

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I set out to compare young, educated, professional, urban Moroccan women and young, educated, professional women of Moroccan origin in France. The purpose of this study is to ascertain similarities and differences with regards to attitudes toward Islam, legal changes affecting women in both countries, and personal and professional goals and challenges. The dissertation is based on in-depth interviews which I conducted in Morocco and in France. It offers a new, comparative look at population groups from countries that to date have not been compared in this way. This research examines the ways in which social changes have been interpreted by my respondents and thereby straddles the boundaries of cultural studies and social sciences.

France and Morocco both border the Mediterranean basin. In the course of history, cultures from both spaces have ebbed and flowed and landed on each other's shores, moving further and further inland. Today, both countries are grappling with issues of cultural and social change. France is attempting to come to terms with the fact that Islamic religion and culture are becoming part of her national fabric, while Morocco is seeking to accommodate reforms that grant women more rights. Currently, three million Moroccan nationals, i.e. ten per cent of the population, reside abroad. 86 % of these Moroccan expatriates live in countries of the European Union, the majority in France.¹ Thus, cultural and societal changes within Morocco and in France reverberate in both countries.

Often having been ignored as agents of change, women are in fact an integral part of a shift in cultural values in both Morocco and France. The 2003 Arab Human

¹ According to *Jeune Afrique l'intelligent*, no. 2003, 27 février au 5 mars 2005, p. 49, 86 % of Moroccan expatriates live in countries of the European Union, 9% in the Arab world and 5 % in the United States and Canada.

Development Report published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identifies the following main tasks in promoting human development: “Building, using and liberating the capabilities of the Arab people by advancing knowledge, freedom and women’s empowerment.” The Report, produced jointly with the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, offers an assessment and lays out a plan of action that emphasizes the role of women in national development. The Report states that because their rights to “self-determination have been grossly violated” in predominantly Muslim and Arab nations, women’s contribution has been underutilized and undervalued (UNDP, 2003: III). The UN Report, compiled on the basis of data collected by hundreds of scholars, offers a comprehensive assessment of the situation of the peoples in various parts of the Arab world, and Arab women in particular. The report asserts: “Knowledge is one of the key instruments of human development, be it in instituting good governance, guaranteeing health, producing the ingredients of material and moral welfare, or promoting economic growth” (ibid.: VI). Because knowledge is a key ingredient in the development of an individual as well as the nation, an advanced level of education was a key factor in selecting women for this study. Higher levels of education enable individuals to evaluate their own culture and traditions more critically and can open the door to personal and professional advancement as well as active participation in the public sphere.

Globalization is another factor influencing women’s understanding of their religion, culture and their personal and professional aspirations. The field of Cultural Studies has addressed issues of globalization. Writes Simon During (1999):

Globalization has both undermined the autonomy of nation states and reduced state intervention in society and the economy – sometimes as a cause, other times as an excuse. It has also drastically transformed and punctured the old metropolitan/colony, center/periphery, north/south divisions, enabling new regions to invent themselves alongside new cosmopolitanisms, elite and popular. Because it unifies the world *and* divides it, the problem of how to evaluate the consequences of globalization or transnationalism has become a central cultural studies issue. (24)

Though this dissertation does not set out to study directly the impact of globalization, it is important to recognize that shifts in attitudes do not occur in a vacuum but are part of larger changes. Inasmuch as the perceptions of Muslims in France are influenced by exposure and immersion in secular, French society with a Judeo-Christian heritage, the presence of millions of Muslims² within the hexagon will in time leave its mark on mainstream French society as well. Separated from the southern tip of Spain by only nine miles at the Straits of Gibraltar, Morocco has deep historic ties with Europe and changes in that country occur as a result of pressures from within as much as from without.

The close geographical proximity of the Maghreb and Europe and their historical relationship, coupled with the fact that a significant number of families have members on both sides of the Mediterranean, allows for cross-fertilization of ideas, views and perceptions that influence and shape societies in both cultural spheres. Globalization offers easy access to French media in Morocco and Moroccan media in France; via the Internet people in both countries can connect with the same virtual communities, transcending geographical boundaries. The target populations of my research in both countries are exposed to similar trends, fashions, music, movies as well as news and public discourse. As a result, young, educated, professional and urban women in North Africa and Western Europe are breaking with traditions, are rethinking their roles, private and public, and are exploring new ground. These changes on the individual level go hand in glove with larger cultural and societal changes in both countries. In modern times, rights and freedoms for the majority population have been achieved by expanding rights and freedoms of minorities. Young, educated, professional, urban women in Morocco and women of Moroccan origin in France are minorities who are breaking with conventional roles assigned to them and are asserting their right to determine their own personal and professional roles.

Nevertheless, the life experiences of women in Morocco and those of women of Moroccan origin in France differ significantly. They are not exposed to the same national contexts and are instead confronted with country-specific sets of circumstances. There are

² The Muslim population in France is estimated at close to 10% of a total population of 61 million.

different social norms in matters such as, for example, relative gender equality in France versus explicit gender inequality in Morocco, near absolute monarchy in one versus democracy in the other, an Islamic state in Morocco versus a secular state in France.

Morocco is an Islamic state that knows no separation of the religious from the secular. This North African kingdom has a highly hierarchical, authoritarian structure. However, the traditional, patriarchal nature of the society is in a state of flux, the previously ascribed role of women is changing and women are in the process of re-negotiating their private and public roles. Recent major legal changes in Morocco allow for a new understanding of the place of women in this Islamic state.

France, a democratic country that guarantees basic liberties for its citizens, offers women of immigrant origins an opportunity to forge a new sense of personal and collective identity. Most women of Moroccan origin in France who contributed to this research described themselves as “culturally French and religiously Muslims.” The microcosm of France encapsulates the newly exacerbated, worldwide tensions between the Islamic and the Western worlds. Of critical importance are the real and perceived conflicts between Islam, Judeo-Christian values and those espoused by secular society. New legislation in France has restricted certain practices of Muslim women in this Western country. Currently, Muslims constitute the single-largest immigrant minority in France and pose the greatest challenge in terms of identity, social cohesion and economic parity. Of critical importance is the extent to which the French government and dominant French society at large can bring minorities into the mainstream. Should they remain an underprivileged underclass, this carries potentially serious risks ranging from petty crime to - in the extreme - terrorism.

The purpose of this study is to ascertain the degree to which attitudes of French women of Moroccan origin in France differ from or are similar to those of their counterparts in Morocco. To the extent that significant differences in attitude are found, the dissertation attempts to identify the factors to which these can be attributed. Where no significant differences can be ascertained, the reasons for similarities are explored. Because this study draws on a comparison of Muslim women in France with those in Morocco, the extent of difference or similarity can serve as an indicator of how young,

educated, professional women view themselves, where their loyalties lie, what they perceive as their main personal and professional challenges, and the extent to which they see themselves as vital parts of their respective societies. Modifications in attitude are often less perceptible than legal reforms and economic shifts, yet attitudes are of critical importance in social change.

Europe is at the threshold of a new era in which new cultural identities are emerging as a result of large Muslim minorities in several major European countries. The prospect of Turkey entering the European Union, makes it all the more important to gain a deeper understanding of young Muslims in the Western hemisphere. To my knowledge, no comparative study based on a similar set of questions has been undertaken in Morocco and in France. The results of this research are intended to contribute to a better understanding of Muslim women and the degree to which their particular circumstances are similar or different in a European country on the one hand and a North African, Islamic country on the other. Improved understanding is a vital prerequisite for policies which aim at greater inclusion and for unlocking human potential with regards to national development.

Much scholarly research has been conducted on “Islam in the West.” Most studies attest to a trend toward secularization among Muslims in the Occident. Muslims residing in Europe or the United States tend to accept the separation of the public, secular sphere from the private, religious sphere. This study sets out to examine whether this trend is particular to adherents of Islam living in a Western country such as France or if a comparable trend can be observed among Muslims residing in the heartland of an Islamic state such as Morocco.

This is a qualitative study which follows the principal guidelines for qualitative research based on personal interviews. I developed a questionnaire for interviewing young, educated, professional and urban women in Morocco and in France. This category of women was chosen because these women are in a better position than, for instance, illiterate or less educated women, to comment on public policy such as legal reforms. In terms of agents of change, they are more influential. For the purposes of a valid comparison, the two population groups had to have several significant traits in common.

As a West-European, albeit not French, I am familiar with the cultural setting of women in France. Having lived and worked in Morocco (1999-2001), I also have an understanding of the social environment in this North African country. Based on my periods of residence in South Africa (1982-1984) and Kenya (1984-1993), I feel at ease in a developing world setting and have acquired some skill in cross-cultural adjustments. Still, one always comes to research with preconceived notions and biases. The single largest difference between the women interviewed and me is that I am not a Muslim. Studying a religion is unlike practicing a religion or leading a life of faith. However, partly because I am not Muslim, the women I interviewed often shared their perceptions and aspirations freely because they did not regard me as being in a position to judge their views from a dogmatic or co-religionist standpoint.

The research is structured around three major themes : Islam, legal changes and personal and professional aspirations and challenges. These three topics emerged as a result of a preliminary survey of the relevant literature. They also seemed relevant choices because a study of Muslim women would be incomplete without including a discussion of the religion of Islam. The focus of that part of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of young women's own understanding of Islam.

As both Morocco and France have seen legal changes in 2004 that directly affect women in both countries, this topic presented itself because of its timely quality. In Morocco, a major reform of the family law has set the scene for considerable societal change in that country. The reform of the Personal Status Code (*moudawana*), or family law as it would be known in the West, changes the concept of the family as a unit presided over by a man to a unit with two equal partners before the law. This transformation in the family unit will affect larger societal shifts as the understanding of partnership changes on a fundamental level. The proposal for each article in the new law was checked by those drafting it against the Qu'ran and if justification for the proposed changes could be found in the sacred text, it was accepted by the government appointed commission that was charged with drawing up the reform of the Personal Status Code. In Morocco, the reform of the *moudawana* has been interpreted as a return to Qu'ranic roots

by abandoning cultural practices written into law upon Morocco's independence from France in 1956. Outside of Morocco, the reform has been hailed as a major step in the direction of granting women equal rights and thus bringing Morocco more into the mainstream of its neighbors on the northern shores of the Mediterranean. Like Turkey, Morocco has its designs on membership in the European Union.

In France the banning of selected religious insignia in public schools including the Muslim headscarf is the result of an ongoing debate concerning the secular nature of the French republic. The greater visibility of Muslims in the public sphere has provoked increased official discourse on the Muslim minority in France. Whereas the Personal Status Code reform in Morocco is an indication of change, the banning of selected religious insignia can be interpreted as an indication of the French government's insistence on the *status quo*. According to Hargreaves (1995): "In the debate over Islam in France, no single incident has generated greater acrimony than the headscarf affair of 1989." (125) Ever since then, the Muslim headscarf, *hijab*, has divided public opinion as France struggles to find a way to incorporate Islamic cultural and religious traditions into her European fabric.

The topic of personal and professional challenges and aspirations emerged largely as a result of pilot interviews conducted in Florida. Women who participated in these sessions expressed a desire to talk about their personal and professional ambitions and the particular challenges associated with achieving them. The choice of this topic was also intriguing to me because little scholarly research has been conducted on this theme and therefore provided an opportunity to cover new ground.

This comparative study offers a fresh approach to understanding Muslim women. It has as its focus 'ordinary' citizens, i.e. the research does not draw primarily on experts, spokespersons, policy makers or religious leaders but is intended to contribute to an understanding of the everyday lives of young, educated, professional and urban Muslim women in two Mediterranean countries. It is however by no means comprehensive. Isaacs and Michael have pointed out that the major limitation of a qualitative study lies in the

fact that the subjects cannot be a wholly representative sample, and therefore results are limited in their representativeness and do not allow for firm generalizations to the populations from which the units come until appropriate follow-up is completed. (Isaac and Michael, 1991: 280)

Definition of Terms

Issues dealt with in this dissertation revolve around a number of concepts and terms which have been used and interpreted in widely different ways. To avoid ambiguity, it is therefore important to make clear how these terms are used in this dissertation. Several particular terms are used and in this section, I will describe some of those terms.

A large part of the dissertation pertains to the ‘veil.’ However, there are a variety of religiously inspired garments for Muslim women, depending in style on geographical region or culture, variously called *tschador*, *burkha*, or *hijab*. In the Qu’ran the term *djillab* appears. In North Africa, the most common type of veil is the *hijab*, which is a headscarf that hides all hair but leaves the face and upper body uncovered, though some women also cover their faces. As the majority of Muslims in France are of North African origin, I use the term *hijab* or “Muslim headscarf.”

As used here, ‘secular’ refers to a condition in which church and state are separated, i.e. there is an absence of religious interference in government affairs and vice versa. The substantive concept from which that adjective derives is secularism which does not necessarily imply hostility towards religious beliefs. In France this concept is called *laïcité* and therefore this term is used. This concept is not applied in Morocco, an Islamic state where the King is at the same time head of state and the nation’s highest religious authority. Because of the historic connection between France and Morocco and the continued close relationship between those two countries, my respondents in Morocco were familiar with the meaning of *laïcité*.

Several of my respondents considered themselves ‘Islamists.’ Islamism refers to movements, often characterized by moral conservatism, literalism, and the attempt to implement Islamic values in all aspects of life, i.e. an Islamist worldview seeks to evaluate all aspects of private and public life based on the Qu’ran and other sacred scriptures. However, there is not one single Islamist movement but several, which may differ and at times disagree with each other on matters of interpretation of sacred texts and practice. In Morocco, the largest Islamist movement is *Al Adl wa Ihsane* (Justice and Charity) which stands in the tradition of Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam that emphasizes personal experience and love for God over adherence to dogma. It is also a movement committed to non-violence and does not overtly participate in the political process of this country. It does not for example field candidates in elections. Moroccan respondents who said they were Islamists or subscribed to Islamist positions referred to the positions taken by the *Al Adl wa Ihsane*. There is in Morocco also a political Islamist group, the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) which has grown to become the third largest political party in the national parliament and is expected to make substantial gains in the elections scheduled for 2007.

Morocco also has what could be termed ‘radical Islamists’ within its borders as evidenced by the suicide bombings carried out by Islamic fundamentalists in five separate locations in Casablanca in 2003. The tragic events of May 16, 2003 in Casablanca marked a watershed for Morocco comparable to the impact the 9/11 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York had on public life in the United States. The international reach of Moroccan radical Islamism can be seen in the predominance of Moroccans in the group that carried out the Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004 and the presence of Moroccans in international terrorist networks that have been uncovered in recent years.

In France, women who said they felt close to Islamism also emphasized their commitment to non-violence which is different from radical groups that call themselves Islamists and support or engage in violence, including in extreme cases, terrorism. Some belonged to the French branch of *Al Adl wa Ihsane*, which in France operates under the name *Participation et Spiritualité Musulmane*. Most respondents however did not

identify with a particular religious group. When the term “Islamist” is used, it is based on this definition.

As used here, ‘second-generation’ refers to children of parents who emigrated from the Maghreb which encompasses the countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania, though there are few Mauritians in France, where the main focus is on Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians. In everyday language, ‘immigrants’ in France most often suggests low-skilled workers with little formal education, even though juridically the term pertains to anyone from a foreign country taking up residence in France. Some respondents in France emphasized that their parents were not ‘immigrants’ by which they meant their parents came to France as educated professionals.

I generally use the expression ‘women of Moroccan origin in France’ rather than ‘Moroccan women in France’ or ‘French women of Moroccan origin’ because some of the women I interviewed there had retained their Moroccan citizenship, some had dual citizenship, and some were French nationals only.

In the Western world, Family Law is part of Civil Law. In Morocco, as in most of the Arab world, a separate, religiously based law, the Personal Status Code, governs matters such as marriage, divorce and inheritance. In Morocco this Personal Status Code is called *moudawana*. Although parts of Moroccan civil and criminal law are also based on Islamic law, only the Personal Status Code is held to be based systematically on Islamic law. In civil law for example, there are certain stipulations pertaining to real estate or property law that are based on Islamic law and in criminal law certain sections are based on Islamic law for example, breaking of the fast during the month of Ramadan, but other parts of civil or criminal law are derived from other sources, notably France.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured around seven Chapters. Chapter 1, The Literature Review, sets my research in the context of academic texts, narratives and novels which have explored ground relevant to my investigation. This chapter is divided in three parts that pertain to three main themes of this dissertation: Conceptions of Islam, Legal Changes and Personal and Professional Goals and Challenges. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework and methods employed in this study. Prior to the field work in North Africa and France, I conducted a series of pilot interviews in Florida with a population group that has much in common with the populations studied for this research: young, educated Muslim women of immigrant origin in the United States. These pilot interviews were crucial in refining the interview schedule used during the field research. The chapter explains how the samples were constructed, the development of the interview schedule and offers particulars about how I met the women interviewed. Chapter 3 introduces the samples by presenting key biographical features, such as age, marital status and living situation. The extent of family relations across the Mediterranean is presented in addition to information about respondents' knowledge of Arabic and/or any of the Berber languages spoken in Morocco. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the data analysis and discussion of the data. These chapters are structured in accordance with the main themes explored in this study. Chapter 4 describes and analyzes responses to questions pertaining to the conceptions of the religion of Islam and the level of respondents' adherence to the required practices, such as daily prayer and fasting. It also offers examples and illustrations of respondents' personalized understanding of their religion. Chapter 5 presents findings about perceptions and evaluations of recent legal changes in Morocco and France. The purpose of this part of my investigation was not to find out how much Moroccan women knew about legal changes in France and to what extent women of Moroccan origin in France were informed and interested in legal changes in the country of their parents' birth. Respondents' views concerning government involvement in personal and religious matters was also investigated. Chapter 6 presents findings which ascertain respondents' attitudes toward these changes and how these affect their own lives. In addition, I wanted to find respondents' views on personal

matters such as marriage, friendships, and professional opportunities. Most importantly, it illustrates women's conflicts in having to choose between marriage and family and professional careers. Finally, Chapter 7 brings together the main findings and points to gaps that could not be filled by this research. It also offers suggestions regarding new questions for further inquiry which arise out of this comparative study of young, educated, professional and urban Moroccan women and women of Moroccan origin in France.