

# The Women's Movement and Political Discourse in Morocco

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## Preface

In preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in September 1995, UNRISD initiated an Occasional Paper Series reflecting work carried out under the UNRISD/UNDP project, **Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives: Integrating Gender into Development Policy**. In view of the intensified efforts in the aftermath of the Conference to integrate gender concerns into policy analysis and formulation, and the progress of the gender programme at UNRISD, the Institute intends to continue this Occasional Paper Series to facilitate dissemination of the findings from its gender-related projects. This paper, based on research undertaken in Morocco as part of the **Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives** project, focuses on the role of the women's movement in shifting the boundaries of political discourse on women's issues.

As in many other countries, the claims of the women's movement have been marginalized in conventional political debates in Morocco. Traditional political actors have long used the pretext of religious and cultural sensitivity in an attempt to keep women's issues off the political agenda and to limit women's visibility and their impact on public life. This paper attempts to place the political discourse on women's issues within the context of efforts by political élites to maintain the status quo against processes unleashed by democratization and the containment of political Islam. Despite changes in the relationship between the state and citizens that have allowed the emergence of the women's movement, the resistance of the old political élite remains strong. Rabéa Naciri argues that under these conditions, the women's movement of the mid-1980s onward has rarely identified its activities as "political", adopting instead a range of unconventional strategies to promote its concerns.

The paper traces the development of the contemporary women's movement in Morocco, concentrating in particular on those associations which emerged in the mid-1980s out of the centre-left political parties. Over the past decade women's associations have worked to consolidate their place in civil society. While asserting their independence, a rapprochement with the most progressive institutionalized political bodies has been sought by these associations as a way to establish influence. The movement has highlighted and exploited the contradictions in the politics of maintaining state legitimacy in Morocco, which depends on placating traditional conservative Islamist interests, while at the same time projecting a modernist progressive image. Interestingly, as the author points out, against the backdrop of political Islam, women have also used Islam as a "strategy of resistance" to strengthen their position.

The author concludes that the visibility and energy of the women's movement have turned it into a defining element in the structure of civil society. By representing their independent interests, feminists have helped to redefine gender and political identities simultaneously. The paper argues that despite claims to eschew conventional "politics", the women's movement has nonetheless helped to shift "political" boundaries by

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encouraging public discussion and debate on issues traditionally associated with the domestic and private sphere. In so doing, the movement has helped to increase political participation and broaden the political terrain in Morocco.

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Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara  
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## Contents

	page
Introduction	1
Redefining Politics and Political Participation	2
Democratization and the Emergence of Civil Society	3
The Women's Movement	7
Women's Status as a Political Issue	10
Islam as a Strategy of Exclusion and a Strategy of Resistance	12
The Ambivalence of the State	15
Political Parties, the Women's Movement and the Redefinition of Political Space	18
Conclusion	22
Bibliography	24
Endnotes	27



## Introduction

This paper aims to contextualize debates over the status of women in Morocco in relation to the contemporary political history of the country. As in many other countries, the claims of the women's movement have been marginalized in conventional political debates. In Morocco, the status of women is a "taboo" subject, and consequently any discussion of the issue elicits deep-rooted passions, particularly with regard to the country's national identity. At present this tendency is particularly pronounced because Morocco, like other Muslim and Arab countries, has seen the development of Islamic fundamentalist movements. These intensify the national identity crisis, as well as the contradictions inherent in the progressive image of the state and political élites, by focusing attention on the status of women. Indeed, debates over the status of women must be viewed against the backdrop of efforts by the state to contain the forces unleashed by democratization and the threat of political Islam.

The women's movement of the mid-1980s onward, although resembling liberal feminism in terms of demands, has rarely identified its activities as "political". Its energy and skill in using unconventional means of engagement have greatly helped to widen the political field in Morocco by making the status of women a subject for political debate. Ironically, however, its discursive strategies have tended to uphold the attitude that "politics" is exclusively limited to the formal political sphere (political institutions and parties) largely dominated by men. This paradox must be ascribed to Morocco's political and historical context. The strong emphasis on the country's Muslim and Arab identity and its focus on ethnic, linguistic and cultural unity are some of the factors that contribute to the ambivalence of the state and political bodies with regard to women's claims. They also help to explain the varied strategies adopted by women's associations in order to achieve their goals.

Conventional political actors have used the pretext of religious and cultural sensitivity in their attempts to keep women's issues off the political agenda, and to limit women's visibility and their impact on public life. In response, women's associations which have emerged since the mid-1980s have adopted a twofold "strategy"<sup>1</sup> aimed, first, at integration into civil society and, second, at a rapprochement with institutionalized political bodies, particularly the most progressive social and political elements. A further tactic has been to exploit the contradictions between the progressive claims of the state and its need to ensure the loyalties of the old patriarchal structures. The latter were destabilized by the social and economic changes which followed independence, but they have grown in force since the beginning of the 1980s. This study will assess the extent to which the strategies of the women's movement have contributed to and succeeded in redefining social and political gender identities. It will aim to show that, despite its claims to eschew conventional "politics", the women's movement has nonetheless established itself as a partner in political discussions on women's issues and in reformulating the terms of the debate. Indeed, the greatest success of the movement has been the "politization" of women's issues.

## **Redefining Politics and Political Participation**

In Morocco, the question of women's political participation was initially taken up as a claim for political rights by a generation of educated women who were active in the process of national policy development in the post-independence years. In the euphoria of this period, a number of these women, who had ideological and family links with the formal political arena, claimed the right to political representation as a public recognition of their abilities and patriotism at a moment when the country greatly needed national administrators and political leaders. They emphasized the right of women to participate in the management of national matters on the basis of their skills and their socio-economic roles. In other words, their claims were not linked to the need for representation of women in terms of specific gender interests or a female political consciousness ("women's voices"), but upon the provision of political "space" for women on the same terms as men. In this optimistic view, it was sufficient for a woman to have a militant or academic background, or both — which was often the case in this social class — to benefit from the same opportunities as men and to be recognized as political actors.

This view gradually eroded with the emergence, in a context of economic liberalization and democratization, of a new generation of women's associations and with the interest of researchers in these new structures. The appearance of new forms of social organization helped to give direction to analysis and discussion on broader socio-economic and political developments, rather than confining debates to questions of political participation.

According to a narrow definition of "politics", which deems political those activities in which political actors engage with conventional political institutions (political parties, government, parliament, trade unions, etc.), it is possible to conclude that the women's movement in Morocco has remained at the margins and has had a limited impact on the contemporary political agenda. In classical political theory, the questions of women's participation in the political sphere and women's role in democracy are characterized in two ways: first, by the division between the public and the private spheres, which are artificially separated and gender-specific; and second, by a very narrow, male-centric, view of democratic participation, which is essentially restricted to formal political institutions and procedures.

In critiques of classical political theory, various analysts — including feminist scholars — have attempted to extend the concept of participation (and the political field in which it takes place) by deconstructing the assumptions underlying the apparent duality of the public and the private spheres. Feminist political theorists have challenged the characterization of the public sphere as a masculine world of reason and rationality and the private sphere as a feminine world of familial love and duty, and, in particular, the attendant notion that the family and the private sphere were somehow excluded from conceptions such as equality and justice central to liberal political theory. "The real contribution of a feminist critique of liberal political theory to democracy is in transforming this conceptualization of the private sphere to achieve a wider notion of political



participation and representative democracy” (Phillips, quoted in Siddiqui, 1995:6).

Further, feminist scholars have attempted to oppose the public/private duality by demonstrating the degree of interdependence between the two spheres and the extent to which social justice for women depends upon equality within the private sphere as well as outside it. From this perspective “whatever influences or affects women’s identity and their roles in either sphere has to be considered ‘political’” (Phillips, quoted in Siddiqui, 1995:7). In sum, “. . . the recognition of this reality redefines our understanding of public concerns, democracy and politics” (Rowbotham, quoted in Siddiqui, 1995:8). It would thus be incorrect to consider the experiences of women’s movements as being at the margin of political activity since their claims — women’s rights, legal and social entitlements, political participation — are fundamentally political, even if their methods of public action are not always conventional in the narrow political sense.

Fraser’s distinction between the use of the term “political” in a narrow institutional sense and in a broader discursive sense is useful for the present study: an issue is political in the institutional sense “if it is handled directly in the institutions of the official governmental system, including parliaments, administrative apparatuses, and the like” (1989:166). A distinction is often made between activities carried out through formal political institutions (“official political”) and those carried out in institutions like “the family” and “the economy”, both of which are seen as being outside the official political system even though, as Fraser points out, “they are in actuality underpinned and regulated by it” (1989:167). In the broader sense of the term, as Fraser puts it, “something is ‘political’ if it is contested across a range of different discursive arenas and among a range of different publics” (1989:167). Crucial here is the discursive sense: an issue can be construed as political if it is discussed and debated by “different discourse publics”. Using this definition of politics, it is possible to see how the boundaries between the political, the economic and the domestic change constantly in accordance with places, societies and history; the line of demarcation between the spheres is always a contested matter. Consequently, for the purposes of the present study, not only must the forces traditionally recognized by the Moroccan constitution as “political” in the institutional sense be identified, but also broader discursive terrains on which the status of women is debated must be analysed.

## **Democratization and the Emergence of Civil Society**

Democratization of Moroccan political institutions began in the 1980s, largely as part of a process of consensus building over the country’s claims to the Western Sahara. Moroccan claims on the Sahara necessitated a unified political front internally in order to reinforce the country’s position internationally.

Political democratization has gone hand in hand with economic liberalization. The economic disengagement of the state in favour of the

private sector began with the structural adjustment programme initiated at the beginning of the 1980s, following a serious financial crisis and increased foreign debt (see USAID, 1996). Economic reforms followed “the new orthodoxy of development which imposes three axioms: priority to exports, liberalization of trade and privatization of public enterprises” (Camau, 1989). The omnipresent state, which for decades shaped social and economic life and was a significant provider of employment, social services and goods, could no longer meet the increasing needs of a growing, young, urban population. The state has thus gradually allowed an opening for new economic actors. However, despite the dynamic nature of a new generation of entrepreneurs who are better educated, and demand more independence from the state and more transparency in the rules governing the economic sphere, the economy is still dominated by political institutions (Leaveau and Bennani-Chraïbi, 1996).

At the same time, there has been a wider margin for freedom of speech and association that offers an opportunity to the institutionalized political forces as well as to new social, economic and political actors to make known and defend their interests publicly.<sup>2</sup> Although the present Moroccan political system can be characterized as pluralist, it is also true that it has been largely controlled by the monarchy. However, with increased democratization a certain number of demands made by political opposition groups — which formed a democratic bloc (Koutla)<sup>3</sup> four years ago — have been met. These include constitutional reforms, the organization of two legislative elections, the appointment of a Minister of Human Rights, the establishment of an Advisory Council for Human Rights and of channels for dialogue and social mediation, and reform of the Trade Code.

These changes reflect the consensus achieved in recent years between the king and the traditional parliamentary opposition parties. In the post-independence years these parties refused any “compromise” with the *Makhzen* (central authority).<sup>4</sup> Following the constitutional reform of 1993, however, consultations and negotiations took place with a view to the participation of opposition parties in government for the first time in Morocco. Political observers have spoken of the emergence of a new political culture based on dialogue and consensus that aims to provide constructive solutions to the political and economic problems confronting the country, an important departure from the culture of confrontation/co-optation between the king and political actors which has prevailed since independence.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the economic crisis, economic globalization, the political crisis in Algeria and the progress of the Islamist movement in Morocco — especially in the universities — have led to a sense of urgency among political actors in closing ranks and presenting a united front.

The opposition parties of the Koutla represent the only legally constituted and authorized political force enjoying legitimacy among the urban middle and upper classes. This legitimacy derives from participation in the independence movement and from the fact that the Koutla has distanced itself from responsibility for the present social and economic crisis. The political and ideological approaches of the Koutla coalition cover a wide spectrum, though subsumed under the headings of “the opposition” and “the left”; the latter range from the nationalist and pan-Arabic left to the socialist

and communist left. The ideological convictions of the political actors are, however, divergent and dialogue on women's issues in some cases represents a threat to the already fragile political consensus.

The two most important members of the Koutla, the Socialist Union and the Istiqlal (Independence) Party, have been unsuccessful thus far in widening their social base, especially among women, youth and the poorest groups. Their support has gradually eroded in a country where more than half of the population was born after independence and is faced with unemployment, inadequate educational and health facilities, and poverty. Because of the élitism of these parties and their inability to present a credible political alternative, their legitimacy is now being questioned. Periodic popular revolt is seen by political analysts as an indication of the exclusion of large population groups which do not identify with any political structure (see, in particular, Bennani-Chraïbi, 1994).

Reform of economic and political institutions has also favoured the proliferation of new civil society groups,<sup>6</sup> which have seized the opportunity to participate actively in the process of political democratization. The variety of elements of what is now commonly called civil society, and its consolidation around associations for women's rights, human rights, civic development, environmental and children's rights, the handicapped, consumers, etc., make it a potentially powerful actor on the public scene. Although the associations are highly varied, many have in common a new vision of politics and the role of public opinion. The emerging social actors agree on the need to establish a legally constituted state in which the rights of individuals and citizens, both male and female, will be recognized and respected; this represents a break with the practices and mentalities that have prevailed in the country until now.

Disaffected youth in particular represent a formidable challenge to the Koutla coalition parties. Universities, which until the mid-1980s were centres for the recruitment of new members of the leftist parties, have been controlled by the Islamists since the beginning of the 1990s. Partly as a result of crisis in the educational system and the extent of unemployment among graduates,<sup>7</sup> the university is seen to contribute to the creation of a social class of frustrated youth who tend to reject traditional political institutions.<sup>8</sup> Educated Moroccan youth thus attempt to organize their political claims and formulate them outside the traditional circuits. Unemployed graduates have discovered an original way of formulating their claims through the creation of associations of recent graduates, which are perceived as an alternative framework independent of all partisan or political influences and count a high proportion of young women members.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the state has recognized the importance of such bodies in community development. These groups are interpreted as a response to the state's inability to respond to the desire of the population for social and economic well-being. The state's recognition of these groups can, at one level, be interpreted as an attempt to limit the influence of the Islamists, who use charitable associations for political propaganda purposes. These new associations are seen to constitute a rampart against the Islamist movement, aiming to compete with it on its own ground.

The emergence of new groups active in a range of non-conventional issues, outside of formal politics, has not left the institutionalized political élite indifferent. There has been an attempt to take over these movements by appropriating their discourse, co-opting some of their best-known members, and encouraging like-minded organizations. However, the capacity of the new civil society organizations to present social and political alternatives and to exert a positive influence depends on the strength of their position in the urban population as well as in the rural population and on their ability to remain independent from formal political institutions. One example is the women's movement. As demonstrated below, it can be considered a "pioneer", with a special strategy and approach linked to its efforts to achieve autonomy from the Koutla coalition.

In view of the instrumental use of religion in Muslim countries in the context of women's interests, and by way of background to the discussion below, mention must be made here of the fundamentalist movement — a force not usually included in discussions of "civil society", the latter being implicitly seen as both independent of any partisan affiliation and as the carrier of civic, democratic and modern values.<sup>10</sup> Like the monarchy, and the territorial unity of the country, Islam is an integral feature of the political system in Morocco. The ancestral religious legitimacy of the king as a descendant of the prophet and, at the same time, the temporal and spiritual leader (*Amir al mouminine*) is reinforced by the recent history of the monarchy, which symbolized resistance to foreign occupation, and is reflected in the constitution, which specifies Islam as the state religion.

The monarchy's management of religion has shaped the political culture of the country since independence in 1956. Religion has been called upon to legitimize the monarchy (Leveau, 1989). Marxist ideologies and those of the nationalist left, which both opposed the legitimacy of the monarchy, were thwarted and the Moroccan communist party was prohibited. In this context, Islam was called upon as a means to exclude political opposition parties, which were accused of being imported, secular and thus illegitimate. The Koutla coalition has taken note of this in order to avoid being excluded from a political arena in which "the dominant symbolism is of religious origin and where the . . . symbolic capital . . . determines simultaneously the place occupied by the party on the political fringe and, particularly, its strategy for obtaining power" (Tozy, 1979). This situation, which is fairly common in non-secular Muslim countries, has prepared the terrain for Islamist and extremist ideologies. The discourse of Islamic groups is socially accepted because it is seen to embody a historical continuity.

The political management of Islamist forces in Morocco is unique, however, in so far as the monarchy monopolizes the production of religious symbolism and maintains a religious pluralism of sorts — represented by currents such as the Oulémas and religious brotherhoods, and certain political parties such as Istiqlal — mediated by the monarch himself.<sup>11</sup> Islamist groups, organized into legal or otherwise tolerated associations, may be active on condition that they respect the rules which govern the politico-religious field. This is the case in particular for the members of the association *Islah Wa Tajdid* (Reform and Renewal), who have formed a political party. It has also been possible for well-known Islamists to present

themselves at legislative or community elections. The Moroccan government tends to encourage the integration of Islamist groups into the system and acts so as not to radicalize them by an overly repressive attitude. Indeed, the fact that the state religion is Islam is often held up as one of Morocco's main defences against the waves of political Islam.

This paper attempts to contextualize the political discourse on women's issues within the context of two inter-related trends: the efforts by political élites to maintain the status quo against processes unleashed by democratization and the containment of political Islam. The strong bipolarity of the political system, occupied since independence exclusively by the king and the opposition parties, has resisted or sought to contain the emergence of new social or political forces. A system based on co-optation of élites and on clientelism has not easily accommodated the expression of the interests of other groups organized outside of these circles. However, economic liberalization has forced the state to make some changes and yield a certain number of its privileges to the private sector and to new civil society groups in general. Despite changes in the relationship between the state and citizens, which have allowed the emergence of the women's movement, the resistance of the old political élite remains very strong, especially when women's groups present themselves as political interlocutors.

## **The Women's Movement**

If the women's movement is understood to consist of organizations concerned specifically with women's interests, such a movement existed in Morocco long before independence. Then, its purpose was to deal with issues such as literacy, social assistance for women and children, etc. But if by this term we understand a current of opinion in favour of women's liberation, we must turn to the middle- and upper-class women who were activists in the women's sections of the political parties before and especially after national independence.

Within the scope of this study, the women's movement refers to those women's associations belonging to the "second generation", which developed in the mid-1980s. Our purpose is not to make a detailed study of all women's associations, but rather to focus on a particular segment that uses a strategy and discourse aimed at a re-evaluation of women's identity and their status in society. It happens that this category is one of the most dynamic in Morocco, which may be attributed to the skill of its members, acquired within the political parties from which many of its leaders came, although other very active associations provide valuable assistance to women in several fields.

In fact, the contemporary women's movement owes much to the women who, for lack of better options, worked in philanthropic associations after having contributed actively to the independence movement. It owes even more to the "first generation" women who continued to work towards integration into the parties of the left in the 1960s and 1970s. The second generation of the women's movement (from the 1980s onwards) is of particular significance because of its qualitative break with the demands,

practices and discourse characterizing the associations and parties of the left during the preceding period. The break occurred at several levels:

- at the organizational level, by choosing to work solely through women's or independent structures, as distinct from the political parties and the trade unions;
- with regard to claims and demands, which can be qualified as feminist because they no longer perceived the subordination of women as a function only of class relations but also in terms of gender relations; and
- with regard to new working methods and alliances which contributed to a transformation of the Moroccan political landscape, whereby there has been an extraordinary opening-up of the structures of civil society and a greater willingness of traditional political parties to work with other groups.

The founders of the first generation (post-independence) women's associations had to face a number of challenges. At some level they accepted certain values of the old colonial system, such as equality and modernity, in a political and ideological context hostile to Western values — and especially those concerning women and the family. They also questioned the authority and legitimacy of a male élite which, on the pretext of having fought for national liberation of the country, tended to speak on behalf of women and to impose on them a narrow plan for liberation.

Another characteristic of the first generation of women's associations was that they gradually came to realize that gender equality and gender relations transcend class struggles. The left found in Marxist ideology a rationale that allowed them to put off claims for women's equality by making them conditional on and subordinate to class liberation. In their desire for acceptance, women of the left long supported this "orthodoxy". They also had to overcome the guilt associated with their departure from traditional norms of female behaviour. To be educated, professionally active and financially independent are privileges that generate some ambivalence for women in Arab societies: not only is their loyalty to their family and children questioned, but their privileged status in a society where the overwhelming majority of women are illiterate and poor becomes a source of culpability. For many years a hierarchy of priorities and loyalties was maintained: inequalities linked to class were perceived as more unacceptable than those related to gender inequalities. For this reason, women of the left were told that "emphasizing one's woes as a woman is indecent". As articulated by one Egyptian feminist, "feminists had to choose between betrayal and betrayal" (cited in Kandiyoti, 1991).

Having been members for years of women's sections created by the centre-left parties, the first generation of the women's movement became increasingly aware of the scale of their marginalization within the "men's clubs". The experience prompted a large number of these women to become members of separate associations within which they could easily speak and be heard, and where their interests were taken into account. Despite their efforts to "disengage" themselves to some extent from the main political parties, the strategies adopted by the women's movement in Morocco in the 1980s have been fundamentally influenced by the relationship of the

movement with the centre-left political groups. Women's associations remain divided between their desire not to cut the umbilical cord from their leftist roots, which, in their view, originate in the political parties — and their desire to affirm their own political identity and their independence from these same groups.

Many women's associations are not yet free of the orthodox political culture that permeated politics in Morocco from the time of independence until the mid-1980s, and which characterized gender claims as a deviation by marginalized women's groups from central political concerns. Women have been forced to rethink their place in these parties, which they had joined as a reaction to social injustice. Although they challenged the dogma that “women's liberation is linked to class liberation”, this did not lead to a re-examination of the views and policies of the parties to which they belonged. In most cases, political parties assumed that the new women's associations would serve to convey their ideologies and motivate potential sympathizers.

Thus the women's movement is divided between its desire not to displease the Koutla coalition or to isolate itself from it, and asserting the movement's claims, which are disregarded by coalition members and in no way represent a priority concern on their political agenda. The fundamental challenge is therefore to be freed from the tutelage of the traditional political parties without becoming isolated. This assumes the ability of the women's movement to extend its base to poor women, to present credible political alternatives, and to make as many varied alliances as possible.

Overall, then, contemporary (or second generation) women's associations can be differentiated into two broad types. The first group comprises those which see themselves as feminists, originating in most cases from the political parties, but with a more or less real margin of independence in relation to the latter. These include the Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (Democratic Association of Moroccan Women), the Union pour l'Action Féminine (Union for Women's Action), the Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité (Association 95 Maghreb for Equality)<sup>12</sup>, and the Association Marocaine pour les Droits des Femmes (Moroccan Association for Women's Rights). The second group is made up mainly of the women's sections of political parties; these groups are perceived as instruments to reinforce the position of the relevant parties, especially with respect to educated women. This is the case for the Organisation de la Femme Istiqlalienne (Organization of Istiqlal Women) and the Association des Femmes Démocrates (Association of Democratic Women).

In the first type of “feminist” associations, which have disassociated themselves to some extent from the original political groups, priority is given to the most radical claims and actions relating to gender discrimination, such as inequality with regard to civil rights, violence against women, sexual harassment — all issues on which public discussion is discouraged by the political class as a whole. The associations, which aim primarily at furthering women's rights, find that their struggle is given little political support by the parties.

The second type of association, which has retained or claims organic links with the parties, gives priority to questions of women's "immediate" or "practical" interests and to demands for the implementation of rights already established by legislation, and other policy initiatives, relating to issues such as female illiteracy, poverty, women and the family, or the political participation of women.

The different types of associations also tend to adopt different discursive strategies. Whereas the "independent" associations place emphasis on gender equality as an inseparable condition of human rights and democracy, the second category gives greater attention to practical arguments and highlights the contribution that women can make to the national development process. Both types of associations offered educated women from the middle and upper social strata a greater opportunity to express themselves freely and provide a means for greater political visibility of their women members than the mainstream political parties (Marand-Fouquet, 1995). These new groups are competing with the institutionalized political parties, which are finding it more difficult than in the past to recruit women.

## **Women's Status as a Political Issue**

The status of women has always been a "political" issue in the sense that it has been the subject of discussion and debate — of contestation — among different groups or "publics" (in Fraser's terminology). In order to understand the contemporary debate on the status of women, it must be placed in the context of tensions that were already evident well before national independence. With the development of the independence movement, certain members of the urban bourgeoisie who had studied abroad (mainly in Egypt and Europe), and who had been influenced by the reformist current of the Middle East and the West, began to denounce the seclusion of women and their lack of education. This reformist élite attempted to show that Islam could accept certain Western values, such as democracy and the emancipation of women. The Koran was sometimes described as the pioneer in this subject and it was argued that, if read correctly, its tenets would rival the principles of Western modernity. This view was rejected by traditional and conservative circles as a threat to Islamic identity, symbolized by and centred on women and the family.

Despite the ideological differences between the two views, they both came to rely on Islam and religious arguments to establish legitimacy. This can be explained in part as a reaction to colonization and the need to create and reinforce nationalist sentiment to stand up to the occupying power. In fact, support from the religious sphere was absolutely essential for this. It is important to emphasize that in both cases the question of the role of women was ideologically very controversial: the education of women symbolized an important political issue for the progressive aspirations of an élite, and simultaneously the aspirations to religious "authenticity" of the politically marginalized traditionalist circles. In view of the challenges presented by the progressive Western values of the Spanish and French occupation, the arguments for modernization were distinguished from the values and models of the colonizers by taking up the discourse and ideology of the reformist



movements of the Middle East, which celebrated women's decisive social role as wives and mothers.<sup>13</sup>

Access to education was recommended on the grounds that women were the educators of future generations. Female ignorance was denounced not as an attack on human dignity but as an obstacle to the education of male citizens, particularly those who would be called upon to play an important role after independence. At the same time, in view of their functions as mothers and teachers, women were held up as the protectors of traditional values and "authenticity", especially in the face of colonization. The education of women was thus encouraged, but this education was to be limited to branches of knowledge which might be useful to them in their roles as wives and mothers. Women's minds were not to be corrupted by allowing them access to "modern" branches of knowledge, which conveyed the values of the occupying power and, moreover, were communicated in the language of the latter.

The predominant aim, therefore, was to ensure that such changes would not introduce disorder into the familial and natural order imposed by divine will and based on the primacy of man over woman. In view of the fear that access to education might become a vehicle for propelling women into the public sphere, they continued to be kept in seclusion, although the boundaries of the private sphere were slightly enlarged. These arguments have remained basically unchanged, although they have been reformulated to suit the end of the twentieth century.

The feeling of national pride that characterized the post-independence years and the impact of the nationalist movement on political life enabled women to achieve two previously unattainable goals: education and work. There is no doubt that the most dramatic changes over the last decade concerned social life; several social indicators demonstrate the extent of the break with the "traditional" system of values in Morocco, where a "quiet" revolution is transforming women's lives and roles.<sup>14</sup> As a result of education and employment, as well as increased urbanization,<sup>15</sup> age at marriage has risen gradually (the average in rural areas is now over 24) while fertility has shown a dramatic drop (particularly in urban areas).<sup>16</sup> Women are increasingly educated: four university students out of 10 are women, and nearly 50 per cent of physicians are women. Women's employment has greatly increased since the beginning of the 1970s (although a decrease has been observed more recently). Large numbers of women work in industry and services, and women make up half of the population working in the agricultural sector.<sup>17</sup>

Another important social change of recent decades, with particular repercussions for women, has been the rise in prevalence of the nuclear family (along with the decline of the extended family). This transition has been closely linked to the emergence of "individual" identity, replacing a social system where one's identity was tied to membership of a tribe or family clan. Such changes have especially favoured women, since they challenge the image of women as guardians of tradition, and family and tribal honour. Thus, in contemporary Morocco, women's roles no longer entirely correspond to the traditional gender division of social roles.

One of the most characteristic realities of Morocco today is the fact that women, who were still secluded four or five decades ago, have entered the public sphere. The strategy used to achieve this transition was that of performance on a professional and familial level. Women endowed with significant social resources, such as education and professional careers, performed several roles simultaneously.<sup>18</sup> Whereas men often identify themselves with a single social role, Moroccan women have used multiple strategies to offset the precariousness of their status and positions. In other words, in order to prove themselves, women have fought on several fronts at once, attempting to firmly establish a number of rights which they perceive as uncertain, such as the right to work. The presence of women in the public sphere — such as the workplace, associations, trade unions, art, writing, media, etc. — has allowed them to acquire new knowledge and experience, and offers a stepping stone for more active engagement in both formal and informal politics.

Many women have thus seized the opportunity structure of the post-independence years to advance their interests. They have not contented themselves to operate solely within the framework of rights granted to them. Education has not only permitted them to “improve” their functions as wives and mothers; it has also become a means for entering other spheres and for overcoming male resistance, allowing women to challenge their inferior status in the family and in the public sphere. Indeed, from this group of educated career women have emerged the rare women leaders of formal political institutions of the state and political parties, as well as the founders and leaders of the women’s movement. In other words, it is a new *élite* that competes with the traditional male political *élite*.

This remarkable presence of women in the public sphere does not signify that this space has been taken over by women, or that interaction between the two genders is accepted and supported by men. Men and women co-exist in a sort of schizophrenic relationship. The implicit rules and the explicit restrictions governing the relationship fluctuate according to place and time. The degree of tolerance of women in the public sphere varies according to a set of social rules and constraints established by men. It is on the basis of these rules that political actors continue to legitimize the exclusion of women.<sup>19</sup>

## **Islam as a Strategy of Exclusion and a Strategy of Resistance**

As argued above, Islam has been used to maintain the privileges of an official political *élite* and exclude the majority of the population, particularly women, from participation in political and democratic initiatives. Until recently, political actors have thus attempted to relegate debate on the status of women to the religious sphere, which has not encouraged a frank exchange on gender issues. This use of religion to oppose demands for gender equality led members of women’s sections of the political parties to opt for independent women’s groups. The women’s

movement thus helped to re-focus the debate on Islam, but on terms partly defined by them.

While Islam can be characterized as a strategy of exclusion used by mainstream political actors, the Islamist movement has been used, paradoxically, by women as a strategy of resistance. Women have always used a variety of means and strategies to minimize the effects of oppression and seclusion — and, in some cases, these strategies might appear to go against their interests as women. Several studies on Muslim countries have attempted to explain and understand the apparent “agreement” of women with their subordinate position or their “conservative nature”. The adherence of young women, especially students, to the Islamist movement — the ideology of which is clearly opposed to their “strategic” interests as women — naturally poses a problem for feminist analysts.<sup>20</sup>

One explanation for women's adherence to Islam focuses on the social context. It is young educated women belonging to poor social groups who are most receptive to the Islamist approach because it values their social roles within the family. The explanation for this paradox may be that the gender division of roles has never been envisioned by the Islamists in terms of hierarchy, but as noble tasks which are the responsibility of the Muslim woman (reproduction, education in agreement with divine law, development of the generations to come . . . ), and thus contribute to the harmony and coherence of the virtuous Muslim city (Bessis and Belhassen, 1992). In other words, this approach affirms and exalts gender differences which are seen as natural and God-given.

A related explanation derives from an analysis of the discourse of Islamists in the Maghreb: “. . . the latter carefully avoid openly advocating the exclusion of women or their seclusion and also avoid developing the theme of women's inferiority. In their opinion women are the best fighters in this new moral order. By a semantic reversal, the most convinced Islamist women affirm that obedience to God frees them from the ascendancy of men (husbands, fathers, tutors, hierarchical superiors)” (Bessis and Belhassen, 1992). Islam therefore becomes a strategy for some women to resist their oppressive economic and social environments, including confinement to the private sphere, which belies the social visibility provided by their education. The immediate social recognition associated with engagement in Islamic movements satisfies needs that the social and economic environment of these women cannot meet.

In relation to this, several authors have studied the meaning of educated women wearing the *hijab* (head scarf). This practice may be interpreted as the use of Islam to conquer the public sphere and an insertion into modern life (Ferchiou, 1995). Such studies have shown that educated women give a multitude of reasons for wearing the veil and do not necessarily see any contradiction between this manner of showing their adherence to a movement which is contrary to their long-term strategic gender interests and their genuine aspirations to emancipation. In her study entitled “Les femmes islamistes tunisiennes” (“Islamist Tunisian women”), Belhassen has shown that, for a number of veiled women, the fact that they do not show their body is equivalent to a feminist gesture — by concealing their body from

men they are no longer perceived as objects, and gender no longer plays a decisive role in the relations between men and women (Belhassen, 1989).

The concept of the “patriarchal bargain” developed by Deniz Kandiyoti provides a useful insight into this dilemma (for a discussion, see Waylen, 1992). Some women in situations of helplessness, whose immediate interests cannot be satisfied, turn to patriarchal protection in order to maximize their security. Recourse to the “patriarchal bargain” implies a price to be paid in return for which, in the absence of other immediate alternatives, women secure the protection of men. The recourse to religion represents a strategy of resistance for educated women from modest social backgrounds who have higher aspirations; these women use the veil to escape from situations of very strict financial and familial control. The veil provides the safety and liberty of movement required to enter the male-dominated public sphere.

The use of Islam as a strategy of resistance can be analysed and interpreted in several ways. It might be seen as a double-edged sword, as it allows immediate social recognition and an opportunity to legitimize women’s incursions into the male public sphere at a relatively small price. But it fits into and is part of the patriarchal ideology that removes a woman’s right over her own body, since her body becomes the property of her husband. In another interpretation, the use of Islam to satisfy immediate needs is interpreted as a tactic which may serve women’s struggles in the short term, but might lead in the long term to political debate on the need to secularize Muslim law. In other words, the use of Islam as a means of emancipation runs counter to the idea that women submit to religious fundamentalism as interpreted by men. It may also lead to “women’s active participation in the manner in which Islam might advance gender interests” (Badran, quoted in Kandiyoti, 1991). In fact, by stimulating debate on women’s identity, political Islam has, unintentionally, encouraged political debate of the role of Islam in society and has thus opened the way for discussion of secularization. It has also allowed women’s discursive strategies to encroach on a sacred area that had been completely closed to them.

It is in this sense that the significance of resistance and reaction mobilized by the women’s movement must be analysed. The dual strategy that has been adopted is the subject of debate. What attitude should be taken in the face of the instrumental use of religion aimed at denying equality to women in the private sphere of the family? One approach consists of advocating the emancipation of women by examining the Koran and other sacred texts from a historical point of view, in order to contradict the non-historical approach of Islamist and traditionalist groups. In other words, it is not a matter of challenging the sacred texts as irremediably and definitively anti-egalitarian. Instead, they must be situated in their historical context and interpreted in ways that are more appropriate to present-day needs. Some female researchers<sup>21</sup>, for example, have tried to argue that a re-opening of the *Ijtihad*<sup>22</sup> is indispensable, so that Islam might be able to accommodate the recent economic, social and technological changes in Morocco and throughout the world. The second strategy, often adopted by the feminist associations, calls for a progressive approach, based on the universalist philosophy of the rights of the individual — of either sex. The women’s

movement utilizes one of these two approaches or the two simultaneously, depending on opportunities and context. This is not necessarily contradictory, since it represents an adaptation to the ambivalence of the other political actors and, more especially, the state.

## **The Ambivalence of the State**

Since independence, state policy vis-à-vis women has simultaneously valued their contributions to national development and their position within the family. The two attitudes have converged to both widen and circumscribe women's participation in the paid economy. On the one hand, women are employed as low-wage labourers in export industries, in social and domestic services and in the public sector, which also allows the state to project a progressive image of Morocco and to obtain international aid. On the other hand, traditional familial and gender norms are firmly reinforced in the private sphere and reproduced in the public sphere, including the labour market, leading to bias against women.

Control over women is achieved through the enforcement of the law in certain areas and by the absence of law or its non-application in others. In both cases the state delegates control over women in both private and public spheres to their male kin. The state can even replace the husband under some circumstances; for example, it can take on the role of civil party against the unfaithful wife if the husband is absent.

The state thereby secures the allegiance of the male population and reinforces the traditional patriarchal structure, which runs counter to the public image that Morocco attempts to convey in its dealings with the European Union (France in particular), in its international trade relations and with respect to international aid. The contradictions are reflected in the legal system, which is secularized and very progressive overall, while women simultaneously remain subject to religious law. In other words, constitutional rights to political and socio-economic equality are negated by discriminatory regulations, such as the duty of obedience to the husband or the need for marital authorization in order to work. Nonetheless, since the International Women's Year in 1975 the international women's lobby has gained strength — and this has had an important impact on the attitude of the Moroccan state (which is keen to maintain its international position and image) and on the emergence of the women's movement in Morocco.

Under pressure from the women's movement, Morocco ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993, stipulating, however, that ratification would not prejudice the rules of succession to the throne, or the provisions of Islamic law (*Shariah*) regarding women's rights.<sup>23</sup> The tension between secular and religious law helps to explain the delay in women's enjoyment of full legal rights and participation in mainstream political institutions, in spite of the enormous changes in their socio-economic position. The Moroccan Code of Personal Status, which governs the status of women and family relations, is based on traditional Islamic law and on the Malékite rite<sup>24</sup>, whereas all other legal provisions are secularized and modern (Rachid, 1991). This code places the woman under male tutelage throughout her life — celibacy,

marriage, divorce, widowhood — and institutionalizes the strict division of gender roles: the man is the head of the family and is responsible for maintaining the women and children; the woman has duties only towards her spouse (or, rather, master).

Political exclusion also operates through the economic marginalization of women, despite their effective and important economic participation. The precariousness of their employment status and working conditions, mirrored by a high gender gap in wage levels, are such that employment provides a poor conduit for emancipation from family control. Law is used to institutionalize economic marginalization. Women's economic contribution to the household is not recognized. A woman still requires authorization from her husband to go into business, work or obtain a passport.<sup>25</sup> Finally, inheritance laws grant women only one half of what men inherit on the pretext that women do not contribute to household expenses — although statistics demonstrate the contrary.<sup>26</sup> The result is social devaluation of women's unpaid work in general and marginalization of women's paid employment.

A few years after independence, the state created the Union Nationale des Femmes Marocaines (National Union of Moroccan Women), presided over by a princess. The declared aim of this association is to stimulate women's potential for participation in national development, while protecting women's traditional roles. The real goal, however, is to control women, especially those who played an important part in the struggle for independence. The state therefore mirrors the approach of political parties, making instrumental use of provisions for women's participation. More specifically, tacit prohibitions have long prevented women's access to high political and administrative posts of the state. The most striking feature of independent Morocco has been the almost total exclusion of women from official bodies, whereas women have occupied ministerial posts and seats in parliament in the other Muslim and Arabic states (with the exception of the Gulf States) — although this is sometimes a result of political expediency rather than a sign of gender equality.

This *de facto* "veto" was put aside when two women members of the Koutla coalition were elected deputies in 1993 and, more recently, in 1997 by the nomination of four women ministers. Apart from parliament and the government, all other official political institutions remain exclusively male. Few changes have been made in regard to intermediate administrative posts — which hold responsibility but little if any real power — mainly as a result of individual action rather than political will. Even if some women achieve a level of responsibility in state structures, they must perform better than their male colleagues to prove that these posts were not granted to them as a political favour or for symbolic reasons related to their gender. Moreover, women must constantly struggle to overcome powerful religious and cultural images that are used as tools to challenge their legitimacy as political actors. Stereotypes of women still abound in school textbooks (Lemrini, 1993). The role of mother is portrayed as the noblest function for a woman. The only concessions relate to the professions of teacher and nurse, which are presented "natural" caring, nurturing roles for women. Role models

legitimizing more varied social, economic and political participation of women are absent.

The Janus-faced state allows national leaders to take pride in the attainments of women in the Arab-Muslim context when dealing with Western partners and simultaneously pride themselves on the fact that the country has been able to retain its traditions. Morocco's identity is based on symbolic constructions that aim to present the country as both Arab-Muslim and open to the West. Everything is accepted from the West except the moral values touching on the Muslim and Arab identity — the family structure and the situation of women. As a beneficiary of assistance from several donor countries in the West and Middle East, the state thus appears to adhere to different ideologies on gender relations simultaneously, and this leads to the implementation of contradictory policies with regard to women (Kandiyoti, 1991). The policies adopted by multilateral and bilateral co-operation organizations, particularly the United Nations and the European Union, which include gender issues as a element in lending and aid programmes, force the state to compromise while attempting to maintain the status quo.

In recent years some countries providing bilateral or multilateral development aid have encouraged the government to accept a broader debate on the question of women's roles. However, women's rights and status are never seriously taken into account in negotiations between states: no state has as yet been threatened with cancellation of aid or refusal of loans because of the position of its women and female children.<sup>27</sup> In development circles, the status of women is rarely addressed, on the pretext that women's status in the Arab-Muslim sphere is a cultural matter. The manner in which development programmes involving women are carried out in Morocco demonstrates this very clearly. Instead of responding to the demands of the women's movement which, following recommendations made at various United Nations conferences on women, continues to advocate a women's machinery endowed with financial and political clout, issues concerning the "advancement" of women are spread among a division, a service and two bureaux within four of the least prestigious, least politically influential and poorest ministries (Barkallil, 1994).<sup>28</sup> This represents a deliberate attempt to avoid politicizing women's status.

The attitude of the women's movement with regard to the state has changed appreciably during the last decade. Originating in a *Makhzen* culture, the women's movement was essentially hierarchical and exclusive. A more democratic approach has gradually been adopted with varied spokespersons and networks, and horizontal relationships with other national and international partners have been established. The movement has broken out of the hierarchical relationship between governing and the governed, thus acquiring a real independence. In this way it has also been the precursor of a new political culture. By choosing to make use of the areas where contradictions in official policy are most flagrant, and by adopting a strategy of openness and dialogue with political leaders, the women's movement has put the political skill acquired by women within the traditional political parties to the task of fighting for specific gender claims.

At the highest level of state institutions, the king has always attempted to maintain, within the framework of pluralism, a balance between the modernist elements of society and the traditionalists and conservatives. In so doing it has been easier to make concessions at the expense of women, since the latter traditionally carry little weight in the formal political sphere. However, the existence of an independent women's movement has made it possible to put women's claims forward by directly addressing the king, if necessary, or the prime minister or other ministers. It is in this sense that the women's movement has had an important impact; its members come forward to address the state on such diverse political questions as the Code of Personal Status, civil rights in the constitution, violence against women or discrimination in recruitment of women graduates for public institutions. The political groups of the left, which still see themselves as representative of the population as a whole, have never formulated the problems so sharply, either directly or through their women representatives in parliament.

The gradual but hesitant recognition of the women's movement by the state can be seen at various levels. In recent years, in official speeches and press conferences, the king has recognized that the problems expressed by various women's groups are fair and their demands relevant. In answer to a question by a journalist on a possible Islamist danger in Morocco, the king insisted that women and intellectuals act as ramparts against this danger. Interestingly, in what can be interpreted as a discursive shift, women are less often praised as the pillars of the family and society, and as the protectors of national identity (as was the case in the past), but as ramparts against Islamic fundamentalism which threatens the political stability of the country.

A further aspect of the political recognition of women has been the consultations set up with civil society. Women's associations were invited by the king to give their opinion on the revision of the Code of Personal Status. They were also involved in the formulation of the national report for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The women's movement has increased its capacity to diversify alliances and networks for making common claims, and to strengthen solidarity between its various components and other groups of civil society. All these factors ensure the independence of the movement from the state, as well as its effectiveness in formulating and imposing its concerns as subjects of discussion at different social and political levels. Extension of the capacity of the women's movement to negotiate is linked to the movement's strategies of rapprochement with political groups and its consolidation in civil society. Indeed, leaders of the women's associations are also members (or leaders) of other associations of human rights, professional or civic associations, and political parties.

## **Political Parties, the Women's Movement and the Redefinition of Political Space**

Over the past decade, the women's movement has made a decisive contribution to the effective acknowledgement of gender concerns as



political questions. Ironically, however, this contribution is not identified as an essentially “political” one by the members of the women’s movement. To understand why, we must situate the feminist struggle within the general political context and examine more closely the links of the feminists with the democratic political groups.

The resistance of the main political actors to the demands of the women’s movement is based mainly on two concerns: equality of civil rights, with its implications for the division of power and male privileges in the family sphere; and equality in access to political power, which represents a threat to male supremacy in the formal political sphere. It is precisely to these two areas that the women’s movement has given priority from the beginning. The other claims, such as education and work, are often perceived as the means to attain these two goals. The women’s movement thus threatens the strongholds and very foundations of male supremacy and that of the élite groups. Consequently the traditional political forces have developed several discursive strategies to exclude women.

In addition to the discourse rooted in religious and cultural tradition explored above, the male political discourse also uses “naturalist” arguments derived from values and rules associated with the public and private spheres. In contrast to male reason and rationality, supposedly “natural” feminine emotion and virtue render women unsuited to public life. They are considered uninterested in politics because, as is often stated, “their nature causes them to tend towards concrete things” (unlike men who easily grasp abstract matters), or because the “gentleness of women’s nature cannot adapt to the political jungle”. Overall, the implication of such discourse is that women’s character, being closer to nature, is less capable of taking part in the political game, which, because of its implicit and complex rules, only men are able to master. All these ideas come together to distance and, indeed, exclude women from political power.

In response to a question by a woman journalist on the low representation of women in elected bodies, and measures planned to improve this situation, posed during a press conference in 1996 organized by the Koutla, the leader of the Istiqlal party made use of both discursive strategies (naturalist arguments and social tradition) to explain away the problem. Similarly, the memorandum addressed by the Koutla to the king detailing proposals for revision of the constitution requested recognition of gender equality in civil rights; however, this demand was conditional on the fact that recognition should not counter national religious values. This condition allows the political parties — like the state — to appear to make concessions to the demands of the women’s movement, while at the same time disregarding them, since it is agreed that Islam cannot accept equality in civil rights.

Overall, the exclusion of women from the formal political sphere works through an elitist system which, in order to persist, uses a number of symbolic and practical mechanisms of exclusion. Conventional politics follow “the rules of the game” consisting of implicit ideas accepted by all and which no one can ignore, at the risk of disgrace and marginalization. Accordingly, it is seen as a strategic error to demand change regarding the status of women on the pretext that the subject is very sensitive on the

religious level; instead, the real goal should concern the strengthening of previously established rights and ensuring their implementation. The basis for this argument centres on the situation of rural women, who make up half of the total female population and who are described as having concerns very far from the “extravagant demands of the feminists”. The demand for the participation of women in the formal political arena is seen as ridiculous in view of the “physical and moral destitution of the great majority of women”.

This discourse, which is widely utilized, has two purposes. First, it makes the democratic participation of women conditional on the attainment of a specific level of education and ability. Participation in community affairs is understood to be reserved for educated women. However, the latter are in a minority and are therefore seen only to represent themselves, almost as if they form a special interest group. This view is not surprising in a country where formal politics and participation in public affairs in general was limited until recently to a very restricted male political élite. Second, it divests the women's movement of all legitimacy because this discourse implies that the demands made by the movement are not among the preoccupations of the overwhelming majority of women. In this way the women's associations are discredited because of what they represent and, particularly, because of what they demand. It is a movement seen to be composed of a marginalized, Westernized élite. The same discursive strategies are not employed by the main political actors in order to deny women the right to vote. On the contrary, since women make up a large electoral reservoir — they customarily vote in greater numbers than men — during the electoral campaigns the tendency is to attempt to mobilize women, thereby profiting from their ignorance and destitution.

A recent study of youth in Morocco suggests that the “elitist” nature of politics is a general problem (Bennani-Chraïbi, 1994). Young people had opinions on all socio-economic problems, but as soon as the issue of “politics” was raised they asserted that they were not interested or had no opinion. In their perception, politics does not deal with affairs that directly concern the citizen. Rather, it is an area of expertise that requires particular abilities: people see themselves as lacking the “capacity”, “knowledge” or “culture”. Not only is there a perception that particular intellectual abilities are required for political participation, but also that the formal political sphere is reserved for powerful individuals: “. . . politics has its ‘masters’ and ‘companions’; it is the sphere reserved for the upper class or those who have property and wish to make a profit”. Political parties are thereby discredited in so far as the popular discourse presents the “political game” as rather unethical and motivated by individual interest. This attitude, aptly described by Chraïbi as being a way of “discrediting the very idea that it is individually and collectively legitimate to judge and question political authority”, underlines the powerlessness and exclusion of non-élites (Bennani-Chraïbi, 1994). This relation to politics is therefore not particular to women — it is rather a feature of the broader social structure.

In this context it is hardly surprising that only a feminine élite belonging to the middle class and thoroughly familiar with the atmosphere of the political parties could have overcome the various obstacles to political participation

and denounced exclusion based on gender. Their social and political proximity to the ruling élites has favoured the emergence of women's associations. At the same time, this situation creates a certain dependency. The women's movement continues to rely on political groups belonging to the parliamentary opposition which might, if elected, make a break with the past and agree to women's demands. Women's groups have therefore adopted a non-isolationist strategy vis-à-vis those elements most hostile to their claims, in particular the conservative social elements within the Koutla. In order to avoid marginalization, they have avoided direct debate on the issue of the secularization of the law.

However, recent years have seen developments in this sphere as well. In the preamble to the egalitarian Code of Personal Status, as well as concerning family relations in the Maghreb described by the Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité, the need for secularization of family law is explicitly stated. Similarly, the various articles of the Code undermine the foundations of male authority and supremacy, and of women's exclusion from economic and political power.<sup>29</sup> This marks a shift from the position, long maintained by political parties and even by some parts of the women's movement, that to engage in discussion of such questions would be suicidal. Such initiatives became possible owing to a combination of the efforts of several women's groups in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, indicating the extent of the independence of certain women's associations in Morocco from the political establishment.

Another example concerns the struggles of women's associations within the framework of national collaboration for revision of the Code of Personal Status, which took place in a loaded political atmosphere coinciding with revision of the Constitution and the national elections. In this context, women's claims could have been profitable electorally, with an ensuing escalation of political manoeuvrings in a national and regional context characterized by Islam. To prevent that possibility the king of Morocco asked the women's associations to refer to him personally when proposing revisions to the Code, in exchange for which they agreed not to turn the question into an electoral issue.

It is to the credit of the women's associations that they have seized favourable political opportunities to place on the agenda questions relating to equality in civic rights and the need to reform electoral laws in order to promote women's participation in elected bodies. The choice made by these associations to collaborate as soon as "highly political" demands were involved, and to form alliances with other elements of civil society, represents recognition of the need to present a coherent front vis-à-vis the actors which are most resistant to their demands: the state and political parties. Similarly, the recourse to forms of struggle and negotiation resembling those adopted by the parties, such as sending memoranda to the king, indicates the will of the women's movement to engage directly in the formal political arena.

Overall, this strategy is modelled on that of the traditional political parties. The women's movement follows the methods of the parties while attempting to differentiate itself from them. The limitations of this approach arise from

the movement's view of its own struggle, which it rarely describes in terms of intrinsically "political" actions and initiatives. Politics is still seen as the sphere relating to power and the official political institutions, the rest being perceived as fringe activities. This idea is based on gender segmentation: women are not to be involved in politics, which are a matter for men, nor are their concerns to be acknowledged as political issues. To challenge an established social order and its norms and values in order to change them is an important feature of the women's movement, but it is rarely described or identified as political by its own initiators.

The women's movement has faced difficulties in reorienting its fighting spirit, support and skill into an institutionalized representation (in government, parliament, unions, professional associations, etc.) because of its links with the political parties. The instrumental use of women's votes during electoral campaigns provides the best example. The Moroccan electoral system, which discourages candidates in legislative elections from running as independents, forces women candidates to run under a party banner. However, when candidates were being listed for the 1993 election, instead of closing ranks in order to elicit better female participation, the women's movement tended to fragment, espousing the quarrels of the political cliques. Women thus competed with each other under the respective banners of the opposition parties. Women became aware of the weakness inherent in this strategy when candidatures were announced: the number of women candidates was ridiculously low — for example, two out of 222 were accepted by the opposition coalition (the Socialist Union and Istiqlal Party), which was likely to obtain the greatest number of seats in parliament. This scenario is likely to be repeated unless women attach greater importance to gender priorities than to partisan loyalties. In the light of past experiences, these loyalties are the most effective instrument for excluding women from representation in official structures.

It seems evident that the strategy adopted by certain leaders of the women's movement, which involves separating the feminist and partisan sides of their activities in order to protect a fragile and continually threatened independence, ultimately increases the ability of other political actors to use the women's vote instrumentally and is contrary to the declared aims of most of the movement's constituents. Despite the difficulties, however, recent developments with regard to women's co-ordination clearly show that the women's movement is moving slowly but surely towards a true solidarity — the primary condition for making independence vis-à-vis the state and other powerful institutions an irreversible reality.

## Conclusion

The process of democratization has acquired credibility in the Moroccan context mainly through two developments: first, the opening up of the formal political sphere to new actors; and second, the broadening of the subjects discussed by political institutions, as well as the forms and discourses underlying political action. Although these changes are still in their initial stages, they have nevertheless greatly contributed to a rehabilitation of political action by extending it to questions that touch on

the socio-economic interests of large groups of the population, including women.

The exclusion of women is not unique to the political and sociological context of Muslim societies. Because the Moroccan women's movement has realized this, it has been able to escape from the trap of double specificity — of situating women in relation to men, and of comparing Arab-Muslim women with Western women — and has cast off its isolation in relation to the theories and discourses of Western feminism. The women's movement has thus helped to promote political debate. It has also focused attention on fundamental questions challenging society as a whole — such as modernity, universality and difference in a country reputed to be deeply traditional.

The women's movement, which was initially marginal and sometimes considered extremist, has progressed since the mid-1980s. Its discourse and claims have become points of reference for intellectuals and the political establishment. Its visibility and energy have turned it into a defining element in the structure of civil society. In short, by representing their independent interests, feminists have helped to redefine gender identities and political identities simultaneously. The movement has helped shift "political" boundaries by encouraging public discussion and debate on issues traditionally associated with the domestic and private sphere, such as divorce, polygamy, matrimonial tutelage, violence, and the political participation of women — all subjects which were previously "taboo", to be discussed "among women only" or among specialists in theology or Islamic law. In so doing the women's movement has helped to increase political participation and broaden the political terrain in Morocco.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term “strategy” used in this paper does not necessarily refer to a voluntary process, but to “choices” that are shaped by social structural factors.

<sup>2</sup> An indication of this greater openness was the recent decision to discontinue files on political prisoners and arbitrary detains.

<sup>3</sup> These are the parties which participated in the national independence movement: the Istiqlal Party (pro-traditional centrist party), the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (left nationalist and socialist party), the Party of Progress and Socialism (Marxist socialist party), the Organization of Democratic and Popular Action (formed recently by secession of the leftist movement, this is a strong pan-Arabic supporter that combines Arab nationalism with socialist leanings).

<sup>4</sup> *Makhzen* is commonly used to describe authority. Morocco has historically often been separated into two areas: *Makhzen* areas were under the authority of the central power and the sultan; *Siba* areas were the tribal regions, which refused central authority. By semantic extension these two concepts have been used to describe the authority of the central power (order) and of rebellion (disorder).

<sup>5</sup> Since this paper was written further developments in this direction have taken place. In February 1998 the king requested the head of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) to form a government. A new government should be formed in March 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Estimates of the number of these groups or associations vary enormously, depending on the source (from 17,698 to 30,000).

<sup>7</sup> According to the Direction de la Statistique (1994), 1,347,552 people were unemployed in Morocco, 39 per cent of whom were women and 13.6 per cent graduates of higher education.

<sup>8</sup> A new development is taking place in Morocco: the apparent “depolitization” of the university. In her survey of students from the University of Rabat, Rahma Bourqia shows that only a small minority of students consider “protest” as the characteristic that best defines youth. Unlike preceding generations, “Third World” and Marxist ideologies apparently have little resonance with contemporary youth. In no way does this signify indifference to national and international concerns, however. A majority of students surveyed felt that associations were the ideal framework for expression and mobilization. See Bourqia et al., 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Most students opt for associations for purposes of mobilization.

<sup>10</sup> There is intense debate on what constitutes civil society in the Arab and Maghreb context. See the *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, Vol. 28, 1989, and particularly the contributions of Camau, Goudron and Zghal.

<sup>11</sup> Tozy (1989) extends his analysis to political and religious trends. This analysis seems better adapted to religious forces.

<sup>12</sup> This network is composed of independent women's associations and individuals from the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia).

<sup>13</sup> The French Protectorate did not favour the propagation of education in general, nor that of women in particular.

<sup>14</sup> There is an extensive literature on the subject. It is impossible to refer to all the publications on the condition, status and roles of women in Morocco. For further information, see Rachid, 1985. For more recent works see pieces by Hadraoui and Monkachi in Mernissi, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> According to the latest population census (Government of Morocco, 1994), half of the Moroccan population is urban.

<sup>16</sup> In urban areas, the average number of children per woman, 4.28 in 1982, had decreased to 2.56 by 1994 (Government of Morocco, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> See particularly Nadira Barkallil, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> See the study by a group of researchers from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia (FNUAP/IREP, 1991), which aims to measure the degree of the break with tradition and the strategies used by graduate women in order to assert themselves as individuals in the family, at work and in society.

<sup>19</sup> Fatima Mernissi has shown how the leaders of the Muslim Arab countries have, throughout history, singled out women and persecuted them whenever their countries underwent serious economic and social crises (Mernissi, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> In this context, for example, the debate within the Moroccan women's movement concerning the attitude to be adopted towards women wearing the *hijab* and desiring membership in the women's associations is highly significant and deserves further analysis.

<sup>21</sup> In Morocco, Fatima Mernissi, Farida Bennani (University of Marrakech) and Zineb Miadi (University of Casablanca) were among the first to adopt this approach.

<sup>22</sup> *Ijtihad* is the attempt to interpret the Koran and the words of the Prophet.

<sup>23</sup> Reservations were also made with regard to Article 9 (nationality), Article 16 (equality in marriage and divorce), and Article 29 (national sovereignty in settling disputes).

<sup>24</sup> The Malékite rite is a school of Muslim law. Malékism, founded in 795, is based on a particular interpretation of the Koran and the tradition of the Prophet (*Sunna*). Applied throughout the Maghreb region, it is considered one of the most conservative interpretations because of certain dispositions related to the status of women and the family.

<sup>25</sup> Some months ago the obligation of women to obtain marital authorization in order to go into business was abolished, as was the obligation for married women to obtain marital authorization before receiving a passport. This has been replaced by the possibility for the husband to oppose his wife's demand for a passport by written request.

<sup>26</sup> For example, according to the results of the 1994 census, two out of 10 heads of household are women.

<sup>27</sup> The World Bank no longer hesitates to reduce or cut aid because of non-respect of human rights or freedoms. Thus, in 1990 the Bank reduced its activities in Zaire and refused new loans to Malawi in 1992, as well as to China following the events of Tienanmen Square.

<sup>28</sup> These are the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Agriculture.

<sup>29</sup> These articles concern in particular equal status in regard to inheritance; the right of Muslim women to marry non-Muslims; and abolition of the duty of obedience to the husband as well as abolition of responsibility of the husband for the wife.