



MOROCCO: TOWARDS AN “ISLAMIC STATE FEMINISM”

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Many scholars, including Margot Badran in her contribution to the present volume,¹ regard the reform of the Family Code (the “Code du Statut Personnel”, or “Moudawana”) that was implemented in Morocco in 2004 as *the* paradigm case of recent legislation based on the *shari’a*.² It puts into practice, at least in part, the ideas of social justice and gender equality advanced by Islamic feminists on the basis of a new reading of the Qur’an. The reform represents the culmination of two decades of discussion between political leaders, liberal feminists³ and Islamists. This discussion was brought to an end in 2003 by a ruling on the part of Mohammed VI that took into account the various parties’ demands. The plan that was brought before parliament in October of that year was accompanied by a royal statement explaining that modifications to the Code of 1957 were based on “the egalitarian spirit of Islam and the universal principles of human rights”.

In what follows, we will argue that these new provisions, which, together with other important measures, were definitively adopted in January 2004, are moves in the direction of an “Islamic state feminism”. In response to feminist demands for equality and Islamist demands for Islamization, the government launched a number of plans aimed to reconcile the two

¹ Margot Badran: “Re/placing Islamic feminism”. See also Margot Badran, “Islamic Feminism: What’s in a Name?” Cairo: American Research Centre, 2 January 2002, *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 569, 17-23 January 2002. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm> (visited 29 February 2012)

² Though what is commonly spoken of in this context is the *shari’a*, the codes of family law in Muslim countries rest in fact on a variety of interpretations of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), in the construction of which the state plays a deciding role.

³ What we shall refer to here as “liberal feminists” are the organizations that strive to institute equality between the sexes by legislative means. From the mid-1980s, the Union for Feminine Action (UAF) and the Democratic Association of Women in Morocco (ADFM) devoted most of their activism to influencing public policy on the Family Code towards secularization and the equalization of the legal status of men and women.

movements and satisfy both as far as possible by establishing the association between Islam and feminism as a central plank of its policy of constructing a moderate Moroccan Islam. To fend off the risk of radicalization, it was essential for the government to occupy (or re-occupy) the field of religion. A further reform, described as of the “religious sphere” and announced not long after the 2003 attacks of in Casablanca,⁴ was intended to bring about this objective. Its most prominent feature was opening recruitment to women for posts of authority in state religious institutions.⁵

We shall examine how the negotiations that accompanied these two major reforms afforded Moroccans space for autonomous action in the field of Islam. The twenty years of debate between feminists and Islamists over legal and religious reforms relating to gender reached their culmination immediately after the Casablanca attacks and Morocco’s decision to associate itself with the American “war on terror”.⁶ We shall examine feminist and Islamist approaches to Islam and feminism and show how Islamic feminism has been useful to the Moroccan government in efforts to defend itself against the ascent of political Islam (both within the country and in the world at large) once it became involved in the international front against terrorism. This study is based on interviews with members of feminist and Islamist organizations as well as an analysis of public statements and speeches by the King, Islamist groups and religious leaders.

Feminist Demands in the Light of Universal Rights and the Islamic Context

On 7 March 1992, the independent association “Union de l’action féminine” (UAF) [Union for Feminine Action] launched a petition in the aim of gathering a million signatures in support of a reform of the Family Code. The proposed reforms would have established the equal status of spouses, women’s right to initiate divorce proceedings and the abolition of guardianship⁷ and polygamy. According to the text of the petition, these demands were all based on *maqasid al-shari’a* (the spirit of the canonical texts of Islam) and international agreements ratified by Morocco, in particular the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This petition was just one of a number of public initiatives undertaken by feminists, including gatherings, enactments of “trials”,⁸ and so on to

⁴ A series of suicide bombings on 16 May 2003 that targeted the western and Jewish presence in Casablanca.

⁵ Some years before, the King established a system of quotas which, in 2002, led to the election of 33 women to parliament (out of 205 deputies). There had hitherto been only two or three women.

⁶ Zakia Salime, “The War on Terrorism”: Appropriation and Subversion by Moroccan Women”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 33 (1), 2007, pp. 1-24..

⁷ According to the Family Code in force until 2004, a marriage contract was valid only if a woman was protected or represented by a guardian at the point when it was agreed.

⁸ Each year on the occasion of International Women’s Day, the UAF organizes a “show trial” in which cases are heard relating to women who have been the victims of violence or legal discrimination, whether attributable to the

obtain modification of the Family Code and, more generally, the secularization of the so-called “woman question”.⁹ The petition aroused strong reactions on the part of the Movement for Unity and Reform [the MUR: *Harakat Al-Tawhid Wa-l-Islah*]¹⁰ as well as certain “independent” conservative *ulema*, who pronounced a *fatwa* accusing the petition’s originators of apostasy. It nevertheless succeeded in launching a debate on the matter and, in so doing, stirred public opinion and ushered in a social movement, both of which helped raise awareness of the feminist cause.¹¹

Liberal Moroccan feminists had always based their demands, which generally related to the Family Code, on universal principles of gender equality and human rights. This approach, which was rigorously secular and universalist, significantly contributed to linking the notion of women’s rights in public opinion with the abandonment of Muslim culture and its replacement by a supposedly egalitarian western one. The model family code that was in 1994 drafted by the ADFM (Democratic Association of Women in Morocco) in collaboration with the “Collectif 95-Maghreb-Egalité” (which includes organizations from across the Maghreb) is of interest in this connection. This Code was based on the principle of universal human rights, irrespective of sex or, religious and ethnic affiliation. It proposed, among other things, establishing a uniform minimum age for marriage (18 years) for men and women alike, eliminating unequal rules governing custody and a man’s right to divorce by unilateral repudiation and requiring each spouse to pay the other a subsistence pension (*nafaqa*) in the event of need.¹² In the case of this Model Code, “women’s rights” signifies “the access of women to everything to which men have the right”, without challenging the system that produces inequality.¹³ For Moroccan feminists, equality is a concept that is universal and in principle secular, as we see in the communiqué issued by the ADFM after the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, which took place in Beijing in 1995: “[The conference] has been an important achievement for the equality of women’s rights since it has been a confirmation of the twin principles of universality and equality.. The realization of what has

Family Code or no. The “Judgment” is generally sent to the political authorities (i.e., Parliament or the Ministry of Justice).

⁹ This expression is normally taken to refer to the struggles for gender equality in the context of independence and nationalist movements.

¹⁰ Known in Arabic as *Harakat Al-Tawhid wa-l-Islah*, the MUR was the successor of an earlier organization referred to as *Al-Shabiba Al-Islamiyya*, a clandestine extremist group founded in 1969 by Abdelkrim Motii and Kamal Ibrahim. Its objective was the establishment of an Islamic state in Morocco. After changing its name and associating itself with other groups, the MUR became less extremist.

¹¹ See Zakia Daoud, *Féminisme et politique au Maghreb: soixante ans de lutte*, Casablanca: Editions Eddif, 1993, p. 315.

¹² Collectif 95-Maghreb Egalité, *Cent mesures et dispositions pour une codification maghrébine égalitaire du statut personnel et du droit de la famille*, Casablanca: Naja El Jadida, special issue, 2002, pp. 105-124.

¹³ Catherine Mackinnon, “Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination”, in Anne Philips (ed.), *Feminism and Politics*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 296.

been called 'the agenda of equality' will result in respect for the rights of Moroccan women both as citizens and as human beings."¹⁴

In contrast to this universalist position and conception of equality, the vision of Islamist women prioritizes Islam and gender complementarity. On one side, therefore, were the Islamists, who, in the name of Muslim identity and a legislative system based on *shari'a*, denied that women should in any way participate in the development of legislative norms in Morocco. On the other side were the feminists, who argued in terms of the heterogeneity of identity, universal values, and sexual equality.

Islamists Begin to Express Themselves on Gender Issues

On 12 March 2000, for the first time in Morocco, Islamist organizations such as *Al-'Adl wa-l-Ihsan* (Justice and Benevolence) and *Hizb al-'Adala wa-l-Tanmiyya*, or PJD (the Party of Justice and Development),¹⁵ publicly engaged with the "woman question" by staging a march in Casablanca, the country's economic capital, in opposition to a feminist demonstration organized in Rabat demanding a revision of the Family Code. Thousands of women from all over the country went into the streets to express their rejection of the socialist government's reform, the "Plan for the Inclusion of Women in Development". However, as Nadia Yassine, the foremost female figure in *Al-'Adl wa-l-Ihsan*, explained, the demonstration's organizers did not intend to dispute the need for changing the legal status of women in Morocco but rather the cultural and political terms in which the reform had been couched.

Born in Casablanca in 1958, Nadia Yassine is the daughter of Sheikh Abd Al-Salam Yassine, the founder and spiritual guide of *Al-'Adl wa-l-Ihsan*. She is one of the most visible and active figures of Moroccan Islamism and long struggled with Mohamed Bachiri, the movement's second highest ranking member, for control over the its stance on women's issues. When Bachiri was expelled in 1995, women activists were finally able to make their voices heard. In a book written for the most part in support of his daughter's ideas, Sheikh Yassine confirmed his own support for the legitimacy of women's ambition to play a wider role in the community.¹⁶ Nadia Yassine was thus finally able to establish the women's section in 1998.

¹⁴ ADFM, *Après Pékin 95: pour la réalisation de l'agenda de l'égalité*, Rabat, 1995.

¹⁵ Set up in 1998, the PJD was the successor to the Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement (*Al-Haraka al-Sha'biyya al-Dusturiyya al-Dimuqratiyya*) founded by Abdelkrim Al-Khatib in 1967. Today, it is the largest Islamist party in Morocco and participates in national and local elections.

¹⁶ Abd al-Salam Yassin, *Tanwir al-Mu'minat* (The illumination of the Believers), Cairo, 2 volumes, 1995. See also Youssef Belal, "Le réenchâtement du monde. Autorité et rationalisation en islam marocain", (doctoral thesis), Paris: Institut d'études politiques, 2005, p.5.

Though the claim is difficult to verify,¹⁷ she maintains that women today make up half of the movement's members. After having become its spokesperson, in December 2008 Nadia Yassine published an article in which she expressed her views on "the phenomenon of Islamic feminism."¹⁸ While declaring that "'Islamic feminism' is a classic oxymoron," she notes elements of convergence with her own ideas, especially the refusal to accept the alienation of women. In the view of *Al-'Adl wa-l-Ihsan*, this alienation actually furnishes an explanation of the way in which power is exercised by the Moroccan government as well as other governments in the Muslim world. Corrupt politicians are said to be the principal obstacle to women's liberation, presented as the sacred duty of every female member of *Al-'Adl wa-l-Ihsan*.

Giving the lie to the conventional vision of Islamist movements as obscurantist and misogynist, the activists of *Al-'Adl wa-l-Ihsan* and of the MUR rebel against male domination and are in the process of redefining Islamic identity and the roles of women in Muslim societies via their defiant incursions into the public sphere.

Though it is also part of the opposition, the PJD adopts a more "moderate" position than that of *Al-'Adl wa-l-Ihsan*. While the latter challenges the religious legitimacy of the monarchy on the ground that the state does not properly implement the teachings of Islam, the PJD supports the King in his role as Commander of the Faithful and claims that the Islamic state already exists in Morocco.¹⁹ The PJD parliamentary group includes several women who in the mid-1990s together launched two women's associations, *Muntada al-Zahra* ("Zahra's Forum") and *Tajdid al-Wa'i al-Nisa'i* ("The Renewal of Woman's Awareness"). This took place at a time when the liberal feminist struggle for gender equality first began to make an impact on public awareness. "Zahra's Forum" is a cultural organization focused on issues relating to development, while "The Renewal of Woman's Awareness", whose position is more legalistic, aims to "preserve authenticity and Islamic identity" in relation to women and implement "women's rights in conformity with the *shari'a*".²⁰ Both associations demand that the position of women in the family and their roles as wives and mothers be guaranteed. On the occasion of International Woman's Day, Zahra's Forum held a June 2007 conference sponsored by ISESCO²¹ on "women at work and their various roles". Among others, the

¹⁷ Since the association is not legally recognized and is semi-clandestine, the names of members and other details are not publicly available.

¹⁸ <http://nadiayassine.net/fr/page/13606.htm>

¹⁹ For a deeper analysis of the relations between Islamists and the monarchy, see Malika Zeghal, *Islamism in Morocco: Religion, Authoritarianism and Electoral Politics*, Princeton NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2008, p. xvi.

²⁰ "The Renewal of Woman's Awareness", *Concepts et pactes*, Casablanca: Najah el-Jadida, 1997, p. 3.

²¹ ISESCO is an international organization operating in the framework of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and specialized in the areas of education, science, culture and communication (<http://www.isesco.org.ma>).

conference issued recommendations concerning the need to tailor holidays to the schedules of working mothers, create nurseries in the workplace, lower the retirement age for women and extend maternity leave to six months, with the possibility of prolonging it via a period of unpaid leave.²² “The Renewal of Woman’s Awareness”, for its part, calls for the “validation of the role of the wife ... in the preservation of family cohesion and instruction of wives in their rights and duties according to the teachings of Islam.”²³ In legal and political terms, the association has taken a stand against “the importation of western laws and laws incompatible with life in Morocco as well as adherence to international treaties that do not conform to Islamic standards.” It calls for “the adoption of laws in conformity with the vision of Islam in all areas of women’s lives.”²⁴

At the time of the new Family Code’s adoption, one of the founding members of “The Renewal of Woman’s Awareness”, PJD deputy Bassima Hakkaoui, commented that, though the reform was based on Islamic law, its development had required that the process of *ijtihad* (the interpretation of religious texts) be pushed to great lengths. The new Code, however, did not entail waiving Moroccan reservations regarding certain aspects of the international conventions to which Morocco is a signatory. While it does indeed state that the family is under the joint responsibility of the two spouses, it does not contradict the principle of *qiwama* – in other words, the husband’s responsibility as head of the family that is specified in the Sura verse from the Qur’an, “Al-Nisa” (The Women). [Al-Qur’an, Sura 4, Verse 34]. Bassima Hakkaoui demonstrated this by distinguishing between the concept of “taking care” (*ri’aya*) and that of “maintenance (*i’ala*).”²⁵

According to “The Renewal of Woman’s Awareness,” if a man is able to support his family, a woman should not work outside of the home. Housework should be formally recognized as an economic activity related to development and should therefore fall under the rubric of “profession” on identity cards. The group had no in-principle objection to the country’s adherence to international treaties to the extent that they are compatible with Islam. It held, however, that treaties involving clauses running counter to the commandments of God should be repealed. “The Renewal of Woman’s Awareness” particularly approves of efforts to examine the compatibility of the Qur’an with contemporary realities as well as everything related to the “motivation for Revelation”²⁶ — that is, social realities to which the Verses

²² “Muntada al-Zahra”, *Al-mara’ al muwazzafa wa-l-tawazzu’ bayna al-adwar*, [“The Working Woman and the Distribution of Roles”], 2008, pp. 131-132.

²³ “The Renewal of Woman’s Awareness”, *Le Code du statut personnel: revendications et propositions*, Casablanca, 2003, p. 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8

²⁶ Bassima Hakkaoui, “Al fasl bayna mashru’ al-khuta wa mudawanat al-’usra. Thawra hadiyya: min mudawanat al-ahwal al-shakhsiyya ila mudawanat al-’usra.” [The Difference between the National Plan and the Family Code. A peaceful Revolution: From the Personal Status Code to the Family Code], *Al-Zaman*, 12, 2004, pp. 47-59.

revealed to the Prophet may present responses or remedies. She asserts that it would be unjust to deprive women of their maternity leave in the name of equality since it is a right of mother and child alike that employers should be made to respect. On the other hand, there is no justification for paternity leave.

Where liberal feminist organizations such as the ADFM and the UAF demand equality, the “The Renewal of Woman’s Awareness” focuses on justice. According to Bassima Hakkaoui, the concept of justice is broader than that of mere equality, which is limited to the goal of securing uniform treatment, and as such implies greater rights for women. She believes that justice is a way of avoiding a confusion of gender roles and thus of recognizing the value of a woman’s role as wife and mother.

The Bid to Feminize the Religious Professions

The reform of the Family Code and the new official discourse relating to the compatibility of Islam with universal women’s rights has in this way opened a space for Moroccan women in which to argue in favor of gender equality in Islamic society. The reform of the religious space has allowed them, after a period of ad hoc training in the public universities, to occupy positions of authority in religious institutions from which they may promote their cause. In 2006, the Ministry for Islamic Affairs appointed an initial cohort of 50 female preachers in the mosques (*murshidat*) and 36 women theologians (*‘alimat*) in various *ulema* councils. The appointment of women to high level religious positions did not figure in Islamic feminists’ list of demands. It did however serve as the framework in which they were able to exercise their religious and political activities with full autonomy and legitimacy. In addition, it tended to promote the use of religious arguments in efforts to advance gender equality. It should also be stressed that each of these remarkable government initiatives was taken in the name of a “transition” towards a constitutional state – that is, one that was Islamic, Sunni and respectful of the rights of women. In the monarchy’s efforts to “re-conquer its religious territory” by redefining and clarifying the authority of the Commander of the Faithful, the reform of the religious sphere and the institutionalization of Moroccan Islam naturally took a leading position.²⁷

On 24 October 2008, the Mohammadia League (*Al-Rabita al-Mohammadiyya*),²⁸ bringing together “liberal” theologians who were members of state bodies, announced a partnership

²⁷ Malika Zeghal, *Islamism in Morocco*, op. cit., pp. 241-242.

²⁸ By royal decree (*dahir*), the League of *ulema* in Morocco in February 2006 changed its name to the League Mohammadia. The decree also conferred the status of public service foundation upon it. While this made it eligible for public subsidies, it also entailed dependent administrative status. These changes were part of the

with an international study group on “women in Islam”. The body was presided over by Moroccan intellectual Asma Lamrabet, the author of numerous books and articles on the rights of Muslim women. Challenging the models of “globalized feminism in the western style”, Asma Lamrabet and her Islamic feminism study group made a case for a “third way”, associating the ideals of Islam and the egalitarian spirit of universal human rights in an effort to reconcile faith and modernity. She thus occupied a space left vacant by liberal feminists, whose lack of genuine religious commitment had exposed them to the accusation of cultural alienation or even apostasy. It should be added that, as formulated by certain conservative *ulema*, Islamic identity is so profoundly opposed to all feminist demands that the individual rights of women may be seen as irreconcilable with the family values of Islam.

In Morocco, there are today some 200 female preachers, together with the 36 women theologians who serve on various national councils. These preachers are obliged to hold a diploma of higher education and must know by heart at least half of the Qur’an in order to sit the oral and written examination that precedes appointment. The theologians are directly appointed by the King. In October 2008, the Minister for Islamic Affairs, Ahmed Taoufiq, explained in a television interview that the process of selecting female theologians had taken a year and that their appointment to religious bodies at the national and local level depended on their knowledge of the aims and intentions of the *shar’ia (fiqh maqasidi)* and their ability to adapt Islamic principle to contemporary situations – in other words, their expertise in modern Muslim law.²⁹ He added that their presence was a powerful symbol that should encourage other women to become involved in public action and debates relating to Islam. These women, it was hoped, would contribute to promoting a moderate Islam (*manhaj wasatiyya* – literally “a middle way”) by reviving Sufi Islam as it had existed between the 7th and 13th centuries CE in North Africa. Given the growing power of Wahhabism, which has been accused of propagating radical Islam and of bearing responsibility for suicide attacks (e.g., those of 2003 and 2006), this task took on special urgency.

In 2003, Mohammed VI invited Raja Naji Mekkaoui, a female professor of law at the University of Mohammed V in Rabat, to be the first woman to give a lecture as part of the *durus hasaniyya* (religious seminars held during Ramadan) at the Mosque of the Royal Palace. The highest-ranking civil and military officials, joined by religious figures from throughout the Muslim world, took part in these sessions, which were presided over by the King himself. Raja Naji Mekkaoui quoted the Qur’anic verse that recounts the creation of human beings: “O mankind, fear your Lord, Who created you from a single soul and created

reform of the religious sphere. By sponsoring research and seminars, the League attempted to spread the ideas of moderate Islam (*madhhab al-wasatiyya*). See <http://www.arabita.ma>

²⁹ Moroccan TV, Channel 2M, 2 October 2008

from it its spouse (*zauj*).”³⁰ She then proceeded to explore the fundamentals of Muslim family structure, which is based on the concept of equality (implied by the word *zauj*), the founding principle of humanity’s creation.

Raja Naji Mekkaoui challenged feminist discourse regarding the individual rights of women and suggested instead a return to indigenous concepts of equity, such as *kadd wa si’aya*, or fair remuneration for all work done by men and women alike. This was a concept of justice founded on the *shari’a* and used in *fiqh* as interpreted in Morocco (especially in the Berber villages of the Souss). Rural theologians, such as Ibn Ardoun in the 16th century, were in general opposed to this practice. The theologians of Fes, by contrast, enthusiastically promoted it, arguing that women who took part in agricultural labor should receive a half share of all goods accumulated by a household over the course of a marriage. After this first “conversation”, Raja Naji Mekkaoui was much involved with the program for educational reform undertaken by the Ministry for Islamic Affairs and, in particular, helped update the curriculum for the first cohorts of female preachers.

Among the women who, following the example of Raja Naji Mekkaoui, were later invited to take part in the Ramadan religious seminars, Farida Zomorod deserves special mention.³¹ She was the only female professor at the *Dar al-hadith al-hasaniyya* theological school. Initially, Zomorod was not particularly interested in women’s issues, concentrating instead on scriptural exegesis.³² She was persuaded to turn her attention to the subject after receiving an invitation to lecture before the King on the theme of women in the Qur’an. Commenting on verses where woman and men are treated as equals, she recalled the historical context of the revelation of the Qur’an. According to tradition, “One of the wives of the Prophet, Umm Salama, asked him why women were not mentioned in the Qur’an. It was then that verse 35 of Sura 33 was revealed, which implies, according to Farida Zomorod, the spiritual equality of man and woman: ‘Muslim men and Muslim women; Believing men and believing women; Devout men and devout women; Sincere men and sincere women; Patient men and patient women; Humble men and humble women; Fasting men and fasting women; Men who guard their chastity and women who guard their chastity; Men who often remember God and women who often remember God; To all of them God has made a ready pardon and a glorious reward.’”

Zomorod went on to explain the concept of gender in Islam in terms of female and male specificities: *unutha* (femaleness) signifies suppleness, sweetness and fertility while *dhukura*

³⁰ Al-Qur’an, Sura 4, Verse 1. Quotations from the Qur’an are taken from the English translation by Tarif Khalidi, London: Penguin Books, 2008.

³¹ Farida Zomorod submitted a thesis for her degree at Fes in 2001 on “The idea of interpretation in the Qur’an and the Hadith”.

³² Interview, Rabat, 13 May 2008.

(masculinity) stands for force and power. This distinction, however, has no bearing on questions of superiority or inferiority. Hierarchy between persons is determined, not by biology, but by piety. “The image of woman portrayed by the Qur’an by means of the concept of *unutha* excludes any distinction that would render her a being inferior to men. A woman is shown as possessed of a particular nature with no other aim than to establish a complementarity with men.”³³

Zomorod also tackled those verses where perfidy on the part of women is implied, refuting certain male interpretations which, on the basis of Sura 12 (“Joseph”), declare that women are perfidious by nature and for all of eternity and that their wiliness is that of Satan. She notes that the word *kayd* (meaning craftiness or deceit) appears 35 times in the Qur’an but is only used to refer to women on five of those occasions. She has spoken of Islam’s egalitarian spirit while simultaneously rejecting absolute equality between the sexes, to the degree that it is understood in terms of similarity. As Zomorod sees it, equality can only consist of complementarity, as in the Qur’anic verse where it is said that man and woman are like a garment (*libas*), each made for the other. In her view, absolute equality could only mean the renunciation by women of their biological and social roles. In her vision of complementarity, the man is the head of the family and the woman is not meant to contribute to the expenses of the household. The pre-eminent position of the man comes from his financial responsibility, which is part of the overall distribution of roles. She quotes the Qur’anic Verse 228 of Sura 2 (The Cow), “Men are more responsible than they,” interpreting it as the gift to men of superior intellect and ability. From this, Zomorod deduces that the responsibility of the Imam – that of leading prayer – can only be assumed only by men.

In April 2008, *Al-Tajdid* (Renewal), one of the leading Islamist daily newspapers, published a series of interviews with women theologians who hold degrees from state universities, members of the various religious councils and female mosque preachers and those following their courses. Fatima, a housewife, reported that the courses had helped her become more pious and therefore a better person, as well as to correct mistakes she had formerly made in her prayer. Without them, she would have continued to pray in an “inadequate” manner. Another student, Radia, recounted how most of the women in her area regularly attended courses at the mosque and claimed that these courses had made her a better and more agreeable person (her personality had been somewhat harsh before, she said).³⁴ She added that the most popular courses were those dealing with the roles of wife and mother and the best way to fulfill these roles. A woman preacher from Rabat, Asia Al-Mostaqim, confirmed

³³ Farida Zomorod, *Conférences sur quelques points en rapport avec l’interprétation du Coran*, Rabat: Ministère des Waqf et des Affaires Islamiques, 21005, p. 80.

³⁴ *Al-Tajdid*, 3 April 2008.

that woman were mainly interested in subjects relating to the family, especially relations with husbands and children. The next most popular courses were those dealing with life after death and the last judgment. According Al-Mostaqim , mosques located in underprivileged areas attracted the largest audiences. The *murshida* would choose her topic in the light of the needs expressed by her listeners: the crucial point was to be conscious of one's limitations and never risk talking about subjects one had not fully mastered. It was always necessary to be ready to cooperate with better informed theologians.

In the same series of interviews, Souad Rahaim,³⁵ a member of the council of *ulema* in the city of Al-Jadida, quotes the Qur'anic verse in which women and men are said to be partners in the business of *da'wa* (preaching and the dissemination of Islam). According to Rahaim women's contribution to religious education, like that of their male colleagues, was necessary to religion and development alike. Khadidja ben Hamo,³⁶ a member of the council of Taroudant and teacher in the field of Islamic instruction, describes herself as one of the first contemporary practitioners of *da'wa* . She attributes the change in policy in regards to religious appointments to the young King's vision of the course Morocco should take in the 21st century. In her view, women will significantly contribute to reform and modernization through their role in reorganizing the religious sphere.³⁷

Religion as Common Ground for Feminists, Islamists and the State

In the 1990s, gender became a field of contention in which two irreconcilable positions confronted each other: the feminist position, on the one hand, and the Islamist position, on the other. In their quest to protect the homogeneity of Muslim identity and an Islamic legal system (the *shari'a*) involving an exclusive interpretation of scripture, Islamists ruled out feminist contributions to the construction of Moroccan legislative norms. The feminists, for their part, drew upon arguments concerning the heterogeneity of identity and such universal principles as human rights and the equality of the sexes.³⁸ In the present article, we have attempted to transcend this dichotomy, seeking to identify points in common and trace the influence that each of the movements exercises over the agenda of its rival. A good example of this phenomenon is to be found in the activity of the feminist organization the ADFM. While continuing to insist that it is inspired by international documents such as the "Convention on

³⁵ Born in Kenitra in 1964, Souad Rahaim is a doctor of Islamic Studies of the Choauib Doukkali University in Al-Jadida, a city on the Atlantic coast to the south of Casablanca.

³⁶ Khadidja ben Hamo is a graduate of the Sharia University of Fes.

³⁷ *Al-Tajdid*, 3 April 2008.

³⁸ Collectif 95-Maghreb Egalité, *Cent mesures et dispositions pour une codification maghrébine égalitaire du statut personnel et du droit de la famille*, op. cit., "Prologue: la réforme du droit de la famille, cinquante années de débat."

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women” (CEDAW), the ADFM has begun to address the law of inheritance in specifically Islamic terms. In May 2008, the ADFM organized an expert workshop on equality in inheritance under the patronage of the United Nations Fund for Women’s Development. In the context of this workshop, Moroccan and foreign *ulema* were asked to examine how the texts might be reinterpreted in the light of present circumstances and, more particularly, to develop religious arguments in support of equality between men and woman in the area of inheritance. It nevertheless cannot be denied that the Islamists have been influenced by feminists in regards to the reform of the Family Code. The enormous efforts made by feminists made in this field in the 1990s compelled the Islamists to adopt a position on gender issues and to reformulate their ideas regarding femininity and maternity in the 21st century. In general terms, feminist demands for equal rights have led various Islamist organizations to question their stance in regards to marriage, women in the workplace, inheritance and divorce. Zakia Daoud has shown that, in Morocco, the opposition between Islamists and feminists ceased to appear radically antithetical once it became apparent that both movements reflected the rising power of the middle class.³⁹ As a result, it became possible to analyze their antagonism as amounting to a rivalry over self-expression and competition for access to certain structures of power. Their mobilization obliges the state to adopt the position of an intermediary that simultaneously responds to the narrative of gender equality, on the one hand, and the demands of Islamization, on the other.

The state’s policy of feminizing the religious professions can therefore be set against the Islamists’ development of projects relating to gender in response to feminist egalitarian mobilization. The Moroccan researchers Mohammed Madani and Taieb Belghazi have examined this change of position on the part of the Islamists, whose activity and programs had hitherto been almost exclusively concerned with the question of political power. In their view, the Islamists had little choice but to offer a range of responses to those disoriented by the crisis in the patriarchal model of the family. For these responses to be credible, however, the Islamist movement was obliged to revise its priorities and consider issues that were at least as urgent as those on which it had formerly focused all of its attention. Islamism’s battlefield, hitherto strictly political, was transformed into a broad front against the powerful feminist challenge of the 1990s.⁴⁰

³⁹ Zakia Daoud, “Femmes, mouvements féministes et changement social au Maghreb”, in Mondher Kilani (ed.) *Islam et changement social*, Lausanne: Payot, 1998, p. 225.

⁴⁰ Taieb Belghazi and Mohammed Madani, *L’action collective au Maroc: de la mobilisation à la prise de parole*, Rabat: Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences humaines, 2001, p. 19.

Conclusion

The Moroccan state's reorientation in the direction of gender equality and the advent of a discussion of women's rights has had to be adapted to in response to Islamist demands for a legislative system that is more rigidly based on the *shari'a*. In order to simultaneously satisfy the demands of feminists and those of the Islamists, the government has been obliged to rapidly develop an "Islamic state feminism". In July 2009, the Ministry for Islamic Affairs assembled a group of female theologians and preachers to hear the King, quoting the Qur'an ("Women have rights equivalent to their duties and in conformity with custom") and the Prophet ("Women are the equal of men"), confirm the state's commitment to integrate women into public religious offices on a basis of absolute equality. It must not be forgotten, however, that, while it opened up immensely beneficial prospects for women, the reform of 2004-2006 also represented a process of appropriation on the part of the government of the feminist and Islamist challenges. Crucially, the "Islamic state feminism" that has resulted from this process does not necessarily share the objectives of either party.⁴¹

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