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**The Place of Feminism in Religious Revival:
Islam, Feminist Groups, and Changing Public Policy in Morocco:**

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One afternoon I was sitting with Sarah in her office at the Moroccan Family Planning Association. While the association sustains itself through charging a nominal fee for services in its health clinics, it is a full member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. I shuffled through strategic planning documents when I noticed that abortion was one of the main objectives the association wants to address in the next five years. I asked Sarah, who was one of the directors within the association and a women's rights activist, why abortion is such an issue in the country. She explained that clandestine abortions happen at an astounding rate because of the social and religious stigma that surrounds the procedure and unwed mothers. As in other cases, these "underground" abortions can oftentimes lead to women's deaths.

Sarah said to me, "In Islam there is a time between conception and when the baby is given *el-ruh*" or soul/ breath. She continued, "Some feminists in Morocco are trying. They say this. Muslims don't always understand it. We're all Muslim. Feminists want women here to be able to end their pregnancies during this time if they want." According to the official policy in Morocco, abortion can only be performed to save a woman's life or to preserve her physical and mental health. Under these circumstances, it must be done within six weeks of conception with the consent of her husband. If she is not married or if the spouse refuses to give permission, the physician must seek approval from the medical authority in the region. In cases of rape and incest or of fetal impairment, abortion is not permitted by law.¹

How can we comprehend Sarah's statement that feminists are Muslims? How do we understand feminism in contrast to the images of oppressed and secluded Muslim women portrayed by popular

¹ www.un.org/esa/population/publications/abortion/doc/morocco.doc

discourses and the media today? Her quote about abortion, which has been a topic of feminist struggle in the United States and around the world for quite some time, opens up discussion concerning the role of feminism at a time of religious revival in Morocco. While Morocco has not been the focus of much media or scholarly attention, political Islam in the country is on the rise. King Mohammed VI recently launched a new policy of development as part of his plan for democracy because according to the government, poverty breeds Islamic extremism.² At a time when numerous Islamic television programs are being piped into homes from places like Egypt and Saudi Arabia and young men and women more than ever are joining Islamic groups, I pose the question, what is feminism's role in all of this? The objective of this paper is to explore the relationship between feminist concerns and Islam through an analysis of public policy, specifically the *Moudawana* or Islamic family code and the abortion law. While I focus on Morocco here, I hope that my discussion speaks to broader theoretical concerns about the plurality and overlaps of Islam and feminist movements.

Rectifying Contradictory Images

After the acts of 9/11 popular images have tended to convey Muslim women as in need of "saving" by the West. Particular aspects of their lives including the veil (or in Moroccan Arabic the *fular*) and gender relations are reduced to what Lila Abu-Lughod has termed "quintessential [signs] or [their] unfreedom."³ Many people outside and even inside of Muslim communities may consider feminism and Islam as binary oppositions.⁴ I will give one example here to illustrate. Recently an interview appeared in *Glamour* magazine of Queen Rania of Jordan by Katie Couric. Couric asks, "How can you explain countries where there's strict Islamic law... women who see things from this country's prism think that's unfair. Is there a way to help them understand those customs?" The Queen answers that in several Muslim countries women actually have a great amount of freedom. The problem is not Islam, but rather it is

² Address by King Mohammed VI to the UN General Assembly in September 2005 (<http://www.un.org/webcast/summit2005/statements/maroc05091eng.pdf>)

³ Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 783-790.

⁴ Snajdr, Edward. 2005. Gender, Power, and the Performance of Justice: Muslim Women's Responses to Domestic Violence in Kazakhstan. *American Ethnologist* 32(2): 294-311.

“tradition.” Couric immediately inquires, “Do you consider yourself a feminist?” I agree with the Queen’s response to this question as she states it is difficult to define yourself using such terms as they are fluid and in flux. While underlying themes may be similar, she reminded Couric that feminism does not mean the same thing everywhere.⁵

The rise of political Islam in Morocco has occurred at approximately the same rate as the rise of national women’s movements. Both are relatively new factors in the country that began primarily after independence from France in 1956. There are two factions of Islamic movements occurring, those that work inside of political power and those that work outside. Both of which have offered opportunities for women’s political participation, which according to Laurel Rapp (2008) has led to larger discussions of Islamic feminism in the country. While women tend to oversee women’s committees, which has raised questions as to the movements’ motives, the participation of women in political Islam has increased in recent decades and continues to remain steady.⁶ The lines have been blurred between what is considered religious and secular feminism. Secular here does not refer to just the opposition of religion, but rather, borrowing from Talal Asad, (2003) as a new way of thinking about the world, where ethics do not particularly stem from a sacred text or an institution.⁷ In Morocco, secular feminism and religious feminism are not mutually exclusive, and while I am aware of the limits placed on cultural relativism, my goal is to rectify the multitude of images that circumscribe feminism and Islam as opposites and define Muslim women as “docile bodies.”

Revising the *Moudawana* and Pushing for Changes in the Abortion Policy

Morocco provides a rich setting in which to disentangle women’s struggles over their relationships to the modern-nation state.⁸ In recent years Morocco has undergone rapid social and economic development and has received the title as leader of women’s rights in the Arab world. This title

⁵ “The World’s Coolest Queen” *Glamour*, February 2010

⁶ May 14, 2008 “The Challenges and Opportunities Moroccan Islamist Movements Pose to Women’s Political Participation”

⁷ Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

⁸ Alarcón, Norma, Caren Kaplan, and Minoos Moallem. 1999. Introduction: Between Woman and Nation. In *Between Woman and the Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*. Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoos Moallem, eds. Durham: Duke University Press. pp. 1-18

came after several revisions to the *Moudawana* or family code in 2004. The code is considered to be based on strict Islamic teaching that suppressed the rights of women in the household. With the support of several women's organizations and human rights groups, the government revised the code, now: the age of marriage for women is 18, equal to that of men, divorce must be overseen by a judge, polygyny is only acceptable with the consent of previous wives, a wife's obedience to her husband is no longer required, and the contract for marriage can be done without the presence of the couple's parents.

I watched a video produced by the UN that showed people's reactions to the changes in the family code. One woman expressed that she believed the changes were necessary and will improve the situation for women in Morocco. Another woman stated that she knew nothing about the revisions and that the interviewer should explain them to her. The men who were interviewed spoke rather harshly about the new code stating that they were already poor and had little control over anything in their lives. The only thing that they had control over, was their wives. Now, they do not even have that. The *Moudawana* recently celebrated 2004 + 5 and feminist groups voiced their dissatisfaction with the lack of implementation and enforcement of the new rules. For instance, the code still does not grant unwed mothers full rights to healthcare or schooling for their children.

Feminists worked for nearly forty years before the family code underwent serious revisions. Today they continue to work to open up a dialogue about abortion. While there has been a push to include economic hardship as a reason for abortion in the official policy, it has not been taken under consideration. The family planning association, under the direction of two men, has been the most vocal advocate for the legalization of abortion under particular circumstances, not as a method of birth control. It has taken to popular media (and we have seen an increase in the number of magazine articles and television programs speaking the procedure) to spread its message that until the negative social and religious connotations are removed from abortion, women will continue to seek out unsafe and unsanitary abortions which lead to greater public health and development concerns.

Restructuring Religious Identities

For many feminist activists in Morocco, such as Asma Lamrabet (the founder of a respected women's group in Rabat) and Nadia Yassine, (a political activist) the terms secular and Muslim, feminism and Islam are not contradictions, but rather open up spaces to create new religious identities. Feminist activists have carefully couched their demands in order to fit within Islamic guidelines and to speak to their Islamic identities. Fatima Sadiqi (a professor and the founder of the Center for Research on Women) suggests it is difficult to speak of secular and Islamic feminisms in part because women "have been deliberately excluded from a full role in society not because Islam prescribes it, but because Islam was revealed in a deeply patriarchal context."⁹ A bridge has been built between secular and religious groups in order to counter the male-dominant discourse that has come to be described as characteristic of Islam.

In the case of the abortion law, feminists urge for a reinterpretation of the Qur'an. Verses such as, "You shall not kill your children from fear of poverty - we provide for you and for them" (*Al-An'am*, 6:151) and "Whosoever has spared the life of a soul, it is as though he has spared the life of all people. Whosoever has killed a soul, it is as though he has murdered all of mankind" (*Al-Ma'idah*, 5:32) have been used to prohibit abortion. Feminist activists such as Sarah have in turn taken to this *hadith* or sayings of the Prophet to propose that abortion is permissible within a time period, "every one of you is collected in the womb of his mother for the first forty days, and then he becomes a clot for another forty days, and then a piece of flesh for another forty days. Then Allah sends an angel... then the soul is breathed into his body" (Sahih Bukhari). What has been intended to subordinate women's choices in society by structural institutions has been used by women effectively to fight such discrimination.

Revisions to the *Moudawana* represent the tactics of what has been termed the "Third Way" in Morocco. The "Third Way," developed by feminists like Lamrabet and Yassine, brings together the precedents of universal human rights and the ethical ideals of Islam. The changes to the family code grant women new rights in marriage and new choices about their bodies which they did not possess previously

⁹ "Morocco's Veiled Feminists," www.project-syndicate.org

on paper. At the same time, the revised code continues to adhere to specific guidelines in the Qur'an concerning polygamy and inheritance.

Conclusion

I close with a question posed by Abu-Lughod, "Can there be a liberation that is Islamic? And, beyond this, is liberation even a goal for which all women or people strive?"¹⁰ When I ask undergraduate students to think about feminism, they immediately think of protests against beauty pageants, crowds of angry women marching in Washington, and the burning of bras – things they have learned about at the university. Liberation in Morocco means something very different than these images given the historical, political, and social contexts in which people live and strive for change. It is not about burning bras, although maybe we could think of this in relation to the veil, but rather to be able to live out one's full-potential while renegotiating religious interpretations. I hope to have demonstrated in this paper that the terms secular and religious feminism in reality do not carry much weight in Morocco, but rather, it is more productive to think in terms of how feminist concerns – those about women's bodies, motherhood, marriage, work, etc – have impacted the shape of Islam in Morocco today and its subsequent impact on public policy.

¹⁰ See Abu-Lughod 2002. For the sake of time, I will not go into detail concerning the various Islamic and feminist movements, but I do recognize their plurality in Morocco, the region, and Muslim communities.