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 other key ethnic groups in the region - the Berbers and Armenians - as members of these minorities. Dargarabedian 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 Armenians - as members or outsiders vis-à-vis the societal mainstream.

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. One of the great disappointments in the production of Al-Raida is 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 standing, illustrating that 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,” 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

Ross-Nazzal and Aglaia Viviani have provided a 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 powerful 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 Iraq 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 (Ermeni) 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 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 Naqy 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 Absou-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.
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 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 rep etition of stereotypes taken from the mass media, with out probing deeply into the respective context and unveiling the hidden social realities upon which the suf ferings of young women and the injustices inflicted on them are based. Only by dealing with these social reali ties 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 circum stances 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 wit nessed 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 Myll) 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 Myll 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 espe cially the paternal grandmother, would often considered the baby girl as a burden befailing her son’s family, an extra and useless mouth to feed, a worthless object that also potentially threatened the honor of the entire fam ily.

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 fami ly 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 their own, that their role was to serve oth ers, 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 ask ing the reason why.

Preparing Girls for Marriage

A girl was only considered as of marriageable age at 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 paces. Elderly woman 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 negative ly 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 conventional ly left in the dark as to which household they were to be trans ferred, 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 her 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 com munity.

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 promise of a woman’s relationship to a man was attributed largely to coincidence. Families judged a new marriage as suc cessful 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...
Resistance was generally broken by a sound beating in wife. live out ones emotions as a young fathers of the family and thereby for fear of awakening other members with each other in such moments however, unable to speak openly exchanged quietly, in the dead of night. The “old women” of a community, often only early age. The “old women” of a community, often only her youth, and made her an old woman at a much too satisfying by being excessively rude and demanding when dealing with her husband, who could demonstrate his manliness to her for many years. In those cases in which a young husband did express the desire remaining 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 compens ated by being excessively rude and demanding when commanded, they so publicly demonstrat ing toughness and harshness, he could prove that he had his wife “under control”, as was matting a full 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, 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 or 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 demonstrate their feelings to love and live out ones emotions as a young woman.

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, really a constant labor for a woman in a 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 wisely responsibilities.

However, even if she was able to live up to her in-laws’ general expectations, she was still keep 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 brought a son into the world. And although the effects of years of hard work, maltreat ment and multiple child births 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 heavily on the living conditions of the young, female population. Many have passed from the health of a mountain school system in these mountains as proof that the current young woman’s traditional education is finally being introduced to the norms of the modern world. Signs of this ongoing process of integration are evident in the Middle Atlas Mountains include the processes of children, proudly carry ing 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 genera tion of young Atlas Berber women from the hardships experienced by the grandmothers, mothers and, in many cases, their older sisters as well? Because the social and economic environment in which they still live remains largely the same for the foreseeable future, which forces a large number of pregnancies, many young women are forced to perform her marital duties to perfection to be an inferior creature; 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 distinc tion 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 remain in the tribe 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 women will often be overly criti cal of other new husbands, chastising women who have, for whatever reason, begun to question the need for awak ening to nuclear family status. Successful young house wives 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 role in society. Emboldened by their newly found household success, they consider any other woman who does not perform her household duties to perfection an inferior wife and thus an incomplete human being.

Changes are also taking place with respect to the free dom that 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 punish ment if caught. The sanctions for 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 accustoms a woman to a life of shame and a lifelong punishment for youthful delinquency. Young women thus are now living in a situation of cultural

... 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. Women are still seen as being lower, debased creatures; they are still viewed with suspicion and considered a potential family liability... bilities, one reason for this being that they can thereby prove their value to the community and blue-print that they have invested their money wisely. Young women thereby also demonstrate to their in-laws that the departure of the childless women in the tribe of the newly wedded couple has deprived the extended family of a treasure that it does not deserve.

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 remain in the tribe 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 women will often be overly critical of other new husbands, chastising women who have, for whatever reason, begun to question the need for awakening 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 role in society. Emboldened by their newly found household success, they consider any other woman who does not perform her household duties to perfection an inferior wife and thus an incomplete human being.
When a relationship ends in divorce, it can have very detrimental consequences for a young woman.

scherizophrenia, 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 have 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 led 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 is no 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 in 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 family of the young woman 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 in the hands of 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 tum 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 the key to improving such a 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.
Throughout their history, the Imazighen have always had female heroes or heroines who have defended their ancestral lands against their conquerors. In 1249 B.C., for example, Amazigh chief Labnas 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 I and King Massinissa plotted with the Romans against the Carthaginians. Prince Jugurtha mastered Roman military techniques and subsequently led a formidable rebellion from 106 to 104 B.C., according to the Roman historian Sallust’s account of the Third Punic War. In the early stages of the arrival of Islam, the Aures (or Tassili-n-Ajjer) and the Aures Mountains of Algeria; the Mzab region of the northern Sahara of Algeria; Algeria’s Tuareg sectors of the Ahaggar and Tassili-n-Ajjer; the Nora Mountains south of Tripoli; the Sahara Sua 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, women who sang, and even during the period of 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. As comparatively large percentage of Amazigh women were versed in the Amazigh language and poetry and thus enjoyed exclusive knowledge about the Amazigh Tifinagh tradition. Not only the Amazigh themselves, but also the conquering peoples of the region were very 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 Caucasion who worshipped the sun and sacrificed to the moon. Soon the Phoenicians became North Africa’s first known conquerors and settlers in what is now Tunisia. From there they exercised domination over North Africa and the Mediterranean for more than a thousand years. A famous Phoenician queen, Dido, offened the city of Carthage near modern Tunisia, 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 have been through the third Punic War, Rome ended Carthagian rule (by 140 B.C.) and reduced Dido’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 herded 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 Mauritanians, 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 Dhabiba Kahena, Dahia Kahena, or Dhibia Kahena. This female warrior leader denied the 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 of the or Jerafa tribe of the Aures Mountains, from where she supposedly hailed. She was universally recognised as the most effective and savage of the feminine emperors who took Amazigh 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 conquerors until her death in battle in 702 A.D. 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 A.D. 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 Amazigh tribes fiercely resisted invasion, and decades of war resulted. Very little is known about Kahena or her early life. Her father’s name was reported to have been Thabitah, 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 Jewish. 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. Kahena’s 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 Barshaka 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 Tuaregs call Tin Hinan “Mother of Us All.” The tall, noble, proud, fierce and nomadic Tuaregs (Imazigh or free people) live in the Ahaggar and Tassili N’Ajjer Mountains of Algeria and the Air Mountains of Niger. They are called “the late-rising 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.
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 succeed 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, materialization of this encroachment, many Tuareg women lost some of their power and independence once their men left for the cities. The Tuareg women regarded themselves as men's equals, 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 their husbands 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. Matrarchs presided over some the Tuareg tribes and the men who headed those 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 Islamized 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 Moors 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 reigned in Morocco from 1510 to 1542.

As recently as in the 19th century, an Amazigh prophetess, Fatma n Souroum or Lalla Fatma (Lalla, “Lady”), took part in the resistance to the French in Kabylia in 1854, a woman leading the North African peoples in revolt. At that 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 travelor, 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 seriousness, these flirtatious pilgrims threatened 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 Aziya tribe enjoyed ample sexual freedom, their inaccessible location protecting them from officials, travellers and the attention of the region’s patriarchal prudes, whose intervention embletted their Ouled Nail sisters. The Aziyat (plural of Aziya) 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 Aziya 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 Aziyat 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.

Accordign to local custom, a woman enjoys the right to marry a new husband every 15 years if need be.

Historically, Aures Mountain women shared with the men equally in the hard labour carried out by her family, including ploughing, sawing, 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 Islamized 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 honored 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 encroachment.
ing religion, and the women still remain quite indepen-

d. An example of this split relationship with the predomi-
nent Arab-Muslim culture can be found in the continua-
tion of the Amazigh tradition of the autumnal 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 the traditions of the bride’s and
the groom’s families, then comes the bride’s ride on a sheepskin-sad-

donkey to the groom’s house and finally, she is car-
fried in by her father, delivering her to the marriage

trade. Women

don’t want to lose

dominance, 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 the traditions of the bride’s and
groom’s families, then comes the bride’s ride on a sheepskin-
sad-donkey to the groom’s house and finally, she is car-
fried in by her father, delivering her to the marriage

trade. Women

don’t want to lose

dominance, 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 the traditions of the bride’s and
groom’s families, then comes the bride’s ride on a sheepskin-
sad-donkey to the groom’s house and finally, she is car-
fried in by her father, delivering her to the marriage

trade. Women

don’t want to lose

dominance, 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 the traditions of the bride’s and
groom’s families, then comes the bride’s ride on a sheepskin-
sad-donkey to the groom’s house and finally, she is car-

ed in by her father, delivering her to the marriage

trade. Women

don’t want to lose

dominance, 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 the traditions of the bride’s and
groom’s families, then comes the bride’s ride on a sheepskin-
sad-donkey to the groom’s house and finally, she is car-
fried in by her father, delivering her to the marriage

trade. Women

don’t want to lose

dominance, 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 the traditions of the bride’s and
groom’s families, then comes the bride’s ride on a sheepskin-
sad-donkey to the groom’s house and finally, she is car-
fried in by her father, delivering her to the marriage

Arabic 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 fulfill few of the promises made to women with respect to their emanci-
pation. Furthermore, the FLN, backed by Egypt, imposed Arab-Muslim nationalism as the predominant state ideol-
gy, thus further undermining the position of Amazigh women.

According to tradition, these Atlas Amazigh, like their
Aures Mountain and Tuyareg cousins, are permitted to ini-
tiate a divorce as well as retain their dowries after separa-
tion. 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
day. Amazigh Women in the Present

The stories of the past aided in the mobilisation of mod-
dern day Amazigh women in Algeria. Their struggle dates
back to the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time
to where the position of village women had rapidly degen-
erated. The early Amazigh pioncers pressured their elect-
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 dur-
ing the 1940s. The movement for an improvement of the
rights of Amazigh women found support amongst the
rank of leading literary figures. These included the novels
of Djemila Debbiche (Leila, An Algerian
Woman, Aziza) and Assia Djebar (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 per-
sonal and family struggles are the clear focus of her liter-
ary 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, nor her
own village of origin. But when you consider the time
period she lived through, how different was her experi-
ence, from the end, from those of her contemporaries?

If an Azriya dancer
dance became pregnant, she was
expected to keep her child as
best they can.

As a result, many women have
married young, and many young
women have become pregnant.

References


Armenian Women
In Jordan

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 some 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.

The Armenians in Jordan

The Armenians in Jordan originally lived in the southern Caucasus and migrated to Jordan during the Ottoman Empire. They were subject to successive massacres by the Turks and were subjected to the virtual elimination in 1915. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

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, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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...
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 is 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 on 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 councils. This means that their participation in Parliament as do other ethnic minorities. This is because of the 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 women 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, their 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 literacy is much lower than that of men; third: The political participation of both men and women is limited to voting in parliamentary elections.

References


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 occupa tions laboring the highest rates of trafficked vic tims 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 (Kistinesen 11). It is only after the termi nation 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 groups 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 problematic nature 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 residents, leads to these 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. I only found that Afro-Asian migrants were the predominant...
inhabitant groups of three of the four buildings on the street. These locals migrated and offered 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 Abeer (The Street of Staves).”

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.

“When 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 you 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 prob es 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 pernec e, they later told me, were manifest- ed in the form of black and white newspaper columns for the reading enjoyment of the journalists and their audience. The painful recollections they entrusted to journalists in no way led to positive action. Their status quo was maintained, along with their suffering.

Independence after Abuse
During the interview, I asked the woman with a three-year-con tract during which passports are confiscated and salaries are occasionally withheld. They either complete the term of their contract or else they complete the term of their contract (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 Mary, 28 years old, resides in Lebanon to this day is due to such an

release. If not, she must remain incarcerated until she pays the money owed for her jail stay (this is usually covered by her 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, blue 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 her 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 (including my interviewee) came in from Jouineh, from Kaslon, 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 her job appointment.

A New Form of Remittance
Recent developments have shown that Ethiopian migrants are not eco- nomic in nature. “We barely make enough money to make ends meet here, between rent, food and clothing,” said one. “Some of the women have been lured in by an illusory work-study program, unaware that the study program would consist of the knowledge that the initial migrant has collected from the networks created act as virtual blockades. As such, the studies the reader is 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 freelancers while they are held as detainees in the larger jail, which is locked down. By running away from their current job, they’ll take it and go. But if you do not, you think they care? “You think it’s pretty,” she replied, “Other people call your dirt and mess.”

The Darkar and the Jail
According to the locals, the Darkar (the internal security forces) conduct regular busts of the migrant residents of the street. “Those who pay illegal aliens immediately (Al Zougbi: b). “I wish they would,” was one comment. Instead, they are arrested and imprisoned.

Harking back to the debtor prison tradition, Lebanese legis- lation favours imprisonment over deportation. According to an officer in the Hebrew police station in Ras Beirut, the duration of imprisonment is calculated based on the fine to be paid (Al Zougbi: b). For illegal residence, the fine amounts to up to $1500. The duration of imprisonment is based on an calculated time equivalent of the monetary amount owed the authorities (estimated at around three months in prison). Upon release, the migrant is expected to pay $500 (Lebanese Pounds [approximately] $3) for each day spent in prison. If the detainee has the money, she is

contrary, the information sent back home serves the pur- pose of thwarting the arrival of a new wave of potential suf- ferers.

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 red dress and complimented her taste. “You think it’s pretty,” she replied, “Other people call me a whore” 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 motorbikes 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 started laughing altogether. ‘Why don’t you say any- thing 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 she got out, it was dark. My boss gave me a note to stay out 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 phen-omenon of gender discrimination described above. From race/family interface is a good starting point. 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 women’s rights, cultural and religious support. The pro-tection of the family’s reputation through the preservation of the woman’s honor (Schneider 19) is central to Arab cul- ture, 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 cen- tral role in the discrimination faced by these women.

Racism is also central to the Ethiopian experience. Associations between Arabs and serfs have long been embedded in Arab culture. “In Arabic, the term abed

Immigrant Workers
Volume XX, No. 101-102 Spring/Summer 2003

AL-Raida

AL-Raida

Volume XX, No. 101-102 Spring/Summer 2003
is used to denote both a 'black' person and a 'slave' (依据). Culture also plays a 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 ‘cultural communal’ to define ‘mutual obligation’ as “an ethnic structure of reciprocity that can only exist in the realm of culture.” According to these definitions, the Ethiopians have not engaged in reciprocal relations with the Lebanese because in their subservient position in the Australian culture, which Arab culture would deem ‘humiliating’. In defining themselves as a ‘culture of honour’, the Arabs differentiate between themselves and the Ethiopian community at large. They invoke this ‘characteristic’ of the Ethiopian culture not because ’honour’ and ‘guest’ are etymologically 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 culture, which the Ethiopian free-lancers are often illegal residents who find 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 still satisfied by being a member of a family. In a strange environment, a sense of family mitigates one’s own isolation, developing a network of family, friends in the local community, acquiring local cultural knowledge, and reconciling themselves to the possibility and friends in the local community, achieving the transmission of negative information carrying back into the household in which the family members belong to the community. This he attributes to their ‘overcoming feelings of isolation, developing a network of family, 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 definitions of immigration and legal status have been mentioned as incentives for permanent settlement over departure. According to Chavez’s findings, a steady source of income also serves as an invitation to permanent settlement. Ethiopian female laborers are often illegal residents and find jobs either through word of mouth or through illegal agencies (Al Zoughi: 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 (Amendaris). 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 reason for this is a disregard of the culture, beliefs, and languages of the migrants. The direct link to the Ethiopian presence as a physical phenomenon divorced of any humanity.

The information gathered on the living conditions, remittance practices, ethnic enclaves and problems of integration among the Ethiopians in Lebanon allows for two conclusions. First, the decision to work independently among the interviewees arose from work in abusive households, significant ethnicities that the migrants belong to, and problems of integration is easier for a family unit than an individual 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 still satisfied by being a member of a family. In a strange environment, a sense of family mitigates one’s own isolation, developing a network of family, friends in the local community, achieving the transmission of negative information carrying back into the household in which the family members belong to the community. This he attributes to their ‘overcoming feelings of isolation, developing a network of family, 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 definitions of immigration and legal status have been mentioned as incentives for permanent settlement over departure. According to Chavez’s findings, a steady source of income also serves as an invitation to permanent settlement. Ethiopian female laborers are often illegal residents and find jobs either through word of mouth or through illegal agencies (Al Zoughi: 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 (Amendaris). 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 reason for this is a disregard of the culture, beliefs, and languages of the migrants. The direct link to the Ethiopian presence as a physical phenomenon divorced of any humanity.

The information gathered on the living conditions, remittance practices, ethnic enclaves and problems of integration among the Ethiopians in Lebanon allows for two conclusions. First, the decision to work independently among the interviewees arose from work in abusive households, significant ethnicities that the migrants belong to, and problems of integration is easier for a family unit than an individual 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 still satisfied by being a member of a family. In a strange environment, a sense of family mitigates one’s own isolation, developing a network of family, friends in the local community, achieving the transmission of negative information carrying back into the household in which the family members belong to the community. This he attributes to their ‘overcoming feelings of isolation, developing a network of family, 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 definitions of immigration and legal status have been mentioned as incentives for permanent settlement over departure. According to Chavez’s findings, a steady source of income also serves as an invitation to permanent settlement. Ethiopian female laborers are often illegal residents and find jobs either through word of mouth or through illegal agencies (Al Zoughi: 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 (Amendaris). 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 reason for this is a disregard of the culture, beliefs, and languages of the migrants. The direct link to the Ethiopian presence as a physical phenomenon divorced of any humanity.

The information gathered on the living conditions, remittance practices, ethnic enclaves and problems of integration among the Ethiopians in Lebanon allows for two conclusions. First, the decision to work independently among the interviewees arose from work in abusive households, significant ethnicities that the migrants belong to, and problems of integration is easier for a family unit than an individual 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 still satisfied by being a member of a family. In a strange environment, a sense of family mitigates one’s own isolation, developing a network of family, friends in the local community, achieving the transmission of negative information carrying back into the household in which the family members belong to the community. This he attributes to their ‘overcoming feelings of isolation, developing a network of family, 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 definitions of immigration and legal status have been mentioned as incentives for permanent settlement over departure. According to Chavez’s findings, a steady source of income also serves as an invitation to permanent settlement. Ethiopian female laborers are often illegal residents and find jobs either through word of mouth or through illegal agencies (Al Zoughi: 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 (Amendaris). 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 reason for this is a disregard of the culture, beliefs, and languages of the migrants. The direct link to the Ethiopian presence as a physical phenomenon divorced of any humanity.
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 ledge. 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 former revolutionaries and freedom fighters who migrate thousands of miles to earn a mere pittance, 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.

“Many things have changed in our society since then. prisoner, who has several friends who now have maids. “Many things have changed in our society since then. “Many things have changed in our society since then. the [first] Intifada," says one former activist and political views, has been replaced with the English term “whore”, with respect to the sensitivities of certain readers.

References


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. Abiad is quoted as Abiad in Arabic. The term Abiad 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 teachings of the Prophet.
6. Stories about Bilala al-Hasab, 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 and employment opportunities alone, but also on networks present in the country of destination.
10. 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.
11. 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.

In Service to the Movement

Freelance writer based in Chico, California

Mary Abowd*
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 a night on the town. One can see mothers and daughters drinking tea, smoking argilas, and chatting with friends. In Bethlehem, maid jobs are common, and one can see sweeping the front steps of homes and feeding ice cream to children, while their parents drink tea, smoke argilas, and chat with friends. In Gaza, an estimated 500 women are employed in the offices, beachfront homes and 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 one of the companies in Gaza that brought the maid from Sri Lanka and Indonesia. (The other two are Al-Wafaf and the Sri Lanka Office for General Services, which advertises “Sri Lankan and Phelipinian (sic) charwomen.”) A two-story operation, located in the wealthy Tel Aviv neighborhood of Rosy, doubles as a $1.5 million luxury beauty salon and gym. Upstairs, while women from Gaza’s elite are limning themselves in fronds in an airy classroom, 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 photos on Rosy’s walls and are often compared to 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? “She, 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, 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 legal protection.”

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 Nabil, 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 5:30 a.m. to go buy bread and milk for my young children’s 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 in the Palestinian society,” says Hammami, “is the result of a major transformation in domestic gender relations, hiring a maid solves the problem for everyone.”

End Notes

* In 1999-2000, Mary Abood 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 l-Ilm in Morocco: The Non-Arab Woman Ethnographer as Student of the World

Alisa Perkins

MA candidate, University of Texas, Austin currently pursuing research as a Fulbright scholar on gender and social change in Morocco

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 women’s status. Deborah Kapchan’s Gender on the Market (1996); Elizabeth Fernea’s In Search of Islamic Feminism (1996); and Brenda Pandolfo’s Impasse of the Angels (1998) provide a graphic approach to understanding sex differences in Arab societies. As described by Azza Basarudin: “Arab women are marginalized within the sphere of Western feminism, such 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, these scholars begin by seeking to understand how the individuals they study theorize womanhood.1

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 relationships and self-revelation with the individuals from whom they wish to learn, and each writes in a personal narrative style that foregrounds 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.”2

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 hybridity and performance theories 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 Wad 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 Hadda’s, and the enactment of female autonomy. Fatima Mernissi, a prominent Moroccan sociologist, wrote 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, ethnographer Fernea recognizes 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. Lalla Djebaili, dedicated activist and member of Unión de l’Action Feminin, 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 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-Majdub 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 legitimize 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 mediates on a common saying in the section entitled, “Contra-diction: Hadda, Son of ‘Ammu: ‘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: “Dialogues of the Heart,” in which Hadda and Pandolfo discuss this Hadith and relate fitna to femininity; “Hasab and Naabid,” 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 naabid with Freudian and Lacanian explorations of how he figures his parents. By laying out fundamental contradictions between different levels of discourse, he 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.

We don’t use this word, feminist... It has a bad connotation. It means we are borrowing someone else’s culture...
The three ethnographers place their analysis within a feminist framework that 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],” Kapchan provides a detailed 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 in opposition with the Western convention of price fix free, a relatively recent mode of exchange in Beni Mellal. The woman vendor asks her Moroccan clients, “Ainwe eell Musli缅?” (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, 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 authoritas 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 disgorge their experience, providing an analysis of how a female marketplace vendor, Battuta, the 14th century Moroccan icon celebrated for her 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 tâlibât-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 into 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 Hadja, 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 distinguish themselves, and the results are 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 Hadja’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 elusive” (2002; 64; qtd. 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 perspectives in dialogue with Western feminisms, these three works facilitate the theorizing of women’s modes of empowerment in contemporary Morocco from the perspective of the non-Arab ethnographer.

References

End Notes
1 Second wave feminists such as Rubin (1975) Rosaldo & Lamphere (1974), and Ormer & 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 Braidoti 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 (Braidoti and Butler 1984: 38).
3 For an explanation of the concepts of intersubjectivity and distance within ethnographic fieldwork, see D. Konte (1990), 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 expected when ever two or more historically separate realms come together in any degree that challenges their socially constructed autonomy” (1996: 5).
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 Quran (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” (Mennessis 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 Abdelhamn al-Majdub” (Kapchan 1996: 73).
Flights of Fancy: On Settling in a Feminine “Home” in Morocco

Maria F. Curtis

Department of Anthropology, University of Texas at Austin

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 route from the oppressive culture. I was always interested in writing 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, SuFı adepts, government attachés, and missionaries.

Some, like Edith Freund in Hideous Kinky1, come to Morocco to live out chemically induced dreams of spiritual fulfillment, and sometimes really do find it. Others, like Jane Bowles 2, run from their own culture, then discover that the people to whose country they have just arrived sometimes try awkwardly 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 archetypical 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 Nisa3 and Elizabeth Fernea’s A Street in Marrakech4, 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 Story5, 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 she 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 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 Maghreb 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 roads. She married a Moroccan Shareef6, a descendant of the Prophet, raised two Muslim children, grandchildren, as well children from her husband’s previous marriages. In her writing, an evidence of the 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 came 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 wadia, 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 food 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 year in Morocco, she had lived in the medina and she 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 flour 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 it is not unusual for nuns to 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.

1. Hideous Kinky, by Edith Freund
2. Hideous Kinky, by Jane Bowles
3. A Street in Marrakech, by Marjorie Shostak
4. A Street in Marrakech, by Elizabeth Fernea
5. My Life Story, by Emily Keene
6. A descendant of the Prophet, raised two Muslim children, grandchildren, and children from her husband’s previous marriages.
Morocco made her feel grateful for the things God had straightforward as in Australia, here she was able to main-
devices”. She repeated several times the fact that being in
revolved around that room and that her children “did not
have lunch with her family.

the middle of a workday to have a healthy home cooked

Australia have often already slept with boys and sometimes
female honor code in Morocco and felt happy that her
while she contributed to it financially through the income
ly every day. These women helped maintain her home

Her café is full of paintings of Moroccan women in all their
dia, that I had heard other women talking about.

Emilie, a French friend now living in Fes, related an experi-
ed problems. As a guest, one’s only choice is to dance and

American woman who told of how she almost did not go
tions, foreign women find the image of the female

Western fashion magazine where only thin women are
body healthier in Morocco. Many women commented on

Her café exudes a femininity that is rare outside a Moroccan

Her café is regaled, and are the recipients of the hospitality they so

Moroccan interiors. The images of Moroccan homes in the

References