Women, religion and development: the case of Morocco

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Development agendas often rely on specific rights-based referential, which may be meant as a general guideline on the approach to be adopted in a certain context for a particular project, but ends up becoming a linguistic litmus test for inclusion. While it is important to refer to human rights in all development work, blindly applying specific understandings of rights as a prerequisite for participation can greatly limit the constituencies that can be reached by projects. Those most in need may be left out because they feel more comfortable associating with organisations that apply a different interpretation of rights. An additional danger is, that the definitions given in the development objectives of international organisations may end up redefining local activism in accordance with development agendas instead of working on the basis of the needs of the participants. Likewise, feminism should be used in development projects as an important analytical tool rather than the only guiding principle on the type of projects that can be supported and the beneficiaries of these projects. Looking at the case of Moroccan women's NGOs, this paper argues that there is scope to include faith-based organisations in development projects and encourage cooperation on strategic issues between faith-based and rights-based NGOs. The paper begins by tracing the roots of the division in women's civil society in Morocco. It then shows how this division is discursively upheld in current political discourses. Interview data with activists in Morocco suggests, that these divisions are more important on a discursive level than in terms of activities and values held by organisations. When we look at campaigns and activities of faith-based and rights-based organisations, we can find many common causes. Even on the level of justifications and referential similarities are often more striking than differences across the imaginary divide between faith-based and rights-based groups. There thus seems to be scope for collaboration between faith-based and rights-based women's organisations on strategic issues. This paper hence suggests, that development agendas should encourage and support such collaboration for two reasons: firstly, cooperation between faith-based and rights-based NGOs would ensure greater participation by women from all social spheres; secondly, inclusion of organisations that set their agenda from a religious referential would minimise criticism of development projects Eurocentric liberal agenda-setting.

Historical roots of the divide of women' Morocco

Moroccan women first became politically active in support of the independence struggles in the 1940s. After independence some women's social work groups were founded, including one supported by the royal family. From the 1960s onwards Morocco experienced a long period of political repression under the new king Hassan II. Women were needed in the struggle for political freedoms and human rights in support of the socialist party and human rights organisations, (Brand 1998; Lopez Plaza 1999) and once more the woman question had to wait. As in many other postcolonial struggles, women were required to show support for the building of the nation, waiting their turn for liberation that never came from their colleagues and allies in these struggles. (Helie-Lucas, 1987; Mernissi, 1988:2). Women's own issues were not heard within the wider political and human rights movements, and moreover women's role in national political struggles was highly contested as late as the

1970s when the first female activists were imprisoned alongside men: the prison guards would give the female militants men's names as they wanted to "enter the world of politics and to perform men's jobs" (Widad Bouab, a political prisoner from 1977 to 1980, remembers prison guards explaining why the women would be called by men's names[1], quoted in Slyomovic, 2005, p.133).

During the time of political repression the king encouraged the formation of Islamist organisations in the universities in order to divide the civil society and thus control him political opposition (Beau and Graciet, 2006). The king succeeded in dividing the civil society, but didn't foresee the popularity the Islamist movements would gain with the people. The largest Islamist movement, Justice and Spirituality, still operating illegally due to their direct criticism of the king and of Morocco's political system and corruption was created by young, urban, university educated group, encouraged by the king's initial opening to more Islamist education structures. Similarly to the human rights and socialist movements, the Islamist movements attracted well educated middle-class women who wished to correct the wrongs in the society and in the corrupt, oppressive political system. Although women on both sides were experiencing the same side-lining of their issues, the political hostility between Islamist and socialist groups became quickly stronger than any uniting causes as women.

It took until the 1980s until the first women's organisations concentrating on the liberation and the rights of women were founded. These were born out of political parties, and although they quickly declared themselves independent of them, the public still largely views the older women's rights organisations as party-political. Due to this, the word feminist has come to signify middle-class socialist woman in Morocco, and is often rejected by younger women activists as well as faith-based activists. Faith-based organisations founded women's sections in the late 1980s and early 1990s as well.

Women's rights NGOs began asking for a change in the family law – Moudawana – in late 1980s. The campaign included collecting a million signatures to an address to the government asking for a change, collected in 1992. In a speech king Hassan II made in 1993 as a response to the petition he asked the women to leave the Moudawana to him as the commander of the faithful in an effort to retain the Moudawana outside of daily political debates (Cavatorta and Dalmasso 2009: 496). While the real issues the women's group were campaigning were not affected in the changes introduced, the fact that the law was voted for by the parliament and thus lost some of its sacredness encouraged the NGOs to press on and continue their campaigns (Sadiqi, 2006). In late 1990s Hassan II wanted to launch the *Plan for the integration of women in development* (PANFID), but due to strong resistance from the Islamists the plan was initially abandoned. Islamist groups deployed their women's sections in the public campaigns and demonstrations against the family law reform. This deepened the already existing animosity between rights-based and faith-based women activist, who had already clashed while working inside the larger socialist and Islamist movements. The PANFID was introduced in 1999 and gave rise to large scale public campaigns by both the opponents and the supporters of the plan. This plan and the feminist movement's participation in it was highly criticised by the Islamist movements as, according to them, it originated directly from the neoliberal economic restructuring programmes designed and funded by different UN agencies and the World Bank (Salime, 2011). Funds were made

[1] Fatna El Bouih, a Marxist political prisoner from 1977 to 1982 wrote her memoir in Arabic, but instead of the literal translation "Talk of Darkness", as was used for the English translation, the book was published in French as Une femme nommee Rachid, A woman called Rachid.

available to women's organisations through the Plan who subscribed to the liberal language promoted by the international funding organisations (Salime, 2011:26). Women's organisations availing of the funding and language and thus being accused of importing Western ideas began mixing their referential in order to counteract the criticism (Sadiqi, 2003). As a result the vocabularies of the feminist groupings have become more mixed and the dichotomies between the two categories less evident.

The Moudawana was finally reformed in 2003 by king Mohammed VI after several more years of campaigning by women's NGOs. This time campaigns included public demonstrations, the largest of which, in 2003 attracted nearly a million people to the streets of Casablanca. Like his father, Mohammed VI retained the responsibility of the reform to himself: the king appointed a royal commission of religious authorities, judges and political figure-heads to review the legislation and give their recommendations for a reform. Civil society was consulted about the reform and the commission also included female judges. After the commission made its recommendations, the new law was debated by civil society and the parliament before put to vote by the parliament. If the first reform of the law in 1992 de-sacralised it and made the changes possible, the vote and debate that ensued the reform in 2003 made sure women's position was no longer taboo and allowed women's NGOs to spread their campaigning activities to other issues, where Islam and tradition previously ruled the conversation and impeded opposing views from surfacing, such as the nationality law and violence against women. The religious authority of the king ultimately meant, that the new family law was accepted by all women's groups, and can now be used as a legitimate reference point by both the Islamists and the rights-based groups.

Competing modernities in Moroccan women's NGOs' referential

Faith-based groups are ever more important for women and in women's social and political activism. These can be roughly divided to three different categories: the ones working within the auspices of Justice and Spirituality, the largest Islamic organisation in Morocco which is still banned as it refuses to recognise the monarch's authority; the ones linking with the official Islamic party Justice and Development; and independently run and funded small social service organisations. The political agenda, referential and definition of the role of women in a society vary greatly between these categories. As Guessus (2011) has discussed in her doctoral thesis, there is a severe mistrust between the rights-based and the faith-based women's organisations, and in many areas the different groups are in direct competition for constituency and some also for state funds, such as the INDH funding. Mahmood (2005:1) attributes some of this mistrust to the difficult relationship Islamic societies have with the West and to the challenges Islamic feminism poses to the secular and liberal political movements from which secular feminism stems. Moghadam (2002:22) reveals the same contention to be true in Iran between the supporters and opponents of Islamic feminism, those opposing to it stating that confined in the limits of the Islamic Republic women can never gain equal status.

Despite these criticisms, women's activism in faith-based groups cannot be reduced to notions of false consciousness or women's tokenism within Islamic movements. From conversations with rights-based NGO members in Morocco, it is evident that they share what Mahmood (2005:5) calls a "dilemma for feminist analysis": why would any woman want to support an organisation whose ultimate goal is women's subordination to men and a society divided along gendered lines? Mahmood (2005:14) suggests severing the assumed links

between agency and subversion and abandoning the idea that anyone with agency will wish to struggle for liberal progressive politics. According to Mahmood, agency should be understood and defined within the social context where it operates and cannot be directly imposed from post-enlightenment Europe to post-colonial Arab Middle East. Moghadam (2002) encourages considering the social and historical location of feminist praxis as part of wider, ever evolving feminist philosophy that should not be divided into binaries but rather seen as fragmented movement that reflects social realities in different regions in diverse ways. Thus there cannot be one good or correct way to do feminism: “Women, and not religion, should be at the center [sic.] of that theory and practice.” (Moghadam, 2002:45). The main criticism Moghadam has for Islamic referential in feminist activism is the possibility of it reinforcing the legitimacy of an Islamic system and reproducing it.

Ijtihad, the interpretation of the religious texts from a new point of view, has become an integral part of women’s activism in Morocco and other Arab Muslim countries, but also a point of division between competing referential and ideas about modernity. Sadiqi (2003) reflects the idea of *ijtihad* to have spread to rights-based feminist organisations since the adoption of the *Integration of women into development* (PANIFD) –policy as a technique of translation, offering “smooth transition between the universal and the local” (p.36). This is because the policy initiative codified into national legislation some aspects of women’s lives that were previously only talked about in the laws directly influenced by *Shari’ah* and available only for the *Ulema* to interpret. Now these laws had been reinterpreted already once and further reinterpretation by any actor became possible. For many rights-based organisations, however, religious references pose a danger of being locked into traditional interpretations that do not allow for full equality of the sexes (Othman, 1999). Faith-based groups base much of their work on the reading of the scriptures from a woman’s point of view, stating that the current interpretations have been tarnished by patriarchal cultural constructs (Mernissi, 1991). *Ijtihad* cannot be directly linked to religious organisations wishing to return to the golden past of Islamic state, as women’s *ijtihad* is in itself a challenge to male control of religious interpretation (Badran, 2005). More particularly Morocco has allowed women to become teachers of the Qur’an, *mourchidat*, since 2006 as an effort to bring about a more tolerant view of Islam. The country’s Islamic council, nominated by the king, has also included a woman within its 16 members since 2003. Both religious roles for women have come about as a political response to the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in 2003, as women’s greater participation in religious life was thought to curb extremism (Steinberger, 2010). References to religion and especially to *ijtihad* can thus also refer to this new empowered position Moroccan women have been given in regards to religion and as a challenge to existing power structures.

In discussing Moroccan feminisms Sadiqi (2003) traces their roots to the encounter of the Moroccan civilisation with the West through the French colonisation, an encounter to which she affords the term ‘modernism’. The first existing feminism in Morocco from the 1960s onwards Sadiqi deems as liberal, or secular feminism, and from the 1980s onwards she denotes the co-existence of religious, or conservative feminism (ibid:21). Both have their roots in the wider political organisations of the country, the liberal feminism stemming from the leftist political rights movement and the religious feminism from conservative political parties and associations which were free to flourish from the 1970s onward when the king Hassan II sought to fragment his political opposition. Some of the antagonism between the groups can be traced back to this old political opposition. Sadiqi indicates the differing interpretations of modernity as an important signifier between the liberal and religious feminists: liberal feminists refer to modernity as a political opening of the country and the

encounter with universal norms and laws, whereas for the religious feminists modernity refers to a return to an authenticity to counteract western cultural imperialism (ibid.). Islamic feminism is connected to the quest by women to reinterpret religious texts (ijtihad) and move away from the male interpretation which constitutes the patriarchal rule in society independent of Islam itself (Latte Abdallah 2010, Badran 2005). Islamic feminism also has more complex origins than a mere response to Islamic revival. It is also a demarcation of difference towards the hegemonic feminist ideology, often duped Western, which has traditionally seen "culture" and "religion" as patriarchal structures opposing gender equality. This position has been reinforced after the stigmatisation of Islam after 9/11 (Rhouni, 2011:72). Finally, Islamic feminism is an expression of the centrality of one's spirituality to the political person, and the importance of that spirituality in everyday interactions.

While understanding faith-based women's organisations from this theoretical perspective, we must also allow for local understanding of the rights-based organisations, which are as much grounded in the cultural and political context as the faith-based organisations. Definition of secular feminism in Muslim countries is multiple, whereby Badran (2005:6) includes referential to multiple sources including nationalist, "Islamic modernist"[2], humanitarian/human rights and democratic and Sadiqi (2003) shows the roots of Moroccan secular feminism in middle and upper class ideologies and political parties' modernisation and secularisation efforts. The tendency is to create a binary vision of faith-based and rights-based organisations, seeing the former as "local", "traditional" and also "anti-women" and "backward", while the latter are often regarded as "imported", "Western" and "progressive". The challenge is to ground both types of organisation in the local context and suspend value judgments of their referential. The advocacy, the work and the aims of both types of organisations are as much part of this grounding in the Moroccan context and results of the background of the actors as the referential they use. Rather than rating the NGOs by their referential, it is important to ask what the relationship between this referential, how is it articulated and who is the audience to which it is presented; or how are these organisations socially constructed and continuing to redefine themselves in their social context. Agency is present in all the groups' activism, but differently defined within the confines of different ideologies.

Suggestions of merging the forces of secular and Islamic feminists are at times made, often by Islamic feminists. Iranian feminists Najmabadi and Sherkat suggested in the 1990s that secular and Islamic feminists should forge strategic alliances over shared goals, and that through *ijtihad* both secular and Islamic feminists could begin to separate cultural norms from religion, revealing patriarchal social structures that impede gender equality in the name of religion (Moghadam, 2002). In Morocco similar pleas have been made by at least faith-based groups affiliated to the Islamic party PJD, only to be refuted as double language by rights-based groups. In Iran, too, Islamic feminists face the accusation of double standards from secular feminists: why speak of women's participation and leave out veiling, sexuality and Islamic law (Moghadam, 2002:30)? The criticism is the same in Morocco towards faith-based groups. *"They talk about political participation, but what about inheritance? Did she tell you what she thinks about that?"* asked an interviewee from a rights-based group when told that this research listened to faith-based groups too. Islamic groups are judged on being selective about which women's rights and what kind of equality they defend, yet none of the rights-based women's groups are entering the debate on homosexuality or freedom of

[2] The quotation marks here are used to draw attention to the already mentioned multiple interpretations of the word modernity in the context of Islam and Morocco more specifically.

religious consciousness. Indeed, the issue of defining someone as Islamic feminist is underlined by the problem that both the secularists and the Islamics tend to reify each other's standpoint and "carry implied or unstated assumptions about either feminism or 'Islam'" (Rhouni, 2011:75). In fact the perceived antagonism and opposing views, according to Salime (2011), have helped both movements redefine their activities and gain new areas of influence, the Islamist women drawing large numbers of supporters to the streets, and thus to the public sphere, to demonstrate against the PANIFD and the Moudawana reform, and the feminist movement increasing its constituency on the back of the Casablanca terrorist attacks, which made Islamists movements unpopular in the public eye. The two movements are continuously constructing their activism in response, rather than in parallel to each other (Ibid:54). Although the rights-based and the faith-based groups are often presented as opposing movements, neither one can be understood as the anti- or counter-movement to each other. Salime (2011) describes this evolvement as feminisation of the Islamist movement and Islamisation of the feminist movement. The greatest divide between the viewpoints is not with definitions of gender roles, but the source of the legitimacy of these gender constructs. Rights-based groups see the Islamist women as yearning for the past, when in fact they are aiming to construct new gender identities using *ijtihad*, while faith-based groups imagine the feminists as appropriating neo-imperial discourses and political practices. Without dialogue between the groups each is left to imagine the worst of each other.

Alliances and divisions across referential and modernities

When asked about referential, women's NGOs usually define it in terms of either human rights or religion, or at times a mixture of the two. But when we look at referential as a linguistic and strategic tool related to the ideology of each NGO, we see, that all NGOs have a more complex referential than one simply described within the dichotomy of rights versus religion. Although older organisations have taken the time to define a referential along this dichotomy, an analysis of the campaigns and activities of NGOs reveals a more fluid and dynamic referential, which changes according to the issue at hand and the changing Moroccan society. Traditions and democracy are mixed in regularly with human rights and religion, and national legislation often becomes part of the referential. On the surface the values of faith-based and rights-based groups seem to coincide. On the question of referential, a rights-based group that originates from the leftist activism in the 1980s and 1990s states:

HZ: "What is the best way to talk to a woman and to say to her that she has; your husband or your boyfriend doesn't have the right to attack your dignity. How to say that? To say that in referring to universal referential gives nothing. To say it in basing oneself on Arab-Muslim patrimony, Moroccan culture is going to make sense to her."

And a faith-based group link to the ruling PJD-party says:

BK: "The referential we have; we work on the rights of women; we are inspired by the values of women's rights on an international level; we are for the improvement of the situation of women and on the other side hoping besides; our Islamic religion and our authentic values of our country Morocco. So we make an equation between the two values: the international values of women's rights and the national authentic values of our society."

Both speak on international human rights and both also refer to Moroccan culture and to Islam as the basis of the values represented and the language used to communicate them. When presented with these similarities, many representatives of rights-based groups claim the Islamists to be dishonest, untruthful and contradictory. On the level of issues and objectives, faith-based and rights-based organisations both work for women's political participation, economic empowerment, education, eradication of violence against women and sexual harassment among other issues, where cooperation could be possible. This would require putting aside political agendas and issues of contention, such as inheritance, and concentrating on one issue at a time.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the divisions between faith-based and rights-based women's NGOs in Morocco. These are located within the political context and nationalist struggles and are thus difficult to overcome. The Islamist revival and a popular questioning of secular modernity promoted by the Socialist parties and hence the rights-based women's groups are part of a genealogy that traces this animosity, as are the public debates over the Moudawana reform. Concentrating on single issues, recognising the multiple identities of the NGOs and embracing strategic cooperation can allow joint action in the future around single issues. Incorporating intersectional feminist theory and understanding NGOs to hold multiple identities also allows a more complex understanding of NGOs' referential and their conceptions of modernity, democracy, human rights and religion. Development agendas that adopt gender perspective have much to gain from supporting such alliances. First of all, by reaching out to both faith-based and rights-based organisations projects can reach far greater constituencies than through rights-based organisations, whose language and referential is fitting and sometimes even tailored to international development agendas. Furthermore, women's rights reforms in Morocco have been criticised for feeding into neoliberal Eurocentric agendas of the World Bank and other international organisations. By including faith-based organisations in collaboration with rights-based organisations, development projects could open up the debate on development priorities to a national debate.

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