

THE FUTURE OF FEMINISM IN MOROCCAN PROGRESS

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Feminism has been a vital component of Morocco's modernization, development, and political progressiveness since the 1940s (Feliu). Not only has feminism contributed to the advancement of Moroccan women but it has also played critical roles in the country's economic, social, and even religious improvements; however, several criticisms of feminism are applicable in Morocco's case. Though it has been instrumental in the increasingly progressive nature of Moroccan society, feminism is limited in its involvement in other current social movements without expanding its inclusivity. The effectiveness of feminism in Morocco depends on the implementation of multiple forms including, but not limited to, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and radical feminism. Feminism's involvement in the progress of Morocco is limited unless used diversely and with a broader-encompassing set of strategies and goals for social justice. Examples of feminism's accomplishments are provided in Stephanie Willman Bordat and Susan Schaefer Davis's article, "Women as Agents of Grassroots Change: Illustrating Micro-Empowerment in Morocco," offering an analysis of "empowerment" by examining women-run cooperatives in Moroccan communities. Also offering examples of feminism's impact, Fatima Seedat's article, "When Islam and Feminism Converge," analyses

the particular and often controversial intersection of Islamic and feminist ideology, while, “Social Determinants of Reproductive Health in Morocco,” by Boutayeb Abdesslam provides an analysis of the state of reproductive health, its improvements and continued disparities, in Morocco. Though clearly evident improvements in the lives of Moroccan women can be seen, the results of feminist work, the current state of Moroccan society as well as changing attitudes of younger generations of Moroccan citizens have found the effectiveness of feminism to be waning as discussed in Katja Zvan Elliot’s article, “Morocco and its Women’s Rights Struggle: A Failure to Live Up to its Progressive Image,” and Zakia Salime’s article, “A New Feminism? Gender Dynamics in Morocco’s February 20th Movement.” Though an imperfect movement, as any, feminism’s long standing history of political and social activism in Morocco places it in the perfect position to increase inclusiveness and goals to bridge gaps between other current social movements such as February 20th and the Islamist movement. Feminism in Morocco, therefore, has the potential to continue to be the country’s most vital social movement; however, this is not without significant challenges which must be addressed within Moroccan society.

Perhaps the biggest and most controversial challenge in feminism’s historic struggle for equality in Morocco is its common incompatibilities with Islamic ideology, a dominant influence over Morocco’s cultural and governmental practices. Both feminism and Islamism present their own ideas of what gender equality entails. While feminism operates on the premise of equality that liberates women from gendered roles and

restrictions in family and society, Islamism advocates for an image of equality based in religious tradition. According to Islam, as Seedat explains, “Equality is envisioned as a complementarity of male and female roles; men and women are created in a manner that suits them ideally to their divinely ordained social roles, adherence to which is necessary to a properly Muslim life” (404). The differences in their approach to equality create quite a bit of tension and disagreement among Moroccan women who desire parity while still wanting to maintain their cultural and religious views. While most secular feminists in Morocco strive for institutional equality (political, economic, etc.) some also believe there can be a convergence between feminism and Islam and that the two do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive; however, most of the rhetoric on the side of Islam expresses the belief that “Muslim women would be better served by the norms of Islam than the radical freedoms of the West, especially those suggested by feminism. This approach characteristically resists the convergence of Islam and feminism” (Seedat, 404). This split between two very different (but in some ways similar) social movements has sculpted the landscape of Morocco’s women’s rights debate and continues to be a significant determinant in the progress of the country. Among scholars, theorists, theologians, activists, and writers in Morocco exist very different opinions of the relationship between feminism and Islam and the possibility of a convergence of the two. Some advocate for a positive relation of the two while others believe that no convergence is possible due to the incompatibility of the two ideologies. Those who advocate for

convergence often are described as taking Islam for granted in that it is not a factor that will or can be removed from the cultural conversation of gender relations (Feliu). Despite the ongoing tension between feminism and Islam, certain accomplishments have undoubtedly been achieved through the work of feminist activists.

Among these accomplishments are women's increased access to education, employment, and reproductive healthcare (Abdesslam), increased economic empowerment among women in urban and rural communities (Bordat and Davis) and, perhaps most internationally notable, progressive legislative reforms made to Morocco's Family Code (Elliot). With the creation of the Commission for Women and the Akhawat Al-Saffa (Sisters of Purity) in 1946, a first wave of feminism swept through Morocco being integrated into the nationalistic political parties (Feliu). It is important to note that "this first feminism developed in parallel to the Muslim reformism and to the Nahda period, or Renaissance, in the Arabic world, according to which women had to occupy an important place in this effort of modernization (literacy)" (Feliu, 102). This attention to literacy automatically began empowering women in Morocco. Just as the printing press exponentially increased the dissemination of knowledge, literacy provides a unique and vital empowerment via knowledge of the world in which one lives. With increased literacy came many other simultaneous improvements to the lives of women in Morocco.

For example, from 1980 to 2005, there has been seen a “decreasing trend in fertility, crude birth, crude death and infant mortality” (Abdesslam). One of the biggest factors in this trend is the increased use of contraceptives among Moroccan women. Abdesslam tells us, “Between 1980 and 2004, the percentage of married women using contraception increased from 19% to 63%” (58). The interconnectedness of education, employment, marriage and reproductive health are further explained by Abdesslam, “Culturally, more and more girls are having access to higher education and young women are getting jobs with responsibility. Consequently, the age of marriage is delayed and women are opting for fewer pregnancies” (58). The “opting” for fewer pregnancies indicates an agency in these improvements to Moroccan women’s lives; however, as will be addressed in following pages, this agency is not universal in lives of Moroccan women, and is dependent on cultural, political, and geographic factors.

Within these accomplishments of feminist activism lie both the evidence of feminism’s effectiveness and its limitations. The political gains for women that have been seen in Morocco have been the results of institutional support. Thus far, the majority of feminist activism has been through the lens of liberal feminism in that women (and men) have been influencing the progress of women’s rights by establishing a presence in governmental positions and petitioning political and religious leaders, creating more equitable access to and using existing structures to create change. This has been effective but only to a point. In the case of the

reform of the Family Code, change through an existing structure can be clearly observed; however, many of the limitations of approaching feminist activism only through the lens of liberal feminism can also be seen.

Much of Morocco's progressive image has stemmed from the cultivation of legislation reform targeting women, though enforcement of new laws has not been at a level considered acceptable by many standards of world-wide feminist communities (Elliot). Morocco's most recent improvement in this regard is the reform of the Family Code. "Aware of the importance of women empowerment, the Moroccan parliament adopted in 2004 a new family code (Moudawana)" (Abdesslam, 63). The Family Code offers institutional support in that the language of the legal code is specifically aimed at women. The Code is "a legal document with particular significance for women, as it governs marriage, divorce, the age at which they may be married, issues of divorce and child custody and guardianship, marital property, their right to work and travel outside the home, marriage, or inheritance" (Feliu, 106). Here we see that the Family Code contains support for multiple forms of feminist thought. The Code advocates for women's legal (liberal) and economic (Marxist/socialist) empowerment, challenges patriarchal family structures (radical), and access to reproductive health (welfare). Ideally, the Family Code would provide this empowerment universally; however, "The notion of gradualism is perhaps the most salient guiding principle when analyzing the Family Code; otherwise the reforms may be dismissed as falling short of feminist expectations and the international praise" (Elliot, 2). The gradual nature of the

progress and support the Family Code offers is evident in that many of the issues it addresses are also issues primarily influenced by Islam (marriage, reproduction, working outside the home, property, etc.) making an instant revolution of women's rights quite impossible. While feminism advocates for the immediate and complete implementation of the new laws, deeply engrained religious laws directly contradict the new legislation and are still primarily practiced in rural areas where illiteracy and limited political participation result in the maintaining of communities governed by Islamic law rather than national law. In this way, institutional support is not enough because the sway of legal institutions does not integrate itself into the lives of all Moroccan women.

Many of the women who do not benefit from progressive legislation are living in rural, economically underdeveloped, and marginalized communities. A more socialist feminist approach to implementing these new laws would be more effective in that literacy and legal education can be considered a resource that all communities and socioeconomic classes deserve equal access to and should be provided as a priority to communities that are isolated and marginalized. This does not necessarily provide any solution to the dispute between Islamic law and national law; however, it does provide women with knowledge of their legal rights and therefore increases their likelihood to advocate for change in their own communities. Not only would a socialist feminist approach improve the implementation of legislation reform of the Family Code, it would also aid in increasing access to reproductive healthcare and contraception.

Much like the implementation of new national laws in rural areas is limited due to lack of education and political awareness, access to reproductive healthcare and contraception is limited in marginalized communities due to geographic location, limited social services, and financial resources (Abdesslam). While the reproductive health and contraceptive use have certainly improved in Morocco, much of the improvement has occurred primarily in urban areas and among married women. It is not surprising that many of the improvements in women's status that occur in conjunction with each other (education, employment, reproductive healthcare) are primarily occurring in urban areas being that rural areas are often lacking many of the links in such progressive chains. As for reproductive healthcare, it is one aspect of women's lives that "is quantitatively and qualitatively determined by conditions such as poverty, income, employment, food security, housing, education, discrimination, and the women status in general" (Abdesslam, 62). All of these factors are more likely to impede improvements to reproductive health care in rural communities where, as previously discussed, legislation is not as commonly upheld; however, employing a more hands-on feminist approach and increased contact with these communities may alleviate many disparities.

The legislative platform that a liberal feminist approach has helped to build provides a substantial foundation for other feminist perspectives to begin constructing new structures. While legislation and new laws improving the status of women are more regularly enforced in urban areas, rural and marginalized areas need the new laws to be brought to them. In

some ways this has already begun to occur through the work of feminist organizations. “Following the 1985 Nairobi Women’s Conference that identified empowering women to make the law relevant and real in their lives as a priority, women’s groups began to examine the link between the law and women’s empowerment and the implementation of human and legal rights education programs” (Bordat and Davis, 92). By delivering knowledge of their legal empowerment, women are equipped with a new perspective of what is possible for their lives; women can’t advocate for rights they don’t know they have. The first step, then, is education of the legal and human rights provided by institutional support. Perhaps the second most influential factor in improving the status of women in Morocco is economic empowerment.

Economic empowerment allows women the opportunity to become less dependent on patriarchal family structures and, by challenging these structures through legal and economic empowerment, women may also achieve the freedom to challenge religious ideologies as well; however, as with legal and human rights, “Moroccan women’s economic situation is limited by several factors, including low levels of education and literacy, which restrict their entry to the labor market, inadequate access to money or credit, and problems getting their products to the market” (Bordat and Schaefer, 96). As has been seen in urban areas where women have been finding increased employment, economic empowerment in rural areas can lead to financial independence, increased access to reproductive healthcare, delayed marriage, fewer children, and overall improved status.

Again, education is the first step in accomplishing this. In the same way that women's groups have begun educating women about legal and human rights, many women's groups focus on economic and social projects targeted at women even in the most remote communities (Bordat and Schaefer). Having the backing of institutional support through law, feminist activists and organizations are able to advocate for the inclusion of marginalized populations and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities in the progress that Morocco is trying to achieve. While legal and economic empowerment are crucial components in the raising of the status of women, achievable through further feminist activism, one thing continuously creates obstacles on the road to progress.

Feminist activism has been met with opposition and a lack of faith from other current social movements—namely the Islamist movement and the February 20th movement. Many members of the Islamist movement identify themselves as advocates for gender equality but on the basis of religious doctrine and often speak out against feminism. The February 20th movement, named for a day of protests in Morocco in 2011 during the Arab spring, was created by and is primarily comprised of a younger generation whose gender dynamics, some argue, have been informed by feminism though the movement is curiously not affiliated with feminism (Salime). Feminism's inauspicious relationship to both movements prevents it from maintaining its impact on social conditions in that in order to continue to grow as a movement it must be able to work in conjunction with other movements that have significant impacts on cultural progress.

In the case of Islam, certain activists and scholars have suggested a convergence with feminism, calling it 'Islamic Feminism' and while it is not an opinion shared by the majority of feminists or Islamists, utilizing a relationship with the February 20th movement may provide a much needed bridge between feminism and Islamism. February 20th has a leadership structured with a focus on human equality, seeing gender equality as an obvious part of that, though "strikingly missing from these formal and informal structures are Moroccan feminist organizations" (Salime, 103). This lack of feminist involvement is at once curious and understandable given that February 20th has a list of demands that "encompasses political claims such as dissolving the Parliament, the government and the constitution, social demands including access to housing and free education, economic demands such as better wages and access to jobs," (Salime). Since the majority of feminist gains in Morocco have had a legal basis, it is understandable that feminists would not want to be affiliated with a movement that advocates for the dissolving of parliament and government. On the other hand, other demands of February 20th seem to be right in line with feminist goals. While a liberal feminist perspective may not be entirely compatible with February 20th, a radical feminist perspective could be a benefit to the movement, the same way, surprisingly, that Islamists participation in February 20th benefitted the movement.

After February 20th was established as a movement, Islamists joined the cause on the basis of shared goals, seemingly disregarding areas of difference which proved advantageous. If nothing else, it displays the

benefit of social movements working in connection with each other in that “the Islamist participation enriched the movement by providing opportunities for discussions and networking among secular, leftists, Islamists and women” (Salime). If this same partnership could be achieved between feminism and February 20th, the same type of discussions and networking could take place between not only February 20th and feminists, but Islamists and feminists. This might also be a vital connection for the feminist movement in that younger generations, by which February 20th is supported, has the potential to represent a new wave of feminism in Morocco but only if feminist activists and organizations are able to participate in the pursuit of their goals; it must remain useful to remain relevant. As a major historical component in the progress of Moroccan women, feminism certainly has a place in the conversations of both the Islamist movement and February 20th, conversations that—albeit contentious—may spark change to be implemented in the cultural fabric of Morocco by the next generation.

Feminism has long been influential in the progress of women in Morocco, though primarily through a liberal feminist perspective. While liberal feminism has constructed a platform from which many improvements in the status of women have launched, there are issues such as education, reproductive healthcare, economic empowerment, in which the successes of feminist activity can be seen in direct contrast to improvements that could still be made. As a new generation of Moroccans begins to shape cultural and political landscapes with their own human

rights movement, and Islamists continue to so strongly impact the same landscapes, feminism must be positioned, in multiple forms, carefully and deliberately in proximity to current social movements in order to remain useful to the progress of Morocco. By increasing presence and activity in rural and isolated communities, and finding common ground with other social movements, feminism has the opportunity to increase support, broaden its demographic base, and secure its hard-earned place in the progress of Morocco and the empowerment of Moroccan women.

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