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“To develop our listening capacity to be sure that we hear everything”:

### **Sorting Out Voices on Women's Rights in Morocco**

By Sumi Colligan

In *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*, Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and feminist, discusses her interview with a woman from the Middle Atlas mountains who migrates to Rabat to secure a job at a carpet factory. The difficulties that she faces as she struggles to accommodate to her role as a laborer in an urban shantytown cause her to reflect nostalgically on rural childhood. Mernissi cautions (1988: 176):

It is necessary to avoid generalizing, to avoid projecting on poor women our own preoccupations and problems, and, above all, to do our work as intellectuals. By this I mean: to develop our listening capacity, to be sure that we hear everything, even those things that don't fit into our theories and pretty constructs. And, above all, to avoid positing a 'return to the past' as an alternative for women. For even Tahra, who seems to flounder and lose her country vigor in the face of the disorder of a city where she has no place, looks to education as the solution for future generations. She only idealizes her childhood, her past, in order to find strength for confronting her future, not for returning to it.

In this chapter, I intend to expand on the theme of developing “our listening capacity, to be sure that we hear everything” in an attempt to avoid perpetuating the stereotype of the passive, victimized Third World woman whose only hope of liberation is through the consciousness raising and activist efforts of Western feminists. Much of the current writing on human rights and women's rights in North Africa and the Middle East suggests that world-wide endorsement of such principles and platforms is most likely to be successful if the people to whom they apply feel a sense of ownership in their creation. The experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism in this region has been a powerful shaper of a social memory that serves as a critical, interpretive lens for assessing the value and applicability of recent international human rights and feminist agendas. While it is true that Africans themselves (as well as members of other Third World constituencies) have engaged in theorizing and executing policies concerning women's human rights, their voices have not been given equal weight in international forums that address these issues (Gathii and Nyamu 1996: 295; Oloka-Onyango and Tamale 1995: 701). The consequence of such an imbalance has been a perpetuation of international hierarchies of power that contribute to the on-going polarization of the West and the Third World and a limiting of the definition and scope of struggles perceived to fall within the purview of women's human rights (Gathii and Nyamu 1996: 294).

Oloka-Onyango and Tamale (1995: 713) suggest that theoretically one remedy to this imbalance lies in an “intra-cultural and cross-cultural dialogue” that recognizes the “personal is political, but the political is extremely rich and diverse.” Moreover, social movement theory in the West is moving away from postulating generic models for social

movements that presuppose the necessity of formal organizations and networks and social actors that share the same grievances and interests. To a degree, then, this theory offers the potential to capture “the richness and diversity” with which social movements manifest themselves in multiple locations and dovetails with views espoused by Third World feminists. Indeed it states:

...the new social movement actor both actively constructs and is constrained by a world of social meanings rooted in specific historic contexts and based in the experiences and identities of race, gender, class and nationality (McClurg Miller 1992: 21-22).

This statement suggests that a person’s subjectivity may be shaped by a variety of influences and identities and coincides with the perspective that we should not make sense of women’s experiences exclusively through the lens of gender oppression. For example, in the story of Tahra recounted by Mernissi, Tahra is marginalized by virtue of being a poor, female, rural migrant, but centered by having any job at all in a country where unemployment for both men and women is quite high.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this approach supports a concern expressed by Third World feminists that the knowledge acquired by Western feminists concerning how to battle gender inequities not be automatically granted greater authority than knowledge produced in other social settings. In fact, one of the most salient lessons we can draw from Mernissi’s example is the importance of paying close attention to women’s words regardless of their social positioning.

Nonetheless, the new social movement theory stops short in several important ways. First, utilizing the term, “social movement actor,” implies that such an actor can clearly be differentiated from other kinds of social actors. Yet Heng (1997: 30) suggests that “feminist” action in the Third World (and no doubt in the First World as well) assumes many different guises and that those who engage in it do not always adopt feminist labels and discourse. As already stated, a narrow definition of social movement can lead to ineffective coalitions and partial solutions. Second, too much emphasis on social location and positioning risks the danger of essentializing consciousness, denying its potential for expansiveness and fluidity (Lam 1994: 891). This outcome may be produced by downplaying the process by which critical self and social examination as well as exposure to the ideas of others can have a transformative influence on consciousness. Finally, social, economic, and political inequalities are produced, in part, by global processes that transcend national boundaries and as Alexander and Mohanty (1997: xxix) argue, “global processes clearly require global alliances.” While the new social movement theory does not ignore the fact that some social movements appear in more than one nation, its conceptual framework focuses largely on the process by which

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<sup>1</sup> The terms, “margin” and “center” are borrowed from bell hook’s book, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. In her book, she (1984: 26-27) speaks of bringing in the voices of women at the margins, women who have been excluded from shaping feminist theory by virtue of their race, class, sexual orientation, and other possible characteristics. hooks (1984: 18) also points out that women at the margins may share features of oppression with men at the margins who may also be disadvantaged by factors such as race and social class.

meaningful social action emerges within the parameters of face-to-face encounters (McClurg Miller 1992: 7). As such, it fails to elaborate upon the manner in which global coalitions are or could be established, negotiated, and/or sustained. As the maxim, “the local is global” illustrates (Oloka-Onyango and Tamale 1995: 701), Third World feminist analyses broaden our understanding of social movements by showing the way in which historical and social particularities overlap with global processes, and in aiding us to better conceptualize each, bring us closer to a theory that is more accurately informed by and informs practice.

The intersection of local, national, and global inequalities in North Africa has generated conditions of flux and indeterminacy as my focus on Morocco will reveal. As a result, women often find themselves caught between pre-capitalist and Western, modernizing, transnational capitalist forces and expectations (Abu-Odeh 1992: 1528; Macleod 1991: xiv) and the surveillance and repression of authoritarian regimes (Hammoudi 1997: 152). Under these conditions, women frequently adopt a diversity of approaches for addressing the contradictions, opportunities, and constraints they face as they draw upon differential access to autonomy, privilege, protection, and resources (Abu-Odeh 1992: 1533; Lam 1994: 872). Thus the relationship of these women to hegemonic power is complex and the line that separates contestation from complicity not so transparent (Macleod 1991: 19). The ideas of French philosopher, Michel de Certeau (1984: xix) are apropos to illuminating such struggles:

A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. ...a tactic depends on time--it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized “on the wing.”

Hence changing circumstances create a space and possibilities for applying “tactics” that resist and manipulate prescribed social relations and allow women to assert some modicum of control over their lives (Macleod 1991: 19). De Certeau (1984: 33-39) believes that a sustained use of tactics can, in fact, produce meaningful change, and may not simply reinforce the status quo. Since gender, class, and global inequalities all have an impact on Third World women, however differentially, it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the exact source of one’s oppression (Macleod 1991: 145). Hence, tactics rather than well-orchestrated strategies may be for some a necessary means of responding to these increasingly “invidious forms of power” (Macleod 1991: 133).

In light of these caveats and considerations, my first task here is to draw upon Moroccan ethnography and autobiography as a means of assessing shifts in local practices, understandings, and aspirations of Moroccan women pertaining to status and to male/female dynamics and the reasons behind those shifts. I then plan to demonstrate links between insights gained from ethnography and autobiography and goals and projects of the Moroccan feminist organizations and other Moroccan based human rights groups. Overall, the purpose of this case study is not to provide a descriptive profile of women’s public participation in Moroccan society, but to highlight certain themes and issues that emerge from the examples under discussion. My conclusion will reference this discussion as a vehicle for posing a cautionary note concerning the process by which

universal human rights are formulated and implemented, proposing that such a process remain sensitive to the specificity of contexts in which women carve out their identities, goals, and actions. Of course, as Oloka-Onyango and Tamale point out, universality and specificity are not intrinsically oppositional forces because a sense of connectedness and a world-wide coalition cannot be genuinely achieved until “women’s diverse priorities and interests have been recognized and the various barriers to this goal have been identified by the international community of women” (1995: 698). Hence, my main objective is to illustrate through an examination of a particular case study the value of acknowledging “both distance and connection” derived from “a special knowledge in the Other,” a knowledge that emerges from an engaged commitment to hearing (Lam 1994: 883).

### **Colonial Encounters**

I first explore the impact of French colonialism on an emergent women’s rights consciousness. The period of the French Protectorate (1912-1956) was characterized by two basic stages. The first stage was based on “‘applied’ ethnology and orientalism” (Hammoudi 1997: 101) and involved indirect rule. The second stage, which followed the devastation of World War I, was expanded to include major expropriation of lands, massive public works projects, and the creation of big business (Hammoudi 1997: 102-104). The French consolidated their power by making deals with rural notables (Mamdani 1996: 83-84), transforming the sultan into a figurehead who was practically under house arrest, and surveying populations, fixing them timelessly on maps (Hammoudi 1997: 16,108). Moreover, under the guise of ethnoscience, they studied Moroccan practices concerning status and hierarchy in order to establish and maintain authority and control, imbuing “difference with an irreducible quality” (Hammoudi 1997: 107).

In this vein, the French deliberately avoided efforts to improve the lives of women because they believed that tampering with “intimate” affairs would undermine their colonizing mission (Maher 1978: 105). Nevertheless, Vinogradov (1974: 198) argues that since French attitudes toward the Moroccans were generally negative,<sup>2</sup> the demeaning and humiliating manner with which Moroccan men were treated tended to destabilize marriages and contributed to the further economic marginalization of women, including an increase in prostitution. Additionally, French run agribusiness turned both men and women into exploited laborers (Hammoudi 1997: 124).

The Moroccans developed pragmatic and symbolic strategies to rid their social body of the ills brought about by this external domination and cooptation. In 1930 the Sultan refused to sign a law dividing Arab and Berber territories and from that point on, became the symbol of nationhood. Ironically, prior to the Protectorate, the influence of the Sultanate expanded and contracted, but under colonial rule, the nationalists rallied behind him and helped consolidate his power (Hammoudi 1997: 15-16).

The Moroccan independence movement provided women with opportunities to transgress their traditional roles and to challenge commonly held assumptions about gender. Not surprisingly, these opportunities manifested themselves differentially along class lines. In an article entitled, “History and Myth: Women’s Stories of the Moroccan

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<sup>2</sup> Vinogradov (1974: 193) reports that the French sometimes called the Moroccans “dirty monkeys.”

Resistance”, Alison Baker (1995: 31) discusses interviews she had with poor women from Casablanca and Rabat who became involved in the Resistance by smuggling arms, keeping watch for French soldiers, and cooking and cleaning for male Resistance fighters after the exile of Mohammed V in 1953. One of the recurrent themes in these women’s testimonies is the way in which their activities revolutionized their own self-image as well as the way men viewed them. One woman recalled that as a child, she had seen a photograph of a Palestinian woman with a gun in a local newspaper. At the time, the image so contradicted her expectations of femininity that she concluded that the person must belong to a liminal category, neither man nor woman. When she assumed her new role, she reveled in her ability and the ability of other women who were co-participants to be “seen” as authentic selves, active, trustworthy, and courageous and their ability to overturn the presumption of suspiciousness and inferiority (Baker 1995: 37-38). Unfortunately, as was common in many African independence struggles, after independence was won and their contributions were no longer needed, they were not encouraged to further realize their potential and returned to a state of invisibility. This state has been further reinforced by the Moroccan government’s withholding of official Resistance designation to many of these women due to their lack of “public” participation and hence, absence of male corroboration of their roles (Baker 1995: 41-42). The shifts in opportunities for women are further documented in Fatima Mernissi’s delightful autobiography, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. Mernissi (1994) writes about growing up in an elite, landholding family in Fez in the 1940s and focuses on the manner in which nationalist aspirations transformed her childhood and generated both harmony and tension between “tradition” and “modernity” as these processes unfolded in family debates and practices. She (1994: 86) emphasizes that the decision of her extended family “council” to enroll her in a secular school was born, in part, out of a recognition that information and a talent for straddling two cultures would enable her generation to infiltrate the minds of their enemy, thereby helping to reestablish the *hudud* or sacred frontier between Christians and Muslims. According to the nationalists, everyone was required for this battle so that at least a partial dissolution of the domestic frontier was necessary to restore order and bring about a lasting independence. Her mother and maternal grandmother offered particular encouragement. In her mother’s words, “Hiding does not solve a woman’s problems. It just identifies her as an easy victim” (Mernissi 1994: 100).

### **Post-Colonial Realities: The Public Sphere**

Mernissi (1994: 37) recalls conversations with her maternal grandmother and the hopes that they inspired in her: “‘Morocco has changed quickly, little girl,’ she often told me, ‘and it will keep on doing so.’ That prediction made me feel very happy. I was going to grow up in a wonderful kingdom where women had rights, including the freedom to snuggle up to their own husbands every night.” However, the current literature suggests the gains Moroccan women have made are uneven as a group and have been granted categorically according to class and rural or urban origins. Moreover, there is disagreement concerning the degree to which women have trespassed and/or dissolved the domestic/public divide and debate concerning their inclusion in or exclusion from the *umma* or universal community of Muslim believers. So the question of women “hiding,” what constitutes hiding, and the consequences of “hiding” have not yet been resolved.

Ilumoka (1994: 310) argues that Western human rights discourse, with its emphasis on formal rights, has tended to obscure the distinct ideological and structural conditions that differentiate nations and create inequalities in access to the ideals embodied in these rights. She states that an identification of those conditions is a prerequisite to achieving the equality necessary for such rights to be realized. With this perspective in mind, I will explore current conditions in Morocco that are relevant to women's human rights.

The modest pace of social reform in Morocco can be attributed to a variety of factors. According to Abdellah Hammoudi, a Moroccan anthropologist, the independence movement was only partially successful in democratizing the Moroccan political process because Moroccan authoritarianism has reasserted itself in new forms. For example, military officers are often selected from members of notable families that once collaborated with colonialists (Hammoudi 1997: 24) and military troops have been stationed at old colonial outposts located in the country's interior, a move that suggests that internal policing rather than territorial defense is the goal (Hammoudi 1997: 27).

Hammoudi argues that an examination of political economy in and of itself is not sufficient to explain the persistence of authoritarianism. He believes the fact that the actions of the monarch are not bound by the constitution can be made sense of, in part, through a consideration of "cultural schemata" (1997: 12). These schemata are based on master/disciple relationships enacted in Sufi brotherhoods that first developed in the 12th century. These relationships were based on domination and submission. The disciples were "feminized" and awaited their opportunity to become masters themselves and create their own following. Similar themes are dramatized today in masquerades held at celebrations that mark the end of the lunar year (Hammoudi 1997: 147). Hammoudi postulates that Moroccans tolerate such rule because these themes have a strong, underlying, evocative appeal.

Additionally, Hammoudi maintains that these schemata have serious implications for women because they essentially render women irrelevant. He (1997: 149) explains, "The unquestionable and highest authority (that of a saint) is embodied in a chain of men whose procreation does not involve women." Hammoudi fears that because these patterns emerge from a religious foundation, women's efforts to establish their own authority within Moroccan society are likely to be stonewalled (1997: 147).

Nonetheless, the Moroccan monarch, King Hassan II, has made some inroads in improving the educational opportunities and literacy rates of women,<sup>3</sup> thereby bolstering their income and economic status (Griffiths 1996: 66).<sup>4</sup> These changes have been brought about through compulsory education legislation in the early 1960s and the government's identification of expansion of female education as a social priority in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Resources have been unevenly concentrated though, so that women in urban areas fare

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<sup>3</sup> According to a UNESCO report from 1994, the overall literacy rate in Morocco is 50%, with 38% for women and 61% for men (Moghadam 1997: 27).

<sup>4</sup> According to UNDP labor statistics, Moroccan women now constitute about 26% of the total labor force, but this estimate is considered low since women's economic activities often go unrecorded (Moghadam 1997: 28).

<sup>5</sup> Griffiths (1996: 66) reports that school enrolment dropped during the mid-eighties, but has started to rise again.

considerably better than those in the countryside. In fact, one study suggests that the literacy rate for females in the cities is almost five times as high as it is in rural areas (Griffiths 1996: 67). The reasons that underlie these discrepancies are largely economic.<sup>6</sup> About half the agricultural work is done by females (although generally unremunerated) and girls are sometimes pressured to drop out of school to help their families or are sent to cities as domestic servants in exchange for small amounts of monetary compensation for their parents. As a result of these inequities, both males and females have flooded to urban environments, making the distribution of population in rural and urban areas even for the first time in Moroccan history (Griffiths 1996: 65). These shifts have created a burgeoning middle class and female urban residents now constitute about one third of all state employees (Griffiths 1996: 67).

Despite these improvements, Morocco's current economic climate, characterized by economic recession due, in part, to price fluctuations in the international market for phosphates, Morocco's primary export, along with the threat of Islamic fundamentalism from neighboring Algeria, may signal a period of increased social control and decreased public debate (Griffiths 1996: 68). A 16% unemployment rate in the cities (an apparently low estimate)<sup>7</sup> has given rise to social unrest that the government has attempted to quell (Griffiths 1996: 67). Moreover, Morocco's request for entry into the European Union has been denied, producing agreements only to turn Morocco into a "free trade zone" (<http://europa.eu.int/search/97cgi>). This rejection has taken place in spite of the fact that about half a million Moroccans work in France (Griffiths 1996: 64), many filling positions that the French themselves eschew. Such agreements stand to benefit European and Moroccan elites, but will probably contribute to the further impoverishment of the majority.

Interestingly, while these modern day shifts and competing forces have produced uneven benefits for men and women, and women in different social classes and regions, they have nonetheless disrupted patterns of authoritarianism, patriarchy, gender, and family (Gilsenan Oct. 2, 1997: 18). These changes, however unintended, tend to create openings for women in varying ways depending on social location, allowing women to assert themselves in an untraditional fashion. In this context, women may counter oppressive forces and encounter new ones. Women have generated diverse responses to this confusing and unstable terrain.

For example, urban-based middle and upper class women have found that these shifts, along with an increase in international attention toward women's issues, have created greater opportunities to bring women's issues to public arenas in the past decade (Simons March 8, 1998: A6). Elizabeth Fernea reveals that women's rights organizations (1998: 106) and women's studies programs (1998: 72) have emerged and are making an effort to document women's problems, establish women's literacy projects, and help create an infrastructure for women's social services. These groups are also attempting to

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<sup>6</sup> Other reasons cited for lower school attendance rates in rural areas include lack of educational infrastructure (about 13%) and resistance from parents to sending their girls to school (about 23%) (Griffiths 1996: 67).

<sup>7</sup> Fernea (1998: 115) suggests that the unemployment rate in Morocco might be as high as 30%.



influence the political process and have had a modicum of success in that the first two women to be elected to Parliament entered office in 1993 (Fernea 1998: 120).

Likewise, while poor women are finding themselves with less economic security, they, too, have been making a greater appearance in the public sphere. Along with a high divorce rate, recent migratory patterns have produced many women heads of household (Fernea 1998: 116)<sup>8</sup> and some of these women are engaging in novel economic enterprises. For example, Deborah Kapchan's ethnographic research (1996) in Beni Mellal, a provincial capital in the Middle Atlas Mountains, reveals shifting patterns in women's activities. Among these are a transition from the selling of food staples to a selling of contraband from Spain (1996: 56), thus involving women in capitalist exchange, and an increase in the number of female orators in the performance section of the marketplace. Kapchan notes that these shifts not only mark an expanded economic sphere, but an expanded use of male discourse as well. By this she means that women will recite the works of Islamic scholars or posit, "Aren't we all Muslims?," as bargaining strategies to establish their legitimacy and trustworthiness with their customers (1996: 141). In the first case, women are appropriating traditionally male domains of knowledge and in the second case, they are asserting inclusion in the *umma*, a construct of a universal community of Muslim faithful that has been defined largely in male terms.

The implications of Kapchan's findings for a consideration of women's rights issues are significant. She suggests that in Morocco the marketplace is seen as polluting, but that its placement at the margins of the social body also makes it a site of transformation where new forms of behavior and discourse are tested (1996: 36). What this indicates is that an openness to social change cannot be measured simply by the monitoring of human rights organizations and movements among the upper classes. Additionally, close attention should be paid to the words and actions of women at the margins for they can provide clues for strategies for grassroots initiatives that improve the quality of life for women. While structural inequalities produced by national and international processes may contribute to cultural, economic, and social paralysis, we must not disregard the role of human agents in generating cracks through which new possibilities emerge. In fact, the Moroccans themselves hold a polysemic concept called *fitna* that captures the perpetually indeterminate, contingent, and shifting nature of social relations and social rules.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the potential for *fitna* is magnified under current circumstances. With this process in mind, Gilson (Oct. 2, 1997: 18) suggests that state authoritarianism may not be so absolute because:

If we also consider the role of the myriad informal practices of everyday life, the resistances, the evasions, and the ways of getting by, it may be that the legitimation of the monarch's power is only a sporadically relevant issue. We cannot assume that silence means consent. Indeed, the powerless are commonly expected to pay lip service to their oppressors (Kapchan 1996: 230).

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<sup>8</sup> Fernea (1998: 116) reports that in the Northern coastal area 60% of the men may migrate to Europe.

<sup>9</sup> Pandolfo (1997: 56) suggests that *fitna* can refer to "a flirtation with the unknown, with the insecurity of novel paths, that taste for dissent, dispute, and hazardous games." She also argues that Moroccans hold an ambivalent attitude toward this process, seeing it neither as totally good nor bad (1997: 332).

Unfortunately, class interests in Morocco as in many other places, tend to divide women and make it more difficult for them to identify commonalities. Again, middle class women have been successful in entering professional and public sector jobs while poor girls and women of rural origins have flocked to the cities to work as their maids (Griffiths 1996: 68; Kapchan 1996: 216). While this trend has brought women of different classes into close proximity to one another, these maids have also been cast as instigators of social disruption and chaos (another manifestation of *fitna*) by their female employers because their employers fear that the maids will publicize the private sphere and raise questions about their honor (Kapchan 1996: 230). Kapchan (1996: 232) argues that a maid may also “become an object of desire or envy because she is made to represent the transgression of prescriptive laws of feminine behavior.” Nonetheless, cracks again emerge as when maids demand that their employer’s children teach them how to read and write (Kapchan 1996: 217).

Moreover, recent endeavors orchestrated by the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM) to raise public awareness about sexual harassment at work are indicative of the kind of coalition building that can take place between white collar and blue collar women. Since sexual harassment on the job is not a class based phenomenon, it is an issue that can potentially bridge a gap between women of diverse backgrounds and experiences and serve as a springboard for further identification of shared concerns. In this particular instance, the ADFM joined 450 female employees of Moroccan Manufacturing, a textile industry in Rabat, who went on strike to protest a physical attack on one of their female employees by a foreman (El Banna 1996: 21).

Women’s opportunities to transgress and subvert public boundaries are not limited solely to educational and employment spheres. According to Buitelaar (1993: 177), the month of Ramadan is a time-out from public isolation and routinely imposed restrictions on female behavior. Women may fast together as well as join each other in pilgrimages, almsgiving, and merrymaking. Furthermore, while men may devalue women’s contributions to Islam, the fact that women view their own actions as significant suggests that women’s inclusion in the *umma* (universal community of Muslim believers) is not necessarily contingent on men’s willingness to acknowledge that they belong. One may belong to a muted group and yet reject externally imposed definitions of self that deny the validity of one’s human agency and unique consciousness. In fact, Rosen (1978: 561) contends that in Morocco women and men are often divided in their understanding and interpretations of relationships and events. As a result, women’s statements frequently contain a subtext implying that men should not be too confident because the world is not always what it appears to be.

Therefore, these divisions may actually be productive in that they may provide unmonitored arenas for women to identify roles and meanings within Islam that may lead to greater equity and inclusion. As in the case of Buitelaar’s discussion of women’s activities during Ramadan, Mernissi (1977: 103) reports that “unorthodox” manifestations of Islam such as the tombs of *marabouts*<sup>10</sup> (saints) offer a sanctuary for women who seek solace and advice from each other. Unlike much of public space, these

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<sup>10</sup> **Marabouts** are individuals, sometimes of Prophetic descent, who are associated with **baraka** or God’s grace. They can be living or dead. Those who visit them or their tombs leave offerings and seek some of the **baraka** to rub off on them in exchange (Eickelman 1981: 228).

pilgrimage sites are places that men pass through, and women occupy (Mernissi 1977: 104). Mernissi (1977: 104) argues further:

They embody the refusal to accept arrogant expertise, to submit blindly to authority, to be treated as subordinate. This insistence on going to saints' tombs exemplifies the North African woman's traditional claim that she is active, can decide her needs for herself and do something about them, a claim that the Muslim patriarchal system denies her.

Currently, Muslim women in North Africa and in the Middle East are also exploring the possibilities of creating greater equity for women within "formal" Islam as well. For example, Fatima Mernissi is working on a project on "Humanist Islam" with some colleagues that involves an investigation of Islamic writing that throws a positive light on women's rights (King-Irani 1996: 16). Mernissi (1995: 33) argues that there is a mistaken assumption in the West that the goals of Islam and the goals of democracy are necessarily contradictory. She points out that people often fail to distinguish between the Muslim state as a form of government and Islam as a culture or religion. She reminds readers of the emphasis on individual responsibility within Sunni Islam and asserts the possibility of locating an ethics within "tradition" that may be beneficial to women. However, she (1995: 44) also recognizes that "minorities, women, and slaves are the groups that have historically constituted a challenge and a limitation to Islam's claim to universality and equality." The degree to which Islam can genuinely accommodate these groups clearly remains to be seen.

Nonetheless, Mernissi's comments serve as an important reminder that culture is neither monolithic nor static and that "traditional" culture need not always be viewed as antithetical to women's human rights.<sup>11</sup> Third World women seeking to bolster their status, security, and well-being need not always look to the West for alternative constructions of rights. Indeed, Mernissi (1995: 43) legitimately asserts that the contemporary "conservatism" of Islam (when, in fact, it acts conservatively), is often bolstered by American foreign policy. She (1995: 43) quips, "One cannot imagine a USA without its precious Arab oil, or the Emir of Kuwait without his Pentagon friends." If we in the West want to see Islamic countries establish an atmosphere of greater openness, then we also need to accept our responsibility in having contributed to some of the excesses of the Islamic state and our responsibility in helping to rectify the damage.

As it stands, some Moroccan women may believe that the solutions rest neither in the West nor strictly in their own traditions. These conflicting and competing forces and the dilemmas they pose are mirrored in certain examples of contemporary Moroccan cinema. In one such film, "A Door to the Sky," produced in 1988 by filmmaker, Farida Benlyazid, a young woman returns from France to Morocco, dressed in punk clothes, and feeling alienated and out of place. In time, she realizes that Western society, too, has its oppressive characteristics and drawing upon the Islamic practice of charity, transforms parts of her home into a battered women's shelter (Shohat 1997: 205-206). Shohat (1997: 206) comments:

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<sup>11</sup> Afkhami and Friedl (1997: xiii) caution that it is important to avoid essentializing the qualities of Islam, Muslims, and Muslim women since stereotypes may "conceal a rich variety of different beliefs, practices, life-styles, and philosophies in Muslim societies."

“A Door to the Sky” envisions an aesthetic that affirms Islamic culture, while inscribing it with a feminist consciousness, offering an alternative both to the Western imaginary and to an Islamic fundamentalist representation of Muslim women.

Such images have considerable value because they may encourage critical reflection and offer alternatives to well-to-do urban movie goers, but what of those who don't necessarily have the luxury of openly posing challenges to systems of oppression that permeate their everyday lives?

Even when there appears to emerge a backlash in women's freedoms, it is prudent to proceed cautiously in one's judgment concerning what signifies retreat. For example, Leila Hessini (1994: 40) notes that when she was enrolled in a Moroccan university, the most outspoken women were the ones who wore the *hijab* (a form of Islamic dress that leaves the face uncovered). She takes issue with the idea that women's exclusion from the public sphere is so clear-cut and posits that the *hijab* allows one to remain interior within an exterior world (Hessini 1994: 43). In confirmation of this analysis, Elizabeth Fernea, an American writer and women's studies professor who has documented the lives of women in different regions of North Africa, quotes a Moroccan university student as saying, “I can wear a scarf or not-But the real question is what do I do with my education, how do I use it for myself and society” (1998: 99). Studies show that the women who are donning this type of clothing are primarily of lower middle class background (Abu-Odeh 1992: 1528; Macleod 1991: 97). As such, they are not guaranteed the rewards and advantages of solidly middle and upper class women. They must battle to maintain their position in the class structure and their newly gained presence in public space. The majority of the women who elect to wear the *hijab* consider it a choice, albeit one that is shaped, in part, by the increase in violence and harassment that is being perpetrated on women who have become more self-sufficient (Abu-Odeh 1992: 1530<sup>12</sup>; Macleod 1991: 113). The veil, as a multivalent symbol, gives the appearance of complicity to normative Islamic prescriptions of feminine behavior, but for many may serve as a “cover” for more forward looking agendas.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the donning of the *hijab* does not automatically mean that women have relinquished their rights and will again be easy victims as Mernissi's mother's warning suggests. Rather Hesseini (1994: 53) contends that this form of clothing makes it easier for women to be seen for their personalities and minds instead of as sex objects. In fact, Muslim women have not necessarily found greater freedom in the wearing of Western

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<sup>12</sup> Lama Abu-Odeh (1992: 1530) is an Arab feminist who says that she rejects the veil for herself, but understands why women wear it. She points out that many working and middle class women in the Middle East don't have cars to transport themselves back and forth from work and school and don't enjoy the protection available to upper class women.

<sup>13</sup> Macleod (1991: 100-101) argues that the veil is a powerful symbol in the Middle East because it is subject to the wearer's control and at the same time signifies constraint. She also points out that social performance rather than internalized beliefs mark conformity to morality in much of the Middle East. For these reasons, the veil may provide an avenue for resistance that remains outside of the awareness of the “oppressors.” By the same token, however, its association with “tradition” may also mute the effect of the protest because it can be coopted by more powerful groups who want to maintain women's subordination.

style clothing because Western-based mass media and advertising continue to exploit women as sexual objects. Muslim women view these images brought to them by globalizing processes and some conclude that the solution to their problems does not lie in capitalist appropriation (Abu-Odeh 1992: 1528; Macleod 1991: 136). Thus while Moroccan women's progress in the public sphere has been ambiguous and uneven, women's secondary status has not remained uncontested and women have resisted designation as simple victims. Indeed African-American feminist writer, bell hooks (1984: 45), argues that being a victim is a luxury of the privileged. She explains:

Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as "victims" because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. (1984: 45)

### **Post-Colonial Realities: Women and the Law**

Coomaraswamy (1994: 48) contends that the area of human rights that is likely to meet with the most amount of resistance is personal status codes that legally define the status of men, women, and children because in many societies norms that govern family relations are more ideologically entrenched than other aspects of culture. In Morocco, interpersonal relations may be the arena in which men feel a need to assert the most legal control and from which women have drawn their primary identities. Additionally, challenging sexist legal and interpersonal expectations that impact the family are complicated by the fact that for many women, families are not only a source of oppression, but a source of dignity and comfort as well (Fernea 1998: 420; hooks 1984: 37; Macleod 1991: 146). Moreover, despite the differential obligations conferred on husband and wife by Islamic law and practice within the domestic context, women have nonetheless managed to display considerable strength and as a result, men sometimes fear them (Fernea 1998: 420).<sup>14</sup>

There is no question that legal reform in Morocco has been slow paced. When Mernissi (1994: 37) imagined as a child that she would live in a kingdom where "women could snuggle up with their husbands," she was making reference to the abolition of polygyny. However, as Coomaraswamy might have predicted, Mernissi's hopes were never realized. Mernissi (1994: 37) explains the inertia of legal change in regard to women as follows:

Most Muslim governments, and their fundamentalist oppositions, even those that call themselves modern, keep polygamy in their family law codes, not because it is particularly widespread but because they want to show women that their needs

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<sup>14</sup> Fernea (1998: 420) notes that women's powers within the domestic domain are sometimes excluded from mention because:

...we Western women are brainwashed from childhood into believing that the only important acts are those that men perform and that women must replicate those acts if they are to gain power or agency. This leads us, I believe, to downgrade any activities and evidences of agency that take place outside the public, i.e., male orbit.

are not important. The law is not there to serve them, nor to guarantee their right to happiness or emotional security. The prevailing belief is that women and the law do not belong together; women ought to accept men's law because they cannot change it.

Mernissi's pessimism can be traced, in part, to the experiences of the Association of Democratic Moroccan Women (ADFM) when they collected signatures in 1992 to modify the Moroccan personal status law, the *mudawana*. In response to these women's initiative, the fundamentalist press called for their execution as heretics (Mernissi 1994: 37). However, despite such violent rhetoric, some reforms were instituted in 1993. In fact, the King himself, although only moderately supportive of altering these codes, intervened on the women's behalf to quell the threats (Fernea 1998: 113). By doing so, the King was taking risks because the legitimacy of the monarchy rests, in part, on upholding Islamic law (Ziai 1997: 77). The King, of course, had to balance this risk against the risk of his country following in the suit of Algeria (Fernea 1998: 113).

The reforms that were signed into law on September 10, 1993 included the following stipulations: that a male guardian could no longer contract a marriage for a fatherless woman without her consent; that a wife could indicate in her marriage contract that she was opposed to her husband taking a second wife and could terminate the union if he violated these terms;<sup>15</sup> and that a man could only obtain a divorce by appearing before a judge (Mayer 1995: 113; Ziai 1997: 75-76). Morocco did ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993, but despite the modest improvements documented above, resists implementing strictures that are fully in compliance with the Convention (Mayer 1995: 105).<sup>16</sup> Mayer (1995: 111-112) suggests that the Moroccan government's unwillingness to enact law that encompasses more radical reforms is derived from Islamic law's emphasis on the complementarity of male/female roles, an emphasis that the government refuses to acknowledge is discriminatory.

However, Mayer (1995: 105) cautions:

...resistance to the international norm of women's equality and double talk about women's rights are not limited to Islam. The US can invoke its Constitution and the Vatican can invoke natural law and Church tradition just as Muslim countries invoke Islamic law. In all three cases, however, the common strategy is to appeal to the laws of Nature, which have made women different from men. The rhetorical strategies attempt in all cases to establish that the speakers' opposition to the principle of women's equality as established in international law is based on higher laws that the speakers are powerless to alter.

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<sup>15</sup> Ziai (1997: 172) reports that official statistics in Morocco indicate that 3% of all Moroccan marriages are polygynous, although the number may be somewhat higher.

<sup>16</sup> Ziai (1997: 76-77) states that the 1993 reforms to the *mudawana* did not address the following: men are expected to provide support for their wives, while women are expected to be obedient to their husbands; fathers still have a say in their daughters' marriages; males and females are subject to different minimum ages for marriages, 18 and 15 respectively; and only widowed women (as opposed to divorced ones) are granted both physical and legal guardianship of their children.

Regardless of the Moroccan government's objections to making its personal status codes genuinely egalitarian, the fact that any reforms were introduced implies that the law is not impervious to social pressure and moreover, the impetus for these changes still came from Moroccan women themselves. Many of these women agree that these amendments were a valuable first step, but there is growing disagreement concerning the degree to which women's needs can ever be fully met within the framework of Islamic legal tradition, and some are endeavoring to expand the scope of civil law instead (Simons March 9, 1998: A6).

While personal status law does not benefit men and women equally, it is interesting to note that both men and women perceive law as necessary in Morocco (Dwyer 1979: 754). In addition, they see it as something that can be subject to interpretation and manipulated to serve one's own interests (Dwyer 1979: 740). Perhaps these points help clarify the conservatism that hinders progress in the area of women's legal rights. However, they may also explain why women have not abandoned the law as an arena of struggle. Daisy Dwyer (1979: 755) comments, "Sexual inequality emerges as a major stress point in Moroccan society, and the law takes on multiple and conflicting complexions in light of it." Both men and women may agree that "orderly" family relations are important, but that agreement does not imply consensus on the value of personal status law. Women believe that without the law men will take further advantage of them while men believe that the law facilitates the containment of women's sexual desires (containment of *fitna*), thereby contributing to the maintenance of society (Dwyer 1979: 754). These discrepancies in the reasons given for why the law is necessary again, reveal a crack in the ideological hegemony of male dominance in the area of "intimacy." Hence it appears that women will not forsake the law despite the prevailing attitude that women and the law are incompatible.

### **"To Develop Our Listening Capacity": Building on What We Hear**

The theme of this paper has been to underscore the importance of paying careful attention to what women say and do in their everyday lives as a means of identifying localized perceptions, definitions, practices, and directions of and for social change. Gocek and Balaghi (1994: 1) argue that a focus on "voice and experience can be utilized as two conceptual parameters to recapture the agency of the hegemonized." However, they caution that researchers must situate voice and experience within a social and historical context in order to avoid essentializing the very identities that they are attempting to demonstrate are constructed, fluid and varied.

It is within this framework that I began with a discussion of French colonial policy on the status of women. The French endeavored to control the Moroccans by holding static "tradition," a body of ideas and practices that they already purported to be timeless. The French hoped that labeling the colonized passive and unchanging would facilitate their own penetration and domination. Not surprisingly, then, Moroccans tend to be suspicious of Western initiated human rights agendas because they believe that it is ironic and contradictory to be classified as backward by the same region that has hindered their progress. Nonetheless, Mahnaz Afkhami, an Iranian who founded the Sisterhood is Global Institute, an institute located in Bethesda, Maryland that is committed to promoting education and dialogue on global women's issues, warns about the dangers of shutting off dialogue with the West as a result of this historical legacy:

For most of the Third World the experience of colonialism led the dialectic of encounter to an intellectual impasse by positing the 'other' as the enemy. As so much of the other is appropriated in the developmental process, the enemy steals within and the impasse, intellectual and political at first, becomes a pathology of self-denial. Since the future is claimed by the 'other,' the alternative that remains is the irredeemable past. In this sense, Islamic traditionalism is a scourge bequeathed by the colonial experience. Muslim women must transcend this experience if they are to accomplish their task of self-authentication. Above all, they should refuse to identify themselves as against the world outside. Rather, they ought to seek to lead in defining its issues and shaping its future. (1995: 4)

Despite the reservations Moroccans hold about the West, most of them have thus far resisted imposing such an ideological blockade. In fact, the strategies of human rights activists within Morocco may offer clues for generating an internal process for setting priorities for change and establishing an exchange with the outside world. For example, Abderrahim Jami, a lawyer who founded the Moroccan Association of Human Rights in 1979, states that he has sought the type of activist "who empathizes with the problems and pain of other people" (quoted in Dwyer 1991: 164), rather than someone with particular political goals or convictions to participate in this organization.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Moroccan women's groups and magazines have solicited women's testimonies from different walks of life in an effort to avoid privileging one voice over another (Fernea 1998: 417).

Despite these endeavors, there are many obstacles, contradictions, and challenges that Moroccan women will continue to face. While Moroccans may not benefit from turning away from the West, the West also need be reminded that they should not turn away Moroccans. Capitalist investment that boosts the economic status of small segments of the population may not be the answer. It is difficult for nations to put their colonial history behind them when neo-colonialism continues to replicate imbalances in power, sapping former colonies of their labor and resources. Of course, internal political and economic policies that reinforce or expand such inequities must also be reevaluated.

Additionally, the setting of priorities for Moroccan women is in itself not a straightforward matter. Afkhami and Friedl (1997: xiv) explain:

There is not a well-defined common ground on which elite women and ordinary women living in quite different circumstances in the same country can meet easily. But there is a perception of the need for such common ground - for a body of knowledge that would articulate women's rights in ways that are not easily dismissable as "elitist," "Western" or "feminist" that could help activists to be proactive and to avoid being put on the defensive.

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<sup>17</sup> Kevin Dwyer (1991: 165) explains that while some Moroccan human rights organizations have broad-based agendas, they have had difficulty challenging the public perception that their agendas are defined by political party affiliation. This misperception tends to undermine the efforts of these organizations, making their work more difficult and less effective.



bell hooks (1984: 65) points out that we don't all have to share the same oppression to forge a commitment to end oppression and that "diversity, disagreement, and difference" (1984: 64) within a movement are healthy, serving as a catalyst for new ideas and expanded membership. Moreover, the new social movement theory suggests that social movements may be more successful when they don't require a high degree of consensus because that way they can be more easily adapted to local resources, networks, needs, and meanings (McClurg Miller 1992: 20).

Given these caveats, the solutions that benefit women, even within a single country, may not be the same. For example, education is important for all women because literacy can contribute to an awareness of options and accessing of resources, but in Morocco it may hold additional rewards for urban women for whom there is a documented link between occupation, income, and educational achievement (Griffiths 1996: 69). Nonetheless, education cannot serve as a panacea for a country that harbors many educated, yet unemployed youth. Hence, efforts could also be made to support economic initiatives that help guarantee women (and men) a living wage such as the unionizing of factories or the creation of agricultural cooperatives.<sup>18</sup> These dialogues and initiatives will not take place without a lot of hard work. But as Badia Skalli, the Socialist Party female Parliament member, states, "Democracy doesn't fall from the sky, madame. One has to learn it, practice, struggle for it" (quoted in Fernea 1998: 122-123). I believe that what the Moroccans should struggle for and a goal for which we should all strive is what Mernissi labels, "the ethics of uncertainty" (1995: 36). An "ethics of uncertainty" encourages debate, eschews totalizing answers, and is open-ended.

Although Moroccan women have by no means stood still, Hesseini (1994: 69) describes these women as persons who continue to pass through public space rather than firmly occupy it. Clearly, the power of masculinity still permeates all aspects of Moroccan society, from conceptions of nationhood to the most "intimate" relationships. Too weighty an emphasis on change and resistance creates a danger of masking the entrenched nature of gender polarities and oppression because a greater significance may be attached to such change than it actually merits. Yet Macleod (1991: 126), an Arab-American political scientist who conducted ethnographic research on the new veiling in Cairo, points out that subordinate groups are not nearly as fuzzy about their own interests nor as inactive as some theories concerning hegemony might imply.<sup>19</sup> She (1991: 127) explains, "Struggle involves both subordinate and dominant groups in a linked interaction, an often lengthy and prolonged attempt to define and interpret current reality and the options for change." There are, in fact, multiple and widening cracks in the hegemony of male dominance in Morocco, both longstanding and new, and that exist both formally, in the guise of organizations and informally, in the guise of periodic gatherings and everyday practices. To ignore or minimize these processes may be equally damaging in that doing so could prevent us from recognizing, supporting, and learning

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<sup>18</sup> For example, the Egyptian government has initiated a small-scale project that grants land to women who are willing to farm it themselves after they have participated in training programs made available to them (Fernea 1998: 256).

<sup>19</sup> Macleod (1996: 126-127) is addressing the works of Marx and Gramsci when she speaks of hegemony here. However, she does state that in some of Gramsci's writing, he does grant subordinate groups greater agency and clarity of mind.

from voices that direct us to the future.<sup>20</sup> If we are serious about building a movement that speaks for the many rather than the few, we need to find a way to allow the many to speak (or the multiple many), to avoid the facile labeling of “subordinates” as deluded by the fog of false consciousness,<sup>21</sup> and to hear the voices at the margins and include them in the center (bell hooks 1984: 15). For to “hear” well is not simply a good idea, but should be a moral imperative.

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<sup>20</sup> Macleod (1991: 156) points out, “Just as the acquiescent aspects of women’s behavior can be singled out for cooptation, so could the protesting elements be encouraged or developed.” Thus to ignore the “protesting” elements” could push women into more conservative camps and alienate them from the agendas of movements designed to improve women’s lives.

<sup>21</sup> Macleod (1991:126) points out that “false consciousness” is normally a state attributed to subordinate groups by dominant groups.

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