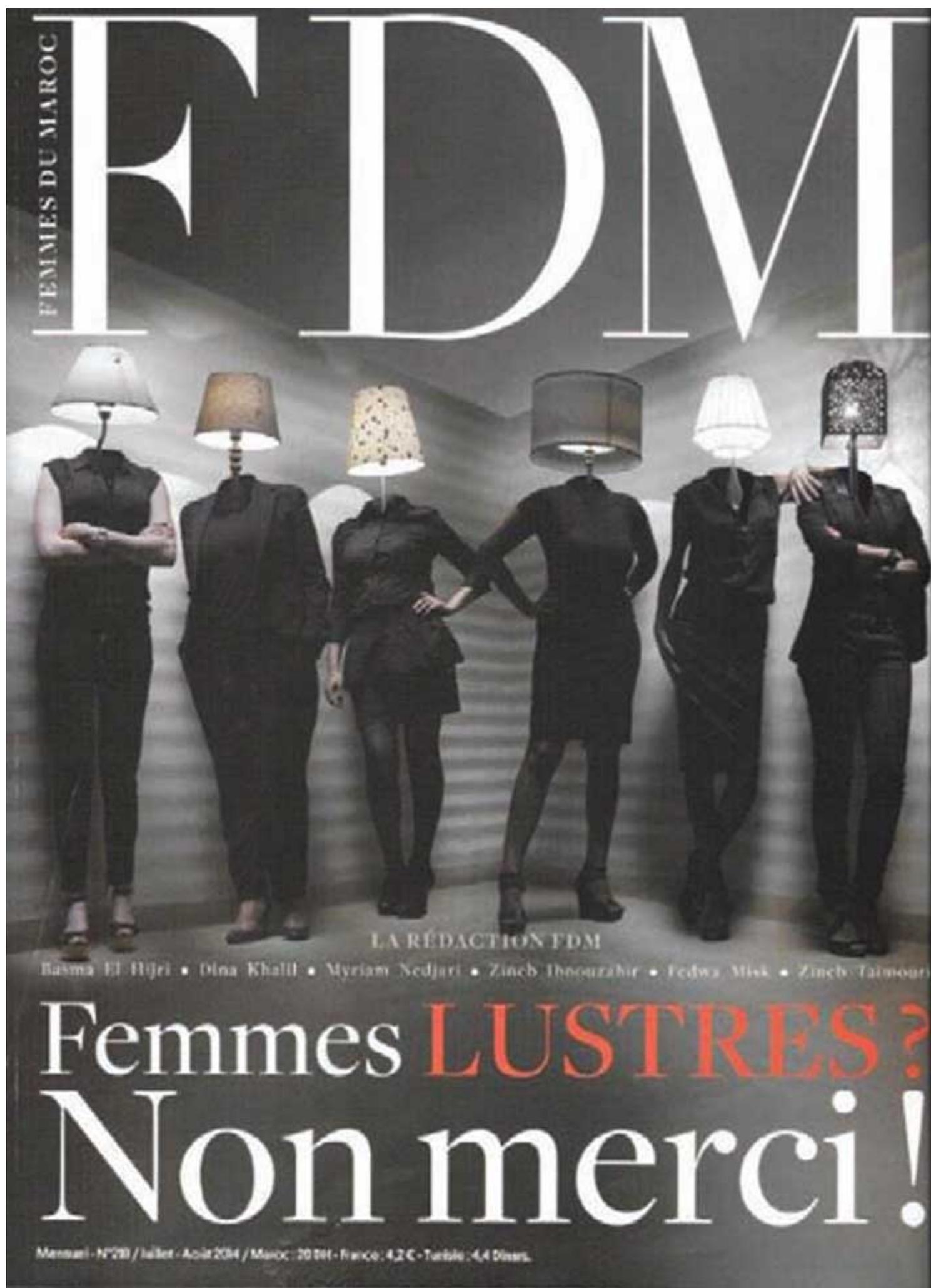


## Special Report

# Moroccan Women: Still at the Barricades

By *Marvine Howe*



The cover of the July-August 2014 issue of Femmes du Maroc (“Moroccan Women”). (COURTESY FEMMES DU MAROC)

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Defiant they stand, six sleekly dressed women in black pantsuits and short skirts, with lamps in the place of heads. The cover of a glossy Moroccan women’s magazine is intriguing for anyone unaware of the ongoing conflict between Morocco’s Islamist prime minister and a sector of his female constituents. Summing up the struggle, the legend reads in French: “Women Lusters? No

thanks!"

The lamp controversy symbolizes the peaceful but intense movement taking place in this ancient tradition-bound kingdom. Moroccan women, tired of being patronized by a dominant masculine society, are lashing back. Their immediate target is the congenial Islamist Prime Minister Abdelillah Benkirane, suspected by many feminists of harboring a not-so-secret agenda to roll back women's hard-earned advances. The crisis came to a head last June, when Benkirane, speaking in parliament, denounced the model of European working women, "who don't even find time to get married, to be mothers or to educate their children." But what stirred feminine wrath was the Islamist leader's condescending flattery: "The lights in Moroccan homes went out when women left the hearth to work outside."

"Scandal! Degrading! Humiliating!" women protested on Facebook and Twitter, in the Moroccan media, and in front of parliament. No way would the Islamist-led government take away their rights. Ten human rights and women's associations announced plans to take the prime minister to court for failing to apologize for his speech, considered "prejudicial against women."

It is difficult for the outsider to understand the level of anger of Moroccan women over what appeared to be simply an ill-conceived gesture by the moderate Islamist leader to ingratiate himself with his conservative base. After all, compared to the rest of North Africa and the Middle East these days, Morocco appears to be an oasis of calm and progress. And women, who had lived under one of the most retrogressive Family Codes, have now gained a progressive legal status which is the envy of much of the Muslim world.

Morocco largely escaped the revolutionary fever of the Arab Spring which has inflamed the region since 2011. Like Tunisia, Moroccan youths, human rights activists, and left-wing and Islamic militants alike took to social media and the streets to protest the lack of jobs, poor social services, and income disparities. The Moroccan protesters denounced the ineffectual political parties, both left and right—but not the inviolable Palace. Moving swiftly, King Mohammed VI skillfully engineered a balanced solution to quell the unrest. There was a referendum on a new "democratic" constitution, with something for everyone: more powers for the government and legislature, the promise of gender parity and an independent judiciary. Yet the king, who is both chief of state and commander of the faithful, retained his broad powers.

Furthermore, election results were no longer skewed. When the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won parliamentary elections in November 2011, the king duly called on its leader to form a coalition government. The Palace has learned a hard lesson from neighboring Algeria, whose military had barred a popularly elected Islamist party from power, ushering in a decade of violence from which the country has not completely recovered. Morocco, on the other hand, has avoided the political turbulence shaking the Arab world with its marriage of convenience between King Mohammed VI and the moderate Islamist-led government. The kingdom has also gained a convenient scapegoat when things go wrong.

## A Price to Pay for Stability



Bassima Hakkaoui, Morocco's minister of solidarity, women, family and social development, and unproclaimed leader of the Islamist feminists.  
(PHOTO M. HOWE)

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This socio-political stability has come at a price for the emerging women's movement, however. On the surface, it seems that the momentum for emancipation has stalled and risks sliding backward. The ruling PJD has not wrought dramatic changes in people's lives, but has provided glimpses into its long-term agenda to Islamize society. The Islamist authorities vehemently disapproved of music festivals, for example, which are more popular than ever. Moves to introduce more prayers on government television were rebuffed by the Palace. Despite an official campaign against alcohol, the local wine industry is flourishing. There is, however, a visible increase in headscarves in city streets. More teenage girls have donned a colorful, tight-fitting headscarf, or *hijab*, with a long skirt, jeans or skinny pants. The explanation: the *hijab* reinforces the image of a "serious woman," and serves

as an important tool to win a husband. Also, many Westernized women acknowledge putting on headscarves when they venture into some urban neighborhoods, as protection from male harassment.

On the 10th anniversary of the progressive new Personal Status Code, or *Moudawana*, many women, whether professionals or stay-at-home mothers, Westernized or Islamist, are resentful of the slow progress of reform. Most women blame the Benkirane government and the dominant male hierarchy for the failure to implement reforms. They are grateful to the king for his support, but stress that the only way for real change to occur is through the transformation of Moroccan society's traditional mindset.

Despite the enlightened spirit of the revised Personal Status Code and the new constitution, the largely conservative parliament has been slow to enact regulatory legislation, and texts are undermined by glaring deficiencies. For example, it took the suicide of a teenager and nearly two years to amend the Criminal Code enabling a rapist to escape up to 20 years in prison by marrying his victim. Nor has there been progress on polygamy and discriminatory inheritance laws, both derived from Islamic *shariah*. In fact, at the end of 2013, when the leader of the Socialist Party called for an end to these practices in the name of gender equality, he was sharply denounced in Islamist circles as “an apostate.”

Nouzha Guessous was the only woman on the Royal Commission revising the *Moudawana*. “It was a good compromise—but there have been implementation problems,” she said recently. “The philosophy of the legislation, based on the family and its components, has changed. Before, the law dictated a family hierarchy; it doesn't do that now. There are contradictions, however. The code proclaims equality but left laws that maintain the hierarchy. Responsibility is still the domain of the guardian or father. There is also the article that gives discretionary powers to judges regarding the minimum marriage age, set at 18. And some judges are resistant to change.”

“I thought things would change more rapidly,” Nouzha Skalli, a leading feminist on the political scene for more than two decades, admits ruefully, blaming conservative and left-wing parties alike for the sluggish pace of reform. One of seven women ministers in the government from 2007-11, Skalli led the campaign to win gender parity, end discrimination and include more women in decision-making positions. She also raised sensitive subjects like decriminalizing abortion, abolishing the death penalty, and ending child labor—issues ignored by the Islamists. Now in parliament, Skalli has relentlessly attacked Benkirane's government for dragging its feet on the constitutional reforms and denounced any attempts to infringe on women's gains. In a recent interview, she expressed disappointment that women have made little progress in politics. Skalli pointed to the low number of women in parliament: just 67 out of 395 seats, or 17 percent, behind Senegal with 42.5 percent women, and Mauritania and Algeria, both with 30 percent! “While the king is a progressive on women's issues, he governs by consensus and has to work with the government and political parties,” she acknowledged.

The unproclaimed leader of Islamist feminists is Bassima Hakkaoui, minister of solidarity, women, family and social development, and a former PJD deputy. Receiving a visitor at the ministry in Rabat, Hakkaoui appeared wearing a floral *hijab* and formless *djellaba*, while noting that her secretary and cabinet director do not wear *hijab*. Asked about the new *Moudawana*, the minister called it “revolutionary,” particularly for enabling women to initiate divorce proceedings and ending the male custom of repudiation. “Before, a woman would have to pay off her husband to get rid of him,” she commented wryly. There is a problem with the minimum marriage age of 18, she conceded, explaining that many rural parents fear their teenage daughters will elope. Now parliament is debating the redefinition of the minimum age to perhaps 16. According to Hakkaoui, the real problem is that men regard women as “inferiors” in social, economic and political matters. “We must change their mentalities,” she stressed.

While Morocco's largely secular women's movement has been at loggerheads with Islamists for decades over reforms, there's a new impetus to reach out to the Islamist leadership to tackle national issues of common concern. Recently, a group of women took up an ambitious new challenge: to correct the negative image of Moroccan women in Middle Eastern media and TV shows. The festering problem turned into a diplomatic crisis last July, when an Egyptian journalist gratuitously insulted Morocco as a country of prostitution and AIDS. The Arab media also depicts the kingdom as a land of witchcraft. Several analysts suggested the problem might be political. Moroccans are criticized by other Arabs for their more open Western lifestyle as well as their tolerance of Islamists.

Emphasizing that Arab attacks on Moroccan women are “a national affair,” the Women Journalists' Network recently organized a seminar at a Casablanca hotel, inviting two cabinet ministers to the event. Some hundred women from the media, cinema and TV met to map out a response to the increasingly hostile picture of Moroccan women in the Arab world. There were no calls for retaliation but, rather, suggestions that the fight should begin at home, against pejorative feminine stereotypes in Moroccan media and TV films. Guest of honor Minister Hakkaoui made an impassioned speech calling for a mass movement against the stereotypes degrading Moroccan women at home and abroad. Announcing the creation of a National Observatory to improve the image of women, she emphasized that women were still victims of gender discrimination. “In Morocco, like elsewhere, there's more interest in a woman's body than in her skills and intellectual capacity,” the Islamist minister said. “The Moroccan woman deserves a better place in Moroccan society, on a par with a man.” □

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