The Women's Movement in the Maghreb: with emphasis on Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria

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Women in the Maghreb and the Arab world at large are usually represented as inferior, submissive and dependent, living in a male-dominated, patriarchal society. Apart from the fact that these women have in fact never been fully subservient, their experiences with patriarchal society vary according to their social background, their educational level, activities and professional status. They have always resorted to whatever means they had to resist their subordination. The feminist movement now emerging on the Maghrebi political and social scene constitutes a modern form of this resistance, and is the inheritor of an ancient tradition of opposition of Maghrebi women to all forms of oppression

Since the independence of Morocco (1956), Tunisia (1957) and Algeria (1962), deep-seated changes have taken place in these countries, transforming their social and family structures as well as the relationship between man and woman. Resistance to change, however, remains strong, with both men and women trying to save an overvalued and mystified tradition of a past gone forever.

While in the wake of independence the number of educated women in the Maghreb was slight, women now make up 4 out of 10 university students in all three countries. Despite differences between these three countries, education is everywhere strongly valorized by professional activity, whether at the level of the importance of women's activity or with regard to the fields of their employment. The spectacular recent increase in women's demand for work highlights the magnitude of the ongoing changes.

In all three countries, the average age of women at first marriage is currently 26 in Morocco, 27 in Algeria and 29 in Tunisia. Moreover, a woman's permanent celibacy is no longer perceived as abnormal or shameful. Women in executive positions live on their own and are perfectly integrated socially, even though marriage remains a quasi-universal practice and widely valued institution.

Women also have fewer children than in the past. The use of contraceptives is expanding even in the countryside, and the ideal family model is no longer the patriarchal 'extended' family, but a smaller 'nuclear' family centered on the couple and their children.

These changes slowly introduced others in social and family practices: for example, when a baby girl is born, it is no longer perceived as a catastrophe, and families tend to treat daughters and sons equally, whether as to education or as to leisure occupations. Several studies conducted in Morocco have shown that where there are constraints such as extreme poverty, or remoteness from educational institutions, parents may give priority to

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sons, but in the absence of such constraints they usually treat their children equally.

The Maghrebi states have not acknowledged these social and economic changes however. Since their respective independences, political leaders have generally adopted policies that seek to transform their societies through education and women's activism. But at the same time, they have done all they can to curb the impact of these changes. The strategies developed differ, but they generally tend to maintain male privilege and traditional family structures.

Among the means used to this end, family law has resisted social changes and the women's movements, both in Morocco and in Algeria. The situation in Tunisia is quite exceptional: the Tunisian personal status code is one of the most egalitarian in the region, or in the Arab world.

This tendency to curb ongoing transformations by not legitimizing them, and by resorting almost systematically to religion and forms of social and political control, has combined with dire economic conditions to deepen the crisis all three countries are suffering from.

It was in this context that the current movement of Maghrebi women emerged, simultaneously in the three countries, around the mid-1980s. This movement is the combined result of: i) social disruptions that impacted women's social-economic status; ii) women's reaction to the incoherencies and contradictions of public policies, and to the inferior status they are locked into within their families and at the lower end of the professional scale; and iii) their exclusion from the spheres of public and political decision-making.

A growing awareness of women's contribution to economy and society, the dissemination of feminist values at the international level, through the Women's International Year (1975), and the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985), favored the emergence of this movement as organized groups in all three countries.

But this birth is also the result of a long maturation, started well before independence, that gradually consolidated itself to become the privileged product of social and political changes. The Maghrebi feminist movement is a new actor, with a political and social project that is coherent and ambitious, aiming to reestablish women's rights and dignity, and thereby bring about profound changes in their respective societies. Women's struggle for their emancipation has accompanied the main political and social changes that have taken place in the region since the beginning of the 20th century. They bear witness to the changes of the past few decades, despite the appearance of stagnation that these three countries may currently give.

I. Women, Colonialism and Liberation Movements

One of the commonalities between the three countries of the central Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) is that all three were colonized by France. Algeria's occupation lasted longest and was the most painful. French colonization had multiple and profound effects, albeit in different degrees, on the three countries and on the status of women.

The An-Nahda Movement

As in the Middle East (especially Egypt and Bilad ash-Sham), contact with the colonizers was a shock that, among other effects, made Maghrebi intellectuals (educated in Europe or the Middle East), demand the renovation of Islamic thought and the reform of society. Women's status was part of a debate that started in the 1830s and 1840s. Indeed, several An-Nahda thinkers in the Maghreb, influenced by the reformist ideology of the Middle East, started calling for the education of girls.

The *'Ulamas* opposed this reformist trend, claiming that French education in North Africa was contrary to Islam and would lead to a loss of identity through acculturation. According to them, this education was against God and the Nation,[1] and it was this that motivated *'Ulamas* such as Ben Badis in Algeria, Allal El-Fassi in Morocco, and Tahar Haddad in Tunisia, as well as nationalists, to establish free Islamic education. At these free schools, they had no choice but to set a good example and send their daughters; but this education had to take place in an Arabic and Islamic framework, and had to take care not to misdirect girls away from their 'natural' vocation, ie. fulfilling their reproductive and family role.

Having experienced another vision of the world, educated young men belonging to the better-off urban strata and the bourgeoisie, started calling for the right of girls - their future wives[2] - to education. The marriage market forced parents to adapt to this new situation, and the ignorance of women started being perceived as dangerous, since intellectuals were marrying educated foreign women.

The mobilization of certain *'Ulamas* in favor of education for girls, its adoption by the nationalist movements in all three countries, and the pressure from intellectuals, removed the last resistance to girls' education. Well before independence, the three countries bet on educa-

tion as a means to accelerate national liberation, and economic and social development. Priority was given to the education of boys, but the education of girls, despite some resistance (especially strong in Morocco), was adopted by the three nationalist movements.[3]

The Limits of Masculine Reformism

The history of the Maghreb countries teaches us that women chose their communal identity to fight colonialism, even though they had to suffer heightened control over their freedom of movement. Veiled and hidden from the eyes of Christian colonizers, to whom the 'Muslim woman' was an object of curiosity and fantasy, Maghrebi women played both direct and indirect roles in their countries' independence struggles. They had to live the conflict between the identity of colonized people and that of subordinate women, in the hope that independence would be as beneficial to them as to men.

The reformists' commitment to education for girls soon showed its limits. Indeed, according to them, education had to give priority to women's domestic role, and the main aim of education was to improve this role. But even though quantitatively and qualitatively limited, the education of women started having effects that went beyond the strict limits set by the patriarchal reformists. Women of the urban elites wanted to make their voices heard, and quit the protective, paternalistic isolation in which the male reformists wanted to keep them. These dissident voices were those of women who had the same cultural resources as men but, because they were women, had become aware of the conditions of women in their countries. Isolated in the beginning, these voices grew more confident as they turned to new resources, and particularly as they had made an active contribution to their countries' national liberation movements.

In Morocco, the women's section of the Istiqlal party (the main party calling for independence), the Union of Moroccan Women (formed by the Communist party in 1944), and the Association of the Sisters of Purity (*Jam'iyyat Ikhawat al-Safa*), belonging to the Party of Democracy and Independence (PDI, 1946), were the first forms of women's organization in that period, marked by the rise of calls for independence. These organizations all gave a priority to the national struggle, or to charity. The Sisters of Purity were an exception, since they raised problems related to the personal status code, such as early marriage, dowry, divorce and polygamy.

As in Morocco, the Communist party in Algeria created the Union of Algerian Women (UFA) in 1943, made up predominantly of European women. From 1945, as the independence struggle got fiercer, the nationalist parties started encouraging women to join their ranks. To this end, awareness cells were created for the sole purpose of mobilizing women for the struggle against colonialism. This mobilization appealed to women as holding their countries' future in their hands, but the question of their status was never raised.

In Tunisia, thanks to the powerful reformist movement led by Tahar Haddad[4] and sheikh Ben Achour, the status of women was raised very early on (in the 1930s) as a necessary condition for the modernization of the country. The first attempts to organize women belonging to the Tunisian urban bourgeoisie took the form of social and charitable commitment towards poorer women. But this movement very quickly engaged in the struggle against French colonization under the banner of the Neo-Destour party (formed in 1934). As in the other two countries, the Tunisian Communist party created two women's organizations affiliated to it (the Union of Women in Tunisia and the Union of Tunisian Young Women, 1944). Women also joined the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), as well as other political groups.

During this period, in all the Maghreb countries, priority was given to issues related to the ideological and political orientations of the different formations. The issue of women's rights had no place except as a political issue between nationalists and colonizers, and between conservatives and reformists. Women were mobilized around these issues without ever having the opportunity to express their specific demands and aspirations.

Patriarchy and Colonization

The arrival of Western colonizers in the Maghreb, with an ideology, practices and a discourse of "I bring civilization and development to the indigenous people" created an identity tension among the population that crystallized around women, family and religion. The latter constituted the most powerful tool to resist the colonizers and their values; this well-known and well-analyzed process placed Arab and Muslim women at the intersection between two identities: that of an oppressed community and that of subordinated women.

The colonial heritage also held a very important place in representations of Islam, which functioned as a resistance force against conquest and assimilation, and which was used by the nationalists of the colonized countries as a mobilizing weapon.

For years "...colonialism wore the neutral mask of universal progress in order to subjugate the people, thereby

maintaining a confusion between modernity, colonialism and domination."[5] Indeed, as Yussuf Bangura notes, "...for several Third World countries, access to modernity consists of nothing more nor less than in breaking with the boundaries of ethnicity, embracing the secular identity of the nation-state, developing a rational and scientific view of development, and treating individuals as autonomous beings."[6]

In Algeria, colonizers and anti-colonizers used the status of women as a political card. In 1958, France called upon women to burn their veils in a major public square in Algiers, while shouting "French Algeria". This move served to "falsify the problem, because spontaneously, without any orders, Algerian women who had been for a long time unveiled, re-adopted the haïk, stating that Algerian women would not be liberated at the invitation of France".[7]

To sum up in the words of Zakia Daoud, "Every questioning of the status quo was judged as conforming to the colonial power's integrationist policy, and condemned as a project of destruction of identity."[8]

II. Maghrebi Women in the Post-Colonial Period

As soon as these countries achieved their independence, they all chose education as a cornerstone of their development programs, despite their different political orientations. The need to ensure the take-over from the colonial powers, added to the desire to speed up the modernization process, gave education a primordial importance. The efforts made in this respect, especially before the 1972 economic crisis, are notable considering the limited resources. Moreover, a pressing social demand that began among the intellectual elite well before independence, spread to other social classes, which saw education as the means to improve their economic and social conditions.

The Limits of National Development Policies

The post-colonial Maghrebi states adopted different means to the common aim of modernizing their societies while safeguarding patriarchy, so as to secure the loyalty of pre-modern forces and leaderships. The development strategy they adopted conformed to the needs of the industrialized countries, and consisted in a modernization process involving factors and tools of production, without changing relations of production or gender relations within the patriarchal family.

The best illustration is the post-independence position of all three states regarding codification of the status of women and family relations. Tunisia, under the voluntarist and modernizing policy of President Bourguiba, and within an Islamic system of reference, opted for an emancipating legislation; Morocco hurried to promulgate an inequitable and retrograde *mudawwana* (1957/58); and Algeria, after 20 years of hesitations and aborted efforts, ended in 1984 by promulgating a personal status code (PSC) almost identical to that of Morocco.

The situation in Tunisia differs from the other Maghreb states to the extent that state intervention in the process of modernizing family and social structures placed women's status in the context of "contradictory relations between a developmental, modernist ideology and a sexist identity ideology"[9]. Put more simply, the Tunisian state, headed by President Bourguiba, took a number of measures to revise the PSC (*majella*), which could be considered as revolutionary in the Arab context, among them the banning of polygamy, judicial divorce, maternal guardianship, etc. These reforms continued under President Ben Ali (1987), so that the state's commitment to the liberation of women became a permanent characteristic of Tunisia. But this 'state feminism' was above all a 'masculine feminism',[10] rooted in a reformist political movement that raised the issue of women's liberation as necessary condition to an Arab renaissance. It is a 'masculine feminism' because it does not aim at transforming women's traditional roles, but at making them more efficient within a patriarchal family structure.

In Algeria, where women's participation in the national liberation struggle is a historically established fact, the ruling National Liberation Front (NLF) tried to establish the idea that from the mere fact of their participation in the independence struggle, women had gained their full dignity as citizens and automatically acquired all their rights.[11]

So much so that when in 1984 Algerian feminists called for revision or abrogation of the PSC, conservatives and Islamists accused them of being 'daughters of France', and 'westernized', forgetting or pretending to forget the role of women in the struggle for independence. This tendency to discredit claims made by the women's movement by appealing to anti-colonial feelings and to reflexes of community and identity had not ceased to function several decades after independence. The Algerian state resorted to this method several times, well before the emergence of Islamism.

In Morocco, in the euphoria of independence, the doors of education and work were opened to women. Allal Fassi, one of the great reformist thinkers of the time,

was appointed by King Mohammed V in 1957/58 to head the Commission charged with codifying customary Islamic law. Contrary to expectations, this Commission rapidly produced a *mudawwana* that consecrated and institutionalized patriarchy and the subordination of women. This text constituted the keystone used by the state to establish the juridical, political and economic foundations of independent Morocco, and as basis of its authority and power. This subordination of women was used to pacify the most conservative ulemas and most traditional milieux, just as one throws crumbs to the poor, so they would accept other secular texts leaving all serious political business in the hands of the state.

In Morocco first, and then in Algeria, the PSC, simple legal texts, were increasingly sacrilized and given the function of permanently fixing the status of women, whereas all other laws were able to evolve freely in a modernity accepted as temporal. One cannot explain what happened simply as a desire to respect the *Shari'a* or/and by the weight of tradition. The *Shari'a* is much more selective, and the negative aspects of tradition have been denounced by the most fervent respecters of the *Shari'a*. The latter has been dismissed without hesitation in favor of a secular juridical system of colonial inspiration, with the exception of the PSC, treated as an exception.

This enclosure of women within anti-colonialist and communitarian boundaries continued long after the decolonization of the Maghreb. Maghrebi women have been held back in a specificity that isolates them. Anything could change, but women were called on to represent continuity, because such was the interest of men, who after independence controlled all power through sending women back to their domestic and reproductive roles. The state had contributed to destabilizing the old order by secularizing the law, through education, and through the massive employment of women, which resulted in making the small nuclear family the norm. But it also tried with great success to limit the impact of transformations these policies might have caused, by investing in the symbolic domain, by the Islamisation of political discourse, and through the Family Code and other legal provisions. To build an independent state, it was above all question of safeguarding the ancient family, religious and tribal allegiances, within an authoritarian and hierarchical framework.

One of the chief characteristics of the post-independence period was the occupation of the religious domain by states to consolidate their power and establish their legitimacy. Islam was immediately proclaimed as official religion (even by Algeria, which claimed to be socialist). The systematic recourse to religious discourse, used for multiple ends in the name of cultural and religious specificity, was given common currency and integrated as a factor of political legitimization by all political actors who sought to compete with the 'authorities'. Among the countries of the Maghreb, Morocco devoted most hours to religious education (1977), with a rigid and retrograde Islamic content, reduced to glorification of the past and to memorize pious sayings.[12] The beginning of prayers in schools in the 1960s, the intolerant and discriminatory contents of schoolbooks,[13] religious programs on television, superficial Arabization, were all contributing elements in the orientation of the Maghreb states (especially Morocco and Algeria).

Algeria and Morocco took care to protect the model of the judicial family model,[14] and the ideology conveyed by family law. Other texts, such as the penal code, the code of penal procedure, the code of public liberties, the code of nationality, all strengthened patriarchal ideology through the absolute power given to father and husband in family and social relations. The introduction into secular texts of discriminatory provisions, supposed to make them conform with the *Shari'a*, can only be explained by the will of legislators to reinforce patriarchal ideology.

Thus, with the exception of Tunisia, Personal Status Codes inspired by Islamic law and based on a fallible interpretation of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* are the origin of the inferior juridical status of women in the Maghreb today. Their discriminatory provisions, as well as the identity and political crystallizations around these codes, represent a blow to women's rights and freedom, even though these are guaranteed by these countries' constitutions,[15] and a main obstacle to women's participation in economic, political and public life.[16]

Family law allows over-early marriage for women (15 years in Morocco, whereas for men it is 18 years). The judge may decide to authorize a marriage even before the legal age, if there is fear for "the morals or reputation of the girl".

The obligation of matrimonial tutelage for women (*wilaya*) is another provision that has been resumed in the PSCs of Algeria and Morocco. The duty of upkeep in exchange for the duty of obedience constitutes the basis for gender discrimination in the region today. With a few exceptions,[17] women owe obedience to their husbands and respect to his family. Because of this, a husband can stop his wife from visiting her family, and can stop her from working outside the house, or simply going out. Except in Tunisia, polygamy is authorized, even though it is becoming rare. Everywhere the family head is always the husband, including in Tunisia, even though it has the

most liberal family code in the region. Husbands have the right of repudiation (unilateral rupture of a marriage), without having to give a reason, whereas women themselves can never divorce, except by going before a court, or by giving their husbands compensation to agree (*al-khul'a*). To sum up, a husband divorces freely, but a wife must ask a judge's authorization for divorce which is only given in restricted cases.

Moreover, the law provides nothing for divorced women, who have right to support only for the brief period called *'idda*. The mother is considered, despite minor changes introduced in Tunisia for example, as child-carer and never as the legal guardian, except in the case of the father's death or other restricted cases.[18] Moreover, a divorced mother and guardian of minor children does not have the right to keep the marital house except in rare cases, and cannot remarry[19] without losing the right to look after her children, whereas a father's remarriage does not entail the same effects.

The law of inheritance has adopted the rule of inequality between men and women.[20] With the exception of Tunisia, the principle of *ta'sib* means that in the absence of a male heir, the collaterals of the deceased compete for the inheritance with female children.[21] Furthermore, in all three countries, a non-Muslim woman has no right to inherit from her Muslim husband.

Other subterfuges have been used to stop women from inheritance: in Morocco, the *habous* or *waqf* allows the circumvention of the unequal inheritance law for the benefit of male heirs, disinheriting the female heirs; the obligatory legacy (*wassiya wajiba*) gives the right to grandchildren born of a pre-deceased son to benefit from an inheritance while depriving the children of a pre-deceased daughter of the same rights.

Since independence, state interventions have mainly aimed at preserving the status quo, controlling claims, and neutralizing social and political forces in opposition. If today the societies of the Maghreb confront a political Islam, one has to admit that the latter has managed to gain ground so rapidly because it found a favorable political, economic and social terrain.

Women's Voices: the Post-Independence Generation

Soon after independence, women who had participated in political action and resistance returned to their homes to carry out the 'noble task' assigned by their past companions, namely educating future citizens. Those who decided to continue in spite of this, invested their efforts in social work and charity.

But very quickly, thanks to the spread of education and salaried professional work, especially in cities, a new generation of women who had not participated in the struggle for independence, joined political and union organizations. Despite a difficult political and social conjuncture, and repression, some women struggled within these organizations, which had always given priority to establishing socialism, social justice, and democracy, never to claims for gender equality.

Starting from the mid-1970s, a new stage in the history of Morocco began, one of relative political openness and greater freedom of speech. This allowed opposition parties to resume their activities, including women, who started organizing themselves in women's sections within their respective parties. This period of political openness in Morocco coincided with the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985), as well as the promulgation of the Convention against discrimination against women (CEDAW) in 1979. These events offered opportunities for women to intensify the debate within party structures on their positions and commitments to women's issues, and more specifically to the issue of revising the *mudawwana* (PSC).

The implicit aim of these women's sections was to increase the audience for their own parties among the ranks of women. Initially social action and consciousness-raising with women were privileged. But very quickly the issues of liberating women, their judicial status, and their representation at decision-making levels were raised. Differences between the demands made by these women's sections need to be noted. Whereas there was unanimity around the issues of education, political participation and women's activities, the question of revising the *mudawwana* was treated in a different and ambiguous manner, depending on the degree of autonomy and combativity of women activists within their respective parties. Indeed, two trends had long coexisted among political and union women activists, and still do today: one follows strictly the orientation of their organization, while the other manages the contradictions between their partisan and feminist identities.

In the mid-'80s the first feminist association was created, the Democratic Association of Women in Morocco (ADFM, 1985), followed two years later by the Union d'Action Feminine (UAF). From then on, several other feminist organizations were created, contributing to the plurality and diversity of the movement, specialization in field of intervention, to a better geographical spread, and to its autonomy. Underlying the emergence of a feminist movement in Morocco is the aspiration of women activists to an autonomy of claims, speech and organization, independent from their male counterparts

in parties, and from women's sections of political and union organizations in which their specific demands as women had always been confined. It was a break with years of compromise and waiting.

In Tunisia, the first initiative of women's organizing was in the Tahar Haddad Club (1977-1987) which brought together political, union and intellectual activists who wanted to think outside the official ideology, autonomously, about the condition of women in a society in crisis. Tunisia experienced political Islam earlier than the other two Maghrebi countries (though strongly suppressed, it is still latent there). Because of this, the women's movement is partly structured by their will to defend women's achievements in regard to their juridical status, since the first demand of political Islam in Tunisia was to cancel these achievements.

This feminist autonomy constituted a rupture with the existing 'masculine feminism' represented by the authorities in place. It was also a break, as in the case of Morocco, with the leftist political and union organizations which were the ideological 'family' of Tunisian feminists, but which refused to take account of their specific demands and aspirations, perceiving feminism as 'out of place' and 'improper'.[22]

This period of self-discovery and attempts to group a plurality of expressions into a unique and autonomous movement was very rich in debates, seminars and publications, notably the magazine *Nissa'*. Two autonomous feminist organizations were created after the mid-1980s: l'Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrates (ATFD) (licensed in 1989), and the l'Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Developpement (AFTURD) (formed in 1985, licensed in 1988). Within the Tunisian political context, these two associations increasingly positioned themselves towards more political claims, such as demands for democracy and respect for human rights. Both in Tunisia and Algeria, it was the women's movement that mobilized earliest and most strongly to defend their societies against the totalitarian threats emanating from political Islam, or the political regimes in place.

In Algeria, as in Morocco, it was mainly the PSC issue that mobilized women to stand up as organized groups in defense of their interests. Indeed, after several hesitations and aborted attempts destined to promulgate a PSC, notably in 1981, when it was withdrawn after the mobilization of women's organizations, this was finally established in 1984. In the words of one writer, "the Algerian authorities spent 22 years to put an end to shaky compromises, and return to the Shariaa, the time needed to wear down its opponents and exhaust women's resistance."[23] This event was extremely important, because it incited several feminist groups to reassemble, and to elaborate a common platform to demand the revision of the Code.

The Women's Movement Today

The struggles of the Maghrebi women's movement to reform personal status law had the merit of highlighting one of the paradoxes of modernity, which is that of trying to fix the status of women according to religion, while other social practices fell increasingly into religious confusion. Indeed, the long-lasting centrality of women's status was 'hollow' in the sense that their fate was discussed and decided in their absence.[24] This absence/presence started to be broken down by the emergence and reinforcement of the women's movement as a pressure group, starting from the mid-1980s, demanding change in laws, role and male/female relations.

In order to bring out the issue of the condition of women from the trap of private life, the Maghrebi women's movement transformed into a political and public issue the whole discussion about practices considered until then as trivial or related to private life, such as the juridical status of women, the sexual division of household labor, conjugal violence, etc.

The women's movement understood from the beginning that the 'private domain' had to be opened up, submitted to analysis, put into question and politicized. The struggle to reform personal status law and establish a family code based on more egalitarian conjugal and familial relations was as painful as resistance was lively. This resistance was supported, not by a stagnating traditionalism, as much as by the will to maintain the distinction between private space, ruled by Islamic law and proclaimed as sacred, and public space, ruled by secular laws and institutions.

Autonomous associations for equality between men and women constitute a new social and political phenomenon in the region's political arena. The history and current evolution of this movement vary according to their political and economic contexts, and according to the freedom of expression and association existing in each of the three countries.

Most non-governmental organizations in the region face several challenges to their work, due to the direct or indirect control of states over their activities, and to lack of resources, training and professionalism. Despite these difficulties, priority has been given by the women's movement as a body to the changing of laws, to the struggle against institutional, social and marital violence

towards women, and for a more effective and free participation of women in building states that are democratic and respect women's human rights.

Conclusion: An Emerging Feminist Identity

As elsewhere feminist ideas in the Maghreb, because they are dangerous to the patriarchal order, are systematically demonized, rejected, ridiculed, or suspected of developing hatred towards men, traditions, values, religion, etc. This is probably the reason why some associations continue to describe their movement as 'feminine'. This defensive attitude appears clearly in the way certain activists are obliged to justify and explain what feminism is for them, and what it is in countries like theirs.

In fact, in all three countries, women's movements were described as 'feminine', from their formation in the '80s until the '90s. But today the tendency is fully to assume the feminist identity, which is not innate but chosen and claimed as a stance with a vision, as well as a discourse and practice. It is a way of seeing the world through the 'eyes of women's strategic interests', with a particular and open vision towards society, including its most deprived sectors. In this way, the issue of democracy is integrated in it as well as the social question in all its dimensions. Feminism is definitely perceived as political project. Traditional politics and the political arena are defined by this new, large conception that integrates all the dimensions of social intervention, because feminism's fundamental aspect is refusal of separation between politics and the social, the public and the private.

This feminist identity that transcends the national sphere to inscribe itself in an international identity is accused of being imported and foreign. But the feminists of the Maghreb know that they bring their own contribution to developing this universal identity in process of construction. They do this just as the feminists of Asia and Africa have done, whose contribution was decisive to reflection on the economic, on poverty, on the intersection of identities, and on other issues.

Living in societies more and more mobilized along cultural and religious lines, feminists of the Maghreb are often confronted with a dilemma: to choose between two identities, the universal one that is closer to their aspirations and their interests as women, and the 'Arab-Muslim' identity presented as being exclusive by conservative and extremist currents in a context of absence of freedom of expression. This identity is often experienced as an eternal warning about frontiers that cannot be crossed: that of religious precepts as defined by men, that of tradition and culture built upon sacred and unchangeable principles.[25]

These tensions explain why many feminists reclaim the specificity and diversity of Maghreb women's belonging, at the crossroads of many identities — Arab, Berber, Muslim, Maghrebi. Indeed their awareness of the use made by the Islamists of the concept of specificity to isolate women prompts them to emphasize the fact that this Maghreb specificity is not linked to the identity question but rather to the political context in which feminist action unfolds, ie. the absence of democracy, high levels of illiteracy, etc. Feminism is the same as elsewhere but, developed in a different context, its expression is necessarily slightly different. Feminism in the Maghreb is specific in the sense that feminists take hold of their history with their own reading, since the special character of feminist theory is to have demonstrated the lack of neutrality of analytical categories, which until then were held as obvious.[26]

The fragility of this emerging feminist identity comes to the surface during major political events, such as the first Gulf war. In a climate of over-heated Arab nationalism, it was difficult for them not to fall into the traps of nationalist, pan-Arab and communitarian injunctions, brandished as the cement of resistance facing imperialist ambitions by the Arab left, and threats against Muslim countries by conservative and Islamic currents. Not to rally to these positions is considered as treason. Several identities came into conflict between the partisan or nationalist positions and feminist positions.

Ever since the issue of women's status and condition has been posed, it was in terms of duality and of priority. The alternatives have always been set in the following way:

- The struggle against colonization required women to repress their aspirations while waiting for independence. This was supposed to solve all their problems and make men and women equal citizens;
- Once independence was gained, despite the involvement of many women in the liberation struggles, their aspirations had to cede priority to building the Nation. Their status on the other hand acquired a position of symbol: that of their country's attachment to the Arab-Muslim community;
- Eager to build a democratic nation, women joined parties of the left. But in this context too they were obliged to wait the coming of a socialist society in which the exploitation of man by man would be abolished, and by the same token men's and women's rights would be re-established. Women's claim of equality is judged to be the demand of a minority of bourgeois women. The example to follow was that of the socialist countries which had liberated women by liberating men;
- More recently, the request for equality was deferred

again under the pretext of social conservatism. This discourse presents the claim for equality as illegitimate because society is not ready for it yet. One has to change mentalities for the issue of equality to be accepted. The still high illiteracy of women, especially in Morocco and Algeria, is taken as pretext to dismiss women's claims. Under the pretext that the vast majority of women are illiterate, it is said that they need education more than rights, because they would not know what to do with them;
- Finally, with the rise of political Islam, women, always in the midst of such interrogations and tensions, are accused this time of weakening the struggle, defined as an existential priority, of political Islam.

The Maghrebi feminists' struggle against violence and discrimination, and to reform personal status and establish a family code based on more egalitarian marital and family relations, has been the more painful in that resistance is still strong. This is one of the paradoxes of modernity in the countries of the region, to want to fix the status of women in tradition and culture, while all other aspects of political and economic life are plunged in a confusion between religion and modernity.

Less than five decades after independence, these three Maghrebi countries have gone through major social upheavals, and are still today in a vortex of change, the rapidity and complexity of which prevent any certainty as to their future. But women in the Maghreb do not want to wait any longer. They needed several years to learn to develop independent survival strategies, to develop a clear and shared vision of the orientation to give their movement so as to maintain the issue of women's rights and equality on the public stage. Finally they have built an autonomous movement, and have the ambition to 'make time move faster' so that women's subordination will be acknowledged as a priority on the same level as development, democracy and social justice.

ENDNOTES

1. Femmes diplômées du supérieur au Maghreb, pratiques novatrices, IREP/FNUAP, Tunis, 1994.
2. Ibid.
3. Bessis, S., Belhassen, S., Les femmes du Maghreb, l'enjeu (Paris : J-C.Lattes, 1992).
4. Reformist Tahar Haddad published a book in 1930 entitled Notre femmes dans la Shariaa et la societe, in which he denounced the subservience of women, and called for renewed efforts to interpret the Qur'an *(ijtihad)*. This book has remained incontestably 'modern', an authoritative reference for the whole Maghrebi feminist movement .
5. Brigitte Firk, "Entre le repli et l'assimilation: six jeunes maghrébines témoignent" Cahiers du féminisme, Paris, Spring 1986.
6. Identity, solidarity and modernization. Occasional Paper no 6, World Summit For Social Development, UNRISD.
7. Daoud, Z., Féminisme et politique au Maghreb, Soixante ans de lutte (Casablanca: Ed. Eddif, 1993).
8. Idem.
9. Ferchiou S., "Femmes tunisiennes entre 'féminisme d'Etat' et résistance", in Femmes de Méditerranée, politique, religion, travail, Andrée Dore-Audibert and Sophie Bessis eds., (Paris: Karthala , 1995).
10. Ibid.
11. Daoud, Z., op.cit.
12. Moulay Rchid, A., « La Moudawana en question », In Femmes, culture et société au Maghreb, Tome II, Femmes, Pouvoir politique et développement, R. Bourqia, M. Cherrad, N. Gallagher eds., (Afrique Orient, 2000).
13. Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc, Etude de l'état de l'égalité dans le système éducatif marocain. Rapport ronéotypé, Rabat September, 2001.
14. Moulay Rchid, A., op.cit.
15. The constitutions of the Maghreb countries state the principle of equality of all citizens before the law.
16. Nadia Hijab, Laws, Regulation and Practices Impeding Women's Economic Participation in the MENA Region, xeroxed report submitted to the World Bank, April, 2001.
17. Tunisia has just abolished the duty of obedience, replacing it with the duty of mutual respect.
18. Judicial incapacity of the father, stateless father, unknown father, etc.
19. Except if the man is related to the children in a prohibited degree.
20. With the exception of the grandparents, who inherit equal shares.
21. If the deceased person has an only daughter, her share is half the inheritance; if he has more than one daughter, their share will amount to two thirds.
22. Zakia Daoud, op.cit.
23. Ibid.
24. Juliette Minces, Le Coran et les femmes (Ed. Pluriel, 1996).
25. Naciri, R., Les femmes arabes et l'intersection entre patriarcat, racismes et intolérance, Communication to a UNIFEM Panel, World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, Sept 2001.
26. Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité, Auto-portrait d'un mouvement, Ed. Al-Maarif, Rabat, Jan 2003.