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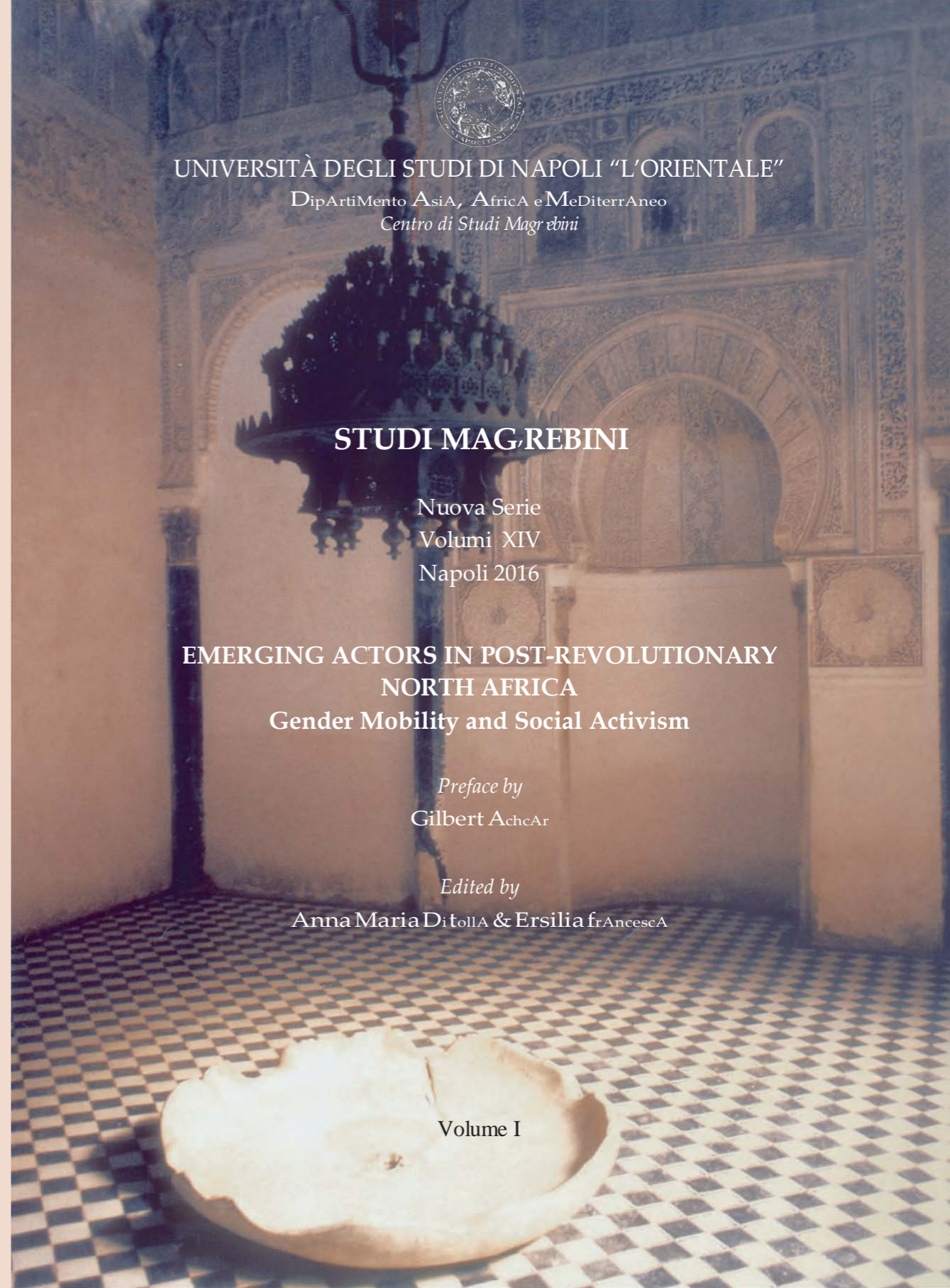
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NORTH AFRICA

Gender Mobility and Social Activism

Preface by
Gilbert Achcar

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In memory of our dear friend and colleague Agostino Cilaro (1947-2017)

*If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.
For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.*

Kahlil Gibran

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Being Young and Post-Feminist in Morocco: The Emergence of a New Women's Activism

Renata PEPICELLI

Abstract

For several months in 2011 a new generation of young women militants invaded the streets and the squares of more than sixty both small and large towns in Morocco, reconfiguring gender roles and turning squares and streets into new gendered spaces. Young women and young men joined and demonstrated together, producing a new kind of activism and a new form of relationship between the genders. Through the internet their message went viral, circulating within the country and abroad, spreading the feminist concept of equality between men and women. However, this young generation of activists did not feel that it fully belonged to feminist practices and ideas and broke away from the historical women's associations which had dominated the public and political scene in Morocco since the 80s. The youth of the 20 February Movement occupied a political space, which can be defined as 'post-ideological', 'post-secular' and 'post-feminist'. On the basis of interviews with activists from different generations, this paper investigates the forms and tools of this new young 'post-feminist' activism, placing it within the long history of the women's movements in Morocco.

Introduction

The 20th February Movement demonstrated the emergence of a new women's movement in Morocco, which surprised many on account of the shape it took and the forms of its engagement. For several months in 2011 a new generation of young women militants invaded the streets and the squares of more than sixty both small and large towns in Morocco, reconfiguring gender roles and turning squares and streets into new gendered spaces. Young women and young men joined together and demonstrated, resisted against the police, performed various forms of art, organized gatherings and meetings, and produced a new kind of activism and a new form of relationship between the genders. Through the internet their message went viral, circulating within the country and abroad, spreading the feminist concept of equality between men and women. However, this young generation of

activists did not feel that it fully belonged to feminist practices and ideas and broke away from the historical women's associations which had dominated the public and political scene in Morocco since the 80s. These new activists of the 20th February Movement occupy a political space, which can be defined as 'post-ideological', 'post-secular' and 'post-feminist', in which the methods adopted in social and political conflict produced new and unexpected alliances with the Islamist movements rather than with historical feminist movements.

Quoting activists from different generations, this paper investigates the forms and tools of this new young post-feminist activism, describing its genealogy, points of continuity and breaks from previous experiences, placing it within the long history of the feminist movement in Morocco. It is based on field research in Morocco and, in particular, on in-depth interviews with young female and male activists of the 20th February Movement in Rabat and on interviews with human rights and women's rights activists.¹

'New Antigones': 'Political Disobedience' and Equality in Practices in the 20th February Movement

Following on from the protests in Egypt and Tunisia between the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011, Morocco experienced important demonstrations across the country during several months of 2011. The demonstrators were asking for political, social and economic reform, such as the reform of Parliament, of the Government and of the Constitution, as well as for free education, jobs, housing and the recognition of Tamazight as a national language.² There was a significant participation of young women right from the very first meetings set up to identify the steps to be taken to bring the Arab wind of protest also to Morocco. 'Prior to 20th February, I attended 2-3 meetings at the head-quarters of the Moroccan Association of Human

¹ I would like to thank Lucile Dumas for her support and assistance during the fieldwork in Morocco.

² For an analysis of the 20th February Movement see the following articles: C. Bayloq - J. Granci, « 20 février. Discours et portraits d'un mouvement de révolte au Maroc », in *L'Année du Maghreb. Dossier : Un Printemps Arabe ?* VIII (2012), pp. 239-258; T. Desrues, 'Mobilizations in a Hybrid Regime: The 20th February Movement and the Moroccan Regime', in *Current Sociology* 61/ 4 (2013), pp. 409-423; T. Desrues, 'Moroccan Youth and the Forming of a New Generation: Social Change, Collective Action and Political Activism', in *Mediterranean Politics* 17/1 (2012), pp. 23-40.

Rights (AMDH, Association Marocaine des Droits de l'Homme), in Rabat' – recounts Ouidade Melhaf, who was 21 in 2011:

These meetings were held in secret. We were afraid. We organized ourselves above all on Facebook. At that time, using the internet was not too risky as the Moroccan government had not yet developed an efficient system for controlling social networks.³

When the movement decided to go public, young women immediately played a central role: they exposed themselves to the judgment of the community and to the repressive forces of law and order. With their votes, they soon became iconic figures in the movement, new 'Antigones', who, in the squares, in the streets, in meetings, and on the social media, revisited the figure of the Greek heroine, updating 'the archetype of the disobedient woman', who rebels against power.⁴ This had already happened in Iran, when Neda Agha Soltan, killed during the protests in 2009 at the age of 29 years old, became the symbol of the Green Wave; or in Egypt, when Asma Mahfouz, in a video posted on Youtube, invited Egyptians to demonstrate in the squares against Mubarak on 25th January;⁵ and again in Turkey with the 'girl in the red dress', photographed in Taksim square during the 2013 clashes, who became the emblem of the rebellious youth, both fragile and strong. In Morocco, the symbol of the movement was to be the face framed by the long dark hair of the then nineteen-year-old Amina Boughalbi,⁶ a third-year journalism student, who quickly became the local and international icon of the 20th February Movement (as from now referred to as 20FM). Together with many other Moroccan girls, until then unknown to the public at large, Amina chose to take a risk, shedding her anonymity and protesting. Appearing in the first frames of the video, which was chosen to launch the announcement of the first demonstration – the one which gave the movement the name of 20th February – Amina

³ Interview with Ouidade Melhaf, Rabat, 11/1/2014. In 2014 she was a Master student and freelance journalist in Tangier.

⁴ B. Casalini, 'Nel segno di Antigone: disobbedienza femminista e queer', in *Genesis XIV* (2015), pp. 117-140.

⁵ See the video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RluiWLTMonY> (Last access 10/7/2015).

⁶ The role played by Amina Boughalbi in the 20FM was analyzed in several academic essays (Salime 2012; Langohr 2014) and in magazines and newspapers' articles.

invited people to protest, stating: 'I am Moroccan and I will march on 20th February because I want freedom and equality for all Moroccans'.⁷ Amina describes the first phase of 2011 in this way:

When the 20FM appeared, my parents, like all other Moroccans, found out about what I was doing through television. My father saw me on YouTube asking people to demonstrate like the young people in Egypt and Tunisia. My mother supports the King. She was afraid. She said that the police would beat me, that I would lose my future. My father was afraid. He told me to be careful and to concentrate on my studies. However, the main problem was my mother. Above all when the threats by phone started to arrive. They said that my parents should silence me, that I would lose my life and my studies. But each time I reassured them, telling them that I was doing nothing illegal.⁸

Coming from a lower-middle class family in the city of Oujda on the border with Algeria, Amina, an excellent student at high school, at the age of 17 moved on her own to Rabat in order to study at university; a radical change in her life which was soon to lead her down the path of politicization.

I changed a lot at university. What made me change was the fact that I started to read and, before that, I had met with some young militants, members of associations like the AMDH. I used to go to cafés. We began to discuss God, religion, the social and political situation in Morocco, the situation of women. It was then that I began to ask myself questions. In class I had a friend who was a fan of Che Guevara and so I began to read about Che Guevara. As a result of these discussions, I began to read the great writers. And so in a year I underwent a complete transformation. I took off the veil and another Amina emerged.⁹

Gradually, from week to week, as the 20FM grew, during the first months of 2011, in both large and small cities across Morocco, the

⁷ The video in Arabic is in: <https://www.mamfakinch.com/video-campagne-20-fevrier-%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-20-%D9%81%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1/>; with English subtitles is on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0f6FSB7gxQ> (Last access 10/7/2015).

⁸ Interview with Amina Boughalbi, Rabat, 17/1/2014. At the moment of the interview she had got a degree in Journalism and worked for the association Médiateur pour la Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme.

⁹ *Ib.*

presence of women increased, mostly young women coming from a middle-class student environment, but also from sectors of the lower classes. Highly visible in the demonstrations and the general meetings (even though in numerical minority compared to the men), the young women within the movement filled all kinds of roles within the movement, from leadership to logistics, facing the police in the same way as did the men. Sabra Talbi, a female student during the 20FM and now a music teacher in a public high school recounts:

During the movement I felt I was a real 20FM militant and did not primarily think of myself as a woman; there was no difference between myself and the militant men. I did everything. I had my own ideas, my own point of view. The police beat everyone, men and women. There was no difference. When the movement came to an end, I felt I was a woman. I cried a lot.¹⁰

For those who had been militants in Morocco for years, this new female presence in both the public and political field represented a significant change, both materially and symbolically. Young women appeared in a significant manner in public in a new relational dynamic. According to Khadija Ryadi, who has been involved in the Moroccan political scene since the '80s as a member of the radical left and the human rights' movement:

The experience of the 20FM saw the participation of many women, many young women, unlike previous demonstrations in Morocco's history. The 20FM militants are more numerous, assert themselves more forcefully, have more faith in themselves compared to when we were young.¹¹

For Ryadi's generation and above all for the women who were active in the '60 and the '70s, like Latifa Jbabdi, Fatna El-Bouih, Widad Bouab – who even paid for their activism by imprisonment and torture –, ¹² feminist activism was mostly in left-wing parties and in

¹⁰ Interview with Sabra Talbi, Rabat, 14/1/2014.

¹¹ Interview with Khadija Ryadi, Rabat, 15/1/2014. At the moment of the interview she was president of the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH).

¹² For an analysis of the repression of women's activism in the '70s and '80s see the experience of Fatna El Bouih: F. El Bouih, 'Narrare il buio', in Elisabetta Bartuli (a cura di), *Sole nero. Anni di piombo in Marocco*, Mesogea, Messina, 2004, pp. 27-

the extra-parliamentary extreme left. However, within these organizations, inequalities linked to class were perceived to be more unacceptable than those related to gender, and the voices of women were often silenced in the name of other objectives, which were considered a priority.¹³

A 'Post-Ideological' Generation

The greater presence of women and their significant role in the 20FM compared to the mobilization of the left of previous decades was accompanied by a series of changes in the form, the instruments and the content of the struggle, which underline the important differences between generations.¹⁴ Khadija Ryadi adds:

These young women place more importance on daily struggle than on reflection. In our time there was more debate, more reflection, people read more. Now technology has greatly influenced the young. There are certainly some better things today: young women are more numerous and quickly learn the practices of the militants. However, there is a difference in the awareness of what they do. There is a cultural and ideological decline. Insufficient importance is given to political ideology, to the content of the struggle. These young women are more interested in immediate results. Compared to before, it is a more practical than political logic. This does not only regard young women but also young men.¹⁵

The young people involved in the 20FM, unlike the generations that preceded them, did not have a strong political background supporting them, nor – and this was one of the main weaknesses of the movement – were they able to create a new and alternative political agenda, capable of obtaining consensus in the long-term throughout the population. The post-ideological approach adopted by the movement on the basis of a series of watchwords such as 'liberty,

140; S. Slyomovics, 'This Time I Choose when to Leave: An Interview with Fatna El Bouih', in *Middle East Report* 218 (Spring 2001), pp. 42-43.

¹³ R. Naciri, *The Women's Movement and Political Discourse in Morocco*, Occasional Paper, 8th March, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Geneva, 1998, p. 8.

¹⁴ For a comparative analysis on the changes in youth activism see F. Vairel, « Qu'avez-vous fait de vos vingt ans ? Militantismes marocains du 23 mars (1965) au 20 février (2011) », in *L'Année du Maghreb. Dossier : Un printemps arabe ?* VIII (2012), pp. 219-238.

¹⁵ Interview with Khadija Ryadi.

dignity, justice, end of corruption...’ and on the basis of a general program of content, allowed for the relatively easy and immediate creation of a mass movement capable of overcoming political differences and positions. Different ideologies and currents of thought, such as those in favor of a form of republican state and those advocating for a parliamentary monarchy, those supporting secularism and those supporting Islamist movements, succeeded in coexisting for several months outside party boundaries and traditional forms of political alliance. However, this post-ideological dimension did not produce an alternative structured political ideology – partly due to the short life of the 20FM. From an element of strength, the post-ideological nature of the movement turned into a form of weakness. When the King showed his intention of fulfilling his promises on the subject of reform in his speech of 9th March 2011¹⁶ various segments of civil society, of the political parties, of the trade unions, of the women’s movement, who had given initial, if lukewarm, support to the 20FM, abandoned it in favor of the new course promoted by the monarchy.

Indeed, many of the young people who participated in the 20FM obtained their political training in the field during the first months of 2011, following, for a number of them, some previous experience within various associations. However, as stated previously, they had no real theoretical political training. With the exception of some significant political experience, such as that of unemployed graduates who emerged in the early ’90s and demanded a job in the public sector,¹⁷ most young people felt they had been distant from politics since the ’80s. The ‘elitist’ nature of politics was a problem for young people who considered themselves far from parties and politics, and excluded from power and from the possibility of criticizing it.¹⁸ Political parties were thereby discredited insofar as popular discourse presented the ‘political game’ as being rather unethical and motivated

¹⁶ See the royal speech of 9th March 2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pTJoUI3W8s>. The French translation is at the following link: <http://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/texte-int%C3%A9gral-du-discours-adress%C3%A9-par-sm-le-roi-la-nation> (Last access 10/7/2015).

¹⁷ M. Emperador Badimon, « Diplômés chômeurs au Maroc : dynamiques de pérennisation d’une action collective plurielle », *L’Année du Maghreb. Dossier : Justice, politique et société* III (2007), pp. 297-311.

¹⁸ M. Bennani-Chraïbi, *Soumis et rebelles, les jeunes au Maroc*, Le Fennec, Casablanca, 1994.

by individual interest.¹⁹ Consequently, for many of the young people taking part in the 20FM, areas of conflict against the establishment could be found in associations, mostly in those favoring human rights, such as the AMDH, or in those fighting against neoliberal globalization such as Attac, rather than in political parties which were considered to be colluding with or co-opted by the system.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the 20FM is characterized by a reality far distanced from pre-existing political experiences. Parties, trade unions and associations were only able to support the movement from the outside.²⁰ To this end, in fact, the National Council of Support (NCS) was set up, constituted by leftist parties, labor unions, civil society organizations and the Islamists of Justice and Spirituality, *Al-‘adl wa-l-iḥsān*. However, the role of the NCS was one solely of external support. Due to a code of conduct within the movement, it was not possible to exhibit any party symbols during demonstrations, nor was it allowed to recite slogans which could be traced back to specific political ideologies.

Ouidade Melhaf, aged 21 in 2011, describes this need for change which drives the young as follows:

The 20FM was made up, above all, of youth, high school students, university students, occasional workers of up to 35 years of age. We were above all young people. We wanted to do something new, with a new leadership. We recognized that the old political generations had done a lot for this country, for the freedom that we have today, but we wanted to do something new.²¹

And Lucile Daumas, a long-term militant in the history of Morocco, from the struggle within the family committees of the political prisoners during the ‘years of lead’ (in Arabic, *sanawāt al-raṣāṣ*)²² to the recent anti-liberalist movements against economic

¹⁹ Naciri, *The Women’s Movement and Political Discourse in Morocco*.

²⁰ If at Rabat many gatherings and assemblies of the 20FM took place in the siege of AMDH, in Casablanca they took place in the siege of the Unified Socialist Party (Parti socialiste unifié, PSU).

²¹ Interview with Ouidade Melhaf.

²² ‘Years of Lead’ is the term used to describe a period from mainly the 1960s through the 1980s marked by state violence against political dissidents. See: Bartuli (a cura di), *Sole nero. Anni di piombo in Marocco*; R. Pepicelli, ‘Memorie degli “anni di piombo” e percorsi della giustizia transizionale in Marocco. Storia dell’Instance équité et réconciliation (Hay’at al-Inṣāf wa ‘l-Muṣālaḥa)’, in Anna

globalization, comments on the new forms given to the movement as follows:

I was not part of the 20FM organization; I felt that I could not belong to it. No one prevented me as the movement was open. I felt it was not my place. The young were very keen to operate differently, to militate differently, to propose different things from those proposed so far by the parties and trade unions. I thought it was right to leave all the creative space to them. I only followed, I didn't participate in the meetings, I only went to the demonstrations.²³

The novel forms and languages of the new political militants appeared day after day in the streets, at meetings and on the internet, in an attempt to expand popular participation. 'The common people and the young felt very distant from politics, from elections' – recounts Ouidade Melhaf:

We wanted to be a creative movement; we wanted new ways of communicating, by video, with banners and through social networks. A lot of people do not read newspapers but are on the internet and on Facebook.²⁴

As in other countries overtaken by the protests of the so-called period of the Arab revolt, there has been a widespread use of alternative tools of communication such as social media,²⁵ but also the theatre and video documentaries. The internet was considered an important tool as an amplifier for the struggle, and as a means to coordinate militants within the same city and across the different cities

Maria Di Tolla (ed.), *Percorsi di transizione democratica e politiche di riconciliazione in Nord Africa*, Ed. Scientifica, Napoli (forthcoming). On the women's role during the 'Years of Lead' see J. Guillerot - N. Benwakrim - M. Ezzaouini - W. Bouab, *Morocco: Gender and the Transitional Justice Process*, International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ,) 2011,

<https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Morocco-Gender-Transitional%20Justice-2011-English.pdf>.

²³ Interview with Lucile Dumas, Rabat, 26/1/2014.

²⁴ Interview with Ouidade Melhaf.

²⁵ See A. Salvatore (ed.), *Between Everyday Life and Political Revolution: The Social Web in the Middle East*, in *Oriente Moderno* XCI/1 (2011); S. Sibilio 'La rivoluzione dei (nuovi) media arabi', in Francesca M. Corrao (ed.), *Le rivoluzioni arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori Università, Milano, 2011, pp. 81-109.

of Morocco. However, it was only one tool among many, as the activists are keen to point out. Even though social media was important in the creation of the movement, it was also a tool which was used against the activists. In the stories of many of the young women interviewed, the description of the disparaging campaign organized on Facebook against the most visible figure of the movement is continually repeated. Amina Boughalbi, for example, recounts:

They did some photomontages. They put my photo on the internet in an embrace with the leader of the Polisario Front, to mean that we were pro Sahara, to mean that we were pro Polisario, against our country. And people began to say that the 20FM young were a threat to the country, that they were paid by the Algerians to attack Morocco through Polisario. Another young man was portrayed in a church, meaning that he was against Islam. Another one was photographed with some bottles of alcohol.²⁶

While Ouidade Melhaf states:

Above all on Facebook I have received insults because of my participation as a woman, rather than because I was a militant. At first it was shocking but then it became the norm.²⁷

The desire to open up to a wide segment of the population, to overcome the ideological barriers which divide society in order to give life to a movement ‘which reflected’ Moroccan society as closely as possible, and which had the strength to demand radical change, led the young members of the 20FM, who defined themselves mostly as supporters of secularism, to form new collaborations which until that moment had been considered impossible; in other words, to admit into the movement Islamist activists, the youth of the Pjd – the party that over the course of 2011 became the major government force – but above all the militants of the strong and numerically large extra-parliamentary organization *Al-‘adl wa-l-ihsān*.²⁸ And, surprisingly, it

²⁶ Interview with Amina Boughalbi.

²⁷ Interview with Ouidade Melhaf.

²⁸ On the role of the Islamists in the 20FM see J. Granci, ‘Traiettorie dell’islam politico in Marocco. Dissidenza e riformismo al cospetto della monarchia’, in Laura Guazzone (ed.) *Storia e evoluzione dei movimenti islamisti arabi. I Fratelli musulmani e gli altri*, Mondadori, Milano, 2015, pp. 230-242.

was this very collaboration, albeit problematic concerning the issue of gender equality, as will be better explained in the following paragraph, which was considered by many young men and women as one of the main legacies of the movement. Ouidade Melhaf asserts:

On a personal level, what this movement has given me is the fact that before the 20FM it was impossible for me to talk to Islamists. The 20FM has broken down this obstacle against change: to accept someone who has a vision for society which is different from my own. For me the great difference is the fact of participating with young Islamists. For me this has been one of the most important things.²⁹

The 20FM, therefore, is characterized as being the mark of a ‘post-ideological’ and ‘post-Islamist’ generation,³⁰ which presented several shifts in the identity of the young, breaking with the forms and ideals which defined the previous generations.³¹ And also as regards gender equality, the positions of the activists underwent significant transformations.

A ‘Post-Feminist’ Generation

Despite the equality in practices, the 20FM did not carry a strong or clear message of equality. The movement did not produce a statement on gender, nor any specific demands that went beyond the demands for equality chanted in some of the slogans (often boycotted by the Islamists) and present in the platform of the movement.³² In this connection, Khadija Ryadi states:

There is a paradox in the experience of the 20FM: admittedly many women and young women participated; however, there was little mention of equality between men and women. Equality could be seen

²⁹ Interview with Ouidade Melhaf.

³⁰ A. Bayat, ‘A new Arab Street in Post Islamist Times’, in *Foreign Policy. The Middle East Channel*, 26/1/2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/26/a-new-arab-street-in-post-islamist-times/> (access 2/12/2016).

³¹ Z. Salime, ‘A New Feminism? Gender Dynamics in Morocco’s February 20th Movement’, in *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 13/5 (2012), pp. 101-114.

³² The gender equality was mentioned only in the second platform of the 20FM – 27th January, 14th and 17th February. See S. Borrillo, ‘Il Movimento del 20 Febbraio (M-20F) e l’uguaglianza di genere in Marocco tra dibattito interno e riforma costituzionale’ in A. M. Di Tolla - E. Francesca (a cura di), *La rivoluzione ai tempi di internet. Il futuro della democrazia nel Maghreb e nel mondo arabo*, Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, Napoli, 2012, p. 37.

in the streets; young men and women shared the same role of leadership, but in the slogans this was not very evident. This was caused by the presence of the Islamists. In order not to have problems with them, and to preserve unity, this concession was made: the question of equality was avoided. It was an implicit consensus. Women and equality were sacrificed. The question of women which was, in fact, present at the beginning returned when the Islamists left the movement.³³

These words are confirmed by Amina Boughalbi, as the reasons behind the sidelining of the gender question:

Initially, men applauded and encouraged the women participation. They always encouraged young women to lead in meetings, to appear in videos. They had no problems with this, or regarding the demonstrations. However, 3-4 months after the creation of the movement, with the ‘invasion’ of the Islamists, things began to change. They made us discuss subjects, which for us were obvious, such as equality between men and women. At first, everyone agreed with these ideals and total equality between men and women was taken for granted. Later the Islamists imposed their view on the debate. They said that it was necessary to give priority to social and economic needs; in other words, bread, jobs and education. Important demands for us also of course, without, however, abandoning the subject of freedom, individual freedom, equality. As time passed the situation started to become serious, so much so that there were conflicts between young people within the movement at demonstrations and general meetings. For example, when we got to the slogan that said: ‘Men and women are equal’, the Islamists began to shout us down and say *Allāh Akbar*, so we could not be heard. [...] They began to attack us also because of the way we dressed, because we went to the demonstrations in jeans or mini-skirts.³⁴

However, analyzing the speeches and practices of the movement and talking to activists both within and outside the 20FM, it does not seem that the only reason for the lack of centrality of the question of gender was the presence of the Islamists. On close inspection, the young women (just as the young men) of the 20FM did not consider the question of gender a central one. Although egalitarian and libertarian practices permeated their public and private lives, they did

³³ Interview with Khadija Ryadi.

³⁴ Interview with Amina Boughalbi.

not formulate an agenda or any specific claims. They did not tackle central themes in their everyday life, such as the question of inequality in the law, or the strengthening of a conservative and backward morality in the face of the development of libertarian behavior practices. For example, in Morocco abortion is illegal even though it is widely practiced,³⁵ and it is against the law to have sexual relations outside marriage. Article 490 of the penal code criminalizes extramarital sex, calling for punishments ranging from one month to one year in jail.³⁶ Any form of conduct that does not lie within a strictly hetero-normative perimeter is condemned by popular morals and by the law. For the young men and women of the 20FM, individual freedom and equality are important themes but to be faced at a later date and would have been brought up only following the establishment of a real democracy. Ouidade Melhaf affirms: 'The 20FM was a protest movement and only after democratization would the specifics be considered'.³⁷ While Sabra Talbi states:

Personally, I am against feminist demands. There is no need to treat the woman in a specific context, separate from society. When we talk of democracy, we are automatically talking of citizens, women, men, who are all equal before the law. We are all human beings. If there is democracy, there will be equality between men and women; everything that is against women will be automatically abolished; women's rights will be respected and there will be no need to talk of the woman as though she were separate from Moroccan society.³⁸

Young people, both women and men of the 20FM generation, consider the feminist struggle to be an area of demand which is too

³⁵ Chafik Chraïbi, president of the association AMLAC (Association marocaine de lutte contre l'avortement clandestin) estimates that between 600 and 800 abortions take place illegally every day. Recently even the PJD has stated the necessity to discuss the law prohibiting abortion. See S. Hamma, « Maroc : El Othmani, numéro deux du PJD, relance le débat sur l'avortement », in *Jeune Afrique*, 4/3/2015, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/226003/politique/maroc-el-othmani-num-ro-deux-du-pjd-relance-le-d-bat-sur-l-avortement/> (Last access 10/7/2015).

³⁶ These cases are rarely taken to court, since a conviction depends on either eyewitness testimony or a confession by one of the perpetrators. However, an unmarried woman's pregnancy is proof of sexual relations and may lead to criminal prosecution, while the fault of her male partner is not established by law.

³⁷ Interview with Ouidade Melhaf.

³⁸ Interview with Sabra Talbi.

narrow, too limited and too limiting, and tied to another period of political militancy. Qods Lefnatsa says:

Previously, women were more tied to the battle for women's freedom but now this is no longer true. Women are not just directing their attention to this cause but also to others, though always with the knowledge that there is still work to be done in order to obtain women's rights in Moroccan society.³⁹

And Amina Boughalbi claims: 'I fight for women's rights but in their entirety. I always join women's rights to other rights. For me fighting only for women's rights is a waste of time'.⁴⁰

And stone cutter Omar Radi, who, was 23 years old in 2011 and one of the 20FM leaders, asserts: 'I believe there was a priority, an agreed hierarchy of objectives, and the question of women was not a priority objective'.⁴¹

According to this perspective, it is from the battle for democracy and for human rights that women's rights will pour forth. The young, albeit recognizing the important battles fought by the women's movement in Morocco, looked with detached criticism at the feminist associations created in the '80s and '90s whose experiences will be better described in the following paragraph. They accused historical women's rights militants of having been co-opted by the system in exchange for concessions regarding legislative reform concerning the status of women and personal positions of power in the top echelons of public and private institutions. Qods Lefnatsa states:

In Morocco today women's associations are no longer feminist associations. There is no longer a strong feminist movement that has the courage to demand freedom for women. Feminist organizations in this country no longer demand equality (*musāwā*) but equity, parity (*munāṣafa*), i.e. a number of seats in Parliament.⁴²

Their commitment, Amina Boughalbi asserts, is

traditional, in the sense that their work does not involve the great majority of Moroccan women. But this does not mean that they did

³⁹ Interview with Qods Lefnatsa, Rabat, 21/1/2014.

⁴⁰ Interview with Amina Boughalbi.

⁴¹ Interview with Omar Radi, Rabat, 23/1/2014.

⁴² Interview with Qods Lefnatsa.

not do anything in the past. It is true that the feminist movement in Morocco played a fundamental role, for example, in the change of the family code. They followed a course of militancy, which was much appreciated, on a national level and at the North African region level. But there was no involvement of young people. Today, they are organizations, which are dominated by figures of old women; there is no renewal and they have not allowed for any exchange. These women have played an important role and we are grateful to them; it is an inheritance which we must defend but it is not sufficient.⁴³

An inheritance, moreover, that does not represent a model of activism to be imitated. For the 20FM generation, women figures, symbols of their commitment, are in fact women committed to the associative sector, in the field of human rights and in the area of social commitment, but not immediately identifiable with the feminist movement (even when dealing with questions of gender) like the previously quoted Khadija Ryadi, Khadija Merouazi, President of the association *Médiateur pour la Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme*, Aicha Ech-Channa, President of the association *Solidarité Feminine*, which helps single mothers, a category of highly stigmatized women in Moroccan society⁴⁴, and Assia El Ouadie, also known as Mama Assia, a magistrate, who, for a long time, looked after the re-education of under-age prisoners.

The split between historical associations of women – such as the *Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM)*, the *Ligue démocratique des droits des femmes (LDDF)*, the *Union de l'Action Féminine (UAF)*, the *Association Marocaine pour le défense des droits des femmes* – and the youth of the 20FM occurred when the former chose not to participate in the movement and to endorse constitutional reform, while the latter invited people to protest and to boycott the constitutional referendum. It was an important rift which, however, should not be interpreted exclusively in terms of a generational split, of a dialectic clash between generations of 'mothers' and 'daughters'. Harsh criticism also came from women of previous generations. Khadija Ryadi affirms:

⁴³ Interview with Amina Boughalbi.

⁴⁴ On the topic see the report 'Le Maroc des meres celibataires' (2010) realized by the association Insaf: <http://www.egalite.ma/attachments/article/212/INSAF-Rapport%20Etude%20nationale%20%27%27Le%20Maroc%20des%20m%C3%A8res%20c%C3%A9libataires%27%27.pdf> (Last access 10/7/2015).

The traditional associations of women in Morocco did not join the 20FM. The pretext was the presence of the Islamists. In my view the reasons for their lack of involvement lie in the fact that the movement made some very strong demands, for democracy, against the existing power. It wanted some fundamental and radical changes. Women's associations in Morocco maintain their elitism and want to change things through negotiation. They are not in favor of mass struggles and street demonstrations as a means to obtaining radical changes. Traditionally, this is not their chosen method. It was also like this for the Constitution. They voted for the Constitution, while we invited people to boycott the referendum. Admittedly, article 19 of the new Constitution states social, economic and civil equality between men and women⁴⁵ but on condition that the principles of Islam and the monarchy are not challenged.⁴⁶

On their part, feminists accuse 20FM female activists of having taken gender equality for granted, and of not recognizing the important results of feminist struggles over the last 10 years, such as the 2002 introduction of the quota system for Parliamentary seats (women obtained the right to 10% of seats); the 2004 reform of family law, *Mudawwana* (which establishes gender equality, removes the marital guardian and obedience laws, provides women with the right to initiate divorce and gain custody of children, abolishes repudiation and restricts polygamy);⁴⁷ the 2007 reform of the Nationality code enabling Moroccan women to pass on their nationality to their

⁴⁵ For an analysis of the reform of the Constitution in Morocco and of the article 19 see P. Longo, 'Il rinnovamento costituzionale in Nord Africa dopo la Primavera Araba (Egitto, Tunisia, Marocco)', in Laura Guazzone (a cura di), *Storia e evoluzione dei movimenti islamisti arabi*, pp. 312-314. Article 19 states: 'The man and the woman enjoy, in equality, the rights and freedoms of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental character, enounced in this Title and in the other provisions of the Constitution, as well as in the international conventions and pacts duly ratified by Morocco and this, with respect for the provisions of the Constitution, of the constants and of the laws of the Kingdom. The State works for the realization of parity between men and women. An Authority for parity and the struggle against all forms of discrimination is created, to this effect'.

⁴⁶ Interview with Khadija Ryadi.

⁴⁷ For an analysis of the reform of the *Mudawwana* see L. Buskens, 'Recent Debates on Family Law Reform in Morocco: Islamic Law as Politics in an Emerging Public Sphere', in *Islamic Law and Society* X/1 (2003), pp. 70-131; Z. Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011; R. Pepicelli, *Femminismo islamico. Corano, diritti, riforme*, Carocci, Roma 2010, pp. 92-98.

children;⁴⁸ and finally the 2011 reform of the Constitution and the approval of Article 19 on gender equality. Moreover, the feminists reproach the new generations of activists for having re-adopted and made their own an old vision of the struggle for democracy, which places the battle for equality in second place. Naima Benwakrim, a leading figure in the Moroccan feminist movement, who has gone through various phases of the movement, founding and participating in many associative experiences of women like Espace Associatif and Jossour, replies to the criticism voiced against women's associations with these words:

The 20FM militants suppressed the question of equality in order to allow the participation of Islamists. Nobody came to discuss things with women. Every time I met them, I told them to call us. They always used to say 'Are you pro *Makhzen* or against *Makhzen*⁴⁹?' They criticized our support of the Constitution and yet this is the best Constitution of the region in terms of women's rights. Everything that was in the women's memorandum⁵⁰ was taken into consideration. After 20 years of struggle we managed to obtain the feminization of the state; it was a great victory. Communication between the women's movement and the state was, therefore, most constructive. Equality had not been requested by the 20FM.⁵¹

⁴⁸ On the legal reforms in Morocco concerning women's rights see F. Sadiqi, 'Special Report on Women's Rights in Morocco', in S. Kelly - J. Breslin (eds.), *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*, Freedom House, New York; Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2010, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Morocco.pdf.

⁴⁹ In the current language with the term *Makhzen* Moroccans refer negatively to the power system in Morocco.

⁵⁰ After the Royal speech of 9th March 2011, many components of the Feminist Movement in Morocco created 'The Feminist Spring for Democracy and Equality Coalition' on 16th March 2011 in Rabat. The coalition aims was to draw up a memorandum reflecting the feminist movement vision of the new Constitution regarding the equality between women and men in civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. More information are on the blog of the coalition: <https://pfdemaroc.wordpress.com/>. The text in Arabic of the memorandum is at the following link: <https://pfdemaroc.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/flddf.pdf> (Last access 10/7/2015).

⁵¹ Interview with Naima Benwakrim, Rabat, 24/1/2014.

Genealogy. The Activism of the 20FM Generation within the Course of the Moroccan Feminist Movement

However, despite the absence of a gender agenda and of specific demands regarding equality between men and women, and despite the split with traditional women's associations, the activism of the young 20FM generation can be located within the long history of the women's movement in Morocco. As underlined by Zakia Salime, feminism, as a matter of gender equality, has penetrated the social imagination of a new generation of activists.⁵² It has shaped their actions and has made gender equality a course to be followed and pursued in their practices both in public and private life. In fact, Qods Lefnatsa, albeit extremely critical of the actions of the women's associations in Morocco, does not hesitate to affirm:

Even though I do not militate as a 'real feminist', perhaps because I am active in other fields, I consider myself a feminist. I feel I am a feminist although I do not use the term.⁵³

The new kind of gender activism of the 20FM youth can be seen as constituting a new wave in the history of women's activism in Morocco when set against the background of various phases in the evolution of the feminist movement in the country.⁵⁴ The first phase goes from independence to the '70s. During this initial wave, there initially emerged a women's movement tied to the struggle for independence and to philanthropic associations, and then, during the '60s and '70s, within the parties and trade unions, in particular of the left and extreme left. These were the years that saw the growth of political parties' female sections, as women appeared on the public and political scene, but there was no specificity in the feminist struggle and the battles for gender equality were subordinated to class struggle.⁵⁵

⁵² Salime, 'A New Feminism? Gender Dynamics in Morocco's February 20th Movement'.

⁵³ Interview with Qods Lefnatsa.

⁵⁴ For a deeper analysis of the reconstruction of the wave in the course of the feminist movement in Morocco see R. Pepicelli, 'Genere e generazioni in transizione: il movimento delle donne in Marocco dall'indipendenza al post-rivolte arabe', in R. Pepicelli - A. Vanzan (eds.) *The future of Women's Movements in the Mena Region. A New Feminist Wave?*, in *afriche e orienti* 17/1 (2016), pp. 14-33.

⁵⁵ R. Naciri, *The Women's Movement and Political Discourse in Morocco*; F. Sadiqi - M. Ennaji, 'The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the

The second wave goes from the first half of the '80s to the end of the '90s. It signals the birth of a women's movement which was autonomous from the parties and unions, and which supported the centrality of a separatist struggle in order to obtain the reform of legal institutions that support and strengthen gender inequality. These were the years that saw the birth of a number of associations such as the ADFM, Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (Democratic Association of Moroccan Women), the UAF, Union pour l'Action Feminine (Union for Women's Action), the Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité (Association 95 Maghreb for Equality), and the ADMF, Association Marocaine pour les Droits des Femmes (Moroccan Association for Women's Rights), which were to dominate the feminist public scene up until the present day, placing the gender question at the center of the political debate.⁵⁶ These realities were strengthened and consolidated thanks to funds from international donors who were interested in broadening the 'emancipationist' debate in the Arab world.⁵⁷

The third wave goes from the end of the '90s to the present day, with a moment of discontinuity in 2011. The year 2011 represented a turning point which saw the contemporary emergence of a new wave, the fourth. In this phase, which coincides with the first period of the reign of Mohammed VI, women's associations born in the '80s and the '90s, encouraged by the support of international institutions such as the UN, EU, WB, chose a method of struggle which was no longer one of conflict with the system, but of consultation and negotiation, in order to obtain a series of reforms regarding the legal system.⁵⁸ Feminist reasoning and feminist practices were taken up by the system and a sort of 'feminism of state' began to emerge,⁵⁹ while leading figures from the women's movement were co-opted and absorbed into state institutions. Despite a series of important victories regarding

Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco', in *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* II/2 (Spring 2006), pp. 86-114.

⁵⁶ H. Alami M'chici, *Genre et politique au Maroc. Les enjeux de l'égalité hommes-femmes entre islamisme et modernisme*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2002, p. 125.

⁵⁷ V. Moghadam, *Feminist Activism in the Arab Region and Beyond: Linking Research to Policy Reform and Social Change*, Freia - Feminist Research Center in Aalborg, 72 (February 2010), <http://freia.ihis.aau.dk/Publikationer+og+skriftserie/Skriftserie0907-2179>.

⁵⁸ Naciri, *The Women's Movement and Political Discourse in Morocco*.

⁵⁹ S. Eddouada, *Women, Gender and the State in Morocco: Contradictions, Constraints and Prospects*, PhD Thesis, University Mohamed V, Rabat, 2003, p. 24.

women's rights, such as the reform of the *Mudawwana* (2004) and the nationality code, already mentioned above, the women's movement lost the anti-systemic character of its early years. At the same time, the Islamist movement – embodied by the institutionalized PJD (Party for Justice and for Development) and in the extra-Parliamentary group *Al-'adl wa-l-ihsān* – gained approval amongst the population⁶⁰ and women's associations asked themselves if it was appropriate to continue along a path which demanded rights within the framework of secularism, which did not include any reference to Islam, or if it was instead necessary to engage in a struggle based on a gender re-reading of the sacred scripts, and which has indeed been defined as 'Islamic feminism'.⁶¹

The fourth wave – which coexists with the third one – is characterized, as already stated, by the establishment of a new generation of activists, engaged within that reawakening in Moroccan civil society which culminated in the 20FM. This new activism was not confined to the 20FM experience but also included groups close to the movement though not necessarily produced by it, such as the M.A.L.I. group, *Mouvement Alternatif pour les Libertés Individuelles*,⁶² which existed before the 2011 protests, or groups which, in one way or another, indirectly emerged out of experiences

⁶⁰ Symbolic of the strength of the Islamist movement was the demonstration of 20th March 2000 in Casablanca in which between 100,000 and 200,000 people opposed the proposed reform of the *Mudawwana*, demonstrating a numeric strength which was far superior to that deployed by the left and by the women's movement which had taken to the squares on the same day in Rabat to express their support for the reform and more in general for the 'Panified', *Plan d'Action National d'Intégration des Femmes au Développement* (National Plan of Action for Women's Integration in Development), proposed by the then government (Buskens, 'Recent Debates on Family Law Reform in Morocco', p. 104). It was the first time that the Islamist women had appeared on the public scene. Some of them rose to the fore. Particularly, Nadia Yassine, daughter of *shaykh* Abdessalam Yassine, founder of the *Al-'adl wa-l-ihsān* movement emerged in the public debate (Interview with Nadia Yassine, Salé, 15/1/2006). A significant number of Islamist women were present at the 20FM demonstrations, although in different forms and in different ways compared to those of the young secular activists, whose activism is analyzed in this paper (Interviews with Hakima El Alaoui and Latifa Hamdaoui, members of *Al-'adl wa-l-ihsān*, Rabat, 24/1/2015).

⁶¹ For an analysis of the Islamic feminism in Morocco see R. Pepicelli, *Femminismo islamico*, pp. 69-82 e 92-98; S. Eddouada - R. Pepicelli, « Maroc : vers un féminisme islamique d'État », in *Critique Internationale* XLVI (2010), pp. 87-100.

⁶² See S. Borrillo, *supra*.

from the widespread uprising of the younger generations. An example of this is the magazine 'Qandisha' edited by Fedwa Misk, which gathers numerous views on the conditions of women, and the emergence of blogs and online platforms against sexual molestation.⁶³ This fourth phase is distinguished by a series of characteristic features that have in common some kind of 'post-' prefix. In fact, the activism of the 20FM generation is distinguished by the fact that it is 'post-ideological', 'post-Islamist', 'post-secular' and 'post-feminist'. It refuses to confine gender activism to women's issues; it is against feminist reasoning being regulated by state institutions and criticizes the NGO-ization of women's activism and demands. While liberal feminists desired change to take place through state institutions, 20FM activists wished for the overthrow of these same institutions.⁶⁴

However, while this new activism clearly breaks away from the so-called third wave associations, following the end of the 20FM and the growing repression in the country, it has had difficulty in finding words and forms with which to define itself and continue its battles. Nevertheless, while some of the movement's activists eventually withdrew, disappointed by the protest's outcome, many others founded new associations, with a mixed gender composition, mostly tied to educational, cultural and artistic projects, and, in many cases, avoiding direct political confrontation. Amina Boughalbi explains this new phase as follows:

For me the 20FM is not dead; because 20th February is not a demonstration but a generation of young people aware of the need for change in Morocco. It is true that today there are no longer demonstrations in Morocco, but the young are still active and have channeled their activities towards other forms of activism. There are those who have created human rights associations like *Prometheus*, *Jeunes pour Jeunes*. There are those who have made films, who have made documentaries on gender violence, on the story of Amina Filali.⁶⁵ There are some young men and women who perform a

⁶³ S. Borrillo, 'Telepredicatrici e attiviste on line in Marocco: la costruzione mediatica del genere femminile tra ideale islamico e libertà individuali', in R. Pepicelli (a cura di), *Le donne nei media arabi. Tra aspettative tradite e nuove opportunità*, Carocci, Roma, 2014, pp. 107-109.

⁶⁴ Salime, 'A New Feminism?'

⁶⁵ It is the case of the video-makers group 'Guerrilla cinema' that realized the documentary 475. *When marriage becomes punishment* on the violence against women.

'theatre of the oppressed' in several Moroccan cities, dealing with issues of a political, economic and social nature. There are some young people who play music, who have created rap groups. The idea of the movement continues to live through these young people.⁶⁶

Following the 20FM, a new political gender awareness appeared in the country, which led Moroccan society not to be afraid to demand its rights and to denounce wrongs. It is common knowledge amongst male and female activists that the 20FM brought a considerable amount of freedom to Moroccan society and encouraged people to mobilize for social, political and economic justice, as well as gender justice. Amina Boughalbi continues:

Before 20th February, people did not demonstrate, now they do, even in small villages. People discuss subjects that used to be taboo like sexual violence, sexual relations outside marriage, relationships amongst the young. There are certain positive changes, even if there are some negative ones with the arrival of the Islamist government. Following the 20th February, Moroccan civil society has taken up a significant amount of control. For example, after the royal decision to pardon the Spanish pedophile, Daniel Galvan Vina, people took to the squares. After the arrest of the two young men who kissed in the street, people took to the squares. There is a general tendency to demonstrate, to take to the squares.⁶⁷

An important case in point for this new gender awareness was the battle for the reform of Article 475 of the Moroccan penal code, which authorized an abuser to marry his victim in order to avoid going to jail. After sixteen-year-old Amina Filali committed suicide on 10th March 2012 because she was forced to marry the man who raped her, a large demonstration took place. Amina's suicide could have been a 'news story', quickly dealt with by the press and then forgotten, as with many other pieces of news of a similar nature, but civil society, reborn after 20FM, together with feminists and human rights associations mobilized and were quickly joined by thousands of anonymous supporters, demonstrating in several cities in Morocco a

⁶⁶ Interview with Amina Boughalbi.

⁶⁷ *Ib.*

week after Filali's suicide.⁶⁸ Their demands received a positive answer in January 2014 when the reform of Article 475 of the penal code took place. The idea, spread by the 20FM protests, that it was possible to express an opinion in public, and manifest one's own ideas, did not remain confined to young people and to the student environment, or to the women who belong to this category. As Lucile Daumas recalls:

In the 20FM demonstrations there were two types of women: on the one hand, young women and female students, and on the other, many women from a lower class environment. These women were strongly aware. They were not in the squares to follow their husbands or sons, but because they knew what they wanted [...] And the thing that was most spectacular was their emergence in the small villages and cities of the South, where the custom was not the *ḥijāb* but the *ḥā'ik*; veiled women, always hidden, took to the streets. [...] In Ait Abdi, for example, they demonstrated to obtain a hospital in which to deliver their babies.⁶⁹

As Zakia Salime wrote, the feminist quest for equality in the youth movement's demands for social justice bore fruit, and raised the visibility of scattered and much more localized protest movements led by women in many poor urban neighborhoods and rural areas.

We have no particular name for these uprisings here and there, other than the names of the women who started them. For instance, when we mention the 'women of Ben Semime', we mean the protest movement that the women of this rural community started against the privatization of a local source of water by a French company. [...] YouTube is crowded with pictures and voices from these widespread and spontaneous protests by women facing situations that drove them to act together.⁷⁰

Conclusion

It is not easy to predict the forms that this new gender activism will take in the near future. The freedom of expression in Morocco is once again diminishing under the weight of new repressive waves. In

⁶⁸ Z. Touati, 'The Struggle for Women's Rights in Morocco', in Mohamed Olimat (ed.), *Arab Spring and Arab Women: Challenges and Opportunities*, Routledge, London-New York, 2014, p. 131.

⁶⁹ Interview with Lucile Daumas.

⁷⁰ Salime, 'A New Feminism?', p. 110.

parallel to this, a neo-traditionalist approach to values is becoming established throughout the country, also due to the coming to power of the PJD, in 2011.⁷¹ Any conduct that does not strictly conform to a conservative and traditionalist ethical code is condemned by public morality and by Moroccan laws, applied more and more repressively. This has been the case, for example, with the arrest of a teenage couple who had posted a photo of them kissing on Facebook in 2013,⁷² or with the arrest of two young women wearing a mini-skirt in 2015.⁷³ At the same time, experiences such as that of the online newspaper 'Qandisha' (www.qandisha.ma), founded in November 2011, find it difficult to make progress.⁷⁴

Only viewed in the long-term will a historical analysis be able to give us information regarding the women's movement in Morocco and the factions within it.

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⁷¹ For the history of the PJD see Granci, 'Traiettorie dell'islam politico in Marocco', pp.221-223.

⁷² Jeune Afrique, *Maroc: un couple d'adolescents arrêté à cause d'une photo sur Facebook*, in *Jeune Afrique*, 5/10/2013, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/149314/societe/maroc-un-couple-d-adolescents-arr-t-cause-d-une-photo-sur-facebook/>

⁷³ Majda Abellah, « Deux marocaines poursuivies en raison de leurs jupes jugées trop courtes » (Last access 10/7/2015) in *Jeune Afrique*, 25/6/2015, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/239715/societe/deux-marocaines-poursuivies-en-raison-de-leurs-jupes-jugees-trop-courtes/> (Last access 10/7/2015).

⁷⁴ Skype interview with Fedwa Misk, 16/7/2015.

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