

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, I set out to compare young, educated, professional and urban Moroccan women and young, educated, professional women of Moroccan origin in France. The purpose of the study was 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. In-depth interviews conducted in Morocco and in France allowed for a comparative look at population groups that to date have not been compared in this way. The reason for choosing these two particular populations groups lies in the fact that large numbers of Moroccans have immigrated to France. Now their sons and daughters are of an age where they are entering public life in France in large numbers. Because I previously lived in Morocco, I have some familiarity with the culture and the people of that country and could rely on a network of established contacts.

The dissertation used qualitative research methods and drew on Grounded Theory, which emphasizes openness for new themes and issues raised by respondents that were not foreseen by the researcher. An interview schedule, which included categorical and open-ended questions, provided the framework for this investigation. I met with most respondents several times over a period of two years, in the summer of 2004 and again in the summer of 2005, which made it possible to ascertain recurring themes. These themes included insistence on individual choice with regards to their personal and professional lives and a right to their own, personal interpretations of the Qu'ran. Individual choice is commonly regarded an Occidental characteristic, therefore it is not surprising that women in the French sample demonstrated such an approach. The

fact that women in the Moroccan sample also emphasized individual freedom and responsibility over conformity to the collective, stands out. Another major theme was respondents' insistence on the differences between culture, customs, traditions and religion.

The reasons for selecting young, educated, professional and urban women were that these women were in a good position to articulate issues that are of concern to the populations from which they were drawn. These women embark on personal and professional paths that are significantly different from those of their mothers, therefore their attitudes are indicators of larger cultural and societal changes. Women in the selected samples also serve as agents of change in the societies in which they reside.

Currently, Muslims constitute the single largest ethnic minority in France and pose the greatest challenge in terms of identity, social cohesion and economic parity. My research shows that young, educated, professional women who have grown up in immigrant families of low-skilled workers and often illiterate mothers, demonstrate remarkable determination to climb the social ladder. They desire to become part of the French mainstream while retaining their religious identity as Muslims. Their counterparts in Morocco felt equally loyal to their country in spite of piercing criticism of social injustices, corruption, and lack of professional opportunities. They displayed a sense of empowerment as a result of the family law reform and were equally determined to take part in public life.

The major lessons learned from this study are that Muslim women in Morocco and women of Moroccan origin in France share many similarities in their perceptions of major life issues. Similarities were found in attitudes toward Islam, legal changes, and views on personal and professional challenges. Differences occurred mainly within each sample and not between the two-county-based samples. Though the two groups of women are exposed to greatly differing influences on a daily basis and their resources for approaching issues vary greatly, their attitudes reveal noteworthy similarities. These similarities certainly reflect the particularities of the two samples, which included only young, educated, professional and urban women. That said, these small samples represent two groups of women who are moving out of the patriarchic, authoritarian structures of

their society (in Morocco) or families (in France) and therefore contribute to cultural change of societies in which they live.

The comparative nature of this study allowed for an examination of samples from two population groups that are not commonly looked at in this fashion. Conventionally, a hard and fast demarcation line between the West and the Arabic or Islamic world is an accepted fact. Therefore, most studies focus either on the Islamic world or the West. An exception to this is recent research by Olivier Roy (2004) who in his *Globalized Islam* has investigated trends among and within Muslim communities regardless of geographical boundaries. His conclusion of a changing conception of Islam that is no longer bound to a particular geographical region, a local authority, or particular dogma confirms my findings, most notably that differences and similarities were more prevalent within country-based samples than between them. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Roy observes that re-islamization is a global phenomenon that occurs within Muslim communities in the Arab world as much as in Muslim populations in the Western world. This newly emerging globalized Islam is shaped by two major trends: individualization and deterritorialization, i.e. the fact of not being bound by cultural practices and norms of a specific country or region. Thus, Roy argues against the perceptions of a dichotomy between the Islam of the Arab world and that of the West. Instead, the fault-lines occur among Muslims populations regardless of their places of residence. According to my research, what Roy writes about conceptions of Islam also applies to other areas such as interpretation of legal changes and personal and professional aspirations. Regardless of their place of residence, women in Morocco and in France distinguished between the religion of Islam and common cultural practices in their country or their families. They commonly filtered out as aspects of the latter with which they disagreed, emphasizing instead aspects of their religion that supported their personal and professional aspirations.

Insistence on the right to interpret the Qu'ran according to their own understanding was coupled with rejection of the right of others to stand in judgment of their choices. This personalized interpretation led respondents in both countries to basically two different conceptions of Islam. One was a more liberal understanding of religion, the other more in line with Islamist readings. The more liberal understanding resulted in an emphasis on ethical behavior freed from obvious adherence to religious

dogma and treating faith or religious belief as a private affair. This group of women emphasized their support for those who opted for more rigorous religious observance, however they felt that a professional career sometimes required less overt devotion. The approach more in line with Islamist views emphasized explicit observance of certain practices, such as wearing the headscarf, and viewing Islam as the basis for all aspects of life, personal and public, which includes an understanding that, ideally, laws should be scripturally based. Those with Islamist leanings in my samples all supported women's right to assume public responsibilities which is in contrast to some other Islamist groupings. Though they insisted on their right to freely choose their path, they were sometimes skeptical of co-religionists who professed to be Muslims but did not in any obvious way show their adherence. And yet even practicing Muslims said that their practice was based on personal choice. "Submission" as the term Islam indicates, was understood as a voluntary act and not one that could simply be passed on from one generation to the next nor could it be mandated. Because certain practices are required and not optional from a dogmatic point of view, insistence on the right to personal choice with regards to religious interpretation marks a significant shift in attitudes.

One possible reason for these diverging conceptions of Islam is suggested by prominent Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan (2004), who writes:

It can never be said enough that intracommunal dialogue between Muslims is virtually non-existent. Groups know one another, know how to identify one another, and work out where they are in relation to one another, but then they immediately ignore one another, exclude one another, or insult one another, without any attempt at discussion..... The culture of dialogue has practically abandoned Muslim communities and the respect for diversity, which always has been and should have continued to be their source of richness, has been replaced by dueling disagreements that contribute to the division, which causes their weakness. (210)

Another reason for differences in religious understanding has been suggested by one of the leading experts on Islam in the West, Joyceline Cesari, who states: "Etre musulman en Europe ou aux Etas-Unis revient à faire sortir le lien à l'islam de son évidence, de son statut de donné communautaire, culturel ou social, pour le faire entrer

dans la sphère des choix individuels et donc du questionnement” (Cesari 2004 : 72). Cesari’s research, however, does not take into account the fact that similar changes in attitude occur among Muslims who continue to live in Islamic societies. In addition, Western influence that results in a critical evaluation of Islam does not necessarily lead to a distancing from it but rather to a new, invigorated understanding that is freed from cultural norms and practices. To cite Ramadan once more: “The West is therefore permeated by a new religiously based citizenship dynamic based on the fact that there are individuals who consider themselves both Muslims and completely European or American” (2004:68).

Continued insistence on a simplistic dichotomy of the West vs. the Islamic world should be considered obsolete. Personal choice, individual assessment of their religion, critically evaluating the difference between local culture and tradition and the religion of Islam could be observed among women in the Moroccan sample as much as in the French sample. The cover story of a Moroccan weekly magazine illustrates this point: “Quel Islam voulons nous?”<sup>1</sup> In the article Moroccan economist Driss Benali is quoted as saying : “Dans l’avenir il faudra commencer à accepter le libre arbitre des individus [...] Toutes les sociétés ont un fond religieux, mais le développement économique les amène à devenir plus individualistes.” The article cites Malaysia as an “exemple extraordinaire” for a country that is, “profondément religieux mais qui a construit son propre modèle de laïcité. Je pense que, devant l’ouverture économique qui se profile, il nous faudra faire preuve de flexibilité.”

Despite the cultural mingling, many Muslims also stress the difference between the West and Islam because of their dualistic worldview. Thinking in terms of “us” versus “them” is still a widespread perspective. Several respondents for example insisted that Moroccan culture and Islamic laws were intrinsically different from and incompatible with French culture and laws. With regards to the law, this difference was based on the belief that Islamic law is divinely inspired and therefore superior to any man-made law. And yet no one in my sample refuted that this divine law had been corrupted in the process of human application. Exceeding the scope of this investigation

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<sup>1</sup> TELQUEL No 99, 7 novembre 2003

but worthy of further research would be an exploration of attitudes towards law in general among the two populations.

Dualistic thinking is the hallmark of the three Abrahamic religions and resulting worldviews. The cosmology of these faiths is based on a belief in the duality of heaven and hell, good and evil, salvation and damnation, God and Satan, life on earth and in the hereafter, superiority and inferiority. In this, basic views in the Arab/Islamic world and the Western world with its marked Judeo-Christian heritage, are more similar than dissimilar. Thus one could argue that some of the conflict between the Western and the Islamic world is rooted in this likeness as there is limited basis for conflict among thought-systems that have little in common.

My findings shed doubt on the continued belief in the perceived divergence between Western European and Islamic worldviews as exemplified in the two samples. They are more in line with Mohammed Arkoun's assertion that the cultures that have developed along the Mediterranean coastline were shaped up until modern times by the same historical forces. Arkoun challenges the notion that the Christian West and the Islamic East are inherent opposites with few, if any, social and cultural commonalities (Arkoun, 1994). Yet despite the historical links and the presence of millions of Muslims within Europe's borders, Islam is not treated as a part of the European religious and cultural fabric. Most women in my samples perceived no conflict between their "Western" inspired personal and professional aspirations and their religious identity as Muslims. Their comments on legal changes, personal and professional goals and challenges were rather based on pragmatic assessments. Whatever helped them to advance their goals of greater personal freedom, choice and professional opportunities was welcomed. Changes that restricted their freedoms, such as the headscarf ban, were either rejected or viewed with skepticism, even though respondents said that laws needed to be obeyed regardless of whether one agreed or disagreed with them. Thus, there was no revolutionary zeal evident among my respondents, despite the fact that in their own ways they were contributing to a significant change in their respective societies.

Similarity in attitudes transcended national boundaries even though the actual status of women in France and in Morocco is unquestionably very different. The women who participated in this research displayed a notable eagerness to contribute to changes in

their respective communities and viewed existing societal or familial structures as being in contradiction to their desire for personal choice and professional advancement.

Evident in the samples was a strong link between the insistence on individual rights, choice and education. All women in my samples received their formal education in educational institutions modeled after Western schools and universities. With attainment of higher educational qualifications came a desire to break out of conventional gender roles and to seek a place in the public sphere. Women in both samples credited higher education as an important factor in their transformed sense of self.

In addition to academic training, another major factor in shaping individuals' perceptions was the degree of exposure to people from different countries. The effect of international travel was profound regardless of the destination. A comparison of responses revealed that an extended stay in Saudi Arabia, for example, had an effect similar to that of a trip to the United States because it brought to the traveler an awareness of the difference between religion and culture. It also allowed for a re-examination of their understanding of the status of women. Even when international exposure occurred within Morocco, for example by attending a university with a strong exchange program, the result was an appreciation of difference rather than a rejection thereof. Respondents with close international contacts often said Islam was one religion among others but it happened to be theirs. Women in my samples took their cues from a variety of sources and observed with interest how women from different cultural and religious backgrounds approached major life issues. In France young women were surrounded by the values of mainstream French society which often were seen in contrast with those of their families. Those women looked critically at both models and did not simply adopt one while rejecting the other. Again, the attitudes of my respondents did not reflect a dualistic world view, but one in which western values of individualism, choice, rights and freedoms go hand in glove with a life of faith guided by the Qu'ran.

Young, educated and professional women arrived at an understanding of the Qu'ran that differed from conventional interpretations because in their reading, the status of women was equal to that of men. Education and professional ambitions were in their view supported by the scriptures. Likewise, the public domain was not understood as being reserved for men. On this point respondents in Morocco and in France agreed

almost unanimously and regardless of their conception of Islam. Though some with Islamist leanings were hesitant about seeing women as judges, in general both groups strongly disagreed with patriarchic, autocratic interpretations.

Interpretation of sacred texts aside, with regards to professional opportunities and challenges, the data analysis revealed that gender was only one factor impacting on women's perceptions of their personal and professional opportunities. Social class surfaced as a recurrent theme in France yet even more so in Morocco. Women in the samples felt that crossing the social divide posed a larger hurdle than overcoming disparities based on gender. Certainly, in a developing world country such as Morocco, class divisions are more pronounced than in a highly industrialized Western country such as France. In Morocco a large middle class is only now emerging; historically there has been a very small elite upper class while large segments of the population hovered on the edges of poverty. The women in the French sample did not speak as much about social class than about the distinction between majority and minority cultures. In France the majority culture was perceived as discriminating against a minority along ethnic and religious lines whereas in Morocco a social minority limited advancement of the majority of the population.

Unemployment in Morocco is officially estimated at 19 per cent<sup>2</sup> but in reality is much higher, therefore employment in line with educational qualifications is limited. Unemployment figures for the French *banlieues*<sup>3</sup> may be comparable to those of Morocco, creating a similar environment of uncertainty. A study investigating unemployment in the French *banlieues* and comparing this with unemployment in Morocco could yield interesting results.

Still, women treasured their educational opportunities as a means which offered them an altered sense of self. Barriers imposed by social class or majority culture filled women in both samples with resentment and frustration. This is not necessarily because of some heightened sense of social justice or support for an egalitarian system but because of their personal experience of exclusion. Very few respondents, for example, displayed a particular interest in political ideologies. Being denied access to a social order

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank Country Statistics, [www.theworldbank](http://www.theworldbank). Last accessed April, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Unemployment among young people is estimated at 25 % in the socially disadvantaged *banlieues* according to "Es beginnt in den Banlieues", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 19, 2005, p.5.

for which they feel well qualified can lead to anger, resentment and alienation that should not be underestimated. Neither the government of France nor that of Morocco should halt the momentum of these women who are keen and willing to overcome current obstacles. If large numbers of women in the end remain unsuccessful as a result of lack of opportunities, discrimination or old class divisions, both nations stand to waste tremendous human and economic potential. Regardless of substantial hurdles, most women in both samples had already made remarkable achievements. Indeed, those who had secured good professional positions said they saw education as an important factor in overcoming boundaries imposed by social class. Higher education allowed them entry into a work environment in which they interacted with people of similar educational backgrounds, regardless of social class.

Nonetheless, professional ambitions and achievements came at a high cost: marriage. The majority of the women in both samples were single, most in their late twenties, some in their thirties. Marriage was seen by the majority of women in both samples as an integral part of life and the fact that they had not yet been successful in finding a husband was a source of great concern, even agony. Most were hopeful that by some miraculous turn of events they would come by a partner who respected their personal and professional choices, supported their careers and would be willing to disregard their age. By any standards, these women had embarked on extraordinary journeys for their lives and were willing to postpone marriage at the risk of possibly never attaining it.

Certainly, no society can afford to have a generation of educated, professional young women rejected by the male population. King Mohammed V provoked a national discussion about marriage and gender roles when he married Salma Bennani, a young, professional information technology engineer. Though there was still a considerable age difference between the then 38-year-old King and his 24-year-old bride, the fact that the monarch chose a professional woman and married her in a public ceremony in July 2002, struck a new chord. The King had invited 200 couples from across the nation to get married at the same time, thereby ensuring that this wedding was an affair that resonated with varying local populations and is remembered. By contrast, the marriage of his father,

King Hassan II, had been kept out of the public eye. In a country where societal change is initiated from the top down, Mohammed V's marriage carried a message of change.

Postponing marriage can be viewed as a courageous, risky, or desperate decision. Courageous because women intentionally prioritize education and career ambitions over fulfillment found in marriage and family life; risky because they might end up not getting married at all or desperate because education is the only avenue that affords women a degree of self-determination and independence unheard of in their mother's generation. Some might argue that Berber populations in the rural areas have traditionally granted women a measure of independence unknown to urban women, such as working outside the house in the fields or tending to livestock, thereby having an opportunity to meet men and marry someone of their own choosing, owning property or learning a skill such as carpet weaving. Even though these are by current standards limited choices, they still serve as a reminder that women's freedom and right to choose are not an entirely new, western invention.

Women in both samples cited changes in mentality and behavior as more important than legal changes such as the family law reform in Morocco. While respondents in Morocco felt that a change of mentality fell mostly on the shoulders of men, respondents in France saw that men and women both needed to change their mentality transform habits and discard traditions that for generations supported a patriarchic, authoritarian system. Respondents cited archaic mentalities as one of the main obstacles on their path to personal and professional fulfillment. They said that a mentality that supported authoritarian, patriarchic systems was based in pre-Islamic, Arab culture and was not justified by the religion of Islam.

Limited professional opportunities, precarious social status as emancipated women, insistence on personal choices in all spheres of their personal and professional lives are traits the women in my samples shared in common. Both were striving to expand the range of their rights and freedoms in the face of tremendous obstacles. In general, disenfranchised groups display similar traits owing to their particular situation of "oppression." It is upon achieving relative equality that differences between them may come more sharply into focus. Thus, broad similarities between my samples in Morocco

and in France may disappear as women attain their personal and professional goals and are able to focus on bringing their individual talents to bear on their respective societies.

Because this investigation is based on two relatively small samples, the findings should be used as a starting point for research on a larger scale with more representative samples. Research into the attitudes of young, educated, professional and urban men would be useful in determining the extent of gender-based differences. Likewise, it would be useful to expand research over larger geographical areas to include other Western European countries with large Muslim populations such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain and those from which the largest flow of Muslim immigrants emanate, namely Algeria, Turkey and Pakistan.

As this dissertation was written in the wake of yet another string of terrorist attacks perpetuated by self-proclaimed Islamic fundamentalists in the summer of 2005 in various locations, it is all the more important that people who are part of communities that can breed violent elements are provided with increased professional opportunities and receive more public support. France and Morocco stand only to gain by tapping into the vast potential of young, educated, professional women who aspire to offer their contributions to the private and public spheres.