

# Containing the Moroccan Feminist Movement, Maintaining Patriarchal Order

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**Abstract.** Women and feminist movements are prominent in all social movements. In new-democratic patriarchal countries, women's movements do not only challenge the corrupt system but also the social structure of society. In Morocco, as a way to control these women's movements and to perform to the 'developed' world that the country is coping with the 'developed' women's rights, the government implants gender-based laws and rights that boost the image of the country but don't necessarily make an impact towards the situation of women. Although these laws have been the primary focus of Moroccan feminist groups, lawmakers purposefully ignore these groups and dismiss their agendas. These feminist movements and women's groups do not participate in the creation of these laws, nor do they get recognition for initiating them. It is therefore important to recognize the government's strategies of putting out the feminist flames and agendas before, or slightly after, the outbreak as a strategy of containment. This prevents the emergence of feminist manifestations and often shuts them down. This paper presents cases from the history of Morocco where this strategy was/is used to limit the influence of women's (feminist) movements. The case study for this phase of research takes place during the 1950s.

## 1 Introduction

Feminist and women's movements feature prominently in all social movements. In Morocco, the feminist movement is social at heart, with a clear agenda advocating for women's rights since the 1930s [1]. Researchers track the start of the women's movement before independence. [1, 2, 3, 4] The emerging movement encountered the first institutionalized family law in 1957, the year after independence from France and Spain had been gained. [2, 3, 4] This written law acted as the breaking point between women and men's inequalities. From that point onward, the feminist movement was recognized as a challenge to the patriarchal hierarchy of Moroccan society.

In his *Republic*, Plato made it clear that "the State is a reflection of the people". [5] Interestingly enough, thousands of years later and at a different location from that in which the Greek philosopher first issued his statement, the idea has been proven accurate because the Moroccan government imposes strict rules on women's movements in the same way Moroccan families limit their women and *bnat* (unmarried girls). Therefore, the issues of feminist movements in Morocco mirror the situation of *bnat* and women in Moroccan society. I have done research on women's issues in Morocco; however, this research delves more

specifically into the larger political scale of women's movements issues and what makes their progress slow and almost not recognizable.

## 2 Family laws in post-independence Morocco

What strategies does the Moroccan government, led by a king, use to obstruct the women's and feminist movements? This question invites us to dive deeper than the typical answer of: "because it is a patriarchal society". Patriarchy, according to the American black feminist bell hooks, is a "political and social system that insists that males are inherently dominant, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females". [6] Moroccan society, though constantly evolving, continues to hold the cultural belief that men are inherently superior. Feminist and women's movements challenge the corrupt values that constrain women and prevent them from having the same rights as men. Some of the demands put forward by most of the women's movements throughout history are the right to schooling, work, to get married without the permission of a guardian and legislation of laws against harassment. The traditional Moroccan society is hostile to these demands because they threaten the structure of the whole society.

The family is at the center of Moroccan society. [2, 7] This central element has a hegemonic patriarchal structure. This "social disease" [6] taking place in the body of the family becomes more threatening if the laws of the country endorse it. We can all agree that a society is unbalanced if the country validates laws that demean half of the society. In Morocco, the 1957 *Mudawanat Al Ahwal Al Chakhsiya* law came as a confirmation of the family structure that placed the power in the hands of the husband/father, and the dependency of women on them. [4] Touria Khannous explains that "the *Moudawana* aimed to preserve tradition". [8]

This patriarchal and traditional structure was confronted with two ideologies according to Naima Benoakrim. First, the liberal ideologies of Moroccan scholars returning from Europe and the Middle East; second, the lifestyle of the French and Spanish colonists. [1, 7] These varying perspectives helped to question the traditional way of thinking. Benoakrim distinguishes between the women's movement before and after independence. The phase before independence was what she describes as "the establishment phase". Meanwhile, the post-independence phase was "the stage of envisioning and developing tools". [1]

Before independence, the women's movement was part of the liberation movement from the French and Spanish Protectoral system since the 1930s and 1940s. [1, 3, 4, 9] Those groups advocated for more freedom for women as well as the liberation of the country. [1, 4] The movements took different forms, such as associations, sections of political parties, and social clubs like that of the Istiqlal Party (Independence Party). Moreover, a female royal family member came out of the women's closet and gave a speech to the public without a veil. [3, 8, 10] How beneficial was this speech to the women's movement?

Even though these groups were actively participating in the liberation movement to allow for women to break free of the traditions' grips, their efforts were ignored as the first law of the country was written by religious men that were selected by the king. [1, 4] This law, the *Mudawanat Al Ahwal Al Chakhsiya* of 1957, concerned men, women, and the family, yet women were excluded from its drafting. [1, 4] As a result, the decisions about the structure of the family remained in the hands of men, with further ramifications as it was now a recognized institutionalized written law. Although some of its demands were met, the women's and feminist movements failed to make a strong ground for women, and for themselves, in the first written law post-independence.

Not involving women in this law-making process indicated that the country was not ready to allow women to take up decision-making positions. The question that arises is what prevented this from happening? Why did this inequality still take place despite the fact that

a royal family member, the daughter of the king, was active in the women's liberation discourse? [3, 7, 11] Was it a genuine intention of the royal princess to be part of the women's movement or did she act as a token at the service of the fake performative discourse of adopting women liberation agendas?

Witnessing the 17-year-old princess unveiled and wearing a Western dress for her 1947 speech, encourages the assumption that the other Moroccan women can do the same. It was a radical influential act as she not only was unveiled and wearing a Western dress, but she was also reaching out of the private sphere, speaking up and addressing the public. Some media platforms judged her action as leading the emancipation of women: "[...] she hosted women emancipation movement in Morocco, (after) she immediately took the floor after her august father". [10] However, there is a gap between the reality of common *bnat* and women and the reality of royal family members.

Fatima Mernissi states that "Muslim society is characterized by a contradiction between what can be called 'an explicit theory' and 'an implicit theory' of female sexuality". [4] The explicit theory gives the power and importance to males' sexuality; the implicit theory is that females' sexuality is more powerful and therefore should be limited. [4] This theory can be used to describe many other aspects of Moroccan society that involve women, for example, that the explicit theory takes women's liberation as an important part of the national liberation movement, but the implicit theory explains that it is not and that it should be controlled if not stopped.

Was this the reason why the government contained the feminist movement? Why would the government dismiss (directly or indirectly) these women's groups and also the effort of members of the royal family towards the liberation of women, despite its parallels with how the country was liberated?

The speech from the royal princess served the purpose of providing visualization of women's issues for international eyes. Meanwhile, locally it created a two-dimensional reality for *bnat* and women. These dimensions did not cross each other, because a common woman will not have the privileges that the royal princess and female royal family members have. Yet, the princess was supposedly speaking for all women. She did not give the stage to members of the women's groups who were active on the ground level, which would have presented a more accessible reality for the majority of Moroccan women to associate themselves with, hence inspiring more liberation/change. The princess' speech linked the women's liberation movement to the figure of a royal family member, thereby creating an unrealistic expectation of liberation. Associating the liberation of women to a member of the royal family creates sanctity around the mission and does not give the opportunity to have different waves or visions.

According to Mernissi, "in 1956-57, at the dawn of independence, a commission of ten men selected from the leading religious authorities and the most prominent functionaries of the Ministry of Justice met and drafted a Personal Status Code which, after some discussion, was adopted and became law". [4] The passing of this law contradicted what was publicly called for in relation to the liberation of women. Only men were invited to the creation of this law. [2, 4, 7] Therefore, we are faced with the explicit belief that women should be liberated, across from the implicit belief that they are not. These two ideologies that come from the same source unveil the first operation of containing feminist demands.

Khannous confirms that "the discriminatory laws of the *Moudawana* (family law) prevented women from achieving their full potential in the socio-economic and political spheres, and are, in fact, to blame for many of the problems women still face in Moroccan society". [8] I validate this statement as it summarises the result of one of the containment strategies used against women's movements. However, Khannous is misled when she states that feminists of the first wave were "supported by progressive, pro-feminist national leaders, such as King Mohammed V who presented his daughter Lala Aicha, upon his return from

exile in 1954, unveiled to the Moroccan public as a gesture to urban women, allowing them to relinquish the veil and work outside their homes". [12] This is so because the first family law, *Mudawanat Al Ahwal Al Chakhsiya*, that "prevented women from achieving their full potential in the socio-economic and political spheres" [10] was actually written under the regime of allegedly "pro-feminist national leaders, such as King Mohammed V" in 1957. [12]

This marked the first absence of the feminist movements and women's groups in the creation of these laws and denied them also the recognition for initiating them. The recognition went to the king and the princess, for, according to the report of *Akhawat Safae* women's association, "[...] His Majesty announced the right of women to life and knowledge. He sent his dear princess, Aisha, the leader of the feminist renaissance, may God protect her, to inaugurate the first school in Fez, bearing his honorable name". [3]

In 1957, in Morocco, there was an effort to control women's movements while proving to the 'developed' world that the country was coping with the 'developed' women's rights. Specifically, to promote the government's supposed support of women's rights that boosted the image of the country, but without making an impact on the situation of women, the princess appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, on November 11: "The cover shows a portrait of princess Aicha with no veil and wearing a modern shirt, while at the back a veiled woman who is wearing a traditional dress. Both women are looking in different directions. Yet, both women are wearing dresses with similar design". [13]

The perspective I acquired from seeing this image in a previous study was summarized as follows: "Looking at the portrait closely can indeed help us understand that traditional days were to be left behind". [7] However, now I have a different view, I believe these two women were looking in different directions because they were looking at different futures that they did not have in common. Unfortunately for the common woman, she will not have the same 'modern freedoms' that the female members of the royal family (and members of the upper classes and elites) will enjoy. This comes as a confirmation that the liberation was linked to the wrong motivation.

Indeed, the princess led a revolutionary idea of unveiling and dressing up in Western clothes, while the common women wore the traditional dress. I do not link unveiling and wearing Western clothes to being modern, but Moroccan society does, associating modernity with outward symbols of the West. In the same analogy, I think that the cover of the magazine presented an accurate visual metaphor of the situation between what is implicit, and what is explicit about the future of women in Moroccan society.

### 3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the emancipation of women that was mostly attributed by media sources to the Sultan of the time and to a princess, had very little to do with the actual work and aims of the feminist and women's movements in Morocco. Such lack of recognition put out the feminists' early flames and prevented the emergence of strong feminist manifestations. The liberation became recognized for the female members of the palace first, then the rest of the women's movement had to work against the persisting tradition. Unlike the economy, which was liberated, and the nation, that was freed, Moroccan women remained constrained with limited space to develop.

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