

Reclaiming the Struggle: The Rise and Evolution of the  
Franco-Maghrebi Feminist Movement

by

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## INTRODUCTION

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The critically acclaimed and extremely popular 1995 film *La Haine*, written and directed by Mathieu Kassovitz, is a visually jarring portrayal of life in the *banlieue*.<sup>1</sup> Through the use of black and white imagery, Kassovitz artfully evokes the desolation, desperation and isolation of life in immigrant communities in France.<sup>2</sup> The film effectively depicts the male dominated culture that has developed in the *banlieue* and the extensive use of *verlan*, French slang that originated in the suburbs, illuminates the distinctive culture that has evolved in these male dominated spaces.<sup>3</sup> One of the most striking elements of the film is the lack of female presence. Most of the women in the film are family members of the three protagonists – Vinz, Hubert and Saïd – and are seen primarily within the confines of the home. When Saïd sees his sister lingering outside, he chastises her and orders her to go home immediately. Saïd's reactions highlight the inability of young Franco-Maghrebi women to move freely about their communities. Furthermore in the film, while the women are often portrayed as figures of authority within the home, they are nonetheless restricted to

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<sup>1</sup> The *banlieue* and *cité* are both terms that refer to the housing projects in France. These projects house many of France's North African and African immigrants and have been sites of some of the worst immigrant violence in France. The literal translation for the term is suburb, but the connotation of *banlieue* differs greatly from the American conception of a suburb.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, the terms immigrants and immigrations are frequently in reference to the North African community specifically. As the thesis progresses, the connections between the North African community, religion, the crisis in the suburbs, and French immigration discourse will become increasingly clear.

<sup>3</sup> Mathieu Kassovitz, *La Haine*, 1995.

the private sphere.<sup>4</sup> Their authority and strength thus remains invisible to the greater public. *La Haine* symbolically depicts the absence of women in the French public sphere and in the French discussion of immigration in France. It is illustrative of the way that the French have traditionally discussed the issue of immigration, especially the North African immigrant community. Focusing primarily on male thuggery and violence within immigrant communities, the discourse of immigration often ignores the reality of the women in these communities and denies their agency. When Franco-Maghrebi (Franco-North African) women are discussed in the public sphere it is not their agency that is emphasized, but rather their status as victims of male debauchery and violence.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this thesis is to nuance and reframe the discussion of Franco-Maghrebi women in France. The lives of these women, some immigrants and many French born, have become increasingly popular subjects of debate in the French public sphere, yet they continue to be painted as the exoticized and victimized other. A number of significant texts on the subject of Franco-Maghrebi women, which challenge this tendency to other Maghrebi women have been published in the past decade. Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar's 1995 book *The Foulard et la République* was one of the only texts that gave a voice to Franco-Maghrebi women who chose to wear the veil and provided a much needed nuance to the headscarf debates, which began in 1989. Scholar Bronwyn Winter in her work *The Hijab and the Republic: Uncovering the Headscarf Debate* (2008), takes the analysis a step

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The term Maghrebi refers to people from the Maghreb. The Maghreb, which literally means west in Arabic, refers to the region of North Africa and includes five countries - Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania. Insofar as Maghrebi immigration to France is concerned, however, only three countries are involved: Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

further in looking at specific Franco-Maghrebi women's associations and the ways in which they reacted to the headscarf affair. Other scholars such as Caitlin Killian and Doris Gray have engaged directly with Maghrebi women both in the Maghreb and France in order to better understand the ways in which women live the immigration struggle.

While all of these works have deeply shaped my own understanding of the position of Franco-Maghrebi women in France, my project addresses the subject of Franco-Maghrebi women from a different perspective. None of these works, or any others that I found, have attempted to look at a cohesive Franco-Maghrebi school of feminism. By exploring Franco-Maghrebi feminism as a social movement I hope to identify the ways in which Franco-Maghrebi women are organizing and overcoming oppression on two fronts. As many of the works that I have just listed show, Franco-Maghrebi women are caught between the oppressive gaze of the West and the increasingly violent male dominated order in the *banlieue*. It is necessary to understand the historical context of Franco-Maghrebi women's status and it is equally important to study the external forces that act upon them. We must, however, move past discussions that treat Franco-Maghrebi women as subjects and study their agency and movement.

### **FRANCO-MAGHREBI WOMEN: DRIVERS OF INTEGRATION OR VESSELS OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE?**

Since the beginning of France's difficult history with the Maghreb in the 1830s, women have been symbols of the clash of civilization between a "modern" and "civilized" France and a "backwards" Islamic society. In the waning years of

France's imperial stronghold over Algeria, there was a sudden frenzy to convince Algerian women that embracing French culture and values was their only hope for liberation and emancipation.<sup>6</sup> This tendency to view women as victims of Maghrebi and Islamic patriarchy is a persistent theme that characterizes much of the debate over Maghrebi immigration in France today. The French have thus systematically attempted to use Maghrebi women to promote the integration of the Maghrebi community in France. It must be noted that when the French use the term integration, it can essentially be viewed as, "a euphemism for assimilation," that is fundamentally at odds with the concept of publicly recognized ethnic difference.<sup>7</sup> By assimilating, or "unveiling" Maghrebi women the French believe they can subsume Maghrebi culture. Such an instrumentalization of the cause of Franco-Maghrebi women clearly shows that the dialogue in France concerning Maghrebi women today has not greatly evolved since the colonial era.

Maghrebi women have also been used by men in their communities to ensure the preservation of traditional values. Within traditional Maghrebi cultures and more broadly in Islamic cultures, women are often seen as the bearers of family honor and vessels of culture. As Mounira Charrad suggests, "Tunisian nationalists treated gender as a resource for power in the nationalist struggle and 'The Woman' as a sacred repository of national values."<sup>8</sup> While Charrad is referring specifically to Tunisia, women were similarly viewed throughout the Maghreb and as a result were

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<sup>6</sup> Julia Clancy-Smith, "Islam, Gender, and Identities in the Making of French Algeria, 1830-1962," in *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, ed. Julia Clancy-Smith (Charlottesville VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998). 188.

<sup>7</sup> Caitlin Killian, "The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair," *Gender Society* 17, no. 4 (August 1, 2003): 567-590. 571.

<sup>8</sup> Mounira Charrad, "Policy Shifts: State, Islam, and Gender in Tunisia, 1930s-1990s," *Soc Pol* 4, no. 2 (June 1, 1997): 284-319.

caught in the middle of violent struggles for independence and sovereignty. This is not to suggest that Maghrebi women passively accepted such a fate. Algerian women, for example, made the conscious decision to put their feminist struggle aside in order to fight alongside their male compatriots against the French during the 1962 war for independence. In quoting the words of a female Algerian resistance fighter who said, “The young women of Algeria don’t have time to discuss the problem of sex right now. We are still in a struggle to make our new country work, to rebuild the destroyed family, to preserve our identity as a nation,” historian Peter Knauss provides a telling example of how women viewed their own struggle and clearly rejected the French as a liberating force.<sup>9</sup> Many Maghrebi women made a conscious and autonomous decision to pursue their rights as women after achieving independence. They recognized both the colonial and cultural sources of their oppression.

This tendency to view Maghrebi women as central to the survival of tradition and culture has persisted well into the present and both the French and Maghrebi males impose such a burden on women. The Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement is thus born out of a desire to freely define their own individual identities without imposed attachments to culture or pressure to “modernize.” It is important therefore to look at all aspects of their movement: their daily/pragmatic actions, external influences and connections as well as the overall structure of their movement. Studying these characteristics will help us to understand how women navigate and challenge these imposed identities.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter R. Knauss, *The Persistence of Patriarchy* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1987). 83.



## FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINISM AS A NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT

It is important to consider what characteristics specifically qualify Franco-Maghrebi feminism as a distinctive social movement. A brief analysis of new social movement (NSM) theory will thus help contextualize Franco-Maghrebi feminism within the broader framework of a social movement.<sup>10</sup> While new social movement theory will be discussed in the introduction, it is not the overarching goal of this thesis to focus on the theoretical elements of Franco-Maghrebi feminism that qualify it as social movement, but rather to provide an in-depth analysis and historical overview of how Franco-Maghrebi women are actually organizing and how they have impacted and in turn have been influenced by French Feminism, Maghrebi and Islamic feminism as well as the French public at large. My description of new social movement theory and the way in which it pertains or relates to Franco-Maghrebi feminism will be drawn primarily from *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* edited by Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph R. Gusfield.

Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield outline eight basic characteristics of new social movements. They are as follows:

- A tendency to transcend class structure
- A tendency to exhibit diverse ideologies within the movement
- A new focus on identity and culturally symbolic issues as opposed to economic ones
- An emphasis on the individual's identity and growth within the movement, thus making it both a collective and individualistic expressions of identity
- Innovative mobilization tactics including strategies of non-violent resistance
- A quest for alternative forms of participation outside of the political sphere
- Decentralized and highly dispersed structure

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<sup>10</sup> Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph Gusfield, "Identities and Grievances, and New Social Movements," in *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*, ed. Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph R Gusfield (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).6.

- Exhibit continuity with past movements but with new approaches.

While NSMs do not always exhibit all eight of these characteristics, they often exhibit some.<sup>11</sup> Four of the eight characteristics listed above are particularly relevant to the study of Franco-Maghrebi feminism as a social movement: the transcendence of class structure, diverse ideological spectrum, non-violent resistance and decentralization are all strong markers of the movement. The transcendence of class structure is present in the movement as women of diverse backgrounds within the Maghrebi community often come together to fight for a common cause. The Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement also exhibits a diverse and pluralistic ideological spectrum, which has greatly shaped the movement. This diversity is in part linked to their focus on pragmatic and institutional change. The movement additionally focuses on defining and negotiating identity and while the socio-economic status of the Maghrebi community in France has shaped the movement, Franco-Maghrebi women highlight the connections between the ability to embrace their difference and upward socio-economic mobility. Franco-Maghrebi feminists have consistently relied on non-violent protest and civil disobedience as a strategy for protesting violence within their own communities as well as discrimination in France. One of the most significant characteristics of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement that can also be considered a unique and innovative mobilization tactic is the diverse associational network that Franco-Maghrebi women have formed through their participation in different women's rights associations focused on the lives of immigrant women. The associational nature of their movement brings us to the final NSM characteristic

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<sup>11</sup> The following paragraph draws exclusively from *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). 7-8.

present in the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement – the decentralized and diffuse nature of Franco-Maghrebi feminism. This explains why, until now, the French public as well as academic researchers have talked about Franco-Maghrebi associations but not of a unified Franco-Maghrebi feminism, which is the focus of my project.

The fragmented nature of the movement has often overshadowed the solid feminist network that has developed between individual association and female activists. One of the most challenging but important elements of my research was to try and piece together an overarching narrative and to trace some of the established connections between individual associations. There is little written information on how the various organizations exchange ideas and resources, and thus much of my research included studying web pages and online forums. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to visit some of the associations in Paris and was warmly received by women working in the field. From my conversations with these women and the girls working at various associations I was able to gain a first hand understanding of the way that individual Franco-Maghrebi women view their connection to feminism and a greater movement of Franco-Maghrebi women. These findings will be explored in greater detail throughout the following chapters.

### **IS SISTERHOOD POSSIBLE: THE INTERSECTION OF FEMINISM AND DIVERSITY**

Feminist movements, which often claim to speak for women as a collective, need to understand the ways in which women's experiences differ based on class, race and sexuality in order to legitimately speak for women as a whole.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that the idea of universal sisterhood that is so frequently talked about in

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<sup>12</sup> Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism," in *Feminism and "Race"*, ed. Kum-Kum Bhavnani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). 26.

American and European feminisms is often illusory. Feminists such as Bell Hooks, Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson all recognize the importance of sisterhood solidarity, but all argue that in order to achieve such a sisterhood, there needs to be a much deeper understanding of race and the way in which current feminist discourse in the west excludes women of color.<sup>13</sup> Creating such a conception of sisterhood that accepts, embraces and actively addresses differences of all kinds has proven to be a difficult undertaking, especially in France. Despite the physical proximity of Franco-Maghrebi feminism to the French feminist movement, my exploration of feminism and diversity has had to be rooted within the women of color movement in the United States and elsewhere, because French feminism very rarely actually tackles the issue of the intersection of feminism and race, ethnicity or religion. While American and British feminists have been slightly more receptive to the concept of multiculturalism, French feminism is firmly grounded in the republican ideal of universalism, which forbids the recognition of different ethnic and religious identities in the public, national sphere.<sup>14</sup> The State can thus only legitimately address the concerns of *individuals*, not groups. Franco-Maghrebi feminism as a social movement thus has broader political implications within the French Republic. It is simultaneously struggling against the present deterioration of women's rights in the *banlieue* and at the same time challenging the color-blindness of the French State. Throughout this thesis, the intersection of feminism and racial-religious difference

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<sup>13</sup> Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Pluto Press, 2000); Amos and Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism."

<sup>14</sup> Joan Wallach. Scott, "French Universalism in the Nineties," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2004): 32-53. 34.

will continue to be discussed as a major factor that shapes the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement.

### **FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINISM: AN APPROPRIATE LABEL?**

Mainstream feminist theory in the Western world has largely ignored the issue of difference. During the colonial era, feminists from the empire often engaged in a highly patronizing discourse on the status of women in the colonies. For this reason, we must consider the fact that not all women welcome the label of feminism even if their actions are focused on the emancipation of women. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar express profound disdain for Western feminism that, “portray[s] us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism.”<sup>15</sup> This condescending portrayal of non-western women was particularly prevalent during the colonial era. It is thus unsurprising that women in and from the Maghreb, many of who participated in the struggles for liberation, reject the Western connotations of feminism as a label. As Marnia Lazreg suggests, the issue of feminism often forces women to choose between defending their cultures, which have been misrepresented by Western feminists, or reaffirming the superiority of Western feminisms as the alternative to their patriarchal and backwards cultures.<sup>16</sup> This polarizing effect suggests that feminism as a label is a delicate subject that must be treated with caution. Miriam Cooke points out that many women in the Muslim

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<sup>15</sup> Amos and Parmar, “Challenging Imperial Feminism.” 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 286.

world view feminism as a neo-imperialist construct that constitutes one of the sources of oppression for Muslim women.<sup>17</sup>

While it is important to recognize that feminism is not a universally accepted label, I have chosen to use the term throughout my thesis. Many of the women that I spoke with in France or have corresponded with via email throughout this project identify with a feminist movement and describe themselves as feminists.

Furthermore, Franco-Maghrebi women are finding ways to assert ownership over the term and in doing so have been able to re-appropriate the sources of their oppression.

Cooke herself eloquently justifies her use of the term feminism in stating,

Feminism provides a cross-cultural prism through which to identify moments of awareness that something is wrong in the expectations for women's treatment or behavior, of rejection of such expectations, and of activism to affect some kind of change.<sup>18</sup>

Her loose definition of feminism effectively captures the essence of Franco-Maghrebi feminism. Feminism certainly has complex connotations, many of which will be explored throughout this thesis. Using the label of feminism to describe the Franco-Maghrebi women's struggle helps us to understand how they are able to subvert institutions of oppression from within. Through their actions they are creating their own distinctive conception of feminism that in some way draws on French feminism and in other ways diverges from it.

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<sup>17</sup> Miriam. Cooke, "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 1 (2000): 91-110. 92.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 92.

## STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The aim of this thesis is to provide a nuanced historical overview of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement, something that is lacking from current scholarship on the subject of Franco-Maghrebi women. By looking at the movement itself as well as external influences and factors that have shaped the movement, I hope to provide a comprehensive understanding of Franco-Maghrebi women's agency and activism in France. For this reason the first chapter will provide a historical overview of Maghrebi women's history in France. By looking at the evolution of Maghrebi women's status in the *banlieue* we will be able to better understand the evolution of the movement. The 1980s and 90s were particularly formative years of the movement and will be discussed at length. Understanding the socio-economic changes that occurred in France during these two decades will help us to understand how such factors have affected the way women are treated within the Maghrebi community – one of the most marginalized communities in France. The second chapter creates an overarching narrative of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle by looking at the interactions between four distinctive Franco-Maghrebi feminist associations, two of which have gained substantial recognition in the mainstream French media. This chapter will also highlight the role that both the State and media together have played in shaping the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement. The third chapter attempts to bridge the chasm between French Feminism and Franco-Maghrebi feminism. By looking at the theoretical and pragmatic overlap between the two movements I will show that while French feminism has consistently tried to distance itself from the activism of immigrant women in France, their

movements are not so different. This chapter will also explore the ways in which French feminism has consciously or unconsciously created obstacles for the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle. Finally the fourth chapter will consider Franco-Maghrebi feminism in a transnational light by studying its connections with Islamic feminism in the Muslim world and more specifically feminist movements in the Maghreb. An analysis of collaborative projects between Franco-Maghrebi feminists and Maghrebi feminists will develop a concrete understanding of how women on both sides of the Mediterranean support one another in a common struggle. As the chapter progresses it will become increasingly clear that female activists in the Maghreb and activists of Maghrebi origin in France are part of a larger transnational Maghrebi feminist movement. Together these four chapters will illustrate the development and evolution of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement and they will help us to understand how Franco-Maghrebi feminism has taken control of the debate over their rights in France as well as how it has been influenced by other feminist movements. This will create a comprehensive image of the movement and its defining characteristics.



## CHAPTER One

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### EARLY BEUR HISTORY AND THE EVOLUTION OF BANLIEUE CULTURE

The Franco-Maghrebi feminist consciousness emerged in earnest in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The reunification of Maghrebi immigrant workers with their families resulted in the growing presence of Maghrebi women and children on French soil.<sup>2</sup> As the presence of Maghrebi women in France grew, they began to form associations and collectives to support one another in their new country. Franco-Maghrebi feminist actions in the 1970s focused primarily on the status of women in the Maghreb. Associations such as the Groupe des Femmes Algériennes (Group of Algerian Women) organized rallies and protests in France to support their peers abroad in their struggle against Islamic fundamentalism, patriarchy and authoritarian governments.<sup>3</sup> As the daughters of immigrant women, born on French soil, grew older their struggle evolved took on a new shape. In order to better understand the evolution of Franco-Maghrebi feminism, we will focus on the rise of female activism during the Beur Movement and the evolution of Maghrebi women's status in the *banlieue* through the 1990s. This will help to contextualize the movement and effectively situate their

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<sup>1</sup> L'Association des Tunisiens en France, "Traces, Mémoires, Histoire: des mouvements des femmes de l'immigration en France," *Traces, Mémoires, Histoire*, 2000, <http://www.femmes-histoire-immigration.org/discuss.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Mayanthi L. Fernando, "The Avowal and Disavowal of Difference France," *Anthropological Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (2004): 835-843. 837.

<sup>3</sup> L'Association des Tunisiens en France, "Traces, Mémoires, Histoire: des mouvements des femmes de l'immigration en France."

struggle. Looking at how the struggles of Franco-Maghrebi women intersect with and diverge from their male peers will also illuminate the growing marginalization of these women and the ways in which they are beginning to fight this marginalization.

### THE BEUR MOVEMENT

The coming of age of Franco-Maghrebi youth in the 1970s and 80s marked a significant moment in French history. The Beur movement of the 1980s was an early manifestation of the struggles of French born youth whose parents had emigrated from the Maghreb.<sup>4</sup> The movement was in no way religious but rather, it focused on *le droit à la différence*, or the right to difference.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Franco-Maghrebi youth were fighting for the right to define and embrace their unique identity. As a result of this movement, the French were forced to address their growing ethnic minorities and immigrant populations who so visibly challenged their traditional conception of Frenchness. While immigration is certainly not a new phenomenon in France, the French have struggled to integrate and assimilate the youth of North African immigrants, born and raised on French soil, whose culture and religion are often believed to be at odds with secular republican values.<sup>6</sup>

This systematic exclusion of Maghrebi culture and its influences on French born youth of Maghrebi descent made it difficult for Franco-Maghrebi youth to negotiate their position in France. Tahar Ben Jelloun, a Francophone author of Moroccan origin eloquently states, “Living together implies not fraternity but rather

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<sup>4</sup> The term Beur is derived from the French slang word for Arabe.

<sup>5</sup> Paul A. Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation* (Indiana University Press, 2004). 163.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 7.

acceptance of a strangeness that is neither obvious nor natural.”<sup>7</sup> This implies an active and conscious acknowledgement of difference and the effects of cultural difference on shaping individual identities. The French do not, however, believe in “expressions of specific ethnic or religious identities in the public sphere,” to be legitimate, thereby making it impossible for Franco-Maghrebi youth to feel accepted as being French while simultaneously expressing their cultural differences.<sup>8</sup> Ben Jelloun describes the existence of Franco-Maghrebi youth as a nomadic one in which they are “relegated to the periphery, in exile every where.”<sup>9</sup> This quotation suggests that Franco-Maghrebi youth do not have a sense of belonging in France or the Maghreb and the cultural divide between Franco-Maghrebi youth and their immigrant parents makes it difficult for them to feel rooted even within the Maghrebi community in France. They drift in and out of different cultural contexts without really feeling rooted in any one place.

It was this feeling of exclusion and isolation that led to the 1983 *Marche des Beurs*: a peaceful demonstration based on the principals of non-violence to promote racial equality for immigrant communities and French youth of North African descent. The concept of Beur identity, according to Jane Hiddleston is an attempt to create an identity distinct from either French or Arab Identity, which symbolizes the unique position that these youth occupied in French society.<sup>10</sup> The protestors demanded equality of opportunity in education and employment, and the right to

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<sup>7</sup> Tahar Ben Jelloun, *French Hospitality: Racism and North African Immigrants*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). 5.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Béland, “Identity Politics and French Republicanism,” *Society* 40, no. 5 (July 2003): 66-71. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Jelloun, *French Hospitality*. 94.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Hiddleston, *Reinventing Community: Identity and Difference in Late Twentieth-Century French Philosophy and Literature* (MHRA, 2005). 178.

acknowledge and affirm their cultural heritage. On a broader, ideological level the Marche des Beurs, also referred to as the March for Equality and against Racism was a movement for such a nomadic generation to demand a space in which they could develop. Beur identity, as Hiddleston suggests, “ is a series of shifting relations and identifications,” further solidifying this concept of a superficially rooted identity.<sup>11</sup> Both Franco-Maghrebi men and women participated in the Marche des Beurs, because this struggle for recognition and acceptance affected the community as a whole, regardless of gender. The men *and* women who participated in the march were actively taking control of their fate and were forging a common path with common goals. It is significant to stress the active leadership and participation of both sexes together because they were so often kept apart within their local communities. While Franco-Maghrebi boys and girls may have interacted in public, in the private sphere, the sexes were kept apart. Not only did the Marche des Beurs express a desire for change within French society, but it also challenged the traditional customs of the Maghrebi community.

The solidarity between men and women during the Marche des Beurs highlights the ways in which both genders experienced and internalized racism and cultural discrimination on the one hand and restriction by Maghrebi culture on the other. The march was undoubtedly a significant display of generational unity and also had particular significance to the emergence of Franco-Maghrebi feminism. These feminists are themselves focusing on and working with communities who feel that they have never truly possessed a culture to call their own. Maghrebi women are

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 178.

neither here nor there, neither Algerian / Moroccan / Tunisian nor French, neither traditional nor modern. While there are a variety of pressures weighing on these women one of the most significant and unique pressures is their lack of an autonomously defined identity. Immigrant women have had a particularly difficult time breaking through the stereotypical image the French have of the submissive, oppressed Maghrebi woman.<sup>12</sup> French feminism in particular, and its strict adherence to secularism has, from the very beginning, isolated Maghrebi women. French feminists have systematically excluded the voices of North African women who oppose secular feminism and have traditionally reinforced this colonial image of Maghrebi women.

As Ben Jelloun suggests, “a girl who is the daughter of immigrants lives in an exile within an exile.”<sup>13</sup> This further illuminates the unique nature of womanhood in the North African immigrant community. While sisters marched alongside their brothers in a show of solidarity for the goals of equality and an end to racism, their daily experiences as women differed greatly from those of their brothers. Young women may feel the same ambivalence towards the homeland as their male peers, but they have a greater expectation to embody the traditional Maghrebi woman.<sup>14</sup> Interracial marriages, independence, sexual liberty and political activism are all much more taboo for Maghrebi women than for men. For women to take part in the march of 1983 they had to defy a tremendous social taboo. This taboo, as Moroccan Feminist and Islamic scholar Fatima Mernissi suggests is linked to the concept of

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<sup>12</sup> Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation*. 142.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Jelloun, *French Hospitality*. 102.

<sup>14</sup> Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation*. 142.

public and private space. In defying this divided space, Maghrebi women have been able to simultaneously challenge the Maghrebi male's consolidation of power over Maghrebi women, and fight for their space in the French public sphere.<sup>15</sup> They were fighting the French and their families at the same time, despite the adamant protests of their fathers against any kind of political involvement.<sup>16</sup> While the women who participated in the march may not have considered themselves feminists and while they were not protesting specifically for the rights of women that simply act of defiance can be seen as an act of feminism.

Caitlin Killian suggests that one of the major points of disagreement between western feminists and North African female activists is the desire to maintain a distinct separation between men and women.<sup>17</sup> Many Maghrebi women express reluctance to embrace feminism as a label because they believe it limits their ability to identify with their male peers with whom they share a common struggle against discrimination. As has been suggested earlier, Maghrebi women are fighting two struggles on two different fronts, and thus some women feel that labeling themselves purely as feminist does not adequately express their struggle in its entirety and perhaps even limits it. Franco-Maghrebi women believed themselves to be working for the greater good of human kind and were fighting not only for women, but for their husbands, sons and brothers as well. Some of the earliest Beur feminists first

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<sup>15</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Cambridge Mass.: Perseus Books, 2000). 111.

<sup>16</sup> It is important here to note that while women did actively participate in the Algerian War of Independence, this freedom and political participation was short lived. The brevity of their presence in the public political sphere in Algeria suggests that in general society viewed the woman's place to be in the private sphere but that on occasion, their utility in the public sphere was recognized.

<sup>17</sup> Caitlin Killian, *North African Women in France: Gender, Culture, and Identity* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2006). 77.

entered into the field of activism during the Marche des Beurs alongside their brothers. They wanted to affirm and celebrate their commitment to the cause of their joint cause as well as to fight for causes of their own. As Leila, one of the women interviewed in Killian's study states,

I don't like the feminist movement...because it creates a break between two humans. I don't want that break. I want men and women to work together to make all of society evolve and to change certain things that work badly.<sup>18</sup>

While not all Maghrebi women would necessarily agree with this statement, Leila highlights an important issue. Maghrebi women may, at times, identify more with the experiences of their male peers than with French women who understand little about their cultural heritage or their experiences as members of a marginalized immigrant community. Maghrebi women saw for themselves an opportunity in the 1983 march to reaffirm their individual identities as well as their group identity as women living in Maghrebi communities. By actively participating in political demonstrations Maghrebi women were engaging in acts of feminism while simultaneously expressing solidarity with male members of the community. For many Maghrebi women, women's inequality was one manifestation of a greater inequality they experienced as immigrants.<sup>19</sup> Leila's statement embodies the spirit of women's participation in the Marche des Beurs. They were fighting for the same rights feminists emphasize but alongside their men.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> Killian, *North African Women in France*. 80.

## A GROWING DIVERGENCE: GENDER TENSIONS WITHIN THE BEUR MOVEMENT

Ultimately, the Marche des Beurs did not adequately address issues of women's equality specifically and in many instances failed to recognize women as legitimate participants in the march. SOS Racisme, an organization founded in 1984 that was inspired by the March, was very heavily dominated by men and focused more on racism as a broad category. Maghrebi women were thus compelled to develop a parallel movement designed specifically for women in order to actively challenge the intersection of racism and sexism. In an interview with Gita Srinivasan, Souad Benani, one of the founders of Nanas Beurs, states "Women's concerns were often overlooked in the ideological battle for equal opportunities for immigrants."<sup>20</sup> Regardless of whether or not women wanted to work alongside or separately from men, they felt that they could not do so and fight for their specific rights at the same time. Nanas Beurs, a feminist organization founded by Souad Benani was created in 1985, following the Marche des Beurs. It was the first feminist organization designed specifically to promote the rights of Franco-Maghrebi women. Benani suggests that in the early years of Nanas Beurs fundamentalism and religion played only a minor role, it was not until the 1990s with the rise of fundamentalism that women began to use the organization for help specifically in the context of Islam.<sup>21</sup> This distinction is an interesting one because while many French and French feminists in particular have often overlooked this distinction and have always assumed that religion was the primary obstacle facing Maghrebi women, Benani is suggesting otherwise.

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<sup>20</sup> Jane Freedman, "Women and Immigration: Nationality and Citizenship," in *Women, Immigration and Identities in France*, ed. Jane Freedman and Carrie Tarr (Berg Publishers, 2000). 25.

<sup>21</sup> Gita Srinivasan, "An Interview with Souad Benani," in *French Feminism: An Indian Anthology*, ed. Danielle Haase-Dubosc (SAGE, 2003). 271.



Political activism was one way in which Maghrebi women participated in the movements of the 1980s but it was not the only way in which Franco-Maghrebi women made their voices heard in the public sphere. Through writing – both creative fiction and non-fiction, Franco-Maghrebi women have been able to express the challenges they face as women of immigrant origin. Anissa Talahite suggests that Beur women writers were undoubtedly influenced by the anti-racism campaigns and their works explored more heavily the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity.<sup>22</sup> For the practical, everyday experiences of Franco-Maghrebi women, their ethnicity heavily shaped their lives and was thus inextricably linked to the concept of gender identity. From the very beginning this intersectionality has played a prominent role in shaping Franco-Maghrebi feminist discourse and this becomes even clearer in analyzing the writings of Beur female writers in the 1980s. Beur writers are to be distinguished from immigrant writers from earlier decades in that they deal specifically with the conflicts that arise from being born in France to immigrant parents. Never accepted by the French but equally rejected by the Maghreb, this community has a distinctive perspective on identity that informs their writing.<sup>23</sup> The act of writing is a very significant form of activism within the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement. The very act is subversive and defines cultural norms and boundaries. The Beur movement and the 1980s in general were significant because

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<sup>22</sup> Anissa Talahite, “Constructing Spaces of Transition: 'Beur' Women Writers and the Question of Representation,” in *Women, Immigration and Identities in France*, ed. Jane Freedman and Carrie Tarr (Berg Publishers, 2000). 103.

<sup>23</sup> Sylvie Durmelat, “Transmission and Mourning in *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin*: Yamina Benguigui as 'Memory Entrepreneur',” in *Women, immigration and identities in France*, ed. Carrie Tarr and Jane Freedman (Berg Publishers, 2000). 177.

they allowed for Franco-Maghrebi women to assert their voice either through spoken word or writing into a public sphere from which they were traditionally excluded.

What is arguably one of the most symbolic aspects of female Beur writing is that women are asserting their voices into realms that are traditionally reserved for men. In many Maghrebi cultures the woman's voice is seen as nothing more than useless chatter or banter.<sup>24</sup> By writing about their gender specific experiences as persons of Maghrebi descent, women are breaking down this societal belief in a very powerful way. Maghrebi female writing is also interesting in the way that its goals parallel those of French feminist writers. Their writing is in many ways an attempt to rewrite history to include women and their individual experiences. One of the central means of protest for French feminists like H el ene Cixous who placed a clear emphasis on writing as a form of feminist subversion, was the simple act of writing.<sup>25</sup> Writing in a male dominated world enabled women to dispel misguided stereotypes about women and to create a space for them in history. As Talahite writes, "writing constitutes one of the ways in which women have attempted to construct spaces of expression outside patriarchal control represented by linearity, rationality and objectivity."<sup>26</sup> This quotation emphasizes the need to challenge the patriarchal structure on multiple levels: both directly through a critique of women's oppression in Franco-Maghrebi communities and indirectly by challenging the methodology and style of male writing. Beur female writing is often in the form of pseudo-autobiographical fiction, which also function as creative works of literature.

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<sup>24</sup> Lilia Labidi, "The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 1 (2007): 6-34. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Gita Srinivasan, "An Interview with Souad Benani." 62.

<sup>26</sup> Anissa Talahite, "Constructing Spaces of Transition: 'Beur' Women Writers and the Question of Representation." 104.

Some of the most significant texts that emerged from the Beur movement of the late 1980s and early 90s are Soraya Nini's *Ils disent que je suis une Beurette* (1993), Ferrudja Kessa's *Beur Story* (1990), and Farida Bleghoul's *Georgette 1986*. Most of these stories follow the lives of an individual Franco-Maghrebi girl as she attempts to deal with familial restrictions as well as exclusion from mainstream French society. Two particularly significant themes in Beur female writing are conflicting cultural conceptions of gender and the effects of immigration and discrimination on gender.<sup>27</sup> These themes both suggest that female Beur writers are attempting to express their desire for a broader conception of feminism that accounts for the effects of cultural difference on gender. They do not seem to view gender as the overarching, broadest conception of identity but rather they are emphasizing and expressing the ways in which different cultural conceptions of gender affect their identity as women. Female Beur writing emerged in the 1980s during an era of protest. It has continued to be a popular form of expression for Franco-Maghrebis throughout the 1990s, as women's experiences grew increasingly distinct from those of their male peers and as their status began to rapidly decline.

### **THE EMERGENCE OF BANLIEUE CULTURE**

The Beur movement began as a movement of relative unity but as the movement disintegrated, so too did the unity between the sexes. The gendered violence and discrimination within Maghrebi communities during the early 1990s led to the establishment of a pronounced gender divide within the *banlieue*, women were forced to spearhead their own distinctive movement. The 1990s were an especially

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<sup>27</sup> Hiddleston, 103

critical decade in the history of Franco-Maghrebi feminism because of the social and economic turmoil that plagued Maghrebi communities. The Beur movement ultimately fell short in its failure to bring about tangible improvements in the quality of life in the *banlieue*. While the march was well received in the Elysée, President Francois Mitterand and his successive administrations from 1981-1995 reneged on their promises of better housing, education and social inclusion of Franco-Maghrebi youth.<sup>28</sup> Many of the youth and social programs in the *banlieue*, which were created during Mitterand's administration specifically to address the concerns of the community, lost funding during the economic crises of the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> These failures and abandonments fostered a severe sense of disillusionment, which have subsequently had serious consequences in the *banlieue*, particularly for women.

The Beur generation has often been categorized as belonging to the hybridized "third space" a term coined by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha.<sup>30</sup> Franco-Maghrebi youth are placed in an interstitial, third space between the colonizing culture and the colonized culture.<sup>31</sup> This concept of third space, which according to Bhabha allows for the development of "new structures of authority, [and] new political initiatives," is an effective way of categorizing the 1980s Beur movement.<sup>32</sup> Their political activism and anti-racism campaigns were an attempt to forge a new kind of political action or rhetoric, but their movement ultimately failed. Not only did

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<sup>28</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves and Mark McKinney, "The Post-Colonial Problematic in Contemporary France," in *Post-Colonial Cultures in France*, ed. Alec G. Hargreaves and Mark McKinney (Routledge, 1997). 46.

<sup>29</sup> Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation*. 173.

<sup>30</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 2004). 56.

<sup>31</sup> M. Perloff, "Cultural Liminality/Aesthetic Closure? The "Interstitial Perspective" of Homi Bharbha," *Literary Imagination* 1, no. 1 (1999): 109.

<sup>32</sup> Hargreaves and McKinney, "The Post-Colonial Problematic in Contemporary France." 4.

Franco-Maghrebi youth resent the State for its failure to improve living conditions in the *banlieue*, but they also resented *Beurgeoisie* who had left the suburbs to pursue professional careers.<sup>33</sup> This atmosphere of abandonment and rejection on dual fronts helps to explain the escalation of violence throughout the 90s as frustrations and tensions continued to mount. The leaders of the *Beurgeoisie*, like Harlem Désir and others in the association SOS Racisme, who began to advocate policies of civic integration, were considered sellouts by the younger generations who wanted to be welcomed into French society unconditionally.<sup>34</sup>

A growing resentment with the French state and a rejection of *Beurgeois* ideals of peaceful assimilation in the early 1990s sparked the rise of new era of Franco-Maghrebi youth culture in which religious fundamentalism and gang violence were the most visible markers of identity. This is not to suggest that these markers were representative of all Franco-Maghrebi youth culture, but rather that they became the most visible force in the *banlieue*. What is most striking about this decade is the regression of Franco-Maghrebi women's rights and the alarming increase in violent acts committed against young Franco-Maghrebi women by male members of their own communities. This violence has lent a sense of urgency to the Franco Maghrebi feminist movement that the French feminist movement does not have. The heightened tension between the sexes has visibly manifested itself through a growing masculinization of the public sphere of the *banlieue* and has greatly restricted the movement and organization of Franco-Maghrebi women.

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<sup>33</sup> Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation*. 170. The term *Beurgeoisie* refers to the professional class of the *Beur* generation.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

Female activist and founder of Ni Putes Ni Soumises, Fadela Amara, stresses the significance of this regression in her work *Breaking the Silence: French Women's Voices from the Ghetto*, written in 2003, and suggests a variety of explanations for such a regression; including high unemployment and disenchantment among young men in the *banlieue* as well as the rise of a transnational Islamist movement.<sup>35</sup> What is significant about Amara's argument is that her analysis illuminates the complex ways in which the intersection of religion and culture, as well as racial discrimination and economic distress during the 1990s have negatively impacted Franco-Maghrebi women. Franco-Maghrebi men in the *banlieue* became increasingly frustrated and restless and often lashed out at the women in their communities.

As Paul A. Silverstein in his work *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race and Nation*, published in 2004, suggests, the aftermath and subsequent failure of the Beur movement led to the creation of a new *banlieue* generation named for the sordid suburban communities many members of the *banlieue* culture inhabited.<sup>36</sup> This generation rejected the notion of a hybridized identity in which they felt excluded both from French society as well as their traditional, ethnic societal structure. They instead turned towards community-oriented movements such as gangs or religious institutions, which provided them with a clearly defined space and a sense of belonging. These community oriented movements helped *banlieue* youth to develop a sense of identity that was not tied to nationality or ethnicity. This drift towards movements in which space was clearly defined led to an increase in masculine territoriality in which the public sphere of the suburbs became a *male* space. The

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<sup>35</sup> Fadela Amara, *Breaking Silence : French Women's Voices From the Ghetto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation*. 169.

evolution of *banlieue* culture thus resulted in a declining presence of women in the public space of the *banlieue*

Silverstein effectively illustrates the failure of the State to fully integrate the Maghrebi community in his discussion of two Parisian suburbs – Pantin and Mantes-la-Jolie. While his discussion does not directly touch upon women, it very clearly highlights the negligence of the State and the ways in which it blatantly ignored some of the alarming social developments in the *banlieue*. He uses these two suburbs as well as others to illustrate the fact that the French State invested in “state technologies to integrate [Maghrebis] economically while excluding them socially.”<sup>37</sup> More specifically, the State did implement certain urban planning initiatives to allow for a better economic integration of the *banlieue*, but they made no effort to socially integrate the *banlieue*. This implies that the French government made no attempts to fully integrate or include Franco-North Africans living in suburban communities and as the tension mounted, the State backed away from its responsibilities. Failures to improve the education system, and the unemployment crisis are two significant ways in which the State failed to *socially* integrate Franco-Maghrebi youth. French politicians and French society tend to attribute the oppression of women to something inherent in Arab or Maghrebi culture. They have, however, failed to acknowledge the ways in which social and economic exclusion, particularly of Franco-Maghrebi males has led to the rise of violence and discrimination against women in the suburbs.

Unemployment became a chronic issue throughout France in the early 1990s. As the most marginalized community in France, Franco-Maghrebi youth experienced

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 120.

the most difficulty finding work. In the early 90s, the unemployment rate was as high as 40% among young men and it has since continued to hover somewhere between 30 - 40%.<sup>38</sup> This resulted in a large number of young, idle men who had even more difficulty finding work than women.<sup>39</sup> As Amara suggests, “their forced idleness completely upset their roles within the family and undermined their authority.”<sup>40</sup> Men, who had previously defined themselves by their status as the family breadwinners, suffered yet another loss of identity. By the mid 1990s, the employment crisis in France had gradually begun to improve. This did not, however, result in any substantial change for the Franco-Maghrebi community. Once again, the State was shirking its responsibility to its most marginalized citizens. Unemployment rates remained disproportionately high, particularly among young men, and discrimination against idle Franco-Maghrebi males was unrelenting, ultimately resulting in a series of violent clashes between Franco-Maghrebi youth and the police throughout the 1990s.<sup>41</sup> This violence and frustration, unsurprisingly, had serious consequences for women in the community. As unemployed fathers, brothers and boyfriends sought to assert some kind of control over their lives, they began to exercise greater control over women in the community. This is not to down play the responsibility of men in contributing to the deterioration of Maghrebi women’s status in the *banlieue*, but rather to highlight the ways in which socioeconomic instability

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<sup>38</sup> Mucchielli Laurent, “Entre politique sécuritaire et délinquance d’exclusion : le malaise de la prévention spécialisée,” *Socio-Logos*, no. 2 (March 28, 2007), <http://socio-logos.revues.org/document79.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Killian, *North African Women in France*. 71.

<sup>40</sup> Amara, *Breaking Silence : French Women's Voices From the Ghetto*. 62.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 63.



and marginalization have contributed to the patriarchal, male dominated order of the *banlieue*.

### THE *BANLIEUE* AS A MALE DOMINATED SPACE

In order to truly understand the evolution of *banlieue* culture and the devolution of Franco-Maghrebi women's rights throughout the 1990s, it is important to better understand the *banlieue* as a physical and perceived space.<sup>42</sup> When described in the popular French media as well as academic texts, the *banlieue* is often characterized as a grey, somber and desolate peripheral space that exists outside of French society.<sup>43</sup> Living in such a marginalized, external space renders the individual invisible within French society and categorizes the individual someone who exists outside of or separate from the rest. This kind of categorization, however, is dangerous because it denies the subtle ways in which individuals attempt to assert control over their lives and their identities within society as a whole. Silverstein's analysis of *banlieue* culture addresses this agency and illuminates the ways in which the *banlieue* youth culture claims ownership over this peripheral territory. One example that he uses to support his argument is the widespread presence of graffiti in the *banlieue* that represents the growing rap culture of the suburbs.<sup>44</sup> This domination of the public sphere, he suggests, is a manifestation of Franco-Maghrebi youth to showcase their presence and control over their communities.

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<sup>42</sup> The use of the word space is to set the *banlieue* apart from the rest of the city. The *banlieues* are seen as entities that exist outside of the city, at the margins and therefore must be considered distinctive spaces.

<sup>43</sup> Sylvie Durmelat, "Natives and Narratives from the Banlieue," in *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*, ed. Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001). 119.

<sup>44</sup> Amara, *Breaking Silence : French Women's Voices From the Ghetto*. 120.

One of the greatest weaknesses of Silverstein's analysis of the *banlieue*, however, is his failure to adequately address the absence of women in this space. While Silverstein does vaguely allude to the influence of traditional social structures in the *banlieue*, he does not explicitly address the implications of this for women. Almost all of his examples focus on discrimination against men and the ways in which Franco-Maghrebi men are asserting control over the territory through rap culture and graffiti.<sup>45</sup> What is most often overlooked and arguably one of the most significant trends in spatial conceptions of the *banlieue* is the growing gender divide. Rather than looking at the *banlieue* as a marginalized or transitional space, it can be seen as a conquered space in which men assert their control over the public sphere and women are forced back into the private sphere. It is useful to think of the *banlieue* as a divided space at the margins in which women are even more severely marginalized by members of their own communities. This is not to suggest that women are passively accepting such a fate but rather to highlight one of the major obstacles that Franco-Maghrebi feminists are faced with. As it has become increasingly difficult for women to freely enter and exit the male dominated public space within the *banlieue*, it has become harder for them to organize or form associations that would address their needs. In some ways the *banlieue* has become a replication of traditional social structures but it simultaneously encompasses radically new trends such as the rise of transnational Islamic fundamentalism and gang violence. Franco-Maghrebi women are thus restricted by traditional social restraints but faced with new oppressions.

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<sup>45</sup> Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation*. 149.

The rise of neighborhood gangs and the emergence of a new, radical political Islam, two new trends that emerged in France in the 1990s can both be seen as reactionary. Amara effectively illustrates the reactionary nature of these movements by linking them to unemployment and idleness. The rise of “basement” Islam, which is based on a highly sexist and macho discourse, is a particularly strong example of this because, as Amara suggests, “it emerged when a significant number of young people from the projects were completely disoriented, facing failure in school, unemployment and discrimination.”<sup>46</sup> In order to regain his individual pride and dominance the Franco-Maghrebi male turned towards an ideology that would reaffirm his dominance and superiority. While gang membership was a very different approach, it achieved the same ultimate end. Gang violence escalated throughout the 1990s, and while statistics are often difficult to obtain, one hotline for rape victims reported 73 cases of gang rape between January to October 2001. It should be noted here, that these are only the reported rapes of which there are few.<sup>47</sup> Both radical Islamism and gang presence successfully conquered and transformed the public sphere within the suburb into a male dominated space. It became his domain over which he could control the coming and goings of others, in particular women. Fear and intimidation as well as force kept women out of the public space and silenced anyone – man or woman – who opposed this new social order.

It is important here to stress that the growing presence of Islam in the 1990s in no way resembles the traditional Islam of the Maghreb – the Islam of the *banlieue* youth’s parents. This new Islam is highly politicized and far more radical than

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<sup>46</sup> Amara, *Breaking Silence : French Women's Voices From the Ghetto*. 95.

<sup>47</sup> Lucinda O'Hanlon, “Violence Against Women in France,” in *Violence Against Women*, ed. C. Benninger-Budel and Lucinda O'Hanlon (World Organisation against Torture, 1999).

traditional Maghrebi Islam. Such a phenomenon is significant because it highlights the desire of Franco-Maghrebi youth to identify with a larger, transnational movement that was not based on any one national identity. By identifying with a transnational movement both Franco-Maghrebi men and women are rejecting the notion of a nationally defined identity and are thus able to finally find a sense of belonging. Again the rejection of hybridized, split identity surfaces as both young men and women in the suburbs sought to identify with movements in which they had clearly defined space. While gang membership and the turn towards Islam are not exclusively male phenomena, there is noticeably less of a female presence because it is more difficult for women to organize outside the home without the supervision of a male relative. In analyzing the gender dynamics within the *banlieue* it becomes increasingly clearer that the most visible attempts of Franco-Maghrebi youth to redefine their identity very overtly excluded women. Women pass through the public sphere of the *banlieue* but rarely linger for fear of being harassed or worse, sexually and physically abused.

Throughout the 1990s, Franco-Maghrebi women experienced increasing violence and restrictions on their personal freedoms from men within their own communities but also felt French society had no desire to hear what they had to say about their experiences as multicultural women in France. While French feminists prefer to subvert race, class and religion to the overarching category of gender, the regression of women's rights in Franco-Maghrebi communities during the 1990s is inextricably linked to these factors. The turn towards Islamic fundamentalism or gang membership in order to feel a sense of belonging and to create a new space was

in many respects a response to racial discrimination and marginalization. In the face of failure and mass unemployment, men used a sexist, oppressive Islamist rhetoric to control women and territorialize the *banlieue* in attempts to reassert their lost dominance. It becomes clear that the work of Franco-Maghrebi feminists is monumental and must be heavily engaged in religious and cultural institutions in order to address the fundamental causes of gender oppression in Franco-Maghrebi communities.

### CONCLUSION

A close study of the 1980s and 1990s brings to light the undeniable link between racism, discrimination and gendered oppression. The decline in Franco-Maghrebi women's power and independence illuminates the severe social tensions that were present in Maghrebi communities during 1980s and were severely heightened in the 1990s. It becomes clear that this counterintuitive regression of women's rights in the Maghrebi community has been the greatest influence on and motivation for the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement. As was suggested earlier, in the 1980s women did not want to adopt the label of feminism and wanted to work with and alongside their male peers. As this became increasingly difficult and violence against women became a daily occurrence, Franco-Maghrebi feminism became a responsive movement operating in crisis mode. Franco-Maghrebi feminism could not be a movement of words or theory, but was forced to become a movement of action. Activism has thus become a central element of the Franco-Maghrebi feminism movement and will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. The

first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by the rise of Franco-Maghrebi women in the *French* public sphere as women begin to organize and protest against oppression at home and discrimination in public. There is a broad range of opinions within the Franco-Maghrebi school of feminism and this becomes clear in looking not only at their literature, but more specifically through their responses to major events such as the brutal murder of Sohanne Benziane October of 2002 and the 2004 law banning the headscarf in public schools. The events of the 1980s and 1990s highlight the ways in which the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement was affected by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and gang violence, both of which are symptoms of a larger issue of social and economic exclusion. In the first decade of the twenty first century, however, Franco-Maghrebi women's actions and responses to these external pressures have gained a growing presence in the French public sphere.

## CHAPTER Two

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### THE FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINIST MOVEMENT: ASSOCIATIONS, ACTIONS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

The Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement is a complex and highly decentralized social movement. Despite this decentralization, however, there are clear and strong connections between the diverse association that will be discussed throughout the course of this chapter. In recent years Franco-Maghrebi women's issues have become increasingly popular subjects in the public sphere, which has exacerbated the philosophical disagreements within the movement. As the previous chapter demonstrated, immigration and the status of immigrant communities in France have become issues of increasing concern. While the discussion of Maghrebi youth in the 1990s was primarily focused on the Maghrebi male, attention has recently shifted to Maghrebi women as tools of assimilation. The recent political and media frenzy concerning Franco-Maghrebi women and their struggle has resulted in some positive effects, but has also negatively impacted the movement. Throughout the course of this chapter we will explore the structural characteristics of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement and associations within the movement. We will also address the ways in which the State and media have been impacted by Franco-Maghrebi feminism and have in turn shaped the movement from the outside. Through an analysis of key events that profoundly affected Franco-Maghrebi women and the nation as a whole, the connections between the Franco-Maghrebi feminist

movement, the State and the greater public and the mutual impact they have had on each other will become clear. Understanding these external influences and connections will help to frame and contextualize the movement as well as highlight one of the significant struggles of Franco-Maghrebi feminists: the right to define and shape their own movement.

### **DECENTRALIZATION AND DISPERSION: THE UNIQUE NATURE OF FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINISM**

A wide variety of organizations and collectives dedicated to the rights of Maghrebi women – both in France and the Maghreb – exist in France today. What remains to be seen, however, is whether or not these various organizations form a cohesive and distinctive movement that distinguishes it from French feminism. At first it seems difficult to draw any concrete conclusions concerning the nature of a potential Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement because the various organizations and individuals actively fighting for the rights of Franco-Maghrebi women are only loosely connected and are highly dispersed. As Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield suggest in *New Social Movements*, however, decentralization and dispersion are characteristic of new social movements and thus these characteristics do not prevent the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement from being considered a movement. Not only do individuals and associations within the movement seem to be disparate, they also often appear to have different short-term objectives. Organizations such as Ni Putes Ni Soumises (NPNS) channel their energy into promoting secular values and stressing the potential for individual liberation in French society, while other associations such as Voix d’Elles Rebelles or Femmes d’Ici et d’Ailleurs focus more



on creating on the ground projects to promote the economic empowerment, independence and overall safety of women in their communities. At the other end of the spectrum there are associations such as Mouvement des Indigènes de la République (MIR), whose overall goal is to challenge what they perceive to be postcolonial institutions still present in France today. Despite these fragmentations, analysis of the various associations will show that they are all concerned with the larger goal of empowering and supporting Franco-Maghrebi women. Many of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist associations are fighting against violence, discrimination and the overall oppression of all women and seek to challenge the multiple sources of their oppression. While there are a large number of associations, this chapter will focus on some of the larger, more widely recognized associations and the ways in which their movements and approaches differ from one another.

The common assumption in French society is that divisions amongst Franco-Maghrebi women are a result of the religious versus secular divide. This, however, is not the case. Deeper divisions are rooted in a disagreement over who is implicated in the deteriorating status of Franco-Maghrebi women in France: French society for its racial-religious discrimination and economic marginalization of the Maghrebi community or Maghrebi men and the Islamic patriarchy that has gained growing momentum in the past decade. It is undoubtedly a mix of religion and cultural practices as well as the socioeconomic decline and growing isolation of the *banlieue*, but there is little agreement over where the fault ultimately lies.<sup>1</sup> The two associations NPNS and MIR illustrate the extremes, and their positions will be

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<sup>1</sup> Bronwyn Winter, *The Hijab & the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate* (Syracuse University Press, 2008). 307.

explored in greater detail in the following section. While these two associations may have succeeded in gaining the most public attention, as Bronwyn Winter suggests in her work *The Hijab and the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate*, many Franco-Maghrebi feminists are still struggling to promote a more nuanced, complex understanding of the role of difference and otherness in shaping the lives and attitudes of Franco-Maghrebi women.<sup>2</sup>

### THE ASSOCIATIONS

There are two primary types of Franco-Maghrebi feminist associations. There are associations whose main focus is on the Maghreb and there are associations that focus on immigration, and thus work primarily with Franco-Maghrebi women living in France. While these two types of organizations may have distinct immediate or specific goals, there is a significant amount of overlap between the two. These two types of associations do, however, occupy different spaces within the French public sphere and as a result, they are affected by external influences, especially public and media attention, differently. This section will focus specifically on associations dedicated to working with immigrant women. It will explore the variety of Franco-Maghrebi feminist associations and collectives, and more importantly will create a master narrative that will help to better explain the evolution and overall structure of the movement.<sup>3</sup>

The two extremes of the movement are represented by NPNS whose position is very much in line with French political rhetoric and republican values and MIR

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 273.

<sup>3</sup> Associations focused on women's rights in the Maghreb will be discussed at greater length in the final chapter of this thesis.

whose feminist collective was founded as a direct response and in direct opposition to NPNS.<sup>4</sup> Both of these movements are highly controversial, widely represented in the French media and both organizations inadvertently reinforce the tendency to instrumentalize Franco-Maghrebi women.<sup>5</sup> NPNS can be said to have co-opted the cause of Franco-Maghrebi women in the *banlieue* in order to pursue, what some would argue, is a French political agenda that promotes integration and assimilation with little acknowledgement of ethnic or cultural difference.<sup>6</sup> MIR can be seen as having used the Franco-Maghrebi women's cause in order to bring to light the hypocritical racism and postcolonial structure of French society. Both of these organizations have drowned out the less strident voices that often lobby for a more balanced discussion of the challenges facing Franco-Maghrebi women. These organizations also both tend to overshadow some of the tremendous on the ground work that is being done by smaller, lesser-known grassroots associations and collectives located in the *banlieue*.

### *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*

NPNS is undoubtedly the best-known Franco-Maghrebi feminist organization. While the association now claims to represent women from all ethnic groups, the origins of the organization are inextricably linked to the experiences of Franco-Maghrebi women. Organized as a call to action after the brutal murder on October 4,

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<sup>4</sup> Houria Bouteldja, "Entretien avec Houria Bouteldja, Porte-parole du Mouvement des Indigènes de la République," December 10, 2006, <http://www.indigenes-republique.org/spip.php?article599>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Kiran Grewal, "The Threat from Within': Representations of the Banlieue in French Popular Discourse," in *Europe: New Voices, New Perspectives* (University of Melbourne: Contemporary Europe Research Center, 2007), 41-67. 61.

2002 of Sohane Benziane, a 17 year old girl of Algerian descent, and the compelling and tragic testimony of Samira Bellil recounting her three gang rapes between the ages of 14 and 17, Ni Putes Ni Soumises spearheaded the Marche des femmes des quartiers contre le ghetto et pour l'égalité (March by Neighborhood Women For Equality and Against the Ghetto), which took place on February 1, 2003, in order to help Franco-Maghrebi women reclaim their space and their rights and to challenge the male patriarchal order of the *banlieue*.<sup>7</sup> Having organized several council meetings with women from the *banlieue*, both in their communities as well as in Paris, Amara and her peers decided that more drastic action was needed to challenge and change the position of women in *banlieue*.<sup>8</sup> The organization, which formally emerged in the aftermath of the march, established its position in stating:

‘Ni putes ni soumises’ C’est pour dire non à la dégradation constante et inadmissible que subissent les filles dans nos quartiers que nous avons lancé ce cri de colère. Un cri au visage de notre société pour que plus personne ne puisse dire: on ne savait pas!<sup>9</sup>

This mission statement establishes two primary functions of the organization: to aid women who are victims of physical or mental abuse as well as to keep the greater public informed and educated about the plight of women in the *banlieue*. The last sentence of their mission statement – which translates to “a cry to our society so that no one can say ‘we didn’t know’” – alludes to their emphasis on the media and

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<sup>7</sup> Amara, *Breaking Silence : French Women's Voices From the Ghetto*. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>9</sup> “Mouvement Ni Putes Ni Soumises - Le site officiel - Présentation du Mouvement,” <http://www.niputesnisoumises.com/mouvement-presentation/>. Translation: “‘Neither whores nor Doormats’ is to say no to the constant and inadmissible degradation that oppresses women in our neighborhoods, that we have launched a cry of anger. A cry in the face of our society so that no one can say ‘we didn’t know.’”

publicity. NPNS appears to be one of the most broadly reaching organizations in terms of its overall ambitions. While it has been suggested earlier in this work that Franco-Maghrebi feminism lacks a strong theoretical framework, NPNS has developed a theoretical framework within the paradigm of French republicanism and has also engaged in pragmatic efforts to keep the public informed about the status of women in the *banlieue*.<sup>10</sup> NPNS' articulation of a rhetoric that is so in line with French republican and secular norms, has made it challenging for other Franco-Maghrebi women's associations with different philosophies to gain access to the public sphere. Their slogan, for example, "Égalité, Laïcité, Mixité" bears a close resemblance to the French slogan "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité."<sup>11</sup> This striking similarity is emblematic of the association's overall philosophy and affinity for French republican values. By including the concept of Mixité, NPNS calls for the normalization of gender relations in the *banlieue* and suggests that it is only through secular republican values that such equal gender relations can exist. While this is not problematic in and of itself, NPNS' failure to adequately question the French concept of secularism or laïcité weakens its overall position. As Kiran Grewal suggests, NPNS has failed to challenge the mainstream representation of women in the *banlieue* as the passive, submissive victims of Maghrebi male patriarchy and further more, NPNS maintains the image of the *banlieue* as a male dominated space in which sexism, gendered violence patriarchy persist.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Grewal, "The Threat from Within': Representations of the Banlieue in French Popular Discourse." 62.

<sup>11</sup> Ni Putes Ni Soumises. *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*. Paris. Print

<sup>12</sup> Grewal, "The Threat from Within': Representations of the Banlieue in French Popular Discourse." 62.

While it began as an organization of the *banlieue*, NPNS rapidly grew into a nation wide and even international phenomenon whose focus has since shifted towards a more ideological approach that is less grounded in the reality of the present day *cit  *. In a literal, physical sense NPNS is removed from life in the *banlieue* by the location it chose for its headquarters. Located in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in the Maison de la Mixit   – a center funded by former President Jacques Chirac – NPNS no longer has a strong physical presence in or connection to the suburbs. While it remains dedicated to serving women who are victims of violence and gendered discrimination, it is no longer as easily accessible to women in the *banlieue*. The relocation of NPNS is emblematic of the direction that the organization is taking. It is itself a model of integration in terms of its shift from the *banlieue* to the actual city and in many ways it mirrors the SOS Racisme movement created in the 1980s, which moved out of the *banlieue* and up the political ladder.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note here that Fadela Amara, who was one of the original founders of NPNS, started her career as an activist in the SOS Racisme movement.<sup>14</sup> Her growth as a public and political figure in many ways mirrors that of the leaders of the Beur movement from the 1980s.

Many of the articles recently published on the association are highly critical of the path NPNS has chosen. While much of this criticism is well founded, it is nonetheless significant to recognize the positive impact that NPNS has had on the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement. Its media strategy, while highly controversial, has been successful at harnessing public attention on the issues of Franco-Maghrebi

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<sup>13</sup> Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation*. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Winter, *The Hijab & the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate*. 273.

women.<sup>15</sup> NPNS has also successfully organized and orchestrated a number of rallies and protests in response to major violations of women's rights. NPNS' most recent protest in January of 2010 was a small and informal gathering on behalf of Rayhana, an Algerian feminist and playwright who was attacked at a gas station in Paris. Representatives from different women's rights groups both local and international, French and Franco-Maghrebi, as well as representatives from different political parties gathered to show a united front against violence and aggression. The presence of politicians at such events speaks to the growing politicization of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement.

In recent years, the willingness to participate in such gatherings has, however, dwindled. The widespread public support that NPNS has received has overshadowed the efforts of other organizations whose opinions and actions differ from those of NPNS. N - a member of the Association des Tunisiens en France who wishes to remain anonymous- for example, clearly stated that she, along with some of her friends and fellow feminists, consciously chose not to participate in the rally for Rayhana because they did not want NPNS to get all of the credit for organizing the rally and they also did not want to exploit the tragedy that befell Rayhana.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that Rayhana herself did not participate in the rally. While this may appear to be a political dispute or power struggle, it reveals a much deeper tension within the movement. NPNS, which has risen to the forefront of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement, is not an adequate reflection of Franco-Maghrebi feminist associations in general and is certainly not an *elected* or chosen spokesperson

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<sup>15</sup> C, interview by Nina Sheth, January 15, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> N, interview by Nina Sheth.

for women in the *banlieue*.<sup>17</sup> This schism reflects a rather profound philosophical disagreement with their overall approach and platform.

### *Mouvement Indigènes de la République*

At the other end of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist spectrum is Mouvement des Indigènes de la République. While MIR is not an association dedicated solely to the rights of Franco-Maghrebi women, there is a feminist collective within the association. The Feministes Indigènes, formerly called Les Blédardes, was created in 2005 as a direct response to NPNS because in the words of Houria Boutledja, the association's spokeswoman, “on n’était pas d’accord avec leur discours, mais surtout parce que leur discours a suscité chez nous une réaction extrêmement violente.”<sup>18</sup>

This violent reaction to the doctrine of NPNS is grounded in the fact that members of MIR find NPNS’ rhetoric unpalatable in the way that it portrays the Maghrebi male. The overarching goal of the Féministes Indigènes is to create a space for immigrant women within the greater narrative of the immigration struggle.<sup>19</sup> While Boutledja recognizes that women’s rights have often been overlooked in the immigrant struggle, she emphasizes the dangers of such an alienation or demonization of the Franco-Maghrebi male.

Like NPNS, the overall strategy of the Féministes Indigènes focuses on promoting their theoretical and political discourse in the media. The rhetoric they use specifically to discuss feminism in France is often couched in language decrying

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with S, 1/15/10

<sup>18</sup> Boutledja, “Entretien avec Houria Boutledja, Porte-parole du Mouvement des Indigènes de la République.” Translation “We did not agree with their discourse, but especially because their discourse invoked an extremely violent reaction among us.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*



colonialism or postcolonialism undertones still present in France. For example during the Hijab debate, Bouteldja spoke of a “colonializing feminism” in response to the *Elle* petition organized by NPNS.<sup>20</sup> This discussion of colonialism and paternalism has led members of MIR to promote what they consider to be a new form of feminism comprised solely of immigrant women whose race, religion and culture all affect their gender identity. Unlike NPNS they actively distinguish themselves from their French feminist peers.<sup>21</sup>

A close analysis of the theoretical and political nature of both NPNS and MIR reveals that despite their opposing discourses, a number of similarities between the two movements exist. Both movements adamantly affirm their adherence to secularism. While MIR fights specifically for the rights of Arabs, Africans and Muslims, it does not consider itself a primarily ethnic or religious organization.<sup>22</sup> Another striking similarity to NPNS is the focus on the media and political affairs. MIR is very much engaged in a media campaign. Their website hosts number of links to television and newspaper appearances of MIR and their organization of highly visual demonstrations and protests further highlights their desire to focus on public attention. MIR also has an initiative called Indigènes TV exclusively dedicated to promoting their voice in the public arena. Not only is MIR very openly seeking media attention, but it is also in the process of anchoring itself in the French political landscape by creating le Parti des Mouvement des Indigènes de la République. While

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<sup>20</sup> Winter, *The Hijab & the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate*. 311.

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that MIR does actually host a number of articles written by Christine Delphy, a well recognized *French* feminist, on their website. She has been a fairly active participant in their movement.

<sup>22</sup> Mouvement des Indigènes de la République, “Les Indigènes de la république » Qui sommes-nous ?,” March 13, 2006, [http://www.indigenes-republique.fr/article.php?id\\_article=59&var\\_recherche=feministes+Indig%E8nes+](http://www.indigenes-republique.fr/article.php?id_article=59&var_recherche=feministes+Indig%E8nes+).

many, including members of MIR have accused NPNS of co-opting the cause Franco-Maghrebi women to further a political agenda, they too have a political agenda in which the cause of Franco-Maghrebi women is central.

### *Voix d'Elles Rebelles*

While NPNS and MIR represent the extremes of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement, there are many associations that fall in between. Most of these associations adopt more pragmatic approaches to the issues of women's rights and empowerment and are more rooted in the communities that they serve. Unlike NPNS or MIR, these organizations channel their energies towards their work in their communities and do not engage as heavily with the media or political sphere. Their rhetoric is therefore less heavily shaped and influenced by the media and mainstream politics. The organization *Voix d'Elles Rebelles*, for example, is highly critical of NPNS in the way that it caters to French political parties and the French media. While the organization does not directly address MIR, its leaders' rhetoric and actions suggest that they would distance themselves from such an extreme as well. Their struggle focuses on economic and social empowerment of women on a consistent basis and not simply in a moment of extreme crises. Their approach can be seen as both preventative and responsive rather than purely or primarily responsive. *Voix d'Elles Rebelle's* primary objective is to defend the rights of women and young girls no matter what their origins, although Maghrebi women are their main constituency.<sup>23</sup> Located in Seine-St. Denis, one of the "banlieue chaude" or sensitive areas, *Voix*

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<sup>23</sup> "Association féministe *Voix d'Elles Rebelles*," <http://www.voixdelles.org/fr/index.htm>.

d'Elles Rebelles prides itself on working on the ground close to the women who are most in need. The association organizes a variety of projects, which include not only helping women in immediate distress, but also educating the community about women's struggles abroad, notably in Algeria.

Another unique element of the organization's approach is its emphasis on male-female unity. While the stated mission of the organization is to aid and defend women in distress, S – a member of the organization who wishes to remain anonymous– suggested that one of her fundamental problems with NPNS is the way in which it alienates women from men and thus reinforces the traditional separation between the sexes in Maghrebi culture.<sup>24</sup> Voix d'Elles Rebelles has organized a number of projects that both boys and girls participated in, which it argues will better enhance cooperation and mutual respect between the sexes in the future. Both boys and girls mingle in the association's head office together and use it as both a recreational environment as well as a learning environment. In order to promote stronger male-female solidarity, Voix d'Elles Rebelles avoids promoting stereotypes of the Maghrebi male and instead focuses on the common elements of the Maghrebi male-female struggle. This is not to suggest that they ignore the issue of male violence, it is clearly an association designed to support women who are victims of patriarchy and male perpetrated violence. The association does, however, exercise caution with respect to such polarizing rhetoric and therefore it has adopted a nuanced rhetoric that focuses both on male patriarchy in the *banlieue* as well as the socioeconomic discrimination against the Maghrebi community in France. This

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<sup>24</sup> S, interview by Nina Sheth, January 14, 2010.

constitutes a significant difference between Voix d'Elles Rebelles and NPNS. Voix d'Elles Rebelles, for example, organized a community service trip to Madagascar to rebuild the maternity ward of a hospital. The trip, which had both male and female volunteers, was designed in order to foster a sense of confidence and to help these individuals get back on their feet in France.<sup>25</sup> It provided them with a set of skills and a greater sense of responsibility and most importantly, encouraged a greater sense of solidarity between young boys and girls from the *banlieue*. It is a telling example of the way that Voix d'Elles Rebelles attempts to gradually break down the strict separation between the sexes in the *banlieue*. Their focus on providing both women and men with tangible skills serves the dual mission of promoting mutual respect between the sexes as well as economic empowerment for all residents of the *banlieue*.

### *Femmes d'Ici et D'Ailleurs*

In contrast to the associations that have been discussed thus far, the association Femmes d'Ici et d'Ailleurs (Women from here and there), has adopted a much different approach. Founded by Fatima Rhazi in 1994, the association is dedicated to fighting for the rights of immigrant women, but has adopted a unique approach that focuses almost exclusively on women's liberation through economic empowerment. Located in Marseille, a port city with many Maghrebi immigrants, Femmes d'Ici et d'Ailleurs functions both as a cultural association dedicated to promoting Maghrebi culture within French society and as a vehicle for women's economic empowerment. Fatima Rhazi's personal story provides a window into the

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with C, interview.

overall philosophy of the association. She was the first female sports' photographer in Morocco, but the moment she appeared on television, her career was over. The scandal that ensued put her in a place of great danger and she was thus forced to move to France with her daughter. While her success in Morocco was significant, it did not enable her to find work in France and it was only when she met a French graphic designer Martine Derain who recognized her potential that she began to get her feet back on the ground. Her difficulties in France made her realize the need for an association that would help immigrant women to gain economic independence and acceptance into mainstream society.<sup>26</sup> The philosophy behind this model is to help women take what they know and turn it into an autonomous, independent economic enterprise. The association offers services such as henna designs, Maghrebi marriage decorations, cooking classes, and custom made clothing.<sup>27</sup> Femmes d'Ici et d'Ailleurs represents a highly pragmatic model that is nonetheless very much engaged in the struggle for women's equality in both the Maghrebi or immigrant community and French society. Their actions also focus on a preventative rather than responsive approach to the struggle for women's rights. While the organization is undoubtedly also engaged in responses to major tragedies or events within the Maghrebi community, its daily activities are designed to gradually empower women and instill confidence in them on a regular and consistent basis.

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<sup>26</sup> Femmes d'ici et d'ailleurs, "Portrait: Fatima Rhazi," [http://www.femmes-actives.org/xportrait.php3?id\\_article=131&id\\_secteur=41](http://www.femmes-actives.org/xportrait.php3?id_article=131&id_secteur=41).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

### *Connections on the Web*

Although each of the associations explored in this section has a slightly different approach, we can see that they do form part of a greater network. On a much broader scale we can see connections between the numerous Franco-Maghrebi women's associations simply by looking at the "useful links" page on individual websites. They are quite clearly part of a larger network of women's rights associations. While most of these associations do not work together on a regular basis, they are certainly aware of one another and often come together in moments of crisis. The association Femmes Contre les Intégrismes (Women against Fundamentalism), for example, whose position is closely aligned with that of NPNS hosts a number of links on its website connecting itself to the likes of NPNS, Associations des Tunisiennes en France, Réseau pour l'autonomie des femmes immigrées et réfugiées (RAJFIRE) and many more. RAJFIRE's website in turn features articles and links to many other associations that focus on immigration rights and violence against women. The collective Les Mots Sont Importants (Words are Important), a similarly structured organization, also hosts a number of articles from various individuals and associations, bringing them together on the web. Les Mots Sont Importants (LSMI) is very clearly connected to MIR but nonetheless hosts a diverse number of articles and texts from members of MIR to Nacira Guenif-Souilamas, a highly respected researcher in sociology from the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), that cover a wide range of opinions.<sup>28</sup> Online connections are but one example of how the various associations are connected to one

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<sup>28</sup> CNRS – National Scientific Research Center

another. These web connections help us to understand how Franco-Maghrebi feminists overcome their lack of physical space in which to organize. The Internet has become a powerful means for women, whose movements are often restricted, to connect with one another.

It is important now to look at the collective response of Franco-Maghrebi women and feminist associations to major violations of Franco-Maghrebi women's rights and how these responses have been discussed and portrayed in the public sphere. The following section will explore the ways in which the French State, through the mainstream media such as television and newspaper, has used Franco-Maghrebi women to further its immigration agenda and how this instrumentalization affects and shapes the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement. Not only will such an analysis help to explain the growing fragmentations within the movement, but it will also illuminate the ways in which the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle is being taken away from Franco-Maghrebi women and how they are attempting to reclaim the movement.

### **VIOL, VIOLENCE, VOILE: HOW THE STATE AND MEDIA SHAPED THE FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

In the words of the members of Ni Putes Ni Soumises, the twenty-first century will be feminist.<sup>29</sup> The increasing coverage of Franco-Maghrebi women's issues in the mainstream French public media and political sphere, does in some respects, appear to fulfill this prophecy. As has been suggested earlier, attention paid to the struggles of Maghrebi women in the *banlieue* has facilitated the rise of certain

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<sup>29</sup> "Mouvement Ni Putes Ni Soumises - Le site officiel - Présentation du Mouvement."

associations, most notably NPNS. In order to understand why certain associations such as members of NPNS have emerged as the clear “leaders” or spokeswomen of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement and women in the *banlieue*, the underlying motivations of the State must be critically examined. It is clear that associations like NPNS and MIR consciously use the media as means to promote their own ideologies and agendas and that smaller associations are also able to use the media to promote their message and frequently rely on the web to communicate with one another. We must, however, consider how the media and political interventions in turn shape the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement.

Through highly mediatized and contentious issues such as debates over the Islamic headscarf and gender violence in the *banlieue* the State has been able to influence and shape the movement. The government and the media together create a standard to which Franco-Maghrebi feminists must hold themselves in order to gain recognition in the public sphere. Because of their instrumental role in addressing other pressing national issues including immigration identity and security, Franco-Maghrebi women’s success is greatly dependent on their willingness to conform to State rhetoric and political ideology. By consistently emphasizing the ethnic, cultural and religious differences of Franco-Maghrebi women, the mainstream media (television and print newspapers and magazines), has greatly alienated Franco-Maghrebi women and set their struggles apart from the rest of society.<sup>30</sup> The implications of State and media influence on the movement will become increasingly

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<sup>30</sup> Mayanthi Fernando, “Neither Whores Nor Doormats: The Commensurable Difference of Secular Muslim Women in France” (Lecture, Wesleyan University, December 6, 2009).



clear when we examine key events that shook both the Maghrebi community and the French nation as a whole.

It is now important to turn to specific events to understand how the State – with the support of the media - is able to use the cause of Franco-Maghrebi women to tackle other pressing issues on their agenda. Looking at the manner in which politicians and the media responded to major events within the Franco-Maghrebi community sheds light into the underlying motives of political actors and the way in which the media has supported these motives. The brutal torture and murder of 17 year old Sohane Benziane in October of 2002, the release of Samira Bellil's gripping and moving book *Dans l'Enfer des Tournantes* (In the Hell of Gang-Rapes) released in 2002 and the infamous *Headscarf Affair* in 2004 are all events that brought to light the rapidly deteriorating status of women in the *banlieue*. These events were catalysts for the rapid growth and expansion of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement and continue to bring a decade long media focus on the problems of the *banlieue* to the attention of mainstream French society. In order to fully understand the public perception and discussion of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement and the way in which their movement has evolved, it is first important to explore the events themselves and the ways in which specific events have affected Franco-Maghrebi feminists as well as how these events have been captured in the media and used by the State.

*Gender Based Violence in the Banlieue: Domestic Violence and Rape as Issues of Immigration*

The murder of Sohane Benziane was an event that changed France as a nation. Sohane was burned alive in the basement of an apartment building in her own community. Her death, a result of a territorial dispute between two young men, was senseless and tragic and made the strife of women in the *banlieue* a public reality.<sup>31</sup> One of the most alarming aspects of her death was the fact that the individual accused of murdering Sohane was met with cries of support from male members of the community upon his arrest. Many wondered how such a horrific event could have happened so close to Paris, right under the very noses of the authorities. With the murder of Sohane, media coverage shifted from the Franco-Maghrebi or Arab male to the Franco-Maghrebi female and her oppression within a marginalized community. Released within a few days of Sohane's tragic death, Bellil's testimony of gang rapes she endured in the *banlieue* and her inability to speak out against her aggressors because of Maghrebi tradition further perpetuated the image of the Maghrebi community as backwards and retrogressive. Bellil's testimony was highly critical of her own family and community for its failure to defend the rights and dignity of women, but Bellil also expressed outrage at the failure of social services to support her in her attempts to seek justice. Her testimony is often read as a clear example of the aggression and violence of Maghrebi males, and while it certainly is, it also stands testament to the failure of the State to protect and defend its citizen.<sup>32</sup>

While during the 1990s, the media had focused more heavily on the status of

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<sup>31</sup> Samira Bellil et al., "Insight: Muslim Women Rebel in France," interview by Christiane Amanpour and Jonathan Mann, May 24, 2004, [http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0405/24/i\\_ins.00.html](http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0405/24/i_ins.00.html).

<sup>32</sup> Samira Bellil, *Dans l'enfer des tournantes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

the Franco-Maghrebi male of the *banlieue* and his aggression and isolation from mainstream society, the early years of this past decade have witnessed a shift towards portraying the oppressed within an already marginalized population – Franco-Maghrebi women. It is important to stress that although the attention did finally shift to the status of women during late 1990s, the historical changes in the Franco-Maghrebi woman's position in the *banlieue* were largely ignored. The connections between the growing socioeconomic instability and alienation of the *banlieue* and the devolution of Franco-Maghrebi women's rights were thus ignored. This new trend is significant because, as Miriam Ticktin suggests, it coincides with a shift in immigration policy and rhetoric. The State's profound failure to respond to the desperation in the *banlieue* has also contributed to tragic events such as what befell Sohane and Samira, but by focusing on the cultural and religious nature of these tragedies, the State lets itself off the hook. Sohane has become the face for all young Franco-Maghrebi women living in the suburbs and as a martyr figure she has also become a political tool used against Maghrebi and Arab males.<sup>33</sup> Ticktin creates a direct link between the political and media discussion of sexual violence and immigration by stating, "the focus on sexuality – and sexual violence, more specifically – can be explained by the fact that it has become the discourse of a border control and the way borders are policed."<sup>34</sup> While the media coverage and political discussion of immigration and immigrant communities has disproportionately focused on violence of all forms, Sohane is not every Franco-Maghrebi woman in the

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<sup>33</sup> Miriam Ticktin, "Sexual Violence as the Language of Border Control: Where French Feminist and Anti-immigrant Rhetoric Meet," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 4 (2008). 864.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 864.

*banlieue*.<sup>35</sup>

Ticktin's argument is particularly significant in the way it illuminates how sexual violence has been presented as a widespread problem and phenomenon of the *banlieue* and Maghrebi communities, rather than a problem of the nation as a whole. Looking at sexual violence through a cultural lens has further alienated Franco-Maghrebi women from their French female peers who have experienced similar forms of violence. As Christelle Hamel stated, "They [politicians] are willing to see violence against women in the housing projects, but no where else!"<sup>36</sup> This quotation illuminates the underlying agenda or biases inherent in both the media and politics. It is important here to recognize the ways in which the State and media function together. Polarizing rhetoric that sets the Maghrebi or Muslim community apart from the rest of France is used in political discourse, but more importantly is spread to the greater public through popular media. This has perpetuated a publicly perceived divide between the Maghrebi community and the rest of society, making it difficult for most Franco-Maghrebi feminist associations to push their autonomously developed agenda. Political figures and the media have hijacked the agenda of Franco-Maghrebi women and have decided which issues are most pressing for them. They have been able to do so largely because of their association with a select group of Franco-Maghrebi women, which gives them the appearance of authenticity and legitimacy.<sup>37</sup> The ways in which the French media have celebrated secularism and demonized religion further perpetuate the image of a modern, liberating French

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<sup>35</sup> Kahina Benziane, "Télé-Matin: Interview with Kahina Benziane," interview by Françoise Laborde, <http://www.ina.fr/media/entretiens/video/2204265001/kahina-benziane.fr.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Winter, *The Hijab & the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate*. 270.

<sup>37</sup> Fernando, "Neither Whores Nor Doormats: The Commensurable Difference of Secular Muslim Women in France."

society in contrast to a restrictive, regressive and dangerous traditional Maghrebi culture.

Both the murder of Sohane and the rise in media focus on gang rape in suburban communities quickly became politically significant issues and began to bridge the gap between *certain* Franco-Maghrebi feminist associations and the State. The heightened national focus on the suburbs also created an opportunity for associations like Ni Putes Ni Soumises to “be heard and expand their ‘movement.’”<sup>38</sup> The March of Neighborhood Women for Equality and against the Ghetto was one of the more successful public manifestations against gender violence following both the murder of Sohane and the release of Bellil’s book. In the words of Amara herself, “In the names of Sohane and Samira we set out on the march.”<sup>39</sup> While the march began as six people from Vitry-sur-Seine, it aroused unprecedented attention and admiration and by the end, there were 30,000 participants.<sup>40</sup> It was a significant event in the way that it celebrated the strength and courage of Franco-Maghrebi women and men particularly in the way that it emphasized an active refusal to submit to the existing order of the *banlieue*. The march was, however, also extremely polarizing. Throughout the course of the march, there were a series of controversial and contentious debates that harshly criticized all Maghrebi men as being violent. Many, including Kahina Benziane the older sister of Sohane, saw these as divisive confrontations, which further aggravated tension between Franco-Maghrebi men and

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<sup>38</sup> Camille Lindbom, “Arab Skin, French Masks: ‘Ni Putes, Ni Soumises’ and the Assimilationist Discourses in France” (2009). 2.

<sup>39</sup> Amara, *Breaking Silence : French Women's Voices From the Ghetto*. 118.

<sup>40</sup> Winter, Bronwyn, “Marianne Goes Multicultural: Ni Putes Ni Soumises and the Republicanisation of Ethnic Minority Women in France,” *French History and Civilization: Papers from the George Rudé Seminar* 2 (2009): 228-240. 235.

women in the suburbs instead of alleviating or ameliorating them.<sup>41</sup> This criminalization of Maghrebi men, culture and Islam has become increasingly pronounced as the movement has continued to gain success. One of the greatest dangers of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* is that it directly plays into the notion established by the French media that there are two clear cut sides – the modern, liberated French and the regressive traditional and religious community.<sup>42</sup> Young girls and women are thus forced to choose what end of the spectrum they belong to and there is little room for women who choose a more nuanced position.

*Marianne in a Miniskirt: Images of the Liberated Franco-Maghrebi Woman*

One of the most striking examples of how the State, with the help of individual Franco-Maghrebi associations, has been able to use the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement to further its own agenda is the *Mariannes d'aujourd'hui* exhibition. The new, “multicultural” Marianne graced the pillars of the Palais Bourbon – seat of the French National Assembly - on July 14, 2003. In some ways, the exhibition represents a new paradigm of French national identity. The images of 14 young women – mostly women of Maghrebi or African origin from the *banlieue* – challenged French society to embrace a new, ethnically diverse conception of national identity: one that included the children of immigrants born and brought up in France. This exhibition signifies the progress that France as a Nation has made in terms of accepting racial difference. Women of the *banlieue*, one of the most marginalized groups in France, were portrayed as the guardians and symbols of France –

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<sup>41</sup> Benziane, “Télé-Matin: Interview with Kahina Benziane.”

<sup>42</sup> Lindbom, “Arab Skin, French Masks.” 3.

Marianne.<sup>43</sup> While it is important to highlight the progress that France has made, the exhibition also represents a clear example of the physical nature of integration and female liberation that both NPNS and the French State tout.

According to Bronwyn Winter, Marianne has always been portrayed as the symbol of the Republic, but never an active political figure.<sup>44</sup> The development of the multicultural Marianne, therefore suggests that minority women symbolize and embody republican values but nonetheless remain passive guardians of these values. The *Mariannes d'aujourd'hui* exhibition was a strikingly clear and visual representation of what Maghrebi and other minority women should aspire to be. As Laurent Fabius, former Socialist Prime Minister, draws a direct connection between physical appearance and liberty in stating, “Marianne cannot be veiled,” the multicultural Marianne will symbolize the moment in which, “France will have taken a step forward in giving full life to the principles of the Left.”<sup>45</sup> This exhibition, like the headscarf and burqa affairs, highlights the emphasis placed on blending in and eliminating visible markers of religious or cultural affiliation.

Maghrebi women will always be marked by their difference, it is an inescapable quality that has continued to define and shape their existence in the public sphere. In the past, women of Maghrebi origin have been portrayed as veiled and submissive. Instead of wearing the veil in this representation of the Maghrebi woman, however, they were wearing the Phrygian cap, a red soft hat worn by today’s Marianne and yesterday’s 1789 revolutionaries. The symbolic parallels between the

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<sup>43</sup> Winter, Bronwyn, “Marianne Goes Multicultural: Ni Putes Ni Soumises and the Republicanisation of Ethnic Minority Women in France.” 237.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 231.

<sup>45</sup> Winter, 267.

veil and Phrygian cap are evident as they both implicitly represent a woman's allegiance to a greater cause. The veil symbolizes adherence to certain religious and cultural norms while the Phrygian cap suggests adherence to French secular norms and republican values. Women are thus still seen as the bearers of national or cultural identity. As George Mosse, 1985, suggests women are "the continuity and immutability of the nation."<sup>46</sup> Many critiques of this exhibition highlight the physical nature of assimilation and the way in which this exhibition imposed an image onto Franco-Maghrebi women.<sup>47</sup> In order to be seen as liberated, Franco-Maghrebi girls must resemble the women in the photographs - coquettish and flirty. This is a clear example of the way in which the State is able to co-opt the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement for issues of national identity. While France is gradually beginning to accept their status as a multiethnic nation, the *Mariannes* exhibition illuminates the ways in which the mini-skirt and make up are still believed to be the ultimate symbols of Franco-Maghrebi women's liberation in the public sphere.

*The Hijab Debate: Intersections of Franco-Maghrebi Women and the State in Popular Media*

Shortly after the opening of the *Mariannes* exhibition, President Jacques Chirac announced the creation of a Commission to Reflect on the Application of the Principle of Secularism (the Stasi Commission).<sup>48</sup> With concerns over the presence of Islam in France mounting, the headscarf affair of 2004 exploded into a debate that divided the nation. The Stasi Commission was charged with the task of better

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<sup>46</sup> George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* ((New York): Fertig, 1985), 17.

<sup>47</sup> Fernando, "Neither Whores Nor Doormats: The Commensurable Difference of Secular Muslim Women in France."

<sup>48</sup> Winter, *The Hijab & the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate*. 215.



understanding the application of French secularism in the public sphere. While the report has come to be associated with its recommendation to ban all overtly religious symbols in French public schools, it made a number of recommendations, which included the need to address racism and discrimination in France and the need to solve the crises in the suburbs.<sup>49</sup> It was in many ways a thoughtful report that “placed the hijab issue firmly within a...context of socioeconomic marginalization and structural and systemic racism and laid responsibility for resolving these problems just as firmly at the door of the government.”<sup>50</sup> The government, however, chose to largely overlook connections between racism, socioeconomic marginalization and the veil and focused exclusively on the religious aspects of the hijab.

The example of the Stasi commission clearly shows us that some in France did attempt to discuss the hijab in a nuanced and balanced fashion, but the policy outcomes of the commission suggest that this nuance was consciously ignored. The numerous televised debates that took place during the headscarf affair bring to light the degree to which this balanced approach was lacking in public discussions of the hijab. Veiled women or Muslim men who were against the law were set in opposition to unveiled women who advocated for the law, drawing a clear parallel between the veil and religious fundamentalism.<sup>51</sup> As many scholars have since pointed out, not a single unveiled woman who was against the law was featured on television.

The media portrayal and political discussion of the hijab in particular, undermine any attempt by Franco-Maghrebi women to add a layer of complexity the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 220.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 220.

<sup>51</sup> Fernando, “Neither Whores Nor Doormats: The Commensurable Difference of Secular Muslim Women in France.”

public debate. While addressing the multiple significance of the veil would have been far more complex, it would have also created a more accurate picture of Franco-Maghrebi women's status in the *banlieue*. Not only does this oversimplification of the hijab debate render Franco-Maghrebi women as instruments of a broader political goal, but it also portrays them as the victim of religious and cultural patriarchy. They are rarely seen as autonomous agents in control of the debate over their own rights. As many members of MIR strongly argued, this is an image that harkens back to orientalist notions of Maghrebi women that can be linked to the colonial era.<sup>52</sup> Such a portrayal embodies one side of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle – fighting against the stereotypes of passivity and victimization within mainstream French society. Looking at the State and media help us to clearly understand one major front of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle.

When we shift our focus to the *banlieue* it becomes clear that while there are many women who supported the law, they rejected and resented the way in which the public debate portrayed Franco-Maghrebi women. In a personal conversation with S of Voix d'Elles Rebelles, she suggested that it was difficult to say 'we support the law, but...' The 'but' was drowned out and thus the plurality of reasons for or against the law was crudely cast as secular or religious.<sup>53</sup> The veil, a piece of clothing with multiple symbolic meanings can be seen as a marker of identity, marginalization, fear, and fanaticism to name a few. Voix d'Elles Rebelles is, as has been suggested earlier, an association that falls in between NPNS and MIR. While Sarah agreed with NPNS' stance on the veil, she found their discussion of the veil highly problematic in

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<sup>52</sup> Camille Lindbom, "Arab Skin, French Masks: 'Ni Putes, Ni Soumises' and the Assimilationist Discourses in France.," in *Thinking Gender' Conference* (UCLA , 2009). 3.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with S, 1/15/10

the way that it echoed what the French politicians wanted to hear and played directly into the media's tendency to cast the situation as black or white. *Voix d'Elles Rebelles* was, however, ultimately cast in the same camp as NPNS without being able to fully articulate its argument.

### CONCLUSION

The complexity and diversity of opinion within the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement have been largely diluted in the public sphere. The extreme political ideologies of associations like NPNS and MIR have come to be seen as representative of the views of Franco-Maghrebi women, but this is quite clearly not the case. Women like C, member of RAJFIRE, as well as N both of whom write proficiently on the issues of Franco-Maghrebi and immigrant women also express frustration at their inability to be heard. According to Winters, C adamantly affirms her adherence to secular values but is nonetheless highly critical of both NPNS and MIR and the way that they have approached the issue of the veil.<sup>54</sup> While C, N and S all express similar points of view, it must be stated that connecting them and other women in the middle of the debate is extremely difficult as their arguments are rarely heard. From personal conversations with these women as well as through secondary sources it becomes clear that they are all very much aware of one another and are voicing their concerns in direct response to the polarizing rhetoric of both NPNS and MIR. The Hijab debate is one of the clearest examples of how these women as well as many

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<sup>54</sup> Winter, *The Hijab & the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate*. 342.

others respond to one another and voice their dissent in however they can. Together, Franco-Maghrebi feminists in the middle are challenging the polarizing and unjust characterization of their movement as one that fights against religious and cultural oppression and reclaiming the right to define their own struggle. In the process they have highlighted patriarchy within the Maghrebi community, the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism and the dangers of fundamentalist secularism.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### FRENCH FEMINISM TACKLES DIFFERENCE: THE INTERSECTIONS OF FRENCH AND FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINISM

The Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement is an active, dynamic movement that has greatly challenged French feminists to more critically examine their discourse on race and religion. French feminism has, however, also affected and often restricted the growth of Franco-Maghrebi feminism in the public sphere. To most effectively understand the impact of French feminism on Franco-Maghrebi feminism, we must look at how the two movements have historically interacted and the structural and thematic parallels between the two movements. While they are rarely compared, a close analysis of the French feminist struggle - particularly in the 1970s and 80s - reveals a number of parallels to the current struggle of Franco-Maghrebi feminists. The origins of both movements bear a striking resemblance to one another and the struggle against oppression in both the public and private sphere is also common to both movements. Most specifically, the theme of male violence, which includes domestic violence and rape, is featured prominently in the discourse of both movements. These parallels and similarities beg the question as to why these two movements have consistently been discussed as two distinctive schools. The answer to this question will be approached from two perspectives, historical and present.

While many scholars suggest that French feminists have consistently ignored the question of racial and religious difference, I will argue that in looking at French feminist writing during the colonial era a discourse on religious and cultural difference can be found. By critically examining the ways in which French feminists have dealt with questions of racial and religious difference in the past and present, we can begin to understand why French Feminism and Franco-Maghrebi feminism have been consistently marked as two distinctive movements despite their apparent similarities and thematic overlap. Looking at both the colonial era as well as the more recent past will also help us to understand how the discourse on male violence has evolved into one of cultural violence and what implications this has had for Franco-Maghrebi women. The growing isolation of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle is not a direct result of their racial and religious difference, but rather is a result of the ways in which these differences have been emphasized in the public sphere. While the two movements may have similar converging struggles, the Franco-Maghrebi women's oppression is consistently linked to their communities and traditions. Franco-Maghrebi feminists are thus isolated from mainstream or national feminism, and a significant portion of their struggle has been to fight this alienation.

#### **THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF RACIAL AND PRIVILEGE DISCOURSE IN FRENCH FEMINISM**

French feminists have consistently been criticized for their failure to develop a discourse on race and privilege. Focusing on the ways in which French feminists have historically addressed questions of ethnic and religious difference will help to contextualize the present issue of race and religion in French feminist discourse and

the way in which the discussion of culture and religion has further alienated Franco-Maghrebi women. The issues of cultural and religious difference were pushed aside or largely ignored during the 60s, 70s, and even 80s but have found their way back into the rhetoric of mainstream French feminism. Because of the pause in discussion, however, the discourse on cultural and religious identity and its place in French feminism failed to evolve into a more nuanced, inclusive discourse. French feminists such as Hubertine Auclert, Marie Bugéja and even Simone de Beauvoir all attempted to tackle questions of racial and religious differences, but from different perspectives and positionalities. Auclert and Bugéja, both of whom resided in Algeria for periods of their life, were openly critical of the Colonial regime, but nonetheless fueled the notion that the Maghrebi woman's struggle was one of liberation from her own kind.<sup>1</sup> De Beauvoir, in contrast, who wrote on the subject in the 1950s, focused more on understanding her own privilege and how such privilege affected her ability to speak for Maghrebi women.<sup>2</sup> These two distinctive positions on the subject of Maghrebi women highlight the fact that the debate on the subject of minority women has grounded, historical roots within the French feminist school.

Hubertine Auclert was an established feminist in France prior to her move to Algeria in 1888. Auclert's position on the issue of Maghrebi women is embodied in her statement that Algerian women are, "little victims of Muslim debauchery."<sup>3</sup> This quotation clearly illustrates Auclert's belief that the fundamental source of Maghrebi women's oppression was Islam itself. Her criticism of the Colonial regime lay not in

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Kimble, "Emancipation through Secularization: French Feminist Views of Muslim Women's Condition in Interwar Algeria," *French Colonial History* 7 (2006): 109-128. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Kruks, "Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Privilege," *Hypatia* 20, no. 1 (2005): 178-205. 186.

<sup>3</sup> Clancy-Smith, "Islam, Gender, and Identities in the Making of French Algeria, 1830-1962." 170.

their treatment of the locals directly, but rather their failure to extend French legal rights and protections to Algerian women. As Julia Clancy-Smith suggests, Auclert blamed the French for colluding with Arab males to help them oppress their own women, particularly by allowing them to enforce Islamic instead of French law. Rather than improving the lives of Algerian women, the French had worsened their position in society.<sup>4</sup> Auclert took the notion of a civilizing mission to heart, and criticized the colonial administration for their failure to fulfill their duty. Her discussion of religion solidifies a notion that still characterizes the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle today. She articulates the Maghrebi woman's struggle as secular liberty on the one hand versus religious and traditional oppression on the other, without fully recognizing the ways in which colonialism directly weakened the position of women in Maghrebi society.<sup>5</sup> Sara Kimbel suggests that French feminists in France writing at the time of Auclert, "reiterated Auclert's argument from the *fin de siècle* that the Republic owed a debt of legal and moral guardianship to Muslim women in the French empire."<sup>6</sup> It becomes clear that while French feminists believed the colonial regime to be at fault, the true source of women's oppression was Islam itself. France was at fault in so far as it failed to promote its cultural superiority over the indigenous culture.

Women like Marie Bugéja, who wrote just after Auclert, adopted similar stances and often portrayed Maghrebi women as women who, "failed to modernize."<sup>7</sup> They were, simply put, victims of tradition. Bugéja's position is also, however, quite

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 169.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 171.

<sup>6</sup> Kimble, "Emancipation through Secularization: French Feminist Views of Muslim Women's Condition in Interwar Algeria." 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 2.



complex. While she, like Auclert and many other French women, viewed secularism and assimilation into French culture as the only true hope for Maghrebi women, she actively tried to foster an Algerian feminist movement by encouraging middle and upper class Algerian women to join feminist groups.<sup>8</sup> Maghrebi women's feminism will be discussed in the next chapter, but it is important here to highlight the fact that there were active external forces acting upon Maghrebi women from the beginning. Both the examples of Auclert and Bugéja played into the highly orientalized notions of Maghrebi women.<sup>9</sup> Their writings reinforced stereotypes about Algerian women and further objectified and alienated them from a larger women's movement.

During the colonial era we see a clear evolution of this earlier discourse on race, religion and culture. Women like Auclert and Bugéja, who may have had admirable intentions, failed to adequately consider their privileged position and the ways in which hierarchical structures can negatively impact the status of women. They also failed to critically examine their own positionality and the right they had to write about these women. Around 20-30 years after Bugéja's time, Simone de Beauvoir began writing on the issue of privilege and race and during the Algerian War, she took up one of the most famous torture cases: that of Djamila Boupacah. Her writings on the subject provide a much more nuanced, evolved discussion of the intersection of race and gender and the responsibility of white feminists to address and acknowledge their privilege. De Beauvoir's greatest contribution to the subject was to consider her own privilege and how such privilege affected her own ability or right to take up the cause of Maghrebi women. What is unique about de Beauvoir's

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 2.

analysis, as Sonia Kruks suggests, is that her approach highlights the idea that we can never fully escape our privilege but rather should be aware of the privileged position from which we discuss others.<sup>10</sup> De Beauvoir never wrote explicitly about race privilege and feminism, but her writings on the subject of privilege are still relevant to contemporary French feminists in the way that it challenges them to analyze their own positionality and accept that they will never be in a position of true solidarity or equality with minority women. This is precisely the kind of nuance that was missing from early as well as current discussions of Maghrebi women.

One strong example of how this concept of privilege affected de Beauvoir's actions can be seen in the case of Djamila Boupacha. Boupacha, an Algerian member of the FLN was accused of planning a bomb in a café and was thus brutally raped and tortured by French authorities in 1960.<sup>11</sup> De Beauvoir, along with Gisèle Halimi who brought the case to de Beauvoir's attention, fought to have Boupacha tried in France, where the justice system was more in line with French social norms and values, and also helped her to press charges against her torturers. De Beauvoir was able to use her privilege to Boupacha's advantage but in doing so also inevitably appropriated the Algerian cause, and made the issue not about Algeria, but about France.<sup>12</sup> She rallied French support by suggesting that torture was against French norms, and that people needed to rally against the use of torture to defend France. This tendency to make the issue about France's norms and values is a consistent one in French feminism. De Beauvoir's work with Boupacha is a clear example of how her views on privilege

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<sup>10</sup> Kruks, "Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Privilege." 186.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 192.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 194.

intersected with her actions. This example also effectively illustrates the ways in which French feminists and Maghrebi or Franco-Maghrebi have been historically connected. The example of Boupacha also, however, illuminates some of the weaknesses in de Beauvoir's analysis of race, power and privilege. As Michael Walzer argues, de Beauvoir's discussion of minorities, in particular Algerians, often focused more on the militants within the movement than the individuals themselves.<sup>13</sup> This is quite clear in the case of Boupacha, and even Halimi concluded by suggesting, as Mary Caputi reminds us, "de Beauvoir's actions arose less from a sense of responsibility towards others than from egotistical motives."<sup>14</sup> Caputi also suggests that Halimi expressed disappointment with her collaboration with de Beauvoir and viewed de Beauvoir's actions more as a cooptation or instrumentalization of the Boupacha case to establish her public opposition to the French colonial regime in Algeria. De Beauvoir's handling of the Boupacha case in many ways foreshadows the way in which French feminists have appropriated the cause of Franco-Maghrebi women today, regardless of their intent.

Auclert, Bugéja and de Beauvoir all attempted to address the issue of racial and religious difference. Their analyses are complex and varied, but ultimately fall into the trap of talking about rather than engaging with Maghrebi women. French feminist writing during the colonial era illuminates a number of important trends that have continued to plague contemporary French feminists. The spectrum between religious oppression and secular liberation, which has consistently been an obstacle to the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement, is rooted in the French feminist colonial

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (Basic Books, 2002). 154.

<sup>14</sup> Lori Jo Marso and Patricia Moynagh, *Simone De Beauvoir's Political Thinking* (University of Illinois Press, 2006). 118.

discourse as is the objectification and orientalizing of the Maghrebi woman. These trends have greatly contributed to the isolation of Franco-Maghrebi women and their struggle and the discussion of racial and religious difference has greatly clouded the similarities between the French Feminist struggle and the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle. A brief analysis of the Second Wave feminist movement will illuminate some of the parallels between French feminism in the 1960s-80s and the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement today. Looking at the way French feminists have discussed gender violence in particular will create a strong connection between the two movements in order to mitigate the chasm between them.

#### **NOT SO DIFFERENT: THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF FRENCH FEMINISM IN THE 1960s-80s**

The French feminist movement has strong historic roots, but truly emerged as a movement during May of 1968.<sup>15</sup> This was an era of social unrest and change and French feminists saw the opportunity to voice their demands alongside their male peers. The emergence of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF) and the French Feminist movement during the 1968 protests is similar to the rise of Franco-Maghrebi feminism, which emerged in the 1980s during the Marche des Beurs. Like their French feminist peers who were drawn into the 1968 protests through mixed associations, Franco-Maghrebi feminists quickly separated from their male peers as they began to realize the need for a distinctive movement that addressed the specific

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<sup>15</sup> Kari Weil, "French Feminism's *Écriture Féminine*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge UK ;;New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). 157.

needs of women.<sup>16</sup> The parallel origins of both movements bring to light a common feeling of marginalization within the public, male-dominated sphere. It would be naïve to suggest that racial and cultural difference have not profoundly affected the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle. Addressing the similarities between French and Franco-Maghrebi feminism, however, will help to connect the two movements despite the historical and present distinctions between them.

While the French feminist movement has often been characterized both domestically and internationally as a highly theoretical movement, the events of the late 60s, 70s and 80s illuminate the more pragmatic elements of the movement. This is not to deny the widely theoretical nature of the movement, but rather to bring to light a lesser-discussed characteristic. By looking at the ways French feminists tackled major issues including abortion, the right to work, domestic violence and rape, the pragmatic tendencies within the movement become clear. Comparing the ways in which French feminists and Franco-Maghrebi feminists approach these issues will create a clear connection between the two movements. This comparison will also illuminate some of the structural and thematic similarities in the two movements.

### *Work As Independence*

Economic employment in the public sector is considered to be one of the primary markers of independence in both movements. By 1945, French women were – in theory - granted the right to work in whichever field they chose, but in actuality

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<sup>16</sup> Claire Duchon, *Feminism in France: from May '68 to Mitterrand* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986). 5.

their husbands still retained the right to forbid them to work.<sup>17</sup> Work and financial independence were clearly seen as integral parts of a woman's liberation, because it allowed her to move beyond her domestic sphere and into the public sphere. While throughout the 40s and 50s work seemed to be the ultimate form of independence, the rise of a Marxist element of the French feminist movement from the late 60s onwards complicated the concept of independence and freedom. Radical Marxist feminists, such as Christine Delphy and other materialist feminist writing in the 1970s, viewed women as a class and thus substituted a gender struggle for Marx's class struggle.<sup>18</sup> What is significant about this Marxist analysis is the way in which it describes the feminist struggle as breaking through the *domestic* mode of production, which is where the most significant gender exploitation occurs.<sup>19</sup> Once women have gained the right to work, however, they are exposed to capitalist exploitation, in the public sphere and are thus exposed to two forms of oppression. The issue of work becomes increasingly complex when looking at both the gender and Marxist elements, but nonetheless remains a significant marker of women's independence.

In the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement this emphasis on employment in the public sector is very clearly seen in the approach of associations such as Voix d'Elles Rebelles and Femmes d'Ici et d'Ailleurs, both of which focus on providing Immigrant women with the skills to participate in the national economy. The concept of work as independence has also, however, become increasingly complicated in the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement because young Franco-Maghrebi women are

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Rabaut, *Histoire des féminismes français* ([Paris]: Stock, 1978). 307

<sup>18</sup> Laure Bereni, "Institutional Legacies of Second Wave Feminism," in (presented at the Feminism/s Without Borders?: Perspectives from France and the U.S., New York University, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Gill Allwood, *French Feminisms: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory* (London ;; Bristol Pa. USA: UCL Press, 1998). 82.

more likely to be employed than their male counterparts.<sup>20</sup> This has led to heightened tensions between the sexes within Maghrebi communities. Franco-Maghrebi women may have the liberty to work and gain their financial independence but they are often exposed to heightened oppression and restriction within their communities, as their male peers grow increasingly frustrated at their lack of opportunity. Work thus takes on a similar complexity in both movements. It is one of the primary markers of independence and freedom but also provide the potential for new oppressions.

### *Abortion, Contraception and the Woman's body in Politics*

In the late 60s and early 70s the discussion of contraception and abortion exploded. French women actively fought against the repressive nature of the prevailing legislation and succeeded in procuring both the right to obtain contraception and legal abortion. In 1967, the *loi Neuwirth* enabled French women to legally obtain contraception. Following the enactment of this law, French feminists focused their energies on the legalization of abortion.<sup>21</sup> One of the landmark moments of the struggle to legalize abortion was the Manifesto of the 343 - a manifesto signed by 343 women including Simone de Beauvoir declaring that they had had illegal abortions. It chronicled the dangerous conditions in which French women had clandestine abortions performed and the desperation of these women. Out of this manifesto emerged the group *Choisir*, among many others. Choisir was created by Gisèle Halimi, reputable lawyer of Tunisian origin, to promote the need

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<sup>20</sup> John Gross, David McMurray, and Ted Swedenburg, "Rai, Rap, and Franco-Maghrebi Identities," in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002). 205.

<sup>21</sup> Duchon, *Feminism in France: from May '68 to Mitterrand*. 5.

for a woman's right to choose.<sup>22</sup> The name "to choose", very clearly refers to the freedom to make one's own decisions about her own body. The theme of choice is a central theme to both the French feminist and Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement. While this theme has manifested itself differently in the two movements, it is nonetheless influential for both. In *Breaking the Silence*, Amara suggests that feminism means nothing to women in the projects because French feminism in particular is not grounded. She discusses her experiences with groups like Choisir and suggests that, "we never discussed anything concrete..."<sup>23</sup> What Amara and others have failed to recognize, however, is the fact that while the actual issues may differ depending on cultural, ethnic or religious context, the fight for choice, independence and autonomy are common ends to which all feminists strive. Revisiting the issue of abortion, for example, we can see that on a more abstract level the right to choose and make decisions about one's own body characterizes the women's struggle. The veil and the burqa affairs reveal a similar struggle for autonomy over the body.

Both abortion and the headscarf affair also bring to light overlapping tensions within each movement. As Claire Duchon suggests, there was profound disagreement within the French feminist movement over whether the right to choose was the more important element of the debate or, as many radical feminists wanted to argue, the need to reject and abolish the institution of motherhood was the overarching goal.<sup>24</sup> The veil has proven to be a similarly divisive issue especially because of its political

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<sup>22</sup> Jane Jenson, "Representations of Difference: The Varieties of French Feminism," in *Mapping the Women's Movement* (Verso, 1996). 92.

<sup>23</sup> Amara, *Breaking Silence : French Women's Voices From the Ghetto*. 130.

<sup>24</sup> Duchon, *Feminism in France: from May '68 to Mitterrand*. 55.



implications. While some argued against the headscarf laws on the grounds that it limited a woman's right to make autonomous decisions about her own body, others argued that regardless of the issue of choice, the veil symbolized women's oppression and therefore needed to be eliminated. Abortion and the institution of motherhood, as well as the veil bring to light the conflict between challenging symbolic oppression and providing women with tangible choice. The treatment of abortion, particularly by radical French feminists also revealed a sincere disdain for traditional institutions of womanhood and the women who choose to remain within such institutions. We can see a similar tendency to look down upon women who choose to wear the veil for religious or cultural reasons. Contrasting and comparing the issue of abortion and the headscarf affair clearly illustrates the ways in which the two movements have substantial thematic overlap despite some of their concrete differences.

#### **FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC: RAPE, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND A THEORY OF *MALE* VIOLENCE**

Both the right to work and the legalization of abortion and contraception have been discussed as public issues. One central element of the French feminist struggle was to make traditionally private issues including rape and domestic violence issues of public concern. French feminists marched, protested and challenged the legal system in order to help victims of rape and abuse seek justice. While the present day discourse concerning the nature of sexual violence has focused primarily on men of Maghrebi or Arab descent, Gill Allwood effectively reminds us that rape and sexual violence have not always been discussed as a cultural phenomenon. The struggle for abortion characterized the 1960s, but women's attention shifted to rape and sexual

assault during the 1970s.<sup>25</sup> It became one of the most pressing concerns of French feminists as they tried to support victims of such trauma as well as challenge what they believed to be societal acceptance and even complicity in such violent crimes. In the early to mid 1970s, French feminists focused on providing concrete support systems for female victims of sexual assault and rape through the form of associations dedicated to helping victims of rape and sexual assault. This focus on associational support brings to light a significant parallel to Franco-Maghrebi feminism, which has placed an even greater emphasis on providing on the ground support to women in need. While the associative element of the French feminist struggle was a crucial component of their overall approach, one of their greatest contributions to French women was to begin to break down the myths and stigma's associated with rape and sexual assault. This has proven to be an extremely difficult task for feminists everywhere and French feminists have not yet fully succeeded in dispelling such prejudices. Allwood suggests that the lack of a legal definition of the crime made the existing laws difficult to enforce and rape was often interpreted in the narrowest possible way, placing a large burden on the victim to prove the trauma she had experienced.<sup>26</sup> As Gisèle Halimi, argued "A woman who has been raped is expected to prove her own resistance towards her attacker and her lack of consent."<sup>27</sup> This quotation calls attention to some of the severe obstacles preventing women from speaking out against their attackers. By supporting the victims as well as challenging the male dominated legal system, French feminists developed a more comprehensive,

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<sup>25</sup> Allwood, *French Feminisms: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory*. 100.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 107.

layered approach to addressing the issue of sexual violence. As we saw in the last chapter Franco-Maghrebi feminists have similarly focused on providing direct support for women in need while also challenging members of their own community and society at large to support and respect women.

In addition to addressing the question of rape and sexual assault, French feminists began to speak out against domestic violence, which continues to be a major concern among French women today. French feminists actions related to rape and domestic violence suggest a growing frustration and concern with the institutionalized nature of *male* violence. It is important to note the masculinity of violence in French feminist discourse. The masculine nature of violence suggests that rape and domestic violence are not linked to certain classes, populations or ethnic groups, but rather cut across all social lines. In discussing domestic violence in particular, the need for a better understanding of male violence becomes clear. The French feminists' discussion of domestic violence is particularly significant because it is often considered to be a highly private issue. As Allwood states, "they aimed to bring domestic violence out of the private domain, where men were able to do what they wanted, and to make it a subject for public debate."<sup>28</sup> This is a highly significant parallel to the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement. Women from the *banlieue* have struggled to make the public aware of their plight, but have had difficulty overcoming the public-private divide. The *banlieue* is often seen as a private sphere of sorts and there is little State or police involvement in family matters. Inserting their struggle into the public sphere thus constitutes a significant element of both the French

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 122

feminist and Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement and can be seen as a significant point of overlap.

Despite these clear similarities and overlaps, French feminists and the State have actually begun to isolate Franco-Maghrebi women by manipulating the discourse on male violence into one of Arab male violence. While such violence used to be discussed as a women's issue, it is now more frequently discussed as an *immigrant* women's issue. As Elsa Dorlin reminds us in a scathing critique of French feminism today, "la violence conjugale tue une femme tous les trois jours en France."<sup>29</sup> Her critique focuses primarily on the ways in which French feminism has recently begun to portray rape and domestic violence as issues of immigrant communities rather than issues of national concern. Franco-Maghrebi victims of rape and domestic violence are consistently separated from French women who have experienced similar trauma, which has contributed greatly to the growing divide between Franco-Maghrebi and French women. Understanding how the discourse on sexual violence has changed over the past few decades helps to explain the growing isolation of Franco-Maghrebi women and their feminist movement.

#### **FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINISTS TACKLE RAPE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE THROUGH ACTION AND WORDS**

The differences between the experiences of French women and Franco-Maghrebi women are undeniable, but there needs to be a greater degree of nuance in the discussion concerning women's rights in France. While it is important to

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<sup>29</sup> Elsa Dorlin, "'Pas en Notre Nom!' Contre La Récupération Racist du Féminisme par la Droite Française," in *L'Autre Campagne* (La Découverte), <http://www.lautrecompagne.org/article.php?id=132>. Translation: domestic violence kills a woman every three days in France.

recognize the ways in which cultural and religious factors affect a woman's identity, this difference should not be used to isolate and alienate the struggles of Franco-Maghrebi women. Violence is violence, and while the initial discourse concerning sexual violence focused on the distinctly *masculine* violence, it is now discussed – at least in the public sphere – as a culturally specific form of violence.<sup>30</sup> In order to challenge the separation of Franco-Maghrebi women from French women who have experienced similar kinds of trauma, I will engage in a brief discussion of two Franco-Maghrebi women's testimonies of violence they experienced. Looking at these two texts will help us to more clearly see the ways in which this kind of violence cuts across class, race and religious lines.

Gender based violence has been the most prominent motivating factor for Franco-Maghrebi women as it was for French feminists in the 1970s. The horrendous acts of violence that have profoundly shaped and marked this movement have already been discussed earlier in this work, but this section will explore in greater detail the ways in which Franco-Maghrebi women lived these experiences. The late Hamida Ben Sadia, who endured immense physical and psychological violence from her husband to whom she was force married at age 16, wrote a telling autobiography, *Itinéraire d'une femme française: Clamart, Bab-El-Oued, Epinay-sur-Seine* (2008), in which she highlighted the complexities of the immigrant life and women's oppression within immigrant communities. She focuses on the multiple sources of her oppression, including her exclusion from French society. While she comes out

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<sup>30</sup> Ticktin, "Sexual Violence as the Language of Border Control." 866.

harshly on her own community, she also recognizes the way in which social factors contributed to her parents actions and her subsequent forced marriage.<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting to contrast her account with Samira Bellil's account gang rape and violence in the suburbs, because while both evoke common themes of isolation, loneliness and fear that can be found in almost any woman's (immigrant or not) testimony of sexual assault, Bellil's autobiography comes out more harshly on the inherent culture of the Maghrebi community and the distinctively violent nature of Maghrebi men.<sup>32</sup> What is significant about both accounts, despite their differences, is the universality of the trauma of sexual violence. Regardless of who is perpetuating the violence and regardless of the justifications or reasoning behind violent actions, women are left to bear their burdens in silence.

In cases of violation, rape or domestic abuse, women are consistently forced to carry the burden of proof. They are questioned about their clothing, their actions and whether or not they adequately defended themselves during the act.<sup>33</sup> French feminism ardently fought against the suggestion that victims of rape were somehow responsible for what had befallen them. Bellil's writing suggests a similar sentiment of feeling persecuted or feeling the need to prove her innocence both within her own community as well as in the French legal system. Bellil states, "Si je parle...[il] va me dire : 'Tu l'as bien cherché à trainer dans les rues!'"<sup>34</sup> Her statement clearly illuminates a forced silence for fear of being ignored, or worse accused of deserving it. She later suggests that even outside of her own community, at the French police

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<sup>31</sup> Hamida Ben Sadia, *Itinéraire d'une femme française* (Bourin, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Bellil, *Dans l'enfer des tournantes*.

<sup>33</sup> Allwood, *French Feminisms: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory*.

<sup>34</sup> Bellil, *Dans l'enfer des tournantes*. 69. Translation: If I speak, they will tell me you deserved it for lingering in the streets.

station, she was also chastised for her failure to defend herself. If there was no sign of a struggle, then it must have been consensual.<sup>35</sup> Bellil's expression of anger and frustration at her family and community for failing to protect or speak up for her greatly resembles the frustrations expressed by many French feminists on the subject.<sup>36</sup> While Bellil attributes this cowardice as a signature characteristic of Maghrebi culture, which she suggests, prizes virginity and family honor, the silence and complicity around male perpetuated violence crosses class and cultural lines.

Bellil's autobiography has been read as a scathing critique of Franco-Maghrebi men. In reading Bellil's testimony, one can easily see how her own personal experiences caused her to lose faith in her community, but as Ben Sadia points out, such testimonies are dangerous because of the way in which they are used to support racist and anti-immigration agendas.<sup>37</sup> In books like Bellil's or even Ben Sadia's, the parallels between Franco-Maghrebi women and French women and the ways in which they experience violence and trauma are clear. Despite the glaring and visible cultural differences, the points of solidarity between the two movements must be emphasized. There is overlap both in the way that women describe men and male violence in their communities as well as how they experience such violence. We must now try to understand how and why the shift from talking about male violence to Arab male violence occurred and why Franco-Maghrebi women have become an increasingly politically useful tool. Thus far we have studied the historical roots of this division and the ways in which, despite this division, the two movements can be

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>36</sup> Allwood, *French Feminisms: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory*. 103.

<sup>37</sup> Oumma TV, *Décès de Hamida Ben Sadia*, Le Devoir de Pluralité, 2009.

connected. In order to fully comprehend the position of Franco-Maghrebi feminism today, we must now shift our focus to the Parity movement of the 1990s, which is an event that has had significant implications for Franco-Maghrebi women.

### **THE PARITY MOVEMENT AND GENDER AS A UNIVERSAL CATEGORY**

The Parity movement has been one of the most defining feminist moments in recent French history. French feminists in the 1990s actively fought for a legal provision for equal political representation between men and women.<sup>38</sup> While many argue that there have been few tangible benefits to women, it symbolically achieved a gendered notion of universalism.<sup>39</sup> This is to say that French feminists in the 1990s were able to redefine womanhood to encompass the other half of the universal citizen. In doing so, they closed the door to all other minorities who might otherwise claim proportional representation. What is most revolutionary about the Parity movement is that it was able to gain political recognition for a specific group. Eléonore Lépinard states, “gender...was treated...as an anthropological property that defines mankind, contrary to other socially constructed differences such as class, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.”<sup>40</sup> This quotation brings to light what French feminists had to accomplish in order to achieve their ultimate goal of equal representation. They had to define gender in such a way that denied multiple differences, thereby excluding all other minorities.<sup>41</sup> The implications of this exclusion have been serious for Franco-Maghrebi feminists. While there is clearly overlap between French feminism and

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<sup>38</sup> Eléonore Lépinard, “The Contentious Subject of Feminism: Defining Women in France from the Second Wave to Parity,” *Signs* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 375-403. 375.

<sup>39</sup> Laure Bereni, NYU Conference, 10/6/09

<sup>40</sup> Lépinard, “The Contentious Subject of Feminism.” 378.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 378.



Franco-Maghrebi feminism, Franco-Maghrebi feminists do not always get to articulate or frame their struggles in their own terms. As immigration and Islam become increasingly political issues, Franco-Maghrebi women have had an increasingly difficult time articulating their own concerns.

Sylviane Agacinski, one of the leaders of the Parity movement suggests that it is not difference that divides men and women, but rather the institutionalized inferiority of women to men that has divided them. She states, “she has not been recognized as half of humanity but as its exotic and ‘particular’ part.”<sup>42</sup> Agacinski is essentially arguing that women have not yet been recognized as the biological other half of humanity or the complementary component that sustains humanity.<sup>43</sup> By establishing gender as a natural divide, French feminists were able to compliment the notion of republicanism, which had become increasingly important in a time of economic unemployment and heightened tensions with the immigrant communities. The woman’s movement thus became a highly political, strategic movement that was easily manipulated to support nationalistic and racist agendas.<sup>44</sup> This is a striking parallel to the way that feminism was used in the colonial era to support imperialistic moral claims over the colonies. French Feminists and colonial administrators actively tried to convince Algerian women that their greatest hope lay in assimilation into French culture, not independence. We see a similar phenomenon today as French feminists actively try to convince Franco-Maghrebi women of their need to assimilate

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<sup>42</sup> Sylviane Agacinski, “The Turning Point of Feminism: Against the Effacement of Women,” in *Beyond French Feminisms*, ed. Roger Célestin, Eliane Françoise DalMolin, and Isabelle De Courtivron (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). 17.

<sup>43</sup> Lépinard, “The Contentious Subject of Feminism.” 391.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 395.

and not focus on visible symbols difference.<sup>45</sup> The example of the Parity movement underlines the underdeveloped nature of French feminist discourse on race and religious difference. While there are certainly historical roots to this discourse, it has not evolved greatly beyond its origins.

This is not to suggest that political representation for women is trivial or insignificant, but rather to highlight the ways in which French feminists have set up a major obstacle for Franco-Maghrebi women. Because they have declared gender to be an all-encompassing category, they have made it impossible for Franco-Maghrebi feminists to voice their specific needs as a minority group. The language used during the Parity movement focused on women as a category and stressed the need for women's empowerment and representation, but as Lépinard suggests, "minority women doubted that parity would have a positive impact on their specific needs and believed it was a claim specific to white French women."<sup>46</sup> While this statement is clearly founded, we must address why minority women felt this way about the parity movement. It has already been demonstrated that Franco-Maghrebi women struggle with many of the same issues that French feminists have historically grappled with and continue to address today, which begs the question as to why immigrant women continue to see their struggles as separate and overlooked. In addressing this question the fundamental problems with the Parity movement become alarmingly clear. Dorlin points out the many ways in which French feminism has allowed itself to become co-opted by the State, especially the right since the Parity movement. She explicitly uses the exotification of sexual violence as evidence to suggest that French

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<sup>45</sup> Bereni, "Institutional Legacies of Second Wave Feminism."

<sup>46</sup> Lépinard, "The Contentious Subject of Feminism." 64.

feminists have distanced themselves from the earlier movement, which talked about male violence as gendered, not cultural phenomena.<sup>47</sup> Because French feminists established gender as the only recognizable group, they allowed themselves to be co-opted by conservative groups who could now take up “the women’s” cause to further an anti-immigration, racist agenda.<sup>48</sup>

Women such as Françoise Gaspard and Christine Delphy have more recently distanced themselves from the nationalistic, anti-immigrant rhetoric employed by more mainstream, politicized French feminism. The example of these two women demonstrates the divisive nature of the Parity movement and an increased fragmentation within the movement over the issue of difference. It is a clear example of the impact that Franco-Maghrebi feminism has had on French feminism in the modern era. Gaspard, for example, along with her co-researcher Farhad Khosrokhavar wrote a compelling article called “The Headscarf and the Republic”, which questioned the overall effectiveness of the headscarf laws.<sup>49</sup> While Gaspard was a prominent supporter of the Parity movement, this study reveals that her position concerning universal feminist discourse is more nuanced, at least on a pragmatic level. She suggests that she personally believes the headscarf to be a symbolically violent and oppressive article of clothing, but nonetheless recognizes the multiple meanings and symbolisms of the veil.<sup>50</sup> The example of Gaspard is significant because it highlights the fact that some French feminists have recognized the

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<sup>47</sup> Dorlin, ““Pas en Notre Nom!” Contre La Récupération Racist du Féminisme par la Droite Française.”

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar, “The Headscarf and the Republic,” in *Beyond French Feminisms* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>50</sup> Agacinski, “The Turning Point of Feminism: Against the Effacement of Women.”

complexity of a woman's identity as it intersects with race, religion and socioeconomic disadvantage. It also serves as a contrast to the overall direction that post-Parity French feminism has taken.

Delphy represents another fracture with the mainstream feminist movement for reasons of minority rights. Since distancing herself from the French feminist movement, she has taken up the cause of minority women and is featured prominently on the MIR website. Delphy's writing, however, clearly illustrates the need for a more cohesive discourse on race and gender in that it clearly objectifies immigrant women. Her article "Race, Caste et Genre en France" is couched exclusively in terms of colonialism and postcolonialism and Marxism. Like the movement MIR, de Beauvoir and countless others, Delphy fails to articulate a position that truly engages with the subjects she is writing about. She, like most other French feminists and even many Feminists of immigrant origins, writes about the Franco-Maghrebi woman without fully engaging with her. The examples of Gaspard and Delphy bring to light the highly divisive nature of the Parity movement. While it was, in theory, a huge step for French feminists, not only has the law failed to produce the desired results, it has greatly impeded the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement.

## CONCLUSION

From the early colonial writings on Maghrebi women to the Parity movement, we have come full circle. While many argue that French feminists have simply ignored the question of racial and religious difference and discrimination, it becomes clear that they have not fully ignored the issue, but rather they have consistently chosen to promote their agenda, which has often come at the expense of Franco-

Maghrebi women. During the 1960s-80s they largely focused on pragmatic issues of violence and sexual assault and developed a discourse on the male nature of violence. While this work should be seen as strong and significant connection between French feminists and Franco-Maghrebi feminists, it has since evolved into an issue that greatly divides the two schools of feminism as the discourse on male violence evolved into one focused on culturally linked violence. Franco-Maghrebi victims of sexual assault, rape and domestic violence are distinguished from French victims of similar trauma because violence in immigrant communities it is considered to be directly linked to cultural and religious practice. This vision the Maghrebi woman as the ultimate victim of archaism and patriarchy has become a widespread image as the politicization of the French feminist movement has become increasingly tied to a nationalistic and republican agenda that alienates immigrant communities. While this paints a grim picture of the future of Franco-Maghrebi feminism in France, it must be stated that Franco-Maghrebi women are becoming increasingly active in their own communities and continue to provide invaluable services to women in their communities. They have forcefully inserted themselves into the public discourse through their writing and protests and continue to challenge French feminism. They have impacted the movement, which is clearly seen in the growing division over some of the most publicized issues concerning immigrant populations in France. While it is important to understand how French feminism and the politicization of the French feminist movement have affected and shaped Franco-Maghrebi women, we cannot forget the ways in which Franco-Maghrebi feminism has and continues to act upon French feminism and France's conception of national identity.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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### FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINISM IN A TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

The Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement has a natural connection to the French feminist movement because of its French roots. We must now, however, consider the transnational nature of the movement and the ways in which it relates to women's struggles in the Maghreb and even more broadly to the Muslim world at large – from Africa to the Middle East to Muslim communities living in Europe and North America. Islamic feminist theory advocates for an understanding of women's equality and autonomy that is grounded in Islam. Islamic feminists argue that Islam itself is not inherently incompatible with women's equality, empowering women to maintain a connection to their religious values while simultaneously fighting for their right to equal and fair treatment.<sup>1</sup> Using Islamic feminist theory as a theoretical framework for Franco-Maghrebi feminism will help us to better grasp how Franco-Maghrebi feminists are able to understand their dual identities as Muslim women living in a secular nation. It enables them to challenge French society for their demonization of Islam and at the same time provides them with the tools to fight religious oppression within the Maghrebi community in France.

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Brittain, "Islamic Feminists on the Move," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/jan/29/islamicfeminismonthefirstmove>.

While Islamic feminist doctrine is certainly a useful element for analyzing some of the theory behind Franco-Maghrebi female activism, it is also important to recognize the shortcomings of Islamic feminism as a label for the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle. It is true that Islamic feminism helps women to negotiate their dual or hybrid identity, but it may also impede the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle to be seen as French. While Islamic feminism is an encompassing label, the term Islamic itself conjures up a host of prejudices that ultimately undermine the attempts of Franco-Maghrebi women to be viewed as French and reinforce some of the very stereotypes they are trying to combat. The distinctions between Islamic, which refers to the faith of Islam, and Islamist, which refers to Islam as a political and fundamentalist movement, are frequently overlooked and the terms are thus confounded.

Islamic feminism is also a potentially problematic label because it overshadows the divide between religion and culture. Maghrebi culture and Islam have often been discussed interchangeably in French sociopolitical discourse, but it is important here to point out that Maghrebi culture is distinctive from Islam as a religion. The Islam of the Maghreb has traditionally operated within the framework of Maghrebi culture and it is only more recently that a political, transnational Islamic movement has developed a presence in the Maghreb.<sup>2</sup> It is especially important to maintain such a distinction when discussing the rise of religious fundamentalism, which must be seen as phenomenon that does not have roots in Maghrebi culture, but rather has been imported. Islamic feminist theory has become an increasingly

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<sup>2</sup> Khalida Messaoudi, *Unbowed: An Algerian Woman Confronts Islamic Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). 11.



popular means of discussing a global Muslim feminist struggle, but for the purposes of this work we will focus on Islamic feminism and its intersection with Muslim women's struggles in the Maghreb and France. This will allow us to see how Franco-Maghrebi feminists are able to draw on Islamic feminism in order to support their attempt at forging their own identity in France.

### **ISLAMIC FEMINISM AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES**

Islamic feminism is a term that has recently exploded onto the academic scene in the Western world. It is typically associated with feminist reinterpretations of the Koran and hadiths and is embraced by many women in the Muslim world as an alternative to “colonial” or western feminism. Author Miriam Cooke broadly defines the movement in stating, “Islamic feminists...are inventing ways to navigate between forced changes necessary for survival, a critique of globalized modernity, and a viable means of self-projection that retains dignity...”<sup>3</sup> Cooke's definition is open-ended and suggests that while Islamic feminists are forced to address the issue of religion regardless of their personal faith, they are more generally concerned with bringing down institutions of oppression from within. It thus serves different purposes and is interpreted differently by women living in different contexts. Cooke's analysis is both an effective way of thinking about Islamic feminism and important in the way that it challenges some of the more stereotypical assumptions about Islamic feminism as a conservative or highly pious movement. Her discussion of Islamic feminism as a battle against invisibility resonates well with the overall mission of Franco-Maghrebi

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<sup>3</sup> Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001). xix.

feminism whose struggle also consist of fighting against women's invisibility within the Maghrebi community and an *immigrant* women's invisibility in French society. While the Islamic feminism is clearly useful on a symbolic front for Franco-Maghrebi women who are trying to foster their sense of dual identity as Maghrebi and/or Muslim women living in France, it does not effectively ground their struggle because they are not exposed to the same legislative pressures as their peers in the Maghreb. Developing a comprehensive understanding of Islamic feminist theory both in the Muslim world and more specifically in the context of the Maghreb and Maghrebi community in France will highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of Islamic feminist theory as a framework for the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement.

### *The Philosophy of Islamic Feminism*

In the conference *Musulmanes Féministes: du paradoxe à la réalité*, organized by the Collectif Présence Musulmanes Bruxelles on International women's day 2004, Islamic feminism was discussed as a means to questioning the validity of western feminism. Islamic feminism is becoming an increasingly popular tool for European Muslim female activists as they try to find their place in European society. Nora El Youssoufi of the Collectif Femmes Musulmanes, a pan-European Islamic Feminist group, eloquently articulates her opinion of the overarching goal of Islamic feminism in stating,

un féminisme musulman devrait non seulement permettre aux femmes musulmanes d'être des citoyennes respectueuse de leurs devoirs au sein de leurs sociétés...mais également d'avoir

l'audace de réquisitionner et de déterminer les fondations et le contenu de leur identité Islamico-occidentale.<sup>4</sup>

This quotation clearly highlights the usefulness of Islamic feminism as a framework of thinking about multiple or hybrid identities. The discourse of Alima Boumédiène-Thiéry and Saïda Kada, both of whom are self-identified Muslim women living in Europe, focus on Islamic feminism as it pertains to the lives of immigrant women. They appear to be less concerned with the exercise of working within the framework of Islamic texts and more focused on how Islamic feminism can be used as an alternative to colonial or occidental feminism. In stating, for example, “Nous ne pouvons plus nous consoler en réaffirmant que l’Islam donne des droits aux femmes que les hommes n’appliquent pas!”<sup>5</sup> Boumédiène-Thiéry largely rejects the process of reinterpreting Islamic texts in order to create a foundation for women’s rights within the religion itself.<sup>6</sup> This rejection is interesting considering that exegesis has become a major component of the Islamic feminist movement. Her focus on the anti-colonial elements of Islamic feminism clearly highlights the ways in which context and location greatly affect the nature and discussion of Islamic feminism. While she embraces the notion of an Islamic feminism that challenges the western stereotyping of Islam, she nonetheless argues that exegesis and defining women’s rights within Islamic texts does not create a

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<sup>4</sup> Nora El Youssoufi, “Introduction: Mot de Bienvenue aux Musulmanes Féministes: Du Paradox à la réalité,” in (presented at the Musulmanes Féministes: Du Paradox à la réalité, Bruxelles, 2004). Translation: An Islamic feminism should not only enable Muslim women to be respectful citizens of their duties within their society...but also to have the audacity to question and determine the foundations and content of their Islamico-Western identity.

<sup>5</sup> Alima Boumédiène-Thiéry, “Opening Statements: Musulmanes Féministes: Du paradoxe à la réalité,” in (presented at the Musulmanes Féministes: Du paradoxe à la réalité, Bruxelles, 2004). 17. Translation: We can no longer console ourselves by reaffirming that Islam gives women rights and that men fail to apply them.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 17.

strong enough platform for women's emancipation. The act of religious interpretation may seem less immediately relevant to the struggles of Franco-Maghrebi women who are not officially forced to submit to Islamic law by the State, but it does strengthen the position of Franco-Maghrebi women within their own communities.

Exegesis has become a significant component of Islamic feminist movement. The process of analyzing and interpreting religious texts, or *ijtihad*, is a traditionally male prerogative, and thus the mere act of engaging in *ijtihad* as a woman is a form of rebellion.<sup>7</sup> In her discussion of the writings of Moroccan feminist scholar and sociologist Fatima Mernissi, Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon states in her work *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History and Ideology* (2005), "Her analysis of the hadith is subversive because *al-fiqh* ("the science of explaining religion") is a male field that traditionally excludes women."<sup>8</sup> This clearly highlights the revolutionary nature of Islamic feminism and illustrates how women engage in subversive actions from within the very institutions that oppress them. The act of exegesis is significant on both symbolic and practical fronts, particularly in the context of a growing transnational Islamic fundamentalist movement that has spread throughout the Muslim world and even the West.<sup>9</sup> It emblematically challenges male patriarchy by breaking down the barriers between traditionally separate spheres for men and women and is pragmatically significant in the way that it enables Islamic

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<sup>7</sup> Wendy Kristianasen, "Débats entre femmes en terres d'islam, par Wendy Kristianasen (Le Monde diplomatique)," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2004, <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2004/04/KRISTIANASEN/11108>. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Lamia Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology* (Lanham Md.: Lexington Books, 2005). 17.

<sup>9</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven u.a.: Yale Univ. Press, 1992). 1-2.

feminists to challenge oppressive legislation from a position that resonates with the greater society.

In her work, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991) Mernissi attacks the hadiths and brings to light the inherent male biases and sexism that existed in early Arabian culture prior to the arrival of Islam.<sup>10</sup> She clearly argues, “Not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies.”<sup>11</sup> What is so significant about this quotation is that it emphasizes Mernissi’s fundamental belief that it is not Islam, but rather the manipulation of Islam that has led to the degradation of the Muslim woman’s status. She identifies culturally embedded sexism and its intersection with Islam as the fundamental problems. As Muslim women from different cultures and countries begin to explore their faith and the place of women within their religion, they are better able to showcase their autonomy and agency. They are engaging in religious dialogue on their own terms and for their own purposes. Knowledge of the religious texts has enabled women to advocate for their rights and to challenge those who oppress women on religious grounds.

Muslim female activists like Mernissi as well as Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian Islamic feminist scholar have also attempted to use religious texts in order to craft a new kind of feminism that rejects the orientalist or colonial image of the Muslim woman. This resonates strongly with the Franco-Maghrebi feminists because it empowers them to defend their rights within the context of Islam, giving them

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<sup>10</sup> The Hadiths are sayings of the Prophet Mohammad that are distinctive from the revelations of the word of God that he received and that are found in the Koran. Mernissi points out that the hadiths, which were interpreted by men close to Mohammad, are often fabricated in order to better serve the interests of men.

<sup>11</sup> Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. 8-9.

legitimacy within their own communities while simultaneously proving to the French that Islam is not universally oppressive to women. The dual function of Islamic feminism is an effective framework for Franco-Maghrebi feminists because it helps them to shape and reclaim their struggle in a fashion that encompasses all aspects of their identity.

### *Islamic Feminism in the Maghreb: A Case Study*

One particularly illustrative example of Islamic feminism in action is the reform of the *Moudawana* or family code in Morocco. The code, implemented in 1958, underwent significant transformation in February of 2003.<sup>12</sup> This was a tremendous gain for the Moroccan feminist movement and proved to Muslim women around the world that the shari'a code could be broken down.<sup>13</sup> As Alexandra Pittman suggests, "Efforts to change the Moudawana were pragmatic from the outset: religion is part of daily life and thus had to be taken into account," emphasizing the influence of religion in the Moroccan feminist movement.<sup>14</sup> The Moroccan group *Printemps de l'Égalité* advocated for reform by citing explicit sections of the Koran that called for equality between the sexes. According to Pittman, this was one of the most successful strategic approaches of the entire Moroccan feminist movement, as it enabled them to challenge fundamentalists from within the same framework of

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<sup>12</sup> Caroline Brac de la Perrière, "Remobilizing the Algerian Women's Movement: the 20 Ans Barakat Campaign," in *Building Feminist Movements : Global Perspectives.*, ed. Lydia Alpizar Duran, Noël Payne, and Anahi Russo (Albany: Zed Books Limited; Macmillan Publishers NZ Limited [Distributor], 2007). 264

<sup>13</sup> Shari'a law is derived from the Koran as well as the hadiths. According to Mernissi, it is the sacred law that governs most social issues in Islamic societies. This legal code has become synonymous with women's oppression in the Muslim world and women throughout the Muslim world continue to challenge the code.

<sup>14</sup> Brac de la Perrière, "Remobilizing the Algerian Women's Movement: the 20 Ans Barakat Campaign." 262

religious discourse. While this has undoubtedly been a significant gain for Moroccan women and society as whole, it is important to consider the limitations of such a religiously oriented approach. For example, Professor Leila Rhiwi from the University of Rabat and coordinator of *Printemps de l'Egalité* expressed concern that the reforms to the family code would not be adequately enforced unless society embraced the concept of women's rights independent of Islam and religion.

Many women throughout the Muslim world participate in the debate about women's rights in Islam because of the pressing need for reform and the undeniable presence of Islamist philosophy in the legal code. This should not, however, lead us to believe that all of these women want to ground their conceptions of women's rights within Islam itself. Women like Khalida Messaoudi, one of the most well known female activists in Algeria, also express their desire to maintain a connection to their religion and culture. In a speech given at the 1999 Simone de Beauvoir Convention in Cologne, Messaoudi decries the tendency to discuss women's oppression in the Muslim world as a question of culture and suggests instead that it is a political issue with cultural or religious justifications. Rather than linking the women's movement in Algeria to a religiously powerful female figure such as Aisha, the Prophet's favored wife, she links the struggle to Kahina, the Berber Queen who fought against the Arab invasion of her kingdom.

Every time an Algerian woman stands up to defend her rights there is a man standing behind her who asks: What do you want, do you want to be like European women? And we answer: We want to be like Kahina! Kahina was a female Algerian ruler in the seventh century. She did not lead her country into fear and terror as the men today do.<sup>15</sup>

In choosing to identify with a cultural rather than religious figure, Messaoudi rejects the notion of submitting to a form of Islam that is not native to Algeria.

Fundamentalist Islam that gained momentum in Algeria throughout the 1970s and 1980s is not, as she suggests in a personal interview with Elizabeth Schemla, the Islam that she was brought up with.<sup>16</sup> Islamic feminism, it has been suggested, is a broad label that can include a variety of opinions on the subject of religion and feminism as well as a variety of approaches to creating a platform for women's rights. We must, however, consider the weaknesses of the label of Islamic feminism, especially when discussing women's movements in countries outside of the Arab world. While there are certainly elements of a common struggle, the label Islamic feminism is in no way representative of the heterogeneity of the Muslim world and the diverse experiences of Muslim women across the globe.

This last point is illustrated by looking at the Tunisian feminist movement. Because of the exceptionally progressive stance on women's right in the Tunisian Personal Status Code (PSC), Tunisian feminists have faced a slightly different struggle. Despite the State's enlightened position on women, gender has been used by the government to gain leverage over its opposition. Tunisian President Habib

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<sup>15</sup> Khalida Messaoudi, "Messaoudi," *Dadalos: International UNESCO Education Server for Civic, Peace and Human Rights Education*, 2000, [http://www.dadalos.org/int/menschenrechte/Grundkurs\\_MR3/frauenrechte/woher/portraits/messaoudi.htm](http://www.dadalos.org/int/menschenrechte/Grundkurs_MR3/frauenrechte/woher/portraits/messaoudi.htm).

<sup>16</sup> Messaoudi, *Unbowed: An Algerian Woman Confronts Islamic Fundamentalism*. 49.



Bourguiba, who ruled from 1957 until 1987 manipulated his discourse on women's empowerment depending on whether his administration was threatened by religious fundamentalists or by the Socialists.<sup>17</sup> The instrumentalization of Tunisian women resembles that of Franco-Maghrebi women by the French State. Like Franco-Maghrebi feminists, the Tunisian feminist emerged in the early 1990s as a response to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. The Tunisian feminist movement, in partnership with the State, strengthened the PSC on issues related to divorce and custody, providing Tunisian women with a more favorable platform for their rights.<sup>18</sup> They also, however, engaged in significant religious discussion, advocating for a tolerant and peaceful practice of Islam.<sup>19</sup> Thus Tunisian women are able to advocate for women's rights within the context of Islam thereby maintaining a connection to their faith and tradition.

Tunisian feminists' comparatively elevated position in Tunisian society has provided them with the resources to support and foster feminism throughout the Maghreb, putting it in direct dialogue with women in Morocco, Algeria, and the Muslim world at large.<sup>20</sup> While they have addressed the issue of religion, as their formation was almost a direct response to the rise of fundamentalism in the 1990s, their movement approaches the issue of Islam different because they are fighting to protect and uphold their legal code rather than fighting to overturn it. The example of Tunisia very clearly illustrates the different roles that religion plays in the Muslim world and also highlights the diverse forces at play when discussing women's rights

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<sup>17</sup> Charrad, "Policy Shifts." 299.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 300.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 303.

<sup>20</sup> Labidi, "The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb."

in the Maghreb. It also clearly parallels with the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement, thereby establishing a clear transnational connection.

### **MEDITERRANEAN TIES: THE LINKS BETWEEN FEMALE ACTIVISTS IN THE MAGHREB AND FRANCE**

The Maghreb is a culturally distinct portion of the Muslim world with a unique history. Its long and painful history with France and the struggle for independence, particularly in Algeria, has profoundly shaped the population. For that reason, we must shift our focus from talking about Islamic feminism as a whole and trace the transnational connections between Maghrebi feminists in the Maghreb and in France. In order to grasp the depth of the connection between women in the Maghreb and Franco-Maghrebi women these connections will be explored from a variety of perspectives. A brief discussion comparing the works of Assia Djebar and Leila Sebbar will help to illuminate both the diverse role of language in Maghrebi feminist writing as well as the broad range of themes covered and the ways in which such themes resonate with the struggle of Franco-Maghrebi women in France. There is also substantial concrete or physical contact between the two movements. A number of feminist associations are based in France and the Maghreb, and they include: Women Living Under Muslim Laws (W.L.U.M.L), Femmes Contre Les Intégrismes (FCI), and *20 Ans Barakat*. These associations will be discussed at length in the following section. There are also a growing number of documentaries that span both the Maghreb and France, which offer an insight into the future of transnational connection between the two regions.

*Literature and Language as a Meeting Space: Intellectual Connections Between Women's experiences in the Maghreb and France*

As women challenge patriarchy in the public sphere their greatest weapon is to record their thoughts, opinions and emotions to create a collective memory and assert ownership over their lives and their words. The act of writing and speaking in the male dominated sphere is a critical component of Islamic feminism, Maghrebi feminism and Franco-Maghrebi feminism, clearly linking the three movements. While Islamic feminism connects to the other two movements in terms of its symbolic significance as an act, Maghrebi and Franco-Maghrebi feminism connect directly through literature and writing. Maghrebi and Franco-Maghrebi women connect through their struggle with language and feelings of isolation, victimization and exile. Looking at the works of Algerian writer Assia Djébar and Franco-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar will illuminate significant overlap in the thematic connections between female writers in the Maghreb and Franco-Maghrebi female writers. For both writers in the Maghreb and writers of Maghrebi origin living abroad, language is a significant issue that they must address. While Maghrebi writers are almost always bilingual, Franco-Maghrebi women, who do not necessarily speak the language of their parents, still struggle with finding words to express or communicate their hybrid identities.

Women writers in the Maghreb are conflicted by the knowledge that their access to the written word stems from their access to colonial language and education.<sup>21</sup> As Mildred Mortimer suggests, “These advantages, necessary to one's development as a creative writer, were inaccessible to the majority of their Algerian

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<sup>21</sup> Mildred Mortimer, “Language and Space in the Fiction of Assia Djébar and Leïla Sebbar,” *Research in African Literatures* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 301-311. 301.

sisters.”<sup>22</sup> Djébar, who entered the prestigious *Académie Française* in 2005, has had a tremendous impact both on Algerian women as well as French Society. She was the first North African woman elected to the *Académie* and embraced the position as a guardian of the French language.<sup>23</sup> While she has acknowledged the French language as a part of her identity, her semiautobiographical novel<sup>24</sup>, *Vaste est la Prison* (2002), illustrates the ways in which she come to terms with her access to the colonial language, the language of her father. In this work, Djébar attempts to bridge her written word with the spoken word, or *Kalaam*, of the women in her life who did not have access to the language of men.<sup>25</sup> In the introduction to *Vaste est la Prison*, Djébar clearly articulates her discomfort with the written word and the way in which she feels caught between two languages: the language of women and the language of men.<sup>26</sup> This clearly surfaces when Djébar is in the *hammam* or public bath with her mother-in-law. The *hammam*, a sacred space for Algerian women, is where women express themselves. Whether they are literate or not, they are able to communicate their deepest emotions through the spoken world in their language. Djébar is not able to follow or grasp the hidden meaning of certain words such as l’edou, which translates to enemy in English.<sup>27</sup> Her mother in law exclaims “Don’t you know how women in our town talk among themselves...Don’t you understand?”<sup>28</sup> In this episode what resonates so clearly with the experiences of Franco-Maghrebi women, is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Blume, “Algerian Finds French a Path to Her True Self,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2005, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/08/arts/08iht-blume.html?\\_r=1&scp=6&sq=Assia%20Djébar&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/08/arts/08iht-blume.html?_r=1&scp=6&sq=Assia%20Djébar&st=cse).

<sup>24</sup> Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*. 30.

<sup>25</sup> Mortimer, “Language and Space in the Fiction of Assia Djébar and Leila Sebbar.” 301.

<sup>26</sup> Assia Djébar, *So Vast the Prison*, 1st ed. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999). 15.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 14.

this feeling of isolation or otherness.<sup>29</sup>

Choosing to write in the traditional vernacular of the Maghreb is not necessarily an option for Franco-Maghrebi women. Younger generations of Beur or Beurette writers such as Faïza Guène or Samira Bellil artfully weave verlan, or the French slang of the *banlieue*, into their writing in order to evoke a sense of ownership over the French language. Guène, in her novel, *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*, very clearly uses verlan to feel a sense of control. On the last page of her novel she states, “Maintenant, kif-kif demain je l’écrirais différemment ça serait kiffe kiffe demain, du verbe kiffer. Waouh. C’est de moi.”<sup>30</sup> This quotation clearly highlights the ways in which Franco-Maghrebi female writers attempt to express their dual identities by expressing themselves in their own original language. While some Franco-Maghrebi female writers use verlan, girls such as Leïla Sebbar’s main character Shérázade in her fictional novel *Shérázade* (1999), clearly exhibit a desire to maintain or develop a connection to the mother tongue. Shérázade, the runaway daughter of Algerian immigrants, lives in a squat between the *banlieue* and Paris. Throughout the novel she is constantly reading Maghrebi authors or trying to learn the meaning of Arabic words and phrases, highlighting her preoccupation with language and her belief that language is the key to understanding her culture and part of her identity.<sup>31</sup>

As Sebbar depicts the lives of lost Beur teenagers struggling to find a place for themselves, she evokes many of the similar themes of isolation and estrangement as Djébar. Born in Algeria to a French mother and Algerian father, Sebbar’s feeling of

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<sup>29</sup> Mortimer, “Language and Space in the Fiction of Assia Djébar and Leïla Sebbar.” 302.

<sup>30</sup> Faïza Guène, *Kiffe kiffe demain* (Paris: Hachette littératures, 2004).188.

<sup>31</sup> Mortimer, “Language and Space in the Fiction of Assia Djébar and Leïla Sebbar.” 309.

exile, of belonging neither to the Algerian community nor to the French, enables her to empathize with the experiences of Beur women on a deep level.<sup>32</sup> This theme of exile resurfaces constantly throughout the writings of Maghrebi women on both sides of the Mediterranean. Female activists from the Maghreb are often physically exiled from their countries of origin or at the very least feel exiled within their communities. Franco-Maghrebi women living in France experience the same sense of rejection and isolation as their struggles are often lost in the greater narrative of immigration, identity and nationalism. They are used both by the French and by men in their own communities and their voices are rarely heard, leaving them at the margins within an already marginalized community. Looking at the writings of two prominent female Maghrebi and Franco-Maghrebi writers, Djébar and Sebbar, both of whom express a sense of solidarity with Maghrebi women throughout the North African diaspora it becomes evident that the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement can be seen as a transnational one. Maghrebi female writers, activists and professional form a dynamic transnational network. Messaoudi for example, is featured prominently on French television and has been invited on several occasions to make speeches in France. Djébar and Sebbar are both established intellectuals in France and their works have had a tremendous impact on the lives of Maghrebi women living in France and the Maghreb. The connection through writing is an important one, particularly in understanding the emotional experiences and thoughts of female activists. We must also, however, consider the physical connections between the two women's movements and the physical spaces in which they meet.

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<sup>32</sup> Hal Wylie and African Literature Association., *Multiculturalism & Hybridity in African Literatures* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2000). 117.

*Transnational Connections: Pragmatic Collaboration Between Feminist Associations in the Maghreb and France*

The proximity of the Maghreb and France would suggest that there is abundant contact between women on both sides of the Mediterranean. The depth of these connections, however, is a significant characteristic of both feminist movements and has not yet been fully explored. While women of Maghrebi origin living in France are not necessarily exposed to the same legislative pressures as their peers in the Maghreb, they are often subjected to similar oppression within the private sphere of their own communities. Immigrant communities who are geographically and economically isolated from mainstream French society often operate under an informal code of behavior grounded in conservative readings of Islam and a patriarchal Maghrebi culture, which are in some respects exacerbated by their marginalization. Many young women of immigrant origin describe a familial pressure to uphold tradition, greatly restricting their freedom and overall autonomy.<sup>33</sup> There are clearly differences in the two groups of women and their overall goals and strategies, but it is important to consider the overlap between the two and the ways in which they engage with one another through unified action and discussion. Since the 1970s, Maghrebi women living in France have formed associations in order to support women living in the Maghreb.<sup>34</sup> Associations focused on immigrant women's rights also often address the issue of women's rights in the Maghreb because it provides an opportunity for younger Franco-Maghrebi women to develop connections to their peers abroad. The examples of transnational cooperation

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<sup>33</sup> Doris Gray, *Muslim Women on the Move: Moroccan Women and French Women of Moroccan Origin Speak Out* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2008). 74.

<sup>34</sup> "Traces, mémoires, Histoire," <http://www.femmes-histoire-immigration.org/>.

provided in this thesis will focus primarily on the movements against the regressive family codes in both Algerian and Morocco as well as women's solidarity movements in France that raise awareness of the plight of Algerian women during the escalating violence of the 1990s.<sup>35</sup> Maghrebi women's rights organizations on both sides of the Mediterranean have fought together to have the rights and autonomy of women in the Maghreb restored. It is important to stress the fact that the transnational connections have been mutually beneficial. While many of the collaborations between women's rights associations in the Maghreb and France have been organized in order to support the women's struggle in the Maghreb, they have benefited Franco-Maghrebi women by enabling them to engage with and develop a connection to the Maghreb. By looking at the collaborations between Maghrebi women's associations on both sides of the Mediterranean, we will be able to better understand the mutual impact such cooperative efforts have had on Maghrebi women and Franco-Maghrebi women.

*Women Living Under Muslim Laws: the Presence of a Global Muslim Women's Rights Network in France*

The association Women Living Under Muslim Laws (W.L.U.M.L) now links Muslim women living in approximately 70 countries from France to Bangladesh.<sup>36</sup> It is a global network that connects Muslim women living in every corner of the world. It embraces anyone irrespective of faith, who is exposed to formally or informally instituted Islamic law. Founded in 1986 and originally based in France, W.L.U.M.L

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<sup>35</sup> This escalating violence, sometimes referred to as a Civil or quasi-Civil War resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Algerians. Women were especially targeted during the violence and were greatly restricted. The conflict was primarily between religious factions and the government, but it was the civilian population that suffered the most.

<sup>36</sup> "About WLUML | Women Living Under Muslim Laws," <http://www.wluml.org/node/5408>.



played a crucial role in creating a network between women from Algeria Pakistan, the Sudan, Nigeria, Morocco, Iran, Mauritius, Tanzania and Bangladesh, forming the Action Committee of Women Living Under Muslim Laws.<sup>37</sup> This network, which has continued to grow and evolve, has played a crucial role in supporting Muslim women's struggle around the world. The founder, Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas, an Algerian born feminist, stresses the importance of international cooperation in stating, "We must exchange information and support one another. We must create such solidarity so that we will be able to retain control over our protest..."<sup>38</sup> She clearly highlights the universal elements of the Islamic feminist struggle and articulates the need for mutual support, which the association has continued to provide since its inception in 1986. It has allowed women to learn from one another and to understand how Islam and Islamic law have affected different groups of women living in different societies and cultures. It is a loosely structured organization that allows both feminist associations and individuals dedicated to their mission of overturning Islamic laws to engage in the networking process, creating a diverse web of resources and groups. What is most unique about the organization's approach is its emphasis on networking as a means to strengthening feminist struggles around the world. While most organizations are concerned with networking, they often do not have the resources to look far beyond their immediate goals. W.L.U.M.L supports these associations and helps them to make those vital connections. Other organizations such as Femmes Contre les Intégrismes , which will be discussed in the following section, have adopted similar approaches creating a diverse and varied network of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*. 115.

global Muslim women's organizations. W.L.U.M.L is a clear example of the ways in which Franco-Maghrebi feminism maintains a connection to the global Muslim struggle, but the following examples will also reveal a much deeper connections with associations focused specifically on the Maghreb.

*Femmes Contres Les Intégrismes and Les Caravanières Venues du Sud*

FCI has played a significant role in maintaining the link between women's rights associations in the Maghreb in France. It was founded in 1995, following a meeting of Algerian women's associations fighting against the "code de la famille", an oppressive code of laws founded on shari'a law that reduces the woman's status to that of a minor.<sup>39</sup> The mission statement of the organization, which is to "réaffirme[r] et oeuvre[r] pour le respect du principe de l'égalité de droit et de traitement entre les femmes et les hommes en France et de l'autre côté de la Méditerranée," indicates that members of the association believe in a common struggle for Maghrebi women.<sup>40</sup> This suggest that while Maghrebi women in France theoretically have more rights than their female peers in the Maghreb, in practice they are often exposed to the similar oppressions, injustices and abuses. In the fall of 1996 and 1998, FCI organized and participated in several joint meetings that included organizations from Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco as well as Spain. It has held meetings both in the Maghreb and France, highlighting the truly transnational nature of the organization. These conferences were designed to bolster support for the

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<sup>39</sup> "L'association FCI (Femmes Contre les Intégrismes)," 30T22:03:00Z 11, 2005, <http://www.fciasso.org/spip.php?article14>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Translation: To reaffirm and work towards respect for the principal of equal rights and treatment among men and women in France and the other side of the Mediterranean

Algerian women's struggle in particular as they operated in highly dangerous and volatile conditions. FCI partners with a number of organizations in the Maghreb including Le collectif Maghreb-Egalité, which is an association established in three countries in the Maghreb. A close analysis of its website also reveals partnerships with a number of associations in France including: Association des Tunisiennes en France, Association de Solidarité avec les Femmes Algériennes Démocrates (ASFAD), and NPNS. Through FCI, the multiplicity of connections between associations in France and the Maghreb becomes increasingly clear. Their website helps to solidify our understanding of how organizations are able to come in contact with one another.

Since its creation, FCI, with the cooperation of women's rights organizations from the Maghreb and France, has embarked on a number of significant initiatives, the most important and well-recognized being their *Caravanières venues du Sud* project. Inspired by the 2001 *Caravanes pour les Droits* project that took place in Morocco, FCI has helped to bring women's rights associations from the Maghreb to France.<sup>41</sup> According to the information provided on the ASFAD website, the movement has continued to gain momentum and while it was initially based in the Rhones-Alpes region, the *Caravanières* now travels across France, bringing their movement and message to all of French society. The 2005-2006 *Caravanières venues du Sud*, which was the first to travel across France, was made up of women's rights groups from the three countries of the Maghreb as well as French associations. Elaborate Berber tents graced the public spaces in the city center and offered different

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<sup>41</sup> "Les caravanières venues du Sud | Projets citoyens," <http://www.projets-citoyens.fr/node/290>.

exhibitions, debates, and discussions on the status of women in the Maghreb.<sup>42</sup> These served as meeting spaces in which women and men could engage in dialogue about women's rights in France and the Maghreb, about the importance of secular values and republicanism, and the dangers of fundamentalism. The agenda of the French organizations involved is quite clear. FCI in particular places a strong emphasis on secular and republican values.<sup>43</sup> The significance of the *Caravane* movement is that it gives both a voice and face to the struggle of Maghrebi women fighting in the Maghreb as well as in France. Despite its clearly secularist agenda, it provides a forum for discussion and its success in the media has brought the debate into the homes of the French public. As fundamentalism and Islam become increasingly popular topics in the French public sphere, it is important to see the ways in which women are able to insert themselves into the debate. This subversive act of speaking and organizing in the public sphere is a significant addition to the debate of Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Protest Through Song: the 20 Ans Barakat Campaign*

The collective *20 Ans Barakat* (20 years is enough!) warrants special attention because of its unique approach and global reach. They have collaborated with associations such as W.L.U.M.L, FCI and in 2006 received the *Caravanières venues du Sud*.<sup>44</sup> The movement was born out of a desire to bring down the oppressive institution of shari'a and to change the public perception of a woman's place in

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> "L'association FCI (Femmes Contre les Intégrismes)."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

society. The slogan itself, *20 Ans Barakat* is symbolically significant as it attempts to evoke the same sense of urgency and solidarity as the slogan for Algerian independence - *7 ans Barakat* did.<sup>45</sup> The overarching goals of the movement, according to the director Caroline Brac de la Perrière are to, “ensure the omnipresence of the issue of equality between men and women and to obtain changes in (and preferably repeal of) the family law.”<sup>46</sup> Some of their more implicit goals also include ensuring the longevity of their movement by appealing to younger generations of women and men on both sides of the Mediterranean to continue their struggle. Their contribution to the transnational Maghrebi feminist movement comes in the form of a protest song and music video. The song *Ouech Dek Yal Qadi*, which translates to “What came over you judge?” deplores the condition of women and calls for the repeal of the oppressive Family code in Algeria.<sup>47</sup> It evokes sentiments of frustration, and despair, but also a sense of power. It also represented an attempt to rejuvenate and strengthen an exhausted movement in which women had fought tirelessly and in violent conditions throughout the 1990s.<sup>48</sup>

The song and video bring together female activists from the Maghreb, Sub Saharan Africa, Argentina and France. The inclusion of women of Algerian origins living in France is significant, Brac de la Perrière suggests, because “Although they don't know Arabic, they are Algerian and they are in the Family Code because those

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<sup>45</sup> Brac de la Perrière, “Remobilizing the Algerian Women's Movement: the 20 Ans Barakat Campaign.” 223.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 225.

<sup>47</sup> Caroline Brac de la Perrière, “Singing for Change - International Museum of Women,” <http://www.imow.org/wpp/stories/viewStory?storyid=1328>.

<sup>48</sup> Brac de la Perrière, “Remobilizing the Algerian Women's Movement: the 20 Ans Barakat Campaign.” 222.

laws follow you everywhere you go.”<sup>49</sup> Brac de la Perrière brings to light the far reaching effects of such a rigid family code and urges women to remain vigilant no matter where they live. The song was featured on the radio several times in France and Algeria and was also broadcasted on French television channels. The group distributed 11,000 copies of the CD in France and the Maghreb and the collective effectively organized press conferences to raise awareness of their struggle.<sup>50</sup> It must also be noted that the song is now easily available on the Internet, broadening its accessibility to the greater public.

While the success of this video and song has been more limited than the creators hoped for, its success at attracting young women and men in Algerian and France is significant. Bridging the generational divide and fostering the notion of a *common* struggle between men and women has helped to ensure the sustainability of the movement. Internal politics and disputes as well as limited access to resources has prevented the founders of the collective to leave the impact they had hoped, but Brac de la Perrière still remains positive about its achievements. Ultimately, *20 Ans Barakat* succeeded in making the Family Code in Algeria a nation wide issue and ensured that the discussion of this code was featured daily in the press. The code was revisited in 2005, and while the revisions failed to adequately improve the status of Algerian women, it suggests changes can and will continue to be made to the Family Code. As of February 2005, Algerian women are no longer obligated to obey their husbands, and do have the right to guardianship of their children in the case of

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<sup>49</sup> Caroline Brac de la Perrière, “Singing for Change - International Museum of Women.”

<sup>50</sup> Brac de la Perrière, “Remobilizing the Algerian Women's Movement: the 20 Ans Barakat Campaign.” 224.

divorce.<sup>51</sup> The Algerian women's struggle is on going, but the impact of associations like *20 Ans Barakat* have uplifted and rejuvenated the movement.

*Transnational Connections Through Film: Maghrebi and Franco-Maghrebi Girls Connect*

There is one final example that offers a glimpse into the potential future of transnational connections between the Maghrebi and Franco-Maghrebi feminist movements. Although it has been suggested earlier that ties may become increasingly difficult to sustain as the generations of Algerian youth born in France grow increasingly distant from their roots in terms of language, custom and tradition, younger generations of Maghrebi and Franco-Maghrebi women have already begun to establish connections. As mentioned above, the collective *20 Ans Barakat* has successfully reached out to younger generations both in France and in the Maghreb. One particularly compelling example that offers an important insight into the future of transnational connections between women's movements in the Maghreb and France is the documentary *Chahinaz: What Rights for Women?*. This documentary follows the story of a 20 year old Algerian girl, Chahinaz, on her quest to understand the source of women's oppression in Algeria and to understand how religion has affected women's rights and women's movements around the world. The documentary was directed by Samia Chala, an Algerian born woman who moved to France in 1994 to escape the brutal violence in Algeria. It was produced by Patrice Barrat who has staked his career on producing films on social issues and struggles.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Caroline Brac de la Perrière, "Singing for Change - International Museum of Women."

<sup>52</sup> "ITVS: International . The Filmmakers . Chahinaz: What Rights for Women?," <http://www.itvs.org/international/filmmakers/chahinaz.html>.

Throughout the course of the film, Chahinaz, an indignant and fearless young student, reaches out to well known female activists in Algeria, Ireland, India and France, engaging in dialogue with the likes of activists such as Christine Delphy. While her contact with reputable, established activists is significant and clearly an important learning experience for Chahinaz, one of the most interesting parts of the documentary is when she has the opportunity to go to France and meet with girls of Algerian or Maghrebi descent living in the *banlieue*. Their exchange is lighthearted, resembling a typical conversation between young women. While they discuss the issue of women's rights in Islam, the girls from the *banlieue* also describe the racism and discrimination that they and their male peers are exposed to daily. Chahinaz and the girls she meets both express frustration at the demonization of Islam in the media and express a desire to maintain a connection to their culture and tradition without being considered submissive. After her discussion with girls in the *banlieue* Chahinaz begins to realize that the Maghrebi feminist struggle is not a simple question of women's equality with men, but is also concerned with combating racism and discrimination.<sup>53</sup> The meeting illuminates the powerful *mutual* impact that the two groups of women are having on one another. In talking with Chahinaz, these young Franco-Maghrebi women were able to understand the differences between their struggles in France but also the ways in which their experiences parallel and connect.

The reliance on the Internet and technology as a source of communication is significant in the way that it highlights the changing nature of the feminist struggle and social movements more broadly. Chahinaz is able to speak with women face to

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<sup>53</sup> Samira Chala, *Chahinaz: What Rights for Women?*, 2007, [http://www.snagfilms.com/films/title/chahinaz\\_what\\_rights\\_for\\_women/](http://www.snagfilms.com/films/title/chahinaz_what_rights_for_women/).



face via her computer from her apartment in Algeria. While older generations of female activists focused on expressing their struggles and experiences through the written word, the next generation is moving towards a multi media approach that provides more people from diverse backgrounds with access to their message. Not only does this documentary and Chahinaz' story show us the persistent connections between young women in the Maghreb and in France, but it also shows us the growing access to information that these women as well as the greater public have. This documentary is a powerful indication of the potential future of transnational connections between Maghrebi women in the Maghreb and abroad, and foreshadows how the younger generations will continue to engage with one another.

#### **INFLUENCES FROM THE MAGHREB: THE IMPACT OF TRANSNATIONAL COLLABORATION ON FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINISM**

The examples discussed thus far have tended to emphasize the impact that transnational collaboration has had on the Maghrebi women's struggle in the Maghreb. While these collaborative efforts have had a clear and direct impact in supporting the women's struggle abroad, they have also profoundly impacted and shaped the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement. As Doris Gray suggests in her book, *Muslim Women on the Move: Moroccan Women and French Women of Moroccan Origin Speak Out* (2009), "Even after having spent decades in France and after adopting French citizenship...Family matters are often dealt with in accordance with the laws and traditions of their home countries."<sup>54</sup> As suggested earlier, immigrant women or the daughters of Maghrebi immigrants are often exposed to the

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<sup>54</sup> Gray, *Muslim Women on the Move: Moroccan Women and French Women of Moroccan Origin Speak Out*. 74.

same oppressions that, while not legally sanctioned, often go unnoticed by the State. Fighting against shari'a in the Maghreb thus parallels fighting against the informal code of the *banlieue* as well. Collaborative efforts such as the *Caravanes venues du Sud* help to educate women and highlight the oppressions that span the Mediterranean and follow Maghrebi women abroad. While Franco-Maghrebi women often view their peers overseas as more oppressed, Maghrebi women do not necessarily share the same view of their status. Hiba, a young Moroccan diplomat states, "Their [Franco-Maghrebi] understanding of our society is based on the Morocco of thirty to forty years ago."<sup>55</sup> What is so significant about this quotation is that it illuminates a geographical lag in information and understanding. Transnational displays of solidarity and educational campaigns help to bring about a better understanding of the present day situation in the Maghreb and the ways in which women are responding to such pressures. While young girls of Franco-Maghrebi origin often feel alienated from women in the Maghreb or women who were brought up in the Maghrebi culture like their mothers, transnational cooperation helps them to understand the similarities between their struggle and that of their peers across the Mediterranean.

Understanding the similarities between women's rights in the Maghreb and the rights of Franco-Maghrebi women in France is deeply significant because it enables Franco-Maghrebi women to better understand their dual or hybrid identities. Maghrebi youth often express alienation and confusion when asked about their cultural background and their greatest connection is often through their parents, whose experiences growing up in the Maghreb may be radically different from life in

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

the Maghreb today. Such connections enable Franco-Maghrebi youth to connect to the Maghreb of today, independently of their parents. Being able to draw from a direct source of knowledge or understanding helps them to combat the stereotypic representations of the Maghreb in France and these joint movements celebrate Muslim women's agency and autonomy on both sides of the Mediterranean.

### CONCLUSION

The Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement has vast and complex transnational connections. They are, for obvious reasons, very closely connected to the Maghreb but are also engaging in dialogue with Muslim women around the world. This growing connection to the Islamic feminist movement has helped the Franco-Maghrebi feminist movement to embrace its dual or hybrid identities. While they many not necessarily wish to entrench themselves in a serious religious dialogue, Islamic feminism provides Franco-Maghrebi feminists with a framework that goes far beyond religion. It enables women to challenge patriarchy and oppressive institutions from within by helping them to analyze these sources of oppression. In France where women are exposed to informally maintained traditional structures of patriarchy, Islamic feminism is helping them to stand on equal footing with religious clerics in their community but more importantly, it also enables them to celebrate and embrace their autonomy. They are no longer reliant on western feminism as the justification for their rights, but rather are beginning to engage in a discourse that enables them to challenge patriarchy in their own community while also challenging the post-colonial gaze of the West. We begin to see, as Malika Hamidi – coordinator of the European Muslim Network – suggests, a growing cooperation between self-

identified secular and religious feminists who choose to focus their energies on fighting for tangible improvements in fields such as girls education, better housing and more.<sup>56</sup> While this growing collaboration is a significant breakthrough, we must be wary about projecting the label of Islamic feminism on to Franco-Maghrebi women, who often have their faith projected onto them from the outside. The label of Islamic feminism runs the risk of overshadowing women who view themselves as secular or wish to define their identity on grounds other than religion. It may also obscure the complex intersection of culture, religion and history, which have together shaped the status of women in the Maghreb.

For this reason, we must look specifically at the collaboration between female activists in the Maghreb and female activists of Maghrebi origin in France. A close analysis of the transnational solidarity movements and associational connections suggests that we must begin to think of a transnational Maghrebi feminism. While there are quite clearly differences, their physical proximity, consistent communication and cooperation as well as their close cultural ties suggest that their experiences as women are very similar. Their search for a discourse that enables them to emancipate themselves from multiple sources of oppression and patriarchy is a shared goal. Gray states, “in both countries, women expressed a need to overcome traditions and customs that impeded choices in the private and public sphere,” effectively illuminating the common struggle of Maghrebi women wherever they may live.<sup>57</sup> We must develop our understanding of this movement in its entirety to truly grasp the ways in which women act and respond to such burdensome forces. Many women on

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<sup>56</sup> Brittain, “Islamic Feminists on the Move.”

<sup>57</sup> Gray, *Muslim Women on the Move: Moroccan Women and French Women of Moroccan Origin Speak Out*. 152.

both sides of the Mediterranean believe their struggles to be one in the same and cherish the support and relationships they have developed with their peers abroad.

Like any movement, however, there are clearly tensions between different groups both in the Maghreb and in France. There are clear geographical and generational divides within the movement, the greatest division being among young Franco-Maghrebi women and older female activists in the Maghreb. This is most clearly seen in the way that the veil affairs and the hijab in general have been discussed on both sides of the Mediterranean. While in many ways the affairs elicited similarly conflicted responses from women in the Maghreb and France, Gray effectively illustrates this generational and regional tension surrounding the veil through her conversations with women of Moroccan origin in France and Moroccan women in the Maghreb. Women in the Maghreb or the mothers of daughters born in France actively fought against the veil, which makes it difficult for them to accept young Franco-Maghrebi girls' decision to re-appropriate the veil as a marker of their identity.<sup>58</sup> Despite this difference in opinion, Gray's conversations make clear that both women in the Maghreb and women of Maghrebi origin in France exhibited a better understanding of the struggle against the veil as well as the struggle for the right to an independent identity. The issue of the veil, while perhaps an over discussed example, brings to light the different goals of Franco-Maghrebi and Maghrebi women. Although they have many overlapping objectives and should be considered part of the same movement, Maghrebi and Franco-Maghrebi women are ultimately struggling to achieve different ends. The Franco-Maghrebi feminist

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 66-67.

struggle is as much about challenging patriarchy within the Maghrebi community as it is about fighting for equality and against discrimination in France. They are fighting for their right to be seen as French *and* Maghrebi. This struggle to define their own identity and space is a significant element of the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle that is unique in the way that it draws from two civilizations.

As women in the Maghreb continue to successfully fight and break down the oppressive religious institutions that restrict their independence and autonomy, they will continue to develop their connection to their peers in France. These two movements are inextricably linked and are able to effectively support and sustain each other in their independent struggles. For Franco-Maghrebi women, understanding the Family Code and traditions of their parents' country help them to more clearly understand their struggle within their own communities in France. Through the support of female activists in the Maghreb, and more broadly of Muslim feminists around the globe, they begin to understand how institutions are challenged from within. Islamic feminism and more specifically Maghrebi feminism has helped Franco-Maghrebi women to reclaim and redefine their struggle in France, by highlighting the agency and autonomy of women in the Muslim world. This has enabled Franco-Maghrebi women to break down the image of the submissive Maghrebi woman projected onto them by the French.

## CONCLUSIONS

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### REFLECTIONS ON FRANCO-MAGHREBI FEMINISM

As women scurried into and out of the St. Denis metro station in a working class suburb north of Paris, I was struck by the diversity of their style. Some wore burqas, others headscarves, but most of the young Franco-Maghrebi girls I saw wore tight fitting jeans and wool coats – their physical features were the only characteristics that distinguished them from young Franco-French girls. I had stepped off of the metro expecting to see the grey, somber and maleness of the *banlieue* as it was portrayed in *La Haine* but was instead immediately throw into a vibrant scene full of women bargaining, selling and chatting. They had a strong presence in the space. The *banlieue* is a more complex and diverse space than the mainstream media describes it to be. It is a space that is written off, categorized as a separate community that exists outside of mainstream French society, but rarely does anyone look far enough into the *banlieue* to see the ways in which it is changing. As I moved away from the commercial center surrounding the metro station and drifted into the more residential areas, the austere and foreboding concrete facades of the government built housing projects – Habitation à Loyer Modéré (HLM) - revived the impression of empty, grey spaces, but as the afternoon passed I realized that within these buildings women were actively discussing and debating their rights and status, and were spearheading initiatives to reclaim their rights. Upon entering the office of Voix D’Elles Rebelles, I began to realize that in order to understand the position of women

in the *banlieue* and their rights and status, you have to be able to move beyond the somber exterior and to try and understand the Franco-Maghrebi feminist struggle in the places from which it emerges.

The girls I met in St. Denis were not the girls one reads about in the French newspapers; they are not passive victims of Islamic patriarchy. They expressed a profound consciousness of the limitations on their freedom and the restrictions that frustrated their daily lives. They were also, however, lighthearted teen-age girls who found ways to circumvent the system and shake off, at least temporarily, the yoke of the male members of their families. What was so striking to me about the afternoon I spent talking to these young women about their experiences as women of Maghrebi and Pakistani descent is the way in which they were able to openly discuss and confront their obstacles together. While Franco-Maghrebi women are often portrayed as silent victims, these girls were eager and willing to share their aspirations and their desires to overcome their oppression with anyone who would listen. For most of these girls, the mere fact that they belonged to an association like Voix d'Elles Rebelles signified an act of subversion or rebellion.

The story of these girls is the story of so many girls in the *banlieue*; they are caught between the real restrictions placed on them by the male members of their family and an image of submissiveness projected onto them by the French. It is a story of negotiation. While it is important to understand how their identities have been constructed or shaped by external factors such as patriarchy and discrimination, it is arguably more important to look at how these girls are reclaiming their identity



and their space. They do not need to be told what the source of their oppression is, they are deeply aware of the multiple forces that weigh upon them.

It was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that the French State began to shift its attention to women of immigrant origin. The discussion of immigration, which has traditionally focused on male immigrants, shifted gears as increasingly alarming accounts of gendered violence began to emerge from the suburbs. The sexual violence and brutal murders of young women in the *banlieue* were events that warranted such attention, but the way in which Franco-Maghrebi women have been discussed in the French public sphere ultimately forces us to question the underlying motivations for the shift towards women's rights in the *banlieue*. When I began this project, I expected that one of the biggest burdens on Franco Maghrebi feminist associations would be related to the lack of resources or hostility within their own communities. Throughout the course of my research, however, it became increasingly clear that one of the biggest concerns of Franco-Maghrebi feminists is the exploitation of their cause by outsiders, be it French politicians, French feminists or religious leaders in their communities. Female activists I spoke with in Paris listed many examples of women who courageously spoke out against violence and oppression they had experienced only to have these deeply personal experiences used against their communities. As was suggested in the second chapter, the discussion of sexual abuse, rape and the overall violation of women's rights has, in the last decade, become inextricably connected to immigration in the French public sphere. Franco-Maghrebi women are thus fighting not only for their rights as women, but in a broader sense they are struggling to take back and redefine the public discourse

concerning their status. In this way, Franco-Maghrebi feminism has significant implications as a social movement.

In order to more effectively evaluate how Franco-Maghrebi women viewed and defined their struggle, I approached my project from a very pragmatic perspective. Rather than narrate their struggle as it has often been described in second hand accounts of Franco Maghrebi women's rights in France, this project provides a historical overview of the evolution of their movement and emphasizes the importance of looking at the actual organizations themselves in order to gain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how Franco Maghrebi women are reclaiming the right to define their own struggle.

The 1980s and 90s were highly formative years for the Franco-Maghrebi feminism because they created the context in which the movement emerged in the public sphere. For the Maghrebi activism on a broad level the 1980s were a formative decade but in the aftermath of the Beur movement, the declining socioeconomic status of the Maghrebi community and the State's failure to act led to widespread disillusionment. This disappointment fueled resentment and ultimately bred significant violence of which women were the greatest victims. Grasping the ways in which the status of Maghrebi women has regressed over time is important to understanding the overall goals and strategies of the movement. When I began this project I assumed that the fundamental tension within the Franco Maghrebi feminist movement would be centered around the religious-secular divide. Because of the way that the debate over Franco Maghrebi women's rights and their status within the Maghrebi community is framed, it is indeed difficult to move beyond the issues of

religion and tradition. Studying the associational nature of the movement, however, reveals a deeper disagreement among Franco-Maghrebi feminists over allocating responsibility for the declining status of Franco-Maghrebi in the *banlieue*. Many of the smaller grassroots associations have come to understand Franco Maghrebi women's oppression as a result of two larger forces: racial-religious discrimination of the Maghrebi community by French society as well as the traditional patriarchy and Islamic fundamentalism in the *banlieue*. Associations such as NPNS and MIR, which are often seen by the smaller organizations as exploitative of the Franco Maghrebi women's cause, adopt more extreme positions, assigning blame exclusively to either the Maghrebi male or postcolonial institutions in France. By emphasizing a religious division among Franco-Maghrebi women and by framing the entire debate about Franco-Maghrebi women's rights in a religious light, the French have sustained their process of othering Maghrebi women.

This tendency to other Maghrebi women has historically colored France's interactions with Maghrebi women in the colonies as well as in France. As this thesis has shown, this is made clear when looking at the relations between French feminism and Franco-Maghrebi feminism. While French feminists continue to advocate for gender as the overarching, defining characteristic that should unite all women, their constant emphasis on religion as the sole source of oppression for Franco Maghrebi women further alienates Franco-Maghrebi feminists, thereby undermining any potential for solidarity between the two movements.<sup>1</sup> The comparison between French and Franco Maghrebi feminism, brings to light some of the more

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<sup>1</sup> Marnia Lazreg, "Decolonizing Feminism," in *Feminism and 'Race'* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2001).

contradictory and inconsistent elements of French republican discourse. While the French conception of identity is predicated on the concept of color-blindness, their tendency to constantly refer to persons of Maghrebi origin as Muslim or Maghrebi rather than French contradicts this principle. The case of Franco- Maghrebi feminism effectively illustrates the dangers of othering and brings to light the many details that the French have overlooked in their discussion of Franco-Maghrebi women's rights.

Because of the divergences between French and Franch-Maghrebi, I was surprised to see the numerous ways in which their struggles converge, particularly around the issue of sexual and domestic violence. Studying this convergence helps to define common aspirations and goals, thereby bridging the gap between the two traditionally distinctive struggles.

In order to fully comprehend the complexity of the Franco Maghrebi feminist movement we must also understand the transnational nature of the movement. Because a central element of the Franco Maghrebi women's struggle is to embrace their pluralistic identity, they have often sought to understand the struggle of their peers in the Maghreb. These transnational connections are not so surprising considering the close proximity of France to the Maghreb. The depth of these connections, however, was not something I had expected to find but does shape the way in which we think about the movement. As my analysis of the influences of Islamic feminism and feminism in the Maghreb on the Franco Maghrebi feminism progressed, it became increasingly clear that Franco-Maghrebi and Maghrebi feminism are part of the same movement albeit with slightly different goals and contexts.

Women's movements that emerge from marginalized populations draw on a unique variety of discourses to shape and articulate their cause. Franco-Maghrebi feminism is an important example of how women at the margins are able to forge a distinctive movement that articulates the multiple sources of their oppression. Their movement, which draws on French as well as Islamic feminist theory, has begun to challenge the dominant discourse on immigrant women and immigration as a whole. The case of Franco-Maghrebi women is a clear reflection of the ways in which traditional patriarchy, religion and colonialism intersect and impact one another and how women in particular are not only victims, but are able to challenge these forces. While I think that Franco-Maghrebi feminism could serve as an effective bridge between the Maghrebi community and mainstream French society in a way that would bring about a better mutual understanding, I have chosen not to emphasize this aspect of their movement. Through the process of writing this thesis I became increasingly aware of the ways in which women's causes are so often appropriated to solve greater national issues such as assimilation, crime, and national identity. This appropriation is dangerous and detrimental to the struggle of Franco-Maghrebi women because of the way in which it reinforces their objectification and denies their ability to be seen as conscious actors. I want to stress here the importance of studying their movement as a means of understanding how Franco-Maghrebi women define and articulate their struggle. We can never fully let go of our own preconceived notions of feminism or womanhood. We can and must, however, learn to listen more closely and observe the ways in which different communities of women transcend their appropriation, objectification, and oppression and act out against it.

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