

# The Feminist Movement in the Moroccan Spring: Roles, Specificity, and Gains

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## Abstract

The Moroccan Spring in 2011 has been a golden opportunity for Moroccan women to put their country on the democratization track. Their decision to take an integral part in all aspects of the uprisings stems from their belief that their participation and contribution are necessary for any potential democratic changes that would undoubtedly secure and bring them more rights. However, the appointment of only one female minister in the first Islamist-led government and the reluctance to implement the provisions of the new constitution, namely the issue of gender parity, are but two of the new alarming examples that have disappointed Moroccan women. Based on interviews with women's movement organizations' leaders and 20 February Movement (20-FMVT) female activists and through following the development of the Arab Spring in Morocco in particular and in the Middle Eastern & Northern Africa region in general, this paper considers the different roles, specificity, and gains of Moroccan women during and after the so-called Moroccan Spring. The paper argues that despite their limited gains in the aftermath of this momentum, Moroccan women managed once again to prove their agency and ability to change laws and instigate reforms.

## Keywords

Moroccan women, Arab Spring, 20 February Movement (20-FMVT), democracy

Anyone familiar with Moroccan women's achievements in the last two decades will not be surprised by their active role in the "Moroccan Spring". In fact, women have never been complete strangers to political activism in Morocco, their involvement in the public arena dates back to the colonial era (1912-1956). During this period, women engaged in the national struggle for independence as groups and individuals both formally and informally. Their activism, participation, and influence shaped Morocco's history, influenced the structure of society as a whole (Yachoulti 2012), and bridged the gap between women and the public sphere (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006: 106).

After five decades of independence and almost two decades of unprecedented reforms under King Mohammed VI in the MENA (Middle Eastern &

Northern Africa) region (the best examples to mention here are the family and the Nationality Codes), Moroccan women, along with their male partners, return to the political struggle not only to defend their cause but also to contribute to democracy and to free their society from authoritarianism. In fact, the Arab Spring, which initially started in Tunisia and later spread to many countries of the MENA region, has been momentous for Moroccan women to reemphasize their political agency in society and their wish to lead

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their country to a better future.

Still, women's involvement in political activism would not have been possible without the positive changes that have affected their health care conditions, the access to job markets which allowed them some financial independence, their frequent interaction with regional and international partners, allowing them to gain more experience and more courage to defend their cause and most importantly, better access to education that equipped them with a better understanding of their civil and economic rights (Yachoulti 2012). In this regard, the present paper is an attempt to document the roles and gains of Moroccan women during and after the Moroccan Spring. That said, the aim of this paper is to trace women's involvement in the development of the Moroccan Spring and investigate the specificity that paralleled this involvement. The paper also digs into the gains of Moroccan women during and after this historical moment.

To this effect, this paper is divided into five sections. The first one reviews the development of the women's movement and the factors that helped women achieve their relative independence in Moroccan society. Tracing this development and changes not only helps in understanding the nature of Moroccan women's activism but also reveals some political aspects of the Moroccan state. The second section familiarizes the reader with the political context of the 20 February Movement (20-FMVT). The aim is to help understand some of the political changes that affected the MENA region in general and Morocco in particular. The third section discusses the research methodology that this paper adopts. The fourth section reviews the different roles of women in the Moroccan uprisings with special focus on the spectacular emergence of new women activists of different ages, ideologies, and social backgrounds. The last section discusses the diverse gains made by Moroccan women after the constitutional reforms of July 2011. The first kind of gains are those outlined in the new constitutional text, the second concerns the changes in the penal code, and

the third pertains to the government plan for gender equality.

## **MOROCCAN WOMEN'S ACTIVISM BEFORE 2011**

The first discussion of women's issues in the public sphere was recorded in the national press in the 1930s and was largely generated by men (Baker 1998). The only female voice was that of Malika El-Fassi—coming from one of the most prominent intellectual families of the Fez bourgeoisie (Baker 1998). This voice took girls' education as the first priority for Moroccan women. Malika El-Fassi's articles at that time aimed "to persuade fathers of the necessity of sending their daughters to school" (Baker 1998: 48). Indeed, access to education and schooling meant a new life and an end to the seclusion of her generation of women.

From the middle of the 1940s onward, the journey of the Moroccan women's movement started to take shape through the encouragement of state, political parties, and civil society (Sadiqi 2003). Also, Moroccan women massively joined the armed resistance, taking active militant roles in the fight against colonization, they managed to fulfil important tasks that facilitated men's fighting. In this regard, Alison Baker (1998: 8) wrote: "Mission for resistance not only brought them (Moroccan women) out of seclusion, but sent them into dangerous situations, travelling long distances by themselves carrying weapons and even setting bombs all the way using their wits to escape detection".

The struggle Moroccan women led at that time had a two-fold dimension: They both rebelled against colonial occupation and oppression and against the restrictive attitude of Morocco's traditional society.

However, after independence, Moroccan women discovered that nothing had changed in their society at large regarding their legal and social status, the question of women's rights and the women

themselves were for the most part relegated to the periphery of the public and private spheres. In simple terms, women found themselves helpless with no power circles willing to speak for them and defend their cause. Different factors came together during that period to prevent women from participating in public life, especially at the political level. These factors ranged from the high rate of illiteracy to the heavy burden of domestic shores. This was reinforced, as is the case with all patriarchal and authoritarian systems, by the political structures which were and are still oppressive and which turned political life into a male-dominated world. Further, this marginalization was exacerbated by the total absence of women's leadership in political parties and government institutions, who could have advanced the status of women.

By the 1960s and 1970s, namely during what is known as the "Years of Lead"<sup>1</sup>, the political atmosphere negatively impacted the vibrancy and effectiveness of active civil society groups including those focused on women's empowerment. Authoritarianism and political oppression did not help women to take action except for some state-sponsored groups. Added to this, political parties were very reluctant to deal with gender issues and claims seriously except when these were part of pushing for a national consensus.

Since the late 1980s, the political and economic reforms Morocco has engaged in favoured and encouraged the rise of a number of associational bodies—under the rubric of civil society. These groups seized the opportunity to proliferate, voice their demands publicly and also contribute to enhancing reforms. Because of their conviction that only an autonomous activism would bring changes to their status, women activists seized the new political atmosphere to establish a number of women's organizations as part of the emerging civil society groups. These include "*Association Democratiques des Femmes Marocaines*" (Democratic Association of Moroccan women known as ADFM), "*Union de*

*L'Action Feminine*" (Women's Union Action known as UAF), "*Organization de la Femme Istiqlalienne*" (Organization of Istiqlali Women known as OFI), "*Association de la Solidarité Feminine*" (Feminine Solidarity Association known as ASF) and "*Association Marocaine de Droit des Femmes*" (Moroccan Association of Women's Rights known as AMDF) among others (Yachoulti 2012). These organizations coalesced into a new movement pressuring to change many things for Moroccan women. Therefore, the Moroccan women's movement in the 1990s was defined by Laila Chafaai (1993: 102) as "a set of feminine voluntary organizations, whose ideological discourse aims to defend women in a general framework of struggle and implement the laws that enlarge public liberties and guarantee equality between the sexes" (The author's translation).

Based on this definition, three observations are noteworthy. Firstly, women's activism in Morocco is practiced through women's organizations, a fact which makes women's movement organizations as the best label of this brand of feminism. Secondly, Moroccan women's movement fluctuates between a social movement organized and directed by women and a political movement that struggles for the emancipation of Moroccan women. Finally, the precedence of the social characteristic over the political one validates the claim that Moroccan feminists' activism emerged out of real social needs of women and not from an alien western concept (Yachoulti 2012).

Generally speaking, women's activism within their own organizations helped them to establish a new presence in society, facilitating their visibility in the public sphere. More than this, activism within their own organizations allowed women the chance to achieve a number of gender reforms and many victories in the name of democracy and equality. For example in 2004, women's rights organizations managed to lobby for the family law known as *Moudawana*, now considered one of the most advanced family laws in the Arab and Muslim world. The main reforms of the new

law included establishing a minimum age of marriage (18 years of age), making men and women equal partners in marriage and household responsibilities, abolishing the requirement of a male legal tutorship in marriage, restricting polygamy, and giving women the right to initiate divorce. However, it is worth mentioning in this regard that the activism of these organizations did not conform to the principles of “a democratic activism” defined in democratic theory (Yachouti 2012). To put it more succinctly, in the late 1990s, after the failure to implement the national Plan for Integrating Women in Development launched by the government and pursuant to the growth of the Islamists as key actors in the political arena, the leading organizations within the women’s movement bypassed all the democratically elected institutions and addressed the king in person to achieve their agenda of reform. The same story of addressing the king in person repeated itself in 2007 when women’s movement organizations sought the reform of the Nationality Code. During a royal visit to Europe in 2005, the Moroccan king, Mohammed VI, met a delegation of Moroccan women living abroad and married to non-Moroccan citizens. The delegation claimed the Moroccan citizenship for their children and pointed to the difficulties their children faced because of some articles of the 1958 Nationality Code. The king promised to find a solution to the problem. On July 30, 2005, in his speech from the throne, King Mohammed VI announced that Moroccan women could pass on their nationality to children born to non-Moroccan fathers and asked the government to submit him proposals to amend the legislation on citizenship (Yachouti 2007). Following the royal decision, both the cabinet and the parliament adopted the draft bill to reform the country’s Nationality Code that was released in the official bulletin on April 2, 2007. The cornerstone of this new code was the amendment to Article Six which sought to put men and women on an equal footing as the source of citizenship, it sought to achieve a complete equality regardless of whether it is

the mother or the father who is the single Moroccan parent.

Still, regardless of its nature, Moroccan women’s activism would not have been possible without the positive changes that have affected their lives since the rise of modern state in Morocco in 1956. These changes have opened the gates widely to women’s access and participation in the public sphere. This includes a revolution in education, improvement health care, access to the job market, and finally continuous interaction with regional and international partners.

### *Revolution in Education*

Access to education was a real revolution for Moroccan women. Immediately after independence, and with the spread of modernization, Morocco devoted considerable funding to scholarization and issued laws guaranteeing compulsory and free education for both males and females. Interestingly, Moroccan women recognized education as the only key tool in securing public power and moving up the social ladder. Therefore, masses of them sought knowledge in schools and beyond.

Still, since the 1960s, Morocco’s adopted educational systems and policies favoured urban, rather than rural, women. This fact made the pace of progress very slow. Until 1990, 51.5% of the whole population were still illiterate. This rate was greater for women: Forty-eight point six percent (48.6%) of urban and 87.2% of rural females were illiterate (Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalite 1999). Indeed, though marked by disparities, Rabea Naciri (1998) argued that education not only permitted Moroccan women to improve their function as wives and mothers but also became a means to enter the public spheres and overcome male resistance, allowing them thus to challenge their traditional status in both the private and public spheres. She maintains that it is “From this group of educated career women have emerged rare women leaders of political institutions of the state and political parties as well as the founders and leaders of the women’s

movement. It is a new elite that competes with the traditional political elite” (Naciri 1998: 18).

Similarly, Fatima Sadiqi (2008) argued that despite the wide disparities between the urban and the rural areas in matters of schooling, it is education that gave Moroccan women new economic and social identities. More specifically, she adds that education “allowed them to participate in the public sphere and improve their life experiences, it considerably delayed age at marriage and decreased the fertility rate” (Sadiqi 2008: 463). Most importantly, Moroccan women’s access to higher education has generally facilitated their access to the public sphere and given them opportunities to engage in new forms of activism that have pushed their cause forward. This is clearly stated in Sadiqi (2008: 463): “The entrance of women into universities created social changes in the Maghreb. Indeed, one of the significant outcomes of women’s struggles in the Maghreb is visible at the level of academe. This is embodied in the emergence and maintenance of gender and men studies postgraduate units”.

### *Improvements in Healthcare*

In contrast to the past, Morocco has, to a large extent, improved the healthcare standards of its citizens. The improvements of infrastructure and a considerable increase in the number of medical doctors and hospitals, though still insufficient, have widely contributed to ameliorating the health status of women. In this regard, a national programme for family planning was implemented by the government during the 1980s as a strategy to counter the “then-perceived” rapid population growth (Sadiqi 2008). Interestingly enough, the success of this programme was conditioned upon Moroccan women’s positive attitudes to contraceptives. Furthermore, “Through its efficient household service delivery, the government was able to provide modern contraceptives to low-income and rural women who did not have access to private-sector services” (Sadiqi 2008: 453). Indeed, Moroccan women’s exposure to education and then to salaried work has encouraged

and sometimes, even obliged them to reduce their fertility rate and regulate their demographic behaviour. The “Demographic and Health Survey” 2003-2004 revealed that Moroccan women have 2.5 children on average, three fewer births than average registered in 1980. This change was more dramatic in rural areas as the average decreased from 6.6 births on in 1980 to 3.0 births in 2004 (Sadiqi 2008). In general, the current health status of Morocco’s women is far better than before. This may be illustrated by the fact that several underdeveloped countries related diseases have disappeared and women are living longer than before.

### *Growing Female Participation in the Labor Force*

Moroccan women have always worked in and around the household economy. It was with the institutionalization of the concept of work that its definition changed. In rural areas, women worked as much as men or even more, taking charge of a very important part of agriculture and performing all the domestic shores. In the urban areas, education has provided women with opportunities for employment. Eventually, whether illiterate or graduate, urban women are factory workers, office employers, and high ranking officials. In this regard, official statistics showed that in 2004, women comprised 24.9% of Morocco’s labour force (Royaume du Maroc 2004) while in 2008, they comprised 28.7% (World Bank 2008). Furthermore, Moroccan economic and professional scenes have witnessed, in the recent years, the appearance of female entrepreneurs, their number exceeds 25,547 and they employ at least one person (Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalite 1999). On the whole, some working women have to a certain extent gained economic independence which has allowed them, in some cases, a household leadership.

### *Growing Interaction With the Regional and International Partners*

With the growth of an educated female population and

access to paid labour, not to mention women's improved health care, many regional and international factors worked in favour of Moroccan women and further enhanced their visibility in the public sphere. Also, their interactions with their regional and international partners have helped them to gain experience to carry out their activism with a greater set of skills.

At the regional level, the 1980s witnessed the emergence of an unprecedented number of women's organizations in the MENA region. Dwan Chatty and Annika Rabo (1997: 17) stated that "With the encouragement of the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women, there was a flurry of the new activity organized around the needs of women". However, they added: "These activities were in association with governmental agencies, especially ministries of social affairs, which have always held very traditional and conservative views of the needs of women. Those that challenged the male patriarchal organization society were harassed and sometimes banned" (Chatty and Rabo 1997: 17).

Indeed, the rise of women's groups was very significant. Valentine Moghadam (1997) argued that although organizations dealing with women's rights or women-in-development issues were still relatively few in number, their existence was especially significant in that they accorded a recognized role for women in the development process and they represented changing state-society relations and definitions of citizenship.

Other regional triggers of the proliferation of women's groups in the region are according to Moghadam (1997: 31), "linked to the rise and spread of the fundamentalism movement and the failure of states to confront them (...), and the conservative revision of the Family Codes". These developments, according to Moghadam:

Have alarmed many women and prompted protest action and organization on their part. One very interesting mobilizing effort on the part of women concerned about fundamentalism and conservative family codes was the

establishment of International Solidarity network called Women Living under Muslim Laws, with affiliated individuals and groups in the MENA. (Moghadam 1997: 31)

Internationally speaking, interaction with partners in the West has allowed Moroccan women to gain more experience and more courage to defend their cause. In this regard, Sadiqi (2006) argued that as women become more in touch with global currents through the media or their own travel, women began participating more often in Moroccan political debates. This has allowed them to challenge the disparities in the legal treatment of women, broach new ideas concerning the role of women in Moroccan society, and question practices that had long been understood as Islamic (Sadiqi 2006). In fact, this interaction and travelling have been facilitated by:

The opportunities afforded by the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) and the Nairobi Conference (1985); the spread of global feminism, the increasing recognition of the importance of a grassroots, participatory, and bottom-up approach to development through non-governmental organizations; and the international conferences of the 1990s under the auspices of UN—the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the International Conference on Human Rights, and especially the Women's Tribunal (Vienna, 1994), the World Summit of Social Development (Copenhagen, March 1995), and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). (Moghadam 1997: 31)

All in all, these factors have contributed to pushing Moroccan women to take charge of their cause and defy the previous factors and prejudiced representations that relegated them for a long time to lower positions. Nowadays, in comparison with few decades ago, the socio-economic realities and the political development both at the regional and the worldwide level give Moroccan women the chance to re-emerge as strong actors and extend their active participation, to ask for gender equality and to put the whole society on a real democratic track.

The following section describes the political scene

in Morocco during the Arab Spring. The aim is to prepare the ground for the explanation of how Moroccan women seized the momentum to push for more democratic changes.

### **NARRATING THE MOROCCAN SPRING: FEBRUARY 20 MOVEMENT**

The revolutions in both Tunisia and Egypt and their aftermath boosted the morale of people in the MENA region and encouraged them to take steps in shattering the walls of fear that had paralyzed them for decades. Popular uprisings erupted in almost all corners of the MENA region, calling for the end of dictatorship and corruption, more human rights and freedom of speech, employment, and equality. They resulted in unprecedented changes. The nature of changes varies according to the levels of dictatorship, despotism, and authoritarianism practiced throughout the various countries of the region. So far, the turmoil has resulted in the overthrowing of four governments (in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen), the introduction of unprecedented political, economic, and constitutional reforms (in Morocco) and the continuous instability (in Syria).

Morocco has not therefore been an exception. The pro-democracy calls that swept the region inspired a number of young people to take action and initiate campaigns and struggles through the use of the internet. In the early days of January 2011, a number of virtual activists created a Facebook group called "Moroccans converse with the king". The group invited the public to address Mohammed VI with questions, concerns, and comments. This mode of addressing the king directly stemmed from the loss of trust in elected institutions, as well as in politicians and their political parties. Also, the majority of the activists who launched the group were brought up in an environment characterised by both radicalization and democratization, they did not experience the fear of the "Years of Lead" that still haunt the older

generations. Further, these younger activists grew up with the new king, have witnessed his reforms and have become part of the youth's political expectations (Skalli 2011).

When President Ben Ali fled from Tunisia on January 14, 2011, the act had a profound impact on the group as they seized the opportunity to fill the group's page with daring demands addressed to Morocco's king. They asked the king to change the constitution, fire the cabinet, dissolve the parliament, put "those who steal public money" on trial, etc.

On January 25, 2011, when the Egyptian people started gathering in *Tahrir* square, the Facebook page administrators changed the site's name to "Freedom and Democracy Now" and then published a call for nationwide protests on February 20 (Benchemsî 2012). It was clear the group wanted their activism and actions to have an impact on real life.

Targeting the same effect, two-minute YouTube videos were launched showing young men and women each starting that "I am Moroccan and I will take part in the protest with the 20-FMVT" and then going on to explain why. The unifying demands and claims of the activists were "freedom, equality, an end to corruption, better living conditions, education, labor rights, amazigh rights and many others" (Benchemsî 2012). Despite the attempt of the official national media to discredit the campaign, the YouTube videos were widely watched by internet users. This encouraged the creation of multiple Facebook groups in different cities like Rabat, Casablanca, Fez, Marrakesh to mention but a few. These local groups decided to meet, discuss, prepare, and urge citizens to demonstrate on February 20. Interestingly, on February 18, *Al Adl wal Ihsan* (Justice and Charity)<sup>2</sup> published a *communiqué* stating that its youth section would join the protest throughout the country, a fact which boosted the courage of all the activists and proved, once again, that their claims and demands were the demands of all ideologies in Morocco. Actually, various sections helped to launch the 20-FMVT.

The success of the first protests that swept through all Moroccan cities and villages not only set the ball rolling for subsequent rallies but received an immediate response from the king and resulted in many political reforms. On March 9, 2011, the King announced the creation of the Consultative Commission for the Revision of the Constitution (CCRC) to propose amendments to the constitution. The ultimate aim was to limit the power of monarchy and strengthen the roles of the prime minister and the parliament. In this regard, the reforms aimed to give voice to all actors in the political arena. Dozens of human rights organizations were invited to make recommendations on constitutional reforms and were consulted by the CCRC. On July 1, the constitutional reforms were subject to a referendum and were followed, on November 25, by parliamentary elections which brought the Justice and Development Party (PJD) to power. In January 2012, the king announced the formation of the new coalition government, comprising 30 ministers, but including only one female minister.

Despite these changes and reforms, virtual activism continued to develop through the creation of a number of websites providing information and news about the movement. The best examples are “*mamfakinch.com*” (we will never give up) and “*lakome.com*” (To You). Soon, however, the protests started to take new directions, the movement’s rallies started to decrease in both numbers and membership for many reasons. Firstly, the gap between the Islamists represented by *Adl wal Ihsan* and the radical left started to show up, when each group tried to prevail and lead the movement. Secondly, the victory of the PJD in the legislative elections gave hope to the protestors that their demands would be met. Thirdly, the king’s strategy to call for constitutional reforms helped contain the enthusiasm of the protesters. Fourthly, *Adl wal Ihsan*’s withdrawal from involvement in the protests badly influenced the movement as it lost the majority of its protesters. Finally, the bloodshed in Libya, Yemen, Syria and the gloomy picture that

surrounded the future of those countries convinced many protesters that change should somehow be achieved peacefully.

Given these factors, despite the persistence of protests in some cities, their influence on the political sphere turned out to be very weak. Another reason is the fact that the new government’s weak performance divided the activists into two groups. The first group called for a return to the streets, while the second one insisted on the “wait and see” strategy, it stressed the importance of giving the government more time to implement its political agenda and promises. On the whole, the importance of 20-FMVT and its rallies lies in the fact that it has “re-thrown” or re-engaged all parts of Moroccan society into the political sphere after years of indifference and political apathy. Yet, the question that remains to be addressed is: What has been the role of Moroccan women in all these changes? This will be discussed after revealing the research method adopted by this paper.

## METHODOLOGY

To investigate and document the roles, specificity, and gains of Moroccan feminist movement in the aftermaths of the Moroccan Spring, the paper adopts a qualitative research method based on data collected through interviews with the Moroccan women’s movement organizations leaders and 20-FMVT women activists<sup>3</sup>, as well as 20-FMVT campaign materials, press releases, and *communiqués* from local and national women’s movement organizations. These interviews concerned 13 women’s movement organizations’ leaders and 15 20-FMVT female activists. The interviews were conducted individually in Rabat, Casablanca, and Fez and sought to answer questions related to the role of women in the Moroccan Spring as groups and as individuals, their gains, and their remaining challenges. The interviews also sought to capture the reflections of these women activists on the different gender reforms in the aftermath of the Moroccan Spring. The

interviews were helpful clarifying many aspects and specificities of the Moroccan uprisings. They also helped in getting closer to these activists to understand their concerns and aspirations.

### **THE SPECIFICITY AND ROLES OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN THE MOROCCAN SPRING**

Of course, women were part and parcel of the 20-FMVT. Like other actors, Moroccan women seized the Arab Spring opportunity and momentum to promote their agenda by organizing their action at both the national and regional levels.

As discussed above, it is the high level of education many Moroccan women enjoy now, their financial independence, their frequent interaction with regional and western partners, and their improved health status that continue to make them very visible in the political arena. Added to this, is the fact that Moroccan women have a well-established history of coordination among themselves for the purpose of advancing their agenda (Yachoulti 2012). In fact, this successful mode of activism was revived during the pro-democracy calls in Morocco in 2011. The best example in this regard is the “Feminist Spring for Equality and Democracy”<sup>4</sup> created by a group of women’s movement organizations on March 16, 2011. The aim of the coalition was to establish equality between women and men in terms of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Immediately after its creation, the coalition drew up a memorandum reflecting the women’s movement organizations’ vision of the new constitution and what Moroccan women aspired to in the twenty-first century (*Association Democratiques des Femmes du Maroc*—ADFM 2011). A month later, given the prominent role of women’s movement organizations as strong political actors in the Moroccan political arena, the coalition was invited by the CCRC to submit its proposals for the reforms. “The Feminist Spring” mainly emphasized the necessity to implement

democratic reforms that are based on international human rights and conventions, and substantive equality between men and women (*Association Democratiques des Femmes du Maroc*—ADFM 2011). The aim was to find a way of adapting the Moroccan context to the international laws and conventions. Because the “Feminist Spring” wanted its proposals to be taken seriously by the consultative commission, and because it included most feminist organizations counted on the liberal bloc, the coalition organised marches in Rabat and Casablanca on May 1, 2011, insisting on the principle of parity and the constitutionalization of women’s gains and rights. Indeed, the outcomes were very rewarding, the newly adopted constitution includes the majority of the recommendations outlined in the memorandum to secure and protect the rights of Moroccan women at different levels. Some of these will be discussed in the section below entitled “Moroccan women’s gains after the Arab Spring”.

A striking aspect of women’s participation in the Moroccan uprisings is the emergence of a new category of free, independent, and non-affiliated women activists whose role in the uprisings cannot be denied or forgotten. These new women activists were involved in every aspect of the uprisings. To begin with, they helped to create Facebook group pages, and paved the way for the rise and flourishing of virtual activism, their postings and views on Facebook and Twitter pages prepared the ground for and initiated the demonstrations of the movement (four of the 14 activists featured in the 20-FMVT’s YouTube video announcing its creation are young women, asking not for gender equality, but for a representative democracy). Also, the new female activists encouraged and urged the citizens to take part in the protests and then, kept informing them as to when and where the meetings and rallies were to take place. They also wrote slogans, shouted in the rallies, and marched alongside men. Most importantly, these new activists took to the front lines to confront the security forces and served as spokespersons of the movement. In this

regard, Safae, a 20-FMVT female activist, testifies that “Women have played central roles, mainly protesting, organizing and blogging”<sup>5</sup>. Hasna, another female activist in this movement, reports her experience in 20-FMVT’s protests: “We walked side by side with men. Some women were even more courageous than men, they had shown greater audacity and zeal than that shown by men”<sup>6</sup>. Actually, this zeal and audacity had a two-fold purpose. First, this new generation of Moroccan women activists sought, as revealed by Tahani Madad, a nineteen-year-old science student who spoke on behalf of 20 February during a conference that took place at the Moroccan Association of Human Rights in Rabat, to see the “flag of freedom, equality and social justice reign over Morocco, through peaceful means”<sup>7</sup>. The second purpose is eloquently revealed by Hasna when she said that “Women’s participation in the Arab revolutions illustrated many things, the least of which was that women had been able to again challenge Arab societies’ views of their weakness and inability at protesting”<sup>8</sup>.

Following these activists on the ground and through social media has shown that these women are young, modern in appearance, belong to different social strata and educational backgrounds, and come from urban and rural areas. Also, some are economically independent while others are unemployed graduates. Some hold different ideologies and political orientation while others engage for the first time in their life in a political activism or social protest. In this regard, the author shall go back to the arguments of both Naciri (1998) and Sadiqi (2008) to re-emphasize the role of education in changing the lives, attitudes, and perceptions of women. In other words, without education and their growing access to universities and thus their growing knowledge of their rights, these women would not have been able to take part in these protests nor play a prominent role in their success. It is important to mention in this regard the fact that though these women have engaged in this movement with the purpose of advancing rights and

liberties for all Moroccans, many of them reported that they received threats and were met with opposition because of their activism. Some bitterly said that they received threatening messages via Facebook and phone calls. Others reported that they were warned by their families not to participate in the protest as they would be jailed and beaten by the police. For example, Kamilia Raouyane, an intern at the Moroccan Association of Human Rights, said at the start of the movement, she received calls at 3 a.m. from someone calling her a whore and threatening her of sexual violence (Bhatia 2012). She added “My grandma, every time I meet her, she says don’t protest, you will go to jail, they will beat you, (...) But I’m not afraid. I really believe in it. If I don’t do this, no one will do this for me” (Bhatia 2012). However, despite all these challenges and threats, women activists, like Kamilia, continued protesting and be part of the movement core.

Generally speaking, the new generation of female activists’ choice to work side by side with men in all the structures, steps, and organization of the 20-FMVT is revealing at different levels. Firstly, it is a practice that shows a new consciousness of feminist activism among the young generation of Moroccan women. That is to say, this emerging attitude, change of the arena of activism and modes of action favors the development of a new mode activism that is likely to cut off with the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) of feminist activism in Morocco. Secondly, the strategy to participate on an equal footing with their male partners in all aspects and facets of the uprisings reveals the desire of this generation to put the whole society on a real democratic track and stems from the conviction that any reform or change of the political system would undoubtedly in its turn bring positive change to women’s status. Yet, the survival of this consciousness is conditioned upon the willingness, ability, and commitment of all Moroccans to engage in the new regional waves of change.

“The Feminist Spring for Equality and Democracy” did not limit itself to acting at the local level but moved

beyond the borders to seek coalitions at the MENA region level. The aim was to unify women of the region against dictatorship, inequality, and marginalization. To this effect, on March 11, 2011, a coalition of women's movement organization in the MENA region named "Equality Without Reservation"<sup>9</sup> launched a campaign pressuring the governments of the region to withdraw the reservations on the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the ratification of its Optional Protocol. Following the same path, the coalition "Equality Without Reservation" invited representatives from civil society, women's rights organizations, the public sector, international organizations including UN Women, and the diplomatic corps from Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia, to meet in Rabat in May 2011 for two days. The aims of the meeting were to review regional changes and strategize for the future in the wake of the Arab Spring transitions; look at how to ensure that constitutional reforms clearly protect equality between women and men in both the private and the public spheres; legitimize women's role in politics and public affairs, and include implementation mechanisms to achieve these effects (Women's Learning Partnership and the Leadership Conference 2011). In the conference, Nouzha Skalli, the then Minister of Social Development, Family and Solidarity, surprised all participants when she announced that the Moroccan government was about to officially ratify CEDAW and its Optional Protocol, a fact which was later implemented on April 18, 2011. Indeed, the activism led by Moroccan women was rewarding. They succeeded in securing new reforms and rights. This is the concern of the following section.

### **GAINS OF WOMEN AFTER THE MOROCCAN SPRING**

In addition to crafting a new status within society because of their unconditional and courageous participation in the protests, Moroccan women

managed in the aftermath of the Moroccan Spring to secure many constitutional rights and oblige the new elected government to amend legislation and launch reforms that would contribute more and more to the advancement of women's status in society. This section outlines the 2011 constitutional gains of Moroccan women, the legislative reform of the penal code namely its controversial Article 475 and the new elected government's plan for gender equality 2012-2016.

#### *Constitutional Gains*

As a response to the uprisings, King Mohammed VI called upon five women to take part in the Consultative Commission to review the constitution and deliver recommendations for democratic reform. These women are Amina Bouayach, Rajae Mekkaoui, Nadia Bernoussi, Amina Messoudi, and Zineb Talbi<sup>10</sup>. Actually, these distinguished female figures were chosen based on their profiles and their extensive network of contacts abroad. Besides, apart from Rajae Mekkaoui who is counted as part of the Islamist bloc, all other female members are from the liberal bloc. Indeed, the purpose of including these women figures was to give the CCRC credibility and moral integrity and to send messages internally and externally about the nature of the reforms in progress.

In addition to this, on April 18, 2011, after years of advocacy by women's rights organizations, Morocco formally withdrew its reservations to CEDAW and its Optional Protocol. The fighting for women's rights and empowerment has in the new constitution authority to cite all of CEDAW's provisions as leverage to hold the government accountable to its commitment to move toward women's full equality (International women's democracy network). Further, in October 2011, following the reform of the constitution, two laws were adopted with respect to provisions for the participation of women in political life. The first one (Law No. 27-11 adapted in the Chamber of Representatives) establishes a quota of 60 seats reserved for women out of a total of 395 seats, representing 15%. The second

(Law No. 29-11 on political parties) stipulates that “All political parties work to achieve a proportion of one-third of women in their governing bodies” (Art. 26). However, the law does not make such a representation obligatory.

The newly approved constitution also incorporates many significant changes concerning Moroccan women. A new section entitled “Fundamental Freedoms and Rights” includes Article 19 which makes both men and women equal citizens before the law (freedom and equality of all citizens and their participation in the political, economic, cultural, and social spheres). In this regard, the state commits itself to working toward the realization of parity and creating an authority for equality and the fight against all forms of discrimination for the purpose of achieving equality between men and women. Article 21 prohibits sexism. Articles 32 and 34 state clearly the rights of women, children, and the disabled. Further down in the constitutional text, we find that Article 59 safeguards these rights and liberties during states of emergency and Article 175 states that these rights cannot be retracted in future constitutional revisions. At first view, one would think that these gains are limited in number but more scrutiny reveals that the gains not only constitute a significant milestone in the trajectory of gender equality in Morocco, but they also provide an unprecedented official framework for Moroccan women to take future action.

### *Changes in the Penal Code*

To crown the aforementioned constitutional reforms and given the fact the Arab Spring is turning into an Arab Autumn, women’s activists, whether counted on the leftist or the secularist bloc, mobilized again to put gender equality issues in the spotlight. In fact, the experience of participating in the 20-FMVT’s protests taught them that only public protests and demonstrations can bring change and make a difference in their lives. They also believe along with other actors and activists that protests are a very

important part of modern and democratic life in Morocco. On the other hand, this change in modes of activism can be attributed to the desire of women’s movement organizations to correct the undemocratic way the *Moudawana* and the Nationality Code were reformed (Yachoulti 2012). Indeed, women activists within women’s movement organizations confirm that the new provisions of the *Moudawana* are not widely implemented and are largely ignored within the judicial system. This is mainly due to the fact that they are top-down reforms. To this effect, because of the absence of laws that address gender violence including domestic violence and rape in Morocco, women’s rights organizations organized a series of protests and events called the—“Spring of Dignity”, after the Amina Filali case. Amina Filali, a sixteen-year-old rape victim, committed suicide after being forced to marry her rapist<sup>11</sup>. The incident was seized by women activists not only to highlight the lack of laws that protect victims of sexual assault and gender violence, but also to remind the decision makers and the Moroccan public at large of the failure of the law to uphold the *Moudawana*. Therefore, women’s movement protests that included organized demonstrations, sit-ins, television, radio, and social media campaigns, and press conferences served to educate and raise citizens’ social awareness of gender violence as well as lobby for legal reforms.

The international network “Equality Now”<sup>12</sup> joined the coalition of Spring of Dignity in asking the government of Morocco to amend the Penal Code to safeguard women’s rights. On December 8, 2012, they organized a human chain that started at the headquarters of the Ministry of Justice in Rabat and ended at the seat of the House of Representatives. Following this pressure, the Moroccan parliament unanimously amended Article 475 of the Penal Code on January 23, 2014, so that men who rape underage girls can no longer avoid prosecution by marrying their victims. Despite the fact that these women activists were encouraged by the outcome of their efforts, they

still insisted that the Penal Code needs more amendment as it does not recognize certain forms of violence against women, such as conjugal rape and it also penalizes other normal forms of behavior like sex outside of marriage. Khadija Ryadi, president of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights speaking to Aljazeera International says “Changing this article is a good thing but it does not meet all of our demands (...). The Penal Code has to be totally reformed because it contains many provisions that discriminate against women and does not protect women against violence”. These provisions are specified by Fouzia Assouli, president of the Democratic League for Women’s Rights, when she says that “The law does not recognize certain forms of violence against women, such as conjugal rape, while it still penalizes other normal behavior like sex outside of marriage between adults” (Al-Jazeera International 2013).

### *ICRAM, the Government Plan for Gender Equality*

Following the struggles of women’s movement organizations, and in an attempt to implement the provisions of the 2011 constitution in terms of equality principles, the Islamists-led government released in 2012 the “Government Plan for Equality ‘ICRAM’—*Initiative Concertée pour le Renforcement des Acquis des Marocaines* (Concerted Initiative for Strengthening the Moroccan Achievements)” 2012-2016. The four-year plan, which calls for creating new laws to advance women’s rights, is built upon eight axes of operation and sets 24 goals to enhance gender equity (and equality) and women’s rights. As posted in the website of the Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development, the plan’s axes include: (1) institutionalizing and disseminating the principles equity and equality, and laying the ground for gender parity; (2) combating all forms of discrimination and violence against women; (3) grading the education and training system on the basis of equity and equality; (4) promoting fair and equal

access to health services; (5) upgrading basic infrastructures to improve the living conditions of women and girls; (6) empowering women socially and economically; (7) implementing an equal and equitable access to administrative, political, and economic decision-making positions; and (8) achieving equal opportunity between men and women in the job market (Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family, and Social Development 2012). A careful reading of the goals of the plan shows the intention of the current government to institutionalize gender equality in all governmental policies by stressing the following pillars:

*Establishing equality to achieve parity.* The plan asserts the need for equality within different arenas. The plan emphasizes primarily equality in terms of work opportunities as the majority of work opportunities target men and neglect women’s potentials and competencies. The plan also insists that equality should target women’s access to various vital social, economic, and political institutions so that women can climb the social ladder and thus, be part of the decision making bodies.

*Implementing new legislation to combat gender disparities.* The plan insists on fighting all kinds of gender disparities that tend to disempower women. These gender disparities are in fact perceived to be real hurdles that curb different groups’ quest to implement equality. The plan states that efforts must be doubled to fight violence against women especially domestic violence as this latter is considered to be the core of gender disparities that degrade and damage women and relegate them at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Moreover, the legislations that ICRAM discusses are linked to women’s health, they seek to implement new laws that can prevent women’s physical and psychological decline through national programmes that increase women’s awareness about health, sexual, and reproductive issues. Furthermore, ICRAM insists that legislations should encompass the workplace, it advocates the necessity of respecting women in the work place and improving their working conditions.

*Promoting women's education.* The plan looks to women's education as a key factor for social development and gender consciousness. Thus, the plan calls for fighting girls' school dropping and women's illiteracy, it asserts that education is of paramount importance to illuminate generations especially girls who will become one day mothers. As a mechanism to fight girls' school dropping, the plan advances non-formal education to help those drop-out girls get back to the school seats and resume their studies and learning process. Last but not least, the plan calls for the need to support women's innovation and creation as fundamental elements that honor Moroccan women.

Equally important, the plan calls for the necessity of providing women with clean drinking water especially in isolated remote areas and for improving disabled women's conditions as this category of women has always suffered from neglect and marginalization. It also recommends the necessity for advancing elderly women's rights and demands their protections from all forms of discrimination. Finally, the plan calls for balancing women's professional and private lives. This equilibrium should encompass all working women and function within all work areas with an eye on helping to alleviate women's stress and boost their productivity.

Indeed, the plan is another immediate reaction of Moroccan government to the struggles and active roles of feminist movement in the Moroccan Spring. It was launched to honor Moroccan women through fighting against gender discrimination and enhancing women's positioning within the Moroccan society.

## CONCLUSIONS

Moroccan women's movement organizations have played an active role in the pro-democracy calls that swept over the MENA region in general and Morocco in particular. Their aspiration is to preserve prior gains on behalf of women and to make sure that Moroccan women are at the forefront of transitional justice in this

historical movement of transformation in the region. However, it is worth noticing that in comparison with their action and activism in the last two decades, Moroccan women managed in 2011 to forge a new image in their society. Previously, defending their cause was the driving force for all their actions. In the 2011, the motives of their involvement in the uprisings were the feeling of their "Moroccanity" and the aspiration to free their society from the yokes of authoritarianism. This change in cause has gained them a new image in their society. They have imposed themselves as undeniable political actors in the Moroccan political sphere. Despite the fact that their gains are few in number, their achievements are very significant in terms of future action. All that is needed now is the political will to enact them.

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## Notes

1. The Years of Lead is the term used by opponents to the rule of the former King Hassan II to describe a period of his rule (from 1960s to the beginning of 1980s). This period of Moroccan history was marked by state violence against dissidents and democracy activists.
2. *Adl wal Ihsan* (Justice and Charity Group) is the biggest and best-organized Islamist group in Morocco. It is active mostly in universities and in helping the poor, but it is banned from politics due mostly to what is seen as its hostile rhetoric toward the monarchy.
3. The interviews with 20 February Movement (20-FMVT) women activists were conducted in collaboration with Fatima Zahara El Amrani, a female doctorate student at Mohammed Ben Abdullah University-Fez.
4. It is a coalition composed of many Feminist organizations in Morocco. It was created on Wednesday, March 16, 2011 in Rabat.
5. Safae, a young university student from Marrakesh ageing 25 and 20-FMVT female activist, interview with the author, in Rabat, on February 20, 2014 (the author's translation).
6. Hasna, a university student from Beni Mellal ageing 20 and

- 20-FMVT female activist, interview with the author, in Rabat, on February 20, 2014 (the author's translation).
7. To see the press conference, watch this video on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9mEB\\_sWnw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9mEB_sWnw).
  8. Interview with Hasna, watch this video on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9mEB\\_sWnw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9mEB_sWnw).
  9. It is a regional coalition of 600 Arab women's rights and human rights organizations belonging to several Arab states; it was created in 2006 and calls for the removal of all reservations to CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the ratification of the Optional Protocol. The coalition is coordinated by ADFM (*L'Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc*).
  10. Amina Bouayache is the president of the Moroccan Human Rights Organization (OMDH) and Vice President of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). Rajae Mekkaoui, is a law professor at the Faculty of Rabat-Agdal, a member of the Higher Council of Ulema and a legal expert and consultant to several national and international organizations. Nadia Bernoussi is a Professor of constitutional law at the Law Faculty of Rabat and at the National School of Administration (ENA). She is also a Vice-President of the International Association of Constitutional Law and international consultant and a former Special Advisor to the Director General of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). Amina Messoudi is a Professor of constitutional law at the Faculty of Law of Rabat-Agdal, a member of the CDMA (Moroccan Association of Constitutional Law) and Iberian and Moroccan-Euro-Mediterranean scientific networks. Zineb Talbi is a magistrate and a special assistant to the General Secretariat of Government and a former member of the Advisory Commission for review of the *Moudawana*.
  11. Indeed the controversial Article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code states that a man who rapes a minor can escape punishment for rape if he marries the victim. This clause is usually interpreted as a way to compromise between the victim and the perpetrator to make the victim girls "corrupted" by rape, avoid public shame and ostracization from society.
  12. Equality Now is an international human rights organization founded in 1992. It works to protect and promote the rights of women and girls around the world in the areas of Discrimination in Law, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Sexual Violence and Trafficking, with a cross-cutting focus on adolescent girls. It encompasses groups and individuals in almost every country in the world. For more information see <http://annualreport2013.equalitynow.org/year-in-review/approach/>.

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