

A Theoretical Framework for Research on Gender/Women Issues in the Maghrib and North Africa

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Introduction

The argument I make in this paper may be expressed in the following way: gender and women's issues in the Maghrib and North Africa are closely linked to sources of power and authority in the region¹. As such they cannot be based on theories that are divorced from specific socio-cultural contexts that create and maintain power and authority in the region. A most powerful source of power and authority is a specific type of patriarchy that is based on space segregation, with public space being culturally conceived as male, and private space as female². Recent history has shown that to get their public rights, women needed to be supported by democratic men who had access to public space: hence the tension is not women vs men but women and men vs patriarchal oppression. Arab-Muslim patriarchy created secondary sources of power and authority: a specific history, a specific way of dealing with religion, a specific use of languages, a specific family organization. All these are closely related and interactive.

On the basis of this we may say that on the one hand, an understanding of gender perception, gender role assignment, and gender subversion can be achieved only within a given socio-cultural context; and on the other hand, only a polyvalent and dynamic approach to the real workings and functioning of these sources can inform us. In other words we need

¹ Authority being power sanctioned in the public space.

² space may be physical, linguistic or symbolic. By contrast, mainstream Western patriarchy is based on the image that multinationals produce and where they often guess women's needs before the women themselves do. Women in the West got their rights when they became consumers and the feminist discourses are implicitly based on "women versus men". In North Africa, the dichotomy women vs men is more complex as it contains 3 layers instead of 2: religious/traditional power holders/scholars, democratic men, and women.

to understand how concepts like *monolingualism*, *multilingualism*, *Islam*, and *illiteracy* work in real social everyday life. Thus, the question that theories of gender in our part of the world should address is: What are the socio-cultural sources of power and authority in the region that constitute culture and regulate gender perception, gender role assignment, and gender subversion? Among the various sources of power and authority, seven stand out: history, Islam, multilingualism, orality, social organization, economic status, and political system.

History

The histories of North African countries show that these countries are not totally “homogenized”, “Arabized” and “Islamized”. For example, Morocco is a Berber, Arabo-Islamic, Mediterranean and African country. The period that extends from antiquity to the French and British colonizations of the region witnessed the invasions of the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Arabs. The coming of the Arabs resulted in the quasi-complete Islamization of North Africa by the end of 13th century. North African women’s present condition is the result of the various patriarchies that accompanied its historical evolution.

Although North African national histories are still in the process of creation and are basically a product of oral tradition, they are considered by the states and educational systems as part of *al-çilm* (written knowledge/science) and are strongly associated with the Arab-Muslim framework and perspective. As such, *al-çilm* fulfils two functions: (i) it acts as a site where gender and class relations are justified and reinforced by the power-holding elite, and (ii) it perpetuates the myth of the neutrality of *al-çilm* (science) and its ability to read and even transform social reality across cultures. Both of these functions are clearly linked to and derive from Islam. However, the view adopted in this paper is that both history and science are socio-political constructions granting that scientific knowledge is closely linked to the political and cultural development of countries and is, thus, the product of specific political economies (cf. Bourdieu 1980).

North African national histories have been officially recorded by men. The images of women in them are generally created from a male’s point of view. Accordingly, gender, class, and regional differences have been blurred, at least in official accounts. In these views, women’s roles are either ignored or made secondary to men’s, and as such, North African women’s subordination has been constructed and transmitted over the years. These views justify women’s subordination in the postcolonial societies (cf. Kandiyoti 1991, Badran 1995). Given the quasi-absence of female interpretations of events in the North African recorded history, a rigid gender dichotomy has been adopted across the years and is inherited by the relatively recent generations in the present time. This historical legacy has deepened the gap between the two sexes and its impact has been accentuated by the status of written history as a ‘venerated’ institution in the Arab-Muslim socio-cultural context. The close

association between North African national histories and written languages³ distances it even further from women, the overwhelming majority of whom remain illiterate, and, thus, largely ignorant of the region's written history. Illiterate North African women have had access to the constructions of Arab-Muslim histories they get through radios and TV, including, increasingly, satellite dishes.

Islam

Like history, Islam is a pillar of North African cultures. Islam was introduced in the region in the 7th century. According to recorded history, it was only in the 19th and 20th centuries and as a result of worldwide industrialization, international trade exchanges, and rapid urbanization that deep reforms in Islamic legislation were brought about and argued for by prominent reformers of Islam such as Jamal Eddine Al-Afghani, Mohammad Abdu, Rachid Ridha, Ali Abderrazak, Qasim Amin, and Tahar El Haddad. These intellectuals and thinkers were pretty close to the earlier reformists. They underlined the 'evolutionary' spirit of Islam and the necessity to reflect it in the Islamic law according to changing social and economic eras. The reformists' names that official recorded history has retained were all male. These reformists were genuinely interested in eradicating the difficulties that the clash between rigid interpretations of Islamic precepts and secular states engendered. It was through the rising voices of these pioneer reformers that 'exceptional clauses' and sometimes total changes in the Islamic legislative laws were introduced after centuries of stagnation.

When dealing with Islam and modernity, it is crucial to differentiate between Islam as "faith", Islam as "culture" and Islam as "politics". Islam as faith is perceived as a personal relationship between an individual and god, and Islam as culture is perceived as part and parcel of the North African's overall identity (whether they practice Islam or not). The strong cultural identity aspect of Islam is apparent in many strong icons of North African social life. For example, almost all aspects of North African social behavior are religious in origin and nature, such as greetings and leave-takings, as well as rituals that accompany the celebration of marriage, birth, circumcision, funerals, etc. The meaning and nature of Islam in North Africa, and indeed throughout the Muslim world, cannot be separated from questions of gender and gender roles.

Islam interacts with other aspects of North African cultures (cf. Eickelman 1976). It is perceived and practiced in a way that is peculiar to the North African socio-cultural context in the sense that Islamic principles are translated into the North African local culture and have become impregnated by it. This is attested in the 'classical style' of Moroccan Islam, as opposed to the 'national style' of Indonesian Islam (cf. Geertz 1971), for example. As Geertz

³ Among the languages used in the region, Standard Arabic, French, and English are written, but local Arabics and Berber are exclusively spoken.

notes, these differences are exhibited in the shape of the mosques, dress, and ritual practices and are due to the fact Morocco and Indonesia constitute the farthest geographical limits of the Islamic area. Thus, although Islam is basically the same throughout the Islamic world, it is lived and manifested differently in different cultures. As a religion in a patriarchal society, North African Islam is closely linked to Standard Arabic, rather than local Arabics or Berber.

Orality

Orality is an important component of North African cultures which deeply differentiates it from mainstream Western culture. In this region, speech carries greater significance in regulating everyday life than writing as communication is mainly channeled through unwritten languages. As North African cultures are deeply based on collective self, the views of others count and carry social meaning. For example, oral blessings, profanity, curses, insults, etc. are more consequential in North African cultures than in Western cultures. These oral ways of expressing the self are not mere words; they carry genuine positive or negative values and regulate behavior in no trivial way. The importance of speech in North African cultures is also attested in the fact that conversation is perceived as a means of bonding between people.

The unique place of orality in North Africa is largely due to the fact that the mother tongues used in this region (that is, the various colloquial Arabics and Berber) are mainly oral. The tight link between non-written mother tongues and orality positions the latter at the center of the North African speech communities' sensory experience. As such, orality becomes a powerful system of communication that deeply shapes the way visual and non-visual representations of cultural roles, among which gender roles, are constructed, maintained and perpetuated in North African cultures.

Orality is also closely related to illiteracy and to women as the vast majority of the latter are illiterate and do not have access to print and electronic texts. These women express their inner self, transmit various types of knowledge to their children, and communicate with the world outside home exclusively through the oral medium. The written medium is generally perceived by these women as alien; and even when the written languages (that is, Standard Arabic, French or English) are used orally in the audio-visual media, these women do not identify with these languages as they generally do not understand movie broadcasts on TV and television programs.

Orality has a dual status in North Africa: it is simultaneously both a "degenerate", "vulgar" and "lower class" medium of expression and a powerful symbol identity and authenticity. The negative attitude to orality resides in the fact that it is transmitted by non-prestigious mother tongues. As to the positive attitude to orality, it emanates from the fact that it characterizes North African cultures from Western literate cultures and emerges as an identity aspect in cross-cultural encounters. The power of *lkelma* (the oral word) is attested in

many deep aspects of the Moroccan culture, such as the marriage contracts, business contracts, and even legacies after death. These contracts were, up to relatively recent times, based exclusively on the oral medium. In present-day North African societies, *lkelma* ‘the oral word’, more precisely *lkelma d rrajel* ‘the oral word of a man’ still holds sway and has authority, especially in rural areas. The dual status of orality in the North African socio-cultural context is deeply related to the ambiguous status of women in the North African socio-cultural context.

Multilingualism

Like orality, multilingualism is a defining component of North African cultures. An understanding of gender role conception in the North African cultures necessitates a prior understanding of the overall linguistic situation in the region, as well as the way languages are used by men and women. The linguistic situation in North Africa is complex as it not only involves a variety of languages but also highlights the social meanings of oppositions such as mother tongue/learned languages, oral/written languages, prestigious/non-prestigious languages, etc. The complexity of this linguistic situation is the result of the region’s historical background and geographical position.

The main languages used in North Africa are: Standard Arabic, colloquial Arabic, Berbers, French, and English. Standard Arabic is a relatively ‘modern’ version of what is usually referred to as ‘Classical Arabic’, the language of the Holy Book of Muslims, the Quran, as well as a very ancient body of old and venerated poetry. Colloquial Arabics share many linguistic aspects with Standard Arabic. However, most linguistic work about the history of Arabic dialects does not derive them from even Classical Arabic; rather, it sees Classical Arabic and the dialects as having a common ancestor. Indeed, much of this work doubts that Classical Arabic was ever really spoken as a language of daily life (Walters, personal communication).

Unlike in the Middle Eastern cultures where multilingualism is often considered a threat to Arab unity and identity, multilingualism is perceived in the Maghrebi cultures as a positive identity-builder. It is highly respected and generally perceived as a way of increasing the individual’s potential for communication and a way of opening up horizons for him/her so far as jobs and social ascension are concerned. Indeed, the mastery and use of more than one language brings social power to language users in the Maghreb. In the private sector, knowledge of French and/or English is an absolutely necessary requirement. As to intellectuals, they perceive multilingualism as a means of knowing better oneself, one’s own language(s) and culture, and as a source of social capital and the basis of tolerance toward others.

Being a power-related factor in North Africa, multilingualism has social meaning and is important in gender perception and construction. Its importance stems from its correlation

with class and level of education: the more economically privileged and more educated a person is the more likely s/he is likely to be multilingual, and the poorer and uneducated one are, the less likely one are to be multilingual (cf. Boukous and Agnaou 2000 and Ennaji 2005).

Social Organization

Of all the components of North African cultures, it is social organization that has the strongest impact on gender perception and gender construction. These roles guarantee the structure and functioning of societies. Control over men's and women's behavior is ensured through a set of three substantive designata: (i) rituals, (ii) the codes of honor and morality, and (iii) the concept of 'collective self'. These three designata are 'created', 'fostered' and 'perpetuated' in the unit of the North African social organization: the family. The family in North Africa is in most cases agnatic and patriarchal, but it is becoming more complex currently.

North African family structure is generally headed by the father and the father's male lineage and is legally founded on blood relations⁴. The patriarchal system is built on the exclusion of women from spaces of public power and by the sanction of all forms of physical and moral violence against them in these spaces. Women's freedom is seen as a challenge to the patriarchal social fabric and men's status quo. It is in the family that women are initiated into their role of guardians of social organization. This initiation is channeled through a rigid system of kinship relations, a battery of traditions and rituals, and taboo.

Rituals may be defined as the sum of patterned actions and utterances that characterize meaningful cultural events. They are usually remnants of past practices or symbols of socially significant acts and words. Being relatively fixed and less resistant to change than everyday interaction, rituals often explain the historical and actual meanings of social practices. The most significant rituals in the North African socio-cultural context are the ones that accompany three important family events: marriage, birth, and circumcision of male children.

As for the codes of honor and morality, the first consists in preserving the public reputation of a family, and the second in preserving a socially accepted public conduct. Both codes rest on girls' and women's good conduct (good upbringing, chastity, hard work, obedience, and modesty). The codes of honor and morality have been institutionalized by recorded history and religion and are inculcated in the family through everyday verbal 'teaching' and behavior. This explains the close relation between family honor and the behavior of girls and women. A woman's sexual purity is related to the honor of her family,

⁴ "natural" affiliation (i.e. cases where women, usually very young, give birth to a child whose father is not known) and adoption are strictly prohibited by Islamic law. However, there are adoptions within extended families at least, where a barren couple will raise a niece (or more likely a nephew) as their own.

especially her male kin, whereas a man's sexual purity is related to his own honor, not to that of his family or his female kin (cf. Mernissi 1984, Ait Sabbah 1986). Women's association with private space is not only exhibited in their appearance (the way they dress) but also reproduced in the architectural organization of the traditional family compound: the high (often unpainted and undecorated) walls are meant to shield the private space, home and the inner rooms from the public gaze. This is congruent with the cultural association of women with property: both need to be protected from the public gaze. Even inside the household, a private domain, men are associated with the "public" and women with the "private". A woman may be the chief decision-maker in the household, but usually this power is hidden and seldom displayed in front of children, let alone strangers. The concepts "public" and "private" are deeply ingrained in the Moroccan socio-cultural collective imagination.

The impact of the family in gender perception is also attested in the social "protective" function that it attributes to males. In North African cultures, female decency is largely defined by male control inside and outside family. The "harsh but protective" presence of a father, a brother, a husband, a son, or a male close kin, is socially perceived as a "shield" for girls and women. This presence guarantees girls' and women's good upbringing in the eyes of society. Indeed, men and women pride themselves on the "harshness" and "notorious severity" of a male in the family. The availability of these male attributes boosts a girl's reputation before marriage and greatly enhances her chances of finding a husband. Furthermore, within the North African family, biological differences are perceived and represented in terms of biological reproduction, hence, the socially venerated status of *mother*. Accordingly, as parenthood and attached responsibilities structure relations between men and women, kinship is related to social reproduction.

Finally, the concept of *self* (or personhood) is constructed in the North African socio-cultural context in a way that is different from the way it is constructed in Western cultures. Whereas the Western concept of 'self' is based on the individual, the North African concept of *self* is based on the family.

Economic Status

The countries of North Africa are economically "developing" countries. Before and during the colonization by France, Spain, Italy, and Great Britain, economy in the region was typically rural and traditional as it relied mainly on agriculture. After the independence of North African countries, a process of modernization started in the region. This process materialized in the emergence of modern-type cities and sustained rural exodus to urban areas. This dramatic transition deeply upset traditional North African social organization and resulted in relatively "abrupt" gender-related transformations. Two aspects of these transformations are relevant from the perspective of this paper: a reorganization of gendered spaces with the advent of women's salaried work and the problem of illiteracy especially in rural areas. Both

aspects existed before modernization, but their social meanings changed with modernism. For example, with the emergence of salaried work, the notions of “public space” and “private space” changed, and with the emergence of a liberal urban female elite, illiteracy acquired new meanings. To these aspects, is added the fact that development has brought a widening of the difference between what women produce and what they earn, as well as a difference in the technologies between those used by men at work and those used by women at home.

The strict public space/private space dichotomy has been significantly disrupted ever since women started to take jobs outside home. This significant change in women’s lives was a result of poverty and education: poor women worked as domestics or in low-paid sectors of industry and educated women secured jobs that their education allowed them. As a consequence of women’s salaried work, the public space/private space dichotomy started to be reorganized (cf. Barkallil 1990). The first cause of this space reorganization is the transition from the tribal mode of production to a structure of dependence which was brought about by colonialism and later modernism. As a result, the large-scale family which included grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and other members of kin shrank to a nucleus of parents and children, especially in urban areas, as a result of women’s work outside home. The Moroccan Arabic expression for women working outside the home is *xarjat txdam* ‘she went out to work’. ‘Going out’ expresses ‘going’ from one space to another. The verb *xarjat* (she went out) further marks the ‘going out’ as a movement from the private/interior to the public/exterior. Although in the West, much is made of World War II and Rosie the Riveter, the representative of women who worked in factories since men, in the military, were unable to do so, many women - especially those of modest means – were already working in factories, and the overwhelming majority of teachers (in elementary and secondary education) were women as were all nurses, haidressers, steamstresses, etc. In North Africa, the first women who took paid jobs were either rural women who emigrated to urban areas or women who lived in the suburbs of big cities. Most of these women were poor (divorced women or widows) and were not proud of their jobs. Although upper and middle social classes encouraged the education of girls, they considered the work of women, and hence their money, as a dishonor to the family. For these, women’s education aimed at producing good housekeepers and child rearers, not money-earners. The public space was seen as a ‘dangerous’ space where women might meet with men who are not part of the family.

This reorganization of space has been greatly enhanced by continuous changes in the economic and educational levels of families. In urban areas, women have had more and more access to power-related public spaces; they gradually started to have special types of dress for public and private spaces. In rural areas, women do not have access to power-related public spaces and do not have special types of dress for public and private spaces. Furthermore, rural women are quasi-exclusively excluded from the administration, and do not usually go to the mosque, and are generally poorly educated in religion. The last point explains the fact that the spread of the Islamist movements is a typically urban phenomenon. It is only recently that

rural women have started to cover their heads. The notion of *hijab* 'veil' is differently perceived in rural areas: there it is a token of modesty, not political affiliation.

It is worthy of note that female job opportunities are more directly hit by economic crises than male opportunities. In times of crisis, women are excluded from stable and high-paying jobs and, instead, are encouraged to take up precarious and low-paying jobs in the informal sector. Starting from the mid-1990s onward, poverty has become more and more female. The loosening of family ties and accelerated urban expansion, has broken traditional solidarity. The loosening of family ties is reinforced by an increase in divorce and has resulted in an increase in the number of female heads of families. In cities, it is in the lower classes that one finds the largest number of female heads of households. Consequently, poverty typically affects the families supported by a woman's salary. Likewise, women benefit less than men from economic and social progress in periods of growth, and they are its first victims in periods of crises. They constitute the most vulnerable social group and the least protected one. This situation is due neither to fate nor chance, it is the result of a systematic depreciation of women's work and status in all fields. However, in the various aspects of North African societies, women are not treated on an equal footing with men in the job market. Women have to fight for many considerations that are taken for granted by men.

In spite of the great benefits that working women derive from their jobs, the reorganization of space in North African cultures did not bring about equality of sexes. Colonization and modernism in North Africa established the "work-money-modernity" order, and brought about new techniques of exploitation, such as the division of the North African society into traditional (rural) and modern (urban) sectors. The newly independent North African states reintroduced differences in the name of a re-establishment of equilibrium. Modernization brought back sexual segregation as women became, once more, the second-class sex. As cities created anonymity, North African urban women were confronted with a psycho-sociological conflict inside their societies: a clash between an essentially tribal superstructure and production system whose economic logic was alien to the traditional communal mode. Modernization benefited upper and middle class women to the detriment of rural women who, up to now, are still largely victims of illiteracy. The profit-oriented economy supported the patriarchal system and made the gap between individuals even wider given labor and class differences by creating two separate and incompatible worlds: the private or "inward" world which was essentially female and the public and "outward" world which was essentially male.

Political System

The North African political systems are yet another important component of North African cultures. These states are a mixture of republics and a monarchy. An attempt to understand gender dynamics within the North African political systems is by definition a larger approach

to gender than a social or an economical approach as the former approach englobes the latter one. In fact, researchers speak of the “politics of economy”, the “politics of education”, the “politics of health”, and so on. The centrality of politics at the larger or “macro” level of analysis is mainly due to the fact that the political systems are inherently overall systems where decisions come from “the top” and directly influence attitudes and subsequent practices in the family and community, and hence shape “remedies” to gender-related matters such as sex-inequality in important domains like the school, work, and law. As such, the political dimension of gender construction constitutes a crucial site of evolution and change although the global nature of the political approach makes its relation to gender perception opaque and not easily discernable.

Regardless of the nature of regimes, the domain of politics is a strong site of public power which is closely linked to men in North African societies. Men are the ones who make politics and discuss political issues inside and outside the family. This association of politics with men has its roots in the North African cultures where the notion of *jamaça* (group), which constitutes the basis of the Arab-Islamic tradition of ruling, is perceived as containing men only. By implication, citizenship is culturally assumed to be first and foremost male because in the North African cultural imagery, men are the ones who are supposed to rule over women and children. The cumulative effect of this state of affairs has created a “political culture” where the hierarchical superiority of men over women is deeply inscribed in the public sphere.

Women are quasi-absent from the political sphere of decision-making as the histories of North Africa show. After independence, the transition from the ideology of liberation to the ideology of state-building and the maintenance of an Arab-Islamic identity pushed the issue of women’s participation in politics to the background. Their status was not considered an important political issue. In the 1990s, the democratization process brought the issue of women to the limelight. Islamism, the Beijing Conference, civil society, and feminist research were factors that further enhanced public attention to women’s issues. But it is only very recently that women appeared on the public scenes of decision-making. It should be stated here that North African women’s emancipation in the public spheres owes a great deal to the “largesse” of men.

Even with the advent of modernity and women’s salaried jobs, the strong patriarchal hold still prevails and is reflected in the structure and ruling system of almost all the political parties in the region although political science has firmly established the concepts of *citizenship* and *participation* for all the members of a society. The North African electoral systems do not facilitate women’s mobility in politics; women’s eligibility depends on specific parties, and women’s issues are discussed within the political platform of each political party. In sum, women are mainly “used” by political parties as a “token” of democracy; their voices are bought, their illiteracy is used, and their poverty is manipulated. In rural and some urban areas, men vote on behalf of their women.

Morocco's political system is distinct from that of other North African countries. It is based on a constitutional monarchy and several political parties. The king holds the supreme executive power as well as the supreme religious power (he is *amir al-muminin* 'Commander of the Believers'). The Moroccan Constitution has a double reference: it is based on both the *aḷ-ḷariḷa* (Islamic law) and the international (human rights) conventions.

Monarchy is highly viewed in the Moroccan culture. It is associated with both religious sanction and modernity. Monarchy has had a very significant impact on the political status of women in Moroccan society. It was not political parties or civil society which foregrounded women on the political scene, but monarchs. The last three Moroccan kings openly encouraged the integration of women in the social and economic developments by adopting a view that reconciles "tradition" with "modernity". King Mohamed V was the first king in the history of Morocco to "unveil" his own daughter in public and make her ambassador to Great Britain. King Hassan II nominated the first four women Secretaries of State. King Mohamed VI is the first Moroccan monarch to nominate a female personal councillor. He further constantly refers to giving wider opportunities and more integration of women in decision-making and special attention to the eradication of female illiteracy in rural and urban areas.

Conclusion

The major purpose of this paper has been to highlight the components that influence gender perception in the North African socio-cultural context. It highlights the fact that there are historical, religious, social, economic and political conditions for the creation of divided interests between men and women in the North African context. These components are also meant to show how power is naturalized and geared towards reproduction of gendered ideologies and how agency is gendered in a male-biased context. In spite of the fact that these cultural components have a strong symbolic value for North African women and men, women both reproduce and subvert gender roles within a context where factors of economic status, class, level of education, etc. carry power and interact with gender. Only a dynamic and constructionist approach to the variables that produce change can help unravel these workings and show that gender coherence can be achieved only within a specific cultural system.

By implication, feminist concerns and strategies need to be grounded in the North African cultural specificities because gender conception is constructed within North African cultures, and it is only within these cultures that they can be deconstructed. The components of North African cultures attest to the fact that North Africa is plural by its ethnicities, histories, and languages, and one can theorize about the language and gender reality only within the context of North African cultures because it is the specificities of the latter that explain the making and remaking of gender in this part of the world.

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