

CHAPTER 6

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES

The theme “personal and professional aspirations and challenges” encompasses a wide range of issues. I included this broad theme in my interview schedule because it allowed young, educated, professional women in both samples to speak about their hopes and aspirations and the obstacles they perceive in accomplishing their goals. As with the previous three chapters, responses to categorical and open-ended questions are presented in tables which are then analyzed and described. Open-ended questions allow respondents to be proactive and put forth issues that the researcher may not have thought about. This study draws on Grounded Theory methodology which encourages the researcher to uncover new trends or issues previously not considered or not fully understood. It is therefore important to offer a setting in which respondents can raise problems or concerns that are important to them. In a study with a cross-national, comparative focus, questions about ideas, hopes or visions lead to a better understanding of themes which transcend nationality and are not necessarily country-specific. They can bring out similarities or differences on a deeper level.

The three previous chapters have addressed core biographical features, the role of Islam, religion and faith in the lives of young, educated, professional Moroccan women and woman of Moroccan origin in France and responses to changes in the law in Morocco and in France. In this chapter, views on issues such as marriage, friendship, professional opportunities and obstacles are described and analyzed.

This chapter offers a glimpse into very personal, intimate matters as well as views on broad issues of public policy. It was not always easy for women to discuss some of these matters freely with a stranger. There were questions respondents had previously not considered. Sometimes women in the samples were apprehensive about offering definite answers. In the process of talking through an issue, respondents occasionally refined,

revised or changed their responses. It also happened that women asked me to share my own views before they were willing to offer theirs. I insisted that I could only share my thoughts after the interview and occasionally that sufficed for respondents to feel reassured that I was not trying to get something that I myself was not willing to give.

This chapter will first look at responses to categorical and open-ended questions that pertain to public issues and will then discuss personal and private matters.

The first question in this section asked about nomination of women to high positions in government or to serve as judges. Islamic Jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is linked to the study of the religion of Islam and is traditionally, a male prerogative.

Table 6.1. Number of Women in Favor of Women in High Positions

Do you think women should be nominated to high positions in government and/or serve as judges?

| Government/Judges | Yes | No | Other | Total |
|-------------------|-----|----|-------|-------|
| France | 21 | 1 | 3 | 25 |
| Morocco | 28 | 1 | 1 | 30 |

Table 6.1. shows that the overwhelming majority of women in both samples thought women should be nominated to high positions of government or serve as judges¹. In fact most responded emphatically, exclaiming “of course”, “absolutely,” or “most definitely.” There was broad agreement on this point in both samples.

One respondent in Morocco and one in France said women should not hold high positions in government or serve as judges because women were “by nature ill disposed” for positions of public responsibility. Though these two respondents were professionals themselves, they felt they did not occupy positions in which they had to make decisions that affected a great many people. Some said women were too “emotional” and due to their menstrual cycles prone to mood swings which would not allow them to be

¹ There are several female judges and one female Supreme Court judge currently serving in Morocco.

consistently impartial as judges. The respondent in Morocco who used the category “other” explained women could hold any office, except that of a judge because like the position of *imam*², a judge was a position reserved for men. In France, those who responded “other” said they were unsure if women currently had the prerequisite professional qualifications to hold such offices and they did not want to see women appointed based on a notion of mandated gender equality.

The next question asked if respondents thought their opinions or views mattered to people who made public policy decisions.

Table 6.2. Number of Respondents who think their Opinions matter

Do you believe your opinions or views matter to people who make public policy decisions?

| Opin.matters | Yes | No | It Depends | Total |
|--------------|-----|----|------------|-------|
| France | 4 | 16 | 5 | 25 |
| Morocco | 7 | 13 | 10 | 30 |

Table 6.2.shows a variation of responses within and across the two samples. Two thirds of the French sample believed their opinions did not matter to people who make public policy decisions compared to slightly less than half in the Moroccan sample. Those who believed their opinions mattered qualified their response by saying during times of election public officials conveyed a sense that they were interested in the views of potential voters. How much these influenced actual public policy was unclear to respondents. In Morocco, respondents cited the example of the changes to the family law as having come about in part as a result of women pressing for reform. In France by contrast, respondents felt that the law banning the headscarf in public schools would not have come about had Muslim women’s views been taken into consideration.

² “leader” or “exemplar”, in Sunni Islam, leader of Friday prayers in a mosque.

A third of the Moroccan respondents said “it depends.” Morocco is an absolute monarchy and democratic processes are only now emerging. Respondents felt they were part of the changes in their country and so they had some sense of empowerment in this otherwise authoritarian, patriarchal society. By contrast in France, an established democracy, the majority in the sample felt left out of the decision-making processes. As this study is concerned with individual perception, the factual basis of statements was not under examination. What is relevant here is how educated, professional young women with no particular access to power, view the weight of their opinions.

As Moroccans have limited experience with democracy, the above question prompted some respondents to ask for clarification. Some wanted to know if the question meant they were free to express their views, or that they would not have to fear repercussions if they spoke their mind. In a nascent democracy where freedom of speech, the way it is understood in the West, is not a guaranteed right, voicing one’s views in public is not a routine occurrence. In an authoritarian political system, public policy is rarely determined or influenced by majority opinions. Thus, some respondents took it for granted that people who make public policy are not interested in the views of the population at large. And so they were baffled by a question about the relevance of their views. Some referred to the massive demonstrations³ in Rabat and Casablanca for or against the family law reform that had been carefully organized and orchestrated by political parties or established Islamist movements and thus had not come about spontaneously or based on grassroots effort. However, several women said their country was in a phase of great change and for the first time, the King and the government were amenable to different ideas. They were quick to point out the reasons for this new receptiveness were based on the government’s fear of the rising popularity of Islamist movements and recent political gains by the Islamist party PJD (Party of Justice and Development). As things stood in the summer of 2005, the PJD was in a strong position to improve its standing in the 2007 elections. Support for political Islam poses a threat to the monarchy. Another reason why people in power had become more attuned to the population at large was the attack by homegrown Moroccan terrorists in May 2003 in

³ In the spring of 2000, tens of thousands took to the streets in Casablanca and Rabat demonstrating both for and against a government proposal to improve women’s rights within the personal status code, *moudawana*.

Casablanca that killed 43 people. This terrorist attack had become a defining moment for Moroccan public policy comparable to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in American political life. Some respondents said the terrorist attacks had pushed the Moroccan political elite out of its complacency and forced them to acknowledge the existence of a potentially lethal, disenfranchised segment of the population. Having an ear on the ground had thus become a matter of survival for the political elite. The responses of women in the Moroccan sample have to be understood in this larger context.

In France, the majority of respondents felt their views were of little consequence to those in decision-making positions. They attributed this lack of interest in their opinions to their demographics as a socially disadvantaged cultural and religious minority. This marginalization could only be overcome with more second and third generation women climbing the social ladder. However, some said that with the creation of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman⁴ (CFCM) and similar, less prominent organizations, the French government “demonstrates that it recognizes the voice of Muslims in France,” even though several said they personally did not feel represented by the CFCM. Zoubida who had just attained a graduate degree in political science in Paris and was looking to become active in political life in France, said: “There are now strong advocates of Islam here in France who make their positions known to a wider public, so we are no longer a large, but voiceless minority in France. But we need more diversity of Muslim organizations because there is not one, homogenous ‘Muslim community’ in France.” Zoubida’s mother is Moroccan, her father is from Niger and she had spent time in both of her parents’ countries of origin. Born and raised in France, Zoubida felt she had a good understanding of cultural diversity and, degree in hand, she considered herself well-equipped to take her place in public life in France. Yet her opinion was not representative of the majority of the women I spoke with. Zoubida attributed some of her zest to her mixed parentage, which had made her a minority within a minority. “If I don’t speak up, no one will speak for me.” She also credited her mother’s insistence on higher

⁴ The CFCM was initiated in 1999 as the first publicly recognized organization to represent the views of Muslims in France

education for providing her with a solid base from where to launch her career. However, the majority of the sample in France conveyed a pervasive sense of being left out of the decision-making process and felt relegated to the margins.

Table 6.3. Number of Respondents in Favor of Government Intervention

Do you think the French government should intervene in the religious domain for example on the issue of the Muslim headscarf?

| Govt.intervention | Yes | No | Other | Total |
|-------------------|-----|----|-------|-------|
| France | 6 | 14 | 5 | 25 |
| Morocco | 7 | 21 | 2 | 30 |

Table 6.3.shows that that the majority of respondents in both samples thought the French government should not intervene in the religious domain, for example on the issue of the headscarf. There were proportionally more women in the French sample who supported such government intervention than in Morocco. Less than one in four Moroccan respondents said they supported such interventions in France. This result indicates that people evaluate government acts not on principle but based on whether such actions personally affect them or people they identify with. In Morocco the government routinely intervenes in religious matters, for example the ringing of Christian church bells is not allowed, proselytizing and conversion from Islam to any other religion are criminally liable. Around the time of my interviews, several Christians were deported after having been accused of bearing witness to their faith⁵. Though not part of my interview schedule, in casual conversations women expressed no qualms about the fact that religious freedom for non-Muslims on their territory was considerably more restricted than in France. Some did not hesitate to defend their government’s intervention on religious matters by arguing that Morocco was an Islamic state. Why Muslims should

⁵ See “Percée protestante au Maghreb” in *Le Monde, Dossiers & Documents*, No 343, June 2005, p 6.

be granted religious freedoms in the *laïc* French state when Christians and Jews were given no comparable rights in Morocco, was a question left unexplored.

Yasmina, a veiled woman in Morocco, offered an interesting perspective on French legal intervention: “We have an Islamic state, so it should be taken for granted that citizens should be allowed to wear the *hijab*. But even here we have seen efforts to keep the headscarf out of the workplace. When I interviewed for a job at a bank⁶, I was asked if I would take off my *hijab* if I was given a position where I had to deal with customers. This is outrageous in an Islamic state but I could find no specific law that protected my right to wear the *hijab* at my place of work. So it is better to have rules on these matters. At least in France things are clear and everyone knows what the law is.” Respondents in Morocco who supported French government intervention on such matters as the headscarf said that school girls were too young to put on the *hijab* in the first place. Others expressed suspicion based on the fact that France was Morocco’s former colonial ruler and did not have a history of respect for the religion of Islam or Islamic culture.

In Morocco discussions about government intervention have to be understood within the context of the monarchy. The role of government was understood as synonymous with the authority of the monarch. In the past people were at the mercy of the King’s whims, especially during Hassan’s II iron rule (1961- 1999), a period now called *les années de plomb*. But in the current climate of political and social change, respondents felt a budding sense of empowerment. One woman referred to a recent cartoon in a weekly magazine that depicted someone bowing to kiss the king’s hand, asking: “How long will we be subjects? I want to be a citizen!”⁷

Women in both samples agreed that a sovereign government is within its rights to pass laws that uphold the values of a country while at the same time protecting the rights of individuals. Though respondents in both countries said they understood the French concept of *laïcité*, they were unsure how this separation between church and state was implemented practically. Said Mouna in Paris: “Christmas is a public holiday, Easter,

⁶ The “headscarf affair” at the BMCE Bank became public in 2004. In an effort to appear ‘modern’, employees who dealt with customers were discouraged from wearing a *hijab*. Bank executives eventually offered an apology to their veiled staff.

⁷ *TelQuel*, April 18, 2005.

Pentecost etc. are a public holidays, there are so many holidays that are actually Catholic holidays. Schools are closed on these days whether you are Christian, Muslim, Jew or whatever. Of course, there is no public holiday for *Aid al Kbir* even though ten per cent of the French population is Muslim. And now Muslim girls are not allowed to wear the headscarf to school.” In her view, the concept of *laïcité* was selectively invoked to discriminate against Muslims. Others said overall their rights were better protected in France than in Morocco because they could practice their religion according to their personal choice and free from government interference. For example it was their personal decision to fast during Ramadan or to openly question any aspect of their religion. They also cited their freedom to publicly oppose the government’s ruling on the headscarf as a right they would not have to the same extent in Morocco.

In France some respondents saw a need for government intervention to curtail an increasingly explosive and divisive situation in public schools, especially in the socially disadvantaged *banlieues*. Samia, one of the youngest women I interviewed and who had just passed her baccalaureate at the time of our meeting, said she was grateful for the French public school system because her parents could not have afforded a private school. From her yearly visits during the summer to Morocco she understood that her cousins there did not have the same educational opportunities. Samia said once students enter public schools, they are not considered Catholic, Jewish or Muslim, they are just students. “We are all citizens of the French Republic where religion is a private matter. And that is a very good thing. I am glad the government insists that religion is kept out of the schools because it causes friction and conflict.”

One woman who works for a publicly funded agency investigating claims of discrimination said she could not imagine the existence of a comparable organization in Morocco. “I don’t fully understand why the government chose the headscarf but from my work I know that there are serious attempts at addressing discrimination. And the headscarf certainly leads to discrimination. I remember that from the time I was at school. Teachers often treated the veiled girls differently or made comments about them. My sister had briefly put on the headscarf while still at school but then took it off because she could not handle the consequences. Now that she is married, she wears it again.” So as to underline the problems in eradicating discrimination, she added: “I and my female

colleagues get paid less than our male colleagues, even in our anti-discrimination agency. So it is not a simple matter.”

Despite the differences in point of view concerning the headscarf ban, most respondents in France said they understood that the French government protected them on other matters of importance to them. If it had not been for French laws, one respondent said, they would have been married off by their families to someone they did not know or did not like or they could not have pursued their professional ambitions against the will or without the support of their parents. As Babès writes: “La laïcité est souvent leur [the second generation] cheval de bataille” (Babès 1997 : 95). Based on their personal experience, assessing the degree to which they supported or disagreed with government intervention was fraught with complexities and nuances.

Moving from general questions about the role of government, the interview schedule also contained questions of a more personal nature. In this part of the interview, I wanted to find out what young, educated women had to say about their professional opportunities.

Table 6.4. Sufficiency of Professional Opportunities

Do you feel that your professional opportunities are sufficient for the moment?

| Opportunities | Yes | No | Other | Total |
|---------------|-----|----|-------|-------|
| France | 8 | 16 | 1 | 25 |
| Morocco | 13 | 16 | 1 | 30 |

Table 6.4.shows that about two thirds of respondents in France felt they did not have sufficient professional opportunities, whereas half of the Moroccan sample felt they did. This difference can be attributed in large part to one significant difference between the Moroccan and the French sample: social class. Among the Moroccan women who felt their professional opportunities were sufficient, most came from middle or upper class

families. Women from that type of background were confident they could obtain professional positions in line with their qualifications. Those from modest backgrounds in Morocco overwhelmingly said they did not have sufficient professional opportunities. In France, there was less of a correlation between a respondents' social class and her sense of opportunity; there women most often cited discrimination as the reason for limited opportunities.

In Morocco *coup de piston* was named as a major factor for securing a professional position. Women with university education who hailed from a rural background or came from less affluent families felt their professional opportunities⁸ were not commensurate with their education. An elementary school teacher in Azrou explained: "I was the first and am the only one in my family to get a university education. Even my two older brothers did not go to university. My mother married when she was fourteen, of course she never went to school at all. She wanted a different life for me so she was really supporting me to get a good education. And my father agreed. But now I am 28 years old, unmarried and work as a substitute kindergarten teacher. Most of the money I earn comes from giving private lessons in the evenings and on the weekends. My family does not have any connections, we don't know anyone in high places. I am here with my mother and I am supporting her on my small salary. I wish I could get a better job." About her personal life, she had this to say: "There have been a few men who asked my mother if they could marry me, but most of them were older men who were either divorced or widowers with children. Though they could offer financial security, my mother did not encourage me to marry any of them. She thinks I should marry someone closer in age to me and someone I like." I asked if she felt her mother was unhappy as a result of having been in an arranged marriage. Rachida disagreed: "My mother was still a child when she got married. Of course it was very flattering to her when the parents of this handsome man came to ask for her hand. Over the years, she learned to love my father. But times have changed and she wants me to make my own decisions." We sat in Rachida's living room in an unfinished house without heating and only cold water. Like

⁸ According to the World Fact Book (2002), the official unemployment rate of Morocco is estimated at 12.3 per cent. In reality, it is likely that the figure is much higher.

so many houses in Morocco, theirs gets build as the family has money to pay for construction. It is a common sight throughout Morocco, especially outside the major urban areas, to see already inhabited houses that are still under construction. Because of restrictive lending procedures by local banks, many of these private houses are paid for by repatriated money from Moroccans working abroad. Remissions in recent years have steadily decreased as immigrants retire in Europe instead of returning to their home country and second generation ties to Morocco become more and more feeble.

It is instructive to take a small detour here and note that decreasing loyalty of children of immigrants to Morocco is an issue of concern for the Moroccan government because it stands to lose significant foreign income. Though there are no accurate figures available, immigrants contribute substantially to the foreign income and development, especially in the rural areas. Expatriate Moroccans also retain their right to vote in Morocco. It is commonly held that Moroccans residing in a Western country do not favor Islamist parties but support government efforts at “modernizing” their country of origin. In an effort to maintain and nourish ties between immigrant families and their home country, the Moroccan government in 2003 initiated a “Ministère Délégué Chargé de la Communauté Marocaine Résidant à l’Etranger,” which is an upgrade of previously much smaller bureau. The mission of this Department is based on a recognition of “l’importance numérique, la diversité et les rôles stratégiques de la communauté marocaine résident à l’Etranger.”⁹ Part of the Department’s mission is to create a database of Moroccan professionals abroad and to “les inciter à s’intégrer davantage dans le tissu économique national.”

However, at the time of my interviews none of the respondents in the French sample was aware of the existence of this Ministry and therefore it could not be ascertained whether these renewed efforts to encourage co-operation between Moroccans abroad and those at home lead to the creation of new professional opportunities on either side of the Mediterranean.

⁹ Broschure of Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et de la Coopération outlining the Stratégie du Ministère Délégué Chargé de la Coomunauté Marocaine Résident à l’Etranger.

Table 6.5. Sufficiency of Professional Opportunities of Men and Women

Do you think women have the same professional opportunities as all other members of society, male or female?

| Same opport. | Yes | No | Other | Total |
|--------------|-----|----|-------|-------|
| France | 8 | 16 | 1 | 25 |
| Morocco | 16 | 9 | 5 | 30 |

Table 6.5. shows a division between the two samples similar to that observed in relation to the previous question. Most French respondents thought that men and women did not have the same professional opportunities. On the other side, slightly more than half of the Moroccan respondents felt that men and women did have the same professional opportunities. This might at first glance seem surprising given that gender inequality is much more prevalent in Morocco than in France and up until the recent reform of the Personal Status Code, much of this inequality had been written into the law. But as with the previous question, responses of women in the Moroccan sample can be attributed again in part to social class. Particularly in developing world countries, social class often outweighs other factors in determining women's opportunity and social standing. A glance at some other developing world countries illustrates this point.

Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan was the first woman to head the government of an Islamic state from 1988-1990. The country with the largest Muslim population worldwide, Indonesia, has had a female president since 2001, Megawati Sukarnoputri. In Bangladesh Khaleda Zia, also a Muslim, has been acting president since 1981 and later became Prime Minister. India, likewise a non-Western developing world country, was headed for decades by Indira Gandhi (1966 - 1977 and again from, 1980 - 1984). In Sri Lanka Chandrika Kumaratunga has been president since 1994. All these women were or are part of the ruling elite and had come by their powerful positions owing to their family relations. Because several of the women in the Moroccan sample hailed from upper class families, it is not surprising that they should assert that gender is not a determining factor in professional opportunities.

In her dissertation, Souad Eddouada¹⁰ describes her experience working with various prominent women's organizations in Morocco: "My experience within the administration of these organizations demonstrated to me that patriarchy not only concerns the domination of men by women since we find hierarchy among women themselves. The absence of the young generation, the survival of hierarchical relationships of power within these supposedly feminist and alternative to male structures, in addition to the gap between the grassroots and their representations by the egalitarian discourses of these feminists' activism are due to the absence of free and open reflection within these organizations." Eddouada observed that Moroccan feminists, "by seemingly arguing for the rights of women, treat Moroccan women as a homogeneous entity, neglecting the disparities among women from rural and urban areas as well as different classes." Eddouada's research confirms that professional opportunities for educated women from the urban middle class are superior to those of rural men or women from a low socio-economic background. Eddouada's observations are pertinent because they shed light on the significance of social class with regards to professional opportunities for women. According to this young scholar, gender is not one of the most important determinant for professional opportunities, instead it is social class.

Educated women from well-connected families were indeed quick to admit that they came by their job not only based on merit but because family ties had opened doors that otherwise would have been closed to them. Women from less well-connected families bemoaned the fact that qualification was often not enough to secure a decent job. Adding those who cited social class and connections, not gender, as a primary factor of employment opportunities for Moroccans, the responses were almost evenly divided among respondents¹¹ who felt that women had the same professional opportunities as all other members of society, male and female.

In France, respondents attributed their lack of access to professional opportunities commensurate with their education to a variety of factors, of which discrimination was

¹⁰ Souad Eddouada, *Women, Gender and the State in Morocco: Contradictions, Constraints and Prospects*, PhD Dissertation Mohammed V University, Rabat, 2003.

¹¹ Those who responded with "other" chose this category to explain about the importance of class over gender.

the most important. Respondents in France also raised the issue of connections, albeit in a larger context. Said Mouna, a lawyer in Paris: “In France, it is not merely personal connections, even though that helps of course in getting a good job, but it is more a matter of being part of the system. As children of immigrants, we are of course not part of that system and we have no network in established circles. Other than our education, we have nothing going for us and often that is not enough when competing with candidates who have equal qualifications but have the advantage of being part of the established system.” By ‘established system’ Mouna referred to the majority culture of *Français de souche*. This eloquent young woman also raised the issue of sexism. “It is not true that in the Western world women are treated equally in the workplace. When I was growing up, I always had that vision that things in French society worked differently than *chez nous*, but now that I am part of the French professional work force, I am quite appalled by what I see going on in the office. Women most definitely are treated differently and do not have the same opportunities as men.” As will be described later in this chapter, respondents also felt that their own families were a major obstacle in moving forward with their professional careers.

Moving from the public and professional realm to the personal sphere, the following section pertains to respondents’ views on private matters. The first question of this kind asked respondents if they considered it possible to live alone. This question may not be particularly relevant in a Western context where young women routinely live by themselves. However even in the Western world, this is a recent phenomenon and one directly linked to increasing affluence. In times past, economic conditions often dictated that young women - and men for that matter - lived with their families until they got married and started a family of their own.

In Moroccan culture, it is still common for young people to live with their parents until they start their own families. Under the old family law, a woman was under the tutelage of a *wali* (guardian), first her father or an older male member of the family and later her husband. Thus, for women in Morocco and women of Moroccan origin in France, living alone or even considering living alone clearly meant breaking new ground.

Table 6.6. Number of Respondents in Favor of Living Alone

Do you consider it possible to live alone?

| Living alone | Yes | No | Other | Total |
|--------------|-----|----|-------|-------|
| France | 19 | 3 | 3 | 25 |
| Morocco | 17 | 13 | 0 | 30 |

Table 6.6. shows that the majority of the women in the French sample considered it possible to live alone. In Morocco, a little more than half of the women in the sample said they could envision living by themselves, whereas slightly less than half did not. In France as in Morocco, respondents went into lengthy explanations about the circumstances that led them to live by themselves.

The story of Halima in Paris is a case in point. Halima, 27 years old, did well in school and was encouraged by her teachers to continue her education at a university. Her brothers were less successful at school and are currently unemployed. Her father had wanted his only daughter to get married and raise children, while her mother supported her plans for a career. Eventually, conflict within the family grew so intense that Halima moved out. “In my understanding, it is not French society that causes us problems. It is our immediate environment in the family that is the problem. They exert such pressure on us [girls] by insisting on culture and traditions. These traditions are not Moroccan or Muslim, they are the customs of the poor, uneducated Moroccan countryside. I know, because I went to the village where my parents came from every summer while I was growing up.” Almost in tears as she recounted her story, she went on: “Because of where they come from, my parents can’t change. So I have to separate from them for a while until I have established myself and then they can see what I have accomplished and things will be easier, I hope.” Since moving to Paris nine months earlier, she had not been in touch with her family. She said she was wary of making friends with other second generation women for fear that someone might know her family and get word to them revealing her whereabouts. She felt equally ill at ease at befriending French women because of her complicated family situation. When arranging our interview, Halima suggested meeting next to a pricey café near the Eiffel Tower. After we got better

acquainted, I asked why she had wanted to meet in one of the most expensive, touristy parts of town, far away from where she lived. She said she had wanted to make me feel comfortable. Learning that I was not French she thought the Eiffel Tower would be a venue a foreigner such as I would appreciate. It is also possible that she chose this tourist location because there she was less likely to be seen by anyone she knew. Halima consistently rejected my invitation to lunch, dinner, even a snack. Despite her urban existence, she had never eaten in a restaurant and said she did not trust food in such places. And so each time we met, we walked the streets and parks of Paris for hours, never consuming anything but bottled water. Halima, of Berber origins with light brown hair and green eyes, was obviously lonely, missing her family and close friends and had not yet adjusted to life in the big city. Despite her shyness and social awkwardness, she tackled her professional ambition with tenacity, determined to carve out a way for herself, develop her potential and break out of the socially disadvantaged milieu of her family. She felt there was no turning back for her. “My family comes from a village in the Rif mountains in northern Morocco. They were not into the drug business¹².” Halima knew that climbing the social ladder was going to be a formidable challenge, but one she was prepared to tackle: “There is nothing for me in Morocco and there is nothing for me in the *banlieues*. I have to make it on my own, no matter how difficult it is.” Halima worked for an online news service and had started hosting a weekly radio show. She also had applied for a position at a large French publishing house. Towards the end of our conversation, she said: “I hope one day my parents will be proud of me.”

In Morocco, women who lived alone also said they did not consider this a “natural lifestyle” but one borne out of necessity because they had a job in the city but no relatives in the urban centers with whom they could live. For them, living alone did not come at the cost of breaking up with their families. Their families had accepted that living by themselves was the cost of pursuing a professional career in one of the major cities. However, nearly half of the respondents said they could not imagine ever living by themselves. They either lived at home with their parents or with their husbands. A few said it was against their religious conviction to live alone as a woman.

¹² The Rif Mountains in Morocco is the largest cannabis producing region in the world and a major drug supplier for the European market.

Fatima-Zohra, 33, was an independent, professional woman in Rabat, who owned her own car, was successful in her professional career and dressed in fashionable Western clothes. She had lived abroad with her parents for several years. She said she could not envision living by herself. "I need to know someone is in the house when I come home and since I am not married that someone is my mother." When I asked Fatima-Zohra if she had considered sharing a house with a friend her age, she said she could not trust even the best of her friends so this would be out of the question. As the issue of fear had been raised before, it was interesting to see what she had to say on trust. I subsequently asked other women about their thoughts on trust. Respondents said trust existed only within the family, nuclear and extended. Some asserted that the absence of trust was a major obstacle to economic development. People were apprehensive about going into business with someone who was not a member of the family. Therefore, positions were often not filled by the best qualified people but by trusted ones, i.e. people who belonged to the family. The issue of trust also entered into discussions of marriage. Respondents in both samples described marriage as an agreement between two families and not just an affair involving two people. Thus, trust between the families joined through marriage was of major concern. One veiled woman in Rabat tried to cut loose from such family obligations. "I am in love!" she announced when I met her one year after our initial conversation. I asked if her family knew her beloved, to which she replied emphatically: "No, not yet. I want to make sure that we have a solid relationship. If we appear unsure in front of our parents, they will take over the process and start making decisions for us. This is something between me and him," avoiding the term 'boyfriend' all throughout our conversation. "We need to trust each other. That is what matters. And we can best develop this trust if there is no interference from our families. You know that here marriage is not just between two people; entire families get 'married' so to speak." She said nowhere in the Qu'ran was it written that parents had to chose a spouse for their children, "I am going to do what is my right and 'he' sees it the same way."

Marriage was a topic explored more directly in the following questions.

Table 6.7. Number of Respondents who consider Marriage essential

Do you consider marriage an essential part of life?

| Marriage | Yes | No | Other | Total |
|----------|-----|----|-------|-------|
| France | 20 | 3 | 2 | 25 |
| Morocco | 25 | 4 | 1 | 30 |

Table 6.8. Number of Respondents who consider it possible to marry a non-Muslim

Can you imagine the possibility of getting married to a Non-Muslim?

| Non-Muslim | Yes | No | Other | Total |
|------------|-----|----|-------|-------|
| France | 11 | 13 | 1 | 25 |
| Morocco | 7 | 18 | 5 | 30 |

Table 6.7 shows that the majority of women in both samples considered marriage an essential part of life despite the fact that most of my interviewees were not married. They had invested years pursuing higher education and/or professional training and were busy establishing themselves in their professional careers. In France, the average marriage age for women is 28.5 years (for men 30.6) in Morocco the average marriage age for women is 20.5 (for men 22.6)¹³. The rural/urban dichotomy in Morocco skews this figure as girls in the rural areas tend to get married in their teens whereas urban women often do not marry until their twenties.

Those few who said they did not consider marriage an essential part of life, emphasized marriage was a choice and not an obligation, even though it had been presented to them as such during their upbringing.

Table 6.8 shows that more women in France than in Morocco considered it possible to marry a non-Muslim. Close to half of the women in the French sample but

¹³ UNICEF country statistics, 2004.

less than a quarter in the Moroccan sample said they could imagine the possibility of getting married to a non-Muslim.

Marriage was an issue of considerable personal agony for women in both samples. Because respondents placed such high value on marriage, they were troubled by the fact that they themselves were still unmarried because of the choices they had made with regard to education and professional life. In looking for a potential spouse, most - but not all - maintained that having the same religion was an important factor, mostly in regard to raising children. Another criterion mentioned frequently was approval of a spouse by parents. Again and again I was told that marriage was understood as an affair that involved more than two people, as an arrangement that merged two families. Several women in Morocco and in France also spoke of the need for financial security. This was especially the case among those who had grown up in difficult economic circumstances and where the father had barely been able to provide for the family. Open-mindedness and intellectual compatibility were cherished qualities too. Said Lamiae in Casablanca: “We need to understand each other. We need to have the same intellectual level. I also think it is more difficult to be married to someone who does not come from the same culture as you. It is not that I insist on marrying a Muslim, but I think it easier if both spouses come from a similar cultural and religious background. To me this is not a religious mandate but I believe we will have similar ideas about raising children.” Though Lamiae said that her preference for a Muslim husband was her personal choice, her sentiments concord with Islamic dogma, according to which a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim.

Touria, a 29-year-old woman in Rabat, described her situation as follows: “Of course, I would like to have a family and children. But now that I have a graduate degree and started a new job, I feel I need to establish myself professionally first. My mother who cannot even read or write is so proud of me. Even if I wanted to, I could not just marry and do pretty much the same things my illiterate mother did. Raising children is not considered a job in Morocco. The life of a married woman is still very traditional, you have to put your husband first, serve your mother-in-law and raise the children. For many married women, life revolves around the home and the *hammam*.”¹⁴ Touria comes from

¹⁴ *Hammam* is the traditional public steam bath where women congregate once a week.

what in the West would be described as a blue-collar family, and is keenly aware of the pronounced class differences that divide Moroccan society.

“Though I am a very educated woman now, I don’t want to lead the life of a typical middle-class woman. Here, middle-class families have maids and servants and nannies. My mother worked as a maid most of her life. It is such a hard job. If possible, I don’t want to have a maid but we don’t yet have the amenities that are common in Europe and so it is almost impossible to have a family where both parents work without domestic help. Though I would like to get married and have children, at this point this is not a realistic option.” As other women before and after her, Touria only half-jokingly asked if I knew of a young man who might be compatible with her.

Latifa, another professional woman in her late twenties in Morocco, who also comes from a family of limited means, echoed Touria’s sentiments: “First and foremost, I have high expectations with regards to responsibility. A husband must be a responsible person and we must communicate well with each other. Often, it is the stupid things that make a marriage fail. I think I would like to have a practicing Muslim as a husband, one who observes the daily prayers, who does not drink or smoke. He must be honest too. But I am not sure what I would do if I were presented with the choice of a non-Muslim who has these character qualities and a Muslim who falls short of my expectation. I hope I won’t ever be faced with that dilemma.” Like Touria, Latifa put her education and profession first and now finds herself fantasizing about the ideal husband without envisioning she will get married any time soon.

And yet another one said: “I get very upset when certain customs are justified by religion. For example when a husband beats his wife or when a brother makes decisions for his sister. I have a much better education and job than my brother, but he feels he can tell me what to do because that is what the Qu’ran allows him to do. I know that the Qu’ran says some of those things and I am really struggling with that because I am a devout Muslim. Also, here you don’t just marry a man, you marry a family. That applies especially to women, they are supposed to become part of the husband’s family and serve their mother-in-law. As a woman, you are not the master of your own time. Let me tell you: I live here in Rabat by myself and when someone wants to visit me, I want them to call ahead of time and not just show up for dinner. When I am at home at my mother’s

house, there are all these relatives who stop by any time they want and my mother has to put everything she was doing aside to prepare a meal for them. I always fight with my uncles and tell them, ‘you should call before you come; my mother has things to do other than to feed you.’ But then my mother scolds me and says I can live this modern city life when I am in Rabat. She says here I can insist on these new ways of going about things, but when I am at home, I have to abide by traditions and customs which include welcoming visitors any time and serving them. Of course, my brother has no such obligations. My mother says even if you don’t like it, this is the way it is in Morocco. She does not want me to come in and upset our relatives just because I am an educated woman who has a good job in the capital city. So as for marriage, I don’t know. It will not be easy for me to find a husband.”

The conflict between the traditional way of life and the new life of educated, professional women was a recurring theme. Zhou, an accountant, said: “For me it is important that my husband has studied or lived abroad. I am a practicing Muslim and I want my husband to understand the difference between religion and some of the cultural practices and traditions in Morocco.” Naima, a journalist in her thirties has had plenty of time to think about marriage: “I really have a hard time putting up with the Moroccan mentality. I cannot even imagine marrying a Moroccan man. Mixed marriages are the way to go but I know there will be difficulties. In my profession, I have the opportunity to meet foreign men and I have dated a few. I think my family would be OK with this but unfortunately, the relationships never worked out. Most foreign men are here on limited assignments. I am not sure if I can find a job in my area in another country. At the moment, my work is very important to me. But at least I am free to pursue my professional goals. How to find a man, I don’t know. I am 33 and still single.”

There are some voices in Morocco that caution against such strong emphasis on marriage. Aïcha Ech-Channa is the founder of the *Association Solidarité Féminine* in Casablanca, an organization that helps women who have children out of wedlock. Her book *Miseria-Témoignages* (2004) was referred to in Chapter 1. Single mothers, she said, “are pariahs in Moroccan society, they cannot find jobs, no self-respecting man will marry them, and often they are cast out by their families.” I met the prominent yet controversial Ech-Channa at a center for *mères célibataires* which she had established in

Casablanca. This feisty women in her mid-sixties said that marriage is upheld as such an ideal that it justifies the neglect, rejection and abuse of unwed mothers. She emphasized that she herself never was a single mother and now had grandchildren but felt called to assist women who are cast out by Moroccan society. As evidence for her assertion about the public contempt of single mothers, she cited the fact that financial support for the center came exclusively from foreign sources. She feared that the rise of Islamism in her country would further aggravate the situation of unwed mothers by dismissing them as “prostitutes.” Widespread prejudices against single motherhood also limit the options of educated professional women. Having children without getting married was entirely out of the question for the women in my samples.

In France, young, educated, professional women were also faced with the choice between career and marriage, even though all aspired toward eventual marriage. As in Morocco, a number of respondents were in their late twenties or early thirties and unmarried. In contrast to Morocco, there were some divorced women with children in the sample. One striking difference in the responses of women in Morocco compared with those in France was how frequently women in France invoked *l'amour* when speaking about marriage. In the interviews in Morocco, ‘love’ was a word rarely invoked. However, it would not be correct to infer from this that ‘love’ was unimportant for respondents in Morocco. The responses rather suggest that the concept of ‘love’ can be associated with different criteria. In Morocco, ‘love’ is not understood as a stand-alone value but contains specific aspects such as compatibility of ideas and character, same religious or spiritual values and honesty. Respondents in Morocco were also more inclined to perceive provision of financial security as a sign of love which is not surprising in a developing world country where everyday survival can be a struggle. The fact that a man was capable and willing to provide for his family was therefore an important criterion.

Respondents in France on the other hand explained that “love” referred to some kind of romantic feeling, a feeling that was important to them. Though the average marriage age for women in France is higher than in Morocco (20 in Morocco versus 28

years in France), women of Moroccan origin understood that they had passed the conventional age of marriage for women from their culture.

Kheira, in her early thirties, divorced and with a son, said: “I am looking for someone with an open mind. Of course loyalty and trust are very important but unfortunately that does not exist. My father had several wives, that is he did not divorce my mother before he moved in with another woman and after that with another one. So my mother never could remarry and my father did not have to pay child support, not for the children from his marriage nor any subsequent relationship. It was a really difficult situation for us. When my sister and I were old enough to live alone, my mother moved back to Morocco. Life in France had become just too difficult for her; she needed the support of her family back there. By the time I got divorced myself, I had a child. Now my mother raises my son in Morocco and I only get to see him once a year. As a single mother, I could not pursue my education and have a career here in Paris where everything is so expensive.”

I was amazed how easily the term “single mother” had crossed Kheira’s lips, given how controversial and problematic single motherhood is in the country where her son is being raised. Kheira continued: “Actually, I am dating a Portuguese man right now. He is Catholic. I don’t know what to do. How shall we raise our children? I am really afraid. If he converts to Islam, he may become like most Muslim men and think he can have more than one wife, or do all sorts of things common for Muslim men. He may think it is OK for him to beat his wife. But if he does not convert, it is not right for me to marry him and it will be difficult for my family to accept. I don’t want to live in fear again. Fear is so much part of our life as Muslims and Moroccans. I am studying the Qu’ran right now to see what exactly it says about a Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim.”

Hassiba’s story was in some respects similar to that of Kheira. She too was divorced, lived with her daughter and dreamed of finding another husband. “Most important is that my husband is Muslim.” Hassiba had said earlier in the interview that she was not a practicing Muslim, she smoked and on her kitchen counter was a rack with wine bottles, so I asked why it was so important to her that her husband should be

Muslim. After some hesitation, she finally said it was because she could not get married to a man who was not circumcised. She had been told, and apparently believed, that sex with an uncircumcised was not “hygienic.” She was under the impression that only Muslim and Jewish men were circumcised. Jewish partners were out of the question for other reasons. Hassiba also believed that Muslims were by definition “cleaner” than men of other religious persuasions as there are numerous prescriptions concerning personal hygiene in the Qu’ran, for example the insistence on ritual cleansing before entering a mosque or prayers. As our conversation continued, it became clear that Hassiba did not question the stereotypes she used. In the Moroccan countryside, I had encountered similar assertions about perceived superior cleanliness of Muslims versus the lax hygienic standards of *Nazrines* (Christians) but I had not expected to hear such a statement in the heart of Paris. Hassiba lived near Montmartre, in an apartment with distinct Moroccan décor, i.e. banquettes with red and gold tasseled cushions which lined the walls instead of a sofa or chairs, and the customary round table was graced with a shiny brass teapot. Hassiba went on to explain that the law banning the Muslim headscarf was nothing less than a Jewish-French conspiracy against Muslims. Though she had lived all her life in France, in Paris, and had French colleagues at the bank where she worked, she had never befriended anyone outside of the North African immigrant community. A car accident had left her limping and capable of walking only with the help of a cane, so this beautiful young woman must have been exceptionally aware of discrimination and the many facets of social exclusion, yet she was quite willing to label people in ways that were based on prejudice. Hassiba was an example of a woman who in effect lived in a parallel society to the French mainstream.

Khadija was a young woman I met at a fancy American ice cream parlor on the Champs-Élysées. Like Halima, she chose a meeting place which she thought would make me feel comfortable. This heightened awareness of cultural difference was a noticeable trait among women in the French sample. In Morocco, women had generally chosen a meeting place based on convenience, their home, their place of work or a coffee shop within easy reach for both of us.

Khadija spoke almost inaudibly: “This [impending marriage] is difficult to talk about. I lived in England for two years and I met a wonderful guy whom I hoped to

marry. Then I got pregnant. It was terrible; my mother arranged for an abortion, it was such a shame. Because I brought such shame to my family, they insisted that I marry this man they had chosen. I could not refuse, after all the shame I had brought to my family already. Even my best friends don't know about the abortion. I did not tell them that this is an arranged marriage. It looks so old fashioned. We Moroccans in France think we are different from the people in the *bled*¹⁵. I mean my friends know that my parents introduced me to this man but I told them that I was in love with him. I just cannot cause my parents any more trouble. I am determined to learn to love this man. He is a practicing Muslim. He is from a good family, of Moroccan origin like me.” Khadija was unsure what her marriage, which was scheduled to take place within a few weeks of our interview, might mean for her professional career but as life in Paris was expensive she trusted that she would continue to work even after she got married or had children.

The majority of women in both samples had at one time or another thought about marrying a non-Muslim. For the most part, they had ambivalent feelings toward that. On the one side, they felt such a union might be better suited to accommodate their professional ambition with family life and also allow them to leave some of the customs and traditions they had come to reject, behind. But the prospect also frightened them especially as they reflected about raising children. Willingness to consider of a non-Muslim husband was also the result of their advancing age and with this the diminished prospects of finding a Moroccan husband. In the samples, there was a direct correlation of age with the consideration of a non-Muslim husband. Most respondents under the age of 26 said they did not consider it possible to marry someone from a different culture or religion.

Aside from marriage, the interview schedule also contained a question about friendships with non-Muslims.

¹⁵ *Bled*, Arabic for land, place, often used in a somewhat derogatory sense to refer to underdeveloped regions of North Africa.

Table 6.9. Number of Respondents with Non-Muslim Friends

Do you have friends who are not Muslims?

| Non-Muslim friends | Yes | No | Other |
|--------------------|-----|----|-------|
| France | 23 | 2 | 0 |
| Morocco | 18 | 12 | 0 |

Table 6.9 shows that the overwhelming majority of women in the French sample said they had friends who were not Muslim. In Morocco, where exposure to people from different religions is much less prevalent, a considerable number of women still said they either currently have or had had such friends in the past when they lived abroad. It is certainly not easy to determine what constitutes “friendship.” One criterion used in my research was if women met with their non-Muslim friends outside of school or work and spent part of their leisure time with them. In the workplace, relationships with people from a variety of backgrounds are not freely chosen whereas in one’s free time, contacts are voluntary. The large number of women in both samples who said they did spend off-work time with people who were not Muslim, is surprising. Self-segregation in one’s private life is a common phenomenon; thus the fact that the majority of the women in the French sample and more than half in the Moroccan sample said they had friends from a different cultural and religious background suggests a strong appreciation for these contacts. However, there is a possibility that these figures are inflated because a non-Muslim researcher posed the question, a factor that may have influenced respondents’ answers. Whereas responses to most other questions had nothing directly to do with me, saying they did not have any friends who were not Muslim could be interpreted as meaning that apart from this interview, respondents avoided or refused private contacts with non-Muslims.

After inviting them to speak about their hopes and visions, I asked women what they viewed as the biggest obstacles in achieving their personal and professional goals. Like Halima, quoted above, Malika in France blurted out a similar response: “The biggest obstacle are our families. They have their ways and want to impose those on us. They

brought the customs of long ago Morocco with them to France. Even in Morocco things have changed but our parents don't know that." In Morocco, the responses were similar but less harshly formulated. Said Rachida: "Our lives are so very different from that of our mothers, even if they support us they can't understand all the things we do and want for ourselves. There are many things I don't do because I don't want to hurt my mother. For example, I rarely go out on the weekends. Every day after work, I come straight home. How am I supposed to meet a man under those circumstances?"

Another woman in Morocco put it this way: "After I finish my studies, I need to find a good job and help my parents financially. They have sacrificed much so that I could get a university education, so I need to take care of their needs as soon as I have a job. Of course, I would like to marry but I don't see that happening. A husband may not want me to send money to my family but I feel very strongly that this is something I need to do."

Hanane struck a slightly more optimistic tone: "In an Arab country, especially in a Muslim society, it is very hard to succeed both professionally and in your personal life. This is because succeeding in your private life is measured by the time and effort you give to your husband and children. But I believe that where there is a will, there is a way. Within the next ten years, I wish I will find a husband who believes that as a husband and wife, we can have common goals and also accomplish our own individual goals. For example, I want to pursue a Ph.D. and so I need a husband who can be supportive of this ambition. For the moment, my education and profession comes first, even if that means that I may not ever marry."

Lila, a young woman in France, felt rather unsure about her personal and professional future. Unlike most other women I interviewed, Lila's parents did not conform to the typical image of North African immigrants. Her father came as professional, working for an international company with headquarters in Paris to which he had been assigned. She had attended private schools in Morocco and in France and had moved back and forth between both countries. She knew both societies from her vantage point of an upper middle-class family. When I told her that I interviewed women of Moroccan origin in France, she told me right away that most immigrants from the Maghreb were "uneducated folks from the countryside. They import their ignorant ways

to France, it is their tradition, not really their religion.” Lila felt she had little in common with the people who live in *cités*, or *banlieues*, France’s socially disadvantaged neighborhoods. In fact, she did not hesitate to use rather severe words to describe her compatriots: “I do not socialize with these people just because they are fellow Moroccans. We do not come from the same background. I don’t have much in common with them.” As we sat on the banks of the Seine, Lila talked about her upbringing moving back and forth between France and Morocco. She was unsure about her professional goals and had moved between different jobs. Due to her father’s connections, she could easily get a good position in Morocco. In France, her father’s clout was limited. She said if ever she moved to Morocco, she could only live in Rabat or Casablanca which was difficult because most of her relatives came from a small town in the interior of the country of which she said: “I don’t belong there. I can’t deal with the attitude of the people, there are too many rules and everyone is in everyone else’s business.” So she chose life in France even though she was uncertain how to pursue her professional goals. “Basically, I want to lead a normal life, have a house, marry, have children and be financially secure.” “Normal” for Lila meant marrying a fellow Muslim and securing her middle-class lifestyle.

Women in both countries felt under pressure to pave a way that had not been trodden before. They were proud of their education and capabilities and eager to apply their skills - even against the will of their parents. None of the women took lightly the conflict their ambitions presented to their families. Nevertheless, I did not hear a single woman speak ill of her parents even in cases where there was severe disagreement, to the point of physical abuse. This may perhaps have to do with the fact that I was a foreigner and an outsider. It is possible that respondents may have been more candid about their conflicted feelings for their parents in a different setting.

Conclusion

Women in the two samples had several overriding traits in common with regards to their personal and professional ambitions and challenges: they pursued their professional goals at the cost of postponing marriage and were aware of the risk of not being able to find a husband. The difficulty in attracting a potential spouse was a particularly sensitive and difficult area for women to discuss especially since the majority considered marriage an essential part of life. Family ties were important to most women in both samples, even if considerable difficulties arose within the family as a result of their decision to pursue higher education and professional careers. Despite the conflicts within their families generated by their decisions to carve out their own personal and professional lives, there was a remarkable absence of hostility towards their parents. Instead, most understood that their parent's generation was bound by customs and traditions they felt not at ease to critically evaluate. Adding to their personal dilemma was the difficulty in finding the kind of jobs they had gone to great length preparing for. In Morocco, these professional limitations were often imposed by social class and lack of connections while women with higher social standing were satisfied with their professional opportunities. In France discrimination and a sense of not being part of the established system were cited most frequently as obstacles in the professional path. Women in both samples displayed great tenacity in claiming their place in the public sphere, a sphere in Moroccan culture previously reserved for men.

As with data analyzed in the previous chapters, the major differences occurred within each sample rather than between samples, indicating that despite the differences in circumstances in both countries, the challenges of young, educated, professional Muslim women are similar regardless of the political or social system. In both countries, respondents saw a need to overcome traditions and customs that impede women's choices in their private and public lives.