



# ***Public Space in Morocco; a History of Gender Segregation***

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## **Abstract**

In this article, I examine the division of space in private and public spheres according to gender in the context of present day Morocco. One of the many male-dominated spaces in Moroccan society is the Café culture, which in turn has implications for the male domination of the public sphere as a whole. The café not only occupy the actual part of an area but also creates a purely male territory where women are often not welcomed. Any women's attempt to trespass into this territory is an exception that is in some cases can amount to cultural suicide. This article investigates parts of the history of Moroccan women's attempt to reclaim public spaces, which can be said to coincide with the first phase of women movement. This article also attempts to create a link with the conceptualization of Harem as a historical and physical limitation to women's access to public space. The article will trace this limitations back to the first Moroccan family law adopted in 1947, which only confirmed the traditional role of women and men. It will be argued that the last modification of the law in 2004 finally gave more rights to women.

## **Keywords:**

space, women, harem, café culture, family law, Morocco.

Space has always been a non-negotiable property that is divided by gender. Moreover, the division of private and public spheres can sometimes be claimed and dominated by one gender; public space mainly dedicated to men, while the private firmly dedicated to women. The laws that define space are often more strict and visible in some Muslim countries. Despite of these countries rich and different histories, it seems that gender based segregation of space is a common ground. To date, women in Morocco still find themselves unwelcome and in strange situations when they are outside, with no male companion. Public spaces like cafés, public swimming pools, the mosque and street corners near shops are the examples of the places one can list as male-dominated spaces, while the private sphere is purely for women. In fact, even if women have the freedom to access public spheres of schools, public bath, the house is where they have to return. So, what is behind this division? Where does it originate from?

Researching this topic in the Moroccan context is very tricky. The country has multiple aspects (religion-ethnicity) which make situation varies in different parts of the country. This paper however, will attempt to explain one aspect of male-dominated spaces in nowadays-Moroccan society (especially in the social context of small towns and residential suburbs of big cities). Furthermore, it will investigate some of the factors that may have influenced the creation of the private-public binary.

### Café Culture

Café culture in Morocco is a visible form of public space dominated by males especially in small towns and residential suburbs of big cities. A modern Moroccan proverb says: 'between every café and a café, there is a café'. Therefore, the domination gets more extensive and the relationship between power and space

is intensified. Not only are woman unwelcome in cafes, they are blatantly exposed to these forbidden places whenever they are outside. What does that mean for space division and what are the aspects of this phenomenon?

A café usually has a space inside the building and a big terrace outside that occupies the sidewalks. For a clear illustration, Said Graiouid<sup>1</sup> describes the café terrace as often set on the sidewalk and is usually composed of at least two rows of tables, though city legislation limits the display of tables outside café to one row. The first observation to be made is that it is a common practice for terrace users to set their chairs facing the street. When a group of five friends or more visits the café there is usually a discreet competition among them about who would take the seats facing the street. Giving one's back to the street means that one is missing out on the street show (Graiouid, 2007)

The dominations of the café culture not only occupy the actual part of an area but also creates a purely male territory where women are often not welcomed. Cafes are filled with men only. Any women's attempt to trespass into this territory is an exception and social (and cultural) suicide. Graiouid adds: "...cafe or other public spaces are predominantly male spatial practices. They secure the male's material, spiritual and psychological comfort and, thus, guarantee his continuity in space and time." (Graiouid, 2004, 4). Therefore, to secure this male territory, female café goers are aware of the male gaze that surround them from inside and outside the café. This act, of sitting on a café terrace, put women under the

judgmental gazes of the other women passing by the café. Therefore, as Graiouid confirms, women are more self-conscious about their café experience than their male counterparts. (Graiouid, 2007)

Like curious spectators, men sit on café terraces to monitor the street show. This setting creates a power relation between the dominant male café goers and the passing by women and reproduces the unequal power relations which prevail in society. In a post-traditional Morocco, where Moroccans strive to be modern, women are still guided by unwritten rules and unspoken social etiquettes. This setting effects a certain women's behavior that includes walking faster with head down or looking in a different direction to avoid eye contact with the male observers. Some women cross the street when getting close to a café, or in the worst case, change their entire route and go through narrow sub-streets, which in turn wastes time and exposes them to certain dangers, for ex. theft.

So, how did cafés become a place where men monitor and control the existence of women in public spaces? When did the dichotomy between public and private public starts, and or where does it originate from? Which factors do contribute to women occupying the domestic sphere and making it their own?

### Women going public

Since the beginning of patriarchal societies, where men dominated, women always came together to overcome the restricting patriarchal conventions. Morocco is no exception. Urban women waved the flag of feminism in the 1930 as a tool their emancipation, from both the colonizers and from the strict oppressing traditions. By associating their emancipation with the freedom of the country, women's movement started together with the freedom movement, a movement of resistance against the French and the Spanish colonizers.

The two leading parties, Istiqlal Party (Independence Party), and Shura and Independence Party created a women's group associated with the party that triggered the first legalized/institutionalized women's movement, which, without a doubt, was one of the very first formal ways that women demanded access the public spaces.

But how did this first movement start and how relevant is it to the space division?

It is a fact that Morocco encountered the western world because of colonization. The result of this encounter not only shaped the political scene, infrastructure etc. but also introduced the way the 'other' men and women lived. It must have been a shock for the Moroccan men to learn that the French and the Spanish men only had one wife. However, I would assume that it was a shock followed by pity. Nevertheless, for women, it might have been a shock combined with envy that the foreign woman could exercise the personal freedom. She could go out, and she could have a husband for herself instead of sharing him with three or more other women. These two worlds met together; the one that launched its first wave of feminism since the 18th century<sup>2</sup>, and the second being conquered that kept its women indoor. The collision, of these vastly different worlds; one holding a colonial agenda explain the uprising of the resistance movement.

The French protectoral system in Morocco started in 1912. Under the same goal, men and women collaborated to resist colonialism and demanded their freedom. Women's involvement in the political scene with the first two political parties that were created in the 1930s and 1940s took two forms: Women Section of Istiqlal Party and

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<sup>2</sup> Here referring mainly to De Gouges Olympe text: *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* (1791, September 5).

AkhawatSafaAssociation – in affiliation to Shura and Independence Party – led by HabibaJasous.

Women Section of Istiqlal Party was founded in the 1940s in the midst of the struggle of the national movement to resist protectoral system. Their demands were to raise an official request to the king of the country to demand secondary education for girls; and opening the higher corps at the University of the Qaraouine in front of women. Fields of work were focused on education of girls in several private schools; charity work that targeted families of resistance fighters and sons of resistance martyrs. Political struggle involved creating secret cells to organize the work of women, strengthen their political consciousness, and prepare them to play roles in resisting the colonizer. Accomplishments of this entity included women's presence in public space was more accepted; girls' access to school and lack of opposition in the past has challenged girls' right to education and their contribution to political action. (Benoakrim, 2017)

While the Women Section of Istiqlal Party initiated the demands for girls' education and involvement in the public sphere, AkhawatSafa Association raised more awareness women's rights. This association was created in 1947, in affiliation with Shura and Istiqlal Party. Through intervention with raising awareness of women's rights, giving literacy classes to women and charity work, this organization was able gradually to make public schools and universities accessible for pre and post-independence generation (Benoakrim, 2017). AkhawatSafa continued its work during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. During The Moroccan Women's Conference that took place in Fez in 1984, AkhawatSafa Organization presented a report that included a major defense boost for women in public against harassment: "due to the corrupted ethics in Morocco, our country,

many women in the street are exposed to men that have no ethics! To throw obscene words at women's ears without having anyone to stop them from doing so. We see that the conference had to submit a special report about this matter to his Majesty and to every Bacha (representative of the king in every small town and city) in every city so they work to keep women's dignity and stop whoever expose her to any harm". (Ma'aninou, 1996)

In the same year when this association was created, King Mohammed V gave an important speech in Tanger (on 9th of April 1947) which was an important milestone in Morocco's road to regaining its independence (Loftus, 2014). He was followed by his daughter Princess Aicha, who he delivered a speech inciting Moroccan women to occupy in the political sphere and fight for their freedom, alongside with the men (London, 2016). The media described the speech as the one "that emancipated women" what transformed into myth that still influences history and made good material for the media when it comes to talking about the emancipation of women. ". she hosted women emancipation movement in Morocco, (after) she immediately took the floor after her august father" (Sar Lalla Aicha, 2011). Indeed, the speech was unique, the princess not only was the first royal female family member to speak to the public, but she also did it without a veil, in front of an audience of men and heavily veiled women.

The cover of the Time Magazine, on November 11, 1957 shows a portrait of princess Aicha with no veil and wearing a modern shirt, while at the back a veiled woman is wearing a traditional dress. Both women are looking towards a different direction. Yet, both women are wearing dresses with similar design. Looking at the portrait closely can indeed help us to understand that days of the traditional are to be left behind. But what will happen to the Harem?

## Harem

'A woman goes out – of a house – twice in her lifetime: once from her parents' to her husband's house and last to her grave' is a strong yet bizarre statement one can understand if put in the right context: harem.

The term 'harem' can simply be defined as a space dedicated to women in a house in old times where wives, daughters and female servants stay. This way of life is not exclusive to Morocco nor to the certain time era. Its root goes deeper into ancient cultures. Though it is as ancient as the Greeks, you can still sense it in today's world: women spaces and men's spaces and the continuous struggles of breaking into the dominant 'male' territories. How influential was the harem on space division, and, is it still relevant today?

In one's imagination and thinking, harem is a sacred place where no men are allowed, except for other women, or close relatives or the father, brothers uncles, and nephews. In her book: *Are You Vaccinated Against the Harem?*, Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi, defines the word Harem 'as what is forbidden or somewhere holy that requires specific and strict laws to enter'. Harem is a spatial concept that separated space in two: indoor female space, hidden and forbidden to all men except the master (the husband), and an outdoor space open to all men except women (2004). It is worth mentioning that the harem only existed within urban areas among high-class and rich families, where the man –the master – could afford having more than one wife, multiple odalisques, and servants, a house with the specific space and structure.

In the reflections from her visit to Morocco in 1910s, Edith Wharton wrote:

It is rare, in Morocco, to see in the streets or the bazaars any women except of the humblest classes, household slaves, servants, peasants from the country or small tradesmen's

wives; and even they (with the exception of the unveiled Berber<sup>3</sup> women) are wrapped in the prevailing (Wharton, 1920)

In Morocco, where life, on the whole, seems so much less joyful and brightly-tinted; and the women of the richer classes, mercantile or aristocratic, never leave their harems except to be married or buried...

The demands of women for their inclusion into public spaces and equality can encounter rejection, refusal, and sometimes persuasion from some men that hold tightly the belief that women are supposed to stick to their role, and remain in the private sphere. Harem concept took a slightly psychological turn when Mernissi called it a disease, as a residue from Middle Ages, attacking men and inspiring them to see their partners as an odalisques, even if they were equally modern and successful. This presence of the harem is not visible in developing countries only, but also in the countries that considered themselves 'developed'. In fact, the more the country inspires to be developed, the more arrogant it becomes, the stronger the harem disease sticks (Mernissi, 2004). She continues that this disease awakens in men, deeply hidden dreams of having three women to spoil him, even if one woman is greatly satisfying him in reality. It also awakens the desire to have a passive, obedient and silent wife, even if she is highly educated and successful (Mernissi, 2004). This multilayered deep desire is a key factor for patriarchal behaviors and the source of private-public dichotomies that we still experience in all aspects of modern day life. So can one be vaccinated against the harem disease, and how far can this disease affects women access to the public sphere?

Harem realm started to fade succeeding Morocco's independence, due to numerous

<sup>3</sup> Berbers or Amazighs (Imazighn) are an ethnic group indigenous to North Africa.

factors, for instance the (timid) women's movement, French/Spanish style of living, education, the creation of many office jobs and rural migration. It is important to study these factors to get greater insight into this phenomenon. Nevertheless, one should conclude that the harem gradually disappeared in Morocco leaving behind that patriarchal culture.

### Women and family code

The family is the backbone of any social structure. It deeply engraves certain man-made systems which contributes to the overall institutionalized ones. Through constant changes that occur within these small and big structures, the new norms and rules effect not only its members, but also the spatial area. Through different religious and culturally based laws, social systems to create family codes that help create a structure to either organize or limit people's freedoms and their rights. How does the family code influence Moroccan family structure? Who made these codes and what was it based on? What has it brought to women? What impact has it made on public-private dichotomy?

After gaining independence in 1956, Morocco quickly institutionalized the first family law. Rachid Zizaoui<sup>4</sup> clarifies that 'Morocco did not have a legislative framework regulating the field of personal and the family; it was regulated according to the provision of Islamic law and also according to the customs' (Zizaoui, 2016). The newly returned king suggested to formulate a law that draws on the provision of Islam sharia laws, Islamic jurisprudence in the field of the family, and through traditions and customs. The committee dedicated to this mission adopted modern sciences, such as sociology, psychology, and use

of statistics to strengthens their conclusions of the need to lift of the damage Moroccan women and ensure the stability of the family. In fact, the committee consisted of ten men that were chosen from high religious authorities and important employees from the ministry of justice (Mernissi, 2005). However, none of the instructions were respected, and the law was decided after only three meetings of the committee (Zizaoui, 2016). With the absence of women in the committee, how objective were these men?

The family code of 1957 caused great disappointment for women's movement. In her masterpiece *Beyond the Veil* (1973), Fatima Mernissi explains that this code came as a confirmation of the traditional family role as a reproductive unit restricting on women freedoms. Mernissi not only questions the objectivity of the committee who constructed the law, but also that how social and economic factors influenced laws on women's right to work. You can easily imagine the form of conflict and tension that resulted from women persistence to work when an Islamic community suffers from unemployment. Every society that is unable to create job positions for its members chooses to return to tradition that denies the work for women and only limits them to sex objects. That is exactly what happened in Morocco after independence in 1956/1957. In Article number 115 in 1957 family law: People's expenditure is on themselves; except for the wives, their expenditure is on their husbands. Therefore, women's right to work clearly cannot be accomplished according to the law being based on the illusion of care and attempt to nourish the traditional image of the family: the masculinity as the power source of economy, and femininity as the passive consumerist force.

Other articles in 1957 family code asserted constraining woman to the private sphere and allowed her spouse to decide when she

can enter the public sphere. "A woman has the right to visit her parents, but only when her husband approves". (art. 35) Though the Moroccan institution endorses gender equality, as both men and women fall under the category of "citizens", it did not give women the rights for to go out, and therefore, obtain a job. In fact, the law "confirms" that a woman should negotiate those rights with her husband.

The first family law had a big influence on the women rights in Morocco. Without a doubt, although it had been modified several times, this law has not made a dramatic change in regards of women's situation. However, with the recently modified law of 2004, women were taken by surprise. The two most argued articles, about the expenditure and taking permission from a spouse to go out, were dropped out. Article 24, women were given the right to marry themselves without needing a guardian, in article 78, a woman has the right to divorce her husband, and article 51 declares both man and woman are responsible for the housework and looking after the children. (Family Code, 2016). How influential was this on women's confidence? Moreover, is it enough to create a generation of independent women?

### Conclusion

Breaking the walls of the traditional family was not an easy task as well as the independence from France and Spain. Women participated in the independence movement in the 1930 and 1940s, along with men as a form of solidarity, and as their emancipation attempt. As a part of Women Section of Istiqlal Party or part of AkhawatSafa association, women's involvement included educating women and getting them to be politically involved and gain the right for women to enter public spaces. However, their participation in the independence movement was not a major breaking point for women's emancipation. The first

family law adopted in 1947 only confirmed the traditional role of women and men. Only with the last modification in 2004, the law gave more rights for women. Therefore, escaping the harem to a post-traditional Morocco was not an easy task.

In a culture where gender relations are mapped along strict spatial boundaries, the social setting of the café acts as a metaphor. The dominant interpretations of gender relations are constantly contested and renegotiated. In fact, observing this power relation is not a difficult mission, and does not even require gender sensitive lenses. Coming myself from a small town in Morocco, I see our relation to public space for women – as a complex and a challenging issue. One must admit that entering the public space is more accessible in modern Morocco; however, it comes with unspoken restrictions. In order to normalize their presence in public spaces women need to adapt, renegotiate and overcome, in their own ways, the complex restrictions enforced on them. 🗨️

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