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## **GLACIER, OSIRE**

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### **Gender Inequality in Morocco: Destabilization and Continuity**

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#### **Introduction**

In an article, professor and researcher Fatima Sadiqi recalls working with female colleagues to establish Morocco's first Center for Studies and Research on Women in 1996.[1] Their success in launching the Center led Sadiqi and her co-founders to create the country's first Gender Studies Graduate Unit in 2000.[2] At the time, Sadiqi was teaching at the University of Fès where, like most female professors,[3] she confronted the glass ceiling hindering the advancement of women's academic careers. Sadiqi remembers a doctoral student who was looking for a thesis advisor.[4] After opening the door to Sadiqi's office, the student discovered that "Dr. Sadiqi" was, in fact, a woman; the student excused himself immediately and left.[5] This doctoral candidate missed an opportunity given that Sadiqi's partner, Moha Ennaji, whose professional background mirrors her own, has claimed that Sadiqi works more than he does.[6]

Since the development of the Gender Studies Graduate Unit at the University of Fez in 2000, Gender Studies programs have been established at other institutions across the country.[7] These Units have three major objectives: to introduce the concept of “gender” to the humanities and social sciences, to reveal how gender is socially constructed, and to deconstruct socio-cultural obstacles to gender equality. Decades later, research addressing the state of Gender Studies in Morocco[8] has revealed that while such programs have acquired recognition among academic circles, they continue to face several difficulties, including a lack of financial and human resources,[9] and isolation within the universities.[10]

Examining whether gender equality has become part of the Moroccan social fabric, this text applies discourse analysis to study perceptions of women in language, to explore dominant attitudes towards women in society, and to assess reactions to proposed reforms addressing gender inequalities. It evaluates whether knowledge resulting from research on gender has contributed to destabilising gender inequalities in Moroccan society.

## I. An Outdated Language

Several studies have focused on how language perpetuates patriarchal values, a gender hierarchy, and the devaluation of women in Moroccan society. Sadiqi herself is a pioneer in the field. In her study *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco*, she demonstrates that language contains an androcentric component, both in terms of the pragmatic use of language - stereotypes, proverbs and humour - and on the structural level of language itself - semantics (the study of meaning) and syntax (the study of the distribution of words in sentences).[11] Other works have highlighted how language - proverbs and popular adages in particular - positions women as the inferior gender, contributes to the prevalence of verbal violence against them, and devalues their contributions to society.[12] Despite such academic research and the efforts of women's and human rights organisations,[13] language remains one of the main vehicles of patriarchal values. By analysing the use of the concepts of *al-maraa* (woman) and *ar-rajoul* (man) in everyday language, the first part of this text exposes how this outdated terminology contributes to perpetuating a major pillar of the patriarchal system: the construction of reductive gendered identities.

In Morocco, everyday language, social networks, popular newspapers, television and radio broadcasts aimed at the public, and even literature specialising in gender,[14] generally employ *al-maraa* (woman in the singular) and *ar-rajoul* (man in the singular). Some examples include the *Observatoire national de la femme* (National Observatory of the Woman),[15] the *Musée de la femme* (Museum of the Woman),[16] and almost all Arabic-language texts.[17] The continued use of these concepts reduces the diversity of complex individuals, women and men alike, to identities defined simply by their sex. All women are reduced to one single woman: the woman, or more aptly, the eternal feminine; while all men are reduced to one single man. By assigning dialectically defined and predetermined characteristics to the concepts of woman and man, this

essentialist terminology implies that the feminine and the masculine are natural and immutable biological facts. Humanities and social science research have clearly demonstrated that the concepts of women and men are socially constructed. Their attributes are normative<sup>[18]</sup> and vary across societies and historical time periods.<sup>[19]</sup> "Woman" and "man" in the singular are rarely used in academic publications of the last few decades. Many researchers opt for more inclusive terminology representative of the diversity that exists among individuals. Recent studies challenge the binary gender categories of women and men and highlight the existence of a plurality of gender identities and sexual orientations.<sup>[20]</sup>

By transforming the social categories of women and men into immutable biological realities, the outdated concepts of *al-maraa* (woman) and *ar-rajoul* (man) contribute to positioning women as the inferior gender and foster contempt for women in society. Expressions still in use today, such as *bhal chi bnita* (like a little girl) and *bhhal chi mrioua* (like a little woman), devalue the feminine being and inflict verbal violence against girls and women. The common phrases *ana rajel* (I am a man) and *koun rajel* (be a man) elevate men to a higher social category than women. This kind of everyday language, including the use of outdated terminology, participates in maintaining Morocco's gender hierarchy.

Any hierarchy implies the existence of a dominated group and a dominant group, as well as relations of domination between them. The "*Koun rajel*" (Be a man) campaign launched on social media in 2018 provides ample insight into the relations of domination that exist between the genders in Morocco. The campaign calls on men to control "their women," including their wives, sisters, daughters, cousins and other relatives, by forcing them to wear clothing considered decent.<sup>[21]</sup> According to this campaign, a normative man is an individual who dispossesses women of their agency, appropriates their bodies, and exercises his domination over them. By perpetuating patriarchal values, supporting the gender hierarchy, and devaluing women, language contributes to a diffuse misogyny that permeates Morocco's entire social fabric.

## II. A Diffuse Misogyny

In 1996, sociologist Fatima Mernissi pondered the Arab world's - including the Maghreb's - hostility towards women in her book *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory*.<sup>[22]</sup> Why does the Arab world fail to see women as a key force for development?<sup>[23]</sup> Why does it feel the desire to humiliate women and hinder their progress despite women's efforts to educate themselves and become productive and useful?<sup>[24]</sup> Why are women the constant targets of rejection and exclusion?<sup>[25]</sup> Mernissi attempted to answer these questions while also proposing possible solutions to the rampant misogyny of Arab and Maghrebian societies.

Unfortunately, hostility towards women remains a problem in the Arab world and the Maghreb. [26] According to quantitative studies produced by the World Economic Forum, these societies are among the worst-performing in the world in terms of gender equality.[27] To reveal the extent of misogyny in Moroccan society, this text analyses the debate, “*La saga des nihilistes*” (The Saga of the Nihilists), recorded in Casablanca in 2018 at the premises of the cultural organisation *Racines*. [28] This episode featured the Advocacy and Communications Director for Human Rights Watch’s Middle East and North Africa division, Ahmed Benchemsi, the investigative journalist, Omar Radi, the singer, Barry, the religious freedom activist, Jawad el Hamidi, the cultural activist and member of *Racines*, Aadel Essaadani, and the economist, Rachid Aourraz. Several of the episode’s participants expressed critical views, including disapproval for King Mohammed VI’s failure to respond to the demands of the Hirak Rif in a context marked by increasing police repression. *Racines* was dissolved in December 2018. At around the same time, several journalists were subjected to trials marked by irregularities that resulted in their imprisonment. Many are still behind bars today. Radi, who published an investigative piece documenting the appropriation of land from ordinary citizens by state elites, [29] was sentenced to six years in prison and fined 19, 000 euros.[30]

The aim of this text is not to minimise the role played by *Racines* in raising citizens' awareness of democracy, human rights and individual freedoms in Morocco. It does not aim to diminish the commitment of the activists, journalists and artists from the episode’s panel who represent the core of Morocco's intellectual and activist elite. The choice of this panel as a case study is strategic and serves to highlight the widespread misogyny that prevails in the country. If the intellectual and activist elite treats women with contempt, can we expect social groups who are less educated on issues of democracy, human rights, and gender equality to treat them equitably? This question could be the subject of another debate. For now, the fact remains that twenty minutes and ten seconds into the program’s first segment,[31] one of the panellists mentions organisations campaigning for women's rights in Morocco, and laughter immediately erupts among the group. Someone then describes these organisations as *lohoumiyya* (carnivores). The comment unleashes more hilarity. Another speaker specifies that these are organisations of *al-marqa* (the sauce). Derisive laughter ensues once again. This derogatory remark served to reduce women to a populist mixture of indigestible sauce. Such a display of virulent contempt for women among the intellectual and activist elite reveals the extent of misogyny in the social fabric. It demonstrates ignorance of theoretical studies on democracy and gender equality, as well as a lack of critical reflection on power and gender among the general population and the intellectual elite.

While committed female activists and intellectuals exist in the country, there were no women on the panel. A few examples include the journalist Maria Moukrim, the activist Ibtissame Betty Lachgar, co-founder of the *Mouvement alternatif pour les libertés individuelles* (Alternative Movement for Individual Liberties) (MALI), and Khadija Ryadi, winner of the prestigious United

Nations Human Rights Prize in 2013. Meanwhile, the country's political parties have been rendered empty shells by the political game that continues to preoccupy them, the monarchy, and civil society. Still, the panellists reserved their laughter for the women's organisations that, contrary to popular belief, have contributed significantly to ensuring the inclusion of women's rights in public policy and in the social debates of their time.[32] The panel's disdain for women expressed during the "*La saga des nihilistes*" was informed by male paternalism. It demonstrates the privilege possessed by a dominant social group to judge a dominated one. This kind of hierarchy and deplorable judgement-making positions women as inferior. The contemptuous treatment of women's organisations by the panel forms part of broader social dynamics that depreciate women's contributions to society.

Already in 1982, Mernissi spoke of the "*paradoxe de l'intellectuel arabe*" (paradox of the Arab intellectual).[33] According to the sociologist, educated men in Arab and Maghreb societies are ready to die for democratic ideals but refuse to extend these same ideals to women.[34] Unfortunately, four decades later, the paradox of the Arab and Maghrebian intellectual persists. When intellectuals and activists debate the issues of democracy, human rights, and individual freedoms in Morocco, they mean democracy for men, human rights for men, and the individual freedoms of men. As a result, reform projects aimed at correcting gender inequalities in Morocco encounter an insidious resistance from the population.

### III. An Insidious Resistance to Gender Equality

There are several examples of projects to reform the status of women in contemporary Morocco that have aroused strong opposition. These include the *Plan d'intégration des femmes au développement* (Plan for the Integration of Women in Development) proposed by Mohamed Saïd Saâdi in 1998,[35] the reform of the *Moudawana* (Family Code) in 2004,[36] the petition to abolish inequalities in inheritance initiated by intellectuals in 2018,[37] and the campaign launched by the *Collectif 490* (Collective 490) in 2019 for individual freedoms, including the right to bodily integrity, the right to engage in sexual relations outside of marriage, and the right to abortion.[38]

Resistance to the destabilisation of unequal gender relations has been legitimised in a variety of ways over the years. One of these justifications, namely that gender equality is contrary to culture, religion and national traditions, has become somewhat of a leitmotif.[39] Calls to respect culture, religion and national traditions are highly selective. When peaceful demonstrators were sentenced to twenty years in prison following a sham political trial during the Hirak Rif,[40] the population did not come out en masse to denounce this threat to divine justice. Moroccans have yet to mobilise in support of children from marginalised communities. No passersby felt it was their duty, as Muslims, to help when a young girl was sexually assaulted in broad daylight and in full view of the public in the province of Rhamna in 2018.[41] When a young girl living with disability was sexually assaulted on a bus during the day in Casablanca in

2017,[42] neither the driver nor the passengers felt that, as Muslims, they had a moral obligation to intervene to protect the victim. In contrast, crowds have come together in wild masses to inflict collective punishment on young homosexuals, an event that occurred in Beni Mellal in 2016,[43] and on young women wearing skirts considered too short, as was the case in Inezgane in 2015,[44] because the alleged culprits had contravened religious precepts. For part of the population, religion does not represent the values of benevolence, solidarity, mutual aid, sharing, justice, and equity. Nor does it constitute an organised network providing support to political detainees, African migrants, economically marginalised people, or other vulnerable groups within Moroccan society. Instead, religion has been reduced to a set of rituals and dogmas disconnected from current issues, such as the climate emergency, the safeguarding of natural resources, the right to life of all living species, the advent of democracy in Morocco and elsewhere, the equal dignity of all, respect for diversity, and the pursuit of social and international justice.

As long as individual freedoms are violated in the country, what we call culture, religion, and national traditions are nothing more than social conditioning, political indoctrination, and repression. Along with popular culture, social norms and laws, a child's family, school, neighbourhood, entourage, and street impose on them a singular model of thought and behaviour. No individual expression is permitted. When a family is permissive towards its offspring, the social environment intervenes to police them by condemning, punishing and excluding rebels. If the social environment is defied, the State steps in with its arsenal of repressive laws and penitentiaries. For example, failure to fast during Ramadan constitutes a crime punishable by a term of imprisonment.[45] What we call culture, religion, and national traditions are political institutions that relate to broader power structures.

We too often forget that culture, religion, and traditions have official definitions. The Constitution considers Islam a constant of the Kingdom of Morocco[46] and limits certain rights by using formulations such as the "*conditions fixées par la loi*" (conditions set by law) or the "*constantes du royaume et de ses lois*" (constants of the Kingdom and its laws). These limitations appear mainly in relation to women's rights.[47] As a result, legal texts perpetuate numerous gender inequalities. The Family Code restricts the practice of polygamy without abolishing it[48] and establishes inequalities between women and men in matters of inheritance. [49] While egalitarian interpretations of the Coran exist,[50] the state elite bases its power on a patriarchal and authoritarian reading of Islam instead of opting for a citizenship contract guaranteeing the equality of all members of the nation through the Constitution. Patriarchy in contemporary Morocco is none other than state sexism based on biology and legitimised by masculine interpretations of religion. Gender inequalities are intrinsic to power structures. The issue of gender equality is a political subject. Any critical reflection on power, democracy, human rights, and public and individual freedoms must include the study of gender.

## Conclusion

Since the inauguration of the first program dedicated to gender studies at the University of Fès in 2000, gender studies have made significant progress in Morocco, as evidenced by the creation of Gender Units at other educational institutions in the country, as well as the production of knowledge in this area and its dissemination through conferences, publications, research, and popular podcasts. There is still a long way to go towards embedding the principle of gender equality in the social fabric of Moroccan life. As this text shows, patriarchal mentalities that devalue women and position them as inferior persist in Moroccan society. Everyday language, with its outdated concepts, sexist proverbs and adages, and androcentric structure is one of many mechanisms perpetuating gender inequalities. A diffuse misogyny informs the attitudes of the population towards women, including the attitudes of the country's intellectuals and activists. In such a context, the principle of gender equality appears foreign to national identity. Certain projects aimed at eliminating gender inequalities in contemporary Morocco have encountered opposition from the general population in the name of safeguarding culture, religion, and national traditions.

Gender studies have the capacity and the competencies to weave the principle of gender equality into the social fabric. It is essential to standardise its inclusion in all disciplines and at all educational establishments, from primary schools to universities. By integrating gender into education, we can hope to gradually eliminate outdated language, pervasive misogyny, and the country's insidious opposition to gender equality. It is important to remember that cultures and national identities are not immutable. As living entities, they transform, evolve and redefine themselves. The integration of gender studies will contribute to making gender equality one of the defining pillars of national culture in Morocco while reinforcing social equity.

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[6] *Ibid.*

[7] "Les études sur le genre à l'université, ou le défi du changement des mentalités et des perceptions," Conseil national des droits de l'Homme, February 20, 2015, last accessed October 25, 2023, <https://www.cndh.ma/fr/article/les-etudes-sur-le-genre-luniversite-ou-le-defi-du-changement-des-mentalites-et-des>

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[9] *Ibid.*, 19.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Fatima Sadiqi, *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco*, Leiden, Brill, 2003, p. 96.

[12] Malika Rafiq, "Violence verbale envers la femme marocaine : proverbes injurieux envers la femme marocaine," *Faits de langue et société*, no 7, 2021 : pp. 83-94 ; Amnesty International Maroc, *Étude sur les stéréotypes de genre répandu au Maroc: rapport d'analyse*, Rabat, 2013, pp. 46-60 ; Moha Ennaji, "Representations of Women in Moroccan Arabic and Berber Proverbs," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 190, 2008 : pp. 167-181.

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- [22] Fatima Mernissi, *Women’s Rebellion & Islamic Memory*, New Jersey, Zed Books, 1996, p. VII.
- [23] *Ibid.*
- [24] *Ibid.*
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] Among others, Egyptian feminist Mona Eltahawy addresses the Arab world’s endemic misogyny in an article titled, “*Why Do They Hate Us*” published by *Foreign Policy* in 2012, last accessed October 25, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/23/why-do-they-hate-us/>
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[46] First article of the Constitution.

[47] Article 19 of the Constitution.

[48] Article 39 to 42 of the Family Code.

[49] For example, Article 345 of the Family Code.

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