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Circular Migration of Young Sahrawis Between the Sahrawi Refugee Camps in Algeria and Spain. The Cultural Aspects of Agency within the Precarisation of Legal Status

Migración circular de jóvenes saharauis entre los campos de refugiados de Argelia y España. Los aspectos culturales de la agencia en el contexto de la precarización del estatuto jurídico

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Abstract

This article describes the practice of circular migration from the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria) to Spain with the aim to work in the Balearic Islands' hospitality industry. This migration provides financial support for the family living in the camps, providing enough vacation time to spend with relatives living there. Young migrants aim to legalise their stay and work in Spain as soon as possible, most often through the status of stateless person. This has, however, a precarisation effect on their legal situation compared to citizenship.

Este artículo describe la práctica de la migración circular desde los campamentos de refugiados saharauis de Tinduf (Argelia) a España con el objetivo de trabajar en la industria hostelera de las Islas Baleares. Esta migración proporciona apoyo económico a las familias que viven en los campamentos y permite a los migrantes volver para pasar las vacaciones con los familiares que viven allí. Los jóvenes emigrantes pretenden legalizar su estancia y trabajar en España lo antes posible, la mayoría de las veces a través del estatuto de apátrida. No obstante, esta forma de regularizar la residencia tiene un efecto de precarización de su situación legal en comparación con la ciudadanía.

Key words

Spain; Sahrawis; circular migration; statelessness; refugeehood

España; saharauis; migración circular; apátridas; exilio

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1. Introduction

> Most of the guys want to leave, most of them. But they all want to come back once they leave. The whole body, the whole soul wants to go back.
>
> Maria

Maria's phrase was repeated by many residents of the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. The desired migration, however, is not permanent. In recent years, mobility from the camps has mainly consisted of a circular migration of young men who work primarily on the Balearic Islands, Spain, leaving in spring to work in the hospitality industry and returning in autumn.

The analysis of adult Sahrawi migration to Spain has been discussed in detail in several aspects so far, including: the migration of those who previously spent their childhood and youth in Cuba within the framework of an educational mobility program (San Martín, 2009; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011); changes in migration flows from the camps to Spain up to 2010 and the impact of migration on socio-economic and cultural changes in the camps (Gómez Martín, 2010; 2011); the interdependence of cyclical mobility and migration with crises and changing political identities (Wilson, 2012); the transnational character of Sahrawi migration and legal obstacles in the process of regularisation of stay in Spain (López Belloso, 2016); as well as the analysis of growth and changes of Sahrawi social associations in Spain in the first decades of the 21st century (Gómez Martín, 2016) or of the diaspora's digital media practices (Almenara-Niebla, 2022; 2023).

The main aim of this article is to describe the circular seasonal migration of Sahrawis from the camps to Spain by analysing its economic and socio-cultural aspects within the theory of agency. I argue that circular migration to seasonal work plays an ambiguous role. This practice solves part of the difficulties faced by the Sahrawis and their families living in the camps, by providing funding to meet their basic needs. In addition, it allows migrants to stay in the camps for extended periods (several months), allowing the realisation of a cultural script in which proximity, presence and daily care are essential for social relations. On the other hand, with the regularisation of residence in Spain in the form of stateless person status, such migrations form part of a capitalist model of self-reliance that does not solve the causes of the problems but offers only *ad hoc* solutions.

The article is divided into four main sections: (1) a state-of-the-art review of the concept of agency in migration studies and the question of circular migration; (2) a description of the actual situation in the camps and tendencies observed within the last several decades within the context of humanitarian aid and entry into the capitalist economy; (3) an analysis of the process of circular migration to the Balearic Islands within the context of the meanings and cultural aspects of agency relevant to Sahrawi circular migrants; (4) the precarisation of the legal status of Sahrawis choosing circular migration to Spain.

2. Theoretical framework

As Tim Cresswell points out, it is important to consider both material and political aspects in understanding migration and mobility (Cresswell, 2010). Expanding on this idea, I propose the inclusion of the anthropological component of the cultural aspects of agency. Reflecting on the cultural components of agency and subjectivity, I refer to the concept of Sherry Ortner, for whom: "agency is not some natural or originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity —of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings" (Ortner, 2005, p. 34). Analysis of the migration of Sahrawis within the cultural framework of agency makes it possible to identify another whole set of crucial elements beyond the economic aspects of circular labour migration, without minimizing the relevance of the latter.

The theory of practice in which Ortner's approach is embedded identifies agency with reference to motivations, interpretations, and desires (Fontanari & Ambrosini, 2018). Inspired by Ortner's theory of agency, Aurora Massa points out that "cultural frames for a set of practices, visible in spaces of thinkability, fantasies and aspirations, [are] all taking shape within power inequalities, moral filters and actual relationships" (Massa, 2020, p. 265). Agency is thus not merely the capacity to act by resisting norms, but also —as Saba Mahmood points out, "in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (Mahmood, 2009, p. 25), including norms related to migration or care regimes.

Both internal and international, migration establishes "livelihood strategies, modes of fulfilling social obligations, sending remittances, pursuing further education, or establishing access to opportunities for oneself or one's family" (Kleist, 2017, p. 5). In a large number of cases, migration is not an individual's decision but rather a household strategy for improving the economic situation or mitigating any shortfalls by diversifying sources of income, as indicated within the theory of new economics of labour migration (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Financial transfers are considered the most notable display of the intersection of development and migration issues (Kelegama & Weeraratne, 2015).

An individual household has the power to increase the provision of basic goods and access to fundamental services related to health or education, or —as in the Sahrawi context— food diversification. Research indicates, however, that transfers have the power to increase economic inequality more often than to compensate them: they rarely improve the economic situation significantly enough to enable the household to become more economically independent or for the migrant to engage in return migration with significantly improved possibilities in the country of origin (Kelegama & Weeraratne, 2015).

However, to understand modern international migration, it is worth remembering that it has occurred since the rise of nation-states, which established firm borders during the development and expansion of capitalist economies (Pawlak, 2018), and that the neoliberal economy is an important context of modern international migration (Brettell, 2022). Raúl Delgado-Wise notes that the decision to migrate is primarily due to uneven economic development between the sending and receiving states and its "contradictory and disorderly dynamics" (Delgado-Wise, 2015, p. 282).

The circular migration of Sahrawis is thus not only a factor that improves the economic situation of their families living in the camps because of the unfinished process of decolonisation and occupation of Western Sahara by the Kingdom of Morocco but is also a reproductive

component of structures typical for 21st century capitalism, similar to the migrant worker programs analysed by Harsha Walia as a form of neoliberal insourcing (Walia, 2021).

Although there is no clear definition of circular migration, the key specificity of circular migrants is moving from one place to another with returns and subsequent departures (Garcés-Estrada, Leiva-Gómez & Comelin-Fornés, 2022) without changing the place of permanent residence (Skeldon, 1985) and can be understood as an umbrella term also for seasonal migration (Triandafyllidou, 2013). As put by J. Clyde Mitchell (1985), it is a process in which people live in or near their place of work without cutting connection with their place of origin because commuting to work daily from the latter is impossible due to a great distance (Mitchell, 1985).

The idea of circular migration emerged as a response to the reluctance of migrants' settlement in a host country, with the parallel capitalist market's need to benefit from their labour (Burawoy, 1976; Plewa, 2013). As Anna Triandafyllidou (2013) points out, the circular migration policy gained popularity, especially after 2007, when the European Commission presented the communication "Mobility Partnerships and Circular Migration." Circular migration is indicated as one of the pragmatic solutions to the European humanitarian crisis and as a triple-win: for the host societies, migrants, and their countries of origin (European Migration Network, 2011).

However, as some scholarly studies point out, the impact of circular migration is not so unequivocally positive (Triandafyllidou, 2013). Firstly, circular migration projects are an element of the flexibility paradigm, within which the labour supply is primarily intended to respond to market needs and adapt to them flexibly (Venturini, 2008). Although circular migration has a positive impact on human capital, reducing brain drain in countries of origin and increasing investment made possible by economic transfers which can improve the economic situation of countries of origin (McGarry et al., 2019), some researchers point out, however, that there is insufficient data on this phenomenon due to the small number of programmes implemented so far (Rahim, Rayp & Ruyssen, 2021).

The opportunities for qualification development in the country of immigration (Newland, 2009) are also countered by the frequent phenomenon of circular migrants remaining in the secondary labour sector (Triandafyllidou, 2013). Specific analysis show, for instance, that the recruitment of low-skilled workers through circular migration programmes can alleviate unemployment pressures in countries of origin, but their further incorporation in home countries' labour market depends on maintaining social capital and the level of demand for the skills and qualifications brought from abroad (Rahim, Rayp & Ruyssen, 2021).

Additionally, the popularity of projects and policies that prevent migrants from permanently settling, fits into the logic of growing hostility to the settlement of migrants in Europe, thereby meeting the political anti-immigrant desires (Walia, 2021). Apart from those problematic issues, for many migrants, circular migration is a mobility pattern which corresponds to their needs and desires as well as a response to changing market requires arising from the specificity of work in agriculture or tourism industry.

We can distinguish between two types of circular migration: induced, when it is arranged and restricted, and spontaneous, if it is an unorganised movement —the latter being the case of Sahrawi circular migration, usually made possible because of a more permeable border (López-Sala & Godenau, 2016). Sahrawi circular migration to Spain, however, takes place in

a specific legal context, with the regularisation of status allowing individuals to stay and work for five years (or more, when extended), and the regularisation process itself is based on humanitarian status —in this case, the stateless person status, possible due to the situation of the Sahrawis and the occupation of Western Sahara.

3. Migration of Sahrawis as one of the practices of economic sustainment in the Sahrawi camps

The Sahrawis originate from Western Sahara, a currently disputed territory in the Maghreb region of northwest Africa. In 1884, the territory was colonised by Spain. At the beginning of the process of decolonisation, Moroccan troops entered and occupied the territory in 1975, forcing around 50,000 Sahrawis to flee the region. Temporary camps for Sahrawi refugees were established shortly thereafter in Algeria. The 1991 ceasefire did not succeed in allowing Sahrawis living in the camps to return to Western Sahara, as the Kingdom of Morocco still occupies the majority of the territory, and the referendum planned in the 1990s never came to fruition (Chatty, 2010; Loewenberg, 2005; Kluszczyńska, 2022a; Zunes & Mundy, 2022).

The number of people living in the camps is a matter of ongoing debate, but according to the World Food Programme (WFP), the most realistic number is around 173,600 (WFP, 2018). Sahrawi camps are among the few examples where refugees form the structures that manage the camps. Self-management, however, does not mean self-sufficiency. The distribution of humanitarian aid, day-to-day organisation, and the provision of access to medicine or education —critical aspects of how the camp functions— are the responsibility of the Sahrawis themselves (Rivero, 2013). The necessary resources —including basic ones such as food and water— must be supplied from outside, and survival in the camps depends almost entirely on humanitarian aid[1] (UNHCR, CISP & WFP, 2019). However, aid has been declining in recent years, meeting less than 50% of the needs for permanent programs (UNHCR, 2022), which is a consequence of a decrease in funding and an increase in the population living in the camps.

In this regard, the economic situation in Sahrawi refugee camps is strongly related to humanitarian regimes and their trends. Although the neoliberal tendencies in humanitarian aid have been criticised (Easton-Calabria, 2022), in recent years, the model in which refugees are provided with protection and support is being replaced by one in which the neoliberal autonomy of the actor in the local labour market is essential and self-sufficiency of refugees is the primary desirable outcome (Ramsay, 2020).[2] Self-reliance, as defined by the United Nations

1 Statistics show that in the last decade, humanitarian aid was responsible for 52% of the food provided, while food accounts for as much as 60% of expenditure for the poorest households (WFP, 2017). Thanks to humanitarian aid, the standard of living in the camps is higher than that of many people living in neighbouring Mali or Mauritania (Zunes & Mundy, 2022). WFP provides food that supplies a minimum of calories for every person (Ouchene & Massebiau, 2018), but focuses on the number of calories rather than dietary diversity (Angeloni & Carr, 2018), and the food base is cereals, sugar, and fats, with insufficient protein (Ouchene & Massebiau, 2018). As a result of such dietary deficiencies, anaemia affects 39% of children and 45% of women of reproductive age (Angeloni & Carr, 2018).

2 The neoliberalisation of care is a process visible in various areas and is a subject of increasing criticism, also beyond migration and refugee regime practices (cf. Gappmayer, 2019; Ouchene & Massebiau, 2018).

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refers to "the social and economic ability of an individual, a household, or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity" (UNHCR, 2011, p. 15).

In addition to humanitarian aid, the incomes generated from small businesses, the salaries owed to state employees, administrators and teachers, and the retirement pensions of former Spanish administration employees have been important financial supports over the past three decades (Tavakoli, 2020). However, as Tavakoli points out, even the small shops or service outlets run by those more affluent are not economically stable, and do not provide economic independence or a sense of financial security to meet basic needs (Tavakoli, 2020),[3] even though both local and international non-governmental organisations, and the Sahrawi government aim to invest in the direction of income-generating activities.

Both the currently existing research and my fieldwork in 2022-2023 show that the specific circumstances of the Sahrawi camps preclude their self-reliance. First, the area is uninhabitable for a large group of people with no external supply of resources due to the lack of potable water and the impossibility of developing agriculture on a scale large enough to meet demands (Gila, Zaratiegui & De Maturana Diéguez, 2011). Second, the local Algerian economic centre is the remote city of Tindouf, which has significant importance to the region, including the camp economy (Tavakoli, 2020; Wilson, 2016), the economic development of which is, however, restricted because it was built around the needs of a military base. Additionally, building economic stability and self-reliance would contradict the idea that the camps are temporary and exist due to the Moroccan-Sahrawi armed conflict. Nevertheless, aid projects focused on economic self-reliance and entrepreneurship development among refugees are part of an increasingly widespread aid agenda (on a global scale, see Ramsay, 2020).

Despite the opening of a capitalist economy[4] in the 1990s, it has been impossible for refugees to self-sustain in the camps, and for some families, the most important sources of financial income are remittances sent by relatives living abroad (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019; Gómez Martín, 2010; Tavakoli, 2020). Migration and mobility play an important role in the social and economic life of Sahrawi society (Chatty, 2010; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017; Gómez Martin, 2011; López Belloso, 2016). According to Alice Wilson (2012) and María López Belloso (2016), we can differentiate several causes of these migration flows. The most important are the stalemate in the Sahrawi-Moroccan conflict and the lack of a referendum, followed by the decrease in humanitarian aid, combined with specific socio-economic changes.

Carmen Gómez Martin (2011) pointed to inflation and declining humanitarian aid as leading factors in Sahrawi migratory patterns as early as the first decade of the 21st century. This indicates the consistency of this trend and, thus, the need to create different forms of economic diversification. Additionally, growing economic inequality and the emergence of the free market continue to be difficult and objectionable topics (Tavakoli, 2020). These differ-

3 My informants also pointed out that with the outbreak of the Morocco-Sahrawi war in November 2020, possibilities for trade in the Algerian camps were reduced; border traffic is now significantly restricted, forcing many people who had been importing goods from Mauritania to discontinue this work.

4 It is worth emphasising, however, that in the camps it is still difficult to identify the prevalence of a free market economy. Among the thousands of tents and small houses, it is difficult to find people accumulating capital with the aim of increasing wealth rather than improving the minimum standard of living of their family and relatives.

ent forms of income have increased financial stratification and facilitated the emergence of privileged groups while marginalising vulnerable people (Finden, 2018). Therefore, increasing economic inequality and a growing sense of economic deprivation are both an outcome and a cause of Sahrawi migration.

Except for a few countries that recognise SADR statehood (e.g., Cuba or Mauritania), leaving the camps and entering a country requires an Algerian travel document (the equivalent of a Sahrawi passport) and, in most cases, a visa. As I outline elsewhere (Kluszczyńska, 2022b), from the moment the desire to travel arises and after obtaining a travel document, the most significant difficulty emerges —acquiring a visa, which is costly and time-consuming. However, visa applications are often rejected despite having all the required supporting documentation enclosed, such as an invitation letter (*carta de invitación*) from a Spanish resident. Those who are successful in obtaining a visa can enter Spain legally, where they begin the next process — attempting to legalise their residence. Residence and work in Spain can be legalised by acquiring citizenship, obtaining the stateless person status, or receiving a residence permit (López Belloso, 2016).

At the beginning of the 21st century, there was no specific branch or economic sector in which Sahrawis were concentrated, but many migrants have settled in Spain permanently or for extended periods (López Belloso, 2016). However, within the last several years, it has been possible to differentiate structural patterns of circular migration, such as the one connecting the camps with the Balearic Island through seasonal work in the hospitality industry, which is the main topic of this article.

The Balearic Islands (mainly Mallorca, Menorca, and Ibiza) are typical Spanish tourist destinations. Influenced by mass tourism since the 1960s, the Balearic Islands have become one of the destinations attracting the highest number of tourists per capita (Garín-Muñoz & Montero-Martín, 2007) with strong seasonality, where the high season begins in March-April and ends in October (Inchausti-Sintes, Voltes-Dorta & Suau-Sánchez, 2020). The tourism sector offers seasonal jobs in hotels, tourist apartments, bars, restaurants, travel agencies, car rental, and event companies (Polo & Valle, 2008). Immigrant workers are a vital part of the development of the tourism and hospitality sector. However, its characteristics include a high level of precariousness, mainly temporary and seasonal employment (Joppe, 2012).

4. Methodology of the research

The topic of circular migration emerged during multi-sited ethnographic (Falzon, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2006; Marcus, 1995) research on contemporary Sahrawi (im)mobility and migration from the camps to Spain. The data, the analysis of which is presented in this article, were collected during ethnographic research supported with biographical and semi-structured interviews with Sahrawi living in the camps (38 interviews, including 14 interviews with circular migrants) and expert interviews (11 interviews, both in the camps and in Spain, with representatives of the SADR/Polisario administration[5]).

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

This research on circular migration is based primarily on interviews and observations conducted in the camps, therefore the emphasis of this research is on the circular migrants' place of origin. This is primarily due to project-specific and organisational funding opportunities. The scope of the research problems, however, was defined in a way which ensured that such field research was adequate. Analysing circular migration from the perspective of places of origin allowed to explore the motivations and factors that shape the decisions of people on the move and enabled a better understanding of the socio-cultural, economic and political context that influences the migration process. Additionally, focusing on the place of origin allows for a more in-depth examination of migration's social and economic consequences for sending communities.

The research was executed by the author, and interviews were conducted in Spanish. Interviews with migrating and non-migrating Sahrawis were conducted during field research in the Sahrawi refugee camps in southern Algeria (October-November 2022 and February 2023), while expert interviews were conducted at various stages of research on Sahrawi (im)mobility.[6] All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Participants of the research consented to the use of their detailed biographies and migration trajectories, but some details were changed to ensure anonymity. Quotes are annotated with the pseudonym and age range of the interviewees, and a note on their current migratory situation.

5. Results of the ethnographic research

The circular migration from the camps can be described as a labour migration,[7] primarily young men, for a period of 4-7 months, occurring interchangeably with periods of living in the camps during the rest of the year. This practice, which is the dream of many young people in the Sahrawi camps, is a strategy that allows several important objectives to be realised. While it allows the migrant to spend a large part of the year in the camps with relatives, caring for parents, older family members, and/or children, and be with their closest people living a quieter camp life, it provides financial means which help the migrant and his or her family to support themselves throughout the year. Sahrawi circular migration thus performs an important function not only on an economic level but also as an empowering strategy compatible with values such as care and family.

In this article, I argue that circular migration to seasonal work plays an ambivalent role for Sahrawis migrating to Spain. On the one hand, this practice solves some of the difficulties of the Sahrawis and their families living in the camps, providing funding to meet basic needs, both economic and cultural. On the other hand, such migrations combined with the regularisation of residence in Spain in the form of the stateless person status, are a part of a capitalist

6 Since 2019, this field research has been conducted in several Spanish locations (Catalonia, February 2019; Madrid, August 2021; Basque Country, May-June 2022; Valencia and Canary Islands, November-December 2022).

7 There are no figures that clearly define the number of circular migrants from the camps. During field research in the camps, however, the phenomenon was described as increasing, and the prevalence of this mobility was proven by pointing out during many interviews the homes of neighbours from which someone is going for seasonal work.

model of self-reliance that does not solve the causes of the problems but is only an ad hoc solution, and not necessarily a long-lasting or durable one.[8]

5.1. The function of circular migration in the context of normative values and financial needs

Isabel Shutes (2021) identifies four basic dimensions of care: emotional, practical, physical, and financial, referring primarily to children, the older people and those with disabilities, although these are also important aspects of self-care and care for other loved ones, extended family, friends and neighbourhoods. In the following part of the article, I will point out that circular seasonal migration appears to be an adequate, accessible strategy for implementing these different forms of care for Sahrawis from the refugee camps in Algeria.

Fatma, a mother in her mid-20s, moved to Spain at the age of seven, where she spent 14 years due to health issues and did not initially intend to return to the camps; however, her life situation forced her to return. Fatma understands the context of care very well: being a mother and an only daughter, she stays for the whole year in the camps providing care to her elderly family members. She also draws attention to the responsibility that characterises young people, especially young men, comparing it to the situation of most Spanish teenagers she grew up with:

> The only thing you can think about here is your family, that your family is at peace. The most important thing, that they lack nothing. There [in Spain], when you reach the age of 18, everyone is going out, they think about the party, the other boys and girls, the branded clothes. But here you think only what to do, that your family was at peace. So young men are working, they take a taxi, for example, they earn 5 euros, 20 euros. The most important: work, work, work. [Fatma, 25-30, currently living in the camps, previously a migrant]

The financial responsibility to care for the family translates into the need to find employment, which is difficult to achieve in the camps. The rising cost of living and declining humanitarian aid necessitate labour migration as the sole option for earning enough to support an extended family. Fatma's two brothers work seasonally in the Balearic Islands. Sidi since 2015, and Saleh, the youngest of the siblings, since 2020. Working in the camps, they earned several dozens of euros a month. Sidi had a stable but low-paid job in the public sector, while Saleh had a temporary, but slightly better-paid one in house construction. However, their earnings did not allow them to financially support even their immediate family, furnish improvements in their parents' house or buy groceries such as meat, fruits, vegetables, or eggs, which are not provided by humanitarian aid, which is why Sidi, and Saleh a few years after him, decided to start seasonal trips to work in Mallorca.

A fundamental condition for the idea of migrating to Spain is the desire of the migrant to financially support their family and loved ones. Sahrawi circular migrations align with the new economics of labour migration model (Taylor, 1999; Stark & Bloom, 1985), which emphasises migration as a strategy not as much for the individual as for the household, and circular

8 On the problematic nature of different solutions to the issue of Sahrawis and camps in Algeria, cf. Gómez Martín (2017).

migration allows for the diversification of income sources. At the same time, circular migration allows for the realisation of the standard of care, of which financial care is an important element. In addition to economic improvement, other forms of care play an important role.

The first basic economic requirement is that arising from the need to enrich the meals provided by humanitarian aid.[9] As I mentioned above, the vast majority of the food consumed in the camps is supplied by humanitarian aid. It consists of a basket of basic products, which currently includes wheat flour, vegetable oil, barley, pasta, lentils, sugar, and tea. This basic help only meets basic nutritional needs. Mohamed Sidi, who left the camps in 2017 and started to work in Mallorca in 2019 to care for his family of origin, but also his wife and one-year old daughter, indicates that humanitarian aid is inadequate both in terms of quantity and type of products: "The help is very little, and there are not many things, there are few things. Well, you have to buy fruit, vegetables, meat, olive oil" [Mohamed Sidi, 30-35, circular migrant]. Indeed, the camp's grocery stores offer fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, dairy products and sweets. However, their small quantities compared to the number of residents in each camp show how inaccessible these goods are to the vast majority of camp residents.

The money transferred by Mohamed Sidi is being spent mainly on daily consumption, as is the case for many other families. However, when a certain surplus occurs, for example, due to fewer family members or a more significant number of migrants working abroad, the money is spent on housing improvements. Fatma presented to me her mother's flat, indicating how the home had changed since her two brothers started going abroad. As she mentioned:

> There you can work and earn money. And with this money this house has been made. They have finished a room here and there. The bathroom, the carpets, the TV, the kitchen. If they hadn't been in Spain, it wouldn't be like this. [Fatma, 25-30, former migrant, now living in the camps]

With two sons of the family working seasonally in Mallorca and one of the sisters having established a family of her own and being less dependent on the money provided by her brothers, the renovation of the house proceeded exceptionally quickly. The guest room already has curtains, a carpet, and sofa mattresses set up along the walls. Most impressive, however, was the bathroom, which was fully tiled and furnished with a sink and a shower tray. Such a renovation, however —even in this family— is planned over the years. For example, the water had not yet been connected and must be brought in a bucket from an outside water tank, as in all the other Sahrawi households.

The water supply to the bathroom will be installed thanks to Spanish earnings from their summer work of 2023. However, the two brothers will continue to work in Spain even when the house renovation is finished, as this is the only way for the family to secure a livelihood when faced with the rising cost of living in the camp. In the words of Saleh, one of the brothers who left camps for the first time in 2020 and started seasonal work a year later: "When the

9 Interestingly, Gómez Martín (2010) listed cars, televisions, telephones and computers as goods and services that were typically available to Sahrawi families thanks to the support of family members working in Spain. This difference may result from the recent decline in humanitarian aid and the need to allocate remittances to basic necessities. It may also be due to the fact that these types of products would not be present in the camps were it not for financial remittances, hence their notability.

flat is finished, we continue to work. Yes, you send money to the family. It does not matter if they need it, but you have to send it to them. But they always need" [Saleh, 25-30, circular migrant].

Changes in housing standards are primarily a matter of safety and convenience. They also significantly affect the range of available opportunities and strengthen inequality of life chances. In poorer homes, electricity may be provided by cable, a single light bulb hangs from the ceiling, and the fixture regularly breaks down. Lamina, a single mother of a nine-year-old daughter, is neither working, nor has any financial help from friends or family working abroad. Her house is one of the poorest in the camp, despite great efforts. Her daughter, Aghla, does her homework lying on the bare floor in the hallway because that's the only place which provides access to light, dim as it is. Fadah, who is the same age as Aghla but whose aunt works in Spain, has access to light in almost every room, and the installation is more secure. Thus, the renovation of the apartment is primarily a matter of safety and convenience for the residents, but it also has a significant impact on their health and further opportunities.

Home renovation is also about strengthening existing structures and building houses that withstand heavy rainfalls. Initially, in addition to tents, houses made of clay were built in the camps. However, the ease of construction, the availability of materials, and their relatively low cost do not reduce the main problem, which is their weakness when faced with heavy rains. Year after year, torrential rainfalls cause a number of buildings to collapse and endanger lives. Money from migrant labour is therefore invested in building newer, more stable, but more expensive dwellings.

Apart from the ability to support to the family, labour migration to Spain gives the young Sahrawis a sense of determining their own lives, caring for themselves and fulfilling their own needs. The interest of the household and of the individual meet in a common goal (Collier & Yanagisako, 1989) —circular migration, which will satisfy both the needs of the household, provide a higher standard of living and raise the social status of the individual, which is increasingly dominated by capitalism and its accompanying imaginary, which in the camp reality materialises in consumer needs such as buying a car. In the context of the refugee camps, however, such a car owned by a young migrant is a basic need for the family, used to move between camps, to get to the doctor or to deal with administrative matters. Having been in the camps during spring and autumn when the weather was most favourable, I also experienced how the unbearable heat and sandstorms make it difficult to move on foot, even over short distances.

Karim has had the opportunity to observe the context of circular migration and its impact on the situation in the camps since he first went to Europe in 2012. There, he volunteered as a counselor to children in the *Vacaciones en Paz* project[10] until 2019, when, due to the rising cost of living, he decided to abandon this position and start seasonal labour migration. He has spent several months in Spain every year since as a buffet attendant, working 40 hours a week and earning €1900 a month. As he explains, describing the earnings:

10 *Vacaciones en Paz* is a mostly Spanish grassroots initiative through which around 5 to 10 thousand Spanish families host Sahrawi children aged 8-12 for two months during the hottest summer months. The main purpose of the project is to give the children time to tend to their health, acquire Spanish cultural and language competencies, and strengthen their cooperation with Spanish society (Gómez Martín, 2010).

> For me, it is not even a dream, it is more than a dream. The money from the first two months, I sent it to the family. I took 500 for rent and food, and 1400 I sent to the family. And the last 2 months I bought the car. [Karim, 30-35, circular migrant]

Financial support includes both smaller amounts sent from Spain each month and a larger amount brought to the camps in autumn. Sidi, Fatma's oldest brother, indicated that most migrants distribute money monthly to different family members; for example, they may send €100 each to their mother and father monthly, as well as an additional €100 for other family members. Additionally, the money brought in to the camps in autumn —which amount varies each year, depending on the job position, the cost of living in Spain or the sums sent per month, among other things— allows for larger investments. In recent years, the living conditions in the camps have improved considerably thanks to these monetary transfers. As Karim explains, financial remittances change the living conditions of the families involved in circular migration:

> I will make a revolution in my house and in my family. I'm going to help my best friend. I'm going to give a chance to one person, and this person is going to help another person. And with these, we are going to improve our living conditions in the camps. [...] Now it has improved a lot. And this is because of the migrants we have there. [Karim, 30-35, circular migrant]

In conversations with those Sahrawis migrating and those dreaming about it, one plan prevailed: support the family and, after a few years, set up their own business in the camps. After several years of seasonal work in Spain, Omar has done just that by accumulating the means to set up an electronics shop. He continues to migrate for seasonal work in Spain; however, he does not have to spend time there from March to October, and he usually goes for a shorter period of no more than four months. During this time, his younger brother takes care of the shop, so Omar feels he is supporting his family not only financially with the capital he earns in Spain but also by providing his brother with a job while he is away.

Because of the high financial needs in the camps, setting up their own business is an achievement few Sahrawis reach. But many dream of it, as does Bryan, who went to Spain in 2018 and started circular migration in 2020. His plan from the beginning of his migration has been to start his own business in the camps. However, despite being able to travel to Spain to work for many more years —Bryan is only 26 years old— he plans to set up his business in the camps as soon as possible so that he can return to the camps permanently while still being able to support his family financially.

From an economic point of view, Sahrawi migrants and their families could benefit considerably more by working in Spain for longer periods (e.g., several years), working and being paid throughout the year, without breaks in periods of income and without spending money on costly trips back to the camps. As Sidi notes, long-term migration, with the plan to earn more capital, return to the place of origin after the years, and start a new, more economically stable life with their own business, is not a scenario available to Sahrawis.

This is because, unlike other migrants, such as those from Morocco, Sahrawis cannot invest a substantial amount of money when they return to their place of origin because it is a temporary refugee camp. Despite the permanency of residence and urbanisation processes as well as being a central reference point for Sahrawis living in the diaspora (Almenara Niebla & Ascanio

Sánchez, 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019), the camps are a temporary solution established on the territory of a foreign country, as even Sahrawis who were born in the camps and have spent their entire lives remember on a daily basis, recalling this temporariness during numerous conversations.

Circular migration is therefore also utilitarian in terms of the pragmatics of the temporary nature of the camps, enabling the migrant and family to improve their living conditions within the possibilities offered by the camp —a safer house of a slightly higher standard, a small shop or a service outlet— but without huge investments that would entail years of sacrifice. Therefore, circular migration offers Sahrawis much freedom to pursue their own goals and act within the norms and values relevant to Sahrawi society, in which caring for and being with family and relatives is crucial. For Omar, who runs an electronics shop, family is more important than work and the money he earns. As he says, it is more crucial for him to spend as much time as possible with his father:

> Being with the father, I can't leave him here alone. It's a responsibility. I can't leave him here. Improve your life and leave your father, it is not possible. Life is not just about money. There is a moral aspect, and you can't buy it with money. The family is very important. Yes, it is. Psychologically, it's better for you. That's why you have to mix it up. Come here, go there. [Omar, 30-35, circular migrant]

At the same time, however, the camps are not a place one escapes from. Silvia Almenara-Niebla (2020) has pointed out how, on the one hand, Sahrawis dream and plan for their future in a free Western Sahara, while on the other, they simultaneously feel at home and a sense of closeness and security in the camps —a home they treat as temporary. Moreover, although temporary, it is a familiar, close, and emotionally significant place (Almenara-Niebla, 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019). As for Maria, who has spent half a year working on Ibiza since 2015, the camps are a familiar and domesticated place despite the poverty and poor sanitation compared to the island:

> It is very important for me to be able to return here. Well, I would rather be here than there. This is where I was born and this is where I have my family, and I have my life really. And I wouldn't change it for anything in the world. [Maria, 30-35, circular migrant]

Daily life in the camps differs significantly from that of Spain, not only because of the work practised in the latter, but also on the level of everyday practices:

> I don't know how they live, pressure, pressure, pressure, the same routine, being at home, children at school, work. It's just that there is no... Like if you're on a hamster wheel, that doesn't stop. But not here, in the camps. Today you are at home, tomorrow you have a wedding, another day with friends. We are having a chat. Freedom. Nobody tells you not to wear this, not to wear that, you have complete freedom. But in Spain there is not. [Hara, 30-35, circular migrant]

Hara, an active social activist who has been going to work in hotels on Ibiza for several years, also draws attention to the discrimination she faces for covering her hair in Spain. The vast majority of interviewees, however, point to values central to Sahrawi society, such as community, mutual aid, and the importance of family and relatives, which —from their perspective— are not as important in Spanish society.

In the context of permanent migration, which was prevalent until the second decade of the 21st century, Sahrawis would only be permitted to come from Spain to the camps for a short and insufficient period of vacation time, preventing them from spending enough time with their relatives in the camps. In addition, the matter is more complex because of the matrilocality of the Sahrawis; after marriage, it is usually the man who moves to his spouse's family compound, building an additional house or placing a new tent.[11] At the same time, however, the man still has a strong connection with his family of origin.

The men's strong connection to their family of origin translates into a willingness to visit frequently and for long periods, as well as a need and expectation to provide financial support for all those remaining in the so-called "big house", including parents, sisters (especially unmarried ones), brothers and other relatives. This oscillation between the home of the spouse and the home of the parents (usually the mother) (Isidoros, 2020), translates into the pragmatism of extended stays in the camps. If the stay is too short, the Sahrawi would not have enough time to serenely visit both their big house and their spouse's house. Hence, several months' stays in the camps made possible by seasonal work also respond to the needs arising from the specificity of family relationships and social norms among Sahrawi.

Sahrawis' seasonal work in Spain exists exclusively owing to the Spanish tourist industry, where the season starts in March and lasts until autumn. For Sidi, several consecutive months of work is the only viable option because it provides an employment contract and allows him to earn enough to live unconcernedly in the camps for the remaining part of the year:

> Well let's say, I can come with two thousand euros [to camps], that's enough to live very, very, very well for 2-3 months. You can live very well. From that 4-7 months of work in a row, you can have good money. Because Spain is a country of tourism, most of us work in tourism. [...] And most Sahrawis don't want permanent job with only one month off, most of us like it, we have 4-5 months of holidays, and 7 months of work, it's perfect. Perfect, wonderful. [Sidi, 35-40, circular migrant]

I argue that temporary work responds to the basic needs of young Sahrawis living in the camps who do not wish to move to Spain permanently. At the same time, circular migration allows for the realisation of the standard of care, of which financial care is an essential element. A young Sahrawi's seasonal work allows their family to purchase food to extend their basic humanitarian aid with dairy products, fruit, vegetables, or meat, as well as to renovate and strengthen their house so that it does not collapse with the spring rains.

Moreover, after saving money over several years, it is possible to set up a business in the camps to reduce the time spent in Spain and employ a sibling or cousin while the migrant is working abroad. Most importantly, however, temporary work allows the migrants to spend more time with their family and friends in the camps, passing unhurried time in the desert and performing the essential norms of day-to-day social life. However, such a form of circular migration requires legalised stay and work in Spain to be possible.

11 According to Konstantina Isidoros (2020), matrifocality and the central role of women are the main features of Sahrawi society. However, the degree of matrifocality varies considerably depending on the family, individual characteristics and the household's economic situation. Certainly, a visible "lack of men" in Sahrawi households is a feature that draws the attention of visitors, as I experienced during my stay in the camps during one of the film festivals.

5.2. Precarisation of Sahrawi legal status in Spain due to administrative practice

It may seem that temporary, seasonal work in Spain is an ideal option for Sahrawis living in the camps. However, in the case of Sahrawi circular migration, the advantages of this type of migration known as the "triple win" are accompanied not only by the inequality of position and vulnerability of migrants (López-Sala & Godenau, 2016), but also by a problematic issue of regularisation of residence and work in Spain. Before a Sahrawi can initiate circular migration, regularisation of entry and stay in Spain is required, nowadays usually in the form of a stateless person status.

Within the Spanish tourism sector, it is relatively easy to find employment through informal recruitmentwhich corresponds with the common pattern of job search among Sahrawis. Seasonal migrants from the camps in search of employment in the tourism sector in the Balearic,[12] often through social networks and after obtaining a visa to enter Spain, and, in effect, after having been granted a document legalising stay. The initiation of circular migration is therefore the same as permanent migration, due to the initial prolonged stay in anticipation of regularisation of residence.

Young men interested in circular migration to the Balearic Islands who have managed to obtain a Spanish visa migrate to Spain, where they await regularisation of their stay for several months or more (Kluszczyńska, 2023). When this process is accomplished, they can return to the camps and start crossing the Mediterranean legally or, when the time limit permits, begin working in the tourism sector. Previous permanent migration, however, has largely been replaced by circular migration, and an important context is not only the increase of air transport services (López-Sala & Godenau, 2016), but also the shift in the path of regularisation of stay in Spain.

Unlike previous migrations, most Sahrawis who have been seasonally migrating from the camps since 2014-2015 have legalised their stay in Spain through the stateless status, which was first offered by the Spanish government in the first decade of the 2000s (López Baroni, 2014). The Kingdom of Spain is one of several European countries where there is a legal pathway related to the recognition of a stateless person status, which in Spain entails a residence and work permit, the right to family reunification and the right to a travel document (Ley 12/2009; Real Decreto 865/2001).

Although the stateless status does not provide as many rights as citizenship, it is usually easier to obtain (López Baroni, 2014; Manby, 2020). Indeed, the possibility of being granted the latter is unrealistic, and the waiting time for recognition of citizenship is much longer. The waiting time to obtain stateless person status is different for each individual; my interviewees indicated that it was usually between a year and can extend up to two or three years. The residence permit is another certain alternative; however, it requires Sahrawis to work for a specific number of months each year, which is sometimes impossible due to the situation of the Spanish labour market. In addition, the residence permit requires a more significant administrative commitment. Baba, who has lived in Spain for more than 20 years, points to

12 To my knowledge, there is no temporary worker program or agency of any kind (which is the case in other migration contexts, cf. Castles, 2006) aimed at recruiting Sahrawi employees to work in the tourism sector.

the functionality of stateless person status in relation to the need for rapid regularisation of residence for Sahrawis who wish to undertake circular migration.

> Now everyone has only statelessness. Statelessness is different from a residence permit. With residence you get one year and you are obliged to work six months to be able to get the next year. With statelessness you don't. You take it and that's it. So we prefer statelessness because it's easier to stay legally. [Sidi, 35-40, circular migrant][13]

Interestingly, the Spanish Civil Code recognises relationships derived from colonial and historical dependence by significantly reducing the minimum time of stay in Spain to obtain citizenship from 10 to 2 years in the case of nationals from Latin American countries, Andorra, the Philippines, Equatorial Guinea, Portugal, or Sephardic Jews. In addition, this time frame has been reduced from 10 years to 1 year for those born to a mother, father, grandmother, or grandfather who were originally Spanish. However, this law does not extend to Sahrawis, despite their recent shared history with Spain and the relative ease by which Sahrawis with Spanish parents or grandparents obtained citizenship until the early 2000s; now, it is virtually impossible for Sahrawis to obtain citizenship on this basis.

This significant change in the way of legalising stay is an example of the precarisation of Sahrawi migrants. Despite the colonial relationship of dependency with the Sahrawi people, Spain avoids recognising the Spanish documents of the parents and grandparents of Sahrawi migrants. From the 2000s, citizenship was granted to Sahrawi with decreasing frequency; procedures became protracted, and an increasing number of applications were denied (Kluszczyńska, 2023). For individual migrants, the increasingly inaccessible Spanish citizenship was replaced by the stateless status, which is much more accessible but characterised by greater uncertainty and precariousness. It does not provide access to full citizenship rights and is only granted for a period of five years, after which a migrant can apply for an extension of the stateless status or nationality if they continued to live in Spain during that period. Tom, who was granted stateless person status in 2017 after two years of waiting, expresses the opinion of many young Sahrawis:

> I know some friends of mine who have renewed [stateless person status] 2 or 3 times, who have not applied for nationality. I don't know about the papers, how many times you can renew them. I have no idea. Nor am I interested. My objective was to work, to be educated, and now I have the document that facilitates my travel, and that's it. I don't care whether I am Spanish or another nationality. [Tom, 30-35, currently living in the camps, previously a circular migrant]

For young Sahrawis whose main need in coming to Spain is to quickly enter the labour market and begin their circular migration to the Balearic Islands, this shift to a status quickly obtained, albeit more precarious, is apparently a change for the better, especially when compared to the residence permit. Young people arriving in Spain are aware that their chances of obtaining citizenship are almost non-existent at the moment. Sahrawis have concrete needs, mainly

13 Applicable laws do not indicate that a period of six months of work is required to extend a residence permit. Nevertheless, the continuity of work is required, as well as the fulfilment of additional requirements and the complicated work of submitting an application (Real Decreto 557/2011) and the uncertainty of its favorable outcome. These problems are not present in the case of gaining stateless status.

economic (but framed in the essential context of social norms and moral values), related to financial security for themselves and their families in the camps. They, therefore, have a practical approach to any legal situation, seeking to obtain the right to stay and work as soon as possible regardless of any long-term citizenship prospects.

The Sahrawis are thus a specific group of circular migrants whose work and stay are regularised, however not, as is often the case, through agreements that facilitate seasonal labour and flows of people within the global capitalist economy, but with the use of an international protection tool —the stateless status. Sahrawi circular migration is a type of circular spontaneous migration that emerged despite border restrictions that are expected to impede it (López-Sala & Godenau, 2016). As a result, the touristic seasonal Balearic labour market gains workers, and the Sahrawis are enabled much easier and faster access to legalised stay and work in Spain —work that is essential to the survival of their families in the camps.

6. Conclusions

Over the past ten years, the mobility of Sahrawis from Algerian Sahrawi refugee camps to Spain has seen the emergence of a trend of circular migration, involving seasonal work in the hospitality sector from spring to autumn and a return to the camps for the remainder of the year. This kind of temporal employment can be treated as precarious work that is unfavourable for refugees. On the other hand, however, this temporal work answers the basic needs of young Sahrawis living in the camps who do not intend to move to Spain permanently. In the face of inflation, declining humanitarian aid and the rhetoric of self-reliance present in the humanitarian field, circular migrations resolve part of the difficulties experienced by Sahrawis and their families, providing a solution to their needs, not only economically but also culturally and socially.

When we turn our attention to the cultural and social aspects associated with agency within the framework of practice theory, we see that not only does circular migration allows families to enjoy financial care but also non-financial daily care and co-presence, which is possible for a few months of the year only through seasonal migration. The long stay in the camps enables migrants to realise normative patterns crucial for Sahrawis related to family closeness, strengthening bonds and non-economic care for the family.

The legal and economic situation of migrating Sahrawis is the result of the exclusionary practices of the mobility regime that influence their precarious situation in the Spanish labour market. At the same time, an important element that encourages them to remain in the secondary labour market are the cultural norms that are important to Sahrawis —the possibility to be mobile, to visit family and to return systematically to the camps. Care regimes, most of which stem from an internalised desire of the migrant to support their family staying in the camps, led Sahrawis to take advantage of job opportunities that allowed them to quickly earn enough money to send to their families while abroad and stay in the camps for longer periods when they return.

At the same time, however, with the regularisation of stays in Spain in the form of the stateless status, this migration forms part of a precarious change in the juridical situation of migrants. These reproductive practices centred around care in the context of exclusionary regimes of mobility reproduce not only socio-economic inequalities but also the depoliticisation of the

Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara and the prolonged refugeehood of Sahrawis living in the camps, and a rejection of Spain's responsibility for this situation.

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