle takes into account four key events: milestones (or stepping stones), intersections, articulations and interstices. I will just focus on the idea of milestones for this work: "decisions and experiences that are remembered as a significant reference⁶" (Del Valle, 1997: 61). As she explains, these experiences or moments are not necessarily recognised as important at the moment they happen, but perhaps after some time has passed when remembering or looking back with self-reflection.

Milestones can be reflected upon by asking questions about oneself: the decisions made throughout life, relationships one has had, the places one has been to and been moving back and forth from... As Teresa Del Valle points out, milestones are dynamic. By this, she means that depending on how a person's life develops, what was once considered an important moment in their life at the age of fifteen can lose its relevance once time has passed (Del Valle: 1997).

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from original Spanish texts have been translated by the author.

Following Del Valle's idea of pinpointing certain relevant moments these women have experienced throughout their life, my tutor, Maggie Bullen, suggested that, before interviewing them, one could ask them to think about a certain experience or aspect about their body they would be willing to talk about in this study: be it a physical aspect of the body, a health issue, a way of dressing and presenting the body, etc. Then, the one could pinpoint some of the experiences they have had in relation to this aspect of their body by asking them to map out five or six moments, indicating that these moments should be related to each other and told in chronological order. These would be milestones, and, here, time, space and gender are to be taken into account, three characteristics presented in Teresa Del Valle's generic chronotopes (1999). These milestones will be the starting point exercise, later used to formulate personalised questions to ask each of the women.

We thought that it would be more appropriate for me to do the exercise first and to share it with the women⁷. That way, I would be sharing my own mapped out corporal experience and I could also present the sort of example I would like them to produce. Due to the circumstances, this would all be done by text/email messages, calls or phone audios. Finally, after receiving their exercise, the idea is to design different interviews for each of them. This part would proceed via a video or voice phone call. The questions for the interviews will be generated from the information given by the women in the first exercise together with the aspects presented in the hypothesis: health and diet, beauty canons, dress, puberty and feminism⁸. My intention is to gather more information about each woman's corporal experiences; - how they felt, thought and presented their body - and to identify which aspects have had an influence on them. This idea of gathering as many details as possible, such as emotions and feelings, comes from the aforementioned methodological technique, the corporal itineraries by Mari Luz Esteban (2006).

Process of methodology

I will begin by saying that, from six women on my interview list, only four have taken part in the study. One of them gave notice, letting me know she was too busy; the other, with whom - of all the interviewees - I have the closest relationship, has just disappeared. From one day to the next, I ceased to have any communication with her, and there has been no news from

⁷ My own exercise of milestones is attached in the appendices.

⁸ The aspects set out in the final hypothesis were readapted in accordance to the women's answers in the first exercise.

her anywhere, not even in any of the social platforms she usually uses. This for me has been quite a concern as, in a way, this study is based on or inspired by her and the little I know about her life. She is the person I spent most time with during my stay in the refugee camps and whom I have also met in Spain. I would have very much liked her to be part of the project⁹.

As for the four who have remained: I sent them an explanation of the first exercise together with my own milestones exercise. There were a lot of explanations which had to be given afterwards individually as the exercise is not particularly easy, but I tried my best to answer and give clear information about what I was asking from them. It took more than two weeks, but in the end I got their answers, three replied by voice message and the fourth sent a written text. It became clear to me then that it is not easy to come up with five particular moments which have had relevance on an aspect of your body. Most talked about an aspect of their body in a more general way, maybe adding one or two particular moments. One of them just sent one single milestone, saying she truly could not think of another. In any case, this information was still very valid for me and helped me define the aspects in my hypotheses together with being the information source I used to create the questions for their interviews.

One of interviews was carried out via voice call, this was with the woman who lives in the refugee camps and the electricity would break down sometimes, interrupting the conversation. Another two interviews were done through Skype, a useful platform as the video call can be recorded and downloaded. I would say that this option worked better, as seeing the interviewees face to face added more warmth to the experience, but was not an option in the case of the woman living in the refugee camps, due to the unreliable power supply. Lastly, I had the chance to meet up with the fourth woman in person leading the interview at some points to more a personal conversation. There was a moment when she cried when she started talking about a relative of hers, a situation I had never been in before in an interview, but was glad to see she still felt comfortable enough to continue talking and open up to my questions.

My aim to get them to describe specific moments or milestones which unfolded chronologically in the form of short scenarios was not entirely achieved. However, a

⁹ The photographs which are found throughout the work are of her. Some were taken by me during my stay in the camps and some were sent to me by her. I was given permission to use them before the communication between us stopped. I find that the pictures are fitting for this study and have added them with the intention of also making her part of this study.

description of some moments did gradually appear throughout their interviews, which I still consider very useful. Also, thanks to having a method such as voice messages through WhatsApp, it was very easy to ask follow-up questions after the interview and which were quickly answered. But nevertheless, I will admit that, what I first had in mind in regard to the idea of milestones, transformed into something different.

In the analysis, I introduced each chapter with the interviewees' answers from their first exercise, where I asked them about their five milestones. As each of them spoke about a different aspect, this worked perfectly. These are the aspects they spoke about first: a health issue, their hair (which I have related to the beauty canon), dress and a moment when their body has changed after going through puberty. The last aspect would be feminism, one which did not appear in the first exercise but later on in the interviews -I think is a necessary aspect to include. I continued by introducing each of the women, including a small paragraph of how I had got to know them. I decided to do this once I started with the analysis: I found out that I wanted to make these women part of the work, to make more space for their persona and to make them more real somehow. By describing what they said about themselves in the interview, and adding some of the things I have experienced together with them, has been my way of doing this. Of course, I have done this carefully, trying not to give too many details about who they are, and showing them what has been written about them first. To be honest, they were not too troubled about their name appearing in the study, but I thought it was best to convince them to change it anyway. In the end, they all gave me a Saharawi name they liked in order to replace theirs.

To continue with the analysis, I categorised the information given by each of them in different Venn diagrams¹⁰ in order to help me identify their corporal experiences within a Western context or Saharawi, or both. Finally, in each chapter of the analysis, I also include some of the experiences the other women had, comparing these and relating them with concepts from anthropology of the body and the theoretical and ethnographical framework.

¹⁰ The Venn diagrams are included in annexes.

Ethnographical Framework

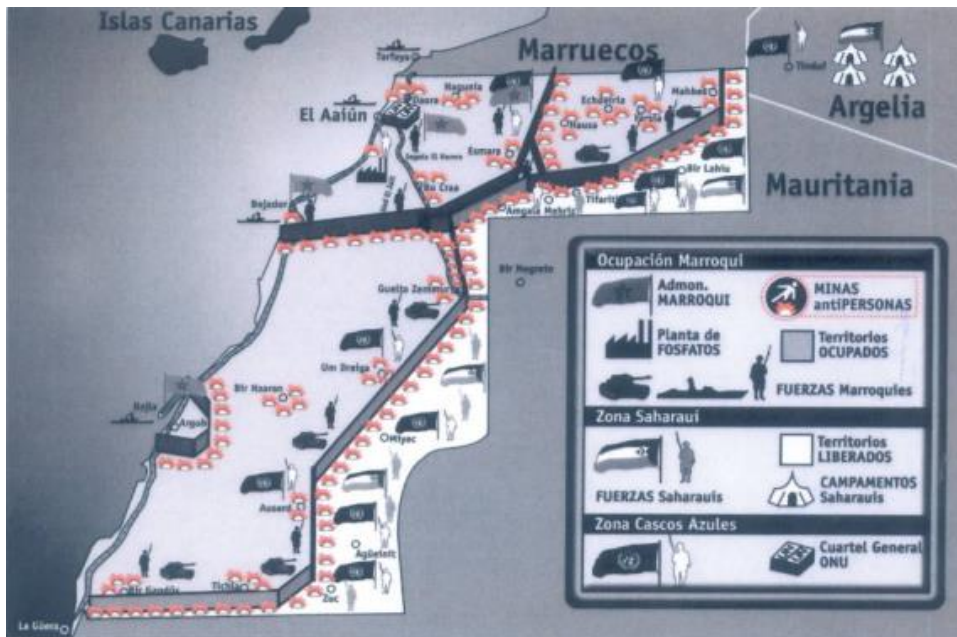
Brief history of the Western Sahara, the creation of the refugee camps and the Saharawi community today

“(…) Y la arena se acumuló e hizo el desierto, y el desierto floreció e hizo un pueblo, y el pueblo sobrevivió e hizo el Sahara (…)”¹¹

In the case of this study, one of the key elements to enable us to understand the situation of the women on whom the study will focus is the history of the Western Sahara and the Saharawi society. I will just give a brief summary of the most important events that will lead us to the current situation of this land and its people. Together with this, given that it is Saharawi women in diaspora who will be the subject of study, I will finish writing about this specific aspect of the Saharawi society, trying to explain the variety that can be found among this group of people.

Without going too far back, it was the 14th of November 1975 when the Spanish dictator, Francisco Franco, signed the Tripartite Interim Administration agreement, in Spanish known as the *Acuerdos tripartitos*, giving authority over the land (known today as the Western Sahara) to Spain, Morocco and Mauritania. Two years earlier, in 1973, in the Saharawi territory the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro) was founded (Beristain and Gonzalez, 2012: 73). It was after the agreements were signed, when the war between the Polisario Front, Morocco and Mauritania broke out, forcing a large percentage of the Sahrawi population to flee to Tindouf, Algeria, in search of safety while the other half of the population remained under the authority of the Moroccan government. Despite the camps initially being thought of as temporary, 45 years later, the vast majority of the Saharawi population who fled are still living there, never having the chance to return to their homeland. It is also important to mention that, in 1980, the Moroccan government built a wall dividing the occupied territory of the Western Sahara from North to South. This wall still exists today and it is approximately 2,700 km-long, constructed mostly of sand, surrounded by landmines, including illegal anti-personnel mines. This made the return of the Sahrawi exodus to their homeland impossible (Fiddian-Qasmiye, 2014: 29). This can be appreciated in the map below:

¹¹ Extract from (Sidi M. Talebbuia, Limam Boisha and Saleh Abdalahi Hamudi) *Poesía y cultura de la resistencia. Tres poetas saharauis contemporáneos* (2016).



Map created by the association of Amigos y Amigas de la RASD, Alava, Spain.

In 1976, shortly after the exodus, the S.A.D.R., better known as the R.A.S.D. (Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic), was proclaimed by the Polisario, setting out the possibility of the creation of a new Saharawi nation, within which a new social order and ideology could be established (Christian, 2008: 1). I will copy here three of the features from the statement made by the Polisario Front, explained by Juan Carlos Gimeno (2007) in *Transformaciones socioculturales de un proyecto revolucionario: la lucha del pueblo Saharaui por la liberación*: 1) The creation of a modern society arising from a social revolution based on the equality of the people regardless of their tribal segment, that is, equality between all Saharawi men and women; 2) the fight for national liberation and the international recognition of their right to self-determination; 3) the fight for their social-cultural survival. This helps us grasp the collective Saharawi identity which exists nowadays. As Gimeno puts it, the abandonment by Spain and the colonization and the Moroccan- Mauritanian occupation in 1975 have contributed significantly to the creation of a strong national Saharawi identity (Gimeno, 2007: 4).

Since then, the Saharawi community has been divided in three major groups: those living under the Moroccan government in the Occupied Territories of the Western Sahara; those

who were exiled and now live in the Saharawi refugee camps in Tindouf¹², Algeria; and those who have fled to other countries.

Another important event in the Saharawi history was the protest camp named *Gdeim Izik* (Camp of Dignity) which took place in the outskirts of the city of El Aaiún in the Occupied Territories between the months of October and November in 2010. The Saharawi people gathered and lived there in order to protest against Morocco's illegal occupation. The camp, for some, is considered to be one of the first events which marked the beginning of the 'Arab Spring'. It is also said that since then, there has been more political engagement among the Saharawi youth together with Islamic extremists gaining leadership among the different Arab movements. This has had a certain influence on the Saharawi youth and how it has developed more of an interest towards religion in recent years. Although the religion of Islam has always been integrated within the Saharawi society, it has been considered to be far less radical because of certain liberties the Saharawi community has had in comparison with other Arab countries which have experienced a more fundamental and dogmatic religious presence. However, the changes the Saharawi society has undergone in the past decade have had an influence in the Saharawi society and resulted in its youth adapting more of a religious lifestyle (Vilches Plaza and Esparza Fenández, 2018: 36).

Going back to 1975, after the proclamation of the R.A.S.D., agreements were made with different countries and this allowed part of the Saharawi youth to study abroad. Among these countries are Algeria, Libya and Cuba... (ibid: 32). In the case of Spain, programs such as *Vacaciones en Paz* started in the 70's with the objective of enabling Saharawi children who lived in the refugee camps to escape from the war as well as the hot temperatures and hard climate conditions of the summer. Nowadays, during the two months of summer, Saharawi girls and boys come to stay in locations throughout the whole of Spain as well as in other countries such as Italy (Cirugeda y Laurence, 2008: 16). Some of the youth stay longer than just the summer, due to health or other reasons, which means a considerable part of their infancy and youth life is spent in a foreign country and usually without their biological family. It is common for the Saharawi youth who end up living in a country such as Spain to then change the pattern of their journeys and travel back to the refugee camps in the summer months to spend the holidays with their biological families. All this leads to there being a curious variety inside the Saharawi community and the Saharawi youth, but as I have

¹² Liberated zones also exist between the Moroccan wall and the border of the vindicated territories (Sophie Carantini, 2006: 13).

explained in the introduction, I am particularly interested in the young Saharawi women who have moved back and forth from the refugee camps to Spain. How has this cross-country experience influenced them during their upbringing, their teenage years and their early adulthood with respect to how they have lived, felt, thought and presented their bodies?

Theoretical Framework

A review of anthropology of the body: authors and contributions

“The subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and this particular world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 431)

I will start the theoretical framework of this work writing about a branch in anthropology which focuses on the body. There are several important authors who should be mentioned here. Marcel Mauss, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty were some of the first to contribute to the sociocultural theory of the body. Other authors who continued with contributions to this field are Nancy Scheper- Hughes, Thomas Csordas and Raewyn Connell. Lastly, and although I have briefly explained Teresa del Valle’s and Mari Luz Esteban’s techniques in the methodology section, I find that once having looked at these authors and concepts, some additional information should be included about their methodological techniques.

Techniques of the Body

Marcel Mauss is considered to be a pioneer in this subject due to his concept of “techniques of the body” presented in his article *Les techniques du corps* first published in 1936. The author analyses corporal or body techniques, such as swimming or walking, from a biological, psychological and sociological point of view. He underlines how tradition, society and education will interfere in how our bodies integrate a certain way of moving and doing things, classifying this procedure depending on the age and sex of the person (Mauss, 1991: 340).

The Social Body

Mary Douglas recognises the contribution made by Marcel Mauss and she also analyses the social body, taking it as the main classification system and as a metaphor of the social system explaining how the body, being a means for expression, is limited by the control of its respective social system. In order to explain this, she uses the example of how societies have different ways of living and understanding a state of ‘trance’: how a Londoner does not experience the same symbolic forms of disassociation from the body as someone from Jamaica in a church ceremony. In short, and to my understanding, Douglas relates the forms

of corporal control together with the existing social control in that society (Douglas, 1988: 105).

The Political Body

Meanwhile, Michel Foucault turned to the political aspect of the body, analysing the relationship between power and knowledge and social changes regarding the political body. In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* he writes a chapter on discipline and docile bodies, where different disciplinary methods are analysed as formulas of domination, “controlling or correcting the operations of the body” and how the notion of docility enables the manipulation of the body “docile bodies can be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, 1977: 136).

Habitus

As for Pierre Bourdieu, in his works he writes about “habitus”, a concept presented first by Aristoteles and also used later by other authors in their works, but it was Bourdieu who took the concept and defined it, giving it a systematic and social formulation. By using his concept of “habitus” Bourdieu suggests a social theory which is neither “objective determinism” nor “subjective voluntarism”, but rather something inbetween: a theory which explains how we adjust to our respective social universe because we have internalized what we have learnt from it as a child, that is, our bodies incorporate the social practices taught to us in a such way, that it becomes “natural” for us to reproduce these same practices when we grow up (Martin Criado, 2009).

Embodied Experience

Finally, in this first group of authors I have mentioned, we have Maurice Merleau- Ponty whose works were also inspiring for Pierre Bourdieu’s theory on the body. In his opinion, there is no significant separation between bodily conduct and intelligent conduct but rather an embodied consciousness. The authors Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi add here, how the notion of embodied mind or minded body replaces the ordinary notions of mind and body, a dichotomy which many authors who study the social-body try to erase (Gallagher and Zahavi: 2008 in Patricia Moya: 2014). Maurice Merleau- Ponty understood the embodied experience and the lived body from a philosophical perspective and defended the idea that the world is perceived through a certain position our bodies take in time and space (Moya: 2014). I have used this last way of perceiving and understanding the body presented by

Merleau- Ponty as a basis for my own work and methodology, as my hypotheses with regard to the body experiences of the Saharawi young women are constructed following a similar argument. I will return to this later on.

I will now continue by giving a short introduction of some of the works of those I have placed in the second group of authors and finish by explaining what theories and concepts in regard to the body and corporal experiences I have found more fitting for the elaboration of this work, starting with Nancy Scheper- Hughes and Margaret M. Lock's article *The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology* (1987).

The Individual Body, the Social Body and the Body Politic

When I read this article, my attention was caught by a short anecdote about a class of first-year medical students listening to a specific case of a middle-aged woman. The authors use this example to explain why it is important the way we conceive the body in our society and how this will have an effect on the type of diagnosis a patient will be given by a doctor. As I think that the anecdote itself resembles quite well one of the points I want to make throughout this work, I think it best just to include it:

We are reminded of a grand rounds presentation before a class of first-year medical students that concerned the case of a middle-aged woman suffering from chronic and debilitating headaches. In halting sentences the patient explained before the class of two hundred that her husband was an alcoholic who occasionally beat her, that she had been virtually housebound for the past five years looking after her senile and incontinent mother-in-law, and that she worries constantly about her teenage son who is flunking out of high school. Although the woman's story elicited considerable sympathy from the students, many grew restless with the line of clinical questioning, and one finally interrupted the professor to demand "But what is the real cause of the headaches?" (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987: 8).

It is, I think, a very good example of how Western medicine has seen and understood the body. Although the class of two hundred students is told how this woman has dealt with many hard and serious situations in her daily life, all this information is considered irrelevant in order to answer the question about the headaches. As the authors explains, this is because Western epistemology and clinical medicine has been influenced by the idea that mind and body are two separate things, the first being intangible and, only the second, palpable. An idea based on Cartesian duality, bringing with it a certain materialistic way of thinking and understanding things. This is where dichotomies such as spirit/matter, body/mind,

seen/unseen, natural/supernatural, magical/rational, rational/irrational and real/unreal come from (ibid: 8).

Scheper-Hughes and Lock divide the body in three levels: the individual body understood in the phenomenological sense of the lived experience of the body-self. The second is the social body where, as Mary Douglas suggested (1970), the body is a natural symbol with different representational uses, which will differ depending on the way nature, society and culture are understood. The third level being the body politic “referring to the regulation, surveillance, and control of the bodies (individual and collective) in reproduction and sexuality, in work and in leisure, in sickness and in other forms of deviance and human difference” (ibid: 8). The authors also include examples of how the body is conceived in different societies, claiming how medical anthropology can be a way of opening frontiers in our mind and develop “new epistemology and metaphysics of the mindful body and of the emotional, social, and political sources of illness and healing” (ibid: 30). I will finish with a phrase from the last paragraph of this very amusing article by Nancy Scheper- Hughes and Margaret M. Lock which I like very much and I think summarises very well the complexity involved in how to understand health and, therefore, the body: “sickness is not just an isolated event, nor an unfortunate brush with nature. It is a form of communication- the language of the organs- through which nature, society and culture speak simultaneously” (ibid: 31).

Social Theory of Embodiment

So far, in this work, different ways to refer to the body and body experiences have appeared such as: corporal techniques by Marcel Mauss, the body as a natural symbol by Mary Douglas or the embodied consciousness by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The body has been studied from different disciplines and various terms have been used to talk about the body and its experiences. But it is Thomas J. Csordas who, in his work *Somatic modes of attention* (1993), focuses on the term embodiment, trying to give it a more concrete definition. First, the author distinguishes the term embodiment from the body, giving it a more profound meaning, understanding it not only as a biological entity, but somewhere in which our perceptual experiences take place, together with the way we present and engage ourselves in the world: “The body is a biological, material entity, while embodiment can be understood as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas, 1993: 135). Csordas reviews some of the previous authors’ works and the concepts that have been used when talking about the body,

trying to elaborate a more precise definition of embodiment (ibid: 136). He points out how paying attention to the body should comprise both paying attention *with* the body and *to* the body, and how the body cannot be attended to as an isolated object, but to the body's situation in the world. As he suggests: "attending to one's body can tell us something about the world and others who surround us" (139). Finally, Csordas's definition of embodiment as a methodological field allows us to overcome the aforementioned dualities between subject and object, body and mind, self and other (152).

Gender Systems

Csordas's contribution to the social theory of embodiment has enabled a more complex definition and understanding of the body, where the body becomes the subject as well as the object, blurring the distinctions which once existed between one and the other and giving a conscious agency to the body. That is, the body is recognized as a subject that interacts with the outside world and others, instead of understanding it just as a biological entity in which interaction takes place. Proceeding with this idea of a more "complex" understanding of the social body, Robert Connell¹³, in his text "Making Gendered People: Bodies, identities, Sexualities" (1999) gives an introduction to gender systems. Following Csordas's idea of how "our body can tell us about the world and others that surrounds us", Connell uses gender systems to refer to this "world that surrounds us" and its classification of the bodies, which as he says: "enters our personal lives, bodily experience, sense of self, and sexuality" (Connell, 1999: 449). In this chapter Connell specifically talks about the gendered duality existing in Western culture and how depending on our body we will acquire a certain identity and way of being (in this case man or woman). What is interesting in Connell's gender systems is how some bodies do not fit in what is supposed to be their respective place in the system, such as transsexuals: "some bodies are more than recalcitrant; they disrupt and subvert the social arrangements into which they are invited" (ibid: 453). These bodies sometimes are "transformed" in order to fit into a certain gender category by disciplinary practices such as gender dress and deportment (ibid: 454). Thus, we can also see here how paying attention *to* and *with* our bodies can tell us more about the world and others who surround us, as it is this world or system itself that creates our gendered identities with respect to our bodies. However, it is not only the biological shape of the body which places us in one classification

¹³ I think it is necessary to clarify that although the author is now called Raewyn Connell, this work was written under the name Robert Connell, which is why I have decided to use the latter in order to cite this particular work.

or the other, but our “performance of the body” (the way we act and present ourselves in the world). Therefore, by recognising that the body has an agency, we are recognising that it is not only the world or in this case, gender systems, that has an influence on our bodies, but our bodies can also actively have an influence on what surrounds us, deifying and changing the existing gendered systems.

I would like to finish this part of the theoretical framework with Mari Luz Esteban’s ‘corporeal itineraries’ and Teresa del Valles ‘generic chronotopes’, two methodological strategies which I consider key when researching the body or corporal experiences.

Corporeal Itineraries

I will start with Mari Luz Esteban, a recognised feminist anthropologist due to her contributions in anthropology of the health and the body, together with her methodological technique of corporal itineraries. In her work *Antropología del Cuerpo: Género, itinerarios corporales, identidades y cambio* (2004) Esteban reviews how the social theory of the body has evolved due to the contributions by authors mentioned above, but emphasises the importance of constructing a solid theoretical base in the anthropology of the body, arguing that it should be “a compromised and responsible anthropology, one which is ‘embodied¹⁴’ in society and takes on board the economy, politics and the analysis of the structures, but also studies personal interaction, perceptions and lived experiences” uncovering the importance of the multiple bodies existing behind the theories and institutions (Esteban, 2004: 26). Esteban also retrieves the agency given to the body in Connell’s gender systems and advocates for an anthropology of the body that takes into account the acts of resistance and the social transformation that can be generated by the social actors in a society, together by criticising our excessive Western way of viewing the body which divides mind and body, leaving the corporal experience aside (ibid: 27).

In corporal itineraries, moments or lived experiences are described as scenes, trying to include as many details as possible: including information about the person such as their family, class, religion, gender... and then about the experience itself, trying to focus on the corporal-physical experience: their feelings, their way of moving or acting, the way they dressed or adorned themselves, how they perceived their body... (ibid: 148). By combining the fragments of the itinerary together, the changes involving the aspects under study can be appreciated, one could say, in a bigger picture. The personal experience of the person is

¹⁴ I have found it most fitting to translate ‘encarnada’, which Esteban uses in her text, to ‘embodied’.

understood within a macro as well as micro paradigm; that is, a particular corporal experience can tell us more about the gender systems proposed by Connell. At the same time, the author suggests how this analysis enables us to identify elements of resistance in our own life; things we can change which can bring an individual and social corporal empowerment (ibid: 155). In summary, Esteban's methodological- theoretical proposal requires: "giving all the theoretical and ethnographical relevance to the corporal as if it were the language of the social, at the same time taking the individual as a representative of the collective and understanding the hybrid as a condition of the world which can be de-generalised and transformed" (ibid: 154).

Generic Chronotopes

Teresa Del Valle's methodology of 'generic chronotopes' is similar to Esteban's corporal itineraries, in the way that it also focuses on corporal experiences as key events with which to reflect upon the life of the individual but also of the collective (Del Valle, 1999: 15). As mentioned before in the methodology, Del Valle proposes 'chronotopes' as a tool which enables the anthropologist to access memories: memories of experiences which have stayed incorporated as a vital part of our existence. The author is referring to non-discursive memories, "something that goes past the corporal experience and personal internalization, and that includes an emotional process" (ibid: 8) this could also be referred to as "embodied memories"¹⁵.

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus is portrayed in Del Valle's description of embodied memories, as she is also referring to something that we incorporate in such a way that it becomes natural to us. By the concept of embodiment the author suggests an action that combines: feelings, emotions, pleasures, sexuality... And as some of the authors have stated above, it brings together mind and body, breaking with the duality of Western epistemology. She explains how the embodied memory can be analysed by studying the context where the memory was created, getting to know why distinct aspects of that memory stay permanent throughout time (11). Therefore, if the term chronotopes embraces the study of time and space, by 'generic chronotopes', Del Valle is referring to when time and space are impregnated by gender, and appear in a dynamic way (12). The author underlines the importance of bringing together time, space and gender, as gender brings dynamic relationships together with other aspects of the social structure in an interactive and social dimension. The union of time, space and gender can represent a common, and at the same time a diverse, experience.

¹⁵ In Spanish "memoria encarnada".

The author explains that this is because the human species is sexed and can be expressed and signified in a variety of ways: gender can create and recreate identities, because relationships and meanings are in constant transformation inside the gender system and by acknowledging that the system is dynamic, as mentioned above, allows us to reflect on people as individuals but also as a collective (15).

My interest and aim for this study is to get to know some of the corporal experiences lived by Saharawi young women, those who have lived in the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria and in a Western country such as Spain. I find that time, space and gender are relevant characteristics which should be taken in account in this study, as my hypotheses suggest that these women will have lived the experience of their female body differently throughout their lives; depending on their social- cultural context and where they were at that moment will have had an effect on how the gender system will have influenced them. By focusing on the corporal experiences of these women, I intend to analyse certain aspects that can be meaningful and significant and can lead us to a better understanding of their lives as individuals, but also of the group they belong to: young Saharawi women who have lived both in the refugee camps and in Spain.

Health and Diet

“The health of individuals depends on a balance in the natural world, while the health of each organ depends on its relationship to all other organs. Nothing can change without changing the whole” (Scheper- Hughes and Lock, 1987: 12)

Having looked at some of the authors and concepts that have shaped anthropology of the body, I would like to move on to the aspects presented in the objectives and hypotheses starting with health and diet. My intention is to talk about these aspects both with regard to Western societies and the Saharawi refugee camps, in the hope of gaining an understanding of both backgrounds. And because diet is so closely linked with health, I will present both these aspects together.

Health and Diet through a Western prism

Before I start with health and diet, I would like to clarify that when I talk about Western societies, I am referring to Europe and countries connected to Europe which share similar values, social norms and lifestyles. Although health and diet in Western societies is a very broad subject which I will not be able to adequately cover in this chapter, I would like to at least briefly write about some of the main characteristics which are used to describe a Western society and how these have a repercussion on health. Because, as Scheper- Hughes and Lock pointed out, sickness is also related with society and culture (ibid: 8). I will be using Richard Eckersley’s article, “Is modern Western culture a health hazard?” (2005) for this, as he too argues that culture can help to explain health within a society. Throughout his article Eckersley uses the term culture and clarifies that when referring to culture, he means “the language and accumulated knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, and values that are passed between individuals, groups, and generations”, explaining that, indeed, the health of a population is the result of a complex interaction between history, culture, politics and economics (Eckersley, 2005: 2).

Two main characteristics can be highlighted when referring to Western culture or society: materialism and individualism. Its market and economy is based on ongoing consumerism, so its citizens are bombarded with messages to keep consuming. This produces a materialistic way of living, creating attachment to money and possessions. Eckersley points out how materialism can produce dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation, and alienation,

as the market is always advertising and creating new desires and expectations cannot be fulfilled (ibid: 2).

As for individualism, although this characteristic can have positive outcomes in a person such as freedom and choice, it can also lead to self-centred actions, relegating collectiveness and the importance of the group. Individualism can have an impact on the way we relate and engage with others and on social trust, creating loneliness, depression and low self-esteem. Several feminist authors, such as Yayo Herrero, have criticised this, underlining how people are not independent but inter-dependent and need one another, not just for physical reasons such as being looked after when ill or in need of care, but for social and physiological reasons too (Herrero, 2014: 57). This inter-dependence collapses with the individual values and way of living proposed by Western values, proving harmful to the health and wellbeing of its people (Eckersley, 2005: 5).

How is all of this related to diet? I would like to refer to the preoccupation with diet that exists in a Western society, such as Spain, today. Susan Bordo in “Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western culture and the body” (1993) focuses on a phenomenon that appeared in the late nineteenth century and stills exists within Western society today: preoccupation with fat, diet and slenderness, a preoccupation that is part of the gender system presented by Connell, as it designates a type of gender role and body.

The materialism and consumerism that lies beneath Western societies has also created a desire for a certain type of body, advertising the contemporary body canon as an aim or goal to achieve. Diet becomes a key aspect in this game, as self-discipline is positively valued in Western society and this can be reflected in a disciplined body (Foucault: 1977), for example, bodies without loose or excessive flesh, as fat is associated with laziness and a lack of discipline. It is believed that diet together with exercise is the main way of controlling this (ibid: 195). However, Bordo explains how the constant advertising of food and instant satisfaction can create contradictions, and the aforementioned dissatisfaction, depression and anxiety can appear together with repercussions associated more directly with diet such as eating disorders, anorexia and bulimia (204).

Before I continue, it must be said that health and diet in Western societies can be analysed from very different angles and a lot more can be said about them, not forgetting that things change throughout history and depending on the region or country. I hope that the above at least offers an idea of some of the main characteristics about health and diet in Western societies. Moreover, as this work is on Saharawi young women, I think it appropriate to

include health aspects such as those related to the physical body such as eating disorders, anorexia and bulimia, as these are issues commonly related to women, and young women in particular.

Health and Diet in the Saharawi Refugee Camps

La juventud refugiada en los campamentos saharauis: Atrapados en la incertidumbre del limbo is a sociological study that was carried out in the refugee camps in 2018 with the financial help of the association of Amigos y Amigas de la RASD de Alava. The study is based on the youth who live in the camps, encompassing different aspects that are relevant in their lives as refugees and their situation of being 'stuck in limbo'. As explained in the ethnographical framework, the refugee camps located in Tindouf have been in a state of limbo for more than forty years without any real solution proposed by the UN or the Spanish government. After so long, the desperation that has arisen from this impasse has had a great impact on the young Saharawi generation who live in the refugee camps. This study shows how the abundance of free time, the lack of jobs, together with the difficulty of getting married because of economic reasons, have strongly affected their mental and physical health. The model of consumerism they see on TV or are exposed to when travelling to a foreign country has also had a big impact, as the reality in which they live does not allow them to follow this type of Western and capitalist life style.

The hostile environment existing in the refugee camps, which are located in the middle of the desert (lack of water, particularly drinkable water, limited access to certain food, and limited sanitary equipment...), brings a variety of health problems such as: "dental problems, optical problems, malnutrition, anaemia, digestive problems, asthma, allergies..." Health is a big issue in the refugee camps, as there is a vast majority who do not know what their health condition is because there are few effective protocols within the health care system. Also, people are often diagnosed with some of the conditions mentioned above when visiting foreign countries and start receiving treatment which is not continued when they come back to the refugee camps (Vilches and Esparza, 2018: 29).

The study points out how issues related to mental health are common to the youth who live in the refugee camps but also how they are stigmatized within the society, making it harder for those who do suffer any type of problem to deal with their condition. According to the

study there is a noticeable distinction between women and men, as it is more common for women to share what they are going through with their female friends than for the men to share with other males. Depression, anxiety, psychosis and bipolar disorder are some of the mental health conditions known to be common among the Saharawi youth (ibid: 45).

As for diet, it has already been stated that living in a refugee camp in the Sahara desert means that there is a limited access to food and a varied diet with meat, vegetables and fruit. However, I think it is interesting to mention that in comparison to what has been said above about diet and women in Western societies, abundance of fat in women has always been a beauty stereotype among the Saharawi community and other ethnic groups of the region. And although what was once the main beauty canon has changed during recent decades due to influence from other Western cultures, resulting in young women desiring a slimmer figure than the traditional voluminous body, it is known that the consumption of corticosteroids to gain fat is still habitual among women (70). In my experience during my stay in the refugee camps, I learnt how it was not common for women to eat light meals such as salads as most wanted to gain fat.

Western and Saharawi Beauty Canons

“We should not let ourselves think that a world in which people are not judged by appearance exists just over the horizon. All cultures are beauty cultures” (Nancy Etcoff in Popenoe 2004).

I had not included the beauty canon as an aspect in my hypothesis at first. This is not because I thought it does not have an influence on our body experiences, but because my last work¹⁶ was based on beauty canons and embodied practices and I was worried I was going to end up with the same or a similar study as my previous one if I focussed too much on this aspect. However, when I received the answers of the first exercise from the women taking part in this study, I realised that it was unavoidable to include this as one of the main aspects when talking about body experiences. Moreover, in the above chapter we have been able to appreciate how health and diet can be directly related to the existing beauty canons. As I have already written a short introduction of what the general female beauty canons are in both societies, I will not delve too deeply into this matter but expand a little on the concept of the beauty canon itself and enter into more detail regarding the characteristics of the Saharawi female beauty canon.

A writer who I think must be taken into account when analysing this subject is Naomi Wolf who, in her book *The Beauty Myth* (2002), argues how the idea of ideal beauty in a society can be used as a political weapon by the patriarchal Western system in order to maintain control over women’s bodies. This is something that is also suggested in an article titled “Femininity and Fashion: How Women Experience Gender Role Through their Dressing Practices” (2018) and how feminist work on fashion “has largely been critical of fashion as a tool of male domination” (Brennan 2011 in Braizaz, 2018: 60). Although the first refers to the beauty canon and the second to fashion, it is impossible to be oblivious to the relation between the two.

¹⁶ My final degree work (2017).

The Western Beauty Canon

Barbie Doll

In this chapter I will not develop any kind of analysis regarding the origins of beauty canons or why they exist in all societies, but rather focus on the fact that they do exist and that they do have certain repercussions as we have seen in the above chapter 'Health and Diet'. Trying to analyse or describe the beauty canon in a Western society can be difficult as, depending on the country, region, community, the year, the moment of fashion... it changes. However, in my opinion, I think that the stereotype image of Barbie is still rooted in our mainstream idealization of female beauty: white, tall, thin, blue eyed blond girl-woman with big, but not too big, breasts and butt. In *The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of Feminine Body in Popular Culture* (1995), Urla and Swedlund also approach the doll's body as the representation of femininity for young girls in the United States. However, we can now find all types of characteristics that have become part of the beauty canon in Western societies, such as: dark skinned, afro hair, thick eyebrows or smiles with gapped teeth... We would only have to go through a couple of mainstream fashion magazines to see the subtle changes in the models' faces and bodies. Because indeed, these are just subtle changes, as in fact, if we were to just have a quick glance at the magazines we would not see much of change at all, and even less so with regard to the shape of their bodies, as we will seldom see a fat model, nor for that matter, will we see a fat Barbie: "our measurements show Barbie's body to be thin- very thin- far from anything approaching the norm" (Urla and Swedlund, 1995: 246).

The Saharawi Beauty Canon

Abundant bodies, pale skin and long, straight dark hair

In regard to what is meant to be the Saharawi beauty canon, the contrast is considerable, especially in relation to body shape. As mentioned in the section 'Health and Diet', abundance of fat in women has always been a beauty stereotype among the Saharawi community and other ethnic groups of the region. A substantial part of my last study was to analyse the origins and reasons of this cultural beauty characteristic, and for this I based myself mainly on Rebecca Popenoe's book *Feeding desire: fatness, beauty and sexuality* (2004) and Sophie Caratini's work *La prisión del tiempo: los cambios sociales en los campamentos refugiados saharauis* (2006) which talk about the practices of fattening girls in the Moorish societies; a practice

that was abolished in 1976 in the Saharawi society with the proclamation of the R.A.S.D¹⁷, although the female beauty canon of an abundant body and the consumption of corticosteroids amongst the Saharawi women still exist.

La costumbre de cebar a las niñas era muy habitual entre las sociedades moras del sur y del este, donde las familias de «jaimas grandes» sobrealimentaban a sus hijas a partir de los siete u ocho años con el fin de que sean obesas hacia los doce años, coincidiendo con el momento de contraer matrimonio. Entre las «gentes del noroeste», que practicaban el nomadismo en los desiertos del Sáhara Occidental, la costumbre de cebar a las niñas era menos frecuente que en Mauritania, porque las mujeres eran más activas y las distancias que había que recorrer eran más largas¹⁸ (Caratini, 2006: 7).

Abundant bodies aside, there are other physical characteristics which should be taken into account when describing the female Saharawi beauty canon. Here are two answers I got from the Saharawi women I interviewed in my last study in 2017, which I think fit in well and can help us get an idea of the Saharawi ideal female beauty:

La sociedad saharauí¹⁹ en ese sentido no ha evolucionado, el ideal de mujer bella blanca y gorda es el mismo desde la época de mis abuelas (...) con muchas curvas, la barriga plana y de piel blanca²⁰ (Baasima).

Tener el pelo largo negro y liso, ser blanca de piel. Tener los brazos depilados, ser muy fina y delicada, tener los pies pequeños, estar rellenita; tener sus mofletes y la barriguita. Yo creo que empieza a los 11 (cuando empiezan a decirte algo por el físico), esto es porque ahí una parte del cuerpo de la mujer que para los saharauis es muy bonito, y esto es el tobillo. Pero lo que pasa es que a las chicas delgadas se les nota el talón de Aquiles, y eso no se considera bonito; es bonito cuando esta gordito y más redondo. Con los 11 años se empieza a notar más la importancia hacía la gordura del tobillo, esto más el mítico culo saharauí (Maha).

Baasima describes a flat stomach, opposed to Maha's chubby stomach; an aspect which I realised is changing in the younger generations of Saharawi women, as a lot of them confessed that although achieving an abundant body with curves was still the canon, they were meant to maintain a flat belly. This is also mentioned in the above chapter in C.E.A.R.'s study; it is pointed out how this is an influence that has arisen with the fact that

¹⁷ R.A.S.D or in English S.A.R.D: Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

¹⁸ This quotation has not been translated.

¹⁹ In Spanish text I have spelt Saharauí instead of Saharawi, as the first is more common in Spanish.

²⁰ All comments from Saharawi women have not been translated.

young Saharawi's have studied abroad in Western societies (Vilches and Esparza, 2018: 29).

The second comment by Maha reinforces the portrait of beauty, explaining how being a fine and delicate woman is well looked upon in Sahrawi society and also gives a specific description of the physical features of the ideal Sahrawi woman: straight, black hair, light complexion, no body hair, small feet, big bottom, chubby build: with chubby cheeks and tummy. Maha mentions the Achilles heel, one of the few parts of the body such as: ankles, necks (when not wearing a scarf) or hands (when not wearing gloves) which are seen when wearing the melpha and, therefore, can accentuate the attractiveness of the person. Here it is important to underline the fact that the fatter the ankle, then the more attractive it is; as a fat ankle would suggest a fat body.

I would like to finish this chapter with the two characteristics: the pale skin or complexion and the straight and long, black hair, as these two in particular caught my attention when I was staying in the refugee camps.

One of the observations I made when walking around the refugee camps was that nearly all the young women I saw walking outside their house were wearing scarfs wrapped around their heads on top of their melphas, sun glasses, winter gloves and winter boots with thick socks, all this in very high hot weather. The times I asked about this, I was sometimes told it was for modesty and that they did not want to show their skin, but the most common answer would be that they did not want to be hit by the sun, and so the more layers they wore the less chance they would get tanned when walking under the desert sun. I once heard a girl say how the reason for wearing such thick clothing in such hot weather was that the more they sweated, the paler their skin would be.

Another known fact among the Saharawi women in the refugee camps is the use of special creams and products to obtain paler skin. C.E.A.R.'s study shows that at least 15.8% of the women have used a specific product to modify their skin colour, a practice that has been proven to be a health risk due to the chemicals in these creams and products (ibid: 81).

As for hair, it is an aspect that came up in some of the interviews from the last study I did as well as in some of the exercises sent to me by the interviewees for this work. Although I did not get to see much of the women's hair when I was in the camps, I do remember expressions of admiration when a woman with thick, long hair would uncover her head for a moment. It seems that the same thing occurs with pale skin: what is less common in the society becomes

the desirable quality for the rest, and so different techniques are put into practice to achieve these qualities, such as putting on creams and products to get paler skin or the use of gadgets such as hair straighteners to straighten their hair. Here is a part of one of the interviews from the last study (2017):

Lo que más sentía es envidia. Pensaba “porque ellas sí, y yo no”. Fue en primero de primaria que le dije a mi madre que no quería tener el pelo rizado. Ella me ofreció alisármelo y acabé alisándomelo todos los días. No deje mi pelo afro natural hasta hace el año pasado, que fue cuando empecé a sentirme orgullosa por mi etnia (Maha).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s book, *Amerikanah* (2014) comes to mind here, a novel about Nigerian diaspora living in the U.S. and in the U.K. Throughout the story Ngozi Adichie tells us about a Nigerian woman named Ifemelu and her life in America. Curiously enough, much of Ifemelu’s scenes are to do with her hair. Ifemelu used to braid her hair when she lived in Nigeria, however, when she arrives in America she starts straightening it and using chemicals on it, in order to look more ‘professional’. The novel also emphasises how a lot of hair salons in the U.S. do not know what to do with black women’s afro hair or how popular women’s magazines include hardly any black models or hair style tips for afro hair (Ngozi Adichie, 2014).

I find that this story is a good example to show how, depending on the society and culture you are in, different beauty ideals and assumptions about physical appearance exist and how moving in between places can produce a change in how one perceives and feels about one’s body, in this case, one’s hair.

Dress and the Representation of the Body

“As part of their geographical relocation between two cultures, the women experienced shifts and challenges in relation not only to the multisensory experience or simultaneous perception of dress but also in relation to the sentiments and meanings associated with varied forms of dress” (Littrell and Ogle in Johnson and Foster, 2007:131).

Thus, the way our bodies are shaped suggests that we belong to one gender or another, and the way we dress and present our bodies, can in fact reinforce this. As stated in the aforementioned sociological article by Marion Braizaz’s “Femininity and Fashion: how women experience gender role through their dressing practices” (2018): “if there is one dimension of social life for which fashion matters, it is gender” (Bard 2014 in Braizaz: 61). In the hypotheses I have said that dress or clothing is an aspect that I consider important in relation to the experiences of the body, and coinciding with Braizaz’s article, I would say that this is especially true in the lives of women as I believe the fashion clothes industry in Western societies is mostly targeted towards women (ibid: 60).

Dress is related with how one represents one’s body, to oneself or to others. It can be the easiest way a person finds to manifest their identity or their origins. I like how Donald Clay Johnson and Helen Bradley Foster in *Dress sense* (2007) explain that the term dress can be used “for the ways in which anyone, anywhere covers or uncovers, adds to or subtracts from, her or his body”... and how “feelings, emotions, memories, impressions, responses and sensations” can also be associated with dress (Eicher and Roach-Higgins in Johnson and Foster, 2007: 2).

Dress and clothing can also be used as a political tool. For example, in a study by CEAR-Euskadi²¹ in 2017, it is pointed out how the neoliberal system we live in gives a sense of freedom (freedom for example, to express our individual self). However, and going back to Connell’s gender systems, there are those who are marginalised and outcast from society. In the study, an example is used of how the black gangs from New York had their own way of expressing their identity: the bandana, baggy pants and XL sports T-shirts. This way of dressing expressed a social and political identity and created a union between the black gangs, demonstrating how a type of dress can be used as a collective identity and political

²¹ Comisión de Ayuda al Refugiado en Euskadi.

mechanism. However, when the fashion industry took hold of the ‘rappers’ look, and made it a mainstream fashion for everyone to wear, taking away the accompanying social and political act, and the meaning and feeling of identity in the way those items of clothing were worn by that particular social group, it turned it into just a ‘groovy look’ (CEAR-Euskadi, 2017: 38-45).

Dress and Traditional Clothing in the Saharawi Society

The Melpha

As I said above, dress is an aspect which I consider has had, and still has, more of an influence in the lives of women, and the same could be said for the Saharawi society. The Saharawi community, who come from a desert landscape and a nomadic way of life, has its original dress which is also known as a cultural icon. However, I would dare to say, that the wearing of the traditional dress is a responsibility that is taken up by the women from the society. As many others who have been in the Saharawi refugee camps will tell you, the sight of an adult woman outside her house without her melpha is very rare or perhaps something you will never see. However, although there are men who dress in a ‘daraa’, their traditional clothing, it is very common to find men dressed in shorts or Western clothing. In addition, in my last study (2017), all the women I interviewed explained how they always wore the melpha when living in the refugee camps, but not necessarily when living in Spain, some however, did cover their hair with a headscarf. So, the wearing of the melpha can be looked at from a social, political, religious and cultural angle, but in this chapter I will focus more on the last; the cultural representation of it.

Dolores Juliano in *La Causa Saharaui y las Mujeres* (1998), tells us the melpha dates back to Roman times and consists of a large piece of cloth which is wrapped round the body and fastened at the shoulders. Unlike the dark coloured, thick robes of other Arab women which completely hide the body, the Saharawi melphas are made of light and airy, brightly coloured fabrics as in the Central African fashion (Juliano: 51). Most importantly, the melpha, or similar apparel, is known to be worn in only a few Maghreb countries, making the melpha a symbol for the Sahrawi people and a symbol of identification. We can appreciate this in Joanna Christian’s work where she describes a painting by a Sahrawi artist: “Fadel Jalifa’s painting of women in their typical Sahrawi dress – a feminine emblem of Sahrawi national identity – provides a rainbow coloured and aesthetically pleasing contrast to the dull and ominous greys of the desert floor and sky” (Christian 2008: 33). When a Sahrawi woman

wears the melpha she represents her ethnicity, making a silent statement of where she comes from and what her religion is. It is important to know that as well as the melpha being a cultural icon for the Saharawi people, at the same time, the image of a woman wearing a melpha underpins a woman's femininity and attractiveness.

During the time spent with Saharawi people these past few months I have realized that the melpha makes it appear as if there is more flesh on the women who wear them and so they tend to wear the melpha in a such a way as to acquire a voluminous shape. Here we have evidence of fatness being important in the Saharawi notion of beauty, as seen in Yeira and Baasima's words, (two Saharawi women I interviewed in my last work) fat is beautiful and the melpha indicates more flesh and enhances curves:

Mis amigas, mi gente de alrededor... Llevan la melpha y la melpha es más carne, se ve mejor. Cuando voy a una boda con la melpha todo el mundo me mira como diciendo; 'que guapa esta', porque esta gorda (Yeira).

Se considera una mujer bella aquellas que rellene la melpha con muchas curvas (Baasima).

In the next chapter we will see how the wearing of the melpha is also a symbol that indicates the rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood.

Puberty

Menarche and the naked body

“All human beings pass through life stages. Life stages are key points of transition which shape us as individuals within our families, communities, and broader societies” (Simon, 2019: 67).

Originally, I had considered exploring the subject of affective relationships as the penultimate aspect of my final hypothesis. However, I realised the difficulties this subject might entail, as it could lead to intimate questions which – as I learnt from my time in the Saharawi refugee camps – were generally not discussed in relation to unmarried women. After the first exercise, one of the women participating in the study revealed that she only remembers one significant moment regarding her body or awareness of her body. In a short paragraph, she described how her mother touched and looked at her naked body after having spent five years without seeing each other. She was 15 at the time.

It took me by surprise to learn that, in a Muslim society such as the Saharawi, where women hardly show the naked body, such an encounter took place. After considering what this woman had described in her paragraph, I realised that puberty, the changing of the body, together with the concept of the naked body, could be an interesting aspect to look into. Not knowing where to acquire information about these issues, I decided to ask the women about their first experience with menstruation as it is one of the more important aspects of puberty. In order to talk about nakedness, the *hammam*²² came to my mind, a common activity among Saharawi women in the refugee camps.

Puberty and Menarche

Puberty is a slow transitional stage from the status of “childhood” to the status of “adulthood”. Arnold Van Gennep (1960) describes rites of passages as “a rite that accompanies the change of place, status, social position and age” (Turner, 1988: 101). The author divides the rite in three phases: the first, the phase of separation, where it is understood that the individual detaches themselves and no longer belongs to the status or

²² The hammam (the Islamic bathhouse) – remains the closest surviving equivalent to the Roman baths today (Górnika, 2016: 126).

place they used to; the second, the intermediate or liminal period, where no specific characteristics are attributed; and the last, the re-aggregation or re-incorporation phase, where the individual is once again in a stable and defined status with specific characteristics. Turner focuses on the liminal phase, explaining how this is an ambiguous phase, a phase which cannot be categorized. People who find themselves in the liminal phase are not in one specific place or another, but transitioning (ibid: 102).

Although it is not easy to specify when childhood ends or when adulthood begins, as these notions depend on their cultural and sociological context, puberty could be considered a liminal phase. It is a time in which our bodies change and mature, slowly transitioning from the status of child to that of adult. I would say that in the case of girls, that the first period is believed to be a common indicator of womanhood.

In an article about cultural perceptions and practices around menarche in the United States, Margaret L. Stubbs explains how menarche has been perceived by girls in negative way because of physical discomfort and inconvenience, but also in a positive way, “as a sign of growing up, being a woman and able to have children” (Stubbs, 2019: 59). Stubbs also points out how this sometimes depends on the pubertal timing. Namely, it is more common for early-maturers to have a more negative experience with their first menstruation than late-maturers. In addition, a study based on puberty in Nigeria and Kenya titled “Adolescent and Parental Reactions to Puberty in Nigeria and Kenya: A Cross-Cultural and Intergenerational Comparison” reveals it was common for adolescents to react towards their changing body by trying to hide it, including from their parents. In adolescence, demands for privacy increase and there is a preference to not expose their changing bodies (Bello et al., 2017: 37).

Another interesting idea from Stubbs’ text is that she mentions how, in different researches, girls commonly refer to their mothers as very important and generally helpful throughout their first period. However, she also comments that the information provided by the mothers is often minimal (Stubbs, 2019: 59).

In her article titled “Veiling as a Rite of Passage”, Louise Simon argues how, in Muslim societies, the wearing of the hijab²³ for the first time marks for girls their transition from the stage of girlhood to womanhood. The act of putting it on symbolizes that they no longer

²³ *Hijab* is an Arabic word that means a veil (or drape, curtain, screen, partition, barrier) that covers a woman’s hair, neck, chest, or even face (Rahman, Fung and Yeo, 2016: 218). In this article, hijab will be used to refer to headscarf (Simon, 2019: 68).

belong to the liminal and ambiguous phase of puberty, but rather to a specific phase with specific characteristics: womanhood. As it has been explained in the chapter above, it is the melpha which is the traditional dress for women in the Saharawi community. Nevertheless, the hijab is a clothing common amongst diaspora Saharawi women who live in Western countries or, as we will see later in the analysis, for girls who live in the refugee camps but are still considered too young to wear the melpha. As I have not been able to find readings on the cultural rites of “the first wearing of the melpha”, I will be instead referring to the hijab throughout this chapter, assuming that both items of dress are related and serve a similar purpose: “in many Muslim cultures girls begin to wear the hijab at this time as an outward symbol which marks their transition and signifies their change in status (Simon, 2019: 68).

As for what was mentioned about mothers in the study on girls from the United States, Simon suggests that, in Muslim societies, mothers also play an important role in regard to religion: “they are often the ones who are teaching their children how to pray and perform other religious observances, as well as how to act and behave appropriately in society”. Simon also comments on how some girls desire to be like their mothers and are happy to start wearing the hijab “just as young Western girls may enjoy dressing up in their [mother’s] clothes, shoes and make-up, Muslim girls whose mothers wear the hijab may want to copy their mothers” (ibid.: 69).

The Naked Body

In her book *Nakedness Taboo* (2016), Barbara Górnicka offers a good summary of nakedness throughout history in different societies around the world. In chapter 5: “Natural bodies? Nakedness, eroticisation and shame”, she explains how “civilising processes have had a direct effect on how we are affected by the sight of naked body today” (Górnicka, 2016: 112). It is suggested that the learning to feel ashamed of our bodies has resulted in seeing them as more erotic and sexual in Western societies. By observing changes over time in attitudes towards nakedness, we can also see the connection existing between shame and modesty. In the book, it is said how many argue that it was through the development of civilisation that nakedness was more inhibited around Europe, and that the Victorian times are considered the peak of nakedness as taboo (ibid).

Nudity in Islam

As for Muslim countries, Górnicka points out how the radical bodily restrictions that existed among the Hebrews were also seen among the early Muslims (ibid). While reading *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* by Fadwa El Guindi (1999), I was presented with a comparison of both texts on Adam and Eve from the Bible and the Quran. El Guindi points out that, although dress (as a way to cover nudity) is integral to both sacred beginnings, in the Hebrew version, it seems that Adam and Eve were shame-free naked until taking the fruit, which made them feel shame towards their naked bodies and, consequently, dress is used to clothe or cover them. In contrast, in the Islamic version, the author explains that the pair were “clothed lavishly immediately after their first appearance” and that it was due to their disobedient act in the Islamic version, it is not only Eve who eats the fruit, but both of them) that parts of their bodies were exposed as a punishment and as a message about human mortality and vulnerability (El Guindi, 1999: 76).

Irantzu Mendia and Gloria Guzman, throughout their study *In Occupied Land: Memory and Resistance of Women in the Western Sahara* (2016) include parts of interviews with Saharawi people who had suffered violence and had been tortured by the Moroccan police. The authors explain how in some of the testimonies several references were made to women of different ages being forced to stand naked. This was said to be a type of “humiliation, vulnerability and deep affront to their personal dignity”. To use an example, one testimony read: “They stripped my grandmother naked in front of everyone”. Another testimony said: “People couldn’t believe such harm could be done among Muslims. For instance, when I tell people that they stripped me naked, people say ‘that can’t be’” (Mendia and Guzman, 2016: 62).

Hamman

Although the humiliation of nakedness in Muslim societies can be perceived in some of the strict forms of Islam of today, the hamman still remains a popular bathhouse among Muslims societies, including the Saharawi. While the rules of Islam state “total nudity is very strongly advised against, even when one is alone” (Bouhdiba in Górnicka, 2016: 125), it is common for Muslim women to share a space together naked in the hamman. In Górnicka’s book, it is suggested that rules on nudity in bathhouses were not due to modesty, but rather to the fear that, if Muslim women were to share baths with women from other religions, they

would adopt non-Muslim practices (ibid: 126). Thus, it would not be a problem for Muslim women to bathe naked with other Muslim women, as we can see is the case among the Saharawi women in the refugee camps who bathe together in the hammams.

Feminism

Movements and organisations in the Saharawi refugee camps and Spain

“Feminist thinkers went directly to the heart of the matter –critically examining how we feel and think about our bodies and offering constructive strategies for change” (hooks, 2000: 31).

For the last segment, I have chosen feminist ideology and ways of thinking which lead one to reflect about the body and gender. As a woman living in Spain during this period of history, I witnessed the outbreaks of feminism throughout the country these past years. I believe it has gained strength, that there has been a certain outburst and an increase in participation in events for change and gender equality as women of all ages join the movement, especially those from younger generations. This outbreak, I believe, has had an impact on the lives of many living in Spain one way or another, and I am interested to see if this is the case for the interviewees. In this sense, I would like to know if the feminist movement in Spain today has had any impact on the way these four Saharawi women experience their body. For this, it is essential to provide a short introduction to the situation regarding the women’s movement and gender in the refugee camps.

Women’s Organisations’ in the Saharawi Refugee Camps

Throughout the ethnographical and the theoretical framework, I have tried to include as much information as possible about the social, cultural and historic context of the Saharawi people. Even so, I think that before continuing, it is appropriate to remind the reader that we are talking about a group of people who are Arab and Muslim (originally Berber nomads) and have either been living in refuge in Algeria, under Morocco’s occupation or in diaspora for 45 years, (Medina Martín, 2014: 892).

As I have mentioned in the ethnographical framework, in 1976, after the Spanish colonizers departed from the land of the Western Sahara and a big part of the Saharawi population fled to Algeria, the R.A.S.D. was proclaimed. Nine years later, in 1986, the U.N.M.S (the National Union of Saharawi Women) was officially created as a wing inside the R.A.S.D. The U.N.M.S declares their struggle to be the struggle for liberation and feminine emancipation, one of the

famous slogans being “Self-determination for the people, self-determination for the women²⁴”. It is curious how many women in the Saharawi Society take on certain positions in government, have a cultural and political status and have certain civil and social rights which women from other Muslim countries may not have. Even so, Medina Martín in her study “Construcción de identidades de género y construcción de identidades feministas en las mujeres saharauis en los campamentos de refugiados/as en Tindouf (Argelia): una lectura desde el feminismo poscolonial (2014)”, points out how, although Saharawi tradition sometimes plays in favour to the women, there are also other traditional elements which do not (ibid: 897). I will not venture into the different rights and laws for women in the Saharawi society in this chapter, as I find it a matter difficult to present in its entirety nor is it my aim here. However, I will provide a basic outline in order to at least grasp certain aspects about women’s organisations and their political agenda.

As it appears in Medina Martín’s text, one of the goals is to create collective strategies towards social equality in different life spheres. Regarding the U.N.M.S.’s political agenda, there are apprenticeships on the feminist movement and women’s movement, empowerment for women, women’s leadership, violence against women, sexual and reproductive health, political participation, etc. These are just some of the things the U.N.M.S has been working on (Chacón and Lopez in Medina Martín, 2014: 902). The U.N.M.S. has also been working together with other international women’s and feminist movements such as the World March of Women. It must be said that the U.N.M.S is the political organisation founded inside the R.A.S.D., but it is not the only organised group of Saharawi women who work towards a change in gender equality, as there are also other movements formed by younger Saharawi women or by Saharawi women who do not live in the camps or the occupied territories, each with their own agenda and strategies.

The New Wave of Feminism in Spain

In any case, as this study is based on Saharawi women who have partly grown up in Spain, I will now include a summary on the latest on feminism and its movements in the country. For this I will use Judith Muñoz Saavedra’s article, “Una nueva ola feminista, más allá de #MeToo: Irrupción, legado y desafíos” (2019), in which the author talks about a new wave within feminism. As Saavedra says, the scene women face today is very different to what the

²⁴ “Autodeterminación de los Pueblos, Autodeterminación de las Mujeres” (Medina Martín: 896).

first feminists faced. Social media and the advancement in technology have created new ways for people to organise and take political action. However, there are certain characteristics of feminism as a social movement which remain, such as its capacity for political impact and producing changes in gender norms. To quote Saavedra: “It has been thanks to the social pressure put out by the feminist movement that has lead women’s movements to become interlocutors and for their demands and vindications to form part of the public agenda”. Saavedra pays special attention to the #Metoo²⁵ movement, which thousands of women have used in order to denounce their experiences of sexual abuse, and comments on how the impact of this particular event gave space to what might be called the fourth feminist wave (Saavedra, 2019: 178).

In accordance to what Saavedra says and as I have stated before, I believe feminism has influenced various spheres of Spanish society; its tools becoming accessible to a vast crowd in which many young girls and women (as well as men) have the possibility to reflect about their body and gender. As for the Saharawi women taking part in the project, I believe many elements of both societies have had an influence in their life experience as women and I am eager to learn more about what they have to say on this matter.

²⁵ The latest 8 of March marches and the Chilean performance ‘El violador eres tú’ which also went viral are other examples of this generation’s significant feminist events.



²⁶ Photograph sent to me by model.

Hasta ahora me da cosa contarlo, 25 años con esta enfermedad, bueno que no es una enfermedad, la alergia de celiaquía.

Nací en los campamentos de refugiados en 1996 y al tener un año y pico estuve muy enferma, vomitaba, anginas hinchadas, tenía fiebre, diarrea... en el 97-98 no teníamos nada que tenía que ver con la sanidad, en ese tiempo la gente saharauí en los campamentos de refugiados era inculta, y la única salvación que tenía era la sabiduría sobre plantas y medicinas tradicionales. No sabían que me pasaba, me llevaron donde la tía de mi padre quien me llevo a otra mujer que dicen que es 'adivina' o algo así, para ver si adivinaba que me pasaba pero tampoco pudo. Entonces mi madre y mi abuela decidieron decirle a mi padre que tenían que llevarme a España. En ese tiempo no había papeles ni nada e ir a España era muy difícil. Y mi padre hasta el día de hoy, no le gusta que nadie se vaya a España, es tradicional, le gusta que toda la familia este junta aquí en los campamentos. Pero mi madre como es una cabezota, decidió ir a España, a las Islas Canarias a través de Mauritania con la ayuda de mi tío, sin que mi padre se diese cuenta. Al llegar a Mauritania fueron ella y mi tío a las Islas Canarias e hicieron ahí un rollo de papeles, me llevaron al hospital directamente y me diagnosticaron que era celiaca. Y aquí empezó la pesadilla: un miembro de la familia celiaca. Esto es una mierda, porque en los campamentos hay falta de alimentos.

Hasta el día de hoy, no entienden que es la celiaquía aunque lo expliques mil veces. Están acostumbrados a entender los que entienden desde siempre. Cuando yo voy a cualquier casa o a cualquier evento o con mis amigas por ahí, sé que me van seguir preguntando: "¿Oye, tú sigues con la enfermedad esa?, ¿Cómo se llamaba?, ¿Puedes comer fruta?, ¿arroz?, ¿legumbres?". Te preguntan preguntas súper megas absurdas porque normalmente todo el mundo sabe que estas cosas no tienen gluten. Hasta el día de hoy me siguen haciendo sentir como una invalida o algo así, no sé cómo explicarlo exactamente... Siempre me he sentido diferente a la otra gente la verdad, porque toda la gente me trata diferente porque soy celiaca, y como si les diese lastima. En general ya no me gusta ir por ahí porque la gente me hace siempre las mismas preguntas.

Sabes que nosotros los saharauis comemos en un plato grande, ¿no? ¿Y que los Saharauis comen con pan? pues muchos me ponen un plato aparte para mí. Me acuerdo una vez con 11 años que fuimos a donde una familia en Auserd (uno de los campamento de Tindouf), y no sabían lo que era la celiaquía. Habían hecho arroz. El padre me pregunto a ver si podía comer arroz, y le dije que sí, me pregunto a ver si estaba segura y dije que preguntase a mis padres si quisiese. Pero me dieron un plato aparte aun así, y no me gusta que me den un plato aparte, me hace sentir la rara o algo así. Me sentí apartada un poco, se quedaron en la mesa haciendo chistes y yo aparte... Cogí mi plato y lo lleve a la cocina, no lo comí, llore un poco y ya está. Pero ese día me sentí fatal. No les conté

nada, cuando me pasan estas cosas no se lo cuento a mis padres. En general no puedo contar estas cosas porque no saben cómo hacerte sentirte bien o que decirte. A mis amigas sí que les suelo contar, con gente ajena es más fácil. Saco todo y me siento mejor.

Empecé a romper la dieta solamente para conseguir juntarme bien con la gente y ser igual que esa gente. La cosa es que cada vez que rompo la dieta me pongo mal. Y solo lo hago para conseguir juntarme con la sociedad, con cómo piensa y es la sociedad. Pero luego al volver a la dieta te vuelves a sentir diferente, como apartada, te apartan un poco: “¡ay la pobre celiaca!”²⁷”

²⁷ It should be noted that Spanish is not the first language of my interviewees and I have transcribed the interviews without making any changes.

Laila is 24 years old. She lives with her family, her mother and two younger sisters, in a house built from adobe in the *27 de Febrero*, also known as *Busdur* or *Bojador*. *Busdur* is recognised to be the last camp to be formed out of the five refugee camps existing in Tindouf. The first time she left the camps, she was two years old. Her mother took Laila to the Canary Islands because she was sick and the doctors back home could not figure out the problem nor how to treat her. Once in the Canary Islands, she was diagnosed with celiac sprue and she was brought back to the camps, where she studied Primary School. Later on, a family from Spain started fostering her during the summers through a program that helped Saharawi children in need of health care. After that, she continued to spend the summers in Spain through a program called *Vacaciones en Paz*. She spent most of her childhood spending the academic year in the refugee camps and the summer in Spain, until she eventually finished High School and moved to the Basque Country for three years. Her aim was to study university there, but it was not possible and after also failing to find a job, she travelled back to the Saharawi refugee camps with her family.

I met Laila around two years ago, while she was living in the Basque Country. She started coming to assemblies and events organised by our activist group to raise awareness of the situation in the Western Sahara. She was shy at first and did not speak too much (she later confessed to me that she was quite intimidated by the group and found it difficult to talk in public when she first arrived), but later she gained confidence and spoke as much as any other member of the group. I remember clearly that, during the first meetings, she would always wear the melpha. Until one day, when we organised a special meal, she appeared with black heeled boots, tight jeans, a jean jacket, a Palestinian headscarf around her neck and a black hijab (scarf) covering her hair. Her hair was quite visible when, every so often, her scarf clumsily slid down. Since that day, I got used to seeing Laila dressed in her traditional dress as much as her jeans and scarf.

When I asked what aspect of their corporal experience they wanted to talk about, Laila decided to tell the story about her health condition, a story which starts with a long journey when she was two. However, I will be focusing more on later events related to her health condition, which are her own memories instead of stories she has been told. Although celiac disease or intolerance to gluten is something that has become, or is becoming, more and more common in the Western world, it is obvious that in other places such as the Saharawi refugee camps it is still quite uncommon, or at least in Laila's experience. From what Laila

tells in her story, one could say that her health is a core aspect which has conditioned her corporal experience, both in an individual and a social sphere.

Laila uses the word “nightmare” to describe what it is like to be a celiac in the refugee camps. She says there is a lack of food and that there are no specialised health protocols for celiac people. In her interview, she answered that she still does not go to the doctors in the refugee camps to get a check up on her condition, but instead waits until she returns to the Basque Country: “No, aquí no hay un médico específico para los celíacos, siempre voy en el País Vasco, para hacerme análisis. Este verano es la primera vez que no hago, por la situación del Covid-19”. As mentioned earlier, this is one of many examples of the difficulties faced in the refugee camps to keep up a protocol of health control and how some health conditions, such as this one, have to be treated by visiting foreign countries (Vilches and Esparza, 2018: 29).

While reading Laila’s way of talking about being a celiac, it is obvious that it has also had a negative effect on her social life whilst living in the refugee camps. She expresses her feeling that she has been treated as “an invalid” and how people feel sorry for her. Laila confesses how she sometimes breaks her celiac diet and just eats whatever her friends eat in order to fit into society, even if later this has a repercussion on her health: When I asked her if she felt the same way when she came to Spain, she replied that it became easier, mostly because of the variety of food there is: “En los campamentos cuando encuentro el ambiente de amigos y tal, llevo a la mierda la celiaquía, no quiero sentirme apartada, por lo menos cuando estoy con mis colegas, así que les digo que soy celíaca pero nivel bajo y como lo mismo que ellos. En España se me hace más fácil. Ahí tenemos todos los alimentos y en los campamentos solo algunos alimentos, ahora no por el covid-19”. Nevertheless, she says she was still stigmatized because of it the first years she came to Spain. She explains how diet was already an issue when staying with a Spanish foster family, as her religion forbade the consumption of pork. For her, being a celiac just further complicated the situation: “En España también, cuando estaba de vacaciones con las familias decían: es que tiene una dieta especial... me sentía algo apartada, sabes qué nosotras no comemos el cerdo ¿no?, Pues con eso ya me sienta apartada, porque hay muchas comidas con cerdo, y a ti te dan otra cosa como ternera o tal... Entonces con eso se me junto lo de la celiaquía”. In this case, the moving in between societies did not necessarily change the way Laila felt in regard to her health condition, as being a celiac was just something else that differentiated her from those she was staying with; both being a Muslim and a celiac were manifested at meal times. I find here that the definition of

embodied experience by Merleau-Ponty is fitting: “the idea that the world is perceived through a certain position our bodies take in time and space” (Moya: 2014). Laila’s embodied experience in those meals with her foster family was influenced by being young, a foreigner, a refugee who stays during the summers, an Arab, a Muslim and celiac.

Lastly, I asked Laila a bit about the “witch” her parents took her to when she was a child, in order to know what was wrong with her. She hesitated at first, warning me I would not understand, that Africa was a different world, but I encouraged her to tell me: “Es una mierda cuando tu sociedad no sabe lo que te pasa y te lleva a una adivina, lo que hicieron no lo aceptarías... África es otro mundo...La adivina cogió un metal de kenito y lo calentó, de verdad, y me lo puso detrás en la nuca, todavía tengo la marca. Por si acaso era un mal de ojo. Luego me llevaron a otra, y me hicieron cortecitos finitos por el cuerpo por si acaso mi sangre estaba infectada por un virus”.

As for the burn mark that was left on the back of her neck, she said she never knew about it until one day, whilst staying in Spain, her foster mother saw it while changing her clothes. Her family did not tell her the reason for the mark until she was 18 or 19 years of age. She says that, still now, she does not tell anyone about how she got the mark, that only her family knows about it and if friends asked about it, she lies or says she does not know how she got it. After listening to this, I find that this body mark partly represents a part of her corporal experience of being a celiac, as it was a mark she got whilst trying to be cured from this sickness that was not yet known to her society. The way she was treated for “a mal de ojo” or “the evil eye” shows us a way of conceiving the body that differs from the Western duality of mind and body, like we saw above in Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s article for example: Western epistemology and clinical medicine has been influenced by the idea that mind and body are two separate things; the first being intangible and, the second, palpable. This is an idea based on Cartesian duality, bringing with it a certain materialistic way of thinking and understanding things. This is where dichotomies such as spirit/matter, body/mind, seen/unseen, natural/supernatural, magical/rational, rational/irrational and real/unreal come from (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987: 8). In Laila’s description of how she was treated, the spirit, the magical and the supernatural, the unreal... are meaningful and are connected to the physical body. It seems though that Laila does not like to tell people how she got the mark, as it may not be accepted by society anymore, even less so in Western society.

Before I go onto the second segment, the beauty canon, I would like to introduce Hayat's story on health. She told me that reading my own milestones that I had sent them, reminded her of her own experience:

Mi historia es muy parecida a la tuya que me contaste de los médicos. Dos años o así antes de ir a los campamentos estaba con las prácticas de la universidad, tenía asignaturas, no tenía casi tiempo, estaba un poco ajetreada, un poco nerviosa, y nada, empecé a alimentarme mal, a no comer, se me empezó a cerrar el estómago, cualquier cosa que comía me sentaba mal, vomitaba.... Adelgacé un montón, un montón, sudaba muchísimo, muchísimo, muchísimo... me despertaba empapada. Y nada, muy parecida a la tuya, fui a los médicos me hicieron análisis, no me veían nada. A veces me decían que tenía un poquito de anemia, pero nada tal... no sabían nada de lo que tenía. Sí que me marco mucho, porque me acuerdo perfectamente, como lo que dijiste tú, que en ningún momento ningún médico te dice: "vas a estar bien". No te dicen nada, simplemente te dicen: "no, es que no tienes nada". Llego un punto que ya deje de ir al médico porque me ponía nerviosa. Y me acuerdo que el verano antes de irme a los campamentos vino mi madre y mi hermana a España, estaban ese verano conmigo en Ourense. Y yo me acuerdo que vinieron ellas y fue una amiga mía a buscarlas a la estación y vinieron al piso donde yo estaba. Yo estaba trabajando. Y nada, salgo de currar y entro a casa, y ellas, mi madre y hermana, estaban escondidas en la cocina y de repente sale mi hermana a darme una sorpresa y un abrazo, y luego de repente va salir mi madre... pero nunca se me va a olvidar su cara... se quedó así parada, se me quedo mirando y empezó a llorar, y empezó a llorar y a decirme que me pasaba, que como estaba así....Se asustó muchísimo. Nunca me había visto tan delgada (Hayat).

I will present Hayat's comings and goings from the camps to Europe in the next chapter, but in order to better understand the above situation I will just add that Hayat had been staying in Spain for some years when her mother and sister came to visit her (she would have been in her 20s at the time) because she was already studying at University. I find that this paragraph is a good representation of what Scheper-Hughes and Lock are trying to demonstrate in their example of the woman with terrible headaches and the classroom with 200 students studying medicine, asking themselves what is the reason of the headaches, ignoring the woman's social life completely. Hayat describes a moment in her life where she had to combined her university work practice with her studying – a time she asserts she experienced stress – and although doctors insisted there is nothing wrong with her health, she was vomiting, getting thinner and sweating a lot at night. The lifestyle she lived in Spain had an impact on her wellbeing; her body was a manifestation of what was going through her life at the time.

Upon seeing her daughter, Hayat's mother encouraged her to come back to the refugee camps to stay for a while and get better. We could make reference here to Herrero and the interdependency of people, and how the physical, social and physiological well-being of an individual is also based on their relationships and interactions with others. In this case, the mother wants her to come back so Hayat can be taken care of by her family in the camps (Herrero, 2014: 57). Hayat said that the camps' lifestyle and diet made a change and she started feeling better: "Sí, la dieta es diferente. En Galicia por ejemplo comía mucho pescado... Pero por ejemplo de carne, yo soy mucho de camello. Pero la verdad es que a me ha sentado mejor la dieta de ahí (de los campamentos), la vida rutinaria también, necesitaba engordar un poco más". However, Hayat also recognises that the lifestyle in the camps have a negative impact in the lives of the younger generation, especially for women, as it is expected they should stay at home: "yo llevaba en España desde los nueve años, y volver en verano no tiene que ver, los tenemos idealizados (los campamentos), y no, son una mierda, no deberían de existir. Por ejemplo, la falta de la salida laboral; acabas una carrera y de repente estas ahí y no tienes nada que hacer, sí, ayudas o aportas en lo que puedes pero no es un futuro. Por otro lado el ser mujer ahí en los campamentos se me hacía bastante duro la rutina: el día, la casa, el no tener nada que hacer... Al principio estaba muy bien pero al mes y pico ya peor, sabía que tenía que empezar hacer algo". The lack of work and abundance of free time is something that the sociological study 'La juventud refugiada en los campamentos saharauis: Atrapados en la incertidumbre del limbo' argues to be harmful for the physical and mental health of the younger Saharawi people (Vilches and Esparza, 2018: 29).

I think that Hayat's personal experience with health in both societies reflects perfectly Scheper- Hughes and Lock's definition of sickness: "sickness is not just an isolated event, nor an unfortunate brush with nature. It is a form of communication – the language of the organs – through which nature, society and culture speak simultaneously" (1987: 8).



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²⁸ Photograph sent to me by model.

Tenía 11-12 años, cuando en el colegio se metían conmigo diciéndome pelo esponja. Me acomplejaba mucho, me acuerdo que muchas veces lo llevaba agarrado o lo llevaba con unas pinzas o lo llevaba así, como aplastado... No me lo alisaba mucho, porque me daba pereza, pero me encantaba el pelo liso y cada vez que me lo planchaba, yo flipaba. Me daba tanto complejo tener volumen que me lo degrade, me quite volumen. Me acuerdo que mi madre me echo muchísimo, muchísimo, la bronca, y aún en el día de hoy me lo sigue echando. Para ella fue como una traición que me quitara volumen del pelo porque para nosotras, aunque tengas el pelo rizado pero mucha cantidad y largo también es tener buen pelo.

Pero esta experiencia no me ha pasado en los campamentos, sino aquí, en España. El que me llamasen pelo esponja me ha pasado en España, no en los campamentos. Yo en los campamentos no me sentía mal con mi pelo la verdad. Es verdad que el prototipo es abundante, largo y liso, pero el prototipo es una cosa y la realidad es otra, muchas tenemos el pelo rizado, y si no es rizado es ondulado, muy pocas lo tienen liso, al final, somos Africanas. Entonces no tenía complejo, pero sí que cuando ibas a una boda te lo alisabas y te lo dejabas ver un poco, el pelo es muy importante para nosotras. Y ya te digo, aunque el prototipo sea largo y liso, aunque tengas largo y rizado y mucha cantidad, también es señal de buen pelo. Así que cuando yo me hice el degradado para mi madre fue una tradición. Me lo sigue recordando.

Incluso en España, ahora sí, ahora parece que está de moda el pelo afro. Ha cambiado la estética, la moda, porque antes el pelo rizado siempre era señal de dejadez.. Ahora ha cambiado, el pelo rizado está de moda, y todo el mundo está "¡Que guay!" Pero también depende que pelo rizado, el mío sí, pero luego hay más rizado, pelo más afro que tampoco está aceptado... pero bueno, sí que ha cambiado la moda.

Hayat is 26 years old. She was born in the Saharawi refugee camps and travelled to Spain for the summer for the first time when she was six years old with the program *Vacaciones en Paz*. At the age of nine, she immigrated to Spain with the project *Madrassa* (school in Hassanya), a project which enables Saharawi children to study in Spain. At that time, Hayat did not know that she was not returning to the camps. She spoke to her parents and they told her she was staying in Spain, claiming this is what was best for her. She first stayed with a family in León for the 5th and 6th grades of Primary School. Once she finished Primary School, she moved in with a family in Asturias where she finished her four years of secondary education in High School. Finally she studied and finished her college degree in Galicia, when she travelled back to the refugee camps to stay with her family for a period of time. Since November this year, 2019, she has been living in London.

I met Hayat while I was working in the camps. She lived in the same camp I was staying in. Some workshops orientated towards empowering women were taking place at the time in the school where I worked, and some days Hayat would take part. After that, Hayat was motivated to help us with an activity that was organised in collaboration with the school of cinema. It consisted of projecting a film at women's centres, followed by a discussion on gender. She travelled with us in the van to the different camps, translating what the women said and helping carry out the activity. Since then, we met a couple of times in the camps. We last said goodbye when she invited me for tea and pastries at her home, where I also met her mother. Ever since, I see the photos she posts on social media, where she appears in places such as Camden Town Market in London, with her long curly hair in view and wearing Western clothes.

Hayat surprised me when she started talking about her hair in the audio messages she sent me for the first exercise; it was something she had not spoken to me about before. That said, it is true that I had only ever been with her in the camps and I never actually saw her hair, due to the fact she always covered it with the melpha. A notion that is worth pointing out from the story above is how she never felt self-conscious about her hair before coming to Spain: "Pero esta experiencia no me ha pasado en los campamentos, sino aquí, en España. El que me llamasen pelo esponja me ha pasado en España, no en los campamentos. Yo en los campamentos no me sentía mal con mi pelo la verdad". The way Hayat feels about her own hair coincides with how Maha, the Saharawi woman I interviewed for my last work, and Ifemelu, the Nigerian character in the novel *Americanah*, feel about their hair when they come to live to a Western country. The three of them either begin to straighten their hair by

using chemicals, or putting down their hair with hair pins. In Ngozi Adichie's book, Ifemelu straightens her hair in order to look professional. Similarly, Hayat comments on how afro or very curly hair is considered untidy. These opinions about afro or curly hair are only adopted once they are in a Western society, a society that has been suggested in the above theoretical framework to have had its female beauty canon inspired or based on the *Barbie* doll. Urla and Swedlund (1995) discuss the doll's body as the representation of femininity for young girls in America, more than the hair itself; yet, the same suggestion can be made for the hair, as *Barbie's* mainstream image does not have afro hair, but long straight blonde hair. As I mentioned in the theoretical framework, the writer Ngozi Adichie, in her novel *Amerikanah*, tries to raise awareness about this phenomenon pointing out how afro hair is not commonly viewed in Western popular magazines and there is a lack of representation of black models and black peoples' hairstyles (Ngozi Adichie's, 2014).

The moving in-between societies has an obvious effect on how Hayat and the others feel and present their hair in society. The beauty style in the country they migrate to clashes with their ethnic physical appearance. As Hayat points out, even if the female beauty canon among the Saharawi society is meant to be straight abundant long hair, Sahara wi people are Africans, and it is common for women who are born in that region to have afro or curly hair: "Es verdad que el prototipo es abundante, largo y liso, pero el prototipo es una cosa y la realidad es otra, muchas tenemos el pelo rizado y si no es rizado es ondulado, muy pocas lo tienen liso, al final, somos Africanas". They live in a reality where they are used to curly hair and therefore have internalized this particular social aspect. However, when they come to a Western country, they become a minority and a self-awareness about their hair that did not necessarily exist before emerges.

Bourdieu, by the concept of 'habitus' explains how "we adjust to our respective social universe because we have internalized what we have learnt from it as a child". In this sense, Bourdieu is referring to "social practices which are learnt when we are children and then become 'natural' for us" (Martin Criado, 2009). However, although the ideas on hair discussed above are referring to a social physical appearance rather than a social body practice, I think that, in some way, Bourdieu's concept of habitus can also be applied here. As Hayat and others internalize as children the physical appearance of the women surrounding them, the ideal becomes natural for them. That is, the afro or curly hair becomes natural for them; they do not think about this, they are not aware of it. It is only when they change to a

different social surrounding that they become self-conscious of that aspect that they had internalized and naturalized.

I think another interesting thing which Hayat mentions about hair is how, in her opinion, afro hair has now become popular or more fashionable in Western societies: “Incluso en España, ahora sí, ahora parece que está de moda el pelo afro (...) Ahora ha cambiado, el pelo rizado está de moda, y todo el mundo está: “¡Que guay!” Pero también depende que pelo rizado, el mío sí, pero luego hay más rizado, pelo más afro, que tampoco está aceptado... pero bueno, sí que ha cambiado la moda”. When I interviewed the other Saharawi women on beauty canons, Rabía said the follownig: “Lo que a mí me llama la atención, en los campamentos el pelo liso es bonito, pero vengo aquí y me preguntan: “ah, ¿pero qué te haces en el pelo?, ¡Qué bonito! Les gusta el pelo rizado. Me hizo sentir bien. Yo me he sentido bien en los dos sítos, tampoco es que tenga el pelo muy muy rizado”. Both suggest that afro or curly hair are now more fashionable in Western countries, such as Spain, to the extent that there has been a change. Nevertheless, both Hayat and Rabía comment on how it is a certain kind of curliness that is accepted – one that, in some way, can still be “tamed”.

I find that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological concept of embodied experience, precisely, “how the world is perceived through a certain position our bodies take in time and space” (Moya: 2014) is adequate to explain Hayat and Rabía’s experience with their hair: the way their hair is perceived by them or others is highly influenced by the time and place they find themselves in. It has not been the same for Hayat as child in the Saharawi refugee camps or as a child in Spain (nor in Spain as an adult); neither has it been the same for Rabía as an adult in the Saharawi refugee camps or as an adult in Spain.

During my interview with Hayat, she remembered another recent moment, or what could also be considered a milestone, where her body had changed. It was during her last stay in the camps and Mauritania, between 2018 and 2019. Her body had gained fat. She says she had never been that fat before. The interesting thing about this event is that, once again, she is not too aware about it until she has to travel back to Spain. Here is what she told me:

Yo cuando estuve en los campamentos y Mauritania, hace un año, entre el 2018 y 2019, engorde muchísimo, nunca estado tan gorda como esa vez. Yo claro, hay siempre utilizaba la melpha o vestidos o incluso debajo de la melpha con más kilos se te ve de puta madre... Yo me había dado cuenta que había engordado, pero no sabía hasta qué punto, que fue cuando me iba a venir aquí a España, y dije ¿Vale ahora con que viajo? Dije, paso de ponerme mis pantalones porque sé

perfectamente que no cabía. Me compre unos pantalones en Tindouf, cuando llegue aquí, no me reconocía. No rechazo los cuerpos gordos o delgados, para nada, me parece que hay cuerpos preciosos, pero yo no me reconocía: no me valía nada, de repente tenía un pedazo culo, un pedazo brazamen, un pedazo muslo... porque yo además cuando engordo, engordo de todo. Yo me di cuenta que había engordado, pero no me di cuenta hasta que me fui a comprar ese pantalón. Además pasa una cosa curiosa en los campamentos, no es habitual que en las casas haya espejos grandes que te veas el cuerpo entero, hay espejos pequeños en los baños o para maquillarte...pero normalmente no hay espejos grandes, entonces sí, tú te miras a ti misma, pero no tienes la misma percepción que si te ves reflejada en un espejo (Hayat).

This was after Hayat had spent around a year in the refugee camps. Even if Hayat acknowledges that, while she was staying in the camps, she knew she was putting on weight, she does not really pay attention to this until she has to travel to Spain. Hayat expresses above how she does not reject fat or thin bodies, but later names all the parts of her body which she had realised had changed: “No rechazo los cuerpos gordos o delgados, para nada, me parece que hay cuerpos preciosos, pero yo no me reconocía: no me valía nada, de repente tenía un pedazo culo, un pedazo brazamen, un pedazo muslo...” The fact that Hayat was not self-conscious of her body gaining fat while staying in the refugee camps can be related to several aspects of her social life that surrounded her at the time. First of all, the fact that, in the Saharawi society, bodies with abundant fat are still considered to be the dominant female beauty canon means that a lot of Saharawi women adhere to this canon, thereby making this a prototype body and a body inside the social norm. Consequently, this means that the Saharawi society will probably not have the constant advertising of female models with thin bodies which exist in Western countries. Secondly, there is the melpha, a clothing that has been said to be part of the Saharawi female beauty image, enhancing the woman’s curves. Hayat mentions the melpha as an influence on how she feels about her body changes; when she sees herself with her melpha on, she is not that bothered about her body gaining fat. In fact, she likes it: “Yo claro, hay siempre utilizaba la melpha o vestidos, o incluso debajo de la melpha con más kilos se te ve de puta madre...” Finally, Hayat makes a good point by suggesting that there are hardly any long mirrors in the refugee camps where you can see your whole body, an object that can commonly be found in Western houses and can take a big part in the preoccupation of one’s body image. The long mirror enables us to view parts of our body which are generally invisible to us. With this in mind, the constant advertising in Western societies of certain body images, as mentioned in the theoretical framework by Bordo (1993), the focus on our body is increased, therefore leading to different

body practices such as dieting or body-building in Western societies. All of this, I would say, has had an influence on Hayat's way of perceiving her body, while her stay in the camps and how her concern about putting on weight reappeared when she had to fly to back to Spain.

Hayat's corporal experience tell us about her individual body experience or the lived experience of the body-self, as well as the social body: "the body as a natural symbol with different representational uses, which will differ depending on the way nature, society and culture, are understood" (Douglas, 1970; Scheper- Hughes and Lock, 1987). I believe that Hayat's experience of living in two societies with different ethnic body aspects, such as hair, and different – or even opposing – beauty canons, which lead to different body practices and ways of perceiving one's body, helps us see clearly how the social body is a complex mix of nature, society and culture, as outlined in the previous sentence.

I would like to finish with an aspect Laila talked about in her interview and which caught my attention. When I asked her what aspect of her body she would like to talk about, she referred to her feet: "Sobre mis pies. No ando como una señorita, ando rapidito y no muy recto, pero yo soy así, lo acepto". She explained how her mother and grandmother tell her off for not walking "straight" or like a "señorita" or "lady". Mauss' body techniques come into mind here: "how tradition, society and education will interfere in how our bodies integrate a certain way of moving and doing things, classifying this procedure depending on the age and sex of the person" (Mauss, 1991: 340). Laila is aware that her way of walking does not correspond to the way her society suggests she should walk because of her gender. In this case this lesson on corporal technique is taught to her through her mother and grandmother.

Laila explains the following and relates what she considers a milestone in her experience in relation to this particular corporal aspect:

Mis pies no se juntan y entonces mi madre y mi abuela me dicen siempre que me ponga ropa ancha y no estrecha, como pitillos, por debajo de la melpha. Porque cuando se levanta un poco la melpha se ve un poco los tobillos y las piernas. Mi madre me complica la vida por los tobillos y mi hermana por la frente. Una vez iba a clase y me puse un pitillo, quería ir a la moda, y mi madre me dijo que me cambiase, que me pusiese un vestido o algo ancho. Ese día obedecí, pero luego me rebele y empecé a llevar pitillos (Laila).

Laila talks about her feet, legs and ankles. Ankles are a part of the body that also appeared when describing the Saharawi beauty canon in the theoretical framework, "one of the small parts of the body which are seen when wearing the melpha and therefore, can appreciate the

attractiveness of the person”. In the case of Laila, though, it seems that her “non-straight ankles” do not correspond to the Saharawi beauty canon. As to the corporal technique of her walking, it cannot be corrected, instead, the mother suggests hiding or concealing her ankles and legs with clothing. Laila at first does as she is told by her mother, but later on disobeys and starts wearing skinny trousers which show the form of her legs.

It is expected of Laila that she walk like a ‘*señorita*’, she is gendered female and thus should walk like a woman. Connell’s gender systems explain how “it is not only the biological shape of the body which places us in one classification or the other, but our “performance of the body” (the way we act and present ourselves in the world)” (Connell, 1999). But Laila does not walk like a ‘*señorita*’. Moreover, when her mother suggests hiding this fact by wearing wide trousers, she disobeys. Here we can recognise Laila’s agency: she refuses to follow the social norms which are imposed on her through and by her mother. Her actions, in a way, defy the existing gender norm of her society, and possibly have an influence on what surrounds her.



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²⁹ Photograph sent to me by model.

Porque yo cuando estaba ahí en los campamentos, como tú sabes, nuestra ropa tradicional es la melpha. Cuando estaba ahí me encantaba ponerme la melpha; comprar las que están a la moda, elegir las más bonita, destinar cada una para cada ocasión: esta es para una boda, esta para salir con mis amigas, esta es para el día del cordero... Estaba encantada con mi vestimenta. Algunas veces en los veranos, hacia tanto calor que decía: “ojala yo me pudiese quitar esta melpha y caminar sin ella”, por el calor que hace. Pero después, sobre todo cuando uno va creciendo y entendiendo su cultura y el porqué de esa vestimenta, te sientes más a gusto. Es que al principio cuando empecé a ponérmelo, no tenía ni idea, caminaba por la calle y la melpha se quedaba atrás, no tenía ni idea. Pero poco a poco es como un avance con la melpha.

¿Pero qué pasa? Cuando una viene aquí al mundo del occidente, si vas a trabajar, mayoría de los trabajos no te dejan venir con la cabeza tapada, entonces eso quiere decir que tienes que empezar a vestirte como aquí ¿no? Entonces eso para mí, no es que sea lo más mas difícil del mundo... sin embargo deja un vacío en mí, porque estoy acostumbrada a esto, me siento muy bien, pero me lo tengo que quitar, lo tengo que dejar de hacer porque para conseguir una cosa aquí lo tengo que dejar, para poder trabajar. Para tener de que vivir aquí tienes que quitarte eso, porque si no, no te dejan trabajar, no quieren a gente con la cabeza tapada... Lo ven desde lejos y te dicen: “¡Que manta!, ¡Que sabana llevas puesta! ¡Eso te corta el paso, no puedes caminar con fluidez!” Que en realidad quiere decir: “no me puedes trabajar bien, que vas a espantar a los clientes, si quieres trabajar, te lo tienes que quitar”.

En universidades y en escuelas, es mi curioso, a veces te piden que te quites eso de la cabeza, o eso del cuerpo. No forma parte de lo que es la sociedad aquí, por lo cual es curioso, ¿no? Tienes que ir como la gente de aquí, o si no, no eres aceptada.

Yo quitarme la melpha no quiere decir que vaya con pantalones cortos o con ropa de baño, porque eso es otra cosa claro, sigo siendo la saharai, la musulmana, la árabe, sin embargo, me falta mi melpha. Yo me la pongo solamente para rezar, porque para salir afuera no puedo, porque si no, no sería aceptada o no podría lograr algo que yo quiero.

Rabía is in her 20's, she lives in the Canary Islands and has been living there since she was twelve years old. She was born in the refugee camps of Tindouf and left for the first time at the age of seven. She explains that she spends the winters in the Canary Islands and goes back to the camps for the summers, except last year, when she stayed for the whole year in the camps. She is currently studying and working in the Canary Islands.

I have only met Rabía once. It was while I was staying in the refugee camps in 2018. She lived in the same camp, or 'wilaya' as they call it, as me and we had friends in common. I remember that once, four of us: two Westerners and two Saharawi women, one of them Rabía, met up for a morning walk in the outskirts of the camp, where there are no more adobe houses or tents and the vast desert landscape starts. It was a sunny morning, but windy too. We had brought a camera with us to take photos in the small dunes that were close by, but had to be careful to not get sand in the camera's lens. The wind made communicating a bit difficult and we had to speak loudly in order to hear each other. I remember Rabía spoke quite softly and there were occasions when I missed what she was saying. That morning we only spoke English between us, the other foreigner was also British and Rabía and her friend were going to classes at that time to learn the language. The next time I heard her voice was during this work, her strong Canary Island accent took me by surprise.

As we can see, Rabía identifies the wearing of the melpha as one of the most relevant corporal experiences she has had. From not being able to walk properly with it and even wanting to take it off sometimes because of the heat, to understanding the cultural representation of the clothing and later having to take it off, against her will, in order to be accepted in another society. Throughout her experiences with regard to the melpha, Rabía express her feelings. She expresses how she has felt with it: "(...) cuando uno va creciendo y entendiendo su cultura y el porqué de esa vestimenta, te sientes más a gusto" and without it: "(...) sin embargo deja un vacío en mí, porque estoy acostumbrada a esto, me siento muy bien, pero me lo tengo que quitar, lo tengo que dejar de hacer porque para conseguir una cosa aquí lo tengo que dejar, para poder trabajar". Rabía's experience reinforces the idea portrayed in Donald Clay Johnson and Helen Bradley Foster's book *Dress Sense* (2007) about how dress can be understood as "the ways in which anyone, anywhere covers or uncovers, adds to or subtracts from, her o his body"... and how "feelings, emotions, memories, impressions, responses and sensations" can also be associated with dress.

Here is what Rabía remembers and describes about the moment she first wore the melpha:

Recuerdo que era una tarde. Tenía 14 años. Estaba con mi madre y mi tía y vino una amiga mía de la infancia a visitarme para dar una vuelta, pero la chica venía con la melpha puesta ya y me preguntaba: “¿Y por qué no te pones la melpha?” y mi madre dijo: “pues venga, aprovechamos el momento esta tarde y te ponemos la melpha”. Estaban todas ahí mirándome, me la puso mi madre. Para ser sincera, la primera vez no podía caminar con ella, me tropezaba muchísimas veces. La primera vez sí que fue un poco... me sentí bien, me gustó, pero no sabía muy bien cómo manejarlo, después me acostumbre a llevarlo (Rabía).

The wearing of the melpha for the first time is a rite of passage for Saharawi girls in which their transition from childhood to adulthood is symbolized. A rite of passage understood as “a rite that accompanies the change of place, status, social position and age” (Van Gennep in Turner, 1988: 101). I will go into this in more depth later in the chapter on puberty where we can see how sometimes the first time a Saharawi girl puts on the melpha is when she gets her first period. In Rabía’s case, her first time to wear it is more of a coincidence; because her friend who visits that day is already wearing it, Rabía’s mother also encourages Rabía to put it on. Her mother is the one who helps her get dressed in it (as we will see later, it is common for mothers to help their daughters put on their melphas for their first time) while the rest stayed to watch the moment and to witness the rite of passage. She explains the difficulty of walking with it the first time and how she later gets used to it and learns to “manage it”. Once again the importance of walking is presented, as we saw before with Laila and her non-straight feet. Rabía gets used to walking with the melpha, a corporal technique which has to be learnt due to her society’s tradition and due to her age and gender (Mauss, 1991: 340).

Here is what another two of them told about their first time wearing the melpha or the hijab:

Cuando me vino la menstruación mi padre me obligo a ponerme el pañuelo, pero no tendría que haberlo hecho porque todavía era muy joven, me hubiese gustado tener más tiempo de disfrutar de peinados. Fue una complicación. La primera vez que me obligo mi padre, no sabía ponérmelo, me lo puso mi madre, pero cuando iba caminado hacía la ESO me sentía rara, sentí mucho calor, y dos calles más adelante de mi casa me lo quité y lo metí en mí mochila y estuve un semestre y pico haciendo esto. Hasta que se enteró mi madre y empecé a llevarlo, pero a mi manera, la manera antigua, menos tapada, porque me incomodaba que mis amigas no lo llevaban y disfrutaban de peinados y de ropa que se pone antes de ponerte el hijab (el pañuelo), como pantalones piratas por ejemplo. Hasta que llegué a bachiller, que empecé a ver videos de cómo se pone el pañuelo y que ropa ponerme con él y te sacas un estilo, y entonces empezó a gustarme (Laila).

La primera vez que volví andaba muy tranquila en mi casa de ahí con mi ropa, me veían las vecinas y así, pero una vez, al estar en casa, dijo mi madre que iban a venir mis tíos y mi madre me dijo que me la tenía que poner. En ese viaje también vino mi madre de acogida, tenía 14 o 15 años. Me la dio mi madre pero me la puse yo, ya sabía por jugar de pequeña a ponérmela (Nabiha).

Like Simon mentions in her article “Veiling as a Rite of passage” Nabiha had already learnt how to put on the melpha as a child when playing to be a grown up and “dressing up” like her mother (Simon, 2019: 69).

Rabía explains that when she arrived in the Canary Islands she stopped wearing the melpha and how she felt she was missing something: “(...) me sentía rara, como que me faltaba algo. Yo por supuesto iba con ropa y tal, pero me faltaba la melpha, pero bueno con el tiempo me fui acostumbrarlo”. Later on she explains that she only wears it for certain occasions such as demonstrations or gatherings and to pray five times a day: “depende la ocasión, cuando hay una manifestación o se va a reunir la asociación me pongo la melpha para demostrar quién es la mujer saharauí, pero cuando quedo con amigas no me la pongo. Sin embargo, me la pongo cinco veces al día, me la pongo para rezar”.

Therefore, the times that Rabía wears the melpha in the Western country she lives in is either to represent her cultural and national identity in public: as has been established in the theoretical framework “their typical Sahrawi dress is a feminine emblem of Saharawi national identity” (Christian, 2008: 33) as it is to pray five times day, an intimate practice she describes doing privately in her house because of her religion, Islam, a religion which is part of the Saharawi society and culture.

On the other hand, she does not wear her melpha when she is meeting friends, studying or looking for work: “para yo estudiar o conseguir un trabajo no puedo llevarlo. Por ejemplo, para el trabajo, la melpha te tapa entera y te dicen: ‘no vas a poder andar’. Esto en realidad quiere decir: ‘no me vas a poder trabajar rápido’, así que mejor no llevar la melpha para buscar trabajo. Y para estudiar lo mismo, no es que el director o alguien te diga que no lleves la melpha, pero te sientes rara, así que mejor no llevarlo al mundo de los estudios’.

From what Rabía says, it seems that in her life in the Canary Islands, Rabía has different social circles. The ones in which she feels free to wear her melpha, which is either during specific moments in society to make a statement regarding her cultural and national identity or in private moments at home when carrying out religious practices associated to her

religious identity. The other circles are those of her social, academic and work life where she cannot wear her melpha, either because she does not feel good with it on or because it will prevent her from getting or achieving certain things. She also expresses the difficulty associated with not being accepted in a society and having to dress the same way in order to be so: “no forma parte de lo que es la sociedad aquí, por lo cual es curioso, ¿no? Tienes que ir como la gente de aquí, o si no, no eres aceptada”.

Here is another story told by Laila which also recounts a judgment regarding her way of presenting her body when living in Spain, but the judgment is not because she wears the melpha or covers her body, but refers to when she does not wear it and so the shape of her body is more on display: “pues mayoritariamente cuando voy de compras o a tomar algo o a clase llevo solo el hijab, el pañuelo. Pero a mi tío no le gusta que me ponga ropa apretada, no me lo dice directamente, pero se me queda en silencio, a veces ni me mira. En Álava vivía con mi abuela y mi tío. Aun así yo en España me pongo mi ropa a mi rollo, ropa a mi estilo y maquillaje”. Both Rabía and Laila when living in Spain feel that the way they present or would like to present their body was not accepted. Rabía’s way of dressing is not accepted by the Western society in her environment, such as institutions like the university or places she works at and Laila’s is not accepted by her family who are living with her in Spain.

Connell in his chapter on gender systems speaks about how the world that surrounds us classifies our bodies and how its classification of the bodies “enters our personal lives, bodily experience, sense of self, and sexuality” (Connell, 1999: 449), this is just what happens in the cases of Rabía and Laila: as adult Saharawi women different social structures have an influence on their personal lives and as said before, in their corporal experience; for example, in the way they present their body. In the case of these Saharawi women, the social structure that currently surrounds them in Spain is in conflict with the social structure existing in the Saharawi refugee camps. What is expected or demanded of them in one social structure, clashes with the other. In the case of Laila’s uncle, he belongs to the Saharawi social structure and thus, Laila feels pressured by him to wear the melpha in Spain.

In her interview, Laila later finished by adding: “¿Porque me tienen que mirar a mi porque lleve maquillaje o por cómo me visto? Sí ahí (en España) hay muchas Saharauis salidas, se pasan de la raya, se ponen ropa corta, se ponen mini falda y se sueltan el pelo, no les importa nada los otros Saharauis que pasan”. She talks about being judged or looked at because of what she wears but also expresses judgement on others for the same reason. Laila’s family member, by acting a certain way towards her, such as not talking to her, is suggesting that

Laila is not dressing in accordance with what corresponds to her as a Saharawi woman. Nevertheless, when Laila talks about the other Saharawi women living in Spain she suggests that they have “crossed the line”, as they were not only not wearing the melpha or covering themselves properly, but were wearing clothes that uncovered more than what they should uncover. I think these different judgments exemplify the concept of the social body as described by Douglas: how “the forms of corporal control are related to the existing social control of society” (1988: 105) and Foucault’s political body or Scheper- Hughes and body politic, when “referring to the regulation, surveillance, and control of the bodies (...)” (1987: 8). Rabía’s body as well as Laila’s and those of the other Saharawi women mentioned by Laila are influenced by the different social norms existing in both societies, creating perhaps a double-edged form of regulation, surveillance and control, due to the different and opposing social norms which interact together in their lives as they move between the two societies.

I think Hayat expresses the above idea well in the following paragraph where she talks about her own experience of her way of presenting her body in Western countries and in the refugee camps:

Si estoy en el occidente y me pongo la melpha se me van a quedar mirando, si estoy en los campamentos y quiero poner ropa normal también se me van a quedar mirando, entonces mi cuerpo siempre está siendo juzgado. Para mí es que la melpha es una vestimenta tradicional mía, cuando estoy ahí no me apetece ponerme la ropa que me pongo aquí, qué sea intrínseco porque la sociedad me juzgaría, sí, ¿pero qué a mí me gusta? También. Incluso a veces aquí para alguna ocasión especial o un acto me la pongo. Pero para ir al supermercado no, sé que me van a estar mirando (Hayat).

The norms about how someone, in this case a Saharawi adult woman, either in the refugee camps or in a Western society, should dress is something that is understood and transmitted by different social forms: be it by social punishment as we have seen above with Laila’s uncle, or because we get so used to the social world that surrounds us and it’s practices in such a way that our bodies internalize them, later reproducing these as if they were natural, be it for example, covering or uncovering our body. Although Bourdieu explains that it is when we are a child that we internalize our social surrounding (Martin Criado, 2009), I think that if you are long enough in a place as an adult this can also happen. Nabihah in her interview recounts an anecdote that could serve as an example of just this:

La última vez me pasó que al estar dos meses ahí me la ponía siempre menos cuando estaba en casa. Cuando volví aquí, era verano, fui a ponerme unos pantalones cortos y me mire al espejo y

no me veía capaz, como... no desnuda, pero con poca ropa, y me di cuenta que tenía que darme un tiempo para acostumbrarme, no podía, me costaba verme, así que me puse unos pantalones largos (Nabiha).

The social norms in regard to clothing and covering the body existing in the Saharawi refugee camps have been assimilated by Nabiha in such a way that although she has lived in Spain most of her life where she does not wear a melpha and where she is used to showing her legs and arms, she feels unable to put on short trousers during the first week she arrived back in Spain.

To finish with this chapter about dress and presentation of the body, I asked the four women some questions about social media. It was something that had been in my mind since that time my friend in the refugee camps showed me her photo on Facebook where she appeared with her afro hair uncovered and wearing a short dress which also left her arms and legs uncovered; as I explained in the introduction, a very different image from how she presented her body in the camps. As far as the women taking part in the study are concerned, it seemed that they only uploaded photos in which you cannot see their faces: “Sí utilizo (redes sociales), pero si subo alguna foto mía es con la cara tapada, diría que es por la costumbre saharauí (...)” (Rabía). “Suelo publicar sobre la causa (Saharauí) y también público fotos mías, pero sin que se me vea la cara o que se me vea de lejos” (Laila). Alternatively, they will only post photos where their faces are visible in a social media where they can control who can see their photos: “Que se me vea la cara, eso solo lo hago en el estado del WhatsApp, pero claro eso sabiendo los contactos que tengo en WhatsApp, porque en el Instagram tienes muchos seguidores de los campamentos, así que no puede aparecer mi cara, si sale mi cara, la tapo” (Laila).

Here is what Nabiha replied in respect to her experience with social media (although she has lived most of her life in Spain, her family has been living in the refugee camps):

Al principio en los campamentos no había Wi-Fi ni nada, pero cuando empezaron a tener ellos Instagram, te empiezan a seguir los tíos, los primos... y al final acabas subiendo una foto en bikini o pantalones cortos, que para ti es lo más normal del mundo, y empiezan a hablarte y decirte que tienes que quitar esa foto, que a ver que van a decir... Y al principio yo me cabreaba mucho y decía: ¡Por mis cojones voy subir más! Luego ya con el tiempo... me di cuenta que le afectaba a mi madre y paré de subir fotos. Esto hace dos años o así. Ella lo entendía, pero la gente en los campamentos habla. Así que empecé a poner que no se me viera tanto...

Social media in this case is also used as a way of surveillance and control of their bodies (Foucault, 1997) by friends or family members from the Saharawi community living in the refugee camps and that is why most of them are careful of what photos they upload and to which media to upload them. Nevertheless, Nabiha, angry at the fact that she is told off by her family because of this, keeps doing it until she realises the effect it has on her mother and then stops. But Nabiha first uses her agency (Connell, 1999) to react to what she considers as an injustice coming from the Saharawi society by uploading even more photos with parts of her body uncovered like her shoulders and legs. She disobeys. Rabía who only usually posts photos in which she is wearing the melpha and where her face is not visible expresses that sometimes she also desires to break “the rules” and see what happens: “Aquí a veces me dicen ‘¿pero porque tapas tu cara?, si eres muy guapa’. Como que no está muy bien visto que una mujer suba su foto. Reúno el valor de ellos y una foto mía sin la melpha está mal visto... pero a veces pienso ¿y sí rompo las reglas, qué pasa?” (Rabía). Both Nabiha’s and Rabía’s acts of disobedience towards posting photos on social media which are not accepted by their society because of social norms regarding how they should present their body, as young female Saharawis, is a way of defying the system, a way of using their agency to provoke a possible change in this regard (ibid).



³⁰ Photograph sent to me by model.

Una de las veces que fui consciente de que mi cuerpo había cambiado fue cuando volvía a ver a mi madre del Sáhara después de 5 años sin verla; desde los 9 años has los 15 años. Uno de los días que yo me estaba cambiando de ropa, se me acercó muy emocionada para ver cómo había cambiado mi cuerpo y se puso a mirar mis tetas, muy ilusionada, diciendo que me estaba haciendo mayor.

Nabiha is 22. She lives in the north of Spain with her foster family and is currently working as nurse. She was born in the refugee camps of Tindouf and she was 7 years old the first time she left. She travelled first to Italy (a country which also takes part in the program *Vacaciones en Paz*) and to Spain the year after. On her third year in the program, she also came to Spain and prolonged her stay because she broke her elbow. She was 9 years old then, and stayed with her foster family for five years, without returning to the camps during this time. At the age of 14, she went back for nine days during the Christmas holidays. Since then, she has been going back every year to visit her family, until her parents came to live to Spain. The last time she visited the refugee camps, she stayed two months in Algeria and about three weeks in the camps.

The first time Nabiha got involved in a socio-political event related to Western Sahara was when she heard of an activity hosted by our Basque-Saharawi activist group. She convinced her friends to accompany her. She said she felt very nervous because she had never taken part in an event like this, nor had she ever been in the social centre where it was taking place. I do not remember seeing Nabiha that day, but I remember that she came to our next assembly, eager to participate and to help organise our following events. It was small, our group, but the mix of different people who joined in maintained it with variety. Sometimes there were more Saharawi young people than Basque, other times more Basque than Saharawi; more boys than girls, more girls than boys... Nabiha was part of the group for more than a year and, unlike some other Saharawi girls from the group, she did not wear the melpha and had been living in Spain for a longer period of time.

When I asked the women to think of five moments they remember feeling conscious about their body, Nabiha replied with the short and particular paragraph above. I was surprised by how straightforward Nabiha told her memory, but how simple and complex it was at the same time. When I asked Nabiha how she felt in that moment, she replied that she felt surprised at first, but that she was happy to show her body: “A mí me sorprendió, pero se lo enseñe encantada, ya que la pobre ha estado tanto tiempo sin verme pues me daba igual. Pero al principio fue un momento que yo también me di cuenta que mi cuerpo había cambiado. Ó sea ya lo sabía, pero no fui consciente hasta ese momento. Y se me acerco diciendo “a ver cómo te han crecido las tetas, pero fue muy natural””.

It is a difficult matter, the naked body, as not only does it depend on a cultural and social taboo, but also something personal and each individual lives it in their own way. I later

interviewed the rest of the women on their naked body by asking about their experiences in the hammam and each answered something different. But I will get to this in a bit. In Nabiha's experience, there is also the fact that her mother and she have not seen each other for five years. The mother is curious to see how her daughter has grown and, while observing her daughter's breasts, she expresses excitement towards Nabiha's developing body. Nabiha is in her late puberty years; she was aware her body had changed but admits it was at that moment when she became fully aware of this fact. In the article "Adolescent and Parental Reactions to Puberty in Nigeria and Kenya" it is suggested that adolescents going through puberty are more inclined to ask for privacy and hide their body, including from their parents (M. Bello et al., 2017: 37). This is not the case of Nabiha and her mother. Although I did not get chance to ask if she usually hid her body from others, such as her foster family from Spain, while going through puberty, the fact of not having seen her mother in such a long time could well be a reason for not feeling embarrassed to expose her body. Nabiha saw how much it excited her mother to see her daughter's body and felt the moment to be natural. Thus, it could be said that moving back and forth between societies had an influence in the way Nabiha experienced her naked body in front of her mother.

Interested in knowing a bit about how the other women experienced puberty, I decided to ask about their menarche. I thought it would be difficult for them to answer such a general question like: 'How did you experience puberty?', so I thought of asking about their first period, as it is something women usually always remember.

Nabiha explained that she was living in Spain at the time:

Estaba en mi casa, aquí en España, me manche las bragas, era marrón, pensé que me había cagado... bajé a donde mi madre y mis hermanas (de acogida) y se pusieron muy contentas. Para mí fue un rollo, yo no quería que me bajase, nos habían explicado con 10 años que era la regla. Me bajo en primero de la ESO, con mi madre de acogida ya llevaría 4 años (Nabiha).

Although her foster mother and sisters were happy to hear the news, she makes it clear that she did not want to have the period and describes it as "a fuss". L. Stubbs explains how menarche has been perceived by girls in negative way because of its physical discomfort and inconvenience, as well as in a positive way, "as a sign of growing up, being a woman and able to have children" (Stubbs, 2019: 59). In the case of Nabiha, it is clear her reaction is negative as she described having the period as "a fuss".

Rabía also got her first period while she was living in Spain and, like Nabiha, already knew about it. Although she does not express embarrassment when telling her foster mother at the time, she says she did feel very embarrassed when she phoned her mother to tell her the news.

Tenía 11 años, estaba con una familia de acogida aquí en Canarias, vi la sangre, se lo conté a mi madre de acogida, y nada, me dieron una compresa, ya sabía que me iba a venir un día. Sí, me acuerdo un día hablando con mi madre por teléfono, y a mí me daba mucha vergüenza, le dije algo de sangre y tal, pero ella me entendió. Me dijo: “ya eres una mujer”. Pero siempre me daba mucha vergüenza hablar de estos temas con ella y me sigue dando vergüenza (Rabía).

Hayat, on the other hand, also got her first period when living in Spain, but does not feel embarrassed to call her mother to tell her, even if she acknowledges that it is a taboo subject in the Saharawi society: “pero además con el tema de la regla, en nuestra sociedad es muy tema tabú, más que aquí. Pero mi madre ya me había hablado de eso, no me dio vergüenza contárselo, era la primera que me apetecía contárselo”.

Laila was the only one out of the four who was living in the refugee camps when she got her period:

Pues estaba en clase de francés en primero de la ESO. No me habían contado nada de lo que es la menstruación. Y de repente sentí un líquido (¡Uag, que asco!), como si me hubiese meado o encima o algo y dije “¿oye profe me puedo ir al baño?” y me fui. Me quite los pantalones y estaba todo lleno de sangre y pensé, me he cortado abajo, me asuste. Me quite mi jersey y me lo ate, porque tenía todo el pantalón de sangre lleno, me asuste, mi corazón casi casi se me sale de la boca. Me escape de la escuela por encima de la pared trasera del baño, y corrí hasta casa. Llegue y empecé a dar portazos a la puerta diciendo “¡joder, mama que ha pasado algo!” y ella se partió de risa, y me dijo: “¡Qué ya eres una mujer!” (Laila).

In comparison to Nabiha and Rabía, Laila had not received any information at all about the period and, therefore, not knowing what was happening to her, she felt scared and ran out of school. While I stayed in the Saharawi refugee camps, we held a workshop named ‘Imagen positiva a través de nuestros cuerpos’. We discussed themes such as sexuality and menstruation, and we were surprised to hear how many of the women taking part in the workshop were not informed about periods before their menarche. As Hayat has mentioned, we got the impression it was still more of a subject-taboo for them than it was for us. We could include here Douglas’ social body and “how the body, being a means for expression, is limited by the control of its respective social system” (1988: 105). Although, in this case, it is

not so much a “social control” but “social taboo”, how a society conceives the subject of menstruation has a direct impact on the way it is experienced by its people. Nevertheless, I am not suggesting that menstruation is only a taboo in the Saharawi society, as it has been considered in many different ways by different societies. It does not depend only on the sociocultural context one is in, but on various other factors which influence how one experiences puberty or their menarche.

To discuss Laila’s experience with puberty, I would like to refer back to the chapter on “dress and presentation of the body”, where Laila tells us how her period came earlier than other girls from her class and how she was obliged to wear the hijab. As we have said above, Stubbs explains how menarche may be experienced in both a negative way as well as a positive way. This, she adds, may depend on the pubertal timing, that is, if girls are early maturers, it will be more common for them to have a more negative experience with their first menstruation than late maturers (Stubbs, 2019: 59). Having to wear the hijab at such an early age, when other girls in her class did not have to, may have influenced Laila’s menarche to be negative experience.

Like Nabiha’s foster mothers and sisters and Rabía’s mother, Laila’s mother is also happy about her daughter’s news. She starts laughing and says: “you are now a woman!” As explained by Stubbs, it is “as a sign of growing up, being a woman and able to have children”. Although all interviewees note their mothers’ importance throughout the process, we have cases like Laila, who did not receive much information about periods earlier. This is something that is also mentioned in Stubbs’ text: “girls commonly name their mothers as very important and generally helpful in their first period. However, she also comments that the information provided by the mothers is sometimes minimal” (ibid).

To continue, and to get to know more about how their experience with the naked body, I asked the women if they visited the hammam when living in the refugee camps. Nabiha was the only one who had never been. The others responded by saying that it was a common activity they did with their mother, sisters and cousins and sometimes with their friends. Here is a good description the hammam in the refugee camps:

Hay de todo, normalmente voy en bragas y otras van desnudas, integral, sin nada. Tengo ido con mi madre, con mi hermana con primas, alguna amiga... En el hammam o vas en bragas o desnuda, nadie va vestido en el hammam. Yo normalmente entro con la braga, hay una zona que es más caliente donde te sientas, te frotas o te frota alguien. Ahí normalmente estoy con bragas,

porque me da rollo sentarme y eso. Pero luego cuando me voy a duchar y a lavarme el pelo, me lo quito. A veces en el hammam aprovechamos y nos ponemos henna en el pelo. A veces tengo vista chicas desnudas, pero mayoría va en bragas (Hayat).

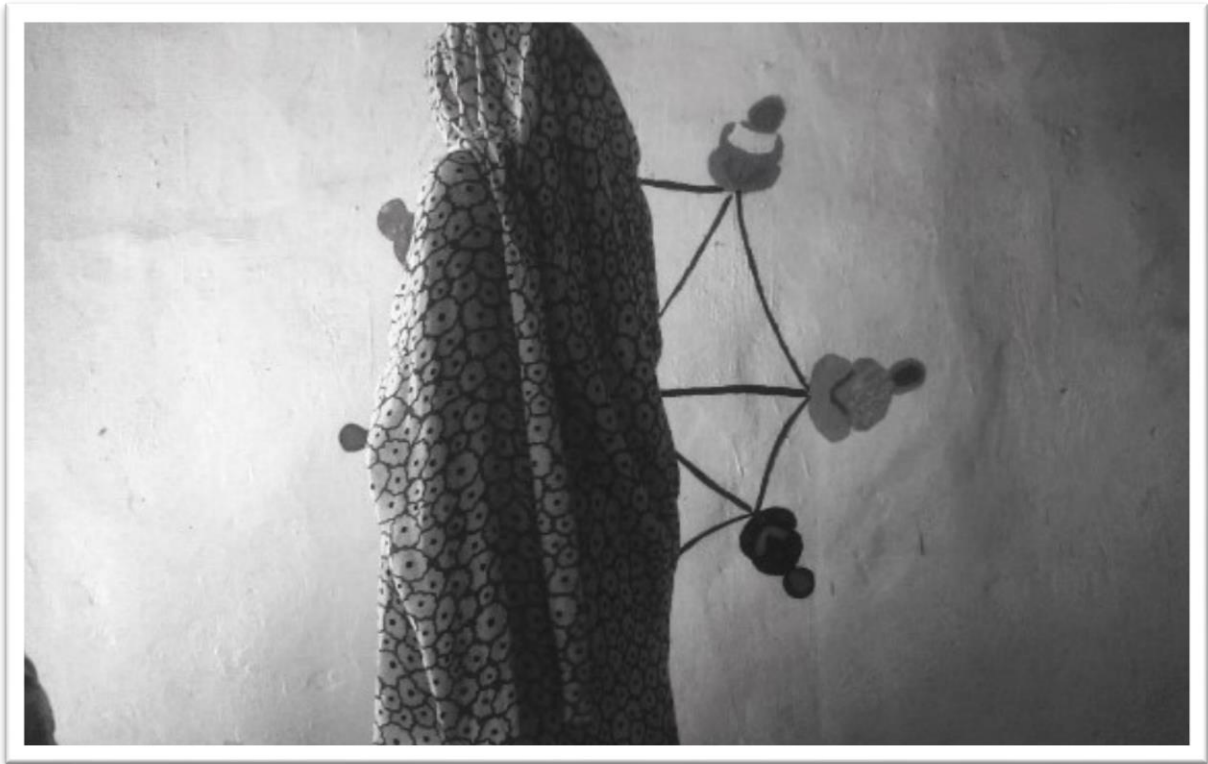
Laila, when talking about her experience, talks about the different bodies you find there, and although she says she does not stare, she remarks on how other people do:

En el hammam todos se desnudan y ves diferentes tipos de cuerpo, feos, bonitos, gordos... O diferentes tipos de colores, las blancas, las negras... Pero a mí no me gusta, no por los cuerpos ni nada, porque obligatoriamente ves cuerpos desnudos, yo no me quedo fijando, pero hay gente que sí y señala y habla sobre los cuerpos (Laila).

As for Rabía, she remembered a specific moment in regard to her naked body:

Sí, voy con amigas mucho, o con mi tía y mi madre. La mayoría de las mujeres cuando ya estas dentro se quitan la ropa, pero yo recuerdo que siempre iba con ropa interior, ja ja, es cosa mía. Yo recuerdo ir una vez con mi tía, y eran todas mujeres y estaban todas desnudas. Recuerdo a mi tía obligándome a quitar, al menos, el sujetador. Y lo conseguí. Siempre lo recuerdo porque estábamos riendo todas y ella diciendo “quítatelo”, y al final me lo quite pero me quede con la parte de abajo, que sino...Porque yo en ese tipo de cosas soy muy vergonzosa. Mi tía luego me decía: “¿pero te moriste o algo por quitarte la ropa?” ¡Me rio! (Rabía).

Although nudity is considered an “embarrassment or humiliation in Muslim societies” (Bouhdiba in Górnika, 2016: 125), this does not apply in situations such as in the hammams. It is true that hammams are segregated by sex and I have not had the chance to know how men experience it. But from what the women’s responded, it seems to be common to be naked in the hammam, at least in underwear. Only Rabía is very self-aware of her body and covers her breast by wearing a bra. But this is a particular case, as her mother, aunt and cousins do not do the same, and tease Rabía for it.



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³¹ Photograph taken by me in the Saharawi refugee camps, 2018.

My final aspect is feminism. I consider it an important part of my own corporal experience and the more I read and got involved in feminist activism, the more I changed my way of perceiving, feeling and presenting my body. As a young woman living in Spain, I have been able to see how feminism has become a tool accessible for a lot of people, but especially young women. It gives them the chance to reflect on the existing norms and change their way of thinking and living their gender and body. My experience at the refugee camps consisted in working for a school dedicated to women's empowerment, and I learnt about different female organisations and the different events which were taking place for women's empowerment in all its forms: health, political participation, education, etc. However, I do not refer to the organisations and events from the camps as feminist, because, as I found out during my stay there, this is not the label they usually used. I take into consideration the fact that it is a concept which comes from the West, and women from non-Western countries do not necessarily identify with the term (Medina Martín, 2014: 892). Nevertheless, both in Spain and the refugee camps, I have witnessed women getting together and reflecting on subjects such as their corporal experience. Therefore, I was eager to ask the Saharawi women more on the matter, as they were travelling back and forth between these two different places with different social contexts, yet both noticeably influenced by feminism or women's movements.

I asked if they had ever taken part in a feminist event or workshop here (in the West) or in the refugee camps. Most of them answered that they had only taken part in such events here.

Sí participe una vez en el evento de la manifestación del 8 de marzo. Yo cuando me fui a España me abrí al feminismo y la política porque yo no sabía de ellos. Yo me considero feminista (Laila).

Sí la verdad, me considero feminista, siempre apoyo y voy a las manifestaciones que se hacen y defendió mucho los derechos de las mujeres, ya sea aquí o los países árabes. Actividades, he tomado parte en Occidente. Sí, tomar parte en este tipo de actividades me ayudado a entender que la mujer es libre de hacer con su cuerpo lo que quiere, te hace entender que tu cuerpo es tuyo, esto no entendía tanto antes (Rabía).

Like Rabía, Laila says that she thought of the body as something to be enjoyed. She further suggests that it was when she came upon the feminist movement in Spain that she stopped accepting comments about her body, such as the ones her mother or others would make about her ankles and legs.

El complejo desapareció al venir a España. Cuando descubrí ese movimiento, que no tenía ni idea de lo que era, entendí que la mujer tiene que ser libre y tiene que disfrutar de su cuerpo, sea como sea, con los complejos que tenga. Ahí deje de aceptar las críticas sobre mis tobillos, de cómo ando, de todo... (Laila).

Laila remembered a meaningful moment from her arrival in Spain. It was at this moment she first asked herself “Am I living in a shadow?”, exclaiming in reply “I have a body!”:

Esto me paso porque estaba viendo la tele, tele 5 creo, y estaban hablando del feminismo y de que las mujeres tienen que disfrutar y vivir de nuestro cuerpo, era un programa de estos que estaban sentados en una mesa y discutiendo. Empezaron hablar del feminismo y al escucharlo pensé “¿Pero estoy viviendo en una sombra o qué? ¡Si tengo cuerpo! ¡Tengo que disfrutarlo, no tengo que llevar ropa ancha y tal! Tenía 21 años creo, antes era un persona cerrada, es culpa de mi sociedad y por mi familia, además como me apartaban en las comidas no era muy sociable. Pero el ir lejos de tu sitio y de la negativa energía, te encuentras con otra gente, te abres a muchas cosas (Laila).

Laila’s expression, “I have a body!”, suggests the obvious relation Laila had made between feminism and her body. Once again, she speaks about dress, a topic that had come up significantly in relation to her legs and ankles, and how she was told against her will to wear wide trousers in order to hide the shape of her legs. She also mentions how being unsociable had not helped, as in mealtimes, for example, she usually ate alone because of her celiac diet. She points out how important it was for her to meet new people from other places in order to change the way she thought about her body.

Rabía also remembered a certain incident which she says had – and still has – a great effect on her as well as the way she presents her body around men. It happened while living in the Canary Islands, in a Saharawi assembly with Saharawi men and women:

Por ejemplo, una vez estaba en una reunión... esto es algo que siempre digo, porque es aquí donde realmente empecé a entender lo que me decían mis padres sobre que una mujer tiene que ser echada para adelante con los estudios. En los campamentos cuando hay reuniones, en las casas de mujeres o cuando viene alguien importante, los hombres se ponen adelante y las mujeres atrás, solo la directora se pone delante. Nosotras atrás, no es que estuviese prohibido, solo como mal visto. Sin embargo, en una reunión aquí en Tenerife en la asociación saharauí, había hombres y mujeres saharauis, yo voy y me siento atrás. Y vino una mujer saharauí, que es la presidente de la asociación, es una persona que admiro mucho. Ella entra en la sala y me ve a mí y me cogió del brazo y me trajo delante de sala, entre dos hombres había una silla libre y me

dijo: “tu siéntate aquí”. Es en este momento que entendí que no hay diferencia entre el hombre y la mujer, que podía sentarme al lado quien sea, ese momento quería volver atrás (en el tiempo) a las reuniones de los campamentos donde me sentaba atrás y sentarme adelante, a lado de los hombres, porque no hay ninguna diferencia (Rabía).

She explains how, in the refugee camps, it is a traditional custom for women to sit at the back in meetings whereas only “important” women and men sit at the front. It is interesting to note that, although she questions this tradition while living in Spain, the doubt is expressed by a Saharawi woman among Saharawi people, and it is then when her opinion and perspective on this tradition changes. We cannot know for certain whether this would have been accepted during an assembly in the refugee camps. It is true, though, that Rabía exclaims how she would go back in time and sit in front in the assemblies she took part in while living there.

Finally, while I was interviewing Hayat about the beauty canon and what influenced her to start accepting her body, she immediately answered: feminism. Hayat was the only one to claim to have taken part in feminist workshops and events in Western countries as well as in the camps. However, this does not necessarily mean that the others haven't. It is possible that Rabía, Nabiha or Laila have also done so, but perhaps the event or workshop was not labelled as feminist. Even so, Hayat is the only one to have evidently taken part in both places (some of the events in the refugee camp being the workshops given in the school for empowering women). She engaged with a certain Saharawi feminist group by which she feels most represented. I asked her about the women in that group, and she replied it was mostly Saharawi women living outside the Western Sahara and the refugee camps. In a way, women who had a similar experience to hers.

¿Lo que ha hecho que quiera aceptarme? Pues te iba a decir una frase muy típica, cuando me metí en el feminismo. Sí, tener un poco más de conciencia de yo: cómo mujer. Sí, me considero feminista. Se han hecho alguna charla en la universidad, porque en Ourense tienen la universidad de trabajo social y hacen muchos talleres y charlas sobre género y bueno, también en los campamentos que hicimos tu y yo, tanto como el cine fórum como el taller con las chicas (taller de sexualidad). En respecto a nosotras, las saharauis, tenemos feminismo saharauí. Ya se hizo un encuentro el año pasado y se va hacer otro. No sé, me gusta, para mí el feminismo me representa una red que tengo, digo las chicas saharauis, porque igual es con quien es más me ha costado crear esta red. Tenemos este dicho que me gusta mucho: “el feminismo saharauí no es la voz de las mujeres saharauis, sino que somos mujeres saharauis con voz” (Hayat).

All except Nabiha mentioned having taken part in some kind of feminist or gendered- related event and express how these events, or sometimes specific moments, altered the way they perceive their body. As we see, each of them has come across feminist ideology in a different way and in different situations. Hayat says it was not until she lived in Spain that she was introduced to certain ideas about the female body, and although the moment when Rabia started thinking differently about equality between men and women occurred in the Canary Islands, this moment happens among a Saharawi community. As for Hayat, as we have just seen, she feels she encountered an approach to feminism in both the Saharawi community and in the Western society she lives in. Hayat underlines the importance of creating a network between women who face a similar combination of oppressions due to who they are and their specific life experiences: in this case, as young Saharawi women who move between the Saharawi and Western society.

Final Thoughts at the End of a Journey

Here are some final reflections. For this I will go back to the objectives and hypotheses I defined at the start in order to see if the objectives have been accomplished and if what I had suggested in the hypotheses has been supported by the findings of the research. It should be remembered that neither my objectives nor hypotheses were strictly specific but, in fact, open to many possible routes. Thus, the conclusions to this work could be presented in many forms.

For my first and main objective I had written that I wanted get to know how young Saharawi women who have lived both in the Saharawi refugee camps and in Spain or another Western country have experienced their body. Although it was a presumptuous objective, I had based it on the premise that Saharawi women who have been moving in between the Saharawi refugee camps and Western countries as young adults have, because of this transient lifestyle, undergone certain experiences regarding their body. I had specified that these women have lived as adults in both societies, and not only as children, as I considered the women had to have a certain age in order to experience how certain aspects such as dress or the beauty canon have an influence on women's bodies in both societies. Throughout the analysis of the work the four women I interviewed talked about several experiences with regard to their body, some have also remembered and described specific moments, which I have named milestones. Some of these milestones were reached in the refugee camps, some in Spain or another Western country, but in order to analyse these in their full context, the women's travels from one place to another should be taken into account. After studying these four Saharawi women's corporal experiences, I dare to say that I was right to suggest in my hypothesis that the movement in between societies has had a major impact on how they have experienced their bodies.

The four women have had different travel patterns from one society to the other, at different stages of their life and for different periods of time. This can be noticed in the experiences they recount. For example, Laila did not come to live to Spain for an extended period of time until she was a young adult and she states that it was then that she refused to continue to accept her mother's comments on physical aspects about her body such as her feet and legs. As for Hayat, she started to become aware of her curly hair when she came to Spain as a child and not before. Another example could be the distinction between how Rabía and Nabiha

have experienced the wearing of the melpha; Rabía, in contrast to Nabiha, has spent longer in the refugee camps where she is used to wearing the melpha, whereas Nabiha only wears it when visiting the camps and is more used to wearing Western clothes.

As for my second and more specific objective, I wanted to pinpoint some of the important moments these women have experienced during their life regarding their body whilst getting to know how they thought about, felt and presented their body. For the first exercise, based on Del Valle's chronotopes and Esteban's corporal itineraries, I thought it would be easy to gather specific memories, or milestones defined by the women in which corporal awareness was presented. This was not as easy as I had thought. However, throughout the interviews and by asking certain questions, the women did remember some specific moments in regard to their corporal experience and were able to describe them to me. When relating these moments as well as when talking about more general experiences they told me about feelings and emotions, as well as the way they thought about their bodies and the way they presented them. This second objective was also supported by the idea that their feelings or emotions towards their corporal experience would be influenced by their moving in between societies. The way they thought about their body would be influenced by the religion, customs or ideology found in either or in both societies and this would be directly related to the way they presented their body; the way they dressed, adorned or covered their body.

We have already mentioned Laila's example with regard to the comments her mother would make about her physical appearance and how this experience changed once she started living in Spain as a young adult, but we can use it again in order to illustrate the above. In the fragment in which Laila explains how her mother comments on her legs and feet, she says "they complicate my life", this can be understood as an expression of frustration, which then changes once she is in Spain. Her way of thinking about the body changes when she changes society; the different beauty canons existing in the two societies together with the different ways of thinking about the body -which are presented to her through Feminism whilst living in Spain - have a big influence on how Laila changes the way she conceives her body. Finally, this has a direct repercussion on how Laila presents her body. Despite not always obeying when her mother told her to wear wide trousers in the Saharawi refugee camps, it is not until she is living in Spain when she claims to have enjoyed more freedom and a sense of entitlement towards her body and starts to present her body how she wants to, in spite of her close family circles not agreeing with what she decides to wear.

Another example is Laila's health story. Just by her describing it as "a nightmare" is enough to understand how she has felt in regard to her celiac condition, this is also expressed when she admits to crying when having to eat separately to the rest of the people at another family's house. Although Laila suggests that dealing with her condition became easier when she came to live to Spain because of the wider variety of food, this was not the case when she was a child and used to come to spend the summer with a foster family. She describes feeling "apartada" (excluded) because she was not only allergic to gluten but she was also Muslim and did not eat pork, both characteristics would come to the fore at mealtimes, making her feel different to the people she was with. In this case, moving from one society to another, where different religions dominate also has an influence on Laila's body experience regarding her health.

The same could be said for Hayat's experience with her hair, Rabía's relationship with her melpha or Nabiha's reaction to her mother's curiosity to see her naked body. Hayat does not remember feeling aware of her hair until she came to Spain as child. Here the different existing body canons are to be taken into account and because of the social pressure that surrounds her, Hayat tries to hide her curly hair by tying it up in a ponytail or adorning it with hairclips; her way of presenting her hair changes during her childhood in Spain. Rabía expresses discomfort when she first started wearing her melpha, but later, because of her understanding of cultural identity, her way of thinking about the clothing changes into something positive and something to be proud of. However, due to the different traditions existing in the two societies and the prejudices regarding the melpha and the hijab existing in Western countries, Rabía stops wearing the melpha when she goes to live in the Canary Islands. Like Hayat, she also changes her way of presenting her body and expresses negative emotions with regard to how she feels about her body. Finally, in the moment Nabiha describes having her naked body observed by her mother, she says how it had surprised her but her "poor mother" had been so long without seeing her, that she did not mind. Although I did not gather much information with regard to how she usually carried and experienced her own nakedness around others, it is easy to see that the fact of not having been in the camps and that she had not seen her mother for so long had influenced her reaction. This can also be identified in how Nabiha presents herself in photos she uploads in social media platforms. She is used to dressing with Western clothes and showing parts of her body which are not shown by Saharawi women when living in the refugee camps. When she is rebuked by family members who live in the camps for the way she presents herself in

the photos, she admits to having felt anger and confusion. Customs, religion and tradition are some of the factors which interact in situations such as this one. In the end Nabiha decides to change the way she presents herself on social media, exposing less bare flesh in her photos. Once again the movement in between societies is regarded as a main factor in determining how these women have thought about, felt and presented their bodies.

For my last and final objective, I had set out to discover what aspects have had an influence on the women's lives with regard to their corporal experiences. Using my own corporal experience together with the women's replies in the first exercise as examples, I suggested five aspects which I consider important: health and diet, the beauty canon, dress, puberty and nudity, and feminism. I have been able to examine in depth how these aspects have interfered in each of these women's lives, comparing the different experiences they have had with regard to each aspect. It was difficult to decide what aspects to include in this third hypothesis, as there are many more which should be taken into account, but because I liked having each aspect (except feminism) correspond to one of their stories told in the first exercise, I continued with this design for the study. Once I finished analysing what they had told me regarding each of the five aspects I could see that some, such as the beauty canon or dress, have different characteristics in the Saharawi refugee camps than in Spain or another Western society, because of the different beauty ideals, religion, tradition etc. prevalent in each society. As to health and diet, puberty and nudity, and feminism, there is not such a noticeable difference of how these have an effect on one society or the other compared to the beauty canon and dress. For example, Laila confesses to have felt different because of her celiac diet both in Spain and in the refugee camps; nudity and a woman's menarche are generally still considered taboo in both societies and, as for feminism, Hayat as well as Rabia have been introduced to a feminist way of thinking by people from both societies. Nevertheless, by getting to know the women's corporal experiences we are given hints of how the various aspects under discussion interact in Saharawi society as well as in a Western society, witnessing -through the life experiences of others- the different ways theses have a repercussion on our bodies.

This study though, is about women who have a certain profile: young Saharawi women who have lived as adults both in the refugee camps and in a Western Country. These characteristics make the women's experiences more specific with regard to how the five aspects impact upon their lives. Moving in between the two societies gives rise to a complex interaction of the two systems, with the women sometimes experiencing different forms of

oppression which collide with or overlap one another. Their experiences are an example of how intersectionality forms part of the life of those who share the same characteristics as them: being female, young, Saharawi and moving in between the refugee camps and a Western society.

Finally, and as I have already said, I have underlined moving in between societies as being an important feature of this study. We have been able to see that it is, in fact, something that appears transversally throughout all the studied aspects and has had a great impact in how these women have experienced their body emotionally, physically and intellectually. Another aspect I consider to have appeared transversally is 'the mother and daughter relationship'. This was something I had in mind since the beginning and wanted to include as a major element in the study, but in the end was unable to because of lack of time. Mother and daughter relationships, without falling into stereotypes, is a subject that has intrigued me for some time. The time I did an exercise on my own corporal itinerary for class my mother had appeared in several of the scenes I described. My teacher then suggested that I should interview my mother in order to delve deeper into how our relationship had had an influence on my digestive problems. Of course, I had said no to that, I was not ready. Nevertheless, it has stayed in my mind and as it can be seen in my milestone exercise, attached in the annexes, it is something I still consider important in the corporal experience I went through.

Although I did not get the chance to interview the women about their relationship with their mothers, it is something that has appeared anyway when talking about the different aspects. When interviewing them on health and diet, Laila told me it was her mother who always took care of her diet when she was little and when Laila's first symptoms appeared when she was a baby, it was her mother who insisted on taking her to Spain. In Hayat's story about her mother and sister coming to visit her while she was living in Galicia, it was her mother who convinced her to come back with her to the camps so she could be taken care of. Here, Hayat describes her mother's shocked face when seeing her daughter's thin body, an image which Hayat says she will never forget. Laila and Hayat also mentioned their mothers when asked about the beauty canon. In both cases, their mothers have a strong opinion of how their physical appearance should be, for example their feet or their hair. Hayat said that even today, her mother does not forgive her for cutting her hair when she came to Spain as a child. As to dress and presentation of the body, we have seen that the first time a Saharawi woman puts on the melpha it is common for her mother to be part of this ritual or even for the mother to be the one who suggests when should be the first time to wear it. Finally, when

the women recount their first experience with their period, the mother is always mentioned as an important person: she is the one who they must tell when it happens and the one who should be happy because her daughter has become a woman.

This study is based on Saharawi women, however, I would say the above does not change much for women from Western societies. Although I am aware I have not been able to analyse this aspect properly in my work, it is evident that mothers have a direct relation to how their daughters live their bodies. Norms learned by society such as how to present our bodies are commonly transmitted by mothers, as they too have learnt and internalized this when younger. Again, I would like to make it clear that I do not want to stereotype or romanticise mother and daughter relationships, neither am I saying that this is always the case, rather that it is something I would like to research further in future studies.

To finish with this study, I would like to repeat what I said at the start about how the body is vulnerable and how it changes in relation to the experiences we have had in our lives. We incorporate certain ways of thinking about, feeling and presenting our body and this is later manifested one way or another. The more relevant the experience is in our lives, the greater the effect it might have on us and on our bodies.

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Annexes

My own Milestones

Durante los dos primeros años de la universidad pase por una época de estrés, adelgace mucho, me paró de venir la regla y tuve problemas digestivos. Os describo aquí 5 momentos (o hitos) que recuerdo y que ahora considero importantes al pensar sobre este proceso. En estos momentos, de una manera u otra, fui consciente de mi cuerpo.

Tres gotas de sangre

Al haber pasado ya un par de meses sin que me bajase la regla decidí ir al ginecólogo. Me recetaron las pastillas anticonceptivas, que la gente también toma para regular su menstruación. Después de estar 28 días tomando las pastillas, el mismo día 28 manche 3 gotas de sangre. Me di cuenta que esto no era mi cuerpo menstruando sino yo forzando a que mi cuerpo funcionase normal. Paré de tomar las pastillas. Estuve dos años y medio sin la regla.

Delante del espejo

Por las mañanas al despertarme, siempre me miraba al espejo largo que colgaba del armario en mi cuarto de la residencia. Una mañana al levantarme la camiseta, me di cuenta que se me marcaban las costillas de arriba. Fue una imagen que me asustó un poco, pero seguí controlando mi dieta y haciendo deporte.

De camino a atletismo

Tardaba 20 minutos en autobús ir a la pista de atletismo donde entrenaba. Cuando empecé la universidad me cambie de equipo y empecé a entrar 6 días a la semana en vez de 3. Tenía poco tiempo para dedicarme al trabajo de la universidad u otras cosas como la compra para casa, cocinar...

Un día en el autobús de camino a atletismo, mientras leía un texto para clase y a la vez pensaba en la comida para la semana, me di cuenta que no estaba respirando bien. Parecía que apenas inhalaba aire, como si se me hubiese olvidado entre todo lo demás, la acción de respirar. Fue en este momento cuando me di cuenta que sufría ansiedad y estrés.

Consulta con el iridólogo

Durante el segundo curso de la universidad estuve yendo al médico para hacerme todo tipo de test de alergias e intentar averiguar el porqué de mis problemas digestivos. Cuando ya casi se estaba acabando el curso y llegaba el verano, mi padre me sugirió ir a un iridólogo que le habían recomendado. Fui y pague una cita privada. No sabía que esperarme y la verdad es que me mantuve bastante escéptica durante la sesión, pero recuerdo bien que durante la sesión me dijo: “Rebecca, ¿pero sabes que te vas a poner bien verdad?”

Aunque esto parezca un comentario irrelevante o una tontería, esta fue la primera vez que escuche a un médico o a una de las personas que me atendieron durante ese año decirme que se me iba a pasar, que “me iba a poner

bien”. De alguna manera, oírlo de manos de lo que consideramos “un experto o experta” me ayudo a cambiar de perspectiva hacia mi malestar.

Conversación con mi madre

Después de volver de Argentina, yo estaba en mi tercer curso de universidad. Había empezado a menstruar de nuevo, mis problemas digestivos habían mejorado y había cogido peso. Una noche le comenté a mi madre cuánto había engordado. Ella puso una cara de poca convicción y me dijo que 57 kilos no estaba mal, pero que no engordase más, que si no ya sería mucho.

Me di cuenta esa noche que había cambiado mi perspectiva hacia el cuerpo y el engordar ¿Quizás gracias a lo que había aprendido en el grado de Antropología? ¿Por lo que aprendí en el grupo feminista? ¿Por lo que aprendí al viajar? No lo sé. Pero mi modo de pensar hacia el cuerpo y alimentarse, habían cambiado. Por lo tanto, no me afectó demasiado lo que me dijo mi madre esa noche. Le conteste diciendo que yo era muy feliz con mi cuerpo y que mi peso era perfecto.

