The Gender, Race, and Intersectionality Issue in the Maghreb

Hogra (حڤرة) : An Intersectional Approach to Racism in the Maghreb –
Analysis
By Yasmine Akrimi – North Africa Research Analyst

1. INTRODUCTION

Race and gender as social constructs have long been treated as separate analysis axes. Intersectionality as a theory and a praxis emerged as to remedy this tendency to view socially-constructed assignations as non-mutual frameworks of oppression. Intersectionality was first developed by black feminist thought as to understand the liminal experience of black women in the United States regarding sexism and racism. Indeed, black women could neither fully identify with the feminist movement which essentially represented the interests of white women, nor with the anti-racism movement which main subject was the black man. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw[1] borrowed the metaphor of an intersection to explain the interconnectedness of oppressions black women experience, at the intersection of race, gender, and social class. Since then, intersectionality has been widely mobilized in academic, activist, and public policies milieus.

However, in the Maghreb, resistance to the prism prevails as intersectionality is timidly penetrating new, non-mainstream forms of feminism. The present paper offers to analyze the main reasons behind the reluctance to considering identities as multi-layered, in the specific case of black Maghrebi women.

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[1] Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies." University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139-167.

Women of the slave-descendant Abid Ghbonton tribe, Gabes, Tunisia (Becoming the Abid, Scaglioni, 2020)

Recognizing Minorities in the Maghreb: The Origins of the Problem

Post-independences, nation-building processes in the Maghreb were framed in hegemonic terms: a single Arab-Islamic culture, a single religion (Islam) and a single language (Arabic). These three principals are entrenched in the highest form of legal recognition, the constitution.

The first post-colonialism constitution in Algeria, voted through the 1963 referendum, inscribed Islam and Arabic as the unique recognized components of Algerian identity.[2] Since, no constitutional amendment has digressed from Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis's, *cri de coeur* reinforcing Algeria's Arab and Islamic identity as opposed to assimilationists who, after more than one hundred years of settler colonialism, looked to France as Algeria's "fatherland".[3]

In post-independence Tunisia, under the presidencies of Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987) and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), the absence of official ethnic or racial statistics is the result of a conscious political strategy: measuring diversity implied creating categories, and allowing them to have political meanings. Labelling individuals as "blacks" meant, on the one hand, ascribing them an involuntary

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[2] Abderhmane, Yassine. "Identity, Belonging, and Constitutional Reform in Algeria: Reconciling Ideologies for a Peaceful Transition", Arab Reform initiative, October 2020.
[3] https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/invisibility-and-negrophobia-in-algeria/?fbclid=IwAR3WAlmJzzGuYhy-BV52zLbuTQwk6GDv6z0d8D4xalReovwov1dbMjl95C0

identity; on the other hand, it meant acknowledging their presence and, consequently, their problems. Ethnic pluralism was denied institutionally and politically, along with any other form of alterity.[4] Diversity hence remains considered to be a source of division and a threat to a country's stability.

In Morocco and Algeria, some reforms were initiated under heavy popular pressure in recent years to officially recognize the Amazigh component of the national identity. In Morocco, the 2011 constitutional referendum, following fear of the spread of the so-called "Arab Spring", inscribed the Amazigh language as an official language of the country.[5] Yet, these reforms lack adequate implementation mechanisms. For black Maghrebis per instance, no policies, including affirmative action policies, have been put in place to relieve them from the weight of generations of slavery and servitude.

Black Maghrebi Women: A Blind Spot for Maghrebi Feminism

The urgency of intersectionality[6] in considering black Maghrebi women's experience stems from a triple dimension: men's domination in society as a whole, black men's domination of antiracism movements, and the leadership of "white", class-privileged women of mainstream feminist currents in the Maghreb.

The influence of French universalism on Maghrebi societies is a prominent factor in understanding local feminism's rationale. France's Enlightenment was built on the belief that minorities' concerns threaten both universalism as a principle and the unity of the French nation. As argued, the same paradigm has been transposed in the Maghreb post-independences. René Descartes, the founder of modern western philosophy, inaugurated a new moment in the history of western thought. Decontextualized knowledge resulted in "universal truth", allowing the western male to produce uncontested scientific knowledge and theory.[7] Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez calls this knowledge the "zero point" of

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[4] Scaglioni, Marta. "Becoming the *Abid*. Lives and Social Origins in Southern Tunisia. 2020.
[5] https://www.jeuneafrique.com/787082/societe/le-maroc-se-dote-dune-loi-pour-generaliser-lusage-de-la-langue-amazighe/
[6] In reference to a 2016 TED Talk by Kimberlé Crenshaw. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o&ab_channel=TED
[7] Menoret, Pascal. Décoloniser les études postcoloniales et l'économie politique : Transmodernité, pensée décoloniale et colonialité mondiale. 2021.

Eurocentric philosophies.[8] It is the point of view that claims to have no point of view, concealing its perspective under a facade universalism. A staggering example of this disguised particularism is the initial so-called universal suffrage, which in fact was male suffrage.[9]

A similar mechanism is arguably in place within mainstream Maghrebi feminist movements which do not consider the imbrication of gender with other social constructs, namely race in this account. Male domination under patriarchy remains the principal feminist struggle, echoing the institutional consideration of women as an "undifferentiated mass"[10]. This perspective contributes to maintaining the experience of non-racialized Maghrebi women as the norm through which to understand, and remedy, gender discrimination.

Postcolonial, multicultural and global feminisms challenge this primary feminist assumptions that gender-based oppression was the foundational form of oppression, and that women shared interests with other women as "women". Second-wave constructionist gender theorists note that socially-assigned identities such as race and social class induce a large spectrum of "women" and "men", traditional distinctions used to maintain complex hierarchical stratification systems.[11] The multiplicity of "men" and "women" highlights the ways in which human experience qualitatively differs following diverse identity assignations and affiliations.

The prevalence of left and Islamic currents within Arab feminist currents might also explain this "color-blindness". The left-wing, Marxist-leaning feminism focuses on social class and believes that women's liberation is part of the larger proletarian struggle. People are hence believed to be marginalized exclusively based on their social class. Pap Ndiaye argues this perspective considers that minorities' struggle for recognition weakens the proletariat and divides it.[12] In parallel, Islamic feminism is primarily based on the complementarity between genders, and the centrality of

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[8] Castro-Gómez, Santiago. Zero-Point Hubris: Science, Race, and Enlightenment in New Granada (1750-1816), translated by Don Deere and George Ciccariello-Maher (forthcoming with Rowman & Littlefield International).

[9] https://pedaradicale.hypotheses.org/2852

[10] Hill Collins, Patricia and Bilge, Sirma. Intersectionality (Key Concepts), 2019.

[11] Hill Collins, Patricia. Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. 1990.

[12] Ndiaye, Pap. La condition noire. Essai sur une minorité française. Paris : Calmann-Lévy, 2008.

the family. It does not recognize racial discrimination in its foundation as it considers piety to be the essence of differentiation between human beings.[13]

Miss Algeria 2019, whose election provoked a wave of racist comments

The Survival of Slavery Myths

The mystification of black female bodies is linked to the survival of imageries inherited from slavery. In the Maghreb, because the latter mainly pertained to concubinage, black women have consistently been perceived as sexual objects. This perception is particularly harmful in conservative societies where a woman's chances to climbing the social ladder are intimately connected to her reputation.

The negative stereotypes accorded to "blackness" have deeply gendered connotations. From the pre-abolition figure of the concubine to the post-abolition sex worker, the triangulation between freed women slaves, "blackness" and sexual availability has remained entrenched in popular racial thinking. In post-abolition times, freed female slaves did indeed land in brothels, lacking the affiliation and protection that would permit them to navigate Maghrebi societies. Nowadays, many black women, especially those who reside in metropolises, complain of being sexually harassed on the street because of their skin color. They are assumed to adhere less strictly to Islamic moral rules, because they are considered "less piously Muslim" due to their honor being less.

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[13] Yassni, Yassine. "La condition des femmes noires marocaines: les stigmas liés au couleur et au genre". 2019.

A staggering example of the survival of this demeaning collective imagery in the Maghreb is the myth of the black woman that "purifies the blood". This urban legend entrenches the idea that intercourse with a woman of color holds healing properties. Several black women, including activists in Tunisia[14], and university students in Morocco[15], have testified to the prevalence of attacks and indecent proposals based on this myth.

Black woman of the valley town of Zagora, Morocco, year unknown

CONCLUSION

Intersectionality represents a clear challenge to classic approaches to racism, sexism, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Its prism visibilizes the interests of minorities which are at the intersections of classic categories and allows for the crafting of public policies that adequately address the layered forms of oppression these minorities encounter. In the Maghreb, black women are both hyper visible in the public space due to their hyper sexualization and invisible due to their lack of

[14] https://www.euromedwomen.foundation/pg/fr/documents/view/8988/la-condition-femmes-noires-marocaines-les-stigmas-lies-au-couleur-au-genre

[15] Yassni, Yassine. "La condition des femmes noires marocaines: les stigmas liés au couleur et au genre". 2019.

representation in economic spheres, cultural productions, and public service. This observation calls for a paradigm shift in the way national identity is imagined and promoted in the Maghreb.

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This project takes critical aim at the racism problematic in the Maghreb from an intersectional prism: 1. The intersection of gender and race 2. Environmental racism 3. The heritage of slavery 4. The subsaharan African migration presence.

Author

Yasmine Akrimi | North Africa Research Analyst