



Instructions for authors, subscriptions and further details:

<http://generos.hipatiapress.com>

## **Young women in Meknes and Fez (Morocco): Perceptions about participation in the public sphere and gender equality**

Eva Zafra-Aparici<sup>1</sup>

Cristina García-Moreno<sup>1</sup>

Manfred Egbe<sup>2</sup>

1) Universitat Rovira i Virgili. España

2) Mount Saint Vincent University. Canada

Date of publication: June 25th, 2021

Edition period: June 2021 - October 2021

---

**To cite this article:** Zafra-Aparici, E., García-Moreno, C. & Egbe, M. (2021). Young women in Meknes and Fez (Morocco): Perceptions about participation in the public sphere and gender equality. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 10(2), 121-146. doi: 10.17583/generos.2021.6244

**To link this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/generos.2021.6244>

---

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The terms and conditions of use are related to the Open Journal System and to [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) (CC-BY).

## **Young women in Meknes and Fez (Morocco): Perceptions about participation in the public sphere and gender equality**

Eva Zafra-Aparici  
*Universitat Rovira i Virgili*

Cristina García-Moreno  
*Universitat Rovira i Virgili*

Manfred Egbe  
*Mount Saint Vincent University*

### **Abstract**

---

From a qualitative research in the cities of Meknes and Fez, this article analyses young women's participation in the public sphere in Morocco. Specifically, we have had as reference the changes that have occurred since the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 where youths and feminism played an obvious role. Findings show that nine years after the Arab Spring, there has been no substantial improvements in the lives of Moroccan women in terms of gender equality. However, it is striking that they are very much present in participating in the public sphere from 'grassroots' (civic society, trade unions, etc.) levels where they find resources and spaces to get-together, create opportunities and make further progress in the fight for their rights.

---

**Keywords:** women, youths, Meknes, Fez, Morocco, participation.

## **Young women in Meknes and Fez (Morocco): Perceptions about participation in the public sphere and gender equality**

Eva Zafra-Aparici  
*Universitat Rovira i Virgili*

Cristina García-Moreno  
*Universitat Rovira i Virgili*

Manfred Egbe  
*Mount Saint Vincent University*

### **Resumen**

---

A partir de una investigación cualitativa en las ciudades de Meknes y Fez, este artículo analiza la participación de las mujeres jóvenes en la esfera pública en Marruecos. Concretamente, hemos tenido como referencia los cambios que se han producido desde la llamada Primavera Árabe de 2011, donde los y las jóvenes y el feminismo jugaron un papel evidente. Los resultados muestran que nueve años después de la Primavera Árabe, no se han producido mejoras sustanciales en la vida de las mujeres marroquíes en lo que respecta a la igualdad de género. Sin embargo, llama la atención que estén muy presentes respecto a su participación en la esfera pública desde los niveles "de base" (sociedad civil, sindicatos, etc.) donde encuentran recursos y espacios para reunirse, crear oportunidades y seguir avanzando en la lucha por sus derechos.

---

**Palabras clave:** mujeres, jóvenes, Meknes, Fez, Marruecos, participación.



This article analyses young women's participation in the public sphere of current day Morocco, especially in the cities of Meknes and Fez. We emphasise on the historical and sociocultural factors that determine our informants' participation and perceptions about equality concerning women's participation in the public sphere of the country.

In Morocco, protest movements have been a common phenomenon since the independence of the country in 1956 (Dahiri, 2015). However, it is important to highlight the latest uprisings that originated from the so-called Arab Spring, that was by large related to the activities of the 20th February movement which consisted of many demonstrations across Morocco calling for extensive political changes. The 20th February movement demanded for: the dissolution of parliament, the government and corrupt parties; the repeal of the constitution and establishment of a constituent assembly. It also demanded the establishment of a transitional government for urgent measures to alleviate 'the sufferings' of the population, and the establishment of an unemployment fund (Harrami & El Arfaoui, 2015; Cavatorta, 2016)

Following the 20th February demonstrations in 2011, king Mohammad VI resorted to win over the angry population by promising subsidies for staple food and government jobs for university graduates. He also brought forward parliamentary elections that were scheduled for September 2012 to November 2011, being the first elections held after the Arab Spring. The number of parliamentary seats for the elections was slightly increased from 295 to 305 with provisions of 60 seats for female candidates and 30 for male candidates under the age of 40 (Alianak, 2014).

The February 2011 uprisings in Morocco unequivocally was about demands for reforms. Issues that had to do with the unemployment situation in the country, especially in the youth population. It provided the forum for a massive participation and made visible a feminised youth, a process of family emancipation, individualization and awareness, and gave a sense of life in the society (Chikhaoui, 2015). However, research such as that conducted by Zerhouni (2017:16) shows the 'weak interest and activism within political groups and simultaneously certifies that Moroccan youth population would like to be more active in a different form of "grassroots politics from below". The author also indicates that, young people are not politically apathetic, although only a few are conventional participants. There is increased interest

in politics and a strong sense of agency among young people. The fact, Zerhouni (2017:8) shows that 42% of young Moroccans declare being ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ interested in politics. However, political interest among young people does not translate into action suggests alienation from and disenchantment with the political system of the country. As Zerhouni (2017:16-17) writes, ‘non-participation may be interpreted as part of a conscious act to undermine the legitimacy of the system’. For example, despite the growing interest in voting, for those who had no intention to vote in the 2016 legislative elections, their decision was mainly motivated by the lack of trust in the political parties and their candidates (39%) (Zerhouni, 2017:15).

A study published by the *Centro Reina Sofia sobre Adolescencia y Juventud* (2015) notes that Arab youths have lost trust in democracy. It notes that only 36% of the Arab youth population believe democratic regimes can prevail over authoritarianism in the Middle East. Another 39% believe democracy will never work in the region. Meanwhile, 38% are of the view that the region is in a better shape after the Arab Spring. As demonstrated in our study as in other studies (Ghannam, 2002; Haeri, 2003; Haenni, 2005; Sánchez, 2013), young Moroccans are feeling trapped between a State in crisis, family traditions, economic difficulties and the lack of individual freedoms despite new and modern referrals (cafés, shopping centres, social networks and mobile communication, among others).

Given this context, this article explores the day-to-day life of young Moroccan women to understand their situation in contemporary Morocco including their participation in the public sphere and perspective on the issue of gender equality. The questions that we formulated and seek to answer in this study are: 1) What is the situation in which young Moroccan women in the cities of Meknes and Fez find themselves today? 2) How do they participate in the public sphere? 3) What do they think about equality and their own participation in the public sphere of Morocco?

As noted by Chafai (1997) and Mernissi (2007), women’s role in access to work and training stands out among the various social, political and economic transformations experienced in Morocco. In this sense, young Moroccan women had an important presence in the 20th February uprisings the Arab Spring, demanding social and labour rights. These authors affirm that the

mobilizations and advances of Moroccan women in the labor and training field are their main strengths because they continue to promote the creation of spaces for social relations and the deliberation on family matters for decision-making and the success of their activities.

Likewise, Borrillo (in Sadiqui, 2012) and Borrillo (2013) points out that the issue of women's rights has occupied a prominent place in the processes of vindication, negotiation and redefinition of social and legal norms in Morocco. In particular, it has been repeatedly invoked in all the debates of the 'Moroccan Spring', animated by the Movement of February 20th and which dealt with the rights of citizenship, the democratization of the country, the right to education, work and a dignified life. In this sense, the Constitution approved in July 2011, took into account the principle of gender equality in Article 19 and established an authority to respect the principle of equality in public and private institutions.

However, several cases (for example, that of Amina Filali) have raised the national debate on the links between women's rights, individual freedoms and social progress (Borrillo, 2013:135). Likewise, there are authors who claim that the feminist mobilizations of February 20<sup>th</sup> were not representative at the quantitative level. However, they have favored the emergence of new models of engagement with feminism because they have generated spaces of participation in formal, but mostly informal, organizations that allow them to benefit from the often manipulative policies of the Moroccan government (Lust-Okar & Zerhouni, 2008). According to Salime (2012), these spaces unregulated by the authorities contrast with the significant setbacks that the government has been having around justice and development. Since the Arab Spring, the number of women parliamentarians has decreased and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the has been significantly hindered in Morocco. Still, according to this author, Morocco is experiencing an unprecedented horizontal extension and deepening of social justice issue embraced by diverse communities of women fighting for specific needs (Salime, 2012: 110) to create opportunities for civil society, participation and influence in the decision-making process and the struggle for women's rights.

Theoretically and methodologically, our research is in the regard situated in the broad field of the Social Sciences and has its roots in the feminist

research and intersectionality. Intersectionality is a socio-legal approach (Crenshaw, 1996) that has allowed the identification and clarification of some complex realities and inequalities (Walby, et al. 2017). This approach fosters the production of critical knowledge and allows us to face the challenges of complexity by relating the category “gender” in a transversal way with other categories such as ethnicity, class or age. In our research, this approach allows us to understand the historical and sociocultural factors that determine participation in the public sphere for young Moroccan women. Also, it allows us understand the perception and experience that they themselves manifest from a *human agency* perspective, that is, from their own power of reflection and action.

Likewise, our research is situated within the so-called postcolonial studies, fundamentally based on the contributions of authors such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) and her critique of Western feminist thought. In addition to its strategic actions, postcolonial feminism tends to underline the great diversity that characterizes the lives of women in different parts of the world, belonging to different cultures with varied social, political, economic organizations, etc. This approach also allows us to break with the essentialization of differences and go beyond Western value standards as the only criterion to establish hierarchies, in this specific case, between the different "ways of thinking and engaging" of women in the world, and particularly in Morocco.

### **Evolution of Women’s Rights in Morocco**

The process of Moroccan women’s movement has undergone for the acquisition of their rights in the private and public sphere goes back to the fifties of the last century, with the Akhawwat al-Safa, first feminine activist group. They called for the education of Women, the abolition of polygamy and challenged inheritance laws (Sadiqi, 2008). Their approaches were later restrained by the Personal Status Code, or Mudawana, promulgated between November 1957 and January of 1958, in which the hierarchization of roles was established, translating women into persons subject to the authority and guardianship of their husband. This, strengthen the patriarchal model in which women were assigned a reproductive role and a duty of obedience. Several

attempts to reform this Code (1961, 1968 and 1982) failed and made the document enjoy an almost sacred character. Therefore, it was practically unattainable to raise those issues that could lead to the acquisition of more social and legal rights for women and their role in the family (Zirari, 2010; Ajaouani, 2012).

The first women's association advocating for women's rights was the National Union of Moroccan Woman (UNFM) founded in 1969. Starting from the 1970s, Morocco experienced moments of political openness, accentuated by a favourable international context<sup>1</sup>, although the real rise of movements advocating for women's rights was not until the 1980s and early 1990s that led to the initiation of the first legal reforms<sup>2</sup>. For example, *l'Union de l'Action Feminine* (UAF) was a non-profit organization that started in 1983 as an informal group under the name of '*Mouvement 8 mars*'. The group, which developed over the years into a movement for the promotion of women's rights, became UAF in 1987. Since then, has fought the efforts aimed at raising awareness among women and to end to discrimination and marginalization.

Among the reforms was the reform of the family code – Mudawana in 2004, which has generally been considered the most important achievement of this national movement, since it allowed issues of women's rights to be taken from the private into the public and political sphere (Ajaouani, 2012). Among the main changes introduced, was the suggestion that marital relations should shift from a model based on wife's obedience to husband to one based on concertation; garner the reciprocity of the rights and duties of spouses and promote ways of dialogue for the resolution of family disputes (divorce by mutual agreement, mediation, etc.) (Zirari, 2010).

In Morocco there is still a great contradiction in the official discourse on the citizenship of Moroccan women: a legal/modernist discourse that is inscribed in the constitution and family 2004 law (Mudawana) and a religious/traditionalist discourse that annuls the first discourse of its patriarchal meaning in Morocco. In order to ensure that the women's have access to full citizenship and are part of the structure of the Moroccan State, a restructuring of the state is required for the change to begin (Sadiqi, 2016). Moreover, one could say that there have been changes towards legal equality between women and men in Morocco, but, as it happens in many other

countries, there is no real equality and there is still a long way to go in this regard. Reviewing The Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) ranking for 2015<sup>3</sup>, Morocco is presented to have breached the gap between men and women by 59% and is ranked 139 of the 145 countries that were analysed (in comparison, Spain presents a 74% breach and is ranked 25th). Moreover, this percentage has not increased since 2006, when it represented 58% then, an issue that reveals the rare influence of legal reforms in this sense.

Moreover, women in Morocco, as in most societies, are affected by traditional patriarchal structures that for centuries have marked a hierarchy between genders. However, beyond the established norms and dominant structures, it is important to consider the meaning that people make out of their lives and their interpretation of particular experiences. Hence, while it is true that the role played by states and societies determine the decisions of the subjects, they also leave a margin of subjectivity, to the subjects' decisions or strategies (Bourdieu, 2000). From the agency perspective, our approach conceive Moroccan women as 'actors or social subjects' in the deployment of their own strategies for change. In fact, and as Yasmine Berriane (2016) notes, in the case of Morocco, women have tended to participate actively in social, political, and cultural movements, although through non-formal channels, often, being invisible or ignored.

Likewise, according to Khadija Abnaou (feminist and human rights activist), the Arab Spring movements have led to the emergence of a new generation of female leadership, while bringing the grassroots women, and not the women of the elites. The Arab Spring has favored the horizontal extension of the question of social justice that has led to the visibility of much more localized movements of protests led by women in poor urban neighborhoods and rural areas. According to Salime (2012) there is no particular name for these uprisings, but there are women who started them. For example, when we mention the "women of Ben Semime", it means the protest movement that the women of this rural community have started against the privatization of a local water source by a French company. When we speak of the "women of Bhalil" we are pointing to the protests of the women of this region against their economic marginalization. The "women of Ait Abdi" started their protest movement to break their isolation and demand access to

public transport, roads and hospitals. In fact, YouTube is full of images and voices of these systematic and spontaneous uprisings.

In short, they are protests by women who face situations that push them to act together. That is why Amina Bougahlbi considers February 20 as "an educational space". According to her, men and women are not only learning "how to work together, listen to each other and respect the opinion of others", but the movement has also helped young women to address issues of equality and parity in practice in the movement (Salime, 2012). They have developed strategies to increase their presence in the public sphere, positioning themselves as leaders of micro-associations / organizations in neighborhoods, committed to promoting local development activities, generally on the outskirts of cities. Among these experiences are those analyzed by Berriane (2013), a good example that shows how women negotiate their access to public space and to what extent the feminization of local associations must face a range of resistance. We visited and studied some of these micro-associations during our ethnographic fieldwork in Fez and Meknés.

## **Methodology**

Due to our interest to meet the objectives set, a part of the fieldwork was done during a research stay in the cities of Fez and Meknes (Morocco) between May to June 2016<sup>4</sup>. Fieldwork was done using a qualitative approach, based on ethnography, to explore the construction of reality and the interpretation of meaning according to perceptions and social interactions of participants in the study (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987).

### **Data collection method**

The research methods used were the best to meet the objectives and allow insight into participants' experiences. Fieldwork focused on the following thematic axes: important events that have occurred in the last five years in the lives of the young Moroccans; employment plans or current employment reality; participation in associations; relevant changes observed in Morocco in the last ten years, as well as in the lives of participants in the study; personal and professional plans/objectives of the participants for the next years and, the

definition of the concept of equality between men and women. We used the following techniques to collect data for this study:

1. Written structured interviews: for which semi structured questions were asked. Specifically, 26 interviews were conducted to women, between 18 and 30 years old and resident in Meknes and Fez.
2. In-depth interviews: conducted with two women (36 and 35 years of age, one in her third year educational training, married with a child; and the other with basic training, single and without children).
3. Focus group discussions:
  - 1) The first group (FGDI) with 6 women of *Association d'Education et de Communication pour le Développement Social (AECDS)* (located in a peripheral neighbourhood of Meknes). These women were monitors/educators, guides and coordinators of the Women's Group in the neighbourhood.
  - 2) The second group (FGD2) was with the *Association Initiatives pour la Promotion des Droits des Femmes (IPDF)*. There were 3 professionals affiliated to the association.
  - 3) The third focus group (FGD3) was with 8 faculty and 2 doctoral students of the Moulay Ismail University of Meknes– all researchers of the Multidisciplinary Research Group for Women (TANIT) of the university.

Finally, and from a more quantitative approach, a statistical review of different official sources was carried out, with the aim of framing the data on the representation of women in Morocco and in the international context. Some of these data are presented as part of the results of this work.

## **Participants**

The variables that guided the selection of 26 women participants were education (informants with primary, secondary, technical or university education); age (between 18 and 30 years) and occupation (housewives, students, unemployed, and active workers). After a first contact and presentation of our work, the 26 women informants were recruited in public places frequented by young people, i.e. shopping centres, public gardens,

cyber cafes, associations and to the Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines (Université Moulay Ismail). In some cases, also through the snowball sampling technique.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the women interviewed**



Inf	Age	City	Marital Status	Formation	Children	Occupation
1	18	Fez	Single	Primary	0	Unemployed
2	25	Fez	Divorced	Primary	1	Seamstress
3	30	Meknes	Married	Primary	2	Unemployed
4	27	Fez	Married	Primary	1	Care Work
5	28	Meknes	Divorced	Primary	2	Factory worker
6	28	Meknes	Widow	Primary	1	Shop assistant
7	26	Fez	Divorced	Secondary	1	Unemployed
8	25	Fez	Single	Secondary	0	Shop assistant
9	19	Fez	Single	Secondary	0	Care Work
10	20	Meknes	Married	Secondary	0	Shop assistant
11	26	Fez	Single	Technical	0	Administrative
12	28	Meknes	Married	Technical	1	Unemployed
13	23	Fez	Single	Technical	0	Student
14	27	Fez	Married	Technical	1	Children's Educator
15	27	Fez	Married	Technical	1	Shop assistant
16	20	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student
17	19	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student
18	20	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student
19	21	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student
20	19	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student
21	22	Meknes	Married	Higher	0	Student
22	21	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student
23	21	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student
24	22	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student
25	21	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student
26	18	Meknes	Single	Higher	0	Student

Source: own elaboration

The initial planning of our ethnographic work focused on conducting structured written interviews with women who met the selection criteria mentioned above. However, once in Morocco, we had the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with two women who did not fall under the set age range for participation in the study (we set 30 as the age limit for youth),

were to. We saw this as an interesting way of complementing and deepening the study analysing two contrasting profiles with very different realities.

With regard to the focus groups, it was considered important to know the assessments of educators, coordinators and professionals of two women's associations (FGDI and AECDS) that fight for women's rights on a daily basis and knew their reality and that had practically no governmental support. We completed the ethnography with the TANIT group, in order to broaden the contextualisation of the reality studied from a more academic point of view.

### **Analysis:**

Analysis has been done using an inductive qualitative approach differentiating opinions from the groups of participants. Using this method of analysis, it was possible to compare perceptions, identify relevant common and different issues, and obtain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Narratives collected were digitally recorded, transcribed and coded (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987). Coding and data management was done using ATLAS-TI software. Participants' narratives were analysed inductively by the authors with cross-checking to ensure consistency.

## **Results: Young Moroccan Women's Participation in the Public Sphere**

### **Brief contextualisation of the reality of women in Morocco**

The total population of Morocco in 2014 was 33,848 million inhabitants and women accounted for 50.2% (of which 50.5% lived in rural areas)<sup>5</sup> of the population. As in other Mediterranean countries, the basic unit of the Moroccan society consist of a patriarchal family, where gender relations continue to be characterised by the subordination of women with respect to men. The organization and structure of the family affects the customs and social traditions and religious principles that establish patterns that are repeated over time. These are patterns that are difficult to change and inevitably impact on women's public participation. On the other hand, labour and wage discrimination, early marriages for women (especially in the rural

areas) or gender violence are issues that must continually be addressed (Ajaouani, 2012).

Keeping in mind the inequality linked to the family reality, in the next paragraphs we show how both the increased education for women (especially in urban areas) and increasing participation in the labour market are progressively causing changes in family structures and behaviours.

Concerning access to education and training, although the illiteracy rate among Moroccan women has gone from 96% in 1960 to 41.9% in 2014, there is still much to be done, especially among women in the rural areas (with an illiteracy rate of 60.4% in 2014). However, in terms of education, women have gained grounds (the gender gap in this field is at 91% in the world ranking) since the eighties, 49.4% feminization rate on global scale (34.8% in rural areas) and 38.8% in advanced studies in 2014 (Haut-Commissariat au Plan (HCP) du Royaume du Maroc, 2014). In this sense, women's active participation in civil society and associations has had much to do in it.

Regarding Moroccan women's participation in the employment market is still low. The country is among the five countries with the lowest rates in the Middle East and in North Africa (Zirari, 2010). In Morocco, women represented only 26.1% of the active population in 2000 and 2013 – they still represent only 26.8% (27% according GGGR data for 2015) – this numbers have practically not increased with regards to the changes the country has experienced in the last years<sup>6</sup>. If we break down these figures according to marital status; 28.7% of the unemployed were single women aged over 15 years, 23.8% were married women and 42% were divorced women (HCP 2013).

In terms of representation in the public or semi-public sector, we observed that women make up only 24.8%, i.e. only a 2.7% increase since 2002. On the other side of the labour scale are the active women with no remuneration, representing about 31% of the female working population as a whole (84% for rural women). This negatively affects their level of autonomy and bargaining power in the family (Zirari, 2010). In addition, although the current law sets strict wage equality for the same work, wage inequality still prevails in relation to gender. For example, women in the public service in Morocco (who represent about a third of state employees) earn only 29% of the annual gross salary (Zirari, 2010).

With regard to political representation, many women organizations presented proposals in 1997 for the modification of the electoral code and officially demanded a minimum quota of 20% for women in the electoral lists, (which they later requested that it be increased to 33 with a minimum limit of 20%) before the 2002 elections (Benradi, 2006; Zirari, 2010). In spite of this, women's participation in the political life of the country is still very limited and major positions of responsibility and decision-making power in the legislative and executive institutions are more favourable for men. As Yasmine Berriane (2016) notes, the day the quota system is no longer applied, the number of elected female representatives should be expected to decrease substantially again, contributing to the reproduction of inequalities.

However, it is important to note that Morocco is one of the Arab countries with a high representation of women in the parliament (a 10%) (Zirari, 2010)<sup>7</sup>, as it also happens in the case of Tunisia. This percentage has increased only by 1% since 2006 given that the gender gap in this area represents only 11% of the world, percentage that has increased only by 1% since 2006 (World Economic Forum, 2015)

### **What do the women informants think about their reality?**

As mentioned above, the basic unit of Moroccan society is centred on a patriarchal family, where the role of women is still subordinate to that of men. This subordination is present in the sharing of domestic responsibilities, especially with regard to childcare. This was an issue raised by the women informants, who consider that, in general, they are given the greatest responsibility for the upbringing of their children. Hence, they often prioritise this issue over the importance of this role for their children.

I would stop working (...). I'm working now because I have to help my husband, but I want to be with my son all the time because it is important for his education (Nadima, 36 years. Fez, 13.06.2016)<sup>8</sup>

They recognise that this limit both their personal freedom and their time, which has a direct impact on their educational and professional development. Interestingly, only two of the women interviewed expressed desire to have children as their number one priority in the next five years. In addition, none

of them alluded to having plans to fall in love and have a family in the near future.

Actually, women interviewed say that education and learning are one of the most important things they have done in the last years. Education has allowed them to expand on their knowledge, set new personal goals, and consider their future career. For most of them, education and training are a priority, although, in some cases, the objective of training is often related to the idea of earning more money to support the family: *'It is important to study! So that you can earn more money, support your parents, the family...without education it is difficult 'to find a good job'* (Fatima, 26 years. Fez, 14.06.2016). However, in some of the interviews, the desire for training and education came out in terms of self-empowerment, knowledge and personal fulfilment. *'I think studying at the faculty is changing my mentality because higher education has given me a global vision of the world and has widened my knowledge of the world'* (Habiba, 22 years. Meknes, 01.06.2016).

The most important thing that has happened to me in the past years is doing a professional internship because it has allowed me to put into practice my theoretical knowledge and learn new concepts related to my future career (Karima, 27 years. Meknes, 03.05.2016).

Regarding their plans for the future, many informants indicated the desire to work and to be well educated. They believe it is the key to being hired in specific and quality jobs. They stress that there are now greater, albeit limited, opportunities for employment, especially in the public sectors. Also, they note that it is important for them to stand out in their professions with the desire to change things and be professionally efficient:

I believe my job has changed my life because my everyday contact with people teaches me many things. I did not learn in school. I would like to continue studying to keep promoting myself professionally (Yasira, 35 years. Meknes, 02.05.2016).

I did like to have a job related to the field of education, being a teacher. I will also like to be a person who is active in society to

help my beloved country to advance and develop (Hana, 30 years. Fez, 15.06.2016).

Indeed, many women in our study indicated that the wage situation is vital to negotiate, defend and protect their rights and those of their children within the family setting.

All of them recognise that the presence of women in the public sphere is gaining grounds in recent years, but do emphasis the need to continue fighting to achieve more egalitarian levels of participation:

I would like that there be greater political openness, more human rights in general, and more rights for women in particular. More women participation in decision-making, equal pay, the right to freedom of speech, and the right to be different, are important too (Sadira, 25 years. Fez, 17.06.2016).

We asked them since when they thought women's participation and presence in the public sphere had increased. The majority believe that the situation of women in Morocco has changed, especially since the reform of the Family Code in 2004 (Mudawana), and that there have been improvements in women's rights. However, they also acknowledge that much still needs to be done. They do not believe that the impact of the 2011 Arab Spring mobilisations has been significant in this regard, nor that it has helped to improve the reality for women. From this perspective, and as a negative element, some participants indicated that since the election of the last government (led by the Justice and Development Party (PJD)), the country has taken a turn toward more conservative tendencies and that today, it is necessary to confront traditional ways of thinking of the previous generations:

The country has changed very much in the last 10 years, it has become a more open country in terms of equality between men and women, although it is developing and there is still much to be done (Jalila, 28 years. Meknes, 13.05.2016)

For me, Morocco has changed very much in the last 10 years, especially in terms of economic relations with Europe and also in terms of equality between women and men at the level of the labour market, in the private and public sector (...) There is a

137 *Zafra-Aparici, García-Moreno & Egbe– Young Women in Meknes and Fez*

change in the family code that gives value to the woman (Hana, 30 years. Meknes, 12.05.2016).

Yes, Morocco has changed a lot, however, since the coming to power of the current government in 2011, there has been a retrogression in terms of the rights of the woman and individual freedoms because it is a conservative government (...). Moreover, we have parents who have a traditional mentality, so the changes only affect lifestyles and not mindsets (Fatima, 26 years. Fez, 28.06.2016).

We wanted to know if the women informants whether they were involved in civil society movements (associations or trade unions). Several of them said that they were involved in social associations, for a variety of reasons. Some of them refer to solidarity, others to their degree of commitment to society, and some to their willingness to pass on their knowledge. Two of them even point out that helping others is an obligation and an honour in life:

Yes, I am member of a civil movement known as *Association d'Education et de Communication pour le Développement Social* (AECDS). Thanks to this association I have been able to play my role in society – doing good to people whatever be the nature - whether material or ideas. For me, the important thing is to share what we have with other people and do our best to help them (Hana, 30 years. Meknes, 31.05.2016).

Finally, we wanted to know what our informants understood to be equality – their conceptualization of equality. In most cases, there ideas about '*respect for the way men and women think*', '*equal opportunities to decide on what to do with their life*', '*shared authority*', '*same rights, duties, freedoms and opportunities*'. A challenge to keep fighting from now onwards. "*It is basically, equality between men and women. It lies in equal rights in all areas because to date, this equality has not occurred for women*" (Nadia, 35 years. Fez, 27.06.2016).

Equality for me lies in having the same opportunities to choose from...Equality is to respect a woman's and a man's opinion; equality in human rights; more women involved in decision-

making; equality of wages, rights and obligations...(Zeina, 29 years, Meknes, 11.05.2016).

### **The reality of women from the experience of Associations**

To expand and complete the information on the situation of women in the region under study, we contacted two of the associations that had emerged to respond to their needs and promote their rights. Specifically, with the women who led these initiatives and who therefore had first-hand knowledge of the reality of the women in the neighbourhoods where they were located.

We visited the *Association d'Education et de Communication pour le Développement Social* (AECDS) a small entity located in a peripheral and working-class neighbourhood north of the city of Meknes (Morocco). This association grew out of an initiative by the women of the neighbourhood. The initial objective was to launch a community support group to provide the daily needs of the women and create a space in which to share their concerns, information, care for their sons and daughters etc. Gradually, the initiative was consolidated, and it has now become a reference point of support in the district with 20 volunteers of different academic backgrounds.

We also visited the *Association Initiatives pour la Promotion des Droits des Femmes* (IPDF), also located in a peripheral neighbourhood of Meknes, managed by female professionals (lawyers, psychologists, etc.) and focused on legal advice and psychological support to women who are victims of gender violence. Both entities are an example of some of the strategies that women themselves are developing to deal with the established patriarchal structures and political and social control, gaining thus a participatory, active and advocating role.

Regarding the role that women have been assigned in their families, the two associations comment that many women would like to denounce irregularities (injustices, harassment, abuses) at the level of the family. However, the social, family, cultural, and religious pressures they face on daily basis, prevents many of them from approaching the association and seeking guidance and information on how to deal with their situation. This misinformation therefore limits their capacity to make decisions, to promote change and to acquire a more active and participatory role.

Another aspect that affects and limits their personal decisions and the development of a more active role is the fact of having children, especially when

they want to opt for divorce in the face of an unsatisfactory marital relationship. The informants of the AECD Women's Association note that women who do not have children from their marriages can easily opt for a divorce, unlike those with children, because if they do, their husbands will have custody of their kids should they remarry another man. Moreover, if they are given custody of their children, they often have to take on responsibility for the children – without support from the man – and often without a job, a home, assistance from their parents and most of them often uneducated. Also, they have to confront society and its prejudices against women who are divorced, since they are generally perceived to be the cause of the divorce. Both scenarios lead these women to tend to accept that being in a marriage that is not working – where they are abused, harassed etc. is the best option.

From this perspective, the role women associations play is that of support, listening to women's problems and providing guidance on legal issues. The perception of the volunteer professionals working in one of the associations we interviewed expressed this:

The main problem is that women are unaware of their status. They take on an inferior role. They do not live the life they want; they conform with what they have, and though they would like to have another type of life, they do not seek it. And these are especially women who have children (Association AECDs)<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, although these associations admit that in the last decade there has been a certain integrated approach to the current political positioning to improve women's equality, there is no effective political will to implement it.

Let us not forget that there is a committee for equality, it is not formed because the current government is very conservative. There has been a regression, a retrogression in this direction and women's issue is not a priority. The woman has to be at home, this is the message of this government (...). And it is the government, the political party that has to guarantee equality (Association IPDF)<sup>10</sup>.

## **Discussion and final conclusions**

This research has focused on whether the reality of young Moroccan women in Fez and Meknes and their participation in the public sphere has improved in recent years. Also in analysing whether the uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 have played a relevant role in this regard. In fact, the phenomenon was presented as an opportunity for massive participation and making visible a feminise youth, a process of family emancipation, individualization and becoming aware and having a sense of life (Chikhaoui, 2015). However, through our research and consistent with Zerhouni's (2017), we have been able to verify that, seven years after these uprisings, changes in the reality and social participation of women in the cities of Meknes and Fez have been minimal.

A significant proportion of the women interviewed recognise that there has been some progress or improvement in some aspects of women's lives, particularly in comparison to the previous decades. At the family level, they allude to small changes in terms of gender equality and in terms of the role they play in the family and in their life as a couple. Even so, they explain that these are only small changes and not substantial improvements that would bring about significant changes in their lives.

We have observed that there have been legislative changes in relation to equality of opportunity, however, some women are afraid to report irregularities as family, social, cultural and the religious pressures they face daily prevents them from seeking guidance and information to change their life situations.

Access to education and training is a priority for most of the women informants. In some cases, this view has been linked to the idea that it allows them to integrate more easily into the labour market and thus provide resources for the family. However, in some of the interviews, the desire for training and education came out in terms of self-empowerment, knowledge and personal fulfilment and from a more autonomous approach.

From one position or another, we believe it is important to mention that most of the women we interviewed are actively involved in the labour market. Women are increasingly working out of the home, although their job is still valued today as a 'support' activity for the entire family (Benradi, 2006). The tendency to legitimise the role of women as linked to domestic and reproductive tasks and 'support' activities come to play in a labour market that is characterised by the

informal economy, very low wages and almost without any form of social benefits. As García-Moreno (2002) also recalls, this contributes to strengthen the model of the traditional woman since those who work outside the home do not amass sufficient prestige to compete with the traditional model.

Given this reality, it is difficult to determine what effect the 2011 Arab Spring mobilisations have had on their job. In addition, the number of active women without remuneration is still high today and the percentage of women in legislative and administrative positions is still very low, so we understand that legislative changes have had little or no impact in this area. As Zirari (2010) argues, this fact negatively affects women's level of autonomy and negotiation power within the family.

About political representation, women's participation in the political life of the country is still very limited and the main positions of responsibility and decision-making in the legislative and executive institutions favour men more. Hence, while some of our informants acknowledge that there is an integrated approach to the political stance from the first governmental reforms, they emphasise there is no effective political will to implement it.

Another topic of interest in our study has been civil society movements, a vital tool to collectivise, make visible and advocate for rights. And as Zerhouni (2017) highlights, youth participation through established institutions has been weak in Morocco. However, the young women we interviewed are not politically apathetic. Many are interested in politics and have a strong sense of Agency. Still, Moroccan women find resources and spaces 'from the grassroots' (small civil associations, trade unions, etc.) to participate, create opportunities and continue to fight for their rights (Lust-Okar & Zerhouni's, 2008).

This idea is in line with what Ekman & Amnà (2012) highlight: 'while there is lower voter turnout and a certain distrust and scepticism about democratic institutions in Morocco, there is at the same time intense associative and civic commitment'. Even so, and as Zerhouni (2017) notes, the fact that their political interest and advocacy does not always translate into widespread women's action may be due to alienation of the system, disenchantment with politicians or consciousness of the barriers imposed by the government.

Finally, as Borrillo (2013) points out, the Arab Spring has made the agency capacity of Arab women visible. It has allowed 'the Western world' to realize the specificity of the forms of public participation of these women and to break,

according to the postcolonial perspective, the stereotype of 'Arab-Muslim woman with hijab' socially and culturally homogeneous and passive to social changes (Borrillo, 2013: 118).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The announcement of the United Nation's Decade for women (1976-1985) and the proclamation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Types of Discriminations against the Woman (CEDAW 1979).

<sup>2</sup> The first reform of the Family Code (1993); the code of commerce and obligations and contracts (1995); the family record book (2002); the penal and criminal procedure codes (2002 y 2003); the family code (2004); the labor code (2004); the revision of the Organic Law and the Chamber of Representatives and the electoral code (2008)

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum. The Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) 2015. Since 2006, the World Economic Forum seeks to measure an important aspect of gender inequality: the relative gaps between women and men in four main areas: health, education, economy and policy. <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR2015/cover.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Research stay linked to mobility grants convened by the PIRSES ARABSPRING Program, (European Project coordinated by the Paris 8 University and focused on the socio-anthropological analysis of the so-called Arab Spring). The University Moulay Ismail's participation in this Project (in particular, *l'Equipe de Recherche pluridisciplinaire sur la Femme, TANIT*) is the reason why fieldwork was mainly done in the aforementioned cities.

<sup>5</sup> Institutional website of the Kingdom of Morocco High Commissioner for Planning (HCP) 'women and men in figures, 2016' [http://www.hcp.ma/downloads/Femme-marocaine-en-chiffres\\_t18705.html](http://www.hcp.ma/downloads/Femme-marocaine-en-chiffres_t18705.html) (Accessed, July 15, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the majority of active women are uneducated (58.9% women and 32.9% men), increasing to 84% in rural women

<sup>7</sup> *The Mouvement pour le Tiers des Sièges Elus aux Femmes* (MTSF) is a coalition association of feminists mobilized in order to get women access positions of decision-making, as well as to achieve feminine political representation. This movement has opened the debate on quotas and parity, and asserts the urgency of positive discrimination measures in favour of women (Zirari, 2010)

<sup>8</sup> To preserve their privacy, all the names of the women interviewed are fictitious

<sup>9</sup> Focus group discussions with 6 women of *Association d'Education et de Communication pour le Développement Social* (AECDS) (located in a peripheral neighbourhood of Meknes). (FGD1). Meknes, 15.06.2016

<sup>10</sup> Focus group discussions with 4 women of the *Association Initiatives pour la Promotion des Droits des Femmes* (IPDF). (FGD2). Meknes. 26.05.2016

## References

- Ajaouani, N. (15-31 de octubre de 2012). *Situación de la mujer en Marruecos tras las reformas del nuevo código de familia (Mudawana, 2004). Una perspectiva histórico-social y jurídica*, IV Congreso Virtual sobre Historia de las Mujeres, Universidad de Jaén.  
<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=4714949>
- Alianak, S. (2014). *The Transition Towards Revolution and Reform: the Arab spring realised?*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.  
DOI:10.3366/edinburgh/9780748692712.001.0001
- Benradi, M. (2006). *Dynamique sociale et evolution des statuts des femmes au Maroc. Prospective Maroc 2030*, Haut-Commissariat au Plan du Royaume du Maroc
- Berriane, Y. (2016). Political Parties and Participation: Morocco. *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, Supplement XIII, General Editor Suad Joseph. DOI: 10.1163/1872-5309\_ewic\_COM\_002046
- Berriane, Y. (2013). *Femmes, Associations et Politique à Casablanca*. Rabat: Centre Jacques Berque. DOI: 10.4000/books.cjb.351
- Borrillo, S. (2013). *Femminismi in Marocco tra politiche di genere e movimenti sociali. Alcune evoluzioni recenti. Femminismi nel Mediterraneo. Genesis, Rivista della Società Italiana delle Storiche*, Viella, 12(1), 119-139. <https://www.viella.it/rivista/9788867281176/3200>
- Borrillo, S. (2012). *Le mouvement du 20 Février et la réforme constitutionnelle au Maroc: un compromis démocratique suffisant? Une lecture de genre*, in F. Sadiqi (Ed), *Femmes et nouveaux media dans la région méditerranéenne*, V/18, pp. 303-324. Rabat: Fondation Hanns Seidel.  
<https://unora.unior.it/handle/11574/133253?mode=full.350#.XxdIMp4zZPY>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Espace social et genese des clases. Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 52-53: 3-14, Le Seuil. Paris.  
[https://www.persee.fr/doc/arss\\_0335-5322\\_1984\\_num\\_52\\_1\\_3327](https://www.persee.fr/doc/arss_0335-5322_1984_num_52_1_3327)
- Cavartorta, F. (2016). *Morocco: The promise of democracy and reality of authoritarianism. The International Spectator*, 51(1), 86-98, DOI:10.1080/03932729.2016.1126155

- Centro Reina Sofia sobre Adolescencia y Juventud. (2015).  
<http://adolescenciayjuventud.org/es/blogs/en-la-red/category/politica-y-participacion-ciudadana>
- Crenshaw-Kimberlé, W. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299
- Chafai, L. (1997). Las mujeres, sujeto de marginalización en Marruecos'. *Anales de Historia Contemporánea*, 13, 35-55.  
<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=232984>
- Chikhaoui, N. (2015). Superar obstáculos en materia de igualdad: el caso de Marruecos. *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, 22, 295-304.  
<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=5178407>
- Dahiri, M. (2015). Les mouvements protestataires au Maroc avant et après la naissance du Mouvement du 20 février et la réforme de la Constitution de 2011', in E. Szczepankiewicz-Rudzka, & A. Kadrim (Eds), *North Africa in the Process of Change Political, Legal, Social and Economic Transformations*, Cracow.
- Ekman, J and Annà, E. (2012). Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology. *Human Affairs*, 22(3), 283–300. DOI: 10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1
- García-Moreno, C. (2002). Las mujeres marroquíes en Cataluña: entre la transgresión y el cambio. *Revista Catalana de Sociologia*, 18, 27-44
- Ghannam, F. (2002). *Remaking the Modern in a Global Cairo: space, relocation, and the politics of identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.  
<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520230460/remaking-the-modern>
- Haenni, P. (2005). *L'ordre des caïds. Conjurer la dissidence urbaine au Caire*. Paris: CEDEJ / Khartala. <http://www.karthala.com/1525-lordre-des-caids-conjurer-la-dissidence-urbaine-au-caire.html>
- Haeri, N. (2003). The reproduction of Symbolic Capital: Language, State and Class in Egypt. *Current Anthropology*, 38(5), 795-816.  
DOI:10.1086/204668
- Harrami, N. & El Arfaoui, A. (2015). L'État et les mobilisations de 2011 au Maroc, in E. Szczepankiewicz-Rudzka & A. Kadri (Eds), *North Africa in*

145 *Zafra-Aparici, García-Moreno & Egbe– Young Women in Meknes and Fez*

*the process of change: political, legal, social and economic transformations.* Cracow

- Haut-Commissariat au Plan (HCP) du Royaume du Maroc (2016). *Femmes et hommes en chiffres 2016*. [http://www.hcp.ma/downloads/Femme-marocaine-en-chiffres\\_t18705.html](http://www.hcp.ma/downloads/Femme-marocaine-en-chiffres_t18705.html)
- Haut-Commissariat au Plan (HCP) du Royaume du Maroc (2014). *Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitat 2014*. [https://www.hcp.ma/downloads/RGPH-2014\\_t17441.html](https://www.hcp.ma/downloads/RGPH-2014_t17441.html)
- Haut-Commissariat au Plan (HCP) du Royaume du Maroc (2013). *National Employment Survey*. [https://www.hcp.ma/downloads/Activite-emploi-et-chomage-resultats-detailles\\_t13039.html](https://www.hcp.ma/downloads/Activite-emploi-et-chomage-resultats-detailles_t13039.html)
- Lust-Okar, E. and Zerhouni, S. (2008). *Political Participation in the Middle East*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers. <https://lib.ugent.be/catalog/rug01:001328711>
- Mernissi, F. (2007). *Miedo a la Modernidad*. Madrid: Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo. <https://www.orienteymediterraneo.com/producto/el-miedo-a-la-modernidad-islam-y-democracia/>
- Mohanty, C. (1988) Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30. DOI:10.1057%2Ffr.1988.42
- Sadiqi, F. (2008). The Central Role of the Family Law in the Moroccan Feminist Movement. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 35(3), 325-337. DOI:10.1080/13530190802525098
- Sadiqi, F. (2016). 'Introduction: The Centrality of Women's Movements in the Post-revolution Dynamics in North Africa', in F. Sadiqi (Ed), *Women's Movements in Post-"Arab Spring"*, North Africa, Palgrave Macmillan, New York. DOI:10.1057/978-1-137-50675-7
- Salime, Z. (2012). A New Feminism? Gender Dynamics in Morocco's February 20th Movement. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(5), 101-114. <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol13/iss5/11>
- Sánchez, J. (2013). 'Jóvenes en tiempos revolucionarios: protagonismo político y agencia juvenil en los levantamientos del Norte de África', in I. Álvarez-Ossorio (Ed.), *Sociedad Civil y Contestación en Oriente Medio y Norte de África*, Barcelona: CIDOB. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=5693428>

- Taylor, S.J. and Bogdan, R. (1987). *Introducción a los Métodos Cualitativos de Investigación*. España: Ediciones Paidós, Iberica S.A.  
[https://iessb.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/05\\_taylor\\_mc3a9todos.pdf](https://iessb.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/05_taylor_mc3a9todos.pdf)
- Walby, S., Towers, J., Balderston, S., Corradi, C., Francis, B., Heiskanen, M., Helweg-Larsen, K., Mergaert, L., Olive, P., Palmer, E., Stöckl, H., Strid, S. (2017). *The Concept and Measurement of Violence Against Women and Men*. Bristol: Policy Press, Policy y Practice  
DOI:10.26530/OAPEN\_623150
- World Economic Forum (WRF). (2015). *The Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) 2015*. <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR2015/cover.pdf>
- Zerhouni, S. (2017). Explaining Youth Participation and Non-Participation in Morocco. *Working Paper*, 36, 3-18.  
[http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/p2y\\_36.pdf](http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/p2y_36.pdf)
- Zirari, H. (2010). Los derechos de las mujeres en Marruecos: balance y perspectivas. *Sociedad y cultura. Desarrollo y cooperación*, Anuario IEMED, 282-288.

**Eva Zafra Aparici:** Departament d'Antropologia, Filosofia i Treball Social, Universitat Rovira i Virgili

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0003-3439-774X

**Cristina Garcia-Moreno:** Departament d'Antropologia, Filosofia i Treball Social, Universitat Rovira i Virgili

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0002-2039-6212

**Contact address:** [cristina.garcia@urv.cat](mailto:cristina.garcia@urv.cat)

**Manfred Egbe:** Department of Applied Human Nutrition, Mount Saint Vincent University

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0003-4646-5690