

Non-Arab Women in the Arab World

Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous

Delineating gender and cultural identities is closely related to power. Rarely, if ever, are individuals permitted to freely choose how they wish to live their lives as women or men, as members or outsiders vis-à-vis the societal mainstream.

This issue of *Al-Raida* deals with the many forms of “not-belonging” and the struggle for recognition within the member states of the Arab League. It is divided into five sections reflecting the disparate vantage points from which non-Arab women have viewed their role in the Arab world over a period of over 150 years.

In the first section, both Rabha El Asri and Arda Dargarabedian portray the position of two of the most significant non-Arab ethnic groups in the region - the Berbers and Armenians - as members of these minorities. Dergarabedian reports on the initial results of one of Jordan's first scholarly surveys on its ethnic mix, whereas El Asri attempts to debunk the romanticised view of Berber mountain life. Juxtaposed to this position, L'Hocine Ukerdis and Ulbani Ait Frawsen expose the historical roots of the heroicised portrayal of Amazigh (Berber) women in the struggle of their people for cultural and political self-determination. One of the great disappointments in the production of this issue was our inability to find authors willing to write

background articles on the position of two of the other key ethnic groups in the region, the Maghreb Jews and Middle Eastern Kurdish populations.

Along with the region's indigenous ethnic groups, the immigrant minorities in the Arab world deserve particular attention. Focusing on the overlapping of issues of colour, class and gender, Alia Al Zoughbi demonstrates how being classified “Abed”¹ can lead to an almost total loss of social status in the Middle East. Ironically, as Mary Abowd points out, experiencing oppression, exploitation and a non-recognition of one's human rights does not protect employers from passing it on to their hired help. In the short interlude between the two Intifadas, Asian and African domestic workers were treated no better in Palestine than were their sisters in other parts of the Arab world.

Alisa Perkins and Maria F. Curtis provide insights into the lives of non-Arab women from the other side of the power-divide, illustrating the motives, experiences and integrational success stories typical of the life of Western women in modern Moroccan society. As a Malaysian academic, Azza Basarudin has written a moving portrayal of her personal experience as an Asian, non-Arab woman researching issues related to gender in the Arab world. Finally, both Jim

Ross-Nazzal and Aglaia Viviani have provided an historical vantage point from which to understand the way American and British women viewed Palestine and Egypt in the mid 19th century.

Some of the weaknesses of this issue's first section are made up for through the inclusion of powerfully individual testimonials by both indigenous minority women and Western women with a wealth of personal experience in the Arab world. Diane King reflects on her work researching the ethnic and gendered oppression of the women of Iraqi Kurdistan during the dark days at the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein. In her view, Kurdish women are far from being the “helpless victims” they are often portrayed as by well meaning Western NGOs. A good friend from my native Austria, Ingrid Jaradat Gassner describes the process of becoming Palestinian over a period of almost two decades. Arda Ekmekji compares herself to the layers of identity one finds in Beirut's old city. Her life as an Armenian academic in a number of Arab countries raises more questions than it answers about the true identity of the Middle East. Looking back over decades of feminist activism in her “native” Egypt, Margot Badran describes how the women's movement allowed her to join the Arab world via her dedication to female emancipation. Speaking from the perspective of a young Portuguese-German student of Palestinian origin living in Lebanon, Mona Katawi

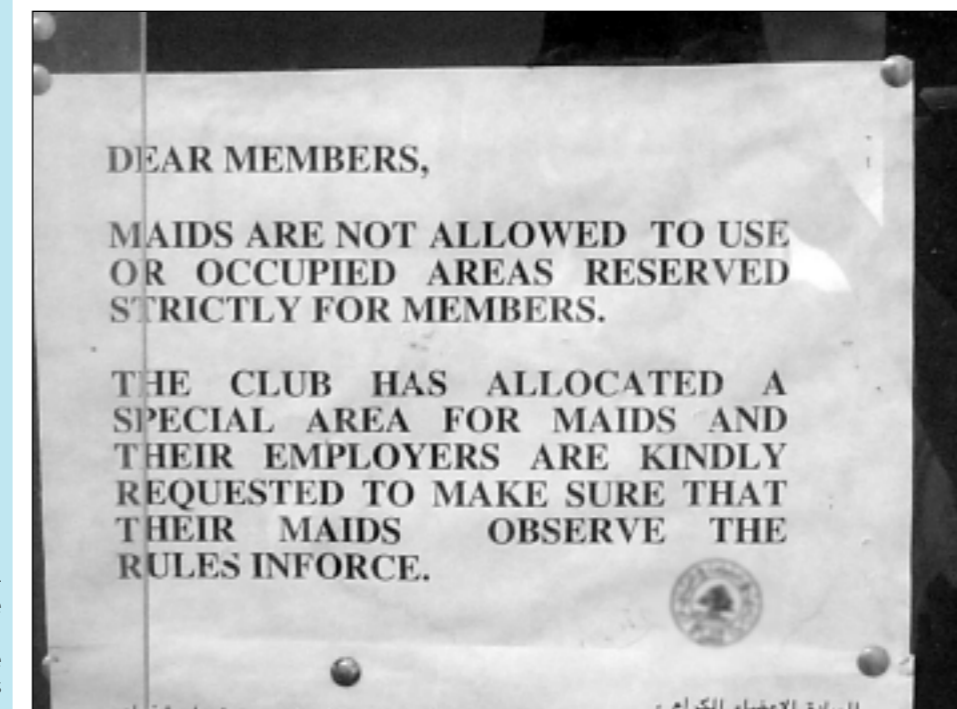
provides a bridge to the last section of this issue, dealing with mixed marriages and the thorny topic of patrilineal cultural and citizenship rights.

Sharon Nagy has aptly juxtaposed the historical and current experience of Western and South East Asian women who have married into upper, middle and lower-middle class families in the Arabian peninsula during the last several decades. Rima Habib and Lina Abou-Habib provide an activist's insight into the struggle to find local support for the human rights of Arab women who have married non-nationals and thus seemingly forfeited their children's cultural identity.

The articles in this issue have opened the debate on who decides the nature of ethnic and gender identity in the region. Ultimately, consensual agreement on definitions is less important than the recognition of the synergetic overlap of both the individual and collective right to self-definition.

End Notes

1. Significantly, the double meaning of the Arabic word “Abed,” i.e. African and slave, finds its historical parallel in the European term “Slav/e,” signifying both a social class and membership in the ranks of the Slavic forced labourers in the early Medieval Byzantine sugar industry.



An announcement on the bulletin board of one of the leisure clubs in Lebanon

The Role of Young Women in Berber Society

■ Rabha EL Asri

The unique position of girls and young women in society has become a topic of widespread interest. Indeed, although much has been written and many conferences held on the correlation of gender and age, very few studies have truly dealt with the unique injustices and hardships undergone by young female populations in different parts of the world. The majority of the gender- and age-related work done to date seems to be a response to an academic fashion, an attempt to be en vogue, resulting largely in generalities and clichés, a repetition of stereotypes taken from the mass media, without probing deeply into the respective context and unveiling the hidden social realities upon which the suffering of young women and the injustices inflicted on them are based. Only by dealing with these social realities can the position of all women, but especially Berber girls and young women living the mountainous regions, be significantly improved.

My concern in this paper is to "give the floor" to the Berber women themselves, to enable them to express their ideas concerning their social position, how they lived in the not too remote past, during which circumstances seemed too awful for them to cope with and what has changed in recent years. I have tried to report,

as objectively as I could, on what I have personally witnessed or have learned through in-depth interviews with various elderly women, whom I asked to tell me about the memories of their individual lives. These women also revealed to me the tales told to them as girls, stories from the remote past, recounted to them by their mothers and grandmothers. I have questioned them about changes taking place in the present. For practical reasons, I have limited my research to the Middle Atlas region, and more particularly, to the Bni Mguild (Ayt Myill) women. But what I found out about their lives can be generalized to the extent that it allows the drawing of conclusions about the life of the entire Berber community.

The Life of Young Berber Women in the Past: Infancy and Early Childhood

In the past, the difficulties of Ayt Myill women's lives began soon after birth. The entire family mourned the birth of a baby girl. An elderly woman told me that fathers, when being told that their new born child was a girl, visualized her as another man's future property, that, in the meantime, he had to nourish, nurture and raise her, only to hand her over later on. Thus, fathers tended to spend as little as possible on their daughters.

The members of the fathers extended family, but especially the paternal grandmother, would often consider the baby girl as a burden befalling her son's family, an extra and useless mouth to feed, a worthless object that also potentially threatened the honor of the entire family.

As of early childhood, Berber girls were reminded of their supposedly base nature. They were expected to atone for the disgrace that they had caused their family by being totally obedient and submissive, by serving the male members of the family, who were also considered to be superiors. Mothers knew that it was their duty to bare a baby boy, and were therefore eager to keep trying, even if they had to have ten pregnancies and more. Mothers who had gone without sons would transfer their bitterness to a new daughter, and indirectly blame her for the fact that her first child had not been a boy. As soon as possible, the mother would begin training her newborn daughter to help around the house so that she could quickly learn her duties and be prepared to face her ultimate destiny. A successful childhood was judged by the speed by which a young girl was able to carry out the everyday chores of a whole household on her own. If her daughter was slow at learning, a mother knew all too well that her in-laws and the entire extended family would blame her for it exclusively.

Until recently, girls were denied their human right to childhood, the development of their potential through play. They were frequently rebuked for manifesting childlike behavior, even at a very early age. Young girls were constantly reminded that they had no right to seek satisfaction of her own, that their role was to serve others, that their mothers were only looking out for their daughters' own good by preparing them to manage an entire household successfully. In so doing, both the mother and daughter could avoid the insults and rebuke commonly heaped on women who were not willing to be thankful for their allotted role, to obey without asking the reason why.

Preparing Girls for Marriage

At approximately the age of nine or ten, suitors became attracted to the daughters of those mothers well known for their hard work and patience. In order to test the patience and perseverance of his potential wife, a man would have his mother put the young girl through her

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paces. Elderly women were seen as being much better able to find a young girl's weak spots. One means of testing her was to place an elbow on the girl's bosom and then push as hard as she could. If the pain caused the girl to flinch she was not deemed a proper match. Failure in this way was certain to play out very negatively because the potential, rebuked mother-in-law would spare no effort to expose the girl's fragility and inability to further the interests of the tribe. No young man is his right mind, especially if he came from a respectable or influential family, would consider wedding such a "weak and lax creature." However, if a young girl did pass the test, worse laid in store for her after the marriage ceremony.

If the families of the two wedding candidates did reach agreement, young women were conventionally left in the dark as to which household they were to be transferred, into Thus, in most cases, brides were sent to serve in a new household, among strangers, and with no preparation. Involving

their daughters in this process, or even informing them of the family's decision was considered a source of shame for their fathers or other heads of the family, e.g. the grandfather or uncle. By considering his daughters' feelings, a man proved himself to be emotional and weak, revealing womanly characteristics against which every respectable man was to guard himself. If it were to become public that a father had these attributes, he would lose the respect of his peers and the entire community.

In the past, the concept that marriage should be based on love was foreign to the Berbers of the Middle Atlas region. This lack of mutual affection was another source of suffering for many women. The presence of love in a woman's relationship to a man was attributed largely to coincidence. Families judged a new marriage as successful if the recent addition to the family was a very young woman, willing to fulfill her newly acquired responsibilities without hesitation, if, as the saying goes, she had an "obedient head" and was willing to follow the commands of her husband, but more importantly, her mother-in-law. Thus, women passed this form of oppression on from generation to generation. A mother who had delivered a son had honored her family and earned the right to be relieved of her family chores as soon as her son married. The new daughter-in-law was expected to follow in her footsteps, to relieve her of the disheartening household tasks that had robbed her of

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her youth, and made her an old woman at a much too early age. The "old women" of a community, often only in their late twenties, had earned the right to command their daughters-in-law around the house, to force them to work outdoors in extremely hot and cold weather conditions, so that they could now enjoy their remaining years paying visits to neighbors or entertaining guests. A wife could only acquire the honor of this belated state of relative freedom if she had produced a male progenitor. Thus liberated from household responsibilities, elderly women often dared to contradict their husbands and express their own opinions, a luxury closely linked to the newfound prestige of mother-in-law status.

After marriage, a young bride's position deteriorated continuously. After the initial seven days of privacy, traditionally, but not automatically, allotted a newly wed couple, husband and wife spent their nights together in the same room as the rest of the extended family. Thus, after marrying a stranger, a woman's husband normally remained a stranger to her for many years. In those cases in which a young husband did express the desire to become more open and intimate with his wife, he was normally afraid to act on it, fearing the scorn of his relatives. Frustrated in this manner, many men compensated by being excessively rude and demanding when commanding their wives about. By publicly demonstrating toughness and harshness, he could prove that he had his wife "under control", as was befitting a member of the "lower order." Intimacies could only be exchanged quietly, in the dead of night when everybody else was sure to be sleeping. Couples were, however, unable to speak openly with each other in such moments for fear of awakening other members of the family and thereby exposing their "shame." Life as a girl and young woman in these communities meant being not only robbed of the right to relax, to play and choose, but also to be denied the opportunity to openly feel and live out one's emotions as a young wife.

The responsibilities of a new, female in-law centered on serving the senior members of her family, to whom she was not permitted to express her real feelings. Resistance was generally broken by a sound beating in an attempt to "reform" her. Daily chores included gathering wood, breaking the ice to fetch water and preparing a fire for heat and cooking purposes. Because

women had to collect and prepare firewood with their bare hands, resulting in a constantly bleeding and blue-swollen condition, they attempted to prepare an ample supply of wood for the winter before cold weather set in. If a woman was prevented from doing this because of childbirth, illness or other reasons, it was expected of her that she dig through the snow in the dead of winter in order to fulfill her wifely responsibilities.

However, even if she was able to live up to her in-laws' general expectations, she was still kept on her guard by habitual snide comments and criticism from them, or from her husband, who could demonstrate his manliness to his family by mistreating his wife. As is well known, past generations of women suffered from a lack of birth control, leading to a large number of pregnancies, which were only considered successful if a woman bore a son. The effects of years of hard work, maltreatment and multiple childbirths caused a young wife to become old before her years. She could only look forward to escaping this situation by producing a healthy son, who would bring a new daughter-in-law into the family, liberating her and repeating the cycle in the next generation.

The Present-Day Position of Young Berber Woman
Life has changed for everyone during the last few decades, so it should come as no surprise that the girls and young Berber women of the Middle Atlas Mountains have also begun to benefit from this transition.

Unfortunately, the harshness of mountain life has improved only slightly, and the difficulty of human existence in this region weighs especially hard on the living conditions of the young, female population. Many have pointed to the recent introduction of a modern school system in these mountains as proof that the current, youngest Berber generation is finally being introduced to the norms of the modern world. Signs of this ongoing process of integration in the midst of the Atlas Mountains include the processions of children, proudly carrying

their school bags on their backs, on their way to and from school, and the significant number of little girls amongst them. But will this recently introduced access to primary education in any way free the next generation of young Atlas Berber women from the hardships experienced by the grandmothers, mothers and, in many cases, their older sisters as well? If the social and economic environment in which they still live remains

largely the same for the foreseeable future, which forces of change can improve their lives? In one of my recent visits to our tribe in the Middle Atlas Mountains, I observed that far reaching changes could neither be observed on the cultural nor on the socio-economic levels.

Women are still seen as being lower, debased creatures; they are still viewed with suspicion and considered a potential family liability in all aspects of their private and public lives. Studies that I am currently carrying out have revealed that these young women continue to be understood as creatures guided by instinct, not by reason, and that they are portrayed as being too weak to be more than "mere dolls in male hands." On the positive side, newborn baby girls are no longer considered to be exclusively a burden to the family. They are now usually welcomed and cherished, although a slight distinction is still made between baby boys and girls during the traditional birth celebrations. In a significant shift in roles, some families now even consider the affectionate and caring attributes expected of their daughters to be an asset, guaranteeing that the parents will be taken better care of in their old age.

The erosion of the position of the traditional extended family in Berber society is also taking its toll on the roles expected of young women. Many young men now chose to withdrawal from the control of their father and mother. They set up a household outside the confines of the extended family. This has broken the passing on of responsibility from the mother to the daughter-in-law, the later of which is generally blamed for undermining the traditional blood relations between parent and child. These claims are based on the fact that she is of "separate blood." Having fled from the expectations to free her new mother-in-law of her traditional household duties, young brides are accused of conspiring with their young husbands and encouraging them to escape the authority of their parents. Although the hardships of running a newly founded household under extreme mountainous conditions can be quite daunting, the traditional household chores have been diminished because the young bride is now living alone with her husband. Gathering firewood and fetching water have become no easier, but now she is doing these things for her own nuclear family. This new generation of independent brides tends to actually embrace their age-old responsi-

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bilities, one reason for this being that they can thereby prove their value to their husbands and reassure them that they have invested their money wisely. Young women thereby also demonstrate to their in-laws that the departure of the newly wedded couple has deprived the extended family of a treasure that it does not deserve.

In order to shore up their newly gained position of responsibility, the young wives will often be overly critical of other newlyweds, chastising women who have, for whatever reason, been less successful in transitioning to nuclear family status. Successful young housewives are known to gossip and spread rumors about other women in the neighborhood, accusing them of being careless about their households, totally ignoring the circumstances that these new families might find themselves in. Thus, these women take on the male role in society. Emboldened by their newly found household success, they consider any other woman who does not perform her marital duties to perfection to be an inferior wife and thus an incomplete human being.

Changes are also taking place with respect to the freedom that young girls and young women enjoy when choosing a future partner. It is now no longer considered out of the ordinary for them to visit the weekly market with their parents. There they can survey the available young men, engage with them in conversation and thus make a preselection about whom they wish to

marry. This new freedom can also encourage a young woman to take the precarious step of using public celebrations and social events to secretly meet the young man of her choice, knowing full well that she risks serious punishment if caught. The sanctions for such illicit liaisons are normally accompanied by a sully of a woman's reputation, thus stamping her as unsuitable for marriage and the role of running a proper and respectable household. If a girl or young woman is accused of violating the socially accepted rules and values, her reputation

will be ruined for life. Although the heads of the Berber tribes set up laws that most male members are no longer willing to live by, female non-compliance is still viewed as a crime that accompanies a woman to her grave. As a form of retribution, women are often forced by their families to marry another man against their will, a lifelong punishment for youthful delinquency. Young women thus are now living in a situation of cultural

schizophrenia; while embracing their decision to choose their own partner, whom they wish to love and live with in peace for the rest of their life, they still live in a social environment that does not recognize this right.

Anecdotal evidence of the identity crisis now confronting Berber girls and young women can be found in my own extended family. I can give a concrete example of a cousin of mine, which just occurred two years ago. She was discovered to be in an amorous relationship with a young man from the same tribe. The young man was a constant visitor to the family home, and feelings of love grew between them. The discovery that my cousin had acted on her own in this manner greatly angered her father; he tried, and he is still trying to prevent any legal bonds that might unite the two and thus legitimize their relationship. His desperate attempts to separate my cousin from her freely chosen partner has even led him to attempt to send his disobedient daughter to Saudi Arabia although she is only 17 years old. Ironically, my uncle is actually aware that what he is doing violates both the rules of logic and respect for legitimate human feelings. However, his male ego has lead him to believe that he has been violated as a father; this prevents him from acquiescing and is blinding his sense of reason. This family crisis will most certainly put an end to any similar expectations on the part of his other four daughters.

It is important to mention here that a woman's choice of a future partner in not longer rejected out of hand. However, the decision of a young couple will not be tolerated without the blessing of the parents. They are the ones who have the final word; either it is consent or a refusal of the match. In order to prevent the family crisis described above, the parents of the potential bridegroom often select trusted individuals from their tribe to approach the future bride's father and beg that he agree to give his daughter in marriage. If this strategy fails, frustrated couples in our tribe have been known to elope. Defying both social norms and their parents in this way, these newly wedded couples are frequently confronted with a major scandal in the community, which often undermines their relationship and replaces romantic intentions with the most unpleasant of feelings. The stereotypical romanticism of the Berber tribes is indeed relegated to folklore, tribal celebrations and tales from the distant past that have no bearing on the reality experienced by young

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women today. Parental opposition to a marriage that does not enjoy their support is constant and overbearing. The continuous intervention of the family against the young couple frequently breaks down their romantic expectations, leading, sooner or later, to divorce. In the end, deadly indifference surrounds the separated couple.

When a relationship ends in divorce, it can have very detrimental consequences for a young woman. She will normally find it almost impossible to return to her family and continue living there the way she did prior to her marriage. Her father, who assumed that he was no longer responsible for her well being, is now her only source of income, thus adding a new and unexpected financial burden to his family. Faced with this highly unpleasant alternative, many recently divorced women are drawn to the attractions of life in town. Of late, girls and young women often do have the opportunity to visit urban centers now and again. Town life promises to provide comfort, cleanliness, and more modern social values. In recent years, rural women, especially young divorcees, have moved to Sidi Addi, Azrou and Ain Leuh. Here, they often form collective groups in order to cover the rent and living expenses and cope with the new demands of a life alone in an urban setting.

Tragically, many young divorced women have young children to provide for, this compelling them to find income at any cost. Appropriate work at a decent wage can rarely be found in these towns because their economies are largely based on agriculture and controlled by men. Consequently, it is not uncommon that young rural women are forced into prostitution in order to provide for themselves and their children. Beginning as a casual pursuit, the demands of day-to-day life turn prostitution into a profession.

In conclusion, this portrayal of the transition in the lives of Berber girls and young women in the Middle Atlas Mountains has illustrated that the key to improving their situation lies in an overall improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the general mountain population. In order for them to maintain the hope that their lives will someday be better, emphasis should be placed on the financial resources necessary for development. On its own, broadening the horizons of young girls through the introduction of primary and secondary education in the mountainous regions will only serve to deepen the social and cultural contradictions that young women are faced with today.

The Origins of Amazigh Women's Power in North Africa: An Historical Overview

■ Ulbani Aït Frawsen and L'Hocine Ukerdis

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Background and Definitions

The term "Amazigh" denotes the major linguistic minority of North Africa. However, "Berber" still remains the more widely used ethno-linguistic word for them. In antiquity, the Romans and Byzantines used this term to refer to those who did not speak the region's "lingua franca", Greek. During and after the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, the Arabs followed this Greco-Roman practice and referred to the indigenous peoples they encountered as "barbar." The French and English speakers adopted the vulgarised term, "Berber", and coined the word "Barbary," with respect to the region of North Africa and its people.

The "Berber" people prefer the term "Amazigh", which they use to describe both themselves and their indigenous languages. "Amazigh" signifies a "free" or "noble" person; the plural is "Imazighen". To define, in the most generic way, the language that they speak, Imazighen use the term "Tamazight." This term is also used specifically for the language commonly used by the Imazighen of Kabylia and Shawia in Algeria, the dialects used in the Middle Atlas (Rwafa) and Shlowh in Morocco, Zwara and the Nofusa Mountains in Libya and in parts of Egypt and Tunisia. Regional Tamazight speakers use their own local-

ized terms to define their own local linguistic variations, such as Tariffit in northern Morocco, Tashilhit in Morocco's Sous Valley, Tanfuset in Libya's Nofusa mountains, Tashawit in Algeria's Awras mountains and the like. The original Amazigh alphabetic transcription system is referred to as "Tifinagh." Variant transcription systems in use today include the Latin and Arabic adaptations of Tifinagh representations.

The Tuareg populations in Mali call their ancestral homeland Azouad (in north-western Mali), and the Tuareg of Niger call theirs Air (in the Air mountain massif of north central Niger, with its capital at Agadez) and refer to themselves as the Kel Air (i.e., "People of Air"). Other groups of Imazighen are also found in Libya, Tunisia and at Siwa Oasis, Egypt. The word "Amazighité" (i.e., Berberism) is often used to sum up the qualities that all Amazigh peoples tend to share commonly. These include speaking the Tamazight language, revering the national homeland (Tamazgha) and honouring of the Amazigh people, residing in the region including Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, as well as other areas, including Siwa Oasis in Egypt, and parts of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and the Canary Islands. Practicing various common customs and traditions, instilling a historical awareness of

the basic outlines of Amazigh history and honouring famous historical figures are all part of this shared identity. They have all played a role in influencing the struggle for the improvement of the social and cultural positions of Amazigh women.

Origins

Since the dawn of history, Imazighen have been the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa, their territory stretching from Egypt to Mauritania and from the Mediterranean to the boundaries of historic sub-Saharan Black Africa. Throughout their history, women have played a vital role in the development of Amazigh society. Various empires and peoples have conquered portions of historic Tamazgha, beginning with the Phoenicians and Greeks and continuing through the Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, French, British, Spanish, and Italians. Imazighen have been subjected to various religious beliefs: their own early pantheistic concepts; the polytheistic dogmas of the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans; and monotheistic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Since the 13th century, most Imazighen have professed the Islamic faith and Islam has penetrated deeply into their collective psyches.

Throughout their history, the Imazighen have always had their heroes or heroines who have defended their ancestral homeland, only to succumb to the superior “civilizational” might of their foreign conquerors. In 814 B.C., for example, Amazigh chief Larbas negotiated a deal to marry Princess Dido, daughter of the King of Tyre, in return for a small piece of real estate that eventually became Qart Hadasht (i.e., the New City, or Carthage). King Juba and King Massinissa plotted with the Romans against the Carthaginians. Prince Jugurtha mastered Roman fighting techniques and subsequently led a formidable rebellion from 106 to 104 B.C., according to the Roman historian Sallust’s account of the Jugurthine War.

In the early stages of the arrival of Islam, the Aures tribal chief Kusaila, and later Kahena, resisted the Arabs in the late 7th-early 8th centuries until they were overwhelmed by the Arab forces, and forced to submit. Salih (Moroccan Amazigh) from the Moroccan Berghawata, took Islam as their role model and translated an “Amazigh” Koran in order to repulse Arab cultural penetration of Morocco’s Atlas mountains. The Amazigh leaders, Yusuf ibn Tashfin and Ibn Tumart, established the great Amazigh medieval empires of the

Almoravids (al-Murabitun, “People of the Ribat”) and the Almohades (al-Muwahhidun, the “Unitarians”), which dominated much of North Africa and Spain in the 12th and 13th centuries. From the 13th century on, however, Arab Bedouin tribes (the Banu Hilal, Banu Sulaym, and Banu Ma’qil) began to inundate the low-lying plains of North Africa and began a unfortunate process of Arabization that would continue into the 20th century.

Imazighen only retained their native Tamazight tongues in the Atlas Mountains and remote sections of the Sahara, not penetrated by these Arab groups. As a result, Amazigh communal consciousness remained strong in the High, Middle, and Riff Atlas sections of Morocco; the Kabylia mountain massifs east of Algiers; the Aures Mountains of eastern Algeria; the Mزاب region of the northern Sahara of Algeria; Algeria’s Tuareg sectors of the Ahaggar and Tassili-n-Ajjer; the Nofusa Mountains south of Tripoli, the Saharan Siwa Oasis complex in western Egypt, the Tuareg Azouad territory of northwestern Mali, and the Tuareg-occupied Air Mountains massif of north central Niger.

Amazigh Women

As mentioned above, women played a very important role in Amazigh societies throughout the various phases of Amazigh subjugation. There have been female rulers, holy women or queens even during the period of the Islamization of North Africa. A female Amazigh leader name Kahina put up fierce resistance to the Arab conquerors of her time. Women were also important contributors to the Amazigh economy. In many cases, weaving provided independence for Amazigh women, especially widows. A comparatively large percentage of Amazigh women were versed in their people’s literature and poetry and thus enjoyed exclusive knowledge about the Amazigh’s Tifinagh tradition.

Not only the Amazigh themselves, but also the conquering peoples of the region were familiar with the tradition of strong female leadership role models. As early as 1200 B.C., Phoenician sailors, coming

from what is now Lebanon, recorded what they had found in North Africa (then called Libya), namely a race of Caucasians who worshipped the sun and sacrificed to the moon. Soon the Phoenicians became North Africa’s first known conquerors and settled in what is now Tunisia. From there they exercised dominion over North Africa and the Mediterranean for more than a thousand

years. A famous Phoenician queen, Didon Elishat, founded the fabled city of Carthage near modern Tunis, where she successfully defended it against the forces of her brother who sought to unseat her in about 980 B.C. By 150 B.C., Carthage was the greatest maritime power in the world. It had successfully disputed with Rome in two of three Punic wars and sent Hannibal over the Alps to conquer Spain and invade Italy. But in the third Punic War, Rome ended Carthaginian rule (by 140 B.C.) and reduced Didon’s empire to a Roman province.

Amazigh women are thought to be the fabled Amazon female warriors recorded by Diodorus Siculus, who reported that they had led their men to war, mutilated their enemies, and hennaed cowardly men. Pre-Islamic desert Amazigh society has been described as being almost entirely matriarchal in nature.

Who was the legendary Kahena?

By 682 A.D., during the Islamic invasions of North Africa, a legendary female leader, queen of Carthage and ruler of the Amazighs and Mauritians, rallied and united her diverse subject peoples. Her forces challenged the Arab/Islamic invaders, who were in the process of capturing and re-building Carthage in 698 when she successfully drove them from her city. She was historically known by many names including Dhabba Kahena, Dahia-Kahena or Dihya al-Kahin. This Amazigh heroic leader decided to leave nothing for successive waves of Arab invaders and therefore laid waste to her own country. Because of this sacrifice she was given credit for successfully preventing Islam’s southward spread into the Sudan.

Kahena was known as the Veiled Queen by the of Jerawa tribe of the Aures Mountains, from where she supposedly hailed. She was universally recognised as the most effective and savage of the feminine enemies of Islamic expansionism in North Africa. According to Ibn Khaldun, Kahena was an adherent of the Jewish faith, who claimed that her entire tribe had converted to Judaism. She continued her struggle against the Arab/Islamic onslaught until her death in battle in 702 AD. She is still gratefully recognised as the “Ancestral Queen Mother” by the Amazigh people. According to legend, she was born into a Jewish Amazigh tribe in the Aures Mountains some time during the 600s AD. During her lifetime, Arab generals began to lead armies into North Africa, preparing to conquer the area and introduce Islam to the local peoples. The

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Amazigh tribes fiercely resisted invasion, and decades of war resulted.

Very little is known about Kahena’s family, or her early life. Her father’s name was reported to have been Tabat, or Thabitah. The name Kahena or al-Kahina is a recognised feminine form of “Cohen”, and it may indicate that her family or tribe were Cohanim. It could also have been a title given to her personally, meaning something like ‘priestess’ or ‘prophetess’. Her followers, and their enemies, credited her with prophesy and magical knowledge. She married at least once, and had sons. Beyond that, almost nothing is known about her.

The Imazighen of the seventh century AD were not religiously homogenous. Christian, Jewish and pagan Amazigh were spread through the region that is now Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya. They shared a common language and culture, however, and the invasion of the Arabs presented them with a common cause, enabling them to join forces in order to drive out the foreign invaders. Kahena emerged as a war-leader during this tense period, and proved amazingly successful at encouraging the tribes of the region to join together against their common enemy. Her reputation as a strategist and sorceress spread, and she managed to briefly achieve an historically unique feat, uniting all the tribes of Ifrikiya, the Amazigh name for North Africa, ruling them and leading them in battle for five years before her final defeat.

Another famous female Amazigh warrior was Barshako who dressed as a man and led camel raids on other tribes. She is said to have returned home only to dismiss her husband, saying that she would no longer cook and keep house for a man.

The Tauregs call Tin Hinan “Mother of Us All.”

The tall, noble, proud, fierce and nomadic Tuaregs (Imucagh or free people) live in the Ahaggar and Tassili N’Ajjir Mountains of Algeria and the Air Mountains of Niger. They are called “The Blue People”

because the indigo dye of the robes they wore coloured their skin blue. These historical robes are now reserved for wearing exclusively at fairs and festivals. They trace their origins as a separate people to an Amazigh desert matriarch, Queen Tin Hinan, who led them on a desert trek to the Ahaggar Mountains.

Women played a very important role in Amazigh societies throughout the various phases of Amazigh subjugation.

Pre-Islamic desert Amazigh society has been described as being almost entirely matriarchal in nature.

The strongest impression of genuine Amazigh culture is conveyed by the Tuareg. This people lives in the Sahara desert and because of its seclusion was able to preserve its uniqueness over time. Only in the beginning of the 20th century did the French succeeded in subduing this proud people. The tomb of the legendary Tuareg queen, Tin Hinan, is located in Abalessa, the ancient capital of the Hoggar region.

In Tuareg custom, only the men are veiled, women wear a head-dress. The sight of a veiled Tuareg noble astride his prized white camel is as romantic and it is arresting. However, it was a sight thought to strike terror in the hearts of all who beheld them sweeping across the desert in raids on caravans of traders and travellers, seeking bounty and slaves – a pursuit that gave the Tuareg tribes a reputation of being wealthy and powerful beyond their borders. Historically they were feared and respected as daring, deadly warriors. A position they retained for as long as merchants crossed the Sahara by camel.

Now that the deserts are traversed by truck, automobile and airplane, and a large portion of the tribesmen's livestock has been destroyed by drought, Tuareg nobles no longer rule their world. Some still keep livestock, while others now lead tours to the ancient, enigmatic rock paintings at Tassili N'Ajjer, northeast of the Ahaggar, and still others work in the cities. Although the freedom loving people understandably dread the perhaps inevitable, future transition to a settled, rural life style, they continue to be proud and noble.

The Transition in the Role of Women

Although the unveiled Tuareg women lost some of their power after their conversion to Islam in the 11th Century, they still retained more economic and social power than most of their urban counterparts. They lived in a completely matrilineal society. Tuareg women regarded themselves as men's equals, marrying at will, speaking in council and serving as heads of encampments. Wives went where they pleased, owned property, taught and governed the home. Tuareg children, in this distinctly hierarchical society, acquired their mother's rank and regarded maternal uncles as next of kin. Matriarchs presided over some the Tuareg tribes and the men who headed others were chosen by women.

At the height of the Arab/Islamic empire, Amazigh

women were famed for their beauty as well as for their energy, strength, and the heavy work they cheerfully performed. In the huge, opulent homes of the Islamic Caliphs of Baghdad, Egypt, Spain and Istanbul, captured Amazigh women were described as the most beautiful of the beautiful, as well as the most desirable and entertaining. The mother of the second Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad was an Amazigh slave named Sallama. Zineb Nafzawi, one of the most famous Amazigh queens, shared power with her husband after the Islamic conquest of Spain, led by Islamicized Amazighs. Together, she and her husband ruled a huge empire extending from North Africa to Spain, between 1061 and 1107. When the Spanish expelled the Moslems from Spain at the end of the 15th century, many Andalusians, who were of Amazigh ancestry, settled in North Africa. From there some engaged in piracy, raiding the Mediterranean for slaves and treasure. Sayyida Al-Hurra was so successful a pirate leader that she became the governor of Tetouan, Morocco. She retained the office for many years and was the undisputed leader of pirates of the western Mediterranean, while her ally, the famous Turkish Barbaros of Algiers, led the pirates of the eastern Mediterranean. Sayyida was a key player in the political bargaining between the Mediterranean powers as well. After the death of her first husband, she married the king of Morocco (on her terms, requiring him to come to her for their wedding). She reined in Morocco from 1510 to 1542.

As recently as in the 19th century, an Amazigh prophetess, Fatma n Soumer or Lalla Fatma (Lalla, "Lady") took part in the resistance to the French in Kabylia in 1854, a woman leading the North African peoples to war once more, this time against the invading French. It took an army of 30,000 to finally defeat the prophetess. The Kabyles, however, remained unconquered until 1933.

The freedom and independence of Amazigh women is well known. An Algerian traveler, Al Warthilani, complained that the women in some Algerian towns went about unveiled, "exhibiting their ravishing beauty and shapely breasts". During Warthilani's pilgrimage to Mecca, Amazigh women from the Beni Amer tribe joined his caravan and virtually drove the pious man mad, displaying their bare-armed, bare-legged charms and gaily trying to seduce those men whose attention they attracted. Claiming divine powers, whether in jest or in all seriousness, these flirtatious pilgrims threatened

According to local custom, a woman enjoys the right to marry a new husband every year if need be.



Picture Credit:
Ayman Mroueh

anyone who rebuked them, which Warthilani did with disastrous results. Their curses seemed to materialize, he complained, calling these "playful girls" slaves of Satan.

Freedom for some Aures Mountain Amazighs extended as far as free love and polygamy. In the same Aures Mountains that spawned the legendary Kahena, some girls of the Azriya tribe enjoyed ample sexual freedom, their inaccessible location protecting them from officials, travellers and the attention of the region's patriarchal prudes, whose intervention embittered their Ouled Nail sisters. The Azriyat (plural of Azriya) of two communities, the Ouled Abdi and the Ouled Daoud, were dancers who traveled from mountain village to mountain village to perform as well as have sexual relations with their patrons.

If an Azriya dancer became pregnant, she was expected to keep her child and was feted by the villagers with baby showers to insure the child's good fortune. Most Azriyat would eventually marry, and/or, if they were financially successful, perhaps make the pilgrimage to Mecca to secure Islamic status. But whatever their fate, they were always accepted by their own community.

Historically, Aures Mountain women shared with the men equally in the hard labour carried out by her family, including ploughing, sowing, harvesting, grinding and shepherding. In order to establish their equality and independence, girls were known to elope in groups with young men. After this "honeymoon" they returned home with the respective husbands that had been chosen by them during this absence. This practice was attacked by the Algerian Arab nationalist movement in the 1950s, which established headquarters in the Aures Mountains and effectively curbed these liberties.

In Morocco, Amazighs account for at least one half of the total population. Although many Amazighs became citified and Islamicized over the centuries, many continued to live in pueblo-like, mud homes in villages of the Atlas and Rif Mountains of the Sahara where they honoured their ancient heritage. Many remain semi-nomadic even today. Some of these nomads are known to have retained their matrilineal traditions. They are famed for their strength, independence, bravery and fighting spirit. Despite some intermarriage with the Arab/Islamic population, which began a rapid undermining of the traditional Amazigh freedom accorded to women, many mountain villages merely pay lip-service to this encroach-

ing religion, and the women still remain quite independent.

An example of this split relationship with the predominant Arab/Islamic culture can be found in the continuation of the Amazigh tradition of the autumn bridal fair, which has survived to varying degrees throughout Moroccan Amazigh society. The Amazigh of Ait Haddidou, who gather on the Imilchil plateau in the Atlas Range for the annual September Moussem or festival are a good example of this ongoing resistance to cultural encroachment. Combining a local saint's day with a market, the Moussem also serves as a bridal fair.

It is here where one can see how reverence for the ancient female heroines of Amazigh civilisation encourage the enduring independence of the region's female population. During the three days of livestock trading, jewelry, clothes and kitchenware vending, sweet-mint-tea-drinking, respect-paying at the domed, white tomb of a marabout (saint), and family and friendship reunions, young Amazigh eyes eagerly scan the lanes between tents and stalls for glimpses of prospective brides and grooms. Swathed in deep blue, striped woolen capes, adorned with huge amber, coal, turquoise and silver necklaces, some displaying the emblem of the Carthaginian Great Goddess of the Sky, Tanitt, rouged and khol-eyed marriageable "daughters of Kahena" gather, gossiping and jesting, to discreetly study prospective grooms who, in turn, observing the bulkily-clad girls as best they can.

On the last day the traditional selection process is carried out. Women and girls promenade down the central path while their suitors rush to grab the hands of their favourites. When her hand is seized, the girl can accept or reject by clasping his hand or pulling hers away until she and the man of her choice find each other and proceed, hand in hand, to stand together before the notary. Later, after the harvest, the traditional marriage of a virgin bride will take place. First there is a mock fight between members of the two families, then comes the bride's ride on a sheepskin-saddled donkey to the groom's house and finally, she is carried over the threshold by her mother-in-law. Unless, of course, she has already been married and divorced, which seems to not be that uncommon. The majority of brides at the Moussem marriage fair wear the peak headdress of a divorced or widowed woman, while minority virgins wear flat headdresses.

According to tradition, these Atlas Amazighs, like their Aures Mountain and Tuareg cousins, are permitted to initiate a divorce as well as retain their dowries after separation. It is possible for them to remarry and there is no upper limit to the number of men a female divorcee can marry. According to local custom, a woman enjoys the right to marry a new husband every year if need be. The historically independent female Amazigh leaders remain legendary role models for young village women to this very day.

Amazigh Women in the Present

The stories of the past aided in the mobilisation of modern day Amazigh women in Algeria. Their struggle dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when the position of village women had rapidly degenerated. The early Amazigh pioneers pressured their elected Algerian leaders to appeal to the French Government regarding the need for reforms in favour of Amazigh women (NB: at that time only French women had the right to vote). These demands were largely unsuccessful. These early attempts at change were, however, later rediscovered by the leading Amazigh political parties during the 1940s. The movement for an improvement of the rights of Amazigh women found support amongst the ranks of leading literary figures. These included the novels of Djamila Dèbèche (Leila, An Algerian Woman, Aziza) and Assia Djébbar (The Innocent Larks).

The best known literary champion of Amazigh women's rights was Fadhma Amrouche, a woman of Kabyle origin. Born in 1882/1883 in a simple Algerian village, her father never legitimised her birth. Thus, she was subjected to endless ridicule by the villagers, prompting her mother to send her away to a Christian convent school for her own protection. Several years later,

at another convent, she was to meet her future husband. They were married, thus necessitating her conversion to Christianity. In the pages her novels, Amrouche describes her schooling, her marriage, and her children. Her personal and family struggles are the clear focus of her literary work, while two World Wars, various epidemics and the Algerian War of Independence flicker through in the background. Despite her popularity, Amrouche's life was not easy. She was never able to feel at home, neither in France and Tunisia, nor in her husband's house, or her own village of origin. But when you consider the time period she lived through, how different was her experience, in the end, from those of her compatriots?

*If an Azriya dancer
became pregnant, she was
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showers to insure the
child's good fortune.*

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into the traditional family dynamics of a polygamous household, and reveal her passionate love for Amazigh culture.

The Amazigh women's political struggle would come to an abrupt halt in 1962 following the achievement of independence by the National Liberation Front (FLN). A single party was established and retained exclusive power until 1989. After coming to power with the support of the country's women, the FLN would fulfil few of the promises made to women with respect to their emancipation. Furthermore, the FLN, backed by Egypt, imposed Arab-Muslim nationalism as the predominant state ideology, thus further undermining the position of Amazigh women.

Amrouche's books are well worth reading for the wealth of information they contain about conditions in late 19th century Kabylia as well as for their portrayal of the simple art of endurance.

Fadhma Amrouche later became a well known Amazigh poet and singer in Paris in the 1960's. She is the mother of the famous writer Marguerite Taos, and the Amazigh singer Jean Amrouche. Her detailed autobiography portrays what it was like to grow up as the illegitimate outcast of her village. A bright and strong-spirited girl, she was educated in French in an age when few women enjoyed the privilege of receiving an education. Her books describe her constant worries about providing for her eight children. They represent a fascinating insight

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Forthcoming

Arab Women and War

Armenian Women In Jordan

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Armenians are among the smallest ethnic minorities in Jordan and have been in the country for a fairly long period of time. This paper will deal mainly with the position and role of Armenian women in Jordanian society by reviewing their general characteristics, social and economic status (based on data from a recent study about Armenians in Jordan), using indicators that reflect their position and role in the concerned areas from a gendered perspective.

Jordan

Jordan is located in south-west Asia, east of the Mediterranean Sea. The population has increased since the 1950's due to high natural growth rates and external forced migration, and is estimated to be around 4.900 million. The majority of the population are Arab Muslims, who make up about 95% of the population; Arab Christians make up most of the rest. However, there are also a number of (non – Arab – Muslim) ethnic minorities such as the Circassians, the Chechens, Druzes, Turkomans and Bahai's, as well as a small minority of Armenian Christians. Together all ethnic minority groups make up about 2% of the total population of Jordan. In spite of Jordan's general interest in collecting data about its population, there is no specific information on minority groups. The official argument for not collecting this data is that they are considered Jordanian citizens and

thus treated like all other Jordanians. The existing studies on Armenians in Jordan are very limited, and are mostly historical articles which focus upon the "Armenian Question" and their migration to the Arab world. The first sociological study of the Armenian community in Jordan was done recently by this author in an unpublished MA thesis, which explored their demographic, social and economic characteristics. It also sought to examine the extent to which Armenians have preserved their identity, as well as the extent of their cultural, social, economic, and political assimilation (integration) into broader Jordanian society.

The Armenians in Jordan

1. Historical Background and Migration:

The Jordanian Armenians originally lived in the southern Caucasus between Turkey, Iran and the Soviet Union. They were under Ottoman rule from the 16th century until World War I. Armenians were treated as second class citizens of the empire until their virtual elimination in 1915, when the Armenian homeland in Turkey was reduced to a wasteland and they were subjected to successive massacres by the Turks. There were several migrations throughout these difficult times. Those Armenians that arrived in Jordan migrated there after the First World War. Most Armenian refugees settled in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine; a few made their

way to Transjordan. However, after the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967, a large number of Armenians left the West Bank and moved to Jordan. (During the sixties, many Armenians migrated to Canada, Australia and the US). According to Armenian sources, the estimated number of Armenians who now live in Jordan is around 3000. The majority of them live in Amman Governorate; a few are distributed throughout the other cities of Jordan. Upon their arrival in Jordan, the Armenians started building their own institutions. They now have their own churches, schools, clubs and charitable societies. The activities of their institutions and the fact that they marry within their own ethnic groups (NB: not with close relatives), helped the Armenians to maintain and preserve their ethnic identity. To some extent, Armenians were also able to integrate into social, economic and political life in Jordan, and consider themselves to be Jordanians by nationality.

2. General Characteristics of Armenian Women

According to the Jordanian constitution, all Jordanians are equal before the law and have the right to assume public office and the right to work. Women were given the right to vote and the right to run for general elections as of 1974. Various laws and regulations safeguard the equal rights of women and protect them against discrimination. However, there is still a gap between the law and its practical implementation. This means that women still suffer from discrimination to a large extent.

Women in Jordan have achieved some progress in a number of spheres and efforts have been made in order to enhance their participation in positions of power and decision making. However, the influence of women in the political, economic and social fields remains limited. Armenian women in Jordan are no exception; their position in society is similar to that of Arab Jordanian women. Female Armenian participation in the various fields of public life is still limited, as will be examined below.

The following information is taken from results of the MA thesis mentioned above, and was based on questionnaires distributed to 213 Armenian families who live in various parts of Amman. Questionnaires were completed by the women's husbands.

Age Composition

Age is an important factor in all demographic studies. The data collected for this study showed that there are disparities between the age distribution among Armenian women and Jordanian women in general. There are fewer Armenians represented in the lower age groups (20 – 29) and more represented in the higher age groups (40 – 50) than is typical for Jordanian society as a whole. These differences are the result of the rate of fertility among

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Armenian women, who have fewer children than the population as a whole. Thus, the average size of the Armenian family is smaller than the average size of the Arab Jordanian family.

Age at First Marriage

Age at first marriage is an important factor affecting levels of fertility and is determined by demographic, economic, and socio-cultural factors.

It was found that 89.7% of Armenian women were married by the age 20 – 29 and 9.4% were married by the age 30 – 39. This indicates that Armenian women marry at a later age than do Arab Jordanian women. This affects the fertility rate among Armenian women and it was found that the maximum number of children of an Armenian woman did not exceed four.

Level of Education

Level of education refers to the highest level of schooling completed by an individual. The study revealed that the percentage of illiteracy among the Armenian women is lower than the percentage of illiteracy among men; 2.3% among husbands and 0.09% among wives. The study showed that more than half of Armenian women have an education that ranges between secondary and college, and almost a quarter of them have university degrees. However, those husbands who do have degrees in higher education have degrees that are somewhat higher than their wives, although their overall education levels are similar. These results demonstrate that Armenian husbands tend to marry wives of a similar educational background. It also indicates that Armenians are aware of the importance that education plays for both men and women in achieving progress in life. It is recognized that there is a strong correlation between a female's educational level and her employment success.

Marital Status

According to the above mentioned study, most Armenians are married. According to church records, divorce rates among Armenians are limited. There are different forms of betrothal among Armenians who live in a traditional society such as in Jordan. The data indicated that 63.4% of Armenian marriages were arranged by spouses with parental consent and approval, and about a third of the marriages were arranged traditionally by parents with the spouses' consent. This means that Armenians have been affected by modernization because it seems that a large percentage of them have the freedom to choose their marriage partners.

Another important issue in marriage behavior is the relationship between the husband and wife; considering that this is an important factor for any minority attempting to maintain its identity. The study revealed that individuals

tend to marry within the same group, though only 8.9% of the sample were married to someone from the same family, e.g. a close relative such as a cousin. The findings also showed that 10.3% of all males were married to non-Armenians (mostly to Arab women). This indicates that there is a low level of marital integration (mixed marriages) of Armenians in Jordanian society. However, there is also a tendency among Armenian women to marry Arab men. Being an Armenian myself, I know of some of those cases personally though the exact numbers are not a matter of record because the Armenian church does not keep files on marriages carried out in Arab churches. An increased number of mixed marriages between Armenians and the general population can be expected in the future, especially if the degree of social integration increases, particularly among the younger generation.

Economic Situation

Certain key indicators reflect the economic situation of Armenian women, such as monthly family income (from all sources), type and location of residence, occupation, etc. After studying these indicators, it was ascertained that the average monthly income of the Armenian families in the study is higher than the average income of Arab families in Jordan. Most of them own the home they live in (house or apartment), and the areas they live in are considered to belong to the good housing areas in Amman.

Concerning the occupational independence of Armenian women and the rate of their participation in the labor force, the study showed that their position was no better than that of Arab-Jordanian women. 73.2% of them do not work outside the home (housewives); 26.8% have joined the labor force, largely in the private sector. This means that their husbands remain the breadwinners of the family, a situation typical of traditional cultures. The study also identified the types of professions they prefer, indicating that 13.2% of all Armenian women work in the educational professions, while 2.8% are doctors, engineers, and lab technicians. The same percentage (2.8 %), have their own private business. The data presented above illustrates that the rate of Armenian female participation in the work force is still low, similar to the rate for the rest of the Jordanian female population. All women in Jordan suffer constraints that limit their economic participation in general, including the following: low female educational attainment, early marriage and high number of children, the economic recession, unemployment, religious, social and cultural influences, and above all the weak female representation in decision making bodies, especially the legislative and executive branches.

Political Participation

Jordanian women's participation in politics, whether in the parliament or in the executive branch of government, in

foreign affairs, or in local councils, is very low. With respect to Armenian women in this area, their participation is limited to voting in parliamentary elections, since their chances of winning as candidates is very low. This is largely due to the fact that Armenians do not have reserved seats in Parliament as do other ethnic minorities. This is because of their numerically limited size and that they are lumped together with the general Christian minority. Though they can run for the Christian seats, their numerical size discourages Armenians from running as candidates. However, there is no law that forbids them or prevents them from running for election if they so desire.

The government of Jordan has made a tremendous effort to encourage and increase Jordanian female political participation. A new law was passed recently, whereby women were given eight reserved seats in Parliament, and this law was implemented in June 2003 elections. Armenian woman made no attempt to mobilize in order to win one of these eight seats for the above mentioned reasons.

Summary

In conclusion, the position of Armenian woman is similar to that of Arab-Jordanian woman. Their role and rate of participation in the social, economic, and political spheres is still limited due to many social and economic constraints. They suffer from gender disparities which are mostly the result of income disparities. These are reflected in the following areas. First, the female rate of labor force participation is much lower than that of men; secondly, their work is limited to certain professions, mostly to education. However, a trend towards gender equity can be ascertained in many areas. First: In marriage behavior, for both men and women have the freedom to choose their marriage partner. Second: Both have access to education, and women's rate of illiteracy is lower than that of men. Third: The political participation of both men and women is limited to voting in parliamentary elections.

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The Street of Slaves

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Preface

According to a recent American report, Lebanon is one of the countries black-listed for engagement in human trafficking (The Daily Star). Domestic labor is one of the two occupations harboring the largest number of trafficked victims in the country, the other being prostitution (AFROL). Domestic laborers in Lebanon consist largely of African and Asian migrants. These are only permitted into the country under a job contract, which stipulates live-in arrangements, a 12-hour working day and one day off per week, usually spent at home (Kristianessen 11). It is only after the termination of their contracts that laborers may choose to work as free-lancers. Free-lancers may be defined as those who "live independently (either renting, or staying in a room in exchange for services rendered) and work on an hourly basis for different employers" (Jureidini and Moukarbel).

This paper focuses on the experiences of free-lancing Ethiopian female migrant laborers in the area of Ras Beirut in Lebanon. Six Ethiopian female migrants acted as the focus group from which information for this paper was gathered. Of central concern to the interviews were issues regarding the process of trafficking from Ethiopia to Lebanon and the problematizing of race, gender and class within this context. The creation and perpetuation of social

networks across the two countries and within Lebanon is also addressed. I begin by presenting the data collected from the interviews, and proceed to frame the findings theoretically.

Introduction

My interest in exploring this topic was generated by becoming aware of an apartment across from mine inhabited by Africans. As far as I had known, my area of residency in Beirut, known as Ras Beirut, and more specifically my neighborhood, was inhabited exclusively by locals and other Arab nationals. The street on which I live is known for some of the most luxurious residential buildings constructed after the Civil War (1975-1991), inhabited by wealthy Arabs. The remaining buildings, sprayed with bullets from the Civil War, are inhabited by lower or middle class locals. Behind this street is an isolated cluster of four buildings also constructed before the war, each no more than seven stories high. A narrow alley, barely noticeable even to the area's residents, leads to those buildings. The apartment I was interested in was situated among that secluded cluster.

I intended to speak to the locals of this cluster in order to get a notion of their perception of the African inhabitants only to find that Afro-Asian migrants were the predominant

inhabitant groups of three of the four buildings on the street. The locals estimated that the migrants added up to roughly 95 residents. "They're decent people," said one woman, "You know, they're not dirty. The only problem is that, because of them, our street is now known as Shari' al Abeed (The Street of Slaves)."²

I randomly chose one of the apartments as the setting for a focus group. Upon discovering that I had a few questions for her and her friends, my host insistently repeated, "Ask whatever you want. There's nothing here. We are all very happy here in Lebanon". Inside were four other female Ethiopians, all nodding their heads in agreement with her statements; except for one, who eyed me with a suspicious, blatantly unwelcoming frown.

"Are you a reporter?" she asked repeatedly. My negation would not suffice. She spoke angrily to the others in the room in sharp, disapproving Amharic, probably rebuking them for having let me in. She snatched my list of questions from my hand for scrutiny while waves of hands rejected my proposition to record our conversation. Meanwhile, the host re-asserted, "Ask all you want. We have nothing to hide. In the first place, we shouldn't complain. Didn't I choose to come to Lebanon? Did anyone force me to come? No, I chose to come here. I can't complain. Lebanon has been good to me ... it has been good to us." She was by far the eldest one among them. The rest were young.

Questions and probes soon revealed that these women were all but happy in Lebanon. The opening declaration of contentment was the result of frustration with reporters. Their stories of penance, they later told me, were manifested in the form of black and white newspaper columns for the reading enjoyment of the journalists and their audience. The painful recounts they entrusted to journalists in no way led to positive action. Their status quo was maintained, along with their suffering.

Independence after Abuse

Domestic laborers arrive in Lebanon with a three-year contract during which passports are confiscated and salaries are occasionally withheld. They either complete the term of their contracts and return home (with the option of later returning to Lebanon), or else they run away prior to the completion of their contract. The latter case often occurs because of abusive treatment. The only reason Mary³, 28 years old, resides in Lebanon to this day is due to such an incident. Mary spoke of her "crazy Madam" who, upon the termination of her contract, refused to return her papers unless she was paid \$1000. Mary did not have the money and refused to endure more malnourishment and ill-treatment. "Even if I stayed," she added, "if I wanted to leave later, she would have asked for the same amount of money. My friend helped me pack my baggage and catch a cab.

When the cab driver found out what had happened, he claimed to be an agent and offered us a well-paid job in return for \$500 each. My friend took care of the expenses since I had no money, but we never heard from the cab driver again."

A common denominator among the interviewees in this apartment is the a priori ignorance of the job they are supposed to be given in Lebanon before arrival. They had all been lured in by an illusory work-study program, unaware that they would be working as domestic laborers. One of them explained that she had had twelve years of schooling, after which she attained a diploma in typing. They had all fallen into the same trap. A job offer posted on the front glass-pane of an agency announced an offer of a work-study program; work during the day, studies in the evening, and a monthly stipend of \$300 to \$400 (as opposed to the meager \$100 they received on average as their pay upon their arrival to Lebanon). None of them expected to be working as domestic laborers. "I never even used to sweep the floor of my own mother's house," said the typist, "And here, I was expected to do everything. My life with them was intolerable. I had to leave with or without my papers."

With no money, no papers, and no justice to expect from the Lebanese judiciary system, migrants find no other option but to become free-lancers while they are held as detainees in the larger jail, which is Lebanon. By running away, these migrants have acted out their desire to depart, but the system will not allow it. The government does not deport illegal aliens immediately (Al Zougbi: b). "I wish they would," was one comment. Instead, they are arrested and imprisoned.

The Darak and the Jail

According to the locals, the Darak (the internal security forces) conduct regular busts of the migrant residents of the street. "Those who are illegal aliens pay some \$100 and then they are let loose," said a local grocery shop owner. The reaction was different when I brought it up among the migrant apartment inhabitants. "Sure, if you have \$100, they'll take it and go. But if you do not, you think they care? They'll arrest you and take you to prison."

Harking back to the debtor prison tradition, Lebanese legislation favors imprisonment over deportation. According to an officer in the Hobeish police station in Ras Beirut, the duration of imprisonment is calculated based on the fine to be paid (Al Zougbi: b). For illegal residency, the fine amounts to up to \$1500. The duration of imprisonment is based on an calculated time equivalent of the monetary amount owned the authorities (estimated at around three months in prison). Upon release, the migrant is expected to pay 5000 Lebanese Pounds (approximately \$3) for each day spent in prison. If the detainee has the money, she is

released. If not, she must remain incarcerated until she pays the money owed for her jail stay (this is usually covered by friends residing in Lebanon). Only after that are illegal migrants gathered in a form of communal housing of sorts, until they add up to a sufficient number for transportation, after which they are deported as a group.

In prison, "They don't care whether you're a murderer, a thief or just someone with no papers. They throw you all in together," said the suspicious one. "They don't even give Kotex [sanitary pads] to women who need it. You live in your dirt and mess."

Ethnic Enclaves

As a result of the difficulties they face, Ethiopian migrants have created tightly knit ethnic enclaves. In times of hardship, this migrant group constructs a strong sense of community and solidarity. My host told of an old, blind Ethiopian lady who had been living in the very apartment in which I was conducting the interview. She was also an illegal resident. Due to her age and physical disability, the woman could hardly work and therefore had no source of income. The people in the building would take care of her by providing her with food, clothing and money. On one of their regular busts, the police arrested her and imprisoned her in spite of her deteriorating health. In collaboration with the Lebanese Red Cross, Ethiopians from all over the country donated money to support her case. "There was money coming in from Jounieh, from Kaslik, from Sidon ... from all over Lebanon," said the one I had regarded as suspicious. They gathered enough money to pay her fines and send her home.

"We do that for the needy. We help each other out," said the elderly one before she left, saying she had a job appointment.

A New Form of Remittance

Remittances sent home by Ethiopian migrants are not economic in nature. "We barely make enough money to make ends meet here, between rent, food and clothing," said one. Remittances are sent in the form of warnings. Network theory suggests that a bank of information is created as a result of information remittance; a bank of information consisting of the knowledge that the initial migrant has collected about her new environment, which she sends back home (Hugo ; Massey et al. 448). Networks are created as facilitators for the next wave(s) of migrants. Potential migrants are informed of what to expect in the country of destination. They then travel there and are received by the previous migrants who are better acquainted with the ways of the foreign land. In the case of the Ethiopian migrants, the networks created act as virtual blockades. As such, the type of informational networks created do not serve as "pull" forces by the country of destination, as the literature assumes would be their primary function (Taylor). On the

contrary, the information sent back home serves the purpose of halting the arrival of a new wave of potential sufferers.

Sex and Servitude

During the course of our conversation, the one I regarded as suspicious had stepped out. When she came back, she was wearing a vibrant green dress. I complimented her taste. "You think it's pretty," she replied, "Other people call me a whore⁴ when I wear this dress."

If they go out in modern attire rather than their traditional clothing, these women are often physically and verbally harassed by Lebanese men. "When we're walking in the streets, guys on motorcycles slap our asses and say nasty things." "Once I took a cab," said the typist, "There was another woman already inside. When she was dropped off, the cab driver started saying all sorts of nasty things to me. I told him, 'Why are you saying this to me? Why weren't you saying these things to her?' I wanted to get out, but he wouldn't stop. Then he picked up another local lady and he just stopped talking altogether. 'Why don't you say anything to her? Come on, tell her the things you were telling me,' I said to him right in front of her."

Her friend added, "Once I went to visit my friend in prison. I had to wait two hours before they let me in to see her. When I got home, it was dark. My boss called me a whore for staying out this late." "Why are we called whore when Lebanese women dress worse than we do?" asked the suspicious one. I asked her what she thought. "Because we have no family behind us," she replied, "Usually if anyone messes with you, they have your father and your brother to deal with. We have no one."

Discrimination: Gender, Family and Race

There are various ways of dealing theoretically with the phenomenon of gender discrimination described above. The race/family interface is a good starting point. To this day, females are associated with domestic servitude (OSCE 17) in the Arab world; this exacerbates the discrimination migrant women encounter. But the disparate inconsistency in the treatment of local woman and migrant woman is rooted in notions of racism and a lack of familial support. The protection of the family's reputation through the preservation of the woman's honor (Schneider 19) is central to Arab culture, as it is to Ethiopian culture as well (AFROL). As such, the local woman does indeed have her 'father and brother to stand up' for her, while the migrant woman is here alone. Family ties, kinship and the lack thereof play a central role in the discrimination faced by these women.

Racism is also central to the Ethiopian experience. Associations between skin-color and servitude have long been embedded in Arab culture. "In Arabic, the term abed

is used to denote both a 'black' person and a 'slave' (Jureidini 2). This can be traced back to the Jahiliyya (the days prior to Mohamed's prophecies). The hadith⁵ abounds with stories of how the Prophet freed black slaves and denounced their subordination⁶ (Khoder 16-18). This indicates the presence of black slavery in the past. The association of servitude with black-skinned people is carried through to this day.

Cultures of Honor

Discrimination goes beyond gender, skin color and family ties. Culture also plays a decisive role, as can be seen in the following juxtaposition of the Lebanese and Ethiopian experience in the "Diaspora." In his article, Citizenship and Honourability, Ghassan Hage invokes Levi-Strauss' idea of 'communal living' to define 'mutual obligation' as "an ethical structure of reciprocity that can only exist and be reproduced in societies that valorize, or honor their members" (7). From that perspective, he argues that the reason heightened tension exists between Australians and the Arabs in Australia is because the Arabs are "well-versed in the game of honour" (7) whereas Australians are not. Drawing upon their own cultural practice and 'etiquette', the Arabs define their status in Australia as that of 'guests' and resent the 'refugee' treatment they actually receive from the Australian community, which Arab culture would deem 'humiliating'. In defining themselves as a 'culture of honour', the Arabs differentiate between themselves and the Australian community at large. They invoke this 'characteristic' of Arab culture not because 'honor' and 'guesthood' are unconditionally adopted in their culture, but because in their subservient position in the Australian culture, invoking this notion delineates the differences between their culture and Australian justifications of the maltreatment of the Arabs in Australia. It is ironic that the Ethiopian community in Lebanon, an Arab country, is suffering from the same maltreatment. This same Arab culture of honor serves as a source of humiliation for our "Ethiopian guests", who, for their part, question the validity of the concept of 'cultures of honour' in the Middle East altogether.

Rather than explain discriminating behavior in terms of "cultures of honour", perhaps the notion of power relations would serve as a better explicator. Hage's notion of empowered practical prejudice proposes that racism is the result of "subordinating a racial group and maintaining control over that racial group" (Sivanandan in Hage 2000, 35). Portraying Afro-Asian migrants as inferior and incompetent maintains their subordinate position in the looking-glass of both the self and the other; locals reinforce the culturally embedded servile position of dark-skinned people, which in turn impedes the migrants' ability to discard this status.

Problems of Integration

In light of what has been revealed regarding the conditions under which the Ethiopians live, issues of integration and communal belonging can provoke further discussion. As these women's declarations have pointed out, the interviewees were not interested in staying permanently in Lebanon. The return home is a journey they await desperately. This is of primary interest to this study, specifically in light of the publication of Massey et al., in which the suggestion is made that once migration has begun, it is not only maintained, but is also more likely to reoccur. Massey further suggests that the duration of stay in the country of destination positively affects the probability of permanent settlement, despite earlier intentions to eventually return home (1986). How, then, can we explain the lack of interest in settlement shown by these women?

Theories that argue for the perpetuation of migration, such as Institutional Theory (Massey et al.) and the Theory of Cumulative Causation (Massey, 1990), may be used to explain the depreciation of migration, as we did before in explaining the transmission of negative information through the use of Network Theory. Institutional Theory suggests that the market adjusts within migratory cultures encouraging the activities of private profit-oriented institutions and voluntary human rights organizations. The private institutions (in the form of recruitment agencies) find a profitable business in coordinating migration between sending and receiving countries⁶. Humanitarian organizations then arise to ensure the establishment and enforcement of migrants' rights and to restrain possible abuse, be it physical, verbal or emotional, along with other forms of discrimination. Hence, migration is encouraged due to the lessening of red tape, the facilitation of finding a job in the host countries, and enforcement of rights through the creation of humanitarian organizations. Although recruitment agencies abound in Lebanon, the activities of humanitarian organizations are still underdeveloped. As the anecdote of the old, blind lady demonstrates, migrant communities must rely largely on themselves in times of hardship.

The theory of Cumulative Causation stipulates that the tendency to migrate is reinforced through a cycle involving the social labeling of jobs as unsuitable for locals, and the migrant's development of a taste for the host culture (Massey et al. 462)⁸. Although domestic labor has indeed become an occupational reserved for migrants⁹, the extent to which the migrants have developed a taste for the host culture is questionable.

Racist reactions and living conditions typical of illegal residents – often encountered by migrants in the country of destination – are a vital cause of disinterest in remaining in a host country. In Lebanon these are most certainly not the only factors repelling migration. Research by Leo Chavez

has shown that despite racist conditions, undocumented migrant Mexicans in the US persistently voice a desire to belong to the community. This he attributes to their "overcoming feelings of isolation, developing a network of family and friends in the local community, acquiring local cultural knowledge, and reconciling [themselves] to the possible threat of deportation" (62). As such, these undocumented migrants choose to stay in the US due to fabricated networks.

This can be contrasted with Lebanon's migrant population. The migrant community in Lebanon is predominantly single; they either leave their families behind or are unmarried. As such, there are few migrant family units. As we saw in Chavez's findings, forming a family and giving birth to children in the country of destination can help incorporate a migrant, legal or not, into the new community. The children begin attending local schools, acquiring local culture, and interacting with local children. Furthermore, the process of integration is easier for a family unit than an individual unit as the community interaction of each individual can then be carried back into the household in which the family members themselves interact. Information about the community, friendship networks and cultural knowledge can thereby be acquired and transmitted at a more rigorous rate as several individuals—rather than just one—are being exposed to the new community. On a different level, the need to belong is in itself satiated by being a member of a family. In a strange environment, a sense of family mitigates one's alienation and makes one more willing to endure difficulties. The company of men and children is absent from most women's lives in Lebanon. When I brought up the subject of family, silence surged into the room. None of them saw the founding of a family as a possibility in the near future.

According to Chavez's findings, a steady source of income also serves as an invitation to permanent settlement. Ethiopian free-lancers are often illegal residents who find jobs either through word of mouth or through illegal agencies (Al Zougbi: c). A steady source of income is therefore far from what the clandestine market offers free-lancing migrant laborers in Lebanon.

As was illustrated through the story of the old blind lady, the Ethiopians have managed to carry their 'imagined community' into this new country, by establishing a strong network of friends (Anderson). However, the isolation of the 'Street of Slaves', its name, and the locals' reaction to the migrants, reflects the marginalization of this migrant community. Social discrimination, political policy and abusive treatment illustrate the larger community's refusal to imagine the intruders as part of their own community. Official attempts at assimilation, integration or multiculturalism have yet to be introduced. On the contrary, there is a complete lack of attention to the migrants' presence. One rea-

son for this is a disregard of the culture, beliefs, and language of migrants. The Lebanese see the Ethiopian presence as a physical phenomenon divorced of any humanity. These workers are expected to perform manual labor with no consideration for the human identity, culture, beliefs and language, which these migrants automatically bring with them. Another reason is the assumption that the migrants' stay is temporary and therefore ineffectual. According to my sources, however, the stay of those illegal migrants I interviewed may not be temporary after all.

Conclusion

The information gathered on the living conditions, remittance practices, ethnic enclaves and problems of integration among the Ethiopian migrant community in Lebanon allows for two conclusions. First, the decision to work independently among the interviewees arose from work in abusive households, signifying a direct relation between household abuse and free-lancing, in isolated cases. Furthermore, none of the interviewees wanted to remain in Lebanon. Free-lancing seems to be the middle ground between avoiding live-in abuse and the inability to go home. It must be noted here that whether or not this can be generalized to all free-lancers is questionable. Previous research has shown that domestic abuse is the exception rather than the rule (Jureidini & Moukarbel).

Second, the incorporation of this migrant community into the larger Lebanese community does not seem likely in the near future. This I attribute to the lack of family units, unstable sources of income, racist surroundings, and the isolation of the migrant community from the local imagined community. Perhaps if the aforementioned factors were present, the interviewees would be more likely to choose permanent settlement over departure.

On a final note, human trafficking and exploitation has certainly been of academic as well as a humanitarian concern. Current legislation policies and procedures in Lebanon have proven inadequate to reform and correct the trafficking and household abuse of domestic migrants. This is because trafficking and undocumented settlement is approached primarily a security and an illegal migration issue. Consequently, most law enforcement strategies target victims of trafficking and household abuse and not the agents that traffic in and/or abuse them. Hard academic results achieve little when they merely reprimand the perpetrators within a system of abuse, who victimize female immigrants. Lebanon is one of those countries that facilitate the negative conditions under which immigrant women live; it turns a blind eye to the abuses they undergo. The Ethiopian interviewees who have been provided a voice in this study have successfully survived the slavery in the households of their initial employers. They continue to suffer from the entrapment of a prison on a much larger scale.

End Notes

1. It must not be assumed that all labor migrants in Lebanon are trafficked. The scope of the research in this study does not permit further in-depth work on this issue.
2. Abeed is plural for Abed in Arabic. The term Abed may be used interchangeably to mean 'slave' or 'black-skinned'.
3. Pseudonym; all names used in this paper are fictional.
4. With the authors consent, the authentic Lebanese term sharmoota, which the Ethiopian domestic workers continuously used in their interviews, has been replaced with the English term "whore", with respect to the sensitivities of certain readers.
5. The hadith is a collection of statements made by 'reliable' individuals, usually relatives of the Prophet, about the life and undertakings of the Prophet.
6. Stories about Bilala al-Habahi, a slave turned Muslim whom the Prophet designated to call for prayer, are among the most popular in the hadith. 'Ubadah ibn Samit was another former slave who rose to prominence.
7. Lebanon is infested with such agencies for housemaids, which take care of an immigrant worker's paper work and guarantee her a job prior to her arrival. In Lebanon, these agencies have attained a notorious reputation regarding their abuse of maids. Cases have been covered by such journalists as Reem Haddad.
8. Finding proof contrary to neoclassical claims, Massey further contends that the decision to migrate soon no longer necessarily relies on wage and employment opportunities alone, but also on networks present in the country of destination.
9. It is considered unsuitable for locals to work as domestic laborers today, but in the past, domestic help came from local women. (Jureidini)

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In Service to the Movement

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In the pre-dawn hours of March 25, Mila Windsari Affendi, a 15-year-old maid from Indonesia working in the home of a prominent Gaza attorney, climbed the stairs of her employer's four-story residence, unlatched a window, and perched her small, shaking body on the frame. While the three young children she cared for slept soundly, Mila clutched her handbag and flung herself off the ledge.

Whether it was an attempt to escape her abusive work conditions and run away, or to end her life, Mila's jump accomplished neither. After crashing onto the dusty street below, she was alive but could not move. One of the girl's legs was paralyzed; the other was fractured. She was bleeding internally from a punctured liver.

While her story provided sensational headlines and a buzz of gossip that spread like wildfire across Gaza, Mila's desperate leap from the window cracked more than just her frail bones. For the first time, it seemed, the news media and the public broke their silence and began to examine the increasingly prevalent practice of hiring foreign women like Mila to work as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy Palestinians.

Even in the wake of her jump, however, the precarious situation of these women persists, as it has since they first began to appear in the West Bank and Gaza following the return of the PLO in 1994.

When the former revolutionaries and freedom fighters came home, some of them brought with them trappings of the lifestyle they had grown accustomed to in places like Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf, where employing live-in maids from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines is commonplace. (A dismal human rights record accompanies this phenomenon.) There, in well-to-do homes, shirts are ironed, floors are mopped, tea is served and children are cared for by hired domestic workers who migrate thousands of miles to earn a mere pittance for their services.

"You would never have seen this happening here during the [first] Intifada," says one former activist and political prisoner, who has several friends who now have maids. "Many things have changed in our society since then. Our values have changed."

In recent years, the custom of hiring foreign maids has trickled down from returning PLO cadres to the mass-

es—those masses with the cash, that is. The up-front cost for obtaining a maid is \$2,500, made payable to the Palestinian agency that facilitates the maid's trip from her homeland.

On a typical Thursday evening in Ramallah, the open-air Al Sirreyeh social club is buzzing with families out to enjoy conversing with friends. It is not uncommon to spot half a dozen Sri Lankan women chasing after toddlers and feeding ice cream to children, while their parents drink tea, smoke argilas, and chat with friends. In Bethlehem, maids can be seen sweeping the front steps inside the ivy-covered gated entrances of some of the town's grandest homes. And in Gaza, an estimated 500 women are employed in the offices, beachfront homes or high-rise apartments of the new returning elite.

There are currently an estimated 1,000 foreign maids working in the West Bank. They come for two-year terms to escape countries of devastating poverty and earn salaries of \$100-\$150 per month. Their employers are required to provide them with food, clothing and shelter and to pay for their medical expenses. The maids typically range in age from early twenties to early forties; often they are forced to leave behind their own children, in order to seek a living by caring for someone else's.

It is customary for a maid's passport and work permit to be confiscated and held by either her employer or the agency that brings her. She is often kept isolated from other maids, for fear she will escape.

"The agency that arranged for our maid told us not to let her out of the house and not to let her talk to other Sri Lankans," says a Ramallah woman who hired a maid to care for her three young children while she and her husband are at work. "We ignored this. But there are four or five Sri Lankans in our building, and sometimes I see them whispering to each other from the balcony."

If this weren't enough cause for concern, there's the fact that these workers have no legal rights and sign no work contract. "We have a new labor code now, but maids working in people's homes aren't mentioned in it," says Ghazi Al-Khalili, general director of planning and information at the Palestinian Ministry of Labor. "These women are working all day and all night. The law says nothing about their hours or their wages."

Following Mila Affendi's jump, Al Resaleh newspaper in Gaza wrote a series of articles that resulted in the closure of Morning Star, the agency responsible for bringing this young maid from Indonesia. Though successful, the campaign focused less on rooting out a system that brings women there, virtually as indentured servants,

and instead condemned the specifics of the girl's case. Morning Star had allegedly smuggled her into the country and forged the age on her passport, representing her as a woman of 27, instead of the five-foot, 80-pound teenager she really was.

"The problem is bringing people into the country illegally," says Ghazi Hamad, editor of Al Resaleh. "To bring girls who are too young, or to deal with these servants in a bad way, this is a problem." However, Hamad says he sees no problem with the concept of having a servant. "It's not a bad thing as long as people deal with the servant as a human being," he says. "Islam tells us to deal with anyone who is serving you as your brother."

But if brotherly love does not extend to one's unlucky maid, as was the case with Mila Affendi, then what? Terrified and desperate in a situation where she was being beaten, Mila could not simply walk out the front door of her employer's home, passport in hand, and file a complaint. Perhaps it is not surprising that she had to exit from a fourth-floor window.

"Palestinians are generous by nature, kind by nature. We don't mistreat these women, like in other countries," says Mohammed Faris, owner of Rosy, one of three companies in Gaza that bring in maids from Sri Lanka and Indonesia. (The other two are Al-Wafah and the Sri Lanka Office for General Services, which advertises "Sri Lankan and Philipinian (sic) charwomen.")

A two-story operation, located in the wealthy Remal neighborhood, Rosy doubles as a \$1.5 million luxury beauty salon and gym. Upstairs, while women from Gaza's elite are slimming their thighs in an aerobics class, having their eyebrows shaped or dipping into the jacuzzi, Faris is busy downstairs matching maids to work in homes like theirs.

His large desk is littered with xeroxed copies of work permit applications and passport photos for hundreds of maids seeking employment in Palestinian homes. Young, empty-eyed faces stare searchingly into the camera; they engage in a bizarre silent exchange with the posters that hang on Rosy's walls. There, creamy-white European models with pouting lips advertise cosmetics and miracle skin treatments: "Without distress and doubts," they promise, "100 percent herbal; 100 percent effective."

How did Faris decide on the name Rosy? "See, I believe every woman is a rose," he says. "Every woman has her own ... essence." Just then, one of the three Sri Lankan "roses" that work for him enters with a tray of coffee. She wears a white cotton shirt and a black skirt. Her

nails are filed into points and lacquered with bright red polish, most likely courtesy of the salon upstairs. She makes no eye contact and says nothing, nervously setting down the coffee cups and exiting the air-conditioned office, back into Gaza's blazing afternoon sun.

Formerly the owner of a household appliance store in Gaza City, Faris sounds like any other entrepreneur when he describes how he got into the maid business. He leans back in his black leather desk chair, takes a drag from his cigarette and explains: "I got the idea to start this business because my dad was sick with diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis," he says. "We got a maid and paid her \$125 per month. Slowly my friends started to bring them, and I thought if there's a demand, why not open an office for it?"

The agency makes a written agreement with the employer, or "second party" that reads something like a warranty for a refrigerator or a TV. "The second party has the right to exchange the servant within 30 days from the date of receiving her if she is ill or unable to work," it states. "After 30 days from the date of reception, the second party may not return her or exchange her." The contract also requires that the family treat the maid well. But, in the absence of laws to protect her, that is largely up to the family.

"The problem with this type of migratory labor is that these women are working in hidden settings, private homes," says Rema Hammami, a professor and researcher in Birzeit University's Women's Studies Program. "They don't have legal rights, nor do they have relatives and family around for support. This puts them at incredible risk."

Tales of abuse, though mostly still recounted by word of mouth, are rampant. Maids have attempted to flee their employers' homes, some escaping into Israel where salaries are higher, though there as well abuse and lack of legal rights remain a problem.

Nonetheless, Faris is right when he says there is a high demand for maids. "There are families who have elderly people living with them, big families with many children. Sometimes because of people's financial situation, the women have to work. But who will look after the children and the house, who will clean and cook?"

"You can't find a Palestinian woman to do this work," he adds. "The Arabic man won't allow a wife, a sister or a daughter to work as a servant in another person's home."

But some women who have hired Sri Lankan maids say

they did so because it was the only affordable option. "I needed someone to work 4-5 hours a day to help care for my elderly parents and my brother who is disabled," says Iman, a 45-year-old Ramallah woman who never married and now carries the responsibility for these family members, in addition to working on her master's degree. "I tried to get a Palestinian to help us, but it would have cost 6,000 NIS (\$1,500) per month. That's more than my monthly income."

The burden is perhaps even more crushing for married women with children. As more and more of these women pursue degrees in higher education or careers outside the home, the social expectations to produce many children (the average Palestinian household has four), cook fresh meals every day, and keep the home immaculately clean, have remained rigidly in place. "We are a male chauvinist society," Faris says. "If the woman has to work, the man is not going to help her around the house."

Yet, cheap as they may come, Sri Lankan maids are still too expensive for some middle-class couples. "I wish we had the money to bring in a Sri Lankan," sighs Nawal, a 34-year-old mother of three young girls. A former Intifada activist with a local women's committee, she now works full time as a nurse in a West Bank clinic, taking classes at night to complete her bachelor's degree. Members of a leftist faction, she and her husband once espoused Marxist principles of class conflict and worker's rights.

In more recent years, those ideals have gotten lost in the shuffle of a hectic daily schedule. "Every morning I'm up at 5 a.m. to prepare breakfast and get the girls ready for school. I arrive home from work at 2:30 p.m. and begin making dinner. Somewhere in there, I have to find the time to study for school. My husband won't help clean the house; he won't even pick up a dish or peel a potato. I feel like a zombie."

In the context of this dilemma, foreign maids, even in their fragile circumstances, end up playing a mediating role. "The whole issue of sharing work between men and women gets buried," says Hammami. "In the absence of a major transformation in domestic gender relations, hiring a maid solves the problem for everyone."

End Notes

* In 1999-2000, Mary Abowd lived in Bethlehem, Palestine, where she worked as a journalist. This article originally appeared in Palestine Report (September 2000) and was published just before the outbreak of the second Intifada.

Tâlibât I-Ilm in Morocco: The Non-Arab Woman Ethnographer as Student of the World

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The status of Moroccan women in the public sphere is undergoing dramatic change. Last September (2002), 35 women won seats in the Moroccan 325-member House of Representatives, whereas previously, there were only two (ArabicNews 2002). This trend toward increasing visibility challenges long-held notions about the gendering of public space in Arab societies.

Three late-1990's ethnographies by non-Arab women offer insight into changing conceptions of Moroccan womanhood: Deborah Kapchan's *Gender on the Market* (1996); Elizabeth Fernea's *In Search of Islamic Feminism* (1997); and Stefania Pandolfo's *Impasse of the Angels* (1998). By developing sensitive and innovative ethnographic approaches to understanding sex differences in Morocco, these works counter negative and enduring trends that have characterized Western feminist research of Arab societies. As described by Azza Basarudin: "Arab women are marginalized within the sphere of Western feminism(s) because they have been portrayed as passive victims instead of active participants seeking mobility and change in their society" (2003: 62).

The ethnographies of Kapchan, Fernea, and Pandolfo share three central characteristics that contribute to the

success of their projects. First, each posits a process of social change in Morocco that operates by the subtle reinterpretation of tradition instead of outright rejection, and in which the ideal of gender complementarity serves as the basis for conceptualizing sex differences. In contrast to the universalizing approaches of earlier feminist ethnographers who imposed a Western sex/gender binary onto their studies,¹ these scholars begin by seeking to understand how the individuals they study theorize womanhood.²

A second strength uniting these works is a commitment to analyzing gender relations in Morocco as part of a network of international power relations. Early Western ethnographies largely regard non-Western societies as self-contained systems, and have studied kinship and male/female relationships as isolated and independent of other concerns. Yet the imperative to take engagement with other countries into account is especially salient in the case of Morocco, due to its geographical proximity to Europe and its history of French colonialism.

Finally, each ethnographer rigorously situates herself within the study, both in ethnographic methodology and in its written representation. Each engages in close rela-

tionships and self-revelation with the individuals from whom they wish to learn,³ and each writes in a personal narrative style that forefronts the conditions under which knowledge was gained, achieving what Donna Haraway refers to as "the partial perspective" and abandoning claims to the "view from above."⁴

In *Gender on the Market*, Kapchan carries out fieldwork in marketplaces and homes of Beni Mellal, a provincial capital at the foot of the Middle Atlas mountains, and deftly engages hybridity⁵ and performance theories⁶ to trace how women are transforming and restructuring these sites to meet their changing economic needs. In the Morocco section of *In Search of Islamic Feminism*, Fernea enters into the university, the courthouse, and a house of Parliament to engage in discussions about women's changing status. In *Impasse of the Angels*, Pandolfo conducts fieldwork in a rural village in the Wâd Dra' valley of southern Morocco, and the section of her book that deals most explicitly with gender is comprised of psychoanalytic and etymological exploration of a long, free-flowing dialogue with one of her informants, a man of ideas named Hadda.

Each ethnographer documents social change by focusing on the interplay between conservative ideologies found within religious and quasi-religious sayings such as Hadiths,⁷ and the enactment of female autonomy. Fatima Mernissi, a prominent Moroccan sociologist, writes about the centrality of these sayings in Morocco and has devoted an entire book, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1987) to tracing the influence and pervasiveness of one particularly influential Hadith: "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" (1987:3). Although such sayings would seem to indelibly confine and restrict women's place, ethnographic investigation reveals a complex and contradictory process of their deployment.

Strategies of negotiating oral tradition surface throughout Elizabeth Fernea's exploration of Moroccan women's empowerment in the public sphere. Fernea engages in interviews with influential Moroccan women, such as Dr. Fouzia Rhissassi, chair of the women's studies steering committee at Muhammad V University; Latifa Djebabdi, dedicated activist and member of Union de l'Action Féminin, and Mesdames Bennani-Smires and Badia Skalli, the first two female members of parliament. Fernea finds that these women do not see their empowerment in opposition to the

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ideologies of the Qur'an and Hadith, but rather against conservative interpretation of these texts. For example, Madame Skalli attributes the suppression of women in Moroccan politics to "conservative ideology...The Qur'an specifically gives women the right to prophesy and participate in political and economic life" (122).

Similarly to the way Mernissi's interpretations of the Hadith serves as a counterpoint for the analysis of lived experience in Fernea's study, a saying attributed to the Sidi Abderahman al-Majdub⁸ serves to animate the discussion of marketplace oratory in Kapchan's analysis. "The woman's market is volatile/He who enters beware! / They'll show you a ton of profit/And walk away with your capital" (1986: 29). There is no doubt that this saying condemns interactions with women in the marketplace. Yet, it is a female majduba/vendor who voices it, and instead of driving away customers, it serves to legitimate her presence and increase the effectiveness of her sales pitch. In analyzing this reversal, Kapchan reveals a complex pattern by which women mobilize patriarchal discourses to increase their own power and authority: "Subversive messages are coded in subtle ways in the Moroccan suq. If marketplace women sometimes employ negative stereotypes of feminine gender, it is in order to situate themselves in a domain that has always been inhabited by men" (Kapchan, 72).

Pandolfo also meditates on a common saying in the section entitled, "Contra-diction: Hadda, Son of Tammu:" "And the Prophet said: I haven't left behind me a more harmful fitna [chaos or disorder] to men than women" (Pandolfo, 160). Her presentation of an extended dialogue with Hadda consists of three parts: "Dialogics of

Fitna," in which Hadda and Pandolfo discuss this Hadith and relate fitna to femininity; "Hasab and Nasab," in which the complementary aspects of masculine and feminine are mapped out through an etymological discussion; and "My Father and I" in which Hadda discusses his relationships with each of his parents. Pandolfo juxtaposes Hadda's explanations of the concepts of fitna, hasab, and nasab with Freudian and Lacanian exploration of how he figures his parents. By laying out fundamental contradictions between different levels of discourse, she taps into

unconscious embodiments of the feminine and the masculine. Her analysis reveals the presence of many competing discourses on gender at work at an individual level and national level.

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The three ethnographers place their analysis within a transnational framework. Kapchan centers her exploration into women's new forms of economic agency upon the concept of hybridity, and investigates how discourses of Western origin mix and blend with other discourses on "pragmatic, symbolic, generic, and semantic levels" (1996: 7). In the chapter "Shtara [Bargaining]: Competence in Cleverness," Kapchan provides an analysis of how a female marketplace vendor defines and legitimates her right to determine the price for her own wares by setting her marketplace strategy into opposition with the Western convention of *prix fixe*, a relatively recent mode of exchange in Beni Mellal. The woman vendor asks her Moroccan clients, "Aren't we all Muslims?" (1996: 58) a rhetorical question traditionally exchanged exclusively among men. Kapchan shows how the presence of Western vendors in the marketplace serves as a factor that reduces the salience of sex differences in this interaction and emphasizes identification along national origin, facilitating the female vendor's ease in appropriating "male" speech.

Fernea also describes interactions with the West, especially regarding the large number of Moroccan men employed overseas. She observes, "This meant women-headed households, and a real shift in the patterns of authority in the traditional Moroccan family" (1998: 116). Fernea also delineates Moroccan women's disidentification with the language and ideology of Western feminism in favor of developing their own paradigms. Each of the women's rights advocates with whom she meets espouses the wish to distance herself from the term "feminist." As expressed by one female undergraduate: "We don't use this word, feminist...It has a bad connotation. It means we are borrowing someone else's culture...We are still trying to find a word to express our desire for women's rights" (1998: 96).

Pandolfo draws attention to the shadow of Western colonization at the outset of her book. During her first visit to Wād Dra' valley, residents compare her to a colonialist from the past who came in the guise of a *tâlib l-ilm*, or wandering scholar, only to leave and return at the head of a French army convoy. Pandolfo is told that he asked residents of the region for information about its communities, "Like you are asking us now" (Pandolfo, 1).

Although Western women scholars carry the stigma of both Western origin and feminine gender, the *tâlib l-ilm* represents a cultural prototype that might account for their presence in Morocco. This figure, typified by Ibn Battuta, the 14th century Moroccan icon celebrated for his journey into foreign lands for the sake of learning and experience, provides a native analog for Western scholarship in the Arab world. These ethnographies suggest that to earn the status of *tâlibat l-ilm*, the non-Arab ethnographer of Morocco must prove herself on two levels: she must demonstrate a remarkably adaptive intellectual capacity, and she must engage with Moroccans on an intersubjective level.

Each ethnographer demonstrates her capacity for insight to her informants in a unique way. Kapchan's ability to perceive the lineaments of the social drama or performative ritual structuring everyday life guides her to the crux of situations, allowing her to formulate questions which bridge the distance between herself and her informants. Fernea's reputation for producing sensitive and insightful work facilitates her friendship with Moroccan women during her research. Pandolfo's demonstration of her mental agility earns the respect of Hadda, a man who holds himself aloof from even the most respected of his own society. At the beginning of their acquaintanceship, he poses a riddle about the nature of insight and understanding, and by solving it, she simultaneously proves her intelligence and her capacity to identify with him.

At the same time as they are achieving intellectual connections, these women engage in emotional bonds with those from whom they wish to learn so that their work takes on an intersubjective dimension. Each of these women become involved in a network of social relationships in Morocco, and we catch this in glimpses throughout the ethnographies.

We see Pandolfo carrying Hadda's child from his mother's to his father's arms, Fernea enveloped in a heartfelt embrace with her longtime friend Aisha, and Kapchan on the rooftop hanging laundry with her friends as they discuss the details of their lives.

Basarudin asserts, "Without accepting Arab women as subjects in their own right, and 'making way for them to come forth not as spectacles, but in their contradictions', cross cultural inquiry will remain a relationship of domination, and feminist solidarity will continue to be elu-

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sive" (2002; 64; qt. Ghosh and Bose 1997: 203). The studies by Kapchan, Fernea, and Pandolfo reflect this insight, and will serve as models to guide future ethnographic work in Morocco. By focusing on changes in women's social agency, emphasizing relationality within

the fieldwork encounter, and analyzing women's perspective in dialogue with Western feminisms, these three works facilitate the theorizing of woman's modes of empowerment in contemporary Morocco from the perspective of the non-Arab ethnographer.

End Notes

- 1 Second wave feminists such as Rubin (1975) Rosaldo & Lamphere (1974), and Ortner & Whitehead (1981) emphasized the separation of biological sex from socially constructed gender roles as a necessary step to understanding the basis of universal female subordination.
- 2 Rosa Braidotti notes: "The sex/gender distinction, which is one of the pillars on which English feminist theory is built, makes neither epistemological nor political sense in many non-English, western-European contexts, where the notions of 'sexuality' and 'sexual difference' are used instead (Braidotti and Butler 1994: 38).
- 3 For an explanation of the concepts of intersubjectivity and distance within ethnographic fieldwork, see D. Kondo (1986), L. Abu Lughod, (1986), and R. Rosaldo (1984).
- 4 On the situated perspective, Haraway writes, "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims...I am arguing for the view from a body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway 1988: 596).
- 5 Kapchan explains: "Hybridity is effected when ever two or more historically separate realms come together in any degree that challenges their socially constructed autonomy" (1996: 6).
- 6 On her use of performance theory, Kapchan writes: "While drawing upon its definition in speech act theory as language which performs...I also allow it to resonate with the concept of performance as cultural enactment or public display" (1996: 22).
- 7 "The Hadith collections are works that record in minute detail what the Prophet said and did. They constitute, along with the Koran (the book revealed by God), both the source of law and the source for distinguishing the true from the false, the permitted from the forbidden—they have shaped Muslim ethics and values" (Mernissi 1987: 3).
- 8 "A *majdub* is someone who has supernatural magnetism, and thus a certain authority, in regard to the world of the spirit... The most famous *majdub* in Moroccan history was Sidi Abderhman al-Majdub" (Kapchan 1996: 73).

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Flights of Fancy: On Settling in a Feminine “Home” in Morocco

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My grandmother, wise like other grandmothers, once told me that life is the stuff that happens while we are making plans. In many ways, this article adheres to her philosophy. When I asked a friend why she had come to Morocco, she told me, “Well, I was just angry in England. I was tired of the people and the society, I needed to go anywhere, and it was just Morocco I ended up going to”. That was a couple of years ago, and she still has not left. What is interesting in hers as well as in other women’s narratives, is the fact that their presence in Morocco is somehow a critique of their own culture. Leaving is a sort of protest, and the act of setting up household, the most personal of human spaces, then becomes at once an act of defiance as well as an escape into a more comfortable culture. Never intending to write about the non-Moroccan women I met in my travels and studies, I find myself trying to understand the larger-than-life gravitational pull to this place that many of us never intended to go to, but now call “home”. Considering that in Morocco foreign women get unwanted male attention in some public places, are the recipients of comic marriage propositions, that they are forced to fight for acceptance in ways they might not have to in their own countries, not to mention the need to learn one or more of the languages that allow them to function (Moroccan regional dialects, Classical Arabic, French, various Berber dialects,

and Spanish) what makes them want to stay?

While coming and going to Morocco, I have met many different kinds of “Western” and non-Arab women. The terms “Western” and non-Arab do not fit neatly in this context, although my own impressions fit into this category. The foreign women I have met in Morocco have been from Korea, Germany, France, Pakistan, the U.K., Egypt, United States, Senegal, Vietnam, France, Belgium, Spain, Afghanistan, Canada, Mauritania, and Turkey. They have been students, nuns, teachers, housewives, travelers, journalists, administrative assistants, business owners, restaurant owners, hotel proprietors, retirees, artists, café owners, heiresses, NGO directors, Sufi adepts, government attachés, and missionaries.

Some, like Edith Freud in *Hideous Kinky*¹, come to Morocco to live out chemically induced dreams of spiritual fulfillment, and sometimes really do find it. Others, like Jane Bowles², run from their own culture, then discover that the people to whose country they have just arrived sometimes try awfully hard to be like the folks back home. Fantasy and ex-patriotism mix with a shock of the encounter of “the other”, leaving some newcomers perpetual pariahs. Some do not adjust but others do find what they were looking for.

Among these women are some who settle in, in every sense, until it is hard to imagine they came from some other place. They are harder to detect because they have learned to fit into their new surroundings. These women seem to take the best of the world from which they have come and the world they have chosen. This article focuses on those women who are harder to detect, who sculpt notions of femininity and identity both gently and mindfully.

One archetypal woman who wrote down her impressions of life in Tangier’s environs around the turn of the 20th century was Emily Keene, the Shareefa of Wazan. A young Moroccan girlfriend upon meeting me asked, “Do you know Emily?! Did you read her book? We read about her at university. Everyone knows her!” Her writing style is similar to firsthand feminist accounts that are now required reading in any Introduction to Cultural Anthropology course like Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa*³ and Elizabeth Fernea’s *A Street in Marrakech*⁴, and she is often one of the first Western women that Moroccans meet in their literature classes. Emily the Shareefa of Wazan, however, did not write her autobiography, *My Life Story*⁵, in the midst of a movement that acknowledged the necessity of female voices. Her text was edited by a British man who says in no uncertain terms in the preface that she had no writing experience and that he chose to leave out personal details “better left unsaid”. We can only regret the many delicious details that he must have deleted, but still, we must also thank him for being slightly ahead of his time. This work is at once a rich ethnographic text of Moroccan women’s daily lives, as well as a rarely heard account of Morocco’s history as it fought off colonialization on every shore, vis à vis the English, the French, and the Spanish, as well as documenting the Algerian-Moroccan border disputes that still haunt current Maghrebi politics.

Although Emily was not free of all of the prejudices of her day, her willingness to look at the other with a determined optimism while never losing herself is remarkable. She remained in Morocco for the majority of her life, and traveled extensively at a time before the advent of the railroad and paved roadways. She married a Moroccan Shareef, a descendant of the Prophet, raised two Muslim children, grandchildren, as well children from her husband’s previous marriages. In her writing is evidence of the opening of a space wherein the nature of what it means to be a woman, and a mother, and to build a home become malleable through her interactions with other Moroccan women:

I was in despair of ever acquiring the language until a woman related tales to me, in the style of the “Thousand and One Nights”, and helped me considerably in attaining different modes of expression. Today I speak fluently the Tangerine dialect, but the purity of my accent leaves much to be desired, and caused amusement to my grandchildren. I am

sometimes guilty of grammatical errors, but must know the language pretty thoroughly, or I should not find myself thinking unconsciously in the same, and my dreams are often in that direction too. (9)

One recognizes the refrains of Emily’s voice echoed in that of other women who have come to settle in Morocco today. A French woman, she had come to Morocco some twenty-five years prior, for what she thought was a vacation. Today she teaches English in a French middle school in Fes, is married to a Moroccan man, mother of three children, and a devoted Muslim. I met one such woman while conducting fieldwork in Fes. Our contact began during Ramadan when I was invited over for a wadifa, or prayer and recitation session, that was to take place from ‘Asr, afternoon prayer, to Maghreb, the prayer which signals the breaking of the fast, when we would pray and then share ftour together. It was clear from her memorization of the long recitation that she too had settled in Morocco. Although there were other Moroccan women present, she was without a doubt leading the session. Our first meeting had taken place in her small house that she was renovating in the medina of Fes. The house was mostly hers, as she was paying for and seeing to every detail of its restoration. She and her husband now live outside of the medina and she dislikes being in a part of town where people live with fences created for ensuring nuclear family privacy. In her first years in Morocco, she had lived in the medina and learned Arabic from neighborhood friends. She now missed the intimacy of the medina whose walls do not wholly contain the lives of its inhabitants. Her daughter, an architect, shares her love of the medina and together they are creating her retirement home.

Our second meeting was at another ftour that she had organized. This time we ate with a group of Moroccan women and three Catholic nuns, one Spanish, one Korean, one Belgian. Here I learned that these nuns, “les petites sœurs”, had lived in Morocco for more than fifteen years. They do not proselytize, but live and work among poor women. One worked in a factory, one embroidered at a cooperative, and the other was now retired, but taking classical Arabic classes with illiterate women at an NGO in Fes. All three were fasting for Ramadan and navigated easily between the different classes of women who were in attendance that day, some Moroccan, some French, some domestic assistants and their friends. Morocco is a culture where women of different classes have substantial contact with one another. Unlike in my own country, the United States, where poor people live within government maintained housing and financial programs, poor people in Morocco are obliged to look directly to their wealthier neighbors for assistance. This face-to-face confrontation with poverty is often difficult for “Western” women in Morocco, and they deal with it in their own individual ways.

I met one Australian woman, a café owner in Fes, who talked about this point at great length. She had met her Moroccan husband while he was working in Sydney, and came to Morocco with him where she had been living for more than sixteen years. Before speaking to her, I had seen her shopping in the market and doing errands. I had seen her walking with her children and heard them speaking Arabic and assumed she was Moroccan. It was not until one day later when I was in her café and she asked in perfect English what I would like that I realized that I had finally met “the Australian woman who speaks perfect derrija”, or Moroccan dialect, that I had heard other women talking about.

Her café is full of paintings of Moroccan women in all their finery. She seems to admire the idea of women who are comfortable, beautiful and surrounded by other women. Her café exudes a femininity that is rare outside a Moroccan household, and it is a place where women of all nationalities gather. She said that she liked raising her children in Morocco because “there is always someone around who can help”, that one is never left alone. She says that her husband’s family has helped her in sharing family responsibilities and her children’s lives are richer as a result. She sympathized with poor women and girls in Morocco, saying she had two women at home helping her and their being there enabled her to come home and share lunch with her family every day. These women helped maintain her home while she contributed to it financially through the income generated in the café. Furthermore, she emphasized the female honor code in Morocco and felt happy that her daughter “grew up in a place where others looked out for her”. She commented that girls her daughter’s age, “16, in Australia have often already slept with boys and sometimes even live away from home, or are expected to contribute financially at an early age”. Morocco provides her with the means to raise a family in a preferable way to that of her home country, where she would never be able to stop in the middle of a workday to have a healthy home cooked lunch with her family.

Her home is a combination of Moroccan and Australian cultures. Her children have their own rooms but she explained the importance of the family room and how activities revolved around that room and that her children “did not lock themselves away only to interact with electronic devices”. She repeated several times the fact that being in Morocco made her feel grateful for the things God had given her, and that even if life were not as convenient or straightforward as in Australia, here she was able to maintain a frame of mind that made her appreciate the things she had. More importantly, she wanted her children to grow up with such an appreciation.

In addition to home structures and their impact on family relationships, foreign women find the image of the female

body healthier in Morocco. Many women commented on being deeply affected by the Moroccan women’s tradition of “dressing up”, because contrary to the stereotypical Western fashion magazine where only thin women are beautiful, in Morocco, every woman at a party is beautiful, and if she is not, her friends and family do their best to change this. My Turkish grandmother-in-law warns me of “nazar”, or the evil eye, “‘ain”, which in Morocco is apparently far less ruthless because beauty is never in short supply. On my first trip in 1997, a woman I hardly knew insisted that I wear all of her gold and her favorite wedding dress (Moroccans typically have several when they get married) to a wedding I had been invited to. The last time someone had taken such pains to help me prepare for a special day was my mother on my first communion. Women in similar age ranges shift roles, playing that of sister, confident, mother. Many foreign women I know in Morocco find this friendship extraordinary and it is a trait they try to share among other non-Moroccan women.

In 1998 in Tangier I experienced a marathon nine wedding summer. In the region of Tangier at that time, it was common to have segregated weddings with separate festivities for men and women. I felt caught in a perpetual state of dress up slumber parties, filled with all the elements of tea parties little girls dream about; sparkly clothes, jewelry, little cookies, and dancing and merry making until all hours of the morning. In Morocco, such experiences are not relegated to the realm of childhood only, but are shared by women of all ages. Although Moroccan women’s family and household responsibilities are extremely heavy, especially when they work outside the home, when they are a guest at someone’s wedding or at other functions they are regaled, and are the recipients of the hospitality they so often offer in their own homes. The women’s party is a culturally sanctioned institution, a powerful female space wherein household tasks and responsibilities are suspended until the party is over⁶. In such parties, the music is simply too loud to complain about quotidian worries or work related problems. As a guest, one’s only choice is to dance and have fun.

Emilie, a French friend now living in Fes, related an experience of attending a Sapho concert in France when she fell in love with Morocco. Sapho, a Moroccan singer now living in France, performed an exclusively Um Kulthoum repertoire dressed in Moroccan kaftans that she changed every few songs. As Emilie tells her story, the performer’s ability to put everyone at ease exuded for her a new sense of home and femininity. She spoke of the performer’s loose kaftan as an alternative vision of femininity that she had not imagined before. She said that Morocco is a place where women are allowed, even encouraged to be “feminine”, whereas in France women so often are forced to take on male characteristics if they are to be successful. She says

she thinks deeply about the “freedom” that Western women claim to have, “freedom to wear revealing clothes, freedom to damage their bodies on diets, freedom to date men who never commit to them”. She instead has found another kind of feminine freedom in Morocco.

German artist Ulrike Weiss, who also has had a long relationship with Moroccan culture, explores femininity through painting and theater in Morocco. In an exhibit housed in the Goethe Institute in Rabat she explored the notion of “Oriental/Occidental” women. This exhibit was one installation of some 400 black and white images of women’s faces which were strung closely together horizontally on something like facsimile paper. The faces were meant to be “read”, and Western faces turned into Eastern ones, and vice versa. The gestalt moment is the realization that there is not so great a distance between the East and West. After staring at the women’s faces their origins eventually dissolve into their femininity. Weiss also produced a theatrical production entitled “What does the Jelleba Mean for You, My Mother?” where she and Moroccan actresses and actors explore what the bounds of clothing mean with regard to notions of gender. Hers is a feminist inquiry that does not judge, but remains open to Moroccan voices and allows their perspective to shape her own.

In conversations with foreign women I have learned that marrying Moroccan men is not what necessarily brings them to Morocco. In fact some women seem to choose Morocco over men. An example of such a case is an American woman who told of how she almost did not go to graduate school to study Arabic because it meant leaving behind her family, and for a short time, her husband. To assuage her, he proposed buying a nice house close to her family. The couple threw themselves into seeing houses and buying magazines to imagine how they might decorate their home. She saw an issue of Marie Claire Maison, a French home magazine, which had a special focus on Moroccan interiors. The images of Moroccan homes in the pages of the magazine made the thought of not going to school seem like a life prison sentence. Three days later she left for graduate school. That was seven years ago, and her relationship with Morocco proved stronger than her marriage. Morocco was the space in which she found the courage to divorce her husband, and where she first discovered Islam. For her Morocco is like a dear friend, one that she may not be able to live with permanently, but must visit regularly.

A French friend, Maud, initially came to Morocco because her Moroccan boyfriend led her there. She was studying to become a teacher in France and had the opportunity to do an internship abroad. She had three choices for countries to go to, her choices were Morocco, Morocco, and Morocco. When speaking to her at the end of her internship in Fes,

she confessed she was reluctant to leave even though it meant being reunited with her fiancé in France. She was looking into job opportunities and ways that she could support herself in Morocco because she wanted to live there with her husband and to raise her children as Muslims. Although she had not yet become a Muslim, she spoke of being interested in Islam and how she was not looking forward to going back to France where she would find herself in situations where people would not understand her no longer wanting to drink or eat pork. She had been exploring Islam on her own during her time alone in Morocco and she showed me her calligraphy workbooks, in which she had lovingly written the word “Allah” on many pages in various styles. At the time of this article, she had just finished making her wedding kaftan, half Moroccan/half Western, and was making serious plans to resettle permanently in Morocco.

What makes these women flock to Morocco as they do? This is no easy question to answer, but many seem to have first come because they were looking for a “home” they had not yet found in their own cultures. Some come because they feel they have to escape a culture that is too centered on the individual, and they come looking for a community. Some come looking for Islam. Some come and discover new sides of themselves that they did not know existed, an inner beauty too long eclipsed by the Western fashion magazine. Some find Morocco a safe space, one that is better for raising children, and especially girls. Some appreciate the fact that gender segregated space also guarantees female space wherein female friendships and modes of being flourish. Although being a woman in Morocco is not always easy, these women find a kind of trade-off; they gladly exchange what they do not like about their own cultures for the things they do like about Morocco. Theirs are flights of fancy that weave, knead, embroider, paint, and nurture a connection between the disjunctive entities of East and West.

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