



Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University
Faculty of Letters Dhar EL Mehraz – Fés
Cultural Studies: Cultures, Identities and Nationhood
in Morocco Master Program

Semester 1

Women's Movements in Morocco

Academic year 2018-2019

Term paper

Moroccan Women's Rights Movements Before and After the Arab Spring

Research paper by: Fadma Fangach

Introduction

Women's movements in Morocco have not always been prone to progress – not that this phase is one of full development but of significant importance to women's situation in Morocco - and it was never a progression of stable linear efforts. It is no coincidence that women are now given more access to authoritative positions in the Moroccan government. Women alongside with men, NGOs and international organizations have made attempts through which women all around the world have made a platform to voice out their marginality as individual independent beings, distinct from that of males, yet acquire the very same rights and duties within the community. The Arab Spring was a tremendously significant opportunity in the search for new opportunities, a new constitution and a democratic government that would fill through the gaps hindering both the individual and mass development. The Arab Spring in 2011 did not give birth to a new Moroccan women's rights movements per se, it rather offered opportunities for women of different backgrounds to claim a part in the public sphere and to take efficient action. In fact, women have never been complete strangers to political activism in Morocco, their involvement in the public arena dates back to the colonial era (1912-56) and this involvement was not praised righteously. These movements fought for authority in a space-based patriarchy and managed to penetrate the public spheres of power, especially civil society. Despite some setbacks, the movements managed to make significant educational, social, political and legal gains all in different degrees. This paper focuses on the development of Moroccan women's rights movements before and after the Arabe spring, their effects on the status of women in Morocco, and the developments in women's rights movements in the post Arab Spring.

The relationship between Moroccan women's rights movements and the transnational feminism lead to question the extent to which this is a feminist movement. Women are the primary agents of the movement, and this fact requires some interrogation and explanation because men also have personal motivations that bring them to the movement, sometimes similar to these of women.¹ One man, for example, became an activist because of his concern for his daughters and their rights. Another, who has devoted four evenings a week for several years to teaching women's literacy classes as a volunteer, does so because he believes it is his duty as a citizen. Men also have close personal and professional relationships with women that bring them into associations, and men accompany and provide emotional support to their

¹ Reilly, Niamh, *Doing transnational feminism, transforming human rights: the emancipatory possibilities revisited*. Irish Journal of Sociology. 19.60-76.

female relatives when visiting women's rights associations for legal counseling. Men are certainly important in the political sphere as champions for women's causes, either in their political parties or in important positions within the government and civil society. However, this movement began and has continued to work by and large as a mobilization of women, and thus most of the language of this essay concerns women's participation in the movement. Although men participate and can be convinced of the necessity of legal reform and education, one of the most significant aspects of this movement is that it is an attempt to mobilize women for the sake of women's issues, rather than depending on men or on a patriarchal political system to solve women's problems for them.²

The first discussion of women's issues in the public sphere was recorded in the national press in the 1930s and was largely generated by men. The first to voice out girls' education as a priority was Malika El Fassi's, who signed the independence manifesto in the 11th of January, 1949.³ During Colonialism, the difficult entrance in the public sphere was achieved through women's groups within nationalist parties. Nonetheless, there was a double-edged sword in such an affiliation. If it represented women activists with opportunities such as: access to public sphere, channels to voice feminist concerns, skills and trainings. These gains came with a price: women had to frame their activism as a secondary demand in the broader (masculine) political agendas. They also had to comply with parties' priorities and ideologies. Consequently, political affiliation created a dependence that limited and even condemned women's groups to disappearance. The political affiliation was a restrictive venue yet a necessary strategy. It enabled women's groups to be legitimized, but women's issues were marginalized because independence was the priority. Again, although women had played an active role in the struggle to end the French colonialism, they were excluded almost entirely from the process of nation building, including the decision-making process leading to codification of the family code. Generally, independence brought a shock to these mostly lower-class women, who had participated in the armed resistance. After independence in 1956, with the abolition of the Berber Dahir, the Mudawana became the symbol of national unity and Islamic identity.⁴

² See Sadiqi, Fatima, *Feminist movement: origins and Orientations*. Fés: Faculty of Letters Dhar el Mahraz

³ Baker, Alison. (1998). *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women*. New York: State University of New York

⁴ Sadiqi, Fatima. (December 2008). *The Central role of the family law in the Moroccan feminist movement*. British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 35, (3), 325-337.

The operation of codification was also meant as a symbol of modernity. Elaborated by a commission formed of ten male religious scholars (Ulama) and jurists, in coordination with the ministry of justice and royal court, the 1957-58 Mudawana reformulated the precepts of the classical Maliki jurisprudence into a modern code⁵. While the form was new, the substance was not; the code clearly stipulated: "For everything not included in this text you should refer to al-rajib, al-mashbur or al-'amal in the school of Malik." Calls for the reform never stopped. Many of the ideas proposed by some progressive ulama, such as Allal el-Fassi, the founder and the leader of Istiqlal party. Many of the suggestions he put forth for change have only just been implemented in the 2004 reforms, such as the removal of the provision demanding females have a male guardian oversee this marriage contract, the establishment of a legal age of marriage (to outlaw child marriage), and suppression of polygamy.⁶

Later, during the "years of lead" in the 1960s-70s, the broader political context shaped the effectiveness of feminist groups. Authoritarianism and political repression negatively impacted feminist organizations. The lack of freedom provided little incentive for women's initiatives. The channels for women's groups were limited to official state-sponsored entities or political parties. In both cases, women's issues were instrumentalized by greater political actors, which integrated women's claims only when their demands were part of a national consensus. Knowing that women and family are located at the core of the Moroccan identity and society, any attempt to question family laws generated significant resistance. Therefore, political parties were very reluctant to deal with gender issues. Until the mid-1980s, according to Zakia Daoud, a French-Moroccan journalist and chronicler of women's rights associations in North Africa, the political situation of women in Morocco was slowly and quietly evolving (1996,274), the struggle from independence from France had involved a diverse set of women.⁷ The postcolonial era (1950s-1970s) had seen the development of nationalist goals for the education for women, as well as the growth of charitable institutions

⁵ In Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, there are four major madhhabs or "bodies of authoritative legal doctrine" (Hallaq 2005, 163) bringing together jurisprudence, interpretation, and application of the edicts in the Quran and Sunna (sayings and acts) of prophet Mohammed, the textual sources of the religion. Charrad's point here is that the Maliki school was well suited to the tribe-based society of Morocco at the time of independence, in which the family was organized according to male relations and inheritance of property and identity through males.

⁶ Salim, Zakia. (2011). *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights in Morocco and Sharia Law in Morocco*. University of Minnesota

<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/between-feminism-and-islam>

⁷ Daoud, Zakya. (1996). *Feminisme et Politique on Maghreb*. Casablanca: Edition Edif.

meant to help poor women, with elite women at the center of efforts in both categories. By 1969, the direct issues facing women (illiteracy, poverty, divorce..) were severe enough, and the growing power of religious groups worrisome enough, to prompt King Hassan II to appeal to women from leading families to form a women's movement that would address legal and other issues. This led to the formation of the National Union of Moroccan Women (Union Nationale des Femmes Marocaines, UNFM)⁸ and its corresponding journal *Aicha*, under the leadership of the king's close female relatives. The nationalist and post-colonialist purposes behind its organization are clearly noted in one of its objectives: "to constitute an impenetrable rampart against westernization" (Daoud 1996,278). However, the elite nature of this organization did not have wide appeal. Opposition political parties began to form women's cells within parties, beginning with the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires, USEP), which in 1975 established among its primary concerns of the Family Code (including the abolition of polygamy and equal rights in marriage and divorce).⁹ Additionally, women were elected to the national councils of their respective political parties, albeit in small numbers.

Daoud Zakya takes a rather grim view of the political response to women's early militancy as well as women's ability to work officially toward political and legal change. However, she acknowledges that this stagnation led eventually to a more active phase: "In effect, during these years of political and feminist maturation, the absence of any action by women's cells within the political parties, a negative 'wait and see' attitude toward the women question, and its consideration as a secondary issue, brought about the birth of others forms of militancy"¹⁰ (309). These involved the formation of formal and informal groups, which placed emphasis on improving women's educational and work perspective, promoting contraception and family planning, improving women's health, and dealing with labor issues such as salary parity, material leave, and sexual harassment. In many ways, women's associations grew to fill the gap left by a government of "phalocrats"¹¹ that could, but refused to, address women's issues. Additionally, women's cells within political parties followed their lead and began forming discussion groups and even establishing magazines. The pioneering group in this effort was the women of the political party Organization for

⁸ In providing names and acronyms of parties and associations in Morocco, I explain the name in English and French and then use the French acronym for the most part.

⁹ Sadiqi, Fatima. (December 2008). The Central role of the family law in the Moroccan feminist movement. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 35, (3), 325-337.

¹⁰ Daoud, Zakya. (1996). *Feminisme et Politique on Maghreb*. Casablanca: Edition Edif.

¹¹ Ibid.

Democratic and Popular Action (Organisation de l'action démocratique populaire, OADP), forming in 1983 the magazine 8 mars, named after March 8, the International Day of Women. This group was established in 1987 as the Women's Action Union (Union de l'action féminine, UAF) and provides a useful example of how the women's movement transitioned from a movement using a variety of tools to address women's issues in general to women's rights movement that took on legal reform as its primary emphasis, during a period of the "explosion of potentialities" from 1985 to 1992.¹² Some of the most influential associations in today's women's rights movement were established in the 1980s, as they moved away from their political party and organizational bases. The Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (Association Démocratiques des Femmes du Maroc, ADFM), for example, arose from the Party of Progress and Socialism (Parti du progrès et du socialisme, PPS) in 1985. Such fledgling organizations formed networks to support one another's work on particular causes, especially among the left-leaning parties. They also began using UN conferences, conventions, and platforms as a point of reference for demanding women's rights and reaching out to international organizations for financial and other kinds of support. These associations resorted to a new repertoire of actions, and at the same time, they maintained alliances with progressive parties. This new balance had fruitful effects on the broader political and legislative landscapes.

The period 1986-92 was also one in which organizations and publishing presses published key works on women's issues; many of them written by intellectuals, many of whom were involved in the women's rights movement or associated political parties.¹³ Much of this writing also addressed the issue of class and how the suffering of poor Moroccans was heavily intertwined with the problems faced by women. Women's issues came to embrace other Political agendas, including protests around the Gulf War in Iraq, constitutional and other kinds of political reform, and the continued formation of women's associations and networks.¹⁴ In 1991, the Women's Action Union collected one million signatures on a petition demanding the King Hassan II reform of the Mudawana, which was delivered to him in 1992.¹⁵ Although the demands went largely unmet and the 1993 reform was a disappointment for the women's rights movement; activists nevertheless felt the petition and reform process

¹² Thierry, Desrues. Juanan Moreno, Nieto. (200). *The Development of Gender Equality for Moroccan Women-illusion or reality?*. Journal of Gender Studies, 18:1, 25-34.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ennaji, Moha. (2016). *Women, Gender, and Politics in Morocco*. Social Sciences. 5. 75.

¹⁵ Ennaji, Moha. *The New Muslim Personal Status Law in Morocco: Context, Proponents, Adversaries and Arguments*. University of Fès. Morocco.

represented to the petition and implemented some level of reform was, for them, a recognition that the Mudawana was not a sacred, unchangeable text, but rather a legal text that could be contested and modified through political process. In the spring 1999¹⁶, the new ruling socialist government under King Hassan II, produced its Plan of Action for the Integration of Women in Development, signed by Prime Minister, Abderrahman El-youssoufi. Its proposals included granting women equality within the household and overhauling laws on marriage and divorce in the Mudawana.

The Plan of Action included many reforms that women's rights groups had been demanding in preceding years, such as abolition of polygamy and repudiation (an informal, verbal form of divorce available only to men), expansion of women's rights to divorce, and increase of the minimum age of marriage to eighteen.¹⁷ Eventually, the announcement of this Plan of Action spurred two marches of historical significance in March 2000, after King Mohammed VI has ascended to the throne. The first was in favor of the Plan of Action, organized by women's associations and left-leaning political parties and held in Rabat as a celebration of the International Day of Women. The second march was in protest against the Plan of Action, organized by Islamist groups and held in Casablanca. As a result, the Plan of Action was dropped, and the new king opted for a more extended public consideration of Mudawana issues.¹⁸ He appointed the Royal Consultative Commission Charged with Reform of the Mudawana, comprising a broad spectrum of the political, religious, and intellectual elite - from conservative religious scholars to activists in civil society - and charged them with creating a list of recommendations for reform, and the new Mudawana was put into effect in February 5th, 2004.¹⁹ Several women's associations called the reforms a "victory"²⁰ for Morocco, an evidence to a strong political will to halt the injustice toward Moroccan women, and a step forward in the process of promoting women's rights and implementing a democratic and modern societal project.

¹⁶ Hursh, John. (2012). *Advancing Women's Rights Through Islamic Law: The Example of Morocco*

¹⁷ Ennaji, Moha. *The New Muslim Personal Status Law in Morocco: Context, Proponents, Adversaries and Arguments*. University of Fès. Morocco.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Salim, Zakia. (2011). *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights in Morocco and Sharia Law in Morocco*. University of Minnesota

<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/between-feminism-and-islam>

²⁰ Ennaji, Moha. *The New Muslim Personal Status Law in Morocco: Context, Proponents, Adversaries and Arguments*. University of Fès. Morocco.

Nevertheless, Moroccan women's rights movements have achieved considerable progress in consolidating legal equality and access to justice, the autonomy, security, and personal freedom of women has also improved. Important progress has also been made in protecting women from domestic violence, and support networks are getting stronger despite restrictive social norms.²¹ Moreover, women are increasingly taking up national and local political posts and becoming more involved with the judiciary. For instance, a twelve percent quota for women as applied to the June 2009 local elections, substantially increasing female political representation.²² Indeed, women's rights groups have collaborated with the government to improve the rights of women, but true equality remains a distant goal. Women's rights movement's top-down approach to social change is still problematic. If it undeniably accelerated reforms in favor of women, it did not necessarily change the lives of Moroccan women. The gap between legislation and practice suggests that women's associations should mobilize more resources to reach out to the masses. While the recent legal reforms have allowed the government to promote a modern and democratic image of Morocco at the international level, bringing certain benefits to society at large, more needs to be done to translate these changes into tangible gains for individual women in their daily lives.

After five decades of independence and almost two decades of unprecedented reforms under King Mohammed VI in the Mena region, Moroccan women along with men return to the political struggle not only to defend their women's issues but also to contribute to democracy and to free their society from authoritarianism in the Arab spring. The following part deals with the Moroccan women's rights movement after the Arab spring, in order to establish an overview of how women seized the momentum to push for democratic changes.

This change have come into a polished form after the Arab Spring. Two major paradoxes have emerged since the 2011 uprisings. On the one hand, a spectacular street presence of women of all ages, ideologies, ethnicities and social statuses during the political mobilization phases of the uprisings and this has been well documented by all types of media. On the other hand, the exclusion of these women from decision-making positions after the uprisings. Second, from the end of the 1970s onward, the success of the Iranian revolution (1979), the

²¹ Sadiqi, Fatima & Ennaji, Moha. (2013). *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Agents of change*. 1 – 297.

²² Hanane, Darhour & Dahlerup, Drude. (2013). *Sustainable Representation of Women through Gender Quotas: A Decade's Experience in Morocco*. Women's Studies International Forum. 41. 132-142.

downfall of the Soviet Union (1991) and the subsequent emergence of the US as the sole superpower led to the emergence of 'political Islam.' This gradually resulted in a complex situation where women's voices started to be categorized in a binary; either as 'secular' or 'Islamic.' Three years after the commencement of the Arab revolts in North Africa, there have appeared many other binaries that planted neither assertion nor imprecision, it was a state of anticipation at most. Women have claimed a very fierce possession and scored a great number of participation in the mobilizations taking place in Rabat, Casablanca and Marrakesh. They have been able to take part, alongside with their fellow men, in braving gunfire, successfully manipulating social media, and actively pushing for democratic elections. TV channels, radio stations and podcasts have hosted talk involving women giving their opinions about the situation and urging women in their homes to take part in the protests. Alongside with the binarity of feminist voice, there have been debates about the division of the MENA region distinguishing between two territories in terms of conflict, the Mashreq (Middle East) and the Maghreb (North Africa). The Maghreb is different from the Mashreq. An important indicator of this is that in the post-Arab Spring period, more women were elected/appointed in the Parliament in the Maghreb than in the Middle East. The main reason for this are formulated in the following terms. As a social movement, the women's rights movement 'functions' in the male-dominated public space and, hence, is bound to either clash or interaction with three powerful sources of authority in this space: politics, economy and religion. In the Mashreq, women's issues have never been positioned as a crucial player in the political games. On the other hand, the countries of the Maghreb have 'used' women's rights as part of the State's socio-political dynamics of the public sphere and most of all have used this interest as a tool of modernization. In Morocco, more women had access to the Parliament due to the success of the One Million Signatures Movement to reform the Mudawana in the early nineties after which women's issues have become part and parcel of the socio-political concerns in Morocco.

Another characterizing feature of the post-Arab Spring uprisings is the dramatic shift of strategies on the part of women's rights movements. Five shifts may be singled out:

- First, women's rights highlighted as a genuine prerequisite for democracy. While women's rights are sometimes seen as secondary to democratic change, gender equality needs to be presented as an essential prerequisite of true democracy.
- Second, acknowledging the strength of the law and fighting the side-lining of the concept of gender equality as a human right in the implementation of the new

constitutions. This means working towards the inclusion of gender equality in every process of democratization and understanding that gender is not only a symptom but also the backbone of every development strategy, because it is the main engine of economic development.

- Third, the push for more interaction between liberal/secular and Islamic feminists in the region in spite of the fact that Islamic feminists work more from inside Islamic political parties. Avoiding polarization and seeking a center where democracy and liberalism are maintained.
- Fourth, the avoidance of blaming religion and understanding that religion is very complex when mixed with politics in a region with high female illiteracy and a strong space-based patriarchy.
- Fifth, the use of social media to foster grassroots movements and allow visibility of political action.

In the post Arab Spring, women's issues became part of the ideological wars that opposed secularists to Islamists. The fact that the king is the highest political and religious authority, and that the interests of the monarchy coincided with those of women in the face of rampant Islamism, facilitated the strategizing between the two and led to various reforms that helped to save Morocco from the upheaval and bloodshed experienced by many of its neighbours.

Conclusion

Moroccan women's rights movements have played an active role in the pro-democracy calls that swept over the MENA region in general and Morocco in particular. Its aspirations are to preserve prior gains on behalf of women and to make sure that Moroccan women are at the forefront of transitional justice in this historical movement of transformation in the region. However, it is worth noticing that in comparison with their action and activism since the colonial era, Moroccan women managed in 2011 to forge a new image in their society. Before the Arabe spring, defending their cause was the driving force for all their actions. In the 2011, the motives of their involvement in the uprisings were the feeling of their society from the binds of authoritarianism. This change in cause has gained them a new image in their society. They have imposed themselves as undeniable political

actors in the Moroccan political sphere. Despite the fact that their gains are few in number, their achievements are very significant in terms of action.

Bibliography

- Baker, Alison. 1998. "Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women." *New York: State University of New York*
- Daoud, Zakya. 1996. "Feminisme et Politique on Maghreb." *Casablanca: Edition Edif.*
- Ennaji, Moha. "The New Muslim Personal Status Law in Morocco: Context, Proponents, Adversaries and Arguments." *University of Fès. Morocco.*
- Ennaji, Moha. 2016. "Women, Gender, and Politics in Morocco." *Social Sciences.* 5. 75.
- Hanane, Darhour & Dahlerup, Drude. 2013. "Sustainable Representation of Women through Gender Quotas: A Decade's Experience in Morocco." *Women's Studies International Forum.* 41. 132-142.
- Hursh, John. 2012. "Advancing Women's Rights Through Islamic Law: The Example of Morocco"
- Reilly, Niamh, "Doing transnational feminism, transforming human rights: the emancipatory possibilities revisited." *Irish Journal of Sociology.* 19.60-76.
- Sadiqi, Fatima & Ennaji, Moha. 201). "Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Agents of change." 1 – 297.
- Sadiqi, Fatima. "Feminist movement: origins and Orientations." *Fès: Faculty of Letters Dhar el Mahraz*
- Sadiqi, Fatima. December 2008. "The Central role of the family law in the Moroccan feminist movement." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies.* 35, (3), 325-337.
- Salim, Zakia. 2011. "Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights in Morocco and Sharia Law in Morocco." *University of Minnesota* (<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/between-feminism-and-islam>).
- Thierry, Desrues. Juanan Moreno, Nieto. "The Development of Gender Equality for Moroccan Women illusion or reality?. " *Journal of Gender Studies.* 18:1, 25-34.