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## ***Power and the production of knowledge: the case of Moroccan feminism***

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### **Abstract**

Our empirical research in the field of the history of women in Morocco, particularly the history of feminism illustrates that to this day some feminist voices and narratives related to feminism in Morocco benefit from much media attention while others are for the most part ignored. Such dynamics of marginalization are made more problematic by the fact that they are produced at both the national and international levels. The first part of this essay explores the different axes around which these marginalization and exclusions arrange themselves nationally, while the second part examines the mechanisms responsible for generating them at the international level.

### **Introduction**

#### **Purpose**

This paper examines the relationship between power and the production of knowledge related to feminism in Morocco, including feminist narratives themselves. While far from an exhaustive study on the relationship between power and knowledge, this essay draws attention to specific examples illustrating how power continues to exert influence over our knowledge of feminism in Morocco. In other words, this study does not seek to implicate itself in present theoretical debates questioning the validity of applying Foucauldian theories of a power diffused in the social body, and of a repressive power also producing social behaviors, to feminist studies (Foucault, 1975; Diamond & Quinby, 1988; Hartsock, 1990; Hekman, 1996). Instead, this study is grounded in a collection of empirical research on the history of women in Morocco, particularly the history of feminism.

In fact, our empirical research in this domain illustrates that to this day some feminist voices and narratives related to feminism in Morocco benefit from much media attention while others are for the most part ignored. Such dynamics of marginalization, or exclusion, are made more problematic by the fact that they are produced at both the national and international levels. The first part of this essay explores the different axes around which these marginalization and exclusions arrange themselves nationally, while the second part examines the mechanisms responsible for generating them at the international level.

#### **Terminology**

First, let us define “knowledge” as the narratives and discourses expressed by Moroccan feminists, both female and male, as well as those studies produced on feminism in Morocco, regardless of the academic discipline or the nationality of the author. Similarly, by “Moroccan feminism” we mean an organized women’s movement expressing a collective demand to reform the status of women. This particular movement began in 1946 within the framework of Akhawwat as-Safa (Sisters of Purity) (Akharbach & Rerhaye, 1992: 17-26). Today the movement encompasses a number of diverse feminisms (Naciri, 1998; Sadiqi, 2008; Dialmy, 2004; Dialmy, 2008). Thus for the sake of convenience this essay will include in the term feminism socialist and/or Marxist feminism, associative feminism, charitable feminism, intellectual feminism, and Islamic feminism. Further, “feminist consciousness” is defined as the resistance of individual women to social constructions perpetuating inequalities between women and men, whether through writing, discourse, or lifestyle. Such a feminist consciousness emerged in the pre-colonial period and predates the birth of the modern women’s movement. Finally, we consider “power” to be a negative concept exercised indirectly by institutions and by social, political and international structures, and resulting in the dynamics of dominance and subordination. In this sense, our definition of power reflects the approach of “intersectional” feminists. In other words, in order to understand the discrimination experienced by women we must consider the dynamics of gender, race, and class, in the production and perpetuation of inequalities (McCall, 2005; Collins, 2002; Pateman & Mills, 2007).

### State of the question

Presently, a number of studies exist on Moroccan feminism. More specifically, Rabéa Naciri (1998), Fatima Sadiqi (2008) and Abdessamed Dialmy (2004a, 2008b) have traced the evolution of the modern women's movement in Morocco from its inception to the present-day. Researchers also seek to examine specific aspects of Moroccan feminism. Laurie Brand (1998), among others, studied the interactions between State elites, political actors, and women's organizations during Morocco's period of liberalization in the 1990s. Her work reflects the views of Zakya Daoud (1993) who analyzed gains in women's rights in relation to the retreat of authoritarianism. With the change in political context in Morocco following the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in May 2003, scholars like Souad Eddouada and Renata Pepicelli (2010) seek to examine the challenges posed to leading elites by the necessity to reconcile the demands of feminists with those of Islamists. Meanwhile, the perseverance of women's organizations forces State elites to consider feminist demands when promoting their political programs. Houria M'chichi (2010) has produced substantial scholarship on this particular issue.

A synthesis of such research indicates that scholars generally agree on the 1940s as the origins of the modern feminist movement. Malika al-Fassi is largely perceived as its pioneer. Between 1935 and 1943, she wrote a series of articles advocating women's progress through education. In 1946 al-Fassi founded Akhawat al-Saffa (Sisters of Purity), a women's organization within the political party al-Istiqlal (Party of Independence), seeking to improve women's status. Most recognize Akhawat al-Saffa as Morocco's first women's organization. In any case, the demands of the emerging feminist movement resulted in the first generation of women with proper access to education. Consequently, in the 1960s, a decade after achieving independence, Morocco's first female jurists, doctors, pharmacists and academics emerged. Subsequently, feminist ideas appeared in newspapers, novels and academic reviews. Partisan feminism also developed along with female journalistic, literary and academic writing. In the 1970s, various feminist sections were formed within political parties including the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (SUPF) and the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS). Despite these efforts, political parties failed to adequately represent women. Resentful of their marginalization within "male political clubs", feminists founded autonomous associations, the objective of which was the advancement of women's rights. Associative feminism was thus formed in the 1980s. Accordingly, various feminist and feminine autonomous organizations were created, although some like the Democratic Association of Moroccan women founded in 1985, the Union of the Feminine Action founded in 1987, and the Moroccan Association of Women's rights founded in 1992, remained allied with specific political parties. In general, however, these organizations advocated the application of recognized rights to women, the abolition of legal discriminations against women, the eradication of women's poverty, the eradication of women's illiteracy and the elimination of all forms of violence against women, including but not limited to domestic violence and sexual harassment, among other issues.

It is in the context of this associative feminism that Latifa Jbabdi, founder and president of the Union of Feminine Action, organized the "One Million Signature" campaign in 1992 (Sadiqi, Nowaira, el-Kholy & Ennaji, 2009: 277-278). The campaign aimed at gathering one million signatures, in order to pressure the ruling elites to change the *Mudawana* (the Moroccan family code) to an extent that would eradicate a series of legal discriminations against women. The text of the petition was sent to King Hassan II, to members of the parliament and to the main newspapers in the country. This petition constitutes a major document in the history of Moroccan feminism. For the first time, women mobilized in masses around common demands, and directly express their demands to the concerned authorities. After this initiative, the family code was somewhat modified. Although the initial legal modifications were minor, they accomplished a major shift in the spirit of the law. The *Mudawana* thus became a human product, able to be abrogated, and it lost its status as a supposedly sacred text with immutable provisions. Moreover, this petition stimulated deep social debates that contributed to publicizing discriminations that women face. As a result, a new Family Law Code that grants women greater rights within the family was adopted in 2004.

Just as feminism found a foothold within Morocco's social fabric—as it sought to achieve additional gains for women—it faced backlash from the emergence of Islamism, particularly in the 1980s. Despite its religious discourse, Islamism is in fact a political movement seeking to legitimize patriarchal norms and values. As such, it targets illiterate women and marginalized social classes, advocating the veil and women's seclusion. In response to the Islamist threat, feminists affirmed publically their spiritual devotion to Islam, while requesting contextual readings of the Quran to elicit more liberal interpretations of religious texts. Currently, the feminist movement remains one of the main promoters of democratization in the Moroccan political scene. Indeed, feminist organizations are more accessible to women than political parties, and thus represent, express, and channel women's demands.

If current discourses on the evolution of feminist activism should agree, a number of recent studies on the history of Moroccan women in general may in fact shed new light on the feminist struggles of Moroccans. Historian Abd al-Hadi Tazi (1993), for instance, produced a unique monograph on the role of women in Maghreb's public sphere from antiquity to

present. Similarly, historian Mohammed Ibn Azzuz Hakim (2001) traced the public activities of Tetouanese women in the region throughout different time periods. Alison Baker (1998), however, limited the breadth of her study to Moroccan women participants in the anti-colonial struggle. For their part, Latifa Akharchab and Narjis Rerhaye (1992), claim regrettably that despite women's participation in the liberation of the country, they were barred from the decision-making process once Independence was achieved. However, credence was given to those rare women who managed to gain access to the current Moroccan political sphere. Finally, Fatima Sadiqi, Amira Nowaira, Azza el-Kholy and Moha Ennaji (2009) have masterly reproduced the writings of the numerous public women unfortunately still ignored by mainstream history. While such scholarship may not aim to expose the history of feminism in Morocco it nonetheless proves, although indirectly—and as will be shown in the following paragraphs—that the history of Moroccan feminism still contains numerous gaps.

### **The dynamics of internal marginalization**

Our empirical research on the history of Moroccan women in general, and of feminism in particular, indicate that at least four factors have influenced existing knowledge of Moroccan feminism, namely the social inequalities existing between women and men, the unequal relations between the ruling elite and the public, the distinctions between social classes, and the taboo associated with sexuality and limiting liberty of expression.

### **The social inequalities between women and men**

Certainly, this is not news; but lest we forget, men continue to dominate the production of knowledge, and literacy rates for women remain significantly lower than those of men (UNICEF, 2009). Thus history becomes largely the history of men. And the few women who succeed at gaining access to the public sphere receive little attention from historians. In the words of the sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1990), these "historical assassins" hide away any traces of a medieval or pre-colonial feminist consciousness in Morocco. Most historians, for instance, rarely recognize Nazhun bint al-Qila'i (? – 1155) as one of the grand poets of Grenade. Historians often overlook her poetry because she transgressed the social restrictions imposed on the feminine body and on the language permissible for female use (Abd Muhanna, 1990: 250-251; al-Maqqari, 1967: 635-638; al-Qudaii, 1986 : 236-238; Hammond, 2003; Garulo, 1986: 110-120; Ibn al-Khatib, 1973: 424-427). Nazhun led such a libertine life that the famous satirist Abu Bakr al-Makhzumi labelled her a whore. Far from passively enduring the insult, she composed a satire, ridiculing the latter's own sexual practices. At the end of her satire, she concluded (trans. of Muhanna, 251):

I replied to a poem by the other,  
so tell me, who is more poetic?  
If the creation made me a woman,  
my poetry is masculine.

Consequently, she proved to her audience that despite being woman, or a subordinate person according to the social beliefs of her time, her poetry belonged to a superior genre. Given this statement, some literary critics count Nazhun among the first feminists in the world (Garulo, 1986: 110-120), thus negating the dominant belief that Christine de Pizan (1364-1430?) was the first woman to write in defense of her gender (De Beauvoir, 1989: 105).

Similarly, in the early twentieth century Mririda N'aït Atiq, an illiterate singer and poet, bitterly contested women's unequal social conditions. She survives in our memory due to the French official René Euloge, but more importantly Mririda's actions and beliefs root modern feminism in a pre-colonial feminist consciousness originating in the cultural traditions of Moroccan society (Sadiqi et al., 2009: 131-133; Haddad, 1997; Euloge, 1959; Halpern & Paley, 1974). Indeed, Mririda indicates in several of her poems that instead of getting married, she deliberately chose to maintain her autonomy and freedom (Halpern & Paley, 1974: 17):

#### Poor Naïve Man

Poor naïve young man, stop bothering me.  
I've come to see my parents,  
Not to look for a husband. God help me!  
[...]  
Do you have something to give me?

Tell me, naïve young man. – Days without meat?  
Without sugar and song?  
Sweat and painful work?  
The dung of the stable, stinking clothes  
And the thick air of the smoky kitchen  
While you're off dancing the *adersi*?  
And no doubt you'd want a household of sons.  
Can't you see this isn't for me? (...)

Mririda understood that, because of patriarchal family structures, marriage alienated women. The poetess felt that marriage robbed women of their personal freedom and enslaved them by forcing domestic work and childbirth—preferably of sons—upon them. Although Mririda was illiterate, she perceived with clarity the dynamics that perpetuate social patriarchal structures. Consequently, she refused to adhere to them. Mririda N'Ayt Atiq constitutes an important example of a pre-colonial and endogenous feminist consciousness. Yet, she remains absent from mainstream knowledge on feminism.

### **The unequal relations between the ruling elite and the public**

Official history remains both masculine and elitist. Until the last century, historians focused namely on the Sultan, his court, his battles, his glories, and his defeats. Thus, those numerous women seeming to articulate a feminist consciousness, among others, have been wiped from our memory. Such is the case for the *caïda* Chamsi az-Ziwawiya. In the first half of the fourteenth century (1337) Chamsi overcame the patriarchal restrictions of her society and successfully gained power (Ibn Khaldoun, 1959: 540-541; El-Slaoui, 1954: 132-134). Also, because of its elitist agenda, history fails to indicate if in the past certain regions of the country were in fact favorable towards women. This question becomes especially important when considering that five centuries later in the same region of the Rif, at the borders of Oudja another woman, Rqia bent Hdidou, became *caïda* of the Aït Zedeg tribe in the 1880s (Charmes, 1887: 215).

Similarly, several examples exist of politics interfering with historical accounts. For instance, most agree that the princess Lalla Aïcha during her famous speech given in Tangier in 1947, calling on women to educate themselves and to participate in the public life of the nation, was the first woman to remove her veil. She thus became the symbol of women's emancipation, and the monarchical institution emerged simultaneously as an agent of modernity. Yet, according to the historian Mohamed Ibn Azzuz Hakim (2001: 106-107), the Tetouanese Saadiya Amghani was in fact the first woman to remove her veil, and also to wear Western clothing, and she did so in approximately 1913. Unfortunately knowledge of Saadiya remains limited. Thus given the literature that is produced on feminism of the Moroccan State (M'chichi, 2010), further research on this female pioneer of women's emancipation could change and improve our understanding of Moroccan feminism. But beyond that, it could tell us more about how politics often dictate or distort historical accounts.

### **The distinctions between social classes**

According to the empirical research, the feminist voices of women from the upper classes tend to be publicized more than women from modest origins. For instance, many consider Malika al-Fassi to be the first Moroccan feminist (Akhbarbach & Rerhaye, 1992: 17-26). Certainly, she deserves her title. However, other feminists could easily share this title with her. Rahma al-Madani ar-Rifiya for example, submitted articles to Tetouan journals and magazines to contest women's unequal positions and to advocate for the right of women to education in around the same era as Malika al-Fassi (al-Marini, 1993: 16). However, no research has been produced on Rahma and no effort has been made to reproduce any of her writings. Such initiatives however, would improve our body of knowledge on the emergence of the modern feminist movement in Morocco, as well as improve our understanding of the first wave of Moroccan feminism.

Similarly, a number of feminists worked along side Malika al-Fassi to formulate a series of demands from within Akhawwat al-Safaa, including the right of women to education, and the abolition of polygamy (Sadiqi et al., 2009, 352). For instance, Habiba Guessouss delivered a celebratory speech at the first assembly of the Akhawwat al-Safaa on May 23, 1947 in Fez (Sadiqi et al., 2009: 174). Most likely, Habiba did not belong to an influential family, and thus sunk regrettably into historical oblivion. Consequently, she is absent from mainstream knowledge of Moroccan feminism.

Finally, it is generally believed that Malika al-Fassi founded the first modern women's organization in 1946. However, according to the historian Mohammed Ibn Azzuz Hakim (2001: 7), the first women's organization was in fact founded in



Tetouan. However, given the current state of research on the topic, no additional information is available on this organization. Filling this gap could further our knowledge of Moroccan feminism.

### **The taboo associated with sexuality**

The taboo associated with sexuality intervenes restrictively in the feminist discourse itself. Since the emergence of modern Moroccan feminism in 1946, no feminist organization has openly addressed women's reproductive rights, abortion rights, and the right of women to take ownership of their own bodies. Certainly, intellectuals like Fatima Mernissi (1985), Soumaya Guessous (1996) and Abdessamad Dialmy (1988) address sexuality in their scholarship. However a major distinction, namely the fear of losing credibility, continues to separate intellectuals from feminist organizations, particularly on the subject of sexuality. In consequence, whether from conviction or whether as a form of strategy, feminist organizations avoid the subject. Sexuality however, is the foundation upon which the socially constructed differences between genders have been built, and upon which a hierarchy between people is established. While not the topic of this study, the different social roles of women and men are built upon the biological differences between the sexes. More explicitly, popular beliefs construct the sexuality of men as free of consequence and the sexuality of women as potentially causing scandal. It then becomes necessary to control women's bodies, and ultimately such beliefs justify women's seclusion within the home, and inversely, their exclusion from the public sphere. The removal of the taboo associated with sexuality would allow for an associative feminist discourse to embed the principal of gender equality within the Moroccan social fabric. More importantly, such an initiative would educate Moroccans about the relationship existing between the constitutive elements of the triangular taboo—namely politics, religion, and sexuality—restricting freedom of expression in almost all Arab-Muslim countries.

### **The dynamics of external marginalization**

Parallel to the internal marginalization of certain feminist voices and narratives of relevance to feminism in Morocco, our empirical research on the history of women and feminism reveals that dynamics of power influence knowledge of feminism outside of national borders by marginalizing Moroccan secular feminism.

Because patriarchy has been, and continues to be—to varying degrees—the legacy of all of humanity, of all religions, and of all civilizations (Lerner, 1986; French, 1986), we might expect that the struggle of women against this system, that is to say feminism, would be perceived as a universal ideology, although it is not. Feminism is also often perceived as a purely Western ideology. In fact, dominant feminist historiography locates the origins of feminism in Europe and in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Schneir, 1972; Freedman, 2007; Gubin, Jacques & Rochefort, 2004). We designate “dominant feminist historiography” to be the historical writings on the history of feminism produced by Euro-Americans approximately up to the beginning of the new millennium. Thus, we can identify modern feminism according to three waves of thought and activism. The first wave covers the period of feminist activism from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, Britain, Germany and France. During this period, feminist activism primarily sought to promote women's suffrage, while it also denounced other inequalities, such as imbalances within marriage and women's lack of financial autonomy (Schneir, 1972: xiv-xv). Emmeline Pankhurst in Britain, Charlotte Perkins and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in United States and Jeanne Deroin in France are among the leaders of this movement (Humm, 1992: 5).

The first wave of feminism ended when these suffragettes finally attained their goal. Thus American, British, German and French constitutions were modified, granting women the right to vote in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Humm, 1992: 2). However, only a few decades later, women realized that gaining the right to vote did not eradicate discrimination against them. Consequently, in the 1960s and 70s, the second phase of feminism was concerned with all forms of discrimination against women (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1986: 163). This period corresponds to the women's liberation movement. Thus, expressions such as “Women's Liberation” were used in the United States in early 1960s (Jackson & Jones, 1998: 3), “The British Women's Liberation Movement” was used in Britain in 1968 (Humm, 1992: 5-6), and “le Mouvement de libération des femmes” appeared in the French press in 1970 (Humm, 1992: 181). The slogans “One is not born a woman, but becomes one” and “The personal is political” describe the spirit of the movement (De Beauvoir, 1989; Lee, 2007: 163). In other words, interactions in the private sphere are insidious indications of power structures paralleling those interactions of the political sphere. Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone are among the great thinkers of this phase (De Beauvoir, 1989; Friedan, 1962; Millett, 1970; Firestone, 1970).

The third wave of feminism began in the 1990s, although this phase did not contradict previous ones. Instead, feminists faced new challenges in this era. On the one hand, they were facing a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1992: ix-xxiii & 454-460); on the other, they needed to fill some gaps left behind by feminist activities during the second wave (Cornell, 1998; Heywood & Drake, 1997). In this fashion, postcolonial feminism emerged to address the omission of non-Western

women in the dominant feminist discourse. Postcolonial feminism revealed that the dominant feminist discourse reduces feminist issues to the experiences of middle and upper-middle classes of Euro-American women (Bulbeck, 1998: 2-10). Similarly, this feminism highlights the fragmentary representation of non-Western women depicted by the dominant feminist discourse. As Chandra Mohanty (1991: 55- 56) suggests, Western feminists' writings about women in the rest of the world should be situated under the hegemony of Western academic production. One of the consequences of this hegemony is that their writings are permeated by imperialism in such a way that representations of non-Western women produce a singular portrayal of oppression; subsequently, these women are also viewed as undistinguished. Characteristics of this woman imagine her to be ignorant, poor, passive and victimized. In other words, she would be the opposite of her Western colleague who is educated, modern, active and combative. The postcolonial feminists did make progress, however, since at the eve of the new millennium, the new dominant feminist historiography considers feminism to include "multiple feminisms," constituting a diversity of voices within the multiplicity of human societies (Gubin, Jacques & Rochefort, 2004: 15).

This overview of the history of feminism as narrated by the dominant feminist historiography raises at least one remark. We need to attach to this "feminism" the epithet of "Western." More explicitly, the dominant feminist historiography narrates the history of Western feminism, not that of feminism throughout the world. However, the hegemony of Western academic production and the ignorance of histories of feminisms in the rest of the world, contribute to the erroneous belief that feminism is exclusively a Western ideology. Thus, for instance, Miriam Schneir (1972: xiv) maintains that a vast feminist literature was produced in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century in the West, contrary to the rest of the world. Therefore, the emergence of feminist expression from Muslim *harems* could not have been possible, among which include the Moroccan *harem*. Similarly, in an historical and comparative study of women's movements throughout the world, Janet Chafetz and Anthony Dworkin (1986:191) maintain that there is no independent women's movement in North Africa, including Morocco. This being said, as a result of these reductionist beliefs, non-Western feminism, thus modern Moroccan feminism, rarely forms part of the body of knowledge relating women's struggles for equality.

Yet, the marginalization of non-Western modern feminisms encourages and reinforces the belief that only Western feminists articulate an ideology for women's emancipation. In other words, Western feminists become the only voices of a universal feminism. In so doing, Western feminists will have nothing to learn, for example, from Latifa Jbabdi and her campaign of one million signatures to reform the family code. And in reverse, non-Western feminists have everything to learn from Western feminists. Does feminism then create a hierarchy between women? Or will it instead become a dialogue between them?

### **Conclusion**

This paper has identified specific examples of feminist voices and narratives in Morocco as either marginalized, over-represented, or distorted at both the national and international levels. Consequently, the history of feminism in Morocco deserves to be rewritten, this time considering the multiple relationships of power intervening in the production of knowledge on the history of Moroccan women in general and of feminism in particular.

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