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What All Americans Should Know About Women in the Muslim World: Clarifying Stereotypes About Muslim Women in Morocco

Alexandra M. Krain
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

The stereotypes about Muslims in Morocco as well as Morocco in general are widespread and often incorrect. The present paper combines both scholarly review and personal experience to clarify stereotypes about public space, work, education, and personal life, focusing specifically on women. Hopefully, this analysis will assist in educating the public about Muslims in Morocco and reveal the under-appreciated similarities between Moroccan and American women.

Keywords

Islam, Women, Muslim, Morocco, Stereotypes

Disciplines

Islamic Studies | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Women's Studies

Comments

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WHAT ALL AMERICANS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT WOMEN IN THE MUSLIM WORLD:

CLARIFYING STEREOTYPES ABOUT MUSLIM WOMEN IN MOROCCO

Alexa Krain

Islam and Women

Dr. Evrard

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Throughout my experience as an American and Catholic female, I have personally assumed and witnessed others presume stereotypes about the Muslim world - more specifically, stereotypes about Muslim women in Morocco. With the combination of media portrayal, lack of knowledge, and limited exposure to Morocco in America, many categorizations are made about Moroccan women. While visiting Morocco, I was stunned by how shallow and superficial my preconceived notions about the country were. What surprised me the most was how much more relatable Morocco and the individuals living there were than I had originally believed. After having personal conversations with Moroccan citizens and experiencing Moroccan Muslim culture personally, I desired to share my new understanding of the nation and its people. The following paper will provide Americans with comprehensive information to elucidate stereotypes of Muslim women in Morocco, based on both personal experience and scholarly review. In regards to public space, work, education, and personal life, Moroccan women are more similar and relatable to American women than Americans typically assume.

Stereotypes, developed by generalizing limited information and using predetermined assumptions and expectations to define a group of people, have influenced how Americans see Moroccan women. Personally, I had assumed that the women were oppressed by limited rights, unhappy, and controlled by men. I expected them to be dressed similarly in long, conservative dresses, wearing hijab. I thought all of Morocco was rural and technologically behind. These ideas are not uncommon and are often what you find when you ask an American to describe Morocco. It is important to clarify the incorrect aspects of these universal judgments to help educate Americans and to mend the harsh separation between Muslims and Americans.

The use of public space in Morocco is a controversial topic that has evolved with the changing ideologies of female expectations. Traditionally, a dichotomy between public and

private space has been extremely rigid and representative of a patriarchal power contrast (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006, 88). Newcomb (2006) reviewed Fes, Morocco, a city with over one million residents (5). There are two main principles that exist, arguing for or against the unregulated inclusion of women in public spaces in Fes. The first characterizes Moroccan female citizens as simultaneously modern, secular, and Islamic, and is in favor of allowing women to freely navigate public spaces. They believe that Muslims can maintain a happy medium between being both modern (in the American sense) and true to the Quran. The Islamist critics, on the other hand, believe that this nation-state view is too enslaved to Western secularism and believe women should return to an “authentic, traditional, Muslim identity” modeled after the Prophet Mohammed (2). Until the 1940s, separation of genders in public was a prominent feature of Moroccan society. However, since the 1960s, many more women were entering higher education and the workforce. In the 1960s alone, female employment rose by 75% (10). This increase in female employment has disrupted and reorganized the private and public domains. The changes in economic and educational levels of families have provided women with more access to power-related spaces. It is important to keep in mind, however, that rural and urban women differ in their degree of access due to economic and social disparities (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006, 89-90). Beyond the public space dichotomy are various combinations of the two beliefs. Some believe it is okay for women to be in public spaces but that the rules of the home should extend to them. For example, women should continue to practice *t’hasham* (being polite, obedient, pleasant in front of elders, men, and non-kin) outside of the home (Newcomb 2006, 11). Others believe they can go into public spaces but must be fully covered. The current situation in Fes and many urban cities include men and women occupying the same public places but associating solely with their own gender (12).

One public space, the café, is a common area for individuals to congregate. Younger women and students between the ages of 20 and 45 are more likely to meet in cafés. There is a constant battle, particularly for women, between balancing appearances with actions. They usually do not sit with men, but will briefly greet male co-workers. Most men claim they do not have any problems with women's presence in cafés, but some might think they will be less comfortable at "dirty" cafes, associating cleanliness with expected female morality (13-14). During my visit to Morocco, we stopped at a café in Rabat for coffee and snacks. I observed a similar arrangement that Newcomb described. The men, ranging in all ages, sat with each other, and the women, mostly younger, sat with each other, although I did not feel that the men were uncomfortable with the women being there. This may seem unfamiliar, but even in America there are single gender groups. Although perhaps to a lesser extent, many females regard their closest friends as other females, and the same for males. It is not uncommon to see single gendered groups over mixed gendered groups hanging out, eating, or going out together.

Women do not typically congregate or linger in another important public space, the street. Women do run errands and use the streets during the day, but it is unusual to see a woman on the streets at night, especially alone (14). The street is often the least acceptable public space for women to be, as they are still treated aggressively by men (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006, 92). A common issue that many women face while walking along the street is catcalling or verbal harassment. I experienced this in Morocco as well. While walking with four other women, I received many catcalls from Moroccan men. However, whenever I walked the street with my host brother, Moroccan men would stare but never say anything. The variation between how men would act towards me if I was with only women or accompanied by another man was astounding. My obvious manner of being a tourist may have contributed to the intensity, but is

still considerably relevant to local women as well. Some women choose to veil to avoid street harassment, which is understandable as I always preferred to go out with another man and made an effort to dress as conservatively as possible (Newcomb 2006, 16). By veiling, women are transposing private logic into public space, using it as a way to access the public area while symbolically remaining in private space (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006, 92). These actions, again, are not unfamiliar to the average American woman. Catcalling is still a significant issue in the U.S., and many women choose to dress more conservatively to avoid this behavior. Unfortunately, I have personally experienced and often found with others that the more “provocative” clothing you wear, the more verbal harassment you receive.

Exercise clubs are often the most controversial spaces, as they are not particularly public or private. Some gyms have separate floors for men and women: women are permitted to pass through the men’s floor, but men cannot go upstairs to the female floor. In one gym, the women’s space was visible to men by a mirrored balcony, so a curtain was installed to appease complaints. This angered some women as it caused the room to be extremely hot, and a desire to keep the curtains open developed. A debate as to whether to open or close the curtains was widely prevalent between the female gym members, and instigated arguments about morality and respectability (Newcomb 2006, 16-22). This conversation continues around the norms of public spaces, yet the transition from one-gender to mixed-gender gym buildings has provoked a more inclusive narrative.

As technology developed, so did the development of how to apply norms to these situations. Cyber cafés provided an interesting opportunity within the public space debate. The internet offers increased opportunities for male and female interaction. Using an online platform to mingle with the opposite sex can create relationships that do not necessarily meet community

standards but uphold personal moralities. It can allow women to demonstrate agency through the manipulation of technology by navigating new spaces among competing discourses with their own standards. The physical cyber cafés are not strictly regulated, as females and males can sit at neighboring computers. They do not necessarily interact with each other at the café, but online mixed gender conversations happen often (18-24).

The media representation dichotomizes these debates about public spaces, but most women do not neatly fall into the secular or the explicitly religious side. Debates about new urban spaces remain vague and unsettled but reveal local efforts to discuss these dynamics (27). With the increased time spent outside the home, many women use these experiences to fulfill themselves as individuals rather than solely as wives or mothers (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006, 91).

Women participating in the workplace is another controversial trend that produces extremely mixed reactions. The stereotype that all Moroccan women marry young and their only role is to care for their children and husbands has been becoming less common as time passes. This pattern is still prevalent, particularly in more rural areas, but it is vastly incorrect to generalize this life path to all Moroccan Muslims. As in America, some women work because they are financially required to, while others work to fulfill a passion, but an increasing commonality is the growing number of women who are in the workforce. All of the urban women that I had discussions with planned on participating in the workforce after they graduated. However, in the rural mountains, none of the women in the family I talked to were in the formal workforce. They spent their days working around the house as well as cultivating the fields around their property.

Cairolì (1998) discusses the difficult livelihood of lower-class Moroccan working women. The Moroccan garment industry is one of the country's most significant export trades

and consists largely of female workers. Women make up 36% of the national economic activity, and almost all 95,000 garment workers are female, which shows just how important female participation in the workforce really is. Participating in the workforce has influenced women's role in society. They regard themselves first as females of the home and transform the workshop floor into an interior space, treating co-workers like family. However, remolding the relationships inside the factory can provide more opportunity for exploitation. In traditional areas, female workers may accept the domineering actions of a factory owner when treating him like a father, accepting a position similar to that of a dutiful and subordinate daughter in a patriarchal family (183). Women, as in the United States, tend to get paid lower wages than men, and some believe it is due to the domesticated and subservient traditions of the patriarchal family (184). This unfair treatment is not unique to Morocco, as America still toils with unequal working conditions for women.

There are also occupationally successful women throughout Morocco. One third of doctors and one fourth of university professors in Morocco are women (Gray 2006, 60). Higher education has allowed them to enter into a work environment where they interact with people of similar educational backgrounds, regardless of social class. The controversy of being a working wife and mother has been a significant reason for the disapproval of women in the workforce. Many women see marriage as important but desire to meet a man who respects their personal and professional choices, careers, and age (62). This is a social change that has been seen in the United States as well. As norms shift and the fight for feminism continues, women gain more agency in choosing how they want to fulfill their life.

The lifestyles of women in different social classes are also comparable between Morocco and the U.S. Employed entrepreneurs and midlevel managers often have flashier jobs and

lifestyles through administration posts and professions. Employed women are more likely to smoke, drink, go out at night, wear internationally made clothing, and travel overseas. They can do this because of higher income and work freedom. However, it is important to note that, even within these classes, there is variety. It is difficult to generalize behaviors without setting stereotypes, but the overriding point is that, similar to American employees, Moroccan professionals have more money and tend to spend it on leisure activities. Another relatable aspect of the Moroccan workforce is the separate male- and female-intensive jobs. Men are often entrepreneurs or managers in manufacturing or service companies, while women work in service industries like finance, marketing, advertising, and media (Cohen 2004, 25-26). These distinctions are similar to a lot of the occupational gender norms we see in America.

Female education in Morocco has been increasing as the feminist movement has developed and more individuals become aware of the potential benefits. It can lead to not only a rise in knowledge but the ability to obtain a job outside of the home, earn their own living, have ownership rights, and be accepted as equal household managers. A woman's visible contribution to the family can increase her social standing, independence, and exposure to the outside world. This can all enhance her voice and agency through increased empowerment (Zvan Elliott 2015, 20). Additionally, literacy, which is learned through education, has also been shown to correlate with improved health. For example, those with more pain, fatigue, rheumatism, and shortness of breath, leading to feelings of general bad health, are more often illiterate. Illiteracy may influence this because of the inability to read physician instructions or the lack of knowledge for healthy behavior (Bekker and Lhajoui 2004, 8).

There is, however, a concentration of female education in major cities like Rabat and Casablanca, and women in rural areas often have a hard time obtaining high quality education or

even any schooling at all. Although only 58% of Moroccan females are literate as of 2014, there has been an upward trend in both reading and primary school registration (Zvan Elliott 2015, 20). The increased schooling of women has also delayed the average age of marriage from 17.5 years old in 1960 to 26.6 years old in 2010 (29).

Mass education and national development fostered the development of a more modern (in Western terms) urban middle class (Menin 2015, 895). While I stayed in Morocco, I had the opportunity to have discussions with various young Moroccan men and women of different backgrounds, social classes, and geographic locations. The conversations I had with the young adults in urban cities were very different than the conversations I had with individuals living in the Rif Mountains. In Rabat, there was a consistent trend of the desire to obtain an education and join the workforce for all fifteen of the individuals I spoke with, both men and women. Their ages ranged from 18-23 years old, and they all had plans to be financially and educationally successful. The conversation I had with a family living in the Rif Mountains went differently. The mother and grandmother of the family were both married under the age of 18, and both did not receive an education past the age of 12. The daughter was 19 years old, and her parents were in the process of finding her a husband. However, when asked about her desires, she expressed her wish to attend university and study to be a teacher. Her grandmother was noticeably upset by this and expressed her desire for her granddaughter to get married and be a “traditional and respectable wife and mother”. The differences in educational expectations and desires between generations were clearly displayed within this family, demonstrating a changing discourse about the traditional Muslim woman. This observation is supported by Sabbe et al. (2015): illiteracy rates for those older than 30 years old in rural and urban areas were 75% and 61%, respectively, and those younger than 30 years old in rural and urban areas were 25% and 9%, respectively

(144). The increased literacy in younger, urban individuals was echoed in their desire for higher education.

The women of Morocco are often assumed to be oppressed and without agency. However, the contrary is more often true. There are a multitude of complex dynamics that make up women's empowerment, and it is important to contextualize women's empowerment in order to understand it. A holistic conceptualization of empowerment demonstrates how "education, employment, and political participation...cannot on their own, solve the issue of women's disenfranchisement" (Zvan Elliot 2015, 20). These are all important, but none are sufficient by themselves to enable female empowerment. Many Moroccan women have gained a critical understanding of their reality through the awareness of power inequalities and mobilization around women's rights. Increased support for their rights, I believe, is how so many of the Moroccan women I met have become more powerful, independent, and driven than stereotypes about them would have us believe.

Using this approach, women can understand that work and marriage are no longer mutually exclusive. If desired, empowerment can be a result of marriage, children, and employment together (20). This is also a key component of success in the United States. Many women desire to be successful in their careers but also raise a family. Additionally, there is a generation gap present between Moroccan women. Older women are more supportive of young women listening to their fathers in regards to marriage, and thus create pressure to accept a forced marriage (Sabbe et al. 2015, 142-43). There is also a geographical gap concerning marriage age. In rural areas, women marry in their teens, while most urban women do not marry until their twenties (Gray 2006, 62). This early marriage age encourages many rural women not

to obtain jobs, as they are forced to stay in the home or are financially supported by their husbands.

Morocco has been an example of a country that combines Islam with the values of democracy and foundations of citizenship. The fight for female equality ran parallel to Moroccan independence from colonial rule and nationalism. The original Moudawana (family code, the body of laws regulating the status of males and females in marriage, divorce, and other family matters) was a setback in terms of female equality in the family, as it was based on strict interpretation of Islamic Law. However, the 2004 reform of the Moudawana provided some progress in equality, although many still believe it needs better application and enforcement (Benlabbah 2008, 1-10). It is also important to state that several Moroccan women see local mentalities and behaviors as more important than these legal changes (Gray 2006, 62). As the 2004 reform was widely enacted by men, it rings eerily similar to much legislation related to women's issues produced by males in United States government; progressive, but alone not sufficient.

I found numerous aspects of urban Moroccan women to be more similar to myself than I thought. Not only were they wearing similar clothes, had coinciding knowledge of pop culture, and displayed comparable mannerisms to myself, we bonded over social media, sarcasm, and fashion. Experiencing how alike these Moroccan women were to myself and my American friends, was shocking and dumbfounding. Feeling ignorant that I assumed they would somehow be different, I quickly befriended many of them. Not all Americans have the opportunity to visit Morocco and interact with the individuals living there. By expressing the several comparable features I saw in Moroccan women, I hope I have conveyed how unjustifiable many of the

generalized stereotypes tend to be and illustrated that living in a different part of the world does not make us entirely unlike.

Many observed stereotypes are not falsely created. However, it is important to understand that they are often based on big picture assumptions and not the whole truth. My observations and interactions with Moroccan Muslim women provided me with a more truthful and representative picture of them. By incorporating larger indicators like legal reform, literacy levels, and occupational statistics with the unique daily lives and choices of women in public, educational, and work spaces, we can begin to more accurately comprehend and personally relate to the realities of Moroccan Muslim women.

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